

The Life and Times of ROLAND NUTTRELL

edited by Lloyd E. Klos

When the theatre organ was enjoying its first great era in the twenties and thirties, Baltimore had an organist whose activity was well known. He was Roland C. Nuttrell, and he graciously consented in 1977 to share his musical life with THEATRE ORGAN readers. He was not sure that he could be classed as the leading theatre organist of Baltimore, but "I was Loew's workhorse in the city for many years.

"During the late twenties, through the forties," he said, "I was known as a 'house organist,' whose duties included opening and/or closing the house, playing overtures, stage shows, intermissions, a Sunday half-hour recital before the show began (by law, we could not begin our regular show until 2 p.m.), and playing as a member of the orchestra (on which contract I was included). I also sub-

stituted as soloist between engagements of featured players, or whenever the soloist was not 'available.' In short, a jack-of-all-trades or a 'workhorse.'

"Loew's operated four theatres in the city for some years. They were: Century, Valencia (atop the Century), Stanley and Parkway. They were all fine houses with Wurlitzer organs (except the Stanley, which had a 3/31 Kimball), and with orchestras until the inevitable inroads of sound. The Century and the Stanley retained their orchestras, while the other two went all-sound with occasional use of the organ alone.

"In 1923, at the age of ten, I was enrolled in the men's and boy's choir at Grace and St. Peter's Episcopal Church. A 3/53 Austin had been installed in 1922 and it was considered the last word in modern organ. This

choir experience with accompanying organ was probably the awakening of my interest in music.

"In 1922, the Metropolitan Theatre, operated by Warner Brothers, opened its doors. It was a first-run house for many years and where in 1926, they presented the first Vitaphone program in the city. The management rejoiced in the presentation of a 15-piece concert orchestra and a new Robert-Morton organ, the first real cinema organ installed in Baltimore.

"The organist was John Varney. In future years, our paths were to cross many times to our mutual benefit, since his work paralleled mine in some of Baltimore's first-class theatres. Though older than I by some years, the playing of silent pictures by this fine organist was just about the best I've ever encountered and was a great inspiration to a budding young student.

"Another item which caught my ear in the early twenties was a noon organ recital from WRC in Washington. The organ was located in the Homer L. Kitt studios and was played by George F. Ross, an announcer; Gertrude Smallwood, Parley D. Parkinson and others.

"When Loew's came to Baltimore in 1926 with the purchase of the Century and Parkway theatres, they proceeded to install Wurlitzers and feature them. This was the final incentive. I just had to be able to play one of those one day!

"In the summer of 1926, my parents presented me with the choice of summer camp or enrollment in the fall term of the Peabody Institute's Preparatory School. I chose the latter. The late Bart Wirtz, the head of the cello department agreed, through my father's intercession, to test me for musical aptitude. He gave me my

Mr. Nuttrell at the console in the John Kuczinski residence in 1976.

(Nuttrell collection)



first piano lesson in his Mt. Washington home and it was on this occasion that I discovered middle C.

"Upon entering the Prep, I was assigned to Nevin Fisher for piano instruction. I am greatly indebted to this fine teacher for much patience and inspiration. Theory, notation, rhythm, etc., were taught in classes. Mr. Fisher assigned a piece called 'The Old Fan,' and we went to work. Much difficulty followed, but he assured me that one day 'The Old Fan' would open up for me. It did and I played it from memory at the first student recital in which I ever participated.

"At the conclusion of four years at the Prep, I applied for admittance to the Conservatory as an organ student. Times had begun to get very bad in 1930, almost as bad as my rendering of the 'Moonlight Sonata' which I offered as proof of my dubious ability. The charitable comment by the director was, 'You need more piano.' I was accepted as an organ major and piano minor only, I'm sure, because they needed the money.

"I was assigned to the late Louis Robert, eminent Dutch organist, teacher and recitalist, who was head of the organ department from 1923 to 1938. He really went to work on me. Our first lesson consisted solely of how to position oneself on the bench and the importance of this. He assigned Bach's 'Little Preludes and Fugues,' and so we began.

