



# San Gabriel Mission Playhouse

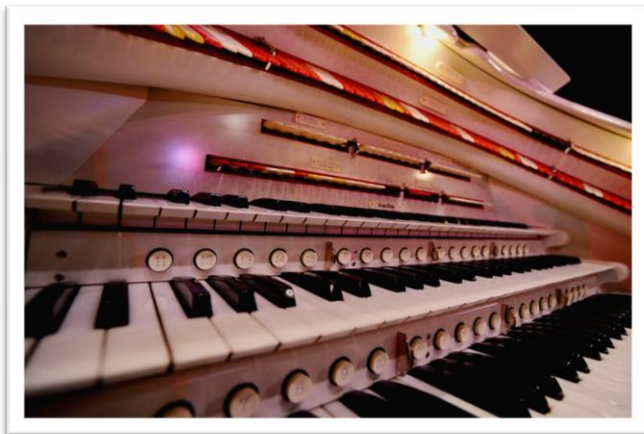
A World of Arts and Culture

## **SAN GABRIEL MISSION PLAYHOUSE WURLITZER**

Wurlitzer Opus 870, a 16 rank Style 260 Special, was delivered to the 3,250 seat Albee Theatre in Brooklyn NY in August of 1924, five months before the theatre opened in January of 1925. The organ was unique in having two Vox Humanas, one in the Main chamber and one located above the projection booth as an "echo" organ. By 1968 the RKO Theatre chain, realizing that their organs were no longer being used, and were subject to taxation, announced they would donate the organs still in their theatres to civic institutions. The American Theatre Organ Society (ATOS) immediately sent word to their local chapters that 35 organs were available.



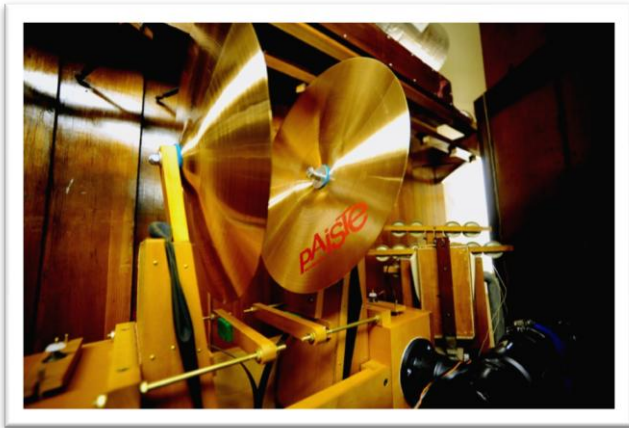
In October, Los Angeles Theatre Organ Society (LATOS) members Mrs. Ruth Skovmand and Neal Kissel talked about the RKO giveaway and decided to do something about it. They heard that the Mission Playhouse (then called San Gabriel Civic Auditorium) might be interested and contacted the theatre with a proposal. A meeting with the City followed and an agreement was reached between the City and the LATOS. Mr. Kissel flew to Brooklyn and surveyed and photographed the instruments in the RKO Madison and the Albee. The Madison would be better in some aspects, but would entail removing the organ through the grillwork, while the Albee could be removed through the chamber access doors, so Kissel recommended the Albee instrument.



In November Kissel and fellow LATOS member Ross Farmer went to New York and spent 11 days, working from early morning to late at night, removing and crating the Albee instrument and loading everything in a 40 foot van for shipment to San Gabriel. The truck arrived at the auditorium the day before Thanksgiving.

Over the next years the instrument was refurbished by LATOS volunteers. They hoped to refinish the white console in natural wood, but after stripping the old finish the casework was found to be marred from previous alterations and a white and gold finish would be necessary to cover the patched woodwork.

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It became the work of one man, Stan Weisbard to finish the console with an undercoating and nine coats of white lacquer, each hand rubbed as applied.

