

# Robert Hope-Jones And His Contribution To Organ Building

While doing research on the history of the Marr & Colton Company, ATOE member Lloyd E. Klos was lent a book by Mrs. David Marr, entitled "The Recent Revolution in Organ Building," by George L. Miller. A Fellow in the Royal College of Organists, Miller wrote the book in 1909 for the annual convention of the National Association of

Organists. In this book, Mr. Miller wrote thumbnail biographies of several organ builders, and described their contributions to the science of organ building. Following is the text relative to Robert Hope-Jones--further proof of the tremendously fertile mind possessed by "The Father of the Theater Organ."

## ROBERT HOPE-JONES

Robert is the third son of the late William Hope-Jones of Hooton Grange, Cheshire, England.

His father, a man of means, was prominent as one of the pioneers in organizing the volunteer army of Great Britain. He was musical, playing the cornet and having an unusual tenor voice. His mother, Agnes Handforth, also musical and a gifted singer, was a daughter of the Rector of Ashton-Under-Lyne, a highly nervous woman.

There were nine children of the marriage, two girls and seven boys. Robert appeared on the ninth of February, 1859. He inherited in exaggerated degree his mother's highly-strung nervous nature. Melancholy, weak, and sickly as a child, he was not expected to live. To avoid the damp and cold English winters, he was periodically taken to the south of France. Deemed too delicate for school, a private tutor was provided. Joining in sports or games was out of the question for so sensitive and delicate a youth--what more natural, therefore, than that he should become a dreamer and thinker. Too ill for any real study, his musical instincts drove him to the organ, and we find him playing for occasional services at Eastham Parish Church at the age of nine. After his father's death, when he was about fourteen, he spent a couple of years in irregular attendance at school, and at the time of his confirmation was persuaded that by super-human effort of will, his physical disabilities might be disregarded, and a life of some value worked out. Then began the desperate struggle that gradually overcame every obstruction and resulted in the establishment of an iron will and determination to succeed that no misfortunes have been able to quell. His want of health greatly interfered with his career till he was nearly 30 years of age.

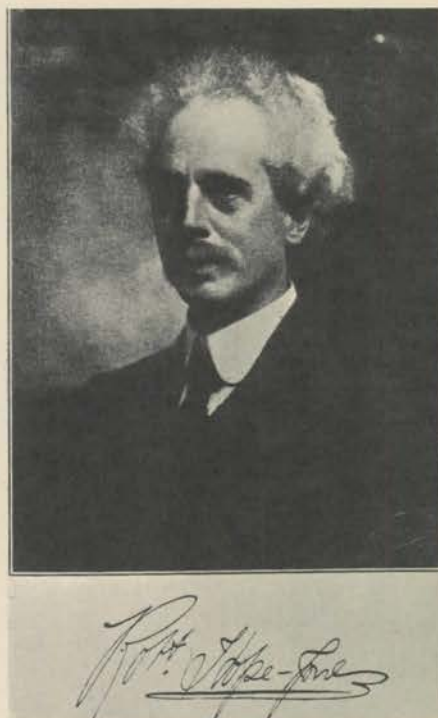
When fifteen, he became voluntary organist and choirmaster to the Birkenhead School Chapel. Two or three years later, he simultaneously held a similar office at St. Luke's Church, Tranmere, where he trained a boy choir which became widely celebrated. For this Church, he bought and set up a fine organ. He subsequently served as church warden and was active in many other Church offices. He erected an organ in the Cloughton Music Hall and organized and conducted oratorio performances in aid of various church funds; training a large voluntary chorus and orchestra for the purpose. For Psalms whose verses are arranged in groups of three, he wrote what he called "triple chants"--a form of composition since adopted by other church writers. He also composed Canticles, Kyries and other music for the services of the Church.

Though St. Luke's Church was situated in a poor neighborhood, the men and boys forming his choir not only gave their services, but also gratuitously rang the church bell, pumped the organ bellows, bought all the music used at the services, paid for the washing of the surplices, and helped raise money for the general church fund. Hope-Jones' enthusiasm knew no bounds, and he had the knack of imparting it to those who worked under him.

