

The Colonial Theatre Kimball

by Irvin R. Glazer

On Friday the 13th, in October of 1967, James Breneman, current owner of the Phoenixville, Pennsylvania Colonial Theatre, signed a contract to buy the long dormant Kimball organ from the owners of the State Theatre on 52nd Street at Chestnut in West Philadelphia. Breneman had been working on the restoration of the 3/8 Kimball in the suburban Lansdowne Theatre (cap. 1,633) when he learned of the impending demolition of the State Theatre, which incidentally had the last, local, rotating organ lift. The negotiated price for the last Kimball in Philadelphia was \$1,510. There were five theatres on the 52nd Street "strip" at that time; they all had pipe organs and the State was the first one scheduled for demolition. Acquisition of a complete pipe organ was a driving force for Jim and was the fundamental component in a complex of circumstances culminating in acquisition of his own theatre and recognition as a foremost theatre organ authority.

When I learned that the State was coming down, I made it a practice to observe the progress and make notes. Removal of the organ, installed in chambers atop the third false proscenium, was complex, in consideration of the great height in a 3,059 seat theatre, and precarious, amidst the labyrinth of catwalks and strutwork in a "Reverse Chute" swell shade arrangement. In the auditorium, four depths of parallel, art deco, imitation organ pipes created a lattice-work 65 feet wide to mask the openings from the tone chute. The relative inaccessibility of the chambers was probably the major factor in protecting the instrument from vandalism. To get into the chambers at the State, there was an unusual, building-length, canopied, external walkway 50 feet above the sidewalk on the Chestnut Street side of the building (left



Original exterior of the State Theatre. Each decorative raised surface behind the vertical sign and within the four "wedding-cake" levels was silhouette illuminated at night.
Glazer photo

hand side of the auditorium). At the stage end of this walkway was a ladder which led 30 feet upwards to the floor of the organ chambers. At this entrance was a small exterior balcony, next to the stage house, with an extended steel girder above, on which to hang a block and tackle. It was from this frightening vantage point, 80 feet up on a 110 foot high stage house area that all the chamber components had to be removed. Pressured by management, disassembly was completed before Christmas and removal effected by the block and tackle system in the January 1968 snow.

Geppert Brothers, the demolition contractors, estimated four weeks to complete the job which they commenced in March of 1968. The State was evidently built to stand forever and the wrecking ball bounced back from the theatre's sturdy surfaces. They were still working at it in June after having learned that, among other architectural features, the basements and steel support structures extended completely under the pavements surrounding this 1929 building.

For weeks, I observed the emergence of various paraphernalia through the stage door, items which you might expect to find backstage at a house which had live entertainment. Two upright pianos and a legless Baby Grand, which I remembered had been in the orchestra pit, stood amidst towers of vari-sized spotlights. I asked about the Steinway Concert Grand which I knew was in a corner at stage left. "We can't get it out ... we've had the legs off once ..." I suggested opening the scene dock door and realized the next day that I had not communicated when I saw a completely disassembled Grand. The dented, golden harp interior was off to one side of the Chestnut Street pavement. The keyboard had been detached and the remainder of this expensive jigsaw puzzle was neatly stacked — surely a sight to send a musician into some form of psychological arrest. The organ would have gone down with the wreckers as did the elevator sections, panel boards and other major elements of Philadelphia's third largest theatre. "It would have been destroyed if I hadn't bought it," Breneman said. "It's a unique piece of Americana that you couldn't duplicate these days." (*Philadelphia Inquirer* interview, August 12, 1981).

I have tried to imagine how the art deco fabric seats looked when installed in the church to which they were donated!

Breneman's initiation into the world of organ aficionados had begun in 1966 when he attended a concert at Drexel University, then Drexel Institute, in Phila-



