

# From Mud to Magnificence

by Tom B'hend

All photos courtesy of B'hend/Kaufmann Archives

It's surprising what can happen to an object when subjected to a variety of divergent ideas. And those who attend LA's The Place, 32nd Annual ATOS National Convention, June 20 through 27, will experience the ultimate in divergence with the new sound produced by one of the most traveled organs in the world — the five-manual Möller now in Pasadena Civic Auditorium.

Built on order of famed British theatre organist Reginald Foort by M.P. Möller Organ Company of Hagerstown, Maryland, and shipped to Great Britain so he could roam the English countryside with it, the big instrument has experienced a checkered career, both in its meandering and its musicality.

Foort's provincial hedge-hopping days were short-lived because of the onset of WWII. The need to transport troops and war material forced abandonment of touring, and the organ was purchased by the British Broadcasting Company. It was hauled to and installed in vacant Jubilee Chapel in London, its home for many years until purchased and shipped across the English Channel for a radio station in Hilversum, Holland, where it remained but a short time. Subsequently, it traveled back to the Möller firm, then to Pacific Beach (a suburb of San Diego), and finally to what appears to be its permanent home in Pasadena.

Reginald Foort at the console of this Möller touring organ in 1938.



Foort masterfully maneuvered the Möller most musically. However, in its Jubilee Chapel home, despite the fact that it was played by leading British theatre organists, the big box of whistles acquired a reputation of being lacklustre and tiresome to listen to for any length of time. Not much has been said of its musical quality while installed in Holland. At the Pacific Beach location, it was generally conceded that the organ was inclined to sound "muddy," although when Foort himself played it on opening night, the Möller sounded fine. In its permanent home in Pasadena Civic Auditorium, the instrument has changed musically and is regarded as one of the finest theatre organs to be heard anywhere.

How it arrived in Pasadena and what transpired to create its musical metamorphosis — which for a time alienated its builder — is an interesting story.

## Organ Returned to U.S.

Preston M. "Sandy" Fleet, well-known ATOS personality, is responsible for bringing the Foort Möller back to the United States. As head of a group that was planning to build a chain of organ-equipped pizza parlors in Southern California, Fleet inspected the Möller in its Holland location and realized it would serve not only as a musical attraction, but also as a physical wonder because of its huge, five-manual console. He then hired Möller to examine the organ and submit a contract price for shipping it to their factory for complete rehabilitation. Factory superintendent Peck Kreglo and an assistant went to Hilversum where they examined every piece of leather, took every bottom board down, thoroughly inspected the instrument for two weeks and then issued a contract price to restore it. Fleet accepted the contract price, and the organ was shipped via container to Hagerstown where it was completely restored before being sent on to Pacific Beach to be erected in the first of the Organ Power chain of pizza parlors.

At Pacific Beach the 28th rank (a 16' pedal Tibia) was added, plus a *Trumpet en Chamade* and a complete Style D Wurlitzer (sort of an antiphonal organ). Also added were the Tuned Tympani from the former Fox Brooklyn Theatre Wurlitzer and a Duo Art grand piano.

Pacific Beach Organ Power eventually "powered out" and closed. The big Möller became a surplus item. Enter a new personality — J. B. Nethercutt, who created the San Sylmar Museum in Sylmar, California, and had gained fame in organ circles for his donations of pipe organs, in addition to his vast collection of antique autos and mechanical musical instruments. Nethercutt purchased the major part of the Möller for approximately \$80,000. Fleet retained the Style D Wurlitzer, which he later installed in his home, and donated the *Trumpet en Chamade* to a church. After the organ arrived at Sylmar, organ curator Gordon Belt removed the Möller chime set and the Tuned Tympani for the Wurlitzer on the Cloud 99 level of the museum and substituted a smaller set of Wurlitzer chimes for the Möller.

