FATHER OF THE THEATRE ORGAN

The Remarkable Story of Robert Hope-Jones

. . . *Alexander Turner, SSB*

Continuing the history of the man who took the organ out of the category of clumsy gadgetry and made it workable in the manner of the modern dial telephone system with the flexibility and playing ease required by the music for the theatre.

Part Two

THE PARK CHURCH organ is said to have been the first to have a Hope-Jones console. It was probably the first to have a suitable bass in this country, for the design of which E. M. Skinner claimed credit since Hope-Jones, who had included it in the specifications, was prevented by illness at the time from working out the details. But the greatest importance of the Park Church contract was that it opened the door for the famous Hope-Jones Electric Organ Company of Elmira and New York, organized with local capital and the support of a luminous directorate which included Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain), James (Diamond Jim) Brady, J. Sloat Fassett, Theodore N. Vail of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, John B. Stanchfield, and E. E. Loomis, then vice-president of the Lackawanna Railroad. This was in February, 1907. The factory was in rented quarters in Elmira with the executive offices in New York City.

Hope-Jones' English organs had been distinguished by their small groups of massive stops, and by their solo voices. He had also developed the stops which would become associated with the theatre organ before coming to this country: the keen strings, Kinura, leathered lips and the Tibia family which numbered—in addition to Clausa—Mollis, Dura and Plena. His pedal divisions were usually extended.

In common with the other builders of the time—and those they served—Hope-Jones had a taste for program music, obvious imitations and simple melodies with accompaniment. Composers devoted themselves to "musical impressions" of everything from clock stores to battles, with a heavy emphasis on the very loud, the elusively soft, and tonal qualities which vied for the listener's attention with the music itself. Characters as antagonistic as E. M. Skinner and George Ashdown Audsley held a primary interest in individual stops of pleasant sound. Even so erudite and respectable a figure as Audsley might inveigh against "ear-tickling" stops. But he would expatiate no less enthusiastically on what might be done with a flute and a clarinet on the same manual, enclosed in separate chambers in accordance with his system of "compound flexibility and expression." In fact the entire point of this palpably impractical system was to facilitate combinations and contrasts of tone color which the unit system achieved directly, simply, and economically.

Basis of Theatre Organ

From the romantic organ, Hope-Jones developed the orchestral organ. That in turn became the basis of all theatre organ design. And by "theatre organ" one means, of course, an instrument of expressive orchestral stops, flexibly controlled, and not simply a conventional church organ installed in a theatre. The first organ to have an "orchestral" instead of a "choir" manual was that in the First Presbyterian Church in Montclair, New Jersey, an Austin designed by Hope-Jones and voiced by Michell. Later it was moved to the Broadway Theatre, New York.

Even as the romantic organ progressed the old manual divisions were becoming anomalous. All divisions were enclosed, hence all were "swell" organs. All were used at times for accompaniment, so the "choir" ceased to monopolize that office—and it was always a rather meaningless term in this country. Likewise, solos were played on all manuals with accompaniments on others. The division which had been reserved for a few loudest blasts was no longer any more of a solo organ than the great, for example, or the swell.

The manuals came to represent functions of the total resources of the organ. Great and choir became more closely associated, with common or overlapping elements, enclosed together. So also were the swell and solo. Suitable pedal would be in each chamber. Thus two manuals controlled each group of stops in varying combinations which were enclosed in one expression chamber. Another two manuals controlled the balance, which were complementary to the first group, and independently expressive.

Such was the effect of Hope-Jones' thinking on the standard organ. In time new groupings appeared with foundations associated (Phonon Diapason, Tibia and possibly Tuba) in one chamber played by Great and Solo, while the stops normally found on the Swell would be in another, and a third might contain the reeds.

