

"Melody Mac"

GIANT OF THE T.O. WORLD

By Lloyd E. Klos
(From information supplied by
Mrs. MacClain)

One of the true giants of the theatre organ world, Leonard MacClain, alias "Melody Mac", is proudly observing his 50th year as a professional organist. The fabulously interesting life of this musician is one which should be read by every Theatre Organ Enthusiast. For that reason, Mr. MacClain has co-operated with the writer to share his experiences with Theatre Organ Journal readers.

Mr. MacClain was born in Philadelphia on September 8, 1899, and at the age of three, showed the unmistakable signs of following in the footsteps of his father, a competent organist-chorister. One day, at the age of 5, his parents, unable to find a baby-sitter, took Leonard to Holy Trinity Church, advising him to be quiet or they would take him home. The youngster, however, became so thrilled with the sound of the 4M Roosevelt organ, that he would not leave the church until he could "see the man who made all the noise." The organist, Dr. Henry Fry, patted the boy's head, advising him to "go home, little man, and when you grow enough, I will teach you how to play it." To this day, MacClain remembers the crescendo indicator, the lights, and the 48 stops of the instrument. First impressions are usually indelible.

Being too small to study organ, the budding genius was started on piano lessons by Dr. Palferman, organist at an Episcopal church. A second teacher was Elmer R. Crouthers, in the American Conservatory of Music. In 1909, having become of size needed to work an organ pedalboard, Leonard MacClain began studying organ with Dr. Frey at Estey Hall, a period of his life which was to last 12 years. He practiced on a 3-stopper (flute, string, diapason) in Room 77 on the seventh floor. It cost him 50¢ an hour, and he later worked a deal with the janitor to operate the elevator in exchange for free time on the organ, an



"Melody Mac" at the 4/95 Moller Concert Console in Convention Hall, Philadelphia. Second console is 4/18 theatre type.

arrangement to which his father was cool.

After six months of instruction, the embryo musician took his lessons on a 4-manual Austin in St. Clement's Church. Dr. Frey was a stern taskmaster, ingraining the youth in the fundamentals and in the standard works of Bach and the other masters. When the teacher insisted on "fourth finger on A flat", Leonard challenged him to a race one day, playing the chromatic scale his way while the instructor played it in

his accepted fashion. Pupil won out over teacher!!

For 29 years, MacClain studied with other organ masters, including Rollo Maitland, Walter Baker, Dr. Alexander McCurdy, Dr. Harry A. Matthews and Joseph Clarke. These men contributed new techniques and facets of organ playing which were devoured by Mr. MacClain, enhancing his status.

One day in 1912 an ad appeared, requesting a pianist to pump a pianola in Gregory's Lyric Palace, and our hero



Mac plays piano on the Mutual Network in 1934.



Mac at the "Photona", Station WCAV. First electronic organ broadcast coast-to-coast (1935). This was a photo-electric cell organ.

dashed down there on his bicycle. He was hired, his first paying job, at \$20 a week, in a theatre. Ever on the alert to make his job easier, our enterprising artist glued 10 rolls onto each other. He had confided to his mother about this job, but not to his father. One night, the latter, a bit miffed at his son's leaving the house every evening, followed him and lost him! Next evening, this was repeated with better results, and he was dumbfounded upon entering the theatre to see his son working the piano, bicycle behind it. The father strode down the aisle to the piano, and demanded, "What the h— are you going in here? I'm paying to make you a concert organist, and here you are playing in this dump." Fast talking by the son convinced Leonard Sr. that \$20 a week was more than the parental 50¢ allowance, and the promise to be home each evening by eleven quieted the outburst.

Next year marked another milestone for Philadelphia's "Mr. Theatre Organ". On a date with a girl one evening, the weather was so stormy that the girl's mother led the youngsters to the Jefferson Theatre. Sitting in the darkened interior, and seeing the idle organ, Leonard asked the usher what had happened to the music. It developed that the organist was snowed in, and when the youth said he could play the instrument he was promptly taken to the manager, Jay Emanuel. In no time at all, Leonard MacClain had his first theatre organ job. Learning about the glockenspiel and the bells took some time, as church organs don't have these stops. He began to improvise from a small book, "The Most Popular Organ Pieces", and was given a steady job lasting a year. He tried to quit the job five times, but was given a \$1 raise each time. When the great flu epidemic came in 1917, theatres were closed, and Leonard got a job making ailerons for World War I airplanes.

