

BALLARAT'S COMPTON

A Triumph After Years of Work !

Compiled by Geoffrey Paterson

from the *Opening Night Program* booklet and an article by Eric Wicks in *VOX* (Journal of TOSA Victoria).

Ballarat, Victoria, is roughly sixty miles west of Melbourne, founded on some of the richest gold mining country in Australia. It has a wonderful climate for growing flowers, begonias in particular, and has been a musical center for the area since the 1860s.

In 1875 an opera house opened, built at a cost of £12,000 for Sir William Clark, one of Victoria's wealthy pastoralists. It was designed by architect George Brown in the traditional nineteenth century European style and opened as the Academy of

Music, later becoming Her Majesty's Theatre.

Ross Thorne in his book *Theatres of Australia* said "This is the oldest operating theatre in Australia. Historically and architecturally speaking, it is probably the most significant theatre in Australia today." While the facade remains in cement-rendered Victorian decorative style, the interior has been modified and a second tier added, but the theatre remains unique and close to its original conception.

Since 1879 it has been the home of the Royal South Street Society and is

the scene of their annual music competition, the Eisteddfod. The society was formed as a young men's debating society; they held their first musical competition in 1891 for voice and pianoforte, drawing 260 competitors. Today more than 30,000 participants appear in the ten-week competitions, with prizes and trophies totalling over \$20,000 (Australian). The Eisteddfod is the largest and most famous in Australia and since 1971 has included an electronic organ section, through the encouragement of the Ballarat Theatre Organ Society, featuring a

Facade of Memorial Theatre, Ballarat.





Hubert Selby and John Atwell, artists on opening night, June 12, 1982.



Interior of the 107-year-old Memorial Theatre, as seen from the stage.

special prize for the competitor with the best theatre organ potential.

The Ballarat Theatre Organ Society was formed in 1970 as an autonomous chapter of the Theatre Organ Society of Australia, Victoria Division. A mere five weeks after the founding meeting the society held its first concert with English organist Vic Hammett presiding. Fundraising events were immediately commenced toward the purchase of a theatre pipe organ, through concerts, social evenings and other functions. With an anonymous donation of \$2000 to add to their funds, the society was able to purchase an English Compton organ from the estate of the late Bill Witt, a

member of TOSA Melbourne, who had shipped it from England in 1971.

A wonderfully successful series of outdoor concerts was held for a period of 11 years from 1971 through 1981, attracting crowds of up to 1400 people and raising nearly \$20,000 in total. These were claimed to be the largest outdoor concerts in Australia, attracting people from various parts of Victoria and interstate. They were held at various locations around Ballarat thanks to a portable sound-shell specially made to fold and fit on a trailer. Called "Organ Music in a Country Garden," "Organ Music at the Old Mill" and, in later years, "Organ Music for the People," these concerts featured well-known theatre organists supported by talented Ballarat artists, including winners of organ sections at the local Eisteddfod.

To stimulate local interest in organ music, a 15-minute "Organ Spot" with notes and comments regarding various theatre organists, by a Ballarat member, was conducted on a weekly basis over the local radio station for a period of seven months.

Funds have come from many other sources, including further anonymous donations, and monies gratefully received from the Victoria Division of TOSA and from the Victoria government.

When the organ was purchased, an agreement was reached with the Royal South Street Society, which had purchased Her Majesty's Theatre in 1965. It seemed the logical place to house Ballarat's first theatre organ, and the first theatre organ installation in any provincial Australian city.

The instrument was originally a 3/6 (7r) Compton installed in the Ritz

Console on lift at stage level, taken from right balcony.



