

the organ in the fabulous...

San Sylmar

MUSEUM

by Stu Green

Every man at some time dreams of owning his castle, a secure place to enjoy and protect his earthly treasures. Many achieve that goal to various degrees, but few make it to the degree of opulence which strikes the visitor upon entering San Sylmar, the name chosen by J.B. Nethercutt for his

private museum in Sylmar, California (just outside of Los Angeles).

The building is impressive for its height even during the approach. In this area prone to earthquakes where tall buildings are discouraged, San Sylmar reaches nine stories into the sky, the tallest building in sight. On



San Sylmar. The top floor (with balcony) houses the Nethercutt's penthouse.



close examination one can still see traces of the cracks the big temblor of 1971 left in the tops of the sandstone-colored structure's side walls. Actually the building, then still under construction, came through the earthquake with very minor damage, despite its proximity to the quake's epicenter.

To enter San Sylmar, one must obtain a pass from the security guard at the employee's entrance (the elevated grand main entrance is opened only on special occasions) and sign in. The security setup is impressive; every interior floor and area outside the structure is visible to the guard on duty via closed circuit television. During my visit guards on patrol were observed making their rounds, often checking in by waving at the numerous TV cameras. There's a good reason for the precautions; inside is treasure.

I was given a badge and assigned a pretty girl guide who ushered me through a large salon which exhibited part of the Nethercutt antique car collection. We headed for a wide, deeply carpeted winding stairway which led to a mezzanine. I nearly stumbled in the deep pile as I ogled the huge chandeliers which light the slickly

PHOTOS
Peg Nielsen and Stu Green

restored old autos (all of which are in top running condition, and finished like new). To put it mildly the tasteful beauty of the richly finished interior is overwhelming. The outside of the building is Spartan-plain; there is no hint of the opulence within and the sight of the antique auto salon and its ornamented furnishings is an eye opener.

At the top of the winding stairway is a mezzanine which overlooks the auto salon. "That's Mr. Nethercutt's desk" said the guide, pointing to a high-backed desk of generous proportion and with about the most lavish gold-flecked Louis the 14th decorative design one could imagine. A smaller desk with the same design a few feet from the boss' desk, was occupied by a lady with glasses, obviously his secretary. The trip to the music room was completed by means of a small elevator which had padded walls lining it.

"The padding will be removed when the work here is completed," explained my guide, "It's here so the workmen don't mar the elevator wall decoration." A decorated elevator yet! Even a small crystal chandelier overhead!

The elevator doors opened on one of the most fascinating rooms I have ever seen. It is huge, roughly 100 feet square. The deep carpet feels like turf underfoot and that impression has been amplified by large raised green "leaves" at regular intervals to give the effect of walking in a field of clover. The item which will catch the organophile's attention immediately is the spotlighted double-stoprail, three-

