

THE AUTHOR

Photo by Brinkley Studio

Frontispiece

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THE CINEMA ORGAN

A DESCRIPTION IN NON-TECHNICAL
LANGUAGE OF A FASCINATING INSTRUMENT
AND HOW IT IS PLAYED

BY
REGINALD FOORT, F.R.C.O., A.R.C.M.

SECOND EDITION

SECOND EDITION PUBLISHED BY
THE VESTAL PRESS
VESTAL, NEW YORK 13850 U.S.A.

CHAPTER IX

SILENT PICTURES AND INTERLUDES

THE most characteristic use of the cinema organ and that for which it was primarily intended—the accompaniment of silent pictures—has unfortunately practically disappeared, but the organ has always been one of the most popular of musical instruments, and, provided organists will only take the trouble to play the right kind of music and present it in an attractive manner, I see no reason at all why the organ should not become even more popular than ever.

One use of the organ which I personally always cordially hated was for that terrible prelude of ten or fifteen minutes in the middle of the day before the pictures commenced. I use the past tense with pleasure because, in my present appointment, I am delighted to say I am not asked to do this, gramophone records being played on our big loud-speakers instead. The idea of playing in a chilly, almost empty, theatre to a few bored patrons straggling in, talking to each other and wandering about looking for the best seats, always gave me the cold shivers! As a rule, managements were not content with my merely playing at this time, but insisted on my doing so with the lift high in the air in a spot-light! I always breathed a sigh of relief when the lights went down and my ordeal came to an end.

Personally, I am sorry silent pictures have disappeared, because accompanying them on the organ could be made a very fine subtle art, the organ being in some ways immensely superior to an orchestra for the purpose. Through having to play from printed music, the orchestra was not sufficiently flexible, and, in the ordinary theatre, where rehearsals were not

possible, the changing from one piece to the next was sometimes abrupt and clumsy, and the keys were rarely related; frequently there was no printed music available which really suited the scenes to be accompanied.

The organist, on the other hand, could either play suitable music from memory, sliding smoothly from each piece into the next without a break, or he could improvise. Above all, playing entirely by himself, he could time his playing where necessary to fit the actual movement taking place on the screen.

One of the most frequent devices in pictures is to work up to a climax and then have a sudden stillness in the action, and this the organist could illustrate musically with ease by starting softly, improvising a tremendous *crescendo* up to full organ and then stopping dead for a silent pause at the psychological moment.

Comedy pictures, of course, provided the organist with his great opportunity: here he could really let himself go with confidence. Curiously enough, few people realized how closely the organist had to watch the screen. Some of the effects for reproducing the missing sounds, such as the surf, motor horn, fire bell, were specially provided for in the organ, but the majority of noises which the organist put in to fit the picture were manufactured, so to speak, on the keyboard. The cinema organ can provide the most realistic reproduction of such noises as bagpipes, a brass band, the smashing of glass, a baby crying, a thunderstorm, or a cock-crow.

One of the best effects I remember getting in a silent picture was in the sentimental situation at the end, when the repentant wife returned to the home and the husband quietly greeted her with: "Hello, Mary," and she replied: "Hello, Joe." I succeeded in reproducing these two phrases in their respective registers

THE CINEMA AND THEATRE ORGAN

A COMPREHENSIVE DESCRIPTION OF THIS INSTRUMENT,
ITS CONSTITUENT PARTS, AND ITS USES

BY

REGINALD WHITWORTH

Author of "The Electric Organ"

WITH EIGHT PLATES, THIRTY-SIX DIAGRAMS
AND A NUMBER OF SPECIFICATIONS OF CINEMA ORGANS
IN ENGLAND AND ABROAD

London : MUSICAL OPINION
13, Chichester Rents, Chancery Lane, W.C.2

1932

Roxy Theatre, New York City, U.S.A.: Three Console Kimball Unit Organ
Main Auditorium (See page 92)



in such a way that the audience really got an impression of the characters speaking.