## Möller Donated

Then the stage was set for moving the Möller one more time! A new home had to be found for donation of the huge instrument. How Pasadena became the potential recipient is not important here, but Nethercutt donated the organ on the condition that the city would contract for its installation. At this juncture, city officials asked Belt to get bids for the job, and he did. He obtained three bids, one from Möller for around \$135,000, one from Wendel Schober (who had installed the organ at Pacific Beach) for a price between \$60/80,000, and a third



In its Pacific Beach venue, the Möller dwarfs both the Style D Wurlitzer (right) and the Duo Art grand piano.

from Junchen-Collins Organ Corporation that came in at a very low \$45,000.

David L. Junchen, then sole active person in the firm, had decided that he wanted to move to California from Woodstock, Illinois, and reasoned that this was the "way to go" since it offered several advantages, foremost of which was that, at this price bid, he would undoubtedly get the job and be required to move. "I ended up putting the organ in for no salary whatsoever, since my bid was so dreadfully low, but I wanted the job and felt it would help me relocate in California, and that it would help build my reputation." Those who know Junchen and how he has established himself, must agree to the rewarding results of his low bid. This job definitely established him in the organ-building world.

#### Möller Disappointed

It must also be noted that awarding the contract to Junchen-Collins caused Möller officials to express their disappointment at not getting the job by declaring that they would no longer acknowledge the organ as being one of their instruments. Fortunately, time has healed this loss, and with the emergence of the organ as one of the nation's most magnificent instruments, it is certainly a credit not only to Junchen and his crew, but to the builder as well.

Reggie Foort was most helpful in resolving the situation when he wrote a letter following the dedication of the Möller. His letter stated in part: "In view of the happy relationship which has always existed between the Möller Company and myself these past forty years, I was naturally a little disappointed that the work of rebuilding and reinstalling the organ was not entrusted to the original builders. However, to be quite frank, I am simply thrilled and delighted with the result and am convinced that the work could not possibly have been done any better or more efficiently than it has been carried out by the Junchen-Collins Corporation."

Installation began in July 1979 during the time the ATOS National Convention was being held in Los Angeles. Besides Junchen, the installing crew consisted of Steve Adams, Dan Hornberger and Bob Otey. Otey was only associated with the project for three weeks because of a prior commitment. "Actually, Steve Adams and I did the vast majority of the installation; Dan Hornberger was with us about three of the nine months," Junchen said.

Junchen devised ramps to haul components into chambers as organ parts could not have been moved into the chambers through hallways; access would not permit maneuvering them into position to go through existing doorways. Large openings were cut out of the two grilles, and the ramps, extending from the auditorium orchestra floor, angled upward to them and into the chambers.

The small Wurlitzer chime set, replacing the Möller unit, was mounted unenclosed behind one grille and, consequently, is heard clearly when played. The grand piano was not included in the installation because it was too small and also would have presented a storage problem on the stage. Junchen also recalled that at one point Belt considered retaining the vibraphone, but after a discussion with Junchen, decided to let it be part of the donation.

#### Solid-State Replacement

The original combination action was a setter board that required the entire dimension of the back of the console. A small vacuum cleaner motor had to be mounted under the console elevator platform to operate the combination action relay because they were unable to run a windline to the console. In service six months, it was replaced with a solid-state unit. The setter board had become unreliable because of its constant travels over rough English country roads when Foort was touring the organ. Through the generosity of Marian Cook, Burton A. Burton and "Sandy" Fleet, a new Trousdale combination action was purchased, and Junchen installed it.

This unit has an excellent feature — cassette tapes are used for each organist's piston setting; there are 100 pistons on the organ, and if they had to be set up for every artist who came to play, it would be a multiple-hour job. As it is, every organist has his own cassette tape. "When Gaylord Carter comes to Civic to play the Amway shows, he shoves his cassette into the slot, and 20 seconds later he is ready to play. Gerald Nagano uses his cassette when he plays for travelogue shows. I have mine so I can demonstrate the organ for visitors," Junchen said. He also disclosed that Tom Hazleton and Lyn Larsen have cassettes.

