

A BOMBARDE PERSONALITY PROFILE

Edith Steele, Theatre Organist

The little lady with the white hair and grandmotherly demeanor looked at the console and remarked briskly, "turn on the juice. I can hardly wait to get at it!" The scene was Bill Barker's home in La Mesa (near San Diego) California. Edith Steele loves to visit Bill's Wurlitzer-equipped home; playing his excellent home installation arouses many memories for the former silent movie organist. For example, how she happened to become an organist.



Bill Baker Jr. listens as Edith Steele makes his home installation "come alive." It's a 2-8 (style 190) Wurlitzer to which Bill has added an Orchestral Oboe and Kinura.

It happened in Joliet, Illinois, not too far from where Edith Ducker was born (Modena, Ill.) more than 60 years ago. Edith was something of a musical prodigy, having played piano from the age of five.

At 16 she was cashing in on her talent by playing piano in a Joliet "flicker" house. She might have continued as a pianist had not fate stepped in. One day the owner of the theatre went to Chicago and attended a movie where he heard, for the first time, the sound of a theatre organ. He knew immediately that his house back in Joliet just had to have one.

"Miss Ducker, in two weeks the organ will be installed and then we won't need the piano anymore. If you can learn to play the organ you can have the job." With that challenge ringing in her young ears Edith Ducker took one organ lesson and practised for the next two weeks seven to nine hours a day on a church organ. She got the job and her life has been an organ-studded musical one ever since.

But she didn't forsake the piano. In those days there were jobs to be had playing in the pit orchestras which marked the better houses. After joining the Musician's Union at 16 she moved to Aurora to play piano in the pit orchestra which accompanied the movies at the Strand theatre (before that it had been the Grand Opera house). The conductor, Lewis O. Miller, hated to lose his dependable pianist but there was an opening at the nearby Fox theatre for an organist. Edith accompanied silent movies there for five years.

In 1917 Edith moved to San Diego where she'd heard about an opening for a pianist-organist at the Pantages theatre. She got the job and played vaudeville for five years.

Then romance entered her life. She met and married a Navy medic, Dr. F. S. Steele and it looked as though her career in music would be slowed down by the demands of marriage, housekeeping and motherhood. And so it was, for a time. It was the middle twenties and something called Vitaphone had reared its mechanical head to rasp a challenge to the live music which, until Al Jolson said "Stop!" in "The Jazz Singer" (the "talkies" first dramatic word), had developed into an art of considerable stature. But Edith longed for the excitement of the theatre and she heard that there might be an opening at the Huge Fox theatre which featured a mighty Robert Morton behemoth, advertised as "a 3200 pipe monster", which dominated the large orchestra pit.



Edith Steele, glamor organist at the San Diego Fox, in 1932 (See 'Personality Profile')

Let's examine the Fox Morton. It had been installed previously in the closed Balboa theatre. It's circa 27 ranks of pipes are controlled by a four manual console. The bottom (orchestral) and top (Echo) manuals are set up as straight organ ranks while the balance of the organ is arranged as a unit organ on the two middle manuals. It has a separate "floating" string ancillary playable from two of the manuals. It always held the title of the largest, most complex theatre organ in San Diego.

But it held no mysteries for Edith Steele. She took to it like a duck takes to Walt Disney and remained there for a seven year sojourn -- from 1925 through 1932. Toward the end of her engagement she posed for the photo shown on our cover. During that period she played through the end of the "silent movie era," and then what silent films that came along (newsreels, shorts and comedies remained "silent" in many cases long after features went "talkie" because the silent versions were cheaper to rent).

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Edith recalls one especially embarrassing moment when she had just finished playing a bombastic overture with the Fox orchestra. At the conclusion she used the crescendo for that "extra oomph." Edith always closed the crescendo pedal and stood on the pedals for the bow the orchestra members took but on one occasion it somehow remained open and the band took its applause filtered through a roar of pedal tones as Edith ran down the scale and off the deep end of the pedalboard.

Another time she made a practice of bringing her small dog to work. The canine dozed by the pedalboard while Edith cued the movie. During a particularly sad scene the dog somehow managed to shove his tail under the pedals. The house was hushed for the sad scene while Edith played softly on faraway strings, milking the scene for all it was worth. Suddenly there was a loud "Yipe!" followed by a series of diminishing "Ki-yi's" as the dog ran up the saisle to put distance between himself and that tail-crushing pedal. "It really broke up the show" recalls Edith.



