

ATOS Member Survey

Results Summary

Background

The **American Theatre Organ Society** (ATOS) is dedicated to the preservation of a unique American art form -- the theatre pipe organ and its music. The membership includes musicians, technicians, and enthusiastic listeners -- all devoted to the preservation and continued enjoyment of what we believe to be a national treasure.

The goals of ATOS are to preserve, restore, maintain, and promote the theatre pipe organ. Presenting concerts, silent film programs and educational seminars for the general public are but a few of the regularly scheduled chapter activities. Organized in 1955, ATOS has been an international society of more than 5,000 members, with 60 chapters in the United States and foreign countries. Recently, however, membership has been declining. It is assumed the decline is due to few new/younger members joining the organization. The survey was designed to inquire if there is more to it and, if not, what is drawing and keeping members today.

Method

The survey was mailed in the May issue of *Theatre Organ Journal*, a publication mailed to ATOS membership. Approximately 3000 members receive the publication. Included with the survey was an addressed, postage paid envelope to return the survey. It was mailed directly to the Apex Management office in Elmhurst, Illinois, with a deadline date of May 30th. Due to late mailing, however, the deadline was extended. Apex received and tabulated surveys through June 27th, in hopes of capturing the most possible surveys.

Return Rate

Three thousand surveys were mailed to ATOS members in the *Theatre Organ Journal*. Apex received and tabulated 522 surveys. That is a 17.4% rate of return, which is very positive. In reading through the comments and tabulating the results, there are some trends we can see in the ATOS membership.

General Demographic Data

As noted, 522 surveys were tabulated. Respondents were from a large range of chapters, representing all areas of the United States and other countries. Of those, over ninety percent were over the age of 50, with a relatively even split among age groups (22% aged 51-60; 33% aged 61-70; 23% aged 71-80 and 12% aged 81 and above). About the same percentage were male. Approximately seventy percent play the organ, but rate themselves evenly among the levels of technical expertise (i.e., 19% have none and don't want to learn; 19% have none but would like to learn; 19% are novice; 21 % are experienced and 15% are expert).

ATOS Membership

Most respondents (about 70%) have been members for at least 11 years, while about 17% have been a member for five years or less.

Chapter Information

Of the respondents, over 76% belong to a local chapter with the highest number of responses coming from the Garden State Chapter (29), Central Indiana (24), Los Angeles (21), Nor-Cal TOS (20), Valley of the Sun (19) and Puget Sound (18). Similar to ATOS membership rates, nearly 67% of respondents have been members for at least eleven years, with about 19% a member for five years or less.

For those who do not maintain a membership with a local chapter, 40% said it was because there is no chapter nearby. About 35% listed a reason other than those provided in the survey. Although no consistent response prevailed, there were several who noted a dislike for the chapter leadership as reason. Other repeated answers included that they are too busy and that they belong to a non-ATOS chapter.

Reasons for Chapter Membership

Respondents marked nearly all reasons provided in the survey at similar rates. Twenty-one percent joined after attending a theatre organ concert; nearly 35% joined because of their passion for the theatre organ; 20% joined to learn more about how the organ works and how to restore them; and nearly 19% wanted to learn more about the organs and playing.

When asked about what they perceive as the greatest value of their chapter membership, nearly half said it was the opportunity to hear and play the organs. Nineteen percent noted their appreciation for chapter efforts to educate the public and fifteen percent noted the social opportunities membership brings.

Reasons for ATOS Membership

For this question, nearly 34% said they joined ATOS to receive *Theatre Organ Journal*, with about 14% noting both the ATOS conferences and the ability to learn about restoration and maintenance. Seventeen percent noted other reasons, such as preservation efforts, and the ability to find out about other concerts and activities taking place throughout the country. In addition, the fact ATOS membership is required for chapter membership was listed as a reason.

Members were not asked what they perceived as the greatest value for their ATOS membership, however, it should be noted that even though the Journal was listed as the greatest reason for joining ATOS, it was clear that for the majority, it is not one of the best reasons for *staying* a member.

Reviewing the average score of statements about ATOS membership, most were in the neutral-positive range of 3.2 to 3.8. Exceptions are the comment on the Journal, as noted above, with an average score of 1.6. In addition, “It is critical that we increase the number of qualified theatre pipe organ technicians,” received a positive score of 4.07 and the statement, “I am doubtful ATOS can do anything to help chapters in a meaningful way,” received a negative score of 2.1. The strongest average of 4.6 was received for the comment, “With dwindling membership, difficulties raising money and increased scarcity of functioning, publicly available theatre pipe organs, it is imperative ATOS create a plan to reverse these trends.”

“New” Members (Members of a Chapter for Ten Years or Less)

We analyzed those who have been a chapter member for ten years or less and although nearly everything was the same in their response as compared to the overall scores, there were a few differences worth noting. First, this group overall scored less willing to volunteer for the items listed. Second, far fewer consider themselves to be an expert or professional when considering technical expertise. Third, there are more women included in the mix (13% versus the overall average of 11%). Finally, and probably most important, those who have been members of a chapter for ten years or less agreed at a much greater level that that the journal *Theatre Organ* is one of the best reasons for being an ATOS member. This would tell us that for younger members (those who have joined more recently) the journal is a valuable resource, but as membership progresses, it becomes less important, instead, other aspects of membership become more valuable.

