

# Famous Organs—

## The Wurlitzer Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra in the Isis Theatre, Denver, Colorado

... Roy Gorish

THE YEAR 1915 is notable as the date when the silent movie entered its Golden Age, for in this year D. W. Griffith released his film "The Birth of a Nation" which became widely acclaimed as the world's greatest silent motion picture. This famous twelve-reel epic doomed the Nickelodeon, as the early movie houses with their two-reelers were called, and established the "feature picture." Motion pictures were nationally accepted as a preferred medium of entertainment by this time, vaudeville houses were feeling the effects of the shift, and legitimate theatres were being rented for these feature productions. The time was right for the advent of the "Movie Palace."

In Denver, the enterprising Samuel L. Baxter had already established a house with a seating capacity of 2,000 solely for the showing of motion pictures. He had come to Denver in 1906, purchased a small theatre for the showing of "flickers," progressed rapidly through the Nickelodeon-player piano stage, and finally established the Isis Theatre with music provided by an orchestra and (reportedly) a small straight organ. Located on Curtis Street, it vied with some fifteen other theatres in what was then referred to as "The Broadway of the West." This theatre soon gained much fame and recognition when late in 1914 Mr. Baxter consulted Mr. Farny Wurlitzer on the building of a Unit Orchestra.

A precedent for a Wurlitzer Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra had already been set by the installation in May of 1913 of the thirteen-rank organ in the Paris Theatre located diagonally across the street from the Isis. In addition, the Wurlitzer Company had been consulted about an organ for the Denver Civic Auditorium in the same year; however, the former was to be no rival for the newly proposed Isis organ, and the latter venture was not to see completion until the winter of 1917-18 due to considerable political discord.

Robert Hope-Jones had been dead for three months when Mr. Baxter contacted Mr. Wurlitzer and although Mr. Hope-Jones had not been actively employed as manager of the factory for a year prior to his death, one can readily see how closely his thoughts were adhered to by the Wurlitzer Company. Mr. Wurlitzer wrote to Mr. Baxter on January 4, 1915: "As regards distinctive varieties of tone color for each of the various stops, here we feel none will question our supremacy. Beyond dispute, the Unit Orchestra leads and always has led in providing extreme colors. In this connection, we venture to call attention to the fact that the variety of tone an organ yields depends much less upon the number of its stops than upon the degree of variance of each from all others." Surely, this statement is a concise explanation of the thought behind the Unit Or-

chestra where the stress is on tone color in an endeavor to emulate the orchestra.

The contract was negotiated on January 11, 1915. The price for the instrument was fixed at \$40,000. Mr. Baxter provided the necessary alterations to the building for housing the organ which brought the total expenditure to \$50,000 for the completed instrument. This amounted to the largest sum ever spent for an organ in a motion picture theatre up to that date.

Mr. Henry B. Murtaugh, who was delighting audiences on the newly-installed Wurlitzer in the Liberty Theatre, Seattle, Washington, was consulted on the specifications, and work on the theatre started immediately. The first shipment left the factory on May 22, 1915. This was followed by two more consignments on June 3rd and 4th—all by railroad from North Tona-wanda, New York.

The end product was a specification consisting of twenty-eight ranks of pipes housed in six chambers and controlled by a plain mahogany four-manual console situated mid-way in the orchestra pit, with 156 stop tablets. One of the prime reasons this organ proved a delight to both audience and organist is that they were both actually engulfed in the organ, as you will notice by the following layout.

The *Main Organ* was located on the left side, and as was the case with all the chambers, it was provided with a "tone reflector" to focus the sound most advantageously into the auditorium. This chamber contained the following ranks and percussions.

16' Tuba Horn	85 Pipes	8' Salicional	61 Pipes
16' Clarinet	73 "	8' Viol d'Orchestra	85 "
16' Horn Diapason	73 "	8' Viol Celeste	73 "
8' Open Diapason	73 "	8' Saxophone	61 "
8' Concert Flute	85 "	8' Krumet	61 "
		Chrysoglott	49 Bars

Noteworthy is the fact that the Horn Diapason was extended down to 16', called "Bass" in the Pedal. The Concert Flute did not extend down to the usual 16' Bourdon. Here, also, we notice the Saxophone and Krumet—stops usually found in the Solo Organ.

The *Foundation Organ* was situated above the pro-cenium arch and contained these ranks:

16' Diaphonic-Diapa- son	73 Pipes	Brass Drum-Tympani (large)
16' Tibia Clausa I	85 "	Snare Drum I
8' Gamba	61 "	Snare Drum II
8' Gamba Celeste	61 "	Tambourine
8' Vox Humana	61 "	Castanets
		Cymbal, Crash
		Cymbal, Band
		Triangle

The twelve lowest pipes of the Diaphonic-Diapason  
theatre organ

extended down to 32', and were located in their own chamber above a false ceiling running lengthwise of the auditorium. Thus, this rank contained 85 pipes in all. No part of this stop was effected by tremulant. The Tibia Clausa I was unleathered.