"At one lesson, the organ in his teaching studio was experiencing generator trouble. It cut in and out with predictable results. Mr. Robert caustically commented that my performance even made the organ object! This great man was very kind to me, considering my musical ignorance. One of his most notable students was the incomparable Virgil Fox, who was graduated in 1932 with all the honors Peabody could bestow.

"My musical ability gradually improved after I received permission to practice on the three-manual Kimball at the Stanley Theatre. While I was in high school I had been permitted to practice on some of the Loew's organs. After joining the musicians union, I played for special shows and personal appearances in any theatre whose organ was not used regularly, but was still playable. I played a kiddie show every Saturday morning at the Stanley in 1931.

"It was at this time that Loew's decided to use the organ as part of the regular program at the Stanley. My father had suffered business reverses, along with most everybody else, and I had to withdraw from the Conservatory. No more money. Luckily, I was at the right place at the right time when Loew's needed someone and I got the job at the Stanley. Now that I had some money, I didn't have the time to return to school!

"The Stanley was a beautiful 3500-seat deluxer with all the trimmings and appointments. The orchestra was composed of many excellent players, some of whom taught at the Conservatory and who could not be taken in by some 'joker' of a guest conductor. The guest-conductor vogue was then in full swing.

"Orchestral musicians are a hard-bitten lot. They are buffeted about by the resident conductor and all the 'guests' who had more friends in the home offices than talent with the baton. It didn't take long to determine whether the conductor was a leader or a follower. He was subtly and cruelly tested by the orchestra, which would lag in tempo or the drummer would double-time a march, and other devices were tried to challenge the leader's ability.

"On one occasion, our exalted guest conductor was running about backstage in search of his striped morning trousers, which had been purloined by a flute player! The or-

chestra elevator was on its way up for the overture, with our flute player serenely sitting on the missing trousers! When we reached stage level, our pompous friend made his entrance from the wings, clad in an oversized pair of work pants, hastily borrowed from a stage hand! He conducted in high dudgeon while the orchestra had trouble playing because of laughter. His one claim to musical fame was a periodic rendering (meaning: to tear apart) of Victor Herbert favorites on his fire-sale violin.

"When the Stanley was taken over by Warner Brothers, I gave a two-week notice and accepted a job with Loew's at the Valencia. As noted before, the Valencia was atop the Century. This unique theatre was done in a Spanish motif with floating clouds and twinkling stars on the ceiling, and other Eberson appointments. It was a 1500-seat house which, when combined with the 3000 downstairs in the Century, made this a real center for fine entertainment. However, there was one difficulty with my new arrangement.

"The new job started during the second week of my notice period at the Stanley, about eight blocks away. In order to appear for all scheduled times in both theatres, I had to negotiate with a colleague to cover for me at the Stanley. I sometimes wondered if folks strolling along the main thoroughfare thought I was a waiter late for work, as I would dash along the

Roland Nuttrell at the Stanley Theatre's 3/31 Kimball in 1932. He began his theatre organ career at this house, playing for kiddie shows in 1931, and then was featured organist for three years. (Nuttrell collection)



street, clad in tuxedo (the standard uniform) in broad daylight! This went on for six days.

"The job at the Valencia lasted only a few months, and then we were transferred downstairs to the Century with its stage band shows, and pit orchestra under the direction of George Wild.

"While there, we had a famous cellist from the New York Capitol who was to conduct and play quartet music as part of his stint. His orchestrations were complete, except for an organ part. I received a guitar score! At the end of the first day's struggle, I obtained the piano part and wrote it out. There was no more trouble until the end of the week when I asked the cello 'virtuoso' to autograph my score. He flew into a rage, and accused me of trying to steal his material for which, he said, he had paid 'thousands of dollars.' I quietly handed him the part and told him to forget it. I heard no more of the incident, or of him.

