

at Vancouver's Orpheum . . .

# FOORT SAYS FAREWELL

by George S. Francis

"First heard November 8, 1927. Rebuilt 50 years later by dedicated members of the American Theatre Organ Society under the supervision of Kenneth A. Hodgson. Returned to the Orpheum and the City of Vancouver in dedicatory concert by Reginald Foort, F.R.C.O., November 12 and 13, 1977." So reads the small golden plaque affixed to the console's facsimile signature, "Reggie", during Foort's twin concerts there, marking his world's farewell appearance.

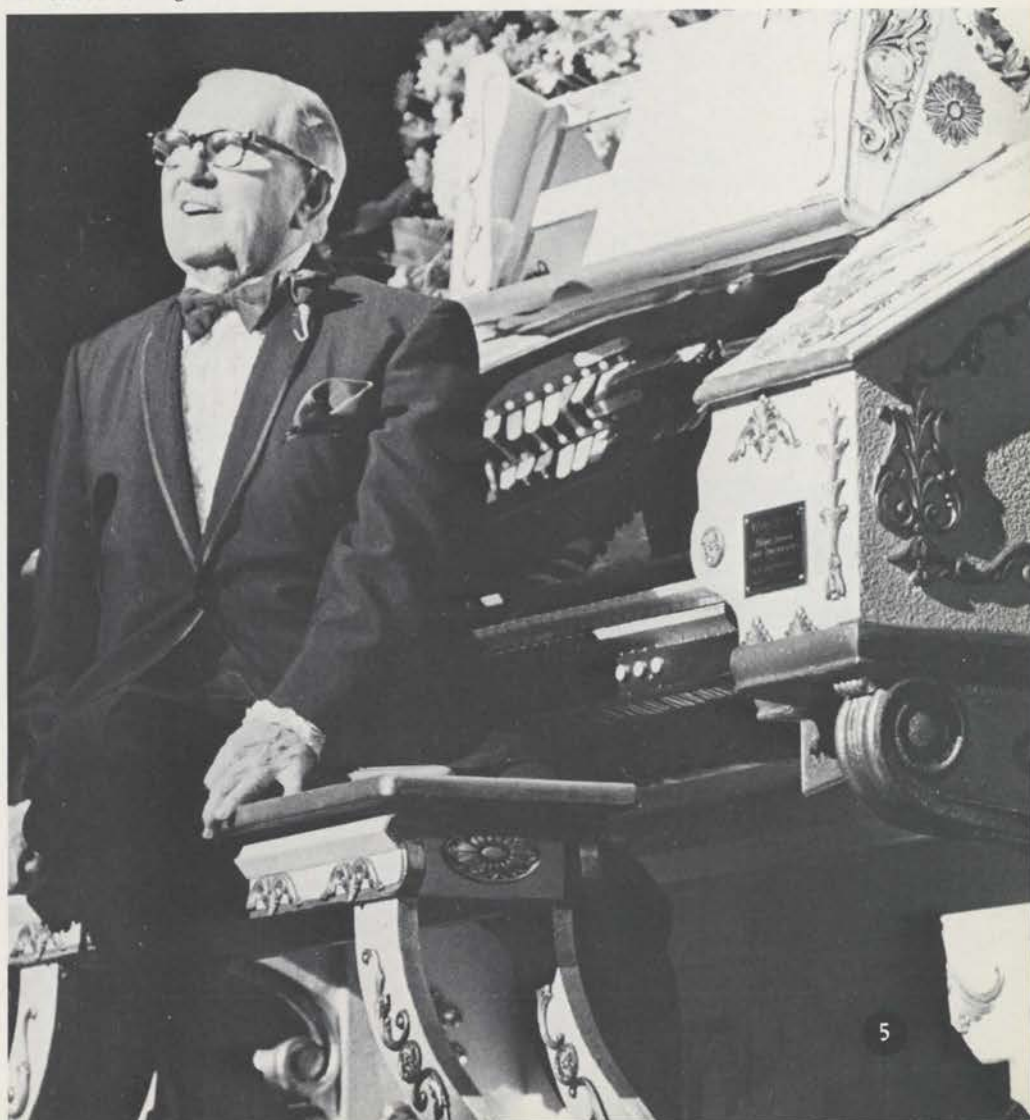
They were two memory-filled nights attended by packed houses to the top rows of the balconies — 5576 devotees; 2788, each performance. Each was a different program and hundreds attended both.

Producer Herb McDonald had inserted postal reply cards in the black and gold souvenir theatre programs, asking they be returned with name and address, plus two more of "friends." From them a newsletter mailing list has been formed. The return, better than six percent — a high average — has resulted in a starting list of over 1500.

