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Author(s): Esther M. Morgan-Ellis

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ESTHER M. MORGAN-ELLIS

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# Edward Meikel and Community Singing in a Neighborhood Picture Palace, 1925–1929

During the mid- to late 1920s, most urban Americans sang popular songs with a group of strangers at least once a week. These sessions usually lasted about ten minutes, and participants read projected lyrics—they already knew the tunes—to the accompaniment of a theater organ. All of this took place at the local picture palace, a multimedia venue that combined motion pictures with live entertainment.<sup>1</sup> These stately theaters, found in cities across the nation after 1913, represented the cultural acceptance of motion pictures as a form of entertainment suitable for the middle class.<sup>2</sup> Since 1905, films exhibited in urban nickelodeon theaters had been attracting a primarily working-class audience. Members of the middle class were interested in film, too, but these potential customers were loathe to admit that they patronized the often-dingy nickelodeons.<sup>3</sup> To counteract negative associations between the motion picture and its rough clientele, picture-palace exhibitors offered their patrons every luxury, including air cooling, comfortable lounges, glamorous décor, and complimentary child care. Individual theaters replicated the architecture and ornamentation of famous palaces, opera houses, and hotels, while the attentive service made visitors feel like European nobility.<sup>4</sup>

Among the luxuries in store for the visitor was a diverse program of live entertainment, including an overture, an “organ solo,” and a stage

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Esther Morgan-Ellis is assistant professor of music history and world music at the University of North Georgia, where she also teaches cello. She has presented papers and lecture-recitals at meetings of the American Musicological Society, the Society for American Music, and the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (US branch), and at *Music and the Moving Image*. Her research concerns American community singing practices of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. Dr. Morgan-Ellis also teaches music history and theory in the vocal arts department at Interlochen Arts Camp.

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show.<sup>5</sup> The overture was presented by the house orchestra, while the stage show featured guest artists and local favorites, most of whom performed in costume before an elaborate set. Audience singing, which usually took place early in the program, was sometimes led by stage performers or bandleaders, or by sing-along films (popular from 1923 into the late 1930s). Most of the time, however, the organist led the community singing. The term “organ solo” is the trade designation for the portion of the show over which the organist had complete control. The organist could use his or her ten minutes in a variety of ways, but in many theaters the organ solo was dedicated to community singing.

This type of community musical involvement was directly influenced by two other singing practices of the early twentieth century: the illustrated song, which introduced participatory singing into the early movie theaters; and the community singing movement, which developed during the Great War as an expression of national unity and patriotism. Although both of these forms required audience participation, they were unrelated and dissimilar. The illustrated song relied upon a solo singer to present contemporary repertoire with an eye to the sale of sheet music. The war-era “community sing” eschewed solo performance and presented nineteenth-century or patriotic repertoire that urged participants to support American ideals.

The illustrated song was a turn-of-the-century musical presentation in which a recent song was brought to life with projected images. A performance required at least two participants: one (or two) to sing and play the piano, and one to operate the magic lantern. While the musician(s) rendered the song, the projectionist exhibited a series of pictorial slides designed to illustrate the text. The last slide in the series contained the words to the chorus and, most likely, an exhortation for all to join in.<sup>6</sup>

Community singing—a public activity that most often featured classic American songs—became very popular during the Great War, when it was used to boost patriotic spirit among soldiers and citizens. Even before the war, however, community organizations such as the Peabody Institute in Baltimore experimented with large-scale formal gatherings dedicated to participatory singing.<sup>7</sup>

The organizations and individuals who conducted and advocated these “sings” believed that community singing improved American society in two important ways. First, community singing encouraged the love of good music and spread music literacy. John C. Freund, founder and editor of the publication *Musical America*, announced in 1919 that community singing would eliminate the public taste for ragtime and jazz, and that vulgar dancing would be replaced by the waltz. With the aid of community singing, Americans throughout the nation would “gradually become inspired by music of a higher order,” especially opera.<sup>8</sup>

Advocates of community singing also used the activity to promote solidarity and neighborly spirit. In 1917, for example, the Los Angeles Board of Education inaugurated public community singing with the aim “of bringing the people of various sections of the city in closer touch with each other.” Miss Annie-Marie Clarke, who led the sessions, and the members of the board hoped that community singing would reduce conflict in the local population and improve mutual understanding. They also saw it as an opportunity to promote the assimilation of foreign-born residents.<sup>9</sup> In the next decade, many motion picture exhibitors hoped to accomplish the same goals when they offered community singing in the theater.<sup>10</sup>

By the mid 1920s, public community singing was no longer exclusively associated with patriotism or cultural uplift. Once the war had ended, members of the music industry quickly commandeered the practice of community singing. In order to capitalize on the sudden resurgence of popular interest in musical performance, music tradespeople—now organized as the National Bureau for the Advancement of Music—began to advocate for a “National Music Week,” intended to promote music literacy and familiarize the public with musical instruments.<sup>11</sup> While various activities were slated, “Music Week” was to rely first and foremost on bringing the public together through song. The *Music Trade Review* described the goal of “Music Week” as follows: “It may not result, of course, in people dropping other pursuits and rushing into piano or music stores to purchase, but it will turn their minds towards music, and having accomplished that much, open a way for musical instrument purchases in the future.”<sup>12</sup>

Although localized “Music Week” celebrations were offered as early as 1919, the vision for a “National Music Week” was not realized until 1924.<sup>13</sup> The community singing fad had finally reached every corner of the country. Over the next year, community singing would take root in picture palaces, introduced by organists who observed their patrons’ enthusiasm for the practice. These organists were supported in their efforts by sheet music publishers, who also hoped to profit. Due to the influence of these publishers, who provided both sheet music and sing-along slides for use with the theater’s projector, picture-palace audiences almost exclusively sang recent Tin Pan Alley hits (fig. 1).

For the most part, all organists relied on the same generic songs and lyric slides. Each organist, however, had his or her own performance style, stage persona, and favored repertoire, and each suited his or her talents to the requirements of the theater that offered employment. Some performers put a great deal of energy into designing original presentations and even creating their own slides. All the same, no organist was guided solely by his or her own preferences. For both players and exhibitors, theater location played an enormous role in determining the style of entertainment.

Downtown theaters were conveniently situated amid shopping and dining destinations, and they were highly visible to out-of-towners. Prime

**ORGAN  
PRESENTATIONS OF  
GREAT SONGS**

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**SMALL SLIDE SETS**

(I'm a Dreamer)  
**AREN'T WE ALL?**  
from "Sunnyside Up"

**LITTLE BY LITTLE**  
from "The Sophomore"

**LOOK WHAT YOU'VE  
DONE TO ME**  
from "Why Leave Home"

**DANCE AWAY THE  
NIGHT**  
from "Married in Hollywood"

**THE RIGHT KIND  
OF MAN**  
from "Frozen Justice"

**MARIANNE  
WHEN I SEE MY SUGAR**  
(I Get a Lump in My Throat)  
from "Marianne"

**IF YOU BELIEVED  
IN ME**

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**SPECIALS**

Medley of Hits from  
"Sunnyside Up"  
Introducing

**IF I HAD A TALKING  
PICTURE OF YOU  
AREN'T WE ALL?  
SUNNYSIDE UP  
YOU'VE GOT ME PICKIN'  
PETALS OFF O' DAISIES**

Medley of **AL JOLSON** hits from  
**SAY IT WITH SONGS**  
Introducing

**LITTLE PAL  
WHY CAN'T YOU  
USED TO YOU  
I'M IN SEVENTH  
HEAVEN**

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We Also Have Individual Chorus  
Sets for All Our Songs.

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Write for All Slides and Information to  
**SAM LERNER**, Mgr. of Publicity  
**De Sylva, Brown &  
Henderson, Inc.**  
7-17 7th Ave., New York City

location guaranteed success for most of these theaters, and managers of theater chains understandably banked on this success when they booked big-name performers, lavish stage acts, and first-run films into their downtown venues. These theaters relied heavily on itinerant patronage. Any single patron might attend infrequently, but a downtown house could count on steady box office numbers all the same.<sup>14</sup> Since any individual patron might never return, however, exhibitors did not trouble to build a sense of community or to link the theater with local interests. The sole duty of an organist at a downtown theater, therefore, was to entertain.

Organists in neighborhood theaters had other concerns.<sup>15</sup> These theaters depended on community support and patronage. Exhibitors were eager to keep neighborhood residents from patronizing the flashier, better-appointed downtown theaters, and they sought to secure local patronage by promoting community spirit and by joining forces with local businesses and organizations. Neighborhood organists played an important role in attracting a local audience as well. These organists presented the same songs and slides as their downtown counterparts, but with a local flavor that appealed to neighborhood patrons—and often accompanied by gimmicks meant to encourage regular attendance.

