

DR. C. A. J. PARMENTIER

50 YEARS

AN AMERICAN ORGANIST

By Lloyd E. Klos



Dr. C.A.J. Parmentier, one of the theater organ greats. - Parmentier Collection

If one searches for a theater organist who has had a career as varied and as exciting as the subject of this feature, he is liable to fail. For, it is extremely doubtful that any performer at the console has had a musical life as diversified as that of Dr. C. A. J. Parmentier.

Born in Belgium into a musical family, he received his first musical instruction from the Catholic Sisters of the Visitation, then studied with Jacques Opsomer, a noted pianist-organist. Later, he studied with his brother, Firmin Parmentier, laureate in organ at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Antwerp, and professor at the Cardinal Mercier School of Music in Malines which was also known as the Lemmens Institute. He received a Doctorate of Music from the Universite Philotechnique in Brussels, and as a young man, concertized in Belgium, Holland and England.

Europe's loss was America's gain on February 22, 1916, for on that date,

Dr. Parmentier, after braving the submarine-infested Atlantic, arrived in America. "I was tremendously impressed by the friendliness and kindness of the people over here", he says. "Only three days after my arrival, I became organist for Loew's Theaters, and, three days after that, was assigned an additional position with the firm. I was playing 8-1/2 hours a day, seven days a week and loved it."

Whenever the Loew's brass made the rounds, the house manager always arranged to have Parmentier chat with them. Though he was a "greenhorn", as newly-arrived immigrants were called, he spoke with a pronounced British-Scottish accent which he acquired when studying English in Britain. Rolling his R's came naturally for this fellow who studied four languages.

Dr. Parmentier and his best friend, Camil Van Hulse, now a prime mover in musical activities in Tucson, Arizona, had taken extra courses in German and English at the Berlitz School in St.

Nicholas, Belgium. They practiced on the same tracker organ at the primary church in the town. Parmentier's brother was the organist, and Camil's father was the sexton whose salary was three times that of the organist! One day, the church deacon stopped Parmentier's brother, complaining that he had seen his kid brother in a cafe with a young lady the previous Sunday. The brother, who was very strict where music was concerned, told the deacon: "My brother studies 13 hours every blessed day, and on Sundays he can relax in any way he pleases."

Following the work for the Loew's organization came a period of demonstrating the Choralcello. This was a pipeless and reedless organ which derived a sustained organ tone from the strings of a piano, and other organ and orchestral timbres from metal and wooden bars. So little playing was required that Dr. Parmentier asked the president of the organ company to give him more work or he'd leave. They sent him to play one of their instruments at the old Belmont Hotel at 42nd Street and Park Avenue which was opposite Grand Central Station.

A few months later in 1917, with still too much time on his hands, he grew restless, and on impulse, took a trip to Puerto Rico. He found no employment until one day, George Lewis, Chief of Detectives of the San Juan Police Dept., paid him a visit and checked his papers. Mr. Lewis, a fine southern gentleman who loved poetry and music, and Parmentier became good friends, and Lewis told him the reason for his unemployment was that he had been suspected as a spy! This was just after the United States entered World War I, and Parmentier had no good reason for being in Puerto Rico.

He did some investigative work for the police department, and played a few concerts. He met Father Willinger, a Redemptorist Priest, who loved music, and soon Dr. Parmentier was playing the Sunday mass. "There was little else to do, and this was the perfect life for someone with little ambition. I got three or four excellent meals a day, beer, cigars, etc., had a large room in a new concrete building on the ocean, the bay on the opposite side, fresh sea breezes, the scent of tropical flowers--an ideal climate. As I said, it was perfect, but not for me." Father Willinger later became Bishop of Ponce, Puerto Rico, and for the past 18 years, has been the Bishop of the Monterey-Fresno Diocese in California.

On his return from Puerto Rico, Dr. Parmentier played the 3-manual Moller on the Loew's Theater Roof in New York. By late summer of 1918, he had been going steady with a lovely

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theater organ

young lady, and when he proposed to her for the last time, he mentioned going to Atlantic City on their honeymoon. The answer was "yes". So, off to Atlantic City went the young marrieds, where the new bridegroom presided at the 3-manual Austin of Stanley's Virginia Theater on the Boardwalk. He never mentioned that the contract for this engagement was in his pocket when he proposed.

