

# THE MIGHTY WURLITZER

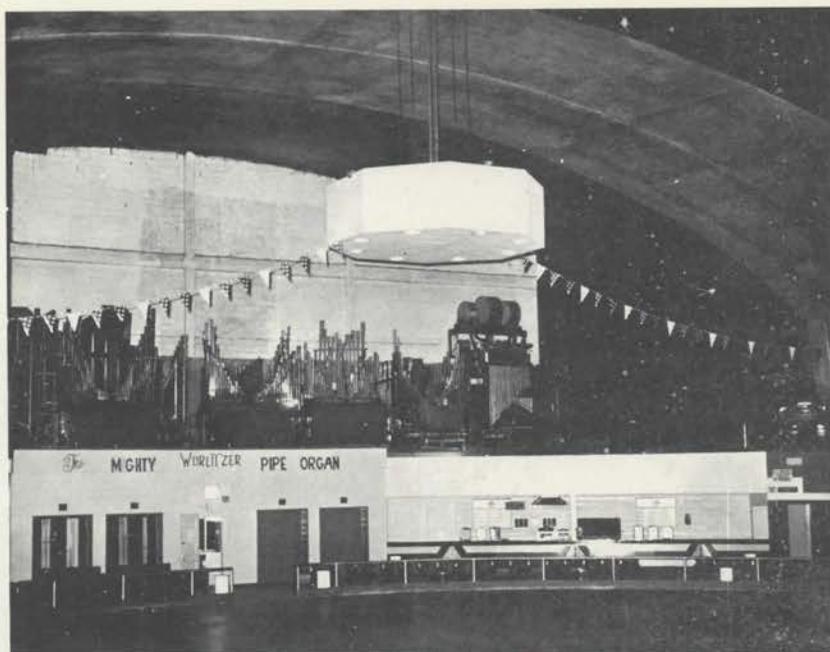
## IN THE ALEXANDRIA ARENA

By Ray Brubacher  
Cover photo by Bob Tobin  
Story photos by the author

The Wurlitzer pipe organ bearing Opus number 2178, a special model having thirty four unified ranks of pipes controlled by a console of four manuals, has indeed one of the most fascinating histories of any theatre organ ever constructed. The dream of one man, a devoted theatre organ enthusiast and accomplished organist, that dream being to own a large theatre organ with the Wurlitzer nameplate, came together in most unusual circumstances to become a reality that even the present owner of this fabulous instrument could hardly have imagined possible.

Back in the fall of 1949, when James F. Boyce, (he is known to all as Jimmy Boyce), took the position as organist for the American-on-Wheels roller skating arena at Alexandria, Virginia, a building a full city block in length and some sixty-five feet in height at the top of its curved armory like roof, he immediately realized that here was a building with cathedral-like acoustics capable of containing a large pipe organ of the theatre style. Jim, long a theatre organ buff, even before the activation of A.T.O.E., started shopping around for an instrument for the arena. The organ was to serve a dual purpose; that of an instrument to accompany the skating sessions, and also that of a teaching instrument. A graduate of the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, Jim felt that his students should be given an opportunity not only to study the classical literature, but also the very unique opportunity to learn something about theatre organs and the interpretation of light music on them.

It was in 1956 that Boyce was finally able to realize his dream. A change in management at the rink gave Jim the opportunity to approach the officials on his idea, and after overcoming a great deal of skepticism, was finally given the green light on his plans. An organ was found, that being a two manual Wurlitzer originally having six ranks but later having a Kinura added. The organ was originally in the Apollo Theatre which was in downtown Washington, D.C., and



General view of pipe work. Left to right: Orchestral, Solo, and Percussions.

was now playing in the Albright Memorial Church in Washington, and as luck would have it, the percussions and most of the traps were disconnected but still with the instrument. Jim brought his prize back to Alexandria and after a considerable amount of refurbishing, presented it the public in 1956. The instrument was continually added to, moved around, taken apart, etc. so as to utilize the acoustics of the arena to the best advantage. After much experimenting, it was decided to leave the organ entirely exposed because in an enclosed state, the organ would just not get out into the building. Larger scale percussions and traps were added to the instrument, and all who heard it were immediately impressed by the talents of the organist at the console, and also by the very fact that leaving the organ in the open did not make it sound like a calliope. It possessed a rich and thrilling sound, more like fifteen ranks.