Figure 1. This advertisement for slides from the publishing firm DeSylva, Brown & Henderson appeared in the November 16, 1929, edition of *Exhibitors Herald-World*. Such advertisements were run weekly by a variety of publishers and listed the most popular songs and medleys currently available for use by theater organists.

At the Chicago Harding, a large neighborhood theater in the influential Balaban & Katz chain, the organist was largely responsible for the success of his theater. This article examines the presentation style that Edward Meikel (1897–1964) developed during his tenure as organist at the Harding. I will examine Meikel's tactics for attracting and maintaining an enthusiastic local patronage based on my assertion that his approach to entertainment was typical of urban neighborhood picture theaters in the 1920s.

### *The Chicago Harding*

The Harding Theater was located in the Logan Square neighborhood of Chicago, a district some six miles northwest of the Loop, Chicago's thriving center for entertainment and commerce. The Harding no longer stands, unlike many of the theaters in the Loop itself. Construction began under the auspices of Lubliner & Trinz, a competing Chicago exhibition firm, but the Harding became the property of Balaban & Katz—the largest and most powerful exhibition syndicate—due to a merger on July 15, 1925. The 2,962-seat theater opened its doors on October 12. The Harding was designed by Freidstein and Company in the Italian Renaissance and Neoclassical style (see fig. 2). It belonged to a trio of similar theaters that included the Congress and the Tower (these two theaters came into the possession of B&K some years later), but the Harding surpassed its siblings and was by all accounts among Chicago's "most elaborate" neighborhood houses (see fig. 3).<sup>16</sup> With its ornate interior and glamorous furnishings, the Harding cost a fantastic \$2 million to construct and, like most urban theaters, was installed in a large commercial structure that also contained offices and storefronts. While small compared to B&K theaters in Chicago's Loop, the Harding was exceptionally grand for the Logan Square neighborhood. It offered three complete shows each weekday and four on the weekend.<sup>17</sup>

On paper, the Harding appears to have been similar to the Balaban & Katz palaces found in the Loop: it showed the same films, presented



Figure 2. The exterior of the Chicago Harding. Courtesy Chicago Architectural Photographing Co. Collection, Theatre Historical Society.



Figure 3. The Harding's lobby. Courtesy Chicago Architectural Photographing Co. Collection, Theatre Historical Society.

the same stage acts, offered the same standard of service, and used the same programming formula. The Harding, however, operated at a disadvantage. To begin with, it was not among Chicago's first-run theaters, which at the time included only B&K's Chicago, Roosevelt, and McVickers, RKO's State-Lake, Warner's Orpheum, and the independent Monroe (all located in the Loop).<sup>18</sup> Instead, the Harding exhibited films booked by the B&K chain only after they had completed runs in other palaces. A similar arrangement governed the stage at that theater. The Harding was able to boast the same stage presentations that were seen at the Chicago but could only offer the shows weeks later, after they had passed through the Uptown.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the Harding did not get exclusive access to these outdated stage shows. When the presentations finally reached the neighborhood they were paired with a local twenty-four-piece orchestra directed by Benjamin Paley and then shared between the Harding and the Senate. While the stage show was at the Senate, the Harding made do with Art Kahn and his stage band.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the Harding was denied access to the true superstars of the B&K chain. The resident musicians were highly capable, but they didn't have the drawing power of bandleader Paul Ash at the McVickers or organist Jesse Crawford at the Chicago. Any Logan Square resident who wanted to hear the best stage band and see the latest acts could easily take a streetcar downtown for a show. A patron would only stay close to home if the Harding had something special to offer.

Of course most neighborhood theaters faced this challenge, and they generally responded with the same strategy. To provide something that the downtown palaces could not, a neighborhood theater emphasized its local connections. The manager and performers operated two parallel campaigns to achieve this goal. Inside the theater, they offered entertainment uniquely suited to the interests of the local clientele, or even utilized the patrons' talents. They also promoted and celebrated local events. Patrons in neighborhood theaters were on friendly terms with the theater employees and with one another, and could expect to see familiar faces. In short, these venues developed an atmosphere of camaraderie and neighborhood spirit. Outside the theater, the managers of neighborhood houses took a strong interest in community affairs, supporting local youth organizations, developing tie-ins with the local merchants, donating tickets to the community's less fortunate, and operating benefit performances near holidays.<sup>21</sup> Often the manager himself would be a prominent figure in community work, which would in turn generate good will and fierce loyalty to the theater.<sup>22</sup> When a neighborhood theater was functioning properly it was viewed not as an entertainment venue or a profit-driven business but as a community center. Local residents were encouraged to take pride in their theater, and the theater in turn was expected to make the community a better place in which to live and do business.<sup>23</sup>

The neighborhood theater of the mid-1920s also attracted a different economic demographic than did the downtown palace. Those lavish venues drew primarily middle- and upper-class patrons, while the working class stayed close to home so as to enjoy the convenience of proximity, the lower ticket prices, and the neighborhood culture.<sup>24</sup> In terms of character, the neighborhood theater was a hybrid between the contemporary picture palace and the early nickelodeon, an exhibition model that had thrived on local working-class attendance. Neighborhood theaters of the 1920s were larger than nickelodeons, usually seating between 300 and 1,000 patrons, and they offered an entertainment program based on that of the downtown palace, although budgetary constraints reduced the extravagance of the sets and the number of performers. Films were selected and even altered to suit the patrons, while stage shows and musical acts generally reflected the ethnicity of the local populace. Lizabeth Cohen, a scholar of Chicago's neighborhood theaters in the 1920s, sums up their appeal to the local workers: "For much of the decade, working-class patrons found the neighborhood theater not only more affordable but more welcoming, as the spirit of the community carried over into the local movie hall. Chicago workers may have savored the exotic on the screen, but they preferred encountering it in familiar company."<sup>25</sup>

In many ways, though, the Harding was an atypical example of a neighborhood theater. To begin with, at nearly 3,000 seats it was much larger than the average. The Harding also offered a higher standard of musical entertainment than the typical neighborhood house, which could



afford to employ only a keyboardist (piano or organ) or a small instrumental ensemble.<sup>26</sup> The Harding management had only limited control over the programming, since films, stage shows, and bandleaders were prescribed by Balaban & Katz. Logan Square was a predominantly Polish neighborhood, but any locals who desired ethnically flavored entertainment must have found it in other theaters.<sup>27</sup> All the same, we know that the Harding catered to a local, working-class clientele and that it fulfilled the same social role as other neighborhood houses.

The Harding is an attractive candidate for study because it received a great deal more press coverage than other neighborhood theaters. The first reason for this was its size. The second was its affiliation with Balaban & Katz, the largest and most influential theater chain in Chicago. Barney and A. J. Balaban and Samuel Katz, three entrepreneurs who opened their first Chicago theater in 1916, developed an approach to film exhibition that relied heavily on live performance, stage spectacle, and captivating theater personalities. Their enormous success inspired scores of imitators and led ultimately to a 1925 merger with Paramount.<sup>28</sup> Despite its pedigree, however, the Harding still suffered from a lack of press coverage. For example, there were 42 trade-press reviews of organ solos at the Harding between 1925 and 1929, whereas there were 154 reviews for organ solos at the Oriental, a Balaban & Katz house in Chicago's Loop, between 1926 and 1932. In addition to these reviews, however, the *Exhibitors Herald*—the leading film-trade journal—also published a number of articles specifically about the Harding, including an article and a letter written by Edward (“Eddie”) Meikel, the Harding’s organist (see fig. 4). Most of the trade-press accounts describe the extraordinary success of Meikel’s Organ Club, which generated much industry talk in the late 1920s.

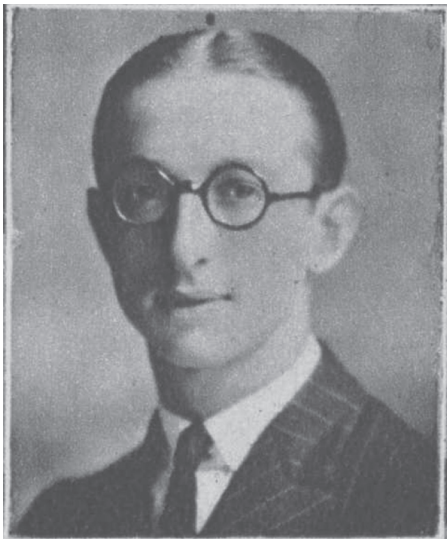


Figure 4. This photograph of Eddie Meikel appeared on the cover of a song for which he wrote the music: “I’ll Wait for You” (1929). The same photograph was also published in *Exhibitors Herald* in November 1927. By this time, he was well known to exhibitors throughout the nation for his innovative community-singing programs.