June, 1919, saw him playing the 3-manual Moller in the rebuilt Fox American Theater in Paterson, New Jersey. In the fall, he was at the Audubon, the top theater on the William Fox circuit. Then came the Fox Washington Theater in New York. The Palm Theater in Philadelphia was next "with a magnificent installation of a 5-manual Robert Morton, the finest orchestral-sounding instrument I ever played." But after a few days, the Philadelphia Musicians' Union refused to approve his transfer, so he returned to New York.

Dr. Parmentier had become tired of playing afternoons, evenings and some mornings, so he accepted a job in a small theater run by a bunch of bootleggers. He liked this job because he worked afternoons only, but from 1 to 6 non-stop.

He says: "Everyone talks about the good old days. Yes, life was more pleasant and less complicated. But the best part was that while we were young, the hard work and long hours did not bother us in the least. The dollars we



Dr. Parmentier at the 5-manual Kimball master console in the Roxy Theatre, New York, March 1927. An organist's position in the 6,200 movie palace was considered top drawer in those days. - Parmentier Col.

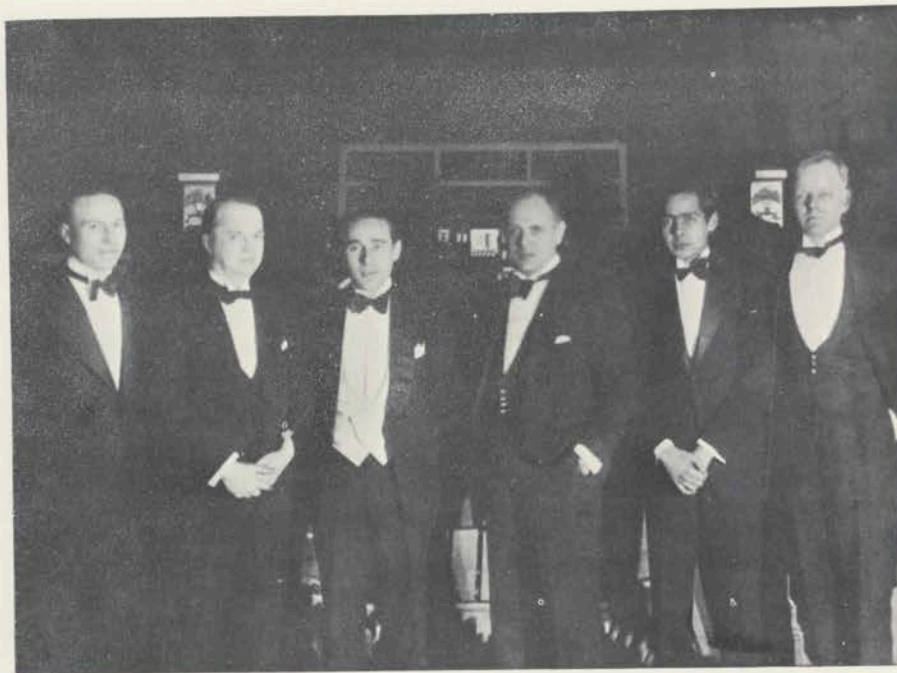
earned were worth 100 cents. Expenses were low, and we did not have radios, television, hi-fi and other gadgets on which to spend our money. Besides, taxes were nothing to worry about."

Since the day they were married, Mrs. Parmentier had desired to see

her husband playing on Broadway. The chance came in the summer of 1922 when he got a last-minute call to play the Capitol Theater, the foremost movie theater of the day. He left a steady job to accept a one-week engagement while regular organist, Deszo Von D'Antalfy was on vacation. Not getting a chance to try out the 4-manual Estey, he went on cold and played the feature film "Nanook of the North". After he finished, the Capitol's music librarian told him that the theater brass--Roxy, Rapee and Mendoza, had listened to most of his performance and agreed to hire him in the event of a vacancy. This happened shortly after when D'Antalfy left for Rochester to join the Eastman School of Music staff. On Broadway at last, Dr. Parmentier alternated the organ work with Dr. Melchiorre Mauro-Cottone. Eugene Ormandy was associate concertmaster and starting his career as conductor. Later, he became famous as conductor of the Minneapolis and Philadelphia orchestras.

