

Romantic? Yes! Hopeless? No!

by D. Brian Jensen

I have read with great interest of the rigors of those stalwart individuals who install theatre pipe organs in their private residences. It readily became apparent that these installations usually involve a home in a suburban location with the organ placed in an existing space such as a basement, a garage, or in a more involved setting; creating an organ studio by a sizable home modification or addition. In either case, I could appreciate the challenge of such a formidable task, not to mention the effort of convincing other family members and friends that you are not a total fool for even considering such a ridiculous project. But, you see, I was foolish. Not only did I acquire a rather tired, old, theatre organ to restore, but I became part of the trend to move into an inner city neighborhood by purchasing a once grand but decaying house to restore concurrently with the organ. Talk about your skeptics!! Much to my relief (and that of others), the results of my labors are beginning to bear fruit in a most rewarding way.



Brian Jensen's Wurlitzer Style E in the library of his restored Baltimore home is shown here.

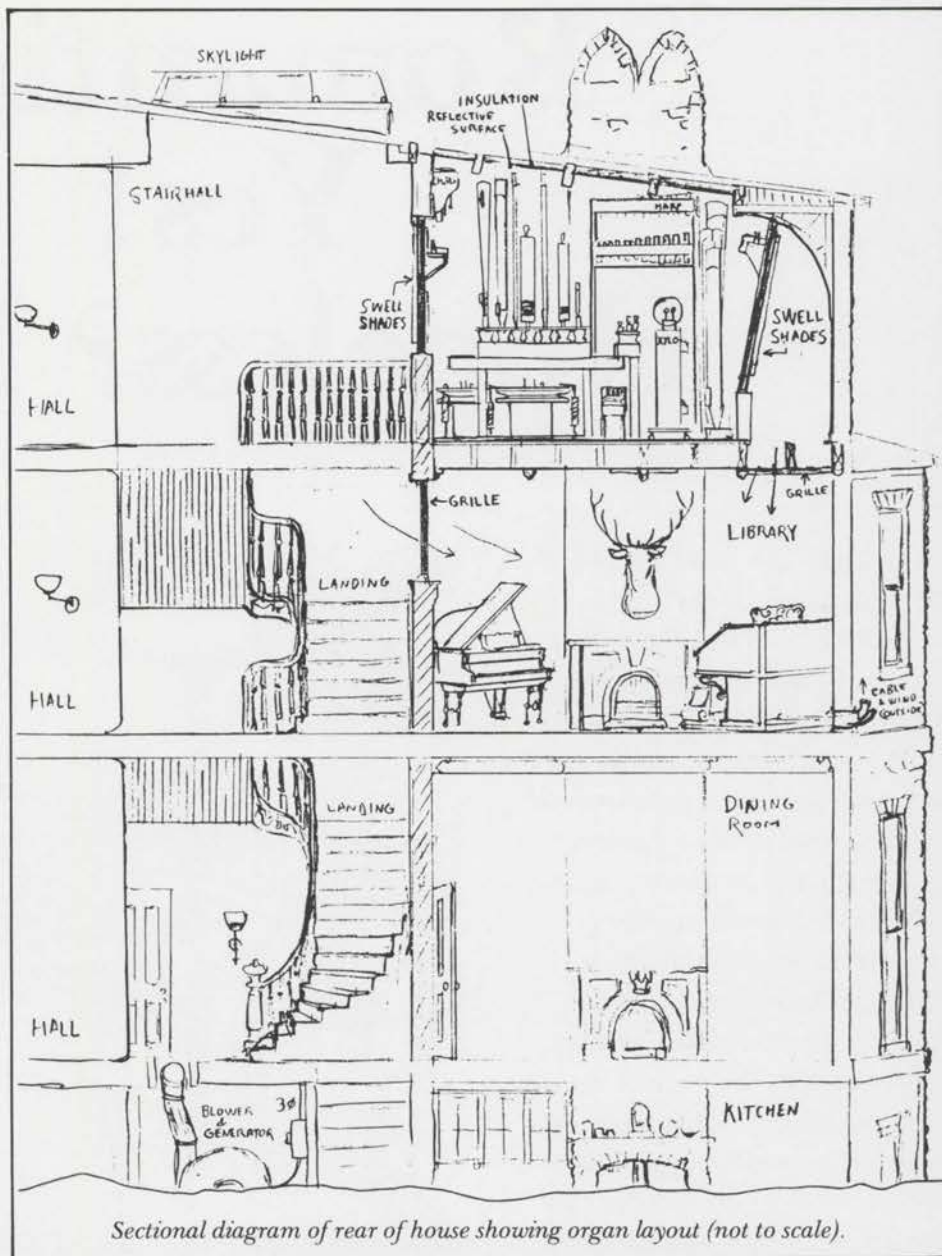
Here follows the story of how this ultimate challenge began . . .

