

(At the request of organist Lew Williams, and with the kind permission of George Wright, we are pleased to present this article from the Summer 1956 TIBIA. Ed.)

## GEORGE WRIGHT



**Because of his virtuosity on the five-manual Wurlitzer he has practically made famous single-handedly, his choice of representative music, and the high quality of his organ recordings, Mr. Wright has done much to further the T.O. with those who didn't grow up in the aura of one.**

The mere mention of the name of George Wright to anyone at all interested in the theatre organ results in many exclamations of praise for this truly gifted artist. His recordings are "required listening" in every record collection. It is fitting that we here present his story — of a lad who dreamed of great adventures in the theatre organ world and who, today a young man of only 36, has attained a unique prestige as an organist.

George was born in Orland, California (about 150 miles north of San Francisco) on August 28, 1920 and, in case you are interested in further statistics: height 6 feet; weight 165 lbs.; blue eyes and brown hair augmented with "alarmingly increasing" patches of gray.

Now let's settle back and enjoy reading George's own account of his career as an organist — which will be climaxed this coming month, when he returns to New York City at the invitation of Virgil Fox to perform in recital from the console of the Paramount Theatre Wurlitzer before the annual convention of the American Guild of Organists!

### Boyhood Dreams

"Certain of my older acquaintances may not be too far from wrong in suggesting that Mother was frightened by a Wurlitzer and that I was weaned on Jesse Crawford recordings. As a child I was enthralled by the magnificent variety of rumbles, roars, and shrieks emanating from the organ grilles in accompaniment to the action on the movie screen. I vividly recall Betty Compson, Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., Eleanor Boardman, and all the rest of the Roaring Twenties screen stars, but even more vividly I recall the theatre organ accompaniment. My mind was firmly made up — even at that tender age — that I should be an organist and show the world that I, too, could

commit the aforementioned rumbles, roars, and shrieks. I would even aim for the highest of all peaks and someday perhaps be allowed to touch a finger gingerly to one of the instruments that God, in the person of Jesse Crawford, had played.

"How well I remember being taken to the opening of the new Fox Theatre in San Francisco in 1929. The front sidewalk, covered in red plush carpet into which a nine year old sank ankle-deep — the ornate main lobby where Mrs. William Fox had spent too much of the stockholders' money on plush gold leaf, French antiques, gold brocades, gold tassels, huge vases which formerly belonged to the Czars, more gold and still more gold. The high point in the program was when Doc Wilson rode up on the elevator astride the Wurlitzer and played his first organ solo. Then and there I knew that someday I would be the organist of the Fox Theatre and that was that.

### Begins Organ Studies

"We moved subsequently to Stockton, California, and it was there that I started my organ studies in 1934 during my freshman year in high school. The Fox California Theatre still used the organ several times weekly — played so capably by Inez McNeil for Saturday morning kiddie shows and during Bank Nite, china giveaways, and the inevitable amateur nights. Mrs. Mac, as everyone called her, knew that I was wild to get my hands on that Wurlitzer. I met her backstage one Saturday morning after I had played a piano accompaniment for some poor monster's tap dance and she agreed — after much pleading on my part — to accept me as a pupil. My first lesson the following Sunday morning at nine was preceded by a totally sleepless night. Mrs. Mac was charging me the monumental sum of one dollar per lesson, and a monumental sum it was to me and my family in those depression days. Imagine any teacher in these times giving even a three-minute lesson for that price! Not Mrs. Mac. She gave up every Sunday morning from nine until noon to work me over. And that she did. Previously, I had played the piano only by ear. Mrs. Mac soon had me reading the little black dots and curlicues. We worked up to Bach's "Eight Little Preludes and Fugues," tempered with such deathless gems as selections from "Hit the Deck, Chu Chin Chow, Show Boat," and all the currently popular tunes.

"I thought I had really arrived when I was allowed to use the Glockenspiel on the second chorus of a jazzy rhythm number. The ultimate of artistic registration was reached when I was told to turn off the tremulants and use the Viol d'Orchestre and Viol Celeste 8' and 4' and Chinese Block for the verse of "Chinese Lullaby."

