

A GREAT THEATRE DIES

THEATRE ORGAN takes great pleasure presenting part two of Eric Wicks' splendid account of Horace Weber and the Melbourne Capitol Theatre Wurlitzer. No detail of the final weeks during which hectic activity went on has escaped Wicks' lucid pen. For record collectors, attention is invited to the advertisement at the end of the story containing information relative to acquiring a copy of the final recording of this Wurlitzer.

-Editor

By Eric Wicks

On April 24, 1963 former T.O.S.A. Victorian Division secretary David Cross heard that the owners of the Capitol Theatre were considering selling the theatre's Wurlitzer. When society members had discussed the possibility of purchasing an organ, there was general agreement that the Capitol instrument was the one to buy, not only for its historic associations, but also because it was generally considered to be the finest Wurlitzer tonally ever to come to Australia.

But we would far rather leave organs where they were, in the hope that they might again be used. However, if it was to be sold, prompt action was necessary, so in the absence of the president, Gordon Hamilton, who was having an extended holiday interstate, I contacted the theatre owning company, confirmed that the organ was to be sold, and let them know that we were interested.

We were asked to submit a written offer for a board meeting by May 8. Not knowing the condition of the organ, or what was involved in its removal, the T.O.S.A. committee decided to offer £750 (about 1700 dollars) for it. It was

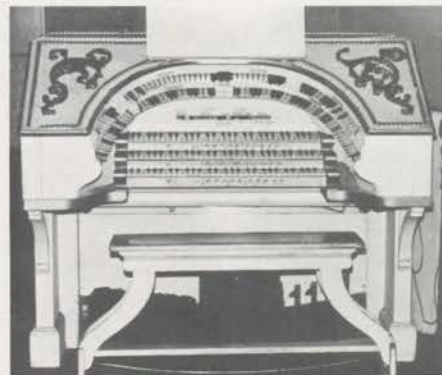
necessary to keep quiet about the offer, so that the story did not become too widely known, thereby attracting offers from more commercially minded buyers bent on wrecking the instrument for its excellent pipework.

Over the next four months there were many telephone calls to the company secretary, Mr. Bill Bunn, on the deal, and we did learn that other would-be buyers had entered the field. The company finally decided to invite tenders from all three prospective purchasers.

Society Gets Organ

By this time, with the advice of president Gordon Hamilton, who had successfully tendered for the Melbourne State Theatre's 4/21 Wurlitzer in the meantime, available, the Society decided to raise its offer to £1250 (about 2800 dollars). When considering the offers received, the company decided to award the organ to the Society, because it wanted to see it preserved, and also because the Society seemed most able to remove the instrument by the date required, December 15. And so, on October 2, I was handed the letter of acceptance of our offer by Mr. Bunn, who at the same time mentioned that the organ was insured for £25,000 (56,000 dollars).

The Society's committee decided that an effort should be made to hold a recital, and also record the organ, before it was removed from the Capitol. This posed a problem. There were only 10 weeks before the instrument was supposed to be out of the theatre, and as it had not been played for over five years, and its maintenance had been neglected, much work was needed to bring it up to scratch. Then the lessees of the theatre were not sure they wanted to let the Society hold a recital on a



The Capitol, Melbourne 5/15 Wurlitzer Console.

Sunday afternoon, because of certain difficulties with staffing and health regulations.

The outline of the program was discussed. There were so many items which "simply must go in" that it quickly became obvious that it would be solid work, and a second organist would be necessary to give Horace a rest. Gordon Hamilton accepted the honor, philosophically commenting that it would let people hear the organ in a different mood. But we were grateful for his acceptance of a difficult role, being sandwiched in between groups of items by the master.

Both organists in their preparation had the difficulty of having to cope with missing notes, either permanent or intermittent, and some hopelessly sour. However, the program finally arranged looked good, with plenty of contrast, and all the organ being fully exploited.

There were some midnight trial recording and filming sessions during the last week or so before the recital.

Here is an odd fact: Although known to be one of the world's outstanding organists, Horace Weber had never been recorded for commercial release. In 1930-31 some organ recordings were made by a company operating in Melbourne and Newell Alton made four sides on the Capitol Wurlitzer. But Horace Weber was in Sydney. Then for many years the only commercial recording in Australia was done in Sydney, and Horace was in Perth or Melbourne.

When the big boom in long plays developed during the fifties, Horace was no longer playing theatre organ. Some acetate recordings were made privately in 1949 of a series of radio broadcasts by Horace Weber from the Capitol, and two L.P. discs were recorded by him at the Armadale Baptist Church in 1957, but that was about all.