So earnest and energetic was this young man that in spite of indifferent health and without at once resigning his work at St. Luke's, he became choirmaster and honorary organist of St. John's Church, Birkenhead, doing similar work in connection with that institution. He trained both the latter-named choirs together, and the writer, whose son was in St. John's choir, frequently assisted him by playing the organ at the services on Sunday. It was at this church, and in connection with this organ that Hope-Jones did his first great work in connection with organ-buildings. The improved electric action, movable console, and many other matters destined to startle the organ world, were devised and made by him here, after the day's business and the evening's choir rehearsals. He had voluntary help from enthusiastic choirmen and boys, who worked far into the night--on some occasions all night. Certain of these men and boys are today occupying responsible positions with the Hope-Jones Organ Company at Elmira, N.Y.

All this merely formed occupation for his spare time. About the age of 17, he began his business career. He was bound apprentice to the large firm of Laird Bros., engineers and shipbuilders, Birkenhead. After donning workman's clothes and going through practical training in the various workshops and the drawing office, he secured appointment as chief electrician of the Lancashire and Cheshire (afterwards the National) Telephone Company. In connection with telephony, he invented a multitude of improvements, some of which are still in universal use. About this time, he devised a method for increasing the power of the human voice, through the application of a "relay" furnished with compressed air. This principle is now utilized in all the best phonographs and other voice-producing machines. He also invented the "Diaphone", now being used by the Canadian Government for its fog signal stations, and declared to be the most powerful producer of musical sound known. In a modified form it was also adapted to the church organ.

About 1889, he resigned his connection with the telephone company in order that he might devote a greater part of his attention



to the improvement of the church organ, a subject which, as we have seen, was beginning to occupy much of his spare time. He had private practice as a consulting engineer, but gradually his "hobby"--organ-building--crowded out all other employment, much to his financial disadvantage and to the gain of the musical world.

His organ at St. John's Church, Birkenhead, became famous. It was visited by thousands of music lovers from all parts of the world. Organs built on the St. John's model were ordered for this country (Taunton, Mass. and Baltimore), for India, Australia, New Zealand, Newfoundland, France, Germany, Malta, and for numbers of English cathedrals, churches, town halls, etc. Nothing whatever was spent on advertisement. The English musical press for years devoted columns to somewhat heated discussion of Hope-Jones' epoch-making inventions, and echoes appeared in the periodicals of this and other countries.

In spite of every form of opposition, and in spite of serious financial difficulties, Hope-Jones built organs that have influenced the art in all parts of the globe. He proved himself a prolific inventor and can justly claim as his work nine-tenths of the improvements made in the organ during the last twenty years. Truly have these words been used concerning him--"The greatest mind engaged in the art of organ-building in this or in any other age."

Every organist fully acquainted with his work endorses it, and upwards of 30 organ-builders have honored themselves by writing similar testimony. The Austin Organ Company of Hartford, Conn. says: "We have taken considerable pains to study his system and to satisfy ourselves as to the results he has achieved. There is, we find, no doubt



whatever that he has effected a complete revolution in the development of tone."

Ernest M. Skinner of Boston used the following words: "Your patience, research and experiment have done more than any other one agency to make the modern organ tone what it is. I think your invention of the leathered lip will mean as much to organ tone as the Barker pneumatic lever did to organ action, and will be as far-reaching in its effect. I believe you were the first to recognize the importance of a low voltage of electric action, and that the world owes you its thanks for the round wire contact and inverted magnet. Since I first became familiar with your work and writing, I have found them full of helpful suggestions."

At first, Hope-Jones licensed a score of organ builders to carry out his inventions, but as this proved unsatisfactory, he entered the field as an organ builder himself.

It was, perhaps, too much to expect that those who had so far profited from Hope-Jones' contracts and work should remain favorably disposed when he became a rival and a competitor.

