

THE
MAKING
OF
A
THEATRE
ORGANIST

OR . . .

How I Got Hooked!

by Bernie Venus



3/10 WURLITZER

I do not know just when it began but I remember that it was at a time when on Sunday night the theme song, "If I Could Spend one Hour with You," meant that Eddie Cantor was coming on the radio; on Thursday night, "Where the Blue of the Night Meets the Gold of the Day," meant Bing Crosby and the *Kraft Music Hall*;

on cold wintry Monday nights Cecil B. DeMille presented "*The Lux Radio Theatre*"; and in Toronto the films changed twice a week with two pictures showing and often the "B" film was better than the headliner. A check into the radio program listings would always give you an "Organ Recital" or "Organ Reveries".

I lived in Montreal where we had Leo LeSieur playing the Aeolian pipe organ in Ogilvies Department Store every noon hour, five days a week. On the radio Kathleen Stokes played the CBS studio organ with "*The Happy Gang*" from Toronto. Shea's Theatre still had a Wurlitzer playing and in Montreal Billy Eckstine played piano on stage at different theatres. Sometimes you were able to hear Norton (Buddy) Payne, who used to play the Palace, Capitol, and Imperial Theatres in Montreal in the silent days.

Bernie in his solo chamber — The Venus 3/10 Wurlitzer came into prominence with the release of the film "My Wife Said 'THAT'S ENOUGH!'" The flicker short was preemed at the 1968 ATOS Convention in Los Angeles and one of the memorable moments was Bernie's booming, triumphal laughter when his months of installation were behind him. The film had one glaring fault; it failed to characterize Bernie's long-suffering wife as the spoilsport of the title. In fact she gets on very well with the monster which occupies so much of the Venus abode.

My brother Alfred was an avid organ fan and had quite a collection of 78's of Jesse Crawford, Dick Leibert and Eddie Dunstedter. I recall one Christmas eve when Alf pulled me on a sled three miles to pick up two 10-inch discs he had ordered for Christmas. They were "Tip-Toe Through the Tulips", and "Body and Soul", and were played all through the Christmas holidays.

I remember getting interested in theatre organs after hearing some of Alf's English recordings of Quentin MacLean, Sidney Torch, and Reg. Foort. This started me reading organ books and sending away for photos of theatre organists.

The last thing my father said to me as I boarded the train for Halifax to embark for England at the beginning of World War II was, "While you are traveling around keep in mind that England has a lot of theatre organs



THEATRE ORGAN

still playing." As soon as I landed in our base area, I hit out for the nearest town which turned out to be Woking, Surrey. After walking around and finding the Ritz Theatre I decided to go in and see the movie. Well I never did see it because as I walked in all hell seemed to break loose as the spotlight aimed at the hole in the floor and out came this wonderful, beautiful looking console, with Harold Coombs, playing "English Organist's Theme Songs". As soon as he finished I headed backstage and learned something; the average theatre organist is a human being just like the rest of us. Even though they are thought of as in the same status as famous actors and actresses, they can be warm friendly people.



Reg. Foort's hospitality was much appreciated by a soldier far from home.

Harold started me on four and a half years of visiting organs, organists, and organ companies, and making so many friends. One particular incident that has always stayed in my memory of wonderful times was an invitation to visit a well-known organist. I was traveling by train and as I came to the station before the one where I was to get off, there standing in the rain with his cap on but no umbrella, looking into every window for me was one of the finest gentlemen I have ever met and one of the greatest organists, Reggie Foort. I became good friends with Reggie, his wife Betty, and their children. After taking me to their home they treated me like royalty. During the following week we visited the Capitol Theatre to see and hear Reg's magnificent 5-manual Moller which was spread across the stage. It sounded beautiful.

