

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.)

CONCLUSION

It all seems to me peculiarly enough that most cinema organists are unprepared for the next move — you know what I mean? They use a certain stop, they come to the end of a phrase and then there is a wild search and “what do I do next.” This is also in turning over. I mean they play sometimes with four beats and they come to the turnover and it may be five beats or six beats first, so they could turn over. Well, this is unforgivable. If you can't turn over within the required space of time, you should have two copies so that you don't have to turn over. This is an example of why I think people are so bad. Not because I was good, but when I couldn't turn over I used to buy another copy and open them both so that I wouldn't have to turn over. This is elementary.

- (W) Mr. Torch, may I say you are one of the most modest individuals I have met.
- (T) Nonsense, I'm a realist. It isn't

a question of being modest. I don't think myself or anyone has achieved the high standard of performance that can be achieved on that instrument. I don't think there has been enough time, effort or money devoted to it. The State Kilburn had more service time and more practice time devoted to it than any other organ in the country. The tuner, the service man lived with that organ 24 hours a day — lived around the corner. You could always get a thing put right or improved, the balance, the weight on the tremolos, which were always being re-mounted. We were always searching for the ultimate.

Should we shift this reed an eighth of an inch or not? I think it would go much further than that, but it takes time and money and patience.

- (K) Which of the theatre organs did you like best of those you played?
- (T) The Wurlitzer, Gaumont State Kilburn. I had more say in that organ than any. This was the best achievement I think, that Wurlitzer had over here. It was the keenest-cleanest sounding organ in this country.
- (W) What was the date of finality of

your work on cinema organs?

- (T) 1939-40. It was in the first six months of the war.
- (K) Then you went in the air force?
- (T) Right. I could see when I was in there that there was no possibility of cinema organs ever being revived again. It was obvious.
- (W) What do you think of the resurgence of interest in the instruments? You know, we have nearly 5,000 members in the American Theatre Organ Society.
- (T) The BBC, broadcast, *The Organ Entertains*, every week, and they seem to have a big following too.
- (W) So I'm told. And growing.
- (T) You see, it depends on what you are interested in. Are you interested in art or are you interested in the cinema organ or are you interested in money. Now, I am only interested in money. I qualify this by saying that in return for money I will give the greatest artistic and mechanical return that I possibly can. But, without money I am not interested. I don't believe anybody is interested unless, of course, you happen to be a rich man with a Wurlitzer at home in your own house and you can afford to play with it.

Parts I and II appeared in the December 1972 and February 1973 issues of THEATRE ORGAN.

You see, now, if you are talking about money I don't believe that in this country, anyway, there is a commensurate return in money for the effort. Whether there is in the rest of the world, I don't know. I often get letters from Australia, from Canada, from the States, people who say to me, "Will you come and make some records, we can sell them." I say "Where's the proof of this?" I say to them "look, give me \$5,000 advance royalty," they all disappear. So there's no proof, you see. Nobody's prepared to back this thing with their money, and I see no point of any of these things unless they are. They must be equated with something.

- (W) To prove my point, I built my chamber myself.
- (T) You're balmy, you know — you must be! I wouldn't go to all this trouble. Why did you do this?
- (W) Because I love the theatre organ.
- (T) I can't understand why someone that has such a good talent has such a bad mind.
- (W) Well, sir, I should tell you that as an avocation I design concert and church organs.
- (T) Do you do your own tuning and servicing?
- (W) Oh yes sir. Remember, I sell, install and service, as an avocation, classic organs. Baroque, what have you.
- (K) Judd lives, eats and breathes and smells organs. He's compiled the complete Wurlitzer list of every Wurlitzer made by the factory. Where it has gone, where it was resold and whether it's in the —
- (T) Really. A splendid avocation. It's taken you a few thousand hours, has it?
- (W) Twenty years.
- (T) Is there still this snobbish attitude on the part of classical organists?
- (W) Rapidly disappearing. Every convention of the American Guild of Organists, since about five years ago, has a session at the cinema organ with a very capable organist playing. And I think this is a fine reintroduction to the art form the cinema organ is. It was abused, it was misused, everything that was wrong

happened to it, as you have already said. But I think it is finally coming into its own field as an art form where true musicianship is performed. I hope I'm right.