All pipework in the organ is original. Nothing was changed, but additional Möller-made tremolos were installed because there were not enough. The glass swell shades which were used at Pacific Beach were within one inch of exactly fitting the Pasadena opening and were installed as is.

"Installing this instrument provided me with a very unique experience," Junchen related. "I looked forward to going to work every day. Many of the days were real tough — we had very heavy labor to do — there was some complex engineering to get it into the space avail-

City of Pasadena Resolution honoring J. B. Nethercutt for his gift of the Möller organ to Civic Auditorium.

## City of Pasadena



### Resolution

WHEREAS, Mr. J. B. NETHERCUTT, Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of Merle Norman Cosmetics, is the owner of the Möller Pipe Organ, known as OPUS 6690-1938, 5 manual 27 rank organ; and

WHEREAS, this organ, weighing thirty tons, was built in the United States in 1938 as a portable organ for Reginald Foort, a famous English organist, and was erected and dismantled 187 times while it was used in England; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Nethercutt acquired the organ in 1977; had it completely restored at San Sylmar, California and desires to give this magnificent organ to the City of Pasadena for use in the Pasadena Civic Auditorium, and

WHEREAS, the City of Pasadena desires to accept his outstanding and generous gift of the organ with gratitude.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, by the Board of Directors of the City of Pasadena, that:

1. The Deed of Gift conveying the interest of J.B. NETHERCUTT in the Möller Theatre Pipe Organ be and the same is hereby gratefully accepted; and
2. On behalf of the citizens of Pasadena, this Board expresses its deep appreciation to Mr. Nethercutt for donating this most valuable and unique instrument to the City of Pasadena for use in the Pasadena Civic Auditorium for the enjoyment of all.

Dated: January 23, 1979.

*James H. Johnston*  
*Boetta Thompson (Dickson)*  
*Le. Nethercutt*

*William A. Johnson*  
*C. Morris Fisher*  
*Ellis L. Jones*

ATTESTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS  
 of the  
 CITY OF PASADENA, CALIFORNIA  
*Harriet C. Jenkins*  
 City Clerk



Attest:



Möller console is brought to Civic stage door in a special tilt-back semi-trailer, January 19, 1980. While Roger Morrison and Bob Pittinger hold big keydesk from rolling out of trailer, Gordon Belt gets help from Jerry McCoy (left) and others to unload the behemoth.

able, but the work was enjoyable, and the people at Pasadena Civic were friendly and cooperative. I had never worked on a job like it, and I knew intuitively that the organ was going to be magnificent," he added.

#### Wright Plays Möller

Junchen also recalled that many people visited during the installation period to monitor the progress. Walter Benedict, one-time mayor of Pasadena, who had the original Hammond organ that was donated to Civic shortly after the popular electronic instrument first made its appearance the market, stopped by frequently. "He was a leading plumbing contractor in the city, and we purchased sheet metal from him for windlines. He was also, at the time of the installation, a member of the board of directors of the Civic and, being an organ aficionado, was a great fan of George Wright." One time when Benedict stopped in, Wright happened to be visiting and Junchen introduced the two men. "Because Benedict held Wright in the 'super diety' domain, he was speechless — he was meeting royalty!

"Wright used to stop by quite often," Junchen continued. "He'd arrive in the middle of the afternoon when he knew it was time for a

Möller console being placed on its elevator platform after being unloaded from truck.