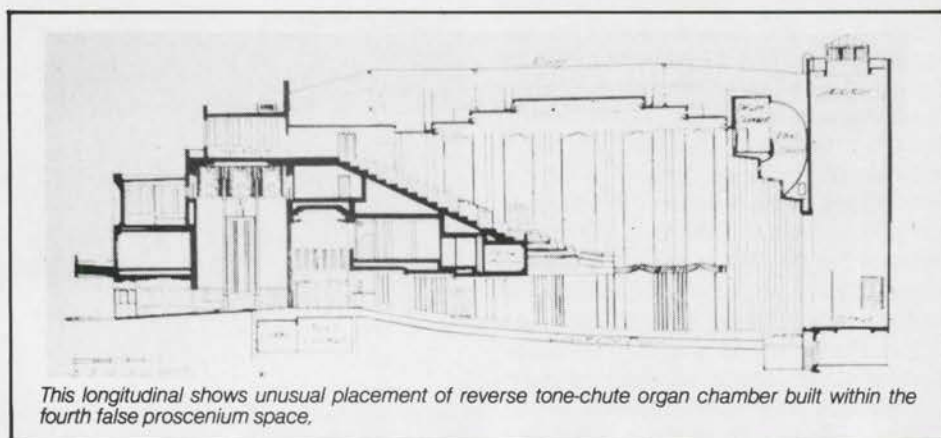
1950 ubiquitous marquee treatment, further cheapened by the roof-top billboard. In the upper left-hand corner is the only pictorial remnant of the canopied walkway which led to the organ chamber at the stage end. Dutor Studios photo

delphia. In Drexel's marbled, sepulchral, Nineteenth Century auditorium, Breneman heard the majestic chords of a classical organ (4-manual, 85-rank Austin, installed in 1928; predecessor organ — three-manual Haskell installed in 1891). Later, intrigued by their conversation, he joined several friends in the audience to see the theatre organ they were restoring in the Lansdowne Theatre. Undaunted by sounds of crashing waves, horses hooves, airplane sounds and sirens, Breneman succinctly observed, "It was the greatest thing since indoor plumbing" (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 15, 1985) and promptly joined in the restoration process. He and Sam LaRosa, who subsequently became associated in all of Breneman's organ ventures, continued at the Lansdowne, self-taught and undaunted by lack of skills.

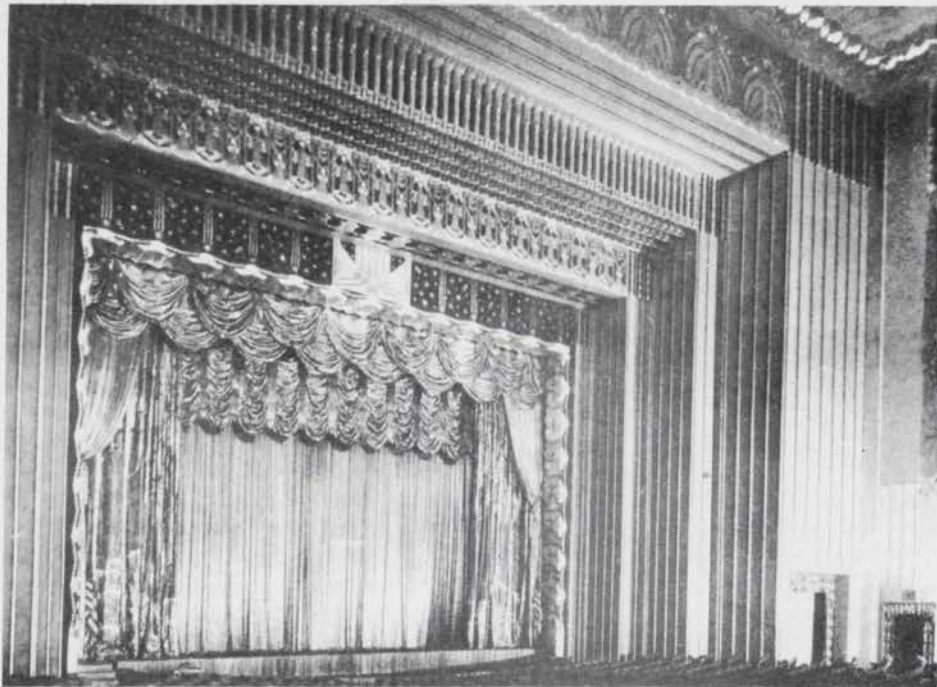
Enthusiastic after his State Theatre Kimball acquisition, Breneman made arrangements to install the instrument in

the Brookline Theatre, Havertown, Pennsylvania, a Philadelphia suburb. The Brookline had originally opened as The Boulevard on August 23, 1928. The inaugural had been postponed from August 20 because an inflow of water during a severe storm caused the console of the new Gottfried organ (2/6 — installed completely in one chamber, stage left) to be found floating in five feet of amphibious orchestra pit. A hastily assembled orchestra played for the opening. The unusual launching of the Gottfried proved to be a portent for the eventual Kimball placement. The 700-seat theatre never really dried out and, even before I was aware of the original "flood plain" story, I detected the mustiness masked as it was by heavy disinfectant and perfumed air. The Gottfried console had to be entirely rebuilt.

