

THE THEATRE ORGAN IN BRITAIN

... Frank Hare

I WOULD, first of all, like to extend my sincere greetings to all of you. It is heartening to know that at least an organization such as yours has been founded in the land of the Mighty Wurlitzer, and I wish it every success.

THE TIBIA is, of course, primarily concerned with news of the United States, where there are more theatre organs than in the rest of the world put together, but as few of you have had the opportunity to visit Great Britain, it is possible that some details of the type of theatre organ installed there might be of interest. It is my intention to describe the individual characteristics and peculiarities of British-built organs, whose makers will be unknown to you, but I propose to discuss the matter generally.

Organs were introduced to cinemas in Britain prior to the 1914-1918 war, though they were very different from the amazing Wurlitzer-Hope Jones Unit Orchestras which had by then appeared in the United States. Hope-Jones had built church organs in England with electric action and movable consoles with stop tablets as early as 1886, but builders were slow to adopt his modern ideas, and invariably the early cinema organs were of "straight" order, with pneumatic action and drawstop consoles. As time went by some enterprising firms perfected pneumatic stopkeys—Conacher (of Huddersfield) and Fitton & Haley (of Staningley, Leeds) used nothing else—and Jardine (of Manchester) were pioneers in the adequate provision of pneumatically operated tonal percussions and traps, and by the beginning of the twenties several firms had turned to electric action and tilting tablets. Scores of church organ builders up and down the country made organs for cinemas in their time, and the number installed must have run into many hundreds, though we shall never know exactly as the majority have by now been removed.

In 1923, John Compton made history by building a remarkable 4-manual extension organ for the Shepherd's Bush Pavilion, London, and this really started the era of the modern cinema organ. In January 1925, the first Wurlitzer was opened at Walsall, Staffordshire, and three months later one appeared in London. Several British builders immediately turned their attention to the new idea, and thenceforth unit organs became the standard instrument for cinemas.

I estimate that by 1939 around 480 unit organs had been installed in cinemas in the British Isles, all but about 40 of them in England itself. Exact numbers are hard to quote, as the records of the two leading British builders were destroyed or seriously damaged by enemy action during the war, and the following figures must be taken as approximate. Comptons head the list at 260, Wurlitzers come next with 100 imported organs, and Christies are third with 80. The balance is made up of instruments by the smaller builders, each with less than ten organs to their credit—Conacher, Jardine, Hilsdon, Spurden Rutt, Fitton & Haley, and Ingram. (The numbers would be increased if one took into account the "straight" cinema organs by some of these builders, but here we are only considering their unit work). There were a few organs imported from the Continent; Standaart and Dekkar from Holland, and a solitary Barbieri from Italy, and finally we must not forget to mention Reginald Foort's famous Möller (now the B.B.C. Theatre Organ) which arrived from the United States in 1939.

Of the 480 organs mentioned, several, including the B.B.C.'s superb Compton, were destroyed by bombing in the war, and quite a number of others have been sold since, some following damage by flooding, and so on. But even



The author at the console of one of the Comptons in England. This make of organ holds the same distinction in Britain as the Wurlitzer does in the U.S.

taking into account those instruments which are being allowed to rot away through lack of servicing, it seems probable that today there still remain more playable organs in Britain than in the United States, which isn't bad going, considering the vast number installed there!

The Relay

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"Spotty Journalism"

There was no "featured" organ solo opening night at the Fox Theatre in San Francisco, opening night, June 28, 1929. . . . There were other featured organists (soloists) at the theatre before George Wright, namely: Henry LeBell, and Floyd Wright (teacher of George Wright). . . . George Wright makes no mention of his having studied with Floyd Wright, a top S.F. organist who was soloist at the Granada at the age of 21. Floyd Wright traveled to Sacramento many times to give lessons to George on the Grant Union High School organ and George later made his home with Mr. and Mrs. Wright receiving daily instructions from Floyd, the real innovator and genius of theatre organ playing and a superlative musician. Floyd Wright lives in San Francisco and can verify all these statements.

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(An organ solo was on the program on opening night but not executed for reasons best unmentioned, but the solo did go on later during the opening week. There were no other organists "featured" at the Fox, prior to George Wright, in the true sense of the word. They did play for sings (if that is to be construed as a "feature," but only George was actually featured on the organ by himself, as a regular feature, with no sings. It's a fine line to draw if one wishes to be technical. We know not why Mr. Wright chose not to mention Floyd Wright and, obviously, this is a matter that must be left to his discretion. J.W.)