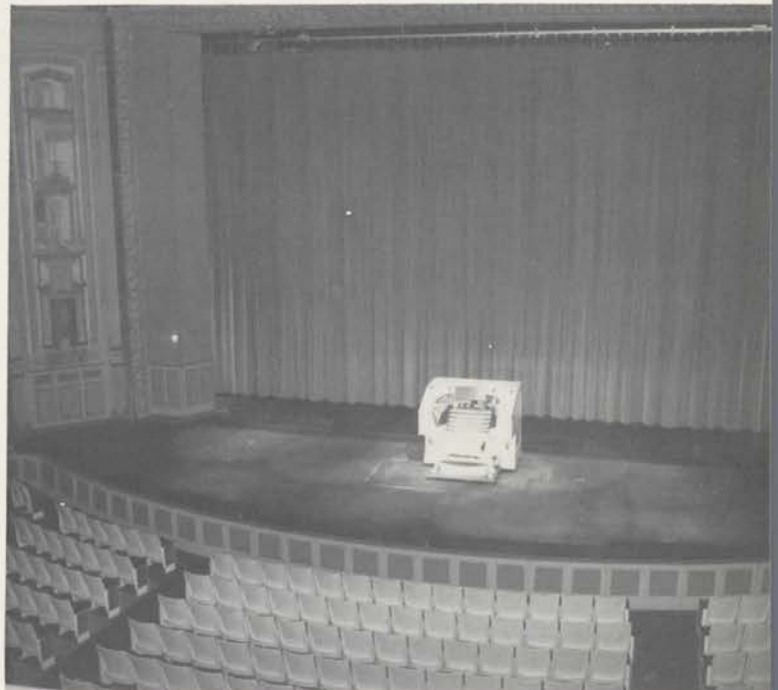
break, and we would go out for a bite to eat. George always said he definitely wanted to play the Möller when it was finished and I was satisfied that it was ready.

"About a month after it had been dedicated, George called and asked if he could come over and play the organ. He assured me that he would only be there for about ten minutes. He just wanted to try it out.

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He said he realized that I was an early-to-bed person and suggested that he come over about six o'clock in the evening. This was fine with me. He arrived one evening about seven o'clock, and at 9:30 he was still playing the organ. He just wouldn't get off the bench."

This revelation countered the rumor that Wright had said he wouldn't play the Möller. When queried about this, Junchen explained what happened: "George later refused to play the organ because I wouldn't change one of the Tibias — exchange it with one of the ranks he owned. I had to put my foot down and say, 'No, the organ stands as it is.' That's ostensibly the reason he will not play it. I believe all of us know George well enough to know that if he does not like an organ he will play it for only a very brief time and get off the bench. After his first time at the console, when he had stated emphatically that



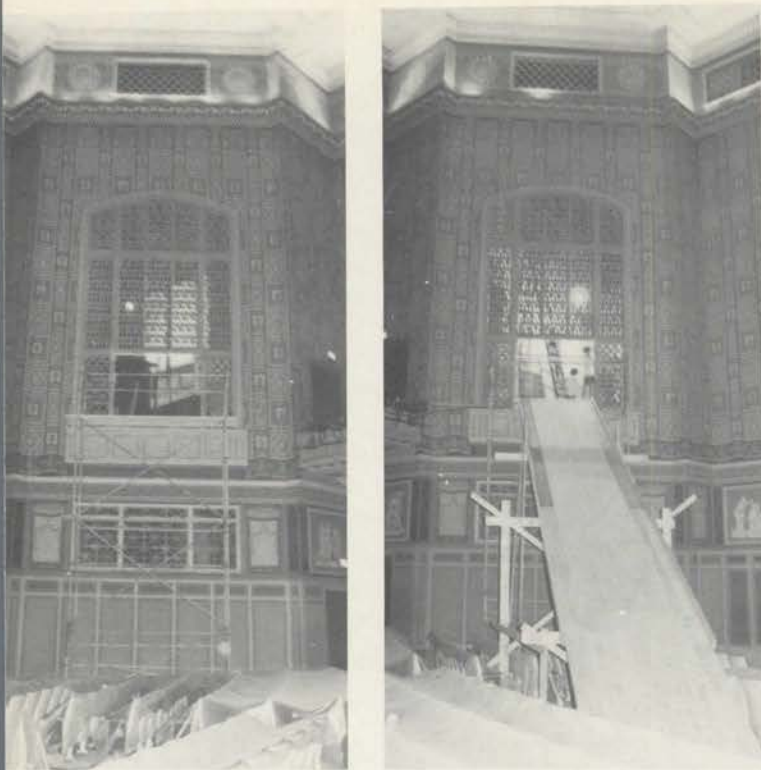
First photo of Möller console mounted on its elevator platform at Pasadena Civic.

he would only play it briefly to try it out and then remained glued to the bench for more than two hours, there's no doubt he was impressed with Pasadena Civic's Möller. He played marches, full organ with Post Horn and everything, just having a ball. Maybe someday he will play it in concert."

