

A Marriage of Wine and Music

Story and Photos by Gary Konas

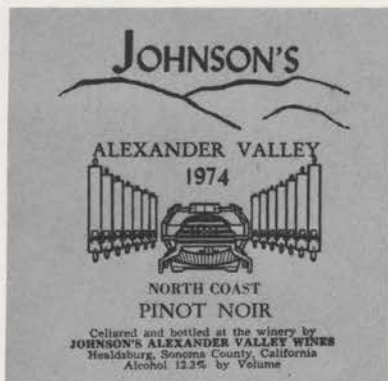
North of the San Francisco Bay area there are three areas, namely the Napa, Sonoma, and Alexander Valleys, that produce many of California's best wines. In addition to producing fine wines, Johnson's Alexander Valley Winery produces fine music, for it is the only winery with a theatre pipe organ in its tasting room.

Jay Johnson is largely responsible for this harmonious blend. He spent several years in the computer industry in San Jose and during this time he developed an interest in pipes by listening to pizza organs in the area. He would have liked to have his own organ but felt that a pipe organ would not fit well in his tract house. A few years ago Jay moved back to the Johnson family vineyard near Healdsburg and with brothers, Tom and Will, established a winery. There was then sufficient room for an organ in the old building that would become the winery facility.

The first organ obtained was a Smith, but it was in pieces and would require a lot of work before it would be playable. Meanwhile a small Marr & Colton became available. It was in storage but in good condition, so after selling the family plug-in Jay bought it. Jay's wife Gay, presently the only organist among the Johnsons, let it be known that she was anxious to have the organ in some sort of playing order soon so that she could continue her practice sessions. And there was a suitable room in one corner of the winery. Thus Jay needed to install the organ fairly quickly, but he was determined not to do a poor job. He was advised to get professional help and took this advice by calling on Bud Kurz, who has installed and maintains organs in the Bay Area. Upon first seeing the organ parts laid out on the floor Bud announced that there was a lot of work to do. However in only ten days the main chests were wound and the



organ was at least partially playable. The one-room setup was supposed to be temporary because Jay was planning to move this organ into his house. It was voiced softly and seemed ideal for a residence. But then he began to think that it would be interesting to have an organ in the winery, at least for a while. Once this was decided the main parts were "unwinded" and everything was physically lifted and moved 90° so that the organ would speak into the main part of the winery. The offsets were then added. Interestingly, the air going to each offset has to be tubed down off the main chest because each rank (except the two unified ranks) is con-



One of the memorable events of the 1975 ATOS Convention in San Francisco was the "Afterglow" excursion to the wine country. Visits to vineyards and wine tasting filled the day and to some the word "afterglow" proved quite fitting. The visit to the Johnson Winery near Healdsburg was especially interesting because of the pipe organ installed in the wine tasting room. ATOSers were curious about that organ and we have received frequent correspondence concerning it. So, we contacted "our man in the wine country," a talented young organist, named Gary Konas, who not only gathered the information and wrote the story, but also shot the photos. This is his unique report.

trolled by a ventil valve. The relay controlling the unified ranks is also tubed pneumatically off the main chest. For each note there is a piece of Tygon tubing that runs from the valve on the main chest to the relay. This should make the organ slower, but it is not noticeably slow. But unorthodox, yes.

This particular seven rank Marr & Colton is an unusual blend of theatre and straight organ, reflecting its past life. It was built around 1924 (original home unknown) and spent a lot of time in a church in Woodland, Calif., a city near Sacramento. From there it went to a house in Northern California and from there to the Johnsons. It has only two unified ranks: Tibia and Diapason. The other ranks are Salicional, Melodia, Violin Diapason (on one ventil chest), Vox and Trumpet (on another ventil chest). The Trumpet was bought to replace an extra Diapason that had been used in the church installation. The Violin Diapason, which sounds something like a viola, has been tuned to celeste slightly in the middle octaves. There is a fairly full set of couplers to help compensate for the shortage of unified ranks. Jay and Bud have added a Toy Counter, Snare Drum, Tambourine, and Wood Block actions have been built out of a modified water-damaged Wurlitzer chrysoglott action. There is also a 29-note Moller Xylophone and a Vibraharp is on loan from Bud. The horseshoe console is in good shape and hasn't needed any restoration. The swell shutters are from a church and are designed to be open when not in use. This is fine for a church whose temperature is



