

BILL GAGE

Theatre Organist of Two Eras

by Lloyd E. Klos

There are still a healthy number of theatre organists whose careers have bridged from the silent movie days to the renaissance movement of this great instrument. During a visit to Rochester in October, 1973, one of these performers, Bill Gage, spent several hours with the writer to review highlights of his career.

William M. Gage was born in 1910 in New York City. As is the case with many musicians, he inherited his love for music. His father was a concert and church organist, and his mother taught piano and voice. Bill's musical education was gained solely from his parents.

"Dad represented Connecticut at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis in 1904 and gave a con-

cert on the organ there. It was installed later in Wanamaker's store in Philadelphia, forming the nucleus of the enlarged instrument now played daily.

"He also played a concert on the Hope-Jones organ in the Ocean Grove, New Jersey, Auditorium in 1915 for a Methodist meeting. I was to play it years later, using its Flag stop when playing 'Battle Hymn of the Republic.' The resulting blast was a real crowd-pleaser!"

Montclair, New Jersey, was the locale for much of Bill's early career as an organist. He first played for the Unity Church in a series of "reel sermons," movies with a message. When he was about twelve, he became a friend of Alvin Sloan of the

family well known in General Motors history. Alvin had rigged a makeshift theatre in his garage where he showed movies. A nearby pump organ was played by Bill to provide the accompaniment.

His first paying job was as a substitute organist at the 1336-seat Claridge Theatre in Montclair, playing a 2/10 Wurlitzer with piano. This was followed by another sub position in Upper Montclair at the 975-seat Bellevue Theatre, which had a 3-manual Austin.

Bill's first full-time job was at the Park Theatre in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, on a 4/18 Marr & Colton. He was about 17 and the future looked bright indeed. His second full-time position was in a Washington, New Jersey, theatre on a 2/4 Robert-Morton equipped with a player. Bill played for the vaudeville acts on a six-day week, which included Saturday matinees. He owned a 1924 Chevrolet which he employed to drive the acrobats, midgets and other vaudeville personnel to Newark. Washington was a sleepy town of 4400 then, but bustling Newark was ten times larger!

With the end of the silents and the decreased use of organs in theatres, Bill was at a fork in the road of life. With encouragement from his aunt and uncle who took a great interest in him, he attended the RCA Institute in New York. Following successful completion of the course, he did service work for a while, establishing many contacts in New York in the

Bill Gage at the Brooklyn Fox console.

(Walter Froehlich Photo)



radio business.

In 1935, CBS in New York needed musically-trained maintenance men for audio work on musical shows. Bill Gage qualified, and he was installed on such programs as *Saturday Night Serenade* for Pet Milk, with Jessica Dragonette, Gustave Haenschen and Warren Sweeney; *Philip Morris Playhouse* with Ray Bloch and 'Johnny'; and *Court of Missing Heirs* where Bill met Rosa Rio, organist for the show.

In 1936, while working the Meadowbrook Dance Hall show, which was a remote pickup from New Jersey, a crisis arose. The wires broke somewhere, and to compound the problem, the standby pianist in the Madison Avenue studio decided to leave. What to do? Announcer Ken Roberts was desperate. "Can anybody play?" he pleaded. One musician offered to play hymns! Great!

Bill volunteered, playing piano for 18 minutes over 125 stations, coast to coast and using no music. "That's how the network learned I could play piano." Shortly after, he was advanced to the respected post of audio mixer.

The period from 1935 to 1943 was a great one for Bill as he met some of the famous organists of the time. "Fred Feibel was a superb theatre organist. I had gone to hear him at the Paramount Studio in 1934, and he showed me some things about registration on that beautiful instrument. He later did a duo-console show with Johnny Winters on the great Wurlitzer in the theatre downstairs. I remember Jesse Crawford's performing there in solo work. Another was Egon Putz.

"These organists came to CBS as staff players, but Fred Feibel became tied up with radio shows and dropped his regular programs, unfortunately. Ann Leaf continued for years afterward. Johnny Hereford, Elsie Thompson, Charles Paul, Lew White, Arlo Hulst, Bert Buhrman, John Gart and Billy Nalle were some of the organists with whom I was privileged to work and hear their styles, which was most educational. They used Lew White's little Kimball over in the Seventh Avenue studio where Rosa Rio did so many of her dramatic backings. Fred Helmes of the Paramount kept the organ in repair.

"I did a wonderful jazz show called



Control room of CBS Playhouse No. 2 Theatre on 45th Street, New York, about 1940. Bill Gage at left and Chick Martini at right. (CBS Photo)

Saturday Night Swing Club with emcees Paul Douglas and Ted Husing. Since I love good jazz, this show with all the greats was a natural. Art Tatum was especially good. Another program for which I worked audio was *Major Bowes and His Family*, which featured the stars of the Capitol Theatre — Charles Magnante, Jan Peerce, Imogene Coca, etc.