The organ's seven ranks are as follows: Diaphone-Diapason, Tibia Clausa, Concert Flute, Salicional, Trumpet, Vox Humana, and Kinura. The installation was on a concrete platform about twenty-five feet long, by eight feet wide, along the front end of the rink over the main entrance doors.

By 1960, Jim felt that his experience with the seven ranker warranted his search for an instrument of more resources, one that would respond to his increasing talent, he wanted something in the bigger class of around fifteen ranks, and again, only something with the Wurlitzer insignia would do. Theatre organ fans who have been in A.T.O.E. since its founding will note that by 1960, more theatre organs were becoming available because of the closings of

many of the nation's large movie palaces. Jim was interested in several nearby installations, but received many disappointments in not being able to negotiate with theatre managements. Perhaps these disappointments can be considered a blessing in disguise for what lay ahead proved to be one of the most outstanding theatre organ acquisitions ever made and certainly the highlight of Jim Boyce's career.

In August of 1932, four Wurlitzer organs were installed in the new complex of buildings in the heart of New York City, known as Rockefeller Center. There was the twin console instrument of fifty-eight ranks in the Music Hall, the three manual installations in the broadcasting studio, and Rainbow Room, and a four manual of thirty-four ranks installed in the Center Theatre, a smaller theatre a few doors down from the Music Hall. This instrument was rarely used, only for special shows, and in the early fifties, when the Center theatre was demolished to make room for the new Time and Life Building, the organ was put up for sale. Dr. Warren Philips, of Harrisburg, Pa., was the successful bidder for the organ, and he installed it in his residence. The greater part of the organ was installed in a large pit in the basement of his home, the sound being delivered to the living room through grillework in the floor. The solo organ and percussions were in a chamber off to one side of the room, and the massive console rested in a special niche in the wall at the far end of the room. There were double doors behind the console which opened into an alley behind the house. Even under these confining conditions, the sound of the instrument was awesome.

