

Historic Event in San Diego



ORGANPOWER

REGINALD FOORT RE-UNITED WITH HIS 1938 5/27 "PORTATIV"

by Stu Green

To the average citizen it probably looked like just another pizza parlor opening — one equipped with one of those strange organs which have been becoming increasingly popular. But to the informed organ buff the announcement of the opening of ORGAN POWER No. 2 at Pacific Beach, Calif., was a unique event — one which actually started over 38 years ago.

It was then that popular British

organist Reginald Foort made a firm decision. He would chuck that nice safe job as a British Broadcasting Corp. organist and strike out on his own, with a large "portable" pipe organ. The story of Reg. Foort's 5/27 "portativ" has been told and retold many times since the 1938 debut of the huge-scaled Moller in a British cinema. (See THEATRE ORGAN, Oct., 1973, p. 5, Winter Issue, 1963, p. 14).

Mr. Foort had taken a bold step in purchasing his own cinema organ. He had gambled on the ability of the Moller Co. over the "pond" in Hagerstown, Maryland, to build a large but transportable pipe organ, one which literally came apart at the end of an engagement, to be transported in sections to the next stop in five trucks. This had never been done on such a grand scale. In fact the idea of a transportable

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pipe organ had remained fallow since the Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey circus had abandoned its circus wagon Kilgen in favor of the louder calliope in the very early years of this century. It was a gamble but Foort won.

The organ was a hit with British theatre audiences wherever it was installed and played by Foort. War clouds put an end to the familiar sight of the five van loads of organ being transported about the English countryside. Then, a disaster opened up a new career for the Moller. The Luftwaffe scored a direct hit on a BBC studio, reducing the BBC's

Organ Power No. 2 is housed in a former bowling alley. The hardwood alleys are now part of the pizzeria floor. The building is located in the business district of Pacific Beach. The tower was erected by a former tenant.



Compton organ to rubble. Another organ was needed quickly. British troops serving overseas listened to their requests being played on organcasts from home. It was a matter of troop morale. Reg's Foort's organ was idle and he offered it. Thus the erstwhile gypsy Moller became the stationary BBC studio organ in 1941 — the last time Reg. Foort played it until Oct. 2, 1975 — 34 years later!

In the early '60s the organ was purchased by the Netherlands Broadcasting Co. and moved across the English Channel where it was heard occasionally on broadcasts from the Hilversum studio. But of late it had been neglected.

Enter Preston M. ("Sandy") Fleet, San Diego businessman and theatre organ enthusiast. We have described in these pages Sandy's home installation in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif., and also "Organ Power No. 1" pizzeria in San Diego, of which he is one of the backers. In addition, Sandy was instrumental in organizing the San Diego Chapter of ATOS. He is the present owner of the former BBC Moller.

Enroute from Holland to San Diego, the Moller underwent some refurbishing at the Hagerstown Moller plant. Then, little was heard about it until invitations went out announcing the debut of ORGAN POWER No. 2, at which Reginald Foort would be re-united with his beloved Moller for the opening.

The building is a former bowling alley in the downtown section of Pacific Beach, an extension of San Diego. Arriving early in the afternoon on the appointed day, we were fortunate enough to find Mr. Foort practicing on the Moller. He practices much as did Eddie Dunstedter, going over certain passages until they are well polished, but rarely playing a selection straight through. During a break we interviewed Mr. Foort, who was obviously overjoyed to find his favorite organ well installed in a permanent home. The organ is now rigged as a two-chamber installation with two sets of percussions, one enclosed, one "baroqued." On the left wall hangs a rare set of Wurlitzer tuned tympani (from the Brooklyn Fox) in plain view.

"The big Tibia is over there" said Foort, with an expansive gesture toward an immense, unenclosed set



Reginald Foort at 1938 Moller premiere.

of symmetrical wooden pedal pipes to the right of the chambers. We couldn't help but note how kindly the years have been to Reginald Foort. Except for some grey in his thinning locks, he looks very much the same as in the photo made at the Moller's London premiere in 1938. And the sounds he made during the practice session indicated that he had lost none of the musical acumen which earned him the most applause ever heard for an organist in the N.Y. Times Square Paramount during a post-Crawford engagement there.