So one of the important aspects of the final recital was the opportunity it would provide to preserve on record the

AU REVOIR TO THE CAPITOL WURLITZER

Featuring Australian Master Organist

HORACE WEBER

Recorded at the Final Recital in the Capitol Theatre, Melbourne,
by the Theatre Organ Society of Australia, Victorian Division,
Sunday, November 17, 1963

Souvenir Programme of the Recital included with each disc

PRICE: \$5.00, surface mail postage paid
(\$7.50 via Air Mail)

Send draft with order to: T.O.S.A. RECORDS, P.O. BOX 20,
NORTH BALWYN, VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

sound of Horace Weber playing the Capitol Wurlitzer. This had its difficulties. With an audience in the theatre, extraneous noise was unavoidable, and the Australian Broadcasting Commission's television crew which came along to cover the recital did their best to be silent, but not always successfully. One elderly gent who sneezed three times during the quietest part of E.T. Chipp's Variations on Haydn's Hymn, Austria, was lucky he wasn't murdered.

But the final result has a sound and a live atmosphere which more than compensates for minor blemishes from an occasional sour or missing note. It reveals the Wurlitzer as a beautiful instrument, capable of producing a glorious full organ tone or music of great delicacy.

T.O.S.A. New South Wales Division president Tom Halloran and secretary John Clancy, with other members, made the longest journey to attend the recital—600 miles. Others came from Adelaide (470 miles), Mount Gambier (286 m.) and from many country towns in Victoria.

When I entered the theatre about an hour before the recital I was horrified to see what appeared to be the console in bits, with Bill Glasson, Julien Arnold, and a couple of others working frantically. At the last minute middle C on the Great had gone dead. So hastily an emergency wire was run from the key contact, up the theatre wall to the relay in the main chamber.

Then the TV director wanted to interview Horace before the recital, and seemed puzzled when Horace insisted that, as had always been his custom

right through his career, he had come to the theatre early to quietly relax for about 20 minutes before starting the program. Which he did. The interview was filmed 10 days later.

After the National Anthem, Horace Weber opened the program with the Dambusters' March followed by a "Tour Through the Organ". Then came Durand's Waltz in E Flat, Song of Paradise, the Minuet from Boellman's Suite Gothique, and Mascagni's Intermezzo.

It was decided to aim for a final recital on Sunday, November 3. This would leave six weeks to remove the organ, excluding the 32-foot diaphones, which were above the proscenium, lying on top of the original chambers, and the piano, which was lying on its back on the old organ lift, under the stage apron—these would have to wait until the theatre was closed.

Who should have the honor of playing the final recital? The answer was unanimous—Horace Weber, if we could get him. But would he do it? After all, it was 14 years since he had last played as a theatre organist, and he had neatly side-stepped earlier invitations to play for T.O.S.A. in a theatre. Over the telephone I told him the Society had bought the organ, and asked if he would like to be the last to play it in its original home, the Capitol. The answer was a prompt and definite "Yes".

Then the panic started. Committeeman Bill Glasson was put in charge of the restoration work, which went on every night and all day Saturday. There was

much that needed doing, and time was short. Some repairs could not be done effectively without major dismantling. Such items were left alone.

Weber arranged to come in and practice between 8 and 9 a.m. each weekday. Committeeman Roy Preston and I went in each day to provide moral support, note anything which Horrie pointed out as particularly in need of fixing, and to enjoy the music. The first morning was a bit of a flop. As soon as the blower was turned on, the G above middle C trumpet ciphered. We didn't have keys to the chambers with us. So Horrie did his best, trying stops, and playing bits of this and that, all in the key of G. "Get's monotonous, doesn't it?", he said.

He pressed all the pistons below each manual. Always the tremos came on. "Look at that. That's what killed the Wurlitzer. Everything played with tremulants—no variety". Variety is something that has always been notable about Horace's playing. Even pops he frequently plays without tremos, nor are tibias included in almost every combination.

The work went on, each day seeing some improvement. Then one morning the G in the middle of the Great went dead—on everything. Much painstaking work by Bill Glasson and his assistants failed to find the cause. Then one night it mysteriously came on again.

Young Myles Browne kept at the tuning of the pipes, which kept slipping out of tune, particularly the reeds. And Julien Arnold, Bill Glasson's right hand man, kept on fixing, fixing, fixing.

Members Allowed to Play

The Society paid for the organ with donations received from members, who subscribed half the cost in six weeks, and a loan from the Commonwealth Bank. It was decided as many members as possible should have the opportunity to inspect the chamber installations, high up on each side of the proscenium (to which location they had been brought down in 1929), and play the organ before it was removed. So every night, after the film show finished at 11, there would be little groups of people, wearing old clothes and armed with torches, climbing the steep stairs to the main or the diaphones, or the ladder up the wall to the solo, and then "having a go", until about 3 a.m.

The management finally said we could have a recital on November 10. Horace said sorry, but he was opening a new organ at a church that afternoon. So the big day was fixed for Sunday, November 17.

Organ Bench Walks

There was nearly a catastrophe during the next item, Bach's Fugue a la Gigue. The console, with the installation of a wide screen, was moved from its lift and stood facing into a corner, surrounded by a waist-high fence. This monstrosity was removed before the recital, leaving

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BURLEY GRIFFIN'S MASTERPIECE — The Melbourne Capitol in 1924, showing its famous ceiling. Thousands of concealed colored globes reflected on numerous small plaster prisms, operated from back-stage switchboard.



