

Lots and Lots of Heart...

# Congenial Helen Dell

by Lloyd E. Klos

If there were ever an award entitled "Miss Congeniality of the Console," it would be mandatory to present it to the Los Angeles Dodgers' official organist, Helen Dell. It has been our good fortune to observe this talented musician in three major concerts, and we can truthfully say that both her personality and her musicianship are in a dead heat in winning fans for the Dainty Miss.

Born in Los Angeles, Helen got her feet wet in show business by taking dancing lessons with her sister, Betty. "Betty was a rather shy youngster," according to her older sister, "and it was hoped that performing before audiences would make her more at ease."

When Helen was nine, both she and her sister began accordion lessons. Their instructor was a former theatre organist, Bert Eberle, who worked in the East. When use of theatre organs diminished in the thirties, Bert went West as there were still some "holdout" positions in theatres on the coast. Their end did come, however, and Bert turned to teaching piano, pipe organ and accordion. This was in the thirties when accordions were as popular then as guitars are today. The writer was swept into this vortex also, and the god of all us amateurs was Charles Magnante, discovered by

◀ Flashing her famous smile, Helen at the Portland Paramount Wurlitzer in November, 1973. Concert tours are a part of her busy schedule. (Dell Coll.)



Major Bowes and added to his famous "family" of entertainers at New York's Capitol Theatre.

Helen Dell speaks with marked reverence when discussing Bert Eberle. "He was positively the most wonderful teacher one could have had. I tended to kick over the traces as a youngster and on occasion when Bert gave me a particular number he wanted me to learn, I was quite adamant in refusing to do so. (The writer was aghast when told this; you should see the change which comes from maturity.)

"However, he eventually used the old psychology on me, asking if I'd like to learn a certain number, and he did it in such a way I couldn't refuse. I owe much to that man, as he gave me my first push into the area with which I greatly desired to be affiliated — show business."

In the late thirties, Helen (left) and her sister, Betty, studied accordion. Much of what Helen learned on this instrument was beneficial in learning to play the organ. (Dell Coll.)



One of the facets of accordion instruction in those days were accordion bands. Some studios offered band training as an adjunct to study. "Bert asked me if I'd like to be part of a girls' trio, and I jumped at the chance. It meant long hours of diligent practice, because we had to play in harmony with each other, to do three-part numbers occasionally, and to perform solos. One thing Bert insisted on was that we *never* sit while playing. Courtesy to our audiences was as important to our practicing as learning the music correctly. He was a stern taskmaster, but we made excellent progress. We played both old and new music, thus expanding our repertoire."

Helen played the accordion until she was 18. She was a "strolling" musician, working in a number of restaurants in the Los Angeles area.

The last place she worked with the squeezebox was Slapsie Maxie's, with Ben Blue, the late comedian. She happened to be in a restaurant which had a Hammond. "How do you learn to play this thing?," she asked of the organist. She was intrigued by the instrument's possibilities.

"By this time, Bert Eberle was a patient in a Veterans' Hospital. After securing a practice card, I prevailed upon Bert to give me some instruction, which got me into a job."

The war came along and for almost six years, Helen turned to the role of housewife and mother, not touching manuals or pedals. After the war, the old urge seized her. She landed an organist position in an East Los Angeles restaurant, which was supposed to be for Monday nights only. However, after her first night, the regular organist quit, and she succeeded to that position which she held for three years until the place was sold.

For about 18 years, she worked in other restaurants, having tenures of seven, five, three and three years in each in the metropolitan Los Angeles area.

In 1966, her father notified her that he was buying three tickets for a round-the-world trip. Would she like to go? Yes or no! She immediately accepted, and while on the trip, managed to play the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, and a pipe organ in Sydney, Australia. Seems someone on the airline they traveled heard of her prowess as a musician.

