

# The Organ Log

## LOS ANGELES

THEATRE ORGAN SOCIETY

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## Is the theatre organ becoming a Dying Instrument?

MEET THE 23-YEAR-OLD REVIVING THE MIGHTY WURLITZER AT OLD TOWN MUSIC HALL

With only 306 theater organs still in use worldwide, El Segundo's Edward Torres is among the few musicians who've mastered the almost-forgotten instrument. The sounds of an organ fill the air as its multiple keys ring out Christmas bells, car horns and chirping love birds. While El Segundo's Old Town Music Hall transports visitors to the 1920s, the person bringing the old-timey music to life is only 23. Behind the 2,600 pipes sits Edward Torres, who's committed to keeping the dying instrument alive.

"Most people I connect with, in terms of things I like, are in their 80s," Torres says.

Wearing sharp khakis and a se-dated Hawaiian shirt, Torres' calm presence makes him seem older than his years. He started playing piano around age 7 and found himself drawn to the music of the golden age Hollywood films he'd watch with his grandmother. Then, things shifted when he saw a YouTube clip featuring the founders of the Old Town Music Hall.

"I took one look at the organ and thought, 'Oh my gosh, that looks like a lot of fun,'" he says.

While most 13-year-olds were

combing YouTube for skateboard fails, Torres became entranced with the ancient instrument. Theater organs are a different beast from the church pipe variety or the at-home Hammonds most people are familiar with. The Music Hall is home to the "Mighty Wurlitzer," a massive theater organ that was made to mimic the sounds of a full orchestra. Though they were common in the silent film era, the Mighty Wurlitzer is one of only 306 theater organs in use worldwide. The American Theatre Organ Society lists about 110 active organ players and Torres says he's one of three people under 30 in all of Southern California who studies the instrument. Even at the Music Hall, which shows silent and classic films following a short organ concert and audience sing-a-long, Torres and owner Bill Field are the only people at the theater who know how to turn the Wurlitzer's 260 switches into mesmerizing music.

Despite years of studying piano, Torres' first performance with the Wurlitzer wasn't such a magical experience.

"It was a horrible thing!" Torres

*(Continued on page 2)*

## Remembering Suzanne "Sue" Mumbrue

[John Lauter](#) FB 12/29/19

Theatre Organ friends, I come to you with very sad news. Suzanne "Sue" Mumbrue, wife of Roger Mumbrue died unexpectedly, December 21.

Sue was as tolerant of all of this organ foolishness as any spouse could expect to be, given that her father was a theatre organ enthusiast and she grew up with a Morton-Wurlitzer in her parent's home.

She and Roger had been married for 53 years. Mother of Diane, Danny, Laurie, Tim, and Kristi, and foster mother to over 50 children over several years. Sue was active in Scouting, having been a den mother for years, active in school programs, church activities and crafts. When Pizza and Pipes opened in Pontiac Michigan Roger and Sue were partners with the other two investors/principals in the building, opening and operating of the restaurant. After opening Sue was

present every day, trading "shifts" with Roger, who still had his day job a GM/Chevrolet engineering. 18 months of starting and operating the restaurant was enough for them, they wanted their lives back to spend with their children.

Sue was always in the conversations when I brought visiting artists and organ fans over to their home to see and hear their home pipe organ. Of late Sue and Roger had been volunteering at the Ball Zoo in their new hometown of Grand Rapids MI.

My most sincere and heartfelt condolences to Roger, her children and all who loved her. I know that encompasses a lot of people.

I apologize for not having a photo of Sue to post with this notice. She was one in a million, and will be missed by many.

*(Continued from page 1)*

says with a smile. "I didn't know what I was doing at all. There's a video of it which I plan to burn one day."

It's understandable that his recital was a bit of a disaster. There's almost no sheet music available for theater organ. That means organists have to transpose piano music from the '20s and '30s, which not always easy to find or play by ear. Torres does both and after nine years of practice he can play modern tunes on the fly — his "Under the Sea" from "The Little Mermaid" is especially good — and he knows all the old favorites by heart.

From 1968 to June 2019, Field or his partner Bill Coffman — who passed away in 2001 — played every show at the Music Hall. For the past few years, Torres played some opening numbers on the organ, while Bill took over to accompany the silent films. This summer, Torres had the spotlight to himself for the first time.

"I was nervous as heck the first night," Torres says. "I was about to

have a heart attack. I told the audience, 'Please refrain from throwing any tomatoes or vegetables at me.'" Torres says that taking the reigns at his cherished music hall was an important responsibility. "My biggest worry was that people would think I'd be just like Bill Field," he says. "The difference is Bill started playing when he was 18, so he had 60 years of experience on me."

No tomatoes were harmed during Torres' debut. The audience loved the performance, all 70 minutes of non-stop music and left happy, Torres says, evidenced by the many compliments he received from the crowd. Though Field will still play as much as he can, Torres is now a lead organist and the key to continuing the theater's success for the next generation.

