

# RADIO CITY

by Lloyd E. Klos

Richard W. Leibert was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and was a student in the Moravian schools. He studied under a cousin, Dr. Fred Wolle, founder and director of the Bethlehem Bach Choir. His first public appearance as an organist was at the age of seven when he played hymns for morning chapel services on an old pipe organ. He became so interested in this instrument that he'd bribe or cajole his classmates to pump the bellows of the organ after school so that he could become more familiar with it.

Finally convincing the headmaster that he could play the organ, he proposed to play a recital for his classmates. So persistent was he to get organ pumpers, that they contrived to play a trick on him. Banding together they stuffed the large bass pipes with goose feathers, borrowed from their mothers' pillows. The opening chord resulted in a shower of feathers in the auditorium, which caused a mild commotion among those present.

One of Dick's earliest recollections of his experience as organist, occurred during a Sunday morning church service. A new organ had been installed, and it was powered by a water motor which pumped the bellows with water from a nearby stream. Midway through the dedicatory service, the organ went flat, all the sound gone. After much confusion between minister and choirmaster, the Reverend announced that the remainder of the service would be sung a capella. A trout was stuck in the organ's mechanism!

Later, Dick studied piano under Hans Roemer. At the age of 15, the Leibert family moved to Washington. Dick entered the business world by selling newspaper advertising, and as a result, made friends with the organist at the Palace Theater. He became relief organist during the dinner hours, and upon his friend's sudden death, became regular organist.

Hearing of a scholarship award to be given by the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, Leibert journeyed there and won a three year scholarship under the tutelage of Dr. Knight. Since then, he has been a self-taught organist and composer.

# DICK



## LEIBERT

Following his studies at Peabody, he was employed by the Loew's Circuit, and went on tour, playing in the movie palaces in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Chicago, winding up with two years at the famed Brooklyn Paramount.

A most tragic experience occurred while Leibert was organist in the beautiful Penn Theater in Pittsburgh. As was the custom in most big theaters such as this, the organ console rose majestically from the pit and emerged into a sea of multi-colored spotlights. One morning, the spring rains caused the swelling of the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers, and this action inundated downtown Pittsburgh. On hearing the news, Leibert rushed to the theater, hoping to save the console, deep in the pit. But, alas! The water, though pouring down the stairways and aisles had not reached the console. However, the electricity had already been cut off, and for the next ten hours, the organist watched as the water steadily rose to a height of 30 feet. Thus, a beautiful 4-manual Robert Morton was completely ruined; according to Dick, one of the finest theater organs he has ever played.

In late 1932, the Radio City Music Hall was fast approaching its opening date, and auditions were held for the post of Chief Organist. Leibert was among 13 applicants. Noting the wide range of selections, from Bach to Gershwin, played by the other organists, Leibert, last on the list, played a medley of all the music of the other contestants.

The judges, Samuel (Roxy) Rothafel, Erno Rapee, and Bill Stern, unanimously selected Dick Leibert for the Chief Or-

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ganist position, which he has held ever since.

The opening night of the Radio City Music Hall, December 27, 1932, was one which will never be forgotten by those present. The show opened at 8:30. On the bill were De Wolf Hopper, the Tuskegee Choir, the Music Hall Ballet and Chorus, the Roxyettes, Weber and Fields, Vera Schwartz, the Berry Brothers, The Wallendas, the Kikutas, Eddie and Ralph, Harold Kreutzberg and Margaret Sande, Ray Bolger, Doctor Rockwell, Josie and Jules Walton, Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh, Gertrude Niessen, a tab version of "Carmen", Banto and Mann, Erno Rapee and the Music Hall Symphony and Richard Leibert and Dr. C. A. J. Parmentier at the Wurlitzer consoles.

The mammoth affair lasted until nearly 2:30 a.m. when the finale "September 13, 1814" and the Star Spangled Banner wound up the show. There was no movie. The reviews of the grandiose beginning were bad. One critic wrote: "The mountain labored and brought forth a mouse."

At the Music Hall, Dick Leibert plays four evenings; the 6:00 and 9:00 shows, usually Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. The openings and the first and second shows are played by Ray Bohr. Jack Ward fills in on the off days, vacations etc., and closes the final show at midnight.

A member of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, Dick is an accomplished composer. Among his creations are "Radio City Hall March", "Come Dance With Me", "In a Little Clock Shop", "You Were a Dream", "Virginia Hoedown", "Where the Pussy Willows Grow", "You Look Like Someone", "Valse Rhythmic" and "Pray for Me".

It is customary for Dick to keep a pad and pencil on his night stand. In an enchanted dream, he scribbled a lovely melody which he was sure would be a hit. Next morning, returned to reality, he discovered that he had written down, note for note, one of the famous Strauss waltzes!

Dick Leibert is equally at home playing Bach or Rodgers. He has conducted his own orchestra as did several other great theater organists. More than 40 recordings are credited to him on Westminster, RCA Victor or Camden

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## DICK LEIBERT (continued)

labels. During World War II, he cut a number of unbreakable "V-Discs" for the armed forces, and which the author fondly remembers playing while stationed in the Aleutians. On one disc, he opened with the salutation: "Hi, fellows. This is Dick Leibert, speaking to you from the Radio City Music Hall. I'm going to fool around on the Wurlitzer at this point."

When Dick was guest artist with the Rochester Philharmonic in 1954, playing both the Eastman Theater's Austin organ and an electronic, the author mentioned these V-Discs to the artist backstage following the concert, and Dick averred that he made several of them.

