

# AN UNUSUAL COMBINATION

## Classical Organist from Italy Plays Benefit Concert on Morton in Fresno's Warnor Theatre

by Ron Musselman

The month of May offered a fair amount of theatre organ concert activity for enthusiasts in California, but the most intriguing event of the month went unheard by most organ buffs, theatre or classical. In fact, I would have missed it too, had it not been for a press release spotted on a desk at the radio station where I work. What caught my eye was the Warnor's letterhead incorporating a drawing of the theatre's unmistakable facade. The copy below explained that the Mt. Carmel Catholic Church was sponsoring a concert May 25 to benefit its Poverello Kitchen (a rescue mission-type community service) which had recently been damaged by a fire. The concert, "The first full organ recital since the re-opening of the Warnor Theatre," was to be played by Giancarlo Parodi, a European *classical* organist. An all-*classical* concert played on one of the most rip-roaring theatre organs ever built! This promised to be a most interesting evening. And ultimately, it was, in the most positive sense of the word. Unfortunately, the event was under-promoted and the resulting turnout was barely 150.

In looking ahead to the concert, I visualized a well-trained and educated European musician agreeing to play a benefit concert in an American theatre, not realizing what he was getting himself into, and trying out the machine the day before the concert, muttering to himself, "What *is* this thing, anyway?" Would the performance wind up being an embarrassment to both artist and instrument? After all, an eminent American classical organist had done a concert on a particularly fine Wurlitzer a few years back and managed to make it sound like a monstrous accordion. And the ultra-vivid tone colors of the

Warnor's 4/14 Morton contain some real pitfalls for the uninitiated — a loud, nasty Posthorn, sizzling, keen strings, and a bright, penetrating Tuba, just to mention a few. The instrument has the potential to do almost anything, but the organist must possess a good deal of skill tempered with taste to make it "sing." In the wrong hands, it has been known to sound quite coarse and ugly. In the case of Mr. Parodi, there was a lot of evidence that he would acquit himself well. He graduated from the Paganini Academy of Music in Genoa, well schooled in piano, organ and organ composition. He has played extensively in concerts all across Europe with orchestras, choruses and vocalists, as well as a soloist. His work has gained him praise from a long list of respected critics. He teaches at Trento University and has had several essays published. He has broadcast on both television and radio in several countries, and is a recording artist with several albums to his credit. So he had all the makings of a "heavy hitter," one of the most important being a large and varied repertoire.

Rushing up to the ticket office on the evening of the concert, we plunked down the cash for two tickets, then hurried through the lobby into the Spanish Renaissance auditorium and settled back into our seats on the main floor just forward of the balcony rail. Not more than 75 people were seated around us in the mostly-empty house, but there were several latecomers. The massive four-manual Morton console was already up at solo position on its lift . . . no dramatic show-biz rise into the spotlight tonight. Finally, at about 8:20, Father Flavio Trettel entered from stage right and strolled over to a microphone to greet the audience (com-

prised largely of church members) and introduced the artist. After the introductory remarks, which were peppered with Father Flavio's infectious sense of humor, out walked Giancarlo Parodi, tall, bearded and distinguished in a conservative blue suit. After acknowledging the applause with a shy smile and a nod of the head, he took his place on the bench. It became evident that he was in unfamiliar territory when he pulled out a piece of paper and referred to it as he began setting up some registration by hand. I could appreciate that almost everything about this instrument must seem foreign to him. But after the lengthy initial setting up, the awkwardness ended. He opened with a lively "Noel Votre Bonte' Grand Dieu," which alternated between medium reed combinations and softer passages on the Concert Flute before a classical-type "full organ" ending which brought down the house. Even at less than full-throttle, that Morton can really stir up an audience. The second piece was a rather sensitive rendering of "Theme and Variations" by Morandi. Bringing us up to intermission time was a composition in four parts which covered a wide range of tempos and registration textures. He extracted some beautiful sounds from the three-rank String Celeste (unison, sharp and flat).

