

# Exploring England—and its organs

... By J. J. Critser and G. Edgar Gress\*

**W**HATEVER WE AMERICANS MAY THINK of the theatre organs of England and the way they are played, our opinions are necessarily based largely on second-hand information. We have little chance to make direct comparisons other than by the often deceiving means of phonograph records and by reading such descriptions as English writers, unfamiliar with what we are used to in America, may write.

We have both had a wide acquaintance with the field in America, and when the exigencies of military service contrived to transport us to Europe, we had a singular opportunity to make a detailed study of the entire British theatre organ field in the light of our previous knowledge. It is our hope that our findings and opinions may therefore have some value, based as they are on such a background, and be the more pertinent for American readers.

## Organ Expedition

Spurred on by insatiable curiosity and feeling that there would be much to learn, we mapped out a systematic eight-day exploration trip with all the care that goes into the advance planning for an Antarctic expedition. Traveling by car, we were able to cover an enormous amount of territory in a short time, visiting as many as four or five organs in a single day and hearing the playing of a wide selection of organists. Although our schedule was packed and on many an occasion we were forced to choose between eating dinner and seeing one more organ (resolved, of course, in favor of the latter!), we found the trip most interesting and enjoyable.

Although there is no point in giving a detailed description of each instrument we saw since all the specifications of the more important organs have been published time and again, it may be of interest to give some of our impressions in general terms and speak at some length about how they apply to specific instruments and players.

## Still Alive

Although the past tense must largely be used in referring to the theatre organ in America, the institution is still very much alive in England, with over forty organists broadcasting regularly over the BBC and a considerable number of the larger theatres still using their organs, at least on important occasions. In any case one never sees the distressingly frequent sight we Americans take for granted, of a once-heralded organ rotting away unused and uncared for until it gets in the way of a new super-duper screen and is bodily carted off to the junk heap. As one theatre manager put it, "We feel that our organ represents a large investment to be safeguarded, and even if we don't find it economic to use it continuously, it does no harm to have it. The show business being what it is, we may be very thankful some day that we kept the organ and took care of it."

One famous English organist now living in America had warned us that there were only two kinds of theatre organs: Wurlitzers, and imitations of Wurlitzers, never as good as the real McCoy. Certainly this is not the case! Not that

\* The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those held by A.T.O.E. members in general.

there were not many cheap "imitation Wurlitzers" built both in England and in America; but the unit organ designer has a wide latitude in which to work, and depending on just what sort of result he is trying to achieve, can produce widely varying instruments.

## A Different Outlook

Thus it was our conclusion that the English organists and organ builders, even including the Wurlitzer representatives there, look at the theatre organ in an entirely different light than we do, and far from imitating the American Wurlitzers, actually drastically modified the tone of those imported there to suit their own ideas and style of playing. As is well known, before Jesse Crawford consented to appear at the Empire, Leicester Square, London, he had the Wurlitzer organ there considerably altered. On paper this organ seems no different from those he was used to in America, but after hearing some other English Wurlitzer installations it's not difficult to imagine just what those alterations might have been.

It's significant, we think, that Wurlitzer eventually dropped the original name "Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra" on the nameplates of their instruments, for the whole tradition of the American theatre organ has been rooted in its treatment as an *organ*, not an imitation orchestra. From the time Jesse Crawford first sat down at a Wurlitzer and began to play it as a fascinating new instrument in its own right, the "Unit Orchestra" concept was dead and stayed that way so far as America was concerned. Others followed suit and one can trace the chain through Richard Leibert and Don Baker right down to George Wright's recent work at the New York Paramount organ. Organs were built accordingly and the "sobbing" Tibias and weeping reeds and strings so synonymous with the theatre organ in America hardly have any counterpart in the orchestra!