On another occasion, at a trade show, when the theatre was filled with cinema owners and managers, whom one would hardly expect to take any notice at all of one's musical accompaniment, an express train started up in the picture, got up full speed and disappeared in the distance, and I managed to reproduce this effect on the organ so realistically that the audience burst into applause.

In reproducing the missing sounds of silent pictures, everything depended on accurate timing; it was absolutely essential to keep one's eyes glued to the screen in order to attain perfect synchronization of sound and picture.

When silent pictures disappeared and the accompaniment came to be provided by mechanical means, the organ was found to be most useful for picking up the threads at the end of one picture and making a neat join into the next, thus obviating an unpleasant blank between the pictures. This joining of pictures can be done artistically or otherwise, but, if done with care and judgment, it certainly makes for the smoothness and continuity of the show. The organist must start in the key of the picture which is finished and make a neat modulation into the key of the new picture, taking care not to play too loudly. This is something that only the organ can do; it would be impossible for an orchestra or a gramophone to do it nearly so well, if at all.

The main function of the cinema organ now is to provide a musical entertainment of ten or twelve minutes in each show, and, if only the organist is willing to take the trouble to prepare a suitable selection and to present it in such a way that it really entertains and holds the attention of the audience, this can easily be made the most popular item in the programme.

Unfortunately, few managements have sufficient imagination to realize that the organist cannot make bricks without straw; that, if he is to get his show over, he must be given publicity and assistance in the way of clever presentation and good lighting effects. Although the organist has to play constantly in the

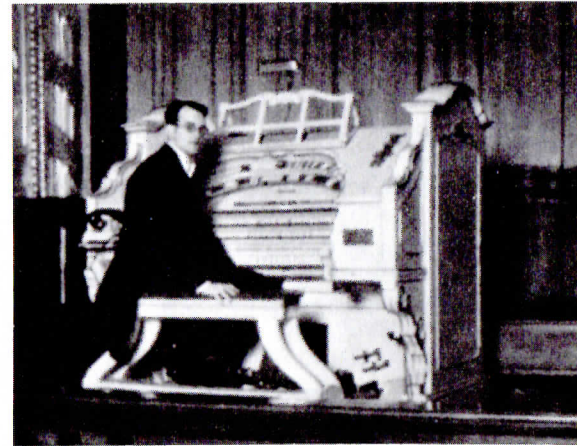


FIG. 51. QUENTIN MACLEAN, TO WHOM THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED, AT THE ORGAN OF THE TROCADERO THEATRE, ELEPHANT AND CASTLE, LONDON

This is the largest Wurlitzer organ in Europe.

same theatre, and, to a certain extent, to the same audience, the variety it is possible to get into his organ interludes week by week is enormous.

People love to hear the music they know, but this must be played with some touch of novelty. Any public performer will tell you that it is not necessary to wait for the applause (or lack of it) at the end to tell whether the audience have enjoyed his show. If an audience is restless, or can be heard whispering or coughing, the organist is either playing the wrong kind

of selection, or is not presenting it in the right way. He must be a terribly severe critic of himself as to whether he is succeeding or failing in holding his audience's attention.

Even when the organ console is on a lift, the modern practice of placing it in the centre of the orchestra pit, so that the organist has to play with his back to the audience is, to say the least, not conducive to good showmanship. The console lift has now become so common that it is no longer a novelty, and if the organist begins his interlude while the lift is at the bottom, even if he has been announced on the screen or by means of a card, it will certainly be some time before he has succeeded in capturing the attention of his audience.

