

# Interview With Ed Stout

I first had the pleasure of meeting Ed Stout in the US summer of 1990 when I visited San Francisco to play, first hand, the fabulous Castro Theatre Wurlitzer. Since that meeting, having experienced Ed's colourful views on life and his irreverent humour, we have become dear friends. This article was written by Englishman, Robert Hope Jones (great, great grandson of THE Robert Hope Jones) who, whilst working for Ed for a period of time, had the foresight to conduct this interview with him forever capturing the interesting life of a man who calls a spade a bulldozer, set exceptionally high standards, redefined the word "Restoration" and who calls "every seat a musical loge." It was subsequently printed in several editions of the Cinema Organ Society Journal and I thought that it would be a worthy inclusion for readers in Australia, particularly his experiences with the Granada/Paramount Style 285 Wurlitzer, now installed here in Melbourne in the Regent Theatre. Here, it is reprinted with kind permission of the man himself. I am trying to twist his arm into writing some exclusive articles for VOX on the fabulous early Wurlitzer organs in the San Francisco Bay Area.

*John Giacchi*



**B**ack in 1996, I had the rare honour of being invited to live and work with Edward Millington Stout III. Over an extended period, I was privileged with the opportunity not only to be taught by one of America's top organ technicians, but also to get an insight into his personal life, in a way that few (if any) have done before. A journey with Ed is always entertaining. Sometimes it's tranquil, explosive the next, like being on a locomotive under thundering skies, but nearly always inspiring. Here, some of Ed is presented for all to read. Quite often it's the controversial side. But Ed is a man of vision, and the words or acts of such men can make the rest feel uneasy.

Here, too, is a dip into the West Coast's past, where the Wurlitzer was once King, and witness to its birth, death and rebirth.

Thank you Ed.

*R.Hope-Jones*

## ***Edward Millington Stout III***

### **Where and when were you born?**

I was born in Pontiac, Michigan, on October 30th, 1934. My Mother was very impatient: she was shooting for Halloween, but just couldn't resist!

### **What is your earliest recollection of having an interest in pipe organs?**

I was four years old and was taken to the Oakland Theatre, Pontiac, which was a premier house. They used their pipe organ for every show, which I thought was wonderful and talked about it quite a bit. Of course, there were other exposures to the organ; I can remember them being used on the radio on a regular basis. I'd say I definitely reacted to it all at the age of four. At the age of six, I can remember wanting organ records. My grandmother Stout had a very expensive Orthophonic Credenza, which, at the time, was the very best gramophone available. On my seventh birthday this player was put down in the basement, along with all the records, for my use. My grandmother and grandfather La Clear had a theatrical background, as did my mother. Mother was dancing at the Oakland Theatre by the age of ten and her parents (a mix of French and Scottish) were performing in stock company shows. Naturally, they liked theatre organ music.

### **During the years when you were growing up, was the theatre organ still a major form of entertainment?**

No, but it was still considered a vital piece of machinery in radio studios and in some theatres where there were still showcases.

### **In those days of theatre shows and radio broadcasts (during the 1940s) can you recall the quality of organs used, music performed and presentation?**

It was mostly what I would call 'affectionate grunge.' The radio sound was a kind of 'legatogrungy' MF ensemble, played for soap operas, throughout the background. This began to change and slowly the Hammond began to take its place.

Fulton Lewis Jr. was a very popular evening broadcaster. His signature tune in and out was a pipe organ recording. My parents acquired that recording. I think it was 'Valencia', played by Jesse Crawford.

### **On several occasions I have heard you say, "a person is either born with musical awareness and sensitivity, or is not." Did you recognize your talents early on?**

I think I did and that certain things irritated me. You see, I was overtly sensitive to imperfections - and not just in musical matters. For instance, if a theatre's stage drape was a little bit too high or a picture was hanging incorrectly, I would either have to fix it or leave the room. I can remember discerning if I liked one sort of music or the other, too.

I was born into a Presbyterian church, which I didn't like because the ministers always reminded me of sombre judges, sitting up there during the service. I know I went to Sunday school on one occasion and I came home to tell my mother that I was never going to sit in one of those little painted chairs, singing songs about Jesus, again! Instead, I wanted to go up into the sanctuary to hear the organ. I was told, "You can go up if you're quiet and behave!" So I endured the sombre men groaning during the service.

Then I discovered the Episcopal Church, which was my undoing because the music was glorious by comparison. So, I 'rode the fence', musically, from an early age.

### **What was your first 'hands on' experience with pipe organs?**

My first hands on was at the age of nine. I jimmied open the door of the local church's pipe organ and crawled all over it having a good time, pulling on tubes and valves. Come Sunday morning, they had ciphers but could not work out who the vandal was. I never owned up as I was frightened to death. When I entered military school they had an old 'tubercular' Kimball in the church where I was a chorister. I won over the choirmaster, Joseph Schilling, (an Englishman, whom I adored) and he arranged for me to spend the day with the pipe organ technicians when ever they visited for maintenance, during which I was excused from classes.

