

The Theatre Organ in Britain

By Frank Hare

HAVING GIVEN YOU an idea of the growth of the cinema organ in Great Britain, and an outline of the makes and sizes installed, we come now to the various positions favoured for the organ chambers and consoles. Whereas, I believe, it is customary in the United States to find organs divided to either side of the auditorium, comparatively few are so installed in Britain. The five largest Wurlitzers and several smaller instruments of the three leading makes—Wurlitzer, Compton and Christie—are treated in this manner, but usually where the chambers are in the auditorium walls, they are found at one side only, one chamber above the other. This idea proves highly satisfactory in most cases, but over about ten units I would consider it preferable to divide. Several large organs, including the 30-unit Christie at Marble Arch, the 20-unit Conacher at Nottingham, and the 16-unit Wurlitzer at Kilburn, are at one side only, which possibly accounts for the cramped state of the chambers at Marble Arch! In some cases, compensating amplifiers have been fitted, with speakers behind the dummy grilles opposite, which is surely admission that divided organs would have given better distribution of sound.

At many cinemas, as in the organ-equipped ballrooms at Blackpool, the chambers have been placed side by side above the stage, the sound travelling down a short concrete or metal duct to emerge through a grille in the ceiling above the proscenium arch. Thus the sound from both chambers is nicely blended before it reaches the audience, and provided the installation is well planned this position is satisfactory to all parts of the house, except perhaps the back stalls, where there is some loss due to the presence of the circle, or balcony, whichever one prefers to call it. Unfortunately, more than one superb organ has been ruined through bad placing of the chambers, resulting in the circle being flooded with sound, and the stalls left in comparative silence—not to mention the poor organist bravely trying to overcome a terrific time-lag, and unable to hear anything but the loudest stops of the organ! In such cases amplification has usually been provided for the stalls, but that is a poor substitute for the real thing.

Finally, we come to the under-stage location, where the shutters open directly into the orchestra pit, usually without any grilles. Many organs have been installed in this manner, including such well known ones as the Granada, Tooting; Opera House, Blackpool; Gaumont, Manchester; Odeon, Leicester Square, and Ritz, Belfast. Such instruments are a delight to play, from the organist's point of view, and are favoured by the tuning and maintenance staff—except on the occasions when floodwater decides to invade the chambers—but as a listener I find them the least satisfactory. Sitting anywhere near the front of the auditorium, one hears far too many sounds from the action, tremulants, and shutters, and even, on occasion, the tremulous puffs of wind rushing into the pipes, which themselves lose a great deal of tonal beauty when heard at close range. But most disturbing of all is the "lopsided" effect when one has to sit in front of one of the chambers, the noise from which overpowers that from the other. It is not altogether pleasant to have to listen to an accompaniment for twenty minutes, trying to guess what tune is emerging from the Solo chamber. The "swing" which one encounters with divided organs has frequently been criticised, but I find it infinitely preferable to the effect just mentioned. I should add that small organs in single chambers may be very

successfully placed beneath the stage, from which position the sound fills the hall well without causing discomfort to those nearby.

Coming to the placing of consoles: the usual position is on a lift (elevator) in the centre of the orchestra pit, except where the latter takes the form of a rising platform for full orchestra, in which case the console has its independent lift at one end of the pit, generally the left. At the Odeon, Leicester Square, however, the console is on a central lift, surrounded by a rising orchestral platform, which can, when desired, be made into an unbroken platform for orchestra only, by taking the console deep down and covering its shaft over. Three or four consoles are on turntables also, so that they can be moved from side to side during performances, or gradually turn as the lift rises. The comparatively few consoles not equipped with lifts generally date from the pre-talkie era, and most of those which were originally placed angularly near one end of the pit have since been moved to the centre. At the famous Tower Ballroom, Blackpool, the Wurlitzer console is on an electrically propelled platform which glides from the back to the front of the stage, along tracks in the floor.

Regrettably, the Tower Ballroom was badly damaged by fire during December, 1956, and the console and pipe work were damaged. The console requires new keys for the three manuals, new stop keys, and new contacts. The shade shutters were scorched, and in general the pipe work was covered with soot. The Tower Ballroom hopes to reopen in time for Whitsun, and Wurlitzer are working on the organ now.

Possibly the fact that the majority of unit organs in Britain were installed after the introduction of talkies—for entertainment rather than accompaniment—explains the rarity of twin-consoled instruments. There is not one example by Wurlitzer in the Country, and only five by Compton and two by Christie. (As a point of interest, the dual-purpose Compton in the Southampton Guildhall has two consoles, one with luminous stop heads for concert use, and one with stopkeys and cinema-type layout for light entertainment use.) In some cases the pit console has been placed on a lift for use in the normal way when it is not desired to make a special stage setting to feature the mobile stage console. With the fitting of big CinemaScope screens into nearly every theatre, I feel, however, that the day of the stage console is nearly over, and am afraid that the future is going to see them tucked away in a corner, covered by dust sheets. Fortunately there are but few single-consoled organs with consoles on the stage, and it is to be hoped that the owners of such instruments will follow the example set at the Astoria, Aberdeen, where the screen has been positioned to allow the console to still be brought into view, thus permitting CinemaScope *and* the organ interlude!

The Granada, Tooting—mentioned in Vol. I, No. 4 in connection with John Madin—was the scene of a second accident. The ceiling of the circle on the right side facing the screen fell down on Christmas Eve, injuring two patrons. Members of The Theatre Organ Club now claim that "we brought the ceiling down with our annual Christmas meeting."

A third disaster was at the Gaumont, Watford, Herts., when a fire broke out under the console, destroying the console and part of the stage and screen. The theatre opened the same day with the stage mended and with a new screen; but no console.