"We had a sister act in blackface. Part of their routine called for one of them to come down to the console and 'smooch' with me. It was embarrassing and added to the laundry bill, as I also received a lot of lampblack. It got a big laugh, especially from my colleagues.

"On one occasion, our resident conductor, George Wild, thought it would be a great idea to have the spotlight organ soloist play the overture with the orchestra. It was a debacle from the beginning with the organ much too loud and frequently on the wrong page! A conference in the conductor's office later revealed that our soloist saw no point in playing with the orchestra unless he could be heard. The idea of being but one instrument in the ensemble never occurred to him. It was really not his fault. He was an entertainer who used the organ as his medium and he was not an organist. At the same time, I think our conductor was trying to deflate his impossible ego.

"As a result of this, I was reinstated for overtures, a move which produced a decidedly icy response from the organist-entertainer who refused to speak to me for about three weeks!

"I think back on a remark made by one orchestral musician when he observed, 'We don't know what he conducted; we played 'Poet and Peasant.' That seemed to sum up some of

our conceited conductors' and soloists' attitudes.

"During my tour of these theatres, I was privileged to associate with many really fine solo organists. Some of these fellows were well-rounded musicians and included Paul Tompkins, Bob West, Lester Huff (all at the Stanley), and Al Hornig, Harold Ramsay, John Varney and Harvey Hammond at the Century.

"We enjoyed our work during those years. In spite of the problems which inevitably arose, we made good music. Of necessity, we had to be good readers. Time is costly and rehearsals were not always lengthy enough to iron out knotty problems.

"There was the inevitable battle with the bottle. Some of our members patronized a fine hotel bar nearby. One Saturday night during the last show, our drummer and a trombone player were much the worse for their day's activities. The drummer leaned over and pleaded, 'Harry, keep me straight. What's the next cue?' Harry replied, 'Finale.' Thunder arose on the downbeat. It was not finale at all, but a light ballet act! This occurred several times until the situation mercifully straightened out. Thunder and lightning were manifest downstairs after the show. As I was in the pit, I didn't witness it. Several were fired on the spot, and because this conduct was strictly against union rules, trials were held and fines levied.

"Once when I was substitute soloist, we experienced recurring difficulties with the console elevator. It rose to stage level, stopped, and promptly began to descend. A touch of the but-

ton sent it up again. This happened several times before the benighted mechanism stubbornly refused to lower the console from stage level! There was much consternation on the part of the management until an electrician got it down and out of the way of the screen. The gulf between that console platform and the lowered pit seemed like the Atlantic Ocean!

"Probably the most hilarious situation I ever experienced occurred one Saturday night before a capacity audience in the Century. The act on stage was 'Ted Healey and His Three Stooges,' plus his 'trained' bear. As the act progressed, it became increasingly evident that the bear had something on his mind. He failed to respond in the normal way and finally made his intentions completely clear by choosing the exact center of the stage and relieving himself according to the call of nature.

"One could sense surprise, consternation and finally dismay at this unexpected event. Evidently the bear had not responded to his trainer's admonitions before the show. Things quickly degenerated into pandemonium!

"Backstage, for a brief time no one knew quite how to proceed. The electrician finally compounded the error by pushing the main switch, plunging the entire house into complete darkness, except for the brilliant spotlight from the booth. The effect was catastrophic! The house was in a complete uproar, doubled up with laughter. Another stagehand finally closed the curtain and the lights came back on. In the complete backstage confusion, someone opened the curtain only to reveal a stagehand with scoop, trying to clean up the mess!

"To continue the show was impossible. The orchestra members were completely convulsed; further playing was out of the question. Conductor Wild straightened up long enough to give me the cue to 'take it away.' I did, but I was in just as bad a condition as everybody else. They got the screen down and opened up on trailers for coming attractions which I accompanied, somehow. The audience continued to howl all the way into the first reel of the feature.

"Next day, the papers, in the style of 'Variety,' headlined: BEAR IN SHOW AT LOEW'S CENTURY LAYS AN 'EGG.'

