

Aluminum Bubble Gets Organ



by Bert Brouillon

"We just wanted it to stay in Fort Worth and be heard by all the people," explained Howard Walsh when asked why he had invested \$20,000 to purchase the 3/11 (style 235) Wurlitzer in the doomed Worth theatre, then dug down for even more money to get it moved to the chambers prepared in the Casa Manana theatre-in-the-round, a huge 15-year-old aluminum bubble built on the site of the Billy Rose's 1936 centennial extravaganza of the same name.

"Everything from days gone by seems to be disappearing," said (Mrs.) Mary D. Walsh, "Nobody seems to care about old things anymore." The prominent couple has a long record

of public service in the Texas city; they were named "Patrons of the Arts" in 1970. When they heard the Worth theatre was to be destroyed and the organ auctioned off, they offered 20 grand for the long silent instrument and it was accepted. That's a lot of money but Howard and Mary Walsh are well known for their philanthropy.

Forty-five years earlier, when the Worth theatre was brand new and about to open its doors for the first time (Nov. 27, 1927), organist Paul H. Forster arrived just as the finishers from North Tonawanda were completing their work. Forster had been lured to Fort Worth from Syracuse, N.Y., where he had gained acclaim as a top sing-along organist, playing a

3/10 Marr & Colton at the Empire theatre. Today he recalls that when he entered the theatre stagehands were erecting a set which focussed on a huge banjo extending upward to the proscenium arch, a background for the vaudeville headliner, Eddie Peabody. Forster liked the Wurlitzer, his first playing job on that brand since he left his native Utica, N.Y. years before. He doesn't recall the names of the tunes he played for his first "Organogue" but thinks they had a Texas flavor.

Forster didn't remain long at the Worth; he and his family missed Central New York state, so he resigned after three months and returned. The Worth organist remembered for his long sojourn at the

theatre was the late Billy Muth. He played through the depression years and brought joy to audiences with his showmanship. After Billy there were a few organists for short periods, then the organ fell silent. In recent years it was revived for intermission music played by Mark Kenning. Then nothing.

That's the background for the encouraging story of an organ being installed in a theatre. Fort Worth is a city which has a now rare sense of civic pride. Businessmen Marvin Moore and Barney Parker can be credited with arousing interest in preserving the organ. Victor Thornton (Thornton Industries) contributed several hundred dollars toward the organ installation; Val Martin and D.A. Hasty donated \$500 toward the steel framing which supports the new chambers; W.B. Henderson and C.S. Sykes (Chickasaw Lumber Co.) kicked in \$500 for chamber building materials; C.W. Stocker Jr. (Burton Bros. Electric) supplied and installed electrical wiring, conduits and fixtures at cost; Bob Hebert (Builders Service Co.) supplied and installed acoustical materials at cost. And so on, down a list of a dozen more donors of time, money and talents. Somehow they collectively saw value in a bit of heritage about to slip away and they banded together to save it.

The two chambers were hung from the roof of the Casa over the last few rows of seats in one of the pie-shaped clusters of seats encountered in a theatre-in-the-round. Directly beneath the chamber structure, sixteen seats were removed and a shallow pit dug to accommodate the console, which is mounted on a Barton "four poster" lift. This location of the console "around the corner" from the swell openings poses a problem to the organist; he doesn't hear the organ directly, and the sound coming around the corner is mixed with reflections bouncing off the light and sound structure above the circular stage. Perhaps later a few small swell shutters will be installed in the floor of the chamber to correct this condition.