The year 1968 marked a big milestone in Helen Dell's musical career. She shared the bench with George Wright on the newly rededicated 4/61 Robert Morton at the Los Angeles Elks Lodge, and created such a favorable impression that the chairman of the 1968 ATOS Convention in Los Angeles, Bob Carson, asked if she'd do a program. She agreed, and the resulting concert at Tubes Inc. served as an open door for her emergence on the theatre organ circuit.

However, not only was Helen in the concert swing, she was doing a few other things: teaching, recording for Malar Productions, arranging, writing music instruction books, and playing shows at the Los Angeles Forum after Gaylord Carter left to devote more time to his Flicker Fingers programs.

In 1970, Helen did a concert at the Fox Theatre in San Diego, and while there, met Edith Steele, a former theatre organist. The two became very close friends, and Mrs. Steele was the source of much advice for her young friend. For example, she said rag tunes should not be played fast, but with a touch of innuendo. It was she who introduced Helen to some of the great composers whose music was ideally suited to the theatre organ. For example, Eric Coates' great marches such as "Knightsbridge" and "Dambusters" were among those Helen added to an already extensive repertoire.

"Edith was most generous in sharing her knowledge with me. She had a marvelous personality and was a great organist and pianist at 83. Greatly excited over the renaissance of the theatre organ during the last four or five years of her life, she had a 2/3 'Bobby Morton', as she called it, in her home. Her son, Marshall, installed and maintained this little gem. It was a sad day for me on April 20, 1971 when I learned of her passing. I'll never forget her as she contributed so much to my musical education on theatre organ."

Then came 1972. The Conn organ position at Los Angeles Dodger Stadium was open. The Dodgers wanted a female organist. George Wright, working for Conn at the time, recommended her. Quite a compliment! Helen had almost landed the position a few years earlier when Dodger Stadium opened. The station which broadcast Dodger games was taken over by Gene Autry's organization



Getting in some practice, Helen plays the Robert Morton at the San Diego Fox in February, 1970. At this time, she met Edith Steele who was to be a big influence in Helen's theatre organ career. (Dell Coll.)

which also operated the California Angels. So, the Dodgers associated with a different station which required another organist who, at that time, didn't know a balk from a passed ball.

This time, however, Conn called Helen from Chicago and she was offered the position, good for renewal after five years, after demonstrating that she did know something about baseball. She answered a question about Ernie Banks' being a long-ball hitter. Her first game was on Friday night, July 14, 1972. She had just returned from the ATOS Convention in Washington, and the Dodgers had come off a road trip. "I was scared to death, but somehow, I got through it all." The score? Montreal 9, Dodgers 1. Hardly an auspicious beginning, but the team was rebuilding as a future contender.

In the course of a season, Helen will play 81 home league games, two preseason games with the California Angels (the Freeway Series), and if the team makes the league championship playoffs and World Series, at least five more. Her position is in the press box, behind home plate, and she plays a Conn 651 theatre organ.

You think it's easy, this routine of playing some numbers and watching a ballgame? Oh, yeah? Prior to the start of each game, Helen presents a

peppy hour-long concert. And the tunes heard will not be repeated for at least 30 games (unless a request is received). She meticulously lists and times her selections for every pre-game concert, those she will play between innings, and one or two at game's end, on yellow legal paper. At the bottom of the list is a secondary one which contains numbers to be played in stated situations: change of pitchers, conferences at the mound, extra innings, rain. (Does it rain in Los Angeles?) Rarely, but our Helen is prepared for any eventuality. In all, she will play about 50 numbers for each nine-inning game.

The song she plays immediately before the National Anthem is "San Antonio Rose," which is manager Walter Alston's favorite. Of the National Anthem, Helen believes it should be played in an inspiring tempo, not as a funeral dirge as some vocalists treat it.

When a Dodger hits a home run to put the club ahead, she might give forth with "Happy Days Are Here Again!," "Fine and Dandy" or "Hallelujah." On the days when the team wins, she'll play "On a Wonderful Day Like Today" or "If I Were a Bell, I'd Ring."

When the team needs a spur, she'll play the charge call four times instead of the usual three. Or, she'll do "Let's Do It." If they lose, per-

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haps "What Can I Say, Dear," "After I Say I'm Sorry?". "The last one comes under silent film music," she says, "rather neutral."