In 1961, the organ was again put up

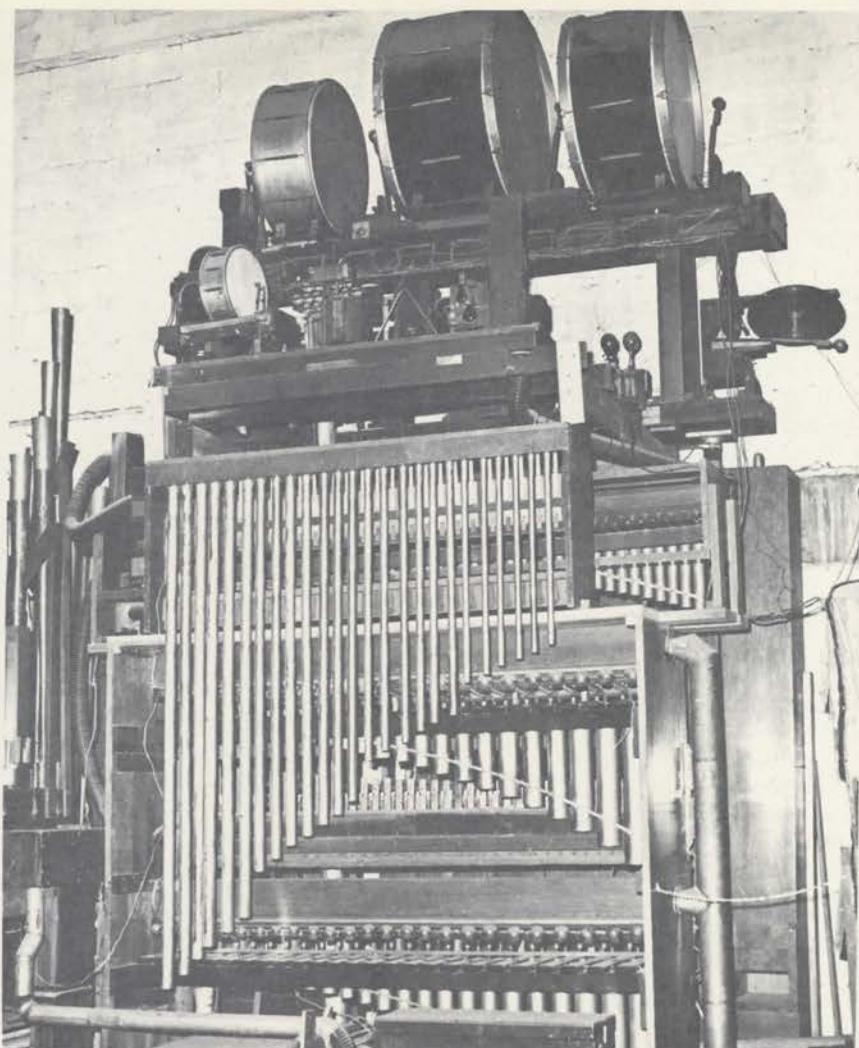
theatre organ

for sale. Jim had played the organ in the home installation, but had never dreamed that he had a chance of owning it. Captain Erwin A. Young, now A.T.O.E., national vice-president was informed of the availability of the instrument and immediately contacted Boyce. When all negotiations were completed, Jim found himself with an instrument far bigger and better than he had expected to have.

How to move the instrument was the next thing that came to mind. The original organ had to be disposed of in order to make room for the new one. Mr. & Mrs. Harvey Bartlett, of Oakton, Va., were the eventual recipients of the 2-7 for their newly completed music studio, where Mrs. Bartlett, a fine teacher, is currently carrying on the tradition of teaching on a theatre organ. Storage space for the new organ had to be found, and found fast for there was a deadline on removing the organ, Chapter member and at that time Secretary-treasurer of the Potomac Valley A.T.O.E., Woody Wise, manager of the Virginia Theatre, offered all of the backstage area of the theatre, which fortunately was within two blocks of

Jim is indeed very thankful to the many enthusiasts and friends who helped him with the removal of the organ. The organ was brought from Harrisburg, in six large moving van loads, and many station wagon loads, over a period of forty-five days. There was much back breaking labor involved due to the way the organ was installed. The moving of the windchests, relay stacks, and combination action setter machine from the pit in the basement, over a ledge, into the solo chamber and up over another ledge out on to front lawn, was a monumental effort from all viewpoints. The blower, a Spencer orgoblo, was completely disassembled, and moved from the far end of the basement, across the pit, and out through the same door. The 25 horsepower motor did not have a lifting ring, so this operation took much planning and effort. The author remembers vividly, the early hours of the morning, when the truck carrying the relays and console was unloaded at the stage door of the Virginia Theatre. All who participated in this phase of the project breathed much easier when the stage doors were closed and the prize was safely home.

Formal installation began in July of 1961, with the moving of the console from the theatre to the rink. The console which weighs in at some fifteen-hundred pounds, and has a cable one hundred and ninety feet in length, weighing seven-hundred thirty two pounds, had to be maneuvered up a flight of stairs and into the main lobby of the arena. At this point it would be well to mention that every spare inch of storage space in the arena was filled to overflowing with



Close-up of percussion and traps.

pipe chests, crates, reservoirs, tremulants, wind lines, and hundreds of parts. Manager Tom Brown must have cast many a skeptical eye over the ever growing mountain of organ material which was accumulating at a really fast pace. The console was polished up and put on display in the lobby along with a large poster proclaiming that soon the second largest WurliTzer pipe organ in daily use, would be supplying music to the would-be awe struck skaters! The next step was the removal of the 2-7 which was accomplished in less than a week.

Jim then had a professional rigging crew raise the console some fifteen feet onto the platform where it would rest. This operation took much of one day because the crew miscalculated on the distance and height of the rigging apparatus, and when after an hour or more of cautious hoisting, the console failed to clear the platform by three inches, things became very uncomfortable for all concerned. Finally, after lowering the console and making the necessary adjustments to the rigging the situation was rectified and the con-

sole placed on the platform.

Plans called for the organ to be installed in the corners of the arena at the front end of the building, with the console placed midway between, but after the erection of a large wooden platform for the holding of two chambers, the local fire department forced the removal of the flooring on a complicated building code technicality, which unfortunately would delay installation for a long time.

