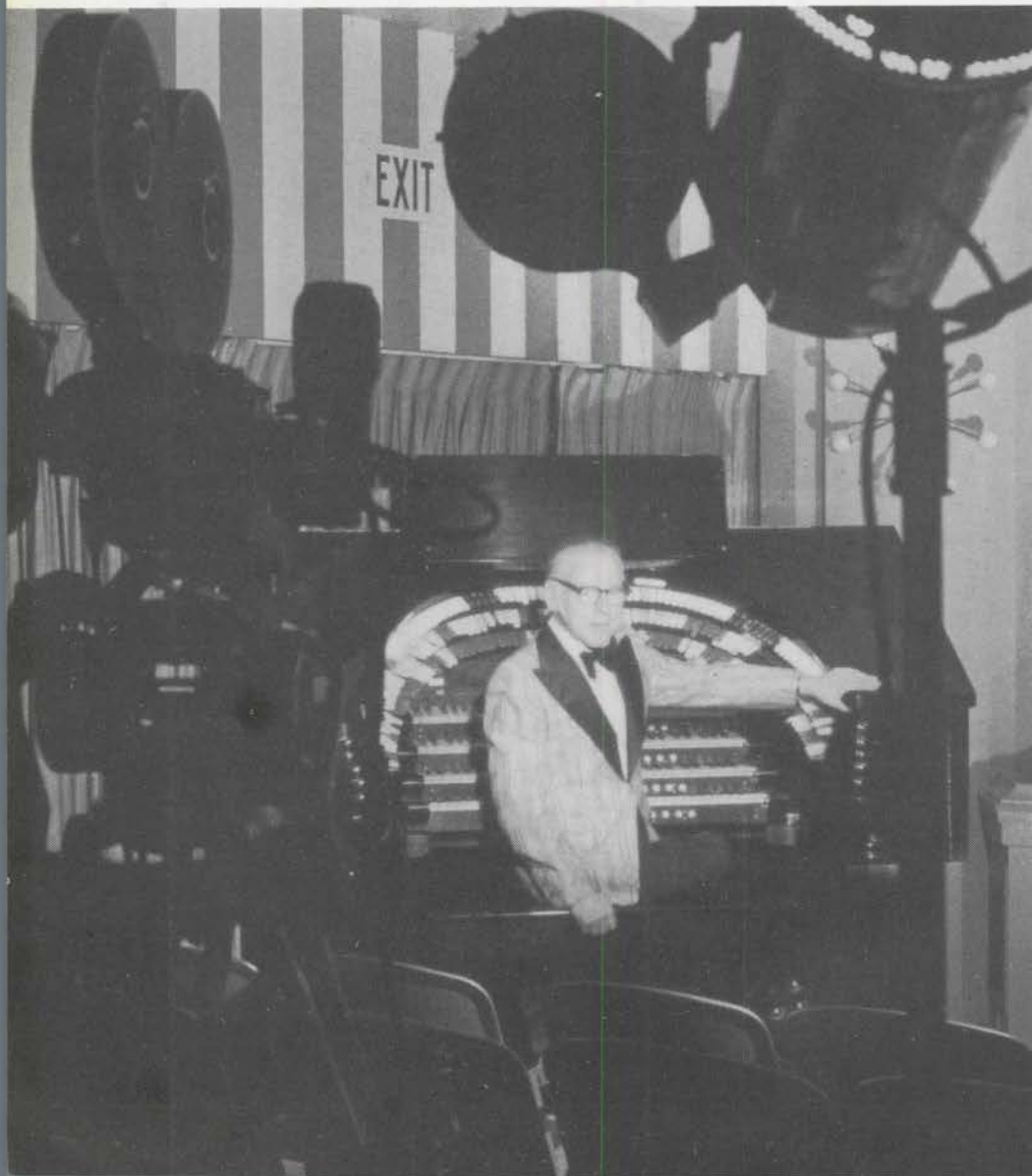


A HOLLYWOOD "DISCOVERY"

THE DRAMATIC VALUE OF THEATRE ORGAN

by Lyle W. Nash

Lights . . . Camera . . . Action — Gaylord Carter at the Wurlitzer in the Simonton Theatre at Toluca Lake.