## Opening Week

When Balaban & Katz opened the Harding on October 19, 1925, they employed many of the commercial strategies that allowed a neighborhood theater to succeed. That splendid affair was best captured in the words of the *Exhibitors Herald*:

The pageant in celebration of the opening of the new theatre lasted eight days. On the night of the opening the streets of three locations were roped off for dancing. Bands played. A parade held the attention of a multitude. A public marriage was performed before the festal crowds. Each day differed from the other.

Friday was children's day. A special mardi gras was theirs.

October 19, the final day of the festivities, the girls living in the vicinity of the theatre took part in a beauty contest.<sup>29</sup>

The author noted that this wild celebration in the streets actually prevented people from entering the theater during its grand opening period, but he went on to praise the exhibitors for their clever marketing and foresight. Even if money was lost, "the effect of the carnival was of great value to the establishment of an amiable spirit towards the Harding."<sup>30</sup>

The street festival was neither the beginning nor the end of the publicity put together for the Harding's opening week. The management of the theater arranged for a ten-page spread concerning the Harding to be issued as a supplement to the October 12 edition of the *Chicago Evening American* (see fig. 5). From this feature locals learned that on opening

New \$2,000,000  
HARDING THEATRE OPENS TODAY!  
LUBLINER & TRINZ  
CELEBRATE 16th BIRTHDAY

FILM PALACE IS TERMED CASTLE OF DREAMS  
A Castle of Dreams!

FIRM CITY'S GREATEST THEATER BUILDER

WHERE YOU SEE L&T - IT'S A GOOD PICTURE!

Lubliner & Trinz' Sixteenth Anniversary

Figure 5. *Exhibitors Herald* reproduced the front page of the October 12 *Chicago Evening American* to accompany its article on the Harding's successful opening.

night their tickets were to be taken by none other than comedian and singer Eddie Cantor. Tickets themselves were sold by his Ziegfeld costar Mary Eaton, a dancer. Reviewers gave these two celebrities some of the credit for the 200-yard line that formed before the first performance at 6 p.m.<sup>31</sup> Once inside the theater, patrons were treated to another surprise. The feature film, First National's *What Fools, Men*, had been shot in Chicago—and it appears that some footage of a monument in the Logan Square neighborhood was incorporated into the film especially for its run at the Harding. The familiar sight “drew thunderous applause when flashed on the screen.”<sup>32</sup>

### *Initial Failures*

Eddie Meikel's predecessor at the Harding was organist Edward K. House, who opened the theater. Meikel replaced House after only a month, although a reason for the substitution was never published in the trade press. House, who spent his career rotating among B&K venues, had previously been at the Tivoli, a mid-sized B&K theater erected in the Woodlawn neighborhood in 1921.<sup>33</sup> He was only reviewed once while at the Harding. Although his solo lasted only five minutes, it proved to be a disaster far beyond its modest proportions. House, who “has a bad conception of what audiences want,” featured a pop number that had failed to make inroads with the music-loving public. After his straight version with slides met with an icy reception, House tried to engage the patrons in a song contest. No one sang, and his solo concluded in dead silence, all applause withheld.<sup>34</sup>

It wasn't easy for Meikel in the beginning either. In his first week he presented a typical introductory solo entitled “The Family Album,” which offered a comic glimpse of Meikel and his relatives. The solo did not include community singing. The *Variety* reviewer observed that it passed muster only because it “fitted the occasion,” but that Meikel would have to do better if he wished to make a career for himself at the Harding.<sup>35</sup>

The *Herald* waited until April 1926 to review the Harding, which neither offered much unique entertainment nor was a leader in the exhibition industry. The *Herald* had published a full-page article on the theater's opening only because the management employed excellent promotional techniques that others might want to emulate, a high-priority concern for that publication. When the *Herald* finally published its first review, Meikel did not fare well: “The only weak spot on the bill was that in which Edward Meikel, organist, sat.” It seems that Meikel had attempted to lead community singing with a set of humorous lyric slides, but few patrons joined in and “the whole affair was a dud.”<sup>36</sup>

Given the extraordinary success that Meikel was about to achieve with community singing, this account is fascinating. It may be, of course, that the *Herald* reviewer considered the solo to be a bigger flop than it really

was. The Chicago-based *Herald* staff was often critical of community singing. A typical 1926 *Herald* review of a performance at the Balaban & Katz Oriental, for example, described community singing as “the usually tuneless mouthings of the weaker-willed part of an audience.”<sup>37</sup> This characterization was quite in keeping with the tone of Chicago critics, who believed that community singing detracted from the artistic value of the program. However, that same journal (and probably the same author) began to provide Meikel with very positive reviews one year later, while praise from *Variety* was forthcoming even sooner. In this short time, Meikel made only one change: he developed an original and brilliant approach to the organ solo and community singing.

### *Meikel Develops the Organ Club*

For a neighborhood organist, Meikel attracted an extraordinary amount of attention from *Variety* beginning in April 1926. On April 21 the journal ran a full review of his work at the Harding—not with the other reviews, but as a highlighted feature at the front of the *Pictures* section. The review was provocatively titled “Novel Idea by Organist—New?” and it offered a detailed summary of Meikel’s innovative approach to the organ solo:

For his regular solo time allotment Meikel has formed an “organ club” along the lines of radio clubs and request programs. All patrons are requested to get into the spirit of the thing and send in requests for songs or ask questions pertaining to anything from love to business advice. The punch is that the names of those who ask for songs or send in questions are flashed on the screen along with whatever they want. As the Harding is somewhat of a neighborhood theater this name idea has a nice box office value. Everything is set to music.<sup>38</sup>

The reviewer suggests that Meikel might have already tried this stunt out at another theater—thus the qualifier, “New?”—but he reports that “it is new to Chicago and hit heavy.”<sup>39</sup> The next week *Variety* printed another short review: the Organ Club was “gaining in popularity,” and Meikel seemed to be on to a big thing.<sup>40</sup> While the Organ Club idea was to develop much further, these early accounts hit upon the key to Meikel’s success.

Meikel knew that the Harding attracted an audience of neighborhood regulars: patrons who attended the theater every week and were largely familiar with one another. In addition, Meikel noted that he was the only live performer who was present at every show. Art Kahn’s stage band alternated with the presentation unit from the Chicago Theater, such that Kahn was only at the Harding every other week. This arrangement offered Meikel the unique opportunity to connect with his audience on a personal level and to incorporate neighborhood patrons directly into

the show. He began with a simple plan. Regular patrons were invited to submit requests, a procedure that was not uncommon among theater organists. During the organ solo, however, Meikel publicly displayed the name of each Harding patron who had made a request. This unusual (and possibly unprecedented) tactic had two effects. First, patrons were thrilled to see their own names and to feel that they were a part of the show and the theater family. Second, patrons read the names of their friends and neighbors on the screen, which reinforced the notion that the Harding was a neighborhood institution that fostered community spirit. One reviewer noted "exclamations of recognition from all portions of the house" when the names were posted, an account that confirms the immediate impact of Meikel's request lists on his patrons.<sup>41</sup> Another observed that Meikel's "audiences enter with the hope of getting in some personal notes."<sup>42</sup> Audience members loved both to be publicly recognized and to recognize those around them, an experience that only a neighborhood theater could offer. The idea must have met with instant success, for the very next issue of *Variety* featured a paid advertisement for Edward Meikel and his Organ Club (fig. 6). Balaban & Katz would not have invested in this sort of publicity unless they believed that Meikel's new idea had the potential for large box office returns (figs. 7a-b).

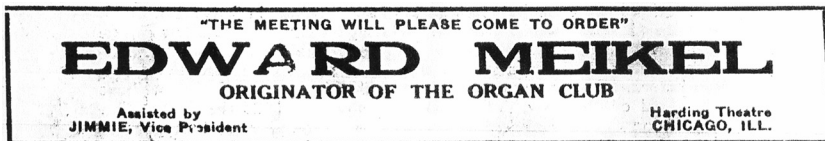
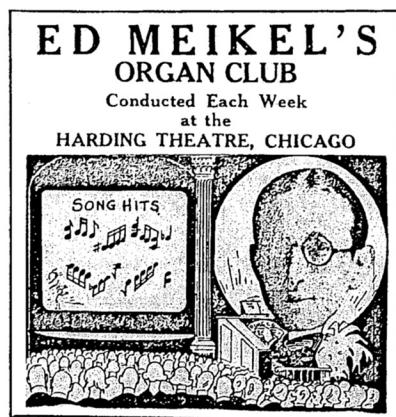


Figure 6. A *Variety* ad for Eddie Meikel and his Organ Club, published in May 1926.



Figures 7a-b. These two advertisements were both published in *Exhibitors Herald*: the first in August 1927 and the second in February 1928. By this time, Meikel's Organ Club was heavily advertised across the trade press.

