

The following article was published in the July/August 2006 issue of Theatre Organ, the official journal of the American Theatre Organ Society. The author, Robert Dilworth, was requested to submit the article. Robert Dilworth is the Founder and President of the Dickinson Theatre Organ Society of Wilmington, Delaware.

## **The Care and Feeding of the Theatre Organist**

Now that you have rented an artist, here are some tips on the Care and Feeding of your Artist --

**Species:** Homo Sapiens

**Type:** Organus

**Habitat:** Usually found in dark theatres or auditoriums probably in, on, or under a theatre pipe organ

### **Often nocturnal**

These creatures can create wonderful entertainment on theatre pipe organs if they are properly cared for.

### **Introduction**

The information, suggestions and observations given below relate to the methods and philosophies we embrace at the Dickinson Theatre Organ Society. The advice is based on our experiences over the past 37 years.

### **Choosing the artist**

Before discussing how to treat the artist, I need to say a word or two about how we go about choosing our artists for the Dickinson Theatre Organ Society. There are four criteria that enter into creating a season that our audience will find exciting.

At the first meeting of our Artist Selection Committee I asked the question, "What would be wrong with this season -- George Wright, Lyn Larsen, Walt Strony, Jonas Nordwall, and Lew Williams?" (This was in the early 90's when all were alive.) The first reaction was WOW! What a season! Then, after a couple minutes of silence, one member said, "Oh, they all play in basically the same style." Of course, the artists named above no longer imitate George Wright as they did very early in their careers but difference in style is one of our criteria.

We also try to make sure there is at least one new artist in the season (New to DTOS that is). Another question is the audience drawing power of the artist. A final point is the fee the artist requests.

### **Contacting/contracting the artist**

Once we have our list of artists for a season, the next step is to contact them to see if they are interested, if they are available for the date we have open, and what they request as a fee. I do not believe in "dickering" with an artist over his fee. The artist knows what he\* must ask in order to make the contract viable for him. To try to get him to lower his fee is like telling him "You aren't worth that much." If the fee is too high,

then we agree to try again later. In the 37 years we have had to suggest only twice that the fee was too high for us in that season.

Once we agree, usually by either telephone or e-mail, a contract is sent. It is important that all the basics are spelled out in the contract - what DTOS expects from the artist and what the artist can expect from DTOS.

### Artist's arrangements

An addendum to our contract requests information as to the artist's motel requirements and travel arrangements. DTOS makes the motel / hotel reservations for the artist and pays the fee for up to three days. The reason for this is that we know our area and what is available; the artist does not. We also make sure that the motel has a restaurant either as part of the motel, on the site, or within walking distance because most artists will not have a car.

The need for travel information is so that a member of DTOS (usually the author) can meet him at the airport and provide local transportation to the motel. We need to know the day of arrival, the name of the airline, the flight number, and time of arrival. We meet the artist at the baggage carousel. If the person meeting the artist is not totally sure of the artist's appearance, we provide a sign for the DTOS member (often my wife) with the artist's name so that he can find us.

If the artist is driving, we make sure he has a good set of directions to the motel and to the school from the motel and a telephone number to call in case he gets lost.

There are too many times I hear stories about how the artists have been treated in other locations. Like lack of instruction on how to get from the airport to the hotel - how to get into the venue for rehearsal - or which hotel is best or closest to the venue - or where the restaurants are.

### Artist's arrival

On the way to the motel from the airport (about a half-hour trip) is a good time to discuss rehearsal plans and any other scheduling factors for the time the artist is in town. It is also a good time to learn more about the artist and his likes and dislikes. If there is anything special or out of the ordinary concerning the concert, this is also a good time to discuss the details.

In some cases, the local travel may be provided by public transportation or taxi. This is not a reason for you to have the artist be alone at this time. Have someone with the artist to lead him through the proper procedures and gates and tolls - and help carry his luggage. Your local people know the system - a person from out of town may not.

