

Exclusive Interview...

Sidney Torch

All photos in this article are from the Sidney Torch collection — Courtesy of Frank Killinger.

THEATRE ORGAN magazine is indebted to Judd Walton and Frank Killinger for this exclusive interview with England's outstanding theatre organist, Sidney Torch.

Although Mr. Torch stopped playing and recording in 1940, his recordings of that time still sound as fresh

and new as if played yesterday. It can honestly be stated that his style and approach was 30 years ahead of his time.

The entire conversation was recorded in May 1972 and no attempt has been made to alter or soften Mr. Torch's opinions.



Sidney Torch — musician, arranger, artist.
(Parlophone Co. Ltd.)

PART II

- (T) Is there the market and is there the opportunity today? You see, when I played it, it was at the peak of popularity. The cinema organ was something for which people actually came to the cinema. They came to see the film, but if two cinemas had the same film, they would go to the one in which Sidney Torch was playing. Not because it was Sidney Torch but because it was a cinema organ — it was an added attraction. But is this a true thing today? People go to see a film because there is violence or sex or sadism.
- (K) But, strangely enough, even today if we get a top-rank organ, like the Fox Theatre in San Francisco a 5,000 seat house, we might fill it. George Wright gave several special performances there at which that house was packed.
- (T) Yes, forgive me though, but this is a special occasion, the specialized taste, but if he were running three performances or four performances a day, seven days a week, and George Wright appeared every day, would this mean a difference? That's the

- point I'm trying to make. You see, in the day I played this was an asset — it meant something. People went because somebody was playing the organ at a specific place. But today they won't do this. Therefore, it is very difficult, if not impossible, certainly unfair, to compare the two days.
- (T) I have had many, many years of people writing to me and say, "Play again, record again." But I don't believe myself that that justifies the concept. I think it is probably better to be a legend in somebody else's mind and I think if they heard me today they wouldn't think as much of me as they did when I was there. Of course, it's something I won't buy. I don't subscribe to it, I don't think I was good. I think I was disappointing. Mind you, I've got gray hairs now and I'm not perhaps as sharply defined, I feel, and this is what in retrospect I see as missing. But then I was young and my only excuse is that because I was young I didn't have the right idea.

- (K) Well, you had the right ideas all right, because as Judd said, they were so far advanced than anything else we made at that time.

- (T) I suppose you've got to judge it by the context of what happens every day. But I think myself, that most people made up for talent with sheer noise that they loudly passed as a substitute.
- (K) Yes, I am sure a lot of them did.
- (T) We used to have a man in this country who used to play himself up to the top of the lift and turn around and say "Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen, I'll play anything you like" and before anyone could open their mouth he'd say "Tiger Rag, yes, that racks me." And this went on for many, many years.

You know, there's very little difference, you're using a different hammer to hit the same nail. One has to express what one wishes to say, refined with taste or unrefined through lack of taste. No matter what you used to do this, the same is applied. You can be a vulgar pianist, you can be a vulgar singer, you can be a vulgar anything. But, I'm not trying to say that I haven't got a vulgar streak in me, certainly I have, but I try and keep it under. Whereas I think that the cinema organ tended to make people more drunk!

Part I appeared in the December 1973 issue of *THEATRE ORGAN*.

- (T) And they became vulgar because of this. It was so easy to be vulgar, it is so easy to be loud.
- (W) The organ became their master instead of them mastering the instrument. This happens today.
- (T) Well you know, it's very, very true the second loudest noise you can make is silence. If you have a terrific crash the next loudest thing is to stop entirely and make everybody wait for it — and then silence, the impact is almost as great as the loud sound.
- (W) They don't know when to take their hands off the keys. You may have a point, sir, that the people of today have no theatre to go to hear an organist play. But, we feel that there is a medium in which people can enjoy the theatre organ or orchestral music or what have you. And that, of course, is the beautiful quality LPs. And I think that this has brought a resurgence of interest in music generally. Especially in stereo — it is now broadcast 24 hours a day on some of our FM stations. In San Francisco we have serious music stations that broadcast only classical music 24 hours a day. There are two of those. And we are trying to introduce to them many of the beautiful organ classics that are available in the classic sets. There are then, the stations who play the junk music. We find that music such as you are doing in your conducting we don't have an opportunity to hear in recordings. We wish we could get some of them in the States. It is in this area that there is a tremendous audience potential, and cinema organ records are going over on these stations. They don't play them all the time, maybe one every few hours.
- (T) Which is the same as our pattern here.
- (W) Right. My word, we wish we had some of your orchestral music available.
- (T) Yes, well you see, these things are a matter of commercial assessment, in the first instance. The rate of pay for orchestral musicians throughout the world is very, very high now, so there-



Sidney Torch at the Wurlitzer organ, Regal Theatre, Kingston. The third manual was a coupler manual with only six stops. These models were built by the Wurlitzer Company only for export to England after the theatre market had dried up in the United States.

