

The 1988 COS Theatre Organ Workshop

by Roger Hedley

Like ATOS, the British Cinema Organ Society (COS) is keen to do all it can do promote the theatre organ, to give help and advice to organists, and in particular to encourage young people to play the theatre organ and keep it alive for future generations to enjoy. There is a wealth of expertise both in Britain and America when it comes to theatre organ performance. Hence, the idea of a Theatre Organ Workshop was born, to try to bring together those with knowledge and expertise and those seeking it, and all in just four days of almost non-stop activity!

This year's Workshop was the third to be organized by the COS, and the unanimous opinion is that it was the best yet! Run by COS Musical Advisor John Norris and publicity man David Lowe, it attracted some 60 people, aged between 10 and 70. A number of young organists attended, with the very welcome support of their parents who, in some cases, were able to come along, too!

The event centered around the society's very own magnificent 4/23, South Bank Wurlitzer organ. This instrument started life in the famous 3,500-seat Trocadero Cinema, Elephant and Castle, in south London. It was installed in 1930 and made famous by the legendary Quentin Maclean. Alas, the cinema closed in 1963 and was demolished to make way for a far less attractive office block, but fortunately the COS was able to save the organ.

The Wurlitzer is now installed in the Edric Hall of the South Bank Polytechnic, a college of higher education only a few hundred yards from the site of the Trocadero. The organ has been enlarged slightly, from 21 ranks to 23, but this has all been done in such a way that it does not detract from the historical significance of the instrument. Thanks to modern technology, the organ could be restored to its earlier specification in a matter of an hour or so should this be needed. A number of top American organists have been very welcome recent guest artists at Friday night concerts: Tom Hazleton, Bill Vlasak, Dan Bellomy, Lance Luce, Lew Williams, current ATOS Theatre Organist of the Year, was the special guest at this year's Workshop.

The Workshop was officially opened on Sunday afternoon, August 21, with a concert at St. John Vianney Roman Catholic Church at Clayhall in northeast London. This spacious modern church houses a 3/6 Compton organ plus Melotone unit, formerly in the Ritz Cinema, Nuneaton, and moved to the church in 1968. To those used to 30+ ranks of Wurlitzer, a 3/6 Compton, even with its electronic Melotone division, may seem very small. However, the position of the organ and the acoustics of the church combine to produce a really big sound, and who better to exploit it than Lew Williams together with "the old organ grinder himself" Robin Richmond. Robin founded the long-running BBC radio show "The Organist Entertains," and after many years absence has now made a welcome return to the British concert scene.

On that Sunday morning, the COS was pleased to be able to support a concert being run by London and South of England Chapter at the Top Rank Club, Kilburn. We had the pleasure of hearing four young organists, Rachael Ward,

David Redfern, Peter Holt and Martin Harris, at the Quentin Maclean-designed 4/16 Wurlitzer. It was an event which fitted in very well with the aims of the COS Workshop.

After Clayhall came a chance to sample some classical organ music at the historic Southwark Cathedral, alongside London Bridge. The four-manual Lewis organ, installed in the Cathedral in 1897 and recently restored to its original condition, was in the capable hands of a good friend of the COS, Harry Bramma, the cathedral's Director of Music. Mr. Bramma demonstrated the organ, gave a short recital, and then — much to everyone's delight — declared open console!

Then came another musical change (no one can complain about lack of variety at a COS event!). The evening meal was taken at the Lee Valley Ice Centre, where David Lowe is the Musical Director, playing a "four-manual" Hammond-plus-additions. On this occasion, however, we were entertained by another young organist, Paul Sheffield, who plays regularly at the ice rink to accompany the skating sessions.

And so, after the first busy day, on to the overnight accommodation at Goldsmiths' College in southeast London. But, more "organ-ising" was to come! Our London District Secretary, John Leeming, had arranged a "Twenty Questions" quiz based around organs and organists, and the college itself also has an organ, a large four-manual Rushworth and Dreaper concert organ, which has recently been restored to health by the COS technical team.

