

# AL GULLICKSON

## The Boy Wonder Organist

by Lloyd E. Klos

Those who remember the great days of the theatre organ in the Milwaukee area probably recall the name of Al Gullickson. His artistry was known there as well as in other areas of Wisconsin.

Born in Oslo, Norway, on May 6, 1907, Alford Loren Gullickson began his music lessons at an early age. After instruction from leading teachers in Norway, Berlin and Paris, he became proficient at playing the harp, piano and accordion before his tenth birthday. A concert tour of Europe followed.

When he was 12, he and his parents emigrated to the United States and settled in Milwaukee. Entering show business, one season Al appeared in a triple roll as accordionist, singer and dancer with Rudy Vallee on a tour of the Orpheum Circuit.

Later, Al began organ study at the Barton

School in Chicago. He said, however, "I took a few lessons, but mostly I just picked it up on my own and practiced for hours every day." After the family moved to Stevens Point, Wisconsin, he served as organist in area theatres while still in high school. On several occasions in the early '20s he was featured as a singing organist over radio stations WTMJ and WISN in Milwaukee, WDAP in Chicago and KDKA in Pittsburgh.

In 1923, he began a stint with the Barton Organ Co. of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, as a demonstrator of their instruments. He dedicated more than 50 theatre organs in Wisconsin, Illinois and Michigan with opening night concerts.

"Those were the great theatre days," he said. "I was known in those times as 'The Boy Wonder Organist'." He must have been a

handsome lad, as he got much mail from female admirers. And not all were from young girls either; mothers and matrons found him irresistible. For example, he opened the 1090-seat Capitol Theatre in Kalamazoo, Michigan, as guest organist in 1927, playing the accompaniment to *Frisco Sally Levy* on a 3/14 Barton.

He was held over by popular demand at the Capitol for several years. It was one of the first theatres to house a "four-poster" lift for which Barton installations became famous. A faded clipping has this to say about his legion of fans there:

"Mr. Al Gullickson, organist of the Capitol, finds that his waking hours are rendered almost unbearable by the nature of letters and telephone calls constantly coming in. They are not all from young things, either, these emotional enthusiasts. 'Mother' gets her occasional innings. Also, spelling and grammar have been sadly neglected in most cases.

"One timid, young thing asked, 'When you are through playing, will you come down and set with me?'

"An emotional creature writes: 'Your picture makes me think of a ainjul.'

"Another coyly admits, 'Ma got hold of my last letter to you. She says I better mind my own business and wash up the dishes.'

"One is signed, 'Only a barberette.' Another reassures the young musician thus: 'I am not a handsome woman, but I am a good woman.'

"Dear me, it is sad, is it not? But worse is yet to come.

"While playing an engagement in a leading Wisconsin city, young Mr. Gullickson was followed by an ancient pest, a wild-eyed woman with literary tendencies. The lady was a sort of high priestess of her cult. She kept midnight vigil so she might go at that hour and deposit a love sonnet or something worse under the young musician's door.

"She finally had an inspiration. She left a token done in pencil. One might decipher a burning sun in the heavens with several tall sunflowers blandly looking on. When asked the interpretation, the lady sniggered and said, 'You know, Mr. Gullickson, the sunflower always looks towards the sun, but the sun never minds.'

"Love can be so unkind," Al says."