Meeting his long cherished instrument was obviously an emotional experience for Reginald Foort. Several times during the practice session he was heard to mutter: "after 34 years — still okay."

Leaving Foort to his rehearsal we sought out Ed Barr, the manager of the Organ Power projects. Ed, at that moment, was no busier than a one-armed paper hanger, supervising the last-minute installation of kitchen gear, carpets, lights and the multi-bulb sign that tells the customer his order is ready.

"It's quite a sign," said Ed, "we can even spell out words on it." He flipped some switches and the lights flashed a huge "WOW!"

Ed revealed that the room, exclusive of chambers, is 68 feet across

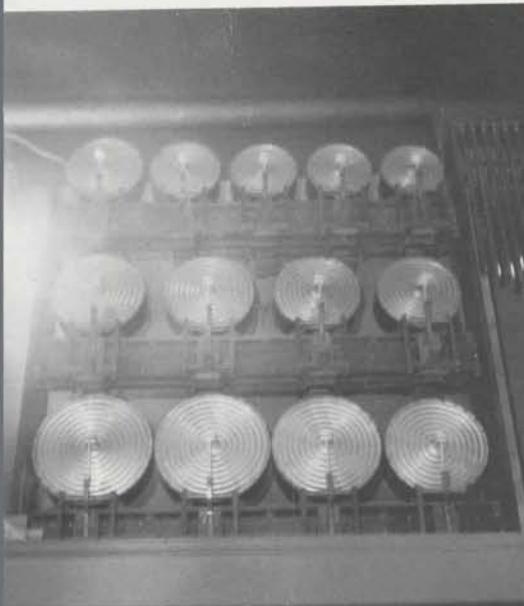


Staff organist Tommy Stark sits at the 5/27 console for this photo which shows the PA system control board (right, foreground). A portion of the stage lighting control panel can be seen at the left.



"Presenting Reginald Foort!" Sandy Fleet (left) introduces the veteran organist (right) while manager Ed Barr (center) looks on. The Moller console dominates the background while a cake replica can be seen just above Ed's head.

Rare tuned tympani mounted high on left wall (unenclosed). They were originally on the Brooklyn Fox Wurlitzer.



and 75 feet deep, with a 30 foot, arched roof. The chamber floor has been excavated to lower the floor two feet in order to accommodate all of the pipes without mitering. Careful attention has been given to the acoustic properties of the room. All of the existing acoustic tile was removed during remodelling, but a small amount had to be returned to the back wall when the room proved too "live."

"We now have a reverb of 3.5 seconds empty, and 2.1 seconds full" said Barr. The rounded ceiling/roof and the diffusing effects of the many fixtures and protuberances on the walls tend to discourage the formation of that acoustical syndrome known as "standing waves."

Leaving Ed Barr to his task of getting the room finished in time for the press preview that evening, we started to leave and did a double take; we had passed by a pipe chamber in the back of the room, nestled up against the kitchen. "Aha, an echo division," we mumbled loud enough to be heard by staff organist Tommy Stark who, until then, had been aurally mainlining the Foort rehearsal.

"No, it's an entirely separate installation — a Wurlitzer Style D, a 6-ranker. See the console on the stage?"

The stage, a two-foot elevation a few feet in front of the huge swell shutters, raises to view a choice selection of music makers. At the left is the grand piano (playable from the Moller console), the imposing five-manual console at center stage and a 2-manual horseshoe console at the right. Quite a sight under the colored lighting!

"The little Wurlitzer was something of an afterthought. Anyway, it isn't playable yet. It won't be heard tonight," said Stark, his "handlebar" moustache drooping a little.

At the doorway we looked back on the scene: colored lights playing on a stage loaded with music makers. Foort rehearsing, the sound of hammering, the shouts of the electricians, workmen scurrying up and down ladders and Ed Barr acting as a general information center and overseer. Confusion!