### **You have been directly involved with just about all the best San Francisco Wurlitzer Hope-Jones unit orchestras: The California, Granada and Fox theatres, to name but a few. I mean, those alone, read as an impressive list!**

Yes, I'd say so. I was attracted by the Wurlitzer sound and knew that that was what I wanted to work on. When I established the business, I worked on a little Wurlitzer at the Lost Weekend cocktail bar. It was a wonderful organ with a neat sound and one of the most gorgeous tibias. Larry Vannucci was resident organist so we 'dove-tailed' on that project. He also played at the Golden Gate theatre downtown where they had many problems with their 3/13 Style 240 Wurlitzer. So Mark Alling, (who was the R.K.O. GM, ran the theatre) had me straighten the organ out. This was to be my first serious contract. Of course, that was all night work due to the theatre's schedule, but I loved it! The Golden Gate led me to the California and the Granada.

Now, the California was closed and out of use, but we used to go down there. It was owned by Paramount. During a variety club luncheon, the Golden Gate Theatre manager had been boasting to Earl W. Long (Paramount's west coast head man, who was a wonderful person) about this fellow (me) he had working on his organ. At the time he was hoping to get the Granada organ working. It was then called the Paramount. but we called it Granada, out of reverence because it was such a famous name. Earl wanted to bring it out of a seventeen year silence. It hadn't been turned on in all that time, and so I was faced with the grandest of the Style 285 Wurlitzers. This was an organ that was in six chambers, eight stories tall. The Fox theatre work followed a little later on. So, I'd say that my involvement with all these venues was, in part, down to doing a decent job and convincing people that they should go ahead and use these organs.

Though the Granada theatre had been dampened with Damask panelling in its latter days, it still had quite a bit of life in it. It was much livelier in the old days. The distribution of the sound was very even, and the California had amazing projection qualities, too.

I've told you that story of when I was working in the solo chamber of the Granada organ. A young Tom Hazleton, was, I thought, in the chamber below the chest I was working on. So, I began talking to him in a normal voice. Suddenly, Tom came in and said, "Were you shouting?" I said, "No, I thought you were down below, where have you been?" He said, "I've been in the back row of the balcony and could hear every word you were saying!" Now that's amazing, so I tried it, and indeed it was true! I've heard people ask, "Was the Chrysoglott in the front of the chamber?" and I'd say, "No, it was in the back of the main!"

Like the Clarinet, if you where in the back of the balcony, it sounded as though it were fifteen feet away. They were amazing and the people putting Megalomania organs together have not learnt from the past - that you don't make chambers 20ft or 30ft high and 40ft deep!

### **Presumably, this early exposure to the original concepts of Wurlitzer gave you the foundations for your own successful tonal finishing?**

I think so. I paid a lot of attention to how the organs sounded, and they really were superbly finished by James Nutall. Wurlitzer sent him out and he initialled the organs. I don't know...I think it's an exposure to refinement and a sense of a dignified sound, but also I learned early on to listen. I often notice with so many organ hobbyists, that as soon as the organist plays, their jaw starts going and they truly do not listen. So how can you compare or be fair? To be honest with you, I think there are varying degrees of sensitivity in people. Now I may be totally wrong, but I like to indulge myself in my 'One Tube Silvertone Theory'! I think most of the world is made up of one-tube Silvertones, and if a million kilowatts of signal are beaming in on them, they might get it. And then, there are those Superheterodynes, that can regenerate and use a very small signal. They are sensitive to the subtle things in the organ and are moved by the sound. I try to figure out what makes an organ blend, what makes an ensemble cohere. For instance, like a band or an orchestra: if there is a trombone calling attention to itself, he's no longer part of the band; he shouldn't be there! The same is with any stop or tremulant on the organ that is preventing the ensemble to cohere and blend. I don't think it is that difficult to analyse and create the appropriate terracing.

### **Do you believe that Wurlitzer's designers had a specific tonal concept when they laid out the specification of any given style/model?**

I think they knew from experience what worked and they had a pretty good idea of what scaling worked. Right from the start they figured out what kind of regulators worked. This enabled them to get a tight control of the tremulant excursion and the sound. You take a Robert Morton, as an example, which has its own sound, and I wished the people who work and play on them would stop apologizing for it. There's no need to put Wurlitzer stop tabs into a Morton console to make it sound like a Wurlitzer. I can remember enjoying all sorts of Don Baker recordings done in his marvellous stodgy style, on a Morton. It is just not my cup of tea but I took it on its terms. Wurlitzers were way ahead

of them on the winding system and certainty on scaling. They had a blending appeal with a clarity of line that I didn't hear in some other builders.

So I do think they knew what they were doing and they learned from their failings and mistakes, because they really didn't have it down in their earliest period, as everybody knows. They would also have been influenced by organists such as Crawford and other stellar personalities. It's a matter of key personnel. During Farney's days, they came up with real quality products. Their secret was to take an invention, develop, improve and make it beautiful and successful.

