

# We're in the Orpheum!

Mindful readers will recall, from April's issue, our leaving the Orpheum Theatre in a state of clouded availability; for the house is usually opened only for extended stage engagements, of which several had to be firmly scheduled before the ATOS dates could be confirmed. With that done, the clouds have lifted, the contract is in hand, and a most unique Robert Morton is being readied for three memorable events featuring England's George Blackmore; Paul Quarino; and the Bay Area's own "Velvet Thrill," Jim Roseveare.

This is most fortunate, for the Orpheum's is the last Market Street organ still in its original setting and the theatre itself is one of only two major city palaces neither demolished nor twinned. Despite an ill-conceived redecoration two decades

ago, the theatre still has many attractive features, and retains much of its era's flavor.

Opened February 20, 1926, as the Pantages, the 2500 (now 1865) seat theatre was the third to last built in the extensive vaudeville chain of that most remarkable of entrepreneurs, Pericles Alexander Pantages, a Greek by birth, but the sort of man for whom fin-de-siecle America was the pluperfect time and place. Leaving home at age nine, Pantages, after several years at sea and in Panama, jumped ship in Seattle then roused about the West Coast, as a promoter and sometimes fighter, until the event which was to destine his life — the Alaska Gold Rush.

Much in the manner of Scrooge McDuck, Pantages adventured to the Yukon in 1897, there making and losing three separate fortunes extracting the precious metal — not from the frozen earth directly, but from other, less resourceful, prospectors, who were found to yield up the shiny stuff far more readily. An earlier experience in theatre management, in San Francisco, encouraged Pantages to ply that trade in the North, but when the auric bonanza turned borasca, he salvaged only enough money from this last venture to join the exodus.

Settling in Seattle, Pantages opened a theatre there in 1902. Endowed with a keen head for figures,

The cathedrals of Mexico inspired architect B. Marcus Priteca to create one of his most intricately detailed theatres, described by decorator Tony Heinsbergen as a "drip castle." The grills above the altar-like construction blended perfectly with the upper walls before the redecoration.

*(Steve Levin Photo)*



and the blessed sense of knowing what the public will pay money to see, he parlayed this house into an empire of nearly 70 theatres, about half of which he owned personally. Second in power and prestige to Orpheum (R-K-O) among the vaudeville circuits, the Pantages chain was acquired by the premier organization in 1929 for some \$24,000,000. At that time, the San Francisco theatre took the name of its new owner. Pantages himself died in 1936.

In Seattle, Pantages met the two young men who were to be the arbiters of luxury during his circuit's greatest period of growth: architect B. Marcus Priteca, and decorator Anthony Heinsbergen. Seldom have two craftsmen enjoyed as symbiotic a relationship, with Priteca's love of ornament and detail — a perfect complement to Heinsbergen's fine eye for color and texture.

The early Pantages theatres were almost always elaborations on Priteca's first effort, the slightly boxy, classically adorned San Francisco house of 1911; in a style dubbed "Pantages Greek" by its architect, and "Louis-Pantages" by a latter-day wag. Heinsbergen came aboard in 1916, and later exposed Priteca to the Spanish and Italian Renaissance designs the architect was to use to great effect in the San Diego, (new) San Francisco, and Fresno Pantages Theatres, of 1924, 1926, and 1928.

The San Francisco theatre was by far the most ambitious of these very similar later houses, and was, until 1930, the largest Pantages built. To maximize seating on a smallish, irregular site, Priteca opted for two shallow balconies — something of a rarity in 1926, but most effective in creating an intimate feeling in a capacious space. The intricate ornamental plastering was contrived to suggest elaborate stonework, with dressed blocks on the walls and massive carvings about the proscenium, organ screens and ceiling.

As always, Heinsbergen's decorations provided the ideal adornment: the proscenium, organ screen "altars," and the sidewalls up to the second balcony were a light, variegated, travertine; the upper walls a medium mottled green with applied designs and the latticework ceiling a darker green with poly-

chrome highlights. This was all brought out by Priteca's masterful use of light: three tiers of illuminated coves around the ceiling and within a great sunburst fixture, combined with subtle effects about the organ screens, bathed the whole space with a warm glow perfectly matched to the colorfully painted details and simulated tapestry hangings.

