

THE PARAMOUNT SOUND

by Dolton McAlpin

The Paramount Theatre in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, is no more. The venerable old theatre, opened in 1920, was razed in 1979 to make way for (you guessed it!) a parking lot. While the heroic efforts of Tom Mitchell, former manager of the house, and other Baton Rouge citizens to save the building from demolition were unsuccessful, a Jackson, Mississippi, couple have rescued the Robert-Morton pipe organ from a similar fate. The North Jackson residence of Tippy and Bob Garner has become the permanent home of the six-rank Morton.

Stories about the Baton Rouge Paramount and its Robert-Morton have appeared in these pages over the years. The organ was installed in 1928 as opus 2412, one of literally hundreds of similar two-manual, six-rank organs which Robert-Morton produced at their Van Nuys factory during that time. Though the organ was used heavily for a two-year period, the last silent feature was shown at the Paramount in 1930, sounding the death knell for the instrument. In 1931 the maintenance contract on the organ was terminated, and by 1934, the theatre management declared the organ unusable.

The little Morton remained a dusty and forlorn ghost, apparently doomed to silence, until it was discovered in

1958 by Donald May. By that time the console had been cut loose and placed in an alley where, of course, it was rained upon. Don completely rebuilt the organ, secured and rebuilt an identical console, and the Robert-Morton was once again heard in public at the Paramount in April, 1966. The first organist was Bob Courtney.

I had the good fortune to be a student at Louisiana State University at that time and I saw the full-page Sunday supplement article in the newspaper about Don and the organ. Shortly thereafter I became a fixture at the Paramount. It was my pleasure to play the Morton every weekend for the largely college crowds until my graduation in 1968. Some of you may remember the two albums we cut on this organ, which were released by Concert Recording. After my departure from Baton Rouge Tom Coeaux continued the weekly programs until the use of the organ declined with the declining patronage of the downtown theatre. The last public performance of the organ was in July, 1978, at which time I was pleased to accompany silent movies during the Baton Rouge Summer Arts Festival. Though the crowds for this event were large and enthusiastic, time was growing short for the Robert-Morton.

Even though the organ was used

rarely in its last years in the theatre, Don kept the instrument in first class condition. When the owners of the building decided to close the theatre and tear the structure down, they asked Don to remove the organ from the building and place it in storage, which he did with extreme care. Consequently, when the Garners bought the organ in 1980, it was in superb condition, though a bit worse for wear because of two or three moves to different storage locations.

When Tippy and Bob loaded the Morton onto trucks and brought it to Jackson, they faced an immediate problem: where to put it. This is, perhaps, a common problem of those who acquire pipe organs for their homes, but in this case the problem was particularly severe because the Garners were already the owners of an eighteen-rank classical pipe organ. This organ was installed in large chambers which Bob had built at the south end of an enormous family room in their home. So, for the last two years, the Garners have lived with one pipe organ installed in the chambers and one pipe organ stacked and jammed into every available nook and cranny of their house.

Finally, earlier this year, the classical instrument was sold and removed and Tippy and Bob began in earnest to install the six-rank Morton.

Although the division of the pipes, percussions and traps between the chambers is identical to the way the organ was installed in the Paramount, the location within the chambers of the various parts of the organ has been altered significantly. In the Garner installation the organ will not be cramped, as it was in the theatre, and the spacious chambers will allow future expansion of the instrument. Bob hopes to add a Concert Flute immediately, and make other additions over time. When Bob built the pipe chambers, he thoughtfully covered the walls with Keene's Cement, a very hard plaster which is highly reflective. Additionally, the chamber arrangement is such that both the blower and tremulants are remote from the chambers themselves, thus drastically decreasing the noise level of the organ.

Don May, of course, is quite ex-

The newly-refinished console awaits completion of wiring into the organ.





Bob Garner checks out the reiteration relay which was added to the orchestra bells.



Installing a pipe organ requires many skills. Here Bob solders joints in a new tin wind line.

cited about the renaissance of the Paramount Morton and has spent many weekends in the Garner home helping with the installation and regulation of the organ. His knowledge and assistance have been invaluable to Tippy and Bob because he has come to know this instrument so well in the last twenty-four years.

During the time that I was playing the Paramount organ, Don purchased and installed in the organ a Wurlitzer Diaphone. After the organ had been removed from the theatre, this Diaphone was acquired by the City of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, for installation in the three-manual, eight-rank Robert-Morton which has now been re-installed in the Saenger Theatre in Hattiesburg. C. G. Soley of Laurel, Mississippi, generously donated to Tip and Bob a Robert-Morton wood Diaphone which is now

Don May adjusts a balky violin pipe.



safely installed in the left chamber. Mr. Soley is the owner of the 3/13 Robert-Morton in the Seale Studio in Laurel.

The Garner installation is now virtually complete except for the final tonal regulation. It holds the promise of being the very best home installation I have ever heard. I am, of

course, delighted that this particular organ, for which I have great sentimental attachment, has been saved and will soon be playing again, more gloriously than ever. I am particularly gratified that it was acquired by two long-time friends of mine, who will give it the care that it needs and the public exposure that it deserves. □

MEMBERSHIP DRIVE "THANK YOU" TIME

The "PIPE UP!" membership drive is well on its way and we are now getting reports on the results of the fall concerts. We find the beautiful posters are being used to good advantage. Please remember that chapters and individuals can obtain posters at \$1.00 each from: Vern Bickell, 1393 Don Carlos Court, Chula Vista, California 92010. One chapter ordered fifty. Back issues of THEATRE ORGAN may be ordered from the same source.

There are many people to whom thanks are due. First of all, Lois Segur, ATOS president. Lois has been very supportive and in constant touch. National Director Richard Sklenar, who is promotion director for the drive. He has done all the editing and his help is greatly appreciated. Rex Koury, our Honorary Chairman, has been most encouraging.

Jack and Betty Laffaw, owners of Pizza & Pipes, Bellevue, Washington, have been very helpful, as has Carolyn Houghton, who handles public relations for them. Ralph Beaudry, Los Angeles, has generously agreed to be a liaison person, as has Myra Sentner of San Diego. On the East Coast, David Barnett of Richmond, Virgin-

ia, will help in the same capacity. Lance Johnson, Red River; Al Erickson, Cedar Rapids; Lee Smith, Sooner State; and Joe Gray of Oregon have been most helpful. Jack Becvar, Puget Sound Chapter chairman, and Marilyn Schrum, Vice Chairman, are hard at work to make the drive a success.

To one and all a most grateful THANK YOU. THELMA BARCLAY