**Is it not possible that had the organ production survived into the nineties, the Wurlitzer concepts may have evolved into similar ideas as those being laid down by the self appointed "experts"?**

Taking a theatre organ out of its original period and placing it in a society like this? It's very hard to guess at what would happen. I mean, this is a desensitized society we're living in right now. They don't want melody, they don't want harmony, they want an angry jungle beat! There is a lot of hostility in the music of today. I don't think the organ sings to those kinds of people. Maybe when they get old or take a sophistication pill: I don't know, I don't think I can answer that one conclusively.

Now, the so called experts? There are people that will take an organ and tamper with it, and it takes some nerve to call these contrivances Wurlitzer organs! Now, I'm not criticizing these people; some of them who come up with these megalomania organs are friends of mine, whom I adore. I don't, however, agree with what they have done because they're not true to any Wurlitzer tonal philosophies. I mean, you can't take a Wurlitzer, Aeolian, Skinner, M. Harris and everything else and call it a Wurlitzer. They've filled too many of the gaps. I can remember a very talented young man by the name of Clark Wilson (whom I have a lot of respect for) playing me a tape of an organ and asking, "what's wrong with this ensemble?" So, I listened and asked, "how many celestes are now on and how many does it have?" He said, "well, there's the concert flute celeste, spitz flute celeste, quintadena celeste, the diapason celeste..." and on it went!

At this point, I said, "stop!" This is foreign to Wurlitzer's philosophy of having all this undulating, heaving mass of sound. Wurlitzer, in their own way, had a clarity in the foundation. I would remind some of these people that the largest standard organ produced by Wurlitzer like the N.Y. Paramount and big Fox organs had two celestes in them. A VDO and a gamba, as they knew damn well that those narrow scales wouldn't pull the whole pitch line of the Goddamn organ! It is insanity. They're interesting, I suppose, these megalomania organs by the fact of their size. They have ill-designed chambers to accommodate all the enormous pedal registers. The chambers need to be tight and small, while all the impressive lumber you want to show off to your friends needs a separate chamber. But by God, I don't hear a lot of clarity in these organs. And glass chambers! Well, right there you can kiss the pedal good-bye as that is just an acoustical winker - it cancels low frequencies! I've watched glass windows in organs moving one inch absorbing the bass! Going back to the Granada organ, the maximum chamber depth was 10ft, with a lot of opening. That's the basic formula for success.

**Why do you think Wurlitzer avoided using larger scaled pipe work for the four big Fox organs?**

I think it was several factors, and I don't know for sure on all of them because I wasn't in the office when the decisions were being made. What they wanted to do, what William Fox wanted to do, was to capitalize on the immense success of the Times Square Paramount, of which the house was more similar to the Granada, very tall and narrow. So they take that organ and they put it into a theatre two to three times the cubic volume of the Granada/Paramount and add to that ludicrous shutter opening. To begin with, right there and then, there's a problem. This was the formula of the Fox installations, especially Detroit. Also, Wurlitzers were riding high. They were very busy and here was this very important contract. At this point, I don't think the instruments were dealt with or looked upon with the same degree of importance as they were in the early period.

**I agree with you there, and by the time the four major Fox theatres were built, it would appear that the usual, careful consideration given to chamber design, had long since disappeared.**

Basically it had. They stuffed them in and they didn't have the excellent egress. Some of the chambers were very deep, with minimum shutter opening, and again, speaking into much larger auditoriums.

I can only, in my mind's ear, project, but I would have thought that they would have taken these organs and 'upped' them by one division. In other words, there wouldn't have been any 10" wind pressure, it becomes 15". There would be no 15" as this would become 25" pressure, and so forth. This would at least provide enough energy to get the sound out. Again, I don't care how loud the organ's shouting, if there's not enough shutter area and sufficient opening in the grille work (at least a minimum of 65%) you're going to have serious problems with sense of presence. It just won't work. You can come up with a very pleasant sound, and I don't intend to belittle the Detroit Fox organ or any of the others, it's a very pleasant, wonderful sound in its own way, but it is definitely a different experience. It's not that symphonic clarity where it just has strength and articulation. Oh my God, those large early organs were phenomenal. Steely almost! Jesus! I hear the strings at the California and I get goose bumps recalling that sound! Again, here comes the sound from eight floors up, and nobody today knows that sensuous experience or the sonic dimension of those halls and the acoustical effect of having sound coming from that position. Even the pavements outside the Granada used to vibrate from that big sound!

The brass chamber was basically on the fifth floor, at the top of the proscenium arch on the right side and it came out like the wrath of God and soared over the whole theatre. It was well thought out. The large organs were big, lush and wonderful. 'Little Girl Blue', that marvellous piece played by George Wright, on the S.F. Fox organ, would not have been so pretty at the Granada theatre as it was at the Fox. Part of the effect was that cushy acoustical situation. Both wonderful, but very different. Anybody who wants to go beyond what the Fox organs were, I just can't understand. Not one bit. Anybody who knows me, knows I like Skinner organs and if I want to hear a Skinner, I'll go and hear one. Fortunately, I can. Ha, Ha!

