

Theatre Organ News From Australia



by
*Bruce
Ardley*



In Australia we were not blessed with the large number of theatre organs installed in Britain and the U.S.A. This was due to Australia's small population during the 1920s and 1930s. However, we did receive three 4/21 and five 3/15 Wurlitzers, as well as many smaller Wurlitzers and Christies.

Last November English concert organist Len Rawle revisited our shores and had the honour of opening the 3/8 Wurlitzer in the Collegiate College Hall, Hobart, Tasmania. Two more openings are scheduled to take place, one being the reopening, at the rebuilt Dendy Cinema Brighton, of the superb 3/15 Wurlitzer. This organ originally graced the orchestra pit of Melbourne's Capitol Theatre and in the latter days, the original Dendy Cinema. The organ has been lovingly and painstakingly refurbished by a dedicated team of workers. It has been fitted with solid-state switching. The console has been repolished and looks glorious.

The other opening will be that of the 3/8 Compton at the Albert Hall, Canberra. This organ was formerly in a cinema at Cheltenham, England. Originally purchased by the proprietors of the Dendy Cinema, it was intended to be installed in another of their theatres. However, this never came to fruition, and it was sold privately. Subsequently the Canberra Division of TOSA purchased it. The opening will provide an exciting event in

the Australian organ scene in 1986.

The TOSA National Convention is hosted in a different state each year and held over the Easter Vacation. The 1986 Annual TOSA Convention was held in Brisbane, Capital of Queensland, the Sunshine State. Titled "Puttin' On the Ritz in 1986," the featured artist was New Zealand's Richard Hore. Richard has been blind since birth and has a highly developed sense of hearing. He has released six LP albums on electronic organs and constantly tours throughout New Zealand.

Queensland's Division has its own organ, a 3/8 Christie installed in the Kelvin Grove High School Auditorium. This instrument was originally installed in the Granada Cinema, Maidstone, Kent, England.

During early March, the ATOS "Pipes Down Under" tour spent four days in Melbourne. Members of the group took the opportunity to inspect the still-silent Dendy Brighton 3/15 Wurlitzer. At the Village Cinema Reservoir they had the opportunity to play the 2/9 Blackett and Howden organ which is controlled from its Christie console. Also, they had the opportunity to see artists Tony Fenelon and Ray Thornley in concert at the Moorabbin Town Hall 4/22 Wurlitzer. A good deal of the concert was unexpectedly performed on a Yamaha FX20.

During 1985, the Assembly Hall at St. Peter's College Adelaide was severely damaged

by fire. The organ installed is the 3/15 Wurlitzer formerly in the Regent Theatre, Adelaide. The console suffered a scorching; however, the only damage to the pipes occurred when a fireman inadvertently trod on a few when checking through the chamber.

The rebuilding of the Hall is expected to be completed prior to the coming Christmas, but it will be a considerably longer period before the delightful Wurlitzer is giving forth. We must be thankful it was saved.

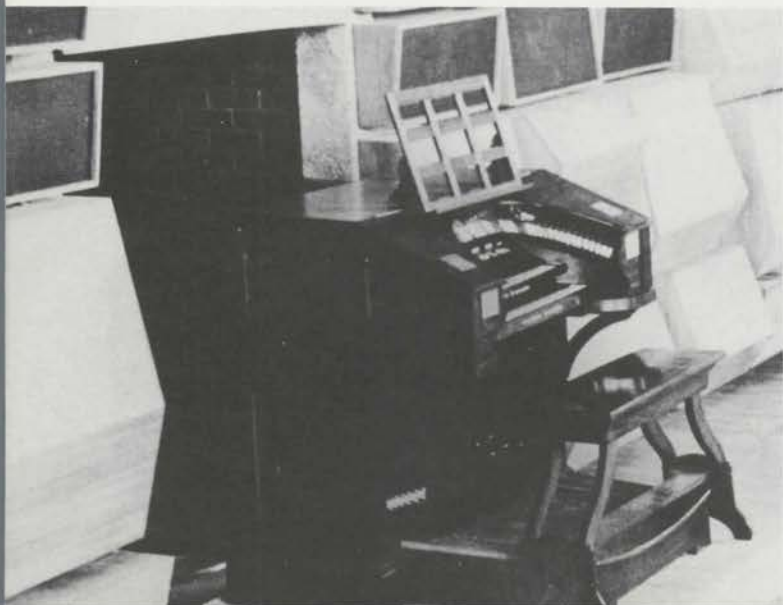
This year was the 60th birthday of the original opening of the 2/10 Wurlitzer in the Arcadia Theatre, Chatswood. A suburb of Sydney, it is situated on Sydney's North Shore, across the Harbour Bridge from the main city.

