

News From Britain

The Theatre Organ Scene in Britain in 1988

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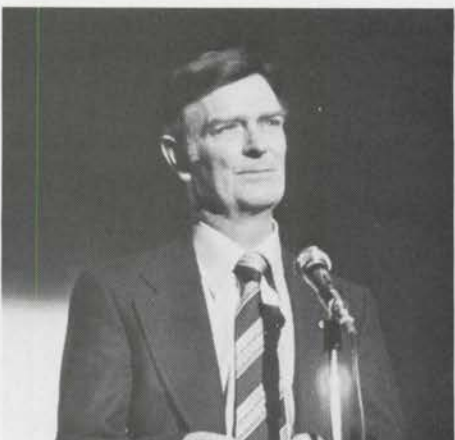
1988 in Britain was a year of change for the theatre organ fraternity — a time for reflection, a time for planning and a time for re-organisation. It should have been a year of celebration, since 1988 marked the 50th anniversary of the founding of the whole theatre organ movement in the U.K.



Lew Williams at the South Bank Wurlitzer (4/23), London during his 1988 Concert Tour.



Hubert Selby, inspiration behind the Cinema Organ Society.



Ralph Bartlett, general secretary of the Theatre Organ Club of Great Britain for half a century.

It was in May 1938 that a young man called Ralph Bartlett started a fan club for the popular radio organist H. Robinson Cleaver. The Robinson Cleaver Radio Club grew and grew, blossoming into a national organisation with over 2000 members. The name changed to The Theatre Organ Club of Great Britain, with Robinson Cleaver as president and Ralph Bartlett as secretary. These two pioneers remained in office for 49 of the 50 years of the club's existence, but they sadly both died just too soon to enjoy the half-centenary celebrations.

The anniversary was marked by special concerts and other events in many parts of the country, but they were of necessity low key affairs, the celebrations being tinged with sadness. Robbie Cleaver was one of the first British theatre organists to prove that the instrument didn't have to be played in a dreary way, and Ralph was, many people believe, the inspiration behind theatre organ promotion and preservation groups all over the world. The Theatre Organ Club continues, of course, and will no doubt continue to grow from strength to strength.

The other national theatre organ group in Britain is the Cinema Organ Society, founded at the instigation of Tony Moss in 1952, with Hubert Selby in the presidential chair, where he remained until his untimely death in 1985. The current president is Douglas (Mr. Brighton) Reeve, and Tony Moss is still very much at the helm as the Society's newsletter editor. The COS, too, has gone through recent traumas, in its case as a result of several key resignations, but, like the TOC, it is thriving and is well-set up for the next decade.

There remain only about eight theatre organs in buildings which still operate as movie theatres — one Wurlitzer, one Christie, one Marshall-Sykes and a handful of Comptons. Both of the national societies have been active in organ preservation, fearing that the theatre organ as we have come to know it would otherwise be lost completely. The COS itself owns three, whereas the TOC's preservation work has been through loosely-affiliated local societies and trusts.

In addition to the national clubs, there are around twenty local groups. The best known, and probably the biggest, of these is the Lancastrian Theatre Organ Trust, based in Manchester, 180 miles northwest of London. Their showpiece is the fine 4/20 Publix #1 Wurlitzer in Manchester's premier concert hall, formerly in the magnificent Paramount (Odeon) theatre there. A much smaller group, but also with a very fine Wurlitzer (said to be one of the best of its sort of size - 3/11 - in the world) is the North-East Theatre Organ Association, who have their very own small theatre in a converted chapel in a village 250 miles north of London. Others include the Sussex Theatre Organ Trust, with their immaculately restored



Tom Hazleton shares the bench of the Granada, Walthamston 3/12 Christie with Len Rawle, during his inaugural concert tour for the Theatre Organ Concerts Association in Britain.



Dan Bellomy at the 4/23 South Bank Wurlitzer, London during his 1988 Concert Tour.



Robinson Cleaver, inspiration behind the Theatre Organ Club.

3/10 Worthing Wurlitzer down on the South Coast, and, 600 miles further north in East Scotland, the Aberdeen Theatre Organ Trust, custodians of the 3/6 Compton in the Capitol Theatre.

The London Chapter of the ATOS is, of course, another well-known local group, with an arm of operation extending as far as Barry in South Wales, where their chapter organ (the 4/14 'Torch' Christie from Edmonton) is located. Their contribution to the London organ scene is well-documented in this journal, with their major concerts being presented on the chapter-maintained 4/16 'Torch' Wurlitzer at the State, Kilburn. Probably their most successful concert of 1988, which they were too modest to report on, was Robert Wolfe's splendid show at that historic theatre.

Robert is one of the few lucky people to earn a living as a theatre organist, and he has that rare gift of being able to combine entertainment, showmanship and musicianship in an attractive and individual way which can be enjoyed by everyone — aficionados and general public alike. From Easter to fall, Robert entertains huge crowds seven days a week at a popular tourist venue in Norfolk. The rest of the year he concertises. He is already well known in the eastern United States, and I guess it won't be long before you west-coasters get to meet him, too! It's a thrill worth waiting for!

Although in one way the theatre organ scene here is fragmented into many different organisations, one of the great success stories of the past couple of years has been the formation of a body which has brought a thread of unity running the length and breadth of the country. This thread is the Theatre Organ Concerts Association (TOCA), an independent body conceived, originally, by a few individuals, but now subscribed to by most of the theatre organ societies in the country. The Association was formed to assist the organisation of concert tours for visiting overseas artists, and was launched by Tom Hazleton's immensely successful tour in summer 1987. Recent appearances under the TOCA banner have included Bill Vlasak, Lew Williams, Neil Jensen and Dan Bellomy, who delighted audiences far and wide on an eclectic range of theatre organs.

After some years of stability it is very much a period of expansion. Membership of all the major theatre organ groups is growing, and young folk are showing greater interest than for some time. More theatre organs are finding their way into commercial venues, and many non-commercial instruments are getting better maintenance as knowledge and skills expand. Awareness of the importance of high standards of performance is also increasing, and all of us in the theatre organ movement are looking forward to the 1990s with great optimism.