**What is your fondest memory of the time you spent at the Granada and California?**

If I told you, I'd be arrested! Ha! Oh my! No, I'm just kidding. (No, I believe you, Ed!) Many memories in all those places. I spent a fair amount of time in the Fox theatre. You see, I became involved there through the auspicious of a mentor of mine, Paul Schoenstein. He took care of the Fox organ in the years of George Wright's residency. He was a professional organ man and was very musical. We got along terribly well and were dear friends. He recognized that I had something special for those organs and a way with them. He nurtured that - really supported it. When Wright wanted the organ putting in shape for those midnight concerts, after the first one, he had the theatre contact Paul, who came to me and asked if I would do the work.

One memory that stands out was when we presented the Granada organ to the public for the first time after 17 years. To begin the presentation, we ran that famous film of the organ being constructed in the factory and then shown being delivered to the theatre, horse-drawn. We ran this 35mm film on the big screen, in dead silence. Just as it was delivered, Tom Hazleton hit full organ, playing Granada! Well, right now, I'm almost choking up thinking about it. At the time, I was on duty and my knees went from under me, but by God, it was moving! You talk about showbiz potency and hitting people right between the eyes! It did that, alright. That organ had the power of twenty! I had a lot of fun there with some wonderful people like Buddy Cole, Johnny Seng, and of course, George Wright played some wonderful concerts, too - there was a guy who could go out on a limb: way out at the top at the tree; the branch would break and he would grab the next one, then you'd wonder, how the hell he was going to get out of this one? He was very inventive on the spot.

**You have spent many hours in the company of George Wright, including listening to him play his Pasadena studio instrument. It must have been quite breathtaking being caught up in such musical excellence?**

Sure. I was very fortunate to have worked for him at various times. The man had so much music in his body and soul, with a wealth of experience coming up from the Crawford influence of phrasing, ballad playing, open harmony and knowing what notes not to play. Exposure to the big bands and orchestras only added fuel to an already waxing, musical soul. The man was totally musical! I don't think I've ever met anybody like that since.

George and I were no longer friends towards the end of his life. We had a difference of opinion, sadly enough. However, I will never lose my profound respect for the man, and I'll always cherish the time I had watching him play. Larry Vannucci did the same thing; it was (and this is so rare) as though the manuals, relays and wind chests were removed and that person's musical soul and being were actually in the chamber, connected directly to the pipe work! ! There was no invisible shield of remoteness or up tightness. Nor did you get the feeling this was a 'study' thing. Not an ounce of detachment! Now when you're in the presence of that kind of being and that kind of playing, you just have to soak it all in, all that you can. Some people are as clever as hell: they'll put a tune under tension; or at the composer's expense through showing off;

they'll take the tune where it doesn't comfortably want to go. But somebody like Tom Hazleton always knows where that comfort zone is, as does Wright. These people are basically disciples of Wright. He developed the style. Boy, how fortunate we are that all this happened. I don't take that for granted. Not for a second did it become familiar. I was privileged to be on the 'inside' of those significant days. I guess that says it all.

**Getting away from theatre organs for a while (which is always a healthy thing to do), you are curator to some of the world's finest classical organs in the Bay Area. I suppose that makes you the 'Godfather' of the San Francisco organ scene!**

Oh well. I've been called that before. That's what happens when you get old. Ha!

Again, I don't know what it is. I've been lucky, and I think it's because I'm so sensitive to music, combined with having an opinion or two! I was fortunate enough to work with some great people who were not 'yes' men, either. If they didn't like something, they said so.

At the Cathedral of San Francisco, I was appointed curator of musical instruments in 1959 - that's a long time ago and the period when I worked for Richard Purvis.

**You must be Grace Cathedral's longest serving member of staff?**

Yes. I have been there for years, with Fenstermaker coming second.

I feel very lucky at Grace, because that's the West Coast's finest classical organ - without any question - and I hold it up with great reverence and profound respect. I am very conservative about any work I do there. I love it: not just because it's large; that organ's ensemble sings. You can say that with any brand. Either they sing or they don't.

Something happens when you hear that sound and if it works, it just turns you on, it goes right to the soul. I can get just as emotional listening to a hymn played on the right kind of organ as I can listening to 'Little Girl Blue', if the organ sings.

A lot of these God-forsaken contrivances that have been impacted into churches in the Neo-Baroque fashion - good Christ, they're for the enjoyment of small dogs, bats and nothing more! They forgot the unison of the organ is 8ft! Supercilious little twits!

