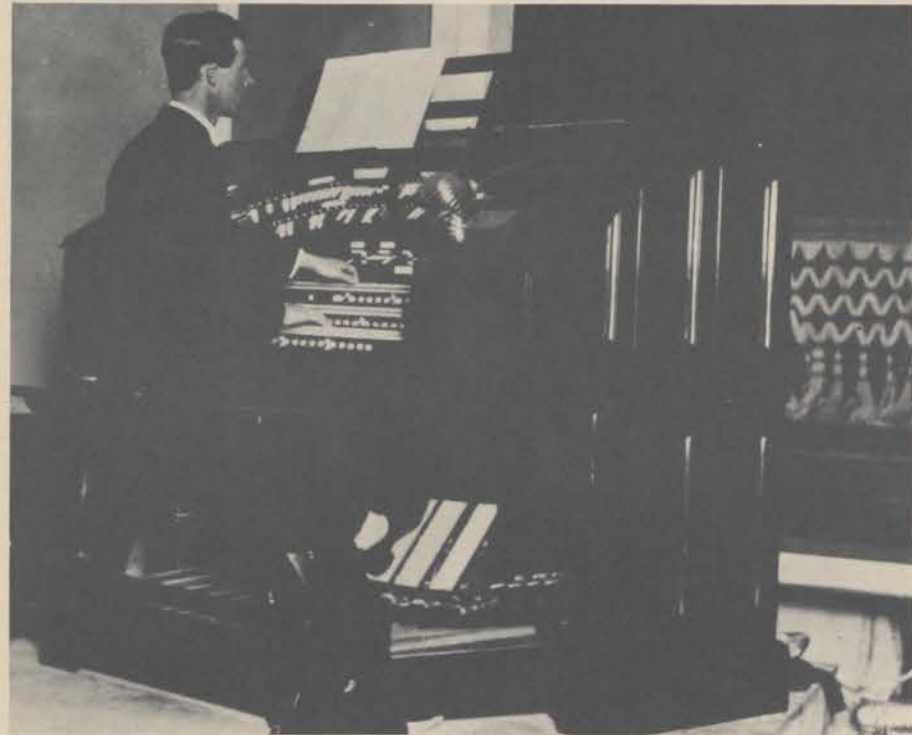


A Great Organist Closes A Great Organ In A Great Theatre!



Horace Weber at opening of Melbourne's Capitol Theatre, November, 1924. Console then was highly polished rosewood.

by Eric Wicks

On Wednesday evening, February 5, 1964, the world-famous Capitol Theatre, Melbourne, Australia, screened its last film programme, "Guns of Darkness," with Leslie Caron and David Niven. The Capitol, work of American architectural genius Walter Burley Griffin, the designer of Canberra, rated by many authorities as the world's most perfect cinema, had succumbed to the big guns of competition from television, drive-ins, and 1000-seat long-run houses. The next day, for the first time in almost 40 years, the theatre which had opened in a blaze of glory on Saturday, November 8, 1924, with "The Ten Commandments," a 20-piece orchestra, and a magnificent 3m/15r WurliTzer, would be in darkness.

For most of the audience that attended the final night it was a sentimental occasion. Some had been present on the opening night. Others had worked there over the years. Many were patrons with a deep affection for the timeless quality of the theatre which had needed no modernisation in four decades, its magnificently beautiful ceiling, and who remembered the many exciting and happy hours they had spent there. The orchestra pit had disappeared under a stage apron built into the theatre with the installation of a wide screen 10 years ago, and the WurliTzer organ, bought by the Theatre Organ Society of Australia, Victorian Division, had been removed — the con-

sole left the theatre after the show the night before.

After the final National Anthem, the audience almost to a man remained standing whilst a record was played, the concealed ceiling lighting for the last time blending and changing through endless patterns of soft color, the two magnificent crystal candelabra burning brightly, and theatre manager Ron Jenkinson and his staff stood to attention at the front of the stalls, facing the audience, in their last tribute to a fine theatre.

