AN INTERVIEW WITH

REGINALD DIXON

On the occasion of his 80th birthday, a few months before his death.

Transcribed by Don Thompson

INTERVIEWER: I believe you first visited Blackpool Tower in 1912, when you were seven years old.

REGINALD DIXON: Oh yes, I remember that! I remember going on the sands with my sister. My younger sister wasn't born yet (that was the year afterwards). We used to watch the Punch and Judy show on the sands every day there. Yes, that was where I used to hear the roundabouts in those days as we went, when the sea receded. That was when I heard "I Do Like To Be Beside the Seaside," all those years ago. We went into the Tower, like a lot of people, on a very wet day and it was very, very crowded. I remember some of the machines where you put a penny in the slot. Some of them were still there when I went all those years later. They were so intriguing. (These automatic instruments — orchestrions, phonolist violinas and the like — were STILL there a couple of generations later. *DT*)

I always wanted to be a concert pianist. I used to struggle very, very hard rehearsing. I used to do six hours a day of "practice," as we called it, on the piano when I was in Sheffield. I must have driven people mad, playing scales for two hours. I'd be about nine years old then. Then I had a period when I wasn't too well and I gave up for a while, then started again — I think I would be about 11. I had another teacher and then I took it quite seriously, and I was teaching music when I was about 13. I took some letters [a diploma] at a college which I shall not name, which now don't mean very much, and I started to teach. I always think it was money by false pretences! I was keen on the piano, I still love it, my listening is the piano, piano concertos, I enjoy it somehow. There's something about it — there are so many ways you can attack a piano. I used to think that, anyhow, but I was never intended to be a concert pianist, as we all realize now. I sometimes think your life is governed for you. But I did enjoy those early days and I worked very hard. Then, of course, I went to Sheffield University for a while, studying harmony and counterpoint. I should have taken the Master of Music exam, but unfortunately we landed right in the middle of a slump, a "recession" as it's known now, and I had to go to work in a cinema.

I: Your father, of course, in Sheffield, would have expected you to go and work in a steelworks I suppose, to be a steelworker.

RD: He was a steel file cutter. When I say that to people ("What did your father do?") they look rather blank at me. I've seen him take an ordinary file without any teeth in it, and with a hammer and chisel make a perfect file. Of course, eventually the machines took over and that type of work became redundant. But he had little shops around Sheffield where he employed women to cut files.

I: What made you want to be a concert pianist; what sparked you off?

RD: I can always remember, when I was five years old, crying to my mother because I wanted to play my piece on the piano, and she used to lock the piano because she said I would damage it. But eventually she gave way. What it must have sounded like I don't know! It must have been terrible! I've always loved music. But in those days, you know, you had nothing else; we'd no radio, no television.

Stocksbridge Palace was where I started. I remember my audition. I played two of Debussy's Arabesques on the piano, and the manager (a grand fellow, a little cockney) came down, went through a trap door in the

orchestra pit and as he came out he said "You'll do, mate!" and that was how I got the job. I used to go by motor bike out to Stocksbridge.

I: I understand you were inventive in those days and you added sound effects.
RD: Oh yes, I took the bottom on the piano out and when there were bangs coming on the screen I used to put the loud pedal down and kick the strings and do all sorts of things like that. The piano didn't like it very much and eventually suffered. They bought a new piano on the night I left!

I: And then you went on to a second cinema in Chesterfield, I think?
RD: Yes, I went to Chesterfield and I used to deputise for the musical director, who was rather an invalid. That gave me good experience. I used to go down to the Wicker cinema for two hours. There was a big pile of music on the piano. I had to read that, follow a violinist, and every time there was a tap with the bow — "next number" — that had to be read and played to silent films. That was an education absolutely and an experience. It was an entire job on its own and it was essential that you read and could at the same time look up at the picture and not lose your place in the music. In later years I got quite a big library together, there was special music written for it. I got rid of it eventually because it wasn't very good. Later, when I went to Healey Palace in Sheffield, we had a good orchestra and we used to play some very, very good music. As they used to say, we used to "fit the picture." But in those days they had big trade shows with full orchestras. I remember playing for the film *The Four Men of the Apocalypse.* And *Intolerance,* that was another very big film, you probably remember mention of that. I played for the trade shows. The trade show, as you know, was for the exhibitors, and they used to go there to see for the booking of the film.