In November, 1923, the new Fox Theater in Philadelphia was opened. Erno Rapee was appointed General Manager and Conductor, and he brought in his first-chair men plus Dr. Parmentier, who played the 3-manual Moller. The arranger and associate conductor was Dr. Frank Black, later to become Musical Director for NBC in New York.

The next four years were eventful ones for Dr. Parmentier. On August 1, 1924, he opened the rebuilt Broadway Strand Theater in Detroit using a 3-manual Wurlitzer. In October, 1924, at the Century



Roxy poses with his entire organ staff in front of the 5-manual Kimball console in the Roxy theater. Left to right: Dr. C.A.J. Parmentier, Deszo Von D'Antalfy, Lew White, Roxy, Emil Velazco and Frank White. Picture was taken at the time of the theater's opening, March 11, 1927. - Parmentier Collection

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Theater in New York, he accompanied Max Rheinhardt's spectacular production, "The Miracle". He also played the 4-manual Skinner at B.S. Moss' Colony Theater which was a Broadway presentation house where he also played for many motion picture trade shows. The Moss Cameo Theater, housing a 3-manual Skinner, also echoed to his artistry that year.

In 1925, he presided at the 3-manual Moller at the old Academy of Music, which was the famous home of Grand Opera many years ago.

In 1926, he played William Brandt's Carlton Theater in Brooklyn. This was a small but classy house. Brandt was a fastidious fellow who loved music, and always showed his appreciation with money and in other ways.

Then, on March 11, 1927, New York's Roxy Theater was opened, the largest and most beautiful theater ever built up to that time. Dr. Parmentier had a leading part. There were 2 three-manual consoles flanking a 5-manual master console in the pit, each on its own elevator. "Roxy's idea of having the Kimball organ installed beneath the stage was so the organ could build up the orchestra for thunderous effects and climaxes, the sounds emanating from the same location. When the organ was being used with the orchestra, the orchestra elevator would be part way or all the way to the top, and this killed the sound of the organ. Even with the orchestra elevator all the way down, the organ did not have a chance to speak out into the auditorium. Burying the organ under the stage was a terrible blunder. This was truly a great theater organ with a splendid variety of tone colors, good foundation and brass stops, lovely string section, keen reeds, mellow flutes, tibias, etc." The master console controlled the complete organ, and each of the 3-manual consoles controlled the brass and woodwind sections.

There was a three-manual Kimball with player in the rotunda, and a 2-manual Kimball in the radio studio. The order for the three organs, involving 5 consoles was the largest theater organ contract ever awarded a builder.

Opening night at the Roxy was a glittering affair. Over 6,200 patrons were on hand, including Harold Lloyd, Gloria Swanson, Richard Dix, NY Mayor Jimmy Walker and other notables. About 9, three chimes pealed, the house lights dimmed, and from the pit rose the 3 consoles manned by Dr. Parmentier, D'Antalfy and Lew White, each wearing a green velvet jacket. The opening number was Wagner's "Pilgrims' Chorus". While playing "Londonderry Air", the



Dr. Parmentier plays the 4-manual Estey at New York's Capitol Theater, August 1923. Dr. Melchior Mauro-Cottone was the other organist, Erno Rapee was Music Director, and Eugene Ormandy was Associate Concertmaster. - Parmentier Collection

solemnity of the occasion was marred by rising applause as dapper Mayor Walker and his wife arrived late, as usual, and took their seats down front. After a stirring performance which featured the fanfare organ of fife, military bugle and fanfare trumpet, housed far above the stage to the right, the consoles descended into the pit, and the

organists received a bear hug from the enthusiastic Roxy.

