

Greatest Night in Organ History

... E. J. Quinby

When most of the "greats" among theatre organists get together for a jam session at the console of one of the larger Wurlitzers, and when their audience is composed almost entirely of real organ enthusiasts—one can well imagine that organ history would be made. And it seems that it was, too.

ADMITTEDLY, with such an ambitious title there may be some who would question its authenticity. However, I have it directly from the lips of hundreds of organ fans who were present on the occasion and who agree with me that there has never been such a large gathering of professional organists and organ fans that met under such pleasant circumstances and had such a good time. The occasion was in the middle of the A.G.O. convention in New York City during the week of June 24, 1956. Through the diligence and resourcefulness of the American Theatre Organ Enthusiasts, many of whom are also members of the American Guild of Organists, arrangements were made for access to the big Wurlitzer in the Paramount Theatre at Times Square, conceded by many to be the greatest Wurlitzer ever built. Failing in their efforts to entice Jesse Crawford back to the scene, the members of these two organizations succeeded in arranging to bring George Wright across the country to perform for this blue ribbon audience. (Both of these gentlemen are familiar with the New York Paramount organ through long experience there.) An unfortunate automobile accident in which he was badly injured prevented George Wright from fulfilling this engagement. However, we had the good fortune to secure Ray Bohr for the occasion, a great favorite with the vast audiences who attend Radio City Music Hall these days.

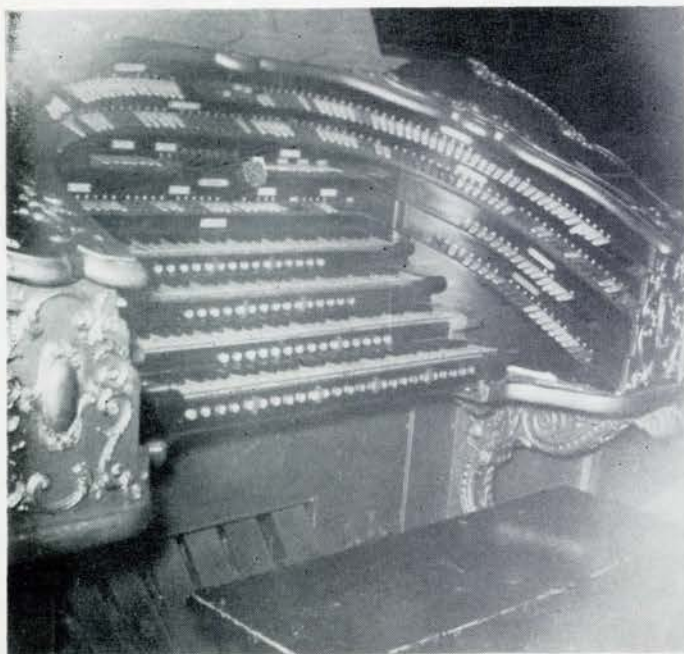
The tightly packed schedule of the A.G.O. convention provided a solid week of recitals by top ranking world famous organists on some of the finest instruments in exist-

ence, such as the newly rebuilt organ at St. Thomas Church, and the organs at St. Bartholomew's Church, Riverside Church, and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. There was even an "organ" recital at the Lewisohn Stadium for which the Allen Company furnished a portable electronic instrument. The big names included M. Pierre Cochereau of Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris, who played the dedication recital on the new organ built by Shantz at the newly opened Newark Cathedral. Virgil Fox, Claire Coei, E. Power Biggs, Alexander Schreiner, Catherine Crozier, Charlotte Garden, and a dozen other distinguished masters of the console played during the gala week. This background is mentioned here to show the calibre of musical entertainment furnished during this convention, tickets for which sold at \$25.00 (exclusive of the banquet at the Waldorf Astoria). Thanks to the efforts of Dick Simonton, arrangements were made to admit members of the A.T.O.E. to the Paramount affair at a reduced rate.