Respondent Needs

The final section, titled “Your Needs,” requests comments regarding ways to improve ATOS, chapters and the many issues that pertain to them. Comments tended to fall into four general categories; marketing, parent/component communications, resources and membership. In this context, I considered marketing comments to generally describe efforts to publicize and promote ATOS, its chapters and their activities. I considered items regarding the communications, relationships and politics of the national ATOS and its component chapters to be in the next category. The third, resources, refers to comments requesting resources from the national organization, such as listings, templates, brochures, etc. Finally, the membership is pretty self-explanatory. This area speaks to the need for new members, the type of members, etc. Granted, some comments would fall into more than one category. In those situations, I would mark all categories the comment applied to.

Generally speaking, the comments were consistent with many of the resulting percentages. For example, when respondents were asked to rank the listed goals of their chapter, the leading three (in order) were to “increase public exposure to the theatre pipe organ,” then to “increase membership,” and third to “improve attendance at our concerts.” In addition, when asked which they would like ATOS to make available to their chapters, the selections that received the highest ranking were “chapter concert promotion and marketing assistance,” then “public relations and marketing tools to take

to outside venues and schools,” and then “membership drive help,” respectively. Overall, members speak of their love of the organ, their enjoyment of hearing it played by a variety of people and the joy in sharing that love of this unique instrument. Judging by the survey, chapter members would like to see the national organization assist them in doing just that.

The greatest number of comments responding to the final five open-ended questions came in the area of **marketing**. For example, suggestions came in the area of establishing public education programs in schools (music history class) and for public access and/or public television. There were several suggestions for additional concerts, namely free, and some also mentioned making the concerts part of old silent movies that would be shown for free. Some suggested posting audio and video files. Others suggest outreach to piano and organ teachers, dealers and players. Still others suggested forming relationships with other organizations. All of the suggestions focus on the need to increase opportunities of exposing others to the theatre organ.

The second most common comment focused on the area of **resources**. Approximately two hundred comments expressed a need for national to be providing the tools chapters need to operate better and for ATOS to serve as a better source overall for information to its members. Chapter leaders are not always experts in the areas they need to be, so examples of good venue agreements, financial procedures and even templates for things like newsletters, membership applications, fundraising help, press releases, etc. would be appreciated. Comments also focused on a need for an organizational brochure (who we are and what we do) that can be used at the chapter level as well. There were no membership applications at the last concert, noted some! Chapter respondents are also calling for assistance with specific restoration projects. Several restoration projects, installation projects, and even help refurbishing an organ that was hurt in hurricane Katrina, were mentioned.

Respondents would like to see ATOS be a better source for information overall. For example, one common request was finding concerts throughout the country (even beyond chapter activities), as well as sources for area teachers, technicians and even where to purchase organ music or get technical training. Some would like to see a national membership directory. Elaborating on that, knowing who owns an organ, the type and for how long, as well as possibly listing technical experience of the members would be helpful.

The third most common category dealt with **ATOS/component communications**. The need for ATOS to “be more effective in chapter support” by responding to inquiries, making members feel more welcome. Some suggested the national board have a better understanding of chapter operations and provide a means for chapter leaders to communicate with each other. There were several comments expressing concern for current leadership and the image of personal agendas and too much “politics.” Some called for new leadership. This may be due to a lack of communication and support for local missions. If chapters don’t see help coming from the national organization, it is assumed national is out of touch and has some other agenda. On the other hand, their

perception could be correct. Members noted wanting to know what the national organization is doing.

It is also worth noting in the communications area there were several suggestions for partnering with or at least having a relationship with other organizations that may have similar or related interests, such as AGO.

The forth area came in the area of **membership**, although it should be noted that most of the suggested ways of increasing membership offered by respondents were included in the marketing, resources and communications sections above. In summary, suggestions for increasing membership, again, were by outreach and publicity and giving chapters the tools to reach out and capture membership – a lack of membership applications means attendees at concerts can't sign up even if they wanted to that day. There were suggestions of reaching out to young people, but it should be noted that even those new chapter members were not “young” in the terms of what one would assume. Forty percent of these newer members are between the ages of 61 and 70. Twenty six percent were between the ages of 51 and 60, and only about 11% were under the age of 50.

General Summary Comments

The American Theatre Organ Society is one that focuses on a unique instrument and a unique love. Those who are members speak of their love for the organ and the desire to share that love. The survey results tell us they need ATOS to help them do that. They need tools, guidance for operating their chapters and help promoting what they do already, such as promotion of local concerts. They would also like assistance with specific projects when the opportunity arises and outreach efforts to schools and area talent. ATOS can also serve their members well by providing resources for learning, maintaining and playing the organs. Having a national source for concerts, technicians and other members give respondents the opportunity to connect with others outside their immediate area and chapter.