Breneman's installation in the Brookline Theatre placed the large-scaled Kimball pipework in new chambers built



This longitudinal shows unusual placement of reverse tone-chute organ chamber built within the fourth false proscenium space.



Organ chambers are within the horizontal area faced with vertical ballet-decor. Swell shades faced the stage and the tone chute reversed to sound behind the four rows of Art Deco organ pipes forming the third false proscenium. The console (note music rack showing in left side of pit) was spotlighted from recessed openings in underside of second proscenium and from Mezzanine projection booth. Glazer photo

in the approximately 15-foot depth of the stage area behind the fixed-position screen. Some ranks from the Stanley (Philadelphia) were added at this time. By the time the use of the Kimball really got going, Breneman was thousands of miles away in Vietnam. Sam LaRosa was "minding the store," in respect to the restoration. After his two year stint, Breneman returned to his dream and I heard many local organists play before and between the showings of the feature pictures. In 1973, history repeated itself with the disastrous sight of the Kimball floating in the orchestra pit resulting in a calamitous effect on the console. All of the pipes, however, were above the water level. Today, the reake of the Brookline has been leveled; muscular men and women are "pumping iron" and, except for some incongruous plaster trim, there is little evidence that this building was once a theatre.

The sorry-looking console was moved into a garage and, after nine months, with a renewed respect for the inherent dangers of a flood plain area, Breneman was on the lookout for a new home for the State Theatre organ. An arrangement was made in December of 1975 with the Colonial Theatre, in Phoenixville, to house the instrument. The 900-seat, neo-classic style theatre had been empty for two years. It was decided to re-install the Kimball by utilizing the back part of the stage in addition to the original organ chambers. In its new four-chamber environment, an additional five ranks saved from the Philadelphia Stanley Theatre's 3/29 Kimball were added bringing the total, at this time, to 26 ranks. But, again, disaster struck!

The restored State theatre organ had been successfully installed in the Colonial Theatre for a scant two-year run when bankruptcy receivers took over in 1978 and closed the theatre "forever." Breneman faced the prospect of a third home and the drudgery of another reconstruction. Our man plunged into the raucous world of the dream merchants and decided to become a tycoon. He bought the theatre early in 1979 and went into show business booking only quality Hollywood product and eventually (in 1983) created the Chester County Center for the Performing Arts. This organization presents a regular Silent Film Series. Vaudeville shows and an organ concert series which has attracted many famous theatre organists from the United States to its console.

The console of the State Theatre was now being utilized to its capacity. There were chests filled with pipes that were unplayable because there were no more available stop tabs. A Wurlitzer Vox Humana and a Moller Musette were just two of the potentials that convinced Breneman to seek for a new console.

The St. Louis Theatre in St. Louis, Missouri, now the elegant Powell Hall, had contracted with Wurlitzer in 1925. In an unusual subsequent bid, they negotiated with Kimball giving them the Wurlitzer specifications and names. Kimball built the organ to these specifications complete with Pizzicato Couplers — an unusual feature, and probably one-of-a-kind. Incorporated into the Kimball's ranks were a Viole Celeste, Dulciana and a Quintadena — none of these had ever been built into a Kimball Theatre Organ. The Wurlitzer ranks as built by Kimball

are listed on page 13 of *Theatre Organ Bombarde*, June 1967, along with a detailed story about the St. Louis Chapter ATOE, Inc. and how they acquired the organ from the restoration people at the "new" Powell Hall. It was to the St. Louis chapter that Breneman turned in his search for a four-manual console.

When the St. Louis chapter acquired the Kimball early in 1968 — "we received word that we could have the instrument if we removed everything" — it had not been played in 38 years. "Water damage, vandalism and missing components dismayed the chapter crew but ... the console being buried beneath the stage had saved it from any major indignities." When Breneman approached the chapter about acquiring the console, it had been in storage for 14 years. Decision by the St. Louis chapter, which came nine months after Breneman's initial call, had understandably divided their membership into two factions — tradition versus the reality of the 14-year hiatus.

