

ORGAN MUSIC ON TOLUCA LAKE

By Douglas Marion



Dick Simonton's Wurlitzer 4/36

The approach to the home is along a tree-lined street of quiet beauty. Unless you knew, you would be unaware of the nearby lake as you turned into the circular driveway. Your first impression would indicate a shake-roof western style home of average proportions. But if you examine it closely, you will note that an architect has here created an impression of quiet simplicity and unassuming beauty that does not quite overcome the feeling of expectancy and excitement you somehow seem to be feeling. For here is the North Hollywood home of Dick and Helena Simonton and their four children.

As your host leads you through the foyer with its Peter Pan fountain, you approach a large sloped-ceiling living room, where your attention is immediately drawn to a four manual draw-knob console, the business end of the 65 rank Aeolian-Skinner concert organ installed at the end of the room. To your left, as you turn for a closer look and just above a door to the patio, is an eight rank Positiv division, with exposed pipework in a symmetrical arrangement.

At the end of a short hall, past the den, you turn down a circular staircase, lighted by a domed sky-light. At the bottom, a door is opened, and immediately in front of you across the room reposes a gleaming black 4 manual console — Wurlitzer! Later, you can't seem to remember crossing the room, but you can remember the row-upon-row of stop tablets! It is impossible not to be completely awe-struck as you feast your eyes on the hundreds of stops, with everything inscribed on them that you ever dreamed of, and many more you may

never have seen before. You find yourself reading stops so fast, you can't really digest those you just passed over!

After the first shock wave has hit you, you do begin to realize that you are in a tastefully decorated theatre auditorium. On your right is the stage with a red and white striped french curtain, and softly upholstered theatre seats in a soft grey extend back toward a projection room. In addition to the arc-light projector there are installed complete stereo recorders, play-back equipment, and a small but efficient work bench with several interest-whetting projects scattered about.

Then, as if drawn by a magnet too powerful to resist, you are back at that big, black, beautiful console. As if from afar, you hear someone say, "Well, lets turn it on" — and it takes on the breath of life. "Go ahead — try it!!!!" — Where do you start??? you find yourself wondering

How DID this all start?

Back in 1926, Dick Simonton was a young boy living in Seattle. He was attracted to the theatre organ when about 10, and spent many an hour in the theatres watching the organists turn out the sigh and sob music for the silents of the day. He studied piano for a couple of years, and finally found a job with a local organ installation and rebuilding concern. In those days, a Style D Wurlitzer could be had for a thousand bucks! But who had a thousand? He worked after school and on vacations at the rate of \$5.00 for a 60 hour week! He recalls spending HOURS changing stop tab engraving from TIBIA to Stopped Diapason — this to satisfy the organ buying church

committees! (Of course the pipes weren't changed — and many more than should didn't know the difference).

His interests turned to electronics when in high school, and he began working on theatre sound equipment. An electronic bass of 32' and 16' pitch was a device he built during this period, and with a working model he applied for a patent. During all this time, theatre organ music could be heard on records, and over live radio broadcasts. He remembers that his first organ record was Crawford's ROSES OF PICARDY, received on his twelfth birthday. Many hours were enjoyably spent listening to Ann Leaf and Eddie Dunstedter, the latter from KMOX which was picked up by Pacific Northwest stations.

The year 1938 found Simonton in Chicago with the W. W. Kimball Organ Company, where plans were being made to bring out an electric organ. When these plans did not develop, he returned to California, but only after discussing with the factory the building of a pipe organ for his planned-for home. In 1940 he acquired the Muzak franchise for southern California, and formed the company he now owns, Pacific Network, Inc.

En route to New York on his honeymoon in 1943, he stopped off at the Kimball factory and made final arrangements for the purchase of his first pipe organ. The war intervened, and delivery of a two manual seven rank classic type unit organ, was not made until 1945. It was the last organ to be delivered by the Kimball factory.

After much research, and knowing that he wanted a true theatre organ, Simonton arranged for the new home which now contains his two four-

theatre organ

manual organs. In 1952 it was completed, and he no sooner moved in than he and his family left for Europe. Dick had tentatively decided he wanted one organ with two consoles, one to play theatre style, and the other to do the classics. After visiting the Compton Factory in England, and other organs on the continent, he wisely decided that this idea was not what he wanted — it must be two separate organs.

