



The Barton op. 350 console in 2012 at the residence of Phil Maloof in Las Vegas. (Photo by Kim Cochrane, Desert Spirit Photography.)

A New Console for the Wilshire Ebell Theatre

By Edmond Johnson | January 2024

In January 2023, the Los Angeles Theatre Organ Society acquired the last theatre organ console manufactured by the Barton Organ Company. The console was originally part of Barton's op. 350, a 10-rank instrument that was ordered for the Paramount Theatre in Newport News, Virginia, and installed in 1931. Over the last 90-plus year, the console has resided in many different venues—most recently as part of the collection of the late Phil Maloof.

The newly-acquired console is currently being refurbished in preparation for installation at the Wilshire Ebell Theatre. There it will control the 1927 Barton organ that was installed by LATOS members in 1984. The console that was previously connected to the Ebell organ was traded to the Phil Maloof Foundation as part of the acquisition of the new console.

The Last Barton

When op. 350 left the Barton factory in 1931, the market for theatre organs was quickly evaporating. The advent of sound films, along with Great Depression, caused a dramatic decrease in the number of new instruments being ordered. In





Above: An advertisement for the Paramount Theatre that ran in the Newport News *Daily Press* on September 27, 1931. **Above right:** A photograph of Organist Gladys Lyle in the *Daily Press* (January 28, 1934). **Below right:** An undated postcard showing the Paramount Theatre and surrounding cityscape. (Postcard image courtesy of Woody Wise.)



1929, the firm had changed its name to the Maxcy-Barton Organ Company, incorporating the last name of long-time company president W.G. Maxcy in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to appeal to the church organ market.¹

The organ was one of three new theatre instruments sold by Maxcy-Barton in 1931, all of which were unusual in adopting a Wurlitzer-influenced “French Style” console design, as well as stop lists that were identical (or nearly so) to the equivalent Wurlitzer models. David Junchen attributes the distinctiveness of these instruments to Dan Barton’s talent as a salesman and his willingness to adapt to his customer’s specific

preferences.² For the Paramount Theatre in Newport News, Barton provided a 3-manual, 10-rank instrument installed in two chambers with the console placed on a lift in the orchestra pit.

The Paramount Theatre, Newport News

Opening on October 2, 1931, the Paramount Theatre was developed by the Newport News Theatre Organization and operated as part of the Paramount Publix chain.³ At opening, the theatre had 1,350 seats, with the interior decorated in a “modernistic style”:

The entire treatment of the walls is one of sharp, though not glaring, contrast. The sidewalls are stippled in green and gold, with

huge mythological figures superimposed in part of the panels. In other panels futuristic floral designs are used.⁴

The first organist to play at the Paramount was Bob Hess, an experienced player who was employed by Paramount Publix to perform at their newly-opened theatres for a time before moving

In addition to providing pre-show organ music, Lyle hosted a popular Saturday morning “Junior Club” that featured cartoons and weekly talent contests where local children would perform with Lyle’s accompaniment on the organ. For years she also gave regular performances on the Barton for the WGH radio station.



Above: The console as it appeared in the Virginia Theatre.
Below: Woody Wise sits at the console. (Photo from the 1972 ATOS National Convention program booklet.)

on to his next appointment.⁵ In 1934, the theatre hired Gladys Lyle (1901-1984) to serve as their staff organist. Contemporary accounts often noted that the “Tiny Mistress of Melody” was only 4’10” tall, weighing in around 80 pounds; a retrospective published decades later likened the appearance of her petite figure seated at the console to “a circus queen atop an elephant.”⁶ Lyle would hold the position for 15 years, only leaving the Paramount in 1949.

The Virginia Theatre, Alexandria

Following Lyle’s departure, the Paramount organ was played only infrequently, and by the 1960s it had gone completely silent. In 1968, the Potomac Valley Chapter of the American Theatre Organ Enthusiasts began searching for an instrument to install in the 1,100-seat Virginia Theatre in Alexandria, Virginia. Woodrow “Woody” Wise, Jr., served as the theatre’s manager and was a founding member of the chapter. The Barton organ was ultimately purchased, with removal from the Paramount requiring a crane to lift the blower and relay from the building’s third floor.⁷

At the Virginia Theatre, new chambers were constructed for the organ and three new ranks were added: a Dennison Post Horn, along with a 16’ Tuba Mirabilis and a 16’ Gross Flute for the pedal (24 pipes each, both by Moller).⁸ As the theatre lacked an orchestra pit, a new alcove was created to the left of the



of stage with a large opening from which the console, newly painted in gold, could be rolled out onto a platform at the touch of a button. The instrument made its Virginia Theatre debut on April 16, 1969, with a performance by Jimmy Boyce, who would go on to serve as the theatre's staff organist.

