

What a wonderful

# WURLITZER

## Bay Area organists play movie palaces — and pizza parlors

By Paul Sterman  
STAFF WRITER

**T**ALK about your dramatic entrances.

At 7:30 on a recent Friday night at Oakland's Paramount Theatre, as the audience is getting seated for a screening of "Casablanca," booming orchestral sounds begin filling this old movie house. And suddenly, Jim Riggs, the Paramount's house organist, comes rising up slowly from the orchestra pit.

He is playing the theater's mighty Wurlitzer pipe organ. The **NOSTALGIA** organ sits atop a hydraulic

lift, which elevates Riggs and the instrument a full 12 feet until they are level with the Paramount stage.

A light shines on his face, and the dapperly dressed musician — sporting suspenders, a coat and a red and white polka dot bow tie — looks completely in his element.

The crowd cheers as he performs what sounds like a big-band version of "Winter Wonderland."

"I love it," Riggs says later of playing the organ at the Paramount. "It's really a gas playing for these folks."

Riggs is one of the half-dozen or so musicians who play the pipe organ at four Bay Area movie theaters where this music is still regularly featured: the Paramount and the Grand Lake in Oakland, the Stanford in Palo Alto and the Castro in San Francisco.

The presence of a grand pipe organ adds immeasurably to the movie-going experience at these four venerable theaters. The organists typically play for about 15 minutes before each of the two prime-time screenings during an evening, or before and after if just one movie is shown.

The organ playing evokes a sense of nostalgia, conjuring up a time when majestic old movie palaces were a common attraction in the Bay Area, rather than a gilded exception in the current landscape of soulless mega-plexes.

There's a certain theatricality to the Wurlitzer pipe organ — this large, elaborate instrument, with its plethora of pedals and keys and electronic controls.

And, of course, there is the music itself. Listening to a theater organist is like listening to a one-man orchestra. The pipe organ produces a wide and rich range of big symphonic sounds — everything from trumpets and drums to cymbals and xylophones.

"It's vibrant, it's full of life," Riggs says of the theater organ. "It has tremendous tone colors and is



JOHN GREEN — Staff

Edward Stout inspects the brass trumpets in the Wurlitzer organ chamber at the Stanford Theatre in Palo Alto.



ARLEEN NG — Staff

Organist Jim Riggs descends into the Paramount Theatre orchestra pit as he finishes his pre-movie concert.

## An era that won't die if local expert can help it

By Paul Sterman  
STAFF WRITER

**W**ALKING into the home of Edward Millington Stout III is like walking straight into a different era.

The house itself is a large, blue Queen Anne Victorian, and to say it stands out among the modern-day homes and businesses that surround it in Hayward is a dramatic understatement.

The front door opens and there is an explosion of organ music coming through the stereo.

"George Wright," Stout points out with a smile.

Wright was considered the pre-eminent theater organist of his generation. He packed them in at the old Fox Theatre in San Francisco in the 1940s and '50s, and made more than 60 albums of organ music by the time he died

last year at 77.

Stout tuned and prepared the pipe organs for Wright for about 20 years when the musician was performing at the old Fox and Paramount theaters in San Francisco. That's just one of the many things he has done in the course of a long career that has made him a walking encyclopedia on the history and technical workings of the pipe organ.

"He's certainly the most knowledgeable technician on the West Coast," says David Hegarty, house organist for the Castro Theatre.

Back in 1958, Stout started his own organ-restoration company. He now runs the company with Richard Taylor of San Mateo. The two men repair, maintain and sometimes install pipe organs — ones housed in both churches and

Please see **Stout**, LIVING-4

Please see **Wurlitzer**, LIVING-4

# Wurlitzer: Bay Area a mecca for theater organists

Continued from LIVING-1

very orchestral. It's an instrument of great drama."

"You can literally shake the building," adds Kevin King, who plays the organ at the Grand Lake theater every Saturday night. "It's a tremendous thrill to be able to play an instrument that can encompass the entire musical experience with one person."