If the team is behind, going into the ninth inning, she'll play "You Gotta Have Heart," which is Mrs. Walter O'Malley's favorite. For the five or seven-minute sequel at the end of the game, she'll play "I'll See You Again" or "Good Night, Sweetheart." After a 19-inning game in 1974, she pumped out "Show Me the Way to Go Home." She must have literally dragged herself to her Chevrolet following that long one!

She does some request numbers, provided they are in sprightly tempo. After all, the music must keep up with the pace of the game itself. "You play bright, happy things and don't build arrangements as you would when performing a concert. The music must not interfere with a fan's enjoyment of the contest." Sounds like the philosophy of the old-time silent movie organists.

Helen wears a set of earphones which connects directly with the speaker system of the stadium; else she'd have a delay in receipt of the sound which travels 500 feet to her. Inside the earphones, she has a radio earpiece, tuned to the broadcast of the game so she doesn't overplay announcers Vin Scully and Jerry Doggett.

Her specialty at the stadium is playing spirited, toe-tapping numbers which gets the crowd into the mood to exhort the faithful to greater effort. She never plays any tunes with



Helen (left) poses with her mother and father near the Sphinx in Egypt in 1966 on their world tour. Her father refused to mount a camel because of fear of rolling motion of the "ship of the desert."  
(Dell Coll.)

insulting lyrics, such as "Slow Poke" if a first baseman loses a race to first against a runner, or "Dizzy Fingers" if someone drops a relay. Furthermore, she does not believe that every action of the baseball should be followed by a succession of notes, such as a descending rendition of the chromatic scale when a foul ball rolls down the screen.

"Baseball is still a game, a great game, and shouldn't be over-shadowed by carnival antics," she firmly believes. And the Dodger executives agree.

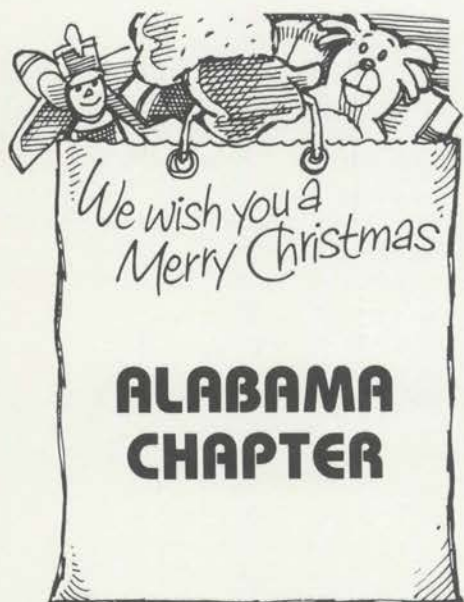
She died a thousand deaths when the Dodgers lost the World Series in 1974, but she knows that there will be other years when the young team will go all the way. A comforting thing which salves the wound of defeat for Helen is the fact that in three seasons as official Dodger organist, she never received a letter of condemnation. She did receive a note from a wag who said, "You play too good!"

When Red Patterson was Vice President of the Dodgers, and Helen's boss at the Stadium, he paid her the supreme compliment when he wrote to this author: "We are learning to think of Helen Dell as a real champion, linked in the same class with the late Brooklyn Dodger organist, Gladys Goodding." Miss Goodding was Dodger organist for 15 years.

When the baseball season ends, does it mean a vacation for Helen? Not a chance! She has performed in a full-length movie *The Interns* with Cliff Robertson, Suzy Parker, James MacArthur and Connie Gilchrist — some pretty fair actors. Helen, dressed as a Red Cross nurse, played the organ, but made sure beforehand that the wardrobe department anchored her sleeves so as not to interfere with her work. In the 1973-74 season, she was on a *Maude* TV segment, playing purposefully atrocious music for Walter's attempts at playing the organ. This was a bit tough, because the director kept hissing into her ear, "You're playing too good!"

