



CIPHERS

SEPTEMBER 2009

NEWSLETTER OF THE CENTRAL INDIANA CHAPTER AMERICAN THEATRE ORGAN SOCIETY

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NEXT CHAPTER EVENT

CONCERT
SEP 13TH 2009 | 2:30 PM

MARTIN ELLIS
IN CONCERT

Manual High School

We lucked out with excellent weather for our August meeting on the 2nd at the Hedback Community Theatre. Ron Wilson was our program artist, and he did his usual fine job with a varied program of standards, as well as music from the '60s and '70s that works well on theatre organ. We were also glad that Ron and Pam Wilson have rejoined CIC and ATOS and hope to get more active in the chapter in the months to come. Thanks, Ron, for sharing your musical talents with us!

It is getting close to the time when a nominating committee will be appointed by the Board of Directors of the Chapter. Their job will be to come up with a slate of candidates for the upcoming calendar year of 2010. As I mentioned in the business meeting on Aug. 2nd, we invite every member to consider getting more involved in the governance of our organization by volunteering to run for a chapter office. It would be great to have two or more candidates for each slot, but that is entirely up to you, the individual chapter members. If you don't volunteer to run, we cannot elect you. It is often difficult to find even one person willing to serve in an office or as a director, and no organization can be healthy without numerous people willing to serve and agreeing to stand for election to an office. Please give it your serious consideration!

Finally, our next BIG EVENT will be the public concert at Manual High School with our own Martin Ellis doing the honors at the Wurlitzer console in the Carl E. Wright Memorial Auditorium on Sunday, September 13, at 2:30 pm. As many of you know, Martin won the very first Young Organist Competition that ATOS ever staged in the middle 1980s. A graduate of DePauw University with a degree in Organ Performance, Martin now serves as the Organist and Choirmaster at North United

Methodist Church, and he is on the staff of the Children's Choir of Indianapolis as the accompanist. In addition, Martin is one of three theatre organists who make up the Trio con Brio, who played a major concert at our recent ATOS convention last summer. Martin has also entertained us as a featured performer at chapter monthly meetings, so we know he's an articulate and accomplished musician, and he will make the Manual Wurlitzer sound great!

Joining Martin will be one of our newest members, singer Laney Wilson, who appeared last at the Ken Double program at WPAC in June. Laney brought down the house with his jazzy style, reminiscent of Frank Sinatra and other such crooners. It will be a program you will thoroughly enjoy, and we really do need the support of our members at this performance. I hope to see every one of you there!

Tim Needler
President, CIC-ATOS



DESSA RECOLLECTIONS

PART ONE

Editor's Note: In our February 2009 issue of CIPHERS, we spotlighted charter member Ed Taylor, who has been a continuous member of CIC since its founding in 1964. This month we begin a series of interviews with other long-term members, beginning with our current president, Tim Needler, who joined the chapter in 1966 and is the second-longest continuous member, some 43 years now.

Jim Rogers: Tim, what caused you to join CIC-ATOS?

Tim Needler: In 1964, three years after I moved here from my hometown of Fort Wayne, I read in an Indianapolis newspaper that the Central Indiana Chapter was being formed. I discounted joining, however, because the article said members would be expected to work on restoring organs, and I had never been very mechanically-inclined and figured I'd be more of a hindrance than a help to the group. A couple of years later in the Army Reserves unit for which I was the company clerk, a young guy named David Ashby, newly back from his basic training, answered my call for someone to type to take over my job when I got out of the service. He was an excellent typist and a very nice kid overall. However, one Sunday when he was supposed to arrive for the monthly session at 7 a.m., he didn't show up until 1:00 p.m., and I chastised him for it and asked why he was so late. He said he'd been playing a theatre organ concert that morning for the Central Indiana Chapter at the Paramount Theatre in Anderson, IN. I was amazed that each of us had an as-yet-undisclosed interest in music. It was David who assured me that CIC needed organists as much as they did technical people and convinced me to join in 1966.

JR: Was it through David Ashby that you met Dessa Byrd?

TN: No, actually, David introduced me to Tom Ferree who was installing the Uniphone organ at the time in the Rivoli Theatre on East 10th Street that he had leased from its then-owner, Forest Kranning. For someone not well versed in mechanical things, I was happy to go over and join the work crew, consisting of Betty and David Roch, Bob Cox, Bob Davidson and a host of others whose names escape me at the moment. My stint on the work crew ended rather abruptly, however, when I mis-wired the Chrysoglott an octave higher than it should have been, and Tom decided it would be better to have more experienced help with the soldering iron!

