

AMERICAN THEATRE ORGAN SOCIETY

Lesser-known builders . . .

Marr & Colton Theatre Organs

From an article by Loyd E. Klos in the Spring 1963 issue of *Theatre Organ*



David Marr, founder of the Marr & Colton Company and his partner John J. Colton

David Jackson Marr was born in London, England, in 1882. He had a great interest in things mechanical -- a love which was to carry through his life. In those days, it was mandatory for most young boys to learn a trade, so he served seven years as an apprentice in an organ building firm in Edinburgh, Scotland, where he learned every phase of pipe organ construction. (This firm later became the Ingram Organ Co., and one of the employees was an eccentric genius by the name of Robert Hope-Jones.)

In 1904, David Marr embarked for the United States where his first employment was with the Skinner Organ Company in Boston. Robert Hope-Jones had arrived in the United States earlier, and he eventually went to work for the Skinner Company.

Robert Hope-Jones was determined to establish his own factory and he left Skinner in 1907 with about 15 men and located in Elmira, New York. His "Hope-Jones Electric Organ Company" was organized through local capital that established a factory in rented quarters in Elmira, with executive offices in New York City.

Remembering the young man who was such a meticulous and dependable worker, Robert Hope-Jones wrote to David Marr, asking that he join the firm in Elmira. This Marr did, and it was while working in the factory that he met John J. Colton.

The Hope-Jones firm was eventually sold to the Wurlitzer Company in North Tonawanda, New York, and David Marr and John Colton joined the Wurlitzer team. For two-and-one-half years, David Marr worked for Wurlitzer, ultimately becoming factory superintendent.

Through these years, Marr's reputation as an organ builder and repairman had become known to various business interests in Warsaw, New York. These included the Whitney Brothers and Bert Gage, who were promoting Warsaw and its ideal location for new industries. Approaching David Marr, they outlined a plan by which he could establish his own factory in Warsaw. Through their capital, a factory would be built, the money to be amortized over a period of time.

The plan sounded good to the young man -- a chance of running his own firm, good financial backing, and attractive surroundings in a nice little town. He agreed to the proposition. Until his new one-story plant could be built, Marr began business in an old garage. His new factory opened in 1915 and was named "The Marr & Colton Organ Company." John Colton was with the new company from the beginning, but contrary to popular notion, did not invest any money in the new organization.

The first theatre organ produced by the infant concern was for the Oatka Theatre in Warsaw. At the height of its operation in the 1920's, the company had branch offices in New York City, Detroit, and Hollywood, and some 375 people were employed by the firm.



The newest section of the Marr & Colton factory

The custom was to build an entire organ, then erect it in a room at the factory for thorough testing. Quite often, Mr. Marr would even tune his new instruments. Following testing, the organ would be disassembled and packed for shipment. Even the console was dismantled instead of being shipped in one unit.

The company flourished so well in the 20's, producing what its slogan proudly heralded "America's Finest Organ," that new additions were made to the plant in 1926. This period coincided with the Golden Age of the movie palaces. Nearly all of them contained a theatre organ as a status symbol of the time.

The lumber used in the organs was shipped to Warsaw, stored in one of the factory buildings, and paid for as it was used. Stop keys were bought from the Durst firm in Erie, Pennsylvania. Some pipe work was purchased from Gottfried, also of Erie. Lifts for the consoles were made by the Warsaw Elevator Company which was handily located a short distance from the organ factory.



The Rochester Theatre 5/24 Marr & Colton organ, billed as "the \$100,000 organ and sixth largest in the U.S." when the theatre opened in 1927.

David Marr would often attend the opening of a new theatre in which one of his instruments was installed. Occasionally, he would do the final tuning in the theatre before the grand opening. In November 1927 when the company's largest organ (5/24) was dedicated in the Rochester Theatre, Mr. and Mrs. Marr were on hand for the elaborate festivities.

In the days when radio was in its infancy, the company used trade magazines and distributed its own circulars to advertise its organs. One of these circulars described a novel method of locally advertising an installation in the Capitol Theatre in Reading, Pennsylvania. While the organ was being installed, the three-manual console was placed on the stage behind the curtain. During every performance, the curtains were drawn back, the console bathed in the spotlight, with two signs proclaiming to the patrons that "Another Marr & Colton organ is now being installed."

As far as can be determined, the Marr & Colton Company built between 500 and 600 organs for theatres, churches, auditoriums, radio stations, and homes. Not one instrument was sold outside continental United States. Paper work connected with export licenses and tariffs was so extensive that this dissuaded Mr. Marr from selling in Canada or abroad.

With the beginning of the talkies, the theatre organ's days as a regular feature in the show palaces were numbered. Sales for the Marr & Colton Company began to decline rapidly. The depression of the early 1930's was also a factor which hastened the end. In 1932, John Colton left the firm to join the Kilgen Company in St. Louis as a salesman. He died not long after on one of his trips to the east.



The console of the 4/18 Marr & Colton in the Roosevelt Theatre, Buffalo, New York

Operations ceased at the Warsaw plant in the fall of 1932. David Marr set up a shop in his home cellar and garage, performing organ repair work. He serviced organs in churches and homes. Not a man to retire, David Marr believed in wearing out -- not rusting out. His health began to fail and he died on December 20, 1951.

The Symphonic Registrator

As the company progressed, various innovations in organ construction were developed, but none was of greater importance to Marr & Colton than the Symphonic Registrator. It was often impossible for many theatre organists to prepare their accompaniments to suit the emotions being depicted on the screen.