The Arcadia opened in 1915 and was successful from the beginning. In the early 1920s the owners had the building almost entirely rebuilt to seat just under 2000. The interior was Romanesque in style and the fittings were luxurious.

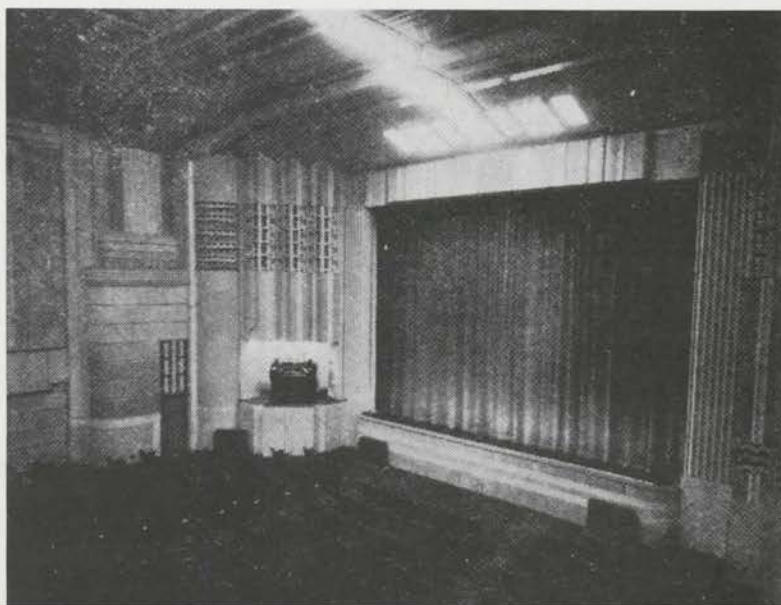
In 1924 the first theatre organ of larger dimensions was installed in Sydney's new palatial Prince Edward Theatre. The instrument was a 2/10 Wurlitzer Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra. The Arcadia's showman-manager Herb Crispe had been eyeing the scene in the United States, noting the increasing use of the unit organ. The success of the organ at the Prince Edward certainly did not go unnoticed by the proprietors of the Arcadia. In August 1925, after due consideration, the Arcadia proprietors travelled to the Prince Edward to meet the Australian Wurlitzer representative, and to hear American organist Eddie Horton, who soon put the organ through its paces. After playing a wide range of pieces to demonstrate the organ's amazing versatility, a reel of the movie *King of Kings* was then shown to the group. Obviously moved by the organ accompaniment, a contract was signed later that morning.

In December 1925 the Wurlitzer 2/10, Opus 1167, arrived on horse drawn carts with the labelling "Organ for the Arcadia Theatre Chatswood" and "The Largest Organ in the State." A cameraman was engaged to film the arrival of the organ at the Sydney docks, then

Console of the Arcadia Wurlitzer now installed in the Chatswood Town Hall. Part of the chamber coverings can be seen at either side of the recess where the console is stored when not in use.



Interior of the Arcadia Theatre, circa 1936. Genuine "Art Moderne."



to its eventual destination. Unfortunately, this film was lost during the 1960s. Little structural work was required to house the pipework and the console was placed on a raised dais to the left of the proscenium.

Some time earlier, a talented young organist and music teacher, Nicholas Robins, had been employed as pianist in the Arcadia orchestra. The manager often took Nicholas to the Wurlitzer representative's home to play the Wurlitzer installed there and did all he could to encourage his development of the-atre organ technique, so that he could have the honour of opening the Arcadia Wurlitzer early in 1926. However, this was not to be, for it was found that Eddie Horton, who had just concluded a season in Brisbane, was available. A hasty telegram confirmed arrangements, and on Monday night, February 8, 1926, Eddie Horton opened the new Chatswood Arcadia Wurlitzer, to a crowd never before seen in the theatre. *The Great Northern* newspaper reported this momentous North Shore occasion in full:

"The Arcadia Theatre Chatswood was packed from floor to ceiling last night, the chief attraction being the opening of the great Wurlitzer Orchestral Organ, which had been installed by that enterprising showman, Mr. Herb Crispe. The motto of the proprietor of the Arcadia is 'We lead — follow who may' and, determined to keep his playhouse in the vanguard of progress, Mr. Crispe, at an expense running into many thousands of pounds, decided to install this wonderful instrument, and to complete the programme, Mr. Crispe has engaged Mr. Eddie Horton, of Prince Edward fame, city, to render a programme of music each evening. Little wonder then that the Arcadia was booked out days before the opening night. Still there is ample opportunity to hear this great organ played by the Prince of organists as Mr. Horton is to render nightly an attractive musical program which is sure to be appreciated by the patrons.