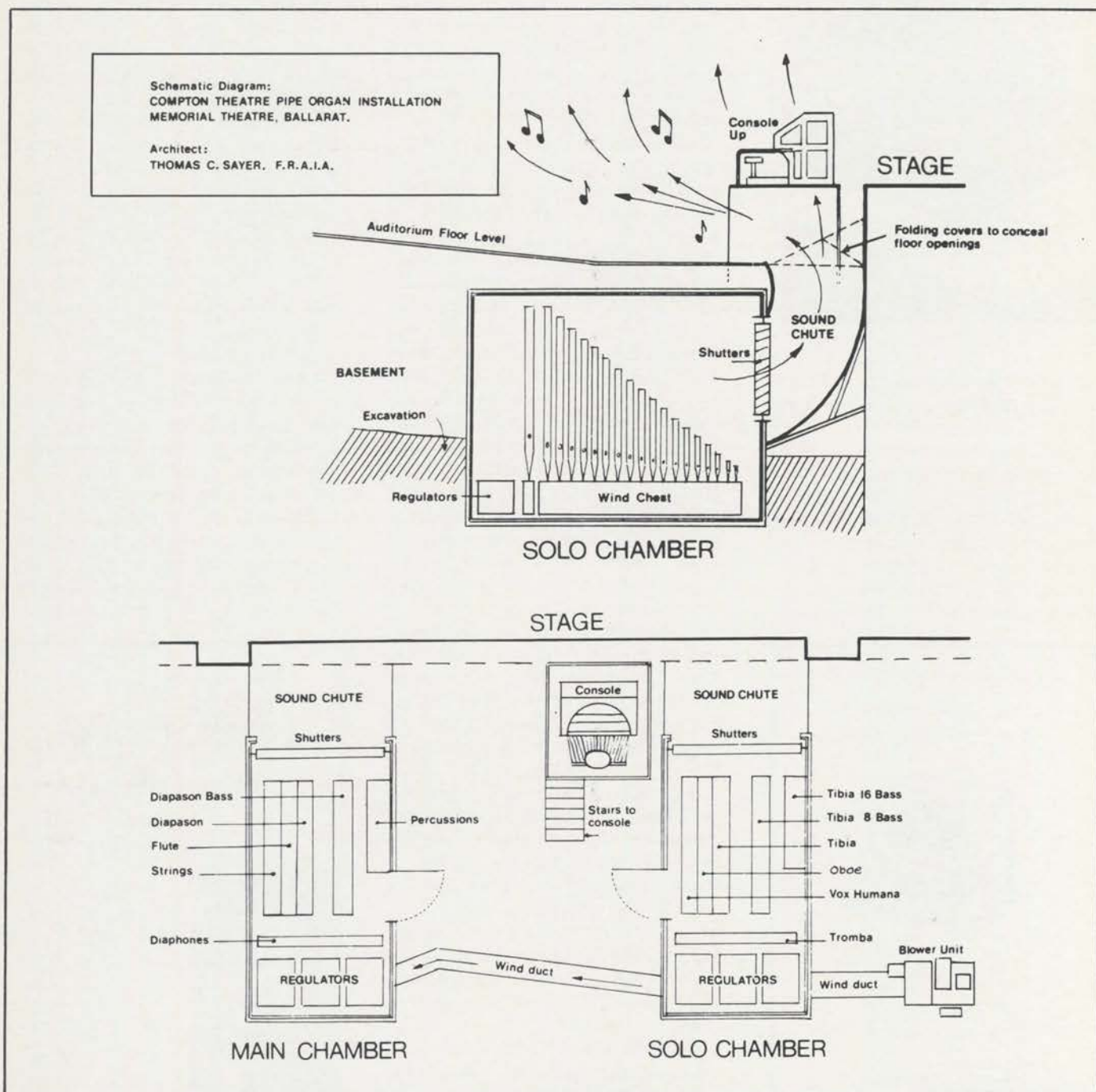
(later ABC) Cinema, Warrington, Lancashire, built by Union Cinemas and opened on August 23, 1937. Though sources differ as to whether it was Harold Ramsay or Alex Taylor who opened the organ, it was played in its heyday by many well-known English organists including Ramsay, Reginald Porter-Brown, Reginald Dixon, George Blackmore and Hubert Selby. The instrument was factory number 379 and is dated on the organ itself 21 May, 1937. The instrument was originally equipped with an illuminated "fruit jelly" surround and one of Compton's unique Melo-

tone units, both of which have since been removed.

Specifications which were suggested by English organist David Shepherd, and added to and detailed by John Atwell, were adopted, and organ builder George Stephens was appointed overseer of the project. Complete plans and details of the whole project were prepared and supervised by the late Tom Sayer.