One week later, *Variety* again reviewed Meikel's work at the Harding. This reviewer echoed a line from the April 21 article when he made an explicit comparison between Meikel and another Chicago organist who was famous for leading community sings: Henri Keates, organist at the Balaban & Katz McVickers Theater. The reviewer pointed out that community singing, while not new to Chicago, served the same purpose at both the Harding and the McVickers: "it thaws out the audience" and prepared them to enjoy the stage show in good humor. However, the reviewer also noted that "Meikel has gone one better" than Keates, and that his Organ Club idea produced even more successful results. Meikel extended the period of community singing beyond the standard time allotment for an organ solo, to the delight of his enthusiastic club members. In the view of the trade press, Meikel had latched onto something unique and highly lucrative.<sup>43</sup>

When *Variety* wished to feature an exceptional presentation whose basic idea others would be advised to consider, the journal extracted the offering from the *Film House Reviews* column, where entire programs were summarized, and instead printed an extended review under *New Acts*. Meikel achieved this honor in August 1926. The review was printed "by request," perhaps on behalf of the many readers who had inquired about Meikel's work. Near the top of the review, *Variety* included a warning to any who sought to imitate Meikel's strategy: "It must be remembered that the Harding is a neighborhood theater and that portions of his stunt would not work in downtown or 'transient' houses."<sup>44</sup> Trade professionals recognized the difference between the Harding, which catered to a regular, local clientele, and a house like the McVickers, which entertained visitors to the city and could not risk alienating the out-of-towner. Meikel took full advantage of his position as a neighborhood organist.

### *Features of the Organ Club*

Initially, membership in Meikel's Organ Club was not a formal affair. His patrons did not fill out applications or receive membership cards, although some of Meikel's imitators later used such devices. Instead, the "Organ Club" was a vague and fluid institution to which all patrons belonged by merit of their attendance.<sup>45</sup> Later, Meikel accepted letters from his patrons in which they requested membership, and he assembled a mailing list of members to whom he sent updates in the form of "Club Letters."<sup>46</sup> With or without formal membership the notion of a "club" was valuable, for it encouraged regular attendance and fostered a sense of belonging and civic pride.

Each meeting of the Organ Club opened with an official "call to order," which set Meikel's feature apart from the rest of the program and indicated that this was not an ordinary organ solo.<sup>47</sup> The call to

order also shifted the balance of power in the theater. As a paid performer, the organist could never achieve social equality with his patrons, no matter how friendly and engaging his persona. His position at the organ gave him special control over the music and the audience. In high-class theaters that featured high-class entertainment this did not present a problem—those organists relied on their position of cultural authority.<sup>48</sup> In theaters that sought a more relaxed atmosphere, however, an organist could bridge the gap between performer and audience through a variety of means. Meikel's call to order transformed the Harding's constituency from passive consumers into participating club members, and it transformed Meikel himself from detached musician into social-club president—still in charge, but of a kind with his patrons.

A core feature of the club, as already mentioned, was the displaying of names of all those who had submitted requests. After some months, though, Meikel had to discontinue this procedure because his club had grown much too large.<sup>49</sup> Instead, Meikel incorporated the names of his club members into the program on a variety of other pretexts. First he began to list the names of local brides and grooms, accompanied by the community singing of parody lyrics—set to comic tunes—with which the patrons conveyed their best wishes.<sup>50</sup> Later, he listed the birthdays of club members each week. (This was only possible once patrons began to register their membership in 1927.) With the list of member birthdays on display, Meikel led the singing of a special "Birthday Song" that he had composed himself and that members had memorized.<sup>51</sup> Anniversaries, births, and any other cause for community celebration also found a place in Meikel's presentations, and the appropriate song for the occasion always made an appearance.<sup>52</sup> In his attempt to incorporate individual patrons into the program, Meikel did not limit himself to names: to celebrate Mother's Day in 1927, he projected photographs of local mothers onto the screen during a medley of appropriately themed songs. A gimmick like this could not have been used at a downtown house, but it had a tremendous effect on patrons at the Harding.<sup>53</sup>

Meikel's club meeting agenda was always "entertainingly presented." For example, under "New Business" Meikel would introduce a tongue-in-cheek issue for his patrons to vote on, such as "Should dresses be longer or shorter?" The membership voted by singing specially written parodies on the topic at hand. Meikel also incorporated Logan Square happenings into the meetings whenever possible. This last issue was near and dear to Meikel, who wanted patrons to embrace the Harding as their personal social club. "I keep reminding the members," he wrote in November 1927, "that the Harding theatre is *their* clubhouse, and that the 'Organ Club' is *their* club." And that club had now reached a membership of 5,000 patrons.<sup>54</sup>

### *Organ Solos at the Harding*

Meikel may have initially won over his audience with the interactive and personalized Organ Club approach, but he sustained that loyal following on the basis of his skill as an organist and showman.<sup>55</sup> He offered excellent organ specialties that would have satisfied a singing audience anywhere, into which he integrated local touches and audience-request numbers. Meikel often abandoned the idea of a theme—which many organists relied upon to unify their solos—and simply led his patrons in singing favorite songs. He also employed standard community-singing gimmicks, like an on-stage thermometer that supposedly registered the volume of sound produced by the audience.<sup>56</sup> Some of his scripted solos, such as a 1927 “school-day” stunt in which songs were presented as lessons and the audience played the role of obedient pupils, were found in singing houses everywhere.<sup>57</sup> However, Meikel’s most innovative and fascinating solos fell into two distinct categories: presentations that celebrated the Harding’s performers and staff members, and solos that incorporated patrons beyond the listing of names and the projection of photographs. We shall look at each of these in turn.

It was not unheard of for an organist to feature other performers in his solo. At the Chicago Oriental, for example, Henri Keates, Preston Sellers, and Milton Charles all presented solos in honor of Paul Ash, the celebrity bandleader who was the Oriental’s biggest draw.<sup>58</sup> These miniature celebrations served two purposes. First, they portrayed the Oriental performers and patrons as an affectionate family in order to promote community sentiment. (The Oriental, while a downtown house, fostered a lively and informal atmosphere.) Second, they boosted Ash, the theater’s headliner. Meikel presented similar tributes at the Harding: he celebrated the theater’s master of ceremonies, Mark Fisher, on several occasions (fig. 8). On the other hand, Meikel explored new territory when he featured members of the theater staff who never appeared in the spotlight. Finally, Meikel promoted various Balaban & Katz stars, some of whom performed at the theater and some of whom did not. It seems likely that these presentations were provided by B&K.

Mark Fisher certainly had a local fan base, but he was not a draw for the Harding like Ash was for the Oriental. Meikel was the star, and he did not rely on Fisher to keep his own career afloat. Meikel featured Fisher in his organ solo on three occasions. In two cases Fisher had been absent for some time, so Meikel led his patrons in a communal welcome to celebrate the return of their master of ceremonies. The other instance was a celebration of Fisher’s first year, for which the Harding patrons sang the traditional “Happy Birthday” song that Meikel had composed for them.<sup>59</sup> To celebrate Fisher’s return in July 1927 the club members sang a special version of “Hello, Aloha” that began, “Hello, Mark Fisher, We’re Glad





Figure 8. This photograph of Mark Fisher was published in an April 1927 issue of *Exhibitors Herald*. The caption described him as “the Chesterfield of bandshow leaders.” In addition to his career as a band leader and master of ceremonies—first with Lubliner & Trinz and later with Balaban & Katz—Fisher was also a celebrated banjo player.

You’re Back.”<sup>60</sup> The “return” solo of January 1928 was billed as “Welcome Mark” but consisted primarily of standard community-singing numbers. At the conclusion of the singing Meikel “requested his members to give Mark the usual club cheer,” which they did with gusto.<sup>61</sup> It is not clear whether Fisher was present to receive these accolades on any occasion, but of course the celebration was really for the patrons, not for the MC. When Meikel and his followers welcomed Fisher back to the theater they reaffirmed the notion that the Harding had become a family in which every member was important. The role of MC was not just a position, and Fisher was not a mere employee. Instead, the patrons were inspired to feel a unique loyalty to Fisher and, by extension, to Meikel and the theater. This model—theater-as-family—was anything but uncommon, but Meikel carried the idea further than had any other performer.

In March 1928 Meikel presented an unusual solo in which he introduced his audience to “every man and woman in the employ of the theatre.” This included ushers, receptionists, doormen, projectionists, and stagehands—all of the picture-palace functionaries that usually remained nameless and even invisible. The presentation featured a photograph of each employee, beside which was printed their position in the theater and “a clever little verse about them.”<sup>62</sup> These verses would have been accompanied by a familiar tune, and they may even have been sung out loud.

