

Europe Calling America

. . . *Ralph Bartlett*

Theatre Organ broadcasting in England is still far more common than in the United States. Lucky listeners may hear at least one programme each weekday, sometimes several. Perhaps our European correspondent can give us some hints as how we might be able to get the T.O. back on U.S. airwaves.

YOU PEOPLE of the States who are accustomed to a wide choice of broadcasting networks may have wondered how we in Britain fare in the hands of the solitary B.B.C. Three services are operated—the Light, of national coverage, which is devoted to the popular field; the Third, also of national coverage, which is “cultural” and caters for the minority; and the Home, which covers the Country by a series of seven independent regional Home services.

The Light programme includes at least one theatre organ broadcast each weekday—sometimes two or even three—but the London Home service has usually only two per week. These are relayed also by the regional stations who, while taking the bulk of their programmes from the London Home service, are able to plan for themselves, and include items of their own production. In 1955, several of the regions excelled by bringing evening transmissions from cinemas up and down the Country: thus the Midland Area, controlled from Birmingham, relayed the organs of the Gaumont, Birmingham (Compton 3-9); Gaumont, Smethwick (Compton 3-9); Gaumont, Walsall (Wurlitzer 2-6, this has since been removed and rebuilt in a residence); and Tower, West Bromwich (Compton 3-12, plus Melotone).

The B.B.C. Northern Region, controlled from Manchester, brought the following, after a long lapse of theatre organs in their programmes: Tower Ballroom, Blackpool (Wurlitzer 3-14); Opera House, Blackpool (Wurlitzer 3-13); Ritz-Essoldo, Birkenhead (Christie-Wurlitzer 3-8); Regal, Harrogate (Compton 3-6, plus Melotone); Odeon-Paramount, Leeds (Wurlitzer 3-19); Gaumont, Manchester (Wurlitzer 4-14); and Odeon-Paramount, Newcastle-on-Tyne (Wurlitzer 3-19).

From other regions came the organs of the Tonic, Bangor, Northern Ireland, (Compton 3-8, plus Melotone), and the Ritz, Belfast, (Compton 4-10, with a super Melotone). These two organs were transmitted by Northern Ireland region. The once much-broadcast Wurlitzer at the Classic, Belfast, has, regretfully, been removed recently by Circuits Management Association. The Compton 3-8, plus Melotone, at the Royal, Plymouth, Devon, was aired regularly every Thursday morning throughout the year, in a programme for hospitals and the sick, presented by organist Dudley Savage. This series is sent out by the West of England Home service, who also re-commenced at the end of the year a short “Melody for Late Evening” series from the Gaumont, Bournemouth, featuring Ronald Brickwell at the Wurlitzer 2-9, with a violinist and a vocalist.

The Light Programme relayed, apart from their own theatre organ in London, the following organs during morning sessions each weekday: Astoria, Aberdeen (Compton 3-8); Ritz, Belfast, already mentioned; Tower Ballroom, Blackpool, already mentioned; Dome Pavilion, Brighton (Christie 4-28); Regal, Kingston-on-Thames (Wurlitzer 3-12); Odeon, Leicester Square (Compton 5-16,

plus Melotone); Odeon-Regal, Marble Arch (Christie 4-30), and the Granada, Tooting (Wurlitzer 4-14).

Generalizing on the year of 1955, my own review of theatre organ solos totalled one hundred and twenty eight, covering theatres as far apart as Belfast, Northern Ireland; Aberdeen, Scotland; Dublin, Irish Republic; Blackpool, Lancashire, and, of course, London. This grand total of organ solos includes theatres of the three main circuits (Associated British Cinemas; Circuits Management Association, who control both Gaumont and Odeon; and Granada Theatres) as well as several independent concerns.

The British Wurlitzer concern, although not officially known under that name, had a most successful year. They rebuilt the Compton in the Odeon, Leicester square—replacing the Tibia with one of their own—and also overhauled several organs for Associated British Cinemas. Early this year they overhauled the B.B.C. Theatre Organ, and have further orders lined up for A.B.C. and Odeon.

The solo of the year in my estimation? Well, how about that which John Madin presented at the close of the year at the Granada, Clapham Junction? He started with an excellent rendering of famous carols, with some delightful straight work included. Then into a nifty piece of work accompanying a short silent film—a real old-timer of the pre-talkie era, with all the fire and thunder provided with suitable music à la Wurlitzer.

The broadcast of the year? Really a job to tell, but high on the list must be the beautiful “Moonlight Lullaby” by Douglas Reeve at the Dome Pavilion, Brighton, on the 29th of August, at 11:20 p.m. It was a broadcast of sheer delight, wonderful tonal qualities, and a programme of well picked items.

The organist of the year? Truly, this item gets harder each time I review the organists I have seen through the year, so to be really honest I will elect two. The first, Bryan Rodwell, for some wonderful orchestral work at the Granada, Edmonton, during one of his weeks out in the circuit from the East Ham Granada. The second is Stanley Wyllie for his St. Patrick’s Day broadcast from the Ritz, Belfast, Northern Ireland.

And perhaps I should mention the good work by Gerald Shaw at the Odeon-Regal, Marble Arch; Charles Smitten for his series of broadcasts at the Odeon-Paramount, Leeds; Dudley Savage for his broadcasts week by week from the Royal, Plymouth; George Blackmore for his “St. Andrew’s Day” broadcast from the Astoria, Aberdeen, and Stanley Tudor, for making the B.B.C. Theatre Organ sound like the Wurlitzer in the Gaumont, Manchester.

Have I bored you with all these reminiscences? I trust not, and I hope you will be with me again next time. One never knows what is going to happen next, what with screens getting larger and larger, organs coming out, and patrons havng sound all round them—well, I ask you, perhaps the good old days of silent films had something after all!