After several conferences with experts, including visiting English organists, it was decided to install the organ in a unique arrangement of "underground" chambers. The the-

atre was not built to house an organ, and it was impossible to infringe upon the large stage area with special built-in chambers. Fortunately, however, there happened to be a large basement area below the stage front. Therefore it was decided to locate the chambers and other equipment in the basement directly in front of the stage. It was also necessary to build sound chutes to carry the sound from the brick and concrete chambers to the theatre. This in itself is quite unusual, as there are very few theatres in the world that have had chambers built in this position. Most were, and are, situated to





David Johnston tries the Howard seat (modified).

each side of the proscenium, under or upon the stage itself, or on a sub-floor above the proscenium.

As the sound chute openings are directly under the orchestra area, special steel frames and folding timber covers had to be made so that the chutes and console pit can be covered when the orchestra is using the area. To obtain the desired ceiling height of 14 feet in the chambers, the basement

had to be excavated a further six feet.

Another problem was to find a lift which would raise the console from the basement to stage level, a distance of approximately 14 feet. It was decided to use a stationary hydraulic fork lift with a special reconstructed steel frame platform for the console. Access to the console is from the basement, and the lift can be operated from there or from the console.

The design of the understage chambers was the "brain-child" of retired architect Tom Sayer, who made great personal sacrifices to design and supervise a most unusual theatre organ installation. Tom was a great friend of all, and we were all saddened by the fact that Tom left this life on April 28, 1982, the day the first sound was heard from the instrument he had nurtured for so many years.

The Ballarat Theatre Organ Society presented a gala Festival of Music to officially open the Compton on Saturday and Sunday, June 12 and 13, 1982.

A trumpet fanfare hushed the audience of 250 which had gathered from across the continent for the opening concert. Then came the supreme moment as sound filled the theatre, and Hubert Selby brought the white and gold decorated console into view. Now a resident of Perth, Western Australia, he has been playing organ since he was 13. Classical training at Rochester Cathedral and theatre organ study with the great Sidney Torch led him to a career during which he played most of the theatre organs in England on tour with one of the major circuits or as solo organist for the BBC. Founder of the Cinema Organ Society in Great Britain, and for many years its president, Selby was a most appropriate choice to be first in concert on the Ballarat Compton, having played it in its original Ritz, Warrington installation. His program, built on tunes of the thirties and forties, was designed to let the audience hear the full range of the instrument, and included a tribute to Harold Ramsay, who drew up the original specification. Selby was joined by trumpeter Geoffrey Smith and saxophonist Barry Currie in a selection which proved the Compton to be a beautiful accompaniment instrument.

After the interval, Mayor Alf Hancock of Ballarat officially opened the organ, and John Atwell took over the

console for the remainder of the evening. Showing the Compton's ability to adapt to different musical styles, he accompanied soprano Helen Burnham in four songs which made up what for many was the most delightful portion of the evening's program. Atwell, a Ph.D. and research scientist by profession, is a versatile organist at home in both the classical and theatre idioms. Currently accompanist and arranger for the hundred-voice Maroonah Singers, he rendered considerable assistance with his valuable advice regarding the specification of the Compton. The different approaches to registration by Selby and Atwell heightened the audience's enjoyment and interest, of course, as did John's tour of the organ's pipe-work and kitchen.

The value and importance of being able to raise and lower the console was most apparent, enabling the organist to present his solos in full view of his audience but removing the distraction of console lights and swinging legs from the work of a soloist.

The end to a wonderful opening night came with a duet by Hubert and John playing "My Way." Ballarat's Compton was at last a reality.

It was unusual on opening night to see an American Howard seat allied to an English Compton console, and on which the two organists appeared to be perched somewhat uncomfortably. One of the virtues claimed for the Howard seat had been eliminated because the two halves were bolted together and didn't move with the organist's legs as he pedalled, although that probably also eliminated one of

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BALLARAT'S COMPTON STOP LIST

PEDAL

Acoustic Bass	32
Trombone	16
Diaphone	16
Tibia Bass	16
Bourdon	16
Tromba	8
Diapason	8
Tibia	8
Strings	8
Flute	8
Bass Drum Tap F	
Bass Drum Tap P	
Drum Roll	
Snare Drum Roll	
Cymbal Tap	
Cymbal Roll	
Cymbal Crash	
Traps to 2nd Touch	
Accomp. to Pedal	
Great to Pedal	
Solo to Pedal	