I: You were playing the organ then, weren't you, at Birley Carr United Methodist Church? That was the first organ you played, wasn't it?
RD: I learned to play in Cemetery Road Congregational Church, which has gone now. I had another music teacher who taught me to play. I had only nine months' lessons on the organ, but I worked very hard.

I: You were only 13 when you were playing the organ there?
RD: Yes, just 13.

I: But I think you saw the talking coming in and were starting to think about other things.
RD: Oh yes, yes. Often I didn't get home till one o'clock in the morning. You see, in those days we had an operator who, as we used to say in Sheffield, loved his "bevvy," he liked his drop of "biddy," and in those days there was no control over the speed of a machine. These days it has got to be so many frames per second in order to keep in with the speed of the sound. By the end of the night I think he must have been leaning on the machine. It went slower and slower and slower and we'd be coming out of the cinema at one o'clock in the morning! Fortunately, where I lived there was a tram depot and I used to catch the last tram. Next morning I was down at the Regent Cinema rehearsing on the Wurlitzer at eight o'clock, in order to get onto the organ.

I: That was the first Wurlitzer you played, wasn't it?
RD: That was the first Wurlitzer I played, yes, yes.

I: But I think you moved down to Birmingham for your first job on a Wurlitzer?
RD: My first job was at the West End Cinema in Birmingham. That would be about 19 . . . was it 27? 28? . . . 28, yes, because I went up to Preston in 1929 and got married.

I: And that again was to take your first job in Blackpool?
RD: I had an audition in 1930, yes. It was a very wild February day, we came on the Promenade, and I was frightened to death because I was out of a job then. I was told afterwards there were quite a number of entrants for it, but I didn't know, I thought I was the only one. I'd had a chance to go before, but my mother thought Blackpool was too wicked for me! They were Methodists, you know, very narrow people.

I: The organ you were playing there, it was for dancing, wasn't it? It wasn't for the cinema anymore. What did that mean to you?
RD: They asked me if I'd played for dancing (Mr. Jepson, our musical advisor). I said, "Oh yes." I'd played for *one* dance, at the Cutlers' Hall in Sheffield. I'd been sent home halfway through! There again, I'd had no experience of playing for dancing, but I was desperate! So I got the metronome going. The very first night, the pianist said to me, "What was that?"

I said, "It was a Quickstep."

He said, "You're telling me!"

The musical advisor, Jepson, said to me, "HAVE you played for dancing?"

I said, "Oh yes."

He said to me, "If you don't make a success of it, you'll go, and the **** organ as well!"

And of course, there was no amplification, and when you'd get a crowded ballroom you couldn't hear the organ at the end of the ballroom, so in '33 or '34 we started to make a suggestion for another organ.

Reginald Dixon *(Thompson collection)*

I: You, of course, then got a new one, with three manuals, and grand piano, xylophone, and . . .
RD: Yes, and I'm responsible for that specification. I say that, whether they shoot me for it or not, but I wanted to have those biting reeds for dance work. Now, of course, they've got marvellous amplification and they can make it fill the place, can't they, without distortion? Things are so much easier than they were in the days gone by. I keep quoting what there wasn't in those days, but it's perfectly

true. It was pretty hard work. You'd no microphones to speak to the people! And I never had a heavy voice, a big voice.

Before the war, I never got home when the season started! I'd be there in the morning and the afternoon, and then they decided to introduce me playing in the ballet, the Children's Ballet, which a lot of the older people will remember. So there were two shows in the summer, with the ballet, 2:30 and (or was it 3:30? It doesn't really matter.) and 7 o'clock at one time, the times varied. Then we had two sessions and late dances, too. We had all the bands like Joe Loss, Ken Mackintosh, Jack Hylton, Ambrose. They used to do a week at the Palace in the Varieties, then come across and play for a late dance, and *I* was in for the interval again! They used to bring me a nice steak and chips at teatime!