A keen interest in old pipe organs, (a natural for a budding, hopeless romantic like myself) began in grade school. However, it was not until my college years at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, that I, as a major in fine arts, experienced my first theatre organ. The Byrd and Loews theatres were but a short distance away, and the famous Mosque theatre was practically on the VCU campus — all supplied, as you know, with superb Wurlitzer instruments. I was quite overwhelmed by their gushing, romantic sound and became an INSTANT convert.

During the summers of my college years, I worked at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., where I quickly made friends with a fellow employee and organ enthusiast, Durward Center. He introduced me to a devout crowd of “console flies” who met regularly at the huge Alexandria Arena to hear and skate to the dramatic tones of the enormous 4/34 Wurlitzer organ (formerly from the Radio City Music Hall Center Theatre), under the capable hands of a jovial organist — the late Jimmy Boyce.

It was also during my years at college that I discovered the wonders and romanticism of late nineteenth century architecture. The VCU campus was situated in downtown Richmond and had incorporated many Victorian era structures into various student housing and classroom facilities. My freshman dormitory was such an example. It was a magnificent row house with ornate plaster ceilings, stained-glass, elaborate woodwork and a grand staircase. Having been raised in the vanilla cookie-cutter style of the Washington, D.C. suburbs, it was love at first sight. Indeed, then, between the sounds of the mighty Wurlitzers and living among grand old Victorian piles, by the time I graduated from school, I had become a confirmed, hopeless, delirious romantic.

After college, I worked for a while servicing organs for the Richmond office of the Washington, D.C.-based organ firm of Lewis and Hitchcock. I quickly learned the construction techniques of pipe organs and enjoyed the work immensely. But I was offered, and accepted, a position in the Smithsonian Institution. Eventually I shared an apartment with my friend, Durward, which we decorated in a grand Victorian style. Durward, in the meantime, had ended his position at the Smithsonian and started his own business restoring automatic musical instruments. The success of this business shortly forced him into seeking a larger shop space than that which he was presently renting. We both agreed that perhaps it was time to find, and buy, the houses of our romantic dreams.



Sectional diagram of rear of house showing organ layout (not to scale).

Dismissing Washington as too expensive, we were beckoned by friends to nearby Baltimore, Maryland. Reminding me of my days in Richmond, downtown Baltimore real estate offered a wide selection from which to choose, both architecturally and economically. Durward finally settled on a great 1883 Queen Anne style row-house with an attached shop building, while I discovered, across the street, a classic Baltimore row house with the traditional Baltimore white marble steps. The house is of 1870's vintage, had a 25 amp electric service that mysteriously would go on and off by itself, and had a water supply that bubbled up through the sidewalk instead of issuing from any interior faucet. However, it did have spacious, twelve-foot ceilings in the rooms, seven fireplaces, and a graceful curving staircase with a sculpture niche among the surviving original features. Truly, a house

well worth the paltry sum of eight-thousand dollars.

In my enthusiasm to restore and create the house of my dreams, theatre organs were all but forgotten, until, a couple of years later, Durward acquired a twenty-six rank Aeolian residence type organ for installation in his music room. Only then did the desire for an organ of my own return. My house was actually becoming livable with the parlor restoration almost completed, new wiring, a new roof, and wonder of wonders, plumbing that actually worked! Unfortunately, expenditures for all of these improvements and the promise of much more to come, seemed to dictate that the only organ I would be able to acquire would be comprised of various parts from different organs purchased for little or nothing, which could be at least based on theatre organ design. It came as a great surprise to learn, from

one of Durward's band organ customers, of a genuine Wurlitzer organ for sale at an attractive price — right in the very suburb where I grew up.