Now getting back to your question. Yes we do take care of a lot of wonderful, historic instruments. Significantly, most of them are Skinners. Now, when somebody asks me what were the two finest manufactures of organs in the USA, I have to say, in my opinion, Skinner for classical and Wurlitzer for theatrical. That's not just from a tonal aspect but also from exquisite workmanship, choice of materials and so-forth. I just gravitate to those qualities.

**You never compromise on matters of quality, do you?**

No! Not one bit! Not one ounce, and I'll tell you where that comes from. I learnt it from my grandfather La Clear who was a furniture maker. I watched him test drawers that he had made. They had to slide perfectly! I learnt some of these qualities from my parents, too. I was fortunate enough to have been raised in a moderately affluent family. My parents had the means to buy good things.

When my father would go into a store, he'd say, "I want to see your best of this, or your best of that." People who see me shop will see the same thing happen. I'm not consciously imitating them, but something which comes from within.

### **You're an expert but you're always learning**

We're all learning, everyday. I'm still a student of this art, and anybody who thinks they're not, should 'give the key away', because they're going to do something dangerous and foolish. What is really terrible to me - to be very honest - is that there is simply not enough time to learn all the things you would like to, and master them. I have done fairly well so far, but there is an awful lot more that I wish I could do.

### **The pipe organ business wasn't your first choice of profession, was it?**

I am a fence rider in a way. The things I've always had a passion for were related to motion picture theatres. I love motion picture exhibiting. When I was a kid, I thought the way pictures were presented was just sensational. At the Oakland Theatre, Michigan, they had two men on the stage who would open the grand curtain.

They would let it travel so far open, then they would hit the picture title curtain and it would bank, drift out and back again, settle down, then the title curtain would do the same thing. To me it was fantastic and they knew it, too. They were all real showmen and they made a lot of effort to make the whole experience enjoyable. I just loved it and so always wanted to run movie theatres, and I did. Now running an organ business and a theatre at the same time (which I did for many years) is nonsense. Its crazy, but I was one of those people with a lot of energy, was turned on by everything and could get by with very little sleep.

### **I think had you gone into film making, you would have become quite famous in that field.**

Who knows. Like you, I have an absurd sense of (irreverent) humour, so I would certainly have upset a lot of people. When I was in the armed air force motion picture business, we ran theatres, and this pal of mine (in the days of nitrate film when two men were required to operate the highly volatile film) named Bob Sherry - a marvelous fellow- he went to the Brook's Institute Of Photography. He also wanted me to go and be a motion picture photographer, but music called me. It had a stronger pull and it was always singing to me in my mind's ear. I have a wonderful sense of recall, so if I've heard a piece of music, I can play it back in my mind, over and over again quite accurately. So the sirens were on the rock beckoning me and so I had to do that. I had to become an organ builder or, I correct myself, an organ technician, because there are a lot of people out there who refer to them selves as organ

builders, but just assemble things that others have constructed. In the case of those who assemble Wurlitzer organs, they refer to having "built" them, it's simply wishful thinking.

Because I adore history, I have a profound respect for creations of other people and of course, the products that came from the Wurlitzer and Skinner companies along with the various other quality makers. I get enough 'internal kick' out of renewing, restoring and protecting what these people created. So I don't have to be an organ builder. Another word that is misrepresented is 'voicer.' Oh I love that ... every Tom with a jack knife is a voicer!

### **Few people probably knew that you once ran your own movie theatre in San Francisco. Can you enlarge on that for us?**

Well a friend of mine, who was a client, had purchased the organ from the State Lake Theatre in Chicago (where Helen Crawford played on this style 240), across the street from the Chicago theatre, and he wanted me to restore it, so I asked, what are you going to do with it? He said, "Put it on the third floor of my warehouse." I said, "Well that's a shame, it should go in a theatre." He said, jokingly, "Find a theatre." Well that week end I went out and committed us to leasing a theatre! So that's how it started. Our first attempt was a Nickelodeon, upon Portrero Hill, called the New Portrero Hill Theatre. It was a 1912 Nickelodeon where we spent two years, and we built the basic organ chambers and a lot of other crazy things. But then the Avenue Theatre became available through Steve Levin (a dear friend of mine) because his father, who owned the Avenue along with many other theatres out there, wanted to cease operations there and was willing to lease it. So by the skin of our teeth and by borrowing money, we entered into an agreement,



abandoned the New Portrero and ran 'grind' (grind is seven-nights-a-week, John Wayne meets Godzilla type-stuff) and kept the thing going, built organ chambers and installed the organ there. Having had a lot of experience with projectors, part of the time I was a projectionist, other times I ran the house. Then during the days, we installed the organ. Again, it was one of those things that you'd quit at 2 am and be up at 8 am working on the organ. At the same time, I kept all my prime contracts with the organ company. It was like having three careers at once, and it was fun.

