



Autographs eagerly sought by concertgoers.

(Peter Hulbert Photo)

Console of the restored Wurlitzer style 240 Opus 1746 shipped from the factory to the Orpheum September, 28, 1927.



# Lee Erwin talks about little mother and Carnegie Hall cinema

*(The following interview between Lee Erwin and Marlin Swing took place after an evening performance of a silent film program at Carnegie Hall Cinema in New York City. Mr. Swing is with the Columbia Broadcasting System and he teaches at the Mannes College of Music. He is also a member of the New York Chapter of the American Theatre Organ Society.)*

- Q.** The Ben Hall Wurlitzer certainly sounds good in its new home. Why does it sound so different from the way I remember it in Ben's apartment?
- A.** The most important reasons why it sounds so different are that the Carnegie Hall Cinema auditorium is a perfect match for the organ,

Peter Schaeble knew exactly what he was doing with the installation, and Randy Gilberti keeps it always in perfect tune.

**Q.** I have lots of questions I want to ask about the organ and all the people who helped with the installation. But first I think we should talk about the way the organ is being used these days.

**A.** It's getting plenty of use. In addition to the silent film programming we have recorded music tracks for all the Buster Keaton films.

**Q.** Well the audience certainly approved of your accompaniment for the Harry Langdon film this evening. I don't know when I've heard that much applause at the end of a film.

**A.** We have great audiences here at the Carnegie Hall Cinema. I would estimate that the average age (of our audiences) is well under 30. Silent films with live organ accompaniment is a new experience for them and they really do let you know when they like something.

**Q.** Do you always have such good crowds?

**A.** Usually we have wall-to-wall people if the publicity is right.

**Q.** How do you manage to play 4 performances in one day? That's a lot of playing.

**A.** That's no problem. It's easy to play when you have an auditorium full of enthusiastic people. But you do have to be careful, because our audiences here take their films seriously.

**Q.** Careful? In what way?

**A.** Well you can't just sit at the console and "noodle." You have to do your homework.

**Q.** How do you do your homework, exactly?

**A.** I nearly always have a 16mm print of each film well in advance and I screen it many times, time it, make my own "cue sheet" and then compose all the necessary themes and incidental music that I will need.

**Q.** What do you do when you can't see a film before the first showing?

**A.** You "wing it" and hope for the best; but I don't like to do it that way because, as I have said, our Carnegie Hall Cinema audiences take their films seriously and I do too. They become very vocal if the film is out of focus, misframed, or if there's any other mistake on the part of the projectionist. I'm sure they would start throwing things at the organist if he tried to make fun of the film by playing all the wrong music.

**Q.** What would be an example of the wrong kind of music?

**A.** Almost any music that is really well known: like playing the Moonlight Sonata because there's a moonlight scene, or playing a pop tune because the *title* fits the scene but the music doesn't. But especially music that is full of the silent film musical clichés of the 20s is wrong.

**Q.** That rules out most of the music suggested on the old cue sheets and a lot of the complete original scores.

**A.** Of course it does. That music worked O.K. back in the 20s, but it would not work now, especially here in New York. Today's audiences of young people have different ears so we have to cater to their tastes — and it's a pretty sophisticated taste — because they will be our only audience from now on. You won't find many people who saw *Birth of a Nation*, when it first came out, in a movie theatre today!

**Q.** So, what does the future hold in store for the theatre organ?

**A.** Who knows for sure. But I predict that the organ will be used for live accompaniment for films indefinitely. There will be a new generation of film buffs ready for the old films every 10 years or so.

**Q.** But the big movie palaces are nearly all gone. Radio City Music Hall has a closing crisis nearly every year. Where will the theatre organ go when they are all torn down to make way for a parking lot?

**A.** They won't all be torn down. The newest trend is to restore the old houses and make them work as civic theatres, because that's less

expensive than building a new one. The organs are being used in the ones that are left; and don't forget high school and college auditoriums. I still have hopes that the former Brooklyn Loew's Kings Theatre instrument will be installed in the Town Hall Auditorium in Manhattan. The theatre organ did survive the advent of sound films, the death of live organ music on radio and then on television. If the popularity of the pizza parlor craze comes to an end it will find a new home somewhere.

**Q.** What is the specific future for the Wurlitzer in Carnegie Hall Cinema?

**A.** The management is very enthusiastic about the organ. During last summer, as you know, we did shows at least once a week. There are plans for using it on a daily basis.