"I remember in playing the Roxy organ", says Dr. Parmentier, "each organist had to be discreet in using expression pedals, so as not to inter-

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Dr. Parmentier at the 3-manual Wurlitzer in the Broadway Strand Theater in Detroit, August 1924. Notice the colorful scroll work on his jacket also the very proper collar and tie which were considered fitting dress for organists of that time. -Parmentier Collection

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fere with each other's dynamics. When playing the 3 consoles, we had to do a lot of rehearsal, and we sometimes used special arrangements. Other times, we talked things over as to how to divide the parts, etc. Also, Roxy insisted that we all keep our feet in action, whether we had pedal stops on or not. It was a tricky and thankless job to play the 3 consoles."

A couple humorous incidents are recalled by Dr. Parmentier relative to his days at the Roxy. Once while watching the personal appearance of a famous movie star, "I mentioned to one of the men from the Glee Club that the girl must be drunk and I bet they'd have to give her the hook as they used to do in vaudeville. Sure enough, after the star kept talking absolute nonsense, the curtain parted ever so slightly, an arm reached out, grabbed the gal, and yanked her out of sight.

"Another time, watching a renowned trio of adagio dancers--you know the kind, where two men with physiques like Greek Gods, throw a pretty little doll all over the place? Well, Sir, right after the act began, the poor girl's straps broke, and the little lady, looking even lovelier than before, had to go through the whole act sans straps. The applause was deafening."

In the summer of 1927, Dr. Parmentier was selected to perform a series of organ recitals, broadcast from the Welte-Mignon studio. These programs featured the most celebrated organists

in the country. "I was proud indeed to have been chosen to play among such a galaxy of concert organists--the true masters of the organ."

From time to time, he played at the Wanamaker Auditorium; Town Hall; Carnegie Hall; St. Patrick's Cathedral; the fabulous Greenbrier Hotel in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia; churches; colleges and schools. He also taught organ when his schedule permitted.

In March 1929, the Irving Berlin Standard Music Co. engaged him to write a series of organ numbers for the silent movies. He finished several which were published. Then came the talkies, and that was the end of that assignment.

The new Waldorf-Astoria Hotel opened on Sunday, October 18, 1931. There was a 4-manual Moller concert organ in the ballroom, and a 3-manual Moller in the Perroquet Suite. Dr. Parmentier played a series of recitals, using both organs, and the music was piped throughout the hotel.

In 1932, Ann Leaf went on an extended vacation, and Dr. Parmentier was chosen to take over her broadcasts from CBS, the programs emanating from the Paramount Theater studio 4/21 Wurlitzer. The announcer was Paul Douglas, later famous as an actor, and on the first broadcast, made the following announcement: "This is the initial appearance of C. A. J. Parmentier." You can imagine the ribbing Douglas got from his colleagues after the program! Three weeks later, CBS asked Parmentier to pick up his mail. He was amazed to see the stacks of letters which had accumulated. "I never dreamed organ programs had

become so popular, and I was delighted to learn what an overwhelming number of true devotees of the organ we have in the country. Even now, people keep asking why we can't have live broadcasts of organ music." At the conclusion of his six weeks' stint, he continued with his work at CBS for a number of years, both as a soloist and accompanist for special shows.

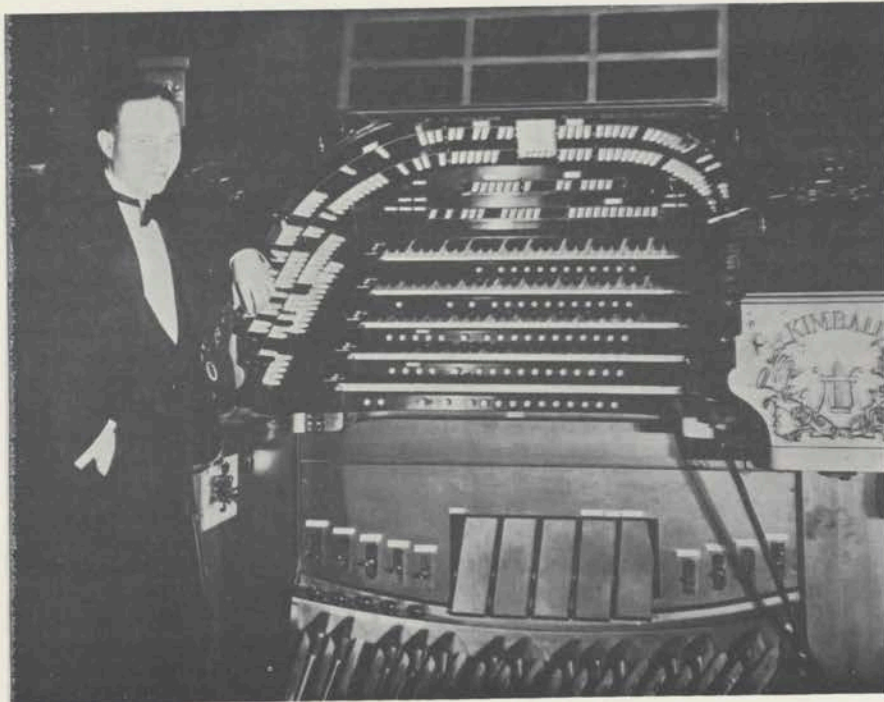
December 28, 1932 marked another milestone in Parmentier's life. This was the opening of the Radio City Music Hall, the largest theater in the world. He and Dick Leibert presided over the twin consoles. Erno Rapee was Musical Director as he had been at the Roxy. He was an excellent conductor and musician, and he always admired Parmentier's work. So, Rapee used him as his organist at the Movietone Studios, Madison Square Garden, etc.