A reinforced steel platform was erected as an extension to the main concrete platform, and the console was moved to a newly poured smaller concrete platform in one corner of the rink. It was decided that the pipework would be placed on the same platform that held the old organ, and since the extension had been made, this would support at least twenty-one ranks plus all percussions and traps. It was originally planned to stack the chambers, but again, room was available for the instrument at one level.

Fall of 1962 saw installation work in full progress. The relays and blower were placed in a room behind the con-

## ALEXANDRIA ARENA *Continued*

cession counter. A special power line had to be run into accommodate the large starting gear for the motor. The four relay stacks including a relay for couplers and second touch were set in place.

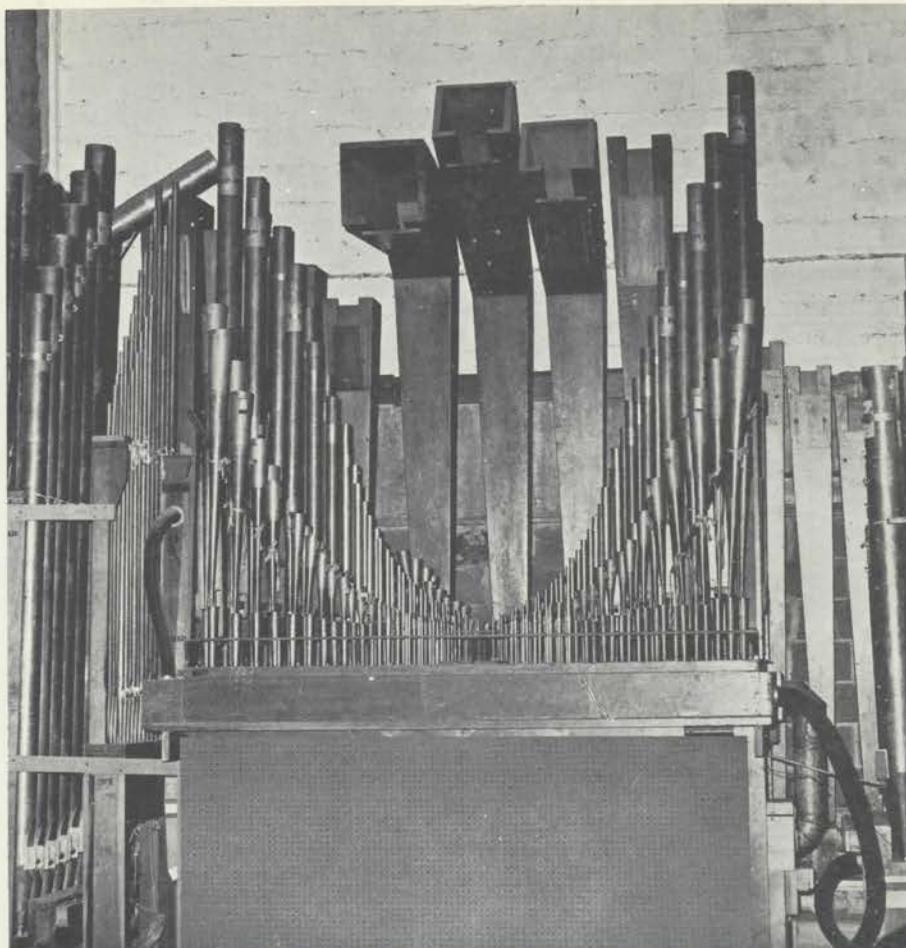
By the end of winter 1963, nine ranks of pipes and numerous percussions were playable, and after several late night crash programs in which many local chapter members stayed up all night to work on the organ, the instrument was premiered at a special skating pageant on Monday evening, March 4th. Needless to say, all heads turned toward the organ loft in utter amazement as Jim proudly opened the organ with a fanfare on the Post Horns.

After the initial thrill of hearing part of the organ come alive for the first time, it was back to work. Ever since that time, the organ has been steadily increasing in size. As of this date, twenty-one ranks are playing with an additional thirteen to be installed. Another extension to the main platform on the other side will be added to hold those ranks. The entire instrument is unenclosed and will remain that way until all ranks are in place.