In a recent article entitled "The Theatre Organ and its

Below: Discord on the Wurlitzer organ, Trocadero Cinema, Elephant and Castle, London. At right, Concord



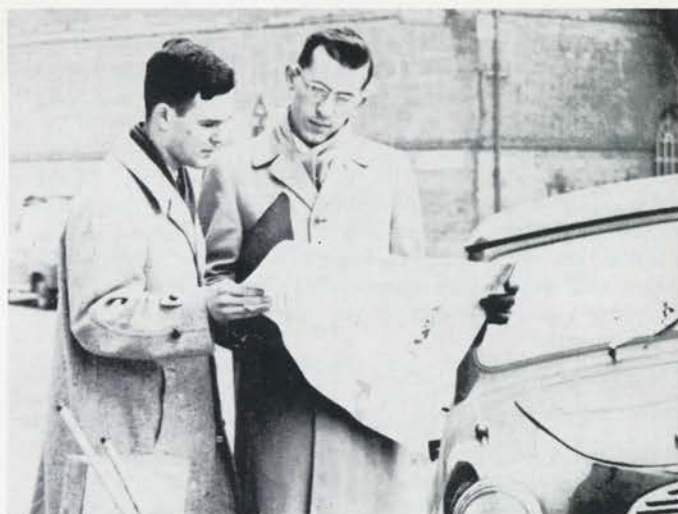
Tonal Design,"<sup>20</sup> one of the present writers summarizes the American concept as a collection of "highly characteristic primary tone colors capable of being freely mixed to provide a wealth of subtle effects," and goes on to speak of "rich, many-voiced ensemble effects typical of the theatre organ," held together by "many tremulants beating against each other in such a way that the regular, mechanical pulses of each are lost to the ear in the vibrant sound resulting." Right down to its location at both sides of the theatre so as to engulf the audience in a tide of diffused, lush sound, the typical American instrument demonstrates how complete was its early break with orchestralism.

Probably the best American theatre organ is the magnificent thirty-six rank Wurlitzer in the Paramount Theatre, New York. Built regardless of cost for Jesse Crawford and largely his own design, it proved such a success that Wurlitzer went on to build four more organs exactly like it. Essentially based on three huge Tibias, four Vox Humanas and enormous masses of silky strings and rich, colorful reeds, this instrument can produce the lushest sounds ever to come from an organ, as George Wright so ably demonstrated. Even the English Post Horn in this organ, used with its powerful tremulant, is rich and lyrical. Its stoplist is contrived so as to make it easy to exploit its predominantly mass ensemble effects: for example, the Great plays nearly every rank in the organ at a wide range of pitches, as was usual with Wurlitzer.

But the most typical English theatre organ, by coincidence also having thirty-six ranks, is that of the Odeon, Marble Arch, London—and what a completely different sort of thing it is! Like the Paramount organ, it was designed by the country's leading theatre organist, Quentin Maclean in this case. It demonstrates admirably the requirements of the English school of theatre players.

If the Paramount organ was basically a new and different instrument, that at Marble Arch is essentially an *orchestral* one. For the English organists began as highly competent church and concert players, totally unlike Crawford. From

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Authors Ed Gress (left) and Jerry Critser.

this background they evolved their style of playing, progressing from orchestral transcriptions played on the straight organ to orchestral transcriptions played on the unit organ. Forced to play jazz, they produced Sydney Torch, who took the next logical step and proceeded to play jazz like a jazz band!

If the American ideal was to flood the audience from all sides in a cascade of rich, lush ensemble effects—an *extensive* approach, if you please—the English were governed by an opposing *intensive* concept. Several times during our tour, organists expressed to us their horror of using two Tibias at once, lest their separate tremulants "fight" with each other. Such remarks startled us considerably until we realized that the English look upon the Tibia primarily as a stop intended to give body to the strings exactly as does the resonating cavity of an orchestral stringed instrument. They use the orchestral reeds strictly for solo purposes, and far from any idea of rich lushness, these stops are voiced in a dry, incisive, realistic manner. Full organ is dominated by Tuba and Trumpet tone of a type totally unlike that of the brilliantly melodious Wurlitzer English Post Horn and smooth Tubas, just as the brass choir is the crowning glory of the orchestra. Percussion tone is an integral part of the scheme, never looked upon as a novelty to be used only for special effects.