#### Blower Problems Resolved

Blower problems confronted Junchen prior to completion of the instrument and, for a time, after its dedication. "Our trouble with the blower was two-fold," he disclosed. "A Kinetic blower was furnished by Möller but never shipped to England in 1938. It was just too big — about 15-feet long! Reggie bought a Discus and about four or five different motors for it. At that time in Great Britain there was a variety of voltages in the provinces, both in direct and alternating current.

"The blower was equipped with babbitt-style bearings which were



Left: Steel-reinforced grilles had to be cut for installation of ramps. Block and tackle suspended from steel beams in chamber ceilings were used to haul heavy components into chambers. Right: Ramp designed by Dave Junchen extends from orchestra floor to grille openings. This phase of project had to be completed quickly so auditorium could be ready for Emmy Award Show in 1979.

not reliable. It had gone through at least two sets of bearings while installed at Pacific Beach and another set while Lyn Larsen was using it for the organ in his Phoenix restaurant. And we had two sets of bearings go out at Civic. That brought about an ultimatum — it had to go — we must do something else.

“At this juncture, Jasper Sanfillipo, who is a mechanical engineer, devised new, modern ballbearings to replace the babbitt-style bearings and donated them to Pasadena Civic. That solved this particular problem, but there was more to be resolved.

“The Discus is a high speed unit turning out 1800 rpm at 30 horsepower, whipping up 55-inch static pressure. It’s a monstrous blower, but even so, it was not adequate to handle the entire instrument, although completely satisfactory when Reggie was touring with it and

Partial view of Solo chamber showing both levels.



when the organ was in Jubilee Chapel.

“At Pasadena several things were not loud enough, so I raised pressures on the Solo Tibia, Post Horn and 32’ Bombarde. Where the Discus was marginally sufficient before, after raising the pressures the organ would run out of wind. It wasn’t readily apparent to the audience, but organists knew it when they played a full-organ passage and a big chord.”

#### Cook Donation

“We were fortunate to have a wonderful friend, another organ buff who had become famous for her lavish organ gifts — Marian Miner Cook. She had only recently donated the former Bronx Loew’s Paradise Theatre Robert-Morton to Kansas City Theatre Organ, Inc. Included in the gift was a brand new Spencer 10-horsepower blower which had never been used.

“About that same time, Lyn Larsen was recording an album at Pasadena Civic, and, while in the middle of a session, the Discus bearings gave out for the second time. Marian was there and recalled the extra blower she had donated with the Robert-Morton. She called Kan-



