

# THEATRE ORGAN

## On The Move

By L. R. Clarke

You want a theatre organ of your very own? If you can find one, go ahead and buy it, there is nothing to it; they are being moved every day into basements, attics or storage, only to be moved once more when a place is found to set them up.

It is doubtful that the theatre organ, as we know it, will ever again have any lasting popularity with the masses, or be heard in many theatres. It is a rarity even though many ambitious members here and there are doing a tremendous job of restoring theatre organs.

Back in the late '30's, except for the very largest theatres, the organs were silent, and many theatre organists were happy to find work playing the Hammond electric organ. Then, a bit of theatre organ music could be heard in Chicago via radio. Len Salvo, WGN; Milton Charles, WBBM; Eddie Hansen, WCFL; Irma Glen and Larry Larson, WMAZ; to mention only a few. Also heard on the WMAZ - 3/13 Wurlitzer was the nightly theme song of Amos and Andy with Dean Foss-



Console of organ finally in place at BBC Theatre, slightly scratched, but ready to go.

- Copyright photo, BBC, Broadcasting House, London W. 1.

ler at the console. There, between the opening and closing theme, it was not unusual to find Jesse Crawford busy setting the pistons for his program which followed. These constant piston changes resulted in a rule that the registration of "certain" pistons could not be altered.

Even these few radio jobs were soon to be a thing of the past for the organist. It was about this time that Dean Herrick left the States and one of the first Hammond engagements in Chicago "to get away from it all" only to be at the con-

sole of a 3/13 Wurlitzer in Johannesburg, So. Africa. In view of the then U.S. picture, which was very glum for the theatre organists, this seems surprising. However, in England also the theatre organ was still in great demand.

The British Broadcasting Co. then as now featured many top theatre organists regularly.

As staff organist at BBC, the name Reginald Foort soon became a household word, as he was featured regularly at either its concert organ or its theatre organ. While his name became well known and his audience great, the financial return could have been better. Realizing there were more than a hundred excellent vaudeville theatres available all over Great Britain, none with an organ of any kind, he conceived the idea of bringing organ entertainment to this area. By doing so, he was able to capitalize on his popularity.

A company was formed to furnish complete travelling vaudeville shows built around a theatre organ. Naturally, this would require construction of a "portable" organ. Inasmuch as Mr. Foort had great respect for the Moller organs he had known on his visits to the states (even though Wurlitzer and Comptons were being heard most everywhere in England), he approached the Moller people to build a completely portable organ with a 5-manual console. Reginald Foort and his close American friend, Reginald T. Watson, designed the organ, and Watson ("the world's greatest organ

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Caravan of trucks required to move the theatre organ during its travels.

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fanatic") literally slept in the Moller plant to help work out the many details.

Mr. Foort was featured at the Paramount in New York in 1935 and this famous WurliTzer left an indelible impression. This had a definite influence on the specifications of the travelling Moller. To improve on the Paramount organ, he specified four tibias, one more than the Paramount. The results were very gratifying. The organ, built to the designer's most exacting specifications, had 27 ranks, fully unified, 259 stop keys and over 100 pistons and controls. The tonal percussions were Deagan and non-tonal Leedy.

When completed, the portable instrument weighed 28 tons and required 65 crates to ship it to England. The crated organ did not leave on the Queen Mary as planned, but arrived in London just one week before the first engagement. Once there, five 30 foot road trucks the size of the London double deck buses and a staff of 12 were needed to handle it. Staff consisted of: Three organ builders, five truck drivers, two electricians, and two stage riggers, not including the administrative personnel.

The drivers soon became experts at assisting in the assembly and disassembly of the organ. The Drury Lane Theatre was rented for the initial assembly and testing of the instrument, under the supervision of Mr. Watson. At the very beginning, the newly assembled crew was given the problem of setting up the organ on a round-the-clock schedule. Day and night, Watson personally kept the crew on the job. Five days later the organ was being played. Time out for a recording session and a Pathe Pictorial and then the organ was immediately disassembled on a Friday, loaded on the five trucks, moved and installed on a Sunday in the Palace Theatre at Manchester, 186 miles away, for the next day's performance. Very few pistons were set up for the first performance, but it is doubtful that anyone other than Reginald Foort knew this.