In her mid-sixties Edith was still fronting her own dance band.



Edith's son, Marshall, was always amazed by his mother's drive and energy. Fascinated by the pedalboard and its deep tones, he has become an able bull fiddler.

It all ended -- theatre organ, that is -- one night in 1932. Edith remembers it well because it was the same night the radio announced the Lindbergh kidnaping. She was the last regular organist at the Fox.

The end of the organ era in theatres did not put an end to Edith's musical career. She raised her son, Marshall, whose interest in music turned to the guitar and bass fiddle. But the desire to play professionally resulted in the organization of a six piece dance band which played San Diego night spots during and after the war years. In fact she kept the band going as long as there was a demand for dance band music but finally gave in to changing times which put an end to the dance band era -- when she was 68 years old.

Edith Steele is now 77 and according to her son, Marshall, "she's going as fast and furious as ever. One of her greatest pleasures, and one she indulges in frequently, is to whang away at Bill Barker's 2-10 Wurlitzer -- an instrument she is doubly attracted to because she was the first to play it when it was installed originally as a style 190 (2-8) in the North Park theatre in San Diego."

She even entertains hopes that the people who operate the Fox will see the light and get the big Morton going again (there's a distinct possibility). Should that happen, it's a safe bet that Edith Steele will be there to thrill younger generations with the theatre organ sounds which have been such a satisfying part of her life.

- Bert Brouillon

How Page Provided Tonal Variety Within In Single Rank Of Pipes

The Page Organ Company built between 400 and 500 organs during the silent movie era, ranging from 2 ranks plus piano and toy counter to good-sized four manual jobs. During this period the Ohio factory's designer of electrical and mechanical actions was Dode Lamson who has a number of "firsts" to his credit, one being the 25 note pedalboard now used by most electronic organ builders. When first merchandised in the '20s the truncated pedalboard aroused the ire of the AGO. The Page company was among those to take increased advantage of unification. To reduce some of the less desirable side effects (lack of variety, especially on small organs), Page varied the tonal treatment and scaling over the octaves. Mr. Lamson, now associated with an automatic record player outfit in Lima, Ohio, explains how they treated a 97-note flute stop. Put down the stops controlling the Page flute--16', 8', 4', and 2' -- and passages played near the center of the manual sound the tones of a Bass Flute, Clarabella, Harmonic Flute and Piccolo, thus providing variety in a rank which on most organs is just an open (inverted mouth) Concert Flute over its entire unified range and used only for accompaniment and mixing.

The tonal variety was achieved by starting down at CC with a regular stopped Bourdon. At 8'FF it is changed to an open wood Clarabella and at 4'F it changed again to an octave of Harmonic Flute (a double length open wood pipe pierced with a small hole which induces the harmonic). The Harmonic Flute quality was continued with an octave of double length, pierced open metal pipes then went into the open metal Piccolo 2'. This set was also unified at 2-2/3 (Twelfth) and 1-3/5 (Tierce). By careful scaling the differences in quality at the changeover points were kept smooth. This explains the tonal variety and general excellence of the small Page organs such as the pit organ built around a piano. It had four sets of pressure reeds (like grandma's Melodian), a 49 note string and a full rank of Flutes, the latter being the set which gave it the theatre organ quality. The process of providing variety within a rank was tricky and expensive but it paid off in the results--a superior instrument.

-David Junchen



Ann Leaf Plays
Silent Movie Program
In
San Francisco

San Francisco--June 22--At 2 PM it was DeMille's "King of Kings". At 5 PM it was Valentino in "Son of the Sheik" and at 8 PM, "Tillie's Punctured Romance" with Charlie Chaplin and Marie Dressler." A big 3-deck Rodgers theatre model had been set up in the Curran theatre and it responded very well to the demands of drama and comedy. To Ann Leaf it was like old times; she started in the organ business in a similar situation, which probably accounts for much of the versatility she exhibited during the marathon silent movie session. All agreed that she had carried out her assignment of playing the proper music to the Nth degree. "And afterwards they practically had to carry me out," added Ann.

Each of the features was embellished with a silent two-reel comedy and a singalong with slides.