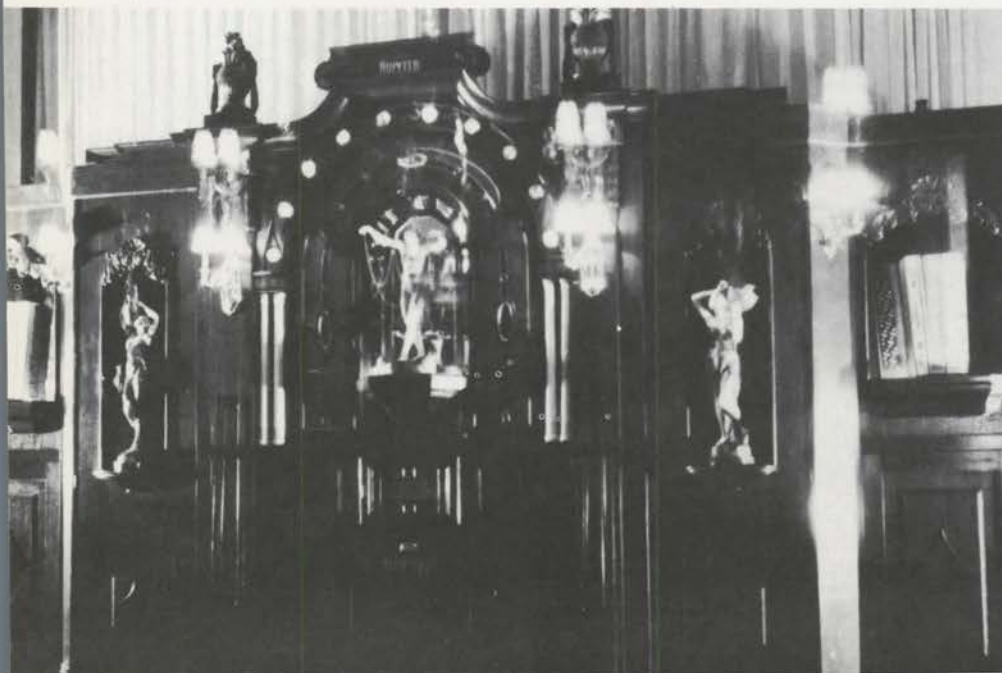
Hupfeld Orchestrion. Note accordions.



The Music Room. The organ console is located in a fenced pit. The glassed-in Solo Chamber may be seen in the distance (above the console). Parts of four grand pianos are visible, also the Hupfeld Orchestrion (behind left pillar). Note: "leaves" in carpet.

manual console resting in a sunken pit near the center of the room. The console faces the West wall but there is no sign of grilles or chambers — yet. At this point the guide left me, saying that Mr. Belt would be along shortly. I took the opportunity to explore the

room and its array of musical instruments. The side walls are formed as alcoves which house an array of automatic music makers. The wall ahead of the console is heavily draped and in the center is a huge Hupfeld "Excelsior-Pan" orchestrion housed in a case easily ten feet tall and over twice that measurement in width. Its special feature is that among its several sets of pipes, reeds and percussions are two visible accordions which play as though invisible hands were pumping them. The left wall alcove houses a large Mortier automatic and a Popper orchestrion which boasts about ten ranks of pipes. Further back along the same wall is an alcove of "nickel grabbers," more modest instruments: a Welte "cottage" orchestrion, a Wurlitzer "LX" piano (a type once common to saloons and other popular gathering places), a glass-encased Wurlitzer harp, a Mills "Virtuoso" violin (a real violin, played by small resin-flaked discs rotating against its strings), a Glockenspiel and a banjo (both glass encased). They all work, just as they did when they caught nickels in public places in





The "nickel catchers."



Mortier Orchestrion.

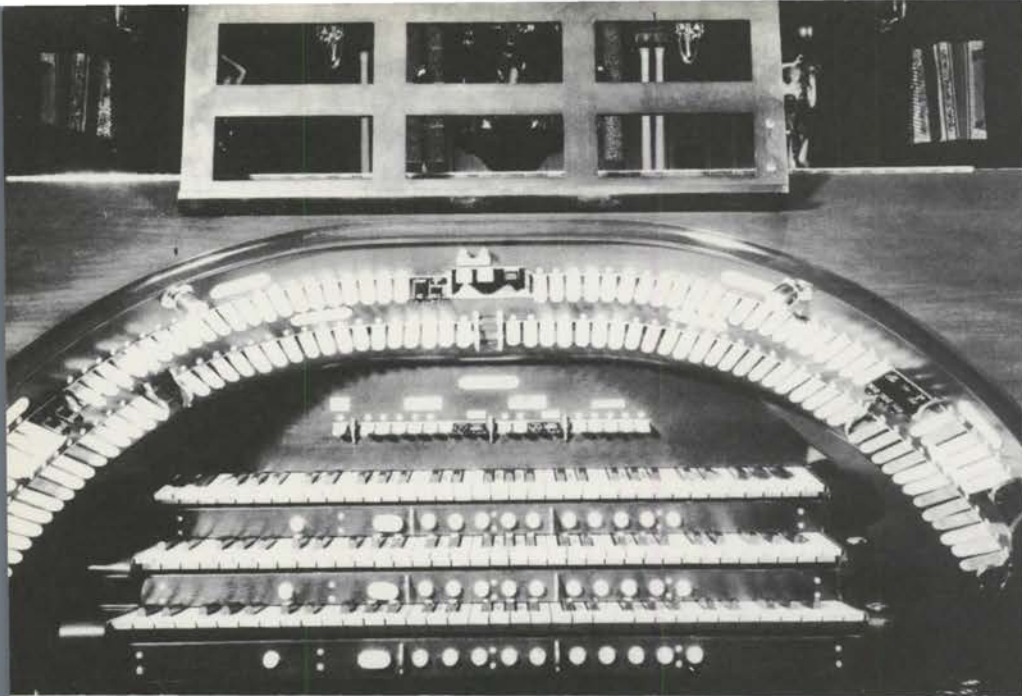
A Wagnerian vista decorates the "Wotan." The mythical god surrounds his sleeping daughter with a ring of "magic fire" which can be penetrated only by a hero.