Moving the organ in and out was by no means a simple matter, even though the portable features were ingeniously designed by the Moller people. The organ was pulled down, travelled and re-erected some 167 times and always in a terrific rush, over the weekend. Most of the work was at night, and the trucks moved through the dark like a circus caravan. It would seem a difficult task to keep such a delicate instrument in good working order, but there were no disappointments, only praise for the organ.

It can't be denied that there were some mishaps. If anyone missed hearing the trumpet fanfare on the 2nd visit to the Hippodrome Theatre in Birmingham, it could have been easily explained. While unloading this section, a rope broke, and the entire unit rolled down an incline, crashed against a wall and snapped off 28 trumpet pipes.

Usually 4½ hours were required to



**Reginald Foort at console after installation at BBC.**

*— Copyright photo, BBC, Broadcasting House, London W.1.*

dis-assemble and load the organ after the close of an engagement. To do a proper job of installation, 24 hours were required to get the organ into a new theatre, set it up, test everything and tune it completely.

The required amount of time was not always available, and the crew proved it could rise to the occasion and complete the installation in less time. At the close of an engagement at the Palace Theatre, Hammersmith, the trucks were all delayed, and one by one they finally departed, the last leaving at 9:00 a.m. Sunday. For a jump of 250 miles they were required to go many miles out of the way due to floods and low bridges. That following Monday at 6:00 p.m. the show went on as scheduled, but the organ was not completely hooked up until 5:45. There was no time for tuning but the impossible had been accomplished.

However, they did not always manage to overcome the many obstacles. In March, 1940, two of the trucks ended up in 16 foot snow drifts in the Yorkshire moors, the others in Bolton Goods Yards instead of Preston. It is doubtful that the actual presence of the entire organ was known by show time, Monday. It wasn't until Thursday that all of the units were back together and in good order and the show went on, just a "bit later" than planned.

At the start of his performance at the Empire Theatre, Glasgow, Mr. Foort suddenly realized that he and the console were sliding down the slight rake of the stage towards the orchestra pit. Too startled to jump, he kept playing. The stage hands were preoccupied backstage, and for the moment did not realize the predicament he was in. By chance, one finally noticed, and he alerted the rest of the crew and they stopped the console just short of the orchestra pit. A lesson had been learned, and from that moment on the console was secured in place per each performance.

As part of his performance, Mr. Foort would finish a selection and then turn to the audience and say, "I hope you don't think that all of that sound is coming from here. This is only the console where I sit to play. Let me show you where it all comes from." With that, the curtain, which separated the console from the chambers, would be raised halfway, exposing plate glass sections below the shutters. With lights which were mounted over the many sections of pipes, he was able to indicate the various sets or groups of pipes being played. The shutters at the front of each chamber were attached to the backdrop, and at the very end of the finale this entire portion suddenly went up, completely out

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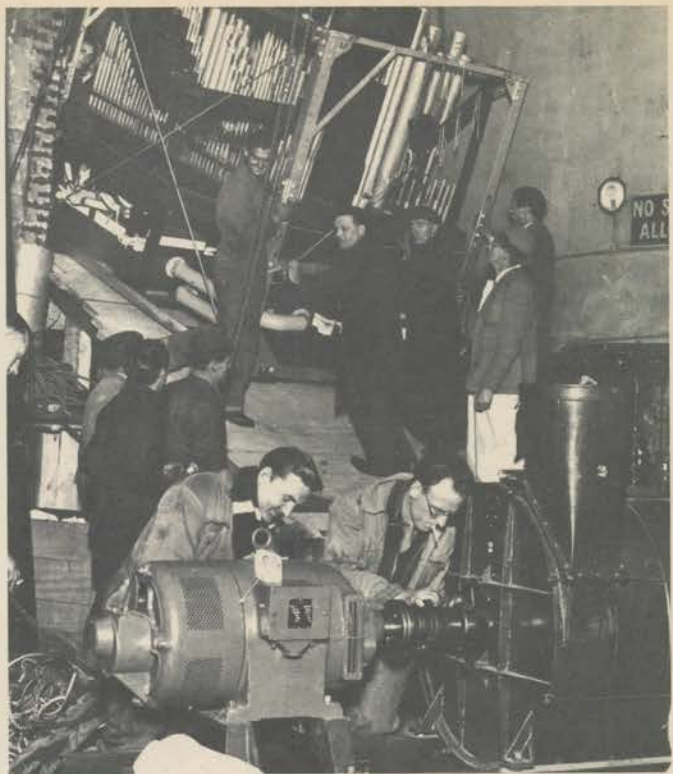




