FATHER OF THE THEATRE ORGAN

The Remarkable Story of Robert Hope-Jones

. . . Alexander Turner, SSB

Concluding the story of the trials and tribulations of an inventor beset with the problems of business—but who, in spite of his financial troubles, is revered by all who find pleasure in the sound made possible by his inventive genius.

Of all his work, the Ocean Grove organ most vividly seized the imagination, and it symbolizes in a way, the musical life of the times. It had only thirteen ranks and was smaller than many of Hope-Jones' others. But what it lacked in numbers it more than made up in lung power and could outblow almost anything else. Apparently it was on this basis that it was so often billed as "the largest organ in the world," a title which it bequeathed to many Hope-Jones' organs which later appeared in moving picture theatres.

Ever since Worcester Cathedral, Hope-Jones felt impelled toward a goal of 100-inch wind pressure. It was a simple, round, impressive figure, perfectly calculated to electrify the imagination. It was never realized and a far lower pressure led to the results we have already seen at Worcester. Here again at Ocean Grove the completed scheme was to have such a stop, and here again it was not achieved. But there were a reed and a diapason on 50 inches which were bolted to the chests to keep them from blowing away. Thirty years later when double that pressure was first achieved—in another organ a few miles away on the same Jersey coast—the blower exploded and embedded its rotor blades in the concrete lining of the blower room.

The Ocean Grove organ may not have had 100-inch wind, but its two stops on 50 inches, its valvular diaphone, and its other features were heard round the world. The climax of an afternoon recital was The Storm, in which the organist began by playing a hymn on the Vox Humana, introduced soft dissonances which were then built up to a terrifying roar when, with all stops drawn, he would flounder on as many pedals and keys as possible. This din would gradually subside to disclose the Vox Humana once again, enhanced by the chimes, sounding a hymn as if in a distant church.

No one could remain unmoved. Those who did not make an awe-struck departure would often congregate about the console where Hope-Jones himself was frequently in attendance to explain the latest marvels of scientific organ building, his great head of fuzzy white hair clearly visible from the remotest reaches of the large auditorium. The reader will probably know that the Ocean Grove organ was installed outside the auditorium, in concrete chambers especially built for it twenty feet below the auditorium, and that the sound was brought into the auditorium by concrete-lined ducts. Across the entire front of the building, above the choir, the dummy pipes spread, and picture post cards of this impressive view appeared with a sign spread across underneath, "The Hope-Jones Organ Company."

Ocean Grove proved to be quite a tourist attraction, and the National Association of Organists held several conventions there as some of its leading lights, notably Tali Essen Morgan, were disciples of the master. It is interesting to listen once again to Hope-Jones' own words as he addressed the delegates persuasively, pointing out the advantages of inclined and movable keyboards adjustable for distance from the bench, of his many innovations and objectives. "By using a cement construction I am able to obtain vastly superior results. A cement box when closed with my patent aluminum vacuum shutters with sound-trap joints will reduce the power of any stop many thousand per cent. . . . In organs I build, all pipes are enclosed in cement boxes and thermostats and tiny electric radiators insure temperature at an even level. The organs are in tune whether the church be warm or cold. Is it not obvious that every stop and every organ console should, as a matter of course, be enclosed? For some years I have never built an organ on any other plan and I believe that the plan must eventually be unanimously adopted. . . .

"What would we think of the orchestral conductor who said 'you double basses, trombones, and bass tubas, and so on represent the pedal organ. You must never play with expression. Always play at full power or stop playing altogether. You strings represent the diapason tone and the great organ. You must either play full power or stop altogether. The clarinets, flutes, and oboes will put in the expression'. . . ."

Of his pedal tonal design, he said, "The foundation department contains the Diaphone, Tibias, and two or three Diapasons. The string department contains a couple of mild and robust Gambas, two or three very keen Viole d' Orchestres, a Quintaton Flute for furnishing the deep body tone often heard in strings, a Vox Humana Celeste and perhaps my new Vox Viola. The woodwind department contains the Oboe, Orchestral Oboe, Clarinet, Cor Anglais, Kinura, Concert Flutes, and the like. The brass department contains the Trombones, Trumpets, and Tubas. The percussion department embraces the tympani, drums, triangle, glockenspiel, chimes, and so on. . . .