- (T) Yes, your statement is very beautifully said, but there is a contradiction in terms. You said cinema organ and musicianship. And I don't think the two things are synonymous. I don't believe there are very many, if any, good musicians who play the cinema organ. You see, it depends on what standards you're setting. I am sorry to be so abrasive on the subject. It would be very easy for me to say how right you are, all things aside.
- (W) Please don't.
- (T) I still think, you know.
- (W) May I interject, sir. What is your definition of good musicianship? — Artistry in music?
- (T) I don't think it can be defined!
- (W) May I ask a very personal question? Do you feel you have musicianship in your work with the orchestra and —
- (T) Not enough.
- (W) I'm glad you said that.
- (T) Not by any means enough. Ah, I'm not, I hope, as vulgar as most of the people who delve in music. And that is especially what it is for. I've yet to hear someone who wasn't vulgar. See, they play wrong harmonies, wrong tempos, wrong rhythms, wrong melodies. Organists seem to have a fixed idea in their head that anything can be juggled because they are playing the cinema organ. You don't have to play four beats in a bar because the composer said so. You can play five because it's cinema organ. You don't have to play a chord of C major. You can play F major if you like, because it's cinema organ. You don't have to play the right pedal note, you can play any pedal note you like because it's a cinema organ. You couldn't do any of these things if you were playing some cathedral? I'm forever damned in my opinion of other cinema organists, aren't I?
- (W) Only yesterday I heard a man play a cinema organ who used 16' stops with a 16' subcoupler and playing in a tenor C octave

— chords. Now this is abominable. But whatever the medium is it must be done in good taste. Now I think that perhaps 5% of the organists we know today play in this mode. But you are right! The great majority use it as a means of expressing their power over the listener. You know, I recall that Jesse Crawford told me that the only organ he designed was the Publix No. 1. And I said to him, "Well Jesse," "why did you leave off the English Horn?" He said, "To protect the audience from the organist." A very astute statement.

- (T) You see, it's a terrible omission though, isn't it?
 - (W) It is a terrible omission, but he recognized —
 - (T) You see, here is the ultimate proof of what I have been saying. Right! You have to take the uppermost out of the orchestra, you have to take stops out of the orchestra purely and simply to protect the listener. This is the wrong way to protect the listener. You should protect the listener by insuring that the person who uses the instrument has sufficient savvy, good taste, whatever it is to be able to have these things but not to use them all the time.
 - (K) It's like giving a brain surgeon's kit to a boy.
 - (T) It's maddening! Your words are final proof of what I have tried to say. This instrument has been badly performed by people who shouldn't be given the opportunity to use it.
- This doesn't apply to everybody. *Of course*, there are good performers. I don't even know their names today. There always will be good performers but they are the very tiniest minority. This applies to painting or anything else.
- (K) You might have heard that we are arranging to release, re-release your records in the United States.
 - (T) Are you? Really! From EMI?
 - (K) From the EMI. We're bringing them out on LPs, double LPs and the deluxe package. It's a complete story on the organs, records, and some of your ballads and so forth.
 - (T) What arrangement did you come

to with the EMI? Have you bought them outright or are you paying the royalties?