The organ was prominently featured during the July 1972 ATOS National Convention, which was hosted by Potomac Valley Chapter and made use of venues within the greater Washington, D.C. metro area. During the convention it was played by five different organists, including Rosa Rio, Dick Smith, and Don Thompson. In 1974, an LP was produced on the organ and released on the Mark Stereophonic label under the title: *Jimmy Boyce Plays the Woody Wise Grande Barton*.⁹ Despite being regularly played, the organ only stayed in Alexandria for seven years. In a review of the Boyce recording in the February 1975 issue of *Theatre Organ*, the unsigned reviewer praised the recording before noting, "This may be the only chance to hear the Woody Wise Barton under theatrical conditions because its record debut is probably also its swansong, so far as the Virginia Theatre is concerned; the organ has been sold."¹⁰ The Virginia Theatre itself was demolished the following year.

Two False Starts

The Barton had been purchased by the Cedar Rapids Area Theatre Organ Society (CRATOS), which soon began preparations for an installation in the Englert Theatre in Iowa City. After several years, and with the installation nearing completion, the theater management decided to "twin" auditorium, a decision that made it impossible for the organ project to move forward.

No longer having a suitable venue for the organ, CRATOS donated the instrument to the Kansas City, Missouri ATOS chapter (KCTPO), where it was originally slated to go into the city's 3,000-seat

Midland Theatre. This plan was scuttled, however, when a much larger "Wonder Morton" became available, undoubtedly a better fit for the cavernous venue.¹¹

The Granada Theatre, Kansas City

Soon the organ found a new home, just across the Missouri River in Kansas City, Kansas. There Bob Maes and Wade Williams had recently founded the non-profit Granada Theatre Historical Society, Inc. to restore the beautiful 1928 venue and bring it back into active use. They received a 20-year lease of the Barton from KCTPO for one dollar per year.

David Junchen oversaw the installation of the organ at the Granada. At that time, the organ was expanded to 20 ranks, along with addition of a Devtronix relay. The organ made its Kansas City debut in November 1986 with a performance by Kay McAbee (1930-2012).¹² Around this time, the console was painted white, with gold accents on the trim and ormolu.

For the next decade, the organ was regularly used for concerts and to accompany silent films, with many prominent theatre organists giving performances. Even with its owners and creative



Tom Hazleton at the console with Mark Gifford looking on.
(Photo courtesy of Mark E. Gifford)

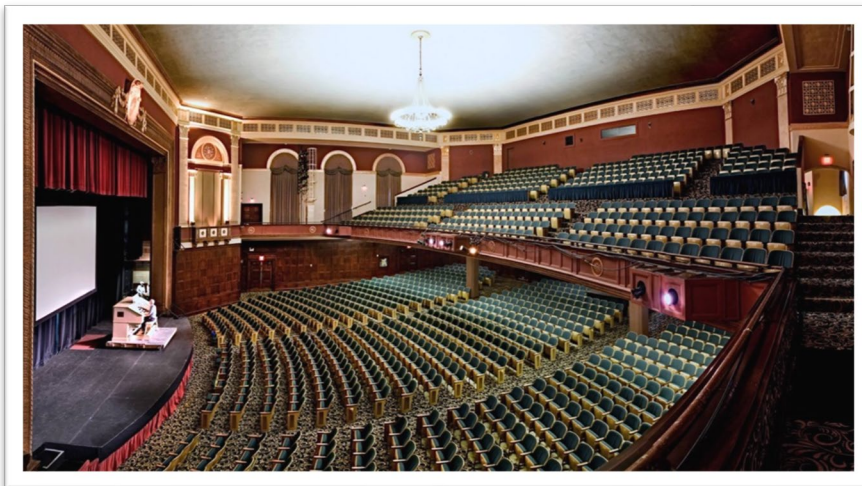
programming, the Granada faced persistent financial challenges, eventually folding in 1996.

The Phil Maloof Residence

Around the same time that the Granada Theatre was closing its door, businessman and theatre organ enthusiast Phil Maloof (1926-2020) became interested in acquiring the instrument for his residence. Bob Maes was engaged not only to install the organ, but to help find a property that could properly accommodate it. Maloof purchased a house in the Rancho Bel-Air neighborhood of Las Vegas, only a short distance from the Strip, and large music room was added to the back of the house. By the end of 1997, much of the organ was installed and playable in its new home, and over the next few years the instrument would be expanded to 34 ranks.¹³

Soon after, Maloof acquired another piece of Barton history: the massive six-manual console from the legendary Chicago Stadium organ. To take advantage of this impressive new acquisition, the organ was further expanded and made controllable from multiple consoles via a Uniflex relay. The Las Vegas-based artist Rebecca Conway was engaged to paint the music room and refinish both consoles; she can be credited with the predominantly gold and red scheme, with additional accent colors, that currently bedecks the op. 350 console.¹⁴ Bob Maes oversaw the maintenance and continued expansion of the organ, while Kay McAbee served as the resident organist.

