

Gaylord Carter In London

An old timer makes his report on the experiences encountered at some of the largest theatre organs in England, compares notes with his confreres over there and describes some of the instruments he was fortunate enough to play.

DURING my recent visit to London for the International Congress of Organists I had the opportunity to hear and play two of the largest theater organs in England. Since this was made possible by your kind letters to Mr. John Howlett, organist of the Odeon Theater in Leicester Square, and Mr. Gerald Shaw, organist of the Odeon in Marble Arch, I am happy to make this report to you. Our mutual friend, Gilman Chase, a distinguished contributor to *The American Organist*, was our contact with the theaters and he arranged the visits.

We went first to the Leicester Square Odeon in the late afternoon and found Mr. Howlett in his dressing room between appearances at the console. I might say that John Howlett was as much fun as was the organ. He speaks with what we might call a broad British accent and punctuates his hilarious comments with copious pinches of snuff. I've never had more laughs in a back stage dressing room.

When it came time for the intermission music, we followed John into the pit, and there it was — a five-manual Compton — probably the most spectacular console I've ever seen. On each side were great glass panels containing changing colored lights giving the effect of a huge jukebox. I understand that at one time the organ bench was lit up in a similar manner, but the organist found himself on such a hot seat that the idea had to be abandoned.

The organ is a pit installation with terrific sock and literally hits you between the eyes. Howlett did a bang-up job of his bit and we then retired to a nearby pub to talk about organs and arrange to come back next morning for a jam session before the theatre opened for the day. The shop talk was enlivened by many mugs of Toby Ale interspersed with slugs of English gin and when it came time for John to go back to work I was glad it wasn't I who had to play. Incidentally, John recommended a nearby steakhouse called the Paramount, and Gil and I slipped in for the best top sirloins we had had east of New York City.

Next morning Chase and I together with Fred Mitchell of the Austin Organ Co. (and Ray Berry, editor and publisher of *The American Organist*) met Howlett as planned and got down to the business of examining the organ. As I mentioned above, this is a pit installation, built by Compton in 1937 with sixteen sets divided between two chambers as follows:

CHAMBER "A" (acc)

32' Stopped flute
16' Diaphonic Diapason
16' Posaune
16' Salicional
8' Geigen
8' Strings (two ranks)
8' Violin
Complete traps (toy counter)

CHAMBER "B" (solo)

16' Tuba
16' French Horn
16' Tibia (Wurlitzer's and John's pride and joy)
8' Trumpet
8' Krummet
8' Clarinet
8' Vox Humana
8' Concert flute

All chorus reeds, tibia, and diapason are on 15'' wind and the rest are on 10''. The organ is completely unified

and distributed over five manuals. One interesting feature is the inclusion of a Compton Electric Melotone Organ for vibraphone, chime, carillon, and tibia effects, playable from any manual through speakers installed on either side of the stage and in the back of the auditorium. Incidentally, the main organ chimes are solid steel bars suspended on steel cables and hung in the solo chamber. They sound like great cast bells.

As I played this fine instrument the snap and bite reminded me of a Robert-Morton I once played in the Music Hall Theater in Seattle. It had real "getup and go" and I was astounded that so much color and quality could come from sixteen sets. I wandered around the theatre while Gil played (and he's plenty good) and noted that the organ is solid and clear in all parts of the house. This, I believe, is unusual for a pit installation.

We spent several hours with John and his organ and we are certainly indebted to him for his kindness and hospitality, especially since he lives many miles away in Dover and commutes daily to London. We figured that either he loves trains or the passing English countryside since he has to cope with both for at least six hours each day.

Several days after our happy visit in Leicester Square we called on Gerald Shaw and his fine Christie organ in the Marble Arch Odeon. Where John's organ was a sock in the puss, Gerald's was more like a pat on the cheek. This Christie, built by Norman and Beard, contains thirty-two ranks plus a four-rank mixture. There are sixteen strings—some of them very soft and very beautiful. The instrument, we were told, was designed by a concert organist who wanted to do something besides blaze away. The small stuff is on 5'' pressure, the diapason on 10'', the tuba on 15'' and the big reeds on 20''. There is natural 32' reed, two tibias, both metal, and a wonderfully breathy little harmonic flute. The console is four manual, and the pipes are divided into two chambers in the standard locations on each side of the stage. Mr. Shaw gave us a wonderful demonstration and both Gil and I enjoyed playing it very much. I might say that when it came time for the theater to open we again retired to a nearby pub and again hashed over the organ business. Shaw informed us that out of hundreds of theatre organs in London only four are being played at this time. I couldn't help but point out that that is four more than in Los Angeles. Shaw also mentioned that with a theatre job, BBC broadcasts and occasional concerts in London's various halls, a British organist earns slightly more than twenty-five pounds a week. With the pound now pegged at \$2.80 it would seem that American organists (those that are working) are better off.

In closing, let me say that both Mr. Howlett and Mr. Shaw are fine organists and fine gentlemen and they made us very happy. After all the excellent but serious concerts we had been hearing in the Cathedrals, churches and concert halls of London it was great fun to sit down at a big theatre organ and take off. My thanks to you for paving the way and to Gil Chase for working it out.