The organ was a typical 2/7, style E Wurlitzer (actually, opus 1690, July 1927). When first I saw it, the organ was being stored in the master bedroom of a high-rise apartment building. The owner of the organ restored pianos for a living and had finally given up trying to find a suitable location for installation. He showed me a great heap of parts which comprised the instrument. This was the first time I had seen the inside of a Wurlitzer. Showing evidence of years of use, water damage, and abuse suffered from a hasty removal from its last installation in a church, the organ, in many ways looked like a more formidable challenge than my house had at first appeared.

I asked the owner if he knew the history of the organ. He replied that it had been originally installed in the Auditorium Theatre in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Suddenly, I remembered that my great Aunt Winnie used to accompany silent movies on piano and organ in her younger days in Winston-Salem. A phone call confirmed (quite enthusiastically) that she had, indeed, played "the pictures" at the Auditorium Theatre. Originally built as a big vaudeville house in the 'teens, the Auditorium later had its name changed to the State Theatre and was converted primarily to a movie theatre, which is, no doubt, when the Wurlitzer was installed. Great Aunt Winnie also described her successful career as a silent movie organist, playing at various theatres in Winston-Salem, Atlanta, and Macon, Georgia, and eventually, her own home town of Mount Airy, North Carolina (the "Mayberry" of Andy Griffith fame). She continued to play in various theatres until talking pictures put musicians and organs out of business.

Well, of course, that did it!! I HAD to own that instrument. So, going a bit further into debt (a great American pastime), a deal was struck and the Wurlitzer was trucked to Baltimore. It was, after all, like bringing home a piece of my family heritage. Once safely stowed inside the house, with its windchests, pipes, and a plethora of other parts filling the first floor like an impassable log jam, I quickly realized that all further work on the house would halt until the organ was restored, installed and playing. Rotting window sills, peeling wallpaper and paint would just have to wait.

Locating a suitable space for the organ to speak into came fairly easily. The largest open, reverberant space in the house is the main stairhall. What was at one time

a maid's room on the rear of the third floor became (with its ceiling removed to provide clearance for the bass pipes) a pipe chamber and space for a separate relay room. The swell shades were mounted just below the skylight in the stair hall. This provided a suitable setting for the sound, which, like daylight, would flood the interior of the house. Not quite so easy was finding a location for the console. It was too large to situate on the main stair landing as I had originally hoped. I finally placed it in the room directly below the

pipe chamber. Because this location was so removed from the main stair hall, a second set of swell shades was installed vertically along with a curved "tone chute" which directed the sound down into the room below directly over the spot on the outside wall where the console was to be situated. During the initial design phase, I set my stereo system in the newly created pipe chamber and, playing theatre organ recordings, I concluded that the sound was not balanced enough at the console between that which came down through the tone chute and what was being heard from the stair hall, since the only opening from the hall into this room was through the stairhall doorway itself. To resolve this, another large tone opening was cut in the adjacent wall into the stair hall until a stereo-like balance was achieved from both orifices. The thick, hard plaster walls and high ceilings further encouraged me to believe in the potential for a grand-sounding organ installation.

Saving the console for last, restoration and installation of the organ continued steadily over the next six years. Since I had never seen the organ in its assembled state, I was quite grateful to the Wurlitzer company for printing an assembly letter code on the ends of windchests and structural components. This was invaluable in realizing the original configuration of the organ. What aided me the most, however, was maintaining an organ-design diary, a logbook if you will. All of the ideas and plans for the installation were drawn, designed, and each ramification carefully considered prior to any construction. This eliminated a lot of wasted time and physical effort to be certain that things were going to fit. This journal has also become interesting reading, documenting the ongoing progress as well as becoming a permanent record of the renovation project for posterity.

One difficulty I was faced with early in the project was whether to install the instrument as it was originally built, or to effect any "improvements." My Smithsonian restoration training instilled in me the value of installing the instrument exactly as it was originally constructed. An unaltered style E Wurlitzer may have been perfectly suited for accompanying silent movies, but I wanted an instrument which was more versatile, which could be used as a solo (concert, if you will) instrument. I decided to preserve as much of the original integrity of the organ by allowing improvements to be limited to a configuration which the Wurlitzer company later developed in redesigning their smaller theatre organs, improvements such as additional tremulants and an expanded stop unification system.