By 2012, Maloof's collection of consoles had grown considerably. In addition to the two Barton consoles, the music room also became home to the two-manual Wurlitzer console from the United Artists Theatre in Chicago; the four-manual Kimball console from the Wiltern Theatre



The interior of the Wilshire Ebell Theatre with the former console on stage.
(Photo: Wendell Benedetti)

in Los Angeles; and the five-manual Kimball console from the Roxy Theatre in Manhattan.¹⁵ The organ controlled by these consoles had also been expanded. As Bob Maes wrote in a 2012 article in *Theatre Organ*:

Today the organ(s) consist of five consoles and about 95 ranks. The reason for approximately 95 ranks is because the organ is constantly evolving and ranks come and go as things are being upgraded.¹⁶

While Barton op. 350 had served as the core of the original house organ when it was installed in 1997, by 2012 the stoplist contained ranks mostly by Wurlitzer and Kimball, along with some ranks by Wicks to make up a “classical” division. Only three tuned percussion stops, a Tuba Mirabilis, and a Kinura were attributed to Barton.¹⁷

Wilshire Ebell Theatre, Los Angeles

Following Phil Maloof's passing in 2020, the non-profit foundation that bears his name decided to search for a new home for the op. 350 console. At the same time, LATOS was looking for a solution for the failing and increasingly fragile console connected to their 1927 Barton organ at the Wilshire Ebell Theatre. In January 2023, the deal was completed, and the op. 350 console was

moved to a temporary storage space in Los Angeles while the next steps could be determined.

After close examination of the console, it became clear that several repairs would be necessary prior to installing the console at the Ebell. The proposed work includes:

- Installation of an Opus-Two control system
- Replacement of all stop action magnets
- Repair or replacement of toe and thumb pistons
- Replacement of expressions shoes
- Repair or replacement of manuals
- Refurbishment of existing pedal board
- Fabrication of a new platform for moving the console on stage and into a new storage area

The Opus-Two system will provide both enhanced console functionality (multi-level memory, record and playback, etc.), as well providing a solid-state

replacement for the Wurlitzer relay that has been connected to the Ebell organ since 1984.

The richly-decorated gold and red console should beautifully complement the elegant interior of the 1,270 seat Ebell Theatre. And though the Ebell's 1927 Barton organ, built under contract by Wangerin during one of the Barton Organ Company's busiest periods, was constructed four years before op. 350, the tonal resources it offers will be similar to what was available to organists at the Paramount and Virginia Theatres.

While there is much to be done, LATOS is very excited to be providing the op. 350 console with new home. If all goes according to plan, the console will be installed at the Ebell by the end of 2024. ■

Author's Note: *This is a preliminary version of this article, which I plan to expand once the console project is completed. Comments and suggestions are welcome.*

Version: January 8, 2023

¹ David L. Junchen, *Encyclopedia of the American Theatre Organ*, vol. 1 (Pasadena: Showcase Publications, 1985), 84.

² Junchen, 82. While Junchen writes that the three 1931 Bartons were "stop-for-stop identical" with the equivalent Wurlitzer models, there appears to have been a few differences between the op. 350 stoplist and that of the 3/10 Wurlitzer models. The Wurlitzer influence, however, is very apparent.

³ "Hundreds Turned Away at Opening of New Theatre," *Daily Press* [Newport News] (October 3, 1931), 4.

⁴ "Paramount Theatre to Hold Formal Opening Tonight at 8 P. M.," *Daily Press* [Newport News] (October 2, 1931), 2.

⁵ Lloyd E. Klos, "Bob Hess: Much-Traveled Theatre Organist," *Theatre Organ* (January/February 1983), 16.

⁶ Parke S. Rouse, "Gladys Lyle's Music Part of History," *Daily Press* [Newport News] (January 31, 1982), 27.

⁷ Ray Brubacher, "The Grande Barton Pipe Organ in the Virginia Theatre," *Theatre Organ Bombarde* 11, no. 3 (June 1969), 5.

⁸ Brubacher, 5-6. The writer notes, "Since this instrument did not possess any couplers, it was decided to add a sub and super octave coupler to the great and solo manual, an accompaniment super coupler to that manual, and a great to pedal 8 foot coupler and pedal octave coupler to that division."

⁹ Mark Stereophonic MC 8494.

¹⁰ "For the Records," *Theatre Organ* 17, no. 1 (February 1975), 42-3.

¹¹ Tom B'hend, "There is a Way!" *Theatre Organ* 28, no. 5 (September-October 1986), 14.

¹² Vickie L. Walton and Mike Weatherford, "Granada Theatre's Back to Lift," *The Kansas City Star* (November 23, 1986), 5B.

¹³ Kahara Pavé, "Las Vegas: A New Theatre Organ Paradise," *Theatre Organ* 42, no. 3 (May-June 2000), 7.

¹⁴ Pavé, 8.

¹⁵ Bob Maes, "The Best Show in Vegas," *Theatre Organ* 54, no. 4 (July-August 2012), 30.

¹⁶ Maes, 32.

¹⁷ It is not clear which, if any, of Barton resources on the 2012 Maloof stoplist originated with op. 350.