On other occasions, Meikel incorporated the staff into his solos as bit players. In early 1927 Meikel presented his organ solo as an argument

between himself and the motion-picture operators. The text of the argument, projected onto the screen, was set to the tunes of various Irish songs. Comedy slides based on "Hello, Swanee, Hello" were interspersed throughout, and of course the program consisted primarily of community singing.<sup>63</sup> The contents of this argument have unfortunately been lost, but the identity of the interlocutors is of great interest. In a downtown theater, patrons were encouraged to forget that motion-picture operators existed at all. To contemplate the film projector and the men who controlled it was to tear down the traditional veil of illusion. From the beginning, picture-palace entertainment had thrived on fantasy and escapism. It was counterproductive to remind visitors that they were in a theater, and that the spectacle of wealth and luxury was both temporary and imagined. Meikel, however, explicitly drew his patrons' attention to the projection booth and its occupants, thereby furnishing his audience with a glimpse into the "family" affairs of Harding employees: real people who had lives outside the show—and bickered like anyone else.

In other solos, Meikel featured his own patrons. The Organ Club format was the perfect venue in which to boost the audience, for club members already possessed a form of recognition (their memberships) and already contributed to organ-solo programming via weekly requests. Meikel took audience participation a step further by importing the atmosphere of a club meeting into his solos. Meikel's patrons exercised an active presence in the organ solo, just as they would in the club room. Sometimes the patrons were featured as characters in the lantern-slide narrative. On such occasions their influence on the solo, although predetermined, took center stage. Sometimes the patrons were allowed an active voice and had the power to change the presentation's outcome. And other times the community singing feature itself was exaggerated until the patrons became stars in that activity.

Though some of Meikel's audience-boosting tactics were employed in downtown palaces as well, three things in his approach stand out as exceptional: the role of the Harding as a neighborhood house, the frequency with which Meikel as organist featured his audience, and the changes that he made to the content and delivery of his solos. The standard way for any organist to flatter his audience members was to present fan letters on the screen. This procedure indicated that audience opinions were taken seriously and that patrons had real influence over the entertainment. At the same time, a fan-letter solo moved the spotlight onto the audience and even turned some lucky patron into a celebrity—at least for a few minutes. In truth, though, the "fan letters" were usually faked to suit the organist's design. It may be that patrons were fully aware of this, especially in a few outrageous cases. Either way, most of Meikel's club members were pleased to be the focal point of the solo.

The fan-letter solo was particularly popular, and it appeared in theaters across the country. In 1927 Bob West projected a fan letter at the

Houston Metropolitan in which a young girl begged that West play a sad song so that the girl's sweetheart should take pity on her.<sup>64</sup> In 1930 Bill Meeder of the Richmond Hill RKO displayed a letter from a young man who wanted advice on how to propose, while the next year Russ Henderson of the Worcester Plymouth presented handwritten letters full of "the oddest requests and 'lines' this audience has ever seen."<sup>65</sup> Most of these letters were undoubtedly forgeries, designed to deliver humor or pathos and to introduce songs already selected by the organist. In the case of Meikel and his Organ Club, most of the letters at least took on the appearance of being genuine. That club members did in fact make requests on a regular basis made the stunt all the more believable.

The trade press was less trusting of the fan-letter gimmick. In a *Herald* review from April 1927, we learn that Meikel projected onto the screen "an open letter supposedly written by one of his club members."<sup>66</sup> Later in the same year Meikel offered a "Request" solo that featured a series of fan letters, each of which introduced a community singing number.<sup>67</sup> There is no indication that these letters weren't genuine, although the status of their authenticity is less important than Meikel's use of the fan letters. Organists in other theaters employed them to put across gags or frame the community singing. At the Harding, fan letters were an extension of the fleeting celebrity already granted to patrons who submitted requests. Meikel's fan-letter solos featured the patrons, if only through a surrogate, and emphasized the spotlighted role of the club member.

Patrons also had the opportunity to influence the entertainment directly while the picture show was underway. The most basic manifestation of this power was applause, which audiences everywhere used to express their satisfaction and to encourage certain modes of entertainment. Picture-palace patrons—who at least aspired to high culture—never expressed disapproval by booing or hurling objects. At worst, an audience would respond with silence.

Organists who featured community singing often explicitly invited patrons to direct the course of the entertainment. In one popular stunt, the organist would invite his patrons to decide a question. This opportunity to participate beyond the usual singing allowed an audience to express its feelings on an issue and, in some cases, actually determine the program. The "voting" element in a solo also encouraged more enthusiastic singing, since each patron was eager to voice his opinion. The sorts of questions put to the audience were often intended to have a single "right" answer, and the resulting agreement among the patrons reinforced their ties both to one another and to the theater. In 1930, for example, Fred Kinsley at the New York Hippodrome asked for his patrons' opinions on Prohibition. He provided three songs—one for enforcement, one for reform, and one for repeal—and invited each patron to sing the song that corresponded with her position. To the surprise of no one, those in favor of repeal (not the final option by chance) produced the loudest singing.

The patrons were then rewarded with another chorus of the song that had represented the vote for repeal, "Happy Days Are Here Again."<sup>68</sup>

Two of Meikel's voting-style solos were reviewed in the trade press. Neither of these presentations was particularly original, but both were well suited to the patronage and met with great success. Shortly after he created the Organ Club in 1926, Meikel offered a solo in which he asked the audience to help him decide whether to get married or not. Meikel provided specially composed lyrics with which the patrons could cast a vote for or against. After patrons had taken sides, Meikel projected a slide that read, "I will be married in October." Then, as half of the audience burst into applause, he changed to a slide that read "1982." This howl-inducing gag was followed by a short session of community singing, for which "so much good feeling had been worked up . . . that the choruses were practically shouted."<sup>69</sup> Meikel's solo demonstrates the organist's power to provoke and then diffuse tension. His introduction of a humorous punchline assured universal goodwill at the end, which allowed each participant to hold onto his or her point of view without threatening the harmony within the theater community.<sup>70</sup>

One year after Meikel asked his patrons to vote on the subject of marriage, another important Chicago organist offered a similar solo. Albert F. Brown, famous for his unique stage presentation solos, queried audiences about marriage at the Granada and Marbro theaters, two Marks Brothers houses located in the Rogers Park and Garfield Park neighborhoods respectively. While Brown's text also played on a cynical view of marriage, he steered clear of almost all humor and chose instead a serious conclusion: a "human-interest presentation" on the stage that featured a man, woman, and baby in a portrayal of domestic bliss.<sup>71</sup> This serious note suited Brown, who had made his name with the attractive and sentimental stage productions that accompanied his organ solos.<sup>72</sup> This approach would not have worked with Meikel's patrons, who preferred humor and rambunctious community singing.

Organists also involved patrons in the solo by singling out exceptional singers and spotlighting their talents. For example, at the turn of the decade both Adolph Goebel of the Yonkers Loew's and Preston Sellers of the Chicago Oriental offered similar solos intended to seek out vocal talent for the newly emerging talkies.<sup>73</sup> To conduct the search, an assistant moved up and down the aisles with a portable microphone and invited patrons to sing, one at a time. The sound was projected through amplification horns hidden backstage. Sellers's audience "applauded enthusiastically" after each person had completed the test, but Goebel found it necessary to minimize the embarrassment that some of his patrons experienced with a hearty round of community singing at the conclusion.<sup>74</sup> In both cases, however, the solo was a great success.

When Meikel decided to use this technique, he embellished it with an additional trick that he knew his would enjoy: he planted a song plug-

ger in the audience. When Meikel called his “volunteer patron” up to the stage, he presented him with a “mammoth cigar” (proportioned so as to let the audience in on the joke) and then invited the plugger, Jack Perry, to sing a number.<sup>75</sup> Pluggers did not appear regularly in Meikel’s solos; in fact, this one example was never duplicated. While there is no indication that Perry’s appearance provoked a negative reaction, the club idea was inimical to outside performers. Meikel developed a reputation for his avoidance of “out and out plugging”—quite the opposite of many other organists, even some so renowned as Jesse Crawford, who plugged songs ostentatiously at the most prestigious theater in the nation: the Paramount in New York City.<sup>76</sup> Meikel’s patrons all lived locally and all attended on a weekly basis. He evidently concluded that if he annoyed his club members with constant plugging, they would defect to another theater.

A year later Meikel featured the voices of his own (genuine) patrons. He informed his audience that during the community singing he would “auction off” sheet music to the loudest singers. Two ushers passed out music to members of the audience while he played, and at one point Meikel himself climbed onto the stage in order to throw rolled-up music into the balcony. It was not uncommon for Meikel to leave his console to encourage the audience in their vocalizing, a “cheer-leading” practice that was widely decried in the trade press.<sup>77</sup> The solo was a smashing success and required an encore.<sup>78</sup> Although the patrons featured in this solo were tangibly rewarded for their exuberance, none of them were actually invited to show off for their peers. Meikel’s auction solo was primarily designed to encourage wholehearted participation. Just one month earlier, for example, Meikel had led a community singing session in which his console began to sink back into the orchestra pit whenever participation flagged.<sup>79</sup> This gimmick, used by many organists, provoked laughter and kept the energy level high. The auction, organ lift, and thermometer gags all introduced a “reason” to sing and helped many participants to overcome any self-conscious tendencies.

