

# HELEN ANKNER

## Over Fifty-five Years an Organist and Pianist

by Lloyd E. Klos

When the theatre pipe organ was enjoying its first run of popularity in the twenties and thirties, Rochester, New York, had a number of organists who achieved considerable fame in the area: Tom Grierson, Edward C. May, Hugh Dodge, Dick Hull and J. Gordon Baldwin, to mention the most popular of those on the masculine side.

Standing head and shoulders above her contemporaries on the distaff side in Rochester was attractive, talented and personable Helen Mary Ankner. She was a professional musician for over 55 years.

The daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Daniel J. Ankner, she was born in Montour Falls, New York. The family moved 25 miles south to Elmira later. Her earliest efforts at music were at the age of four when she learned to play a one-hand arrangement of "Alexander's Ragtime Band," her father's knee serving as her piano stool. And while she dressed dolls and made mud pies, she hummed the minstrel tunes her father taught her.

During her grammar school days, she began her musical studies under the Sisters of St. Joseph. She was graduated from Elmira's St. Mary's School in 1921, and continued her musical studies while attending Southside High School from which she graduated in 1925. Later that year, she completed a course in Elmira College's School of Music, studying piano with Ethel Holt and organ with George Morgan McKnight.

For about a year, she served as organist at SS Peter and Paul's Church in Elmira, and during the winter of 1926-27, was organist at the Majestic Theatre. The instrument was a 2/4 Wurlitzer, Opus 1081, which had been installed the year previous.

In 1927, she entered Rochester's Eastman School of Music, studying organ and piano. Her organ instructor was Abel M. DeCaux, who had nothing but contempt for the "movee organ," as he put it. Included in her training was a six-week course for theatre organists, taught by Robert J. Berentsen, who was also on the organ staff of the Eastman Theatre. For practical experience, she played the 4/155 Austin in the theatre, the largest organ in the world at the time of its installation in 1922.

Those were the days when the organ was used for stage novelties as well as for overtures with the orchestra and silent film accompaniment. In 1927, *Democrat & Chronicle* reviewer Harvey Southgate, while covering the First National Film, *The Gorilla*, at the Eastman, had this to say: "The bill also brings the organ [console] into view in a number called 'Organ Blues,' in which Dorothy Drakely and Kathryn Lynch rise to view atop the organ [console] to sing 'Blue Baby,' while Helen Ankner plays the accompaniment. It is good to see the organ get a chance once in a while on an Eastman program." While at the Eastman, Helen defrayed expenses by playing the 3/11 Hope-Jones Wurlitzer in the Regent Theatre, a couple of blocks away.



Helen Ankner at the console of the one-manual organ in the studios of WHAM in the Eastman Theatre Building about 1928. Make of the instrument is unknown. (Ankner Collection)

In 1928, she joined WHAM as staff organist and pianist. The station was a part of the Eastman School then. (Later, when WHAM was taken over by Stromberg-Carlson Co., the main studios were in the Sagamore Hotel on East Avenue.) In those days, a musician who could adapt to situations could really be kept busy, and the talented Helen Ankner jumped from place to place like a frenzied bee. While with WHAM, Helen continued her tenure as Regent Theatre organist.

One day she experienced the frightening prospect of being late for a radio show. She and contralto Bess Perry had finished a program at the Eastman Theatre, and by some circumstance, found themselves locked in the darkened house, five minutes to air time!

They hurried to find an exit and opened a window on the second floor. "Do something!" cried Helen. "Oh, yeah?" said Bess. "You're telling me! What'll we do? Jump?" Four minutes to air time! One of them called to a group of urchins outside the building, asking that they bring a ladder. Three minutes to go! Down the ladder, down the street, up the stairs of the Sagamore to the mezzanine studios of WHAM ran the duo. They made it with 30 seconds to spare! They'd never do it today through all that East Avenue traffic!

