

# How It Happened

by Terry Hochmuth

Any theatre organ enthusiast will understand that the acquisition and installation of a complete, late vintage theatre pipe organ, in prime condition, is the quintessential dream. However, like most dreams, this does not "just happen." And, in this case, a LOT had to happen. Let me share with you the tale of Wurlitzer opus 2131 and how it got from the Oriental Theatre in the Mattapan District of Boston to our home in New Lenox, Illinois.

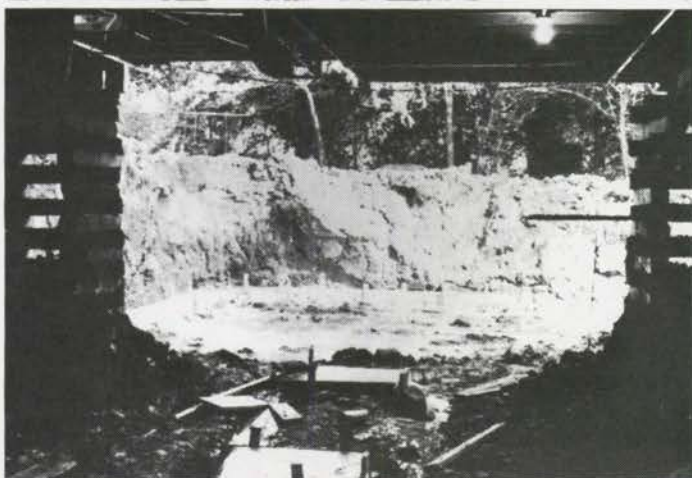
Ever since my first encounter with these wonderful old instruments, I have known that somewhere, someday, there would be a special Wurlitzer waiting for a new home — and I would have that home. Dan Stankey, my partner in the Stankey-Hochmuth Organ Company, and I heard about this Oriental Wurlitzer when we were on a trip to Indianapolis, and John Ferguson told us that it was to be installed in a restaurant there. We subsequently learned that the plans for the restaurant had fallen through and the organ was for sale. We returned to Indianapolis to see the instrument, and when we saw the unusual Oriental console, we knew that this was the Wurlitzer we had been waiting for. It could best be described as "Chinese Deco," and had been owned by a man who had worked for Aeolian-Skinner, a man who had obviously treated it with great care when removing it from the theatre in the late 1960s.

We had acquired a substantial collection of organ components through the years, and we decided to sell this material and purchase the Style 2, 3/14 Balaban Wurlitzer. The next move was to get the instrument safely stored in our shop until the house could be readied for its installation — and then the fun began!

Drawings were prepared for an addition to our residence that would do justice to the Wurlitzer. Continued expansion of the dimensions for the studio resulted in the realization that we should add a full basement under the house which was, at that time, approximately 2500 square feet. A local contractor was consulted and agreed that this could be done, unusual as it was (a basement should be built before — not after — the house!).

Construction was started in May 1983 and completed that same Christmas. Actual "floating" of the house began with the digging of two eight-foot-square holes under one end of the house to a depth of about ten feet. Railroad ties were placed in the holes in a criss-cross which served as support for the full-length steel beams which were then slid under the full length of the building. Two house-lifting jacks then gradually elevated the entire structure off its foundation.

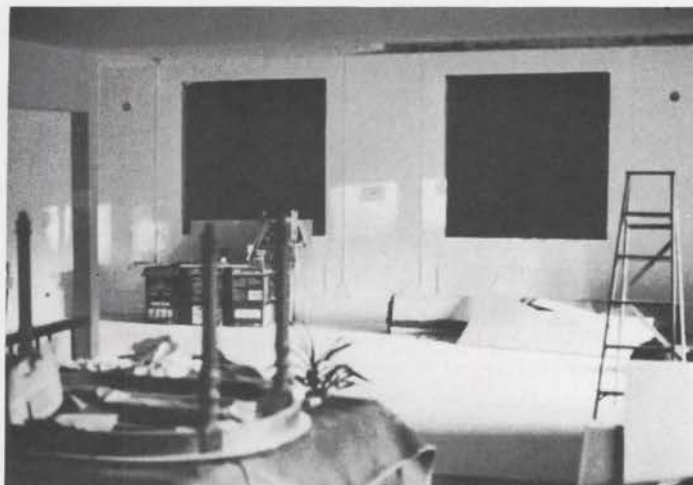
*Photos, top to bottom: Before, a blissfully bucolic, master bedroom balcony looks out over heavily wooded area. Note brick pillar at left. • House rests on railroad-tie pillars as bulldozer goes to work. • View from underneath the house shows chamber excavation. • Finished house now has eight pillars across the front.*