Following intermission, as the artist commenced playing, out of the chamber came the sound of a theatre organ bird call! All in good taste, though. The piece was "St. Francis d'Assisi," in which, according to Father Trettel, St. Francis is communicating with the birds. It was well played and Parodi's use of the silent movie effect actually enhanced this peaceful, pastoral "musical picture." Next was the familiar Widor "Toccatina," and here the 14-rank organ sounded more like 100 ranks. And the rousing final chord brought another round of enthusiastic applause. Following two works by the contemporary composer Hidas (which concluded with an appropriate thunder-and-lightning finale), Mr. Parodi was given a standing ovation. He responded by playing a lengthy medley of popular Italian standards, and several people in the largely-Italian audience could be heard singing along in more or less the same key. At the conclusion, the artist bowed to the audience as they applauded him, then turned to the console and bowed to it.

That gesture undoubtedly came from the heart, for he had reportedly "fallen in love" with the instrument, having been surprised and pleased with what it could do. This was evident in his playing. He really liked the big Tuba and made use of it several times. The strings were also used more than once, and the untremmed Krumet was highlighted, sounding for all the world like an ancient Krummhorn. He seemed at times to be showcasing the excellent pipework for the listeners as much as he was the music.

On the whole, it was a most enjoyable concert. We walked out of the theatre in an afterglow of high spirits. It was as much a victory for Giancarlo Parodi as it was a concert. We had watched a man enter an unfamiliar situation, grapple with a foreign beast, and manage to produce some excellent music. □

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*Groups*

*Lloyd E. Klos*



*Lockport  
Theater  
Organ Society*

**(LTOS) — Lockport, New York  
716/439-6643**

Our August 11 concert at the Senior Citizens Center was a great success, artistically and attendance-wise. The affair was a sellout, all 420 seats occupied. Carlo Annibale played a very entertaining program on the 2/6 Wurlitzer. Included were Broadway show tunes, contemporary selections, and the oldies which our people enjoy. There was a medley of hymns, and as a surprise, a couple



Carlos Annibale practices for his August concert at the Lockport Senior Citizens Center.

numbers composed by Carlo's wife, Doris.

One thing the concert emphasized is that we need a larger blower if we are to add two ranks. A search is under way for one and if you have one available, please call me at (716) 439-6643, or write me at 33 Ontario Street, Lockport, New York 14094.

HAROLD LeVALLEY



*Niagara Frontier  
Theatre  
Organ  
Society*

**(NFTOS) — Buffalo, New York  
716/834-2712**

When theatre mogul, Edward H. Bebko took over North Tonawanda's Riviera Theatre last winter, he instituted organludes before the first show, at intermission, and following the final show, on Friday and Saturday evenings. The policy has had an electric effect. Attendance is up several hundred percent, enthusiasm of the audiences for the 3/20 Wurlitzer is overwhelming, and the youngsters are profuse with their favorable comments. Ed's father, the renowned Doc (Eddie Baker) says that "the organ, thanks to a fresh maintenance crew who know what they're doing, never sounded better. It is a pleasure to play this organ for a live, appreciative audience. It is a situation which is every

theatre organist's dream come true." The Riviera thus joins a very select list (Radio City Music Hall, Anderson, Indiana, Paramount to mention two) who employ a theatre pipe organ in its original installation as part of their programs. Furthermore, where do you find another theatre owner who employs his father to furnish organ music?

LLOYD E. KLOS

**RTOS**



*Dedicated to preserving the sound of the  
"King of Instruments"*

**Rochester Theater Organ Society  
(RTOS) — Rochester, New York  
716/ 266-8251**

After its usual three-month summer hiatus, the Rochester Theatre Organ Society launched its 19th Auditorium concert series on September 17. A good crowd was entertained by the fourth appearance of Canada's Ambassador of Musical Good Will, Don Thompson. Three times, Don has been selected to lead off an RTOS season, and he again acquitted himself favorably.

He has come a long way since his initial appearance here in 1972. One can see the improvement, a greater degree of self-assurance, and as always, a commanding microphone presence, without a lot of undue chatter. It keeps the audience receptive to his easy-going banter.

Don performed a goodly number of classical selections, which were a relief to him after the "many evenings of constant requests for the mundane" at Toronto's Organ Grinder Pizza. His schedule there allows him to travel, and his Rochester concert, on the heels of his English swing, launched him on a tour of eastern U.S. installations.

Perhaps the high point of the program was his rendering of a sizable Sigmund Romberg medley. His "Variations on the Mickey Mouse Club Theme," brought a good response, and a number not often heard on the circuit, "Vilja" was done in