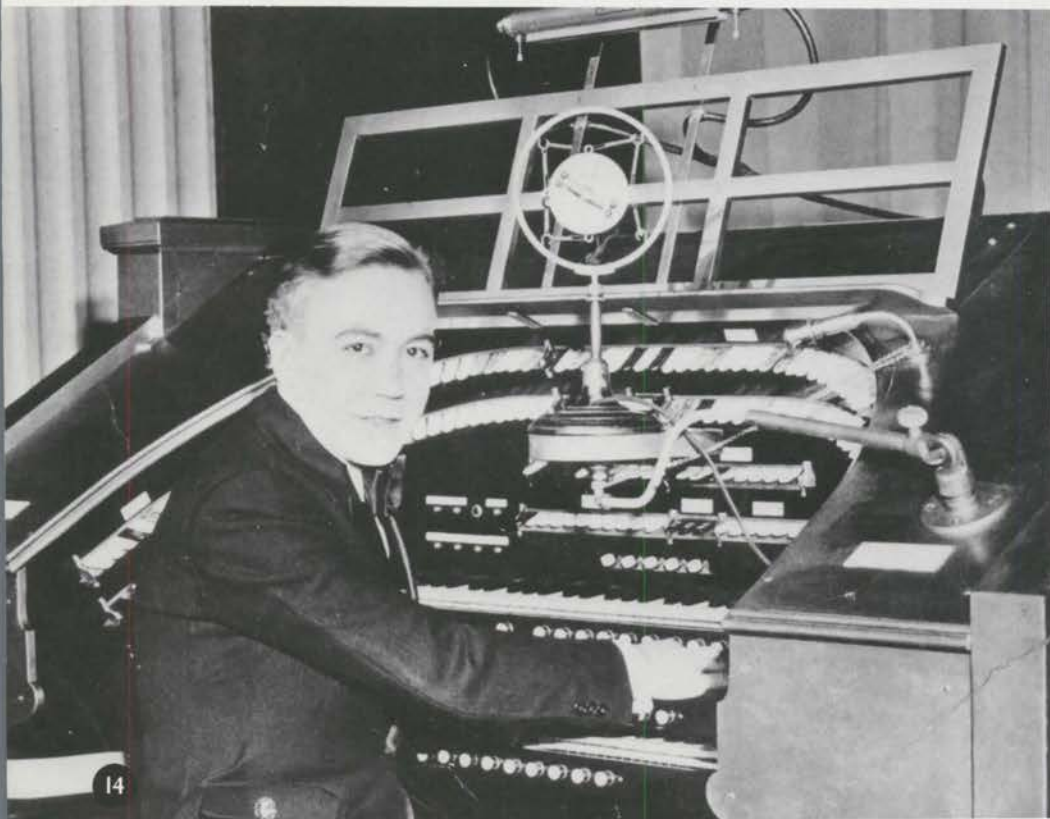
In 1927, he opened the Fischer Theatre in Oshkosh, which was billed as "Wisconsin's Most Picturesque Playhouse." Al accompanied *Seventh Heaven* with Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell, and of course, played the well-remembered "Diane," written by Erno Rapee.

The folksey advertising said: "Howdy, folks — meet Al Gullickson, Boy Wonder Organist, playing the picture. He plays the classics like a master, and jazz like you never heard before."

When he opened the 2/8 Barton in the 1200-seat Jeffries Theatre in Janesville, Wisconsin, a reviewer from the *Janesville Gazette* commented:

"Alford Gullickson, the Boy Wonder Organist, who has been at the organ console since the opening of the theatre, has achieved

A young Al Gullickson at the 3/18 Kimball in Milwaukee's Warner Theatre. The carbon microphone was used for his radio broadcasts. (L. Gullickson collection)



considerable distinction for his remarkable melody and the marvelous results he obtains from the organ. Letters, telephone calls and personal messages have been received by the Jeffries management from patrons of the theatre, telling how genuinely they enjoyed the playing of Mr. Gullickson."

In April 1931, he opened the Barton in the Fox Theatre, Green Bay. A reviewer covered the event: "Capacity audiences greeted Al Gullickson, the Personality Organist of Green Bay, at the Fox Theatre over the weekend upon the dedication of the new Barton organ, installed in the house during the past few weeks.

"Twin-city movie fans were thrilled at the skill and genius of the young musician who has won state-wide fame through his fine playing. The handsome, golden-voiced instrument was inaugurated on the Fox program at the midnight preview on Saturday. That seemed to be the most important part of the program in spite of the fact that two very fine, high-class feature films were shown, plus newsreels and enjoyable comedies.

"Despite the fact that 'the show must go on,' the large audience applauded Mr. Gullickson until he had to return to the beautiful console, time and time again. He not only thrilled the crowd with his perfect organ music, but proved an unusual entertainer with the accordion. The young organist seemed to feel his audience, and each number he played proved more popular.

"While he did not deem it just proper to demonstrate the beautiful organ with instrumental and classical selections at the opening, he showed clearly the volume and capacity of the mammoth instrument.