"The old idea that reeds are unreliable and need frequent tuning must be abandoned. You see thick reed tongues that are once and for all screwed into place and tuned—no tuning wires are provided The reeds stand in tune as well as the flue pipes. . . . Pizzicato touch was first used in the organ I built about the year 1895 for J. Martin White, Balruddery, Dundee, Scotland. . . . It is generally applied to the couplers. Let us draw the Swell-to-Great coupler at pizzicato touch and have a diapason speaking on the Great and an 8′ flute on the Swell. If we now strike a chord on the Great Keys the Swell will also speak at the moment of striking, but will instantly become silent again, leaving the Great Diapason alone. The percussion effect thus produced is at times valuable."

And, in a more prophetic vein, "I frankly declare myself in favor of the bold introduction of the organ into the secular field. With the advantage of these great powers of flexibility and expression that I have described and with the

new range of tone colors now available, there is no reason why the instrument shall not be modified and introduced freely into public halls, theatres, hotels, restaurants, parks and other pleasure resorts. But gentlemen, if we are going to do this we must frankly set on one side all our conservatism—all our traditions born of church use—and we must approach the modified organ as a new instrument. We have heard much said against 'degrading the organ' and 'prostituting our art.' I cannot see the matter in this light. . . . (The) public will have light and popular music and if any of you organists are minded to meet the demand and have an instrument to enable you to do so, I fail to see that you thereby hinder yourselves from performing the highest classical compositions on the church organ when the proper times and seasons arrive."*

In 1912 advertisements were appearing for "well educated young men with high piano or organ technic and exceptional musical temperament, to study and play Hope-Jones Unit Orchestras. Hotel, theatre, and other positions at good remuneration guaranteed. Address: R. Hope-Jones, North Tonawanda, N.Y."

Financial Difficulties

New York headquarters of the Elmira company were in an appropriately unconventional building of Moorish decoration at 41 Union Square. It still exists and deserves a reverent glance at least from any passing organ enthusiast. In 1907 Union Square had not become a focal point for political agitation, but was still a center of fashionable business and the arts. Charles Dana Gibson was setting the type for feminine beauty and few more popular writers were being published than O. Henry whose haunts were a block east on Irving Place. New York's cultural life centered in Stanford White's National Arts Club, a short walk north on Gramercy Park. Here Hope-Jones would entertain his colleagues at dinner with his engaging discussions of his work, absent-mindedly consuming all the rolls and illustrating his discussion with a blue pencil on a legal sized envelope. These were always with him for sketching his inventions.

At home in Elmira he worked indefatigably on the new devices which emanated from his fertile mind. Inspiration would often strike in the middle of the night and he would bolt off to the factory drafting room, there to wait impatiently until the men arrived and the device could be put into instant production and become part of any organ then in progress. Only the faithful Mrs. Hope-Jones would prevent his going off without his coat and hat in his haste.

But all the enthusiasm and fertility did not satisfy the creditors. The company had been incorporated in 1907, the year of the great panic, and was undercapitalized from the start. No doubt the directors, after two years of fine showmanship, were beginning to realize that more than ardor was necessary to keep the books balanced. A practical organ man who could interpret them to Hope-Jones and Hope-Jones to them might keep things straight. R. P. Elliot who had organized the Austin Organ Company, and who was its secretary when Hope-Jones arrived, was now returning from a year abroad to head another organ adventure. He was met at the pier in New York by Hope-Jones and rushed directly by train for Elmira. When he returned three days later it was as president of the company. A translator was certainly needed, for Hope-Jones spoke one language and the financial interests, another.

Of Elliot's administration, *The Diapason* could report in its first issue (January 1, 1909): "Since he has been in that office provision has been made for quadrupling the capital of the company and extending its facilities to a point said to be beyond anything existent in the organ world. And in it all the leading subject of this article is that at least a genius and a great man shall come into his own; that the work of Robert Hope-Jones, happy combination of scientist, artist, musician, and inventor, henceforth shall be unhampered by lack of capital or the facilities for expression." By the end of the year the factory employed seventy men and was shipping a new organ every three weeks.