A Late Start

The Paramount Theatre could not be made available to the A.G.O. and A.T.O.E. members until the bewitching hour of 2 a.m. After the Tuesday 11 p.m. closing of Virgil Fox's musical service at the big Riverside organ, the visiting organists and organ fans had about three hours to kill, during which time they found their way into various night spots in the vicinity of Times Square, with the result that they arrived at the Paramount Theatre feeling no pain. This blue ribbon audience of organ people was, therefore, in a carnival mood to start with. They had come to have a jolly time listening to a jolly good organist at a jolly big organ. Ray Bohr more than exceeded their expectations. Having recently finished recording this organ for RCA Victor (The Big Sound), Ray knew where to find everything at this complicated console and he turned out a masterful program of lively theatrical character in spite of the fact that none of the combination pistons were available. When he led off with the familiar Widor Toccata, noticeable murmurs rose from the audience as they commented, "THAT old chestnut!" This quickly turned into expressions of amazed delight when, super-imposed upon this difficult composition, they heard the popular song "This Can't be Love." How Ray ever accomplishes this seemingly impossible feat is his own secret. When he had finished, the audience was not content with mere applause—they stood up, they stomped, they hollered, they whistled. Never before has such a gathering of normally dignified, serious professionals been observed to indulge in such enthusiastic abandon along with the Fans. To this writer, it was almost as thrilling as the performance itself, and Ray had plenty more to offer, over which they expressed similar enthusiasm, once the ice was broken.

Those of us who knew the organ and the auditorium had selected seats in the front rows of the balcony where the acoustics are at their best and where a bird's-eye view of the vast audience below could be had. All too soon Ray Bohr was signing off with "Goodnight Sweetheart," and despite



The console at the New York Paramount—the source of all of the entertainment during the T. O. E.'s "night of nights."

the roaring din for encores, he declined. Instead of continuing, he modestly suggested that there were many splendid organists in the audience who might wish to try this unusual organ and invited them to step up. When it became apparent that Ray Bohr could not be prevailed upon to continue, the audience began calling for their favorite organists, whom they knew to be present. Searle Wright, who had introduced Ray and had described the organ, was prevailed upon by popular acclaim to perform. A prominent member of the organ building profession stood up in the balcony and proclaimed, "He's a theatre organist from way back. You can't fool me; I've been in this business too long. Wait 'til you hear what he'll do!" Whereupon Searle Wright accepted the challenge and further delighted the audience with an impromptu performance in true theatre-organ style rarely equaled by current professional theatre organists. This, of course, brought the house down again. If the long-haired members of the audience experienced any shock at what they heard, it was totally eclipsed by their sheer enjoyment. Their enthusiasm was genuine.

Next the cry went up from various points in the audience for Virgil Fox to perform, and those of us who had ever been privileged to hear his theatre-organ technique were well aware of the delightful entertainment that awaited us. However, Virgil Fox, bodily boosted up on to the stage by the audience, turned to address them, "We have a pleasant surprise for you," he announced, "for in the audience we have a famous coloratura soprano. If she will be good enough to come up here and sing, I will be pleased to accompany her at the organ." Whereupon a groan went through the audience, for they had not come to hear any "canary" sound off. What they wanted was to hear some more real organ talent. But the groans quickly turned to laughter and applause when a rotund gentleman named Roy, who maintains the mammoth organ in the castle of John Hays Hammond, Jr. at Gloucester, was projected on to the stage. While he burlesqued the entrance of a typical grand opera star, Virgil Fox burlesqued an elaborate musical introduction, and then they were off with an aria from "Carmen." No audience at a smoke-filled Minsky Burlesque Theatre ever enjoyed the performance more or ever roared their appreciation louder. Flourishing a flimsy silk handkerchief, this "soprano" would reach for an impossibly high note and out would come a preposterous croak, while Virgil Fox managed equally fantastic flourishes with the organ accompaniment.

