

# Floods Damage Organs in Eastern Iowa

David C. Kelzenberg

Mother Nature showed her dark side during the month of June, with repeated thunderstorms dumping rain and more rain on the Midwest. Rivers, lakes, and reservoirs rose, eventually spilling over dams, levees, and banks, flooding some areas in unprecedented amounts.

Eastern Iowa was particularly hard hit, as cities along major rivers and tributaries were inundated by floodwaters. The massive Coralville Dam, built by the Army Corps of Engineers in the 1950s, was designed to control the Iowa River upstream of the towns of Iowa City and Coralville, while creating a huge water reservoir—a man-made lake designed for recreation, boating, swimming, and fishing. For only the second time in its history, the reservoir's capacity was exceeded, with water flowing freely over the emergency spillway of the massive dam and overrunning everything in its downstream path.

Both Iowa City and Coralville were impacted by the swiftly rising water. In Iowa City, the University of Iowa had built numerous buildings along the banks of the river, under the mistaken assumption that the Coralville Dam, some 10 miles upstream, would prevent future flooding of the Iowa River. Among the buildings constructed adjacent to the river is the Voxman Music Building, home to the university's School of Music. Named for the renowned educator and long-time School of Music director Himie Voxman, the Voxman Music Building has housed the university's School of Music since its construction in 1970. Along with other nearby buildings such as Hancher Auditorium, Clapp Recital Hall, the Theatre Building, the University of Iowa Museum of Art, and two art buildings, Voxman was built immediately adjacent to the scenic and usually tranquil Iowa River, a mistake that would come to haunt the university in 2008.

When it was apparent that a flood was coming, Iowa City and Coralville residents turned out in a massive sand-bagging effort. Walls of sandbags were erected along the riverbank and around low-lying buildings. But the rain kept coming, and so did the floodwaters. By the time the water stopped rising, every important university building along the river—the entire Fine Arts Complex, the Main Library, the Iowa Memorial Union, several other academic buildings, the university's largest dormitory, and its power generating plant, not to mention numerous homes and businesses in both communities, were flooded.

Some of the victims of this devastating flood were organs. In the Voxman Music Building, two large studio organs and several practice instruments were flooded with mucky river water to a depth of about 18 inches for over a week. The most serious loss was to the university's 1987 North German-style organ by Taylor & Boody, Op. 13, which has been widely acclaimed as a masterpiece. In the other teaching studio, a large two-manual tracker instrument by Schlicker was also severely damaged. In addition, three practice instruments, by Casavant, Brombaugh, and Holtkamp, suffered a similar fate. Fortunately, the water never reached the level of the pipes, but many parts such as blowers, winding systems, pedalboards, and actions were essentially destroyed.

According to Delbert Disselhorst, longtime chair of UI's organ department, the effect of the flooding has been devastating to the department. "All of these organs will be removed from the building and returned to organ builders for rebuilding. We estimate that the building itself will not reopen until the fall of 2009. However, it may be another year or more before the organs are back in place and ready to resume their teaching and recital



The Taylor & Boody North German-style organ at the University of Iowa being dismantled for shipment to the Taylor & Boody shop (Photo by William Dickinson)

duties." Gregory Hand, new professor of organ at Iowa, added a note of optimism. "The organs, despite everyone's best efforts, sat in 18 inches of dirty water for some nine days. However, everyone at the university has been extremely helpful towards the organ department, and there has never been any question whether the organs would be fixed."

Carroll Hanson, the curator of organs for the university, explained further. "The damaged organs included the university's original teaching instrument, a Holtkamp 'Martini', which is believed to be the last instrument built by Walter Holtkamp, Sr., in 1961. Also damaged were tracker practice instruments by Casavant and John Brombaugh. The



Pipes being removed from the University of Iowa's Schlicker organ (Photo by William Dickinson)



The University of Iowa's large Schlicker studio organ after most of the façade and pipes have been removed (Photo by William Dickinson)

large Schlicker studio organ, a two-manual tracker of about 25 stops, suffered severe damage to its winding system and mechanicals."