EFFECTS TOE PISTONS

Siren	
Auto	
Firebell	
Cymbal Crash	
Snare Drum - 2nd Grand Crash	
Train Whistle	
Police Whistle	
Birds	
Cymbal Roll	

ACCOMPANIMENT

Tromba	8
Diapason	8
Tibia	8
Clarinet	8
Oboe	8
Strings	8
Vox Humana	8
Flute	8
Tromba	4
Octave	4
Tibia	4
Strings	4
Vox Humana	4
Flute	4
Twelfth	2½
Flautina	2
Chrysoglott	
Snare Drum	
Castanets	
Tambourine	
Block	
Sleigh Bells	
Tom Tom	
Sand Block	
Octave Coupler	

TREMULANTS

Tibia	
Diapason	
Tromba, Oboe	
Vox Humana	
Main	

GREAT

Tromba	16
Diaphone	16
Tibia	16
Clarinet TC	16
Strings TC	16
Vox Humana TC	16
Tromba	8
Diapason	8
Tibia	8
Clarinet	8
Oboe	8
Strings	8
Vox Humana	8
Flute	8
Tromba	4
Octave	4
Tibia	4
Strings	4
Flute	4
Tibia Twelfth	2½
Flute Twelfth	2½
Piccolo	2
Fifteenth	2
Flautino	2
Tierce	1½
Xylophone	4
Glockenspiel	4
Orchestra Bells	4
Chimes	4
Sub Octave	
Octave	
Solo to Great	16
Solo to Great	8
Solo to Great Pizz.	8

SOLO

Tromba	16
Diapason	16
Tibia	16
Clarinet TC	16
Tromba	8
Diapason	8
Tibia	8
Clarinet	8
Oboe	8
Strings	8
Vox Humana	8
Tromba	4
Tibia	4
Tibia Twelfth	2½
Piccolo	2
Xylophone	4
Glockenspiel	4
Orchestra Bells	4
Chimes	4
Sub Octave	
Octave	
Unison Off	
ACCOMPANIMENT	
2nd TOUCH	
Tromba	8
Diapason	8
Tibia	4
Chimes	
Great to Accomp.	4
Solo to Accomp.	8
EFFECTS TABS	
Aeroplane	
Surf	

the seat's alleged vices.

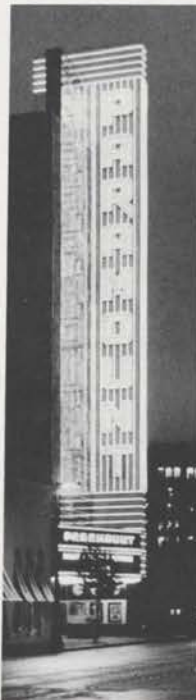
However, for Sunday afternoon's concerts, Cinema North, Melbourne, had come to the rescue with its Christie organ bench, on which Cyril Pearl looked far more comfortable as he rose into view for a happy hour of music played in his popular rhythmic style. A natural musician, completely self-taught, Cyril began as a trombonist with a school band, turned to piano and began a long career playing with dance bands throughout Melbourne and suburbs. His jovial personality and toe-tapping rhythm make him a favorite with audiences everywhere. To please the eye during his concert, he accompanied breaks featuring the girls of the Ballarat Calisthenics Club.

After the interval, David Johnston entertained with a bright program which included a humorous version of the late Vic Hammett's interpretation of "The Village Band." David then took the audience, many of whom were not at opening night, on a tour of the organ. Then came a Chaplin silent, *The Skating Rink*, to show the organ's original purpose, a sing-along, a tribute to the late Tom Sayer with two songs he composed, "Somehow, Sometime, Somewhere," and

"Have a Nice Day." A ballet interlude by the Carol Oliver School completed the afternoon. Johnston has been musical director at Melbourne's Naughty Nineties Music Hall for many years, and is well known in Ballarat as a participant in the society's outdoor concerts and as an adjudica-

tor for the organ sections of the Eisteddfod. As one of the most popular organists in Australia today, his inclusion on the program was a natural choice.