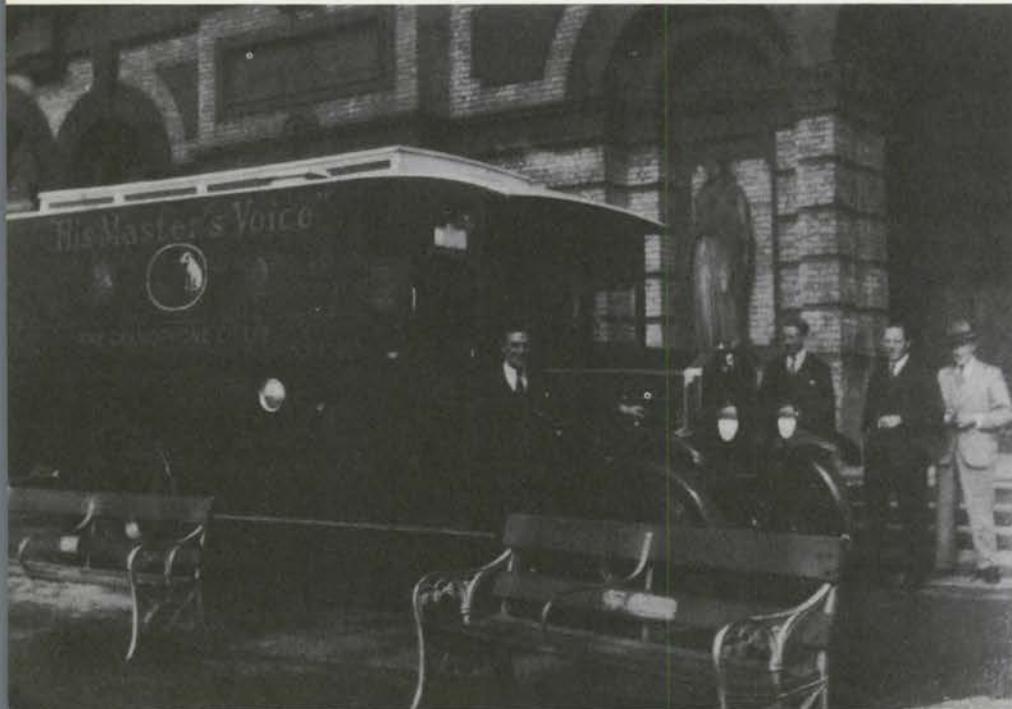
- (K) No, they're just on lease basis — Just on a royalty basis. So you'll be getting royalties from it.
- (T) Surely hope so — I'm all in favor, as I told you, I am all in favor of money. The point is what do you give in return for this. So many people want the money and don't want to give anything. I say you should make good records but you should also make money.
- (K) You're right.
- (T) This is what, your company, Doric, isn't it?
- (K) Yes.
- (T) What are you going to do, LPs?
- (K) The best method is in doing it in LPs.
- (T) What do you intend — one double sided LP?
- (K) Two.
- (T) Two double sided LPs. In other words, you'll sell them as a package. You can't buy one, you've got to buy the two?
- (K) You've got to buy the two. They're in one package.
- (T) And what will you have per side, 6 titles?
- (K) Six titles per side, so there will be 24 titles.
- (T) Have they got 24 titles of mine? I forget what I made.

- (K) Yes — as a matter of fact, I have 30 titles to choose from and we picked 24 of those.
- (T) This is very interesting. I don't think, myself, that you'll do any good with this. If you see why I got a very poor opinion of it in the first instance. When I've got a poor opinion of the commodity, I've also got a poor opinion of the person who buys the commodity. So, really, I am biased. I sincerely hope you sell them, not only for your sake but for mine. Nevertheless, I cannot envisage. There's a vast difference between the person who says, "Gee, that was nice," and the person who says, "Gee, that was nice, I'll give you ten dollars for the privilege." There's a large gap there. There are always plenty of people in the world who will listen to nothing.
- (K) Of course we're taking a calculated risk.
- (T) Do you sell all over the states or only locally?
- (K) We sell all over the states. Because we are doing a specialty sale, we are selling by direct mail and we advertise through the organ journals and other journals, of course.
- (T) Well, that is more hopeful, that type of approach. I think then you are, in other words, going directly to the prospective buyer

instead of going to everybody hoping that the right buyer will fall out.