### Artist's rehearsal/setup time

Here at Dickinson, we provide all local transportation unless the artist has a car. We arrange a meeting time to pick him up for each rehearsal session. At the school, we

make sure the organ is set up for him with plenty of light. Although we keep the houselights on, they are kept at a low level. We also make sure that no one is in the auditorium during his rehearsal session - but have a DTOS representative (usually me) nearby in case of a question or problem. Make sure the artist knows where that person is and how to contact him. Instruct him as to restroom locations. I usually come back to the console after about an hour into the practice session to see if there are any problems or questions and ask if the artist would like some water or soft drink. After that, I wait for his signal.

It is important to let the artist alone during his practice time. He does not need a friendly discussion/argument in the third row behind the console during a rehearsal. Time is usually limited and he has a lot of work to do to get ready for the concert. There are sounds to hear and combinations to find, pistons to set and acoustics to get used to. The artist does not wish to be rude by telling people who are bothering him to "get lost" but it would be much better to see him after the concert with your pictures or stories.

It is important that no one be in the auditorium during the early rehearsals. Even talking at the rear of the auditorium/ theatre, can be a major distraction. This is the time the artist is carefully listening to the various sound of the organ and searching for just the correct combination. The artist's ears are incredibly sensitive and they can hear much more than you imagine they can. Keep the talking out in the lobby, or in a dressing room or workroom.

During his final rehearsal, usually on the morning of concert day, I am setting up for the concert - placing the Public Address microphones, setting the stage curtains, the screen, the video projector, the reception tables, etc. By that time, the artist has already set his combinations and is usually doing a last minute run-through of the program and does not mind the minor distractions.

Often, at the end of a practice session, the artist would like something to eat. Usually we go with him to provide transportation and company (eating alone is often very lonely). We also usually pick up the tab. Then we return him to the motel.

If there is time in the practice schedule, on the night before the concert, DTOS treats the artist to a dinner at one of the local "better" restaurants for the artist's choice of cuisine.

### A word about the organ

The bane of any concert artist is to find dead notes (notes that do not play). If you wish to put on a public concert, every effort should be made to fix all the dead notes in the organ. An organ is not in "mint" condition if all the toys and traps play but there are dead notes in the various ranks. A theatre organ is a "melody" organ. An artist cannot play a melody if there are notes missing. Also, for the comfort of the artist and audience, the organ should be in tune.

### Before the concert

In our situation at Dickinson, we tune the organ during the afternoon before the concert while the artist is back in the motel resting. One of our DTOS member is designated the Artist Liaison. That person will pick up the artist at the motel and drive him to the concert. His responsibilities include guarding the door to the artist's dressing room to provide the degree of privacy the artist requests - or staying with the artist to provide company and some diversion if requested. He also provides water, coffee or soft drink from the snack stand both before the concert, at intermission, and immediately following the concert. The Liaison tells the artist when it is show time and guides the artist to the curtain leading to the console and advises him when it is time to go to the console.

### During the Concert

During the last number for each half, the Liaison makes sure he is located just offstage to help the artist. At the close of the first half, the artist walks off stage from the bright spotlights into the darkness backstage. As soon as the artist is past the curtain, the Liaison takes hold of the artist's arm to lead him to the dressing room until the artist's eyes become accustomed to the darkness.

### Following the Concert

Here at Dickinson, immediately following the final encore, the curtains are raised and the on-stage reception begins. We provide a podium or table for the artist to greet members of the audience and to sign playbills or CDs while audience members socialize over punch and cookies.

Most artists do not want to eat before the concert. As a consequence, by the end of the reception, they are ready to eat. Wilmington, Delaware is not a hotbed of 24hour restaurants but there are a few. We take him to the restaurant where we are often joined by a number of the DTOS workers who have finished cleaning up after the concert. DTOS again picks up the tab for the artist. This is a great time to relax and let the adrenaline disappear. It provides a gentle let down from the "high" of the concert. Then we take the artist back to the motel.

Don't forget, we are also responsible to take the artist to the airport in time for his flight home. Sometimes this means a very short sleep. But the trip back to the airport is a good time to reflect on the previous evening. I often ask the artist what was good and what changes are needed in our hospitality or the organ. We often discuss the program itself.