Some years ago I evolved a little showmanship scheme which I was fortunate enough to be able to put into practice at the Regent, Bournemouth (and which brother organists all over the country have flattered me by imitating!), by which I have the organ console sent up in a spot-light (and the modern cinema organ really makes rather a striking picture when presented in this way without the organist), and I make my own entrance by walking across the stage as the main tabs are raised. The personal touch of a little speech, in which I announce what I am going to play, helps to concentrate the attention of my audience, and when I sit down to begin my solo, I am assured of absolute silence. When I have finished, I leave the organ and return to the stage, the tabs being closed in the usual way; thus my interlude takes on something of the nature of a stage show, and the audience is enabled to let me know, by the volume of its applause, whether it *really* wants me to play again.

There are so many types of interludes which can be played on the organ, and which will be found acceptable to any normal cinema audience, that it is

impossible to give anything like an exhaustive list. Selections from grand or light opera, or Gilbert and Sullivan, medleys of works by well-known composers, the quasi-oriental type of suite like the *Four Indian Love Lyrics*, brilliant overtures, tone-poems of the *Finlandia* or *Invitation to the Waltz* type, or the usual medley of popular classics or dance numbers always prove successful.

Apart from these, there are one or two types of interlude which are worth mentioning. When playing for comedy pictures one of the most successful devices used to be to play a well-known tune, the name of which, when spotted by the audience, would be found to be particularly fitted to the situation on the screen. I expanded on this idea by playing a whole series of fifteen or twenty pieces, the names of which would tell a complete story to the audience. An even more successful adaptation of the idea can be worked out by showing a series of specially drawn, humorous sketches on the screen by means of lantern slides illustrating the various ideas.

Other instruments can be combined with the organ with immense success. There is no doubt that one of the secrets of the art of entertainment consists in appealing simultaneously to both eye and ear; no matter how good an organist you are, unless you give your audience something to look at during your interlude, their attention will certainly be liable to wander. If, therefore, you can get a pianist, or a violinist, on the stage with good lighting effects you will not only have provided something different from an ordinary organ solo, but you will be giving your audience something to hold their visual attention as well.

Many theatres are fitted with what is known in the profession as a "non-sync." This consists of a gramophone, connected to the loud-speakers intended for

the reproduction of talking pictures, on which ordinary gramophone records can be played, and which enables the records to be amplified to such an extent as to fill the whole theatre. Its curious slang name is an abbreviation of "non-synchronous," and signifies that music can be played which is not synchronized with a picture.

The use of suitable records, by this means, particularly vocal records, accompanied by the organ, opens up a whole new world of possibilities for organ interludes. The organist can play a selection from a well-known opera and conclude by having the big tune of the opera sung by Caruso or some other artist of equal celebrity, and the reproduction of these records is now so extraordinarily good that it is almost indistinguishable from the singing of the real artist appearing in person.

On a recent occasion I was accompanying a superb record of Drigo's *Serenade*, sung by Gigli, and a member of the audience was overheard by one of the attendants to remark on leaving the theatre that "She was most surprised to discover that Reginald Foort had such a beautiful voice!"

The main difficulty about using gramophone records in conjunction with the organ is that of getting the record and the organ exactly in tune together. This is done by altering the speed at which the record is run; increasing the number of revolutions per minute makes the record sharper and *vice versa*.

Playing to a record, however, is not altogether as easy as it sounds, because, if the record is not dead in tune, it is impossible to tell while you are playing whether it is the record which is sharp or the organ. All you know is that something sounds horribly out of tune! The fellows who work the moving picture machines are invariably only too keen to help, but unfortunately they are not trained musicians, so, at

one time, when I had to rely on one of the operators to work the "non-sync." for me, I arranged a system of signalling by which, if the record was flat, I held up my left hand, and if it was sharp I held up my right hand. I shall never forget one dreadful Sunday evening when I was playing my usual half-hour's organ recital before the show, and included five or six gramophone records in an ambitious attempt to make it interesting, both the operator and myself got our system of signalling so thoroughly muddled up that he lost his head and began to alter the pitch all over the place! After twenty-five hectic minutes, during which I had to transpose whole items, in an endeavour to coincide with the gramophone, in desperation I cut the last record and finished up with a solo played on the organ alone!

