

# 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



Window cards promoting concerts are a rarity these days. Jack Reynolds believes in them. (Pegpic)

before the show. But no one could have predicted what would happen to test Ann's mettle.

The afternoon show started a few minutes late. The console, located in the left extreme of the orchestra pit, is not on a lift, so Ann just started her overture, "Everything's Coming Up Roses." She had completed only a few measures when it happened — a jarring pedal cipher sounded out. Ann quickly slipped into that key to minimize the dissonance, but the tone persisted.

By now, the Pepiots were busy in the chamber, pulling pipes. It was no

San Bernardino's California Theatre is well-maintained. With the organ put in top shape the house could become a factor on the southern California organ hobby scene. (Pegpic)



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simple one-pipe cipher. Every octave E-flat on the pedalboard was affected, on every rank of pipes. It was one of those dreaded relay ciphers. Meanwhile, the projectionist had started the film. Somehow, the word was passed on to him to rewind and await a signal.

Ann stopped playing and waited for the flaw to be corrected. She fielded questions from her audience about the organ and about her career. To say the least, she was magnificent in her handling of a difficult situation; she had no idea as to whether repairs could be made which would enable her to continue. But she never expressed that fear. Gradually the volume of the cipher subsided, and Ann figured the organ was ready. She put down some pedal stops and there was the cipher, loud and penetrating. She quickly cut off the errant pedal voices. She gave the projectionist the signal to start and went into the Spanish motifs appropriate for *The Mark of Zorro*. The

organ sounded okay. It wasn't until much later that we learned that she had accompanied the antics of a young Doug Fairbanks using only the manuals. A second cipher lasted less than a minute.

After intermission, the Pepiots had some of the pedal ranks playing, but only the soft ones. If Ann needed a loud bass passage she had to double it with her left hand. Ann opened *Steamboat Bill Jr.* with a rolling "Father of Waters" from Grofe's Mississippi Suite. When star Buster Keaton had performed his final pratfall, the writer approached to photograph Ann at a "new" console. It was then that we learned that much of the pedal division was still disabled.

The point is that the average listener did not know that Ann Leaf was working under a very real handicap. Being the trouper she is, she made the best of what she had available and thus presented a very listenable score for two silent classics.

Incidentally, she played an "atmospheric" score for *Zorro*, meaning the music fitted the scenes in an artistic way without calling attention to the selections, titles or other associations. She had more fun with *Steamboat Bill*, throwing in tunes whose titles pointed up the scene, perhaps more forcefully than the actual music. Either way, Ann made a success out of what could have been a disaster. Her audience never knew how close they had come to an impasse where the show couldn't go on. The organ behaved perfectly for the evening show and attendance was much higher.

As for the theatre, it is safe for the moment, under lease to a local light opera theatrical group which has been doing SRO business. It is hoped that this proof that the organ can also draw audiences will help generate some maintenance funds. □