

Blue Coat School, Oldham. 'The Installation'

The Pyramid Theatre, Sale, Cheshire, contained, as part of its Egyptian decor, an organ console mounted upon a movable platform to be found upon the Theatre's wide, deep stage. This console controlled a Christie organ of seven units of pipes, which was installed below stage, behind the orchestra pit. What made this particular console special, in fact almost unique, in British theatre organ installations, was the fact that it was one of two consoles to control the same installation, the other console to be found in the centre of the orchestra pit, between the two organ chambers. This instrument played its final notes as the organ of the Pyramid (by now renamed Odeon) at a farewell concert on the 10th December 1972. After somewhat protracted negotiations, it eventually became the first of three theatre organs to fall into the ownership of the Lancastrian Theatre Organ Trust.

Around Christmas 1972, the Trust formed a Technical Team under the direction of Mr. Les Barlee to remove the instrument into store, this feat being accomplished within about three working days, as the prevalent rumour at that time indicated that the Theatre building was to be demolished starting on a certain day early in 1973 whether all those parts remaining in the Theatre had been removed or not! The instrument was removed to a church in the City of Manchester where it joined, among other things, three piece suites and bedroom furniture, the church being as so many were at that time surplus to the requirements of the congregation who had removed themselves to the local schoolroom. There the organ was to stay until the Trust found a new home for it. The new Metropolitan Borough of Rochdale expressed an interest in finding a home for the organ. As the church had by now come under the threat of demolition, the organ once more picked up her Tibia's and Tremulants and moved, this time to a vacant schoolroom in Castleton, Rochdale. The original intention had been to install the organ in one of the local schools, thus fulfilling one of the Trust rules to provide educational facilities, but as structural faults were found in the school, that project was abandoned. Subsequent plans to install the organ in the new Civic Hall at Middleton also failed to reach fruition. The future began to look bleak. Fortunately, at around this time, Mr. Wilt Fitton, the head of music at Oldham's Blue Coat School, arrived upon the scene to offer the use of their School Hall as a home. A site meeting of Trust and School officials soon confirmed the suitability of the Hall for such an installation and so, once more, our by now much travelled instrument moved, this time for hopefully the final time, into the school cellars and attics to await restoration and re-erection.

In July 1968, a new extension to the Blue Coat School, including the main assembly Hall, was opened. It is within this Hall that the organ has been installed. It was, unfortunately, impossible to find room for the pipework at the stage end of the Hall, but to the rear of the Hall is to be found a space below a raised section of flooring which provides the necessary headroom. Unfortunately, this space had been hewn out of the solid rock of Oldham Edge, was filled with assorted junk and rubbish, including relics of the days when the Blue Coat School was a charity orphanage, in the form of stone sink units, and was, to say the least, somewhat unlevel of floor! However, undaunted, a "heavy gang" of lads, teachers, volunteers and parents of school pupils cleared out the area and, where necessary, chipped out the floor to make it level enough for concreting and paving to take place. This resulted in a space well large enough to house the two chambers of pipes, the blower room and relay room. A wall was built along the full width of this space to provide the rear wall of the entire installation. This space was further subdivided to provide the four rooms required. The risers of the steps at the rear of the Hall, which had previously consisted of solid timbers, were removed and replaced by wire grilles, these being covered by decorative wrought iron work to provide the necessary sound opening. Thus we have a situation similar to Sale, whereby the organ speaks out at floor level into the Hall. Here, due acknowledgement must be accorded to the people involved in the, so far, heavy, dirty "navvying" type work necessary. The Trust says, "thank you lads, and well done!"

And so to the actual installation. As previously mentioned, the organ requires four rooms. As one is seated in the Hall, facing the organ grilles, these rooms are, from left to right: the Relay Room, the Main Chamber, the Solo Chamber, and the Blower Room. The pipe chambers between them utilise the full width of the steps opening. The Relay Room and the Blower Room are to be found

behind the solid walls at each side of the steps. The space behind the rear wall of the installation, being the full width of the Hall, is utilised for work areas.

The Blower Room containing the 'Discus' single stage blower, which 'inhales', filtered air for the organ. The blower is driven by a 6 h.p. motor. The whole assembly is mounted onto a channel section steel frame to impart rigidity, the joint between motor and blower shaft being through an anti-vibration joint. In the original installation, a belt driven generator provided the Direct Current necessary for the organ electrics to function. This has been replaced by a transformer/rectifier unit, one of the few fundamental changes to take place to the installation.

At the opposite end of the installation is the Relay Room containing the electrical "Brains" of the instrument, for it is here that the signals from the organists' fingers upon the keys (and feet upon the pedalboard of course) and the signals from the stopkeys as to which ranks of pipes are required to play are added together to form the sounds requested of the organ. The relay system provided one of many amusing incidents during the re-erection of the organ. Access to the whole instrument is gained by passing through a door measuring some 3 ft. by 4 ft. in height. The relay stack itself is approximately 7 ft. high and 2 ft. 6 in. wide and contains hundreds of soldered joints to cotton covered cable which, dating from the 1930's, is neither colour coded nor easily handled. The problem, then, was how to get such a large, heavy unit through a small door as, being somewhat new to Christie designs, /e did not wish to dismantle the unit to any great degree for fear of not being able to build up ever again! The problem was eventually solved by dismantling the wind chests to as great a degree as possible and, utilising every inch of flexibility of the wiring looms, moving the whole machine through the hole, the exercise being reminiscent of a giant wooden caterpillar on the move. As soon as the last part of this giant sausage cleared the access door, the stack was re-assembled as quickly as possible before anyone forgot which screws went into which holes!

