

"The George Thompson Caper"

by Stu Green

"When Theatre organ magazine editors slug it out -- the same one always comes out second best..."

-Aesop

(Most of the stories about pipe organ home installations presented in these and other pages have involved the co-operation of the many owners. What would it be like to try for a story about an organ which is jealously guarded from the probing of BOMBARDE reporters by its saturnine owner, perhaps because he is the editor of THEATRE ORGAN, a rival of this sheet? I have a special bone to pick with Mr. George Thompson because he pirated the BOMBARDE's notes during the 1965 ATOE convention in Chicago to provide a convention coverage for his own mag (see page 21 of the Summer 1965 THEATRE ORGAN). Therefore, this article will represent a "chip on the shoulder" reportage of a forbidden installation, and I'm going to play dirty. Ed.)

Salinas is a pleasant little town about in the midriff of California. People live there, get married, go to church, visit headshrinkers, consume hotdogs, crumple one another's fenders, burb the baby, and spend the night in the drunk tank occasionally -- much like any other town of 53,000 population. Except for one grisly detail!

George Thompson lives there!



BEAUTY AND THE BEAST - George does a 'Phantom of the Opera' bit while pawing his way through a 'pointer system' version of Beethoven's Fifth symphony. It was the appearance of this photo in the local bugle, the Salinas Californian, which sparked this article. Doesn't he look mean?

Perhaps that name doesn't mean much to you but it does to the writer. Mr. Thompson happens to be the editor of THEATRE ORGAN. Now, being the editor of a magazine devoted to the theatre organ isn't such a terrible crime in itself (heck, even the BOMBARDE has one!) but this George Thompson is, in addition, an inhuman monster who snatches stories in the dead of night while his comrade in arms is snatching 40 winks in the arms of Morpheus --er--sleeping, that is.

So, this will be a story of revenge. I feel that the different approach will make it novel.

I cased the Thompson pad as soon as I lost the RR police who'd seen me leave the freight car. Otherwise the trip from LA to Salinas had been uneventful.

There was no point in walking up to the Thompson door. I'd heard that several of Thompson's curious neighbors have flat noses from having the big oak door slammed in their faces. It's an attractive house in what is temporarily Salinas' "suburbia" and one end of it showed evidence of an addition. That, I figured, would be the chamber which neighbors said had been added.

Figuring that perhaps I could get some info by phone I located a phone booth. Sure enough, there was a "G. Thompson" in the book. Practicing my "presidential drawl" I dialed the number and prepared to say, "Howdy -- this is Lyndon..." The phone was picked up before I got half way through "Howdy" and a somewhat grim male voice stated, "This is to inform all callers named Stu Green that they are not invited to enjoy the wonderful sound of George Thompson's mighty Wurlitzer." This is a recording, Click! And I had squandered a whole silver dime for that message!

This was going to be tougher than I thought. Luckily I had some rather elastic connections in the rubber industry so, in short, I managed to get Harry over at Goodyear to enlist the services of the famous Blimp. It was a windy day and Harry didn't quite get the point. He couldn't understand why I insisted that he hover over this one area while sketches and outlines were drawn. The pilot had a heck of a time holding the big sausage in one place and more than once he grabbed his parachute and threatened to walk home, leaving Harry and your reporter holding the gas bag. But finally I had a good sketch of the Thompson layout. Especially interesting was what looked like a smoke house in the far corner of the lot.

To get this story it was going to be necessary to turn to science. A number of manuals on scientific sleuthing were consulted and I found some second hand snooping equipment in a pawn shop. It was rather bulky so I decided to take up a position behind the smokehouse -- which turned out to be something quite different. It has a crescent carved in the door!

From this vantage point I set up the sound sensing equipment and immediately got results. A sound like kettledrums -- apparently from a dripping faucet in the Thompson pad. Gad, what a slovenly fellow -- to endure a dripping faucet!

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The nose took on the appearance of a Pizza.



A pair of gasbags hovered over the residence while one of them sketched it.