The most severe loss was the Taylor & Boody recital instrument, which has served as a focal point for teaching and

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Workers from the Bedient shop remove components of the Schlicker studio organ at the University of Iowa for restoration (Photo by William Dickinson)

recitals. Many students and guest artists have enjoyed its remarkable qualities since its installation. This instrument and the Brombaugh practice instrument will be returned to the Taylor & Boody shop in Virginia for restoration. Work on the large Schlicker instrument and the Holtkamp Martini will be undertaken by Gene Bedient's shop in Lincoln, Nebraska. The Casavant practice instrument will be returned to Casavant in St. Hyacinthe, Quebec, Canada, for restoration.

Fortunately, the Casavant recital instrument in Clapp Recital Hall was not damaged by the flood. This large concert instrument, reportedly the first large tracker instrument to be installed in a major American teaching institution in the 20th century, was installed in the new Clapp Recital Hall in 1971 under the supervision of the "father" of organ instruction at Iowa, the late Gerhard Krapf. But, while the organ sits high in the hall and remained above the floodwaters, the hall itself was inundated, and will require major renovation. Another survivor of the devastation, a small portable continuo organ by Taylor & Boody, was moved to the second floor before the waters rose, and was untouched by the floodwaters.

Other instruments at the university were also compromised by the flooding. Some pianos and a harpsichord were removed from the path of the rising waters, while others were not as fortunate.



The University of Iowa's Holtkamp "Martini" organ after the floodwaters receded. Damage and the high water line are clearly visible below the manuals. (Photo by William Dickinson)

Steve Carver, piano maintenance coordinator for the university, recalls details of their efforts to save the instruments. "We moved pianos all week until Friday the 13th (of June). We were initially told we could work through Friday but the river came up much faster than expected, so the building was locked down early Friday morning. We will lose about 25 upright

pianos, a mixture of Steinway and Everetts. We left nine Steinway grands on the first floor to finish on June 13, but were unable to access the building to complete the move. These will at the least require all new legs and lyres (about \$2000 per piano), but may well be totaled too.

"I am more concerned about what the exposure to high humidity after standing in 18 inches of water will do to the soundboards, etc. of the instruments. We were able to move about 20 more Steinways upstairs. But even these may suffer from lack of proper ventilation this summer and fall. I have been recently told that all 50 grands and uprights on the second floor will have to be relocated before winter.

"We removed the Italian harpsichord (built by the Zuckermann shop) from the building on June 12 and were planning to do likewise to the remaining two (a French double by David Rubio and a Flemish single by Edward Kottick) on June 13. As we were locked out of the building, these two stood in 18 inches of water for about nine days. I cannot comment on their condition other than to say there is a good chance they will be severely damaged. I have grave concerns in the long term how this flood will impact our inventory."

This is a crushing blow to the UI School of Music. However, their resolve to work through these problems remains strong. Teaching will continue for the current academic year in facilities provided elsewhere in town. Local churches in particular have opened their space for teaching. It is anticipated that the Voxman Music Building, Hancher Auditorium, and Clapp Recital Hall will reopen in time for the 2009–2010 academic year, although it is unclear whether the organs will be back in place by then. But return they will, hopefully in better shape than ever and with provisions in place to prevent repeating this sort of tragedy. The



The console of Wurlitzer Balaban 1A, Opus 1907 (1928), installed in the Paramount Theatre, Cedar Rapids, as it appeared before the June 2008 floods. Some decorative details were unique to this console.



The Paramount Theatre's Wurlitzer console as it appeared after the floodwaters receded. In this photo, the console rests on its back on the stage of the theatre. Parts of the damaged stage extension can also be seen adjacent to the console.

harpichords and pianos will also be restored, and music instruction will continue at the high level for which the University of Iowa has become known.

Meanwhile, in nearby Cedar Rapids, it was the Red Cedar River that caused problems, and if anything, the flood was even more devastating here than in Iowa City and Coralville. Organs were severely damaged in Cedar Rapids as well, although it was organs of a different type entirely.

The Red Cedar River runs through the heart of Cedar Rapids. Much of the city's history is tied to industry lining the river, and downtown Cedar Rapids is bisected by this body of water. In the middle of the river in the heart of the city, Mays Island has stood for hundreds of years. A prominent landmark, Mays Island is home to the city's municipal government, making Cedar Rapids one of just a few cities whose seat of government is located on an island. Also on the island are the courthouse and Veteran's Memorial Coliseum, home of a famous large stained glass window designed by artist Grant Wood. At the height of the flood, Mays Island was completely invisible, with only the tall buildings standing above the water to show where it once was.