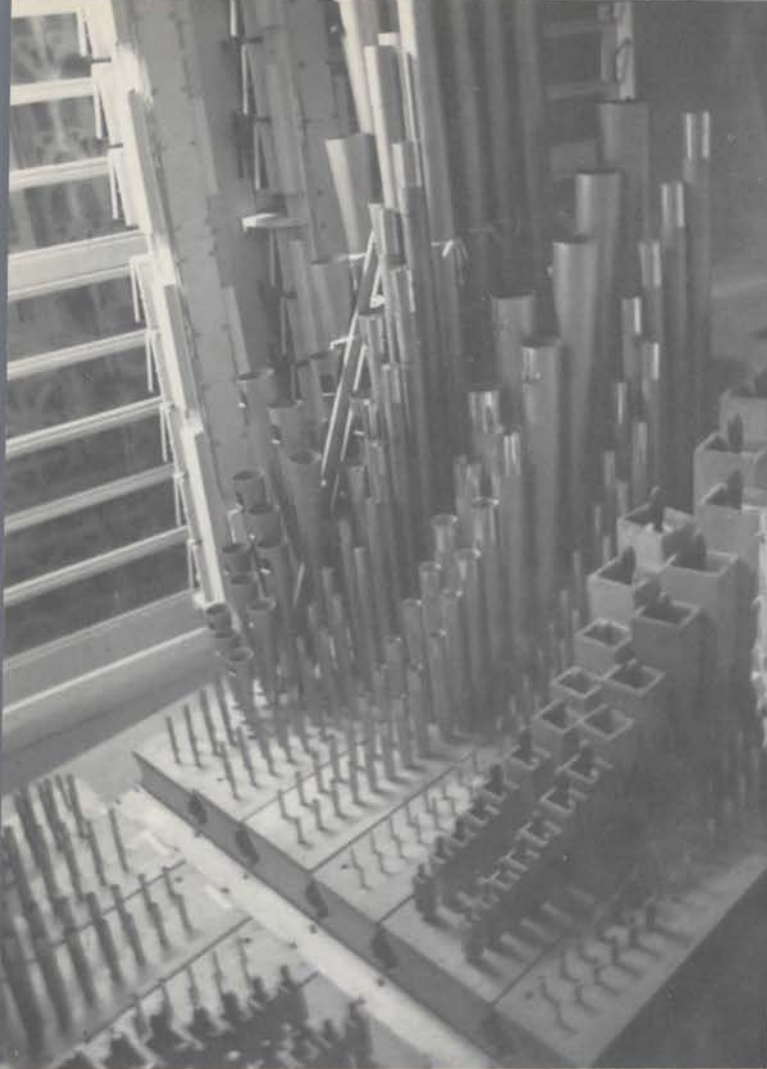
David Junchen and Dan Homberger work on glass swell shades prior to racking pipe-work in Solo chamber.

sas City Theatre Organ President Bob Maes and explained the predicament. Maes, on behalf of his group, donated the blower to Pasadena.

“I then used the Spencer to power only the Main chamber of the Möller and the Discus to supply wind for the Solo side. The organ has had sufficient wind since then.

“For a short period we used the large Spencer blower purchased from Ethical Cultural Society in New York to wind the Möller. It is a huge, extremely heavy, cast iron affair of early design that puts out 25 inches pressure (in small quantities), but it could not produce the wind needed. It played the Society’s 15-rank organ, but could not meet the Möller’s needs. It is for sale at a very reasonable price if anyone can use it.”

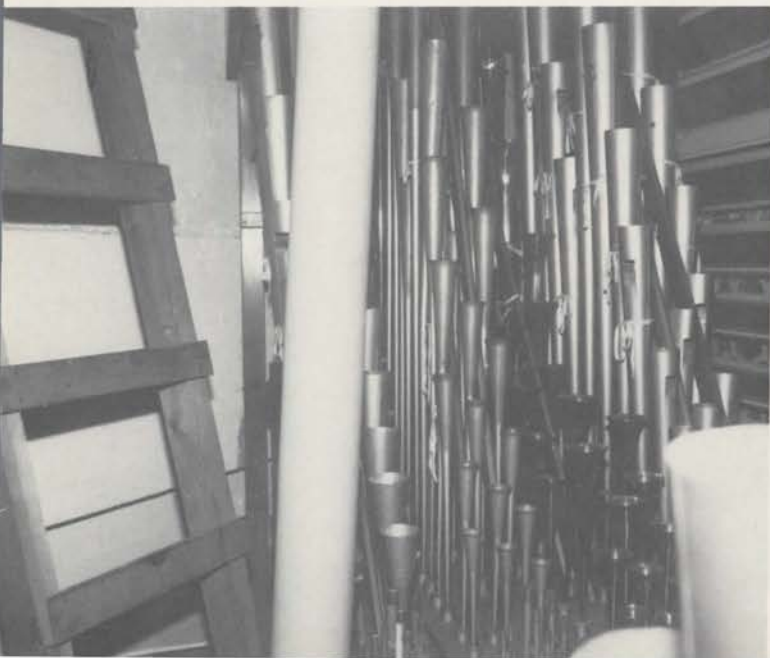
Installation work was completed and the organ dedicated in April 1980. Junchen briefly told the amusing manner in which he received