A comment heard on all sides was the wonderful quality of sound that filled the theatre, and the way all the



GEORGE WRIGHT PARAMOUNT ORGAN PREMIERE

Recorded *live* in concert on November 7, 1981, on the occasion of the inaugural of the Wurlitzer pipe organ of the Paramount Theatre of the Performing Arts, Oakland, California, coinciding with the 50th Anniversary of the opening of the theatre.

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ranks came together, blending into a harmonious whole rather than a collection of individual ranks. It was noticeable also that the sound was fine in all parts of the theatre, from the stalls to the "gods." The organists were delighted with the sound at the console. The famous American organist Ashley Miller, who played in concert on August 22, has said: "I haven't played that many Comptons, but the installation at Ballarat was the best one I've played yet."

Many had good reason to be happy on opening night. George Blackman, founding president of the Ballarat Theatre Organ Society, had that night seen and heard the Compton, the purchase of which he negotiated, rise from the pit making beautiful sounds. "This is the happiest night of my life," he said. Warwick Kittson, current Ballarat TOS president, said: "It's been a long time, and we've come a long way since our society was formed."

The past ten years have seen constant work and planning, hundreds of hours spent building chambers and



Cyril Pearl at the Compton on Sunday afternoon, June 13, 1982.

overhauling the organ, and of course that other basic essential of the enterprise — raising the money. To all members of the Ballarat TOS go top marks for having the persistence, zeal and determination to see through such a great project. The addition of

the Ballarat Compton, located between Melbourne and Adelaide, to a circuit which includes organs in Sydney, Brisbane and Perth, should make Australian tours for overseas artists a practical, and attractive, possibility. □

GLOCKENSPIEL CELESTE

by Leon Berry

The term "Celeste" is generally thought of as meaning "sharp." I would like to point out that while the effect of a celeste is obtained by tuning one rank of pipes sharp of another, the name itself means "Heavenly," and also that other names have been applied, such as "Unda Maris," which literally means "Waves of the Ocean." At this point I can't resist telling about the time the Hub Rink, where I worked, bought the Wurlitzer from the Bailey Theatre in Buffalo, parts of which were subsequently used to augment the rink organ. Several of the skaters who had become organ "nuts" went along to help dismantle and move the instrument. While one young man was removing a bottom-board from the main chest he noticed the round tag which Wurlitzer always used at this location to identify the cable, and thinking it was an inspection tag remarked, "Unda Maris, what a nice name! I wonder if she still works at the factory?"

The effect produced by tuning a pipe slightly sharp of another is a

"beat," or tremulant, and a sort of three dimensional feeling or depth is achieved. "Increased brilliance" could be said to describe the upper register.

After some preliminary experiments, I tuned a set of Glockenspiels sharp of another set and added them to the organ in my home, and consider the results most gratifying. The set which is tuned sharp is thirty notes beginning at tenor C. Using a Conn Stroboc tuner, I set it sharp enough of A-440 to produce a beat of 4 cps at this lowest note, which is on the slow side for a tremulant but a pleasant undulation nevertheless. Of course, the beat increases in speed with each note until it doubles at each octave, and at 16 cps is no longer an undulation, but a shimmer. If the bells did extend higher than this, I doubt it would be reasonable to continue the tuning on this plan. However, as they follow the tempered scale they are usable alone as well as together with the other set, which incidentally is thirty-seven notes from tenor C.

A Glockenspiel bar may be raised

in pitch by grinding the end of it. It may be lowered by grinding some of the metal away at the middle of the bar on the underneath side. As it can only be checked for accuracy at intervals, it is advisable to practice on a few spare bars to get the feel of it first. Raising the pitch seemed to require more grinding than lowering it, as I recall.

Many tuners, especially on church organs, do not tune a celeste rank to a tempered scale, but adjust each pipe to produce the desired beat with the other rank, which is tempered. Strings, such as a *Viole d'Orchestre*, are the ranks most commonly matched with a celeste rank. A *Dulciana* is generally paired with an *Unda Maris*. However, *Gemshorns* and *Flutes* are often provided with celeste ranks. The name "Harp Celesta" is frequently applied to an organ percussion essentially the same as a "Chrysoglott," but in this case "Celesta" in no way implies that anything is tuned sharp, but does allude to the Heavens. "Chrysoglott," by the way, means "Golden Voice." □