One of Meikel’s audience-centered solos stands out as uniquely suited to the neighborhood house. To celebrate the third anniversary of the theater, Meikel projected the name and birthday of every member of his organ club onto the screen. Then he led the club members in singing the official songs for the Rotarians, Lions, Kiwanis, and American Legion clubs, all organizations to which patrons belonged.<sup>80</sup> This program achieved a number of Meikel’s objectives as a neighborhood theater musician. First, the singing of club songs demonstrated that patrons were not only moviegoers but active members of the Logan Square community as well. We have seen a number of examples in which organists humanized themselves or their fellow performers, but in this case Meikel humanized his patrons. He permitted each of them to transcend the role of entertaineé and to express deeply held commitments within the context of the theater. Second, the singing

of club songs spotlighted the idea of community organizations, which in turn validated the Organ Club as a legitimate body of civic-minded locals. Finally, in order to celebrate the theater, Meikel wisely chose to celebrate the community. Because the Harding, like all neighborhood theaters, relied on its ties to the community, any endorsement of that community could only strengthen the theater.

Meikel's style of presentation could perhaps be found in many other neighborhood theaters, even though no accounts of them exist in the trade press. (Few neighborhood theaters were reviewed at all.) Meikel's approach would have been inappropriate in a downtown palace, which would more likely entertain its audience with recent hits rather than the singing of club songs. Downtown palaces sought to homogenize their audiences, the members of which came from varied backgrounds and social classes.<sup>81</sup> It was not in the exhibitor's interest for patrons to identify with clubs or other social organizations. Patrons had more in common in a neighborhood house, and could therefore express a greater degree of individuality without the threat of disharmony. The theater community thrived on personalized contributions in many different forms and on the notion that the theater itself had now become an important community center belonging to the neighborhood.

### *Meikel's 5,000th Performance*

The notion that the Harding belonged to the residents and merchants of Logan Square was never better expressed than on the occasion of Meikel's 5,000th performance at the Harding in November 1929. To celebrate his extraordinary success, local merchants came together to launch a newspaper-based exploitation scheme that would solidify the organist's position as a community institution and boost their own enterprises in the process. The *Logan Square Life*, a community newspaper that enjoyed wide circulation in the neighborhood, dedicated an entire issue to the celebration of this performance (fig. 9).<sup>82</sup> A cover story featured Meikel's Organ Club and described the success and notoriety he had achieved with it over the years. The highlight of the issue was a series of congratulatory advertisements placed by local businesses, many of which included photographs of Meikel patronizing their neighborhood stores. In addition, a commissioned drawing of Meikel was cut up and cleverly dispersed throughout the advertisements in the paper. The local merchants offered a prize to the reader who could best fit the pieces together.

This newspaper extravaganza, inspired by Meikel's contributions to the community, greatly benefited all of those involved. In a single stroke, *Logan Square Life* generated goodwill among its readership—most of whom were enthusiastic members of the Organ Club—and increased advertising revenue due to the congratulatory notices inserted by local merchants. The merchants themselves benefited from association with

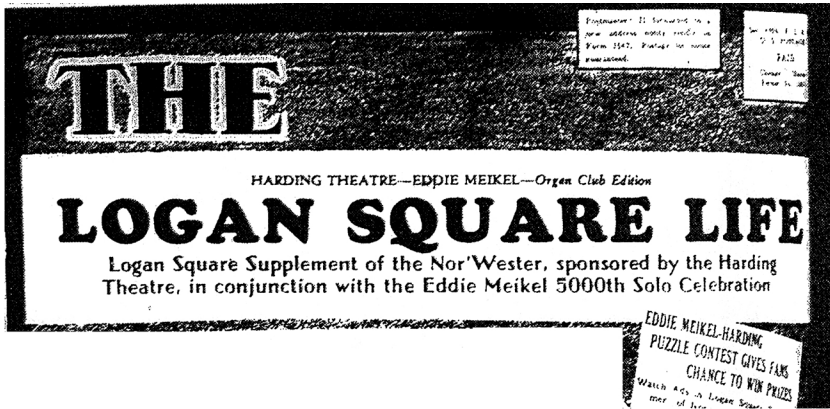


Figure 9. In November 1929, *Exhibitors Herald* reproduced the front page of the *Logan Square Life* issue dedicated to Meikel and his Organ Club.

a neighborhood favorite, as well as from their puzzle-piece promotion. The Harding received free publicity of a kind far more effective than any paid advertisement. And, of course, Meikel himself basked in this “testimony to the friendship and esteem which he has merited for his faithful and completely successful work at the Harding.”<sup>83</sup>

While this celebration of Meikel’s 5,000th performance obviously affirms his enormous success with the Organ Club idea, it also bears witness to two important facts about the Harding and its position as a neighborhood theater. First of all, the investment of the Logan Square business community into promoting Meikel says far more about his reception and influence than reviews and the trade press alone can ever say. Second, this promotional stunt demonstrates the unique position of a neighborhood theater. All of the Logan Square businesses, including the Harding, relied overwhelmingly on local patronage. This reciprocity between the theater and the neighborhood business district was a crucial factor in its success. This prestigious position was hard-won, for the Harding initially had to prove its value to the community—both on a social and a commercial level—in order to succeed. Here we might recall the expensive street festival that celebrated the theater’s opening in 1925, an investment on the part of the Harding to ensure the goodwill of the Logan Square neighborhood. Only with persistence and the insightful, community-boosting contributions of Meikel could the Harding have achieved its enviable position in the local economy.

### *The Spread of Meikel’s Organ Club Idea*

In a 1928 article entitled “Organ Clubs Draw Good Patronage,” *Herald* commentator A. Raymond Gallo lamented the lack of organ clubs, despite the

many advantages they afforded.<sup>84</sup> Gallo, a longtime trade journalist who was in an excellent position to survey the field, was doubtless correct in his observation. At the same time, it seems that a few organists began to imitate Meikel's Organ Club idea almost immediately. We know that he inspired imitators within the first year of his experiment and that these imitators generally met with a great deal of success.

Among the first to jump on this bandwagon was Clark Fiers of the West Side, a neighborhood theater in Scranton, Pennsylvania. In early 1927 Fiers published an article offering advice on how to conduct community singing. Among his recommended tactics was the "community singing school," an organized approach to singing during the exhibition program that was based on Meikel's club. Fiers had recently started his own "West Side Singing School," an effort that he expected to pay off in the near future even though his patrons weren't "singing so loudly and lustily yet." Although Fiers does not mention Meikel by name, he does pay him an obvious tribute: "One familiar Chicago organist has every audience at his feet, literally, and how they sing with him."<sup>85</sup> Any *Herald* reader would have immediately recognized Meikel as the originator of the club idea, and this description of his success rings true with other published accounts.

One year later the Organ Club idea returned to Chicago, when Chauncey Haines of the B&K Norshore inaugurated his own club for patrons drawn from the Evanston and Rogers Park neighborhoods. Haines invited patrons to become official members of his new organ club and to submit requests each week. He then conducted a singing contest between the two neighborhoods represented by the Norshore patronage, a good-natured exhibition of community spirit that resulted in an encore and much good cheer.<sup>86</sup> Contests had become a staple in all singing houses, but only a neighborhood theater could reliably assign teams based on local residence instead of, say, by gender or hair color. Neighborhood loyalty doubtless inspired the patrons to greater effort as well.