In 1918, Leonard was chosen as relief man for the premier organist in Philadelphia, Jean Gertz. The theatre was a top-ranking house, and to play there was achieving real prestige. The organ was a 3-manual Kimball, and a good one. The owner was "Kid" Boyd, a colorful character with polka dot tie, derby hat and toilet water.



Opening of the Egyptian Theatre (Kimball 3/7). Leonard MacClain's name "in lights".

Mac's next job was at Philadelphia's Family Theatre, an establishment with a barker outside, a phonograph in the balcony and a suction fan in the back of the theatre which sucked you in the front door and blew you out the back. The organ was a 2-manual Kimball Leonard was a friend of a beautiful organist, Gertrude Lawrence, then playing in Segal's Apollo Theatre. She wanted nights off, Leonard days off, so they swapped jobs. After a spell the manager of the Apollo put him wise to an opening at the 56th Street Theatre, a ritzy place where a doorman in tuxedo opened the doors for people arriving in carriages. The organ was a 2-manual Kimball, which followed a pattern in Leonard's early years of theatre work. One day, Harry Rodell, tuner for the Kimball Company, informed him of an opening at the Leader Theatre. Our hero demurred, but when the prospect of increasing his wages by \$50 weekly was thrown in, the change was made. The future "Melody Mac" was making \$127 a week, at only 20 years of age. Quite a fabulous sum in those days! He began work at the Leader in April, 1920, and was the organist there until September, 1927.

Richard Bach was organist in Philadelphia's Strand Theatre, and upon his leaving, Leonard MacClain aspired to the post. He had opened organs in the Lansdowne, Waverly, 69th Street, Holme, Egyptian and Mixon's Glenside, plus others in the Philadelphia area. The powers-that-be wanted him to remain at the Lansdowne, but Mac was insistent

on working the Strand, and that job he got. Bach left the organ with 127 dead notes! It was a 3-manual Kimball. Gee, Dad, still no WurliTzer! It was a wild ride in a Stutz-Bearcat to the theatre which Mac experienced on the day of his contract signing. Herb Effinger was the driver, and his mother was the theatre owner.

While at the Strand, Vitaphone came in and MacClain could see the handwriting on the wall. However, he stayed at the Strand Theatre for 4 years, doing some radio work on the side. At this time, Moller opened a studio at 13th and Vine Streets. The organ was an 18-ranker, close to WurliTzer in quality, with a French trumpet used in place of a post horn. Carl Bonawitz, Otto Schmidt, Richard Bach and other organists were invited to show their wares on opening of the store, but Leonard MacClain, the only one to show up, did the honors of the day. He was given full use of the studio, and he taught and demonstrated. He played in the window and really stopped the traffic!

From the Strand, he went to the Commodore about 1932, a theatre near the University of Pennsylvania campus. The students came in and enjoyed the song fests, with occasional risqué parodies on the slides—except when the censors would come in. However, through arrangements with the doorman, the operators would be warned of the censor's approach, and certain choruses were deleted!

MacClain went to the Tower Theatre which had an excellent WurliTzer, in 1934. A WurliTzer at last! When the State Theatre opened, he was transferred there, playing another Kimball, and becoming the only organist who ever

Please turn page.

played there. The Tower Theatre organ however, is the one installation which is closely identified with Leonard MacClain. To his way of thinking, it is one of the best Wurlitzer installations he has ever played. For 4½ years, deluxe shows were put on in that theatre, complete with orchestra and organ. The extravaganzas were held there until a musicians' strike in New York City forced their closing. The shows did not return, but the organ has remained. Mac had it restored, and uses it to this day for his Epic recording.

The last theatre organ played in Philadelphia was in the Fox Theatre. MacClain played the Moller there for three years, until its demise in 1941. He sometimes MC'd for the stage shows, featuring such stars as Artie Shaw, Arthur Treacher and Abbott & Costello.

According to MacClain, "For me, radio started in Philadelphia way back in about 1922...Radio was so small in those days, that the fellow had his transmitter at one end of the studio, and you had your piano at the other end. In other words, you were sitting in the control room. When he blew a tube, he would be off the air until he saved enough money to buy a new one. There were WIAD, WELK and WHBW. Then we met up with WIP, a darn good station. That was where they held auditions to see if the canary birds would sing with us. I got the job because the birds liked me. They sang best to my music. That was for Hartz Mountain Roller—\$15 for 15 minutes, which was nice pay just for having the birds sing. I did this for about 6 months.

"When I was doing Piano Novelties I got a call from WPEN which was installing a Wurlitzer organ. Lew Jacobsen, who knew me from the theatre, is an organist, and said, 'This is going to

be my organ, nobody's going to play it but me.' He said further, 'You know where they need you? They need you out in the country in the shack in the lane where WPEN has a show called "SS All In Fun". They need a piano player.'"