- (K) That's right. Because we've built up a mailing list of organophiles, if you can call them that, and the ATOS journal is very good in this regard. It goes all over the world. We send records to Australia, also Canada.
- (T) Australia is a very big market for me.
- (K) Yes, very good. And we send some here to England. Now, I can't sell these in England, I can only sell them in the United States.
- (T) You see, they've got so many successful things to sell in England, of course, they can't be bothered with anything for under \$3.00. They've got the Beatles at one end and the Philharmonic at the other end and they can't be bothered with it. What is the actual sound like on the tapes?
- (K) Some of it is gorgeous and some of it, of course —
- (T) Do you get any needle hiss?
- (K) On some a little bit, on others you can't detect it.
- (W) Mr. Torch, I can tell that Frank has actually been able to bring a xylophone out of one side and the tuba out of the other.
- (T) Frank, I appreciate this. I have the greatest regard for the scientific side of it. I think the scientific side of recording has progressed much. I mean, you have been in it all your life. I've been in the business of recording all my life, making gramophone records and I've lived with all these engineers. The actual advance, that side, is far greater than the advance in the performance side of the personality of the performance. I think, myself, performances are retrograde, they're going backwards as opposed to the mechanical side going forward.
- (K) What we've done is taken these tapes and re-copied them and put them through what is called a synthesizer. Now what this does is not a true stereo in the sense of the word, but it does give you a chance to spread the organ out and make it sound larger so that some of it comes on this side and some of it comes on the other side.

Early recording van used in making wax masters on gravity feed lathe. All Torch records were made on this type of equipment. (See Part II, February 1973) — (Photo courtesy of Gustave Cook, Studio Manager, E.M. I. Records, Abbey Road, London)



- (T) This is what we've always needed, isn't it?
- (K) Right.
- (T) This was the factor that would have been the really deciding thing in organ records. If people have got stereo there is no instrument in the world which is more suitable to stereo.
- (W) Right.
- (T) Are you taking the train, the "Flying Scotsman?" What is it like on your imitation stereo?
- (K) Oh, it's great.
- (T) Tremendous.
- (K) That's the best track in the book. That thing is fantastic. How you managed to do that I'll never know, because I know you had to do it from the top each time.
- (W) How did you get the air pump sound?
- (T) The surf effects — opening the shutters and closing them.
- (W) Did you use the cymbal somehow to get that?
- (T) Yes, the cymbal roll on the organ. One foot on the shutters, the other foot on the cymbal roll. This is not clever, I cannot understand why anyone thinks this is clever. The difference between doing that and not doing that is the other person who doesn't do it is so satisfied with the bangedy-bang trying to rack louder and faster. More muddy than anybody else. He doesn't try for anything else. I cannot understand why you are impressed by this. I can understand you being *unimpressed* by the fact that somebody else didn't achieve it.
- (W) Mr. Torch, may I presume that you played with an imagination that no one else has ever possessed on the cinema organ. Believe me.
- (T) This is possible. But it's not that I am good, it's that others are so bad.
- (W) Again I must say, sir, you are being very modest.
- (T) No, I don't think so. You take the great prophets out of the Bible. What was so great about them? It was the fact they were surrounded by such a lot of bloody fools. What do you think about that; isn't it true?
- (K) Well, we've gone through and taken these tapes, retransferred them and we're deticking. Where



Sidney Torch at the Wurlitzer Organ, Gaumont State Theatre, Kilburn. This was his favorite instrument and it was here that he personally directed the tonal regulation. It is still in excellent condition, although the fate of the theatre is uncertain.

ever there are any ticks, we cut the ticks out. We are trying to get as smooth a sound as possible.

- (T) I would love to hear it.
- (K) Well, I'll send you copies.
- (T) I wish you would. I'll tell you why. Because my wife, who is a musician too, but was a BBC producer and was in commercial radio before the war — we worked in the same form of entertainment for many years. She worked for radio Luxemburg and radio Normandy, they called it

the radio Luxemburg, then she worked for the BBC and I worked for the BBC and for many, many years, although we worked in the same sort of field we never met. She has always said to me "If I had known you when you were an organist I'd never have married you." Yes she really means this. So I would like once to be able to prove to her that she is making a mistake.