The St. Louis console was put on display in the left side of the Colonial's inner lobby for the first time in May 1984. John Jackson, an eminent local designer with a Philadelphia College of Art background, was hired to appraise the console construction and determine alternatives for refinishing the exterior surfaces. It was known that ivory and copper had been the original colors and noted that the Toe Studs, hardware and trim were copper-plated. It was surmised that the original painting at the factory was effected by dipping, and subsequent refinishing appeared to be house paint brushed on. Breneman's original preference was to remove all layers of finish and then spray — repaint and seal. Most Kimball consoles were originally finished in a mahogany-stained Birch veneer but the "special order" St. Louis console, after stripping away the layers of finish, was revealed to be of solid English Walnut, a most elegant building material. Jackson, with Breneman's concurrence, thought that the newly revealed beautiful wood grain should be seen. Meticulous hand-rubbed applications of five coats of Jackson's special formula, which consists of a mixture of tung oil and Water-Lox plus two coats of wax created what could arguably be called the most refined, tasteful and luxurious console finish of any contemporary theatre organ.



Original facade of Colonial Theatre, circa 1903.

Bill Lawrence photo



Colonial facade, circa 1938.

Photo courtesy of William Morrison



Another 1950's marquee treatment.

This beauty deserved a special setting and the first step was to initiate construction of a deeper and wider orchestra pit. The hallways in the Colonial were too narrow for a wheelbarrow so that the debris from the excavation was removed by hand-carried cardboard boxes — 1600 boxes, 80 tons — in 60 days. The first three rows of seats were removed, the excavation made through a 14" floor. When the new pit was completed, twenty-foot plants were braced between the seat armrests in the center aisle and the 1,700 pound console was inched up the incline and on to a screw-jack turntable lift (from the Madison Theatre, Peoria, Illinois). Pictures taken during each phase of the project graphically attest to the difficulty of a major engineering effort. A "cliff hanging" schedule to be ready for a major concert mandated a 48-hour work session at the finish! The dedicated crew consisted of Breneman, LaRosa, Glen Thompson (on the faculty of Elizabeth College where he has taught a "Theatre Pipe Organ" course), Jim Taylor and Bill Greenwood.

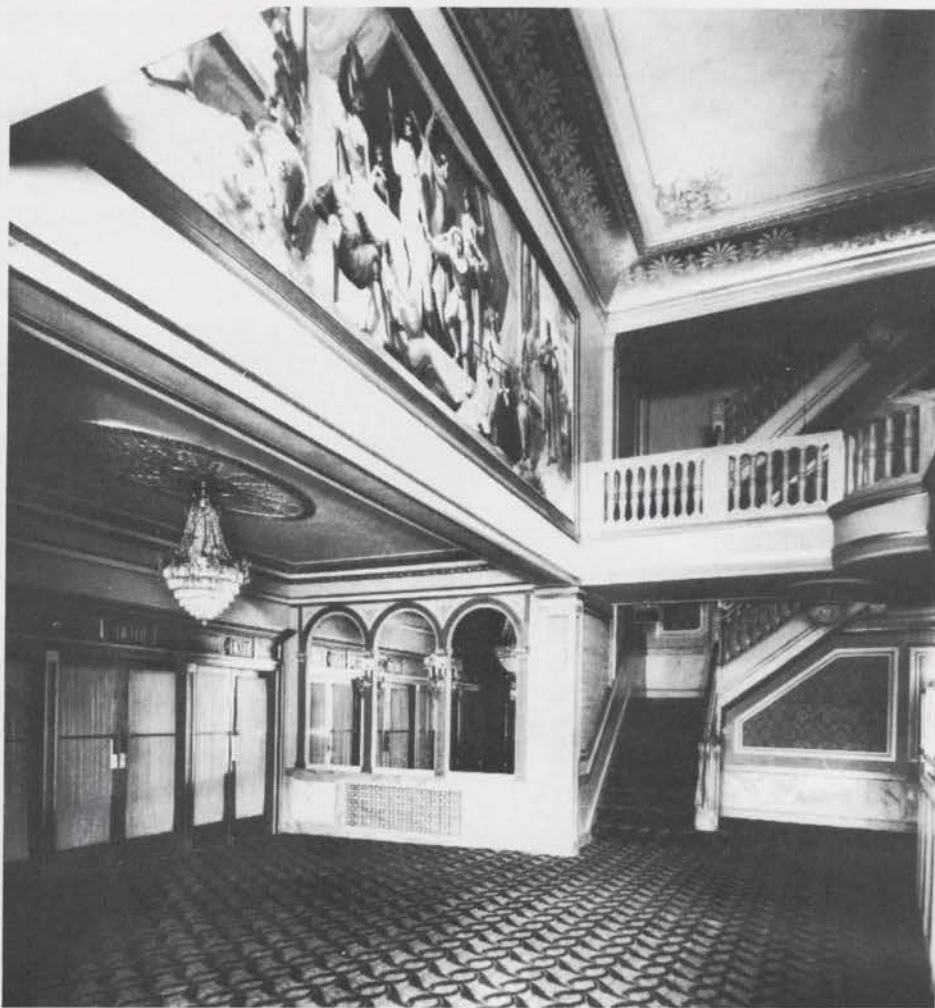
The new console utilizes a Solid-State Z-Tronics Relay system installed with Greenwood's assistance.