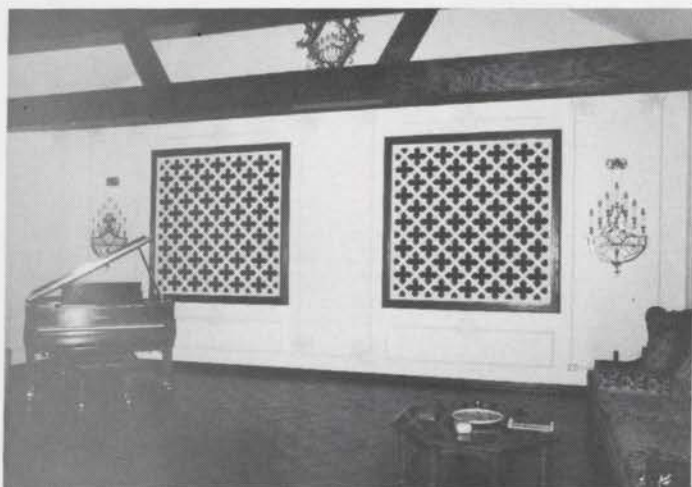
*"Our plan was to create a room that would be reminiscent of a movie palace of the 1920s."*



Work well underway, Dan Stankey stands in one chamber.



Chamber openings before installation of shutters.



Grillework is flanked by rare wall brackets from a theatre in Chicago.



Console in place. Note grille opening and unusual wall bracket.

The old block foundation was removed along with all of the soil from under the house. While it was strange to hear bulldozers under the house, we were able to continue living there during the entire construction period. We did, however, have to remind visitors that "that first step is a doozy," as it was a 12' drop out the front and back doors!

New footings and concrete walls were poured to accommodate the original building as well as the new studio addition. The basement was poured at a grade allowing a full 8' suspended ceiling height in the basement with about 2' above this for mechanicals, etc. Total height from basement floor to the peak of the organ chambers is 31'8".

Our plan was to create a room that would be reminiscent of a movie palace of the 1920s; we contacted Decorator's Supply in Chicago and this firm supplied all of the plaster moldings and organ grilles. Each grille is a single cast of

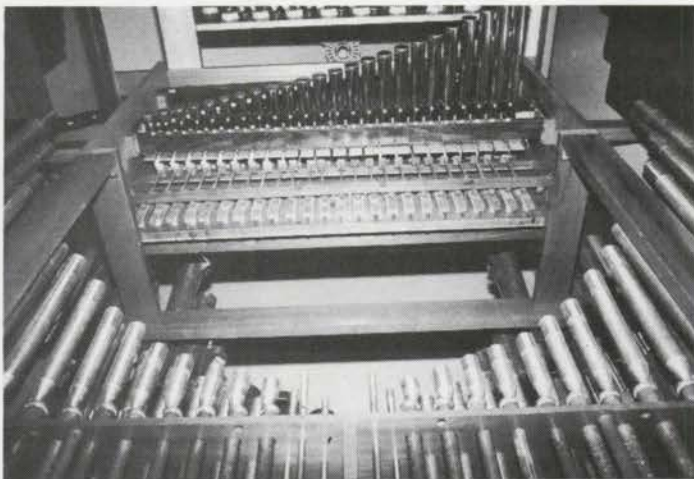
plaster with steel rods and hemp rope supporting the plaster. Oak moldings framing the grilles were fashioned on the site.

Grand Stage Lighting of Chicago supplied the four-circuit cove lighting which is recessed into horizontal beams, and each of the green, red, cobalt and amber circuits is controllable by its own rheostat. Contemporary track lighting and soffit lighting is also present.

