In the beginning, we did not plan to build a music hall. Our original objective was to enlarge the three-manual, 17-rank Wurlitzer that we have had in our home for many years. But then we realized that simply enlarging the organ would not produce the "in the theatre" sound that we were seeking. To accomplish that, we needed a room with substantial volume for the sound to develop, and that meant that either we had to build a huge addition to the house, or we had to construct a new building. Since neither my wife, Sarah, nor I wanted to change the design and feel of our home, we decided to build a new venue for a new (read "larger") organ on a six-acre piece of land that was only four miles from our home. I have never been able to shake the desire for an installation with the tonal variety and excitement of a large Wurlitzer in a small theatre. We had to try to duplicate that sound.

In designing the shape of the auditorium, I did not try to copy the shape of a theatre, because theatres were designed to show movies and stage shows, and, in most theatres, any consideration of acoustics for the organ seemed to have been secondary. Instead, we planned an auditorium with approximately the proportions of Boston's Symphony Hall (which is well known for its fine acoustics), only in miniature. The auditorium of the Music Hall is 44' wide x 86' long x 36' high at the peak of the cathedral ceiling. This gives the auditorium ample volume for the full sounds of the organ to develop, and it approximately follows the ratios of width: height: length of 1:1:2, that works so well at Symphony Hall. Interestingly, our swell openings, which extend the full width of the auditorium, also mimic the full width stage of Symphony Hall. At the recommendation of our acoustical consultant, we made the rear wall of the auditorium convex, to better distribute the sound.
During the design and construction of the auditorium, a great deal of consideration was given to achieving a stiff, hard structure, which would enhance the sound of the organ. The walls of the building are 12" concrete block, steel reinforced, with foam insulation outside the block, and a vinyl siding exterior. The ceiling is 5/8" sheet rock over 3/4" plywood on 2x12" joists (with fiberglass insulation), supported by over-sized trusses for extra stiffness. As it turned out, these were all great decisions, because after tuning the room acoustically with sound absorbent pads and a bass trap, the auditorium has a reverberation time of about two seconds, and it has proven to be spectacularly good acoustically. Best of all, there isn't a bad seat in the house.

Once the basic structure was up and enclosed, it became obvious that it would be much nicer if we provided some finishing touches to the interior. At this point, Sarah took over the interior design of the Music Hall. In addition to plastering the interior, we designed a paneled column and chase structure along the side walls, which was tastefully trimmed in maroon and gold. The floor of the main area was covered with a carpet bearing a Florentine pattern, and a wood dance floor runs down the center of the auditorium. A 44-seat balcony with reproduction antique theatre seats was built over the reception area, and a projection room is located behind the seating on the balcony.

The organ chambers are located on the upper level directly behind the front wall of the auditorium, and the reservoirs and tremulants are mounted on specially designed racks directly underneath. This arrangement keeps the wind noise out of the chambers, and since the wind piping is run under the ceiling of the regulator room, it keeps the wind conductors off the chamber floors. The organ speaks directly into the auditorium through three openings in the wall in each chamber. The chambers are over-sized for easy maintenance, and to permit visitors to enter the chambers to view the organ's pipework. In a departure from the normal concert hall installation, we decided to mount most of the percussions on the front wall of the auditorium.

The organ console is installed on a turntable near the front of the auditorium. The turntable is mounted on casters, so that the console can be located anywhere in the front part of the room, as long as the electrical cables and wind line will reach. This gives the hall tremendous versatility.

All lighting in the auditorium is controlled by a computerized theatrical dimmer, from a console located on the balcony. The lighting technician has at his control 35 colored spotlights, a follow spot, three video cameras, and a video projector. A 16' motorized movie screen permits movies and video views of the console to be shown, and motorized curtains on all windows allow us to hold daytime events.

Full climate control of the building includes separate systems for each organ chamber, for the auditorium, and for the blower room. The furnace room and sound isolated blower room are in an extension at the rear of the building behind a block wall. This unique project captured our contractors' imagination, and resulted in a very high level of craftsmanship and quality of construction throughout. The building was designed to be almost maintenance free.

"There isn't a bad seat in the house."

The Shanklin Music Hall Wurlitzer consists of 34 ranks of pipes, 11 tuned percussions, and numerous traps and sound effects, all played from the four-manual console that was originally installed in Boston's 4,500-seat Metropolitan Theatre (presently the Wang Center). It is interesting to note that the Metropolitan organ was the largest theatre organ that was ever installed by Wurlitzer in New England. On April 24, 1999, exactly 69 years to the day after Jesse Crawford played the opening shows on the Metropolitan Theatre's new Wurlitzer, Ron Rhode, seated at the same console, played the dedication concerts on the newly assembled Wurlitzer in the 350-seat Shanklin Music Hall.

The restoration of the Shanklin Music Hall Wurlitzer was done with two objectives in mind. The first was to create a superb musical instrument. The second and equally important objective was to restore irreplaceable antique materials. In view of this, all of the sounds of the organ are produced by real pipes and real percussion instruments operated electro-pneumatically, exactly the same way that they were during the golden era of silent film. There are no electronic sounds or sound enhancements. And all the pipes (except for the Trompette en Chamade), all percussions, and all windchests, tremulants, reservoirs, and swell shutters are vintage Wurlitzer. On the other hand, the relay, combination action, and recorder-player, which are transparent to both the organist and the audience, are new solid-state units, which save space and increase the reliability and versatility of the instrument.