Later, between the "thuds" of the plopping droplets I heard the distinctive sound of organ music -- of a sort. With some glee I recognized the tune -- "Long, Long Ago" -- pointer system version! Now I was getting somewhere!

Some strange sounds came in on the electronic snoopers but they seemed to have more to do with plumbing than music. Time was a wastin' so I tried some disguises.



He set up the snooping devices in an improvised command post behind the compost columbarium.

As the Fuller Brush Man I got a good look into the Thompson living room before the front door smashed my putty nose flat -- like a pie in the face. There, at the end of the room farthest from where I suspected the chamber was located there was a niche occupied by a lovely 2-manual console set at an angle. This guy really had something. Then--splat!



The putty nose disguise didn't work either.

Back behind the --er--outhouse I started assembling the facts -- and learned I didn't have any. About this time a "bleep" appeared on the snoop screen, signifying someone was approaching. It was a woman -- an attractive one. Hm! So this character is a Lothario, I thought. Another set of bleeps and another woman approached. She entered the house without knocking. Then a young girl with curlers in her hair. Here was George Thompson with three women in his house! I had him dead to rights!

Well, not quite. A few minutes after the last female entered, George drove up in his boom-buzzard, parked and went in. Shortly thereafter the organ music started and it wasn't "chopsticks" this time, rather some well-played standards.

Meanwhile my suspicious mind was churning. What was George up to with three female critters and organ music too?

I upped to a window (it was now dusk) and peeped in, being very careful this time. The young thing with hair curlers was playing the organ. George was sprawled in a chair reading a newspaper. Another gal, who appeared also to be a teenager, was either crocheting or knitting. The third appeared to be working in the kitchen.

"George Thompson and his harem!" I chortled. "What a headline that'll make!"

Back to the backside of the backhouse and I got out the makeup kit and the telephone repairman's uniform. Once more in a disguise I whacked on the door. A lady answered, the attractive one who'd been working in the kitchen. "Yes?"

I explained that there'd been some line trouble and that I'd like to check the telephone. She said okay. Inside, George had disappeared into a door which I knew led to a chamber. The lady took me right to the door and said the phone connections were in there. This was my moment. I activated the secret camera nestled in one nostril and "shot" big, tall old George through the door. He was just standing there in the chamber, admiring his pipework, big as life.

I fumbled with the phone connection box and tried to make like I was busy. Ignoring me completely George fumbled with one of the pneumatics on his Chrysoglott Harp while I shot him again with the nostril camera.

The organ, I noted is all in one large, high-ceiling chamber. I counted eight ranks of mint condition pipes. Between the chamber and the living room is what is known as a "mixing chamber" an area where the sometimes too loud sounds of theatre pipes can be tamed by space. It's also a spot to set

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CHRYSOGLOTT, ANYONE? Old gimlet eye inspects the percussions in his Mixing Chamber. Behind him is the large movie screen through which the organ sounds.

up percussions or ranks not under expression. George had his Chrysoglott so mounted, also his Chimes and Glockenspiel.

But I was most interested in the contents of the chamber. I spotted some neat pipework. It had obviously been in a theatre some time in its career and there were indications that it also might have seen church duty, one air leak in a chest having been patched by the cover of a hymnal. It looked very much like a style D Wurlitzer -- the six ranker -- to which two more ranks had been added.



IT'S COOLER INSIDE - Editor George cools his pinky over the exhaust from a ciphering Flute pipe. This photo, shot with a 'nostril' camera, shows some of the instrument's pipe-work. Front to back: Vox, Concert Flute, String, and Tibia. The offset bass Diapason and Tibia are at George's right. There's a bass drum way up there. Swell shutters are directly behind the old grouch.

I didn't get a close look at the console this trip because of an unpleasant incident; the phone rang. I had been fussing with it, making like I was adjusting it or something. But the phone double-crossed me by giving indications of health. George grabbed it out of my hand and eyed me suspiciously. He told the party at the other end that he'd call back and hung up. Then he yelled, "Hey Ron--we got an organ bum to throw out." A younger edition of George appeared. They grabbed me and a moment later I was sailing through the Thompson front door. They have the hardest sidewalk! During the flight I inhaled the nostril camera!