**Q.** But there aren't that many silent films available.

**A.** There are plenty of films, but what I mean by using it every day is that the organ would be played every day even when they show sound films. Not as intermission music, but a short organ concert between films, and perhaps a 30 minute concert every day before the first show.

**Q.** But you couldn't do all that playing.

**A.** Certainly not. There would be a job for several organists, like at Radio City Music Hall.

**Q.** But the programming at Radio City Music Hall is so different from the Cinema programming.

**A.** Yes, it is. Carnegie Hall Cinema is a "repertory theatre": a daily change of films and, usually, a double feature. That's over 700 films a year! And films from all over the world. Last week I played a Soviet film, *New Babylon*. Another Russian silent is scheduled for next month.

**Q.** I had planned to see the Fritz Lang, German film *Siegfried* but I couldn't be here. I know you were doing a lot of homework on that film. How did you finally solve the problem of *not* using any of the Wagnerian music?

# ANN LEAF WINS A ROUGH ONE

by Stu Green

**A.** I finally decided on a very abstract score since the film was abstract — but wonderful. We hit upon the idea of pre-recording an entire performance, and at given intervals during the regular shows the pre-recorded version was played through the theatre sound system along with the live organ. So, at times we had two organs playing at the same time!

**Q.** How did the audience react to that?

**A.** Apparently no one knew. I asked some of our regular customers after each performance, but no one detected our very effective "trick." Since the organ chamber is situated on stage, directly behind the screen, there was no separation between the two organ parts. It was a very successful experiment.

**Q.** Is it possible that Carnegie Hall Cinema might be the one place in the country where silent films could be shown on a daily basis?

**A.** I doubt that the management would change their present policy because it's a very successful operation, but who knows what might happen in the future.

**Q.** The set-up is certainly ideal for it to be the Silent Film Capital of the World!

**A.** Yes. The organ is perfect for films and the location is perfect. A lot of out-of-town people don't realize that the Cinema is actually in the Carnegie Hall building at 57th St. and Seventh Avenue, probably one of the "safest" corners in the heart of Manhattan. A subway stop is right at the door and there are many parking lots and garages in the immediate neighborhood. It would certainly be fun if we could have silent film seven days a week!

**Q.** One more thing before we finish up this part of our talk. How did the rumor get started about a fire that damaged the organ?

**A.** I don't know. There certainly was no fire. "Little Mother" is alive and well and completely intact. And now it's time to get her started up and ready for the last show tonight. We'll talk later. □

On Dec. 3, 1977, Ann Leaf played a concert which displayed much more than her musical expertise. To use a vernacular term, she exhibited a determination to do her bit for her audience which can best be termed "guts."

The concert marked two noteworthy events on the southern California theatre organ scene: (a) the introduction of the 2/10 Wurlitzer in San Bernardino's 2500-seat California Theatre to the concert scene, and (2) the reappearance of concert impresario Jack Reynolds on the So. Calif. scene after a decade in the Bay Area. Both events are worthy of note.

The two-manual, 10-rank Wurlitzer has been given some maintenance for many years by a local enthusiast but really needs a general overhaul, as events will bear out.

Ann Leaf talks to her audience while waiting for the cipher in the pedals to be fixed. She finally played her show without pedals. (Pegpic)



Actually, at its best, the organ is small for the large house. The volume of sound is perhaps adequate but never voluminous. And the organ is incomplete. It is one of those rare 10-rank Wurlitzers which includes a Posthorn in its original stop complement. However, that ubiquitous, unorganized band known as "Midnight Organ Supply" stole the Posthorn pipes some time ago, so Ann was working with a 9-rank organ.

Because the organ is relatively small and lacking in solo voices, Ann opted for a movie show rather than a straight concert, and well she did.

Reynolds, whose skills in promoting LA organ concerts a decade ago are well remembered, did most of his promotion for this show in the San Bernardino area, hoping to introduce a theatre organ revival locally. He decided on matinee and evening shows. While the 2:00 p.m. show attracted fewer than 400, it was an encouraging start. Outside, the weather was beautiful, with a temperature up in the 70's while most of the USA was in a refrigerated state as brass monkeys were being dragged indoors by the score. Even so, the atmosphere in "San Berdoo" was heavy with "smaze." No matter, it was fine weather for outdoor activity. So a small matinee turnout was anticipated.

To guard against the unforeseen, Reynolds hired organbuilders Les and Olive Pepiot to stand by — just in case. The man-and-wife team had done some patching during the days