Some of the programs in which Helen was a participant in the late twenties and early thirties include: *The Arpeako Minstrels*, a variety-comedy show; *Saturday Night Re-*

quest, using a pipe organ in the Eastman School studios; *Odds and Ends*, a light program in which Helen provided background music for Bess Perry, a contralto and monologist; *Browsing in a Musical Library*, a vehicle to display Helen's talents as a classical organist; *The Four Instructors*, which included banjoist Arling Newcombe, Francis "Sax" Smith, and tuba player Deke Clemens, with Helen playing piano; *The WHAM Concert Ensemble*, a ten-piece orchestra, including the twin pianos of Helen Ankner and Clyde Morse; *The Three of Us*, which featured songs by Katherine Bishop, Inez Quinn and Helen; and *The Major and the Minor*, featuring the piano artistry of Helen Ankner and Clyde Morse.

There were other programs of varying tenure, of course. In the days of "live" radio, many of the shows began as experiments and lasted until something different came along. Some had long tenures on the air.

For example, the three vocalists on WHAM's *The Three of Us* were engaged in other lines of endeavor. Katherine Bishop was a secretary in the publicity department, but someone discovered she had a contralto voice. Helen Ankner, it was noted, always hummed to her playing, indicating she had perfect pitch. Announcers and technical men spent two years trying to break her of the habit, but with no success. Inez Quinn was secretary in the program department. In their spare time, the ladies tried some harmonizing. Program director Clyde Morse heard them, gave them a spot on the air, and they were an instantaneous success.

The subject of this feature graciously lent us her scrapbook, and the contents give an idea what sort of person Helen Ankner was in those days. In telephone conversations with her in 1977 she appeared to have lost none of her effervescence and enthusiasm. Helen was known as the "Sweetheart of WHAM," just as another Helen (Dell) has a similar title in her role as Los Angeles Dodger organist. According to one write-up, "Helen Ankner gets so much enjoyment out of her music that she thinks she must be selfish. And she's very serious at not being that."

According to another story, "Rain may be just rain to you, but to Helen, it's something to walk through. She walks miles every day, rain or shine."

She also engaged in tennis and other sports. Like her namesake on the Dodgers, Helen Ankner went in for the study of philosophy, and problems-of-the-universe discussions. A hobby was the composing of music, her "Blue Eyes" being published and performed over the air. "It's worth a trip to the studio to see her smile," said one press release.

So popular was Helen in the great days of radio that an article was run in a 1931 *Rochester Sunday American* on the type of shoes she used in her organ playing: "It takes all kinds of shoes to play the organ, at least the one in the Eastman School of Music studios of WHAM.

"One pair Helen Ankner uses to play a short program of jazz and classical, another for a longer program. The type of music has nothing to do with the species of shoes, but the tootsie coverings themselves must be just so or Helen can't manipulate the bass pedals with her usual enthusiasm.

"Then again, shoes which are fitted to the organ pedals, much in the manner of foot coverings shaped to the accelerator and clutch, are of the low-heeled, ground-gripping type.

"High heels are sometimes worn when Helen hasn't time to dig up her other pairs which are in evidence all over WHAM's cloakroom. One pair is resting under the water cooler; another in the drawer which is filled with scores and program notes; and

yet another pair over in one corner, forlorn, as if tossed to one side.

"Shoe manufacturers in Rochester are reported working overtime and trying to convince other organists in the country that shoes make the music. All Helen said when told of this was 'Oh, shoo.'"

In April 1932, Palace Theatre house organist Tom Grierson, suffering from a nervous breakdown caused by a seven-day-week schedule, was forced into an extended period of rest. Helen Ankner was selected to fill in at the 4/21 Wurlitzer, and from all reports, acquitted herself most nobly. At that time, the organ was used for spotlight solos and community singing. Often it was used with Russ Kahn's RKO pit orchestra in playing the overtures. The Sibley Tower Clock Program was also a vehicle on the Wurlitzer's daily schedule. Wrote one reviewer, "Miss Ankner has a crisp style of playing with a well-defined rhythm which makes her listeners want to sing."

In December 1932, Helen began an engagement at the 3/13 Wurlitzer in the Century Theatre, taking her into February 1933. Like the Palace stint, this one included programs with music ranging from classics to modern jazz. The Century had the only two-console theatre organ in the city, Opus 1928.