For nearly fifteen years, he has met concerted opposition that would have crushed any ordinary man--attacks in turn against his electrical knowledge, musical taste, voicing ability, financial standing, and personal character. His greatest admirers remain those who, like the author, have known him for 30 years; his greatest supporters are the men of the town in which he lives; his warmest friends, the associates who have followed him to this country after long service under him in England.

Long before Hope-Jones reached his present eminence, and dealing with but one of his inventions, Wedgwood, a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and a learned student of organ matters, classed him with Cavaille-Coll and Willis, as one whose name "will be handed down to posterity"--the author of most valuable improvements.

We are too near to him to realize the size of the greatest man the organ-building world has ever seen. When considering the influence exerted upon the art of organ-building by Barker, Cavaille-Coll, Willis, and Hope-Jones, posterity will unanimously acclaim the latter by far the greatest of the "Big Four."

In the spring of 1903, Hope-Jones landed in this country. At the instigation of R.P. Elliot, the organizer, vice president and secretary of the Austin Organ Company of Hartford, Conn., he joined that corporation, taking the office of Vice President. Subsequently, a new firm--Hope-Jones and Harrison--was tentatively formed at Bloomfield, New Jersey, but as sufficient capital could not be obtained, Hope-Jones and his corps of skilled employees joined the Ernest M. Skinner Company of Boston, Hope-Jones taking the office of vice president. Working in connection with the Skinner Company, Hope-Jones constructed and placed a fine organ in Park Church, Elmira, N.Y., erected in memory of the late Thomas K. Beecher. He there met, as chairman of the committee, Mr. Jervis Langdon, treasurer of the Chamber of Commerce of Elmira. That gentleman had the foresight to appreciate the fact that the Hope-Jones organ was vastly superior to any other, and he secured the industry for his city by organizing a strong corporation under the management of experienced businessmen.

NOTE: Hope-Jones story will be continued in the next issue of THEATRE ORGAN.

# Famed Radio City Center Organ Speaks At Alexandria (Va.) Arena

By Ray Brubacher

March 4, 1963

Last night, part of a dream was fulfilled for Jim Boyce, owner of the 4/34 Wurlitzer formerly in the Center Theatre, Radio City, New York. Nine ranks of this organ were played for the first time before the public in a special "Rollerama" skating show, held at the huge Alexandria, Va. rink. Ranks playing included the English Post Horn, Solo Tibia Clausa, and Brass Saxophone, and a very beautiful English Horn.

Jim's plans are to have these nine ranks performing perfectly (if that's ever possible to achieve on any organ) which will involve wind leak chasing, more regulating of tremulants and six million more minor details, but a great vote of thanks must be extended to the many ATOE members whose assistance was invaluable and to those who worked many nights up into the early morning hours, under the watchful eye of Bob Wyant of the Newcomer Organ Company. Credit should also be given to the wives of some of the members who were able and willing to work with the more delicate operations such as wiring in ranks to the spreaders, and refurbishing the

console which was already in excellent condition. ATOE members married to these dedicated wives should consider themselves blessed in a very, very special way.

The Solo Tibia and Post Horn must be heard to be fully appreciated in this structure which when empty, has reverb time to give away. For the grand finale number in the show last night, Jim had saved the post horn until the last few bars of the music, and when he loosed this fiery demon of a pipe organ stop, people just turned around and stared, (gawked) would be more appropriate terminology.

Still to be connected are choice ranks such as the Muted Viols, the Trombone with 16 foot extension, the wood and metal diaphone diapason ranks, Violin Diapason with 16 foot extension, to name just a few.

A full story will follow upon completion complete with photographs of the entire installation.

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Published quarterly in London  
by The Theatre Organ Club  
(President: Robinson Cleaver)

Annual Subscription \$1, Post Free

Subscription Agent for U.S.A.

R. GROVE

2210 INDIANA AVENUE

CONNERSVILLE, INDIANA

Overseas Distribution from:

121 CLYFFORD ROAD, RUISLIP GARDENS, MIDDLESEX