GRAND *The Family Theatre*



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An Every Day Feature

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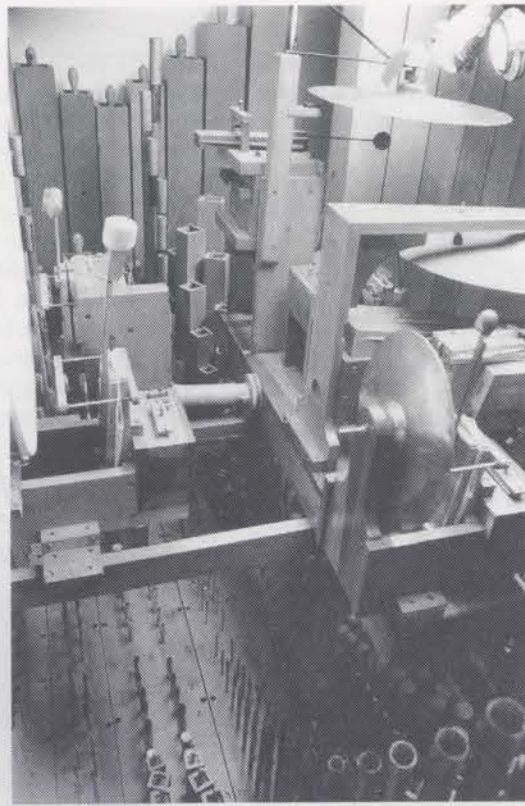


What's Your
Favorite Tune?
Ask Her, She Will
Play It!

Brian Jensen's Great Aunt Winnie



The author's classic Baltimore 1870s row house.



Chamber view; although tight, everything is accessible for servicing.

I obtained a larger Wurlitzer relay and switchstack to substitute for the original in which the cables had been cut. I found that the primary action on the larger relay had been releathered quite ineptly, whereas the primary action on my original relay were beautifully done. I switched primary action boxes and much to my amazement, they fit exactly — down to the last screw hole! There is something to be said about mass production techniques!

Through research, I learned that my Wurlitzer was removed from the Auditorium/State Theatre in the mid 1930s and reinstalled in a church nearby. As usual, except for the chrysoglott and the chimes, the percussions and special effects had been stripped. I was able to find replacements, most of which are Wurlitzer. One of the effects which was not built by Wurlitzer, the xylophone, is now a large-scale, 49-note Moller unit which, by dropping a felt strip pneumatically in front of the hammers (my own design), doubles as a marimba/harp. The combination action had also been removed from the console when I purchased the organ. I was able to replace it with a Wurlitzer action from a larger organ. This doubled the number of pistons from the original action, which had been only five per manual.

The console shell itself was battered from years of abuse. The keyboard bracket scroll carvings were missing and the finish mottled by ill-placed plants and careless watering. An easy solution would have been to simply paint and cover all of the

damaged areas, but I wanted to retain the natural mahogany color. I found that by matching a stain to the darkest discoloration, the new lacquer finish effectively disguised the worst of the blemishes. The missing scroll carvings were duplicated from plaster molds which were made from original carvings, and the reproduction was then cast from this mold using plastic, auto-body putty, gilded and lacquered.

