

# JOHN GART

When the writer was 17, he was given an Excelsior accordion as a Christmas present. Accompanying the "abdominal Steinway" was a catalogue showing all the models, plus a page of illustrated endorsements including one of John Gart of New York. The years passed until November 1972 when we were talking with Dr. C.A.J. Parmentier, and when he mentioned theatre organist John Gart, the name was instantly recalled as a top-flight accordionist.

However, Mr. Gart was also an excellent theatre organist, pianist and conductor, and we prevailed upon him to supply us with information which could be incorporated into a feature biography for THEATRE ORGAN. Thanks, Dr. Parmentier, for providing Mr. Gart's Florida address.

John Gart was born in Poland in 1905. "I started studying music when I was six. I was partly interested in it and partly *made* to be interested in it! My father was an opera singer. When attending concerts, the conductor would lift me onto the podium, put a baton in my hand, and I'd wave it in time with the music. This gave me some feeling about rhythm, etc."

Studying the violin for eight months didn't inspire him to great heights. However, he discovered the piano, and at the age of seven, he was accepted at the Imperial Conservatory of Music in Moscow where he studied piano and theory with Boris Levinson and counterpoint under Reinhold Gliere. At the age of twelve, he toured Europe, accompanying a concert violinist and an opera singer.

In 1922, he immigrated to the United States and studied organ with Dr. Clarence Dickinson at the Brick Presbyterian Church on New York's Fifth Avenue, and with theatre organist Herbert Sisson, who had played the Strand, Rialto and Rivoli in New York. All of Mr. Gart's theatre experience would be in the metropolitan New York area.

"My first job was in 1923 as relief

## THEATRE ORGANIST

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## RADIO ORGANIST

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## TV ORGANIST

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## VAUDEVILLE CONDUCTOR

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## ACCORDIONIST

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## COMPOSER

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## COMMERCIAL JINGLE WRITER

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## RETIREE

by Lloyd E. Klos

organist and pianist with an orchestra which played for silent movies in the Coliseum Theatre in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. Since all the members of the orchestra were Italian, and I understood very little English anyway, the orchestra leader addressed us all in Italian. I was unaware of this and thought it was mostly English! I couldn't fathom why my American friends couldn't understand me!"

After a year, he became the regular organist at a Wurlitzer in the Park Theatre at Fifth Avenue and 44th Street. The September 29, 1924 issue of the *Park Theatre Times*, a pamphlet handed out to patrons, (a feature of theatre-going in the twen-

ties) does not identify the organist, but described him thusly: "Our organist, while only a youngster, has been complimented very highly by the Wurlitzer Co., the makers of our organ, which by the way, is the finest organ made. They have offered him a huge sum to join their forces as a demonstrator, but our contract with him prevents him from accepting — now."

In 1925, Mr. Gart began playing in Loew's theatres as a full-time organist. The first was the 1800-seat Loew's Sheridan on Sheridan Square and 14th Street. Second was the 2600-seat Loew's 83rd St. in Manhattan. In 1927, he began a very successful three-year run in the 3600-seat Metropolitan in Brooklyn which had a 3-manual Moller. He then had a stint at the Capitol Theatre's Estey.

By this time, Loew's was constructing its sumptuous movie palaces including five "Wonder Theatres" in the New York metropolitan area. On January 12, 1929, John Gart opened Loew's Valencia Theatre in Jamaica, Long Island. It had one of the "Wonder Mortons," a 4/23 organ. "How I loved it!" he says.

The inaugural program included the overture "Slavonic Rhapsody" by the Valencia Symphony Orchestra with Don Albert conducting; MGM News Events and Fox Movietone News; Organ solo "The Voice of the Organ" with John Gart "at the console of the mighty Robert Morton organ;" a stage presentation "My Mantilla"; 16 Chester Hale Girls, backed by Walt Roesner's Valencia Stage Band; the feature movie *White Shadows in the South Seas* with Monte Blue and Raquel Torres; and the Recessional with John Gart at the organ. You really got your money's worth in those days!

