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Return to Clapham Junction – 80 Years On

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The 8-rank Wurlitzer in the Granada, Clapham Junction was regarded as the finest of the Mark II Granada series. It left the theatre in 1982, but now has a new lease of life.

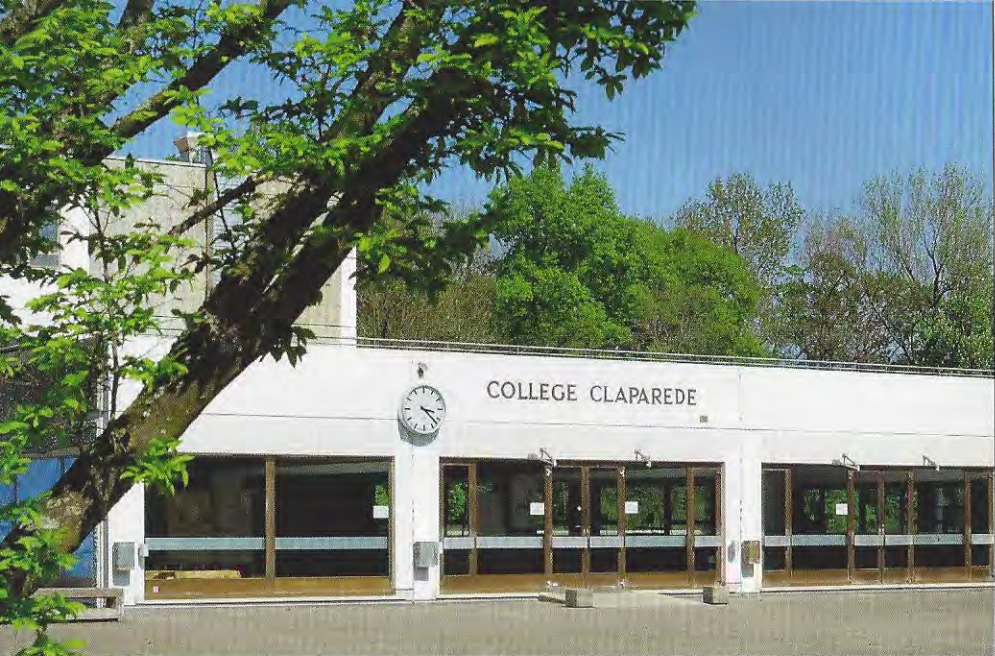


London could be a dark place in 1950. In those gloomy post-war years many parts of the less-prosperous inner suburbs were still dimly lit by gas, and any brightness shone like a beacon across the night sky. One of my earliest memories is travelling on a late-night train from London to the family home in Woking, and seeing the red neon glow of the word **GRANADA** shining from on high as we passed through Clapham Junction station. It was magical to a young lad, and little did I know what treats were in store for me 20 years later.

The Granada cinema at Clapham Junction was opened on 8th November 1937 as 'More than Just Another Cinema', and featured the most impressive of the Mark II Granada Wurlitzer organs designed by Harold Ramsay to give the maximum impact for the smallest outlay. A fiery English Horn and a quacking Saxophone may not sound like the most subtle of features of an eight rank organ, but they complemented the other imaginatively-chosen ranks exactly as

Left: Concert in progress at the Granada Clapham Junction in the 1970s

(Photo: John D. Sharp)



The Collège Claparède resides in attractive wooded surroundings a short bus ride from Geneva city centre (Photo: John Leeming)

demanding, and delivered an instrument of surprising versatility.

Concerts on this instrument were always exciting and could be moving, too, in the right hands. I remember some outstanding events there in the 1970s. My first experience was from an emotional Jackie Brown who had just been told (wrongly as it happens) that the theatre was about to close down. The closure was only temporary (for tripling), and who can forget the powerful reopening concert in 1973 by Ernest Broadbent to an audience of maybe 700 enthusiasts?

Other high-spots included Bryan Rodwell's dramatic 'Return to Pipes' concert in 1978 and Vic Hammett's swansong, playing his heart out in 1974 just a few months before he died. There were plenty more, too.

But it was not to last. The theatre closed for conversion to Bingo in 1980 and the organ was removed in 1982, some 45 years after it had been inaugurated.

The Wurlitzer was acquired by COS member Jacques Jonneret and installed in the Collège Claparède, a secondary education

college, and one of just three in Geneva with a specific music option. The installation there was not, initially, a great success, but in recent years a change in its fortunes has given the organ a new lease of life. A group of enthusiasts formed a society to get things moving again – the Association of Friends of the Claparède Cinema Organ – whose President is Nicolas Hafner, a renowned classical organist with an eclectic taste in music. Another major player in the Association is Vincent Thévenaz, also a distinguished organist and master of many other musical instruments. He is Professor of Organ and Improvisation at the Geneva High School of Music. The Director of the College, Madeleine Rousset-Grenon, is also very much part of the team.

These dedicated musicians and their team have made it their task to bring the Wurlitzer back to the highest standard so that it can once again thrill audiences with its dynamic and dramatic music.

British musicians and technicians have been very much involved in the organ's renaissance. Each November, to coincide



Above: Nicolas Hafner, Association President, with Simon Gledhill in 2016 (John Leeming photo)

with the anniversary of the organ's first installation in 1937, a festival of music and film, *L'orgue fait son cinéma*,* includes a Wurlitzer concert. In November 2015 Richard Hills was the featured artist. A further celebration takes place every Easter, and the organist in March 2016 was Simon Gledhill.