Borrowing was an obvious and old device when Hope-Jones used it, having been applied even to tracker organs. Development of the electric action made it practical, while the tonal composition of Hope-Jones' organs lent themselves especially well to it. Borrowing was a convenience to the organist. The standard argument was "how many times have you wanted to use the swell Salicional on the pedal without crippling the swell manual?" Very few organists were quite ignorant enough to believe themselves deceived when they were given such conveniences. But borrowing did cost something and a certain amount of it would equal the cost of more stops. What made unification justifiable in the case of the Hope-Jones organ was the great size of the pipes and chests, duplication of which would have been prohibitively expensive both in cost and in space, and the extent to which he carried it.

With the concentration on a smaller group of basic stops and their unification across manuals, the great, choir and swell "organs" lost their identity in a community of stops distributed functionally to the manuals where they would

be useful. Together with the new effectiveness of structurally integrated organ chambers and their heavy shutters, this made it possible to use fixed tone colors in many ways where their limited dynamic range would have otherwise prevented. Hope-Jones pointed out that a Tuba on the Ocean Grove organ could be sufficiently subdued to accompany a soft string.

The independence of the individual stops and the compound expression (to borrow Audsley's term) which was peculiar to the unit system produced a new instrument called the Unit Orchestra. In its complete form its foundations, strings, wood-winds, and brass were each separately enclosed in their own chambers and played on various manuals as required. The Unit Orchestra was a new instrument with its own proper application and criteria. It was not another edition of the standard organ intended to do what the older instrument had done two hundred years previously. Anyone who specializes in the keyboard music of Bach would inevitably view the piano as an instrument far inferior to the harpsichord. But for an executant of Brahms and Tchaikovsky the values would be reversed. In appraising the Unit Orchestra today it is only fair to remember what it was, what it was intended to do, and how successfully it did so. The matter of comparative esthetics is another question.

The Unit Orchestra found an immediate and perfect application in the nascent moving picture theatre. Here the conventional manual names ceased to have any meaning whatever and at the outset Hope-Jones abandoned them in favor of an "accompaniment" and "solo" supplemented by a great as the middle of three manuals and an "orchestral" —now principally for strings—at the bottom or a bombard at the top, of four. Since the entire organ emulated orchestral choirs the word orchestral was soon dropped as a manual name. In this scheme the solo manual was what its name implied, having characteristic stops of all kinds together with heavy reeds when there was no bombard. But it was no longer reserved for a few loud stops.

So the Unit Orchestra as it evolved under Hope-Jones' hand was distinguished from its ecclesiastical predecessor by (1) the type and voicing of its stops, (2) the way in which they were enclosed, (3) the way in which they were assigned to the manuals, and (4) the names and functions of the manuals. It is sad to have to record that this creative impulse terminated so far as the name Hope-Jones is concerned with the man himself. There was more and bigger hokum—several varieties of bird whistles, ditto of grand crashes, train whistles, aeroplane propellors. The one who smoothed off the rough edges of the first theatre organ, who gave it rounded and slick contours was not Hope-Jones' legal heir but his close friend and co-worker, Robert Pier Elliot, eventually General Manager of the W. W. Kimball Company in Chicago, Illinois, and builder of some of the country's finest organs in theatres. That is another story which has long deserved telling. It too, was sadly obscured by what Mr. Thompson-Allen calls the "high pressure commercialsim and salesmanship" of less sincere businessmen.

But it all began at Elmira where Hope-Jones had his own factory and a free hand. He could build as he wished. It was here that unification became a system rather than a haphazard pillage of one division of the organ by another. Skinner later claimed that Hope-Jones had simply imitated two extended stops, a Tuba and a Philomela, which Skinner had installed in the Hutchings organ at the Second Congregational Church, New Britain, Connecticut. Casson claimed precedence for unification and about every other device later identified with the Hope-Jones name and actually there was very little new under the sun, even then. A century before the Abbe Vogler had proposed simplifying the organ to four unified stops—an advance which Hope-Jones never achieved!

No more beautiful examples of the craft were ever built than those which came from Elmira. And though none would be considered large today, their materials, workmanship and scale were all monumental. Each one attested in its own way to a love and devotion for the organ which could regard nothing as too fine to incorporate in it.