In the great movie houses an elevating organ console was a must - majestically rising from the depths of the orchestra pit with the organist bathed in the spotlight. Fortunately Kissel and Farmer had also removed and included the Allbee's elevator when they removed the instrument. However it was estimated that excavation, building forms, pouring concrete and installing the elevator equipment

would entail a cost of \$5,000. The problem was solved by a donation by another LATOS member, Frank J. Sherwood.

Installation was completed and the organ dedicated on February 11, 1972 as part of a regional celebration featuring nationally known organists at numerous organs of the area. Lyn Larsen performed on Friday, followed by the legendary Gaylord Carter accompanying the Harold Lloyd silent film "Why Worry" on Saturday, and Bill Thomson on Sunday.

At the Albee, the Brass Trumpet and 32' Wood Diaphone were missing. For San Gabriel, a Post Horn was substituted for the Trumpet. A Wood Diaphone was located, but there was not enough room for it in the main chamber, and the auditorium would not allow it to be placed on the back stage wall, so a Metal Diaphone had to be substituted. The "echo" Vox Humana was installed in the Solo chamber, the Tibia was further unified with electric switches, and the stop list slightly reconfigured. Because of limited chamber size, the Wood Harp, Chrysoglott, Xylophone and upright piano were installed under the stage apron. Otherwise the organ was installed much the way it had been in Brooklyn.

There were a few shortcomings as installed at San Gabriel. The substitution of a Post Horn for the Trumpet left a gap between the bright Post Horn and the mellower Tuba Horn and substituting the Wood Diaphone for a Metal Diaphone left the instrument somewhat weak in the pedal. The mechanical relays and number of available pneumatics in the console also forced some compromises in the stop layout. For example, the Solo chamber Vox was available only on the Solo manual, the Main chamber Vox only on the Great and Accompaniment. There was limited unification of the Tibia on the Solo manual so a Tibia/Vox combination on the Great would have the two ranks coming from opposite chambers. The first problem was solved in the 1990s when Peter Crotty made a personal donation of a Trumpet.

For some years, the theatre had been discussing the desirability of having a full orchestra pit elevator.



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This would necessitate having a console with multiple plugs and a detachable wind line so the console could be removed from the orchestra pit when the pit was needed for a full orchestra. With a look to the future, in 2007, Peter Crotty, through his Peter Lloyd Crotty Family Fund, agreed to fund a second restoration of the instrument.

It was felt that the best solution to a removable console would be electrifying the console and replacing the original mechanical relays with a modern electronic system so the console could be detached through one single plug. The Uniflex

system was chosen as a proven unit and as the one with which most organists are familiar. A side benefit of these choices would be room for more stop actions and further unification of the instrument so that now all ranks would appear on all manuals and at more pitches.

The console was shipped to the Crome Organ Company in Reno where new stop bolsters were fashioned to accommodate the Syndyne electric stop actions, and the console itself was transformed from the earlier panel style to the later "scroll" style. It was then refinished in white with added gold ormolu.

At the same time, several digital voices were added. The main chamber received an electronic Salicional and Vox Celeste, electronic celestes were added to the Solo String, and all the strings, the Clarinet and Oboe Horn were extended to 16' electronically. Electronic Sleigh Bells and a Vibraharp were added to the Solo chamber. An orchestra elevator would block the understage Chrysoglott, Wood Harp, and Xylophone so they were duplicated electronically in the chambers. That also meant that, until the advent of an orchestra pit lift, those instruments are available unenclosed from the beneath the state and under expression from the electronic voices in the chambers. For the pedal, an electronic Diaphone to 32' was added, as was a second 16' Tibia, and an 8' "Bump" Tibia, all playing thru a large speaker system located backstage.

During the restoration, all pipes were removed and cleaned, chambers were re-plastered, swell shades re-leathered, and the console re-finished and decorated.

The newly restored instrument was presented in its rededication in 2010 to a full house. Since the first artist to play the organ back in 1972 was Lyn Larsen, he was chosen to open the program, followed by Jelani Eddington, Chris Gorsuch, and Russ Peck. In 2011, the organ was presented to the public in "Wurlitzia," a program featuring the organ as well as the Temple City High School Jazz Band.



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