The Colonial Theatre, located on Bridge Street in Phoenixville, was opened in 1903 as a vaudeville house with a film projection booth added years later. It was the largest of the three theatres built in an industrial town which was a depressed area following the closing of its major industry, Pheonix Steel, employing 2,700 people in a community of 18,000! The town is contiguous to the Valley Forge National Park area and from that entry point up through Main Street, Phoenixville resembles a turn-of-the-century mid-Western town with substantial, well tended houses in the middle of large lots. A left turn at the end of Main Street brings the restrained, brick-treatment, Georgian inspired, facade of the Colonial Theatre within view. The theatre is central to a well planned, tree-lined business district with red brick pavements. A prior modernization mars the simplicity of the theatre front with a scaled down, ubiquitous white plastic marquee. Breneman plans to replace this and the front doors as part of his overall plans. The three-level (Orchestra, Loge and Balcony) theatre is basically the same as when it opened. The front wall of the original projection booth has been extended flush to each outer wall of the auditorium. Matched pairs of pilasters topped by gold-leafed Ionic capitals flank both simulated, box-seat organ chambers which border the proscenium arch. Previous organ installations were the afore-

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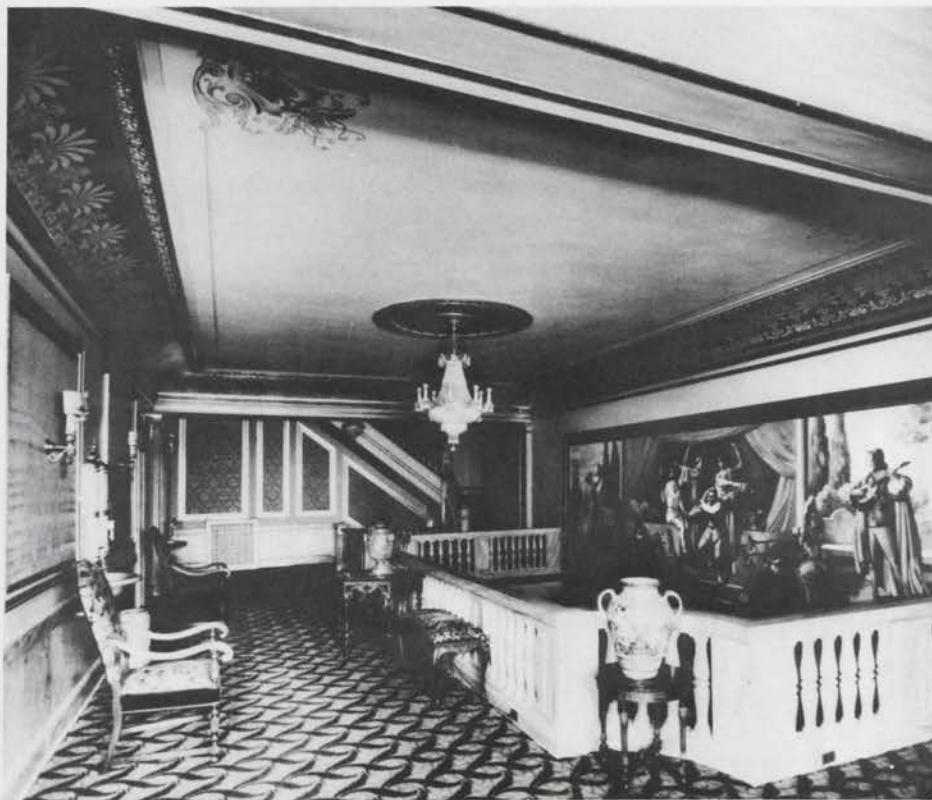
mentioned State Theatre Kimball, a 3/10 Wurlitzer (1927-1960) and a 2/6 Moller (1921-1926). The lobby and mezzanine areas abound with handsome crystal chandeliers and wall brackets newly installed to match the originals. The master plans also call for a large crystal chandelier in the central ceiling decor to replace the long-gone original. Restoration work in all parts of the theatre is continuous.