While working at the Century, Helen once had a frenzied four-hour afternoon. A lover of dogs, she and WHAM announcer Jack Lee were re-

In the early thirties, "The Three of Us," a WHAM singing group, was quite popular. The participants (l to r) were Katherine Bishop, Helen Ankner and Inez Quinn. (Ankner collection)





An organ's size made no difference to Helen Ankner. Here, with daughter Connie looking on, she plays the 4/21 Wurlitzer in Rochester's RKO Palace Theatre in 1941 for a teachers' convention. (L. Klos collection)

turning to the station after a theatre broadcast, when her pet terrier, "Jiggs," got loose at Rochester's busiest intersection, Main & Clinton. Helen spent the afternoon searching for her pet on the five floors of the city's largest department store, Sibley's. Meanwhile, Lee chased the elusive dog through traffic in the 80-degree weather. The chase ended in the WHAM studios, the dog seeking rest under an office desk!

Another incident emphasized her versatility as a musician. She was playing for a wedding in a local church, and got so engrossed in the music that she almost forgot that she was scheduled at the theatre very shortly after the ceremony. She finished the wedding march and dashed to the theatre, where she was in time to play "The End of a Perfect Day."

In the late thirties, Helen married William Kondolf and moved to Philadelphia for four years. She taught piano at the Richter School of Music, and played organ at station KYW.

Upon her return to Rochester, she resumed her career on radio. One of the programs she played was *True Stories of the New York State Police*,

using an electronic. She also taught for a while in the preparatory department of the Eastman School of Music. This began a whole new vista for Helen, who opened a day school for pre-school children, teaching music through color association.

Two of Helen Ankner's associates from theatre and radio days have contributed their impressions of her for our narrative.

Norbert Klem, a violinist in the Rochester area for over 60 years, recalls when he was playing in the Regent Theatre orchestra in 1927. "She acquired the habit of arriving at the console about a minute before she was to play with the orchestra. Occasionally, in her haste to play on cue, she'd forget to turn on the organ, and when she did, hands on the manuals, it created a big whoomping sound!"

"Helen and I also played over WHAM from the studio atop the Eastman Theatre Building. This studio was used by motion picture organ classes for instruction, and besides the 2-manual Wurlitzer, it had complete screening equipment. I played violin, Helen the organ, providing soft background music for a Mrs. Webster who read poetry.

"In later years, Helen and I teamed up to play a number of weddings at country clubs and the like. She was a very competent musician, no matter what the task."

Anna Walker Goss, now living in Florida, remembers Helen very well. "We worked together at both the Piccadilly and Regent theatres, and that was so long ago. She was a very lovely girl with great musical talent and a sparkling personality. Everyone liked Helen, and she had a great deal of musical experience.

"When at the theatres, we went to work at 1 p.m., and the orchestra came in at two. Then, we relieved them for their intermissions. The same in the evening. I usually played from 1 to 2, and in the late afternoon from 5 to 7:30. Of course, when the 'talkies' came in, and the orchestras were dropped, times were different."

Through the years, Helen always managed to stay extremely busy, fulfilling engagements for clubs, associations, schools, etc. She sat in as pianist for a number of local orchestras including those of Sax Smith, Hughie Barrett, Charles Siverson and Gene Zacher. After World War II, she had a stint as organist on WHAM's *Cinderella Weekend* show with comic MC Ross "Peachy" Weller. She also played intermission organ music on an electronic for the East Rochester Artists Country Playhouse for several summers.

Though primarily a theatre and radio musician, Helen was also a church musician, playing the pipe organs in Rochester's Corpus Christi, Our Lady of Good Counsel, and Asbury First Methodist churches. For ten years she taught music at Nazareth College.

One of the last musical projects in which Helen Kondolf had a part was a re-creation of a *True Stories of the New York State Police* show, which aired in February 1982 on WXXI-FM. She played organ background, just as she did some 40 years earlier on WHAM.

Up to her death in March 1982, she taught at her home in Fairport, New York, and fulfilled many engagements as pianist and organist. She stated that she was grandmother for nine children of her daughter, Connie, and enjoyed the role. "I am flattered that I've been asked for some background concerning 'little ol' me.'" □