As of 1974, Helen Dell had recorded seven albums and one 45 rpm single for Malar Productions for which she serves as musical director; published two books of organ arrangements, and has composed a number of selections. She was named Best Female Organist of 1974 in a national poll, conducted by *The Organist* magazine. Also, she has worked with comedienne Lily Tomlin on three TV shows, playing the first two (pipes and/or electronic) and writing some of the script for the third. She also continues classical organ study under Richard Purvis whom she labels as "The Best."

Helen received another deserved honor when on October 31, 1974, she



was honored with several other musicians at a luncheon in Los Angeles, sponsored by Broadcast Music Incorporated. The year previously, some east-coast organists, including Ashley Miller and New York Met organist, Jane Jarvis, were given similar awards. Again, BMI saluted musicians who make their contribution to sports.

"It was a tremendous surprise for me, and when I saw Red Patterson, vice president of the Dodgers, and pitcher Tommy John present, it was just wonderful. Our board chairman, Mr. Walter O'Malley, sent a telegram of congratulations. I received from BMI a walnut shadow box with a music rack on which is a parchment. The words are as follows: 'Music-In-Sports Award to Helen Dell in recognition of her contributions to the entertainment of fans at Dodger Stadium.'

"Before we go further, let me say that the Dodger organization, from Mr. O'Malley down through the ranks, has been simply wonderful to me. I couldn't ask for a finer employer. They are Class A-1, true blue, all the way. Some sportswriters have tended in the past to berate the club, its owners and operators. I feel that it is a warm, human group, and I wish space allowed to tell some of the wonderful stories connected with it. They are heart-warming I assure you."

Helen Dell has hob-nobbed with some of the great personalities in entertainment, performing in the homes of Harold Lloyd and Loretta Young, for example. Others with whom she has worked include Ferde Grofe, Ben Oakland, George Jessel, Ben Blue, Ella Fitzgerald, Gordon MacRae, Pat Boone, Gisele MacKenzie, Milton Berle and Billy Eckstein. There were others, of course.

But the personalities she'll never forget were those whom she drove to their hotel following a Dodger game, Dizzy Dean, Pee Wee Reese and Carl Erskine. "They were such gracious gentlemen, and Carl sent me a letter afterwards in appreciation."

Helen is a born musician, and a born public relations asset to anyone for whom she works. "I love my work," she told the writer while in Rochester during her December 1974 eastern tour. "In my concerts, I know I'm not going to please everybody. It is everyone's prerogative not to like some of my renditions. But, I

try to collate a program which will have something that everyone will enjoy."

If the writer can be excused for turning the tables, let me say that from personal experience in observing organists prepare for their Rochester concerts, Helen Dell goes to the top of the list, in meticulous devotion to practice, programming and timing. She avoids the tunes which have been literally done to death on the circuit. Furthermore, her sparkling personality is as great an asset to her as her musicianship. "Prima Donna" is not a phrase one uses in sizing up this artist. She is a delight to work with, whether it be during an interview, setting combinations or arranging her agenda while in town. And during her concerts, she knows the value of not talking endlessly, not trying for laughs. She does not employ gimmicks, and she is all busi-

ness, making every effort count for the success of her program.

Of the ATOS, she has the fondest respect and admiration. "The work of the people behind the restoration and maintenance of the theatre organs on the concert circuit is amazing. Where else do we have audiences enjoying the thing I love to do best? Were it not for these very dedicated people, we just wouldn't have a concert circuit which enables us organists to set out and see the country in conjunction with our tours." She has played ATOS Conventions in 1968, 1971, and 1974.

All we in the ATOS can say is that as long as we have the talent, charm and personality inherent in organists of Helen Dell's calibre, the organs will continue to be maintained. What it amounts to is a two-way street. One factor cannot exist without the other. It's that simple. □

At Dodger Stadium, Helen is ready for the work she enjoys most. Two sets of earphones have her "wired for sound" with the speaker system and with the radio pickup. (Dell Coll.)

