

## Profile No. 5:

# Little Organ Annie

A Loving Look At Ann Leaf

... by Ben Hall

ONE NIGHT ABOUT three years ago I was having a drink with Jay Quinby ("The Hope-Jones of the Orygphone") out at Jay's highly-unified Summit, N. J., carriage house and organ studio. We were bemoaning the scarcity of live theatre organ music on the radio. All we could tune in was an 11-rank Austin (since defunct) courageously played by Betty Sheldon (organist at Seattle's FIFTH AVENUE Theatre in happier days) from a station in Brooklyn operated by Jehovah's Witnesses — and, when the sun-spots were smiling, good old Sandy McPherson playing the megacycle-mangled five-manual Moller via short wave over the BBC. We were comparing 1955 with those Golden Days when a twist of the dial at almost any time, day or night, would bring in Eddie Dunstedter, Lew White, Milton Charles, Venida Jones, Dick Leibert, Irma Glenn, Fred Feibel, and Ann Leaf.

*And Ann Leaf.* The mention of her name reminded me of the many midnights, years ago, when I'd violate strict parental curfew to listen for the strains of "In Time," the unforgettable theme that introduced Ann's "Nocturne" on the CBS network. With the Silvertone Midget under the covers with me, I got a fairly close-up idea of how the Paramount Studio Wurlitzer sounded on those coast-to-coast lullabies, and now in 1958 I'm pleased to report that this great organ sounds just as good as ever



Thousands of the autographed photos of Ann Leaf at the New York Paramount Studio Wurlitzer (1930) were sent to fans all over the world.

— and maybe a lot better. It's been given a splendid installation in Richard Loderhose's new studio on Long Island, and I heard Ann play it in person only a few weeks ago.

Meanwhile, back to 1955. A few days after Jay and I had been reminiscing, I got a phone call from him. "Ahoy," he said in his best nautical manner, "I just heard that Ann Leaf is in New York and she's playing at the Belmont Plaza on (and here he discreetly lowered his voice) a Hammond. Let's go hear her."

I called the Belmont Plaza right away to see what time Ann appeared and was told that she was no longer there . . . but I would find her at the Rainbow Room. My office was only a few blocks from Radio City, so next day I ducked out earlier than usual and dashed over there. The signs in the lobby advertising the Rainbow Room didn't say anything about Ann Leaf (a situation later remedied), so I thought there must be some mistake. But I took the ear-popping elevator trip up to Mr. Rockefeller's tavern in the clouds just to be sure. Somebody was there playing the Hammond, all right . . . very pretty, very tiny, and very, very good. I took a table as near the console as possible and as soon as she had stopped playing I went over (all that was missing was my autograph book) and asked if she were Ann Leaf . . . as if I didn't already know.

She was. And that's how I met her.

I hopped to the phone and called Jay who was at his apartment in town. Ann and I had decided to surprise him, so I told him nothing except to get himself up to the Rainbow Room on the double. Before you could say "Mitey Mite of the Mighty Wurlitzer," there was Jay. And it was Ann's turn to do her part in the surprise. Back at the console she was waiting for my signal, and as Jay appeared she modulated into "In Time." For a moment I thought Jay was going to jump down the five steps that led into the room. His face lit up like a crescendo indicator and he went over and hugged Ann, Hammond and all.

Later we were joined for dinner by Jay's lovely wife, Margaret, and Ann's husband, "Kleinie" Kleinert. All during dinner, in spite of her protests, the talk was mostly about Ann and her wonderful and exciting career.

"I was making music, of sorts, when I was three," Ann told us in a voice that's never lost its Nebraska freshness. "The family had bought a new piano and I was forbidden to touch it because I usually had strawberry jam all over my fingers. But one day when Mother was in the garden, I was feeling extra naughty . . . so I crawled up on the bench and proceeded to play a reasonable facsimile of "Dardanella", with *two hands yet*. Mother, who thought someone had broken into the house to play her new piano, came running inside. When she found out who it was, the family had no choice; they *had* to give me piano lessons, strawberry jam and all."

A clipping from an Omaha paper describes her public debut . . . how little Anna Leaf, age 11, knocked

'em cold playing a Mozart concerto with the Omaha Symphony. From then on, she knew what she was going to do, and she's been doing it ever since: making people happy with her music.