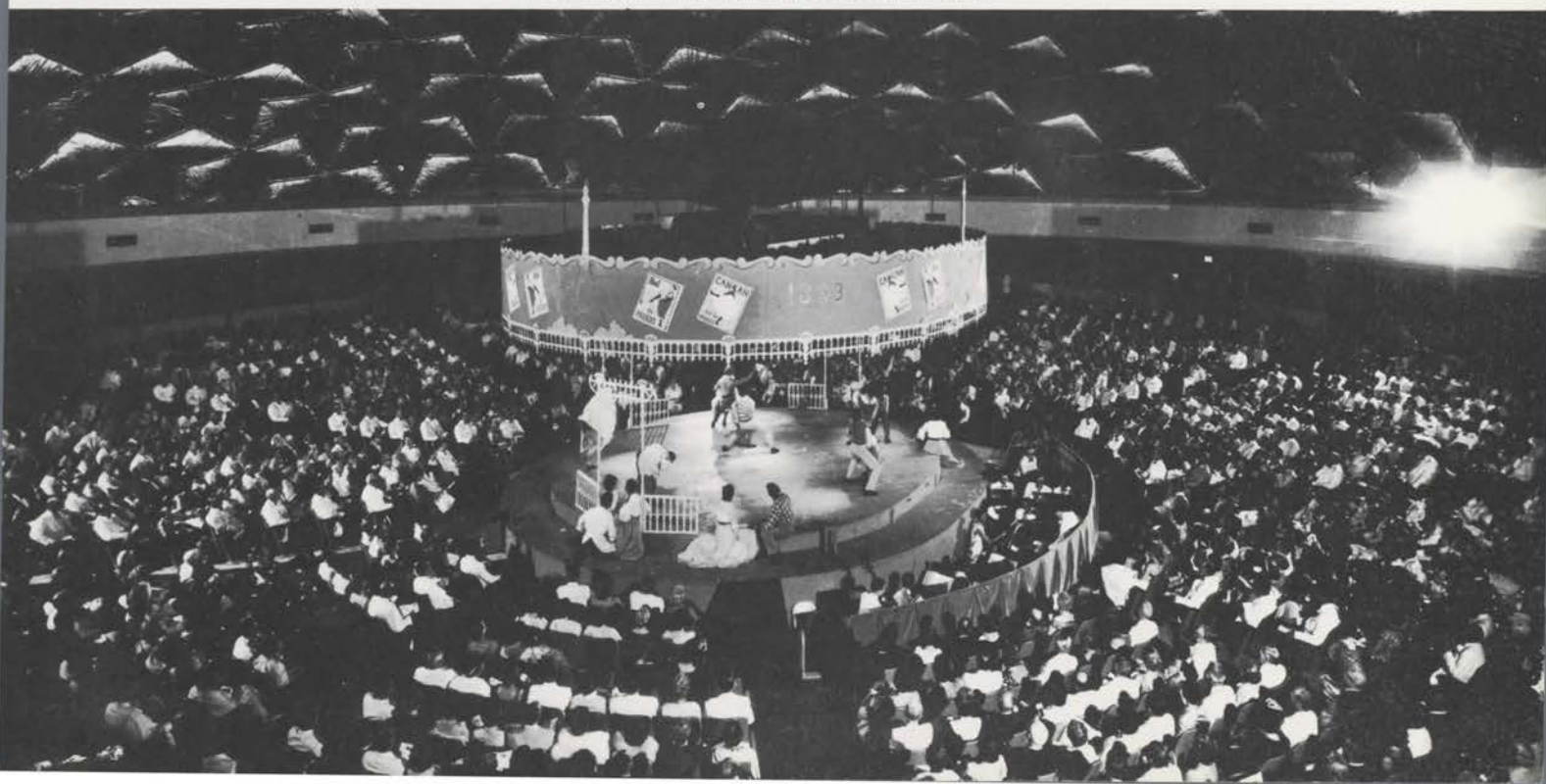
Melvin Dacus is the energetic manager/producer for the Casa, the man who supervises the staging of such performances-in-the-round as "Porgy and Bess", "My Fair Lady", "Carousel" and "1776" for the summer entertainment of Fort Worthers. Once the directors of the Casa, which is a civic enterprise, decided in favor of installing the organ there, Mel Dacus went to work. He cooperated with the chairman of the Organ Installation Committee, Homer Tomlinson Jr., and installation supervisor Jim Peterson. Mel also decided

that the opening concert must be a memorable affair. To insure a high level of music and showmanship he hired TV and film scorer Rex Koury, now embarked on a concert career. From St. Petersburg, Florida, he lured the Worth's first organist, Paul Forster, out of retirement.

Mel Dacus selected a date for the gala opening long before Jim Peterson and his band of volunteers had the organ set up in the chambers. Minor difficulties saw the installation falling behind schedule but the manager was committed to the date, September 25th, 1972, the only time the house would be available for such a show. Jim Peterson and crew redoubled efforts. On opening night only the percussions, Pedal Tuba and toy counter effects had not been connected. The approaching deadline had also made it necessary to use considerable quickly installed "flex" air conductor so the sound of escaping air added its sibilance to the music. And there was time only for a rough tuning before the opening concert.

Luckily, both Rex Koury and Paul Forster are top showmen. Neither would be discouraged by a less than perfect instrument if there was any chance of making the program come off properly, and there was that chance. When the 1100 paid admissions (at a whopping \$6.00 a head) had found

Interior of the Casa Manana during a performance.



seats, Casa prexy Robert McCollum and Mel Dacus paid tribute to the citizens who had made the organ installation a reality, then introduced the internationally famous Texas Boys Choir. The lads, directed by founder George Bragg, sang two well-received classical selections and a medley from "Oliver" with great precision. Then it was time for the great unveiling.

All eyes were directed to the rear of one section of seats as the brightly illuminated console climbed up the worm gears concealed inside the elevator's four corner posts while Rex Koury played a tune long connected with the Casa - "The Night is Young and You're So Beautiful." Applause fortissimo!

