

GEORGE CELEBRATES FOURTH ANNIVERSARY OF "SAN GABE"

by Stu Green

We don't often review concerts in these pages, mainly because such coverage could fill the magazine twice over. But George Wright's May 10th bash at San Gabriel (Calif.) was something special. At the door, ticket takers handed out sheets announcing an "Extra Added Attraction — The Hour Before Tomorrow," to be presented after the concert for anyone who wanted to remain.

A George Wright concert is never cut and dried. There are always surprises. As always, Merle Bobzien and Ken Kukuk had the 3/16 Wurlitzer in top shape. Even so, there are two ranks that do not meet George's exacting requirements, the Solo String (lacks a celeste) and the Saxophone, which is not a brass rank but apparently an experimental set which George feels lacks character. So, he plays his concerts on a 3/14. To further complicate, or enhance matters for his concerts, George replaces the left chamber Concert Flute pipes with a Moller rank marked "Stopped Diapason." We all know that Diapa-

George Wright at 'San Gabe.' He celebrated with a nostalgic 'broadcast.' (Stufoto)



son sound comes from metal pipes, so the result is a "Stopped Flute," in effect, a "Tibia Minor" voice, although George does not agree to that classification.

George rode the console up at the appointed hour. He was attired in a cream-colored suit and his silver-hued shoes made his pedalling visibly dramatic. His console riser was a fast and furious "Night Ride."

His opener was in honor of composer Irving Berlin, now in his 90s, with some early hits (circa 1921), including "Stepping Out With My Baby," "We'll Never Know," and "Everybody Step." The dated jazz breaks and fills put the forgettable tunes in period perspective. George puts much stock in lyrics and the current "After the Lovin'" practically poured forth the words his audience didn't know. A salute to the late film director, Alfred Hitchcock, included "The Trouble With Harry" (the trouble is, he's dead but unburied in the movie) and Hitch's TV theme, "Funeral March of a Marionette" with sarcasm from the Kinura and bones represented by Xylophone.

A salute to two friends in the audience, organist Gordon Kibbee and wife, Marie, resulted in a garlicky "O Marie" and a lovely "This Is All I Ask," one of Gordon's favorites. George chatted easily with the Kibbees (in the back rows) and with a few kibitzers who shouted suggestions. He is expert in handling unexpected interruptions, sometimes with a laughing "Oh shut up!" They do.

Next, George offered his favorite from the *Rose Marie* operetta, "Totem Tom Tom," which, after the suggested warhoops, smacked of Jesse. A wild "Twilight in Turkey"



Howard Culver, longstanding voice in West Coast radio. He can make even nonsense verse sound romantic.

(Scott) was followed by an offer; encouraged by the favorable reception of his ATOS convention seminar last summer, and armed with many requests for a continuation, he is considering more seminars on playing technique. He asked interested people to fill out cards in the lobby, or drop him a line at San Gabriel Civic Auditorium.

After "I Love a Piano," (Berlin) which starred both the stage grand and the pit upright. George gave a plug for Volume 2 of his Chicago Theatre album, which he said may become a collector's item, due to a small supply and no more pressings.

After intermission, George played a tune for still voluptuous Mae West, "All of Me," in his best lowdown and dirty style. He seems to have a thing for blonds; at one point he introduced a striking lovely, a regular denizen of the left front fox at his concerts. When the spotlight caught her, there was gorgeous blond Elsa, sporting a black mink coat. The audience approved.

An outstanding number was George's revival of a '30s favorite, Rube Bloom's "Song of the Bayou" with its octave-spanning question and answer opening theme followed by a spiritual-like choral second theme with a pronounced 4-to-the-bar bass pattern, a welcome old friend. Another good choice was Dana Suesse's "My Silent Love," an excerpt from her larger "Jazz Nocturne." It was a 1930 experiment with a whole-tone melody, and Miss Suesse's only hit.

The closer was a spirited "Slaughter on 10th Avenue," Richard Rodgers' symphonic flirtation with '30s gangsters in semi-ballet style. Then George announced his innovation. In celebration of his 4th year of concerts at "San Gabe," he would offer a re-creation of the type of organ-poetry broadcast he used to do over radio KFRC, San Francisco, playing the station's 18-rank hybrid organ, with romantic readings by Howard Culver — after a brief intermission.