Soon she went to California with Esther, and six years later, Mozart concerti and strawberry jam behind her, she took her first bow as a theatre organist at Sid Grauman's MILLION DOLLAR THEATRE playing the Wurlitzer Special. Then she played the 5-manual Robert Morton in the KINEMA, (later renamed the CRITERION) and on the style 210 Wurlitzer in the Los Angeles PARAMOUNT. This was in the silent picture days when playing the organ was a full-time, neck-straining job. But Ann loved it . . . the most fun, she recalls, was playing a new picture "cold" without benefit of a prior run-through, as it unreeled above her on the silver screen. "I always managed somehow to stay one jump ahead of Mary Pickford," she laughs, "but Douglas Fairbanks was a problem."

While she was accompanying Mary and Doug in California she met Kleinie who was then musical director and violin soloist for the Publix Theatres chain. Suddenly the flickering romances on the screen of Grauman's MILLION DOLLAR seemed silly compared to the real thing, and when Kleinie left for Dallas to play an engagement at the MELBA Theatre, Ann, as she puts it, "stopped grinding out 'Hearts and Flowers' and started a little chase music of my own. I chased him clear to Dallas. And I caught him, too."

About this time, Boris Morros, one of the most flamboyant personalities in show business, summoned her to New York to audition on the Paramount Studio Wurlitzer for a projected CBS program of organ music. As it turned out, she auditioned for Jesse Crawford himself. Crawford was considerate but demanding; near the end of the audition he went over to the console and dashed off an impromptu invention — one of his deceptively smooth, brilliantly polished gems of miniaturization — and turning to Ann, said, "Play it."

For Ann, whose amazing musical mind had been punching out a mental player roll all the time the Poet of the Organ was improvising, this was not the gigantic feat it would have been for some organists. Still, she admits she had qualms as she went to the console. "Should I play it exactly as he did," she asked herself, "or should I do an improvisation on *his* improvisation in my style?" She decided to do it as Crawford had played it, and she evidently made the right choice. When



Ann Leaf at the console of the "Wonder Morton" in Loew's Kings Theatre, Brooklyn (1958) as she gives it its Saturday morning exercise.

it was through, Crawford gave a glowing report to Morros. Not long afterwards Ann got the coveted CBS job for which Morros recommended her.

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Soon Ann became one of the network's most popular personalities. Besides two shows of her own, "Nocturne" and "Ann Leaf At The Organ," she was a regular feature on broadcasts with Fred Allen, Frank Parker, Ted Malone, Tony Wons, and Ben Alley. Maybe you remember the Philco ads that ran in those days showing two pictures of Ann at the Wurlitzer. The first picture had her twisted almost out of recognition, like a reflection in a Coney Island fun house . . . this was the way you heard "Nocturne" on an *ordinary* radio. The second picture showed Ann straightened out and playing right . . . the way she sounded on your Philco Super Heterodyne. Another popular ad of the day was a nice full-color photo of Ann at the Kimball console (formerly Lew White's studio organ) in the old CBS studios on Seventh Avenue. In this ad, Ann told us that Maxwell House Coffee was good to the last vox. There were fan magazine features galore, miles of syndicated material about how she always worked in linen overalls at the studio, others telling her beauty secrets (secrets which most of her contemporaries wish they knew today), and there were all kinds of gag shots. A memorable one showed her looking about two feet tall beside towering Tiny Ruffner, her announcer.

One reason for Ann's tremendous popularity on the radio (besides, of course, the wonderful music she played) was the way her sunny personality came across. In my record collection one of the prize items is a transcription of a 1934 "Ann Leaf At The Organ" program. To hear her joke with the announcer, spring the song cues like a trouper, laugh in her wonderful way, is almost like having her sitting beside the superhet with you. Occasionally she would even sing, but usually

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"It looks more like Baby Rose Marie at a 2-manual Estey parlor pumper," says Ann of this 1932 item from "Radio Round-Ups."

## ANN LEAF

the vocals were taken care of by gentlemen like Frank Parker or Ben Alley.