I'd learned a little from this encounter and decided that the only way I could learn any more was to get back into the house. The next caper took some doing. I latched onto a wooden packing case large enough to hold me. I attached hinges and a clasp operable from the inside. I took it up to my hotel room, phoned the express company to come get the box in room 13 and squeezed my bulk into it and waited -- and waited -- and waited. It must have been hours before the uniformed man with the dolly showed up and rolled me down to his truck. Naturally the box was addressed to George Thompson and marked "Do Not Open Until Christmas." I'd outsmart him this time!

It never occurred to me that the delivery man would stash the box with me in it in George's work room with the lid side down and pile some other heavy boxes on top of it. I was trapped!

About six PM George came in with some square who was curious about the organ and I must admit I learned a lot from their conversation. The guy asked just the right questions, the very ones I needed the answers to. I couldn't see much from my box prison (except through a knothole) but I sure heard a lot. I found out that the organ was a Wurlitzer and had originally cost the theatre it was in about 14 grand. When he and his son Ron (the guy who'd helped give me the bum's rush) started dismantling the organ, they marked everything so they could get it back together again. I learned they knew plenty about organ installing and dismantling from helping other fans move organs--dating back even to silent movie installations for George. He'd bought the organ before he'd moved to his present Echo Valley home so it went into storage. Once settled in the present house George and Ron planned and built the 20x30 foot music room which houses the console and the additional 9 x 18 by 11 1/2 foot tall chamber, once a garage. He mentioned the organ now has 890 pipes but that would make it a more than 10 ranker. I think George was just blowing off steam when he made that claim. About 600 would be nearer the truth.

The instrument, I learned, is a style 165 (a late style D, actually), Opus 1900, which had been installed in the Amazon theatre, San Francisco in 1928. The original ranks were Style D Trumpet, Diaphonic Diapason, Tibia Clausa, Salicional, Concert Flute and Vox Humana. The instrument had "done time" in a church and an improvised Dulciana (made by choking a Salicional) and a nondescript Oboe Horn (carved out of a clarinet of unknown parentage) had been added. The "dulciana" has been given the required hormones and is once more Salicionaling. The battered "oboe horn" will soon be replaced by a Kinura. A borrowed Clarinet rank is "sitting in" meanwhile. This guy, Whoever he was, kept on asking just the right questions. And here I was, trapped, with no way of taking notes. I sweated.

George told the fellow that the installation project started just after the building additions had been completed -- in December of 1963 -- and that about 300 man hours had gone into wrestling chests into place, racking pipes, putting in wind lines, putting up the swell shutters, shoving the hefty 3-horsepower blower and blower motor onto the perch in the sound damped corner of the one time garage just behind the chamber (the blower is a noisy one which required its

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own padded cell). By the next Labor Day (1963) the organ was playing.

About that time George made a decision: he figured that he'd better learn to play the darn thing -- now that he had it going. He's been at it ever since. So have his kids (I learned that the two girls I'd seen were actually his daughters and the good looking woman who came to the door was his wife. Could this miserable character be so human as to be a family man?

Then George pushed a button and the grill-work before the mixing chamber rolled back to reveal a huge perforated movie screen. I saw it through the knothole with my left eye! Clever!

Finally the two left the work room and went in to play the organ. I was getting more uncomfortable in the upended crate but I saw no way out. I might be trapped there permanently. Some day they'd perhaps open the crate and find a wisp of mummy in it. I know George would be the first to say my looks had improved with age if that happened. I was ruminating on the subject of entombment when the organ ceased playing music from the "Crypt scene" of "Aida" and George, wife Vi and the stranger reappeared and they were talking about the box.

"It's probably those Kinura pipes I ordered" said George. "Herb, help me turn the box over and we'll see how they weathered the trip."

I was uncerimoniously plopped over and then I heard the phone ringing in the distance. "Saved by a bell" I thought, with not much originality, Vi went to answer it and in a moment returned and said "It's for you, George." Herb left with him and I was alone--and right-side-up. I unfastened the cover and escaped through a window.