George told us beforehand that he had no idea how many in his full house concert audience would return for the experiment — perhaps 10, 20 or 30 people.

When George returned to the stage with Howard Culver, he faced a practically full house. Culver sat at a small table, equipped with a lamp and microphone. The stage and booth lighting, which had been outstanding in helping to establish moods throughout the evening, illuminated Culver only while he was speaking.

"The Imaginary Broadcasting Company brings you The Hour Before Tomorrow, featuring George Wright at the organ" intoned the voice in mellifluous tones. George soloed such nocturnal selections as "Down By the River," "Midnight Bells," "In the Still of the Night," "Over the Rainbow" and "When Day Is Done."

Culver's words were voiced in romantic tones — "words to smooch by." He included the words to a couple of the tunes — "Night and Day" and "When You Wish Upon a Star" but was most effective during such poems as "The Instrument" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Yet his most interesting reading was from *Through the Looking-Glass* during which he used those same romantic innuendos to underline the nonsense of the Jabberwock. 'Twas brillig. Even frabjous!

The audience sat there spellbound in complete silence, except for a few chuckles during the *Looking Glass* passages. The half hour wedding of voice and organ was over all too soon as Culver "signed off" while George underscored with "Goodnight Sweetheart." Suddenly the hypnotic spell was over and the audience made its way to the parking lot but with vivid memories of a George Wright concert which more than "hit the spot." □

At Boston Church

UNUSUAL PLAYER ORGAN

by Dr. John Landon

It was an eerie experience — a cold March night, sitting in almost total darkness amidst the faded gothic grandeur of Boston's Church of the Covenant and hearing the 4/60 Welte-Tripp pipe organ playing by itself. Unseen ghostly fingers from virtuoso organists, now dead, brought forth from the organ sounds that are all but forgotten today by the listening public. The performances were stunning, every nuance of expression, the changes of registration, the opening and closing of the swell shutters, it was as if the dead had been brought back to life.

The Welte Company was but one of the many firms engaged in the manufacture of automatic roll-playing pipe organs. Although many were remarkably good at reproducing the artists' work, the Welte received the most prestigious endorsement of the world's most highly-esteemed musicians. The Welte Reproducing Organ Player was first exhibited at the Turin Exposition in 1910. It was widely-acclaimed and led to the assembling of a roster of talent unequalled by any other company. This impressive list of organists included Bonnet, Gigout, Dupre, Henry Goss-Custard, Lynwood Farnum, Edwin A. Lemare, T. Tertius Noble, Max Reger, Clarence Eddy and Samuel Baldwin. The artists journeyed to Freiburg, Germany, or New York to make organ rolls. Eddy and Baldwin left an additional mark upon history, having helped in the founding of the American Guild of Organists.

Welte eventually assembled a library of more than 1,000 rolls, some of which played up to 15 numbers.

Selections were geared to the tastes of residence organ owners and included orchestral transcriptions, operatic selections, salon music and standard classical organ works. Artists of impeccable credentials were attracted to the Welte Company because its reproduction of their work offered them life-like immortality.

The chief limitation of the reproducing pipe organ was that at \$10-15,000 only the wealthy and near-wealthy could afford them. With the passing of time many of these instruments have gone into oblivion, unappreciated for art's sake or for the remarkable technology which they represent. A few have been rescued by private enthusiasts. In the case of the Welte in Boston's Church of the Covenant, two dedicated organ craftsmen have spent untold man-hours in an ultimate labor of love, connecting a Welte reproducing player to the Church's 1929 Welte-Tripp organ, an organ which remains virtually the same as it was when it was dedicated 51 years ago. This organ was the last completed by the Welte Company before it sank into bankruptcy.

Ken Clark, an expert on player mechanisms, located the Welte reproducing player in 1970. He began looking for a church in which he might install the player, once restored, where sufficient tonal resources could be found to fit the builder's intentions and adequately reproduce the rolls of the masters. He located Boston's Church of the Covenant through Nelson Barden, restorer and rebuilders of pipe organs, who had done considerable work on this instrument over the