FATHER OF THE THEATRE ORGAN:

The Remarkable Story of Robert Hope-Jones

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Part One

ONE MAY BE FOR OR AGAINST, but he must concede that no organ builder ever attracted such warmth of friendship or heat of enmity as did Robert Hope-Jones. More than a generation after his death he is a live force. While much of the organ world is energetically ridding itself of his influence, a consequential other part still venerates his memory, makes pilgrimages to his works and looks wistfully back to the times when he flourished. No other organ builder so stamped an entire age —the most prolific in American organ building. The appearance of this journal is evidence of how vigorous is the interest in his works, his times, and his remarkable if quaint history.

For the theatre organ was Hope-Jones's own peculiar creation although he did not live to see the first flush of its success or to realize the glories that it would reach in the middle 'twenties. The associations did nothing to help his repute since later extravagances of the theatre organ seriously impaired its status as a vehicle for serious music.

I much prefer the terms Unit Organ and Unit Orchestra which are more accurate and comprehensive, and which properly describe instruments found in all kinds of places—churches, municipal auditoria and residences as well as theatres. It is to be hoped that the AATOE can rescue this much maligned department of organ building from the opprobrium into which it is unjustly placed, and show that it produced more than mere musical slapstick for the silent films.

What may be taken as a typical attitude of the opposition is expressed by A. Thompson-Allen in his article "The History of the Organ" which appears in *Religion in Life,* Winter, 1954–1955: "The decline and fall of the organ as a pristine musical instrument was close upon us by the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. A host of evil geniuses descended upon the field of organ building. An English electrician by the name of Robert Hope-Jones turned his attention to the organ. A new system, known as the Unit extension system (which enabled the same pipes to be used over and over again at different pitches and under the disguise of forming extra stops) deceived many foremost organists. Organs with twice the number of stops and less than half the number of pipes were extolled by high-pressure commercialism and salesmanship."

Now, as anyone familiar with the facts must know, that is a very naive statement of the case. I for one would be quite willing to leave open the question of Hope-Jones's "genius." But of his sincerity, his inalienable devotion to the organ and his ardent idealism, every informed organ enthusiast must certainly be aware. His tragic end was in itself sufficient evidence of these. His remarkable influence was unhappily indicated by an old associate of his who recently used Hope-Jones's macabre invention as a means to end his own misery.

"A Precocious Child"

Robert Hope-Jones was born on February 9, 1859 at Hooton Grange, Cheshire. He was a sensitive, delicate, and precocious child, unable to engage in the sports which occupied most children. His life was despaired of, but he was able to escape the rigorous English winters by journeys to the south of France. Turning to music he played occasional services at the Eastham Parish Church at the age of nine. By fourteen he had lost his father and had become voluntary organist at St. Luke's Church, Tranmere, and later at St. John's, Birkenhead. At seventeen he was apprenticed to the electrical and shipbuilding firm of Laird Brothers, working up from workman to the drafting room. Later he became chief engineer of the National Telephone Co. and several patents in telephony bore his name.

This experience was to serve him well, for the principle of low-voltage signal current which made the electric action practical was most widely applied at that time in the telephone. The initial mistake of experimenters with electric action was to overwork the electrical system. Sources of power were expensive and uncertain, and the high voltages in use caused arcing, burned out contacts, and were a fire hazard. Among the expedients devised to deal with this condition was the mercury contact in which a nail was plunged by the key into a trough of mercury—the same principle now applied to our familiar silent light switches. Hope-Jones seems to have realized the inherent impracticality of such an approach and attacked the problem from the other side: using signal currents only and leaving the heavy work to the wind pressure. Unfortunately his first pneumatic system was crude.

First Hope-Jones Organ

The first Hope-Jones organ was that which he rebuilt at St. John's, Birkenhead. Only simple hand tools were available, and the work was done by him and the men and boys of the choir in spare time—which was a greater achievement then than it would be today. Raw materials came from the closest sources such as knive-

ivories which were reworked to become stop tablets. The work began in 1886, and after repeated difficulties had been met it was completed in 1892 and proclaimed to all the world as the greatest advance in the history of organ building. It contained an electrical action and many revolutionary features which Hope-Jones's inimitable showmanship demonstrated with elan. For fullest effect the console was taken out into the churchyard where, amidst the tombstones, he sat playing to an audience within the church itself!

This caused such a sensation that contracts were soon forthcoming to electrify other instruments. The promise of success made it possible for Hope-Jones to marry in 1893. His wife, the former Cecil Laurence, deserves an eternal place in the annals of organ building—not simply as the wife of an organ builder, but for the heroic services she personally performed, for her courage during the parlous times to follow, and for her wonderful loyalty through Hope-Jones's personal vicissitudes.