- fore, the initial cost of making tapes of orchestral music is exceptionally high. And no company will set up to do this unless it is assured of a reasonable risk in getting at least a return and at the best a profit. Now, as you must know (you are in the recording business), classics are duds, as you buy a subsidy. It's the subsidy on the pop records that pay for the other side and in the end it's all a figure in the books, isn't it? It depends on which side of the ledger you are going to put these things on.
- (W) That's right.
- (K) How did they record your organ records? I understand they had a van that went around to the theatres.
- (T) Yes, they had a recording van which they would bring around and go up on the roof. With a bit of rope, they would hang a microphone, let it dangle down and trust their luck. If it didn't go right we would all break for a half an hour while the rope was shifted to another place. This happened on every session. No one ever found the right place for the microphone because it entirely depended on what you were playing and the registration.
- Of course, I am not an expert on microphones although I've spent my life recording, but it seems to me that we have lost this thing of having one microphone balance the sound

as it is played in the studio or in the home, from the viewpoint of one pair of ears. After that I am fully in accord with boosting this or boosting that for the purposes of getting something mechanical to sound as if it were live even the sound as if it were altered, but wanted — you are trying to do something. Today they have 27 microphones. Everybody has a microphone. But there's no one microphone that gives you the overall sound. This is the one thing, of course, we used to try and do with the cinema organ and once you've played you could never achieve, because if you played quietly it was too far away; if you played loudly it was too near. If you used the reeds it was too violent; if you used the flutes it was too mellow. You were always in trouble, the engineer was always coming to say "Can you boost bar so and so; can you take down bar so and so. You never played as you really wanted to, because in those days we didn't have the ability to record four bars and cut it in. It was all wax and you had to start from the beginning to the end, what is more, when the van came out there was only storage space for 70 waxes and the hot cupboard. As you know, the waxes had to be kept at a set temperature. So that you would get this thing; the telephone would ring, the recording engineer would say to you, "You had better be good this time because this is the last wax!" If you didn't get that one right your session was over and you got nothing. As you didn't make anything except royalties, it was up to you to see that it was in the can.

How you manage today is quite a different matter. You go in there for the whole day and you record four bars at a time and then you fake it out. You would have what, seven channels, eight channels. We had one channel and the wax and the diamond would cut it like that.

We used to blow the needle, blow away the surface wax, and off you'd go. And if someone came into the theatre and dropped a pail (one of the clean-

ers came in while we were recording and dropped a pail). People used to come in the middle of a record and say, "Hey, where is the gas meter?" Or the electric meter.

- (K) How many takes, may I ask you, did you have to do on the average number?
- (T) Very difficult to say. You see, in those days, we used to make at the most three waxes in a four hour session. Frequently we only got two. Shall we say that the van carried perhaps twenty waxes??
- (K) Probably, Yes.
- (T) So you might get perhaps six or eight, or even ten takes, frequently you would only get the first half a minute and the batter would go. "Sorry, the needle jumped."
- (K) Something would happen — at once.
- (T) The wax has got a pop in it, you know, a bubble or something like that. You might touch something. A cinema organ can be very difficult you know, you touch it with your cuff, something squeals. It has to be played like that. It has to all be done away from the keys.
- (K) Because I listen to those, and I never know a clinker, I never knew a wrong note.
- (T) Well, the whole point is you don't expect to hear a wrong note or a click or something on any other form of recording. You choose to comment upon the cinema organ in this way because you are used to hearing that performance and you hear clinks and long notes and stumbles that you shouldn't hear. There is no reason at all why the thing shouldn't be played well,

but it requires good players.

- (W) Your work on the State Kilburn was marvelous.
- (T) Well, that was the highest point I reached, really in technique, but it still was unsatisfactory. It had a terrific lag, you know. The distance from the console to the chambers was something like, about 80 or 90 feet. The lag was such that it was quiet a second or two, so you had to play purely by touch. You didn't listen.
- (K) When we recorded the Fox in San Francisco, we put cans (head-phones) on the organist.
- (T) Very unsatisfactory.
- (K) Yes, it was. But it was the only way they could keep their tempo.
- (T) No, I don't believe it is the only way you can keep a tempo. You must learn to keep tempo despite it. For a stranger it can be terrible. But then it is part and parcel of the technique of playing this instrument. If you are not prepared for a lag in sound you shouldn't play the cinema organ — or any organ. It is an instrument that lags behind the actual execution. It's very nature is such. And over the distance it travels from where you actually touch the keys to where the pipe speaks and to when it comes back to ears. This is what is so frightening about electronic organs today. They are quicker then you can play. Everybody can play fast now. The thing to do is to play fast.

I don't think you should confuse good playing with technique. It's rather like confusing good driving with speed, you know? I mean, just because you drive fast you're not a good driver.

— TO BE CONTINUED —

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