"In a very few words the great organist was introduced last night to the audience by Mr. Crispe, and loud applause greeted his masterly manipulation of this King of Instruments. To show that the musical side of the programme at the Arcadia is to be on an elaborate scale, it may be mentioned that the present up-to-date orchestra is to be maintained in addition to the great organ. Such a feast of music cannot fail to appeal to the residents of the North Shore."

Details of the instrument and other words of praise for the venture followed. The film magazine *Everyone's* gave a front page cover story. The review is creditable, but several blunders were made, the most unforgivable being the mis-naming of the theatre as the Dreadnought. These two theatres were in constant competition.

The organ became very popular with the patrons and its music was loved by most; some people who previously had not been movie-goers would leave for home as the film started. Others, like an enthusiastic youth in the early '30s, had an insatiable desire to play it. This particular Horton hid in the theatre after an evening session, and after all had left,

JULY/AUGUST 1986

ARCADIA THEATRE

CHATSWOOD

For Reservations 'Phone J2832 and J2833

To-Night and Every Night and at Matinee Saturday

EDDIE HORTON

THE MASTER ORGANIST, at the Console of the

MIGHTY WURLITZER

HOPE-JONES ORGAN

(THE BIGGEST IN THE STATE)

and E. James Davidson & the Arcadia Concert Orchestra

Features for To-night (Tues.), Wed., Feb. 9, 10:-

All Star Cast in
"The Winding Stair"

Adolphe Menjou in
"Lost a Wife"

Opening publicity in *The Great Northern* newspaper, February 9, 1926.

groped his way to the switchboards, put on a couple of lights, found the organ controls, and sat at the console, his dream wish come true, playing well into the early hours of the morning.

For a while, the organ and orchestra were used together to accompany silent films and do other feature work, the organist featured two and three times during the session, including intermission.

With the coming of sound to the Arcadia, the orchestra was dispensed with. However, the management decided to continue featuring the now-resident organist Nicholas Robins at the Mighty Wurlitzer, despite the new attraction of talkies.

In June 1936, the Arcadia was completely renovated and modernized by Chas. Bohring-

er to conform to the typical commercial architecture of the day, "streamlining," strong verticals and triangular motifs. The beautiful classic proscenium was razed and in its stead rose a monument in plaster-work and ornamental grille-work. The organ console was placed under the left chamber in a futuristically styled alcove. Not long after the installation, the Arcadia organ was regularly broadcast over the A.B.C. and several commercial radio stations. Recordings for international release were made by E.M.I. on many Sydney organs, including the Arcadia.

Shadows crept stealthily over the cinema scene from the advent of television to Australia in 1956. In November 1956, the Arcadia organ was used for the last time by a resident organist, Charles Tuckwell, and remained

Nicholas Robins (circa 1930), the first resident organist at the Arcadia.

(Photo courtesy of Mrs. Robins)



idle until organists Ron West and Barrie Brettoner were engaged for Wednesday matinees and Saturday evenings. The organ was used right up to the last night of the Arcadia, Wednesday, April 26, 1961. Thus the curtains fell for the last time, to an almost empty house, Ron West paying his last respects to the organ playing "We'll Meet Again."

The Arcadia Theatre building, furnishings, fittings and the historic Wurlitzer organ were placed on the market for sale. Though offers of more than \$2000 were made for the instrument, it was finally donated to the Council of the Municipality of Willoughby, where the theatre was located, by the theatre proprietors. It was later dismantled by organ builders S. T. Noad & Son and packed in car crates to be stored at the Council's Depot, where it lay untouched until November 1969.

So, quietly the Arcadia Theatre came to an end, even before the people were conscious of it, the local people who had by the thousands watched and helped this great suburban cinema grow over the decades from a small showplace to a fine top-ranking affair of the '30s to '50s.

I recall the radio broadcasts of the late 1940s and early 1950s by Charles Tuckwell, the then-resident organist. In the early 1950s, when on annual leave in Sydney, I visited the Arcadia for a normal movie session to hear the organ live. The sound was bright and un-

impeded by heavy curtaining, and Charles Tuckwell's snappy style of playing was memorable.

The organ is now installed in the Chatswood Town Hall and whilst it was officially opened in the 1970s, there is still much work needing to be done. This is sad, for although not large, it is a quality instrument and could proudly hold its own on the international circuit. Let us hope that this will soon occur.

I am indebted to Ian Griggs of Sydney for permission to use much of the material from his excellent book completed in the early 1970s on the history of the Arcadia and other cinemas in the surrounding district.

