

AN ORGABIOGRAPHY

By Genevieve McMahan

Never, but never, have I been swept away with any wild daydreams of being owned by a theatre pipe organ. My exposure to them was limited to the guided console with the golden voice accompanying the silent flickers. So it was quite a revelation, a few short years ago to discover the organ itself is a conglomeration of tin, wood and leather concealed from an unsuspecting audience.

My routine as an Ohio wife and mother was sometimes nudged a little off course by a spouse who frequently imparted juicy little tidbits about pipe organs. Fulfilling his lifetime interest in pipe organs, he followed indirect leads to uncovering forgotten instruments, gathering information about their locations and playability, and advising, to who ever would lend an ear, whether or not they could be salvaged. The outcome of my husband's visit to an Eagles board meeting, in a converted theatre set up for bingo, completely altered our joint family activities. Acting in an advisory capacity of aiding them in disposing of a pipe organ he ended up buying the contraption. This in itself was an astonishing development, but eeh gad, we didn't even have an organist in the family. Our joint repertoire was limited to monotonous renditions of Love Letters In The Sand and the first four measures of American Bolero. It didn't take me long to realize that our lives were about to revolve around a Wurlitzer opus 1432, of 6 ranks—divided: (Main) Flute, Open and Salicional; (Solo) Tibia, Vox, Trumpet, and the Toy Counter—a nonsensical but lovable accessory.

We were catapulted into a feverish world of activity when the project of removal was underway. Four nights a week with a borrowed station wagon, three dubious youngsters of our own, plus any more we could coerce into helping we tiptoed through the auditorium of bingo players, trudged up four flights of steep stairs into sooty organ chambers and loaded up the outstretched arms. Parading back through the bingo party leaving a trail of grimy footsteps, we pretended to ignore the startled expressions on the players' faces as the game came to a faltering halt. We are past masters at doing everything the hard way, so although we reached a hasty decision to make a basement installation, the organ had to be stored in the attic. The carting of pipes and boxes up to their temporary quarters was executed with a minimum amount of grumbling and fumbling, but maneuvering the chests



Mrs. McMahan at the neat M & C console.

over bannisters and around corners was quite a strain on some beautiful friendships.

Most hobbies are pursued in a logical sequence of steps, but ours was a mish mash of planning, hunting for a console, blower and motor, and starting a complete restoring job. Some of my husband's ideas were quite a stumbling block, but we finally resolved his insistence on a three manual console by locating a Marr Colton 3-7 in Toledo. The console weaved and sagged, due to tired glue, as it was transported 125 miles in a trailer, so we decided to give it our immediate attention. In the renovation and reassembly, a revised combination of glued and screwed joints produced a console capable of being knocked down—a feature proving invaluable to us at a later date. It was placed on a caster bearing platform so it could be horsed around like any other abnormal piece of furniture, requiring little more than the standard wifely super-



Mr. McMahan at work in the solo chamber.

vision. The restoration included a complete wood refinishing, renewal of all felt, recementing the lead tubing and the indoctrination of leathering. The art of releathering can best be accomplished with a pot of strong coffee, pipe organ records grinding full blast on the hi fi, and a semi awareness to the tedious ritual of strip, sand, dip, brush, smooth, press, dry and trim. The fabulous organ buffs we were beginning to meet generously permitted our brain picking, accelerating my apprenticeship so I was soon graduated to a journeyman. Allowed to dismantle the offsets, relay and two main chests, I toiled with the speed of a snail and was overwhelmed to face a mounting display of pans, caseroles and soup plates filled with discs, gizmos, thing-a-ma-bobs and doodads.

By this time I had acquired a nonchalance and pride for the hobby that mystified our skeptical friends who weren't exactly hep to the rebirth of a historical culture. I didn't have to catch my breath the day my husband phoned to forewarn me he had just bought a blow-



Jr. McMahan in the main chamber

er, and to be prepared to write a check upon delivery of same within the hour. Nor did I bat an eye the day we received a telegram to wire money to a California friend who had just located a motor (single phase—whatever that is). And I was johnny-on-the-spot with assorted candles for illumination when the running of the blower dimmed out the house lights.

When the installation was 85% complete and the neighbors were blandly accepting our peculiarities, although they had no comprehension of the instrument or our goals, we faced another hurdle. A transfer back to Seattle! Previous assignments have always occurred with a crash decision on the part of management, so I've been left alone with the joy of moving children and household possessions. No move is easy, in spite of the advertising, and to compound this

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theatre organ



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one with the complex problem of moving a pipe organ took some extra curricular planning. I scrambled atop my soap box and insisted it was my frustrated husband's duty to get the organ packed and stored in the double garage, ready for the transcontinental move after the school year ended. His remaining time was short to say the least—two days—but he accomplished it. Neighbors watched with incredible horror the delivery and stacking of ten casket crates in our front yard, so I hastened to explain we were not in the bizarre business of disposing of bodies. Traffic crawled past the flurry of activity on our property as the packers carefully wrapped and stored the pipes in these unorthodox containers. Weeks later it was necessary for the movers to employ a fork lift to move the cumbersome boxes into the van, and I was thankful I had left town before any prospective buyers viewed the deep ruts left in the black-topping of our newly resurfaced driveway.

It was after my husband had escaped to Seattle that I was alerted to availability of a fine set of Kinuras, and a siren to complete the toy counter. The day they were delivered I couldn't contain myself and placed a long distance call to the west coast. With my faraway mate waiting patiently at the end of the line we blew the Kinuras into the phone and ran the siren as fast and loud as we

could on our son's train transformer.

Back in the northwest again I found that trying to find a house to suit a family is one thing, and trying to find a house to accommodate a theatre pipe organ is another thing, but trying to describe the need for unlimited empty space to a real estate salesman, who doesn't know the difference between a pipe organ and a mouth organ, was the unsurmountable mountain. We bought a house to suit the realty agent. At first it was tempting to do some remodeling, but couldn't seem to agree, or foresee, what would produce the ideal situation, so the organ was interred in the uphill corner of a daylight basement.

The chambers are mostly concrete and are treated with a coat of full gloss enamel. The use of a diagonal wall to divide the organ presumably discourages standing waves (my husband said that). The shutters are fashioned into two



Relay in roll-out position (note the casters).

chamber doors, providing rather unique entree for any pipe organ, as well as a conversation piece for curious friends, furnace men and plumbers. The relay found its niche in the unused end of an extra long garage. By application of hinges, casters and gatehooks, it opens up like a book, exposing all its guts (if you'll pardon the expression) for trouble shooting and maintenance. The 3 HP blower, sporting a customized filter designed and built by one of our sons, resides in a concrete fruit closet—I was tired of canning anyway—and adjoins the main chamber. This gives the advantage of a very short induction run as well as muffled silence. Muffled silence?? Other husbandly innovations are the floor mounted toy counter and Chry-soglott-on casters. The detached console dominates one end of the recreation room and is a constant source of knowledge to our teenagers' friends who exclaim, "What is that?" The full organ can be played and enjoyed with the shutters wide open if you like experiencing the similarity of its performance with a vibrating ferry ride, or a king size earthquake; or are particularly entranced with the oscillation of huge view windows.

Well, this miniature version of seven years of "togetherness" has finally depleted my vocabulary. Now that I've abandoned my blue-jeans, and my fingernails have grown out, I'm ready to conquer a delayed daydream—the fifth measure of American Bolero. —