I: How much were you getting a week for this then?
RD: Well, I started off in the wintertime at six pounds a week, and in the summer, nine pounds a week!

I: Well, of course, even before the war, in the mid-1930s you were already broadcasting, weren't you?
RD: Yes, one August before the war I did eight broadcasts in one week, and they were all live! In those days, you see, you hadn't the recordings, they were live, and they were sent out to places like Canada. I often wonder if anybody ever heard them! We did get occasional letters. Sometimes these were 3 o'clock and 4 o'clock in the morning. Then later I started with Radio Luxemburg. I did three nights a month starting at midnight. They wouldn't close the ballroom till 4 o'clock in the morning. I remember struggling with the melody from "Rhapsody in Blue," the middle part you know. I had to announce at the end of it and I kept stumbling over the announcement. And of course, there again, you know, they were wax records, you hadn't tape. I had just done a successful one, and leaning back, I heard a slow handclap up on the balcony! It was one of my keen fans, the fireman! He thought he was giving me a bit of applause. I said, "I could kill you! You just ruined my record." I had to go through the whole lot again after that.

I: As well as the broadcasting, there were records you started to make in the '30s too, weren't there?
RD: Yes, yes.

I: And you were selling millions. These were 78s, of course. What was your favorite?
RD: Well, I don't . . . do you know, I can't really remember.

I: "Tiger Rag" was one I think that had a big sale.
RD: That was the highest selling record (in about 1934 I think it was) in the country, wasn't it, that "Tiger Rag?" I used to listen to the dance bands and I must have copied what they did. Of course, "Tiger Rag" was a favorite amongst all the bands.

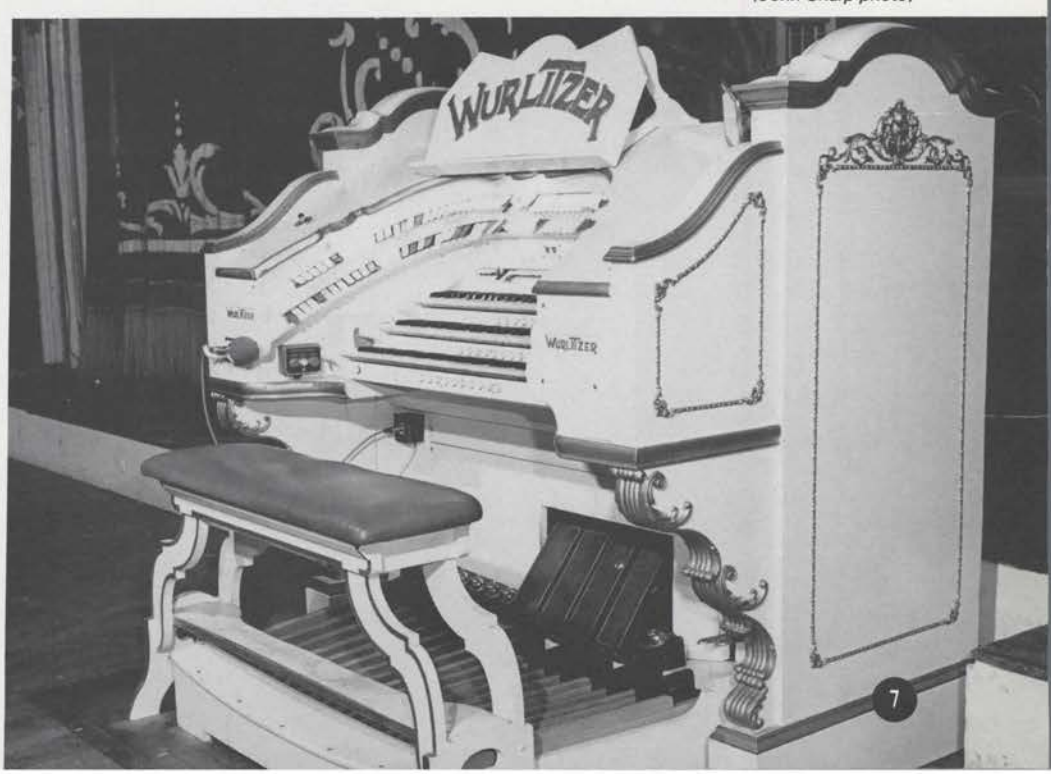
I consider my technique was because I had rehearsed so much on the piano and done all types of scale practice. Minor scales, major scales, double thirds, all that, which gave me a good technique. You see, now take the modern electronic organ. Your hands don't get strong playing one of those because there's no resistance in them is there? On a Wurlitzer you've got the time lag to fight, too. One fellow once said to me, "Do you realize that your feet are in front of your hands?" I said, "No, I don't realize it, but I know why, 'cause it takes longer for the sound to go through that big pipe than it does through the shorter ones." Which is true, isn't it? You see, you've got to wait until the wind travels round. It can probably be only a fraction of a second, but it's there. So therefore, your feet have got to be in front and the lower the longer it takes. That comes automatically.