"As talking pictures gained in



popularity, pictures got longer and better and the need for stage shows and orchestras diminished. Many pits already displayed potted palms instead of musicians (no pun intended). Orchestras remaining were reduced in size. We no longer rejoiced in a full ensemble with viola, cello, French horn, etc. Woodwind players had to triple on flute, clarinet and saxophone. Microphones were placed before our two remaining violinists, and more organ was demanded for support. At the end, we had reduced from 30 to 11. The featured organists were kept on when the stage shows and pit orchestras were abandoned. I went into radio.

"I was fortunate to have cultivated the acquaintance of a news editor at one of our local radio stations, WCAO, 'The Voice of Baltimore.' Over midnight coffee (five cents a cup), we talked of many things. One idea of his was the possibility of a midnight program of organ music and poetry reading. As I needed a job, I was interested. He made overtures to the station's management, and I interceded with Loew's city manager, William K. Saxton. The idea met approval, and 'Nocturne' went on the air in May 1937 at the Parkway Theatre, and stayed until May 1957, a long period for a locally-originated program. Poetry readings were by Charles Purcell.

"The organ-poetry show was accomplished by remote control. I was at the Parkway organ, while the poetry reader was several miles away in the studio. This was managed by a series of cues not generally detected by our listeners.

"We relied on several devices to broadcast a complete program. One involved transcribed verses. By using subtle musical cues, I would signal the engineer in the studio when it was time for a verse. Engineers are not always musically alert. One of our stalwarts was utterly convinced that as soon as the program hit the air, he was free for a half hour to indulge in his favorite outdoor sport — the shooting of rats with an air rifle!

"I played softly and gave the musical cue — nothing. Another cue — nothing. On to the next number. He suddenly remembered and then it all came through at 78 rpm. They were recorded at 33-1/3! It was awful. I'm firmly convinced that Walt Disney must have heard one of these pro-



At the 2/8 Wurlitzer in Loew's Parkway in 1947. It was on this instrument that Mr. Nuttrell played for the "Nocturne" shows for 20 years. Charles Purcell read poetry. (Nuttrell collection)

grams and got the idea for the voice of Donald, the famous duck!

"At the end of that particular program, he thought it was a big joke. His main concern was that he might have hit several rats that night. After several similar performances and other infractions, he was finally dismissed.

"In 1939, the area in which the Parkway was located experienced a plague of rats. The management did all it could to eliminate the nuisance, but the rodents stayed on. A favorite nesting place was inside the console, and many a night I played the program with my feet up on the bench, or with a garter around each trouser leg!

"When *Gone With the Wind* made one of its periodic visits and the theatre opened at 9 a.m. and closed at 1 a.m., the organ wasn't available. So we went downtown to the old stamping ground, the Century, for a couple of weeks. When the organ acted up and needed attention, we used standby transcriptions of the entire program.

"Throughout the life of the broadcast, I continued to play in the Loew's theatres for any special work needed. We had personal appearances, audience participation broadcasts, etc.

"Al Jolson appeared at the Stanley for Warners, when the orchestra was no longer with us and the pit was filled with potted palms. For the appearance, the pit elevator was to rise somewhat higher than usual. Both pit and

console elevators could be controlled from the backstage switchboard. The pit rose on schedule and continued to rise until no one could see Jolson except the balcony patrons! He was at a loss for words for once in his life! Simultaneously, the console was descending! It was finally straightened out when a regular stagehand took over from a substitute electrician.

"At this time I decided to resume organ study. My teacher was Richard Ross, a Peabody graduate and former student of Louis Robert. Richard had developed into a brilliant concert organist and concertized throughout the country and Europe. He was studying with the noted Joseph Bonnet in Paris when the outbreak of World War II brought him home. It is to Richard Ross that I owe much of my knowledge of the standard organ literature, conducting, choir training and much more. We became fast friends and had many musical and gustatory adventures until his untimely death at the age of 39 in 1954.