The 2/7 Marr & Colton console. Percussion resonators provide a suitable background.

the same as that in the chamber, but not so good for a cool winery with a heated chamber. So, a block is flipped up to keep the shutters closed when the organ is not in use.

What are the future plans for the organ? Perhaps a move. Eventually Jay would like to have a larger organ in the winery, preferably a 3-manual Marr & Colton if one can be found. Then the original M & C could go into his home. Until then he'd like to work on getting it more unified. A ten rank Morton relay is available to unify the Trumpet and Vox, and would make possible the addition of two more ranks. An exposed classical division is tentatively planned to make classical music concerts possible. The soft-spoken Melodia will be replaced by a larger scale Flute.

Within the next few years a new winery building will be built, with a chamber, of course. Then either this expanded M & C or a three manual organ will be installed there.

Other plans involve Jay's expertise in electronics. He would like to design an interface between the organ and a small computer to have the computer "play" the organ. This would be accomplished by using computer impulses on a cassette tape made by someone playing the organ. It would then be a player organ, with cassettes taking the place of perforated rolls. This technique has been employed using reel-to-reel computer tapes by J.B. Nethercutt in his San Sylmar installation (THEATRE ORGAN, Feb. 1973), but present technology is making this system

Wine tasters examine the stock and view the organ chamber through the plate glass window (left). The offset pipes (right) are part of the 16' Diapason.

Cases of wine compete with the organ for space in the tasting room. This photo shows the relative positions of console and chamber. Note the unenclosed percussions mounted on the wall — and the stock in the foreground.



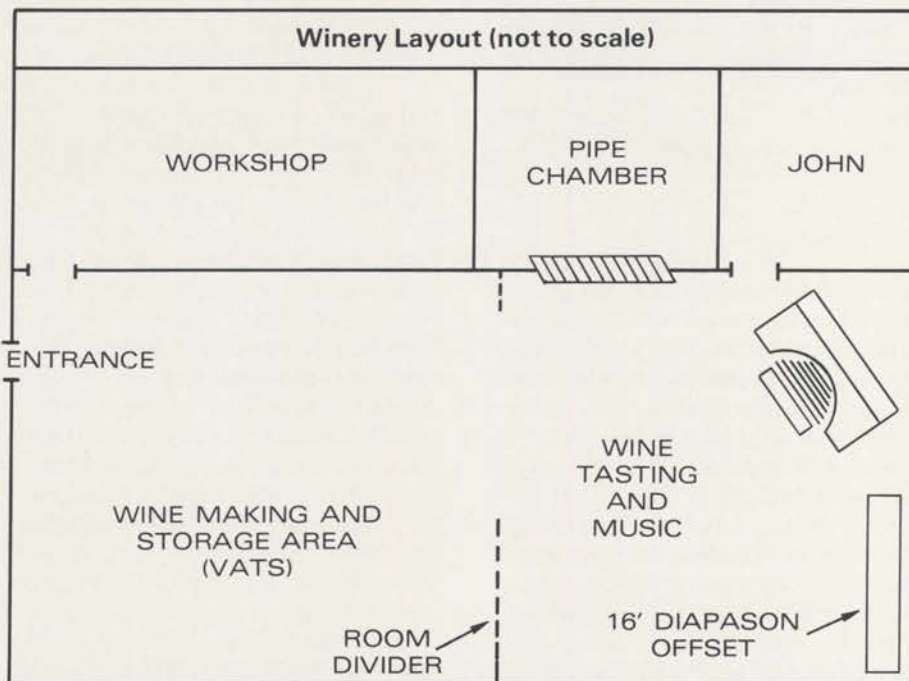
more affordable. With a collection of such cassettes, of course, visitors could be given a concert even when no organist is present. Jay is certain that he could design an interface if it weren't for the fact that the wine business is occupying all of his time at present.

