

Rosa Rio on Public Television

by June L. Garen

Along with the traditional turkey and pumpkin pie, something special was added to the 1979 Thanksgiving menu in Connecticut. On this most nostalgic of holidays, Connecticut public television viewers were treated to a rare bit of nostalgia — theatre organ. At nine o'clock in the evening on the state's public TV channels, the *Nancy Savin/The Arts* program presented a performance and interview segment with Rosa Rio, that grand lady of the theatre organ, at the console of Connecticut Valley Theatre Organ Society's famous Marr & Colton at the Thomaston Opera House, Thomaston, Connecticut.

The continual striving for excellence by the dedicated crew under the guidance of pipe organ expert Allen Miller has made this 3/15 instrument one of the finest in the country. The organ is basically a 1926 Marr & Colton theatre pipe organ which was originally installed in the Palace Theatre in Danbury, Connecticut. The original console, which had been removed many years before, was replaced with one from a Kimball organ, originally installed in Philadelphia's Warner Theatre. Coincidentally, Rosa Rio was the artist at the console when the refurbished Marr & Colton made its concert debut at the Thomaston Opera House in 1971.

Nancy Savin/The Arts is televised weekly on public television stations in the Connecticut area, and guests range from nationally-known celebrities of all phases of the arts to local personalities or groups such as the Yale Slavic Chorus who sing Eastern European folk songs. Miss Savin, producer and hostess of the program, is an equally beautiful and talented expert on classical music



The glamorous and talented Rosa Rio poses at the console of one of the three electronics in her Shelton, Connecticut, studio. (Rio Collection)

and dance. She is, herself, an accomplished musician and possesses a fine operatic singing voice.

Nancy Savin "discovered" CVTOS's Marr & Colton when she was invited to accompany Bob Howe, chairman of the Opera House Commission and a Connecticut Valley Chapter member, to a George Wright concert in March 1979 — and it was love at first sight and sound. Anxious to incorporate this "wonderful sound" into the personality interview-performance format of her series, she and Bob Howe put their heads together and came up with the idea of organ music and its use on old-time radio, and the name of Rosa Rio was almost synonymous. Rosa and her husband, Bill Yeoman, are both members of CVTOS.

Bob Howe made arrangements for the two ladies to meet at Rosa's

home in Shelton, Connecticut, where they became instant friends. By the end of the evening plans for the television program were firm, and arranging for the use of the Opera House and the organ were left in the capable hands of Mr. Howe.

The date set for the television taping was November 3rd at 3:30 p.m. A mobile unit was dispatched to Thomaston where the crew of approximately 17 technicians began setting up equipment at 11:30 a.m. Connecticut Valley Theatre Organ Society members were invited to participate as the "live" audience, and more than 150 members and Rosa Rio students and fans were on hand to make their TV audience debuts. Rosa was her usual effervescent self, colorfully-attired in bright red Chinese silk handkerchief top imprinted with gold medallions that

looked spectacular on the color television screen.

The camera work by the three camerapersons (one, a petite young lady) was outstanding. Both the long-range shots and the close-ups of the keyboard showed off the Marr & Colton to full advantage. Nancy and Rosa chatted first about the organ with Rosa explaining its mysterious workings and demonstrating some of its capabilities. They reminisced about Rosa's experiences as a theatre organist accompanying silent films, and she illustrated just how it was done by accompanying a portion of an old Laurel and Hardy silent comedy, *The Finishing Touch*.

With the advent of talking pictures, Miss Rio continued her musical career playing the organ for radio programs, and she shared some amusing anecdotes connected with her radio experiences. The television audience was also treated to the familiar themes that accompanied such programs as *Ted Malone — Between the Bookends*, *Mert and Marge*, *Lorenzo Jones*, *Front Page Farrell* and *My True Story* — to name only a few. Miss Savin also displayed the trophy recently presented to Rosa Rio by the "Friends of Old-Time Radio" for her contribution to that medium. She logged more hours than any other artist.

The last five minutes of the program were allotted to Rosa to just let herself go and give everyone a sample of the theatre organ sound at its best. The Opera House was filled with the glorious melodies of "Romance," "I Wish I Were in Love Again" and "Stella by Starlight."

The entire half-hour's taping went without a hitch and required no retakes. Credit for this was due entirely to the high degree of professionalism of these two talented ladies, and the rapport so readily apparent between them. The finished product telecast on Thanksgiving evening was a joy to the eye as well as the ear.

It is possible that this program may be made available to public television stations in other areas of the country. Anyone interested in obtaining this tape for presentation on a public television station in your area may address inquiries concerning distribution to Mrs. June L. Garen, Diaphone Editor, CVTOS, 247 Laurel Road, West Springfield, Massachusetts 01089. □



Mike Ohman, '79 Los Angeles chapter chairman, presents the ATOS Honorary Member Award to J. B. Nethercutt. (Pegpic)

ATOS AWARD PRESENTED TO J. B. NETHERCUTT

Some unfinished ATOS business was accomplished during the pre-Thanksgiving Bill Thomson concert at the San Sylmar Tower of Beauty in California, that unique museum of restored vintage autos and musical instruments. Back in July, Jack B. Nethercutt, owner of the museum, was selected as the 1979-1980 ATOS Honorary Member, an annual award for distinguished service to the theatre organ. Nethercutt's qualifications for the award were formidable:

1. Underwrote the restoration of the organ in the auditorium of his alma mater, Santa Monica High School.

2. Donated the 4/20+ theatre organ to the Oakland, Calif. Paramount.

3. Donated the Foort 5/27 Moller organ to the City of Pasadena, Calif., for installation in the civic auditorium.

4. Donated the 4/22 ex-San Francisco Orpheum Robert Morton organ to Oakland's Piedmont United School District for a high school installation.

5. Donated a 2/7 Wurlitzer to the First Presbyterian Church in Phoenix, Arizona.

6. Donated a composite 29-rank Wurlitzer-Moller organ to the First Christian Church in Porterville, Calif.

The award was to be made during the ATOS Convention Banquet in July, but Mr. Nethercutt was out of the country. The San Sylmar Museum curator and program director, Gordon Belt, stood in for Nethercutt.

The final step was taken during the late November concert. There in the music room of the museum surrounded by his collection of vintage musical instruments (including a superb 4/35 Wurlitzer), and before an invited audience of friends and admirers, the award was given to Mr. Nethercutt. The presentation was made at the close of intermission, between halves of a concert performed by Bill Thomson. LA Chapter Chairman Mike Ohman made the presentation, voicing the above-listed donations. Most in the audience were unaware, until that moment, of the scope of Mr. Nethercutt's activities in behalf of the King of Instruments.

Mr. Nethercutt accepted graciously, then it was back to the concert and Bill Thomson's organ stylings. □