"In 1940 I enrolled in the University of Maryland and began the long trek toward acquiring a college education. This was completed in 1947 after many evening classes at U.M. and long summers at Johns Hopkins.

"At the same time I was accepted as a teacher of mathematics and science in the Baltimore Public Schools. A church job was added. With all of this activity, I was getting

five hours of sleep a night and no days off. Many a night I lowered five or six seats in the front row of the theatre in order to get a few winks, only to awaken just in time to slide onto the bench at midnight to begin the program. I also did a lot of sleeping on the all-night street car, the operator arousing me at my destination.

"Some nights when I wasn't too sleepy and needed practice, I'd become engrossed in my work only to find out that my monitor was telling me that I'd been on the air for almost a minute, playing pedal scales!

"In 1953 I resigned from the Church of the Holy Nativity, where I'd been playing for ten years, and accepted a similar position at St. Timothy's Church in Catonsville, Maryland. In 1963 I felt it was time to slow

up some. I resigned the St. Timothy's position and, for the first time in years, had weekends to myself. I didn't play a note until August 1976.

"Then, through the courtesy of the Rector of Grace and St. Peter's Church and with the consent of the regular organist, I received permission to practice on its magnificent 3/53 Austin. The organ had been completely refurbished and revoiced, and had many changes in its speaking registers. It is now one of the largest and finest instruments in the city. In this way, I kept my hands and feet limber, while the responsibility for regular duties and boy-choir training were the domain of the regular parish organist. And so I was back where it all started for me, 54 years ago."

Mr. Nutrell died in 1980. □

Questions and Answers on the Technical Side

by Lance Johnson



Do you have any questions?

Send them direct to:

**QUIZMASTER
and Organbuilder**

**LANCE JOHNSON
Box 1228**

Fargo, North Dakota 58102

Q. Recently I built a tremolo using the same dimensions as a Wurlitzer tremolo. I cannot even get it to beat with the use of small weights, helper springs or through the adjustment of the slide. What could be wrong? (I made the slot larger in the wind box in order to get a deeper beat.)

A. You must make the wind box slot the exact same size in area as your Wurlitzer model in order for it to operate. The ratio of slot size to plate size is critical. When the slot is too

large air escapes too quickly, so that the plate will jump to the top and stay in the upward position.

Q. I have just purchased a two-manual, ten-rank Wurlitzer and would like to know if the chests should be rewired. It is evident that the wiring was done over by the previous owner and, even though I am not an expert on wiring, it looks very crude. Cables are not strapped down and the soldering looks amateurish. Would you recommend that it be rewired?

A. If the wiring looks amateurish, chances are it was done by an amateur. Your wiring should most certainly be re-done unless you want endless trouble.

Q. I own a large steak house and gambling casino and would like to know if I could install a theatre pipe organ in the dance area, even though the ceiling height is only ten feet. Would there be room for the taller

pipes, etc.? Could I use it for dancing, sing-alongs or just plain entertainment like the pizza parlors? (I want to dump the rock bands.)

A. Unless you want soft dinner music, I would suggest installing it in a room with at least a two-story ceiling with the swell shades on the second floor level. You should visit some of the better pizza parlor installations to ascertain what is involved with a pipe organ installation. It also helps to begin with a large base of working capital, in case it doesn't pan out.

Q. I have a Robert-Morton theatre organ with an annoying problem. When I turn the blower on one note in my 16' Bourdon chest ciphers until the reservoirs are filled. I first suspected that the valve spring had broken or the valve was misaligned. I opened the chest and found neither to be the case. Where do I look next?

A. It seems to me that you have an obstruction in the chest magnet which prevents the armature from seating until full pressure is in the chest. Clean out the magnet recess and try it again.

Lance Johnson, owner of Johnson Organ Company since 1954, builds, repairs and maintains both theatre and classical organs. He also is an accomplished artist on both types, and holds a bachelor of music degree in organ. He is a founding member of the American Institute of Organbuilders, and is chairman of the Red River Chapter of ATOS. □

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