those long ago pre-jukebox days.

The opposite wall has a continuing display of ancient music makers in a single rather long alcove which may be concealed by drawing floor-to-ceiling accordion blinds together. This alcove houses two medium-size Wurlitzer orchestrions and a 1910 Welte "Wotan," named for the top god in ancient German mythology (the Greeks had another name for him — Zeus). Outside the alcove is a Weber "Maestro" standing alone. Some of the instruments along this wall can be circuited to play pipework in the Wurlitzer organ, I learned later. Up to this point I had seen no sign of the pipes which just had to be connected to that intriguing console in the carefully fenced pit. The instruments listed by no means exhausts the number of restored automatics in the room. There are many more.

Another matter of interest is the four pianos in the music room, two of them with automatic players of the type which is rolled up to the keyboard so its "fingers" can play on the keys. All four are highly ornamented, with perhaps the red and gold Chinese decor of one Steinway being the most striking. There is also a 7' Mason & Hamlin with gorgeous tone. A larger Steinway piano is equipped with its own "Vorsetzer" player. But the most



Console closeup. The Hupfeld Orchestrion accordions may be seen in the distance, above the console.

imposing instrument is the huge (10') piano made by the Ehrbar Piano Co. of Vienna for Emperor Franz Josef I, the beloved monarch of Austria, before the turn of the 20th century. It is ebony-hued with a gold trim design, and is equipped with a Hupfeld "Dea" player which is similar to the Welte Vorsetzer, an instrument of majestic tone worthy of a Liszt or a Paderewski.

At the rear of the music room is a raised oval large enough for a medium-size orchestra. But a climb up the two steps reveals a long dining table, complete with high back chairs. I was admiring the painting which covers the ceiling of the mirrored oval dining area, an angel-studded sky mural which would intrigue a Michelangelo, when a voice behind me asked, "How do you like the dining room, Stu?"

It was Gordon Belt, "J.B.'s" Program Director for San Sylmar who is also in charge of the installation. Gordon came on the scene as one of Dick Villemin's organ installers. This project was started four years ago, shortly after the structure was raised. Gordon remained as an employee of the museum when the organ had been installed. He has been supervising maintenance and planning expansion of the instrument ever since. He is thoroughly familiar with one of the most extraordinary pipe-plus-computer arrangements imaginable. He has to be; he may be called on to make repairs in a pinch.

The basic organ started life as a 3-manual, 14-rank (style 260) Wurlitzer in Keith's theatre, Atlanta,

Georgia. After the usual story of neglect and disuse it finally was purchased by Nethercutt and moved to Dick Villemin's organ shop in Porterville, Calif., about 5 years ago. Villemin's crew enlarged the instrument to 25 ranks in the process of refurbishing it (including releathering throughout). Among the added ranks are: second

The Emperor's piano.