When he's not behind the keyboard, Torres is a full-time student at Santa Monica College. He also teaches piano and helps out on the business side of the Music Hall. Torres doesn't dream of performing on Wurlitzers around the world or

somehow score a Top 40 hit via theater organ. He just wants to do his part to keep the Music Hall going, honor old-time music and spread the joy of live theater organ. "The two people in the building that know the music are me and Bill," Torres says. "It's a part of history that needs to be preserved and presented for the future."

Torres can't quite put into words why he's so enamored with a time period that came decades before he was born. But his eyes light up as he sits down at the organ to play "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" or "When You Wish Upon a Star." "It's just fun!" he says.

<https://losangeleno.com/people/edward-torres>

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### **Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall**

David Higgs  
March 1, 3:00pm

Enjoy concert showcasing the 4,322-pipe William J. Gillespie Concert Organ — a stunning one-of-a-kind instrument built especially for the

Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall.

David Higgs, one of America's leading concert organists, showcases the beauty and power of the William J. Gillespie Concert Organ. The chair of the Organ Department at the Eastman School of Music performs extensively throughout the United States and abroad, and has inaugurated many important new instruments. He will perform music of Dupré, Durufle, Liszt and more.

TICKETS; [www.pacificsymphony.org/tickets/concert](http://www.pacificsymphony.org/tickets/concert)

And, "The Hunchback of Notre Dame"

May 10, 2020, 7:00 p.m.

Organist Dennis James provides a chilling soundtrack for "The Hunchback of Notre Dame."

The 1923 silent-film classic, based on Victor Hugo's 1831 novel of the same name, is known for the grand sets that recall 15th century Paris as well as for Lon Chaney's performance and make-up as the tortured hunchback Quasimodo, the deaf, half-blind, hunchbacked bell-ringer of the famous Cathedral of Notre Dame.

TICKETS; [www.pacificsymphony.org/tickets/concert](http://www.pacificsymphony.org/tickets/concert)

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### **Silent Sundays Series:**

San Gabriel Mission Playhouse

**March 22, 2:30pm**

Mark Herman accompanies

The Freshman (1925)

"The Freshman" starring silent comedy great Harold Lloyd! a kind-hearted, optimistic, and "bespectacled go-getter who heads off to college thinking his experiences will be just like the ones he saw in the movies"

Silent Sundays conclude with Charlie Chaplin's  
"The Gold Rush" (1925) on May 31st.

San Gabriel Mission Playhouse  
320 S. Mission Drive San Gabriel, CA 91776  
Tickets; (626) 308-2868  
Online or at the door.

## Reviews

### **DAVID GRAY at BANDRIKA**

By Angie Hougen

On January 19th, a substantial turnout of LATOS members and their guests enjoyed a delightful afternoon of music by the talented artist David Gray. His program of Hollywood music and several rarities delighted the audience, with each number more thrilling than the one that preceded it. His virtuosity and musicianship was truly captivating. We owe a special debt of gratitude to composer Nathan Barr who hosted the concert at Bandrika, his recording studio which houses the 20th Century Fox soundstage Wurlitzer Theatre Organ. At the conclusion of the concert, LATOS members were given access to a behind the scenes tour of the studio, and chambers.

Thank you Nathan for your hospitality.

## Reviews

### **EDWARD TORRES at OLD TOWN MUSIC HALL**

Editor's Review.

Jan 31 - Feb. 1, Edward Torres accompanied "Rubber Tires" (1927) Silent with Bessie Love, Harrison Ford, on the Mighty Wurlitzer, at Old Town Music Hall.

This was a fun, brisk, silent comedy/love-story where the Stack family of New York City drive their, very sought-after, worthless old jalopy, to Newhall, California, hoping that there would be oil on the land.

Edward's humorous accompaniment of this film was flawless and really brought the story to life. Thank you Edward, we are looking forward to the next silent.

**DID YOU JUST SEE A GREAT SHOW?**

**PLEASE SEND YOUR REVIEWS TO**

Editor Vicki at; [fodofixer@msn.com](mailto:fodofixer@msn.com)



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#### ONGOING EVENTS:

ONGOING: Concerts, Movies & Shows at the Old Town Music Hall, 140 Richmond Street, El Segundo. Many shows feature the 4-manual theatre pipe organ. Call (310) 322-2592 (recorded info) or visit <http://www.oldtownmusichall.org>

ONGOING: Concerts at The Nethercutt Collection. Visit <http://www.nethercuttcollection.org/Calendar.aspx> for dates & info.

ONGOING: The Organ Grinders every 2nd Sunday of the month at 2:00pm. Open console on a Roland Atelier (also a volunteer pot-luck). Westminster Presby-

terian Church. 1757 North Lake Ave., Pasadena, in the "Lawrence Chapel" (not in main sanctuary). Free parking in the rear. Contact Elly Reitz 626-281-3311 for more info.

ONGOING: Paramount Iceland, (3/19 Wurlitzer) organ is played for skating sessions every Tuesday 7-8:30pm. featured artist, Bill Campbell. 8041 Jackson St. Paramount. 562-633-1171

ONGOING: SBTOS, Adam Aceto, plays at the 7 PM intermission on Friday nights. Call the theatre at 805-963-4408 to make sure Adam will be playing.

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