

A Human Dynamo

“THE WORLD’S OLDEST ORGANIST”

by Tom B'hend

Lloyd Gould del Castillo, which has been shortened in recent years simply to “Del Castillo,” is about as close to being a human dynamo as it is possible to find. Describing himself as being the world’s oldest organist, now at age ninety, he undoubtedly can claim that title because he is certainly one of the world’s busiest organists.

As an example of his continuous performance industry, he was asked to play a brief recital for the Los Angeles Theatre Organ Society on March 27 at San Gabriel Auditorium preceding a general membership meeting. He accepted, and during his program was congratulated on his coming birthday, April 2, 1983. There was a proclamation from Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley. The Society presented him a plaque attesting to his artistry, and a warm-hearted note from fellow organist George Wright.

The biggest surprise was Del’s program. Long noted for his originality in presenting concerts, whatever he does always has a new twist to make each show different. Redundancy to Del is as bad as copying the work or ideas that someone else has produced.

For LATOS members he presented an informal mini-concert comprised solely of his own compositions. While it is no secret that Del had written music, some of which has been published, it was an entertaining revelation to hear him play his own works for almost an hour. Most members were unaware of the prolific output of this artist. Del later admitted that he has been writing musical compositions since he attended high school.

Most appealing were his salon-type selections — light, bright and airy — the kind of music generally played by theatre organists during intermissions. This sort of musical selection engenders in the listener a “theatre feeling” because it seems to blend well with being in a theatre, creating a sensation of well-being, a happy frame of mind, etc. One of this type, “Cuckoo Clock,” was announced and Del said he was unable to locate the music but would play the piece from the old 78 rpm Red Seal record he placed on the music rack. The platter was a recording of the number by Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops Orchestra.

Del was introduced to the famed conductor while he was a student at Harvard. Fiedler and the orchestra played two of his selections — one an overture, the other the aforementioned salon piece — in one of his concerts and used them with other compositions by Del in later programs. On another occasion Del was invited to conduct the Boston Pops at a special “Harvard Night” show, and he played his own “Harvard Fantasia” which he wrote for the event. The show was produced in Boston’s Symphony Hall.

Much of Del’s life was spent in Boston, where he was born in 1893. He began his musical career on the piano. His mother, who was a teacher, started him out. Later she would become his assistant, but that’s getting ahead of the story. Curiously, the name Del Castillo, which suggests Spanish descent, was actually Cuban. Del’s

grandfather emigrated from the Caribbean nation to the United States, and his father, who was a doctor, was born in New Hampshire.

Before he reached high school age, Del was not particularly inclined to follow a musical career. However, he became leader of the high school glee club and played drums in the band. It was while attending this institution that he wrote his first music, a march. By the time he completed his high school work he had set his goal in life, a career in music. It was his major upon entering Harvard.

For two years he was conductor of the Harvard Orchestra and wrote music for the Pi Eta Club shows produced at the university. One of his classmates was Leverett G. Saltonstall, whose name became a household word in politics, much as Del’s became known by having it spelled out on theatre marquees. There were others in Del’s class who were to become famous statesmen — James B. Conant, later a Harvard president, Tudor Gardiner, a Maine Governor, and Saltonstall who was Massachusetts Governor and U.S. Senator.

His first job upon graduating from Harvard in 1914 was writing the music for a Masonic biblical pageant, “Chosen King.” In order to qualify for the commission, he became a Mason. He toured with the production until its run ended and then he decided to become a theatre organist. He had studied classical organ at Harvard under Raymond Robinson. Motion picture theatres were just starting to install pipe organs. Del figured he

could accompany silents.

He first applied for the position of organist at the Fenway Theatre, a mid-town house in Boston that was nearing completion. Two others who had applied before him were given the posts as first and second organists. He then went to downtown Boston and landed a job at the Park Theatre.

Asked how he applied his classical training to silent photoplays, Del said, "I just did it off the top of my head." His success at the Park was sufficient after three months to make him rather cocky and he returned to the Fenway to listen to the two who had been hired in his stead. Leaving the theatre, he told the manager, "I could play your organ better than both of them!" Thereupon the manager fired both organists and hired Del. "My bold-face claim put me on the Fenway bench and I had to play all shows, from about noon to 11 p.m. daily, for two weeks. Finally I got a second organist. My dad encouraged my mother to become a theatre organist, and she was hired as second console artist at the Fenway."