In the centre of the front row of the lounge stood an erect grey-haired figure, head slightly bowed, listening to the memory-evoking strains of "Look for the Silver Lining," played on the Capitol WurliTzer. It was Horace Weber, the featured organist at the opening of the theatre, hearing again the music with which he closed the organ at the final recital on Sunday afternoon, November 17, 1963.

Horace Weber is a phenomenon in Australia's musical life. For over 60 years his masterful playing of the king of instruments in theatre, church, city hall or cathedral has been heard throughout the country.

Many enthusiastic lovers of organ music will listen to recordings from England, Europe or the United States, and mentally compare what they hear with the standard set by Horace Weber. Whether it be one of the great composi-

tions from the classical repertoire, a simple hymn, or a frivolous Hit Parade pop, over the years Horace Weber has presented them with an innate musicianship and virtuosity of performance which seldom fall short of perfection.

Father Started His Training

His musical training was thorough, in the best classical tradition. A cathedral organist whilst still in his teens, his entry to the theatre organ world came at a time when he was already acknowledged as a brilliant organist and musician.

Over the years, whilst playing in theatres, his approach to the instruments at his command has always been that he is playing an organ, not a box of whistles and kitchen utensils. The result has been basically sound organ music, developed in the way that can only be accomplished by true organists.

Adelaide-born Horace Weber, the son of a piano mechanic who was himself a fine organist, started his musical career as a choir boy at St. Peter's Anglican Cathedral in that city at the age of seven and a half, and later won the coveted silver medal for the "best all-round boy." His father started teaching Horace the piano when he was aged nine, and allowed him glimpses of organ playing on a cabinet organ. He remembers the first time he played an organ with full scale pedals; it was at St. Luke's Church, Adelaide, where his father was organist. Weber's amazing progress is exempli-



Weber at Capitol in 1932. Console was given "wedding cake" treatment when American Newell Alton came to theatre with Conductor Jan Rubini in 1929.

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fied by the fact that he was appointed assistant organist at St. Peter's Cathedral when aged 12. His father overcame the difficulty of adequate practice by arranging with the South Australian Education Department for Horace to attend school in the afternoon only. So one week he would practice all the morning on the organ at the cathedral — a big three-manual Bishop from London, and go to school in the afternoon, and then the next week he would practice piano in the morning, and go to school in the afternoon.

Although training for a musical career, Horace had all a boy's natural instincts for sport and outdoor activity. One of his boyhood friends, R. S. Thompson, now a prominent Adelaide businessman, recently recalled how Horace was "always keen to kick a football, but naturally did not play in matches because of the risk to his fingers. But he would join us at practice, and always wore gloves even when 'marking' (the high leap for the ball to grasp it whilst in flight which is one of the characteristics of Australian football) the ball to have a kick."

Horace has a vivid memory of how he first learnt that he was to become the acting cathedral organist, when only aged 12. "The organist and choirmaster, Mr. John Dunn, was going to England for a trip, and was to be away 11 months. He simply said to me, 'I'm getting Mr. Arthur Otto in to do the choir, and you will do the organ.' That's all he said. But it was a very fine experience. I think that it hit me along musically more than any experience I had. You just had to do the work."

Passing the senior organ examination of the Royal Academy of Music when aged 14, Weber then started piano studies at the Elder Conservatorium of Music, Adelaide, under the head piano teacher, Russian-born Bryceson Treham, with a career as a concert pianist in view.



Gordon Hamilton, TOSA Division President, during a midnight practice session. He was featured with Weber at final recital.

Spring '64



Horace Weber shown as he plays final recital on Capitol WurliTzer last February 5th.

Although he developed into a magnificent pianist, and still is, his brilliance as an organist brought increasing demands for his services as a recitalist, first at various churches around Adelaide, and then his first big recital at the Adelaide City Hall when aged 16.

The following year, he was appointed from 15 applicants to the post of organist and choirmaster at St. John's Cathedral, Napier, New Zealand, where, during his four years' stay, he gave over 100 recitals, apart from services.

It was here that he had the opportunity to go to America. "I had a choice of going to America — everything was right — or getting married," says Horace. "Well, I got married. And I'm not sorry."