As the organ started to approach 30 ranks in size, it became obvious that a large four-manual console would be required to control it. I had long admired the console from Boston's Metropolitan Theatre, but since this console was being used nightly in the Portland Organ Grinder, we didn't have much hope of acquiring it. Then one evening, Ron Rhode called to tell me that the Organ Grinder was closing and that the organ would soon be for sale. I passed this information on to Ken Crome, and a short time later he called to tell me that he had purchased the Metropolitan console along with several other items for our organ.

Unfortunately, when the Metropolitan organ was removed from the theatre, it was broken up for parts. One of only two similar instruments built by Wurlitzer—the Brooklyn Paramount is the other—the "Met" organ was no longer intact as a complete instrument. But here, with the original console and all the basic components gathered, was an opportunity to recreate an historic Boston treasure close to its original home. We already had all 26 ranks of pipes that would be required, plus eight additional ranks that would add richness and versatility to a concert instrument in a smaller hall. We then commissioned Lyn Larsen to design a stop list that would be well unified, easy to play, and that would fit the original stop rails of the Metropolitan console. At this point, our restoration project was off and running!
The Metropolitan Theatre console was expertly restored by the Crome Organ Company, complete with the original electro-pneumatic stop action in the bolsters. Thus, we were able to preserve the satisfyingly positive feel of the original Wurlitzer stopkeys and the characteristic thump of the original Wurlitzer combination action. Syndyne Stop Action magnets were used in the fall board to make room for added stop tabs, and to permit the new solid state combination action to be mounted in the space previously occupied by the fall board blow box. The combination action is a 64 memory Z-tronics solid-state action in which the range for each piston can be instantly set at the console. The console's manuals were restored with ebony sharps and ivory naturals as original. The console was refinished in ivory lacquer, and then the trim and decoration were gold leafed by Peter Achorn of Fire Gold.

Prior to installation, all windchests, percussion actions, reservoirs, and tremulants were completely rebuilt using original style materials insofar as practicable. The wiring, however, was completely redone to conform to the National Electrical Code, and the wind piping is mostly plastic pipe with miter cut elbows so that it looks like the original metal wind conductor. Wind for the organ is supplied by a 25-hp Spencer three-stage Turbine Blower, which was originally installed in the Center Theatre, Rockefeller Center, New York. The blower and motor were rebuilt and dynamically balanced, and the blower now runs surprisingly cool and vibration-less.

The main organ pipe work is installed in two chambers behind the front wall of the auditorium. Wurlitzer Celotex studio-type swell shutters give the organ excellent expression. The wiring, however, was completely redone to conform to the National Electrical Code, and the wind piping is mostly plastic pipe with miter cut elbows so that it looks like the original metal wind conductor. Wind for the organ is supplied by a 25-hp Spencer three-stage Turbine Blower, which was originally installed in the Center Theatre, Rockefeller Center, New York. The blower and motor were rebuilt and dynamically balanced, and the blower now runs surprisingly cool and vibration-less.

In addition to the Wurlitzer Pipe Organ, we are fortunate in having two outstanding pianos in the Shanklin Music Hall. The upright is a very late model Wurlitzer theatre organ piano. Unlike earlier organ
pianos, which had no keyboard, our piano does, and it can be played manually, as well as from the organ console. We installed an Ampico vacuum pump in the piano since it is much quieter than the original centrifugal pump.

The grand piano is a 7' Mason & Hamlin Model RBB equipped with its original Ampico reproducing player action. We have been told that there are very few Model RBBs with their original Ampico player action still in existence. This piano will play from Ampico rolls in such a way that the expression (loudness of the notes) is controlled in both the left and the right hands independently. This very closely reproduces the sound of the piano being played by a live pianist. We have adapted this piano so that it can be played from the organ console.

Prior to the installation of the organ, Don Phipps and I built the racks for the reservoirs and tremulants, assembled the blower, and ran the main wind line into the reservoir room. Then, when the organ arrived, Ken Crome and his team, with Don's help, installed the organ in two sessions of about a month's duration each. While this was going on, Allen Miller installed the Z-tronics Relay and the Trousdale Player. Once the organ was playing, Allen, with an able assist from Brant Duddy, voiced and regulated all the pipes. At the same time, Don Phipps was putting the finishing touches on the organ and correcting problems as they showed up. Meanwhile, I was installing the components to "tune" the room acoustically, finishing up the installation of the lighting system, and generally doing whatever was needed to complete the project.

This whole process was fascinating, and it was fun. It took about a year before we knew that everything was working exactly the way it should, but our persistence was well rewarded. The sound of the magnificent Wurlitzer pipe organ in an auditorium built especially for it exceeded our most optimistic dreams. In the years since our grand opening, the Music Hall organ has been played by many outstanding organists. We have been fortunate to be entertained by: Ron Rhode, Tom Hazleton, Rob Richards, Jelani Eddington, Dave Wickerham, Simon Gledhill, David Peckham, Clark Wilson, Phil Kelsall, John Giacchi, Richard Hills, and numerous others. When we see the enjoyment that this Wurlitzer in the hands of a gifted organist can provide for the thousands of people who have attended concerts at the Shanklin Music Hall over the years, we know that all the effort has been worthwhile.