After an early (for some, too early!) start on Monday, a morning of talks and seminars took place at the South Bank Polytechnic. Lew Williams provided an opening "Fanfare" on the Wurlitzer, following which official welcoming speeches were given by the Mayor of the London Borough of Southwark and by the Director of the Polytechnic.

The first session consisted of an hilarious hour with Robin Richmond talking about the theatre organ world and reminiscing about his own career. David Williams, one of the society's younger organists, then took over to talk about "Registering and Arranging, American-style," which is one of his particular interests and something he has studied over many years. David was followed by John Mann, whose topic was "Entertaining the public." John hails from the south coast seaside resort of Brighton and spends all his time entertaining people, touring with his Eminent 2000 theatre organ.

After lunch, John Barlow (a former ATOS London Chapter Young Theatre Organist of the Year) gave some very



Simon Gledhill leading a seminar at the South Bank Polytechnic.



Workshop participant Robert Hope-Jones (great-grandson of THE Robert Hope-Jones!) at the COS South Bank Wurlitzer.

good advice on "Arranging a Song for the Theatre Organ," proving that it is possible to play modern tunes on the theatre organ in an appealing and musical way.

Buses then took everyone to Alexandra Palace in north London. This famous north London landmark, surrounded by an extensive park, is not a royal palace but a "people's palace," built in 1873 as a place of entertainment and recreation for the people. In the Great Hall was installed a four-manual, 87 speaking stops, "Father Willis" concert organ, which was badly damaged during World War II and rendered unplayable. For reasons which are still unexplained, the Great Hall was gutted by fire in 1980. Fortunately, however, most of the organ had already been removed for renovation and so was saved. The huge Great Hall has now been rebuilt and the organ is being reinstalled, albeit in a smaller form than before the fire. We had the honour of being shown round the instrument by Henry Willis IV, the present head of the Henry Willis Organ Co., who are carrying out the reinstallation work. Although the work has not yet been completed and only the flue pipes were operational there was enough of it working to allow Lew Williams to give an impromptu recital!

Finally, we moved on to an evening of food, drink, theatre organ music and relaxation — at the Plough Inn, Great Munden. The Plough is a splendid British country "pub," in the depths of the Hertfordshire countryside and accessible only through some very narrow country lanes, which taxed the skills of our bus drivers to the full! The food was good, the beer excellent, and the ex-Gaumont Cinema, North Finchley, 3/10 Compton organ (plus grand piano, Melotone and Solo Cello!) was in the capable hands of Robert Wolfe, who demonstrated his special style of playing and answered questions from the audience.

For those of you who have not come across a Solo Cello before, perhaps I should explain that this is a John Compton invention which produces, by the mechanical bowing a single string, a sound not entirely unlike that made by a real cello. The Plough organ has one of the few remaining operational examples. All too soon closing time arrived, and the party had to return to Goldsmiths' College. But then again, there was always that concert organ to play (which some people did until the small hours of the morning!).

In addition to owning the South Bank Wurlitzer, the COS London District technical team also looks after a number of other organs in the London area. These include the lovely 2/8 Wurlitzer in the New Gallery in Regent Street (only the third Wurlitzer to reach the UK, and made

famous by Reginald Foort and those well-known sisters Ena Baga and Florence deJong), the little 2/5 Compton in the former Cameo-Poly Cinema, also in Regent Street (and now part of the Central London Polytechnic), the even smaller 2/4 "straight" Compton "Miniatura" organ in the Central London Polytechnic itself (but what a big sound!), and the fine 3/12 Christie in the Granada Cinema, Walthamstow (installed in 1930 and still going strong).

It was to these venues, plus Clayhall (and of course the South Bank Polytechnic) that group visits were made on both Tuesday and Wednesday mornings. Each small group was accompanied by at least one experienced theatre organist for a morning of personal tuition, advice and practice. The visits were arranged by Musical Advisor and top organ teacher John Norris. Both the 1987 and 1988 ATOS London Chapter Young Theatre Organist of the Year competitions were won by students taught by John Norris — in 1987, Benjamin Vine and in 1988, Christopher Bannister.