Hard times were still to come. With the executive offices in New York, there was no one in Elmira to hold the reins on Hope-Jones. Conditions did not improve sufficiently and soon there were troubles again, even with the new capitalization.

But during the company's three years many had caught the infectious enthusiasm of its leader—among them, Theodore N. Vail, who as president of American Telephone and Telegraph Company and a director of the organ company, had some reason to understand the dim financial prospects. Nevertheless, he saw an opportunity to serve a personal objective in such a fascinating, idealistic and esthetic enterprise with its worthy religious associations. His native village of Brandon, Vermont, needed an industry to occupy its townsfolk, mostly farmers, during the long and unproductive New England winters. What better or more appropriate industry could it have than the organ company? He summoned Hope-Jones and Elliot to his home and presented the plan to them. He would underwrite the company personally and it could carry out its work unhampered by fiscal worries. Brandon would have a worthy industry and its name would be heard throughout the world wherever its fine products were known. After dinner Hope-Jones retired to the garden, leaving Vail, Elliot and other directors to discuss the plan privately; as Elliot should know of the private problems which might arise from Hope-Jones' presence. There had been an incident in Elmira and the company paid a $500 fine. Vail pondered the matter soberly.

"I will go through with it," he said, "since I have already given you my word. But under these circumstances, I would rather not.'

This sad turn of events was the beginning of the end for Hope-Jones, though he did not realize it then. Mr. Elliot, the steadying influence, took his leave to join W. W. Kimball as Eastern Manager. The Elmira company was sold, the materials, patents, name, good-will, Hope-Jones himself, and some of his key men were taken over by a manufacturing company in North Tonawanda. It was a strange and unhappy union as ever did happen: a man of mercurial charm and prolific inventiveness on the one hand, and a production line on the other. The purchasers were not unnaturally anxious for profits. Hope-Jones was given a contract with a substantial consideration, payable over a period of years and set at designing instruments for mass production. The theatre organ was making its appearance. An Acme or Palace was being built on every block having as a headline attraction, "the largest organ in the world" which "cost $100,000."

Church organ business was of secondary interest to the new proprietors who were more at home in a different atmosphere, having supplied music to the entertainment business for some years previously. But the organ in the Ethical Culture Auditorium, contracted to Elmira, was built at North Tonawanda, and a contract entrusted to the company for an instrument in the Baptist Temple, Philadelphia. The few church organs built thereafter were quite overshadowed by the large theatre output. The fanfare and flourish of the Elmira period with its full-page advertisements shrank to a few single column inches of copy from Hope-Jones' own adroit pen.

Apparently Hope-Jones was not aware of what was to come. As Mr. Elliot put it, "the grass was always green over the hill for him." The factory was large, its facilities complete, and an aggressive sales staff worked from shore to

* Reported in *The Diapason*, October 1, 1910.

Hope-Jones Organs

Place	Building	Date	Size	Comments
Elmira, New York	Park Church	1906		Built by Skinner
Rochester, New York	First Universalist		3-	
Brooklyn, New York	Hanson Place Baptist		3-	
San Mateo, California	?			
St. Paul, Minnesota	St. John the Evangelist	1910	4-15 + bells	With provisions for a 5 stop 2m gallery organ. Enclosed: 1 Foundations, 2 Tuba, 3 Swell and Choir Console Picture in The Diapason 2/10
New Orleans, Louisiana	Touro Synagogue	1910	4-10	4 chambers
Buffalo, New York	St. Paul's Cathedral	1908	4-	4 chamber Unit orchestra with conventional manual names. Spec in Miller
Batavia, New York	State School for the Blind			
Irvington-on-Hudson, N. Y.	?	1909		
Jersey City, N. J.	?	1909		
Buffalo, New York	Statler Hotel*			20 ranks including percussions. Two consoles, playable in dining room and in Banquet hall.
New York, N. Y.	Ethical Culture Auditorium*	1910	4-	Contracted to Elmira and built by successors
San Francisco, Calif.	St. Lukes Church	c1910	?-14	40 stop tabs, 1034 pipes, 3 chambers
Ocean Grove, N. J.	Ocean Grove Auditorium	1908?	4-12(?)	
Denver, Colo.	Paris Theatre	1913		
Chicago, Ill.	Cort Theatre	1912		
Philadelphia, Pa.	(Grace) Baptist Temple	1911	4-15 + 5 perc.	10"-32" pressure
Pittsburgh, Pa.	Fort Pitt Theatre			