Between the Relay Room and the Blower Room, as previously mentioned, are to be found the two chambers containing the pipework. In the Main Chamber (to the left as one sits in the Hall) are to be found the Flute, Strings (which, although classed as one unit actually consist of two ranks of pipes) and the Diapason (the bottom octave of which are actually wooden Diaphones). In this chamber may also be found the Chrysoglott, consisting of 40 tuned metal bars which are played by felt covered wooden hammers. Across the two rows of such notes are to be found metal rods holding "paddles" which, rotating over the tubular resonators placed behind each note, produce the Vibraphone unit of the instrument. All other tonal and non-tonal percussions and effects are to be found in the Solo Chamber that to the right as viewed from the Hall. In here also are the remaining four units of pipes; the Wooden Tibia's, the Cello and the two Reed units, the Tuba and the Vox Humana.

The only changes to the instrument layout have taken place here, whereby the bottom octave of the Tibia rank, the large pipes, which at Sale had been placed flat on their backs to the rear of the chamber, have now been placed vertically one above the other. This had the result, as we found in one of our tuning and regulating sessions, of restricting the volume of the Vox Humana to such a degree as to make that rank almost useless, the Vox now being effectively buried deep in a well between two walls of wooden pipes. Consequently, the Vox Humana windchest was elevated by some 3 ft. to try to alleviate the problem.

The one Tremulant for the Main Chamber of the instrument, and the three Tremulants for the Solo Chamber have been placed outside the chambers in the workshop space at the rear. This is to try to eliminate the Tremulant 'chatter' which one so often notices during quieter concert moments. At Sale, the Tremulants had been originally hung one above the other on the relay room wall. Here at Oldham, the distance between Relay Room and Solo Chamber in particular is too great for that idea to be effective, so the Tremulants were placed outside the Chambers, this allowing a shorter run of wind trunk which should result in less lost motion within the system!

And so we may now turn our attention to the bit one sees, or rather the bits one sees, as on this organ one sees two large 'bits' of the installation, the twin consoles which make this organ almost unique among those to be found in British Theatres, and as far as we are aware, the first transplanted organ to be so equipped. Basically, both consoles are identical, being of three manuals, of which the top are available for percussions and certain pitch couplers only. A stop list is published elsewhere in this brochure for those many people who are interested in organ

specifications. At Sale, one console was fixed at the centre of the Orchestra Pit. This console was attached to a fairly short cable and was originally clothed in dark wooden casework. Upon the stage was to be found the second console which was mounted upon a movable platform at the end of around 150 ft. of armoured cable, thus enabling it to be placed upon the stage in the most convenient position for solo use. This console was clothed in a rather more ornate case reflecting the decor of the Theatre. Thus were to be found representations of the Pyramids (to suit the name of the Theatre!) and of the facial masks of the then recently discovered Tutankhamen. Towards the latter end of the organ's Theatre days, the stage console was played more infrequently and so Keith Phillipson of the Theatre Organ Club transferred pit console clothing to stage and vice versa thus enabling theatregoers to glimpse the more decorative casework. The pit console has never been installed upon a lift. Here at Blue Coat, the ornate casework remains upon what was the pit console, but has now become the stage console, the plain casework similarly remaining upon the stage console, but that has now become the pit console (if you think that's complicated, you should try wiring them in as our ever patient 'trained snake' Eric Halsall has had to do!). The present pit console is to be found at the opposite end of the Hall from the pipework.

In this position, it is used regularly by Mr. Fitton for school assembly, much to the chagrin of those pupils who have to stand directly in front of the pipes I would imagine! This position also does undoubtedly give the organist his best impression of his playing and so no doubt will be used by those pupils who wish to learn the mystique of Theatre Organ styling. The main cable for this console, incidentally, was fed below the school floor through a space of no more than approximately 12 ft. headroom by a young (small) pupil who was not, contrary to popular opinion "press ganged" into the job, but who actually volunteered! We are able to report his successful emergence into the Relay Room with the cable following! A drawstop to be found below the treble end of the accompaniment manual of the stage console, decides which of the two consoles should become 'Master' console. This determines which console controls stops drawn and position of swell shutters (Venetian blind like devices placed at the front of the organ chambers to control the volume). Keyboards of both consoles, however, may be used simultaneously. It is this drawstop, which has caused much of the time of the installation to be spent upon the electrics, as the complexity of the system is quite high. Forget not that this organ was designed fifty years ago, well before the advent of the mighty silicon chip.

And so, our tour of the instrument draws to a close. By all means read the stop list, by all means sit back and enjoy the music, which today sees the culmination of some 10 years work. Thank, if you wish, the Technical Team members who have given so freely of their time, effort and even expense to re-install this unique instrument, but, mainly, please, please come along to the functions held here at Blue Coat School, and bring along someone else who may not know what he or she is missing, for it is only when we convert empty seats to full ones that the finances will become available to continue Theatre Organ presentations. Please remember also that we still have another world famous instrument to start upon. I refer of course to the Tudor Rose' Four Manual Wurlitzer Organ, ex Gaumont Theatre, Manchester, patiently awaiting a new home.

Gordon Kershaw 1983.