Because Harold Lloyd and Mary Pickford and Richard Simonton, Sr., had an abiding love for their classic films, the art of creating motion picture music for silent films is being preserved and recorded for future generations.

For Harold Lloyd the desire for ideal movie music began more than 50 years ago. Lloyd first heard Gaylord Carter play in 1922. The two artists found a common cause in music that lasted a lifetime. Now Carter is marking the end of 50 years of making movie music with great Wurlitzers or Bartons or Robert Mortons. Surely one highlight of his long musical career is creating the lasting theatre pipe organ scores for Harold Lloyd films.

Lloyd began his project of adding music to his silent films in 1970 and personally supervised much of the recording work.

For Mary Pickford it was her husband Charles Buddy Rogers who sought the pipe organ music of Carter for her films when they were revived. A great example of what a pipe organ score can add to a film is the delightful music added to the Pickford and Rogers film, *My Best Girl*.

Carter and the theatre organ and Lloyd films were designed for each other. A movie screen chase without sharp organ punctuation is almost nude.

Although Hollywood has long been acclaimed the technical creative center of film making, it was the Toluca Lake home of Simonton which held the key to this posterity project.

Scoring of films requires — a music source — tape recording facilities — film projector/equipment with complete interlock and synchronism, all at one location. Many sound stages in Hollywood have one or two of these vital component units but none offer all three.

At the Simonton Theatre all units are almost within whispering distance of each other. This is exceptionally convenient for creating musical scores for films.

Key to the project is the magnificent four manual, 36 rank Wurlitzer theatre pipe organ. Beautifully voiced, superbly tuned and ever in good condition, the Wurlitzer is the heart of the Simonton Theatre.

For more than 10 years film producers, movie historians, film stars, and musical artists from around the

world have used the facilities for recording, researching, enjoying films and music.

Jesse Crawford used the Simonton Grande Organ for recording all his final albums.

The great and near-great of ATOS have visited the theatre and played the organ.

Today Gaylord Carter enjoys playing for films as much as he ever did — perhaps more. “Today’s audiences,” he said recently, “are starved for live music. TV is great but the in-person relationship and the now feeling is total magic. Silent film music added the extra dimension to the enjoyment of pictures. Accomplished organists kept your ear busy but never intruded on the action. A throbbing Tibia or crying Vox Humana in a darkened theatre with Janet Gaynor and Charlie Farrell pledging eternal love was an art blend you’ll never get from bongo drums or a jangling electric guitar.”

Early this year sound film producers learned of the theatre organ magic. Producers of the MGM feature, *Wicked, Wicked*, used the Simonton Grande Organ for special mood music for some of the terrifying scenes of the mystery film.

Ladd Thomas, chairman of the Organ department of the University of Southern California School of Music, was the organist. The film producers obtained the 1925 *Phantom of the Opera* score and had Thomas review it for use with the Duo-Vision picture.

Organist Thomas (he is only 37) explained the new experience this way:

“It was an exciting and hectic experience for me . . . creating mood music for films . . . it was my first . . .

I used several of the *Phantom* themes and also improvised on them . . . I would assume that playing for silent films (without dialogue) you would be the sum and total musical punctuation of the drama . . . You simply brought out the action in the old silent films . . . Today you have many sound effects of which music is but one. You approach it differently. Yes, I would say the theatre pipe organ as we know it and for what it was created to do and accomplish . . . there was never anything of its equal ever made.”

The renaissance of the theatre organ continues.

Now the Harold Lloyd Foundation trustees have made plans for a motion picture theatre on the fabulous Green



(L to R) Matty Kemp, Gaylord Carter, Richard Simonton Sr., Richard Simonton Jr., and an unidentified technician.



Technicians at work.

Acres estate. (See: THEATRE ORGAN, June, 1973, Page 4).

How does Simonton feel about all this?

“Nostalgia, or living in the past, is popular because something in our present lives does not totally satisfy us. We have a void. Maybe we lack daring to try the new — when we know how beautiful things were in the by-gone

era. With the theatre organ and old films we have a matchless time machine at our disposal.

“We can review fashions in women’s wear, the cars we admired, the language we used, our mortality outlook and our sense of humor.

“Have you ever noticed the titles on an old silent film recently? Some of them are dandies.” □