#### Marble Arch vs. Paramount

Consider how these concepts apply to the Marble Arch organ. The first obvious difference between it and the New York Paramount instrument is one of location. Why cram the largest theatre unit organ in Europe into the auditorium's right-hand chambers, leaving nothing behind the left-hand grille but a Carillon attachment? Because an orchestra would never be split between two sides of a room! How is the tonal material organized? Into String, Woodwind, and what amounts to Brass sections. Tibias and Vox Humanas, far from being the backbone of the organ, are present in much smaller quantities than at the Paramount—only one Vox Humana appears and even then its voicing is that of a solo stop. There are indeed two Tibias, but true to the idea of their going with the strings, we find the large one on a mere ten inches wind pressure (later increased) and the other on an astonishingly low five inches. Compare this with the New York organ, where in a hardly larger room the Solo Tibia is on twenty-five inches wind and the two others on fifteen inches.

The voicing throughout is highly imitative. An example is the Saxophone stop, which sounds much like a Tuba with an added dry, reedy twang and resembles its namesake

startlingly well. Compared with it, a Wurlitzer Saxophone seems more like a Vox Humana with the caps removed. As for strings, there are fifteen ranks of them—nearly twice the Paramount's eight, and almost half the total number of ranks in the organ.

Chorus reeds of the straight organ type, never used by Wurlitzer, dominate full organ with ease and the layout of the console accordingly differs from that of the Paramount organ. Instead of the Great being an ensemble manual, it's more like Wurlitzer's Bombarde, playing the brass and foundation stops almost exclusively. Only by coupling can everything in the organ be played from a single manual.

### Other British Organs

Thus we found a completely different type of unit organ in England, designed for a different style of playing. It may be of interest if we give a few of our impressions of some of the better-known instruments we visited, bearing in mind the basic style of design and voicing and regulation quite common to all of them. First, we discuss the three chief British makes Compton, Christie and Conacher.

1. *Odeon, Marble Arch, London: Christie, 4m/36r.* In practice the organ is as good as its excellent design, and although it takes time to get used to, it is amazingly versatile and beautifully voiced.
2. *Dome, Brighton: Christie, 4m/40r.* Another very effective instrument, basically an orchestral unit organ but with some straight organ features added in the attempt to produce a "dual-purpose" design. Installed in chambers at both sides of the stage in quite a small auditorium, it "gets out" excellently, and has the most compact large horseshoe console we've ever come across.
3. *Regal, Edmonton, London: Christie, 4m/15r.* Well known through the many recordings of Sydney Torch, this organ sounds nothing like the records. Installed in two chambers to the right of the stage, it seems exceedingly dead and muffled due to the very dead acoustics. Its Post Horn is the driest, thinnest such stop we've ever heard.
4. *Odeon, Tottenham Court Road, London: Compton, 4m/12r.* Completely in the English style, this organ, in two chambers on the right side of the auditorium, contains an example of the well-known Compton Melotone unit, sounding not unlike the early Hammond organs and providing organ-like tones and in addition some curious vibra-harp and marimba effects.
5. *Guildhall, Southampton: Compton, 50r with two 4m consoles.* Basically a concert organ with a second horseshoe console playing it as a unit instrument, this installation is not very successful for either purpose, largely due to the highly resonant acoustics and the organ's impossible location high over the stage. Its chief feature is a tremendous array of big Tubas and Trumpets.
6. *Odeon, Southampton: Conacher, 4m/13r.* One of several similar instruments built by the company, this is an organ completely in the style we have been discussing, with some very good string and reed voicing of the type.
7. *BBC Studio, Jubilee Chapel, Horton, London: Moller, 5m/27r.* Although built in America, this famous organ is thoroughly in the English style, having been designed, of course, by Reginald Foort as a touring instrument. After seventeen years of hard use it's still going strong and is used an average of eight hours a day for broadcasts and rehearsals. We visited it a few days after it had received a thorough overhauling and cleaning and found it quite exciting. Totally unlike most of its recordings and broadcasts, its voicing is exceedingly pungent and incisive and the strings and reeds have a dry realism that is quite uncommon. Of course the organ sounds tremendous in such a small studio and the fiery, trumpet Post Horn must be heard to be believed! A few recent modifications include the temporary removal of the top manual to make room for an electronic toy, and, more serious, the excision of the No. 1 Tibia, its stopkeys now being wired to the Doppel Flute rank. This latter simply demonstrates further the typical British misunderstanding of our use of the Tibias. Foort, familiar as he was with the New York Paramount organ, had seen the usefulness of such a stop with a powerful tremulant, but evidently his countrymen do not; having reduced its tremulant to a mere flutter, they naturally found it hooty and piercing, and finally did away with it entirely.

