

**"N**o, I couldn't do it," I told my friend Johnny. "You know I'm only an ear player who's never had any music lessons!" Johnny owned a machine shop which, during this wartime period, was netting him some \$17,000 a month, and, long an organ buff, he wanted to buy an organ radio program every Sunday evening for half an hour to advertise his shop. He had a Hammond with Leslie speakers at home which I often played, but he wanted me to play his program on the radio station's small pipe organ. "Come on!" he said. "I'm taking you down to the Musicians' Union and buy you a membership, and you'll be paid at the rate of thirty dollars an hour."

Wow! I'd never had an hourly rate that high in my life. But I told him, "Sure, I play our own Hammond at home, and yours, but I can't play a pipe organ. Anyway, I'm no pro! I'm not a public performer. How could I play on the air?"

"Quiet!" said he. "The way you play my favorite piece 'Poor Butterfly' — that alone is plenty good enough for me." The thirty dollars an hour, even for half an hour a week, was just too much of a temptation for me, a poverty-stricken schoolteacher with a family, and with a pressing need to increase the family budget in any way possible. So I finally told him I'd risk it, and as we went on the air the first Sunday evening I was shaking in my boots, hands a-tremble, as I went into the theme he'd chosen, "Memories." But I comforted myself with the thought that an ear player who plays a tune he knows in a familiar key can hardly go wrong, and as the weeks passed I got along well enough

to begin to receive requests by mail. I played the tunes I knew, ignored the rest. Then, about the fourth week into the program, I made the mistake of my life and almost died on the organ bench with the ensuing horrible nightmare experience.

That week I had received a handwritten request from some poor old

## CONFESSIONS OF AN EAR PLAYER

by Bill Reeves

widow 800 miles away who wanted me to play "Evening Star" from *Tannhauser* in memory of her dear departed husband. I didn't know the number too well, but you can't let a fan like this down on a program called *Memories*. I looked up the music, memorized it, learned it the way the composer had intended it, and we went on the air.

Didn't I know any better? My memory has always been a treacherous trickster. I've always marvelled at Rubinstein, with a memory like a computer, who seems never to have forgotten any piece he's learned over a span of some 70 years, who still

can sit down and expertly render, note for note, a long, intricate, difficult classic he hasn't played for ten or more years! Yes, of course, I forgot my painstaking memorization right in the middle of the old woman's request. There I sat, with the "on the air" red light on, conscious of the technicians watching me, mindful of Johnny and our other friends listening at home. "This can't be for real!" I told myself in horror. "This must be death!" Somehow, some way, I kept monkeying around until I actually blundered back on the track and completed the number, and later our loyal and uncritical friends said they'd noticed nothing wrong. But it's a wonder my thinning hair didn't turn white that night, and I've had enough sense never to depend on memory since then. If I can't play it by ear, I don't play it. Rubinstein I'm not!

Well, self-taught is a poor way to go, the hard way. Certainly no prodigy, still at age seven I was easily playing "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and other simple tunes with one finger on our old family piano, banging whatever single note seemed to fit in the bass. This drove my poor mother wild, but I kept fooling with it until in time I could fill in the right hand a little in the key of "good ol' F" and supply four or five chords in the left. But all the time I wanted an organ and spent many bewitching hours in the silent movies on the front row just to watch and hear the organist accompany the picture. Though little more than a kid, I saved my money and one day saw advertised, by an aged missionary who'd taken it to China and back, an old Mason and Hamlin reed or-

Ol' G Flat Bill murderin' "5-Foot-2"



Doris — wife and duet-partner for 43 years.



gan for thirteen dollars. It had badly-leaking bellows which I didn't know how to repair, but I bought it, pumped like the devil to keep up the air, almost wore it out completely practicing, and loved it. I knew I'd never be rich enough to own and maintain my own pipe organ, so it would have to do.

Then one day in college I got a lucky break and moved up the scale with far-reaching consequences. A friend handed me a chart of fourteen chords, written in keyboard-map style with numbers, given him by someone who had bought a course in piano playing by ear with which he'd made no progress. This course was offered by a teacher with a school and a weekly radio program which demonstrated his considerable skill. His system was all in the key of G-flat, using mostly the black piano keys, to make it easier for beginners to keep their place and not get lost among the unbroken array of white keys. I took the chart home, learned the fourteen chords, and was soon wheezing away playing every tune I knew in this odd key of G-flat on my old reed organ. Now, with more chords in my arsenal, and by gluing my ear every week to the man with the radio program, I was able in time to "astonish your friends," as his ads promised. Eventually I went on to transfer from this key into half a dozen more common ones, and picked up a book listing and naming all the chords, learning how to form majors, minors, sevenths, augmented, diminished, a big help in trying to sight-read a new piece of popular sheet music without having to use "all them bunches of black grapes," as a friend calls written notation.

