

The following article was published in the January/February 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 Secret of Our Success

I have been asked to write an article for the ATOS Journal about the "Secret of the Success of the Dickinson Theatre Organ Society". For many years artists have told us that DTOS consistently draws one of the largest audiences in the country. Stories from other parts of the country seem to substantiate this.

I hate to tell you, but there is no 10 second answer to our success and there is no "secret". It takes a goal, hard work, a consistent philosophy through the years, and some luck. I don't have all the answers. I can only tell you what has worked here at DTOS.

Shortly after I learned that John Dickinson High School was the proud possessor of a theatre organ, I had the opportunity to read Ben Hall's book, "The Best Remaining Seats". As I read of Roxy's exploits, his basic philosophy became clear to me -- that if the audience were treated as royalty, they would fill the theatre. The theatre is a magical place where the cares and trials of the audience members could be forgotten for a portion of time. He accomplished this by having the staff of the theatre provide all needed services so that the audience only needed to enjoy the magic of the performance. Part of that philosophy is illustrated in this quote from Hall's book, which was taken from the playbill of the Capitol Theatre in New York (1921).

When you enter these portals you stray magically from the dull world of confusion and cares into a fairy palace whose presiding genius entertains you royally."

Creating the atmosphere where this can take place is not done by accident. It requires a group of dedicated people working together for a common goal. We dare not try to make this a private hobby adventure wherein we invite the "great unwashed" to have an occasional glimpse of our heaven. We must treat this as a business. Our business is to provide good entertainment for the general public. Not only is everyone welcome, but we must try to give them an experience following which they will want to come back again -- and again. Here at DTOS we try to do that by providing all the necessary services to bring the general audience into a feeling that they are part of our family.

One of the ways we promote a feeling of family is our newsletter, *The Vox Humana*. The newsletter is sent out to the 1200 names on our mailing list 3 weeks before each concert. This list is culled every year. If we have not heard from a person in two years (purchase of tickets, contribution, or CD purchase by mail or check) we send them a letter requesting them to do one of the above actions or we will drop their name from the list.

The newsletter is not simply a concert announcement. It also contains a concert review of the previous concert, information about other DTOS events, occasional "Spotlight" interview of one of the DTOS workers, information about the organ and organ crew activities, information about our publications and CDs, and the requisite ticket information. We try to make it informative and chatty, not formal.

The first contact with the audience is at the curb. When a car arrives at the school, we have

a DTOS'er (plus a member of the security company we hire) assist in unloading passengers at the entrance to the lobby. It is a small service, but greatly appreciated especially by some of the elderly and handicapped members of the audience. It also speeds the inflow of people since the driver does not have to exit the vehicle to assist his passengers.

When the patrons are inside the lobby, there are signs to direct them to the ticket table. Once tickets are taken care of, there are other places in the lobby to attract their attention. There is an information table where questions can be asked and answered, a snack stand, a music shop where there are displays of theatre organ CDs, DVDs, books and booklets. And just before the main entrance there are several tables holding Marion Flint's ever-changing display of theatre organ venues around the world.

Once inside the auditorium, the patron is handed a playbill and an usher offers to show them to their reserved seat. Many of our audience know where their seat is located and don't need assistance since all seats are numbered, but new-comers need minimal directions.

The playbill gives the biography of the artist, organ facts, information about DTOS, lists of contributors and a few advertisements. This gives a first-timer something to do while waiting for the program to begin. They may also find that their seat neighbors have introduced themselves and engaged them in conversation.

Here at DTOS we strive to start each show on time. When showtime arrives, the houselights lower to one-half for about 30 seconds for the stragglers in the aisles to get to their seats before the lights go out. Certainly by 1 minute past starting time, I am in the spotlight to introduce the show. I chat with the audience; I don't read from a prepared script. I welcome them, urge them to sign up for the newsletter, give them information about nearby organ events. I give them information about our next concert, urge them to visit the music shop, and then introduce the artist.

When I introduce the artist, I do not give any biographical information; that is in the playbill. Instead, I relate some personal experience I had with the artist during the time since he arrived to begin practicing. Often it is nothing more than a comment about his forgetting a bow tie and how we got one for him -- or as I told the audience in one concert, "He told me he was not superstitious, but he doesn't shave for three days before a concert. Here is....." This approach to the introduction helps makes the audience feel they are sharing in the overall experience -- like family.

Nothing can spoil the audience's pleasure faster than something the artist has no control over - such as problems with the operation of the lights and sound equipment or staging effects. I remember how distracted I was at another venue where the houselights didn't go off until the fourth number. We strive for professional quality in our staging to enhance the concert.

