

# The Plaza Wurlitzer Finds A New Home

by Ronald F. Wehmeier  
(all photos by the author)

It was a hot afternoon on August 29, 1928, when opus 1949, a Style 220 special with French console, was shipped from the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company in North Tonawanda, New York. The organ was destined for the first of its five homes, in the newly constructed Plaza Theatre in Kansas City, Missouri. Designed by Boller Brothers and Edward W. Tanner, construction of the theatre began in February 1928. Located in the exclusive Country Club Shopping Plaza envisioned by the pioneering real estate developer J.C. Nichols, the theatre was built as a premiere motion picture house. Inside, the motif was Spanish-Moroccan, patterned after the Palacio de las Duenas of Seville, Spain.

As shipped from the Wurlitzer factory, the console was finished in natural mahogany. It was a 3/8, prepared for, but not originally equipped with, Orchestral Oboe and Kinura. In the theatre, the console was situated on the left hand side of the orchestra pit, and the chambers were located on either side of the proscenium arch.

According to newspaper accounts at the time, the opening of the Plaza Theatre was a gala event in Kansas City. Dressed in the finery of the day, the capacity audience was treated to the movie *Street Angel* starring Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell. Directed by Frank Borzage, the picture utilized the newly developed Movietone sound-on-film system. Of course, the organ was featured prominently at the premiere and subsequently.

During the waning years of theatre organ production following the advent of talking pictures, and throughout the Great Depression, the organ was used infrequently for sing-alongs and bank nights. During the latter half of the nine-



Opus 1949 in its new home.





Music room in Kass home. Note antique microphones.

teen thirties and up until 1960, for the most part it lay silently in the orchestra pit. In 1960, the organ was removed from the theatre and relocated in the Russell Stover Auditorium of the University of Kansas City. It was installed there by a local theatre organ club, and used for chapter meetings. During this period, the organ was refinished in a reddish mahogany color. In 1962, the organ was acquired by its third owner in Georgia. At the time of its installation there, only five ranks and the chrysoglott were operational.

I acquired opus 1949 in 1972, and moved it to my home in Cincinnati in a 24 foot U-Haul truck. I installed it on the first floor of my home. Next to the console was a 1929 Steinway Duo-Art concert grand, playable from the console. The pipes, relays, blower and wind chests as well as percussions were located in the basement. The sound spoke through a single grille in the floor in a hallway adjacent to the room in which the console was located. Because of my interest in Jesse Crawford and admiration for the decor of the Wurlitzer in the New York Paramount Theatre, I refinished the console in ivory, with gold trim. (See January 1979 THEATRE ORGAN).

In addition to making the original nine ranks playable along with the toy counter, I added a Post Horn made by Moller and voiced by Adolph Zajac, a Wurlitzer Kinura and Wurlitzer Oboe obtained from Proctor's Theatre in Long Island, a Wurlitzer Salicional Celeste from the 277 Wurlitzer originally located in the WLW studios in Cincinnati, a new Brass Trumpet made by Bizik and Schopp, and an upright piano. I had originally acquired the Style B Wurlitzer from WLW radio station in 1962, and sold everything ex-

cept the Salicional and a 5-rank chest for parts.

Over the ensuing ten years, I continued to search for parts and pipes to augment the organ. I obtained a hard to find solo scale Tibia Clausa from a theatre in Pittsburgh. Along with this I added a Moller Lieblich Flute, a 1917 E.M. Skinner Oboe Horn, a Wurlitzer Salicional Celeste, a Moller Horn Diapason, and a Wurlitzer Quintadena. Over the ensuing four years, I continued to add to the organ. The most recent features included a bell tree, tap cymbal, splash cymbal, brush cymbals and claves. As of now, the organ has been enlarged to 19 ranks.

In addition to being mint Wurlitzer, the organ also contains a full scale 49-note marimba obtained from the Capital Theatre in Cincinnati, along with xylophone, chrysoglott, glockenspiel, tuned sleigh bells, and cathedral chimes. All of these percussions are mint Deagan. In the original eight ranks, the leather was in excellent condition, and only the added ranks had to be releathered.

For a variety of reasons, including the opportunity to purchase a larger Wurlitzer, I decided to part with my opus 1949 in early 1987. Even after eight years, Dr. Larry Kass, of Cleveland, Ohio, remembered the cover story about my Wurlitzer in the January 1979 issue of THEATRE ORGAN, and contacted me in early 1986, and subsequently purchased my organ. I had the unique opportunity of being involved in the construction of the new music room from the very beginning, when I sketched the dimensions of the organ chambers and blower room.