The winery is still in the growth stage. Tom, who has previous experience in the industry, is the wine-maker and Jay primarily takes care of business and distribution matters. Their wives, Gay and Gail, are also very active in the family business. A third brother, Will, is chairman of the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors and does not actively participate in winemaking. The reputation of the winery is steadily being established by the first wines, which have won numerous awards. Hopefully, within two years ATOS members in most major cities will be able to find the wine with a drawing of a theatre organ on the label, but so far the only non-Californians with such luck are those in the Denver, Boulder, and Minneapolis-St. Paul areas.

The Johnsons are most accommodating to visitors interested in the organ. Once a month they have an open house and someone such as Bud Kurz, Tom Hazleton, Warren Lubich, or Harvey Blanchard plays for the afternoon visitors. The tasting room is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and visitors are welcome to



The outside of the Johnson Winery gives no hint of the roaring beast within.



**Stoplist, 2/7 Marr & Colton
Johnson Alexander Valley Winery**

Pedal

Open Diapason 16'
Bourdon 16'
Tibia 8'
Principal 8'
Cymbal
Wood block
Tambourine
Upbeat Cymbal
Upbeat Wood Block

Great (Lower Manual):

Tibia 8'
Melodia 8'
Violin Diapason 8'
Salicional 8'
Tibia 4'
Open Diapason 2-2/3'
Tibia 2'
Vibraharp
Cymbal
Wood Block
Tambourine
Snare Drum

Solo (Upper Manual):

Trumpet 8'
Open Diapason 8'
Tibia 8'
Vox Humana 8'
Tibia 4'
Tibia 2-2/3'
Tibia 2'
Vibraharp
Xylophone
Vibraharp Damped

Couplers:

Great to Pedal 8'
Solo to Pedal 8'
Great Unison Off
Great to Great 4'
Great to Solo 16'
Great to Solo 8'
Great to Solo 4'
Solo to Solo 16'
Solo Unison Off
Solo to Solo 4'

Tremulants:

Main
Reed

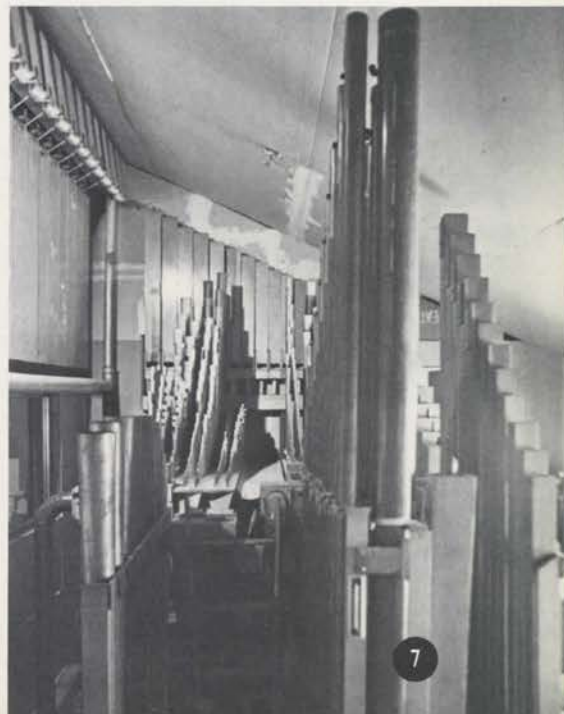
Toe Pistons:

Bird call
Cymbal roll
Pedal chime
Vibraharp damper

Combo Pistons:

3 each manual

Inside the chamber. Treble pipework is visible in front of the Tibia offset in the background. Bass offset chests mount (L to R) Trumpet, Salicional, Open Diapason, Melodia and Bourdon.