Cedar Rapids knew a flood was coming, and her citizens prepared accordingly. As in Iowa City and Coralville, volunteers turned out in a monumental sand-bagging effort. What no one could have anticipated was the magnitude of the flood of 2008. The water rose, up and up, and UP, and when it peaked it had completely inundated Mays Island, downtown Cedar Rapids, and many residential neighborhoods near the river. Hundreds, if not thousands, of homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed. Countless people were left homeless, and the government offices of Cedar Rapids and many of its downtown and neighborhood businesses were compromised. Amid the devastation, overshadowed by the tragedies of people left homeless, businesses destroyed, and historic buildings damaged, two significant cultural icons were also devastated by the raging waters. These were architectural treasures: two historical theatres dating back to 1928, and musical treasures—the theatre pipe organs that they housed. While these instruments represent a tragic loss, things could have been worse.

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David Kelzenberg at the console of the "Rhinestone" Wangerin-Barton, Opus 510, installed in the RKO Iowa Theatre, Cedar Rapids, in happier days.



The Iowa Theatre Barton console after the floodwaters receded. This console sat in water up to its solo (top) manual for several days. Damage to the instrument and the muddy residue left behind by the floodwaters is clearly evident.

In 1929, the city was proud to acquire a new municipal organ, a 4-manual, 56-rank instrument built by the Ernest M. Skinner Company and installed in Veteran's Memorial Coliseum on Mays Island. If that important instrument were still installed in that arena, it would have been completely destroyed during this flood. Fortunately, it was spared this fate. In the 1950s, the instrument was moved to Sinclair Auditorium on the campus of Coe College, some 10 blocks above the high water line. As a result, it suffered no damage during the flood.

Unfortunately, Cedar Rapids' two historic theatre organs did not fare as well.

The beautiful Paramount Theatre, built in 1928, stands at the corner of Third Avenue and Second Street in the heart of downtown. Built in the grand style, this 2,000-seat movie palace was completely restored to its former glory just a few years ago to the tune of 7.8 million dollars. Its grand Hall of Mirrors, modeled after the great Palais de Versailles in France, ushered generations of moviegoers toward the opulent auditorium, where the sound of the 3/12 Mighty Wurlitzer beckoned. All of this glory came to an ignominious end during the first week of June, when the river crested its banks and inundated downtown Cedar Rapids.

A wall of water rushed through the Paramount Theatre building and into the auditorium. The heavy Wurlitzer console, raised on its lift to stage level in anticipation of the flood, was savagely tossed onto its back and onto the stage. The stage extension, built of heavy reinforced panels and extending over the orchestra pit, was knocked into complete disarray. In the end, some 8.5 feet of water covered the stage, organ console, and the entire auditorium. The lift and console were completely submerged for at least a week, and in the sub-basement, the organ's blower was under at least 30 feet of water.

Fortunately, the organ chambers were not breached by the water, or the tragedy would have been far worse. The pipes, percussions, and windchests, as well as the original Wurlitzer relay, appear to have been spared. The blower was not reachable until one full month after the floodwaters receded. It is damaged, but still responding to a turn of its motor.

The most serious loss is the console itself, which was virtually destroyed. While it was found essentially intact after the waters receded, the waters had weakened wood and joints, and it literally fell apart as workers carefully attempted to remove it from the theatre. This is particularly tragic as this was an unusual Wurlitzer console, with unique



In downtown Cedar Rapids, Mays Island, original home of the city's municipal Ernest M. Skinner organ, is completely under water. The organ was moved to the campus of nearby Coe College in the 1950s, and thus fortunately escaped the ravages of this monumental flood.

decorative details, controlling an unusual instrument. Classified by Wurlitzer as a model Balaban 1A, the Paramount's organ (Opus 1907) is the only extant instrument of this model still in essentially original condition, still in its original home. Only seven Balaban 1As were built by Wurlitzer, and this one has resided in the Paramount Theatre since opening night in 1928.