Tibia, second Diapason, Flute Celeste, Moller Posthorn, second Solo String and Celeste, Brass Musette, Unda Maris, Dulciana and second Vox Humana. More additions are planned.

All this was revealed by Gordon Belt as we stood in the exquisitely appointed dining oval of the music room. But I still hadn't seen any evidence of chambers or pipes. Gordon sensed my puzzlement and motioned me over to a cabinet across the aisle from the Weber "Maestro" orchestrion. He pushed a couple of buttons on a lighted control panel and a tape one half inch in width started moving from reel to reel. Simultaneously the sound of an organ issued from the curtained West end of the room. Gordon touched another button and curtains in two widely separated areas of the wall started folding upward and there were two chambers behind double acoustic glass with swell openings above. The sound improved as the curtains disappeared overhead, a majestic theme from Richard Rodgers' "Victory at Sea" suite.

"Who's playing that?" I asked.

"That's Dennis James," replied Gordon, "He dropped by to try out



The Nethercutts are pictured among the cherubs in the Michelangelo-style ceiling painting above the oval dining area.

the organ when he was in town for a concert recently."

"But I don't see any perforated rolls moving."

"You won't. All the impulses required to reproduce all aspects of an organist's performance are on this digital tape."

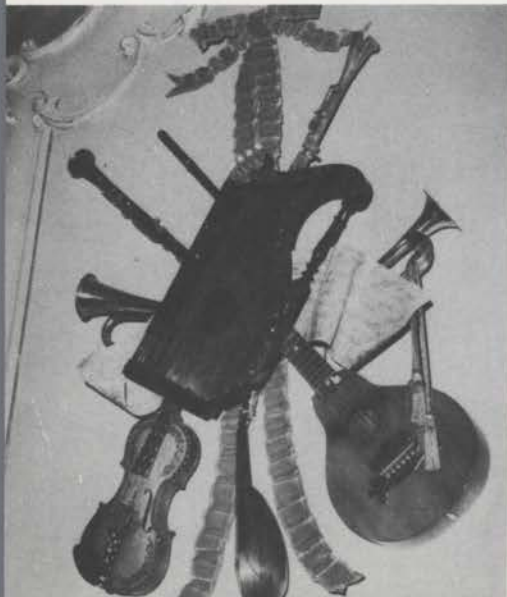
"A tape recording?"

"No, not in the usual sense. There is no modulation on the tape, only computerized impulses which play the organ exactly as the recording organist did."

Belt then provided a brief rundown on the radically different method of recording developed specifically for the Nethercutt instrument by Dick Peterson of Worth, Illinois, who is known for his Peterson Chromatic Tuner.

In short, the tape records magnetic

Wall decoration in the dining area. The instruments are real.



impulses generated by the ten-volt keying potential as the organ is played. Impulses from every keying contact, combination and switching action are broken down into digital bits of information and recorded on the computer tape. This could be done with the blower off, provided the organist could play without hearing his music. Only the keying voltage is required. When the tape is played back the computerized impulses energize the organ's low voltage circuits (keying, combination and swell pedal action) exactly as they were put on the tape; the computer merely reads the tape. This is perhaps an oversimplified explanation of a very complex recording system but I don't want to get into such related areas as computer programming, digital data processing, memory circuits, data checking, data decoding and tape reading. Let's keep it simple.

There may be one interesting parallel; the final stage of the playback circuitry, the circuits which control the organ's 10-volt keying potential, must be roughly similar to the GENII Processor developed by Marvin Lautzenheiser to control his 3/11 studio Wurlitzer in Springfield, Virginia (THEATRE ORGAN, October, 1972), as the function is the same. Most of the electronic switching circuitry for the Nethercutt organ is located in a large, 2-deck relay room located between the left Main Chamber and the Right Solo Chamber. Needless to say, there are boards loaded with diodes, transistors, printed circuits and capacitors operating traditional Wurlitzer switches and relays, all of which have

been newly wired with the same type of cotton covered cable wire used by the original builder.