So Mac went with the show which went on the air every morning and stayed for 6 years. Sometimes, after being up most of the night, he merely went to the transmitter and slept there, being awakened in time for the show. Everybody had a phony name—"High Pressure Charlie", "Joe Fall in the Entry", and "Bill the Goofy Golfer." "Just Call me for breakfast", was Mac's reply when a name was sought for him. When it was his turn to play, the announcer said, "Let's have a melody, Mac," and says our hero, "That is all I got from then on. 'Melody Mac' stuck with me ever since that show."

At station WHAT, Jack Dolph installed high frequency equipment for the Philadelphia Public Ledger. From the Uptown Theatre Kimball organ, Mac did three half-hour shows a week, anything he wanted to play for \$125 a week. When the station folded, he went back to WIP to do a show called "Melody Mac". At this station was initiated the famous stunt of having listeners write letters, requesting numbers to be played, with Mac playing them on the spot. If there were an occasional selection with which he was unfamiliar, the requestor would get \$1.00. In six years, 6½ million pieces of mail were received, and the show, on every day for 15 minutes, had a No. 1 rating in Philadelphia for 3½ years. The name of the program was "Do Re Mi For You", and following each one, poor Mac was numb and cold from thinking and working fast. At the same time, he was also Musical Direc-



MacClain at the 2/15 Kimball in the 56th Street Theatre in the year 1916.

tor at Station WCAU. And, if that were not enough, he was also broadcasting from WIBG on the Wanamaker organ. Three radio stations to share one's talents! Few have it!

His last radio show was for an appliance dealer, 13 weeks in duration. Through tape, he could record the shows in advance. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, he recorded on Theatre organs and Sundays on his church instrument, a 3M/50R rebuilt Haskell.

Because of his early training, Leonard MacClain is as equally at home on a church organ as he is on a theatre instrument. His first Church playing was for services when he was 7 or 9 years old, a Dittinger tracker organ in the the Reconciliation Church. This was before he took organ lessons. His first recital was in Scott's Presbyterian Church. Other churches included the Holland Church; Chambers-Wylie Church; Wayne Central Baptist Church; Tabernacle in Ocean City, New Jersey; then back to Chambers-Wylie, where the organ had been completely rebuilt.

Leonard MacClain played the first electronic organ over a coast to coast broadcast on April 6, 1935. It was the newly invented Photona, built by Ivan Eremeeff, on the photo-electric cell principle. Asked what he thought of it, Mac replied, "It belongs in an institute!" And that is where it is today—the Franklin Institute. It has no pedals, and was very noisy, with the speaker placed in another room to get away from the racket. Cost of the device was \$76,000.

By now, the reader must acknowledge that Melody Mac is quite a versatile fellow. Recording artist, composer, conductor, radio, TV, stage, theatre, concert organist, church organist, theatre organist, choir director, accompanist, pianist, arranger, director, teacher—Leonard MacClain is all these. The writer was given 15 pages of material, single-spaced from which to formulate this biographi-



MacClain at organ in Moller Company Studio, Philadelphia.

cal sketch. But let us proceed to mention a few other accomplishments in the life of this amazing entertainer.

One of the greatest thrills of his life occurred one night when he was playing for the International Convention of Rotary at Philadelphia's Convention Hall. He played a 1/2 hour concert before the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy was to begin the main body of the program. When they came to the last number, Ormandy introduced it as "a march every American loves." It turned out to be Sousa's immortal "Stars and Stripes Forever." Mac reasoned that if he were to help the show end on a dramatic climax, he should join in with the 4-manual Moller. By touching low C on the pedal, he found he was in the same key as the orchestra. Then pushing No. 8 General which brought out all the stops, the whole ensemble really roared forth! The applause was deafening! Ormandy confessed to a friend that he never understood the tremendous applause for the final number.

Not only is Leonard MacClain "Mr. Theatre Organ" of Philadelphia, he is indeed "Mr. Organ of the entire Philadelphia Area." He has played for political conventions, the flower shows in Convention Hall for years, Philadelphia Inquirer Charities, Music Festivals, Liberty Real Estate Trust Co. programs on the bank floor prior to Christmas, and many other specific programs and events. He has been substitute organist for Wanamaker's store for about 20 years for special affairs, or as replacement for Mary Vogt while she is on vacation. It is a tremendous instrument, the largest concert organ in the world, and Mac does love to perform on it.