During her long run on CBS, Ann made a number of guest appearances around the country. One of these was at the METROPOLITAN Theatre in Boston where a new 24-rank Wurlitzer had replaced the theatre's original Skinner. This is the same organ that Ed Gress, that indefatigable enthusiast, has recently so beautifully restored. Another of Ann's personal appearances was to inaugurate the new Wurlitzer in station WHEC in Rochester, New York (where Denver's Dick Hull was then the "boy wonder" staff organist). While in Rochester she played a special broadcast for Good Gulf Gas on the Wurlitzer in the RKO Theatre. And according to newspaper clippings, her visit was a social, as well as musical triumph. During a sojourn in California she broadcast from the Wurlitzer in the CARTHAY CIRCLE Theatre, though she did not appear in the theatre during show time. One of her unique regular programs was called "Three Consoles" and it featured Ann at the New York Paramount, Eddie Dunstedter (and sometimes Venida Jones) on the Kilgen in KMOX, St. Louis, and Milton Charles on the WENR Wurlitzer in Chicago; quite a feat of remote control in those days.

From 1929, when she first went on the air for CBS until the late 30's, Ann's pipe organ music could be heard on the air almost every day. But many people don't know that Ann Leaf is still heard daily on CBS. All you have to do is tune in "Nora Drake" or "Road To Happiness" and you'll hear her setting the mood for Nora's tribulations or smoothing things out when the going gets rough on the "Road."

But fortunately you don't have to get soap in your ears just to hear Ann play nowadays. Her two Westminster records, made last summer on the BYRD Theatre Wurlitzer in Richmond (ah, there's a town with a soul—three first-rate Wurlitzers still going strong) have a favorite place in most record collections. Ann admits being partial to the second album, "The Very Thought of You," because it is, she feels, more the sort of thing she enjoys doing . . . lighthearted and with a beat. However, the first album, "Ann Leaf At The Mighty Wurlitzer," contains a full helping of her delicious theme song, "In Time," together with some wonderfully lush ballad arrangements. Some of Ann's own compositions appear on both records. The lilting "Happy Island" is the sort of tune that gets in your head and stays there . . . and the same goes for her rollicking "Rio Coco." Not yet recorded are Leaf originals like "Aristocrat at the Automat," "Mirage on the Desert," "The Ivy League Rock," and (this is Jay Quinby's favorite) "Tugboat on a Toot."

One of the happiest features of my friendship with Ann has been the opportunity to go with her to Loew's KINGS Theatre in Brooklyn where she gives the superb 26-rank Robert Morton a Saturday morning workout. This theatre is a wonderful setting for organ music, a cross between Saint Peters in Rome and Madame Pompadour's boudoir, and the organ, one of the Five Wonder Mortons installed in Loew's deluxe theatres around New York in the late 20's, has a personality all its own . . . and strings that would make Mantovani's mouth water. Early arrivals at Saturday matinees are sometimes lucky enough to catch a bit of Ann's music before CinemaScope time, and many of them are astounded to know that there's an organ in the theatre. The reaction of others is even more curious: "Gee, listen to that lady play that great big piano!" is one comment I overheard not long ago. But the real stopper was "Man . . . dig that crazy Hammond!"

Hammond diggers would enjoy a visit to Ann's apartment in Manhattan's sprawling London Terrace. Here the Hammond has a sunny spot by the window overlooking the courtyard, beside it is the Mason & Hamlin piano and one or the other is being played constantly . . . sometimes both. A collection of fine water-colors hangs on the cocoa-colored walls, and there is a general air of hominess in the whole apartment that is rare in New York. One end of the living room is given over to Kleinie's rapidly growing display of ceramics—wonderfully original groups in bright glazes, single heads, fantastic objects. Peter Kleinert, age 13, is a creative youngster whose enthusiasms have taken over most of the remaining spare corners in the apartment. A few months ago his bedroom had so much model railroad gear in it that sleeping space was at a premium: now it's astronomy. Peter has a huge telescope twice as big as he is, and with the cooperation of some friendly penthouse-dwelling neighbors on the floor above, has made the roof of London Terrace into a sort of East Coast Mount Palomar.

To say that Ann keeps busy is a vast understatement. Between sessions at CBS, practicing, composing, feeding her hungry menfolk, (and recently painting furniture), she loves to go to Philharmonic concerts, the theatre, and the opera. Her real passion, though, is the theatre organ, and to hear that green and gold monster out in Brooklyn come to life under her touch is an unforgettable thrill.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if some midnight, not too far away, you could turn on your radio and hear "In Time" . . . again?

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