

# THE RAY BOHR STORY

By Douglas Marion



Ray Bohr at one of the two identical consoles in the Radio City Music Hall Theatre.

**THE FABULOUS** Radio City Music Hall Organ has beckoned to many. But only a few have made the trip successfully. After thirteen years at its console, Ray Bohr has certainly arrived, much to his credit and our fortune.

AS DOES many a biographical sketch in the Theatre Organ World, the Raymond F. Bohr story is intimately oriented toward the musical magic of Radio City Music Hall. But long before he sat at the side of the Music Hall's immense stage and watched and waited as the lights dimmed, the audience became hushed, and the organ cue faded into an organ prologue, Ray Bohr had started on his musical career that led here.

Born in Nyack, just north of New York City, Ray started his musical career by studying piano. He was just six at the beginning, and in two years he expanded his music and became a regular member of the choir of Grace Episcopal Church. This was his introduction to organ music. The firm attachment to the organ began at this moment, and the next

logical step was to learn to play this instrument. His first experiences were entirely without official sanction. Ray used to sneak into the church and turn on the organ. Inevitably he was apprehended, but not inevitably he managed to wind up as organist for choir rehearsals. So, although Ray tells us nothing about his first attempts, one is inclined to believe that Choirmaster, Albert E. Clark would not have picked his new accompanist without good reason. Not a bad start for an eight-year-old!

It is a long journey from the beginning to the climax of almost any story, and the next years were the preparatory ones. Ray obtained a job with M.A. Clark & Sons, a local organ firm. He wanted to learn all he could about his beloved instruments and took the job cleaning

up the fourth floor and in doing other unspecified tasks which Ray includes in his description 'general flunky'. But this official title did not last long, for Ray was soon going out on regular repair jobs. This soon taught him much about the inner workings -- or not workings -- of straight organs.

The Rockland Theatre in Nyack boasted a Wurlitzer 2/7 and Ray wanted to get his fingers on this keyboard. Finally, when he did get permission to play it, he discovered that its relay had been damaged by water. Undaunted and completely unafraid of work, Ray blended advice, ingenuity, and a lot of hard labor into getting the organ playing again. And the thrill? Will any of us ever outlive that moment of high adventure when, with all obstacles overcome, one of these beauties is put 'back on the air'?

Then there was the job as theatre organist! Ray, then a bright sixteen, was still in high school while playing organ three days (nights?) a week. This point Ray calls the biggest thrill of his life. And, parenthetically, he revisited this

organ recently and found it in excellent condition still. To quote Ray himself, "Good ol' Wurlitzer!"

If one must be absolutely fair, there is a police record in the lives of most of us. And so with Ray Bohr. He was loafing along — well, almost, anyway. Still working days with an organ company and playing nights, Ray managed to get in a little practice in his spare time. And by merest coincidence all his spare time was between one and six a.m. So there he was, practicing about four in the morning to be ready for his day's work and that night's show. Some narrow-minded neighbor who completely misunderstood the whole thing called the police to investigate the strange sounds.

But World War II came along to interrupt organ studies and playing. Ray Bohr found himself in the Signal Corps on duty in the Pacific Theatre. And as it did to so many important people, death came to Franklin D. Roosevelt just before the war ended. Ray recalls his depression when it became his task to play the little field organ for the memorial services held on the tiny airstrip on Iwo Jima. At the moment the war seemed endless. In a few months a bomb dropped on Hiroshima just 700 miles from the point where the little Estey ciphered during the memorial service, and the beginning of the end was knelled.

When he returned to civilian life, Ray resumed study with Harold Friedell of Calvary Episcopal Church and St. Bartholomew's Church in New York. His instructor was, at that time, president of the examining board of A.G.O. Ray was a demonstrator for Wurlitzer Electronic Organs, but he could not at first bring himself to tell Friedell that he was also working at Radio City Music Hall. News just didn't get around in New York in those days, we guess. When he finally did break the news to his teacher, Friedell was delighted. He was a wonderful man, says Ray.

The Rainbow Room boasted a 3/11 Wurlitzer Residence organ with a second console and player. Ray took over this job but reminds us that the organ sounded like a 'filter cigarette'. He explains that the original installation spoke into the room through the ceiling, but since this conflicted with the interior decorator's ideas of interior decorating, the swell shades were hidden by plastering up the hole and sound was brought in by way of a microphone and speakers. Ray says this produced an effect that was 99% speaker and the rest organ.

We don't know what happened to the Rainbow Room, but the organ is now installed in the residence apartment of Joseph Oelhaf, in Greenwich Village.

As has been apparent all along, Ray doesn't like to load himself up with unused time. So while working the Rainbow Room, Music Hall at Radio City, he also played for the 'Bride & Groom' show on TV, for a year or so. He tells us that he then took on a 'full time job', whatever that could mean, at the Music Hall where he is playing still, his thirteenth year there.



Photo taken a few years ago. Ray Bohr and the 3/14 Wurlitzer Studio organ at Radio City Music Hall, used extensively in Music Hall recordings.



Here is 16-year-old Ray Bohr at the 2/7 Wurlitzer in The Rockland Theatre, Nyack, New York.

Four records provide Ray Bohr music for those who know organ music. These will be reviewed elsewhere, but watch for the new one coming out under DESIGN label, this one in stereo.

Such is the story of Raymond F. Bohr as we have been able to pry facts out of his life. And it seems to have just gotten a good start. We expect to hear more from and of him as we go along. And thanks, Ray, for being ours.