He has accompanied such noted people as Kate Smith, Lanny Ross, Conrad Thibau, Rosemary and Betty Clooney, Wilbur Evans, and many more. Over radio he has accompanied the Duncan Sisters and the Boswell Sisters.

He has coached many fellow organists, helping them in their careers. Among them are Jackie Davis, Eddie Layton and Jack Ward, the last an associate organist at Radio City Music Hall. With Scotty MacGregor he has made over 500 children's records, working nights cutting the records without benefit of arrangements—just improvisation.

He is a composer of note, having been responsible for "Yearning"; "Smile, Darn Ya, Smile"; "Be a Good Egg", etc. He has written musical scores for commercials and TV programs, among them the theme song for "Martin Kane, Private Eye", which starred Bill Gargan a few years ago.

Leonard MacClain has recorded for Valdoray Records, Master Marinka Series, Somerset Records, Palda Records, Harmony Records, and Epic, to name a few. In addition to "Melody Mac" and Leonard MacClain, he has used the names of Warren Averill, Ken Reed and Rodney Davis as aliases in his work.

Since 1953, Mac has been asked to give concerts on the beach at Wildwood, New Jersey. He did this for a couple of years, but has refrained recently in fall, 1962

vor of travelling about the country, playing organs and visiting with organ enthusiasts. In 1960 he gave two concerts for ATOE members in California, one in Lorin Whitney's famous studio, the other in Joe Chadbourne's "barn". About 25 organs were played by Mac on that trip, a real busman's holiday.

Last summer, after a brilliant performance at the ATOE convention in the Richmond, Va., Mosque, he visited theatre organ enthusiasts in the Buffalo and Rochester areas. There, he and his vivacious wife, Dottie, gave their listeners two concerts they'll long remember. The writer spent a most enjoyable evening during their visit, reminiscing and discussing organs and playing tapes. As a story-teller, Mr. MacClain is unsurpassed; as an organist, he is an entertainer in the true sense of the word, playing music from Bach to Ger-shwin, and asking for requests from his audience, interspersed with humorous anecdotes.

Currently, he has a full schedule of teaching in the Philadelphia area at his Music Studio, and in Wilmington, Delaware. Pupils come from all the surrounding states. Interspersed are the special shows he is asked to do.

And so, in 1962, Leonard MacClain observes his golden anniversary as a professional musician. His father once offered him sage advice. "Never do anything you aren't happy doing, and don't ever work for anybody but yourself if you want to be a success." Leonard

made up his mind when he was a little boy that he'd be in music the rest of his life. He loves making music. He has realized all of his ambitions—to be an organist, to own his own organ school, to be a famous recording artist, and to direct music in a radio station. TV was not in his early plans, of course, but he has appeared on that medium, and has sung and MC'd shows in some of the theatres in which he's worked.

The writer strenuously urges all Theatre Organ Enthusiasts: If ever you have the opportunity of seeing Leonard MacClain in action, do not miss the opportunity. You are in for a real treat by a real musician—a musician's musician. This writer has heard him perform twice, and will not fail to hear Melody Mac again, should the occasion present itself.

The American Association of Theatre Organ Enthusiasts, members and chapters across the breadth of America salute Leonard MacClain on his 50th year as a professional musician. In tribute to this talented organist, the directors of ATOE at their 1962 Annual Meeting in Los Angeles unanimously nominated MacClain as Honorary Member. As ATOE President, W. 'Tiny' James has eloquently stated, "ATOE owes Leonard MacClain a lot, as Mac has given very freely of his time and talents for our organization." To which this writer adds, "May Leonard MacClain enjoy many years of success and happiness in the organ world which he so richly deserves."

LETTERS (continued)

long. This is slid onto an arbor about 3" long which is a brass tube .156 O.D. and is available in hobby shops. The arbor is chucked in a lathe which I set to about 360 RPM. Using No. 38 magnet wire, I leave a length of 2" or so for a lead and start winding. If the straw is marked off 1/8" from each end and the wire allowed to wind along the straw only to these marks and back again, I found that about 7 passes would produce a reading of 85-90 ohms, measured by scraping a small area on the wire and checking to the front lead.

Later I found that it is easy to forget whether 7 passes have gone by, so I used an electric clock and came up with a timing of roughly 55 seconds, which of course will vary with the speed of the arbor.

This may help someone who is glueing up paper tubes and searching for a quick method of winding. Good luck!

E. S. Bassett
312 Homestead Ave.
Waterbury 4, Conn.

(Accompanying drawing will give visual explanation.)