"The organ at the Fox Theatre was originally a nine-rank Wurlitzer Model 210. When the theatre was rebuilt and enlarged in the middle twenties a Robert-Morton Oboe Horn and English Post Horn were added, along with a third manual of eight straight stops from the dismantled Spencer organ in the Tivoli Theatre in San Francisco. The eight straight ranks consisted of 8' French Horn, Stopped Diapason (redwood), Muted Viol, Muted Viol Celeste, 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ ' Twelfth, 2' Piccolo, 8' Kinura and Trumpet. In addition to the usual 16' and 4' octave couplers this manual also had 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ ' and 2' couplers — making for odd sounds with the Kinura and Trumpet, to say the least. Somehow this conglomeration of the works of various builders hung together to make beautiful sounds, and Mrs. Mac certainly knew how to coax them out. If anyone deserves credit for showing me how to play a rhythm tune or put together a show medley it's dear Mrs. Mac. She is supposedly play-

ing the harp these days, but if I know her as well as I think, it's more likely a rhythmic "Peanut Vendor" or Vincent Youman's "Hallelujah" on a torrid Wurlitzer — Morton-Spencer installed on her own special cloud.

"Mr. and Mrs. Edward Pepper, owners of radio station KGDM in Stockton, were organ fans and the proud possessors of three organs — a two manual Moller in their residence, a Wurlitzer Style D on the first floor of their furniture store, and a theatre organ in the studios, the latter a 3/7 Moller. It was a poor excuse for an organ. The stoplist was slightly unusual — being drawn from seven ranks Diapason. Tuba, String Celeste, Tibia Clausa, Kinura and the original nanny goat Vox Humana. I chose to practice on the store Wurlitzer to which had been added a Salicional Celeste and Clarinet from the dismantled Smith organ from the National Theatre in Stockton. This was one of those rare little organs that sounds twice its size in quality, not quantity. I can still recall its beautiful Trumpet and a peculiar silvery, singing sound that would force Harry James to look to his laurels.

### The High School Episode

"A few miles from Stockton, in North Sacramento, the Grant Union High School had just bought the organ from a theatre in Northern California and was about to have it installed in the school auditorium. The problem was to select an organist — preferably a student. The superintendent visited our home with the lucrative offer — paying me to attend his school and a free organ on which to practice. Outstanding athletes have been lured from one school to another, but to approach a music student! I literally jumped at the offer, packed my small suitcase, received the somewhat reluctant parental blessing and ventured forth into the wide, wide world to seek my fortune.

"The school was quite a new one, situated in an isolated section of the outskirts of town. I suffered the pangs of homesickness the first night, a condition quickly alleviated following introduction the next day to the gentleman who was to install the organ — kindly old Fred Wood — the proverbial Limey with an unbelievably scandalous Cockney accent. Formerly in charge of the console department at the Wurlitzer factory in North Tonawanda, the company had sent him to San Francisco to superintend Hope-Jones' installation of the big organ for the California Theatre in San Francisco. One taste of the California climate and he was an adopted native for the rest of his life.

"Fred immediately had me helping re-leather pneumatics, cleaning magnet caps, soldering spreaders and doing other activities necessary to the installation of an organ. Previous to this time I hadn't known that such an animal as a pneumatic even existed and I couldn't have differentiated between a Tibia pipe and a Chrysoglott bar. Fred set me straight. The mysteries of relays and switches were logically explained and I fast became a first-class helper. By this time school was in session but not for George. I didn't bother to register for classes, and, happily enough, no one complained. The more important thing was getting that organ finished and playing. By now I'd been away from practice too long and my fingers longed to trek up and down the manuals.

"Came that wonderful day of days. With the wind turned and all chests checked out for dead notes and runs, we were ready to put in the pipes — all six ranks. The little divided Style D Wurlitzer was at last in the home stretch. Untuned, unregulated, and with no swell shutters, I played and played until the

wee small hours. Several days later the organ was presented to the student body in a more refined condition and its success was something more than mild. The kids, accustomed to long dull lectures and travelogues during the assemblies, really waxed enthusiastic over my popular tunes. The organ was an unqualified hit.

"The following year it was our fortune to acquire some of the school's money for additional parts. We added a Brass Trumpet, Orchestral Oboe, Clarinet, Piano, Vibraharp and Marimba to the manual divisions; added couplers and Tibia Clausa unifications to the Solo manual, and a 16' Tuba and octave coupler to the Pedal. Unlikely tonal additions perhaps, but ones that sounded extremely well there.