The French Take Over

Before the applause for "Mme." Roy and Prof. Virgil died away, calls for M. Pierre Cochereau could be heard from various parts of the audience. The question in most minds at the moment was would the organist of Notre Dame Cathedral be aloof, or would he be a good sport and enter into the spirit of the occasion? The audience was promptly delighted to see M. Cochereau ascending the steps to the console on the stage. Once up there, he turned rather apologetically to the audience to explain that he had never seen, never heard such an organ, but would be delighted to try it. He asked Searle Wright to show him where to find the various percussions and traps on the console and, after a short pause for this sketchy "lesson," M. Cochereau proceeded to improvise a delightful waltz in the Viennese style, humorously punctuating each line with different percussions and traps. All too soon, his charming performance was completed and he turned to bow modestly while accepting the applause over his latest "triumph."

Then Richard Purvis, organist of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, was induced to try his technique at the 4-manual horseshoe console. As he slid into position, the stentorian voice from the balcony resounded, "There's another theatre organist of the Palmy Days; you can't fool me, I knew



Well known Ray Bohr, one of the featured performers at the Paramount console.

him WHEN!" Whereupon applause broke out in advance of the performance—but Purvis soon demonstrated that as a capable purveyor of the good old theatrical art he richly deserved the enthusiasm displayed by long- and short-haired visitors alike.

Next, we were treated to a masterful performance of the theatre organ art by Ray Shelley from Wichita, Kansas. His musical offerings in the true theatrical tradition constituted a splendid demonstration of this special technique, and again the hall echoed with applause. This went on, one big name after another performing at this, the foremost "Mighty Wurlitzer." It was altogether regrettable that no one brought in a magnetic tape recorder to capture this whole affair for posterity. At length the theatre's Assistant Manager, Mr. Bernard Lapp, appeared on the stage to apologize, "I'm having just as good a time as anyone here but, boys and girls, we've got to bring this wonderful concert to a close so that the cleaners can get the place ready for our 9:00 a.m. opening. It is now 4:00 a.m., folks, and we are delighted to have you here with us, but we are extremely sorry that this cannot go on indefinitely."

Flashlight cameras clicked as various amateur photographers snapped notables at the console, and the audience started trickling out. But this was not the end of that memorable night. Joe and Anna Oelhaf, who have the former Rainbow Room Wurlitzer installed in their penthouse, invited a few of us to join them in a trip to that establishment. This, it appears, was overheard by many and sundry in the immediate vicinity and it resulted in a mass taxi pilgrimage. When Joe unlocked the door to his premises, it looked as though half the Paramount audience had accepted the invitation. Somehow this multitude of friends and strangers proceeded to squeeze into the limited space atop his building in Greenwich Village. Surely that organ never was heard by a more appreciative audience. Ray Bohr performed with more than his usual abandon while the Oelhaf's served refreshments to one and all. Wednesday's sun rose upon a novel symphony, for Joe had trotted out his collection of musical instruments for exhibition. Amongst those present it developed that there was a violinist, an oboist, a flutist, a pianist, and a performer on the French horn to augment the organ, and an impromptu musical carnival progressed until dawn when

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SPINNING ORGANS

(from page 16)

TRUMAN WELCH (Wurlitzer, Iceland Amphitheatre, Paramount, Cal.)

Broadcast 614 10-in. Theatre Pipe Organ.

One kiss, Bill, I'll see you in my dreams, In the mission of St. Augustine, Diane, Many times, My one and only highland fling, The syncopated clock.

Broadcast 616 12-in. With Truman Welch.

Washington Post march, Heartaches, Hi-lili-hi-lo, Spaghetti rag, Sleepy time gal, Ec choco, Tenderly, Deep purple, My heart stood still, It happened in Monterey, Blue is the night, If I could tell you.

GEORGE WRIGHT

A—Wurlitzer, Rich Vaughn's residence, Hollywood, Cal.

B—Wurlitzer, Fox Theatre, San Francisco, Cal.

A—HIFIRECORD R-707 12-in. More George Wright.

