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REVIEWS

VIDEO

THE ATLANTIC CITY CONVENTION HALL ORGAN: The Senator's Masterpiece. San Francisco: Vic Ferrer Productions, 2005. DVD. \$19.998 (available from the Atlantic City Convention Hall Organ Society <<http://www.accos.org>>). With this expert video product, the organ preservation movement takes an immeasurably valuable step forward. As the first slide says, the video is dedicated to preservationists everywhere. For too long, however, many have viewed preservationists as an idiosyncratic lot of amateur enthusiasts, concerned more about a self-declared agenda than the real common good, oddly tinkering with faded artifacts that have long since outlasted their authentic worth to society as a whole. To view but a section or two of this visually sumptuous, expertly crafted production is to understand that the traditional assessment is wholly mistaken. The effort under way to restore the world's largest musical instrument, the Midmer-Losh organ of what is now Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City, commands the serious attention of the leading figures in organ-building, just as the creation of this Herculean instrument consumed similar figures 80 years ago. To see names like Nelson Barden, Jean-Louis Coignet, and Jack Bethards lending approbation and leading the cheers implies the magnitude and significance of the instrument itself and its value as an artifact worthy of preservation in a setting unlike any other.

Since the Boardwalk Hall organ is not playable, much of the video is a series of headshots and voice-overs that accompany a series of rostrum camera shots of old still images. Vic Ferrer contributes expert editing and flow. His background audio comes from the last recorded performances on the Midmer-Losh (from 1998, prior to the devastating effects of the hall's restoration on the one remaining chamber in operation) and otherwise appropriately symphonic instruments. This background score includes a fair share of show tunes and standards and contributes to the comfortably familiar impression that lingers with the viewer. This is a documentary style that we know and anticipate, much like Ken Burns taking a nostalgic look back at baseball. It is noteworthy not because the primary concern of this review should be proficiency in visual media production, but because of its mood and the promise that this polished production holds for outreach. When Vicki Gold Levi, Atlantic City historian, speaks, when, in an added special feature, a representative from Bally's hands ACCHOS treasurer John Clotworthy a check for \$10,000 to begin research into restoration, when we see videos of school-age children touring the organ chambers, then the cultural blockade between the organ community and the rest of society begins to fade.

Curiously, that fissure between the worlds of art and politics corresponds neatly to the circumstances under which Senator Emerson Richards began the odyssey. As numerous

speakers proclaim, the tradition of the organs in municipal spaces was nothing new by the time the Atlantic City Conventional Hall and its organs were conceived in the 1920s. But the scale of things, the political wallop of it all, and the placement of the instrument within a palace of economic might and large-scale entertainment were certainly beyond anything experienced before or since. In one trivial sense, several of Ferrer's scenes insinuate an apt metaphor - no other hockey rink has ever heard organ music like this! the catalyst, naturally, was State Senator Emerson Richards. We mainly remember Richards as the deus ex machina of the project, the New Jersey politician who could pull the strings, cut the contracts, and divert the cash from the city coffers into the hands of his organ-builder of choice, Seibert Losh. And, one wonders, how much of that reputation was furthered by the seminal portrait cut over and over in the classic William Barnes title, *The Contemporary American Organ*. But, as the video documentary makes clear, the Convention Hall organ offered both Richards and Losh the opportunity to rise above their conventional reputations and expectations, to aspire towards higher artistic ends.

Richards, it turns out, was a legitimate organ expert, a consultant who had studied the organ in meticulous detail, who understood the classic principals of the instrument as well as the full flowering of its symphonic, theatrical potential. As the grainy clips of home videos (included among the bonus tracks and mainly shot by ACCHOS members during visits about a decade ago and prior to the restoration of the hall and its re-branding as "Boardwalk Hall") vividly chronicle, the instrument is not exclusively an agglomeration of extreme-pressure brass stops, layers of sizzling, chronically out-of-tune strings, and crashing basses. Indeed, there are moments when we hear delicate, clear ensembles, foundation stops of nobility and uncontaminated tone. The Boardwalk Hall organ, we can tell, is a real organ. Richards, it would seem, wheeled, dealt, and dreamed real art.

We learn something about Seibert Losh, too. For decades, the commonly remembered portrait of this otherwise forgettable, mainly local organ man was that of an eccentric-looking face with its prickly barbs of hair, bad haircut, and odd spectacles. But the measure of the artisan is in the doing. As the talking heads tell us, although otherwise a grade B organbuilder, Losh and his little company did splendid work on this job . . . and perished in the effort.

How ironic then, that this consuming passion would topple so many attached to it. Losh's little shop on Long Island sank as a consequence of the huge losses on the Convention Hall organ and of Richard's prevailing changes to the contract, which usually meant additional stops added at no additional charge. The Great Depression trampled Atlantic City and Richards. Losh, too late, sued the city for money owed him. Though he won the suit, his firm went under. Losh died. The organ itself suffered damage, beginning with the flooding from a hurricane in 1944, and ultimately the ravages of leaks, dirt, neglect, and aging. As is so often the tale, ham-handed "improvements" to the facility came at the expense of the organ. Installing air-conditioning prior to the 1964 Democratic Party Convention meant severed wind lines to the chambers flanking the side

galleries. Efforts to "protect" the remaining playing portions in the stage right main chamber meant laborers climbing through the organ to hang plastic, meanwhile crushing pipes and allowing concrete dust from demolition into the organ. That was the end. Clearly, the rough history of the world's largest musical instrument was but a portent of the decline of the city itself, an effect that lasted decades.

What remains now is the hope of resurrection. In an era where Atlantic City has been "rescued" through its consumerist reinvention as a place of corporate play, power, and glitz, is there room for such an expensive, old-tech toy as this? That is the decisive question, and the question that must be unsnarled in order to find the wherewithal and talent to return this landmark to playing condition. The obvious ironies surface. Who is today's Emerson Richards? Do the right-minded have the political clout? Who are the Seibert Loshes? Will they survive the effort?

But there is reason for optimism, even the glowing optimism voiced in the video. Resurrection has happened elsewhere. Boardwalk Hall itself has been beautifully restored and is in operation for the purposes it was conceived. The lovely 55-rank Kimball organ (also designed by Richards and also the concern of the ACCHOS) in the Boardwalk Hall ballroom is set for restoration (after workers there simply cut cables and disabled the relay during building renovation). The Organ Historical Society has awarded both instruments citations.

But perhaps the greatest cause for optimism is this video itself. Such an eloquent piece focused on the pipe organ ought to evoke notice by the community at large. One can hope that some wide distribution of this disc can stir up awareness, curiosity, and, ultimately, support. And that widespread awareness must include the secure recommendation here that this readership ought to step forward with its patronage, buy the disc, and play it for others, including those not in the organ community.

As a footnote, the special items on the disc include not just the home videos from various organ visits and tours of the chambers (with the audio of the amazed exclamations of the visitors at seeing things like pipes on 100-inch wind pressure bolted into place so as to keep from being launched out of their holes!), but a trailer to an upcoming video (in 2007) about organ preservation entitled "Enduring for a Reason." No Doubt, it will be another important document that ties together our past and our future.

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