### Wurlitzers in Britain

With all this in mind it should be evident that the organs Wurlitzer sent over from America needed some drastic alterations to satisfy English ears. Of course they could not be completely rebuilt, but their voicing and regulation could be changed, and usually was. Our first reaction was that no one had ever regulated them properly—we'd never heard sounds like those from Wurlitzers back home. Later, placing things in perspective, we could see that the British had simply adjusted these instruments to fit their own style of playing. It's especially interesting to study those actually designed in England; for example, for the English organists Wurlitzer had to provide a fiery reed chorus, and this they did by developing modified versions of their usually ultra-smooth Tubas, a special, less cutting Post Horn on only ten inches wind pressure, and a completely new stop, the French Trumpet. As for some actual installations:

8. *Gaumont-State, Kilburn, London: Wurlitzer, 4m/16r.* On paper one of the strangest organs ever to bear the company's nameplate, this instrument, designed for Sydney Torch, is an excellent example of an "Anglicized" Wurlitzer. Any idea of lushness is strictly banished and aside from two Tubas, a French Trumpet and a Post Horn, the only reeds are a sharp Krumet and a soft Vox Humana, quite in accord with the Torch jazz-band style. Although this organ sounds much like its recordings, the resemblance is in tone only; for all its loud reeds, the pipes, in two chambers to the left of the stage, seem bottled-up and distant. The Wurlitzer touch remains in that the two Tibias, while quiet and subdued, have a much more singing tone than one usually finds in British-made organs.
9. *Granada, Tooting, London: Wurlitzer, 4m/14r.* While quite similar to Kilburn in design and voicing, this organ is by far the more effective due to its locations under the stage of a much smaller auditorium. The organist can certainly hear what he's doing—with a vengeance. The voicing is typically clean and crisp.
10. *Odeon, Leeds: Wurlitzer, 3m/19r.* No wonder Jesse Crawford liked this instrument so much. It's the exact opposite of Kilburn or Tooting and is one of the most nearly American sounding Wurlitzers in England, resembling very much a similar installation in Loew's Memorial Theatre, Boston, Mass.
11. *Trocadero, Elephant and Castle, London: Wurlitzer, 4m/21r.* Falling somewhere between Kilburn or Tooting and Leeds, this organ, perhaps due to the acoustics, sounds very refined and retains this quality of refinement even with the tremulants turned off—something which Quentin Maclean puts to good use on many of his excellent recordings of the instrument.
12. *Empire, Leicester Square, London: Wurlitzer, 4m/20r.* Rather similar to the Trocadero organ, this one is, however,

English console star John Madin at the Granada, Tooting.  
See page 15.



not as effective, and lacks the Tuba Mirabilis and Post Horn of the former instrument. Like it, and also like the Leeds organ, it is installed in the typical American divided manner, something hardly ever done by the English builders.

### Musical Implications

Thus in England we found a style of theatre organ design, voicing and playing based largely on imitating the orchestra or the jazz band. Let us now briefly consider some of its musical implications.

It should be obvious that the sheer imitation of one instrument by another, if carried to its logical conclusion, can have no musical purpose whatever. One can always ask, "Why an imitation? Why not the genuine article?" and be perfectly correct in so doing, for no matter how adept the imitation, it is still just an imitation. The most cleverly made orchestral organ conceivable, played by a dozen different organists from a dozen different consoles, could never take the place of a symphony orchestra. Indeed, the closer the imitation came, the more ludicrous would be its effect.