James Breneman is now a nationally recognized authority in the field of Kimball theatre organ construction and maintenance. Outwardly reserved, Breneman is observed as paying strict attention when an organ technician or musician speaks. He is a perfectionist and immediately rejects all but first-class performance reflected in the peerless sound of the Colonial Kimball and the quality of his screen and concert programming. Initially self-taught, Breneman now surrounds himself with experienced and prominent organ builders. Astute enough to recognize the continuous unfolding of his aesthetic appreciations, Breneman has expanded his fields of expertise into theatre history and construction and architectural acoustics. I have sought Breneman's help and advice in respect to proposed placement of the Sedgwick Moller into the auditorium of the Springfield High School, the practicality of restoration or moving of the Concert Moller in the Edison High School (Northeast) submitted to the Philadelphia Board of Education and the suggested organ placement in the large and fairly new auditorium of The University High School (placement and acoustical unsuitability). I asked Breneman to bring his technical know-how to complete the rehabilitation of the Civic Center (Philadelphia) Moller which has been a local ATOS project since the 1970s. With his no-nonsense approach, Breneman tackled this last job in December of 1987. The organ played, in its entirety (for the first time since Truman's inauguration in 1948) for the Drexel University Commencement on June 12, 1988, and is now part of the facilities offered in the Convention Hall.



*Colonial inner lobby as it appeared in 1928 and in the faithful restoration today.
1928 view of Colonial mezzanine.*

*Glazer photo
Glazer photo*



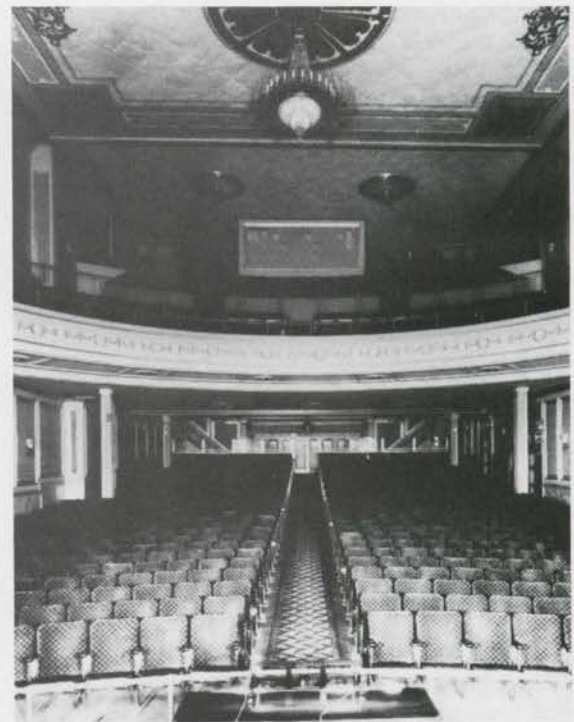


Colonial Theatre 1927, note 3/10 Wurlitzer.

Glazer photo

Colonial Theatre 4/32 Kimball Chamber Analysis

RANK	COMPASS	RANK	COMPASS
<i>LEFT CHAMBER</i>		<i>RIGHT STAGE CHAMBER</i>	
Tuba Mirabilis	16-8	Tibia Clausa	16-2
Trumpet	8-4	Open Diapason	8-4
Orch. Oboe	16-8	Viola	8-2
Oboe Horn	8	Viola Celeste	8-4
Violin II	16-4	English Horn	8-4
Violin II Celeste	8-4	Vox Humana II Rks.	8-4
<i>LEFT ACCOMP. CHAMBER</i>		Marimba	8
Horn Diapason	16-4	Xylophone	4
Muted Violin	8-4	<i>RIGHT CHAMBER</i>	
Muted Violin Cel.	8tc-4	Post Horn	16-8
Quintadena	8.4	Solo Tibia Clausa	16-2
<i>LEFT STAGE CHAMBER</i>		Solo Vox Humana	8-4
Tuba	16-4	Cello	16-8
Clarinet	8	Cello Celeste	8
Kinura	8	Saxophone	8
Flute	16-2	Musette	8
Flute Celeste	8tc-4	Sleigh Bells	2
Violin I	16-2	Song Birds	2
Violin I Celeste	8-4	<i>EXPOSED</i>	
Diaph. Diapason	16-4	Piano	16-4
Glockenspiel	2	Chrysoglott	4
Traps.		Chimes	8
		<i>RELAY</i>	
		Z-tronics Versiplex	
		<i>BLOWER</i>	
		Spencer Turbines	



Colonial Theatre, 1928.

Glazer photo