Having four movie palaces where theater organists regularly perform is a luxury for Bay Area audiences. Most major cities don't have a comparable combination of old theaters and pipe-organ players, say local organ experts.

"This area is a mecca for the theater organ," says Edward Stout, a Hayward resident whose company has been restoring and maintaining organs for more than 40 years.

## Band substitute

Invented by Englishman Robert Hope-Jones, the theater pipe organ was created with the aim of replacing or supplementing the pit bands that accompanied silent movies. The Wurlitzer company began developing and marketing the pipe organ in 1910, and became the dominant maker. The company's product was known as the "mighty Wurlitzer."

The instruments are music machines. The Wurlitzer in the Grand Lake theater, for example, has 61 keys on each of three keyboards, and 197 stop tabs — the name for the electronic controls arrayed directly above the keyboards.

The stop tabs activate every imaginable sound; not just cellos and clarinets and snare drums, but tom-toms and castanets and cathedral chimes as well.

Some of the instrumentation makes for great sound effects — which, of course, is perfect for silent movies. There's chirping sounds for forest scenes, a loud honking noise for car chases and a wacky, whirring siren for pratfalls.

The keyboards, the controls and the pedals are all part of what is called the console. But the bulk of the theater instrument isn't even seen by the audience. All of the pipes — and in the Grand Lake organ, there are about 2,000 of them — musical instruments and other equipment are housed in two large backstage chambers, high up on either side of the stage.

The process that allows the theater organ to produce its sound is complicated. Essentially, the organist is playing the music by remote control. The console itself doesn't produce the sound — the equipment in the chambers does. The console sends electronic signals to components in the pipework and instruments, allowing the equipment to be activated by high-powered air blowers underneath the chambers.



RAY CHAVEZ — Staff

Organist Kevin King stands in the middle of the organ chamber inside the Grand Lake Theatre.

The whole process is an impressive marriage of electronic and musical wizardry. And the organist is the one waving a wand with his deft maneuverings at the console.

"You really have to think like an orchestra conductor," says King. "You have to be thinking ahead for whatever is coming up next, and you're literally using both hands and both feet all the time."

## A view to a thrill

As Riggs performs before the screening of "Casablanca," several people gather around him to get a closer look. They're riveted by the way he manipulates this instrument, adroitly pressing pedals and keys as he plays a set of Christmas chestnuts.

"There's so many buttons, and he's barely even looking at his feet — and his feet are flying," says Jimmy Miller, a 13-year-old from Hayward.

Stan Haney, 69, takes a seat in the front row so he can get a better listen to Riggs. The Belmont resident says he's taking beginning piano lessons, so he's intrigued by what the organist can do.

"Here I am struggling to play scales, and this guy is playing with all four limbs," says an admiring Haney. "Watching him maneuver over this whole instrument is something else."

Riggs, 43, was first introduced to the pipe organ when he was 13. A neighbor in Lafayette had a Wurlitzer in her large home and invited Riggs over to check it out. When he heard the sounds, it was a revelation.

"It really was like the clouds parted and the sun shone," he says. "I knew from that moment that was something I had to do."

And he did. Riggs taught

himself to play the pipe organ, and he would go on to get Bay Area movie-theater gigs, perform on international theater-organ tours and record five CDs of organ music, two of which were recorded at the Paramount.

King, the Grand Lake organist, first got hooked on the pipe organ when he was a kid growing up in San Leandro. He would go with his family to Ye Olde Pizza Joynt in Hayward, where a Wurlitzer provides nightly entertainment.

"It looked like it was so much fun — this wild instrument with all these noisemakers," says King.

When he was 14 he began taking organ lessons. And often he would go over to a now-defunct theater in San Francisco called The Avenue, where individuals could rent the Wurlitzer there for something like \$5 an hour so they could play it. King did a lot of practicing there.

