

Organ Society Listening Post

by

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On a certain evening, once a month, members of the London District of the Cinema Society can be seen converging on the magnificent Public Library belonging to the Holborn Borough Council in Theobalds Road in West Central London. (Holborn is one of the best known business districts of London, with, surprisingly, quite a large residential population). What are they doing there, these members of the Cinema Organ Society? Well, perhaps we had better begin at the beginning.

Soon after the Society was formed in 1953, a few of the London members decided it would be a good idea to get together in an informal way to have a chat, and listen to records of theatre organ music. It was not possible to get to know each other very well at meetings in vast theatres in semi-darkness while recitals were taking place, and the idea of these meetings met a real need.

At the start, about 10 or a dozen members used to meet in the hall attached to St. Mark's Church, Marylebone in West London. At most of these early meetings the records came from the wonderful collection of about 3,000 discs belonging to Douglas Badham.

Doug was then General Secretary of the Society and is now its much respected Chairman. He is a great authority on theatre organ records – particularly the pre-war 78's, which were the only ones available at the time.

Gradually other members joined in and brought along their favourites, all of which gave some of us a chance to hear records which were new to us. Incidentally, quite good business was done in buying and selling duplicate copies and some members were able to add to their collections discs they had been searching for for years. In those early days meetings were quite informal, and we soon got to know our fellow members during the interval while drinking a cup of tea – a peculiarly English habit which seems to mystify you American friends!

Later, a small room was obtained adjoining the Fred Tallant Hall at Euston, which was more central. Another advantage was that they had a refreshment room which we were allowed to use. As the Society grew, this room soon proved too small, and we had to move into the small hall in the same building, and eventually into the main hall. The buildings were rather old and decidedly Victorian in comfort, and furthermore there was no place to store our record playing equipment, which had to be transported back and forth every time we met.

After looking around for some little time, Dennis Mathew, then General Secretary, heard there was a chance of hiring the lecture theatre in the Holborn Library, recently opened by Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother. A few of us spent our lunch break going to see the Librarian and viewing the Hall. We found a beautiful little theatre with a seating capacity of 200-300 on the top floor of the Library, which had built-in stereophonic hi fi playing equipment, and a first class tape machine. Although the hire charge was more than we had been paying, we felt that the location was ideal. Rather nervously we suggested our charge per member should be increased to two shillings and sixpence (roughly 35 cents, to you!). But we need not have worried as more and more members joined us.

Since moving to our new 'home' about four years ago, we have become more ambitious, and the usual programme is varied from time to time to include film evenings (mainly on organ topics), showing of colour transparencies of consoles, theatres and organists, or a combination of these with records. Other popular events have been tributes to the late Jesse Crawford, and Quentin Maclean. In the latter case we were able to hear by kind permission of C.B.C. the Canadian radio tribute to "Mac". Also by special permission, and kind co-operation of A.T.O.E. members, we were able to hear the complete broadcast of "Farewell to the Fox," originally broadcast from San Francisco. We have also been honoured by visits from famed radio organists George Blackmore and Gerald Shaw, who have presented their musical autobiographies with the aid of their own private recordings.

At some of these special events attendances have reached nearly 200 people, and nowadays an average attendance is 40 to 50. Meetings are somewhat less informal than in the early days, as the disc jockey for the evening always takes a great deal of time to prepare an attractive programme, very often based on a theme of his own choice.

We do not forget the great players of the past and 78's still find their place in our programmes; some of them still sound remarkably good on hi fi equipment. Douglas Badham is still responsible for the meeting arrangements which we all enjoy immensely.

We can certainly recommend the idea to the readers of THEATRE ORGAN. The writer has found that it is well worth while, for not only can we recall our old British organist friends, but we have been introduced to the stylings of many of your famous American organists, not forgetting also, those in Australia, and the continent of Europe.



Cinema Organ Society members listening to records played by Len Rawle (sitting at table with tape recorder in Holborn Library Hall).

—Photo by John D. Sharp