Like the theatre itself, the Wurlitzer organ is owned by the City of Cedar Rapids. It has been carefully maintained by, and at the expense of, the Cedar Rapids Area Theatre Organ Society (CRATOS) since that group was formed in 1969. CRATOS volunteers are working hard now to restore this organ to its former glory, but many questions remain about the structural integrity of the building, possible insurance coverage, and funding. The generous support of friends of the theatre organ will be needed to allow this special Wurlitzer organ to sing again. Obviously, the console will need to be completely rebuilt or replaced.

Meanwhile, at nearby Theatre Cedar Rapids (originally the RKO Iowa Theatre), Cedar Rapids' other historic theatre organ suffered a similar fate. Theatre Cedar Rapids is home to the celebrated "Rhinestone" Barton theatre organ (opus 510), so named because of its spectacularly decorated console. This is another unique instrument, the largest of several Bartons that were actually built by the Wangerin Company of Milwaukee, and like its Wurlitzer neighbor an original installation from the year 1928. As far as is known, this is the only organ ever delivered with a

console covered in black velvet, brilliant rhinestones, and sparkling glitter. This organ was historian and restoration expert David Junchen's favorite Barton organ, and anyone who has heard or played it in its original home in Cedar Rapids can understand why.

The news from Theatre Cedar Rapids is somewhat brighter than that from the Paramount. At First Avenue and Third Street, TCR is a bit further from the river, and there was no wall of water crashing into the building. But creep in it did, and although the console had also been raised to stage level in anticipation of the flooding, the water rose to about the level of its solo (top) manual, where it remained for several days. The console damage was disastrous. Fortunately, the blower and relay for this instrument are located at chamber level, so only the console and its Barton four-post lift were damaged by the floodwaters.

The Barton organ is owned and maintained by a small non-profit corporation, Cedar Rapids Barton, Incorporated (CRBI). The organ was not insured, and funds for its restoration will need to come from generous donors and grants. Already a grant has been provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, which has been used for the removal of the Barton console from the theatre and into safe storage where the damage is being assessed. However, significant funds are still needed to support the restoration or replacement of the organ's console and other work needed to bring the Rhinestone Barton back to life.

With all of the personal tragedies the people of Cedar Rapids and Eastern

Iowa have suffered as a consequence of this devastating flood, the restoration of these two historic theatre organs may seem an insignificant goal. Yet the people have demonstrated a strong will to restore their beloved theatres, which they consider important cultural landmarks for their city. Many of these same people have spoken out in support of restoring the organs, which they consider the "voice" of these theatres, providing much needed moral if not financial support. And it is the firm goal of CRATOS and CRBI working together to do whatever it takes to bring these unique historical instruments back to their former glory.

It will take time for these transformations to take place. And, it will take the generous financial support of many of our friends in the organ community and the music world. At the recent annual convention of the American Theatre Organ Society in Indianapolis, many people contributed to the cause of these two organs. But this is only the beginning. An online fundraising appeal is underway.

How can you help? If you would like to support the ongoing restoration and upkeep of the Cedar Rapids theatre organs, please consider making a contribution to the cause. You can do so online by visiting <www.cr-atos.com>, where you may make an online contribution and view many photos and news stories on the flood damage to the organs. You may also purchase a copy of "Back in the Black," Scott Foppiano's spectacular CD recorded on the Rhinestone Barton, proceeds from which will support the organ fund. Or, you can send a check (made payable to CRATOS) to CRATOS, PO Box 611, Cedar Rapids, IA 52406. You can designate your donation for the Wurlitzer, the Barton, or both. The people of Cedar Rapids thank you for your support and encouragement during these difficult times. ■

David C. Kelzenberg studied music performance and music theory at Quincy University and the University of Iowa. He has an interest in and has performed on all keyboard instruments, including organ, harpsichord, clavichord, and piano, and has made a special study of the history of early keyboard performance practice in the 20th and 21st centuries. He has taught music theory, French horn, trumpet, organ, and piano. His organ teachers have included Richard Haas, Rudolf Zuiderveld, and Gerhard Krappf. He is co-owner of the international Internet mailing list PIPORG-L (devoted to the organ), and founder and co-owner of HPSCHD-L (devoted to stringed early keyboard instruments such as the harpsichord and clavichord). He serves on the board of directors of the Midwestern Historical Keyboard Society, the Cedar Rapids Area Theatre Organ Society, and the Iowa City Early Keyboard Society.

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