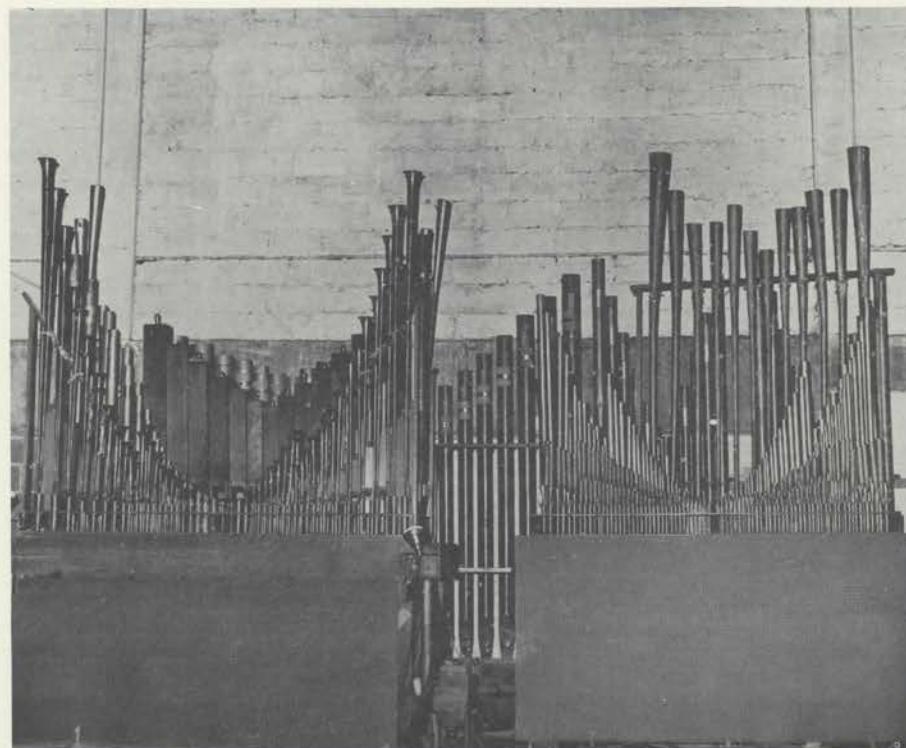
There are many rare and outstanding ranks of pipes in this organ. It may be of interest to note that there are ten 16 foot extensions, four of which are reeds: English Post Horn, Contra Fagotto, Trombone, and Tuba Profunda. Other ranks of interest include a Brass Trumpet and Brass Saxophone, two ranks of Muted Viols, a 16 foot Viola Diapason, Spitzflute Celeste, and an independent 4 foot Octave and a two rank mixture on the Great manual. Percussions include five drums: thunder drum, two bass drums, and two snare drums (band and orchestral.) There are several cymbals, a large marimba harp and orchestral harp chrysoglott, and many more features which will be enumerated in the complete stoplist which follows.

The sound of the organ can be very favorably compared to that of the Radio City Music Hall organ, but in this vast arena, gets out much better with a sound that can modestly be described as spine tingling and thrilling in every respect. The organ has been received enthusiastically by all who have heard it.

In closing, it is indeed fitting to say that here is truly a rarity, one of the largest theatre organs ever constructed, installed in a place where all can come to hear its magnificence, and owned and played by someone who very well deserves to have such an instrument at his disposal. Jim has been completely understanding and has made this fabulous instrument available for many public occasions, chapter meetings, and to any and all who wish to try it, at all hours of



View of Great Chamber. Note Mitering of Wood Diaphone.



Pipe work of orchestral and solo chambers.

the day and night. He has always welcomed all enthusiasts, and will go out of his way to make anyone who comes to play or look, feel completely at home. In addition, Jim has just released his first recording on the organ for century records called SKATE ALONG WITH THE MIGHTY WURLITZER in mono and stereo. The recording truly shows off the organ with all of its acoustics and reverberation. It can be said that all theatre organ enthusiasts owe him a tremendous debt of gratitude for playing such a large part in keeping the tradition of the theatre organ alive, and constantly in the public eye.

#### DETAILS OF THE CONSOLE

The console is of the approximate dimensions as that of the Music Hall console, and is of the same general design only in a light cherry veneer. Its dimensions are six feet wide, four feet deep, and five feet in height. It weighs fifteen-hundred pounds.

NUMBER OF STOPS - 303

TREMULANTS - 9 controlling 11 trem.