- (K) Right.
- (T) I think I could only do this, not

(K) with my ability, but with your mechanical tricks. I think you might achieve it where I couldn't. I hope so. I hope you'll enjoy these. We are doing our best to get everything out of them we can. Some of the titles they didn't have and I had to take them out of my collection. The trick in copying from 78s, shellacs, is to get the right size stylus diameter where it will hit the groove where it has not been touched before. When they do this in the States, they get a series of about 15 styli all of different diameters and they'll keep trying them all until they find the quietest take where this needle going down in the groove. In the first place, they use a truncated needle, when this needle goes down in the groove, they'll finally spot it where it has not been touched and where it is smooth, that's where they'll tape. Then from that, they will do their other electronic equalization and that sort of thing. However, I had to do very little equalization. All I had to do was cut off the top end, because nowadays our frequencies go way out. On your records there was nothing, because of the microphones of those days there was nothing over 4,000 cycles. Of course, the organ fundamental goes out to 5,000 and then your harmonics out beyond that. So they don't have quite the lifelike sound that you get from today's recording, but by golly, they're soft sell. We are getting the bass response you put in there, but you never got it off of those records originally. It's there, and we got that good hard bass like "Teddy Bear's Picnic" as a prime example of this and there are others the same way, with that good solid bass response. It comes out beautifully. As I say, I hope you enjoy them and I hope you'll forgive us if we haven't done the job they deserve.

(T) But if you talk about "Bugle Call Rag", how can you re-issue this with Jesse Crawford's thing about taking the English Horn out of the Wurlitzer to safeguard the customer?

(W) Ah, he and you, sir, would not

violate your artistry by the over-use of the English Horn, as do far too many organists today!

(T) Well, I agree the English Horn is placed in the wrong hands on occasion. I've come into the theatre full of people when the organs were alive and all the stops had been on the pedals and full on the pedals too. I'll tell you, it makes a lot of noise.

(W) Mr. Torch, let me ask you a way out question. Under the right circumstances, would you consider playing again and recording?

(T) I don't think I could, you know. I haven't played for what 30, 33 years. I don't think I could.

(W) I'd be willing to listen.

(T) You must be the only person that's in the world. I have an appointment in ten minutes and I must go. I am sorry, I'm enjoying this - it's 2:30 isn't it?

(W) Yes sir. May I ask one last question? May we have your permission to use selected comments on the jacket?

(T) Sure. I don't think that I have said anything that I shouldn't say. If I have said something that you think might be offensive to other players of the instrument, please cut it out entirely. Why be controversial?

(W) Would you like us to send you a copy to review before we print?

(T) That would be rather nice.

(W) We can do that.

(T) I can't stop you. I've agreed to do this and it's in your hands.

(K) Well, we are certainly not going to use anything that would be offensive to anybody. We don't want to invite any criticism.

(T) The only name I've mentioned has been Jesse Crawford and then with great respect.

(W) May I say, realizing that you have to get on, that I deeply

appreciate this opportunity to meet you, sir.

(T) It was very nice and I've enjoyed it very much. □

ADDENDA

Since the above interview, a letter from Mr. Torch tells of his decision to retire from his post after conducting, arranging and playing for over 50 years. He states, " - the orchestra gave me a silver salver and two verses of 'For he's a jolly good fellow' ", all of which was rather warming. He plans to retire to a place by the sea near the south coast of England.

The effect of Sidney Torch's music on the theatre organ has proven to be just as electric today as when it was first heard. Many, especially in this country, are hearing him for the first time. English organ enthusiasts have been unanimous in their pleasure and praise, even those who were fortunate enough to have been involved with his playing in the in-theatre days. A new wave of "Torchiana" is sweeping the British Isles as can scarcely be believed, as one recently wrote.

Enough has been written since last May when the memorable meeting with Mr. Torch occurred, regarding his music and its recent re-issue. More important, is the man, his ideals, standards of performance, maintained throughout the years without compromise! His contribution to contemporary music and its performance may not be fully realized in our time. Be that as it may, we who profess to know and who certainly endear the theatre organ, are fortunate to again have contact with Mr. Torch - a musical giant of his time and a colossus of that wonderful art form - the theatre organ.

J. W.
March, 1973

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