The Music Hall's 58-rank Wurlitzer is controlled by 2 four-manual consoles, one on each side of the auditorium in alcoves concealed by curtains. Parmentier says: "This is a fine instrument, but a bit tricky to play, because some of the organ chambers are located in front and overhead, while other chambers are almost a block away. To get to a console while the stage show is on, one has to literally crawl through a small opening in the side wall. The 6 buttons controlling the opening, closing and stopping of the curtain; and the rolling out, rolling in and stopping of the console, are located out of sight below the console, and if you push the wrong button, you can really get messed up!" There is also a 3-manual Wurlitzer in the broadcasting studio.

From the Music Hall, Dr. Parmentier went to the Center Theater, once part of the Radio City complex. The Center, housing a 4-manual Wurlitzer, was elegant, but when the Music Hall became a movie house, the Center turned to musical comedy shows, ice shows, and later to movies for a short period. It was finally razed to make room for the Time and Life Building, the organ going to a home in Pennsylvania. Parmentier was organist at the Music Hall and Center Theater, full or part time, for ten years.

During this decade, he played at several high society weddings, some held in churches, others in unusual places such as a large private ballroom in a New York City penthouse, and on Long Island estates.

From 1935 to 1938, Parmentier worked for the Hammond Organ Co., where he promoted sales to churches, auditoria, homes, and to places where organs had never been used--the Paramount, Vitaphone and RCA Studios; Madison Square Garden; and the Queen Mary. He says:



Dr. Parmentier at the Master Kimball Console at the Roxy Theater, March 1927. -Parmentier Collection

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"Regardless of one's feelings about electronic organs, they did create jobs for organists which is all to the good."

In 1937, he was chosen to play a series of commercial concerts for the Hammond Organ Co. over WQXR.

In October 1937, he was organist for George Abbott's production of "Angel Island", starring Betty Field and Arlene Francis. The critics did not like the play, and this unfavorable reaction helped close it after a six-week run. Only a Hammond was used for the music. However, the critics wrote such phrases in their reviews as "A vast pipe organ stormed and uluated in the darkness... The most exciting thing about the show is the ominous off-stage organ music which opens and closes the scenes... Perhaps the best performance of the evening was given by Dr. C. A. J. Parmentier, the organist."

In 1938, the pipe organ builders of America decided to take the Hammond Organ Co. before the Federal Trade Commission in Washington. They wanted, among other things, to prevent Hammond from using the word "organ" in its advertising. Parmentier was chosen to play the Hammond at the hearing. Objection to the use of the organ as evidence was sustained, but the three commissioners said that they would be pleased to listen to an "off-the-record" performance when they recessed for lunch. From the Washington Herald of April 14, 1938 is gleaned the following: "Settled comfortably in their roomy chairs, members of the Federal Trade

Commission enjoyed an off-the-record concert by C. A. J. Parmentier, NY concert organist, in the FTC trial room. Busy employees of the commission stopped incredulously as the strains of "Whistle While You Work" sounded behind the mahogany panels of the trial room's doors, only to fade into the majestic strains of a Bach fugue..."