Tibia Slides. One of the most fascinating effects on the cinema organ is that beautiful "*glissando*" which Jesse Crawford uses so superbly in his records. This is produced entirely with the fingers, but is only really effective if done on the tibia clausa stop or on a combination of stops in which the tibia clausa is predominant. This stop takes a tremulant better than any of the other stops, and the secret of the effect is that, when a chromatic scale is played very rapidly, the tremulant makes each pipe sound as if it were run into the next, and the effect to the listener is almost exactly the same as that of a *portamento* on the violin, the sound of each separate pipe not being distinguishable.

This tibia *glissando* is such a delightful effect to produce that organists tend to use it too frequently, with the result that it loses its novelty.

Using the Solo Stops. Although it adds considerably to the variety of effect obtainable from an organ if the beautiful solo stops are used one at a time, many organists appear to feel that they are not really making

use of the organ unless they have several dozen of these fascinating stop-keys down.

I am reminded in this connection of a story which my old teacher, Sir Walter Parratt, used to tell. He was a great believer in using the solo stops of an organ singly and used to impress the importance of this on his pupils by begging them to emulate the famous Italian cardinal who had the extraordinary faculty of being able to keep silence in thirteen different languages!

Tremulants. The most vexed question with regard to cinema organs is that of the use of tremulants. The tremulant is the mechanism which gives the tone that well-known "wavy" effect in imitation of the *vibrato* of the singer or violinist. It is in the form of a wooden box, which is inserted in the wind trunk leading to the wind reservoir under the pipes, and contains a valve, which, put into action by means of a stop-key at the console, interrupts the steadiness of the wind supply.

The orthodox organist, accustomed to large masses of diapason and full-swell cathedral organ tone, hates the use of tremulants at all and does not hesitate to rush into print to express his abhorrence thereof.

It should be remembered, however, that in the cinema we are not in church, and the cinema organ is primarily intended to be, as far as possible, a one-man orchestra. Now, in the orchestra to-day, no instrument, with the possible exception of the clarinet, plays without a distinct *vibrato*; Leon Goosens, for example, probably the greatest oboe player who ever lived, plays with a *vibrato* exactly like a solo violinist; tremulants are used in the cinema organ in an endeavour to imitate that beautiful "live" shimmer which is so characteristic of the orchestra.

Even small organs contain at least two tremulants, and the valve in each of these is capable of a number of different adjustments—wind pressure, speed of beat, length of stroke—and I cannot help feeling that cinema

organists are inclined to be too easily satisfied with the organ builders' ideas as to how the tremulants should be adjusted.

I aim at getting considerable variation into the effect of the different tremulants and to obtain a live quality of tone without allowing it to deteriorate into that horrible "wobble" which is so objectionable.

The acoustics of the theatre are an entirely different proposition from those of a cathedral, and the organ played entirely without tremulants gives, in my opinion, a dull, unpleasant, dead effect. On the Regal organ I have ten tremulants, and my general practice, when playing any of the various full organ effects of which the organ is capable, is to have three or four of these tremulants on and the remainder off. This, I find, gives quite a fair imitation of the full orchestra and gets away, in the only way I have been able to devise, from the dead, "churchy" effect of the organ when played without tremulants at all.

The Personal Touch. There is no doubt that audiences find an attractive organ interlude a pleasant relief from the mechanically produced music and other sounds of the talking pictures. In spite of the amazing standard of efficiency which has been attained in the reproduction of music by mechanical means, the personal touch can never be replaced. As far as the musical entertainment of an audience is concerned, there can never be any really satisfying substitute for the personal appearance of the artist.

In the early days of the modern cinema organ, I was fortunate enough to play a not altogether inconsiderable part in helping to establish its popularity; I sincerely hope that, for many years to come, it may continue to entertain audiences and bring a little colour into the rather grey lives which most of us live in these difficult times.