Two large, wall-bracket fixtures at either side of the organ grilles, designed and fabricated by Victor S. Pearlman Company of Chicago, came from an unidentified theatre in Chicago. In the center peak of the room, there hangs a large, diamond-shaped, art glass fixture which measures over six feet and holds an electric candelabra. Adorning two sides of the fixture are Foo Dog heads, appropriate to the Oriental theme of the console. These fixtures were procured through New Metal Crafts of Chicago.



Unique Oriental decoration on side panel is highlighted in gold leaf.



View of Main Chamber looking up from basement.



Special scale Post Horn built by Trivo for 17' wind.



**MAIN CHAMBER**  
(foreground to back)  
Quintadena  
Oboe Horn  
Harmonic Tuba  
Diaphonic Diapason  
Viol  
Viol Celeste  
Concert Flute  
Clarinet  
Vibraphone over top

**SOLO CHAMBER (R to L)**  
Vox Humana  
Orchestral Oboe  
Krumet  
Brass Saxophone  
Salicional  
Tibia Clausa  
Brass Trumpet  
Horn Diapason  
Violin I  
Violin II  
Post Horn

While construction of the studio was underway, the organ was being rebuilt in our shop. Because it is a late vintage model and had been so carefully dismantled, there was very little major work that had to be done except for cleaning off the light coating of typical theatre dirt.

Specification of the organ was changed to provide more versatility. To the original 14 ranks we decided to add five for a total of 19 ranks. A rare set of saucer bells from our original collection was also used.

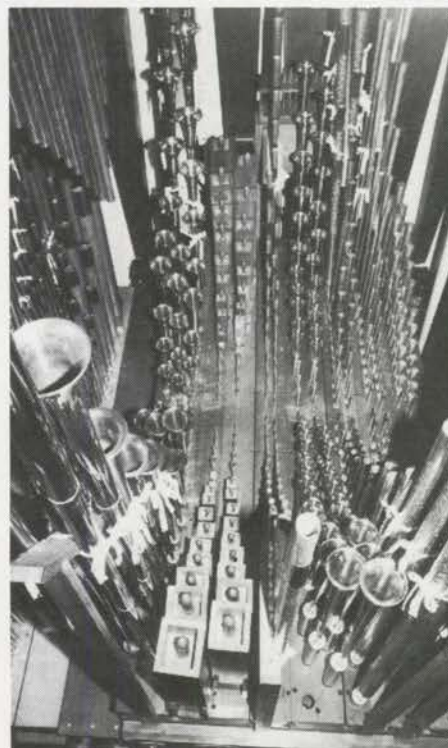
Console refinishing was done by a local New Lennox furniture finishing shop. As was the case of many late Wurlitzer consoles, the gesso gold finish had been used on the Oriental shell. We retained this effect only on the inset panels, and the balance of the console was sanded smooth and an ivory finish applied. Original ormolu was retained and covered with 24-carat gold leaf. This presents the console in a dignified, formal appearance in the studio. I must admit to a tempta-

tion, at one point, to give it a red lacquer finish in keeping with its Oriental theatrical mode — appropriate on a commercial setting, perhaps, but not in a home.

Peterson Electro-Musical Products replaced the original relay and switch-stack with their solid-state system. They also installed their combination action memory system, multi-plex player system and the DC voltage supply.