Flair for the Dramatic

The same qualities which made Hope-Jones such an attractive figure—his charming eccentricities and superbly merchandized enthusiasms—are clearly evident in his work. Some of his specifications are quite inexplicable except by reference to his personality. He was abnormally preoccupied with details, sometimes to the detriment of the whole, and loved extremes as only a creature of the romantic age could. Hence his flair for the dramatic, which expressed itself in very large and very small scales with sounds correspondingly extreme, thicker and more effective expression chambers, for high wind pressures and great wind chests beyond anything built today, for methods of generating greater quantities of acoustic energy (the Diaphones), and for multiplex touches.

To visualize his full impact one should recall that American organ building was dominated in his time by German traditions with all their stalwart virtues and undeviating procedures. The console had pull knobs with globular ebony ends inlaid with ivory discs, laid out true and square in horizontal and vertical rows. From ten to forty stops, an organ specification was predictable to a tolerance of two stops, whoever built it. The organs coming from Elmira represented a very different approach which would either be liked or disliked, but intensely, in either case. Looking back it is natural to think of most developments which we associate with the conventional ways and methods of a decade later as having originated, almost as a matter of course, with Hope-Jones. Or at least one would think of him as the crest of that ground swell which was moving a few builders to exploit the new possibilities of a perfected electro-pneumatic machine and the increased wind pressures now at their disposal. So it is interesting to study his instruments and see just where he stood in relation to his own day and to that new day which he really ushered in.

Hope-Jones was able to leave his work in several very fine buildings. One of these was Robert D. Kohn's *avant-garde* Ethical Culture Auditorium, New York, the modernization of which organ it was my honor to supervise in 1935. Another was Claude Bragdon's distinguished First Universalist Church in Rochester. When the American organ case had degenerated to a flat row of pipes on a shelf, Hope-Jones was building real and becoming examples of that art. (Some reader may be able to correct me if they were only coincidental with his organs.)

And a third splendid building was the Hanson Place Baptist, Brooklyn, a Greek revival edifice about a century old, where the instrument is fortunately well preserved. Behind its English style organ case are the usual Hope-Jones concrete chambers with heavy shutters. Before it is a Hope-Jones console which is certainly the most flexible and efficient to use and the most contemporary in appearance even today. At the time it was built most of the large builders had already introduced pneumatic swell motors, register crescendo pedals and either ventil or pitman chests. This organ had no register crescendo pedal and it was necessary to build up to full organ on pistons. It had mechanical shutter action so that the great weight of Hope-Jones' heavy shutters were moved by calf-power! Within the organ there was, of all things, a slider chest for two string ranks which are played on only one manual. Why?

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Sliders were all but obsolete when this organ was built. They were not needed to isolate the stops from others on a common key action, for there were no other straight ranks and a switch would have done as well anyway. And any ulterior objectives which Hope-Jones might have had, such as later brought the renaissance of the slider chest, could have been achieved by chest design which would channel the air in the same way without the defects of slider stop control.

Without the background of Hope-Jones' personal capriciousness and even his love of the unusual, his work is inexplicable. He was a pioneer, but he was also a determined non-conformist. In the case of the crescendo pedal, he maintained that the tone-producing elements of the organ should be individually capable of their own crescendo, as are other instruments. It should not be necessary to add them up for dynamic effect. The concrete chamber with its heavy shutters was the answer. He held to this position consistently except in his largest instruments and the limited number of stops in his organs made a register crescendo more rough than in the standard organ. But that never solved the problem of getting the stops on in sequence while playing with both hands, as every organist must, time and again, whatever the expressive powers of individual stops! Lack of a crescendo pedal could never conceal the inescapable difficulty in building up the registration of a small unit orchestra, for whether by hand or foot, it must be done.