Seven years ago, the Oakland resident purchased the Wurlitzer in the Grand Lake theater when its previous owner died. He did it so the organ could stay in the theater and continue to be played there.

King has to do a lot of repairs and upgrades to keep the organ in proper shape. He says he's poured more than 2,000 hours of work and \$30,000 to \$40,000 for maintenance since he bought the organ. But the 40-year-old musician says he loves the technical work on organs, comparing it to working on antique cars.

## The organ grind

Because theater-organ gigs aren't that numerous, local players typically string together various organ jobs to make a living. Several perform at the Bay Area's three main pizza eateries that feature pipe organ

music: Ye Olde Pizza Joynt, Pizza & Pipes in Redwood City and Bella Roma in Martinez.

Some organists like David Hegarty, the house organist at the Castro, play at churches as well as theaters. Musically speaking, church organs are more conservative instruments, lacking the orchestral range and color — no brass saxophones, for example — of the theater versions. And, of course, a church is generally a more somber place than a movie theater.

"Theater organs are so much more fun to play," says Hegarty, 54.

The San Francisco resident has been playing at the Castro for 21 years. He performs several nights a week there and the rest of the week at the Stanford Theatre.

Bill Taylor, who also plays several nights a week at the Stanford, has a regular day job. He's an engineer for Hewlett-Packard in Cupertino.

The 47-year-old San Jose resident has a strong family connection to the theater organ. When he was growing up in San Mateo, his family owned a Wurlitzer. They eventually installed the organ in the old Encore the-

ater in Burlingame — and that same organ now comprises the bulk of the one in the Castro Theatre.

As kids, Taylor and his brother, Richard, were fascinated by the technical workings of the pipe organ. While Bill went on to become an engineer and organ player on the side, Richard, a San Mateo resident, parlayed his interest into a career repairing and maintaining organs, and now runs the Hayward organ-restoration company with Stout.

The Stanford and Castro theaters have organ music seven nights a week, while the Grand Lake features the instrument Friday and Saturday nights. Riggs plays at the Paramount's classic-movie series.

The local organists say they generally play show tunes and popular music from the years between the two world wars, such as the songs of — as Riggs calls them — the Big Five: Gershwin, Berlin, Porter, Rodgers and Kern.

And if an old musical is being screened, the organists might perform tunes from, or associated with, the film.

It's rare that music is written specifically for the pipe organ. So usually organists take piano music for a tune and create their own adaptation for the organ.

## Pepperoni and Disney

Playing at a pizza parlor is quite different than playing at a movie theater, local organists say. It's usually a younger crowd, so the music selection is different. The organists take requests, and Disney music and scores from films like "Star Wars" and "Indiana Jones" are popular choices.

And sometimes people want to hear contemporary tunes like Ricky Martin's "Livin' La Vida Loca," notes Tino Contreras, general manager of Pizza & Pipes.

"It's nice eating and listening to music — listening to the pipe organ," says Contreras. "It's really an experience."

While the chambers in movie theaters hide all of the organ's pipework, in the eateries the pipes and other items are usually hanging overhead, out in the open, so people can see the equipment moving while the organist plays.

Riggs, a Walnut Creek resident, plays at the Bella Roma on Thursdays, and at the Ye Olde Pizza Joynt Wednesdays and Saturdays. King plays at the Bella Roma on Fridays and Sundays. Riggs also has a new pizza gig: He'll be performing off and on over the next five weeks at a new, 500-seat pizza restaurant at the Fiesta Hotel Casino in Las Vegas.

There's another great Bay Area site to hear a theater organ: The Berkeley Community Theatre, which houses an enormous Wurlitzer. It has 40 tons of pipework and equipment, notes King; one of the sets of pipes is more than three stories tall.

For the past 15 years, the Northern California chapter of the Theater Organ Society has been volunteering its time installing the various parts of the organ in the Berkeley building. And the job still isn't completed.