Became A WurliTzer Man

Instead of America, it was back to Australia, first to the North Adelaide Baptist Church, where he gave his two-hundredth recital, and then he followed the former city organist into the Flinders Presbyterian Church, Adelaide, where he stayed for three years, until the big change — his introduction to the WurliTzer.

"It happened this way," says Horace. "They put an organ in the Grand Theatre, Adelaide, and the proprietor of the theatre, Mr. Drake, appointed a man named Will Parsons as organist. He played the piano at West's Pictures in

Hindley Street. I knew him very well — a very fine theatre pianist, but he didn't know an organ from a harmonium. He was appointed under a two-year contract to play that organ. Well, the organ was opened, and Will held that position for about five weeks. Then they closed the organ up, and had it all done up again.

"One Friday night Mr. Drake came to see me at the church during choir practice. I knew old Mr. Drake, although not very well — he had been a great big tall ex-bookie.

"Anyway, he wandered into the church during choir practice and walked straight up to me and said, 'You're Weber, aren't you?', and I said 'That's right, Mr. Drake.' If I hadn't known him I would have thought he was a policeman, the way he spoke. 'I want to see you,' he said. I said, 'You can't, Mr. Drake, until after practice.' 'Right, I'll meet you at the Grand Theatre at half-past nine,' he said.

"I wandered around there, and there it was. He had me cornered to play this theatre organ. I'd never seen a theatre organ in my life. I was used to the old cathedral work. It was a two-manual WurliTzer Duplex, with an 88-note piano keyboard at the bottom, and a 61-note manual at the top. I told him I didn't know anything about theatre playing. But he said, 'Go down and play something. And don't tell me you can't, because you can.'

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"So I went down and played two things that were among his favorites, although I didn't know it — the Soldier's Chorus from Faust, and he thought that was absolutely wonderful. Then I played the same old thing which I often played at the Capitol — The Rosary — and he thought that was wonderful, too. A few days afterwards he saw me and told me that if I would sign a three-year contract he would give me 17 pounds 10 shillings (about 80 dollars) a week.

"And of course I took that position! You can imagine, a poor old church organist in 1919, what he would be getting, and a man comes along and says, 'I'll give you £17/10/-a week, three year's contract.' I said 'thank you very much.'"

Those, of course, were the silent film days. And Horace Weber says he thinks he learnt more playing theatre organ for silent films than he did at the Conservatorium or in Cathedral work. "Playing picture organ in silent days you had to play from all sorts of scores — song copies, piano conductor's copies, all sorts of things. When you had to make your own pedal part from these it would be quite hard, but when you came back to ordinary organ music — three staves — it was quite simple."

Here it must be mentioned that to Horace Weber the pedal part, even for a pop, is not just a rhythmic bassy bump — it's a real pedal part, played with both feet, with the top end of the pedal board getting almost as much work as the lower.

The organist at the Grand was not on view to the public. The console was raised about half-way up the theatre wall facing the screen, and surrounded by a high curtain. "In summer I'd probably play just in a singlet. In winter I'd have my topcoat and everything on."

Horace says the Grand WurliTzer was a fine little organ of its kind — 11 or 12 ranks, with two flutes — a concert flute and an ordinary Hohl flute, but no tibias. He used to try and fit the picture, using appropriate music, such things as Wagnerian opera, even Bach. "A lot of people don't think I play Karg-Elert. And Max Reger. Karg-Elert was just composing then for the harmonium, not the organ. I used to play a lot of him, to fit in with a dry picture. The picture was dry, so I played dry music," says Horace.

"During the period I was there we added a bass drum, snare drum, and two cymbals. They were the most vile things you ever heard. They were terrible drums, but the best we could buy in Adelaide. My brother Victor put them in — he is a piano and organ mechanic. But in those days they had no way of working them. The bass drum was just a thump."

Played First Big WurliTzer

In 1922 Horace Weber was engaged to open the two-manual Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra at Hoyt's De Luxe Theatre (now the Esquire) in Melbourne. Two



About Eric Wicks

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Eric Wicks, Vice-President of the Theatre Organ Society of Australia, Victorian Division, was a pupil of Horace Weber for three years before joining the Australian Army during the Second World War, which, he says, was probably a good thing for those people who like to enjoy listening to theatre organs. He is now editor of the Melbourne suburban newspaper, East Yarra News. He likes to tell friends he is a member of the "coolie labor" force helping the more expert TOSA members dismantle theatre organs.

years later, in 1924, he was appointed from 12 applicants as organist for the first full-scale WurliTzer in Australia at the new Capitol Theatre.