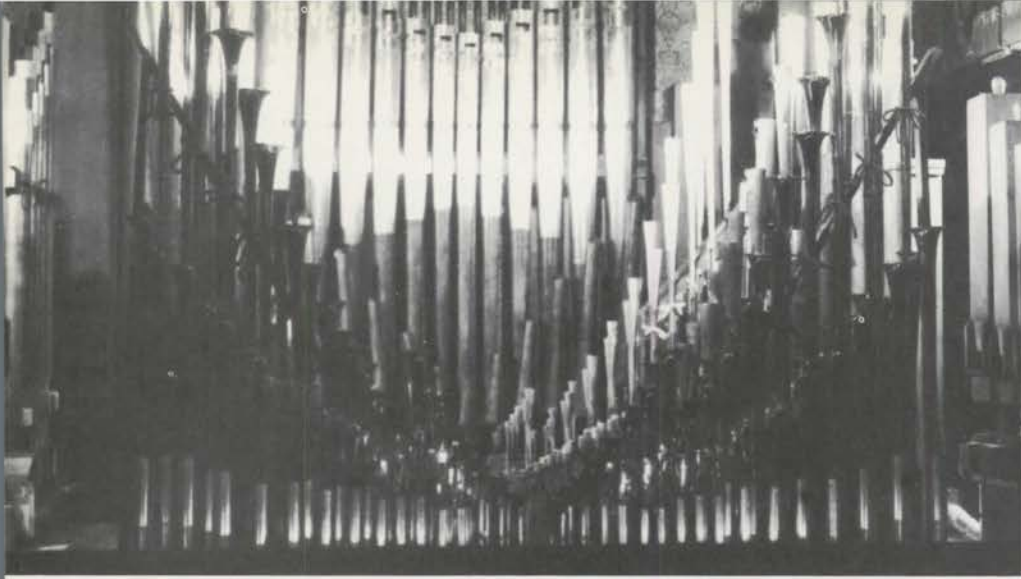
Chambers are divided into two levels, with the floors of the upper levels near the tops of all chests. Concealed in the lower level are the sometimes noisy regulators and chuffing tremulants. Thus the music-making parts of the organ are acoustically separated from what might be distracting action noise.

"The organ hasn't been tuned thoroughly since February," said Gordon, "Dick Villemin is sending in tuners this morning." Just then two young men appeared with a small tool kit. They were the tuners and they set to work immediately, while Gordon continued the revelation of wonders on other floors. The nine story building, due to the high ceilings, has only six floors. There is one room full of antique pianos and reed and electronic organs (including one roll-playing Aeolian Hammond) and another one with row after row of shelves constructed specifically to store the thousands of rolls collected to play most of the automatic instruments. Provision is being made to store 40,000 rolls. Manufacturers never fully standardized the roll perforation parameters and the number of functions the perforations triggered, so not all rolls are interchangeable. Eight of the automatic orchestrions use the pipework of the organ, but draw only those ranks they were originally equipped with. The rest are self-contained.

The top floor penthouse of the San Sylmar building is the "J.B." home away from home, the place Mr. and

Gordon Belt operates the digital tape player, brain center of the theatre organ automatic facility.





Solo Chamber as seen through window.



Inside the Solo Chamber.

Mrs. Nethercutt escape to rather than Palm Springs when they want to get away from their Beverly Hills home for a weekend.

The floor directly above the big music room houses a theatre, the Cameo, which can show 35 and 16 millimeter films and project slides from a completely modern projection booth which also has switches to control screen bordering devices and the various stage lights, effects and curtains. For wide screen movies a special motorized screen is rolled down in front of the little theatre's gaily decorated proscenium arch. There are two consoles in the Cameo's pit. One is between two Seeburg "Filmplayer" swell boxes which house four ranks of 61-note voices played from a 61-note

upper manual, the bottom manual being a piano. It also has some pneumatically controlled sound effects for cueing silent films (as opposed to the type energized by pull cords), including a bird chirp, snare and bass drums. I tried a few chords and noted that the Vox Humana was especially fine, but the effect marked "Horse Hoofs" sounded like chattering false teeth.

