

# La Chelle at the Console

by Doris Taylor

On a Sunday afternoon we visited Elbert La Chelle (pronounced La Shell) at his home in San Francisco. The living room had a Baldwin with a synthesizer, a large Conn, and a Steinway Grand — a fine setting for a great theatre organist.

When we asked Elbert about his ca-

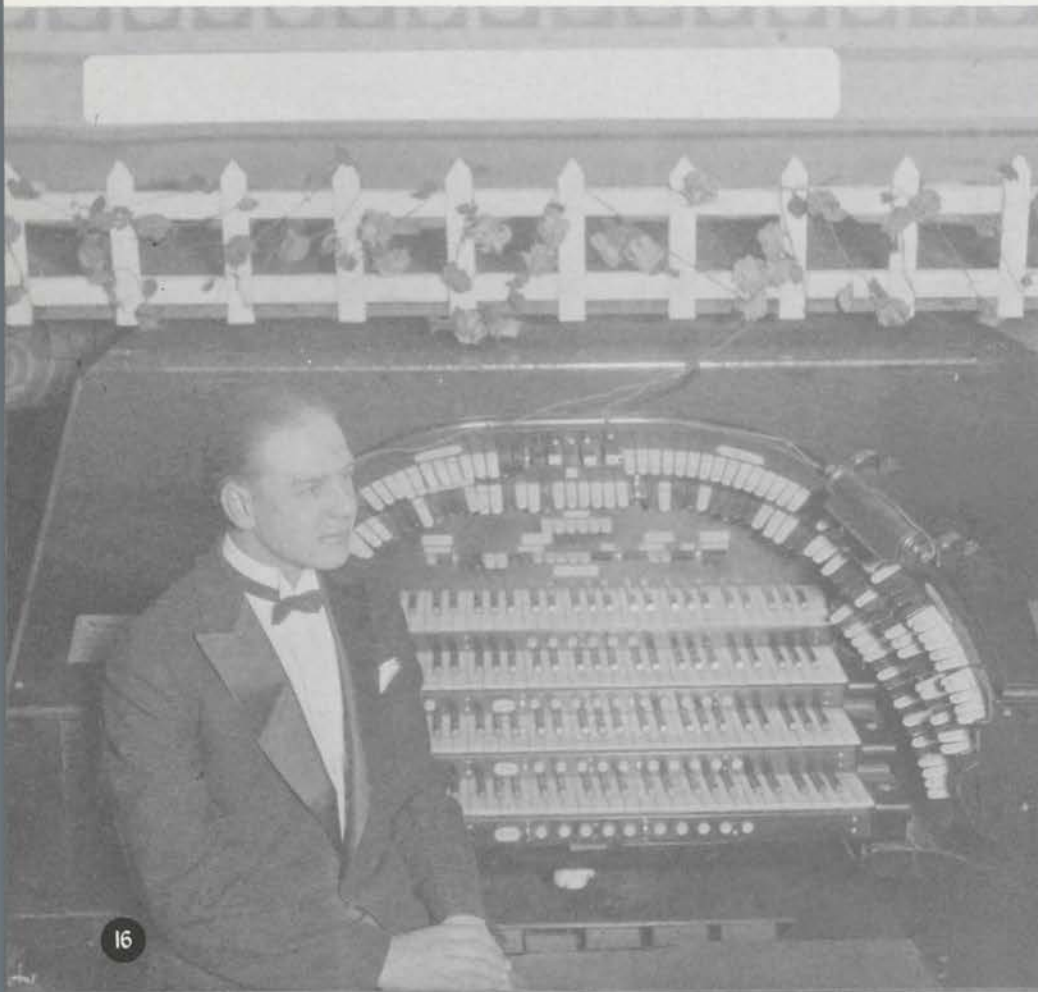
reer as a theatre organist he said, "I was born at the right time to have many opportunities as an organist. In those days one could get employment if he could play Chopsticks." He indeed was born at the right time, as he had opportunities to see and hear theatre organs in their natural habitat.