The Organ Club idea took root not only in neighborhood theaters but also in small-town theaters. Exhibitors in both of these situations faced the same problems and opportunities, since they each catered to a local population. Few small-town organists were covered by the trade press, but in 1928 Charles Kusserow was acknowledged for his success with an organ club. Kusserow was organist at the Adler Theater in Marshfield, Wisconsin, a rural town located some distance from any major city center. Kusserow's strategy was to mail each patron of the theater a letter in which he invited the recipient to fill out the attached membership card and join his organ club. Kusserow named his club the "I Scream Club" so as to clearly indicate its primary function: community singing.<sup>87</sup> Another small-town organ club cropped up in Lockport, New York, at the Palace



Theater. Here organist E. B. Davis adopted the slogan "All for Fun and Fun for All" to characterize his organization.<sup>88</sup>

In later years the organ club became a lifeline for console artists who struggled to retain a theater post. The introduction of film sound at the end of the decade threatened theater musicians everywhere, and organists in neighborhood and small-town houses were the first to go. In 1929 Paul H. Forster, organist at the Eckel Theater in Syracuse, developed a Meikel-style organ club in order to prove his value to the management. Eckel's club revolved around audience requests. To facilitate these, he installed in the lobby a box of request cards on which a patron might write a request, name, and address. An average of 4,000 requests were submitted each week. Forster would then choose which numbers he wished to play and decide in which week each number would be performed. Once a schedule had been drawn up, Forster would send a printed card to each patron who had successfully submitted a request that read: "Dear Patron: I thank you for your request. . . . will be played for you in my Novelty during the week of . . . I hope you will be here to sing with the Organ. Cordially yours, Paul H. Forster, Organist." Forster would then project the names of every patron whose request was to be played at the beginning of the organ solo, at which point those patrons became official members of the Eckel Organ Club. As the idea developed, the community newspaper provided assistance by printing regular notices about it. The management observed that the box office receipts were up, since every patron who had a request accepted was sure to attend the theater during the week in question. In this way, Forster was able to secure his position for quite some time.<sup>89</sup>

### *Epilogue: A Word from Meikel*

Eddie Meikel was not only a successful organist and community-sing leader; he was also a vociferous defender of community singing in the trade press. In 1926 and 1927 the *Exhibitors Herald* published a series of attacks against community singing. These attacks were penned not only by the trade journal's writers but by several notable theater organists as well. The first came from William R. Weaver, an *Exhibitors Herald* critic who penned a regular column on stage presentation in the picture palace. His initial article, titled "Why Not Play the Organs?," highlighted the first objection made by critics of community singing: the organ, a "great instrument" installed at enormous expense, was wasted on community singing.<sup>90</sup> In his follow-up a month later, Weaver emphasized the "prestige effect" of the organ, an attribute that was permanently undermined by audience participation.<sup>91</sup> Weaver viewed the organ as a high-class instrument that should be reserved for dignified entertainment. He was

not alone in this opinion. Organist Albert F. Brown, who boasted a reputation for artistic organ presentations, also argued that every organist must fulfill the potential for prestige inherent in his instrument.<sup>92</sup>

Weaver also took aim at the figure of the organist. In both of his 1926 articles, Weaver argued that community singing did not permit capable organists to fulfill their potential. He hoped that the value of all true artists would be acknowledged once the singing craze passed. He also predicted that organists who were “near-comics getting away with the current murder”—that is, using techniques such as Meikel’s to mask their incompetence—would disappear into ignominy as soon as community singing faded in popularity.<sup>93</sup> A year later, the *Herald* suggested that community singing could destroy the reputation of a “name” organist and reduce his value as a box office draw. The journal encouraged all organists to avoid community singing unless exhibitors demanded it, and to return to the “classical solo number” that had represented the high point in organ entertainment.<sup>94</sup>

Meikel, who based his success on finding creative ways to get his community to participate, led the rebuttal. His arguments were well considered and forcefully delivered, and his was perhaps the most aggressive voice in favor of the practice. However, his comments reveal a duplicity, for while he outwardly supported community singing as a commercial tool, designed to entertain the patrons and build box office revenue, he persistently reminded the trade-press readers that he eagerly anticipated the day when community singing would lose popularity and he could tackle more “legitimate” presentations. Thus, from 1927: “I don’t really believe there is an organist today playing community sings, who would not prefer to do something along more legitimate lines. Personally, I have an idea for solos that I am ready to spring as soon as I am convinced my audience is tired of the sings. . . . I am constantly on the alert looking for the handwriting on the wall.”<sup>95</sup>

Unfortunately, it doesn’t appear that Meikel ever had the opportunity to offer his new idea to the public. After 1929 the *Harding* was no longer mentioned in trade-press reviews, probably because the theater had ceased to offer live entertainment. Most neighborhood houses dismissed their organists in response to talking pictures and the effects of the Depression. All organ entertainment had been removed from the *Harding* by April 1931 at the latest.<sup>96</sup> By June of that year, the *Oriental* was the only Chicago theater to employ a full-time organist. His primary duty was to engage the patrons in a participatory organ solo.<sup>97</sup> Meikel himself made occasional appearances at the console of the *Oriental* as late as August 1932, always as a community-singing leader.<sup>98</sup> His work was not reviewed in the trade press after that date.

The last we hear from Meikel is in 1960, four years before his death. He had just published the instructional manual *Adventures in Playing*

*the Organ: The Professional Approach to Organ Instruction*. At this point he resided in California, where he appears to have enjoyed some degree of celebrity. A newspaper advertisement for his book proclaimed the author to be a "leading popular organist and teacher."<sup>99</sup> But the golden age of the theater organ—in which Eddie Meikel had played such an important if forgotten role—had long passed.

## NOTES

1. Contemporary surveys indicate that rates of urban picture-theater attendance were very high between 1925 and 1929. The 1927 edition of *Film Daily Yearbook*, published near the height of the picture-palace era, claims that the weekly picture-theater attendance in cities of 25,000 was 14,800—a figure that suggests that at least half of all urban Americans were visiting the movie house once a week or more. In 1951 *Film Daily Yearbook* published a retrospective set of attendance figures that claimed that weekly paid admissions to movie theaters had hit 65 million (more than half of the total population) in 1928. See Richard Kozarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915–1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 26.

2. Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 121–23.

3. Russell Merritt, "The Nickelodeon Theater, 1905–1914: Building an Audience for the Movies," in *Exhibition, the Film Reader*, ed. Ina Rae Hark (New York: Routledge, 2002), 25–27.

4. Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 49–56.

5. For a sample program from the New York Rialto in 1926, see "Ukulele Vocalists, Spanish Dancers, in N.Y. Rialto Show," *Exhibitors Herald*, January 23, 1926, 49.

6. Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 182–83.

7. "Park Band to Lead Community Singing," *Baltimore Sun*, April 17, 1915, 16.

8. "Predicts Doom of Ragtime," *Washington Post*, March 10, 1919, 9.

9. "Inspire Patriotism," *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 1917, III2.

10. W.S. Russell, "Singing Popular with Audiences," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, September 13, 1930, 58, 61.

11. The bureau was an agency of the National Piano Manufacturers Association and the Music Industries Chamber of Commerce (Franklin W. Koch, "Cooperative Promotional Efforts of the Music Supervisors National Conference and the National Bureau for the Advancement of Music," *Journal of Research in Music Education* [Winter 1990]: 269).

12. Editorial, *Music Trade Review*, February 24, 1917, 22. This editorial dates from before the Great War had concluded, but the music tradespeople did not act on this idea until 1919.

13. "Wisconsin Association of Music Industries Meets," *Music Trade Review*, September 20, 1919, 23; C. M. Tremaine, *The History of National Music Week* (New York: National Bureau for the Advancement of Music, 1925), 12.

14. Theatre Historical Society of America, "Oriental Theatre," special issue, *Annual* 24 (1994): 3.

15. These concerns applied to small-town theaters as well, but this study is confined to the neighborhood house.

16. David Balaban, *The Chicago Movie Palaces of Balaban and Katz* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 40, 72, 80–81.

17. "Harding," *Variety*, October 21, 1925, 32.

18. "Chicago First Runs," *Exhibitors Herald*, October 24, 1925, 52.
19. "Harding," *Variety*, November 18, 1925, 40.
20. "Harding (Chicago)," *Variety*, August 18, 1926, 52. In August 1926, B&K instituted a policy in which three stage bands rotated between the Harding, Senate, and Belmont (all neighborhood houses). One band was directed by Kahn and one by the newcomer Mark Fisher (later to be master of ceremonies at the Harding), while the third band was in fact Paley and his orchestra "converted to a stage attraction" ("Harding [Chicago]," *Variety*, September 22, 1926, 19).
21. "Good Will Show Proper for Xmas," *Exhibitors Herald*, December 17, 1927, 39.
22. "What Is the Value of Your Goodwill in the Community?," *Exhibitors Herald*, November 5, 1927, 46.
23. "Your Theatre a Community Asset," *Exhibitors Herald*, December 24, 1927, 12.
24. Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 100.
25. Lizabeth Cohen, "Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots," *American Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1989): 14–16.
26. Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, "Sound Comes to the Movies," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 118, nos. 1/2 (1994): 8.
27. Joseph Parot, "The Racial Dilemma in Chicago's Polish Neighborhoods, 1920–1970," *Polish American Studies* 32, no. 2 (1975): 30.
28. Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 55.
29. "Harding Publicity Draws Thousands," *Exhibitors Herald*, October 31, 1925, 47.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*
32. "Cost Estimated at \$2,000,000," *Exhibitors Herald*, October 31, 1925, 47.
33. "Old Fashioned Movies," *Variety*, March 4, 1925, 35.
34. "Harding," *Variety*, November 18, 1925, 40.
35. "Harding, Chicago," *Variety*, December 23, 1925, 33.
36. "'Madame Butterfly' Bit Hits; Paley's Violin Solo Pleases," *Exhibitors Herald*, April 3, 1926, 38.
37. "Special Holiday Shows Dominant," *Exhibitors Herald*, December 25, 1926, 82.
38. "Novel Idea by Organist—New?," *Variety*, April 21, 1926, 25.
39. Meikel had previously held a post at the Capitol Theater in Davenport, Iowa, but it is difficult to say whether the entertainment he conducted there bore any resemblance to the Organ Club. None of the national trade journals ever reported on his offerings in any detail ("Double Bill for Special Midnight Show," *Billboard*, January 6, 1923, 9).
40. "Harding," *Variety*, April 28, 1926, 53.
41. "The Organ Club," *Variety*, August 25, 1926, 25.
42. "Harding," *Variety*, November 9, 1927, 26.
43. "Harding," *Variety*, May 12, 1926, 20.
44. "The Organ Club," *Variety*, August 25, 1926, 25.
45. "Harding," *Variety*, May 12, 1926, 20.
46. Ed. Meikel, "Community Sings Passing? Not Yet, Says Organist," *Exhibitors Herald*, November 26, 1927, 25.
47. "Harding (Chicago)," *Variety*, August 18, 1926, 52.
48. For an example of high-class entertainment, see the presentations of organist Jesse Crawford at the Chicago Theater (or, from 1926, at the Paramount Theater in New York City). Crawford never offered community singing and did not engage on a personal level with his patrons. Instead, he presented himself as a detached artist and maintained cultural authority over the audience.
49. Meikel, "Community Sings Passing?," 25.
50. "The Organ Club," *Variety*, August 25, 1926, 25.