To the left of the Filmplayer is a Wurlitzer style 210 console on an elevator which draws its pipework from the 25-rank chambers directly beneath the 50-seat theatre, the sound being conducted to the theatre via a very elaborate electronic sound transfer system.

"We don't really need the sound system for the bass," explained Gor-

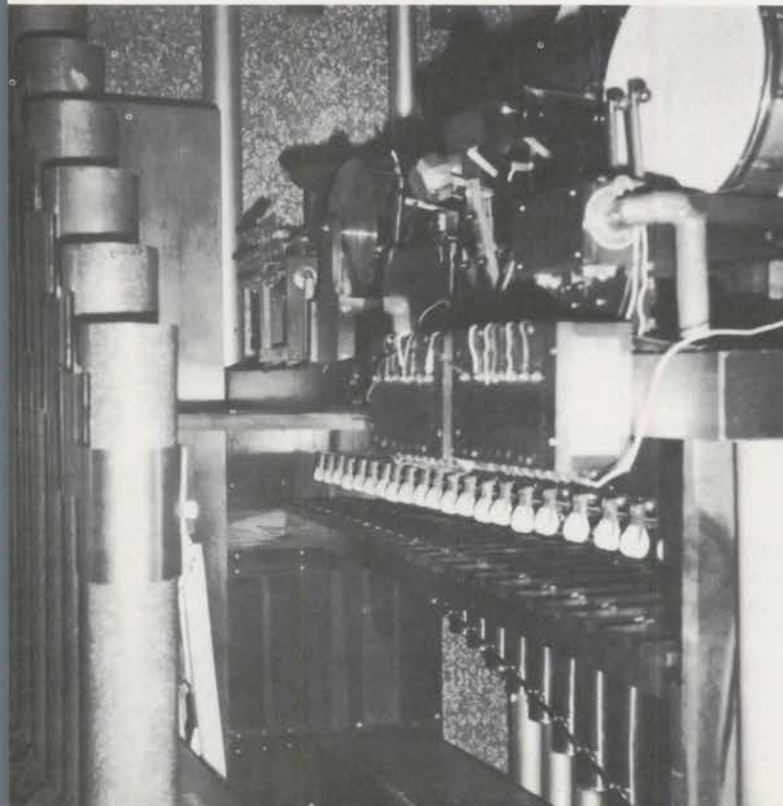
don, "It comes right through the floor, clear and crisp."

At this point confusion took over; I had absorbed so much mind-boggling input concerning the flexibility of the organ and the various devices which are wired to it, I asked Gordon if there was any simple way to state how many ways there are to play the organ.