"The Robert Morton organ, as I remember, had the most wonderful sound. In fact, I liked it better than a Wurlitzer then. It approximated very closely the sound of orchestral instruments in a very sonorous and pleasing fashion.

"My wife, Mims, reminded me of a very interesting incident which occurred while I was playing at the Valencia in 1930. In those days, we used song slides on the screen, and occasionally I used a vocalist offstage who would sing a popular hit.

"One day, I got the idea of having a singer perform from the pipe chamber, directly behind the shutters. (Shades of a C. Sharpe Minor presentation!) The vocalist, Sunny O'Brien, used a megaphone as P.A. systems hadn't come to the fore. The effect was very successful, and I received many good comments on it. One came from a lady who stopped me on the street, saying that she recognized me, and that she loved the organ solos; in fact, she thought it was wonderful to hear the organ make sounds like a human voice with words!"

In 1931, he was selected to open three big Loew's presentation houses — Pitkin, Paradise and Kings. The silents had gone, of course. He also served as organist and musical conductor at Loew's 46th St. Theatre in Brooklyn.

An item from the inaugural program of Loew's Pitkin Theatre says: "John Gart, who will preside over the new \$100,000 (sic) Morton organ, a prized feature at Loew's Pitkin Theatre, is well known as organist of leading deluxe theatres. The console, mounted on a revolving and disappearing elevator, is one of the finest instruments of its kind." In the days of the Wonder Theatres, the organist played a spotlight solo, and after the entire program, a recessional.

*The Motion Picture Herald*, dated November 21, 1931, gives us an idea of the type of organ presentations given after the demise of the silents:

"John Gart at Brooklyn's 46th St. Theatre, presented an up-to-the-minute and pleasingly entertaining organ solo entitled 'Flying High.' Opening with a special lyric to '99 out of a Hundred,' as airplane effects were heard, the 'trip to the moon' started. At this time, the song sung by the audience was 'Makin' Faces at the Man In the Moon.' For the 'visit to Mars,' 'Stardust' was played and sung. A timely lyric about 'Lindy' was then sung to the tune of 'Japanese Sandman,' with special lyrics about the Graf Zeppelin to the tune 'Augustine' following. 'Keep

Your Sunny Side Up' was sung for closing as a film of planes in action was flashed onto the screen. This was a thoroughly enjoyable solo."

In 1932, Mr. Gart played the 2868-seat Loew's Gates Theatre in Brooklyn. He was a vaudeville conductor, led his own group "The Rhythm Boys," and performed organ solos.

"I remember being a very serious individual, and was very concerned with my work at first. However, when I became a vaudeville leader, all hell broke loose! I used to play all kinds of pranks on the performers, such as breaking them up while they were singing. I'd wear a crazy wig, funny mustache or cross-eyed glasses! Their first impulse was not to notice, but they soon wound up in convulsive laughter, and the audience loved it!

"Sometimes, I'd play their number several tones higher or lower and they'd lose themselves and blush! At first, they didn't know what hap-

pened, but when they realized how much better they were received by the audience, they'd ask me to do it again and again!

"It was customary for the performers while in the middle of their act to ask the leader for an instrument and make believe that they didn't know how to hold it, then break out with great sounds. But when I handed a performer a violin without strings, or a trumpet without a mouthpiece, the audience loved it!"

By this time, the use of organs in theatres was steadily decreasing, and the consoles were being lowered into the pits forever. Fortunately for some organists, they were able to continue in the infant medium of radio. Some stations had pipe organs in their studios which was a blessing. Others had the newly developed Hammond (after 1935) which was mobile, enabling the instrument to be shunted from one studio to the other.

John Gart at Loew's Metropolitan console in 1927. Moller had already adapted its church organs for theatre use by adding romantic stops and traps. (Gart Collection)





John Gart became a top-ranking accordionist, shown here with his Excelsior in New York in 1935. Note resemblance to Lawrence Welk's accordionist Myron Floren. (Gart collection)

With a Hammond, John Gart moved into radio, and by 1938, had become a popular performer in that field. On NBC, his group "John Gart and His Rhythm Makers" were featured over the air from such places as Hotel Shelton, Hotel Pierre and the Ritz-Carlton. There were frequent society functions with Meyer Davis' Orchestra. He was also featured on the NBC Blue Network on *Lanny Grey's Rhythm School*.