In 1938 & 1939, Dr. Parmentier was staff organist for NBC where he played just about every type program--oratorios, accompaniment of operatic and pop singers, adventure stories, background music for poetry readings, dramatic and comedy shows, "The Gospel Singer", and his own solo organ broadcasts. He remembers working around the clock during the troublesome days before World War II, and during the illness and eventual death of Pope Pius XI.

Parmentier has never ceased to wonder at the efficiency and preparedness of the press and radio. He recalls that when King George VI became gravely ill, he was called at 3 in the morning to rush to the Movietone Studios to record music and sequences announcing the King's death. He died long after.

In 1939, Dr. Parmentier performed at receptions in honor of foreign dignitaries and many of the state governors in the Federal Building at the NY World's Fair. He also played with the Triton Band which accompanied the spectacular fireworks and fountain display called "The World and the Cathedral".

At the fair in 1940, he accompanied the Pageant "Railroads on Parade". This was a magnificent extravaganza, tracing the history of transportation

through canoes, sailing vessels, the Erie Canal, Conestoga Wagons, pony express, stage coaches, railroads, etc. The climax came when the real Twentieth Century Limited moved slowly across the amphitheater stage. "At this point, I always watched the audience to observe its reaction to seeing an attractive lady undressing in a Pullman section, and just as the young beauty was about to remove her last undergarment, the train faded from view".

During the war years, between appearances at the Music Hall, much of his time was spent doing broadcasts and transcriptions in French, Spanish and Portuguese for the US State Department and the Office of Inter-American Affairs.

In 1935, Dr. Parmentier had begun a new line of work at the Waldorf-Astoria. This has developed to where he now plays for the foremost organizations here and abroad--breakfasts, luncheons, meetings, receptions, dinners and graduations. He also performs at the Americana, NY Hilton, Plaza Hotel, etc. Literally playing before the crowned heads of the world, he has performed for Queen Juliana of the Netherlands; King Paul and Queen Frederica of Greece; King Baudouin of Belgium; Prince Philip, Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden of England; Charles DeGaulle, Leon Blum and Vincent Auriol of France; Dr. Sygman Rhee of Korea; Giovanni Gronchi, Alcide DeGasparri, Mario Scelba and Antonio Segni of Italy; Dr. Weitzman of Israel; Jan Masaryk of Czechoslovakia; Cardinals Spellman and McIntyre; and all the U.S. Presidents from Hoover to Johnson--a veritable Who's Who of World Leaders.

At a United Nations luncheon in 1946 at the Waldorf, Dr. Parmentier was shown a perfect example of humility when an Archbishop walked to the console to ask on behalf of Russian Foreign Minister Molotov what he had finished playing. It was the Waltz in C Sharp Minor by Chopin. A Prince of the Church had done this for a leader of a country which tries to abolish religion!

Another time while playing before a meeting, one of the guests asked the Dr. to play Drigo's "Serenade". In the middle of it, in walked General Eisenhower, and the newspapers the following day recorded the incident by saying that Parmentier was playing the General's favorite number during his entry.

Both Presidents, Truman and Eisenhower, have been lavish in their praise of the organist. In 1952, President Truman prefaced his Columbus Day speech, carried nationwide on radio and TV thusly: "And before I start my regular address, I want to say that I don't think I've enjoyed organ music any more than I did the music put out

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Dr. Parmentier plays the Radio City Music Hall organ in 1924. -Parmentier Collection

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by your organist here. He really played things worth while."

Since 1947, Parmentier has been giving special demonstrations and recitals for the Baldwin Organ Co., and for awhile, he headed its organ school. Both Waldorf-Astoria and Americana hotels have Baldwin organs in their ballrooms.

In 1949, he began playing at swanky hotel weddings on a large scale. Many orchestra leaders now rate him the top wedding organist.

"Unusual things happen at weddings. Bridesmaids, ushers and others faint. One 6-foot, 4-inch groom dropped like a ton of bricks at the altar. The little bride smiled at him helplessly while they were reviving him. Once a tiny flower girl wet her pants, thereby delaying the processional.