His training started with piano lessons at the age of five as a student of Mrs. Walter Denton. He also studied pipe organ with Cecil Teague, an English organ teacher in Portland, Oregon, in the twenties. He was ready for the opportunities that arose.

As Elbert was born in Salem, Oregon, it was natural that his first job was playing the three-rank Hope-Jones at the Liberty Theatre in Salem. He knew very early in life that he wanted to make playing theatre pipe organs his career, so he convinced his mother to let him quit high school in the second year. His first full-time job was at the Oregon Theatre in Salem. He left Salem in 1922 at the age of 17 to become head organist at the Heilig Theatre in Eugene, Oregon, where he played the 2/4 Robert-Morton for two years.

Elbert then came to the San Francisco Bay Area where the theatres were larger and the audiences more demanding. His first job was at the Stanford Theatre in Palo Alto, playing the 3/10 Smith. In Burlingame, he played the 2/8 Smith at the Garden Theatre where he was billed as "the famous singing organist." "Combined with La Chelle's extraordinary instrumental talents is his vocal training. Possessed of a rich, resonant voice, he augments his daily program with new and old song hits." Also quoting from an October 12, 1926 Burlingame paper, "E. La Chelle was a successor to Elmer Vincent at the Garden Theatre. La Chelle is Eddie

Elbert La Chelle at the San Francisco Paramount Wurlitzer.



House the second. His touch is like velvet and no sweeter tones can be drawn from an organ than those which filled the Garden Theatre." (Elmer Vincent and Eddie House were San Francisco Peninsula favorites during the twenties, and House later became nationally known through his appearances in the Midwest.) Elbert opened the Peninsula Theatre, down the street from the Garden on Burlingame Avenue, in 1926. The 1800-seat Peninsula was the largest theatre between San Francisco and San Jose, and boasted a 3/13 Robert-Morton with piano. Elbert also played at other Bay Area theatres, including the Warfield, New Mission and New Fillmore in San Francisco, and the Strand in Alameda.

His big break came when San Francisco radio station KFRC announced auditions for an organist and he was chosen from the many applicants. The organ was a three-manual hybrid of about 18 ranks which was assembled locally for KFRC in the early thirties. For ten years Elbert worked as staff organist for the entire Don Lee network, which was the West Coast headquarters for the Columbia Broadcasting System at that time. Later, KFRC/Don Lee affiliated with the Mutual Broadcasting System. During the many years at KFRC La Chelle worked with people whose names are still familiar to TV and radio audiences. Merv Griffin started at KFRC as a vocalist; Harold Peary, "The Great Gildersleeve," also worked at the 1000 Van Ness Avenue studios. Elbert was also the organist for *Hawaii Calls*, which used short wave radio to transmit the program to the mainland. When the signal was too weak to hear, Elbert played organ interludes to fill the time on the air. Another program was the *Hartz Mountain Master Canary Chorus*, which was broadcast early on Sunday mornings. The canaries sometimes refused to sing early in the morning so they had to be recorded at other times. La Chelle's "Organ Melodies" on KFRC was very well received and will long be remembered.

The young George Wright also played at KFRC during the forties. At the dedication of the Oakland Paramount Wurlitzer in 1981, George recognized Elbert as one of the prominent radio organists during the "golden age" of radio in San Francisco and played a portion of La Chelle's radio theme.



On Navy duty at the Hammond & Solovox.

World War II interrupted Elbert's music at KFRC. He was in the Navy and was assigned to the USS Henderson, an old Navy transport on a regular run between San Francisco and Honolulu. After the Henderson was decommissioned, La Chelle was

transferred to the submarine base at New London, Connecticut. There he joined the base band. However, the band already had a piano player, so Elbert had to learn another instrument. The band needed a bass player so Elbert mastered the bass viol.

La Chelle at the 3/18 (?) hybrid organ in the KFRC studios.