When we returned three hours later, it was a different scene. Gone were the workmen and quiet had been restored. Camp chairs had

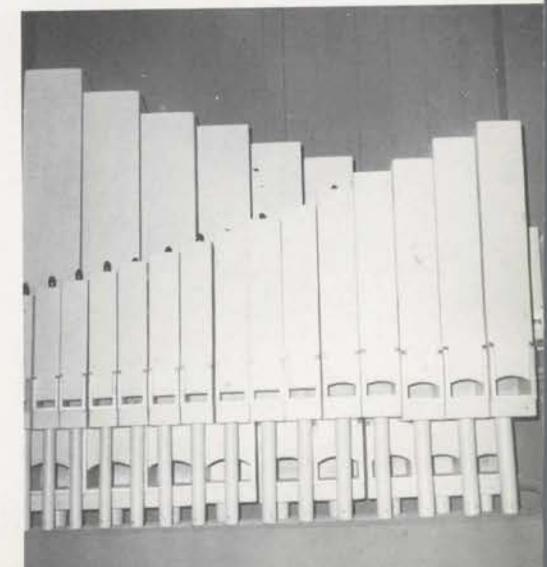


Reg. Foort at rehearsal. Meeting his Moller after 34 years was an emotional experience. Here he had just finished a portion of his famous improvisation, "Dust Storm."



Looking across the stage. Staffers Cheryl Creel and Wayne Seppala pose at the piano and Moller. The Style D Wurlitzer console is in the background.

Unenclosed Pedal Tibia. Scaling is truly colossal.



formed several rows of seats in front of the low stage. Overhead lighting still highlighted the instruments on the stage.

Soon the invited guests started to arrive in twos, threes and fours. Soon thereafter the gratis wine and beer started to flow, and this would later affect the program.

Some guests came great distances (President W. Riley Daniels of the Moller Organ Co. from Maryland, for example). Mike Ohman came from Provo, Utah; Bill Brown from Phoenix; Judd Walton from Vallejo, Calif.; Jerry Nagano, Joe & Ida Mae Koons and Russ Nelson from the LA area. New Seal Beach residents Dick and Jane Loderhose were on hand, as was organist Gaylord Carter, from San Pedro, plus the San Diego majority of organ music buffs, among them Bill Barker whose home boasts a 3/10 Wurlitzer. There were many, many more. By 8:00 p.m. the room was full of chattering organ enthusiasts.

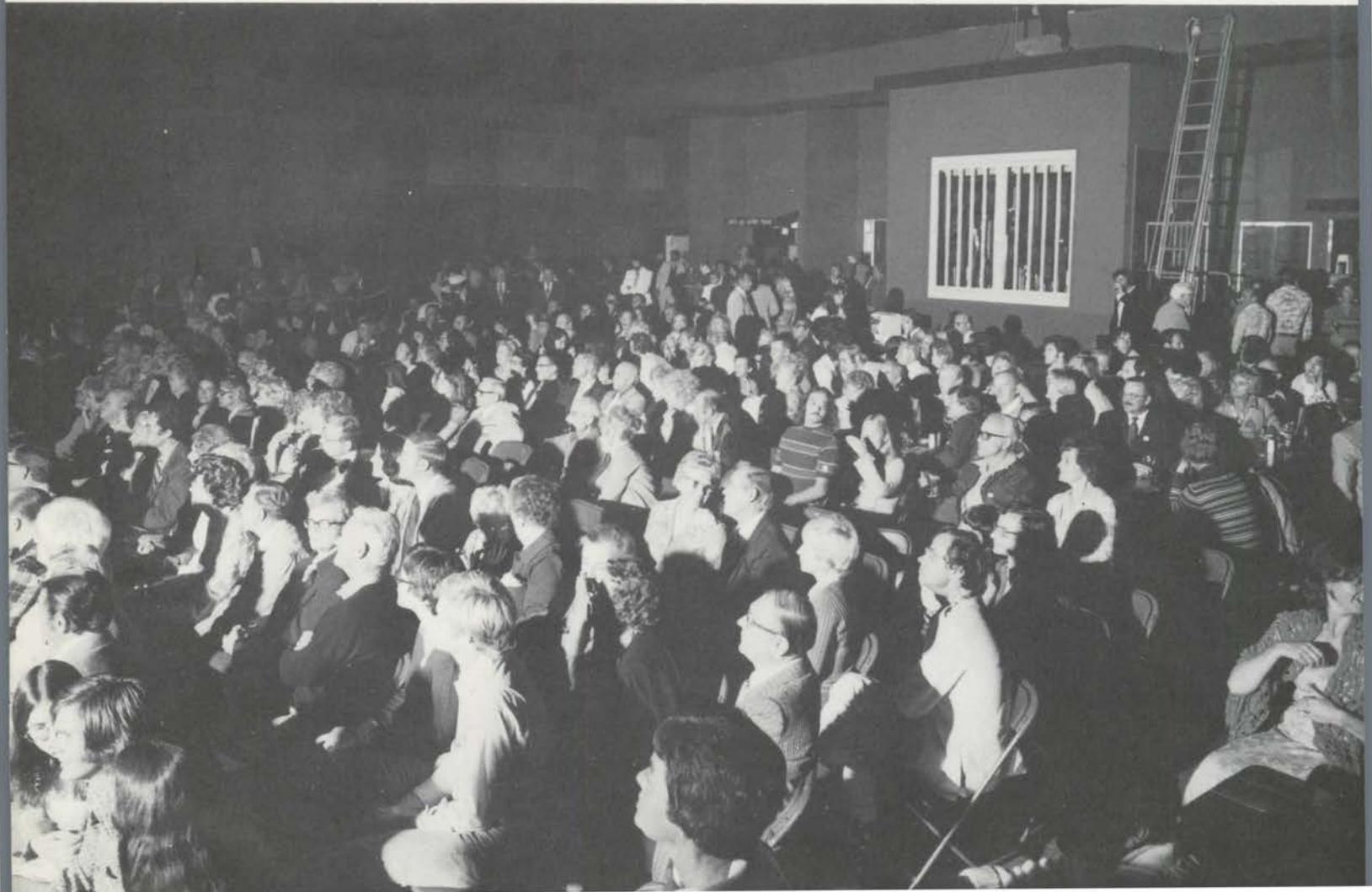
Style D chamber at rear of room provides a vantage point for spotlight operator while partially attentive first night audience talks it up.