Ever since we installed our overhead camera several years ago, the audience has enjoyed viewing the artist's hands on the keyboards on the large (16 foot) screen. Not only is this a different view but it is educational and often exciting. Without the screen, the view of the artist and console is limited except for a few seats in the auditorium. Frank Pratt is very correct in his article in the September/October issue of Theatre Organ Journal. The audience does enjoy this addition very much. At one concert we didn't use the overhead camera because of a staging situation and there were many questions about where was the picture. An informal survey ran 50 to 1 in favor of the projection.

At the beginning of the second half, I again appear to announce any other items or anything I think the audience would appreciate hearing. I also invite all the members of the audience to our on-stage reception immediately following the concert. This is a chance to meet the artist, socialize with friends, meet new friends and just look around. We serve homemade cookies and punch. This is a very important part of trying to create a feeling of belonging.

While creating a feeling of belonging is part of our “secret” for keeping the audience happy, we cannot ignore the importance of the organ and the artist.

The organ must be in the best condition possible. Not only must it be in tune but everything has to work properly. The theatre pipe organ is known as a melody organ in that one hand is playing a melody while the other hand is providing the accompaniment. Even one note that does not play can wreck havoc in a concert. That missing note can cause the audience to wonder whether the problem is with the organ or with the artist. Also, it can force the artist to change his playing style to overcome this missing note.

Almost from the beginning we noticed that the original 19 ranks were not going to be sufficient for the use we planned for the organ. The first need was to have some organ sound from behind a chorus on the stage. When the organ was loud enough for the chorus to hear the pitch, the audience could not hear the chorus. Thus the first addition was the 4 ranks from the Orpheum Theatre in Champaign, Illinois. This was installed in a moveable chamber on stage.

When an artist prepares for a program, he selects the sounds he feels best fit the music to create the effect he desires. As our early concert seasons progressed, we listened to the comments of each artist as to what was good and what was still needed with respect to the organ. Often these comments led toward the expansion of the organ. Under the leadership of Brant Duddy, careful additions were made to the organ to increase the sounds available on the tonal palette for the artist. No additions were made just to enlarge the organ. They each had a specific tonal color that was desired. We finally stopped at 66 ranks, making it the 4th largest Theatre Pipe Organ in the world.

The organ crew checks the organ about two weeks before each concert to find any dead notes (or other problems) and works to make the necessary repairs. Because of the changes in temperature and humidity in the auditorium, the organ is tuned immediately before each concert. Thus, we have gained the reputation among artists that “everything works”, which gives them the confidence to do their best in concert.

We select the artists for a season using a variety of criteria. First, we want the season to be exciting to the audience so that they will purchase season tickets. In order to do this, we try to mix the playing styles of the artists so that we don't have a complete season of one style, no matter how good that style might be. Second, we try to have at least one new (to DTOS) artist in each season. We do not invite artists that played in the current season for the next season. We try to book artists far enough in advance that we can finish all the preliminary work (contract, biography, photo) before May of the preceding season so that we can prepare our concert brochure and make the announcement of the upcoming season in the newsletter for our June concert which coincides with the start of season ticket sales.

We feel that an artist can perform his best when he is comfortable about the job. We provide a comprehensive contract so that the artist is aware of what we expect and what he can expect from DTOS. When the artist arrives in our area (usually at the Philadelphia airport) we meet him and provide his transportation to the motel and between the motel and the auditorium for his

practice times. We have someone at the auditorium while he is there to take care of any problems. We usually accompany him to lunch or dinner so he is not alone. However, we try not to smother him; we leave him alone at the console to do what he needs to do. Another part of the DTOS artist hospitality is dinner at an upscale restaurant of his choice the evening before the day of the concert.

We have an Artist Liaison whose job it is to see to the needs of the artist. He brings him to the auditorium. If the artist requests, we keep him isolated from friends and well-wishers. We supply his requests for water or soft drink. We run his errands. Sometimes we just chat to pass the time.

At intermission, the Liaison is just offstage to assist the artist to the dressing room until his eyes become accustomed to the darkness. His beverage choice is there waiting for him. If he has a problem with the organ, we try to take care of it during the intermission. Following the final encore, there is an on-stage reception so that the audience can meet the artist. We provide him with a podium so that he can autograph CDs or playbills.

Following the on-stage reception, we take the artist to a local restaurant for a meal. Since many artists do not eat before the concert, they are ready for food by this time. Many of the DTOS workers opt to join us for this social time. We have had as few as 4 and as many as 30 gather at the restaurant. This is a time for a gradual let-down from the emotional high of the concert. The conversations around the table are not just the artist being grilled or performing, but everyone socializing with each other. Naturally, most of the conversations have to do with organ topics.

Another aspect of our success is merely the result of actions we took to carry out the original vision.

Because DTOS had to be self-sufficient, we have had to look on the venture as a business. The school district does not provide any money for the organ other than free space and electricity (including heat and cooling). Each season has to generate enough money to pay for the concerts as well as the maintenance of the organ.