"When, in 1938, a huge government grant was allotted the school, including funds for a new or enlarged organ, Fred Wood and I bought the organs from four different theatres, a new four-manual console and relays from Kilgen in St. Louis and ended up with a theatre-type installation including the luxuries of English Post Horn, Krumet, Saxophone and other stop names that titillate the ATOE imaginations. Twenty-two ranks may seem to be a lot of organ for a 1220 seat auditorium, but it was installed so as not to be overpowering. This is really an outstanding theatre organ, and to the best of my knowledge is still used regularly.

"The following year came this message: How long can I stay on at this school in a post-graduate capacity? The authorities were more than willing, but I felt the urge to try my wings in the commercial field. I had spent every possible spare moment for five years in diligent practice and work, work, and more work. The big city of San Francisco beckoned. I ended up in Oakland, just across the Bay.

"The fledgling landed in a Chinese night club at another Style D Wurlitzer. Some of my experiences at the New Shanghai Terrace Bowl on 10th Street and Broadway would defy telling and postal censorship regulations. For one thing, I shared a dressing room with a fan and bubble dancer named Lotus Lee, former Lea La Rae, nee Hortense Rozelia Estorga. No, that wasn't a magenta spotlight focused on my face during the floor show organ solo — merely the remainder of a teen-age blush. The establishment had its good points, including a nightly broadcast over an Oakland radio station, and the invaluable experience playing for shows. The organ had been installed with saliva, Scotch tape and baling wire, so my schoolday installation experience put me in good stead. Never a night went by that I didn't have to clean the generator commutator, recover a pneumatic, fix a cipher. Invariably during the day the rats had increased their population inside the console, so this meant a nightly adjustment of the stop-key contacts. All of this, too, for the magnificent sum of \$56.60 weekly, paid by my ever-loving boss Dr. Fong Wan, whose favorite expression was '... Hammond awgun go aw, ee, aw. Wuhlitzuh pop awgun go ooh, ooh, ooh, all day long.' And so it is with regret that our ship sinks in the west, and we must leave the colorful Orient with its brilliantly-plumaged Tibias and console rats. About that postal censorship ... well, uh ...

#### Off to San Francisco!

"Over in San Francisco, Radio Station KFRC had acquired a hybrid organ — Estey-Kimball-Wurlitzer-Morton-Photoplayer-Gottfried — as payment for unpaid bills — from a music store in the city. It was originally a Spencer church organ with seven or eight straight stops on the Swell, another seven or eight

"judiciously unified" on the Choir and Great, plus fan tremulants! Elbert Lachelle, long-time staff organist of the KFRC, and his predecessors, had doctored the organ but it still was in a sad state of affairs when I joined the staff in 1941 at the recommendation of Lachelle who had joined the Navy. Begging, borrowing, buying parts and pipes kept George busy, let alone the never-ending job of re-leathering pneumatics and replacing string, screen door springs, and friction tape. This is the only organ I have ever known that had five straight ranks of different makes of Tibia pipes on the Swell manual at eight, four, twelfth, tierce and two foot pitches, to say nothing of a sixth Tibia in a unit Flue chest to service the Choir and Great manuals. Martin and Fallis, the organ service men, really earned their five dollars a week on that one, but we were all gratified because it sounded terrific over the air.

#### On the NBC

"This hybrid organ finally got the best of me and I moved a bit further uptown in 1942 at the request of the National Broadcasting Company. What a joy to land on a good Wurlitzer in good condition! This 3/19 job, which NBC purchased from Paramount Studios in Hollywood in 1941 for the outrageous sum of \$1100, was virtually a new organ — all brownskin leather, bakelite magnet caps and originally voiced and finished by the great genius, Jimmy Nuttall. It had been my privilege to express my thoughts about its installation when Paul Schoenstein and Charles Hershman were laying it out for the new NBC building, so it ended up exactly as I wanted it — nothing but pipes and rackboards and percussions in the actual chambers, with all the noise-making regulators, tremulants, and conductors in a sub-chamber. This was a typically fine Crawford-type of Wurlitzer that almost played itself when hands were placed on the manuals, and it was a pleasure to hear some real Wurlitzer sounds once again — Tibia, Krumet, Oboe Horn, Quintadena, Brass Trumpet and all the trademarks.