In 1918 the Fenway became part of the Publix circuit. And the same year Uncle Sam pointed his finger at Del and got him. He joined the Army at Camp Devons, Massachusetts. Being a musician, he went to the camp band leader and applied for assignment. "What instruments do you play?" queried the head man. "What instruments do you need?" shot back Del. Naming several, Del stopped him when Baritone Horn was mentioned. "I knew nothing about playing such a horn, but a trip to Boston for several lessons took care of that. What I didn't learn was the fact fumigation of the mouthpiece is essential. I came down with a lip infection and had to settle for playing cymbals," he recalled.

Shortly afterwards, Del became band leader and received a "17" sergeant rating — "the kind that didn't know how to soldier." This was in April 1918. The following July Congress commissioned all band leaders second lieutenants. One week before going overseas, Del had "Looie Bars."

First foreign stop was Winchester, England, for training, Then his unit shipped off to the south of France and arrived there two weeks before the Armistice was signed. Del soon returned to the States and the organ bench at the Fenway Theatre.



Lloyd del Castillo and his Ninetieth Birthday cake, following his mini-concert at San Gabriel.

(Zimfoto)

Theatre organists might have tired playing for all's-well-that-ends-well pictures, but their own love lives brought the domestic way of life into full perspective — which is another way of saying Del got married in 1919 to Phyliss Woolley. The couple started raising a family and this brought about a problem with Paramount Publix several years later. The company asked Del to move to London to open one of the new chain houses. He refused because of his family and went back downtown again, this time to Loew's State.

During his theatre career, Del was a frequent contributor to *Diapason* and *The American Organist*, as well as to *Exhibitor's Herald*, *Motion Picture News* and other trade journals. His writing quite naturally added to his stature in the entertainment field. Eventually, Publix asked him to return to the fold and sent him to Buffalo to open Mike Shea's lavish new playhouse.

In 1924 Del invented the character of Dinny Timmins, an illiterate elevator operator who became a regular

contributor to the Jacobs music magazines published in Boston. After Del's move to Los Angeles in 1943, they were discovered by Lloyd Klos, who ran a column of Dinny's he had come across without knowing the author. Del read it and confessed to Lloyd that he was the author, and from then on Dinny's Colyum has been a regular feature of THEATRE ORGAN.

Recalling his stay at Shea's, Del said that in the second week following the theatre's opening, Mike Shea came down to the console one day and remarked, "When that organ opens up, it moves the orchestra right out into the alley!" "It was an exceptionally fine instrument with a beautiful tone," Del noted.

On another occasion during his tenure there he became a prisoner in one of the chambers. "The orchestra usually joined the organ in the final minutes of the picture and then took over playing for the stage show. One particular attraction called for eight bars to be played by the organist to open the stage presentation. I was

winding up the feature when a cipher developed. The orchestra then came in for the final scenes and I figured I would have time to go up and pull the pipe, then return to the console and play the eight bars. I made it up to the chamber in double quick time, pulled the pipe and turned around to go out. The theatre, being brand new, like the organ, still had a few problems. The door to this chamber was one of them. It became stuck hard and fast, and I couldn't get out. I didn't make it back to the pit and I heard the pianist play the eight bars. I was 'chambered' until I wrote a note, impaled it on my pen knife which I dropped out through the shutters, hoping it wouldn't kill a patron. The note and knife were found and handed to an usher and I was released from my prison after about half an hour."

Nine months later Del was transferred to Publix's Big Apple showcase, the Rialto Theatre on Broadway, where he stayed approximately six months. From there Publix sent him back to Boston as solo organist at their cavernous Metropolitan Theatre. Del's name was a lighted feature on the theatre's marquee. It was to be his final theatre position.

No, he didn't tire of playing pipes. He wasn't fired, either. And he didn't have an accident. But he did have one of his original ideas again. He would help other aspiring organists learn how to fit music to the pictures. Accordingly, he resigned his position at the Met, went back downtown again and rented space in Loew's State Theatre Building. Into the space he moved two two-manual Estey pipe organs and eventually a three-manual from the same builder, and opened the Del Castillo Theatre Organ School of Boston. Business boomed! Then it bombed!