Hope-Jones' methods of enclosure were similarly mystifying until one perceives their underlying personal motives. It is amost self-evident that an expression chamber or a manual is effective to the extent that it can be used, and that the better stops are distributed in several chambers, the more flexible they will be according to Hope-Jones' own philosophy. So when we find only one or two stops given a private expression chamber and a fourth manual (Ethical Culture, N. Y., St. Johns, St. Paul, Minn.) it can only be understood as a dramatic gesture, a way of saying "Look and see how important these stops are; they have an expression all to themselves and can be played from their own manual!" To play a tuba solo against the rest of the organ as an accompaniment did not require such expense as that.

Improvisation . . .

To the Editor:

I believe I can shed further light on the exciting announcement in your Fall, 1955, issue, concerning the Quinby Orgyphone Laboratory's startling new organ. By a fortunate coincidence I was passing through South Insomnia on a business trip to Ho Ho Kus, New Jersey, at the time the prototype instrument was being voiced.

The instrument is an ingenious combination of all the bad features of pipe and electronic organs. It is, in reality, a compact pipe organ tuned as closely as possible like an electronic, and with the various stops cased in simulated radio speaker enclosures. The effect is amazing.

During my brief visit to the laboratory I was able to watch the forming of the Choir organ's 8′ Horribellow stop. This is an interesting hybrid, the resonators being of wood, triangular in shape and with leatherette-covered tongues. The resonators are capped with conical, spotted-metal hats which, I understand, are being furnished quite economically by the Continental Can Company. The stop is a realistic imitative voice very close to that of the pastoral Guernsey, though with overtones of the Holstein in the higher registers.

One stop which is not listed in the advertisement but available in the Swell organ is a most delightful two-rank celeste consisting of a 4′ Gaboon and a 3′ Spits Flute. The combination produces a sharp, almost metallic beating that blends well with the 16′ Vulgaria in the Great organ.

A unique feature of the laboratory, which certainly points up the thoroughness with which Mr. Quinby conducts his operation, is the laboratory chimney which is an actual, working 128′ Sub Tibia Sewera. This, perhaps, was an important contributing factor that influenced the recent decision by the citizens of South Insomnia, formerly called Pleasantville, to rename their town in honor of Mr. Quinby's Orgyphone Laboratory.

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GEORGE WRIGHT

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including the luxuries of English Post Horn, Krumet, Saxophone and other stop names that titillate the ATOE imaginations. Twenty-two ranks may seem to be a lot of organ for a 1220 seat auditorium, but it was installed so as not to be overpowering. This is really an outstanding theatre organ, and to the best of my knowledge is still used regularly.

"The following year came this message: How long can I stay on at this school in a post-graduate capacity? The authorities were more than willing, but I felt the urge to try my wings in the commercial field. I had spent every possible spare moment for five years in diligent practice and work, work, and more work. The big city of San Francisco beckoned. I ended up in Oakland, just across the Bay.

"The fledgling landed in a Chinese night club at another Style D. Wurlitzer. Some of my experiences at the New Shanghai Terrace Bowl on 10th Street and Broadway would defy telling and postal censorship regulations. For one thing, I shared a dressing room with a fan and bubble dancer named Lotus Lee, formerly Lea La Rae, née Hortense Rozelia Estorga. No, that wasn't a magenta spotlight focused on my face during the floor show organ solo—merely the remainder of a teen-age blush The establishment had its good points, including a nightly broadcast over an Oakland radio station, and the invaluable experience playing for shows. The organ had been installed with saliva, Scotch tape and baling wire, so my schoolday installation experience put me in good stead. Never a night went by that I didn't have to clean the generator commutator, recover a pneumatic, fix a cipher. Invariably during the day the rats had increased their population inside the console, so this meant a nightly adjustment of the stopkey contacts. All of this, too, for the magnificent sum of $56.50 weekly, paid by my ever-loving boss Dr. Fong Wan, whose favorite expression was '. . . Hammond awgun go aw, ee, aw. Wuhlitzuh pop