

Gaylord Carter Presides at San Diego Morton Organ Rededication Show

by Bert Brouillon

San Diego — More than 18 months of restoration work on the Robert Morton organ in the Fox theatre here came to fruition on this March 25th as the fully restored 4-manual, 31-rank instrument was re-introduced to the public in a gala concert duo which attracted an audience of mostly San Diegans but also visitors from as far as San Francisco, Los Angeles and one man from Olympia, Washington. There were two performances, a matinee and an evening show.

The idea of a theatre organ concert is something new in this day and age to citizens of this southern-most California metropolis, and judging from the reception afforded the organ and organist, the situation looks encouraging.

As all who read this magazine are aware, the organ was overhauled, repaired and improved by a group known as "the seven". They decided to limit their numbers to seven because "organization is less complex that way."



Early arrivals line up at the box office as the traditional searchlight sweeps the marquee. The silk-hatted doorman stands at the curb ready for the 'carriage trade'.

The enlightened Fox Manager, Bill Mauch, and the enthusiastic owner of the house Philip L. Gildred Sr., are "right up there" with the "seven" in their enthusiasm for the organ, and the response to tonight's performance was important to them as well as to the seven.

They decided early to make it a gala occasion, complete with sky-searching lights, uniformed doorman and miniskirted usherettes (the miniskirts being of the '20s variety). For this first concert, promotion was light, as the "seven" felt their collective way on a limited budget. There were announcements to

SD's many plug-in clubs, handbills distributed to music stores, an interview on radio with Gaylord Carter, a few small box ads in newspapers and several published news items involving the organ and organist chosen for the kickoff concert. Yet, when the show started, the 2400-seat house was more than half full.

The performance was a familiar one to those who follow the fortunes of the "Flickerfingers" boys, Jim Day and Gaylord Carter. Their shows consist of a surefire combination of vintage film classics, topflight musicianship and high entertainment value. The film selected was an excellent print of the 1920 Douglas Fairbanks starrer, "Mark of Zorro." This swashbuckler has been discussed in these pages a number of times so we will not describe its content. However, this time the musical accompaniment seemed better than ever. Gaylord played it with the close cueing he is noted for, especially when milking comic situations.

Reasons for the added impact of the music score might be attributed to the instrument. This reviewer has seen the same show accompanied on smaller pipe organs and also on plug-ins. Each time Gaylord put his "all" into his presentation (he can't work any other way) but there was something extra this time. Possibly it was the great range of possibilities inherent in the restored Morton for the presentation of all kinds of film and solo music.

Of course some of the laughs came in the wrong places; the corny subtitles offered an unscheduled source of merriment.



— Roy Robinson Photo

Manager Bill Mauch and Fox Theatre owner Philip L. Gildred Sr. are jubilant over success of attendance and enthusiasm at pipe organ concert marking restoration of the theatre's long-silent instrument.



Sample: (Girl to Zorro) "They say you ride as though you were part of your horse."

How does the reconstituted organ sound? It has that mellowness typical of Robert Mortons, fast response and the tonal balance is good. The only criticism we could make is probably relative to the installation; even at crescendo volume, the instrument is never loud enough for its 31 ranks. That amount of pipework should insure thunderous crescendos. The lack of additional volume, needed to climax descriptive music or cap solos, might be traced to deep chambers, with pipework well to the rear. That condition is repairable and the addition of the sharp Trumpet (unenclosed) should help considerably.



— Roy Robinson Photo

Gaylord Carter outlines his plan of action to five of the "seven" before the evening performance: "No matter where you're standing in the auditorium, wave and take a bow when I call your name". Left to right are Wayne Guthrie, C. R. "Bob" Lewis, Carter, Bob Wright, Bob Risks and Archie Ellsworth, five of the "guys who fixed the organ."

But we are ahead of our story. A rededication calls for a few remarks by an official or dignitary. The "seven" produced no less than a judge, fresh from court. Judge Earl B. Gilliam, an exceptionally youthful-looking magistrate, hopped into the orchestra pit to present Gaylord with a rare coin to commemorate the occasion. How Gaylord managed to refrain from making the obvious remark as the judge approached may never be explained.

Then Gaylord demonstrated the awakened giant with some novelties from his entertaining bag of tricks. He took his audience on a brief "trip

through the organ" with tunes he has recorded, "Westward Ho!" "Diane" and his classic "hurry" — the "Big Chase." Then came a Victor Herbert medley and a minor classic by Ravel. All were enthusiastically received by the audience and there was much beating of palms plus a standing ovation for Carter after the film presentation.

Since we wrote about their triumph over the usual things which tend to scuttle a pipe organ, the "seven" have been busy making improvements. A faulty design had the very limited "Orchestra" manual installed where the accompaniment manual should be, as the bottom manual.

This arrangement was clumsy for an organist used to playing accompaniment on the bottom manual, so one weekend "Sevensers" Don Snowden and Bob Lewis shuffled the manuals to the normal order. From the bottom they are now, Great, Swell, Orchestra and Echo. Another story is the effort to get a lift going under the console. And the addition of a newly-built, just-arrived trumpet. Later!

Out in the lobby, theatre manager Bill Mauch was examining the tally

sheet and rubbing his hands together. It had been a long time since he had seen the theatre so full on a Tuesday evening. Hovering around him were the "miniskirt misses," teenagers moonlighting, and somewhat bewildered by all the fuss over a long-dead musical instrument they had never heard nor seen until tonight. But no matter; their leggy charm added much zest to the occasion.

Back in the auditorium, Gaylord had been joined by "Koko," veteran film animator Max Fleischer's agile little clown, who sprang out of the inkwell to conduct a sing-along and set Gaylord's tempo with his famed "bouncing ball." The audience roared through

choruses of "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp" and "Pack Up Your Troubles" as though sing-alongs had never gone out of style.

It was a most successful show. Afterwards the "seven" gathered in the back of the theatre to discuss the evening's events. While the matinee had drawn only a few hundred customers, the evening show had done well. Total attendance passed the 1700 mark. The theatre had more than covered expenses and there was reason to rejoice. In addition, the organ had behaved flawlessly. Not one cipher had marred the presentation. The future looks bright. — Bert Brouillon

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Mr. Jeff Zych has volunteered his services and equipment to produce a film on the story of the retrieval of the 3-10 Wurlitzer from a theatre in Ohio and its reinstallation here in Downer's Grove High School North. The organ is a gift of the Glen Alden Corporation.

The film will have a general rather than a technical approach. It will cover the complete restoration of a theatre pipe organ from beginning to end and will be produced dramatically with an artistic approach. There will be a minimum of narration, thus permitting the sound of the organ to monopolize the sound track. Visually, the organ and its mechanics offer many unique compositional elements for photographing. The film will run approximately thirty minutes, depending upon the involvement of the project.

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