My familiarity with the key of G-flat was heaven-sent when my wife and I got our Hammond organ, at that time the only plug-in on the market and the next-best thing to a pipe organ. Unlike my old and beloved reed organ, the Hammond had pedals, bass notes played by the feet, and it took only a little practice to master these mostly black pedals in G-flat without peeking, and it formed a useful preliminary in going from there to the other pedals, learning them by touch. Then, when many other makes of plug-ins finally came on the market, we fell in love with the pipe organ-like Tibias on the Gulbransen Rialto theatre organ,

### ***New System to Take Affect . . .***

## **NOTICE REGARDING 1979 RENEWALS**

1979 membership renewals are due by December 31, 1978. With our membership list now on a computer, we are able to issue renewal notices on a selective basis.

If your 1978 membership was submitted by a chapter, you will not receive a renewal notice from ATOS headquarters: rather, it will appear in your chapter newsletter and you should pay your 1979 ATOS dues through your chapter treasurer.

Renewal notices from ATOS headquarters will go only to those 1978 members who **did not** pay 1978 dues through a chapter. This is our first attempt to use the computer list in this manner and since there could be some omissions, please consider your 1979 membership renewals as due now.

We will not be able to mail 1979 membership cards until early in December.

bought one, and I was already right at home with it. And whenever I tend to louse up the pedalling in other keys, I can always drop easily back into my sure-footed old G-flat!

One evening a guest brought his violin and suggested we play duets. I had the notion then that to a violinist all keys were about the same, and boldly led forth with "Miami Shores" in G-flat, while he sawed uncertainly along, demanding at the end, "Say, what key are you in, anyway?" We stuck to C, F, and G after that. Another time a guest who thought he could sing asked me to provide organ accompaniment to his "Danny Boy." This one I started off in F, only to have him ask, "Just move that up half a step, will you, please?" Why, sure, pal, my pleasure! Half a step up from F is what else, my old key of G-flat, and away we went, touchingly.

Now, if he'd asked me to move it *down* a half step, into what to me is the very unfamiliar key of E, which operates with a fistful of chicken tracks, sharps to you, and in which I don't think I could play "Shave and a Haircut." I would have had to tell him, "Look ol' buddy, you'll sing it in F or you won't sing it at all!" He must have thought, mistakenly, that I am one of those rare

prodigies who play anything at all, equally well, in any key. I wish I could! We've long known a grand Polish lady who can do this, and I want to tell you about her later.

One evening a friend sat down beside me on the organ bench as I ran through "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows," and remarked, "I've always wanted to play the organ like that. Will you show me how?" I told him no, I couldn't, I was still trying to learn myself, and he should get a good professional teacher of popular music. At this he acted somewhat resentful, as though, if I weren't so darned mean and really wanted to, I could easily show him a few simple short-cut secret tricks which would enable him, with no previous experience, to sit right down and rap off "Oh You Beautiful Doll" the way I do it. I told him "Podner, it doesn't work that way." Then he added ruefully, "Well, at least you could tell me how you know what keys to press." I stared at him, speechless, and I'm still trying to figure out a simple, one-sentence answer to that one!

Another evening we went to an organ party, where a guest I didn't know mounted the organ to play "Shanty in Old Shantytown." From

his first notes I realized he was in my old G-flat, and I went over to the piano and accompanied him. "Hey!" he hollered. "You're the only guy I've ever met who can play in my key!" No, he'd never heard of the play-by-ear course in G-flat mentioned above, like me had never had any lessons, but by some strange coincidence had been playing by ear in this key for years. He had an odd way of always playing the melody in his left hand with a right-hand obligato, but the other guests loved our duets and kept asking how, if we'd never met before, we could stay together in perfect time on the tunes we both knew. My new friend explained, cryptically, "You have to be able to count beyond three." Since he, like us, had a piano and an organ at home, we've happily been playing duets ever since, in guess what key?

