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Elaborate organ setup is source of wonderment for O'Fallon, Ill.

By William Lamb
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Like a lot of retirees, former Air Force Col. Jack Moelmann of O'Fallon, Ill., has a hobby, one that he tends to in his basement in his spare time. But when Moelmann sits down at his white and gold Rodgers theater organ, something entirely extraordinary happens.

With the flick of a few switches and a tug at a knob or two, Moelmann brings the entire room to life in an exuberant cacophony of music and motion. Cymbals crash. Train whistles toot. Glockenspiels chime. Sleigh bells jingle. And the warm, distinctive drone of Moelmann's organ blares at top volume from 88 speakers in 28 cabinets.

Moelmann, 63, conducts the entire thing from his souped-up Rodgers console, a custom Century 340 model, to which he literally has added enough bells and whistles to put some full-bodied orchestras to shame.

"I don't play golf," he said. "It's a waste of real estate. This is my hobby."

The elaborate setup is an outlet for Moelmann's lifelong love of music and his background in electrical engineering, which he studied at Bradley University in Peoria, Ill. It also is the product of more than three decades of work. Moelmann began assembling "the stuff," as he calls it, in 1971, when he bought a Hammond organ to replace a smaller one that had outlived its use. A year later, he paid \$1,500 for a secondhand percussion set and xylophone and wired them to the Hammond.

"It all went to hell after that," he said.

Today, the splendid mess takes up a considerable chunk of Moelmann's basement family room, which measures 20 feet by 40 feet. More than 18 miles of wire connect the organ console to nearly 100 other instruments that Moelmann has collected over the years, including an upright piano, an accordion, a pair of xylophones and two sets of chimes. Moelmann has wired the whole thing so he can control each of them without leaving his seat.

More than two dozen remote-controlled animals - bears, monkeys, giraffes, penguins and more, all of them wired to Moelmann's console - contribute to the visual razzle-dazzle. When it's going full-blast, the rig consumes 64 amps of electricity, or the equivalent of five clothes dryers operating simultaneously. For this reason, Moelmann tends to play it only when he has an audience.

"It's an electrical and engineering nightmare to do this," Moelmann said between drags on a cigarette during a recent interview at his house. "It's a maintenance nightmare and it's a musical experience."

Moelmann keeps his full head of hair - more salt than pepper these days - neatly trimmed and impeccably combed. He peers out at the world from beneath arched eyebrows, his lips perpetually curled into a mischievous grin. Moelmann, who never married, shares his house with Chelsea, his 8-year-old Australian shepherd dog.

An entertainer at heart, Moelmann says he maintains the organ more for the enjoyment of others than for his own amusement. Moelmann's annual Christmas concerts, advertised by word of mouth, are a hit with friends, neighbors and fellow members of O'Fallon's St. Michael's Episcopal Church.

The idea, he said, is to re-create for his guests a time before "talkies," when a single organist was expected to create the soundtrack for a silent film with

a clever combination of music and sound effects.

"I wanted something that approximated musically, the best that I could, what was in the old theaters like the Fox and others years ago," he said. "The visual part of it is for the enjoyment of other people, because I don't care if it's all lit up with all the animals going and all that. It does nothing for me."

This year's Christmas show, held Dec. 18, was a meticulously choreographed event, with Moelmann juggling the roles of conductor, arranger, musician, bartender and emcee.

"This is a theater organ," he told his audience before kicking off a medley of standards with "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles." "Not to be confused with a church organ, even though we can do the churchy things. This one is more orchestral. It's got a duck on it."

With a flip of a switch, a wall-mounted duck decoy perked up and quacked.

"It's orchestral," Moelmann added. "It's got trumpets and xylophones and bells and cymbals, all of which we're going to use in this next slaughtering of music. Hope you enjoy it. You might as well."

After a short intermission, Moelmann screened a movie, Laurel and Hardy's "From Soup to Nuts," from 1928, from his personal collection of about 200 silent films. Then he closed the show, as he does each performance, with his signature "Tribute to America," a medley of patriotic songs set to stock projector footage of snow-capped mountains and the Air Force Thunderbirds.

Moelmann grew up in Oak Park, Ill., and took up the piano at age 7. He became enchanted with the pipe organ at Grace Episcopal Church and talked his way into a \$1-a-month job turning pages for the church organist. By age 14, Moelmann was filling in as the assistant organist.

When he's not playing at home these days, Moelmann performs in some of the country's more celebrated old movie palaces, including the Alabama Theatre in Birmingham, Ala., and the Temple Theatre in Meridian, Miss. He served three years as president of the American Theatre Organ Society in the 1980s and currently serves as the group's secretary.

Moelmann's chops and technical wizardry have won him an admirer in Stan Kann, the organist at St. Louis' Fox Theatre, who once joked that the only thing missing from Moelmann's organ setup was a vacuum cleaner. So Kann, who collects vintage vacuums, gave Moelmann a 1949 Kirby model, which Moelmann naturally has wired to his console.

"I've never seen anybody else with that much stuff hooked up to an organ as he's got," Kann said in a telephone interview. "It's really an elaborate bunch of stuff. He knows how it all works, he knows every button, every switch. And if it doesn't work, he knows where to look for the trouble. It's absolutely amazing."

Most fundamentally, Moelmann said, playing the organ is fun.

"When this stops being fun for me, I'm not going to do it anymore," he said. "I'm not running a business. I'm not making any money off it. I built all of this for the enjoyment of the people."

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