Yes, I consider that playing the piano, practicing on the piano, was responsible for my technique on the organ. I'm afraid I couldn't do it now.

I: The war years. You went into the R.A.F., I think. Went in as an Aircraftsman and came out as a Squadron Leader?
RD: Acting Squadron Leader, yes. What happened, I tried to join up quietly, going to Gloucester, as a radio operator, but someone found out and sent me to Uxbridge as a musician. I had a five-piece band eventually, arriving at Northolt, with 90% Polish personnel. Very brave men, too. I've always had very great admiration for the Polish people. It was, as you know, just after the Battle of Britain when I joined up, and we used to try to play Chopin; they loved Chopin. There was a Polish Sergeant Pilot there. I was Acting Sergeant at that time, in the Sergeant's Mess, and he always used to ask me to play "Poeme" by Fibisch.

I felt it wasn't a war, it wasn't what I joined up for. So I went in for a commission and eventually got one. They put me into movement control, which was connected with RTOs and Air Ministry movements. In fact, I went on all the D-Day exercises and finally finished up at Air Ministry

Console of the "Dancing Queen," the 3/14 Wurlitzer Opus 2187 in the famous Tower Ballroom Blackpool, England. Designed by Reginald Dixon, it was opened by him April 10, 1935, and played by him until he retired in 1970. *(John Sharp photo)*



when they were preparing for the invasion of Japan. Then they dropped the atom bomb there and eventually I was demobbed. I don't want to go into a lot of details over the war, but I felt I was a small cog in a very important job, that's all, and I look back and felt that I did something worthwhile. I used to occasionally go up to Bangor (where the BBC theatre organ was housed) on my leave and do a broadcast. I remember on one exercise I was at Old Sarum where they were all congregating for the invasion, and I heard an organ as I went past the Nissen huts. It was Charlie Smart doing a broadcast that I should have done! I was "somewhere in England" and nobody knew where I was. That was prior to D-Day. Looking back, I wouldn't have missed that now, but there were times I used to worry, wondering if I ever would get back to playing.

I: In spite of all that, you became a national broadcasting figure in the really big days of radio just after the war.
RD: Yes, it was hard work. I felt it was hard work to come back again somehow, because, in five years another generation had sprung up, see? I mean now, after 14 years away from Blackpool, a number of people say "Who's Reginald Dixon?" Which is true. People say, "Oh, people will remember YOU forever." No, it doesn't happen, does it?

The morning broadcasts . . . it astounded me that, you know. Ten o'clock in the morning. They were coming in at 9 o'clock and the ballroom would be packed with people! It was really remarkable. I couldn't understand it . . . just for half an hour's broadcast! One of the things which they loved was to sing. I remember the producer saying, "Try to get them singing." I said "Try! I can't *stop* them!" They'd sing anything. So that was the idea of the last five minutes being a sing-along. And if it wasn't in I'd get letters complaining about it.

I: You were awarded the MBE, but one of the big honors was to be allowed to switch on Blackpool Illuminations in 1956.
RD: Yes, it was a wonderful year.