In June 1986, a hole 14-feet deep and 30 x 28 feet in dimension, was excavated adjacent to the living room of the Kass residence. This hole was the site of the

future organ chambers, the Main chamber on the left measuring 17 x 14 feet, and the Solo chamber on the right having the same dimensions. They are enclosed entirely in concrete and waterproofed, with a separate room for the blower and electrical panels, and are temperature and humidity controlled at 70 degrees Fahrenheit on a heating and cooling system separate from the rest of the house. The ceiling of the chambers (and floor of the music room) was made of poured concrete, six-inches thick, reinforced with rebar. To further project the sound through the tone openings, the walls and ceilings were sealed with cement and coated with epoxy paint.

Behind the console are two large steel grilles, measuring 3 x 10 feet each. One grille is located over the Main chamber, and the other over the Solo. Under each grille was placed the original Plaza Theatre swell shades. Chests, regulators, and tremulants are enclosed within 3/4-inch birch plywood, and all supports and racks were custom built of solid poplar and coated with orange shellac in keeping with the Wurlitzer tradition. As seen in the accompanying photographs, percussions were placed under each of the swell shades for maximum tonal projection.

Installation of the organ took place between late March 1989 and May 1987. Moved to the Cleveland area over a period of three weeks, the organ was fully playable, tuned, and regulated by late May. To muffle the sound of the 10 hp blower, an elaborate system of baffles was constructed, and the blower room was fully carpeted from floor to ceiling, including walls.



The new owners wanted the console refinished in its natural mahogany with gold trim and Wurlitzer brass nameplates.

The console is located in the center of Dr. Kass' Wurlitzer Room. To the left of the console is a 1955 Hammond B3 with Leslie and Hammond speakers. To its right is a 1976 Mason and Hamlin Model A piano. The new owners also display their collection of vintage microphones from the golden days of radio in the Wurlitzer Room, along with an authentic "On the Air" sign from radio station WJW in Cleveland, dating from the late 1930s. A sophisticated, high fidelity sound recording system has been installed in the room to record and play back selections made by Dr. Kass and by visiting artists.

From one end to the other the room measures 26 x 28 feet, and the entire length of the living room and music room combined is 65 feet. The music room and living room contain cathedral ceilings up to 16-feet high with hard cedar surfaces to reflect the sound. Above the console is a stained glass mural depicting musical themes. When the room is darkened and the stained glass mural is illuminated and the console lights are lit on the Wurlitzer, the ambience is one of an elegant yet intimate movie palace of the Art Deco era of the late 1920s. Acoustically, the sound is spectacular. It is full-bodied, yet pleasant to the ear. The various orchestral elements can be heard individually and in a satisfactory blend.

It's been a long trek for opus 149 over the past 59 years, but now it has a new home. Both architecturally and acoustically, the Plaza Theatre Wurlitzer never looked or sounded better.

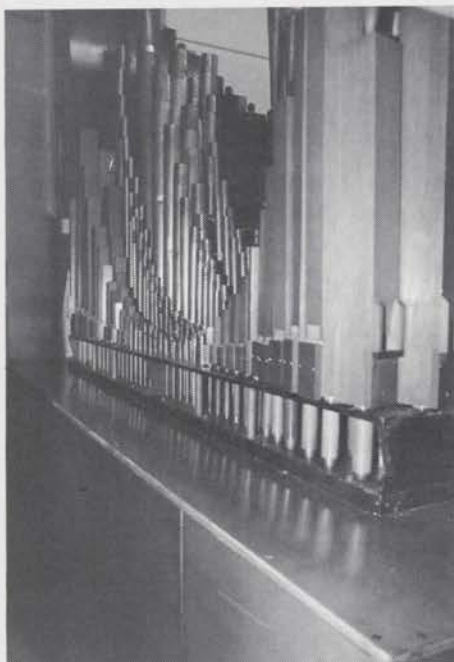


Solo chamber.



Main chamber.

Solo chamber.



Main chamber.



*Music was originally discreet, seemly, simple,  
masculine, and of good morals.  
Have not the moderns rendered it  
lascivious beyond measure?*

JACOB OF LIEGE, c. 1425

