

# Edwin A. Link and the Roberson Center Organ

Story by Lloyd E. Klos

ONE OF THE most remarkable stories to come "full circle" in these days of the Renaissance of the Theatre Organ, was realized on September 21, 1968. For, on that date, the 3/11 Link organ, formerly in the Capitol Theatre in Binghamton, N. Y., was dedicated in its new home, the Roberson Center for the Arts and Sciences in that city.

To understand how this installation came into being, the first to be erected in a cultural center anywhere, it is necessary to acquaint the reader with the background of the organ's donor, Mr. Edwin A. Link, Jr.

In the early 1900's, the Shaff Brothers Piano Company of Huntington, Indiana, headed by George T. Link, sold pianos to the Automatic Musical Co. of Binghamton, N. Y. In 1910, the latter company went into receivership, and Mr. Link's son, Edwin A., Sr. was designated by the creditors to operate the faltering firm. So with their two sons, George T. and Edwin A. Jr., the family moved to the Southern Tier City. The organization was operated successfully for several years, and later was purchased by Mr. Link Sr. from the creditors.

The company became known as the Link Piano Company, and the business consisted mainly of building automatic pianos, known as nickelodeons. The Star Theatre in Binghamton was the first to install a Link automatic piano to accompany the silent movies. Only one roll at a time could be used. Classical music was employed, since the music couldn't be changed fast enough to match the mood called for on the screen.

The Link Co. then developed a motion picture model which consisted of a piano attached to a music roll cabinet in which were four perforated rolls, each with 8 to 15 selections. There were various mood pieces to match that of the screen. This was a big improvement over the earlier model, since the mood could be changed speedily by the press of a button.

In 1914, Link built its first automatic theatre pipe organ. This model, consisting of a piano connected to two

Photos: John J. Young, Jr. Collection

cabinets containing four ranks of pipes and a 4-roll automatic player, was affectionately known as a "Peter Flunk". The device could be played manually or by remote control from the projection booth.

As larger theatres were built, larger, more complex organs were demanded.



*Edwin A. Link adjusts the marimba-harp stroke in Roberson Center organ. Switch and relay stacks at right.*

George T. Link became general manager of the expanding firm when his father retired. In 1925, the company engaged the services of the most famous theatre organist of his day as adviser, C. Sharpe Minor, who was then featured at Grauman's Million Dollar Theatre in Los Angeles. Under his guidance, the firm designed and built a new line of organs, incorporating new stops and tone qualities — the Link-C. Sharpe Minor organ, which became well known throughout the country through concerts played by Minor on the newly-installed instruments.

Minor also headed his own road show, centered around a portable Link 3/8 organ, housed in six cases, which could be moved and erected quickly.

With rich velvet curtains surrounding the pipe cases, sequined swell shades, jeweled console, and vaudeville acts, the show was quite a sensation. When the organ was played, colored lights were thrown onto the console.

On September 23, 1927, the 2600-seat Capitol Theatre opened in Binghamton, containing the latest and finest of the Link-C. Sharpe Minor organs, a 3/11 instrument, built especially for the theatre. Five thousand patrons attended the two shows on opening night to see the new "playhouse worthy of a city of a half million." Herbert Vogis, a Cleveland organist, received acclaim from the Binghamton Press "for his

work at the console of the huge pipe organ", the next day. The remainder of the program consisted of orchestral music, a newsreel, a local picture, and the feature film "Soft Cushions", starring Douglas MacLean.

Meanwhile, Edwin Link, Jr. was growing with the firm. Spending much of his free time in the factory, he started working his way to the top by assuming small responsibilities. Becoming proficient in pipe organ knowledge, he first assisted in the installation of an organ in the Colonial Theatre in Norwich, N. Y., and soon took charge of installations in the Symphony and Sun theatres in Binghamton, as well as others in New York State. Other assignments took him to California; Chicago; Atlanta; and Elkhart, Indiana.

His first of 35 patents was for an organ tracker bar. He developed more efficient metal keyboard and stop actions, and made improvements in player mechanism. He also designed unit chests for C. Sharpe Minor models, and electric actions for pizzicato and sostenuto touch.

Several years after the Capitol installation, Ed received a call from the manager to tune some of its pipes. Arriving at the theatre, he was introduced to a chubby-cheeked 12-year old boy, who never had an organ lesson prior to this meeting. The performer was Searle Wright, and because of his sensitive playing, was engaged to play the theatre for an entire week.



*Albert Emola, employee of the Roberson Center, adjusts Tibia pipe.*

When sound, added to motion pictures in the late Twenties, and the depression of the Thirties both sounded the death knell for theatre organs, the Link Piano and Organ Co. began to diversify. It developed record changers for phonographs, for which Ed Link obtained several patents. He also built his first Link Trainer, a simulated cockpit for teaching fundamentals of flying. This led to a flying school which became Link Aviation Inc. Hundreds of the Link Trainers were produced for America's pilot-training program in World War II.