Jay and Gay Johnson, the organ-lovin' wine-makers. Their dog, seen slinking away in the shadow, refused to pose.

try out the organ. And organ enthusiasts are welcome to come over and play any time someone is home, evenings included. In addition the winery is available for private evening parties, and practice time is made available for students. The Johnsons even have an undeveloped campground on their Russian River frontage (no charge, but please reserve) for those who wish to stay a few days to fully enjoy the organ and the wine country.

Visitors to Northern California are invited to visit the Johnsons. They're located in a bucolic portion of the Alexander Valley, about fifty miles from San Francisco. The Napa Valley, with its larger nationally known wineries, is fast becoming one full parking lot on weekends, while the Alexander Valley, with around fifteen uncrowded wineries, is looking more and more attractive to those who would rather speak to a winery's owner than to a tour guide. To get on the mailing list, which gives dates of open houses, send your request to Johnson's Alexander Valley Winery, 8333 State Highway 128, Healdsburg, Calif. 95448 (phone 707-433-2319).

As the winery and organ expand we wish the Johnsons the best of luck. ATOS members can feel proud that the Johnsons have adopted the theatre organ as their trademark to be displayed on each bottle of wine they produce. □

THE CONSOLE ON THE COVER

by Harvey Roehl

This is the console of the 4/24 Robert Morton machine that is being rebuilt by a group of volunteers, to be placed in the Broome County Performing Arts Theatre known as "The Forum Theatre."

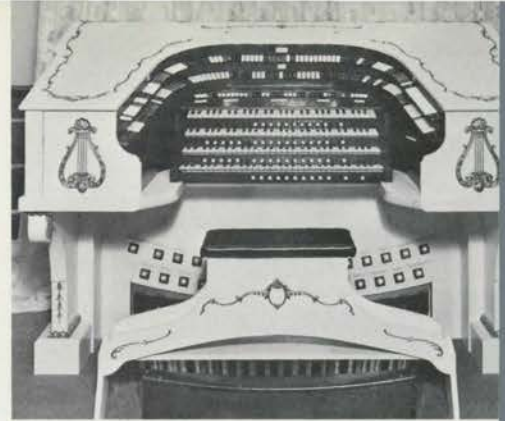
The Binghamton Savings Bank purchased the instrument as a gift to the community, and has financed everything but the labor of the restoration project, and of course many local industrial concerns have made contributions of components as well.

The organ was installed in 1922 in the America Theatre in Denver. This theatre was closed around 1930, and the organ was eventually to find its way to the Pillar of Fire Church, where it remained until 1970. It was then purchased by an organ broker in Michigan, who stored it in a chicken coop until the Bank bought it last year. Needless to say, it was pretty much a pile of junk when it arrived here!

The console was, for all practical purposes, built from scratch! George Melnyk is responsible for the technical aspects of the reconstruction and the re-engineering of the console, and Albert Emola gets credit for the artistic work including re-design of the shape of the legs, the design of the ormolu, and working with George on the refinishing. All the work was done in George's shop.

Upon completion of the work, the console was displayed in the Bank lobby for three weeks, where professional photographer Fred Snyder took this picture (at the Bank's expense) especially for the THEATRE ORGAN magazine.

The Bank plans to bring in some well-known theatre organist to play for a two-day re-dedicatory program when the organ is complete. Tickets will be free to local citizens who have only to ask for them at one of the offices of the Binghamton Savings Bank; tickets will also be given to organ enthusiasts from out-of-town



who write and ask for them.

In case you are wondering about the red piston, it has to do with a solid-state capture action engineered and built by George Melnyk. He plans also to incorporate a cassette unit which will capture all of the registrations used by the organist, such that he can crank them right back in the next time he plays the machine! □

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