Finally the Canadian Army decided I should earn some of my pay. They

sent me to Italy, but not before I met my future wife, Elaine, while visiting the famous Blackpool Tower Wurlitzer. Miss Ena Baga was playing there while Reg. Dixon was in the Air Force and in no way was Elaine going to let me tour the Tower Organ with Miss Baga, without her tagging along.

While stationed in Brighton I spent each Saturday night at the Dome listening to Dudley Reeve play the big Christie Organ. Because I was there so often to hear him play, Dudley arranged for me to get in free.

The last person I talked to in England while waiting for the train to come home to Canada, was Sidney Torch. My unit had twenty minutes to wait so I phoned him. I was hoping he would make some more organ recordings, but he said no, he was going to start an orchestra.

After I was home in Montreal for a few weeks I decided to visit Toronto where I heard Quentin MacLean playing at Shea's. Result: I stayed in Toronto.

When the decline in theatre organ playing became evident, I started checking out the organs in theatres in Ontario, Canada. I soon learned that there were fewer Wurlitzers in all of Canada than in the city of Buffalo. After checking out organs from Rochester, N. Y. to Detroit I met Harold Logan who has a very fine installation in Niagara Falls City, Ontario. He informed me that the Wurlitzer organ in the Granada Theatre, Buffalo, was for sale with two or three bids in already. This was in 1959.

It was on a very cold Saturday morning in January that a friend and I left Toronto at 6 AM to get to Buffalo to see the Granada manager and present my bid. After one tense week of waiting I received a phone call which said "You now own a Wurlitzer pipe organ but I don't know what you're going to do with it."

After securing an official receipt, my cousin, Joe Booth, and another organ nut, John Holywell, and I spent the weekend from Friday night to Sunday night dismantling the solo chamber and packing it for shipment. The following weekend we did the main chamber. After three weekends of dismantling and packing the organ, we discovered the Government of Canada had just passed an "anti-dumping" law that included pipe organs, or as they put it, anything not made in Canada. This meant the special duty could be up to 75 percent of the



Listening area — The main chamber is behind the Chinese characters at the left, Solo chamber at the right.

original value, less depreciation, plus the regular 25 percent and sales tax. This started a five-month battle (from January to June) and nine trips in order to deal with Canadian customs. I obtained a letter from the Wurlitzer factory giving the original cost, shipping and installation charges, and present value. After all this I came to a dead end with customs. It seemed that no one had sufficient authority to make a decision on this entry.

Finally, after so much frustration, I decided to write to the Prime Minister of Canada, who was then the Honourable Mr. Diefenbaker. His secretary informed me that he had read my letter and put it in the hands of Mr. George C. Nowlan, the Minister of National Revenue. Three weeks later he said if I had proof of date of purchase please let him know. So on June 11, five months after I got my receipt, we got the go-ahead.

Loading the 36-foot tractor-trailer took all weekend. When the driver arrived on Monday morning he said "now I've seen just about everything." The load was higher than the top of the trailer. It was impossible to go under the highway overpasses so we headed out into the country to go over level crossings until we arrived at Canadian Customs. The customs men were waiting and wanted to know who I knew in Ottawa to get this kind of pull. I told them "The Prime Minister" and that was that.

The next day, what a sight! The garage was filled with organ parts till it bulged, and the lawn was covered. Finally we managed to get everything else into the basement.

I started to wash away the more than thirty years of accumulated dirt. (The organ was installed in the Granada February 3, 1927). This took me until January 17, 1960, exactly one year to the day since we first left for Buffalo to put in our bid.



Console and main chamber — The console is floodlighted. Walls and floors are hard-surfaced.

Elaine and I decided that since we were already adding on a bedroom we would add two rooms and plan on a large two-chamber installation. It wouldn't cost much more to add two rooms instead of one. After three years of building, mixing concrete and sawing wood we had a 14' by 38' extension with an 11' ceiling. The main chamber is 14' by 12' and the solo chamber, with switches and relays, is 14' by 35'. The ceiling joists are 10" deep with 6" of fiberglass insulation right through and lined with gyproc sheating. The walls are hard surfaced and the floors tiled throughout.