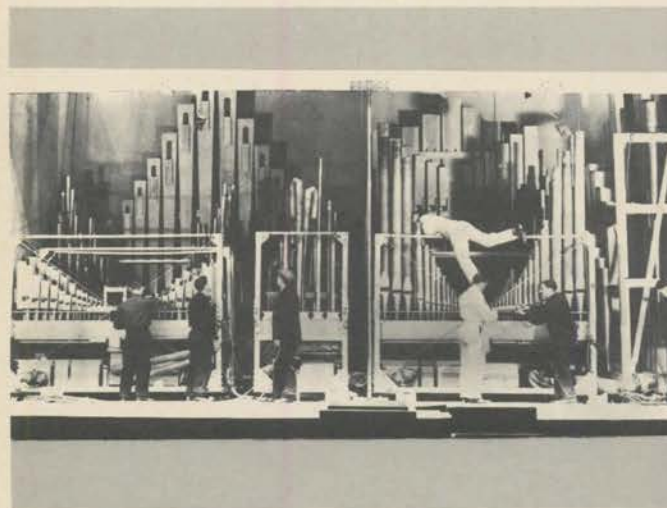
5-manual console nears completion in Moller factory.  
 — Photo courtesy M.P. Moller, Inc.



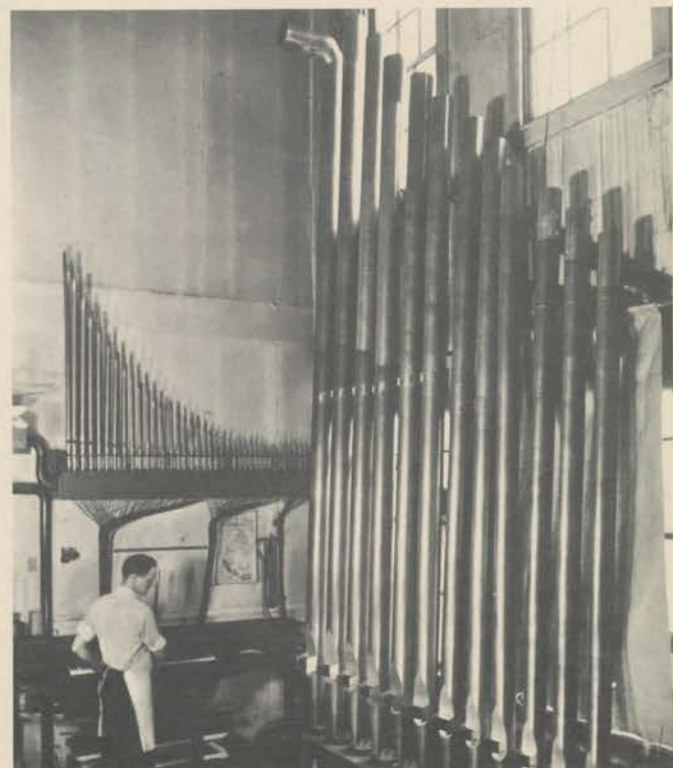
Completed console ready to be crated and start traveling.  
 — Photo courtesy M.P. Moller, Inc.