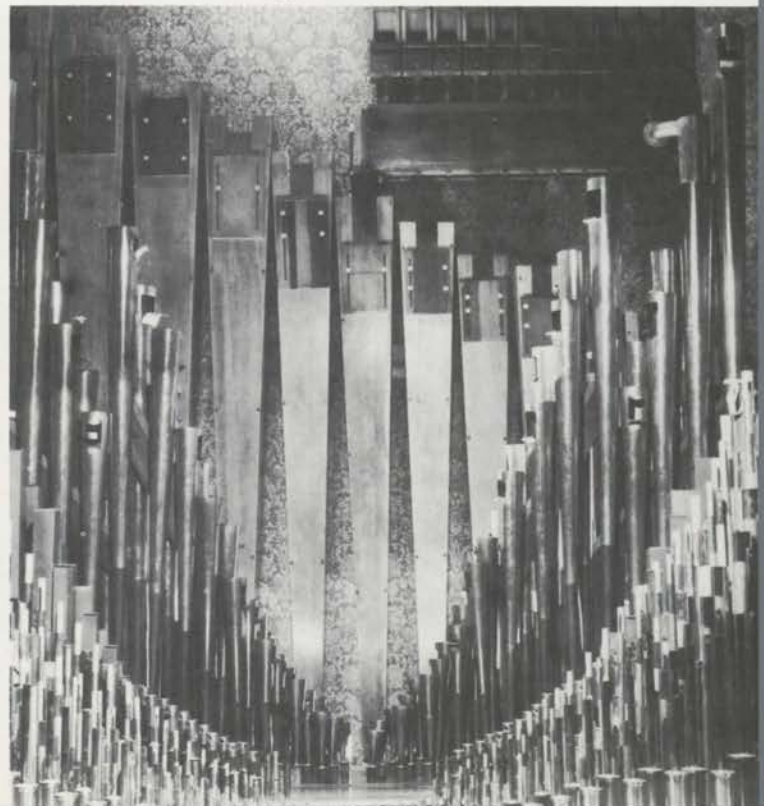
"Sure," replied Gordon, who is obviously used to the wonderment of amazed visitors, "There are eleven ways to play the pipework in the two chambers in the music room: the eight roll players, the digital computer and the two consoles. It's really quite simple."

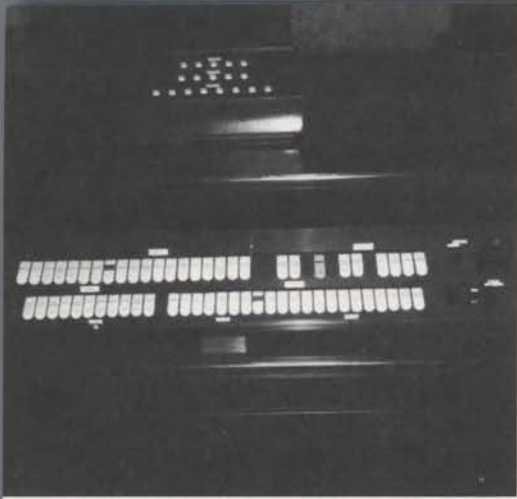
Perhaps to Gordon, but not to the casual visitor who wanders in from the sleepy little town of Sylmar to find

Toy Counter and Marimba behind Diapason offset rank.



Main Chamber as seen through window.

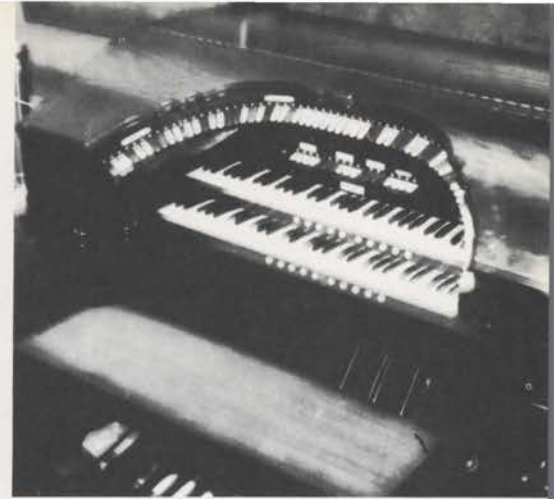




Registration for the eight orchestrations may be selected from these stop keys.



Housed in these cabinets are the roll players which play eight of the orchestrations, the ones which utilize the theatre organ's pipework.



The Cameo Theatre console draws on the 25 ranks of pipework in the Music Room theatre organ downstairs.

himself in a Xanadu of beautifully restored relics of more graceful eras, whether musical or automotive.

How is it possible? Obviously, the museum required a lot of money. It has been financed 100 percent by Mr. Nethercutt. It all started many years ago when he started collecting old cars and restoring them as a hobby. Then he expanded to include automatic music makers. The collection became so large that storage became a problem

so the concept of a museum loomed gradually.

As we said, the museum required considerable money. J.B. Nethercutt has been very successful in business (he manufactures the Merle Norman line of cosmetics). He credits the U.S. form of government with much of his good fortune; this republic provided the opportunity he could not have enjoyed under any other system and he is grateful to the extent of being an

unabashed flag waver.