"Another bride said "yes" before the Rabbi had a chance to ask "Do you... The Rabbi with a beautiful Jewish accent admonished her: "Don't be in such hurry: you going to be married long time." (sic). At still another ceremony, it seemed as if the groom would be unable to walk down the aisle. He was an expert ski instructor. If he had not been an expert, he might have broken only one leg!"

Despite these activities, plus an occasional recital or demonstration, Dr. Parmentier still has found time to play for the Unity Services held each Sunday at Carnegie Hall from 1962 till recently. The organ is a 4-manual Kilgen with solo manual no longer operative. Shortly, a firm from Holland is scheduled to install a new baroque organ with tracker action and 56-note manuals.

Commenting on his work, Dr. Parmentier reflects: "I love my work because it is so diversified. I meet so many wonderful people in so many places. I especially enjoy playing for such youth groups as the Boy and Girl Scouts, CYO, etc. Another favorite assignment is for the NY Herald Tribune World Youth Forum at Philharmonic Hall. Some of the most brilliant high school students from around the world come here, attired in native dress, to speak on a most interesting variety of subjects. I wish that the world of grown-ups would share their ideals and enthusiasm. Perhaps the most satisfying part of my work lies in the fact that I am so close to my audiences, and the way they respond is most gratifying. In spite of the magnificent recordings available, the public still prefers live music, and rates the organ as the King of Instruments."

Following are a few comments from the press and notables:

Evening Tribune, Lawrence, Mass.: "Dr. Parmentier played in superb style, and disclosed a fine-grained musician-



Three noted organists get together for a chat in 1938. Left to Right: Deszo Von D'Antalfy; Fernando Germani, organist at the Vatican; and Dr. Parmentier. - Parmentier Collection

ship. His interpretation of the masters was stamped with the qualities of the discerning and painstaking artist".

Harding Spectator, Bridgeport, Conn.: "Dr. Parmentier is the possessor of a flawless technique and is gifted with the soul of an artist."

Dr. Eugene Ormandy, Conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra: "He is one of the few select organists in our country, and a composer of outstanding merit".

Lowell Thomas, noted author, lecturer, news commentator and traveler: "The most delightful concert I ever heard. An artist of great versatility".

Pietro Yon, late organist of St. Patrick's Cathedral, NY: "Your soleful and artistic playing was no less beautiful than the spirit with which you offered your work."

Some of Parmentier's published compositions include "Adoration", "Sunset in Damascus", "Desert Caravan", and "Supplication".

He says: "Many years have passed since I played for silent movies, but in recent years, I have been told by several organists that during the silent movie era, they would visit whatever theater I was playing, just to hear me improvise. This is most flattering, but I would have preferred knowing about it sooner!

"While there are still many ex-theater organists extant, those whose careers date back to 50 years are almost extinct. If the Good Lord grants me a few more years of good health, I may yet become a museum piece."

Little Wurli Reperking In Champaign

Champaign, Illinois -- A project that started back in October 1963 began to pay off early in April when Dave Junchen and Bob Hoffner (on pass from Chanute Air Force Base) stopped in just to make a few sounds on the nearly rebuilt little Wurliizer in the RKO Virginia theatre here. The work done over the past three years, much of it by ATOers, was so near completion that, after the usual period of chasing down ciphers and dead notes the boys decided that it would be nice to have an accompaniment manual to play on so they fixed all the lower manual ciphers. Then the just-repaired pedalboard looked easy to reinstall-and so it was. Then they rough-tuned the Barton Kinura which replaced a Wurliizer Clarinet. After that they did the same for the Diapason.

In just over an hour and twenty minutes the lads got two manuals and the pedals in playing shape and then took turns playing it for the next 45 minutes, right up to show time. The 2-8 still needs all its primaries releathered and a "releathering party" is in the offing. However, getting both manuals and pedals in place and operating, plus the temporary tuning made the difference between an organ to play and just one to make noises on. The group of youthful rebuilders is handicapped by lack of time and normally gets together for a work session at the RKO Virginia on Saturday mornings, all they can spare from their college study time.

-Effie Klotz