One section of organ being moved into one of the many theatres. The electric motor in foreground was one of several required due to various electrical currents encountered.



Installing organ on stage. The entire front portion which included the shutters was fastened to the back-drap.



This 16 ft. section was not used until the organ was permanently installed at BBC.

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SPECIFICATIONS FOR THE MOLLER AFTER INSTALLATION AT BBC

PEDAL

	ft.		ft.
Acoustic bass	32	Vox humana I	8
Diaphone	16	Vox humana II	8
Bourdon	16	Vox humana I	4
Gamba	16	Vox humana II	4
Stentor principal	8	Snare drum	
Diapason	8	Chinese block	
Tibia I	8	Castanets	
Tibia II	8	Tambourine	
Tibia III	8	Sand block	
Gamba	8	Tom-tom	
'Cello	8	Super octave coupler	
Flute	8		
Acoustic reed	32		
Tuba mirabilis	16		
Sousaphone	16		
Tuba mirabilis	8		
Trumpet	8		
Tuba horn	8		
Bass drum (F)			
Bass drum (P)			
Bass drum roll			
Cymbal roll			
<u>Couplers</u>			
Accom. to pedal			
Great to pedal			
Orchestral to pedal			
Solo to pedal			
Canceller			

ACCOMPANIMENT

Gamba	16
Bourdon	16
Stentor principal	8
Open diapason	8
Tibia I	8
Tibia II	8
Tibia III	8
Gamba	8
Gamba celestes	8
Viol D orchestre	8
Viol D orch. celestes	8
Orchestral strings	
II ranks	8
Muted strings II ranks	8
Concert flute	8
Octave principal	4
Open diapason	4
Tibia I	4
Tibia II	4
Tibia III	4
Gamba	4
Gamba celestes	4
Violin	4
Violin celestes	4
Orchestral strings	4
Muted strings	4
Concert flute	4
Twelfth	2-2/3
Viola	2
Flautina	2
Chrysaglott	
Chrysaglott damper	
Tuba mirabilis	8
Solo Trumpet	8
Chorus Trumpet	8
Tuba horn	8
Clarinet	8
Saxophone	8
Krumet	8

Second Touch

Tibia I	8
Tibia III	8
Tibia I	4
Solo Trumpet	8
Tuba horn	8
Clarinet	8
Saxophone	8
Krumet	8
Musette	8
Triangle	
Cymbal crash	

Couplers

Orch. to accomp.	8
Solo to accomp.	8
Great to accomp.	4
Canceller	

GREAT

Diaphone	16
Open diapason	16
Tibia I	16
Tibia II	16
Tibia III	16
Gamba	16
Stentor principal	8
Open diapason	8
Tibia I	8
Tibia II	8
Tibia III	8
Gamba	8
Gamba celestes	8
Viol D orchestre	8
Viol D Orchestre	
celestes	8
Orchestral strings	8
Concert flute	8
Quint	5-1/3
Octave principal	4
Open diapason	4
Tibia I	4
Tibia II	4
Tibia III	4
Gamba	4
Gamba celestes	4
Viol D orchestre	4
Viol D orchestre	
celestes	4
Orchestral strings	4
Concert flute	4
Tibia III twelfth	2-2/3
Flute twelfth	2
Tibia III piccolo	2
Violetta	2

	ft.
Flautina	2
Tierce	1-3/5
Mixture 4 ranks	
Tuba mirabilis	16
Trumpet	16
Tuba horn	16
Saxophone	16
Vox humana I	16
Tuba mirabilis	8
Solo trumpet	8
Chorus trumpet	8
Tuba horn	8
Orchestral oboe	8
Clarinet	8
Saxophone	8
Krumet	8
Vox humana I	8
Tuba mirabilis	4
Solo Trumpet	4
Chorus trumpet	4
Tuba horn	4
Saxophone	4
Xylophone	4
Sub octave coupler	
Super octave coupler	
Solo to great coupler	
Orchestral to great coupler	
Canceller	