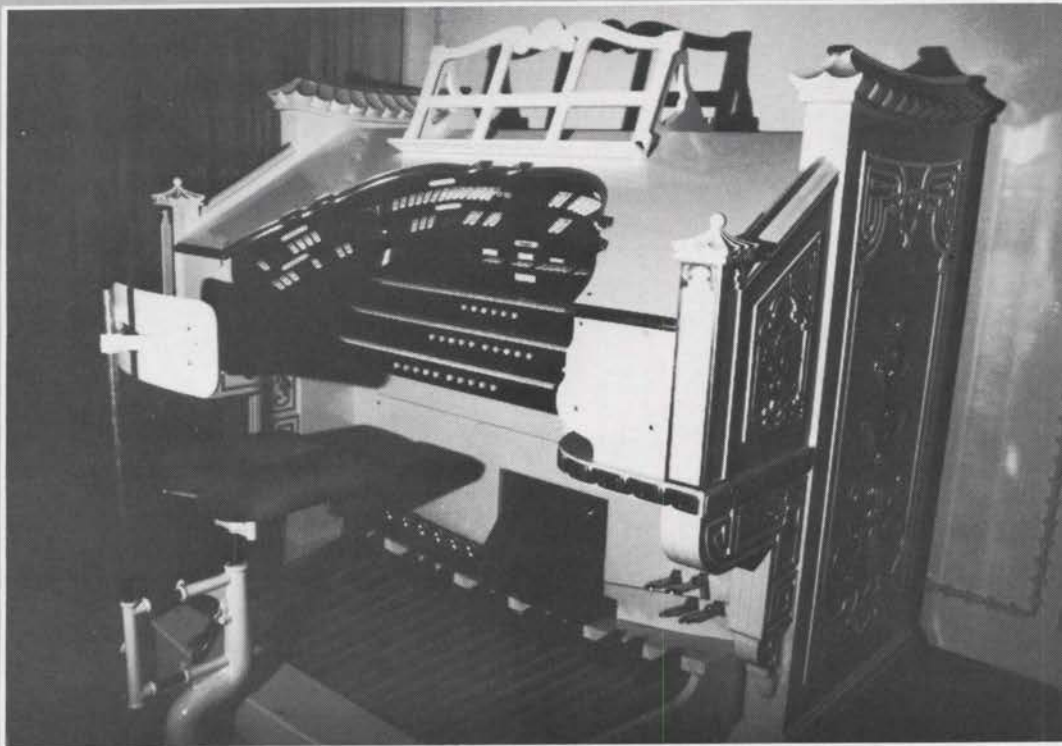
The organ first played during the Christmas holiday period of 1984, and has since received careful and meticulous tonal regulation and finishing by Larry McPherson and John Ferguson.

A public dedication concert is scheduled for October 29, to be played by Ron Rhode. We are most pleased and proud that we have been able to adapt our home to accommodate this lovely addition and that we are able to contribute to the preservation of another of the grand old American traditions — the theatre organ.



# Wurlitzer Opus 2131

Oriental Theatre  
Mattapan Square, Boston, Mass.  
September 15, 1930



*Oriental console has been refinished in off-white and gold leaf. The original Howard seat is red velvet.*

## Original Chamber Specification

### MAIN

8' Clarinet  
8' Viol d'orchestre  
8' Viol Celeste  
16' Concert Flute  
16' Diaphonic Diapason  
16' Harmonic Tuba  
8' Vox Humana

Vibraphone

### SOLO

8' Brass Trumpet  
16' Tibia Clausa  
8' Salicional  
8' Quintadena  
8' Kinura  
8' Orchestral Oboe  
8' Oboe Horn

Marimba  
Glockenspiel  
Xylophone

## New Chamber Specification

### MAIN

8' Clarinet  
16' Viol d'orchestre\*  
16' Viol Celeste\*  
32' Concert Flute\*  
16' Open Diapason  
16' Harmonic Tuba  
16' Oboe Horn\*  
8' Quintadena  
Vibraphone  
Saucer Bells

### SOLO

8' Brass Trumpet  
16' Tibia Clausa  
8' Salicional  
8' Brass Saxophone  
8' Krumet  
8' Orchestral Oboe  
8' Vox Humana  
16' English Post Horn  
16' Horn Diapason  
8' Violin I  
8' Violin II

Marimba  
Glockenspiel  
Xylophone  
Cathedral Chimes  
Sleigh Bells  
Toy Counter

\*Low 12 notes are Peterson electronic

Blower: Original 7.5 h.p. rewound to 10 h.p with new fans by Spencer Turbine. Arco roto-phase phase converter.

DC Voltage: Peterson rectifier.

Relay System: Peterson electronic.

Player System: Peterson Electro-Musical

Console Combination Action: Original pneumatic with Peterson electronic memory.