When Cinerama redecorated in 1953, the walls were painted out in that chalky pink peculiar to theatre renovations, and all decorative lighting was eliminated in favor of rose-colored downlights. Similar atrocities were committed in the lobby and other public spaces, but the major ceilings and the ravishing balcony soffits were left untouched to suggest what this theatre once was. Yet, despite what is gone, much remains to surround suitably the big sound of the Robert Morton organ.

One of the first vaudeville magnates to realize that movies posed a genuine threat to variety entertainment, Pantages made pictures a

significant part of his presentations earlier than most. Beginning with the Los Angeles Pantages of 1919, every house he built was supplied with an organ — always a Robert Morton — almost always installed underneath the stage.

With 22 well-unified ranks, the San Francisco instrument was not only the largest in the Pantages chain, but stands among the most substantial yet of California's only major organ builder. Eschewing total placement beneath the stage, the architect allotted four distinct areas for pipe chambers: both sides of the proscenium, a space above the projection booth and the traditional pit.

Very similar to a large Wurlitzer "main chamber", the pit, or "center," chamber at the Orpheum contains no radical voices, but rather sets which might blend with and support an orchestra. A small second chamber in the pit once contained the traps, which have since been moved into the "left" chamber. To

A product of Robert Morton's "dreadnaught" period, the Orpheum console, with 221 stops, is as large as it looks. Now located outside the pit, it will be returned to its elevator when the stage apron is removed — perhaps by convention time. (Steve Levin Photo)



# THEY DON'T BUILD THEATRE ORGANS LIKE THIS ANYMORE

support the now-removed Cinerama screen, the pit was covered in 1953, mandating amplification of the chamber there, but better-than-even chances are quoted for having the apron stripped away by Convention time.

The sets in the normally placed "left" and "right" chambers comprise what alone would make a plausible eleven-rank specification, needing little color or foundational support from the pit. The grills through which these high-set chambers speak once blended perfectly with the dark finish of the upper walls, but since the redecoration, this effect has been lost.

The "echo" chamber sits directly atop the old projection room and speaks through the lighting coves and open ceiling. It is a complete, autonomous division; playable on the Pedal, Orchestral and Solo registers. Despite the great separation of the divisions, the organ's sound is coherent, a characteristic due largely to the well-planned independence of its major parts.

The massive four-manual console — at which presided the likes of Buss McClelland, Henri LeBel and Eddie Horton during its heyday — originally sat at pit-center on a combined elevator and turntable. Inaccessible from below since the stage apron was built, the console was moved out of the pit three years ago to permit its use in a stage show, with its return pending the opening of the pit.

In recent years, this unusual machine has been concertized upon by Gaylord Carter and George Wright in addition to its occasional use by ATOS and various short-term lessees of the facility; and has been recorded for Doric Records by Tiny James. Always playable, the organ has been kept, since 1953, by veteran organ buff and ATOE charter member Ron Downer.

As the Orpheum organ is seldom heard by the public, and the house's capacity is far in excess of Convention needs, tickets to Jim Roseveare's program are to be offered for general sale, as are those for John Seng's at the Paramount. Pre-register by July 1, or simply stop by the Hilton on July 15 between noon and nine. We'll be happy to see you, and you'll be glad you came! □

*This article appeared in the August 1974 issue of the BROADCASTER, published by and for employees of Delco Electronics Division, General Motors Corporations, Kokomo, Indiana, and is printed here by special permission.*

Words are simply not adequate to describe the music that pulses forth from the magnificent theatre organ that Delco retiree Frank May has reconstructed in his home. So we will have to settle for lesser things like how and why he built it.

This is not the modern kind of organ you might see advertised on TV, guaranteed to belt out *Home on the Range* after three days of finger exercises. Rather, what Frank has built is an instrument of the type that once filled with music the great, palatial movie houses of the 1920s and 30s.

Frank and Frances May, members of Central Indiana Chapter, at the console of the 4/19 Barton.

Giant, ornate theatres like the Indiana in Indianapolis or the Fox or Michigan in Detroit all had elaborate organs that simulated orchestrated music for the silent films of that period. A relatively elite group of talented and well-paid organists traveled the country playing them.

With the advent of talking pictures, theatre organ popularity began to wane though the instruments remained for several years providing music between movies and during interludes. Nearly obsolete in the modern cinemas of today, the tradition of the theatre organ and its music is now being preserved by hobbyists like Frank and his wife who have taken great pains to