The organ sounded good though a little out of tune. Rex Koury had anticipated an imperfect instrument when he learned that there had been only 15 days for installation after the chambers had been completed so he was aware that much would depend on his showmanship. He was ready with some of his best novelties. One which was especially effective was his "movie-less silent movie," a story told by the audience's easy recognition of the tune titles or type of music. Of course, there was the "Musical Salute to Texas" which evoked much mid-tune applause; a tune composed especially for the donors of the organ, "The Walsh Worth Wurlitzer Waltz"; Rex's rousing variations on "When the Saints Go Marching In," some "real family music" from "The Godfather" and the Koury arrangement of national tunes which he calls "Rhapsody Americana."

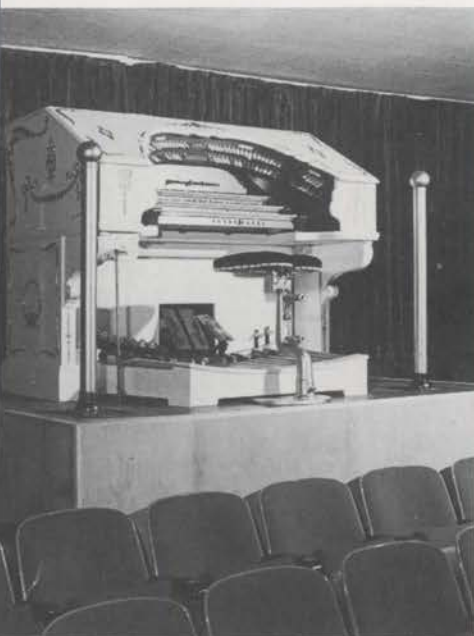
After intermission, Rex introduced Paul Forster. Now a spry 80, Paul reeled off "Say it with Music", "Indian Love Call" and "Tea for Two" in much the same style which made him the "sing-along king" way back when. Near the console, shooting photographs for this article was a former student of Forster's, Stu Green. Rex and Paul hoisted blimp-size Stu to the top of the lift for a handshake with the organist he has idolized for over 45 years. "After

F. Howard Walsh and Mary D. Walsh, the organ's donors, listen with organist Paul H. Forster (right), as Rex Koury plays a private performance after the concert - the 'Walsh Worth Wurlitzer Waltz' he composed for them.





Paul Forster accommodates autograph seekers. — (Stufoto)



The console in 'up' position. The Barton 'four-poster' elevator was brought along from the Worth Theatre. Chambers are hung from the roof directly above the console.

The Casa Manana's energetic manager/producer, Mel Dacus, signs the elaborate programs given out at the concert. — (Stufoto)



three lessons, Paul suggested I take up plumbing," admitted Stu, "I wish I had."

It was a great day for Paul Forster. He had planed in from Florida and been given red carpet treatment by the Casa staff. Interviewed later, his eyes sparkled as he said, "Just think — after 45 years, to be placed on a pedestal again. That applause sure hit the spot."

During the second half of the program, the organ acted up a bit. One swell shutter broke loose from its pneumatic engine and stalled wide open, and Jim Peterson was horrified to hear what sounded like a trem thumping wood. He rushed to the chamber to discover the unwanted percussion sound beating with the tremulant was something inside a regulator. There was nothing he could do while the organ was being played.

Worse yet, as the air heated within the Casa, the pipework crept a little more out of tune.

If these flaws annoyed the audience, there was no evidence. They applauded the Koury showmanship with the enthusiasm of those who have a special interest in the enterprise. Many did. Among the 1100 were a fair share of the Casa's Board of Directors and volunteers who had worked so hard to get the organ playing in 15 days. Refinements could be accomplished after the shakedown trip.

When Rex Koury had played his final encore, he and Forster went up to the stage to sign autographs in the elaborate tassel-decorated program book Mel Dacus had prepared for the event. Mel's signature was sought after as much as those of his stars. While he had the opportunity, Mel questioned the handful of ATOSers present concerning improvement of the organ, which isn't quite loud enough for the house in its present state. He got a variety of suggestions, ranging from "make the chamber walls more reflective" or "add more swell shutters" to "add a posthorn."

The next morning's newspaper reviews were enthusiastic in their praise of Koury, Forster and the whole concept of having a theatre pipe organ installed in a civic building. As mentioned before, there's something different about the people of Fort Worth. Perhaps "wonderful" is a more descriptive word than "different." □



Mr. and Mrs. Jim Peterson. Jim supervised the installation crew but says he couldn't have made it without the Mrs. "She's the best little cable splicer in the world". (Stufoto)



Paul Forster and Rex Koury talk it over on the morning following the dedication concert. Both organists were impressed by the interest shown by Fort Worth citizens in preserving the 3/11 Wurlitzer. — (Stufoto)

TEXAS HOSPITALITY. Rex marvels at this example of closely-knit Fort Worth civic mindedness. The Inn manager was obviously in the Koury audience the preceding evening. — (Stufoto)