The Gart combination consisted of a Hammond organ, Rickewbacher Electric Violin, Gibson Electric steel guitar and Deagan vibraharp. The

group played anything from swing to rhumbas and made several transcriptions for Musak. A vocalist who got her start with this aggregation was Dinah Shore.

John also appeared in 1939 on the NBC program *Tasty Yeast Jesters*. He played an Excelsior piano accordion, Peg LaCentra sang, and there was a string bass and a guitar. John's prowess with the accordion began several years earlier, and it is noteworthy that he rode to greater success as a musician with the use of the piano accordion and Hammond electronic organ in the late thirties.

"I had started to play the piano accordion in 1931, and wrote some compositions for it. Gradually, I used it with some success, first in vaudeville in 1937 and in radio and records until 1941. This was the time that the accordion was achieving its greatest popularity with such stars as Pietro Deiro, Charles Magnante, Joe Biviano, Frank Gaviani, Vincent Piro, Gypsy Markoff, Phil Baker and Lawrence Welk performing on radio and on tours."

John furthered his radio career by playing themes and background for such programs as *Bright Horizon* with Richard Kollmar, Alice Frost, Audrey Totter and Frank Lovejoy; *True Story Theatre* with Henry Hull; *Superman* with Bud Collyer, Stacy Harris and Gary Merrill; *The House of Mystery* with John Griggs as Roger Elliot, the Mystery Man; *Romance of Evelyn Winters* with Toni Darnay and Karl Weber. There were others, of course. John impro-

Accordionist Gart with *Tasty Yeast Jesters* which aired on NBC radio in 1939. Peg LaCentra is vocalist, and John has a \$1000 Excelsior, a big sum for a small instrument in those days! (Gart Collection)





John Gart plays a Hammond for a musical group at the Shelton Corner at Lexington Ave. and 49th St. in New York in 1939. Dinah Shore sang with this group. (Stan Art Photo)

vised all the background music, but the theme was the same, day after day.

"I was asked, since I was playing on so many shows, and always without music. If I ever played the wrong theme. I replied that I hadn't — yet! One day, I rushed in to play a CBS show, and when the director gave me the cue, my mind went blank! I didn't know on what show I was, or what to play!

"After several agonizing seconds which seemed an eternity, the director frantically cued me again. I had to play something! Putting my hands on the manuals, and not knowing what would come out, the right theme came forth. My subconscious had fortunately taken over!

"Another afternoon after playing several shows, I was walking to the elevators on the third floor of NBC, enroute to my 45-minute lunch period. An actor rushed up and told me that organist Dick Leibert became suddenly ill prior to the show he was to play. Before I knew it, I was hurried to the studio, barely having time to start the organ. There was no music on the rack, no time for orientation. My actor friend stood at my side and whistled the theme in my ear. The director was greatly relieved and so was I! Another crisis was passed."

In 1940, John Gart had an en-

viable assignment on NBC, that of supplying musical background for Eleanor Roosevelt's series of informal talks over WMAQ. Many organists auditioned for this position.

Playing into the forties, John began to conduct and compose for radio and television. He worked on *Big Town* with Edward G. Robinson and Claire Trevor; *Truth or Consequences* with Ralph Edwards;

*Ellery Queen* with Carleton Young and Santos Ortega; *Robert Montgomery Presents*, *What's My Name?* with Arlene Francis; *Chance of a Lifetime* with Dennis James, *Star Time*, *Cosmopolitan Theatre* and others.

To show his ability to adapt his playing to any situation, he was known as "Radio's Quick-Change Artist." This was especially true while playing mood music for *Truth or Consequences*. He played for tenors who couldn't tenor, baritones who belted, and sopranos who sobbed. The contestants thought nothing of changing keys in the middle of a song, and John had to be ready to change instantly!