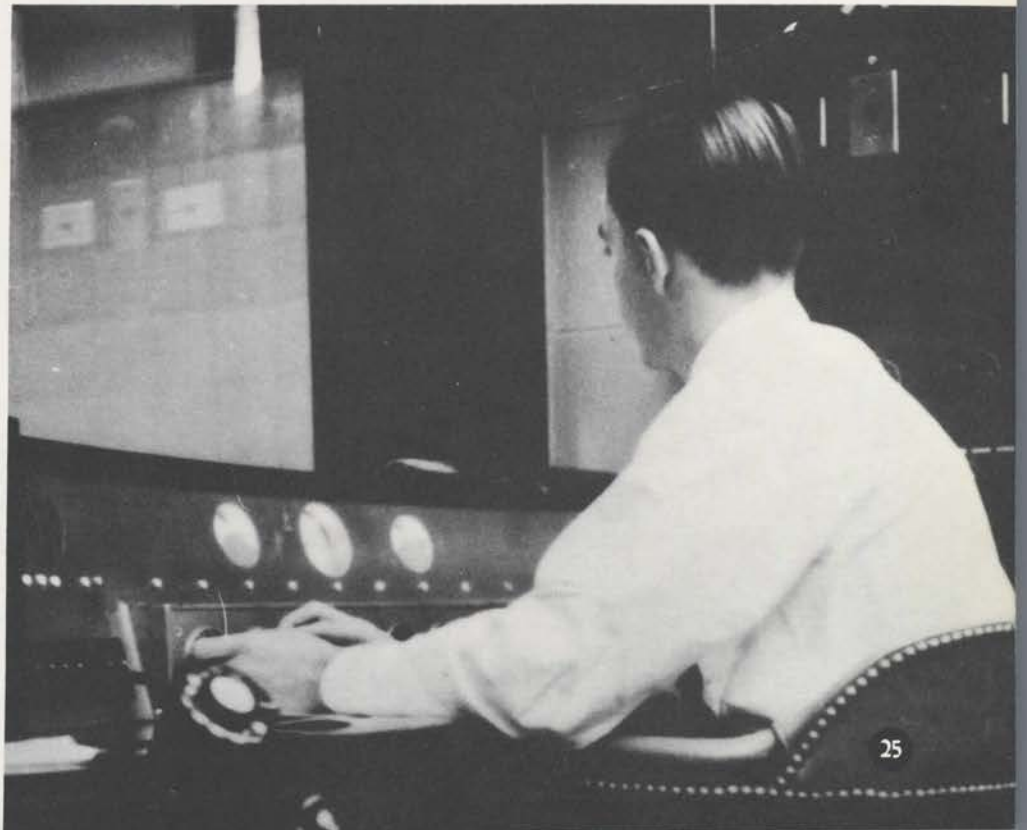
"I missed doing *War of the Worlds* on Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre

show in October, 1938, by one week, thank goodness! The studios were bedlam afterwards, and police cordons were all over 485 Madison Avenue. I was told that when the Martians were supposed to have landed in New Jersey, some Princeton professors actually drove out to find them!"

When World War II came, Bill Gage eventually got into specialized work. From 1943 to 1945, he worked

Bill Gage at the console in CBS Studio One at 485 Madison Avenue, New York, in 1938.

(John Deitz Photo)





Bill Gage at the 3/11 Wurlitzer console in the Casa Italiana, where he was house organist for ten years.
(Photo taken in May, 1977.)

in Boston in Harvard's Radio Research Laboratories. From 1945 to 1947, he toiled for CBS in general engineering work, creating new audio techniques for the network. In 1947 and 1948, he was employed by Columbia Records in recording and maintenance. This gave him wonderful experience, learning about the new high-fidelity recordings (he knew Emory Cook), which gave him the background necessary for establishing his own recording studio later.

This period saw Bill becoming associated in the infant medium of television on the *Toast of the Town* show with Ed Sullivan, doing audio and camera work. He also did *The Fred Waring Show* when it was sponsored by General Electric in 1951. "It was a wonderful treat to do audio control with this marvelous group. There were 16 microphones which had to be controlled, the show fed into the mixer, and sent out over the air. I also did the Perry Como show and remote assignments at Yankee Stadium, Ebbets Field and the Polo Grounds. Hockey games and dog shows were covered from Madison Square Garden."

About 1952 Bill established his own "Community Recording Service" in Montclair, New Jersey. "Working for myself, I was able to control my hours and have evenings and weekends for myself. I did my own recording, editing and master-

taping. Glee clubs, musical shows, etc., were my specialties during the ten years of the business."

Bill managed to do a couple of network shows early in the sixties, *Love of Life* and *Secret Storm*, which used the talents of organists Charles Paul and Rosa Rio. The last network show he did was *The Guiding Light*, and it was also Bert Buhrman's last before he headed west. Arlo Hults, followed by John Gart and Billy

The Casa Italiana seats 1000 and has a ballroom floor plus a kitchen to serve 500. It was formerly the Stanley Theatre.
(Bill Gage Photo)



Nalle, replaced him.