The Hope-Jones Organ Co. received a contract for Worcester Cathedral in 1895, where the pair spent the last hectic nights before the dedicatory recital. Five minutes before the organ was to be heard for the first time a wind trunk burst under the tremendous pressure which Hope-Jones was beginning to use. Hope-Jones rallied his men and all set struggling to tame the tornado unleashed in the crypt, while Mrs. Hope-Jones served beer and cheese all around.

Trials and Tribulations

Although trouble dogged Hope-Jones's steps continually, the company seemed to have received a substantial number of contracts. They were very seldom profitable, and Hope-Jones was already attracting both admiration and hostility. Instruments were sabotaged, usually by cutting of cables. The organ at St. George's, Hanover Square, was partially destroyed by fire attributed by Hope-Jones's friends to jealous competitors, and charged by the latter to Hope-Jones himself as an escape from the results of bad design. Ernest M. Skinner later quoted Hope-Jones's employees of the time as saying that he had done it to enlist sympathy. Despite financial backing, the company lost money. Mrs. Hope-Jones came forward splendidly as ever and gathered a dozen girls to make small parts in the factory. In 1897 the factory was unionized and amidst threats of violence the police demanded that the workers surrender either their jobs or their membership in the union. Whether Hope-Jones or the law was responsible for this, I do not know. But the company at Battersea was terminated and its properties were hastily and wastefully bundled off to Norwich where Hope-Jones and his key men joined forces with Norman and Beard. This substantial and versatile company was to sub-contract Hope-Jones work under direction, independently of its own product. There was a temperamental incompatibility between the staffs from the outset which eventually brought the association to an end. Hope-Jones retained his optimism and buoyancy throughout these trying times even though he was hounded by both creditors and unpleasant personal rumors. After months of wandering, during which he was almost homeless, another association was formed with a builder at Hereford—Eustace Ingram. It was then that the instrument at Warwick Castle was built, and his friends received charming notes from him on crested stationary!

The reader will understand that Hope-Jones was a soloist who did not easily adjust himself to the discipline of work in concert. This, together with his costly experimentation, made business collaboration hazardous. So by 1905 Ingram also had reason to regret his partnership and to seek means of dissolving it. This was available in a most unfortunate form. Scotland Yard was notified of Hope-Jones's abnormal romantic tendencies and evidence gleaned through a peep-hole in the voicing room was adduced against him. Ingram later said he never expected Hope-Jones to move so fast. With scarcely passage money in his pocket, he and Mrs. Hope-Jones boarded ship for America.

This unhappy incident has been heatedly debated on both sides of the Atlantic. The evidence was never offered in court but its validity was vehemently maintained by both Ingram and G. A. Wales Beard who were explicit with names and places. Another previous partner, equally outraged by his business methods, denied seeing any suspicious conduct in four years of intimate association. Practically all Hope-Jones's friends stood by him. It seems incredible today, but one must remember that this was only ten years after Oscar Wilde was sent to Reading Gaol.

Journey to America

Hope-Jones's arrival in America was characteristically dramatic, though perhaps unintentional. Friends at the Austin Organ Company in Hartford learned by letter from New York that his 'long-formed plans' to visit 'the land of opportunity' had been realized. He had anticipated it for so long, and there seemed no time like the present. So he had come. The inference was that he had come at the invitation of Skinner. There were mixed reactions. An old associate, Carleton C. Michell, was now with the Austin company and realized his power as a competitor. But if he were in the company, what might not happen? Michell also feared the loss of his own authority in tonal matters. A berth was made for him as second vice-president which he relinquished a year later after contributing some improvements to the wind supply, use of imitative solo voices and bland foundation stops, the diaphones which appeared in some Austin organs of the period, and the stop-key console.

Hope-Jones then visited Harrison, an organ builder of Bloomfield, N. Jersey. But it took only one or two contracts to leave Harrison penniless and embittered.

His next connection was with the Skinner Company. Mr. Skinner, in a letter to C. A. Van Buskirk (October 18, 1932), said that he went to England especially to see the Worcester Cathedral organ, but became so disgusted when he heard some of Hope-Jones's other instruments that he did not even visit Worcester. But Hope-Jones's reputation had become so great subsequently that Skinner believed him to be an artistic success although a commercial failure. And setting aside his earlier conclusions, he took on Hope-Jones. The association lasted for fifteen months, during several of which Hope-Jones was confined to his home with rheumatic fever.