This lovely Polish lady mentioned above who plays anything in any key by ear and reads anything at sight is a marvel, truly a born organist. I won't reveal her age except to say that as a young girl she got her first job playing silent movie pipe organ. She had played all the top spots in the Los Angeles area until she and her husband bought and beautifully refurbished their own cocktail lounge. An electronics wizard turned organbuilder, he installed a basic Hammond to which he added three more manuals, featuring dozens of unusual sound effects all operated from the console, grand piano full of solenoid switches, banjo, marimba, accordion with compressed air, every kind of bells, you name it. On this magnificent instrument, proudly called by her husband the largest and most versatile Hammond in the world, our Polish friend presides nightly, playing thousands of requests of every kind by ear and memory. You should hear her electrify the patrons with her rousing "Poet and Peasant"! She has mastered the dozens of stop-tablets and other controls so effectively that she offers a constant variety of tonal surprises, so much variety, in fact, that she sometimes finds herself ending a number in a different key from the one she started with. But the customers love every note.

She knows so many thousands of pieces that once in a while she has a little lapse common to most mu-

sicians, forgets the bridge to a particular number. She just improvises a bridge of her own! One evening I requested an old favorite of mine, "Mean to Me," and she rendered it delightfully. But I told her, "Great! But you played the bridge to 'I Ain't Got Nobody'!" She laughed, ran it through again in a different key with other sound effects. "That was beautiful," I told her, "but this time you had the bridge to 'Am I Blue'!" She threw back her head and really laughed, changed stops and key, and went through it again, right this time. The patrons loved it all.

One day her husband, Sam, called me up. He is understandably proud of the five-manual electronic marvel he has built for his wife, but his real love has always been the pipe organ, though he himself doesn't play. He told me he had bought the huge four-manual Wurlitzer formerly in the Los Angeles Carthay Circle Theatre, now used in a large dance studio. "I don't know yet where I'm going to install it, Bill," he told me, "but before I dismantle and move it, I want to give you a chance to play it." We hurried over to the studio and joined other friends. I mounted this monster, ran off as many requests as I knew, including Sam's favorite piece "Yours." "I'd give my right arm if I could play this organ like that!" he declared, and I had to remind him of the legendary one-armed, busy paper-hanger with the hives and tell him he'd likely have a little more trouble with only one arm. Then he began pushing down the banks of stop-tablets on his side of the console, ordering me to do the same on the other side. "Let's get this show on the road!" he hollered. "Let's get every stop on, and you open this beast up full blast so I can really hear what I've bought!" This was around Christmas time, and, swell and crescendo pedals floored, I burst forth into verse and two choruses of "Jingle Bells," shook the building, wowed the guests, and gave myself the thrill of my life. If I do say it in all modesty, I'd never heard a "Jingle Bells" like that before. Or since, either!

My wife is a trained vocalist, pianist, church organist, and super sight-reader, but with all this, still it takes something more, some special gift, to be an ear player. She can't do it, and it makes her furious to hear me

running off many dozens of pieces with nary a note in sight. And like many other musicians we know, she can't play even "Happy Birthday to You" or "Auld Lang Syne" on New Year's Eve without reading from the music, while I must have six or seven hundred numbers at ready command. I can't read the spots, the "black grapes," with anything like her fluent expertise, and she can't run off "Mississippi Mud" and the like without them. So the way we do, I hand her a fistful of popular tunes from our huge stack dating back to the 1900's, let guests choose which ones they want to sing at the piano, and away we go in a good old snappy toe-tapping rhythm, she reading her notes, and I trumpeting along on the Rialto by ear. We, and our guests, have a ball!

The ideal to dream about, of course, would be our longtime Polish friend's ability to play by ear anything she's ever heard, to read any music expertly and artistically, even difficult classics, but yet through it all, through the years, to keep every note in unflinching retention in the memory, like Rubinstein. Well, we can dream, can't we, while we go ahead just doing the best we can with what we have? I envy my wife's skill and her access to the whole musical range of classical literature denied me, though if a classic has a recognizable tune such as "Liebestraum," "Granada," "Jalousie," and others, my ear version of it seems to please nontechnical listeners. My wife, in turn, wishes heartily that like me she could rap off without the notes "The Darktown Strutters' Ball," "St. Louis Blues," and all the rest, just in case she ever finds herself at a party where there's a piano or organ but no sheet music.

But perhaps it's just as well. We have a barrel of fun duetting on the beloved old tunes like "Whispering," "I Cried For You," "Five Foot Two," "One Alone." We even duet on Pearl Curran's classic "Dawn," the second half of which, in our copy, is written in — are you ready for this? — six flats, my old G-flat! Duck soup! Together in our duets, each in our own individual ways, we make a complementary pair, like the sun and the moon — though, wait a minute, in this age of Women's Lib, I don't dare suggest which might be which! □