Bill left CBS for good in 1965 on the early retirement plan. The previous fall, he had attended the farewell concert at the New York Paramount and he joined the New York ATOS Chapter then — his interest in the theatre organ was rekindled. He was elected chairman of the chapter in 1966, and since then made a point to play as many of the organs remaining in theatres (and elsewhere) as possible.

At the ATOS Regional Convention at Richmond in 1966, he played the Mosque Wurlitzer. In 1967, representing the New York Chapter, he played the Fox at the Detroit convention. He played the old Waldorf-Astoria Hotel organ now in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, and performed a concert on the newer Waldorf-Astoria Moller at Montclair, New Jersey, State Teachers' College. He performed piano-organ duets and played concerts for Dairyland, Central Ohio and Motor City Chapters of ATOS.

In 1967 he became associated with the Stanley Theatre in Vailsburg, New Jersey, a suburb of Newark, through his friend, organ technician Walter Froehlich. He did many shows there on the Wurlitzer before the theatre was taken over by Seton Hall University as a Center for Italian Culture. "Through the gracious-

ness of Rev. Monella, I continued to play there (now named Casa Italiana) and to do classical programs on the chapel organ.

"At the Casa, which has a variety of presentations, there was a rock concert a while ago. The finale was an ear-splitting racket, and the so-called leader threw zillions of feathers at the audience, covering organ console, stage, seats, etc. During my intermission stint, the pedal division acted strangely. Walter Froehlich checked it and found that feathers had gotten into pedalboard contacts. What a mess!"

The Casa Italiana organ was a 3/11 Wurlitzer with Trumpet added. It was to be replaced by the 4/28 Wurlitzer from the Fabian Theatre in Paterson, New Jersey.

In November, 1970, Bill Gage played the final concert at the Brooklyn Fox. Thanks to Walter Froehlich, who served as appraiser and removal contractor, the marquee proclaimed his name "at the Mighty Wurlitzer." The New York Times ran an extensive article on the demise of the Fox, and the ABC Network did a featurette on it. Mentioning Bill, the ABC said: "Bill Gage has a library of mono and stereo recordings of practically all his playing, carefully edited for reference. Many of the best theatre organs still playing have been visited, and their thrilling sounds have been captured with portable recorders."

"Rosa Rio was soloist at the Brooklyn Fox in the thirties. There were lots of pink and blue roses painted on the console, which came out of the pit and rose to a dizzy height, even rocking gently. The pipes were installed in several chambers in this high-ceilinged theatre. Incidentally, the organ, especially designed for the Fox, was a 4/36, NOT a 4/37 as others have maintained. Walter Froehlich is the authority for this, having checked the instrument carefully.

"When Rosa finished her tenure at the Fox, she left behind a box of music in her dressing room, containing many period pieces of a wide range of moods which I have memorized and recorded. I see Rosa occasionally — a wonderful person. The organ was removed from the theatre and shipped to Philadelphia."

Bill Gage had a most interesting life, theatre-organwise. In addition

to his music, radio and recording activities, he was an excellent photographer (including underwater) and was a ham radio operator. But, his main interest was that in which he began his career — as a theatre organist. He was available for concerts, and manifested the desire he expressed when joining ATOS in 1964 — to play every remaining theatre organ, from Austin to Wurlitzer.

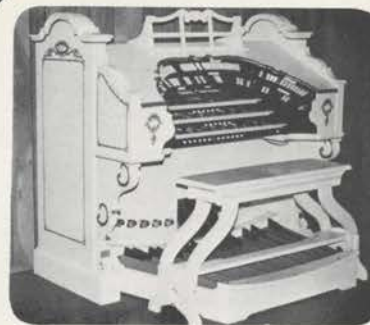
His philosophy on the renaissance of the theatre organ was this: "The novelty factor in the eyes of the young people and the nostalgia factor in the eyes of the older folks, when combined are of great benefit to the cause. It is live entertainment — no editing, no re-runs, nothing is censored.

"The audience has much to enjoy, provided the organ is in top condition and the organist possesses showmanship and technique. Orchestration is most important, and the balance of sound a great factor. The pipe organ is the grand-daddy of electronic instruments. Though many of the former are being played in pizza parlors, the fact remains that these instruments are being saved, at least!

"In my experience, tonality of instruments is most important. Wurlitzer, Robert-Morton, Marr & Colton and some Kimballs and Bartons have good tonality, with Wurlitzer being the best balanced of them all. Jesse Crawford recognized this and used it to his great advantage.

"It's a big thrill to play a monster organ, *but* you have to work out your arrangements beforehand, or you're lost. The sense of power at the console while making that huge sound is very exciting. But if you haven't prepared yourself or learned stop placement, it can be a case of sinking in a hurry!

"The orchestral organ is such a wonderful medium of expression if you want variety. It is basically a wonderful way to create music, using the vast facilities offered. It is really a super orchestra, and can do things no orchestra can do. It's up to the player to bring out all those truly unique tones and blends which can be made to create really heavenly music. The richness and power of the stops combine to make a rare listening experience. Let's keep those theatre organs playing!" Bill Gage died in March, 1979. □



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