To assist in the presentation of the concerts, committees were formed to provide the necessary work -- ticket, ushers, stage crew, music shop, snack stand, etc. The heads of these committees met following each concert to discuss the results of the concert and plan for the next. This was formalized into the Board of DTOS, Inc. a not for profit Corporation of the State of Delaware with a current annual budget of \$75,000.

One of our greatest challenges has been how to let people know about us. Even after almost 40 years we are not as well-known as we would like. We have learned from surveys of our "family" that the most effective publicity is "word-of-mouth". Audience members talk to their friends and co-workers, and talk about the fun times they have. Many in the audience bring guests to a concert. Another way we encourage new people to come is to provide each season ticket holder with a guest ticket for a concert of his choice. Nearly half of the first-timers come back after their first concert and about half of these eventually become season ticket holders.

Our two annual Open Houses offer a taste of theatre organ without the cost of a ticket. Each year we provide a theatre organ experience for the 5th graders in our district. We give a one-half hour presentation in their classrooms to introduce them to the organ via a Power Point presentation. Then they are bussed to the auditorium for a one hour concert (with silent film).

The students react to the program with great enthusiasm and occasionally will use the free tickets which are offered to attend a regular concert. We also provide a DAYTIME Concert on the Tuesday following Easter (the school parking lots are available then). For \$1.00, we present a one hour theatre organ concert. Often it includes a sing-a-long and a silent film. The publicity for this concert goes to all the senior centers and senior assisted living homes in the area. Attendance is generally around 500.

Is our audience gray? Sure, but there are many younger people as well. As the older ones drop out due to health, not being able to drive at night, etc., new, younger ones are being added to our audience. By younger people I mean in the 35 to 50 age bracket. (I doubt many groups would be able to fill a theatre, concert after concert, with teens.) By the time a person is reaching the age of 35 to 50 he begins to look for musical forms other than rock, hip-hop or rap. Many gravitate to Country and Western, a few to classical, and some to Classic Rock or Big Band, which is where our new audience members come from. The big question is how to reach out to them.

We have found that advertising in the daily newspaper, radio, and TV is not effective. They are money losers because of the expense of the ad. However, we do request public service announcements from them. There are several weekly newspapers where we occasionally purchase advertisements since their rates are considerably lower. They are also more likely to do feature articles on some aspect of DTOS.

In the beginning, none of us had any idea where this project would take us. We have been lucky. Many things worked out for us without any effort on our part. Our first concert brought 1500 people to our 1200 seat auditorium (chairs in the orchestra pit and on stage). This was the result of the unusual event of a group of students who brought this miracle into being and plenty of newspaper help.

The acoustics of the auditorium are excellent for the organ. There was plenty of space behind the walls and backstage for chambers. There was unused space on either side of the projection and lighting booth at the rear of the auditorium for an organ workshop and the DTOS office.

Originally, the school district loaned us \$10,000 to get the organ moved from the Boyd Theatre in Philadelphia and installed in the auditorium of the John Dickinson High School in Wilmington, Delaware. After we paid back \$5,000, the rest of the loan was forgiven. From that point on, we were financially on our own.

When DTOS incorporated, we had a written agreement with the school district as to what were our rights and responsibilities. We work well with the Red Clay School District (Dr. Robert Andrejewski, Supt.). The Superintendent is a supporter of our efforts. In return, we have given equipment and scholarships to the school. Because of our close relationship with the school, we have been able to develop a consistent schedule for our concert series, making possible our season ticket program.

A large part of our "secret" is the people who have made DTOS's concert series such a success. Each of our concerts involves about 75 volunteers working in some capacity either before, during, or following the concert. We must thank the members of our audience, which averages almost 900 per concert. Without them, our efforts would have no purpose.

We did not start off this way. We had to develop this cadre over the years. In the beginning,

we had a group of students and adults who caught the vision. Despite the large audience at our first concert, the second concert was the beginning of our “building” period. The students were a great help with posting flyers in local store windows as well as providing the various work crews. However, after this group of students graduated, the tasks fell to adults. Each of the committees found adults who volunteered their efforts to “make this thing work.” As the size of the audience grew, so did our group of volunteers. Like most volunteer organizations, we are constantly looking for more volunteer workers. We have been lucky so far.

So, how can your group adapt our “secrets” to make your group more successful? If I were to suggest where to start, I’d say, “Look at your group’s basic goals and philosophy. Are they willing to make the operation into a ‘business of entertainment’ or do they want it to be strictly a hobby for them and a few others? Are they willing to give up much of their time to make this work? They need to look at the organization carefully to see how the organization meets the needs of the stated goals and philosophy.”

It is not good enough to say, “We’ll give a concert.” Look at all the other aspects. As theatre organ “nuts” we tend to make the organ our first priority. Yes, the organ IS important, BUT without the support of an audience, how can it continue? The “Secret of our Success” is the continuing vision of an organization which provides a well maintained organ, excellent artists, and a welcoming presence for our audience.