The blower is in a separate concrete room with a 4" soundproof door. The power supply, my own design, provides 10 volts at 125 amperes. The main chamber contains the Flute, String, Celeste, Violin, Diapason, Clarinet, Bourdon 16', and Diaphone 16'. The solo chamber has the Tubahorn, Tibia, Kinura, Vox humana, Ophicleide 16', Xylophone, Chimes, Harp, Glockenspiel, Sleigh bells, plus all the traps, relays and switches. The piano is outside the chambers near the console.

The chambers speak out into the music room which is 25' by 30' with finished hard walls. The console is finished in off-white and gold, floodlighted in colour. It is on a platform which is moveable up to 20'. Gold and black velvet drapes help to set off the decor of the music room which is

Music room and console — From the solo chamber grille.



authentic Chinese. We have not lost any of the original Wurlitzer sound and the shutters give us complete control of volume.

The organ, after four years of steady rebuilding, played its first recital in June 1968. It was such a success that we had another recital in September. This has become a regular event and each time there seems to be more people. The only problem seems to be that no one ever wants to go home.

In November Horace Lapp played and told us of some of his experiences while playing 'The Silents' around Toronto. It was a memorable afternoon and as usual no one wanted to go home.



Horace Lapp playing the 5/105 Casavant. He's one of Canada's leading theatre organists and he's equally adept at a straight organ.

When it was ascertained that Mildred Alexander, the distinguished organist from California, would be in Toronto earlier this year, it was decided by the Toronto Theatre Organ Society to have a weekend organ crawl to coincide with Miss Alexander's appearance. More than a month of planning, which included radio and newspaper advertising went into this endeavour.

There were three concerts over the weekend; Saturday evening at the Metropolitan United Church that has a 5/105 Casavant organ. Horace Lapp, presided at the console with an outstanding diversified program.

Sunday morning, Colin Corbett gave a brilliant performance at the 3/19 Hillgreen-Lane at the Odeon Carleton Theatre where he has been resident organist for a number of years. Colin's organ recital consisted of popular tunes and the background music to a hilarious Buster Keaton movie.

Sunday afternoon a large number turned out at the Venus residence to

hear the 3/10 Wurlitzer. Among those attending were several from the "Home Theatre Organ Club" and representatives from the Niagara Frontier Chapter in Buffalo, N. Y., Randy and Carol Piazza; Wally, Irene and Shirley Cole.



Colin Corbett and Mildred Alexander during the organ crawl which ended at the Venus home. Andy Jarosik, who does a regular stint at the Wurlitzer in the Riviera at North Tonawanda, looks on.

The program opened with Douglas Young at the Console. We were then graced with the artistry of Mildred Alexander, looking so lovely dressed in an exquisite lace pant suit. Millie played "Open Your Eyes" and "Cry Me a River" with such feeling that it brought tears to our eyes. One of her other selections was the full score of Gordon Jenkin's "Manhattan Tower" in a stirring presentation. It was evident that Millie enjoyed the Wurlitzer, using everything it could give including the recently installed piano, but certainly no more than we did listening to her perform. An open invitation is extended to Millie to visit us on her next trip to Toronto, which cannot be too soon.

We would up the crawl with some tunes by Colin Corbett (unfatigued by a long morning concert) and more played by Miss Ling Kong Chan and youthful Andrew Jarosik, who plays the Riviera 3/11 Wurlt "South of the border" in North Tonawanda. It was quite a crawl.

I have a Gottfried French Horn and Wurlitzer Trumpet which I hope to add in the near future to round out the organ. Of course — my wife said "That's enough" and I think she means it this time. I noticed she wasn't smiling, when she said it! Never-the-less, I think I would like to — (Bam!!!) — A 000-000-000-00!!

(Er — Mr. Venus is temporarily indisposed. Ed. □