JR: So it was Tom Ferree who introduced you to Dessa Byrd?

TN: Yes, it was. Tom had grown up in his family's home on Washington Boulevard, just two doors south of Dessa's home at 5510 Washington Boulevard, a four-square brick home painted off-white that is still there and looking exactly as it did then. This would have been sometime in the late 1960's, possibly 1967 or so, that Tom called me one afternoon, saying he was at Dessa's house having cocktails and asked me to come over and join them, which I did.

JR: For those who may not know much of Dessa's early musical history, can you fill us in?

TN: Well, from what she and Virginia told me over the years, Dessa was born in Marshall, IL, and came to Indianapolis to attend a music school, graduating about the time she was 18 and then took a job playing in one of the local theatres for silent film accompaniment. She eventually was hired by the Circle Theatre, probably when it installed a new Wurlitzer organ to replace the Hook & Hastings that had been installed in 1916 prior to the theatre's opening. Dessa was then hired to play at the Indiana Theatre although I do not believe she opened the venue as organist. She once told me that the owners of the Indiana Theatre asked her to go to Chicago to hear and play a Barton organ in the Patio Theatre there. She liked it and gave the "okay" for the Indiana to install a Barton organ similar to what she'd heard in Chicago. And, of course, that is the organ our chapter owns and installed in the Warren Performing Arts Center. Dessa played at the Indiana Theatre for a number of years, and Virginia also played there in the later years.

JR: Did Dessa also broadcast over radio in those early days?

TN: Yes, she had a coast-to-coast program from the Indiana Theatre on WIRE radio, which was on the "Blue" Network, I believe. (If anyone reading this has more accurate information, please let me know as I'm dealing mostly from memory here.) When the theatres came into difficult financial times in the Depression, most of the organists were let go. Dessa got a job playing at a local restaurant on a Hammond, as I recall her saying. I do know that Virginia said she was the first demonstrator of the "new" Hammond organ when it came out in the mid-thirties, and I believe she worked for Pearson Music who was the first Hammond organ dealer in town.

JR: I heard Dessa was "well-fixed" financially. Is that true?

TN: Yes, Dessa lived well. She had divorced her first husband, Ed Resner (who had directed the Circle Theatre Orchestra when Dessa was the featured organist) and later married Leo Rappaport, a wealthy Jewish gentleman who owned most of the downtown theatres, including the Indiana and Circle Theatres. She told me one time, "Leo left me \$1,000,000 when he died, and I've been through most of it!" and laughed. It probably was true. Dessa had hired a well-known decorator who did her interior in all white with gold accents, white carpeting, lavish furniture, an ebony Steinway grand and matching smaller console piano in the sunroom behind



HAPPY LABOR DAY

the living room. She had a live-in housekeeper named Eva, Hungarian by birth as I recall, who would fix drinks for the guests, and sometimes Dessa would invite a guest or two to stay on for dinner that Eva had fixed.

Most often, her sister Virginia Byrd Rehtoris (18 years younger) would be there as well, and the two sisters enjoyed playing duos for their assembled guests, usually with Dessa on the grand and Virginia on the console. And often the guests would be asked to join in, which was always great fun. Both were excellent sight readers, and Virginia had a fine ear and could improvise and keep up with the best of them. Both were very talented, well-trained musicians. Dessa enjoyed entertaining and often would have a group over after the Rivoli Theatre's organ shows for a late-night party. Many of the theatre organ world's greatest came to town in those days to play the Rivoli organ, such as Don Baker, Lee Erwin, Gaylord Carter, and "youngsters" such as Lyn Larsen.

JR: Was Dessa still playing professionally back then?

TN: Well, she still had her 30-minute weekly radio show that was recorded in her basement by recording engineer Les Ohmit on the 2-manual Allen theatre organ and later broadcast, I think, on a Tuesday or Wednesday evening on WFMS, I believe. And Tom Ferree would have her come over to the Rivoli Theatre and practice as much as she desired. Eventually, she gave her Farewell Concert at the Rivoli which was recorded and the resulting LP's sold to the public. It was a standing-room only crowd that evening, and Dessa looked fabulous in her evening gown. She was wearing a diamond-bracelet that got caught in the keys of the lowest manual and gave her a bit of trouble, but she managed to get it free and continued on as though nothing had happened.

JR: It sounds like Dessa was a colorful individual.