Upon his return, he immediately started planning for both organs as separate projects. His search led him to many theatres and other supposed sources of theatre organs, but he was not long in finding what he wanted and arranging for the purchase. Both organ installations were underway at the same time, and perhaps it is a miracle that the tibias did not end up in the choir division of the concert organ! As a matter of fact, a brief mention of the AEolian-Skinner is in order at this point, even though it must be reserved as a separate story at a later date. As the instrument now stands it is made up of six divisions: -

Pedal - 8 ranks, Choir - 10 ranks, Great - 13 ranks, Swell - 20 ranks, Positiv - 8 ranks, Echo - '6 ranks, (electronic). It is a thoroughly complete American Classic Organ designed after the standards established by the late G. Donald Harrison of the AEolian-Skinner Organ Company. It has been just recently completed with the final tonal finishing of the pipe work by Don Gillespie of Boston, Mass.

The Wurlitzer 4/36 is made up primarily of two organs — Opus No. 2035 built March 1929 for Paramount Picture Studios, Hollywood. It was originally a 3 manual of 19 ranks designed for recording purposes and was installed on the scoring sound stage. James Nuttal was responsible for the design, installation and tonal regulation. It was used intermittently until 1931 when it was removed, crated and stored. In 1942 it was sold to NBC in San Francisco and installed there. While in the Bay area city it was broadcast by many prominent organists including George Wright, who served as staff organist for a time at the station. It was subsequently removed in 1953 to make room for a TV studio and at that time it was acquired by Simonton.

Installation started almost immediately, and additions to the organ came primarily from Opus No. 1732, a 3/8 Wurlitzer installed by the factory at Treasure Island, San Francisco, for the exposition of 1939-40. Other additions came from Opus No. 170 built for the Coliseum Theatre, Seattle, and from the Hope-Jones Organ built for St. Paul's Cathedral, Buffalo, New York. The four rank Vox Humana Chorus is from the Seattle Coliseum and is installed as an echo organ at the rear of the theatre. It includes a 4' rank, an 8' with 8' celeste, and a 16' C! rank that actually extends down to 16' C!

For months, as the organs and assemblies were received, the theatre looked like an organ factory store-room without apparent rhyme or reason. One had to gingerly thread his way through the maze of boxes, parts, chests, reservoirs, cable, percussion instruments and the like to get from one end of the room to another. Gradually, however, and with painstaking care the organ was being installed in the two chambers behind the stage. When it was determined that something was amiss, out it came for re-installation based on improved plans. At times it seemed as if the work had stopped; the pile of parts seemed to be growing larger rather than smaller as one might expect. But each part was finally properly located, and the duct-work and wiring were beginning to reach completion.

No great to-do was heard when the blower was first turned on, as there remained the task of leak chasing, pressure regulation, etc. With still much to do, work progressed at a steady pace with every effort directed toward an installation as near technically perfect as possible. Even at this stage, removal of a component part and re-installation was done to make it just right.

The triple-bolster console is an impressive creation which was executed by Bill Bunch using the console shell and combination action and manuals from the St. Paul Cathedral organ. The bolster and combination-pneumatic assembly were fashioned by hand with painstaking emphasis to detail, following closely the measurements and design established by the Wurlitzer factory. It is complete with all new stop tablets, engraved to the exact organ specifications.

As of today, work still is progressing on final details of the organ. Preliminary tonal regulation has been done for the entire organ. Final work is now underway on this phase of the finishing, and even as late as a month or two ago, some re-arrangement was being undertaken to eliminate "bugs" that had shown up in the completed organ.

Those who have not heard the organ would wonder how it might sound. Even many who have heard it, but whose impressions were gained several months ago, might well ask the same question. For much has transpired since then. The organ has many wonderfully soft and lovely combinations available. The Muted String, Quintadena, Dulciana and their celeste ranks make possible some of the most delicate tonal shadings imaginable. On the other hand, the reeds have power and fire to satisfy the whims of the most ardent exponent of the "blast 'em out of their seats" school!

Here has been created a really magnificent theatre organ. Many persons have stopped by to try their hand — amateurs and professionals alike — during the various stages of comple-

tion. As of this writing, it is Jesse Crawford who is giving the organ the workout it deserves — and if ever an organ was built for an organist here is the prime example. What's to come? Just you wait and see!

As you are brought back to the present, and find yourself thoroughly enjoying your surroundings, you cannot help but marvel over the fact that theatre organ enthusiasts are so dead in earnest in their desire to promote and encourage the preservation of the theatre organ. Not as a competitor to their close relative, the concert organ, but as a distinctive musical form in its own right!