In 1954, Mr. Link affiliated his company with General Precision Engineering, a business which grosses upwards of \$200 million annually. The firm builds simulators for NASA, driving simulators, electronic components, and devices for deep sea research, the last of great interest to Mr. Link.

In 1966, it was announced that the Capitol Theatre in Binghamton would be razed, and a suggestion from the

former "Boy Organist", (now organist and choir director at Columbia University) Searle Wright, that the organ be saved, awakened Ed Link's latent interest in the organ. Mr. Wright suggested that it be re-installed in the new Roberson Center, an idea which won prompt approval from the center's board of directors. The organ was removed from the theatre and brought to Mr. Link's garage workshop for refurbishing and enlarging. A complete miniature organ factory was set up for the work.

Almost two years were spent by Mr. Link and his two associates, John Cebula and Albert Emola. Other volunteers giving unselfishly of their time and effort were Chester Rataski, Ernest Bier, Connie Bult, Les Corcoran, William Cowen, Robert Gurdin and Hugh Holland.

The planning for the organ's installation in the center began before it was removed from the theatre. An organ loft, divided into three chambers, was designed above the stage on the third floor of the Roberson building. Chutes were built at either side of the stage, their openings concealed by grilles to carry the sound to the auditorium. A third opening above the proscenium, carries the sound from the percussion chamber.

The gumwood console was originally painted an antique white with gold trim. This was removed, and the case refinished in natural wood to match the decor of Roberson Hall. Damaged pipes were repaired, missing ones replaced, and all revoiced and tuned.

The console is on a hydraulic lift which lowers it to a chamber beneath

the auditorium floor when not in use. Blower and motor are housed back of the stage in a separate insulated room. The organ by the end of 1968, had 17 ranks, with addition to the original stop list of a gedeckt, salicional, post horn, gemshorn, oboe horn, and quintadena. The post horn and tibia are on 15 inches of wind, the quintadena on 6, and the remainder of the instrument on 10 inches.

Arrangement of pipes and effects in the three chambers is of interest. The left chamber contains the open diapason, concert flute, vox humana, viole d'orchestre, viol celeste, clarinet, gedeckt and salicional.

The right chamber has the tibia clausa, tuba trumpet, orchestral oboe, kinura, solo string, post horn, oboe horn, gemshorn and quintadena.

The middle chamber has the percussions — martial drums, piano, traps, harp, marimba, carillon, melotone, orchestra bells, roll xylophone, and cathedral chimes. The switch stacks are also located here. Link, by the way, was the only organ builder to put toy counters and percussions on vacuum action.

The organ was dedicated on September 21, 1968, by Searle Wright, the organist who said that his initial meeting with the organ over 40 years previously was the turning point of his life. Then, on September 28, Billy Nalle gave a public recital on the instrument to a full house of enthusiastic listeners. A silent movie presentation with organ accompaniment has been a monthly feature since.

In January 1969, Billy Nalle returned to do a repeat concert which was



*Albert Emola installing wiring on flute chest pipes (front to back): Vox Humana, Clarinet, Open Diapason, Violin, Violin Celeste, 8' Diapason (offset against wall).*



Mr. Link at console of the Orchestral organ.



Albert Emola tunes pipes in the right chamber.

recorded by Concert Recordings for early release.

According to Keith Martin, Director of the Center, "The Link Orchestral Organ, installed in the Roberson Center, exemplifies much of the purpose and philosophy of the institution . . . Alive with music, it is capable of an extraordinary range of sound. Among its uses will be recitals, concerts in conjunction with instrumental and vocal productions, accompaniment for programs of the dance and for the development of youthful talent.

"One of its most appropriate functions lies in the revelation and commemoration of the brief but engaging period in the development of our culture — the golden era of the silent cinema and the day of the movie palaces, great and small. It was a time

when the orchestral organ in the theatre introduced music to millions and reinforced the passions of the silent films with its music and magic. This era will be recreated at the Roberson Center with a series of the great silent films of the Twenties . . .

"If the 'gift without the giver is bare,' then Roberson Center's Link Orchestral Organ is richly and warmly clothed. Many thousands of hours of Mr. Link's own labors of hand and mind pervade the splendid gift in every part.

"It is a challenge and a fascinating opportunity for the Roberson Center for the Arts and Sciences and the community to make the most of the organ's capabilities for illuminating the past and lighting new ways of music in the future."

Thus, we have come "full circle" in the story of the organ and its builder who contributed to the Golden Age of the Theatre Organ, and now are taking an active part in that instrument's renaissance. Much will be heard of this organ in the future if plans of its sponsors are hopefully realized. □

#### Ranks are as follows:

Post Horn	Solo String
Tuba Trumpet	Viole d'Orchestre
Open Diapason	Viole Celeste
Tibia Clausa	Salicional
Gedeckt	Quintadena
Kinura	Concert Flute
Orchestral Oboe	Vox Humana
Oboe Horn	Gemshorn
Clarinet	

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