PROPERTY OF ORGAN SOCIETY - Loading the Capitol console onto a truck in a lane beside theatre at midnight on Tuesday, February 4, 1964 are, from left to right - Jack Williams, Bruce Hester, Roy Preston, Bill Lasson (directing), Wally Chamberlain, Laurie Dick, David Johnston, Julien Arnold (front), and George Bloom.

MELBOURNE CAPITOL

(Concluded)

the console on a low platform. Whilst Horace was playing Bach, I could see something was unsettling him.

Sneaking down the side aisle, I was horrified to see the organ bench teetering over the edge of the platform on one side, and every movement of his brilliant pedal technique was rocking it nearer to the point where it would tilt over, and send our recitalist crashing backwards to the floor. The rest of the item was played with me kneeling on the floor, holding the bench!

The first section concluded with two old ones-Meadowlark, which was introduced to Australia with Horace's picture on the front of the sheet music, and Jack O'Hagan's popular Australian song, Gundagai. Gordon Hamilton then took over to play Leroy Anderson's Sleigh Ride, 'Til There was You, Samba Caramba, and "Carousel" selection.

During the interval, because the console was accessible to the public, the wind was switched off. This created an awkward moment when Horace prepared to open the second half of the program with the Introduction and Finale from E.T. Chipp's Fantasia on Haydn's Austrian Hymn. The recorders were ready, the TV cameras started rolling, down came those masterful hands for the first might chord, and nothing happened.

Undismayed, Horace slid along the

the bench, pushed the button to start the blower, and then proceeded to again astound his hearers with a brilliant tour de force, concluding with what is rated as probably the most difficult pedal passage ever written.

Calm was restored with Softly Awakes My Heart, followed by Country Gardens the Hallelujah Chorus, and a selection of hymns and Christmas carols.

For his second group Gordon Hamilton provided an unusual Goldmine in the Sky, a stirring South Rampart Street Parade, and a selection of Pops of 1924, the year the Capitol was opened, six years before he was born.

Horace Weber's final selections were all in the popular field-California, Here I come, I'm on a Seesaw, Easter Parade. Then, complementary to Gordon's 1924 bracket, came some Hits of 1963-I Love You Because, Lazy Hazy Crazy Days of Summer, and Hey, Look Me Over.

Before the final programmed item, Gordon Hamilton, as T.O.S.A. president, made a short speech of thanks, presented Horace with a bedside clock as a memento of the occasion, and asked as a special favor if he would play his famous broadcast theme. This, to say the least, was an unusual theme for theatre organ broadcasts-Guilman's Grand Chorus in D Major. A thrilling rendition, although by now a note of sadness was beginning to affect the proceedings, as everyone present knew that within a few short minutes they would have heard the Capitol organ in the theatre for the last time.

Blower Stopped, Circuit Cut

Eventually it came, a moving performance of Look for the Silver Lining. When the thunderous applause had died away, there came the solemn moment when the wind was turned off for the last time. The theatre was hushed as Horace Weber pressed the "off" button. Seconds later the sighing note of some pipes as the wind died away were heard. And that was it.

Steps had been taken to ensure that no-one else had the opportunity to play the organ, even one note, after Horace Weber had concluded his final recital. Theatre electrician Pat Dennis backstage had permanently broken the circuit, and he defied anyone to find where.

The recital over, the tension relaxed, and the members took it easy for a couple of weeks. Then the job of removal was started, in earnest. Again working during the evenings and on Saturdays, with stalwarts Henry Stollery, Julien Arnold, Roy Preston, Bruce Hester, Jock McDonald and Jack Williams providing Bill Glasson with his most reliable nucleus of a team made up then of "casuals", the two chambers were almost completely emptied, and their valuable contents trucked into store in two and a half weeks. A break over Christmas, and then the mopping up continued, the last of the diaphones and the piano leaving the theatre by the end of February.

T.O.S.A. members now cheerfully face months of reconditioning work, after which it is hoped the Wurlitzer will be re-installed in a suburban theatre which is shortly to be rebuilt.

BIG WURLITZER GOING INTO CAFE

by Allen W. Rossiter

A former theatre pipe organ is assuming a lofty perch in a fabulous setting. It is the 4m/20r Wurlitzer-Moller recently removed from the State Theatre in Jersey City, N.J., and now being installed in the Pudding Stone Inn in Boonton, N.J. by the Westervelt Pipe Organ Company. The Inn is an old hostelry perched high on a hill overlooking the New York City skyline some 32 miles away. From its dining room one can count the windows in the Empire State Building on a clear day.

Organist for this instrument will be Frank Cimmino, a very capable young man, who is presently playing at the Inn on an electronic organ. He was seen recently on coast-to-coast TV on NBC's Sunday Show.

The dining room view has prompted the management to advertise "Dining in the Sky." Organman Westervelt remarked to this correspondent that the management has promised New York Chapter ATOE use of the room as a meeting place after the organ is installed. With its high place now assured, the Pudding Stone Inn box of whistles could well become the "Pipe Organ Showplace of the Nation."

theatre organ