### Respect the Artist

One artist told me this story. They arrived in town with one name and telephone number of a person to contact to arrange for practice/setup time on the organ. Unfortunately, no one ever answered the phone. They had to make their own travel and hotel arrangements. They went to the theatre, which was dark and locked. There was no notice in the window of a contact person and it was noticed that there was no notice of the concert. Throughout the next day a periodic visit to the theatre did not provide any additional information and no one made contact. About a half hour before concert time, in a last effort to fulfill the nature of the contract (which was written and signed through

the theatre management), another visit to the theatre yielded a still dark theatre. It was about 10 minutes until concert time when the theatre's organ technician arrived and said, "I don't know how many people you think you're going to have tonight." The artist was directed to the console which was not tuned or even in playing condition. Absolutely no solo voices could be used—only ensembles--due to the massive number of the dead notes, and the theatre was freezing. Within the next 15 minutes or so, about 30 people showed up for the concert.

I've heard several stories of "private" receptions following the concert, held in someone's home. When the artist arrives he is greeted by 20 or more members of the "inner circle" of the hosting organization. It is obvious by the chair setup that they will soon be listening to the host's organ. The artist is expected to sit down and play at least a mini concert - all without prior knowledge or consent and, of course, without an additional pay. After all, he is only "playing" not working -- right? Wrong? Remember to a musician, their music is their work -- in the same fashion, an accountant invited to a party would not expect to spend the party time doing the host's financial accounts nor to do it without pay.

Artists often have had to make all of their own arrangements - travel, hotel, meals, rehearsals, etc., and have not seen one member of the local organization except for one person who after the concert hands him the check and then disappears.

Artists generally have their program all planned BEFORE they arrive at the venue. To come up to the artist WHILE HE PRACTICES and ask him to play such and such during the concert isn't considered professional. As the DTOS M.C., I often have been approached during the intermission, to ask the artist to play a particular song. I usually don't ask him. Unless the artist specifically asks the audience what they would like to hear, he wants to play the list he prepared. In one concert here at DTOS, I mentioned that several people had asked me to have the artist play a certain piece which he had recorded. He graciously did so, but the flow of the concert was spoiled.

If the artist is making his first visit to the venue by car, he should receive directions with maps before he leaves home. If the venue is in a building complex (such as a school campus), a more detailed map is helpful. If the access to the building for practice is a back stage door, that needs to be noted. Likewise parking information should be provided.

The DTOS style of treating an artist began with one particular episode. About 1970, I wanted to book Gaylord Carter for a film show at Dickinson High School. Two years before, I had the privilege of attending one of his concerts at the famed Tower Theatre in Philadelphia and had such a great time I wanted to share the fun I had had with the Dickinson audience. I had no idea how to contact Gaylord but I knew he was appearing at a theatre in Alexandria, Virginia. So, on concert day, my wife and I and four children piled into the car and made the journey to Alexandria in hopes that I might have a chance to talk to the great man himself.

It was a dreary winter day with no sun and as we drove past the theatre toward our motel next door, I spotted a “little old man” walking in front of the theatre. “That’s Gaylord” I practically shouted to the family. I thought how lonely he looked with no one else around.

After I checked the family into the motel, I went to see if I could get into the theatre to talk to Gaylord. The lobby was all locked up but I found a side door that was open and walked in. I could hear the organ but the theatre was dark. As I walked a little farther into the building, I could see Gaylord at the console with a single dim spotlight shining down on the console - the rest of the theatre was dark. No one else was in the theatre.

So, what is wrong in this picture? I could not shake the feeling that artists should be treated with more respect and honor. After all, they are Artists, the Star, and are famous (at least in the theatre organ world). I didn’t want one of our artists to have to “fend for himself”. They deserve better.

### In Conclusion

You contracted an artist to work for you. You want the very best performance possible.

So you need to make every effort to provide the artist with the best possible conditions while in your care. You need to provide for his basic needs of housing and food, practice time with no distractions, an organ in good working condition, and, above all, courtesy and respect.

\* = We acknowledge that there are several very good female artists on the concert trail but the term “he” or “him” refers to artists of both genders.