The *Unenclosed Percussion and Effects Chamber* was also located above the procenium arch immediately in front of the Foundation Organ with both sharing a common ornamental grill. Here was found:

Wood Harp	49 Bars	Wind Machine
Xylophone I (large scale)	37 Bars	Lightning Effect
Chimes (Tower scale)	25 Tubes	Fire Gong
Thunder Sheet		Auto Horn
Rain Machine		Steamboat Whistle
Surf Machine		Telephone Bell

The Wood Harp was a conventional Marimba without reiterating action. It was constructed in the manner of a regular instrument with divided naturals and sharps unlike the chromatic scheme later employed in organs. The Tower Chimes were the largest scale tubular chimes manufactured by Deagan. The lightning effect consisted of an intricate array of electric bulbs (the old hand-blown variety) concealed behind the ornamental grill and put into action through a series of pneumatic motors which operated electric switches. In the top of this chamber was the tone opening for the 32' Diaphone pipes.

The *Solo Organ* was on the right side, directly opposite the Main Organ. This organ was entirely straight with the ranks available on the Solo Manual only at 8' pitch—to other manuals only through coupling. Here were found:

8' Trumpet	61 Pipes	Glockenspiel	37 Bars
8' Orchestral Oboe	61 "	Xylophone II	37 "
8' Kinura	61 "	Sleigh Bells	25 Notes
8' Oboe Horn	61 "	Bells	25 Notes
8' Tibia Clausa II	61 "		
8' Quintadena	61 "		

The straight Solo Organ seems to have been standard procedure in all Wurlitzer organs of large size at this period. This scheme was abandoned in the case of the larger organ in the Civic Auditorium where the Solo Organ is unified to a degree. The Isis Solo division is identical to that of the early Style 35 of which there were several installations prior to 1915. The Bells were of the tuned door bell variety.

The *Tuba Chamber* was also located on the right side of the theatre in a position slightly above and partially behind the Solo Organ. Herein was contained the 16' Bombarde-Tuba Mirabilis consisting of 85 pipes. This stop was voiced on 25" pressure and was not effected by tremulant. The lowest eighteen pipes had wooden resonators, but all of the pipes were reeds—not the customary Diaphonic-Bombarde. For some unfathomable reason, one lone percussion was found in this chamber—the Tom Tom. It is known that the Tom Tom, probably the first one ever used in a theatre organ, was an after-thought of Mr. Baxter's; but why locate it with the Tuba Mirabilis?

In the back of the theatre on the right side was the *Echo Organ*. Like the Solo Organ, this organ was also straight except for the Bourdon which was drawn at 16' and 8' pitches. (The entire organ, excepting the Spring '65

Bourdon, was on one chest and affected by only one tremulant. Everything was voiced on 6" pressure.) Here were found:

16' Bourdon	44 Pipes	8' Vox Humana	61 Pipes
8' Horn Diapason	61 "	8' Vox Humana	61 "
8' Gamba	61 "	4' Flute	61 "
		Chimes (Class A)	25 Tubes

The 16' Bourdon and 4' Flute were independent ranks. There is no indication that the second Vox Humana was tuned as a celeste rank.

The organ was officially opened on August 4, 1915; and it was a gala affair. Mr. Wurlitzer had persuaded Henry Murtaugh to come to Denver for the opening of this organ. Carmenza Vander Lezz, employed by the Wurlitzer Company as an official demonstrator, also performed. In the audience were the principals from the Wurlitzer Company, the Mayor of Denver, and many other prominent local dignitaries. There is even the story of the pedal tones causing the fragile electric filaments in the light bulbs to break, plunging the theatre into total darkness for a period.

Mr. Murtaugh apparently remained at the Isis for some time because early newspaper accounts make reference to his daily recitals. The organ was an important and vitally needed addition to the musical life of Denver at this time—a period when organs were called upon to provide the music now available to everyone through radio, recordings, and orchestras. It was acclaimed as a great concert instrument and utilized by the Chamber of Commerce as an example of one aspect of Denver's cultural life. One Denver newspaper stated: "A feature of the city. Something that every visitor must see at least once; and every citizen will want to hear time after time." It is interesting to note that the word "recital" was always used in referring to a performance. The term "interlude" is nowhere to be found.

To quote from the various sources of publicity about the organ seems unnecessary, but two outstanding facts prove beyond any doubt the success of this instrument. Mr. Baxter felt confident that the organ was sufficient alone in its drawing power for him to give up everything else in the way of music; and because of increased