Foreseeing the need for instantaneous and proper blending of tone colors, the company highly advertised this unusual feature ...

**Every Tone Element . . . Every Shading
Every Emotion to Fit the Sentiment Portrayed in a
Motion Picture
*Instantly!***

Organs equipped with the Symphonic Registrator had a row of stop tabs across the front board of the console. Each tab had a spot of color for identification and the tabs were further inscribed to suggest a mood that might be called for on the motion picture screen.

A TYPICAL SYMPHONIC REGISTRATOR

Love,	Suspense	Waltz 2	Chase
Mother	Garden	March	Chinese
Love,	Water	Mysterious	Oriental
Romantic	Rural	Gruesome	Spanish
Love,	Children	Neutral 1	Funeral
Passion	Happiness	Neutral 2	Sorrow
Lullaby	Festival	Neutral 3	Pathetic
Quietude	Fox Trot 1	Night	Cathedral
Jealousy	Fox Trot 2	Fire	Full Organ
Hatred	Waltz 1	Storm	
Anger			
Excitement			
Agitation			

From time to time, David Marr was asked to write articles for publication in trade papers or magazines. An article he wrote for *Motion Picture News* in 1921 represented his professional advice on theatre organ installations. It is reprinted below in its entirety.

PIPE ORGANS

A Necessary Adjunct to Motion Pictures

By David Marr

People go to a moving picture theatre primarily, of course, to see an attractive picture.

But a motion picture theatre may offer excellent pictures week after week, and yet, through lack of a "certain something" in the atmosphere of the house, may fall far short of playing to capacity audiences. Every alert house manager has studied the psychology of a moving picture audience as it sits, watching the unfolding of a story on the screen.

You, of course, have noticed how for a time, there seems to be a little undercurrent of unrest throughout the house. Neighbors talk to one another in undertones -- or not in undertones; irrepressible small boys make comments concerning the action in the pictures; little children ask questions in high treble voices.

Then, soothing, resonant, and restful come the first clear notes of the music -- and in a flash, the whole spirit of the audience is changed. They relax and give closer attention to the picture, and an atmosphere of friendliness and comfort pervades the theatre.

Time was when the manager of a motion picture house who felt that he required music to bring the utmost returns from this theatre, found himself in somewhat of a quandary. If he hired an orchestra as expensive as his ambition desired, this rather considerable expense would cut deeply into his profits; with only a piano, it was doubtful whether the instrumental music alone would draw and hold the extra percentage of patrons whom he sought.

Now, however, all that is changed, for in the modern pipe organ, one secures an instrument which furnishes music of such splendid quality and volume as to charm the most critical audience, organ music which forms a perfect accompaniment to every picture -- be it a simple comedy or a complicated emotional drama. Nor is a large investment required, neither is first cost for the upkeep. These instruments are built in various sizes at reasonable prices, and if desired, terms can be arranged which extend payments. Some of these organs are no more difficult to play than a piano, and any musician will get really wonderful effects out of these instruments.

Here are five reasons why you should have an organ in your theatre:

First, there is but one instrument which alone will give you thorough satisfaction, and that instrument is an organ. The pipe organ is conceded by all musicians to be the "King of Musical Instruments."

Second, even if you use an orchestra, there are times when the organ is indispensable.

Third, patrons of the better class of motion picture theatres have

reached the point where they expect organ music to be at least part of the regular program.

Fourth, the organ is being used today in many theatres, not only alone, but also in conjunction with the orchestra. Organ music alone is soothing and restful.

Fifth, in the smaller theatre and neighborhood houses, the pipe organ is fast displacing all other forms of music. The installation of an organ in these theatres provides an added attraction that is sure to increase their patronage.

The pipe organ has passed through an evolution during the last ten years. In the large organs, the electro-pneumatic action has superseded both the tracker and pneumatic action. There is no question but that the electro-pneumatic action will soon surpass all other forms of action in the small as well as the large organ. It is well for the would-be purchaser to familiarize himself with the different types of organs and make his choice carefully. The cost of upkeep is an item of importance. It is well to select an instrument of such careful design and workmanship that there is small chance of any of its parts getting out of order or adjustment.

Of course, the prime requisite in any musical instrument is its tone, and while many organs sound all right when first hearing them, they prove to be a great disappointment after months of service. Be sure when buying an organ that you select one with a tone of which you will never tire. While a great many stops are desirable, it is much better to have an instrument with a fewer number of stops of refined tone than one whose many stops are harsh and rough in tonal quality.

It is always well to have a new theatre planned from the start with organ chambers appropriately placed. Installing the organ in an organ chamber places it in a better position for the distribution of tone, and also leaves the orchestra pit clear for musicians whenever required. If your architect is not familiar with organ construction, it is well to have him obtain the necessary information from an organ builder. If you are installing an organ in a theatre already constructed, have it placed in a chamber if possible. We always recommend this to our customers, and make a careful study of their conditions.

One mistake many theatre owners make is to install a large and costly instrument and then expect to employ an ordinary musician to play it. It is much better to buy a small organ, and place it in the hands of a good player than to buy a large and costly instrument and put it in the hands of an ordinary musician. There are also many cases where small theatres have been provided with too large an organ. One would not think of using a brass band in a small parlor or reception room. A large and loud organ is as much out of place in the small theatre.

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