I: You were such a tremendously glamorous figure then. I think, to cope with the fans, you had photographs made that tore off like postage stamps, perforated like postage stamps.
RD: Oh, yes, mmm. A firm in Dundee did them for me. They had glue on the back and they used to stick them on the corner of the autograph book page, inside. Yes. I'd almost forgotten about those! I had some of them at one time, but they've disappeared like other things.

I: You were judging the beauty contests, of course.
RD: Yes, yes. You make a few friends there and I always think a lot of enemies, too! I remember walking past, and there was a girl from Sheffield. It was a terrific walk round that stadium — like walking to the scaffold I thought sometimes. As I was walking past the Sheffield girl (she didn't get a prize), a voice said "Th'art not a very good picker, Reggie!"

I: 1969 was your Ruby Wedding, and retirement too, after 40 years at the Tower.
RD: Actually, it was '70, I thought.

I: 1970 you actually finished?
RD: Yes, '69 was the starting of it. In many ways I didn't want to leave, but I just felt that the strain was beginning to prove too much. You see, I started in May, I used to supposedly have a day off, but the last two years I did a BBC program with Vince Hill on my day off, and then I did two series with Moira Anderson, and that was supposedly my day off. I used to get home at half past five! My wife would have a lovely meal for me, but that was my day off. Then there was the weekend, and of course, as you know, I did three shows on Sundays. I didn't play as much as I did before the war because I couldn't. So then I realized that possibly I could move around a bit. I was able to go over to Holland with my Dutch friends.

I played the very first electronic organ in 1934, in the cellar in the Plaza, Stockport. It was a sack of potatoes, supposedly! It had been brought over against an embargo. The man that told me has gone now so it won't really matter. That was the first Hammond. They called it a Lafleur, in those days, to differentiate between the church and the cinema. The Hammond was the church model, and the same model was the Lafleur because some people would say, "We don't want a cinema organ in our church." Now, of course, you more or less have to play a computer, haven't you? I could get on any Wurlitzer or a Compton and within a short while produce some sounds — a few settings here and there — but I could hesitate with an electronic organ because they are not the same, they are not alike, are they? They're all different, they all have different positions for this, that and the other. I think they've been a good thing because they do produce some brilliant young organists, don't they? You might say, "Well, YOU haven't got an electronic organ." I haven't for the simple reason that they keep improving them! I think there's a bit of Yorkshire still left in me; I won't get one till they get the ultimate. But it's probably going to be too late then.

I was looking the other day, and I could see the Tower. Whenever we used to drive back home when we'd been away during our holiday, I used to say to my wife, "There's the office! Back again tomorrow!" I still regard it as "the office," although it's now 14 years since I left there. Actually, there's a certain amount of luck in life. Well, call it luck, if you like, maybe I'm wrong there. As I said before, I sometimes think your life is planned out for you. I have regrets, but I've got a lot of very happy memories, VERY happy memories. □

CLOSING CHORD

"The flag on Blackpool Tower is flying at half-mast today." Thus the BBC announced to the world on its Overseas Service on May 9 that the world's most popular theatre pipe organist, **Reginald Dixon**, had passed from the scene. Popular as many other organists were, in the UK and USA, none were truly beloved of the general public as was Dixon. Genuinely a household name in the UK, Holland and throughout the British Commonwealth, he will be mourned by countless people to whom his name was synonymous with organ music; in fact, many of them could probably not name another organist. Millions danced to his music in the famed Tower Ballroom over the 40 years of his residency there and countless others listened to his many broadcasts or bought his recordings. At one

Reginald Dixon

time he was broadcasting on the BBC up to eight half-hour programs a week (what a wealth of material he must have covered) and he remains the world's most prolific recording organist.

He was born in Sheffield, Yorkshire, in 1904 and took piano lessons quite early in life. He taught himself to play the organ at Birley Carr Methodist Church in his home town, but his first job was as a pianist for the silent movies in an industrial town in England's midlands. While appearing at Preston he met Vera, his future wife, and popped the question to her while sitting in the balcony of the Tower Ballroom, long before he had any thoughts of playing there.