### **Tell me about 'Show Time San Francisco'.**

At one point I thought it would be great to have a radio programme because they used to do that in the old days. For instance, when Dick Clay (a dear friend of mine), and I were teenagers, we used to go to the Fisher Theatre to hear Don Miller play the organ. Now this was before we even knew each other; we were at the same shows, but never bumped into each other, but this Don Miller used to broadcast on the radio. They'd have somebody read a poem and then he'd play the organ, etc. So a bunch of us got together and decided we'd do the same thing. In fact, Jim Roseveare was pivotal in the thing as he was there all of the time sharpening his skills. We also had the benefit of Tom Hazleton playing for silent pictures and performing on the radio, then a very young Lyn Larsen came on the scene, full of energy and wonderful ideas. The radio show was done in front of an audience and became a very popular programme. That came at the end of my experience there as my organ business was becoming more demanding, so I decided to cease activities there and focus on the organ company.

### **The tonal work that you so generously did for Dick Taylor on the Castro organ: would you say that it stands as an Ed Stout sound or a true Wurlitzer sound.**

Oh my! No, the Castro is a Wurlitzer sound. There is no Ed Stout sound. I have an approach, yes, in fact Tom Hazleton once said, "Gee, I can hear Redwood City, the Avenue and the Castro as all having identifiable traits." There are certain things I do: for instance, you don't make the string tremulants so deep that they almost stop speaking, and various other tricks in the terracing where you accelerate things and so forth. I always like the tibias as to be feathery and more transparent as their blending qualities are very important to me, that they carry the ensemble, rather than having this ponderous, mammary sound that is out of control, swinging around in the ensemble. That's a syndrome that destroys rhythmic excursion and movement in the playing. Too often the tibias are much too loud with too much tremulant excursion, making them very dominant. I would say that I am very pleased with the way the Castro organ co-operated with what I wanted to do. At the same time it's really about taking the organ where it wants to go in that room.

### **I'd say the Castro's acoustics contribute to a certain portion of the organ's brilliance, but what you've achieved takes special talent, and a gift that you are famous for.**

Well, I've been at it for a long time and part of it is truly loving the sound. Obviously, in 42 years you gain quite a few skills. There are a lot of people who have done that,

and everybody has their particular focus and way of doing things. I have mine which is based on how I feel the instrument wants to make music. That's the whole point. But once again, I am pleased with the Castro. My partner and owner of the Castro organ, Dick Taylor, (who is extraordinarily gifted) basically wanted the same thing and was willing to put the time into that organ, which most people commercially can't afford to do. Like trying to get the Orchestral Oboes to take the tremulant each at the same depth, on every note. Well that's a lot of time on curving reed tongues. Everything that was done there was done out of respect for the history. The other side of the coin is that the Castro (like many other organs) has many imperfections and many holes. The whole idea is that if you know where they are, you make sure others don't hear them. My approach is basically to go after what ever element is calling attention to itself. While the hobby syndrome (bless them) is: there are fourteen dead notes on the tibia, but here comes this drooling idiot and he'll come unto you and say (Ed puts on his Gruffy voice), "Well we got the pizzicato going, Mr. Stout." They just don't get it.

### **What is your Philosophy on tuning organs?**

Well, first of all, when to tune and when not to tune!

### **Which of your many clichés are used the most?**

I don't know ... witticisms have always come to me very quickly and naturally. I'll hear other people say 'Ed Stoutisms' and think it's kind of cute and get a 'bang' out of it. For me, a remark is for the moment and a lot of them only mean something for the people at that time and place. For example: New Davies Hall, (which is the ugly monstrosity with a transparent front) of which, somebody asked me what I liked about it. I said, "If Cinderella had a clubbed foot, Davies Hall would have been her glass slipper!" Well its funny and it almost gives you a picture, but also an absurd remark for the moment. I think my favorite intro, and I use it when I MC, is when I say, "Time now... to make every seat... a musical loge." That one originated from the script of the Show Time radio program when we were boasting about the acoustics of the Avenue theatre, which were basically non-existent. It was pure theatrical hype! We were boasting about the fact that the organ was on the stage floor and I ended a line by saying, "The organ chambers are ideally spread 70ft across the stage floor, making every seat... a musical loge."

I can't think of any clichés - can you? As I say, they're for the moment.

I suppose the one that sticks to me the most is about Robert Morton.

"Oh yes! why, I'm a man who can afford second best and that's why I've chosen Robert Morton!" I tell Morton owners that I'm glad there was a Robert Morton, a Kimball or who ever, because without them how could you appreciate Wurlitzers to the degree you do? There has to be a reference.

### **Tell me about the world's shortest organ survey.**

That was for a church in Oakland that had an instrument, which in its day, was quite amazing. It was a 60-rank Kimball, but it had been up-ended, added to with all sorts of compromises. It was structurally unsafe and the wiring was in a terrible state - a filthy state! They kept putting good money after bad into it for years. So I wrote this report which consisted of two pages: 1. A cover page, which read, "Special report for the First Presbyterian Church, Oakland."

When you opened it up, it said: "Options 1, 2, and 3," alongside which I glued a wooded kitchen match!