51. "Harding," *Variety*, November 9, 1927, 26.
52. Meikel, "Community Sings Passing?," 25.
53. "Organ Solos: Edward Meikels," *Exhibitors Herald*, May 21, 1927, 40. Meikel's name was often misspelled in the trade press, as it is here. Other common misspellings include Miekkel and Mickels.
54. Meikel, "Community Sings Passing?," 25.
55. "Organ Solos: Edward Mickels," *Exhibitors Herald*, April 2, 1927, 46.
56. "Harding (Chicago)," *Variety*, August 18, 1926, 52.
57. "Organ Solos: Eddie Meikel," *Exhibitors Herald*, October 15, 1927, 58.
58. "Organ Solos: Henri Keates," *Exhibitors Herald World*, June 7, 1930, 104; "Organ Solos: Preston Sellers," *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, October 6, 1928, 52; "Organ Solos: Milton Charles," *Exhibitors Herald*, December 24, 1927, 69.
59. "Organ Solos: Eddie Meikel," *Exhibitors Herald*, October 15, 1927, 58.
60. "Organ Solos: Edward Meikel," *Exhibitors Herald*, July 2, 1927, 48.
61. "Organ Solos: Ed Meikel," *Exhibitors Herald*, January 21, 1928, 58.
62. "Organ Solos: Eddie Meikel," *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, March 3, 1928, 45.
63. "Organ Solos: Edward Mickels," *Exhibitors Herald*, March 26, 1927, 35.
64. "Organ Solos: Bob West," *Exhibitors Herald*, August 13, 1927, 40.
65. "Organ Solos: Bill Meeder," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, April 5, 1930, 51; "Organ Solos: Russ Henderson," *Motion Picture Herald*, May 9, 1931, 50.
66. "Organ Solos: Edward Meikels," *Exhibitors Herald*, April 23, 1927, 48.
67. "Organ Solos: Edward Meikel," *Exhibitors Herald*, October 1, 1927, 41.
68. "Organ Solos: Fred Kinsley," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, April 12, 1930, 67.
69. "The Organ Club," *Variety*, August 25, 1926, 25.
70. It appears that theater patrons everywhere tended to take a relaxed attitude toward voting solos. In 1932 Bob Demming of the Buffalo Century actually asked his audience to express their preference between the two presidential candidates, Roosevelt and Hoover. The songs were chosen for comical effect, and the result was a tie. Despite this political partisanship, which might have produced unpleasant sentiments, the patrons all joined together for a good-natured community-singing finale. Theatergoers were looking for lighthearted fun, not serious debate, and they were happy to ignore politics and personal philosophy while at the picture show. In addition, the organists who led community singing fostered such goodwill over time that their patrons were highly receptive to whatever entertainment lay in store ("Organ Solos: Bob Demming," *Motion Picture Herald*, October 29, 1932, 65).
71. Walter Hirsch, "Four Arrangements of Organ Solos," *Exhibitors Herald*, September 3, 1927, 18. Here is the complete text of Brown's solo, one of few reproduced in the trade press:

TITLE—THE MARRIAGE RIDDLE (Burlesque). (Play Mendelssohn's "Wedding March.") Opening (the following to melody, "Marching Through Georgia"):  
 Folks, I've got a problem that I wish you'd solve for me, For a year I've been keeping steady company, But I don't know just how happy I am going to be, If I go out and get married—Oh gee—you see, I need your good advice, Do you believe that married life is nice? Please don't make a joke of this, but answer truthfully, Do you think that I should get married? Looks like you are all afraid to tell me anything, But I heard when folks are happy that they always sing, So I'll flash a song and if I hear your voices ring I'll know that I should get married—Before I start I warn you once again This song is for the happy married men So if you've not lived your married life successfully Don't sing the words of this chorus. (Insert chorus of popular song.) I thought all the happy married men would sing right out But there's no such animal I've learned without a

doubt, If there's any HAPPY married WOMEN let them shout Loud as they can in this chorus. (Insert Chorus—"Always.") That proves there's few happy married women—don't forget But I haven't hear from all you single people yet Those of you who wouldn't dare get married on a bet All join in on this chorus—(Insert chorus of popular song.) Now let's hear from both the married WOMEN and the MEN And the ones that wish that they were single once again and the SINGLE ones that wish that they were soon to wed All join in this chorus—(Insert chorus—"Russian Lullaby.") (The following to melody "Here Comes the Bride.") By all advice, marriage is nice, If first you don't succeed, just try it over twice—Love dreams come true, I'll prove to you Don't say I'm wrong till you hear this sweet song—TITLE SLIDE—BABY FEET GO PITTEP PATTTER

72. Will Whitmore, "Brown Tells 'Herald' Readers How to Use Scrimaphone," *Exhibitors Herald*, August 6, 1927, 9.
73. "Organ Solos: Adolph Goebel," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, December 7, 1929, 60.
74. "Organ Solos: Preston Sellers," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, September 20, 1930, 61.
75. "Harding (Chicago)," *Variety*, August 18, 1926, 52.
76. "Harding," *Variety*, November 9, 1927, 26.
77. "Chicago Oriental," *Exhibitors Herald*, September 25, 1926, 53
78. "Organ Solos: Edward Meikel," *Exhibitors Herald*, August 27, 1927, 48.
79. "Organ Solos: Edward Meikel," *Exhibitors Herald*, July 30, 1927, 34.
80. "Organ Solos: Eddie Meikel," *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, November 3, 1928, 48.
81. David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 226.
82. "The Tribute an Organist Can Win," *Exhibitors Herald World*, November 25, 1929, 64.
83. W. S. Russell, "Merchants Boost Meikel Organ Club: Join Paper in Big Tribute to 'Vet' Organist: The 5,000th Performance at the Harding in Chicago Is Occasion for Tieup," *Exhibitors Herald World*, November 25, 1929, 55–56.
84. A. Raymond Gallo, "Organ Clubs Draw Good Patronage," *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, June 2, 1928, 115.
85. Clark Fiers, "Playing the Organ Solo," *Exhibitors Herald*, February 19, 1927, 30.
86. "Organ Solos: Chauncey Haines," *Exhibitors Herald*, March 17, 1928, 38.
87. Gallo, "Organ Clubs Draw Good Patronage," 115.
88. "E. B. Davis Likes Our Slogan for His Organ Club," *Motion Picture News*, October 26, 1929, 40.
89. "A Good Idea," *American Organist* 12, no. 9 (September 1929): 557–58.
90. William R. Weaver, "Why Not Play the Organs?," *Exhibitors Herald*, July 24, 1926, 42.
91. William R. Weaver, "The Last Word about 'Community Singing,'" *Exhibitors Herald*, August 21, 1926, 45.
92. Albert F. Brown, "Field Open to Organist with Ideas," *Exhibitors Herald*, January 29, 1927, 33.
93. Weaver, "The Last Word about 'Community Singing,'" 45.
94. "Theatre Men Weigh Organ Solo Values," *Exhibitors Herald*, April 23, 1927, 43.
95. Meikel, "Community Sings Passing?," 25.
96. "18 Organists Dismissed by B&K," *Variety*, April 22, 1931, 29.
97. "5 Organists Left!," *Variety*, June 16, 1931, 57.
98. "Oriental, Chicago," *Variety*, August 30, 1932, 37.
99. "Play Organ Like a Professional," *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 1961, H8.