One of his factories is next door to the museum and, as we have mentioned, his office is on a balcony overlooking his auto salon, so he may be seen around the museum much of the time, either conferring in his office or guiding little knots of bug-eyed visitors among the wonders.

It's a private museum, all his, but a museum is a place to see things. Does J.B. Nethercutt intend to reserve the museum for his own private wonderment? Not if past performance is any indicator. While the museum is not open to the public, there are ways of gaining admission. Being an ATOSer helps. Recall that J.B. opened his then unfinished music room to attendees of the ATOS mini-convention held in Los Angeles in February 1972 for an electrifying concert played by Rex Koury. At that time J.B. addressed the visitors and stated that the organ would sound much better if visitors would come

The Cameo Theatre. Console Up.



Peg Nielsen tries out the Seeburg "Film-player."



back to hear it when the room had been completed. He added that while it was a private museum, any of his friends were welcome to return, and that he considered the ATOS members in the audience his friends. Quite a number have already taken advantage of that invitation, as have a large number of organists. We noted digital tapes in the library marked with the names of Lyn Larsen, Rex Koury, Randy Sauls and Eddie Dunstedter, to name a very few.

When carpeting was laid in the music room, much of the organ's brilliance was absorbed. That possibility had already been considered and a multi-channel reverb system, including an echo room under the building, now maintains the liveness required for the best in organ sound. It is now a controlled liveness which can be increased or decreased, to compensate for any size audience.

We have already mentioned the elaborate TV-augmented security system which protects the building and its contents. How about such impersonal destroyers as fire? The possibility has been anticipated, especially in the area of the pipe chambers and relay room. Should a fire start there the increasing temperature would quickly trigger the release of a massive cloud of Helon gas to neutralize the oxygen on which fire feeds. Mr. Nethercutt is taking no chances.

What will be the fate of the museum in the far future? Will J.B. will his treasure to children or relatives, or leave that part of his estate as a legacy to the public and the form of govern-

Rex Koury gave the theatre organ its initial ATOS workout during the February 1972 mini-convention in Los Angeles.



THE SAN SYLMAR WURLITZER CHAMBER ANALYSIS

25 ranks playing; 2 ranks will be added in the Main chamber; seven in the Echo chamber.

SOLO

Brass Saxophone
Brass Trumpet
Tibia Clausa (large scale)
Quintadena
Oboe Horn
Orchestral Oboe
Kinura
Vox Humana
Solo String
String Celeste
Tibia Minor (small scale)
English Posthorn
Horn Diapason

ECHO

(to be completed)
4-Rank Vox Chorus
16' Vox
8' Vox
8' Vox Celeste
4' Vox
Viole Pomposa
Viol Celeste
Tibia

PLANNED ADDITION

Tibia
Tibia Celeste

MAIN

Brass Musette
Viol d' Orchestre
Unda Maris
Viol Celeste
Dulciana
Solo String
Flute
Flute Celeste
Vox Humana
Tuba
Diaphonic Diapason
Clarinet

ment which helped make his fortune a reality?

While pondering this intriguing matter, I was brought out of my day-dream by the voice of Gordon Belt: "See that blank spot up there by the Solo Chamber? We have a seven-rank echo organ to install up there — including a Vox Humana chorus. Then, later, we'll install a four-manual console so more unification will be possible on the stop rails."

With a feeling of "will wonders never cease!" I retreated to the nor-

malcy of the street outside where automobiles still spewed out pollution and the hum of civilization continued as always. Then I looked back at the big gate which is the main entrance to the Nethercutt Museum. It just didn't seem possible that such grandeur of other eras could be contained within those stark walls. Yet, I'd just seen it all. I couldn't help but think that in comparison, Kublai Khan must have been a piker when it came to building what he called "pleasure domes." J.B. has a much better idea. □

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