Partial view of Main chamber lower level. Glass swell shades and back of decorative grille are seen at left.

his final payment. "I asked Bob Holden, General Manager of the Auditorium, about three weeks before completion of the job, if it would be possible to get a check for the final payment because it would help my cash flow; I had gone in the hole through underestimating the job. He said, 'Okay.' About an hour later, we were working on the stage, and Holden came to the balcony rail above us. Folding the check into a paper airplane, he hollered out, 'Okay, Junchen, here it is!' and sent the check sailing down onto the stage."

Lower level of Solo side showing (L to R) Tuba Mirabilis, Post Horn, Brass Trumpet and Tuba Horn.



Dedication of the Möller was set for Wednesday evening, April 26, 1980. With the announcement came persistent talk about the listening quality of the instrument. Its reputation, of course, was that it was "dull." This reputation for blandness had followed the organ from London to Pacific Beach, and it was assumed by many that the Pasadena project would be more of the same. "At the opening concert in Pasadena," Junchen recounted, "people really came to 'bury Caesar.' Not a great deal was expected of the organ because of what had been heard previously."

Here it is necessary to flashback momentarily and review what had been taking place as the work of erecting the organ was nearing com-

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## Please Vote!

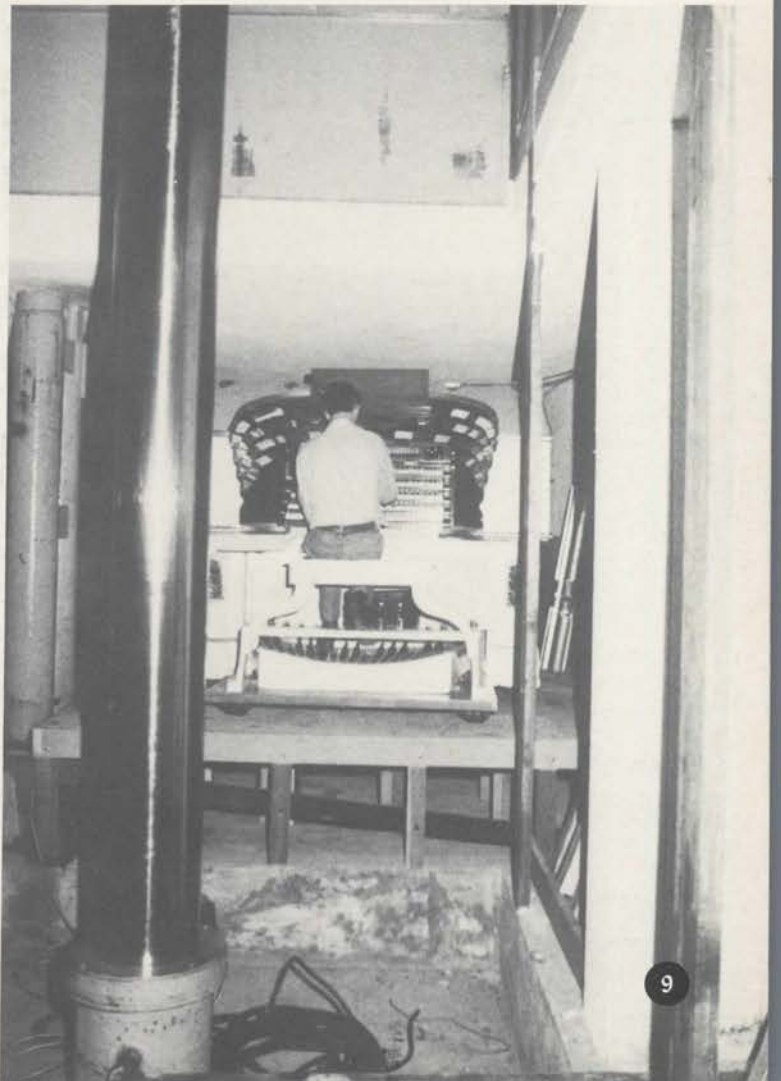
### Your **BALLOT** Is in this Issue.

