

# *An Interview* *with Lyn Larsen*

by Steve Cohen

"Artifacts" of the '30s and '40s are evident in the plush living room setting of Lyn Larsen, internationally known organist. Mahogany cabinets, antique clocks and other memorabilia remind visitors of the heyday of organists — when the audiences in theatres across the country were treated to tunes on the mighty instrument either at intermission or during the showing of a silent movie.

Recently, during a warm and breezy afternoon in Phoenix, Az., Larsen spoke of his theatre organ experiences. The interview follows:

**Q: How popular is organ music?**

A: Organ music is a specialized interest. In Phoenix, people partially are made aware of it because of Organ Stop Pizza. The restaurant has been here for 4½ years.

**Q: Is organ music gaining or losing popularity? Why or why not?**

A: It's becoming more popular, I think, but I don't know why, really. One reason might be that a few places are exposing this kind of music to the public. I'd say there are about 25 to 30 restaurants on the West Coast which have similar-type operations like Organ Stop Pizza.

**Q: What age bracket or interest group is primarily attracted to organ music?**

A: It's a dose of Heinz 57. In the restaurant, the greatest percentage consists of the family. Little kids are fascinated with the organ.

**Q: Is organ music more popular in one part of the country or world over another? Or more popular at a certain time of the year?**

A: Geography doesn't have anything to do with the popularity. The interest can be generated if the public is exposed to the mu-



sic. As for a certain time of the year, in Phoenix the winter visitors remember the theatre organ the first time around — when the scores were being played for the first time. It's a nostalgia thing for the older people.

**Q: Does a musical background run in your family?**

A: No.

**Q: What is your favorite organ music to play? Your least favorite?**

A: My personal favorites are show tunes of the '30s and '40s, the works of Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Rodgers and Hart. I also like the new music of Barry Manilow and Eric Carmen. Their styles of music are very adaptable to the organ. Disco music also goes well on the organ. What I like least is the country and western music set to the organ. First of all, lyrics are important to country and western tunes, and you lose them in organ music. And secondly, country and western music requires a guitar (at least most people associate a guitar with country and western music), and you don't use a guitar in organ music.

**Q: What has been your "best" concert?**

A: I have three in mind. Last year I played the Easter sunrise Service at the Hollywood Bowl. The stadium had a seating capacity of 25,000, and the services began as the sun rose. I presented a concert before the opening of the stage presentation, *The House at Noon*, at Radio City Music Hall in New York in November, 1976. During my 1970 tour in Australia the two one-hour specials on national television were very exciting to do.

**Q: Have you given any concerts before Royalty?**

A: I was made an honorary citizen one night in Knoxville, Tenn., when I performed.

**Q: What do you feel has been the foremost factor contributing to your success?**

A: Luck, and hard work. I feel very lucky to have a comfortable house. When I first started out, I did a lot of single night concerts. They're a long haul. I re-

member the first two tours I did cost me more to travel than the money I made from them.

**Q: What advice would you give to youngsters who would like to play music professionally?**

A: If a youngster enjoys playing an instrument, then he or she needs to ask him or herself, 'Am I willing to devote the next 15 years to building my career before I can see any results?' A lot of people aren't willing to devote the time it takes.

**Q: What kind of music do you personally feel is best suited for the organ?**

A: No one type. I judge everything on a song-to-song basis. I look at anything new that comes out, and I ask myself if I can adapt the organ to it. If you change too much of a song, people aren't able to identify with the song.

**Q: Do you compose organ music?**

A: Yes. One of my compositions is entitled, "Stanley," a tribute to Stan Laurel of Laurel and Hardy fame.

**Q: Organ music seems to add significantly to motion picture soundtracks. Have you written scores for movies?**

A: Yes. Two of the silent films I've scored include the original *Phantom of the Opera* (with Lon Chaney) and *The Eagle* (with Rudolph Valentino).

**Q: How did you and Organ Stop Pizza get together?**

A: The man who owns the business is a personal friend of mine. Four or five years ago he conceived the idea of combining his hobby of organ collecting with the business of selling pizza. After his restaurant had opened for three or four months, he invited me to look at the business and discuss the possibilities of playing the organ while people ate their pizza. That's how it began.

**Q: Cadillacs are to cars as what person or persons are to Wurlitzer organs?**

A: That's a tough fill-in. Two musicians have influenced me tremendously. They are George Wright who was the featured solo organist on the Wichita Wurlitzer when it was in the Paramount Theatre in New York during the '40s and '50s,

and Ashley Miller, an organist at Radio City Music Hall in New York.

**Q: Do you play the organ full-time or do you split your time among other business endeavors?**

A: I play the organ full-time. Last year, in addition to working in Phoenix, I'd estimate that I played 45 one-night concerts. One of my more recent schedules had me in Livingston, N.J., on Friday; Long Island, New York, on Saturday; Boston, Massachusetts, on Sunday and Sioux City, Iowa, on Monday. I've also played at the Senate Theater in Detroit and the Fox Theatre in Atlanta.

**Q: What has been your biggest concert ever, attendance-wise?**

A: Aside from the Hollywood Bowl last Easter, in 1970 in Melbourne, Australia, I played to a crowd that was estimated to be between 13,000 and 14,000.

**Q: What kinds of entertainers have appeared on the same bill with you?**

A: Ninety-nine percent of the time I perform as a solo artist.

**Q: Where is organ music going? What is its future?**

A: It's hard to predict. Organ music is solid. It appeals to a special interest group, too. It wouldn't surprise me if in 10 years, the interest in theatre organs was less than it is now. But it could just as easily go in the opposite direction. □

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ROBERT CARWITHEN  
PLAYS CONCERT AT  
OCEAN GROVE, NEW JERSEY

Robert Carwithen, Director of Music at the First Presbyterian Church in Germantown, Pennsylvania, played a concert at the Great Auditorium in Ocean Grove, New Jersey, in August. An audience of 3,000 enjoyed a two part program played on the Hope-Jones Organ, originally installed in 1907, and extensively renovated during the early 1970's. Works of J.S. Bach, Gilbert Martin, Seth Bingham, Henri Mulet and C.M. Widor filled out the classical section. Joplin, Kriesler and Romberg highlighted the popular music, as well as a medley of show tunes. □