



Doris Miller at the console of the 3/13 Wurlitzer in the Orpheum Theatre, Vancouver, B.C.
(Courtesy of the Vancouver Sun)

The Orpheum Wurlitzer-

Canada's Last Original Installation

by Thelma Smith

Way back in the year 1927, a brand new Wurlitzer organ left the factory in North Tonawanda, New York, for the Orpheum Theatre in Vancouver, B.C. Its cost, then, believe it or not, was \$45,000. While it wasn't the most expensive organ in town (the one in the Capitol Theatre had cost \$50,000), its 13 ranks, with nearly 2000 pipes, could handle anything in a silent movie.

Today, some 53 years later, the Orpheum organ is the only theatre organ in Canada still in its original location. Except for an occasional concert, it sits silent, played only by the maintenance crew who come in to tune it.

The Puget Sound Chapter helped to clean and repair the organ in 1964, during restoration work at the Orpheum, and for the first time were first allowed to work at the console. Although it had not been played for

some time, it could still be saved, despite the dirt, for it had been used occasionally by organ enthusiasts who rented playing time in the years when the theatre belonged to Famous Players.

Three enthusiastic members of the Puget Sound Chapter, well acquainted with this organ, are Bill Hale and Bert and Doris Miller. They will be among a large group of Puget Sound Chapter members who will head north to Vancouver for a concert on this magnificent organ in May.

Bert Miller, whose enthusiasm knows no bounds, is worried that his kind of music is disappearing. "These days, we've got to have a kid with a gee-tar. We've caught ourselves between symphony music, and gee-tars, and we just aren't going to have this beautiful kind of music, much, anymore."

Bert's wife, Doris, is the last of the

theatre organists in Vancouver, B.C. Her career began in 1926, when she played the organ at the Princess Theatre. It was one of the last theatres in town to convert to sound, but, in 1931, it finally did. Because of their love of organ music, the Millers still travel far and wide to haunt Washington State theatres, private installations and pizza parlors. Doris is always asked to play, and does so, as a true pro.

You will often find Doris, when the time and opportunity are available, sitting, bundled up, on the organ bench, in the darkened and cold Orpheum, playing by the light of a single lamp. The original mahogany has been covered in white paint, with a surface texture resembling that of icing. The ornate trim is gilt, and two rows of new plastic keys shine at the surrounding stops. It looks very much like a wedding cake wired for sound.

The console, like many theatre organs, is mounted on a hydraulic lift and can be played at any height. Sections of the stage, however, must be removed to allow the hydraulic life to operate, and this means a member of the stage hands union must be there to operate the lift. And, the theatre is only available when the orchestra is not rehearsing, or touring performers are not setting up. To open for practice, or performance, is an expense.

The Millers have been hoping that people in rest homes throughout the city of Vancouver could be treated to a bus ride for a morning or afternoon concert, and that school children be given the opportunity to hear, see and understand this mighty and wonderful maker of music.

The Wurlitzer at the Orpheum, while a drafty chill to the body while practicing, brings back memories to warm the soul. There is talk of the magnificent days when theatre organs, and many members of ATOS, were in their youth. They can remember that going to the theatre in the twenties was a "big deal," when, for 25 cents, you could enter a "palace." Hats off to those who remember, who help to bring back those memories for others and who repair, encourage and enrich what used to be. Hopefully, someday, we will all be able to enjoy and see again, the mighty organs of times past. □