* Built at North Tonawanda

shore to scatter its blessings. Once the 'models' were rolling off the production line there was instant opposition to change. The original designs were standard for a long time before larger instruments were offered to widen the sales opportunities.

But Hope-Jones' ardor was not dampened by mere policy. He had the confidence of the men whom he always encouraged in a most gracious manner, and generously credited for their contributions to the organ which bore his name. The men were eager to cooperate, but the management was not. He must not interfere with standardization. There were to be no free improvements, no love-offerings to purchasers. When this policy was disregarded stronger orders were issued—but to no avail. No interpreters were needed here, only results in the language of the balance sheet. Every manner of threat and promise was invoked to keep him in line. When these failed Hope-Jones was forbidden to enter the factory and the guard was given orders to exclude him. He would receive full compensation according to contract but must stay away from the factory and away from all instruments under construction. He could sell under direction if he so wished, but was not forced to do so.

This sort of thing could not last long. Hope-Jones began to turn his attention elsewhere. He and Mrs. Hope-Jones spent some months at the Hotel McAlpin in New York—an existence which he frankly said he could not endure—his active mind must have an outlet. Old colleagues were forming the Marr and Colton Company in Warsaw, New York, and invited him to join them. Once again there seemed to be a promise of better things. He went to Rochester for consultation with his attorneys but the answer was again no. His contract was binding and he could not break it.

Handforth, a brother then resident in Peru, had been visiting Hope-Jones and his wife in Buffalo. When he received the bad news, Hope-Jones wrote to his wife, "something had burst" in his head. He checked out of the Hotel Seneca and wired to Handforth, who was about to sail for home. Would he return to Buffalo immediately to be with his wife. Then he rented a room in a house on George Street, almost within the shadow of the First Universalist Church which had one of his best organs.

When he failed to appear the following day, the landlady entered and found the last example of his ingenuity. He had attached a rubber tube to the gas jet and fitted it with a T outlet. One end was firmly taped with adhesive to his mouth, which was sealed closed. Gas escaping from the other was ignited, and he thus asphyxiated himself. He had firmly bound himself to a chair so that there would be no danger to anyone else. His death occurred on September 13, 1914. A coroner issued a verdict of suicide while insane.

Interment was at Elm Lawn Cemetery, North Tonawanda with the Rev. G. Sherman Burrows officiating, assisted by the Rev. A. S. Moiser. His old associates from the factory were pall bearers and many warm friends came from distant points to pay their final tribute. Associates provided funds for a memorial which was executed in keeping with his history. Above the grave was raised an enormous granite cross, eight or nine feet tall, inscribed only with the dates of his birth and his death, and the signature which had come to mean a new era in the history of the greatest of musical instruments.

Mrs. Hope-Jones, at first unable to recover on his contract, was later granted a monthly pension and presently returned to England to spend her remaining years in invalid retirement. Shortly after her death, Mr. Elliot received a letter from an intimate saying that one of her last wishes was that he be told of her appreciation for his long, faithful friendship to her and her husband.

Bibliography

R. P. Elliot, The Unit Organ. *The American Organist,* 1921.

George Laing Miller, *Recent Revolution in Organ Building.* New York, Charles Francis Press, 1913. (*Said by some to have been written by Hope-Jones himself; by others, to have been written by Elliot*).

Verne D. Batigan, A Genius Who Failed. *The American Organist,* Aug.–Sept.–Dec., 1939. (*From which much of the present article has been revised*).