COUPLERS - 30

NUMBER OF PISTONS - 60 disposed of in the following manner.

- 10 generals above the solo manual.
- 10 double touch on accompaniment manual controlling accompaniment and pedal.
- 10 double touch pistons on great manual controlling great and pedal.
- 10 double touch pistons on orchestral manual controlling orchestral and pedal.
- 10 double touch pistons on solo manual controlling solo and accompaniment manual.
- 16 toe pistons controlling pedal combinations and effects.
- 13 piano pedal pistons controlling the following effects-

Sforzando	Chime soft
Mezzo	Muffled Drum
Thunder	Chinese Gong
Thunder (reed)	Cymbals
Piano soft	Celesta
Piano sustain	General canceller
Chime damper	

4 pistons to the left of the generals above the solo manual which control the following.

- Drums
- Tremulants off
- Traps off
- General canceller (pistons extends out about one inch.)

There are four expression pedals which control the following, from left to right-

- Great
- Orchestral
- Solo
- General

#### ALEXANDRIA WURLITZER Chamber Analysis

GREAT	PITCH	PIPES	PRESSURE
1. Trombone - Tromba	16' - 4'	97	15''
2. Diaphone-Phonon Diap.	16' & 8'	85	15''
3. & 4. Violins II	8' & 4'	146	10''
5. Viola Diapason	16' - 2'	97	10''
6. 2nd Open Diapason	8'	73	10''
7. French Horn	8'	73	10''
8. Clarinet	8'	73	10''
9. Spitzflute Celeste	8' & 4'	85	10''
10. Dulciana	8' - 2'	85	10''
11. Concert Flute	8' - 2'	85	10''
12. Octave	4'	73	10''
13. & 14. Mixture (12th & 15th)		122	10''

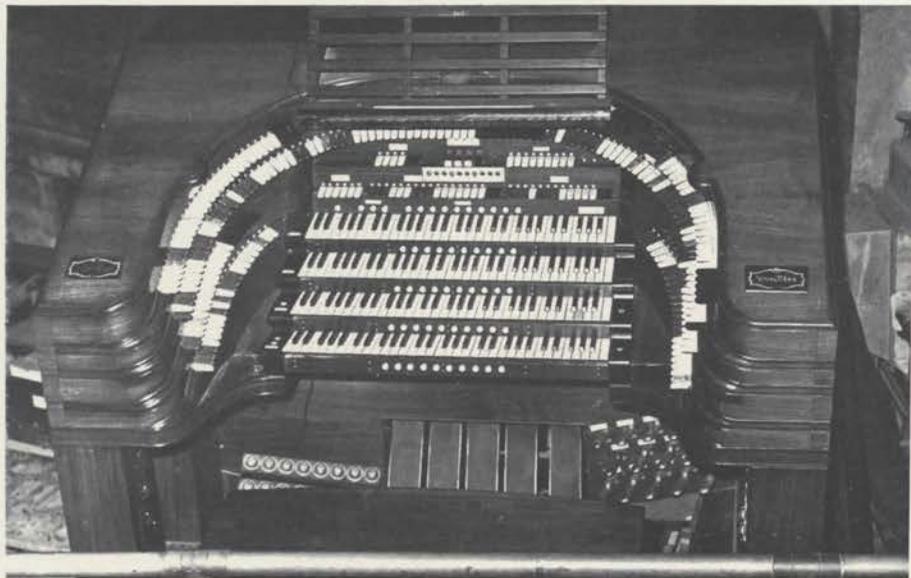
#### ORCHESTRAL

15. Brass Trumpet-Clarion	8' & 4'	85	10''
16. Tibia Minor (Bourdon)	16' - 2'	97	10''
17. Gamba	8'	73	10''
18. Diaphone - Horn Diap.	16' - 4'	97	10''
19. Fagotto-Oboe Horn	16' & 8'	85	10''
20. Vox Humana	8' & 4'	73	7''
21. & 22. Muted Violins II	8'	146	10''
23. Salicional	8'	73	10''
24. Voix Celeste	8'	73	10''
25. Vox Humana	8' & 4'	73	7''

#### SOLO

26. Tuba Sonora	16' - 4'	97	15''
27. English Post Horn	16' & 8'	85	15''
28. Tibia Clausa	16' - 2'	97	15''
29. Brass Saxophone	8'	73	10''
30. Harmonic Flute	4' & 2'	73	10''
31. Cello-Violone	16' - 4'	97	10''
32. Cello Celeste	8'	73	10''
33. English Horn	8'	73	10''
34. Kinura	8'	73	10''

Note: All relays are 73 notes thus the extra octaves on all ranks.