Elbert La Chelle at the "new" Wurlitzer console at the Castro Theatre, where he is now playing regularly.

After the war and his discharge, he returned to his old job at KFRC. About the same time he went to work for John Rickey, owner of some of San Francisco's better restaurants. He played an electronic organ at the Town House and at the Red Chimney. A few years later KFRC discontinued the use of the organ and sold it to a church. Elbert then played the organ in a dance band at Sweet's Ballroom in Oakland for a while before he went into semi-retirement. He played electronic organs on passenger liners such as the SS Santa Mercedes and Santa Magdalena. He lived in Hawaii part of the time each year and maintained an apartment there. In Honolulu, where he has many friends, he was a member of the Honolulu Organ Club and has given concerts there.

In 1976 Elbert became a staff organist at the Castro Theatre in San Francisco, playing a three-manual Conn nightly for intermissions between the regular features. In 1982 he began playing the four-manual Wurlitzer pipe organ which replaced the Conn at the Castro and his career had thus come full circle. A plaque in the lobby of the Castro says: "The Castro Theatre presents Elbert La Chelle. A movie palace organist extraordinaire, Elbert La Chelle is nationally celebrated for his virtuoso technique and extensive repertoire including original compositions. A veteran of fabled theatre palaces as well as his own coast to coast radio program, La Chelle recreates nightly the excitement of the golden age of movie going." □

# Reflections

## ATOS '82

by Harold Bellamy

The 1982 ATOS annual convention is now history and after a respite of only a few days, we went back to our normal busy mode.

We have, however, reflected on our performance and believe that, overall, we put on a successful convention. This consensus is substantiated by the many favorable comments, verbal and written, which have been made by the attending delegates. Several quarters of the theatre organ world have suggested that we recount our convention experience, both for our mutual interest and to perhaps benefit future conventions. The following, therefore, is a description of how we organized and planned, along with some observations relating to our performance.

Achieving the prime goal for the convention — that of getting together as ATOS members to enjoy theatre organ music — was extremely satisfying. The fine performances of the many artists, a great brunch/annual meeting, the conviviality at the banquet-dinner dance, and the moonlight river cruise all spoke to this achievement.

We are also very aware of the fact that mistakes were made. Although hopeful to the contrary, we were certain that Murphy's Law would prevail sooner or later. We intend to convey to San Francisco our advice for minimizing mishaps, but we do so with the knowledge that Murphy's Law does not confine itself to Michigan. Generally, we believe that our planning was successful. Similarly, we believe that we also were well organized.

The planning process was lengthy, starting over two years prior to the convention when we attempted to obtain a confirmation of our designation as the official host of the ATOS '82 Convention from the national office. Of concern was the fact that our

chairpersons, Marge Muethel and Jim Boutell, were faced with the necessity of tying down a hotel and convention dates. Unfortunately, the national office in 1980 was undergoing a measure of disorder, a situation which did not enhance prompt communications. There were also references to convention guidelines which never did materialize.

Unable to wait, the Motor City board instructed Marge and Jim to proceed without official sanction. After securing hotel and convention dates, they entered into the negotiations phase for room rates, facilities, food and the establishment of ground rules for both the hotel and Motor City. This task became complicated with several changes in hotel management and the hard realities of rising costs. Next they moved on to the organizational structure and program format. For structure they decided on eight working committees: registration, hospitality, transportation, food, publicity, security, concert artist hosting and convention store. The program format would be developed by a series of convention committee work sessions. Although somewhat apparent, the following is a brief description of these committees, assignments and some observations regarding their intrinsic qualities.

**Registration:** The assignment — check in the delegates and give them their convention information and schedule packets. Sounds simple enough, doesn't it? Not so. The committee had to set up a check-in system, work with the Tourist Bureau, tabulate reservations, collate delegate activity choices and coordinate incoming revenues and registration lists with our treasurer. As a result, this function ran so smoothly it did appear to many as a simple task.

**Hospitality:** This committee's job