

## Theater organ [cinema organ]

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A type of pipe organ built between 1911 and 1940 specifically for the accompaniment of silent films and the performance of popular music in the magnificent movie palaces that arose during the first four decades of the 20th century. Used at first to substitute for the house orchestra during breaks, the theater organ eventually superseded the orchestra, for a single organist could improvise a more flexible accompaniment to the action on the screen. In the United States the term “theater organ” is preferred; in the UK “cinema organ” is used. Many characteristics of the theater organ can be traced to innovations in organs built between 1895 and 1910 in the UK and United States by Robert Hope-Jones (1859–1914), an early pioneer of the use of electricity in organs. Hope-Jones developed many of his innovative ideas in his native England, but not until he immigrated to America and later worked with the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company of North Tonawanda, New York, was his concept of the “Unit Orchestra” fully realized. This included the use of rapid electropneumatic action, remote consoles, numerous couplers and accessories, and, in particular, unification. With this economical system, the effect of a larger organ was obtained by the expansion of the number of pipes in each individual rank, and electrically “borrowing” additional stops from each rank at different pitches and on different manuals. “Double touch” enabled the organist to play a solo with a different stop arrangement from its accompaniment on a single manual, by applying additional pressure to the keys.

Given an equal number of pipes, a theater organ tends to be louder than a traditional organ, because its pipes are built to larger scales and are blown on higher wind pressure. The *Tibia Clausa*, a stopped wood pipe of hooting flute-like tone originated by Hope-Jones, became a characteristic sound in the theater organ, as did keen-sounding string-toned stops and Hope-Jones’s most distinctive invention, the powerful Diaphone, usually found in the Pedal. A distinctive feature of theater organs is the use of a strongly fluctuating tremulant mechanism which causes the pipes to speak with an exaggerated vibrato. Theater organs were provided with numerous percussion stops such as drums, cymbals, castanets, chimes, and xylophones, as well as various sound effects including bird calls, hoof-beats, police sirens, train whistles, ocean waves, and crashing sounds. These sound-effect stops are often referred to as the “traps” or “toy counter.” Other featured stops included those that closely imitated orchestral instruments. Color-coded stop control tabs were arranged in an arc above the manuals in what became known as the “horseshoe” console. The elaborately decorated consoles were usually on elevators, and entertained audiences as they dramatically rose from the orchestra pit to a thundering fanfare and brilliant illumination. Star performers such as Jesse Crawford were referred to as “spotlight organists” and often played popular solo selections before a movie began.

The prototype of the theater organ was initially built under the direction of Hope-Jones at the Wurlitzer firm of North Tonawanda, New York, in 1910 and soon proved a more versatile replacement for an orchestra. Wurlitzer eventually dominated the manufacture of theater organs, producing twice as many as

its American rivals, which included Robert Morton, Barton, Kimball, and Möller, and in the UK, the Compton firm. Indeed, the term “Mighty Wurlitzer” became synonymous with the instrument. Wurlitzer’s finest example was installed in the Paramount Theater, New York. Its largest instrument was installed at Radio City Music Hall, New York. *Valencia*, recorded in 1926 by Jesse Crawford on a Wurlitzer, became one of the first phonograph records to sell a million copies.

It is estimated that 7000 theater organs were built in the United States between 1911 and 1929, accounting for a quarter of total pipe organ production, but theater organs fell into disuse following the advent of sound films in 1939. Many were subsequently destroyed or put to other uses, and an entire industry vanished. Theater organ music began experiencing a renaissance in the 1950s, when George Wright at the “Mighty Wurlitzer” in Radio City Music Hall made some of the first “high fidelity” recordings. As the movie palaces began to be pulled down or rebuilt and the organs were in danger of destruction, organizations such as the American Theatre Organ Society were formed in the United States and Britain to rescue some of them and reinstall them in auditoriums, restaurants, and homes. Notable extant theater organs still in their original locations include the Radio City Music Hall in New York, the Fox Theater in Atlanta, Georgia, the Fox Theater in San Francisco, California, and the Paramount Theater in Oakland, California.

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