Tuesday afternoon was spent back at the South Bank Polytechnic, and opened with a talk by top BBC orchestral composer, arranger and conductor David Francis. With the help of Lew Williams at the Wurlitzer, David was able to illustrate just how aptly the description "Unit Orchestra" can be applied to a theatre organ and how orchestral music can be adapted for the organ. He had composed a special piece of music for the occasion and presented it to the society. Called "South Bank Showtime," it's just right as a signature tune for the organ, and everyone received a copy to take away!

Simon Gledhill, Britain's most outstanding young theatre organist, then took over to give some excellent advice on "Arranging a Medley," something that alas appears to cause many organists some difficulty. Choosing some tunes written by Noel Coward, he showed just how much thought and planning has to go into putting together a medley which is well-balanced, musically interesting, and a pleasure for the audience to hear. He emphasised the importance of having a theme, rather than just playing an assortment of totally unconnected tunes slung together at random.

COS newsletter editor Tony Moss followed with an illustrated historical look at cinemas, theatres and their organs, which the audience found very enjoyable. Then it was time to board the waiting buses once more to go off to the Musical Museum in Brentford, west London. Founded in 1963 by the indefatigable Frank Holland MBE, the museum contains a large collection of mechanical musical instruments. However, the centre of attention on this occasion was the

3/12 Wurlitzer organ, formerly in the Regal Cinema, Kingston-upon-Thames, in Surrey, and made famous by Joseph Seal. Our guest was David Shepherd, who talked about and demonstrated ways of playing marches and novelty numbers, something which he is expert at doing. The rest of the evening was spent socialising, hearing the various exhibits and playing the Wurlitzer, helped greatly by a splendid buffet meal arranged by the museum's Curator, Michael Ryder.

After some more group visits on the Wednesday morning, the final afternoon was spent at the South Bank Polytechnic, first of all listening to the presenter of the BBC's "The Organist Entertains" radio programme, Nigel Ogden, talk about theatre organ performance and particularly programming — how to put together a well-balanced programme which flows well, keeps the audience interested, and doesn't contain too much of the same type of music. He stressed the importance of listening to other organists play — in broadcasts, on record, and live — and also listening to a wide range of music generally, in order to develop a wide repertoire and greater depth of musical knowledge.

After Nigel's contribution, a film show was given by John Huntley. John is well known in Britain for his archive film presentations, and on this occasion his subject was — the theatre organ! Included in the show were a film shot in the Christie organ factory during the 1930s showing theatre organs being built, plus some "shorts" featuring well-known organists playing the organ: Ann Leaf, Jesse Crawford and Don Baker from America were featured, as was Reginald Foort at the 4c/10 Compton then in the Paramount Cinema, Tottenham Court Road, in London. Quite a number of these short films were made in Britain during the thirties, primarily for use as interlude material in cinemas which did not boast an organ of their own. Film quality was very variable, to say the least.

However, the highlight of the afternoon was what we believe to have been the first screening for almost sixty years of a promotional film made by the Wurlitzer Co. in 1929, showing organ production in the North Tonawanda factory. A copy of the film was specially made for the COS by the British National Film Archive, who have a nitrate print in their collection. The film was, of course, silent, but "resident" technical expert and organ-builder David Pawlyn was able to add some interpretive comments to explain the various organ building processes being shown.

And so to the final session of the Workshop, which was led by Lew Williams. Lew's mastery of the theatre organ makes him an excellent choice as ATOS



Lew Williams and Robin Richmond at the St. John Vianney Church, Clayhill, Compton Organ.



L to R: David Lowe, Lew Williams and John Norris at the South Bank Polytechnic, home of the COS South Bank Wurlitzer.



Workshop participants gathered round the Goldsmiths' College organ (John Norris playing, David Lowe turning pages).