The waltz in springtime, That's all, Edelma, Nice work if you can get it, You'll never walk alone, Stars are the windows of heaven, The galloping comedians, The bull-fighter, Reaching for the moon, Sanctuary, My romance, American bolero.

B—HIFIRECORD R-708 12-in. George Wright's Showtime.

There's no business like show business, My funny Valentine, The lady is a tramp, Little girl blue, The man I love, Just one of those things, Showboat medley.

Stereophonic Tapes

HI-FI R-707 More George Wright.

HI-FI R-708 George Wright's Showtime.

OMEGA ST 7007 Gordon Kibbe. Pipe Organ High Fidelity Showpieces.

Granada, Somebody loves me, Begin the beguine, My heart belong to Daddy, and others.

Recording Companies

Alma Records, Inc., 4605 Elmwood Ave., Los Angeles 4, Cal.

Broadcast Records, Record Broadcast Corp., San Marcos, Cal. Camden (See Victor)

Columbia Records, Inc., 1473 Barnum Ave., Bridgeport 8, Conn.

Dot Records, Inc. Recordings available from Randy's Record Shop, Gallatin, Tenn.

Epic Records (See Columbia Records, Inc.)

HIFI Records, High Fidelity Recordings, Inc., 6087 Sunset Boulevard Hollywood 28, Cal.

King Records, Inc., 1540 Brewster Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.

Mercury Record Corp., 35 E. Wacker Drive, Chicago 1, Ill.

MHT, The Music Hall Theatre, Seattle, Wash.

New Sound, 50 Julian Ave., San Francisco, Cal.

Pacifica Records, 7614 Melrose Ave., Hollywood 46, Cal.

Replica Records, 7210 Westview Drive, Des Plaines, Ill.

(SOOT) Sounds of our Times, Cook Laboratories, Inc., 101 2nd St., Stamford, Conn.

(SS) Summit Sound Systems Co., 917 E. Market St., Akron 5, Ohio.

Victor, RCA Victor, 155 E. 24th St., New York, N. Y.

Westminster Recording Co., Inc., 275 7th Ave., New York 1, N. Y.

Zodiac Records, 501 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

ERRATA--to come

From a slow start and with some handicaps, *The Tibia* has not always been 100 per cent accurate—mistakes have crept into its pages. But in No. 4 out February 15, 1957, corrections and additions for the first three issues will be tabulated. Watch for them!

Greatest Night

(from page 11)

coffee and Danish pastries were served by the dazed host and hostess.

Then someone remembered that Ann Leaf was scheduled to play the big Robert Morton in Loew's Kings Theatre over in Brooklyn at 9:00 a.m., which precipitated a dash for that objective. There we joined an audience of parents gathered to witness their off-spring graduate from several high schools to the lively accompaniment of Ann Leaf. Organ fans who have never heard this tiny technician per-



ANN LEAF, in a characteristic pose at the console of the Paramount Studio Wurlitzer, New York.

form her own "Tugboat on a Toot" on a big theatre organ really have a treat in store. (We are trying to prevail upon Ann to record this and some of her other thrillers for circulation.)

Thus it is difficult to say just when one day's program ended and the next day's features of the convention began. One fact is certain: Few of us got any sleep! But then it's usually like that when dyed-in-the-wool organ fans get together. Those of us who continued right through agreed that the mere loss of sleep was richly repaid by the performances we witnessed, and that this was by all means the greatest night in organ history. If you weren't there yourself, you had better not dispute this opinion with those who were so privileged.

Late Release

A special Hi-Fi Show edition of Leon Berry at the Giant Wurlitzer Organ in the Hub Rink, Chicago, has just been released on the Audio Fidelity label, AFLP 1828. The disc includes a variety of showy organ music, opening and closing with a "Cinema Fanfare,"—the theme of Paramount newsreels, "Paramount on Parade." The recording is exceptional with respect to frequency range, lack of distortion, and definition, and the choice of selections should gladden the heart of anyone who remembers the Decade of the Theatre Organ—the 20's.