More important, analysis shows an audience breakdown indicating half the audience had never been in the newly-renovated theatre before; a third were from places far removed

Mr. Foort acknowledges ovation as console reaches concert level.

(Peter Hulbert Photo)





Ken Hodgson, supervisor of Wurlitzer rebuild, with assistant Bert Blok putting final touches on the complex switch stack system.

(Wayne Leidenfrost Photo)



Albert Paull, Norman Schmidt, and Ralph Johns making adjustments in main chamber.

(Wayne Leidenfrost Photo)



Erskine MacPherson and George Francis preparing toy counter for concert.

(Wayne Leidenfrost Photo)



Dan Bohline was responsible for eye appealing cosmetology on Orpheum console.

(Wayne Leidenfrost Photo)

Mike Leader and sound engineer Frank Killinger record the Foort concert using Swiss-made Studer equipment.

(Peter Hulbert Photo)



from the metro Vancouver area and for many it meant overnight in a hotel. Many were from Portland and Seattle, some from Calgary and from the mid-province, Okanagan city of Kelowna. A number travelled from Vancouver Island and Victoria, meaning long and fairly expensive ferry trips to the mainland.

Since there are virtually no more theatre organs playing publicly in Canada now, most having disappeared into homes, and the Orpheum's now being the country's last to still perform on its original stage, aficionados have been starved for the old sound. They proved it by the distances they travelled to hear it again. The second draw was the esteem in which Reggie is held by Britishers. There are thousands of those in that southwest populated corner of the vast province of British Columbia.

He did not disappoint. Making public thanks, he began by expressing pleasure with the rebuild by the ATOS volunteers under Hodgson. To old timers, if memory served, it seemed the 3/13 Wurlitzer — a standard Model 240 — had never sounded better. Part of that sound was the Orpheum's new acoustics, now heralded by world concert hall critics as one of the world's most acoustic-perfect theatres. The new natural reverb is sharp, clean and seconds long. It has become a lively hall.

What may be said about Reggie's program choice not said before in a hundred ways? He said his numbers were to be *his* favorites of 65 years on the bench. To most of the audience that meant a grin to companions and putting on the "I remember when" look. Many were heard later to say: "Made me think of friends not remembered for thirty years."

He played them all — a parade of nostalgia done with the easy charm and sweet voicing of the master's trademark.

Fed by closed circuit television, in a room below stage packed with the finest Swiss-made Studer tape machines and 12-channel mixer, Frank Killinger of Doric Recording, Monterey, sound engineered the 15 i.p.s. masters of both shows in entirety. From them he edited a stereo album as a continuous groove of numbers linked with theatre presence, applause and some of Reggie's chat.

The "live in concert" record (Foort's 301st) is being released under the Doric label in the U.S., the Amberlee label in the U.K. and in Canada under a new label: Quest Organ Master — the first in what will be a long series there.

There were other firsts. After the house lights dimmed and the stage bathed in blue and rose, two young butlers in gray cutaways revealed the console draped in its heavy padded cover and encased with a great, wide, bowed red ribbon with a huge card reading "To Vancouver With Love." When all were removed and masses of golden flowers arranged the width of the console top, a semi-circular, twelve-foot high organ screen of thin gold tubes that terminated in 220 tiny light bulbs, went to full brilliance and chased around like a theatre marquee, under the blue-white arc spotlights.

Then came Reggie's music on a silver tray, followed by a red rose for his lapel on a silver salver. For its first performance in 20 years, only one tune sufficed — "Happy Days Are Here Again."

The screen's lights dimmed to a glow and became stationary, the arcs were subdued, softened with pink, and during the rest of the production the audience forgot the cavern of the empty stage to the right. The screen is a permanent asset to the Orpheum's organ and is to be used at all concerts. It was designed by Cameron Porteous, the city's leading stage designer.

Net proceeds of the concerts were turned over to the city by Mr. McDonald a few days later in a ceremony before the Councillors in the Council Chamber. The sum reimbursed the city loan grant of \$16,500 which had been advanced to pay for organ parts and for some of the labor in the restoration and the lift overhaul. Mayor Jack Volrich expressed surprise. He said the return was an event the Chamber had not witnessed for a long time. He said Council never expected to see the money again.

Next Vancouver performer will be Ann Leaf, February 11 and 12, followed by Rex Koury, April 29. The fall production on September 30 will feature Ron Poll, staff organist at the city's popular Organ Grinder pizza restaurant. Christmas '78 will star George Blackmore. □