Then Ed Barr stepped to the microphone at the console and welcomed the invited guests, who continued to chatter. Ed played a record of a 1938 BBC Foort broadcast, then down came a screen and we saw part of a Pathetone newsreel about the "wonder organ" with Foort demonstrating the effects possible e.g. a steam train taking off. Using a split screen, Foort supplied the "choo-choos" and whistle while the other half of the screen concentrated on the moving wheels of a locomotive.

The filmed Foort then started the "William Tell Overture." This was picked up by the "in person" Foort playing the Moller. It was a well planned intro but wasted on an inattentive crowd. To further complicate matters, the very complex PA system went into a tantrum and distorted the voices of all who used it to sound like Donald Duck.

Despite the annoyances and display of audience bad manners, Foort went through his planned program with all the skill a lifetime of devotion to the organ has developed. It was possible to hear the music by

getting as close to the massive glass swell shutters as possible. During the program Reg. Foort played his radio theme "When You're Smiling," "Slavonic Rhapsody," "You're the Cream in My Coffee," "Lover, Lullabye of Broadway," a nautical medley with "Sailors' Hornpipe," "Anchors Aweigh," a bit of Mendelssohn's "Fingals Cave Overture" with storm effects, then Grieg's "Morning," "Show Me the Way to Go Home," "California Here I Come" and "Home Sweet Home," a complete adventure in music. The surprise was a version of Sousa's "Stars & Stripes Forever" quite unlike anyone else's. He treated it more as an Eric Coates concert piece than a military march. His harmonization and continual key changes were offbeat from the start and he moved the various sections around to accommodate his radically different treatment but left the trio's piccolo ornamentation intact. He ended on a roof-raising full organ chord which drowned out the incessant gab long enough to alert the audience that it was a cue for applause. Perhaps a "pizza parlor" audience is less inter-



ested in the music than the munchables, but this was a selected audience which had been invited to a special pre-opening concert. Apparently many present failed to grasp the historical significance of the event nor were they touched by the magnificence of Reginald Foort's music — all of this prior to the serving of the first pizza. Several pleas were made for the audience to "pipe down," one by Foort himself: "If you aren't quiet, you won't hear it at all, so, to all who came here to talk — please stop." The gab level continued. Of course it was "old home day" for many who had not seen fellow buffs for ages, and a pizza parlor isn't exactly the same as a concert hall. Yet, Reg. Foort deserved more respect than he got. The free flowing beverages contributed to the decibel level of "vox populi."