ORCHESTRAL

Diapason	16
Tibia II	16
Gamba	16
Stentor principal	8
Tibia I	8
Tibia II	8
Tibia III	8
Doppel Flute	8
Gamba	8
Gamba celestes	8
Octave principal	4
Tibia I	4
Tibia II	4
Tibia III	4
Doppel flute	4
Gamba	4
Gamba celestes	4
Tibia II	2-2/3
Tibia II	2
Tuba mirabilis	16
English post horn	16
Chorus trumpet	16
Tuba horn	8
Orchestral oboe	8
Clarinet	8
Saxophone	8
Krumet	8
Musette	8
Vox humana I	8
Tuba mirabilis	4
English post horn	4
Chorus trumpet	4
Chrysaglott	
Xylophone	
Glockenspiel	
Chimes	

COUPLERS

Solo to orchestral	8
Great to orchestral	8
Canceller	

TREMULANTS

Controlling all ranks

4 Balanced Pedals

Main	
Solo	
Percussion	
Crescendo	

SOLO

Tibia I	16
Tibia III	16
Viol D orchestre	16
Tibia I	8
Tibia II	8
Tibia III	8
Viol D orchestre	8
Viol D orchestre	
celestes	8
Tibia III Quint	5-1/3
Tibia I	4
Tibia II	4
Tibia III	4
Tibia I	2-2/3
Tibia III	2
Tibia I	2
Tibia III	2
Trumpet	16
Saxophone	16
Vox humana I	16
Tuba mirabilis	8
English post horn	8
Solo trumpet	8
Tuba horn	8
Orchestral oboe	8
Clarinet	8
Saxophone	8
Krumet	8
Musette	8
Vox humana I	8
Vox humana II	8
Solo trumpet	4
Saxophone	4
Vox humana I	4
Vox humana II	4
Orchestral bells	
Sbu octave coupler	
Super octave coupler	
Canceller	

BOMBARDE

Orchestral to	
bombarde	16
Orchestral to	
bombarde	8
Solo to bombarde	8
Orchestral to	
bombarde	5-1/3
Orchestral to	
bombarde	4
Orchestral to	
bombarde	3-1/5
Orchestral to	
bombarde	2-2/3
Chrysaglott	
Carillon	
Chimes	

\*Concluded on next page

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# MOLLER SPECIFICATIONS (Concluded)

## PISTONS

### Manual

Acc. (2nd touch pedal)	20
Great (2nd touch general)	20
Orchestral	20
Solo	20

### Toe

Pedal	5
Solo to percussion	
Cymbal roll	
Bird whistle	
Sforzando	
General canceller	

### Traps

Sleigh bells
Police whistle
Bird whistle
Steamboat whistle
Surf
Firebell
Siren
Chinese Block tap
Chinese block repeat
Cymbal Crash

## THEATRE ORGAN ON THE MOVE

(Concluded)

of sight, and the thunderous sound of the organ literally brought the house down.

World War II came, and as it progressed, moving of the giant organ became more and more difficult. Later, it was necessary to switch some pipes and leave the large string section behind in order to ship the organ by rail. During a week's engagement at the Empire in Liverpool, bombs were dropped nightly, usually during the second performance, and on the Saturday night of that engagement three incendiaries were burning in

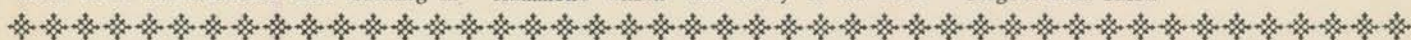
the roof space, but the show continued. It was the organ crew who saved the theatre.

During the war many theatre organists played an important part in keeping up morale during the air-raids, and BBC made full use of their theatre organ (a Compton) until one night in September 1940, when it was destroyed by a bomb dropped on St. George's Hall. This fact was kept a secret for security reasons, and BBC immediately started using a Hammond which was ready in an emer-

gency studio outside London.