#### Beckoning to the "Voice of Prophecy"

"No sooner had I caught my breath at NBC when the manager of the S.F. Fox Theatre phoned to ask that I take over the community sings on the Saturday midnight shows at his palace of passion and pleasure. My thoughts raced back to that opening night in 1929 — the voice of prophecy had spoken in the voice of the theatre manager. The deal was all set, but the organ proved to be a disappointment to me. The Mrs. William Fox mentioned in an earlier paragraph had caused several elaborate layers of golden draperies to be hung over the organ grilles in spite of the pleadings of the Wurlitzer installation men. The organ sounded like a mouse in a ball park. After one show I was ready to throw in the towel, especially when the manager would not grant me permission to remove the draperies. An enterprising girl friend and colleague, June Melendy, allowed me to cry on her shoulder over the unhappy situation. Fortified with a suitable stimulating beverage, and a long, sharp butcherknife in hand, (acquired from June's mother,) we entered the theatre late that night, as partners in crime, cut the heavy ropes that supported the draperies. I must say that Miss Melendy, scaling the iron ladders leading up the walls of the building in high heels, huge picture hat and a new mink coat presented a never-to-be-forgotten picture! The dastardly deed committed, and bedecked with about thirteen years of black dirt, dust, and dry rot covering us from head to toe, we truly looked like the Gold Dust Twins.

"The management could not but forgive us. The new sound of the organ was a revelation. The mouse in the ball park had emerged a giant, attuned to his surroundings. I can truthfully say that this is by and large the best theatre organ I have ever played. True, it has its faults and idiosyncrasies as does every organ, but this is the definitive theatre Wurlitzer.

"Soon the Saturday midnight community sing was expanded to a four times daily schedule for Saturdays and Sundays, and the other five days a week followed in short order — by public demand, I'm happy and proud to say. June played on my day off, Wednesday, and occasionally we dragged out the second console and frightened the paying customers with duets.

#### Another Childhood Dream Comes True

"Happy days, those, but soon ended, for in November, 1944, I was called to New York to play a show for NBC. Naturally, as soon as I arrived in New York the sponsor decided to move his show to Hollywood. I stayed and stuck it out. There were many pleasant days in New York in radio — including guest appearances with Paul Whiteman, Percy Faith, Bing Crosby, Perry Como, my own little orchestra on the Robert Q. Lewis Show, and a wonderful seven-year association playing in a trio with Charles Magnante, accordionist, and Tony Mottola, guitarist, on a radio show sponsored by The Prudential Insurance Company. It took the strength of Gibraltar sometimes to put up with the singer on the show, but the musical good times with Charlie and Tony were more than rewarding.

"Came the Paramount Theatre and another childhood dream come true. Here was Crawford's famous organ — even his old dressing room — now presided over by the unbelieving dreamer. Yes, I pinched myself, but there wasn't much time for even pinching — what with sometimes six and seven shows a day to play at the theatre in addition to my radio activities. I really kept the pavement warm between NBC and the Paramount! Yellow Cab profits went up that year — as undoubtedly did those of Goodyear Rubber.

"Now that I think back, it's hard to draw too many New York details from my memory. Time passed so quickly, success came in the musical field, but hanging over it all was the ever present dislike of New York City and having to live there. Gad! Those icy, cold winters — those, hot, humid summers. California beckoned once again, so here I am in Hollywood living a relaxed life once more and never once missing being tied down to a theatre schedule. One relaxed show a day for Don Lee Television allows me to keep my finger in the professional field and permits me ample time for practice and planning new recording repertoire.

"Do I think the theatre organ as such will ever come back? Most definitely my answer must be negative. Where are the organs to play? Who will service and repair them? Who will play them? Does the public want to hear them? I don't think so. Quite a number of us have been lucky enough to acquire these instruments for home installations, but there, I think, it ends. Perhaps recordings may stimulate a certain amount of new interest, but it just isn't in the cards for a medium such as television to get on the band wagon. Space requirements, installation and service expense don't fit into the picture — with accent on the space requirements. Let's leave the theatre organ to the hobbyists ... and a wonderful hobby it is. I know — it's mine, too. And I wouldn't have missed a moment of it for the world."