It was over an hour later. I had limped back to town and was walking along the main drag when a big, light-colored Caddie screeched to a halt at the curb, Out hopped George.

"Hi, Stu -- glad to see you!"

Glad to see me?

"You gotta come out to the house and see the organ -- but first I gotta go over to the police station and report a theft."



'I DONE IT!' To be perfectly fair, it should be mentioned that George CAN smile on occasion. Here he had, after 58 attempts gotten all the way through 'Long, Long Ago' without a bobble. Just at the moment of triumph he was told that his mother-in-law had broken her leg. He just couldn't suppress his mirth. Nearly cracked his face.

This was George Thompson?--friendly as all get out? But the bit about the police station unnerved me. That was the last place I wanted to visit--again! Was this Thompson cat playing cat and mouse?

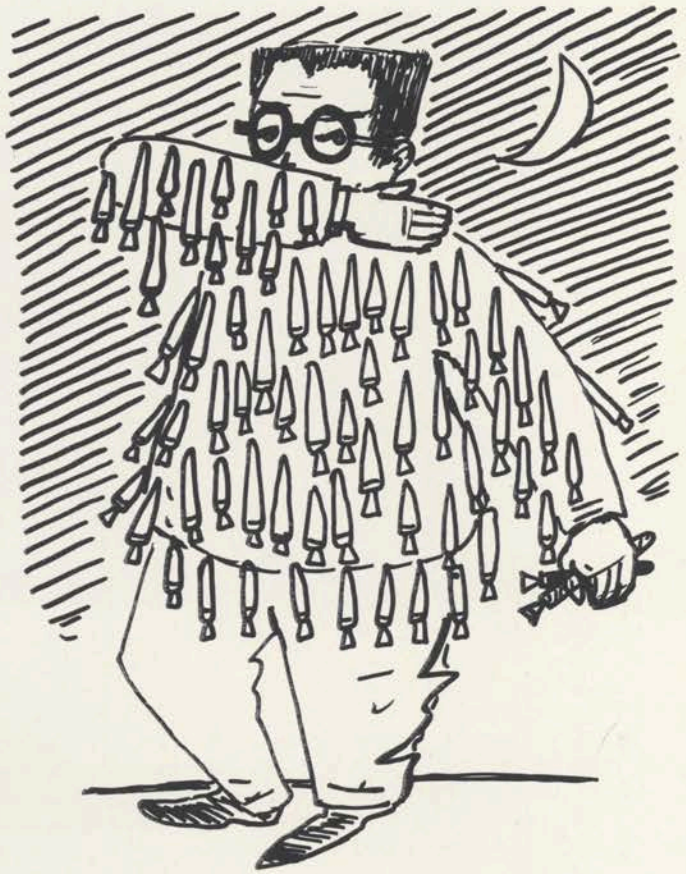
"I've been plagued with a barrage of kooks trying to get in to see the organ lately. They come to the door with crude disguises, pose as phone repairmen -- set up command posts out behind the privy. Real nuts!" wailed George

But why -- the -- police -- station?

"It's kinda weird," said George, "But I just had a whole set of Kinura pipes swiped right out of my work room-- a newly arrived case of them--and it all happened in the two minutes I was away answering the phone."

Are you sure?

"Sure I'm sure -- I came back and the case was open and every pipe gone. The crook can't get far loaded down with 73 Kinura pipes."



He pictured himself sneaking off into the night looking like a Kinura tree.

I couldn't help but visualize the 'thief' plodding along, looking like a Christmas tree decorated with heavy Kinura pipes, but George broke up my daydream with, "It was a lucky thing that Herb Caen, the reporter, was visiting me. He just left--with the story. It'll be in his column -- tomorrow."

Herb Caen! the famous San Francisco journalist! No wonder he'd asked just the right questions.

"Well--I'm going over to the cooler and make my report. Don't go away. I'll be back in a minute and we'll go out to the house. You're just in time for dinner."

With that George Thompson dove back into his Detroit Dinosaur and roared away.

I sat down on the curb -- and tried to get my foot out of my mouth. But it was hopelessly stuck.