During a tiring recording session, it is not unusual for Leibert to leave the console for a few minutes and stand on his head. "It's good for the brain", he explains, "and my family loves to have me do it at home, because all the change falls out of my pockets!"

Dick's ancestors had arrived in America in the early 1600's and settled in Bethlehem, Pa., which was to become the scene of the annual Bach Festival. Music was always an integral part of the Leibert family home life, and since the inception of the festival, there has rarely been a performance without one of the family's participating with this famed chorale.

In the spring of 1966, Mayor Schaefer of Bethlehem, Pa., issued a proclamation, proclaiming the day of his recital in his home town as "Richard Leibert Day", an honor which included the keys to the city and a street parade prior to his concert.

An important part of his musical schedule is the late fall concert tour on which he embarks yearly. He has played over a thousand concerts in "Community Concerts" series, appearing in 200 cities in over 40 states. Some cities have been honored by his presence two, three or even four times.

The 1966 fall tour took him to Macon, Warner Robins and Carrollton, Georgia; Lewisburg and Knoxville, Tennessee; The Fisher Theater in Detroit; Salt Lake City and Montplier, Utah; and Cortez, Colorado. In the spring of 1967 there followed a stint at the Wilton Theater Kimball in Los Angeles.

Leibert has done concerts for the YMCA, Lions, Kiwanis and Junior Chambers of Commerce. Under auspices of the Baldwin Organ Co. and its dealers, Dick has appeared at more than 100 colleges, from Lubbock, Texas to Boston, Mass. The Baldwin dealer in each locality installs an organ with adequate number of speakers for any auditorium not fortunate to have a pipe organ installed.

# DISC SQUEALS

Last issue we listed a source of certain early George Wright HI-FI label mono and stereo discs at \$1.00 each, a deal we checked out and found satisfactory. Allied Radio, 100 North Western Avenue, Chicago, Illinois, 60680, is now offering a package of ten GW HI-FI stereo discs for \$17.88 plus postage. It's called *Organ Spectacular in Stereo*, and includes many which were unavailable from Publishers Central Bureau. We have not checked this one out so can't give it our blessing but those interested can send to Allied for free Catalog No. 273. The records are listed on page 25.

Demands from non-DTOCers for the "For Members Only" record of Ashley Miller playing the Detroit Senate Theatre 4-34 Wurlitzer have been so overwhelming that DTOC Secretary Ben Levy has issued a statement on behalf of the club which reads, in part:

Away from his musical chores, Dick Leibert has a most interesting private life. He is happiest when sailing his 36-foot cutter "Bahaman" off the New England Coast. He and his family, consisting of wife, two daughters, and two sons, make a yearly pilgrimage to tiny Block Island, 20 miles out to sea from Rhode Island. There he engages in surf-casting for striped bass, or a two-day sail into the Atlantic for Block Island swordfish.

He is a sports car enthusiast, having entered his Jaguar in a number of competitive events, and winning an event known as the Rip Van Winkle Regularity Race. His wife acts as navigator, and the usual arguments which ensue in these events led Dick to suggest that all cars carry a complete set of divorce papers in the glove compartment, together with a fountain pen. The pen would carry disappearing ink, which fades within 12 hours!

Leibert is a rose fancier also, and succeeded in winning a blue ribbon in his wife's garden club in Wilton, Connecticut, where they reside in a rambling stone house, high above Long Island Sound.

Dick Leibert, the organist's organist, appears to be happy, well-established and at peace with the world.

"At the time this recording was made the Board of Directors of the DTOC hoped to be able to make copies available to non-members. However, after a careful review of the Federal regulations which apply to non-profit private clubs such as the DTOC, the Board has most reluctantly come to the conclusion that any such distribution, even to recover costs, would be in violation of these regulations and would seriously jeopardize the Club's legal status.

Therefore, it is with the most sincere regret that we must inform you that copies of this recording cannot be made available to non-members."

Mr. Levy's complete letter of explanation of this action will appear in our next issue.

*A concert played on the now-removed Moller organ in the Sedgewick Theatre in Philadelphia by Don Kinnier is available on a stereo recording at \$5.35 post-paid. The Final Performance disc includes Caravan, March Medley, The Stripper, Gershwin Medley and an interesting item labeled The Stripper's Sister — plus many others. Proceeds will go toward relocating the organ. Order from Delaware Valley Theatre Organ Society, Box 195, Abington, Penna. 19001. The Album is entitled Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgone.*

**Concert Recording has undertaken a most risky assignment. A disc will be prepared which will compare the sounds of the major plug-ins with the authentic sounds of pipe originals they seek to imitate. The object is "to provide an unbiased sample of the manufacturers' ability to reproduce the sound inherent in the King of Instruments." So far, samples of Rodgers, Hammond, Wurlitzer and Baldwin have been lined up. Concert is also re-releasing many of the George Wright HI-FI label series for the benefit of those who want to fill in their collections.**

In fact, Concert Recording has grown so much, it has acquired a "flack" to push its wares. The first blast from the new Public Relations office is solid "Hollywood"—an announcement that Concert has acquired a "million-selling LP record" of theatre pipe organ music for later release. It is stated with some fanfare that "The significant factors which make this recording so successful are being withheld until further notice." A cliffhanger!

The Noreen Hennessy recording listed but not reviewed in the last issue (For the Record) was issued by the Theatre Organ Society of Australia and all profits from its sale (by Concert Recording in the USA) will go toward support of the New South Wales TOSA's theatre organ relocation project. A worthy cause.