"However, manager Hannan has announced that Mr. Gullickson will appear in a classical program during the performances beginning with Tuesday evening when Will

Al Gullickson at a Hammond console in his brother's music store in 1975. At the time, he said he played for his own enjoyment. (Dr. John Landon collection)



Al poses with Miss Wisconsin in January 1966 at a Hammond organ.

(L. Gullickson collection)

Rogers will be featured in *The Connecticut Yankee* as the feature film presentation.

"Although the services of the young organist are in great demand, the theatre management has arranged for a two-week engagement, thus giving the twin-city movie patrons the opportunity of hearing the finest in organ music."

Gullickson played the Parkway 3/10 Barton in Madison, the Wisconsin 3/10 Barton, the Warner 3/18 Kimball and the Riverside 3/13 Wurlitzer in Milwaukee. He accompanied such classic films as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* with Lon Chaney (1923), *The Sheik* with Rudolph Valentino (1921) and *Seventh Heaven* with Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell (1927). Among the stars of stage and screen whom he met were Jimmy Cagney, Rose Marie, Judy Garland, Sophie Tucker and Ted Lewis.

"We had four shows a day, seven days a week, and I played over the radio before the theatre opened. I played over stations WTMJ and WISN in Milwaukee."

A faded clipping shows the artist at the console, with a carbon mike visible. The cut line says that "beginning Monday at 10 p.m., WTMJ will bring the listener the music of the Warner Theatre's organ as played by Al Gullickson. The organ is a duplicate (*sic*) of the Roxy Theatre organ in New York, and the largest in the middle or Northwest, having 30 pipes" (*sic*).

Near the end of his theatre days, he presented a concert on the state's largest theatre organ, the Kimball in the Warner Theatre, Milwaukee. Years later, he was asked to present another concert on this instrument after it was installed in Tech High School in Milwaukee.

Following his theatre days, Al was one of the last full time organists working the Milwaukee area. The first Hammond organ came out in 1935, and he purchased the tenth instrument to come off the assembly line. He later worked for the firm, demonstrating and giving concerts. He played at conventions, in hotels and in night clubs. In 1937, he was featured as an accordionist in a downtown Milwaukee night spot.

He had stints at the Mandalay Lounge of the Racine Hotel, and the Faust Hotel in Rockford, Illinois, from which he did both radio and TV broadcasts over WREX.

In 1960, he began a string of engagements at Weiss' Supper Club, The Pied Piper, and Wonder Bar, of Rhinelander, Wisconsin. In 1967, he performed over WAEO-TV.

Al's brother, Lloyd, was in the retail music business for over 30 years. Al worked for him from 1958 until Lloyd's retirement in 1969, as a salesman-demonstrator.

Al's step-daughter, Eleanor Morgan, now living in Sweden, gives us a few intimate glimpses of the late organist. "He collected photos of his contemporary organist friends: Jesse Crawford, Dick Leibert, Milt Herth,

Ken Griffin and George Wright. He kept a telegram from Miami, dated 1927, offering \$175 a week, which he refused.

"His oldest sister always wondered where his parents stashed us four older children while they were trundling the baby about Europe on their tour. She also stated that it was very true that Al had to change his room number every few days to avoid female admirers. Shades of Elvis Presley!

"Al composed five songs: 'Black Maria,' 'Joan,' 'That's Me,' 'Whirlwind' and 'That's Where My Money Goes.' I am fortunate to have a recording of the first."

Eddy Hanson, an organist with a dry wit, relates the story of his contemporary. "Al

was appearing in a theatre where one of the acts featured a large troupe of Chinese acrobats. Dressing room space was limited, so they used Al's room for their overflow. Al fumed the first day, and then made up a bundle of shirts, opened their dressing room door, tossed it in, and barked: 'No starch, and have these back by Friday!'"

Toward the end of his days, Al Gullickson lived in a nursing home in Rosholt, Wisconsin, where he died at age 72 on June 13, 1979.

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solo melody. A solo string, depending on the range, can imitate a beautiful violin or cello solo as well.