It is absolutely essential to realize that the organ, even the "orchestral" organ, is something more than a one-man band, but a fascinating instrument in its own right, with its own capabilities and limitations. Clearly, the organist must approach whatever music he would play simply as *music*—not piano music, orchestra music, or jazz-band music—and interpret it in terms of the organ and the organ's possibilities, not those of some extraneous instrument. Only then can the result have any musical significance whatever.

Herein, it seems to us, lies at the same time the greatest shortcoming and the greatest potential of the English approach to the theatre organ. There is nothing inherently wrong in transcribing for the theatre organ works originally written for other instruments, however wrong it may be to play transcriptions on the legitimate organ. For while the legitimate organ has an extensive literature of its own, unfortunately the theatre organ has not, and almost anything played on it must be to some extent a transcription.

Neither can we see anything wrong with the English type of theatre organ design and dry, realistic voicing. Regardless of whether it was originally intended to imitate the orchestra, such an incisive, clean sound is no doubt better suited to complicated, fast-moving music than the indefinite, ethereal lushness of the American style.

### The Organist's Role

Therefore it is the organist's musical sense and imagination which are at the crux of the matter. If he would play orchestral music, he must have the insight not only to interpret it well as does an orchestra conductor, but to go further and adapt it to the new and different medium. And this is no small task. When even so thorough a musician as Quentin Macllean never got beyond the stage of literal orchestral imitation, it is no wonder that his less gifted colleagues haven't either. The state of English theatre organ playing today unfortunately ranges from mediocre to unspeakable and one finds few organists indeed who even so much as care about their playing, beyond the fact that through it they can eat thrice daily. Rather than exert their atrophied minds, these musical nonentities are content to pull out their battered old piano-conductor scores and feebly grind out what somehow passes for music, with all the musical wit of a three-speed phonograph. At a level considerably below even this rock-bottom are those who, not content to half-heartedly emulate the orchestra, insist on imitating a merry-go-round or one-man band. This latter type of creature seems especially prevalent at certain western and southern sea-side resorts, and one can only hope for a cleansing tidal wave.

But we need not end on so black a note. Fortunately there have been, and still are, a few really serious musicians at

work in the theatre organ idiom. Prominent among them in the period just before World War II was Stuart Barrie, whose work is surprisingly little known considering its superb quality. Barrie had an incredible genius for handling orchestral transcriptions in the way we have been discussing, translating the composer's intentions into theatre organ terms without losing a particle of the original musical meaning, and indeed often enhancing it. Further in the past, Sydney Toreh never seemed to go too far with his jazz-band style, always leaving himself a generous amount of leeway in which to adapt the jazz-band idiom to the organ.

### Two Present-Day Organists

We have spoken at length about the magnificent organ at Marble Arch, and it is a pleasure to report that the musical genius of its present organist, Gerald Shaw, is quite as magnificent as the organ. If John Howlett is facetiously known as the "bishop" of the profession, surely Shaw is the pope! Possessing formidable technical ability and musical insight, and a real enthusiasm for the instrument, Shaw inherits the tradition of Stuart Barrie and not only plays music beautifully, but re-creates it as a living entity in the process. As if this were not enough, he's one of the very few Englishmen ever to really understand the work of Jesse Crawford and the American school. Everything Shaw plays is polished to perfection and an exciting musical experience.

Another prominent modern organist is Bryan Rodwell of the Granada circuit. Rodwell is evolving a style genuinely new and original in his attempts to play the theatre organ as a progressive jazz instrument. Understanding thoroughly this quite intellectual idiom, he has the technique to play in it most interestingly. Rodwell will indeed bear watching.

It was a privilege and a great pleasure to be able to study in such detail the British theatre organ scene, and in concluding we should like to express our appreciation to the many organists, theatre executives, and organ builders who contributed so much towards making our explorations successful. Especial thanks are due Mr. L. B. Fancourt of Circuits Management Association Ltd., to Mr. J. I. Taylor of the John Compton Organ Company Ltd., and to the British Broadcasting Corporation. ●



**An American Organ in the Old Tradition**  
3m/14r Moller unit organ in the lobby of the San Francisco Fox Theatre. Lucius Downer at the console. (Photo by Bro. Andrew Corsini, C.S.C.)