

# CINEMA ORGAN NEWS FROM BRITAIN



by  
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A great Hello! to all my USA theatre organ friends and to the readers of THEATRE ORGAN. Firstly, I would like to say how honoured and indeed flattered I am to be asked to join the other fine contributors to THEATRE ORGAN, rather than just "take it easy" as I had intended. Mr. Gilbert and Mr. Koury won me over, as have many friends like John Landon who, like me, have been reading THEATRE ORGAN since it was "The Tibia." Remember that name? I do, and looked forward to learning more each issue about the USA scene. Like your country, we have the largest theatre or cinema organ scene in Europe, as you will all realise. Many organists attained nationwide fame in the Golden Era from 1928 till 1948 when the two major circuits over here, ABC and Odeon, started to drop the use of the organ from hundreds of cinemas. Finally, by 1960 there were hardly any cinemas featuring the organ solo. Now about four cinemas feature the organ in their regular programme, and that's not daily either now.

Hector Olivera at the Publix No. 1, 4/20 Wurlitzer in the Free Trade Hall at Manchester. (LTOT photo)



We are all very saddened by the news of the death of David Hamilton, a very popular organist who was well known in your country, too. He was a leading sales executive for many years in Chicago and London with the world famous Conn Organ Company as many of you know. He survived a brain tumor operation in 1969 in Chicago, and a couple of years ago decided he should take things easier so came back and set up his own Conn organ store in Huddersfield in Yorkshire. I stayed with him for a few days in early September. Later in the month he went for a few days holiday to Portugal with friends and came back, became unwell, and died on 23rd October. He was about to make another recording of the beautiful Compton organ at The Plough Pub in Hertfordshire north of London. Also, there had been in the pipeline another recording made at the celebrated 5/19 Compton of the Odeon Cinema Leicester Square, London, Britain's most famous in-theatre organ. A charming, friendly and gentlemanly person who was never heard "knocking" fellow organists. We shall miss him greatly.

This year has seen the biggest invasion of American organists since "Ike" sent over all those gum-chewing servicemen to help get rid of Adolf Hitler — Dennis James, Rob Calcaterra, Walt Strony, Hector Olivera, Warren Lubich, Bob Vaughn, Lowell Ayars and making his debut here Rex Koury. And what a debut. I saw him play a brilliant concert at the Assembly Hall at Worthing in Sussex. The organ, a 3/10 Wurlitzer in a most marvellous installation — one of the best in the U.K. — was the perfect vehicle for his smooth and impeccable styling. From Lizst's Hungarian

Rhapsody to showtune medleys, it was about the most enjoyable performance I had witnessed for years. This organ was formerly in the Buckingham Town Hall and prior to this most of it was in the Metropole Cinema in Victoria, London. Also among the American visitors was organ enthusiast/writer Dr. Ed Mullins.

In the summer the Cinema Organ Society, known as COS throughout Europe, hosted a unique double event in the Moorish Granada Cinema in Walthamstow in east London. On the Christie 3/12 we saw Rob Calcaterra play a brilliant concert, the best I have ever seen him play, and then, after a box lunch and a break, on came Walt Strony to play a superb concert. Both mastered the Christie with its overhead chambers, which are not uncommon over here. The organ also sports a pit console now hidden away under the orchestra pit and derelict. It was the Granada circuit's first giant super cinema seating just over 3000, and the organ was always one of the finest Christies we ever had. A unique idea this double event, and a great success it was.

Londoners are rather blasé where theatre organ concerts are concerned, I am afraid. We are very spoiled here, as there isn't far to go or too long to wait for theatre organ concerts in the U.K., and possibly there often are too many concerts chasing not quite enough customers. Cost of travel and petrol (gasoline to you) is very high here and that makes people very choosy these days.

Some of your organists are getting quite at home here now, and more are playing concerts on the most common brand of all makes, the ubiquitous Compton. Rob Calcaterra, Lowell Ayars and Warren Lubich have all played concerts on Comptons. One of your greatest and much admired over here is Ashley Miller, who played a great concert earlier this year at the Regal Edmonton in north London. He is another organist not frightened to tackle the native brands, including electronics.