Although movies aren't screened there, the local organ group does sponsor four major organ concerts a year at the theater that are open to the public.

## A beautiful friendship

After the curtain went down at the "Casablanca" screening and the images of Rick and Ilsa and Sam faded, Riggs rose majestically from the orchestra pit once more, playing "As Time Goes By."

Curious onlookers again gathered around to observe Riggs more closely. "You play beautifully, sir," one man said.

Play it again, Jim.

The Nor-Cal Theater Organ Society, based at the Berkeley Community Theatre, holds monthly concert meetings, gathering in places like the Paramount or the Grand Lake. The group has about 250 members, and one of the perks is getting the chance to play the Berkeley theater's Wurlitzer just for fun. For more information about the group, call (510) 644-2707.

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# Stout: Duo keeps organs tuned

Continued from LIVING-1

theaters.

During the last several years, Stout and Taylor have been installing and upgrading a 1928 Wurlitzer in Palo Alto's Stanford Theatre, which enjoyed a plush renovation in the late 1980s. The theater, originally built in 1925, shows films from the silent era through the early '60s.

For the past 40 years, Stout has also been the curator of musical instruments for Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

Music and theaters have played prominent roles in Stout's life and those themes are reflected in his home.

As the 65-year-old organ expert begins leading a visitor through his house, he cheerfully points to a 16-millimeter film projector, one of the first ever made.

Lots of great old photos hang on the walls — pictures of famed organists, like Wright and Tom Hazleton, when they were young, a shot of the old Wurlitzer organ factory, and several of San Francisco's now-vanished movie palaces, such as the California Theatre on Market Street, built in 1917.

Organ memorabilia and antiques fill this house. In the hallway is a Victor Credenza acoustic phonograph, and on the treasured machine is a recording of music by Jesse Crawford, the top theater organist of the 1920s.

Stout has hundreds and hundreds more records of organ music.

His grandparents were vaudeville performers, and he loves talking about the days when the Bay Area was dotted with old, ornate movie houses. Back in the '40s and '50s, for example, San Francisco had towering edifices like the California, Fox and Paramount theaters (all of them now gone), and in the East Bay there was such sites as the Orpheum, Paramount and Grand Lake theaters.

And theater organists were key entertainers of those times. They performed constantly at these hallowed movie halls, and the top ones often had their names featured on the theater's marquee.

In the '50s, the invention of the "Hi-Fi" stereo sound sparked a new surge of interest in theater organs, with their orchestral range and sonic firepower. Wright, a Sacramento native who was playing organ at a Chinese restaurant in Oakland when he was 18, performed midnight organ concerts at the Fox that sold out the 4,600-seat house.

"It was a wonderful era," says Stout wistfully.

His first job with his organ-restoration company was for San Francisco's old Paramount. The theater's organ hadn't even been turned on for 17 years, and the Paramount — seeing the crowds Wright was bringing in just up the street — asked Stout to restore the Wurlitzer.

His company has gone on to do such other restoration jobs as the Odell organ at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in San Jose and the Skinner organ at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. (Since 1924, organ concerts have been held at the Palace at 4 p.m. every Saturday and Sunday. Hegarty performs there the first weekend of each month.)

In a 4,000-square-foot carriage house behind the Victorian, Stout and his employees labor on organ repairs. The organ shop is filled with machines, tools and seemingly every organ part imaginable — all meticulously stocked and organized.

Stout has an endless supply of anecdotes and historical tidbits. He's both playful and passionate, growing angry when talking about the dismantling of the old San Francisco movie palaces, and then lighting up when he hears a particular piece of organ music on the stereo — Wright playing "My Romance," for example. Stout hums along with enthusiasm.

He acknowledges that pipe organ music no longer has a lot of mainstream appeal among today's listeners.

"But I don't think it will ever disappear," Stout says, "because (such music) still resonates in the hearts of sensitive people."

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