Having encountered many hardships with the travelling organ because of wartime conditions, Reginald Foort, who had learned of the destruction of the BBC studios and the organ, in May 1941 offered his portable organ to BBC for the duration. Eagerly they accepted it, and the organ was installed in temporary studios outside of London, where it remained for several years. Following the war Mr. Foort decided to sell the organ outright to BBC. After a complete cleaning, etc., BBC re-erected the organ in Jubilee Hall, East Road, London, where it remains today. At this time the 16 foot extension of the Gamba rank was finally installed and put to use. These large pipes had remained unused and in storage because it was determined at the very beginning that they were too delicate to be subjected to constant handling. After approximately 167 trips, the organ is still in daily use... a fitting finale..

The foresight required to conceive such a large undertaking is certainly commendable, and while this may not have been the first travelling pipe organ, it was without a doubt far and away the largest ever built.



### A Mighty Sound Revived!

# Geo. Wright at Orpheum Theatre, San Francisco

By Al White

On December 13, 1963, the marquee of the Orpheum Theatre in San Francisco proudly announced, "It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World," intimating that the unexpected was taking place inside. By all accepted standards, it was. The big 4/21 Robert Morton pipe organ had virtually been completely overhauled, and for three days George Wright would perform for capacity audiences.

The Orpheum Theatre in San Francisco is the Cinerama showcase, and when the wide screen process was introduced, the remodeling had made the organ almost unusable for public shows by extending the stage out over the orchestra pit, thus covering the console and the foundation organ. Through the efforts of two local ATOE members, Ron Downer and Ernie Langley, the chief Cinerama projectionist, the management

was persuaded to allow an opening to be made in the stage for the console to once again rise and be visible. The first time the organ had been used since the Cinerama debut was in February, 1963, when Tiny James and Everett Nourse played for the opening week of "How The West Was Won."

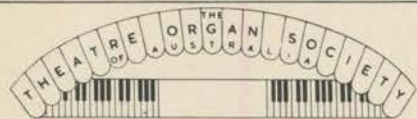
Late this year Radio Station KPEN-FM, which had sponsored the previous George Wright concerts at the late S.F. Fox, was investigating the possibilities of sponsoring another Wright concert at one of the theatres in San Francisco that still possessed a usable pipe organ. The Orpheum, with its 4 manual Robert Morton, was selected following a meeting with George Wright, Jim Gabbart and Gary Gielow of KPEN-FM, and Sam Pearlman, district manager for Cinerama.

George indicated what he felt needed to be done to make the organ ready for a concert performance, and under the supervision of Dick Villeman (ATOE-AGO), the rehabilitation started. Helping were Charles Hershman (who had originally installed the organ), Ron Downer, Bob Rhodes and Tiny James. The console required the most attention, as it had been liberally sprayed by water a few years back during a fire on the Cinerama stage. The four manuals had to be completely reworked and the many pallets in the console recovered, together with a complete overhauling of the combination setterboards.

Following the usual running down of dead notes, crossed wires, etc., the pipework was then completely gone over by Villeman, and the regulating and tuning completed just in time for the first concert. Of course, during the rehabilitation, the usual things that were not included in the original listing showed up: regulators blew up, tremulants gave up, and to top it all it was found that previous 'mechanics' had grabbed the key relay drawers and bent contact wires together or had broken them off entirely. This was one of the longest jobs encountered in the entire rehabilitation. The only problem that still exists is the matter of regulated heat in the four chambers, as this creates a terrific tuning problem. But plans are now afoot to correct this situation.

The series of three concerts featuring George Wright were scheduled for Friday and Saturday nights, with a matinee on Sunday afternoon. Prime evening time was available due to the theatre being closed to normal operations during the transition between Cinerama pictures. Promptly at 8:30 p.m., the house lights dimmed, George Wright sat down at the organ and the new combination of George Wright at the Magnificent Orpheum Theatre Robert Morton commenced. The concert, as all George Wright concerts are, proved to be full of surprises and a playing ability that is beyond approach.

The organ sounded tremendous. The



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