The truly legendary Reginald Dixon, who was 80 years old in October and lives in quiet retirement just outside Blackpool, wasn't well enough to attend a special concert to honour his birthday at the place where it all happened, the Tower Ballroom Blackpool. Held on the 24th November, the concert featured Phil Kelsall, the very

popular chief organist of the team that plays on the celebrated 3/14 Wurlitzer designed by Reg Dixon for the ballroom in 1934. It replaced the 1929-built 2/10 Wurlitzer now installed in the Manchester studios of the BBC Radio. The BBC ran a special programme in its weekly radio slot for us theatre organ fans called "The Organist Entertains," hosted by organist Nigel Ogden, which included a short interview with Reg. The BBC Radio Manchester programme hosted by Alan Ashton each week as well devoted 60 minutes to Mr. Dixon's illustrious career, with comment by other well known organists and was a more worthy effort.

Our ATOS London Chapter has had to refute statements about the placing of its Wurlitzer 3/8 from the Granada Cinema Welling in Kent. It seems someone "jumped the gun," not uncommon in matters like this. ATOS hasn't as yet settled on a new home for this perky late-style (1938 vintage) organ.

One organ in the news here is that in the Regal Cinema Henley-on-Thames. The 3/7 Compton has been filmed for an upcoming movie called *A Private Function*. One of its stars, Maggie Smith, is seen coming up seated at the illuminated console playing "Ciribiribin" (actually dubbed in by organist William Davies). The console lighting was set to red, white and blue in keeping with the period of the film. At least they didn't dub a Hammond or other electronic into the sound track. Manchester's Free Trade Hall and its Publix 4/20 was the centre of two weeks in September for the Manchester Festival. Hector Olivera excelled himself, a simply brilliant concert on the organ he knows well and has recorded.

With news of all these splendid organists from your country coming here, I can tell you we are sending over one of our newest young stars of the console, Nicholas Martin, who is to play three concerts on that splendid four-manual in the Kirk of Dunedin in Florida. Nick played two highly successful seasons at the Tower Ballroom Blackpool before going to Turner's Musical-Merry-Go-Round, a superb organ-oriented emporium in Northampton, England, where he resides as resident organist at the magnificent 3/19 BAL4-style Wurlitzer which was formerly in a motor show-room at Diss in Norfolkshire and pri-



Rob Calcaterra and Walt Strony played a "double bill" concert on the 3/12 Christie at the Granada Walthamstow in east London. (John Sharp photo)

or to that in the Paramount (later Odeon) Cinema in Newcastle-on-Tyne, England. Nicholas has two LP recordings out which are available through Organ Literature Foundation, who are doing their best to help us theatre organ lovers by supplying so many recordings these days.

It's not often that a famous organist can go back after many years and play a concert on an in-theatre organ where he made his national name, but the great George Blackmore can. Up in the oil-rich city of Aberdeen in Scotland (the Dallas of the U.K.) the proud Capitol Cinema still stands, the last of the big supers complete with a most delightful Compton 3/8. George played it as resident in about 1950 for a few years and broadcast it nationwide. He became a household name here on radio and returned on 7th November to the city that boasts the only theatre organ in that northerly part of our country. A sister organ in the suburban Astoria Cinema was transplanted to a school hall and destroyed in a fire a year or so ago.

It's always nice to hear about a new cinema organ installation. An organ that started life in 1938 at the Grand Cinema Southport, a northwestern seaside resort in England, then went into a church, to then be moved again to Ron Curtis' organ studio in Bolton, and then to another organ studio at Hyde in Cheshire, has now found yet a new and, it is hoped, permanent

home in the Town Hall at Chorley, in Lancashire, England. A 3/6 Compton, which Ron Curtis nicknamed "The Concrete Shifter," should sound well I'm told. It was the standard late-style highly popular and successful money spinner for Compton's (Metal Tibia, Diapason, Flute, Viola and Muted Trumpet and Tuba, and usually equipped with a Melotone Unit, the prewar electronic division found on virtually all Comptons from 1935 onwards). This organ — a corker — lost its 'Mel' along the way like many others. Its glass console surround was last seen draped around a Hammond on the bandstage of the Tower Ballroom Blackpool; the Hammond now replaced by a large Technics. It is used to give the Wurlitzer blower a rest for 30 minutes at dance sessions. The fancy glasswork, very much part of our theatre organ scene over here of course, looked totally out of place in that fantastic ornate "High Temple of Terpsichore."

That's all for now. Keep those Tibias sobbing.

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*Ian Dalgliesh began writing on the British cinema organ scene for The Console in 1964. He started this column, also for The Console, in 1969. Interested in theatre organs since early youth, Ian has been very active in the Cinema Organ Society over the years, as well as being a member of ATOE and ATOS since the early days.* □

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