He worked on *Love of Life* for two years; *The Guiding Light* eight years; *Valiant Lady*, *Where the Heart Is*, *The Lanny Ross Show*, *Hobby Lobby* with Dave Elman and the *Bert Parks Show*.

"When TV began in the early forties, it was thought of as a fad and most thought it couldn't last long. As a matter of fact, a prominent producer who was to put on a TV series on the old Dumont network called me to play a show and thought it a very good one. In fact, if it went as good as expected, then the show 'might get on radio!'"

In 1944, John Gart performed for the Kem-Tone show over the NBC Blue Network. A verse was written for him to the tune of "The Lost

The John Gart Combo poses in the Rainbow Room in New York's RCA Building in 1941. John presides at the Hammond. (Stan Art Photo)



Chord" as follows:

Seated Wednesday nights at the organ.

John Gart is not ill at ease  
As his fingers wander idly  
Over the noisy keys.  
For he knows what he is playing,  
He's striking a chord for  
Kem-Tone

(From here on, any similarity between this and the Lost Chord, isn't!)

In 1945, after a period in the army, he was on CBS, NBC and WOR. For six years, he was on *Who(m) Do You Trust?* starring Johnny Carson. Mr. Gart also organized a very successful trio of organ, harp and violin, which made many electric transcriptions as well as some records.

In the fifties, John was connected mainly with television. The shows included *Chance of a Lifetime*, an audience-participation affair; *The Dunninger Show*; *High Finance*; Edward R. Murrow's *Small World*; *Wagon Train*, *You Are There*, *Ellery Queen*, *Robert Montgomery Presents* and *Big Town*. He found time to make nine recordings for Kapp Records, using a plug-in. Songs of the West, Rodgers & Hammerstein favorites, South American tunes,

folk songs and marches were featured.

Another field in which his talents emerged was in composition. Not only did he compose themes and background music for the TV shows mentioned above, but he also composed tunes for commercials. In the sixties, he was president of Radio-Television Spot Productions Inc. which produced spot commercials. For example, in the first six months of 1960, the firm had credits for two dozen accounts including those for cigarettes, cookies, tea, oil, soap and toys.

Well remembered are the opening lines to the Halo commercial: "You can always tell a Halo girl; you can tell by the shine of her hair." John Gart was responsible for that one. Personalities who assisted with others included Tony Perkins, Tommy Sands, Jimmy Rodgers, Andy Griffith, Tab Hunter and John Saxton.

"Creating something you feel, and creating an assignment with a message are two entirely different things," he said in an interview. "If you have the desire to create, it doesn't take long to get the idea on paper. I believe in the spark or inspiration as far as music is con-



John Gart checks his score before a presentation of the "All-Star Review" on NBC television in 1952, in which John conducted a 24-piece orchestra. (Gart collection)

cerned. Melody is not the sole consideration in judging a composition. It's good if you can recognize the theme, but more than that, it must create a sustained feeling. An assignment necessarily takes longer. If I didn't have any real feeling for it, I'd leave it and come back sometime later. This would give me a new slant. I would sometimes tell a client that I'd have the finished product in one week, which usually resulted in a scramble before deadline."

During his career, John Gart composed six books of radio and TV music for the organ, as well as hundreds of compositions for piano accordion and organ, plus orchestral works.

"Now, (in 1974) I'm retired and living with my dear wife Mims, in Winter Haven, Florida. I practice three to four hours every day on the organ, using ear phones, if you please."

He still retains a very strong philosophy on the pipe organ, and after many years of performing on it, speaks of it in reverent tones. "I have respect for the organ. It may be similar to the piano as far as popular music is concerned, but this is not so for classical music. The organ is the most difficult instrument to understand, the least appreciated of all. It requires an artist who can properly employ both hands and feet, who can manipulate the stops and expression pedals, who can play with taste and color. Then the instrument is like an orchestra. I have always loved the pipe organ and I always will." □

The John Gart Trio performed over CBS from New York in 1942, and included Verlye Mills, harpist; Buddy Sheppard, violin; with John at the Hammond. (Gart Collection)