View of console. Note similarity to Radio City Music Hall Console.

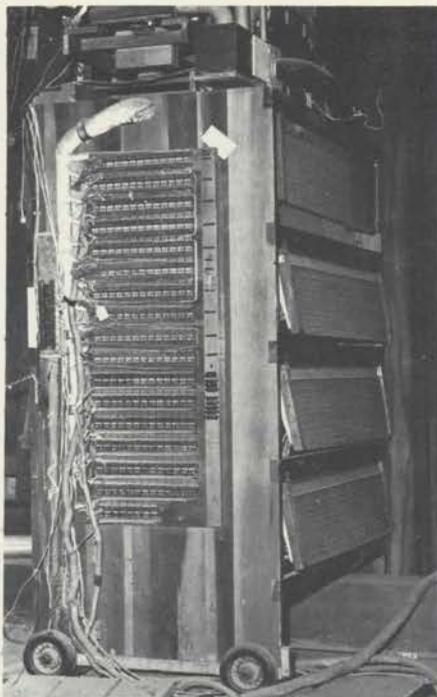
**CRESCENDO PEDAL** - The crescendo pedal is equipped with an automatic cancelling pneumatic which throws the crescendo pedal off when the general cancel piston is pressed.

There are ten toggle switches on the

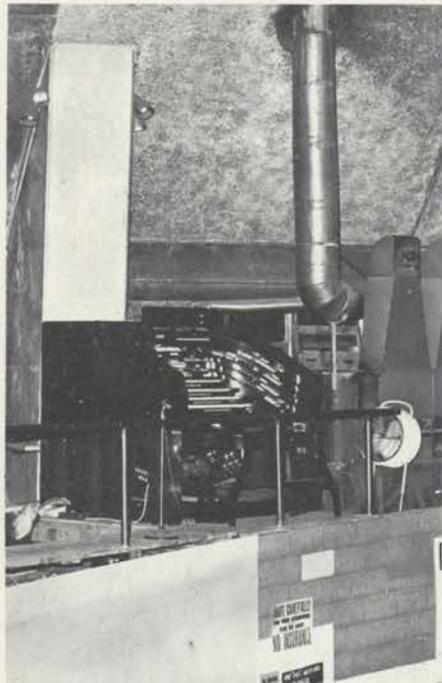
back rail of the console which couple the chambers swell shades in various combinations to the expression pedals.

**MORE PHOTOS . . .**

See next page



Combination setter panels. Five panels each side.



Another view showing location of console.

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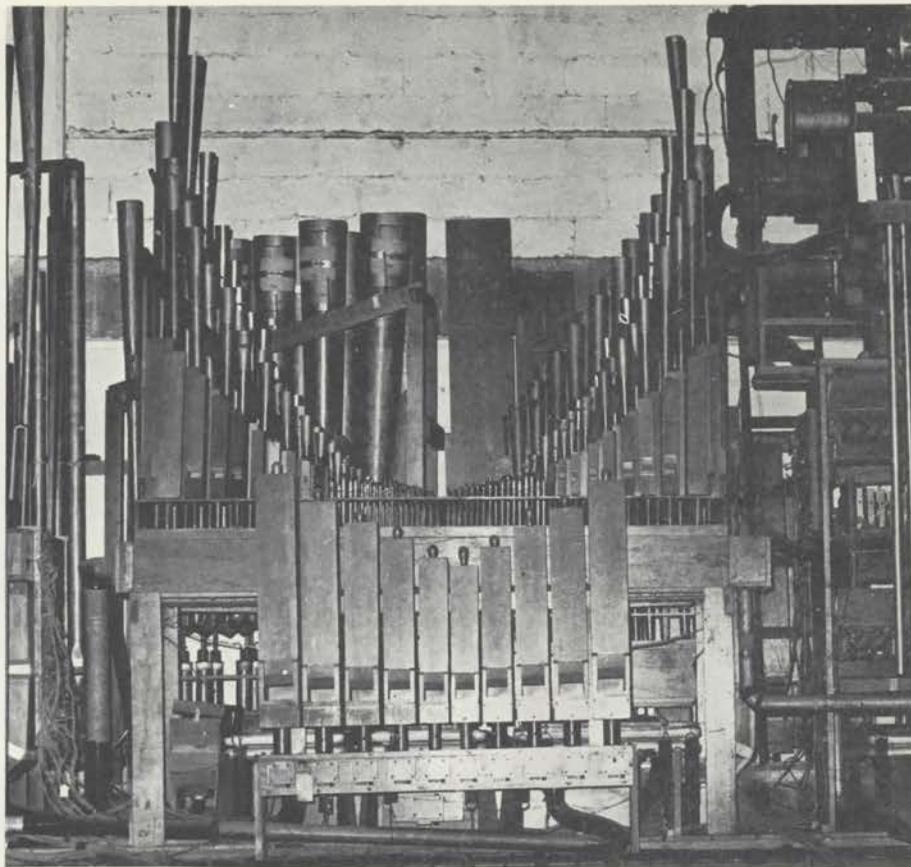
PRICE \$1.00 each