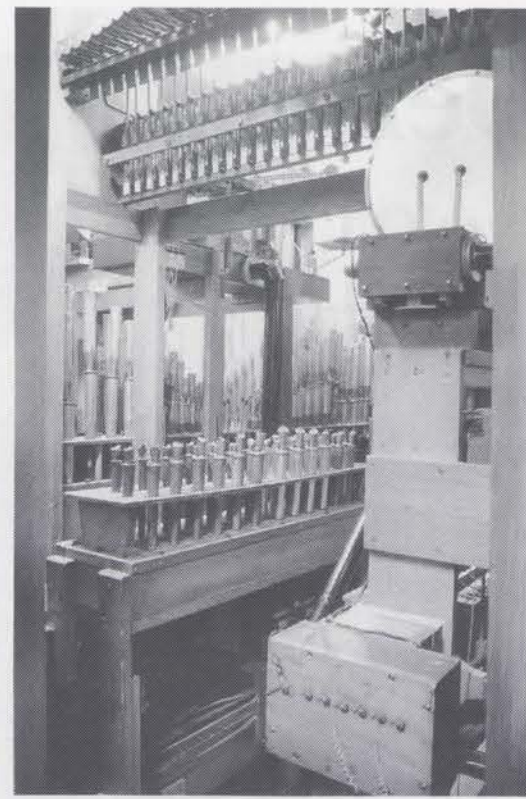
The blower motor required three-phase current for operation. This minor effort proved to be quite an exercise. While it was conveniently available on the pole directly behind my house (an advantage of living in the inner city), the task of convincing the electric company of why it was needed in a residence was exasperating. I was passed from person to person until I finally was referred to a senior representative who began to grasp the purpose of the three-phase current. (To these people, it was absolutely incredulous that someone would install a pipe-organ in their home, let alone an organ from a theatre). Once the communication barrier was bridged, the three-phase service was promptly installed. Finally, after the winding and wiring was tested and the pipes were tuned, the Wurlitzer again began producing music! It quite surpassed my expectations!

The organ had its first concert at a gathering of sixty members of the Baltimore-based Free State Theatre Organ Society in the fall of 1987. All of the years of un-rushed progress, the pages of drawings,



Author Brian Jensen seated at his Wurlitzer before completion of Victorian room.

How would such a hopeless romantic complete such a room . . .? Why as a Victorian Gentleman's library, of course.



Chamber view: note unusual rank of "capped" Kimuras, made by Hall, which allow the Kimuras to blend better with the ensemble.



Organ control panel in Gothic library. Antique meters register voltage and amps from organ's DC generator.



Grand piano with Welte reproducing player. Grille work above allows sound to enter from stairhall.

the carefully considered procedures for the restoration and the installation paid off handsomely in the finished instrument.

The installation, however, was far from complete. The cracked plaster walls and ceiling, the gaping tone openings in the hallway and in the room below all needed to be detailed in a way which would be aesthetically pleasing, and complement the instrument it housed. The room itself had even been used as a spray booth during the refinishing process for the console!

How would a hopeless romantic complete such a room and create an atmosphere that would be appropriate for playing and listening to such an instrument? Why as a Victorian, neo-Gothic, Gentleman's Library, of course.

I based the design for the room on a favorite period room which had been on display at the Smithsonian. My Gothic fantasy room took about two years of fun to create. Being an experienced exhibits specialist, and as such, a master of illusion, it was not difficult at all to produce the sumptuous fantasy as it might otherwise appear. The ceiling beams, cornice moldings, Gothic quatrefoils, tracery, and fretwork emerged from easily sculpted styrofoam, and held in position with "Liquid Nails." The ceiling's beaded-board effect was created by using inexpensive masonite paneling. I rationalized that all of this fool-the-eye approach was little different than the Victorian craftsmen of a century ago. Often they would use painted plaster or wood to imitate stonework, or false grain-

ing over a pine or poplar base wood to present the illusion of expensive walnut or rosewood. I was only preserving the tradition — with a slightly modern bent.

Many elements in the room were salvaged from other buildings, serving new uses. For instance, the bookcases were built from walnut choir stalls from a demolished church in Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania. The carved wood window valences were fashioned from sections of the discarded facade casework from the Moller organ in Saint Matthew's Cathedral from Washington, D.C. Antique shops and flea markets supplied appropriate furnishings and finishing touches; for example, brassware from the exotic East, a stuffed elk head, and a Gothic art case grand piano with a Welte reproducing player mechanism.

Now you may ask, is it finished? Well, that depends — the Gothic library, perhaps, is; the Wurlitzer still has a few more refinements to be completed, and, of course, there is the rest of the house which must be completed to complement the parlour and the library (even the kitchen is furnished with vintage appliances). The skeptics, at least for now, have been silenced. I don't feel nearly so foolish anymore for having embarked on such an enormous task. I have demonstrated that, with careful planning, steady work, a fertile imagination, and a LOT of time, anything can be accomplished. Besides, after all, what is time to a hopeless romantic who is pursuing a dream?