TN: Well, she was. Each year she would buy a new Cadillac convertible, usually in a bright red shade with a white leather interior and white top, and she looked great driving that around town. She definitely had a "star" quality and demeanor about her.

JR: What about Virginia?

TN: Virginia lived only a couple of blocks from Dessa with her husband Steve (an accountant with the Hugh J. Baker Company) and her only child, Beverly, who was in high school in those years. Dessa depended a lot on Virginia as she aged, and Virginia was very cheerful and loving in her attention to sister Dessa. Virginia once told me that Dessa was very much like a mother to her, especially after their mother died at an early age, and she felt she owed Dessa a lot. Virginia was a very social individual, involved in many different organizations and an excellent hostess in her own right. She went from early morning to midnight many a day. I once asked her, "Virginia, how do you get everything done that you volunteer to do?" Her short and no-nonsense answer was, "I sleep fast!" I often think of that when my schedule gets overloaded and the only time left is late at night.

JR: Well, there is a lot more I'd like to ask you, but let's continue this in the next CIPHERS.



CELEBRATING 25 YEARS
indianapolis chamber orchestra
PRESENTS

Heather Hinton | Organist

Saturday, September 19, 2009 - 8:00pm
Second Presbyterian Church
7700 North Meridian Street
Indianapolis, IN 46260

The ICO opens its festive Sterling Season - Celebrating 25 years - with organist Heather Hinton. Hinton is currently Organist and Assistant Director of Music and Fine Arts at Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis and instructor of Organ at Butler University. A winner of the 1996 National Young Artists Competition of the American Guild of Organists, she will perform Poulenc's Organ Concerto. The evening's program will also include Haydn's brilliant and energentic Symphony no. 99.

Tickets: \$25 Adult, \$10 Student

For tickets call 317.940.9607

CIC-ATOS member save 20%!

Mention promo code: ATOS 919 when purchasing your tickets!

EVENTS CALENDAR

September 13, 2009 @ 2:30PM

October 11 2009 @ 2:30PM

November 8, 2009 @ 2:30PM

December 13, 2009 @ 2:30PM

Martin Ellis in Concert

Chapter Meeting Featuring **Donnie Rankin**

Jim Riggs in Concert

Chapter Meeting Featuring **Mark Herman**

Manual High School

Hedback Theatre

Manual High School

Warren Performing Arts Center



ARTIST SPOTLIGHT: MARTIN ELLIS

After many years working in the field of professional music, Martin Ellis enjoys an extremely diverse career as an organist, pianist, choral and orchestral arranger, and professional accompanist. In addition to his concert engagements, Martin is currently the Principal Organist/Assistant Director of Music for North United Methodist Church of Indianapolis, Indiana, and is one of the senior staff accompanists for the prestigious Indianapolis Children's Choir and Youth Chorale, serving the advanced treble choirs and high school division.

As a solo artist, Martin Ellis enjoys an active concert career in both classical and theatre organ venues and has performed on organs of distinction across the United States. Regionally, he is an active recitalist for Reynolds and Associates Pipe Organ Builders and is frequently featured on new and restored organs by the Reynolds firm. Additionally, Ellis has become the third member of Trio Con Brio with Donna Parker and Jonas Nordwall, having performed with the group as understudy since its inception twelve years ago. In the past three years, Trio has undergone several recording projects and continues to be featured artists for the American Guild of Organists' and the American Theatre Organ Society's conventions, as well as performing at many of the high profile organ installations in the U.S.

While at home in Indianapolis, Mr. Ellis works as an arranger for two leading choral music publishers and serves as the instrumental arranger for many of the Indianapolis Children's Choirs major concerts and tours. To that end, Martin has traveled with the children's choirs throughout most of Europe, Canada, and is the featured pianist annually for the Pacific Rim Children's Choir Festival in Honolulu, Hawaii. Additionally, Martin still manages to find time to be a "parent" to two African Grey Parrots and keep up with his love for cooking and reed organ restoration.

CHAPTER NOTES

Please note the email change for one of our members:

Tom Whitehair: tomwhitehair@att.net

Gene Niccum, 76, a CIC member from Muncie, passed away on Thursday, July 23, from a lengthy fight with cancer and was laid to rest on Monday, July 27. He had been employed by Ball State's School of Music for 31 years and was their Music Properties Technician and well respected for his maintenance of musical instruments for the University. We extend our deepest sympathies to his surviving brother and other family members and friends.

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