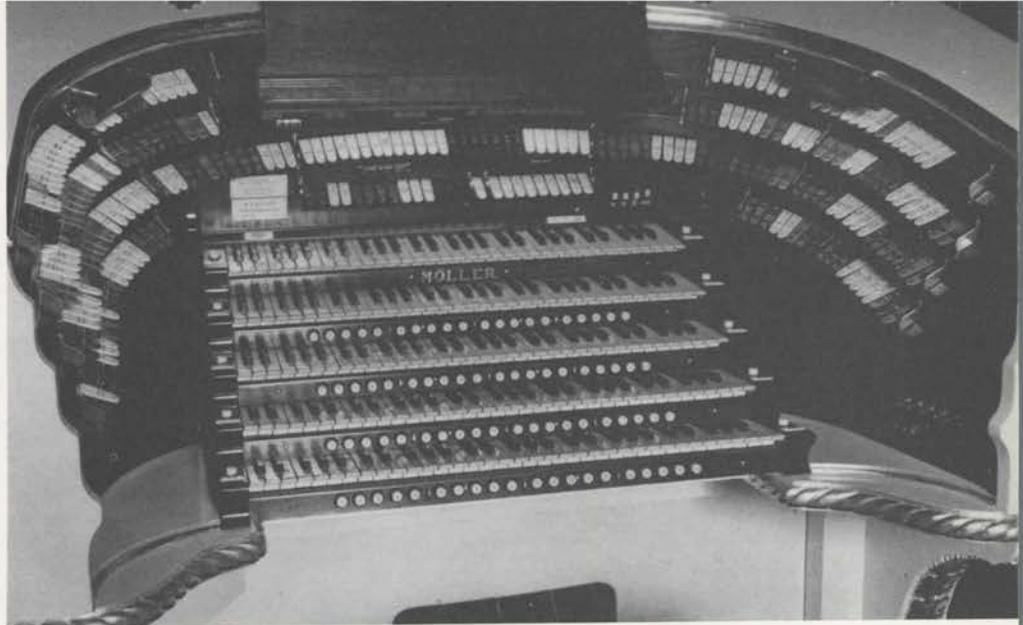
A story describing the building of ORGAN POWER No. 2, sketches about the installers, organ technicians and the staff organists will appear in an upcoming issue of THEATRE ORGAN.

Despite the distractions, we were able to arrive at several conclusions:

- 1) Reg. Foort still "has it."
- 2) His 5/27 Moller is more concert than theatre organ, comparable in tonal makeup to the LA Elks Temple 4/61 Robert Morton.
- 3) The instrument is ideal for its present location; the many solo voices available give it an edge on smaller instruments in similar set-ups.
- 4) Moller was rarely, if ever, able to produce the schmaltzy theatrical Tibia voice. But Moller's Reeds are outstanding. So is their ensemble sound.
- 5) The Moller's new home is acoustically ideal.
- 6) ORGAN POWER pizza is tasty.

The press preview ended around 11:00 p.m. after a number of ORGAN POWER'S staffers had given samples of their artistic endeavors. They were all good, and we hope subsequent pizza munchers will give them more attention than the preview crowd did.

As the last of the first night audience left, Ed Barr took out his list of things that had to be done before the public would be admitted on the following evening. High on the list were the words "PA system." □



Console Closeup. 300 stopkeys, 100 pistons, quadruple stoprail, 5 manuals, plus control of Style D Wurlitzer ranks — a total of 34 ranks. Total weight (all parts) — 60,000 pounds.



Lots of 'Organ Power' in this group of Press Preview guests. Left to right: Bill Brown (three theatre organs), Dick Loderhose (five theatre organs), Bill Barker (one 3/10 Wurlitzer), and Wayne Gilbert (one 10-rank Robert Morton). The guy at the right end (holding 'Stufoto Brownie') just happened to wander onto the scene as the photo was snapped. He says he toots a lung-powered 'one-rank Conn Songflute.'

Photo made on opening night (to the public) shows staffer Chris Gorsuch entertaining at the Moller. The grand piano is at his left and the Style D console at the right. Double-decked glass swell shutters control the volume. The four at the left are for the Main Chamber. The Solo (right) has a similar set of four but only two are shown in this photo. Plate glass windows between shutter sets, from floor to ceiling, help the visual aspects.