An advertisement appearing in the December 1927 issue of *Diapason* declared the school "is pleased to announce that at the end of only eight months' operation it is obliged to add to its equipment a three-manual organ to accommodate the increasing enrollment. This instrument will be installed with the other modern and completely equipped Estey unit theatre-type organs in January, when Mr. Earl Weidner will become associate instructor. It is hoped these increased facilities for practice and study will eliminate the present waiting list, and permit instant enroll-

ment . . ."

With a sigh bordering on wistfulness, Del remarked that for over a year the school was a tremendous success. Then Al Jolson came out in "The Jazz Singer" and ruined not only the organ school but also several thousand organists who would soon be out of work. "It was a great idea to open the school, except I didn't know it was the end of silents," he recalled ruefully.

However, always an originator of a new idea, Del turned near-disaster into triumph. He returned the two-manual jobs to Estey and sold his three-manual along with himself to budding radio station WEEI in Boston. The station bought the organ and hired Del as staff organist. Subsequently, Columbia Broadcasting System acquired the station as its Boston outlet and Del stepped up as first production manager. He finally was named program director. Retaining this position until 1943, Del decided to move to California and made arrangements to move to Hollywood and CBS' station there, KNX.

Arriving in Hollywood and assigned to KNX, he ran into union opposition. A rule was on the books that would not permit him to play for six months. It was a stumbling block that caused him to trip over to Melrose Avenue and put his writing knowledge to work. He landed a job as a script writer with RKO Studios for six months; just long enough to keep busy until the union restriction faded away. At the expiration of the work rule, he started his job at KNX as organist, conductor and production staff member.

His KNX position lasted two years until Del decided to become a free lance artist and conduct small orchestras on radio. During this period he also became musical director of the Laguna Art Festival and had an 18-piece orchestra under his baton.

He appeared in a great many shows aired over all networks. In his free lance capacity he could hire his own musicians, provided his orchestra numbered seven men or less. This factor made his orchestras less expensive. For musical aggregations numbering more than seven, a contractor was required to hire musicians at a much higher cost.

Del finally bowed out of radio in 1958 when he took a sabbatical leave and, with his family, toured Europe

for a year.

Upon returning to Hollywood he became Chief of the Organ Department of the Sherman School of Music. In the ensuing years, Del has continued teaching and carried on his concert work, playing throughout the United States. He is also active in silent film programs and his accompaniment technique is on par with other leading exponents of this type of presentation. Del also served several years as Editor of *Off the Keyboards*, official publication for the Professional Organists' Breakfast Club of Los Angeles. During this time he has contributed to THEATRE ORGAN and other publications.

He has record albums to his credit recorded on the Wiltern Theatre 4/37 Kimball prior to its removal, the 4/61 Robert-Morton in the former Elks Temple in Los Angeles, Joe Koons' Motorcycle Shop Wurlitzer/Welte and the San Diego Fox Theatre 4/32 Robert-Morton.

Del was awarded Honorary Member status for 1982 at the Detroit Convention. His name is already inscribed in the ATOS Hall of Fame.

But to return to Del and his mini-concert at San Gabriel March 27. The appearance of this artist was to honor his birthday. As he finished playing and started to take the console down, LATOS official Peter Crotty came on stage holding a small cake which was expressly designed for the organist, with one candle for each decade. Del pushed the UP button, took the cake and disappeared back into the pit.

When he was sought out for interviewing and photographing after lowering the console, Del had disappeared, along with the cake, and couldn't be found. Later, he was contacted by telephone and asked his formula for longevity, or how to care for a human dynamo. His recipe: "One drink before dinner and moderation in all things!"

The "one drink" part of his statement rings true, but that part about moderation, especially for a 90-year-youngster who still maintains an active daily schedule that would put many younger men to shame, seems like it doesn't apply to him.

Oh yes, and that note to Del from George Wright, which reflects the sentiments of all organ buffs, reads: "Congratulations on your Ninetieth Birthday — here's to a hundred at least!" □