I was to take this report to the head of the organ committee, an attorney, in the Pyramid building. So, I placed it on his desk. There was this impressive looking front cover which he opened. When he saw that match, he looked at me and looked down at the match and said, "Are you kidding?" and I said, "No!" He threw the thing at me! Now the fact of the matter is, I did write a proper report, some ten pages long. The summary which I handed to him suggested that they just burn the thing down.

**One topic that has been "talked to death" is the destruction of San Francisco's Fox Theatre, the crown jewel of landmarks. You were involved with the theatre during its last months. What can you remember of that dark period?**

Well there was a great effort to save that theatre as there was no building quite like it anywhere. One of the reasons for that was that there was a grace to that elegance. The forced perspective of the auditorium was just unbeatable. All of those elements that Lamb used in the other theatres came together in a very nice way in the Fox. It wasn't 'clunky'.

For me the loss of that theatre was the moment when SF ceased to be a truly cosmopolitan city. In the '50s, it was all hats and gloves; people dressed up. There were many fine shops and restaurants along with great old cafeterias on Market Street that were there from the teens and twenties, because of the shopping and the theatres. The theatres brought down tens of thousands of people into the town, because if you can imagine the seating capacity of those big houses doing five a day, that's a lot of people.

So, with the passing of these theatres, all these other industries that they supported disappeared, and Market Street became a honky-tonk Street of Burger Kings and sleaze-box motor-cycle outfit shops. So that was a turning point in the town and was pretty much down hill from there. Of course, a few years later in 1965, the Granada was torn down, oh, and the California went in 1961. So gone were the big three halls with fabulous organs. I mean, can you imagine? It was a really dark period, but I was most lucky to have been involved as closely as I was.

**In a way, for my generation, it is like being deprived of something that will never happen again, with the only trace being on paper and recordings.**

Yes, here and there through recordings, you are able to get some idea of the building's acoustics, but you can't adequately describe it - it's like listening to it through a telephone. What you miss is the dimensions of the thing, where the building is over half of the instrument in its effect on it. I can share my enthusiasm with people like you who are sensitive and have a longing for it, but that sort of experience can't be duplicated again. I have often thought what a pity it is that some of the extremely wealthy people in this country who have the means to have purchased some of these landmarks and preserved them, writing the whole thing off as a promotional head quarters or exhibit room for what ever corporation they might have had, didn't do that. Again, the hobby aspect of it is, "I want it in my back yard." Truly, the only wealthy man I know of who has done it correctly is David Packard, over at the Stanford Theatre, Palo Alto. He preserved a downtown

theatre, spent a fortune on it, had an organ re-installed and this venue is open most of the time presenting films and the organ, twice nightly. Tell me any philanthropic man, or a man with means, who has done that. I can't name one, so he stands out very much alone. So many people have had the opportunity and the means to do what he did and they didn't pick up on it. The Uptown theatre in Chicago and places like it could be saved by men with cheque books and they wouldn't even feel it. Set up a non profit organization to save the place.

**In general, do you consider the various societies that exist being of future benefit to the theatre organ?**

No, I think that they have done a lot of harm. The ATOS (especially) has been very harmful with very little respect for history, virtually encouraging the destruction of these instruments. Its the only hobby discipline (I should I call it an undiscipline) that I'm aware of that boasts and brags about the destruction of the instruments they're supposedly protecting. There are very few examples of original styles left because of this obsession for cancerous growth, and this is not limited to the theatre world. It is very difficult for an organist to put a leash on canine instincts. Some organists love to leave their mark on an instrument and I often say that these musicians are 'three-legged dogs': the fourth is perpetually lifted, and there is something to that, perhaps frustration from not being able to control the production of the character and sound. They can choose certain stops and create basic sounds, but they cannot create the colour. Somebody else is doing that. That, I feel, is one of the subconscious things that has led them to want to tinker and change things. I have often said that the tragedy of the pipe organ is the fact it is large enough to have a damn door on it. If Stradivarius had a doors on them, there wouldn't be a single one left.

But getting back to the organ societies, most of them celebrate poor installations and show examples of breaking organs up. As soon as somebody gets a ten rank organ, the first thing they have to do is add a Post Horn, or if they have a 15 rank organ it has to become a 20 rank organ. What history is there of it? Well I've heard all their arguments: "Well it is a musical instrument and this is the 20th century and this is ... blah, blah, blah, blah. Nonsense! At the Castro theatre, they are told two things: "You can adjust the height of the bench, and the combination action pistons if we like what you put on." And of course, that organ possesses a real organ relay, so if some clown is being abusive, (registration wise) you can just go back to the relay room and loosen the leather nut on that particular switch.

That brings me on to the wholesale destruction of the relays. Some organists (sensitive organists) are coming around (not vocal about it yet) and saying that the Wurlitzer relay had a definite feel and a response time that was comfortable. Without that wonderful system, there would have been no theatre organ. It was that responsive electrical system that would allow an instrument to play that way. Those beautifully manufactured systems are now held in contempt. Some poor dweeb with an organ of nine ranks, and the first thing he's got to do is put on a solid state relay on. Why? Because of peer acceptance, and that's what every other clown is doing. It is just a shame.