Bruce Ardley, well-known Australian organist and theatre organ enthusiast, has agreed to write this column for THEATRE ORGAN on a regular basis. His column will cover the theatre organ scene in Australia.

Bruce studied classical piano for nine years, beginning at age nine. He first heard a theatre organ when he was 13 and immediately became addicted. He began the study of classical organ at 17, and subsequently studied theatre organ with the late Stanfield Holliday at the 4/19 Wurlitzer in the Melbourne Regent. He has been a member of the Victorian Division of the Theatre Organ Society of Australia for over 25 years. By profession he is a bank manager. □

surmise is perhaps 60-65. Sorry to state, but most won't be around in the next ten to 15 years and there goes the theatre organ. Players, but no one to listen.

I doubt that the organ crews want to destroy their hobby by up-grading to synthesizers and electronic gizmos. We need to get more older people and those in their fifties to bolster the art. The new young generation of music lovers have tin ears. If it's not loud it's no good. They want to jump and shake, not listen quietly to some good music. They are also capable of damaging an installation. An exchange of audience is not an answer. A campaign to introduce new organ players to the pipes is in order. Use advertising money and price inducements to the organ and piano teachers and organ dealers to create a bigger audience of the present new organ players. Select the groups that will respond.

Maybe dealers and teachers can contribute to the cost of a bus load of new people who never heard of a pipe organ but want to see what it's all about. If they like to listen to it, I'm sure they may be an added customer for future concerts.

Special prices could be arranged with the chapters to get many from nursing homes who are the listening age. Dealer participation with their organ customers and organ classes should be made a part of the program. Maybe free copies of THEATRE ORGAN to people attending electronic organ concerts can help the education process.

ATOS and its chapters need a new way of thinking.

Musically,
Al Kaufman

Bridgeport, Connecticut

Dear Mr. Gilbert:

With regard to the article "The Theatre Organ . . . Wherein Lies Its Future?" by John Ledwon, in your January/February 1986 issue, I have a few comments.

While I agree that much of the popular music today has its appeal based upon the delivery and style of the artist, with the melodic considerations coming in a distant second, it should be mentioned that the old-time style of music with "hummable melodies" is still alive and well — except that such music is now in the country and western category. The only problem is that the theatre organ is not recognized as a standard instrument in the country and western field.

Second, overlooked in the article was the fact that many theatre organ concerts — and a generous number of theatre organ recordings — emphasize classical music. This type of music has not gone out of style and is still popular with concert goers, if not teenagers and the younger generation.

Mr. Ledwon's points are well taken, and it is incumbent upon all of us to help promote the popularity of theatre organs. It is interesting that when theatre organs were first installed in pizza parlors back in the 1960's, much was said that indicated that purists were offended by the entire concept. Now it seems that purists are a bit sad that the day of pizza with pipe organ accompaniment seems to be fading.

Letters to the Editors

Opinions expressed in this column are those of the correspondents, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or the policies of ATOS or THEATRE ORGAN.

Letters concerning all aspects of the theatre organ hobby are welcome. Unless clearly marked "not for publication" letters may be published in whole or in part.

Address: Editor, THEATRE ORGAN
3448 Cowper Court
Palo Alto, CA 94306

Dear Bob:

I would like to thank most sincerely all those very kind people who wrote to me and sent tapes of Al Melgard at the Barton organ in Chicago Stadium. The letters and tapes were very much appreciated. Thank you all.

Yours sincerely,
Laurie Morley (Mr.)
Stokely, England

Dear Editor:

"Why is it that the console of most theatre organs have been placed on the left side of the stage?" That gem extracted from *Etude* by Jason and The Old Prospector brought on acute nostalgia when I realized I was the question's author!

Since there were no theatre organs or theatre organists in my area, my meager source of TO lore was the yearly visits of the piano tuner. The *Etude* had a Q & A department and I bombarded them with TO queries so often that they began ignoring me!

All because I happened to walk by the local

music store with its Victrola in the doorway playing Crawford's "Indian Love Call."

So my special thanks to "Nuggets from the Golden Days" for digging up such treasures. (The other question referred to, about blowers, was probably mine, too! Fifty-two years is a long time.)

Incidentally, why is it that the consoles of most theatre organs have been placed on the left side of the stage?

Sincerely,
Hugh Lineback
Silom Springs, Arkansas □

Dear Editor:

I would like to add a few comments to the article by John Ledwon in January/February 1986 THEATRE ORGAN. He has analyzed the problem correctly and his suggestions have merit. The present crop of theatre organists have a handle on the type of music the present older groups want. There should be no shortage of players. The shortage, however, is the audience. The median age I would