

# *The Adventures of* TOM

August 2007

T.D. Busted

Not many 20 year-olds (soon to be 21!) can say that they own their own pipe organ. Then again, not many 20 year olds would seem to have an interest in such a peculiar instrument. I don't remember where or when I first caught the bug. It probably stemmed from my exposure to the instrument used regularly in worship in mother's church as I was growing up. I do though distinctly remember the first time I heard "REAL PIPES!!!!"

All little children squirm in church at some point and I was no exception. Grandma watched over me on my left as I noisily wriggled about the painfully hard wooden pew in the back row. The beautiful sanctuary of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in East Stroudsburg, PA and its gorgeous stained glass were no match for my wandering attention and antsy behavior. Then suddenly a warm tone wafted above my tiny body and hugged me from all around and carefully crept into my innermost core. Mesmerized, my young mind suddenly succumbed to the warmth of tone that filled the room as the choir and congregation bellowed joyfully the familiar Ralph Vaughan Williams hymn "Lasst Uns Erfreuen." The sturdy and dignified bass pipes of the organ gave nobility to the ever-moving bass line as the manual reeds and flues swelled in the triumph of the many Alleluias that adorned the text. From that moment on I became an avid fan of *real* pipe organs and sought them near and far for their warmth and beauty capable of creating musical, emotional, and spiritual effects greater and more varied than any other instrument or group of instruments I have ever heard (with the exception of the simple yet the most intimately human instrument of the voice). A lifelong obsession was started.

This wonderful obsession has led me to places and opportunities I had once only dreamed of. From working on the simple 5-rank Möller in my garage to working on the grandest instrument in the world, these opportunities are true blessings. It seems appropriate to me to remember my roots and give gratitude to the people who got me started in this organ world and introduced me to its wonderful curiosities. What better gratitude can I give than to take you, my Lehigh Valley AGO Friends and Family, on the adventure with me by telling you about all the wonderful people and instruments I have become acquainted with out there on my journey? For those of you who don't know me, the name is Tom, and if I may, let me take you on a uniquely fascinating, fun, and somewhat educational modern-day adventure through the wonderful realm of the "King of Instruments."

\*\*\*

## **Adventure One: "Tuning the Wanamaker Organ"**

"It's a small world after all!" Last May I was at a reception for my professor Dr. Shelly Moorman-Stahlman at the place of one of our LVC (Lebanon Valley College) alumni. The reception followed her performance in the Organ Marathon at the Kimmel Center.

Standing next to the elegant display of cheeses from around the world and crackers I got into a conversation with a woman about my major, "organ performance," and then followed by the usual "but I plan on becoming an organ builder." I forget the person's name but she was tied into my college somehow and we had a nice conversation.

During that conversation with the woman, directly opposite me on the other side of the cheese table stood someone I only recognized from pictures I had seen in the *Stentor* (Friends of the Wanamaker quarterly magazine). "Are you by chance Curt Mangel?" Indeed it was! That sparked a

good organ conversation for at least an hour, up until the rest of my group was about to leave the party to travel back to LVC. A taller gentleman named Peter Batchelder stood next to Curt.

I found out that they had been up late tuning the Kimmel Center organ before the marathon. Curt is curator there as well as the Wanamaker Organ and takes care of mechanical problems while Peter is one of the best tuners in the country. I asked them about how they tuned the Wanamaker Organ and Peter began to tell me the challenges one comes across with such a large instrument spread over so many floors. There are temperature changes, humidity changes, and other factors they have to deal with. I was enjoying the explanation but admittedly could only follow the verbal explanation so far. Curt then handed me his business card and invited me to hold keys as they tuned up for Wanamaker Organ Day on June 8 so I could see how it's done for myself. What a wonderful invitation!

Moving ahead to the first week of June, I arrived Wednesday afternoon on the PATCO train thanks to my friends in New Jersey who let me park my car in their driveway and took me to the train station. We arrived just in time for lunch and met Curt and the rest of the crew at this really neat little Irish bar called McGillans. After lunch it was off to the store to unload an 8 rank Wurlitzer theatre organ from a truck. This organ, once carefully restored by the restoration team, will be played in Greek Hall on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. I'll talk more about this organ in coming issues. It was a lot of heavy lifting and rolling carts of pipes and organ parts. But again, what an historic moment! The first playing theatre organ in the city in several years right in the same Wanamaker building with the world's grandest organ! Curt told me in an email "History is always happening at 1300 Market Street!"

The rest of the week I helped hold keys between about midnight and 7:30 or 9 in the morning. It was a bit weird going to bed after breakfast and waking up in time for dinner, but I managed. I helped hold keys for Peter all three nights. Let me tell you, it takes a lot of patience to hold keys, especially for Peter. He is so careful at what he does that he wants the tuning to be flawless, nearly impossible, yet he strives for the best tuning he can get. He doesn't use electronic organ tuners. He relies on tuning forks and counting beats to get the best equal temperament there is. Temperament is set in the middle octave of the tuning stop and then is spread to the rest of the organ from there and then checked over again and again to make sure each note is perfectly in accord with the rest of the instrument. We would spend hours on this precious octave using the circle of fifths to tune every fifth slightly flat and every fourth slightly sharp, thus creating the *equal* temperament that can be played in all keys (Bach was a major supporter of this temperament and wrote his *Well-Tempered Klavier* based on such tuning. To learn more about how this tuning is accomplished, see George Ashdown Audsley's *The Art of Organ Building* vol. 2 pages 638-650). This tuning takes a lot of work but is well worth the effort, as the Wanamaker Organ has never sounded better!

Three crews are able to tune the organ at the same time and it creates quite a raucous in the Grand Court, but every crew is still able to tune their own division, sometimes through use of radios to communicate with people at the console and also through use of several tuning keyboards in different divisions of the organ. In three strenuous nights, the crew was able to pull the organ well enough into tune in time for the Saturday event with the premier of Peter Richard Conte's transcription of Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. The day also included a Florida boys choir, Alan Morrison, Ron Rhodes, and brass and percussion. What a truly marvelous occasion and well worth all the effort put in by the expert organ technicians from around the world and a humble college student from the Poconos.

Next time: "*The Wurlitzer*"