Theatre Organist of the Year, and of particular interest to us here in Britain is his scholarly interest in the playing of Sidney Torch and Quentin Maclean, which he was able so admirably to demonstrate on Quentin Maclean's "own" instrument in a spectacular public concert on the Wednesday evening. The hall was completely full, and the audience thrilled to the sounds of the mighty Wurlitzer.

All too soon the concert had to draw to a close, and with it the 1988 Cinema Organ Society Theatre Organ Workshop. Many good friendships were made or renewed, and everyone went away knowing more about the theatre organ and how it can be played. Perhaps the two most rewarding aspects of the whole event were the number of top musicians who were willing to give up their valuable time to pass on some of their knowledge to those eager to learn, and the number of young people who supported the Workshop. The 1989 Workshop is already being planned.

The COS is the largest national organisation for people interested in the theatre organ, with over 2,000 members spread throughout the UK. The society itself owns three instruments — the South Bank Wurlitzer in London, a Compton organ in the Midlands (which is currently being overhauled prior to reinstallation in a new venue), and a Wurlitzer in Yorkshire (also due to be moved to a new location shortly). The COS also runs concerts using other organs, including, in London, the instruments at the New Gallery, the Cameo-Poly, and the Granada Walthamstow, all of which are in the society's care.

However, the COS is very anxious to be able to promote the theatre organ cause in any way that it can to support the work and activities of other organ groups and organisations, no matter who they might be. There is no place in the theatre organ world for isolationism or conflict between different groups; co-operation must be the name of the game. To any readers of THEATRE ORGAN who may be coming to Britain, may I, on behalf of the COS and all other organ groups in the UK, extend a warm invitation to you to come along to an organ event. There are a number of organs in this country which are worth hearing, and some good organists to play them. A letter or telephone call to COS committee member David Lowe will secure for you all the latest information about organ events in Britain. David lives at 18 Spruce Hills Road, Walthamstow, London E18 4LD (telephone 01-531 7979).

A note about the author:
Roger Hedley was Treasurer of the Cinema Organ Society for the year 1988. He remains a member of the society's General Committee.

Banda Records presents their newest CD

GEORGE WRIGHT

"KALEIDOSCOPE"

a brilliant new collection of eclectic goodies —
more than an hour of exciting goodies in the inimitable
Wright style — DDD all the way

Last Night On The Back Porch • Do It Again • Spring Is Here • The Mooche • The Song Is You
A Fred Astaire Memoir • Ill Wind • Cavaquinho • The Night Was Made For Love • Spring Fever
Mexican Hat Dance • All Of Me • yesterday • "Meet Me In St. Louis" Medley

BANDA RECORDS
P.O. BOX 392
OXNARD, CALIFORNIA 93032

U.S. and Canada:
\$20.00 Postpaid - First Class
England \$22.00 (U.S.) Postpaid
Australia \$23.00 (U.S.) Postpaid

STILL GOING STRONG!
George Wright's "Red Hot and Blue" and "Anything Goes."

SORRY, NO CREDIT CARDS OR C.O.D.

Please allow ample time for handling and delivery.

T.O.S.A. (W.A.)

invites you to join us in a
triple celebration

- ★ the 17th National Convention
- ★ our 21st year as a society
- ★ the opening of our Compton

**CLOSING DATE FOR
BOOKINGS
31ST JANUARY 1989**

Post your registration booking to:

**Convention Secretary
T.O.S.A. (W.A.)
P.O. Box 343
MORLEY 6062
WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

Telephone enquiries 09-276 6668

Sit back,
relax . . .
and be entertained

"music is the key"

**Keep in
touch with
the British
Theatre
Organ
Scene!**



Subscribe to *The Journal of the Cinema Organ Society*, a quarterly publication featuring photos, history, stoplists, biographies and technical articles . . . Plus monthly newsletters of the latest theatre organ news, events, and record reviews.

Send \$20.00 (U.S.) or 9.50 pounds sterling for membership in *The Cinema Organ Society*. Includes a subscription to the *Journal* and 12 monthly newsletters.

General Secretary:
John Smallwood

33 Idris Villas, Tywyn, Gwynedd,
LL36 9AW, Great Britain