

Foot's Concert Moller Transformed

Now It's A Theatre Organ In Pasadena

by Bert Brouillon

A new auditorium installation is a rare and remarkable event in the theatre organ world. One which had been anticipated with more than usual interest was the placing of the historic Reginald Foort 5/27 concert Moller in Pasadena (Calif.) Civic Auditorium (5/28 if the Pedal Tibia added by Sandy Fleet is counted).

The initial dedication concert was played by Tom Hazleton and covered briefly as a Vox Pop in the last issue. However, the concert presented on May 23rd would be an ATOS concert. The LA Chapter had put con-

siderable effort into making it a gala event, so we waited until now to introduce the instrument to our readers. Of course previous issues have been explicit in documenting the origin of the Moller from its conception in 1937 as a transportable pipe organ in the mind of its first owner, Reginald Foort, to its installation in a San Diego pizzeria in the mid-'70s. Then came its purchase by philanthropist J. B. Nethercutt and donation to the city of Pasadena. It's all covered in the past issues of this publication.

Of course, in presenting a first chapter concert on a newly-installed instrument, the choice of artist is all-important. Naturally, the name of George Wright came up. But George explained that he had scheduled one of his regular and well-attended concerts at San Gabriel Civic Auditorium only thirteen days earlier than the ATOS date and did not relish over-exposure. So he declined. Of the five other organists considered, Lyn Larsen was selected. Lyn has a great popularity in southern California. His first public concert was played on the 2/8 Wicks/Morton then in the Orange Theatre, Orange, Calif., when he was 19. Some of his most memorable record releases were played on the Kearns/

Carson 3/26 studio Wurlitzer in Hollywood. He got his start in southern California and the fans have not forgotten; he was an excellent choice.

The organist rode the console up with a loud "That's Entertainment" ending in a smoothly-fingered upward portamento. He was attired in conservative dark blue topped off by a generous butterfly tie. Lyn greeted his listeners with that boyish enthusiasm which has endeared him to audiences everywhere. His first selection was an oldie, "It's Delovely."

The surprise was that the instrument had the sound and feel of a theatre organ rather than that of the quasi-concert organ Foort had designed and which still permeated its ranks in its San Diego installation, despite considerable efforts then to make it sound more theatrical. The Moller Company's efforts to build entertainment instruments have always been highly flavored by its long church organ experience. Somehow the vestry and nave sounds always seemed to intrude, with one notable exception — the very late Atlanta Fox 4/42 Moller.

One of Lyn's programming strong points is his continuous search for offbeat material. He mentioned Neil Moret's greatest hit, "Chloe" but turned to two lesser Moret tunes, "Song of the Wanderer," (a film themesong ballad) and a charming "Silver Heels" which sounds like presto silent comedy accompaniment. Good novelty programming.

To demonstrate the Moller's speed, Lyn played an "Ethel special" — "Tico Tico," which served its purpose. His Eric Coates group included the atmospheric "Westminster" as well as the overplayed "Knightsbridge March."

After intermission Lyn played one of his operatic favorites, the aria "My Heart at thy Sweet Voice" from *Samson and Delilah*, then Notre Dame Cathedral organist Andre Comprà's "Rigadon," a showy exposure of frenetic pedal technique which Lyn performed expertly, and which triggered visually-oriented persons in the audience. They loved it.

Lyn's Gershwin medley, always a crowd pleaser, included a romantic "Embraceable You" and an energetic "Swanee." His closer was a lively rendition of Ponchielli's "Dance of the Hours" which included some

At the appointed hour, the console lift, located in the center of the orchestra pit, brought Lyn Larsen up into the spotlight. (Zimfoto)





The 3,000-seat auditorium is not gaudy in the movie palace sense, but the acoustic qualities attract features such as the Philadelphia Orchestra. The hall was equipped with left and right side organ chambers at the time it was planned, but the chambers never housed an organ until now.

eyebrow raising melody alterations during the fast passages, but no clinkers. He was rewarded by the enthusiastic applause of his large audience. He played two encores at audience demand.

The big question after Lyn's performance was how Lyn had managed to make the Moller sound so theatrical, considering the instrument's design as a quasi-concert organ and its resistance heretofore to efforts to alter that aspect. We sought out Dave Junchen, now a member of the Pasadena-based Beranger Studio, successor to the Junchen-Collins Organ Co. located in the Midwest. Dave, with Steve Adams, has invested the past nine months installing the Moller in the Pasadena Civic Auditorium's virgin chambers. Our first question was about what substi-

tutions of pipework had been made to obtain the theatrical tonal character. To our surprise Dave replied "none."

He explained that he had accomplished the changeover from "semi-straight" to "theatrical" mainly by the adjustment of Tibia tremulants and wind pressure. This was no cinch; the Moller tremms and the chests they shake are huge, compared with most other brands.

Even before such changes could be made, the matter had to be cleared with the auditorium manager, Doris Stovall. Ms. Stovall has an interest in classical music and is a performer of classical organ works. But she realized that a theatre instrument would serve more users of the hall than would an instrument of more "legitimate" tones. She gave her

okay to make it sound theatrical.

Giving full attention to the Tibias, Junchen and Adams got the pipes to chirping in theatrical tones. The effect on the entire instrument's character was electrifying, again underlining the correctness of those who have declared that the theatre organ's basic sound is that of the Tibia. The Strings and Reeds were okay "as is." Incidentally, the pipe complement includes Moller's only Brass Trumpet.

Some wind pressure changes were made. The Solo Tibia was upped from 15 to 18 inches; the Posthorn was raised from 15 to 20 inches, which may yet prove to be too much of an increase. The volume is tremendous and the voice dominates the right chamber. No changes were made in the placement of pipework. The solo and accompaniment chamber content specified by Foort has been retained.

Another plus for the release of the instrument's theatrical capabilities was an entirely new and more inclusive stoplist, meaning more unification of the voices. This included an entirely new and expanded array of Reisner-made stopkeys on the stoprails. The new specification was the work of organist Tom Hazleton and organbuilder Dave Junchen. It includes some unusual couplers, for example a Pedal to Manual 8' coupler and couplers which sound a full seventh chord at the touch of one key; hit C and it sounds a C-seventh chord. Useful for novelty effects.

There is still work to be done. The string tremms in the left chamber have far too deep an excursion where a shimmer would suffice. This was noted especially by Ann Leaf during Lyn's concert. And excessive loudness, especially in the right chamber may be due to a condition noted by staff organist Jerry Nagano; the organist can not hear the full volume of the instrument from the console. These are refinement problems; the difficult work has been completed, and the venerable instrument is secure in an acoustically fine hall. In effect, it is more like a new instrument from the TO viewpoint. Its Diapasons and Reeds are intact for the presentation of classical fare, but Dave Junchen's new Tibia sound puts it firmly in the theatre organ corner. □

Pasadena's Civic Auditorium has long been the cultural center of this California city.