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pletion. When pipework was being racked in the Main chamber chests, Junchen corrected several problems that were apparently overlooked in previous attempts to repair them. He also revoiced ranks, not drastically, but terraced them to the auditorium into which they were to play, and also with other ranks of the instrument. He achieved an excellent ensemble. Reggie Foort, on the evening of the dedication, said that the Civic installers had recaptured the original sound of the organ.

Steve Adams, who Junchen credits for much of the revoicing chores, said, "We recaptured the original voicing by regulating to the room and all the ranks to one another. We did a lot of recurving of tongues, shaping of lips and opening and closing toes, but we did not change tongues or shallots, just corrected things that needed to be done. The potential was there — Dave just brought back what had been 'lost.'"

Möller console is rolled off of its elevator platform when not in use and stored on this special platform under the orchestra pit.





Reginald Foort at the champagne buffet reception following organ dedication flanked by five who contributed to this historical event: (L to R) Steve Adams, "Sandy" Fleet, Tom Hazleton, Foort, David L. Junchen and Doris Stoval, Auditorium Manager.

When Tom Hazleton started to play his dedication program, there were a number of patrons who began to wonder what they were hearing. They were a bit speechless until intermission when comments were heard about how superb the Möller sounded. "When it turned out to be other than what was expected, the comments were some of the most wonderful things that had ever happened to me in my life because they were so beautifully expressive of the beauty of sound the concertgoers had heard," Junchen said appreciatively. He added that he had heard a tape recording — one that was made by someone in the balcony with an "electrified purse," and just after Hazleton played his first chords, the party exclaimed, "M'gawd, I'm hearing it, but I don't believe it!" The explanation given by some know-it-alls: "Junchen has replaced half of the Möller pipework with Wurlitzer ranks! A Möller never sounded like that!"

"But the organ was fully original except for its 28th rank, and comments like this made my day," Junchen concluded, smiling. □

Preston M. "Sandy" Fleet and Reginald Foort during intermission at dedication of the Möller in Pasadena on April 26, 1980.



## FROM MUD TO MAGNIFICENCE

Placement of the Moller is in two chambers, one on either side of the proscenium arch, in the large open grille areas. Facing the stage the chamber designations are: Left, Main; Right, Solo.

**Rank Pipes/Notes Pressures**

### MAIN CHAMBER

#### Unenclosed

16' Pedal Tibia	32	10''
Xylophone	49	20''
Vibraphone	49	12''
Toy Counter		20''

#### Chamber

16' Diaphonic Diapason	.85	15'' & 10''
16' Chorus Trumpet	.85	15'' & 10''
16' Cello	.97	15'' & 10''
4' Cello Celeste	.61	10''
16' Tibia Clausa II	.97	15'' & 11''
4' Vox Humana II	.61	10''
8' Open Diapason	.85	10''
8' Concert Flute	.85	10''
8' Viol d'Orchestre	.85	10''
8' Viol Celeste	.73	10''
4' Orchestral Strings	122	10''
4' Spitz Violes II	122	10''

### SOLO CHAMBER

#### Unenclosed

32' Bombarde	.12	28''
Glockenspiel	.37	28''
Chimes	.18	28''

#### Chamber

Marimba	.49	28''
16' English Post Horn	.85	20''
16' Bombarde/ Tuba Mirabilis	.85	15''
8' Tibia Clausa I	.85	18''
8' Tibia Clausa III	.85	11''
8' Brass Saxophone	.61	15''
8' Vox Humana I	.73	10''
8' Solo Trumpet	.73	15''
8' Tuba Horn	.73	15''
8' French Horn	.73	10''
8' Orchestral Oboe	.73	10''
8' Clarinet	.73	10''
4' Krumet	.61	10''
4' Musette	.61	10''