It was the first WurliTzer in Australia with 16, 8 and 4 Tibias, and cost the then staggering sum of £15,000 (about 75,000 dollars). Newspapers of the day indicate that the opening of the theatre with "The Ten Commandments," the large orchestra under Sam White, the stage "prologue," and the magnificent organ rising up from the pit whilst being played by Horace Weber, was something of a riot.

The program in those days opened with a "gazette," (type of newsreel—Ed.) after which there would be the orchestral overture, followed by the solo organ spot. Once, giving one of his "Trips through the Organ," Horace announced to the audience that he was going to do something different — play the piano with his feet. They thought it was a joke. He coupled the piano 16, 8 and 4 to the pedal, and played the Bach G Major Fugue. They thought it was wonderful. Horace says there was nothing wonderful about it — just showmanship, that's all. But there are few theatre organists who could do it with a work of that nature.

Old timers remember the big controversy in the newspapers when the then city organist of Melbourne, William McKie (now Sir William McKie, organist at Westminster Abbey) told students during a lecture at Melbourne University Conservatorium of Music that the Capitol WurliTzer was only fit to use as drains. When this was reported in the press, Horace Weber bounced right back, and the argument was very heated.

Eventually McKie came across from the town hall (it was only on the other side of Swanston Street) to the Capitol to hear Weber play the WurliTzer for him. McKie was quite surprised, and admitted that the organ's tone was very fine. He

said he had been quite mistaken, and had made his statement to the students on what he had been told, without having heard the WurliTzer. But he wouldn't accept the invitation to try it himself.

In 1929 Weber left the Capitol for the Victory Theatre, Kogarah, New South Wales (his place at the Capitol was taken by American Newell Alton, who came out with violinist-conductor Jan Rubini), and later he followed another American, Price Dunlevy, at the Sydney State 4m/21r WurliTzer, from which he broadcast daily for two years. He was then at the Roxy, Paramatta (a three-manual Christie) before returning to the Melbourne Capitol in 1932 for two years. He then transferred to Perth, West Australia, where he was featured at the Ambassadors and Regent Theatres before returning to Melbourne and the Capitol in 1938 for another six years.

His last theatre appointment was at Melbourne's Regent and Plaza Theatres in 1948-49. The Plaza, with a 2m/13r WurliTzer, is below the Regent. The original Regent, opened in 1929, was destroyed by fire in 1945. During his period here Weber was again playing the Ambassadors' Perth organ, which had been brought across to Melbourne, and rebuilt from a 3m/15r to a 4m/19r by including some of the Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra originally in Hoyt's De Luxe, before being installed in the Regent to replace the original 4m/21r WurliTzer lost in the fire.

Since his retirement from regular theatre work, he has been actively engaged as organist and choirmaster at the Armadale Baptist Church, Melbourne, and gives many recitals there and at other churches. In recent years he has also been in demand as an electronic organ demonstrator.

(Editor's Note: Part two of Eric Wicks' excellent story discloses the tremendous activity on the part of the Victorian Division of the Theatre Organ Society of Australia to prepare the Capitol WurliTzer for the final Weber concert, the big musical event, and final removal of the instrument by the Society. The article will appear in the next issue of THEATRE ORGAN.)

MacClain, Cole Suffer Attacks

Two famous organists have recently suffered heart attacks and have been forced into semi-retirement until their health improves. The two, ATOE's Leonard MacClain, who resides at Devault, Pa., and Buddy Cole, of North Hollywood, Calif., have both produced new recordings that are currently being distributed throughout the United States. Both men are inactive and will be on the mend for several months.

However, it was announced in Niagara Frontier Chapter's "Silent Newsreel," official unit publication, that MacClain sent word he plans to attend the 1964 National ATOE Convention in New York next July.

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