It's a discipline and a hobby that I have very little respect for. The clock makers and old motor car societies are different. If you took a Duesenberg motorcar and put a

Chevy engine in it, you'd be run out of town on a rail: and they have the gall to call it a Wurlitzer organ! Some of the people have musical instrument collections that are phenomenal. Now here's a gorgeous Hupfeld Orchestra or Welte Orchestrion, and if you suggested putting a magnetic tape right there in the window they would think you were insane. They wouldn't want to speak to you again. Yet the very part of what made the unit organ possible... (historically if this equipment didn't work that would be something else). But these people who claim these relays are unreliable are liars and incompetents. The Castro organ, for just one example, has been playing every night of the week for 15 years and in that time there were only two problems, which were shunt-shorting bars coming unsoldered. Fortunately, they are designed (with maintenance in mind) compartmental with ventilis; you can repair them while they are being played and I have done that in some of the big theatres. While the organist was playing on the other three manuals, I had the problem fixed and back on line in twenty minutes, thank you very much. Try that with your zip-o-matic chip that was vomited out of a hole. That really annoys the hell out of me!

Some clubs do the equivalent of devaluing the coin. They want to-make eeeverybody happy. You show me everybody happy and I'll show to the stowage deck on a ship, the bottom of the aquarium. Well, I've said too much.

One good aspect that has come out of the societies is the promotion of young talent who have real potential. Strangely enough, they're all coming from Europe and Australia. I haven't heard any young talent in the USA that has impressed me for a long time. Once again, I wonder how the hell we ever won the revolutionary war against a country that can produce a Simon Gledhill. It must have been a dark day over there.

#### **Having said all that, do you see yourself continuing to work on theatre organs in the future?**

I am going to limit myself with those activities as I have a lot to do in the classical organ field.

I find that in the theatre organ world I am becoming a little bit fatigued with the ego-trips and the shallowness. The whole thing is much more unstable. I'll continue to work on them as I do love them very much, but its going to be limited. I've done it for a long time and if its not a satisfying musical and emotional adventure, I don't want to spend my time on it. I have only arrived at that feeling just in the past few weeks. I still listen to the music. I have recordings of Simon Gledhill... talk about gifted, my Lord what a wonderful musician he is, which gives me hope for the instrument. It's never going to come back as a major thing, never ever again, but I think there will always be theatre organ music if these clowns don't destroy the organ's identification. That is what is happening right now. These large collections are in no way Wurlitzer organs or unit orchestras. To me, it is dangerous to get that far away from the original concepts, sounds and ensembles. I can remember going from the Grinder organ to Uncle Milt's, and God, that was a refreshing experience with everything clean and a pitch line very evident. I have this like for clarity because of this exposure to those large, early organs had dignity.

#### **A note on the interview from Ed Stout.**

It has been some four years since Robert conducted his interview with me in my Hayward home and in reviewing his efforts, I am still in harmony with my answers to his questions. I still believe the basic tonal concept of the Wurlitzer organ is being corrupted, at the expense of the sound that made the builder's reputation. The Avenue Theatre project with its original style 240 thrilled the patrons and organists alike. Lyn Larsen did some of his finest work on that 13 rank organ and it was splendid without an English Horn.

During the interview I was giving Robert Morton organs a bad time and that was intended to be in good fun. I have for years kidded my dear friends, who are owners and protectors of Morton organs and I see no reason to stop at this age. I very much going down to the Arlington Theatre in Santa Barbara to enjoy that large instrument and I have also enjoyed helping their fine technician, Roger Inkpen, with the tremulants.

I believe there is much to be thankful for when considering how many excellent musicians are attracted to the theatre organ. Since George Wright "changed the papers in the cage" with his introduction of the HI FI series, there have been several generations of GW disciples. The first time I heard Tom Hazleton play was during a tuning trip to his home town, Pacific Grove, California. My associate and I opened the door to this little church with a Murray M. Harris organ, of which Tom had sexed up the tremulants. He was figuring out the Wright arrangement of The Boy Next Door and I knew at that moment a great gift was well on the way. That period produced and gave nurture to Lyn Larsen, John Seng, Walt Strony, Jonas Nordwall, Jim Roseveare and so many more dedicated artists. There have been several more generations since the early 1960s and there seems to be no end. Just listen to Richard Hills! No end unless the instruments themselves continue to loose their identity. I believe we should all look back to the recorded examples of the true Wurlitzer organs, including the Times Square Paramount, The Paramount studio organ and the Richard Vaughn installation. I find as much enjoyment listening to those recordings today as I did in 1955 and the realization that the pedal was all on tremulant does not seem to detract from the thrill of listening.

*Respectfully Submitted, Edward Millington Stout*