The episode with Skinner was filled with comedy and exasperation, as anyone familiar with the two person-

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TONAL DESIGN OF THEATRE ORGAN

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size—20 ranks—we arrive at this scheme as a fair example of balanced design:

Chamber	Rank	Wind Pressure (inches)	Borrowed At:	Number of pipes:
S	Solo Tibia Clausa	15	16′-8′-4′	85
M	Tibia Clausa	10	Tc 16′-8′-4′-2 2/3′-2′	85
M	Diaphonic Diapason	15	16′-8 -4′	85
M	Horn Diapason	10	Tc 16′-8′-4′-2 2/3′-2′	97
M	Concert Flute	10	16′-8′-4′-2 2/3′-2′-1 3/5′	97
M	Flute Celeste	10	Tc 8′-4′	61
M	Salicional	10	Tc 16′-8′-4′-2 2/3′-2′	85
M	Voix Celeste	10	Tc 16′-8′-4′	73
S	Violin	10	16′-8′-4′	85
S	Violin Celeste	10	Tc 16′-8′-4′	73
S	Tuba Sonora	15	16′-8′-4′	85
S	Trumpet	10	Tc 16′-8′-4′	73
S	English Post Horn	15	Tc 16′-8′	61
M	Oboe Horn	10	8′-4′	73
S	Saxophone	10	Tc 16′-8′-4′	73
M	Clarinet	10	16′-8′	73
S	Cor Anglais	10	Tc 16′-8′	61
S	Musette	10	Tc 16′-8′	61
S	Solo Vox Humana	10	Tc 16′-8′-4′	73
M	Vox Humana	6	Tc 16′-8′-4′	73

Percussions:

M: Chrysoglott and Vibraphone; set of traps and effects.[1]
S: Chimes, Xylophone, Glockenspiel and Orch. Bells, Sleigh Bells, Marimba and Harp.
Unenclosed: Piano & Mandolin, Master Xylophone.

Console Layout

One matter yet remains: that of the organization of manuals and registers at the console. The Wurlitzer scheme, from bottom manual to top, was as follows:

I. *Accompaniment*—providing an equipment of stops, principally at 8′ and 4′ pitch, for accompanimental purposes. The drums and traps play exclusively from this manual and the pedal. A number of solo registers at 8′ pitch appear on the second touch.

II. *Great*—the ensemble manual, commanding the entire tonal contents of the organ, and useful for solo or accompanimental purposes as well. A wide selection of stops appears at 16′, 8′, 4′, 2′ and mutation pitches; also the full complement of tonal percussions.

III. *Bombarde*—playing the dominating solo voices of the instrument at 16′, 8′, and 4′ pitch.

IV. *Solo*—providing a collection of the solo possibilities of the organ, chiefly at 8′ pitch, as well as a group of percussions.

V. *Pedal*—equipped with a group of appropriate 16′ and 8′ stops useful in playing the bass line of a composition, and also operates exclusively the Cymbals, Bass Drum, and Kettle Drum on either first or second touch.

In a three-manual instrument the Bombarde would be omitted, and in a two-manual organ the Solo would also be left out, the Great, however, taking its name. Thus a two-manual's keyboards are named Accompaniment and Solo, though the Solo is really more like a Great.

As must be obvious, couplers are of little use in an instrument in which virtually every voice plays at several pitches on each manual and in the pedal, and so even in large theatre organs few of them are really needed except for sheer playing convenience.

And so we come to the end of our discussion. We have traced the development of the theatre organ, defined and classified its tonal equipment, and seen how its resources are organized for action.

The writer hopes that this brief treatment will be of use to designers of unit instruments and will aid them in achieving well-organized tonal schemes. The importance of such organizations cannot be over-estimated. On them depends whether an organ will easily do what its player wants it to do, or whether it will be an individualist with a one-track mind, suitable for specialized use only and constantly frustrating the attempts of an organist to use it effectively in the performance of all types of music.

[1] The writer looks with disfavor on the usual practice of locating all the non-tonal percussions in the Solo chambers. After all, these stops are used chiefly with the accompanimental part in playing and are more easily controlled if located in the same swellbox as the accompanimental flutes, strings, etc.

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(*from page 7*)

alities might expect. Hope-Jones was hired as a salesman according to Mr. Skinner, but that title could scarcely have described Hope-Jones's estimate of himself. One incident will illustrate. Skinner was chosen to build the organ at St. John's Cathedral, New York, but on the understanding that Hope-Jones would have no part in the project. Technicalities held up delivery to Skinner of the contract, but he wired the good news to the factory and then took the train to Boston. When he arrived the next day he read in the papers that the contract had been given to the Skinner Company because of the admiration of the cathedral authorities for the work of Hope-Jones. Skinner was not willing to concede any virtue whatever, and very little originality to Hope-Jones's work. According to him the Skinner magnet and electric action were taken over by Hope-Jones who claimed them for his own, and the suitable bass was invented by Skinner to comply with one of Hope-Jones's contracts.

Hope-Jones brought in three contracts while with Skinner. The last was for Park Church, Elmira, N. Y. and with it, the curtain goes up on the real story of the Hope-Jones organ, and of his own colorful, fascinating and highly controversial career in the United States.

(*To be continued*)