**THEATRE ORGAN**

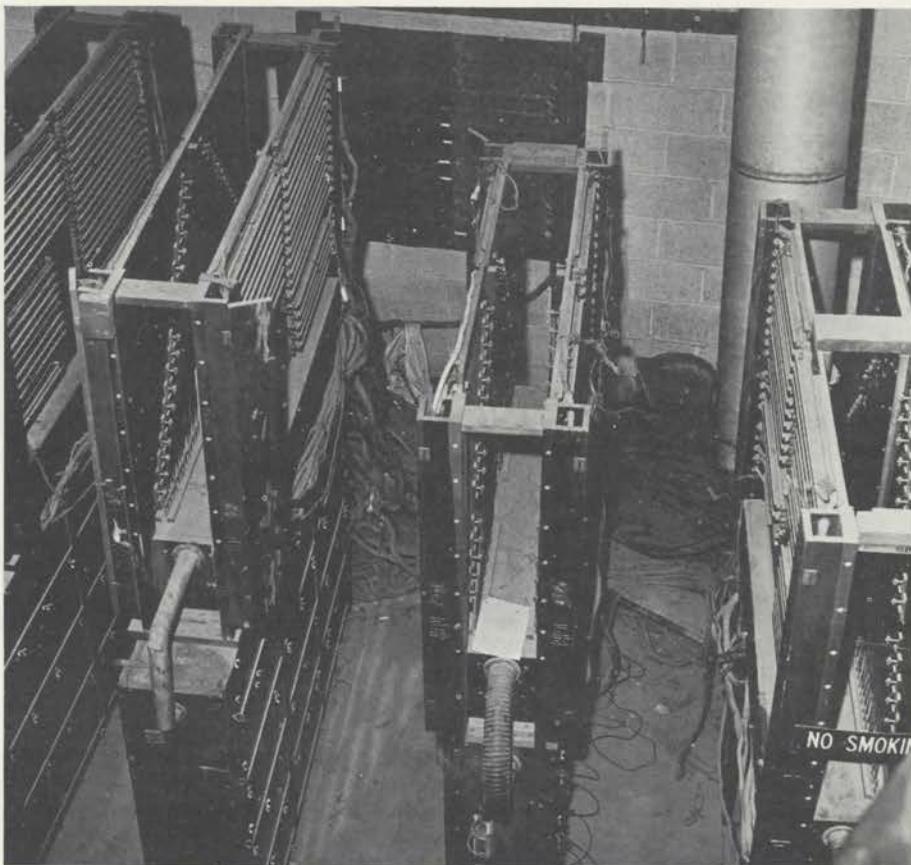
- 1959 - Volume 1, Number 2
- 1962 - Volume 4, Numbers 3 and 4
- 1963 - Volume 5, Numbers 1, 2, 3, 4.
- 1964 - Volume 6, Numbers 1, 2, 3, 4.

**BOMBARDE**

- 1964 - Volume 1, Numbers 1, 2, 3, 4.



Solo Organ pipe work.



Relay section controlling massive 4/34.

NO SMOKING

theatre organ