In Simonton's home, notable among the activities centering around the theatre with its fine Wurlitzer have been the showing of some of the silent movie classics of several decades ago. With Gaylord Carter doing the interpretive accompaniment at the organ, Dick has shown BEAU GESTE, THE BIG PARADE, etc., to name just a few, to capacity audiences. At the most recent such affair, which was by invitation only, Oliver Wallace was the guest of honor. Wallace is musical director of the Walt Disney Studios, but will perhaps be better remembered for his early-day work with the then new form of theatre instrument introduced in the Pacific Northwest, the Wurlitzer Theatre Organ. It was Wallace who gave Crawford his first insight into the possibilities of the Theatre Organ as an interpretive instrument. For in those early days Crawford was just starting his career as a Theatre organist.

Dick, incidentally, is a member of the Hollywood Film Archives Committee which is planning a multi-million dollar silent film archive near Hollywood Bowl. It is planned to equip the theatre itself with a fine example of the Wurlitzer art in the form of a 3 manual 19 rank late model Wurlitzer. At a recent board meeting, A.T.O.E. pledged itself to assist in this aspect of the Archive to the fullest extent possible.

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Regretfully now it is time to leave.. the several hours have passed all too quickly. But there is always the hope that you may once again return to the Simonton home on Toluca Lake and enjoy the sharing of a rich experience — and most certainly a determination to head for home at once and start tearing out walls and floors for you might know what!



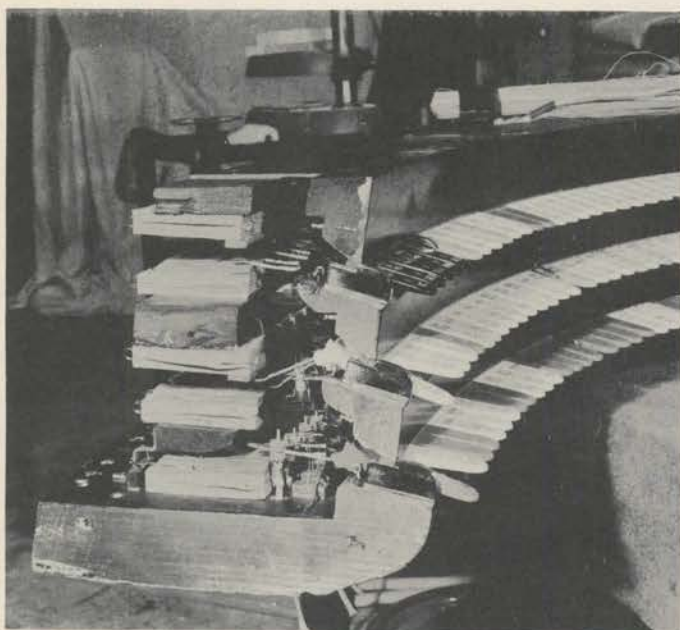
Positiv division of Simonton's concert organ.



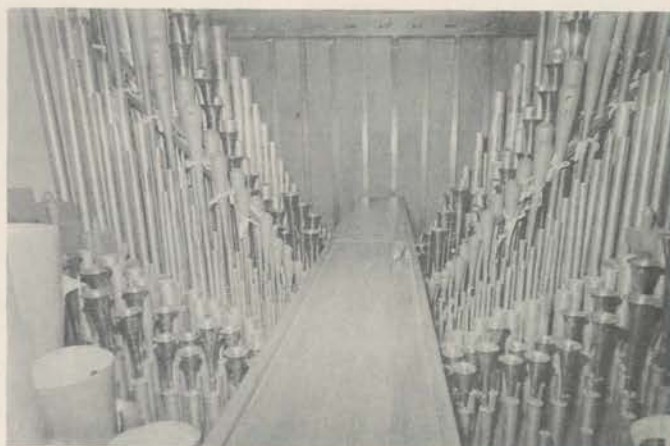
Dick Simonton, past ATOE President, holding very rare vox humana pipe, low C of the 16' octave echo chamber! (ccc)



Oliver Wallace, Dean of Theatre Organists, and Musical Director for Walt Disney productions, shown at the Simonton organ. Photo taken recently when he was guest of honor at a silent picture showing.



Close-up of Bolster showing three tiers of stops and pneumatics, specially built from Wurlitzer plans.



View of solo chamber looking toward the shutters. Main chamber arrangement is identical in layout of manual chests.