3) As the Tibia is the backbone of the theatre organ, the DIAPASON is the backbone of the classical or church organ. The Diapason does not imitate any instrumental sound, but is a tone peculiar to the organ. It is a full, round, but indefinite sound often used to add body to a full organ combination. The 8' Diapason also is a very good accompaniment (often in combination with Strings and/or Tibias). If you are playing a classical selection or hymn on a theatre organ, the Diapasons most definitely should be used at all available pitches to achieve the most "classical" sound.

4) The REEDS and BRASS are normally grouped together and color coded "red" on many theatre organs. Although orchestral the sound is produced very differently, on a theatre organ they serve the same function — namely as solo voices, imitative of their orchestral counterparts. Be careful not to obliterate the solo sound you are trying to achieve by adding other stops with them. If you want a Clarinet to sound like a clarinet, use it alone. Any other stops will detract from its authenticity. Three "red" sounds worthy of special attention are the Vox Humana (human voice), Kinura, and Post Horn. The Vox is a very distinctive, pretty theatre sound when used in combination with Tibias and Strings. The Kinura is a raspy, nasty, biting sound, usually combined with a higher-pitched Tibia for clarity. The Post Horn is a very brassy, piercing sound that can be heard even over a full organ combination. It is often used for accents and "riffs." A 16' Post Horn also adds a great booming foundation to any full organ combination.

This is a very brief description of the four families of theatre organ sounds and their use. Remember to strive for variety by changing your combinations every eight measures or so. Strive for clarity and authenticity of sound by selecting the proper octave in which to use the stop you have selected. Strive for contrast between the melody and accompaniment, so both can be heard distinctly, but with the melody prevailing. The most important factor in registration is to select sounds that please you and your listeners. This is accomplished by many hours of fun experimentation. You have an entire orchestra at your fingertips and you are the conductor! As a final word of caution, don't be misled by organ arrangements that give registrations "for all organs." This is really not possible, and many times those registrations are not as good as what you can develop on your own instrument.

Do not underestimate the importance of registration as a skill worth developing. No matter how accurately or fancily you play, the end result will not be pleasing if you have not taken the time to carefully register your selection! □

## KEYBOARD TECHNIQUES



by Cheryl Seppala



## REGISTRATION

The art of skillful registration is of primary importance in good theatre organ playing. Let us define registration as selecting and combining the various voices and controls on the organ to produce the most desirable effect. This selection of sounds is a very personal matter to be sure. Each organist has his "pet" combinations he prefers to use. However, there are some combinations that are frequently employed. These are the ones we shall discuss.

First of all, let us agree that there are basically four different families of sound on an organ. They are Tibias or Flutes, Strings, Diapasons, and Reeds/Brass. Also there are the fun extras like percussions and toy counter. And there are also non-speaking tabs such as tremolo, couplers, and on many electronic theatre organs reverb, sustain, vibrato, etc.

Let us consider these four families of tone and how they might be used alone or in combination. We will assume we are all familiar with the pipe footage notation on stops, with 8' being the standard pitch, 16' one octave lower, 4' one octave higher, etc.

1) TIBIAS must be considered to be the backbone of the theatre organ. They create the beautiful, lush, smooth, throbbing theatre sound we know and love. In

fact, we love that sound so much, we are sometimes tempted to forsake all others and just use Tibias. They are such a comforting sound when we are practicing something we don't know very well yet. It is true they predominate in many theatre organ combinations because of their rich beauty. For example, open harmony is often played on an 8' and 2' Tibia. Blocking is often done with a 16, 8, 4 and 2' Tibia Chorus. Some beautiful solo melody registrations utilize Tibias. One of my favorites is Tibias 16, 4, 2 2/3 and Vox Humana 16 & 8. Tibias are also often used in combination with Reeds to add color or clarity. For example, add a Tibia 2 2/3 to an Oboe for an Oriental flavor, or a Tibia 4 to a Kinura for clarity and punch. And on many electronic organs, percussive effects are obtained by using Tibia sounds with sustain to create harps, music boxes, chimes, etc.

2) STRINGS add a full, rich, ethereal dimension to any combination. If you are fortunate enough to have a String Celeste, use it with your Tibias for a lovely theatre combination: Strings and String Celeste 16 & 8, Tibias 4 & 2. Strings also provide a beautiful accompaniment for a