While at the Preston theatre he heard that the Tower company was looking for an organist to play for dancing, and even though he had no experience in this kind of playing, he applied. To his surprise he was appointed and commenced his duties in 1930. By 1932 he was already recording and broadcasting with some regularity, and by 1934 it was decided to replace the 2/10 Wurlitzer with an instrument more suited to Reg's ability and fame, so the 3/13 Wurlitzer was installed, which became world famous as Dixon captured the hearts of the English with his infectious rhythm playing.

His white suit, two-tone shoes and pencil-slim moustache were copied by countless young men of the day. In a much publicized newspaper poll he supplanted Gracie Fields as England's most popular entertainer. At the peak of his popularity in 1939 he volunteered for the RAF and was absent from Blackpool until 1945, during which time "Squadron Leader Dixon and his melody sextet" entertained the troops from "somewhere in England" until he put his foot down and insisted on active service.

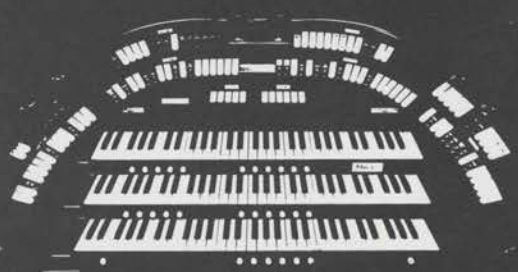
In 1945 he returned to Blackpool, nervously wondering if his public would still want him. He need not have worried. His popularity was as great as before, so much so that Queen Elizabeth awarded him the M.B.E. He continued broadcasting, recording and playing for dancing until his retirement from the Tower in 1970. His final performance was broadcast in its entirety on the BBC and at its conclusion he received a 20-minute standing ovation, with many people openly weeping. It was described in the press as "the end of an era."

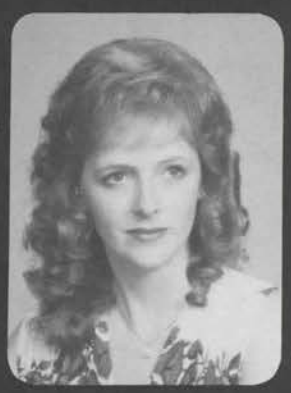
Dixon continued playing, however, and toured England giving concerts wherever there were pipe organs, or touring his own electronic organ. The BBC installed a 3/13 Wurlitzer (formerly in the Empress Ballroom, Blackpool, whose nucleus was the original Tower 2/10) in the Playhouse Theatre, Manchester, so that he could continue to broadcast regularly. His final concert performance took place in the City Hall of his home town in 1978 and he then returned to his bungalow on the outskirts of Blackpool.

He will be fondly remembered, not only for his music and recordings, but also for the profound effect he had on the lives of quite a few young musicians, many of whom became professional organists solely as a result of his example and inspiration. He always had time to reply to fan letters or spend time with his fans, and continued to correspond with the writer and offer encouragement right up to this year. He leaves a void which can never be filled.

DON THOMPSON □

KEYBOARD TECHNIQUES





by Cheryl Seppala

COUNTER MELODY

After you have become acquainted with the vast variety of rhythm patterns available to complement your favorite melodies, you may wish to add a left-hand counter-melody to further enhance your arrangement.

Let us simply define a left-hand counter-melody as holding down any note of a chord while playing a rhythmic accompaniment around it. A counter-melody improves the sound of a rhythmic accompaniment by eliminating the choppy, monotonous effect, while adding pretty harmony.

The first step in learning to play a counter-melody is to develop the ability to sustain one finger while tapping the other fingers around it. We will call this finger independence. As a preparatory independence exercise, play a four-note chord with the left hand in this manner: Press the lowest note of the chord down firmly, then tap the remaining keys in the chord lightly and staccato. If you are performing this correctly, the counter-melody note predominates the others. Repeat this procedure using the top note of the chord as the counter-melody. Finally, try this exercise using one