2017 was the 80th anniversary year of the organ, the Wurlitzer's birthday was to be celebrated in a big way. Robert and Abi Balfour-Rowley spent a lot of time at the College working on the organ to ensure that it was sounding at its best for the big events of the year. These were kicked-off by a major festival spread over several days in

*A suitable translation in English would be *The Organ at the Cinema*.

April. Five British theatre organists, all of whom had, in days gone by, played in public at Clapham Junction – Keith Beckingham, David Ivory, John Mann, Len Rawle and Bernard Tilley – showcased the organ over two concerts; in addition Bernard accompanied a hilarious Buster Keaton comedy, *The Haunted House*.

Below: Simon Gledhill delivers a master class to High School students (Vincent Thévenaz photo)



A highlight of that festival was an organ accompaniment by Vincent Thévenaz of the 1921 Swedish silent film *The Phantom Carriage*. Robert Balfour-Rowley described this event as “... one of the most moving musical experiences I have known.”

The main festival events were streamed live on Facebook, and were seen and heard all over the world. At the time of writing



they are still available to watch. Simply search for *Orgue de cinéma du Collège Claparède* on Facebook and you'll find the material.

The next celebratory event coincided with the organ's 80th Anniversary month in November 2017, and included a concert and short silent film presentation from Simon Gledhill.

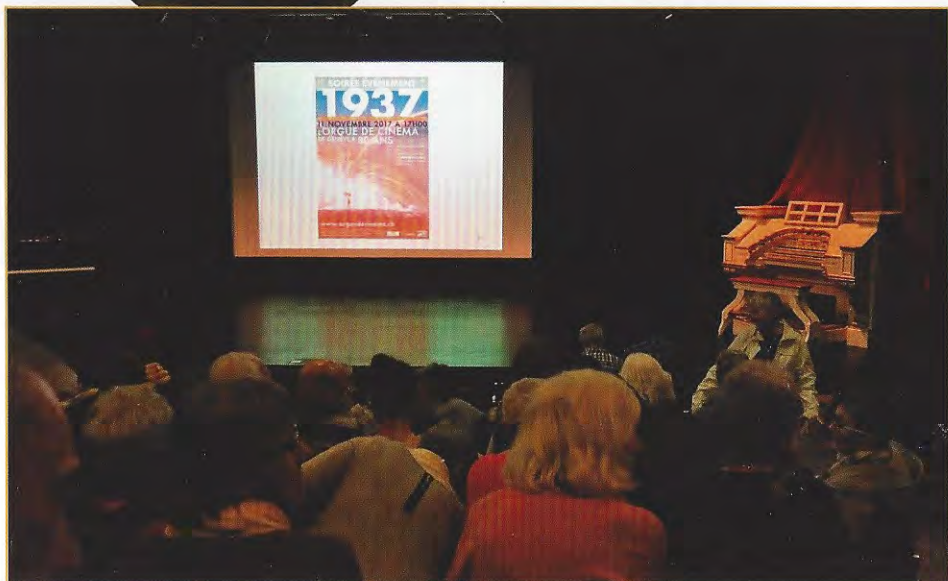
I was lucky enough to be able to attend this special event. Simon had already been hard at work by the time I arrived at the hotel on the Friday evening of November 10th. He had been conducting a seminar and Wurlitzer master-class with a group of students from the High School of Music, who apparently showed great interest, and I am told that there was real potential amongst some of those who ventured on to the keyboards.

I was invited to join a few of the group for a meal that evening, and I was pleased to re-acquaint myself with Vincent Thévenaz and the charming Martine Hahn, one of the most helpful and supportive people you

Left: Vincent Thévenaz introduces the evening's proceedings.

Below: The audience assembles

(Photo: John Leeming)



Left: Stills from the celebratory film shown at the November festival. Top to bottom: Keith Beckingham, David Ivory, John Mann, Len Rawle, Bernard Tilley

could ever hope to have in a theatre organ group. Simon, Robert and Abi made up the rest of the party, and we enjoyed a splendid meal in a restaurant near the cathedral.

Saturday morning was free, so Simon and I took the opportunity to visit a couple of fascinating exhibitions at the European Centre for Nuclear Research (CERN) – the home of the Large Hadron Collider – just outside the city on the border with France.

Back at the hotel the ever-helpful Martine arrived to take Simon to the College for his final rehearsal. Many members of the audience had booked in advance for a package which included the evening concert, a pre-concert catered meal and a 'surprise' event at 5pm, which I was strongly advised to attend!

So, five o'clock saw me seated in the auditorium ready for the 'surprise', which turned out to be a very well-made film about the organ and its celebration year. Robert and Abi were shown working in the chambers and talking about the work they were doing, and the five organists from the Easter event were included talking about their interest in theatre organ with snatches of their performances.

The film was aimed largely at non-specialist audiences, and was probably the best example of a film of this nature I had ever seen. It was informative, cleverly filmed tightly edited and, most important of all, respectful of the organ as a legitimate musical instrument.

The auditorium was packed for the evening show – it looked to me like the best part of 400 people. Simon gave an immaculate performance, as would be expected, and he must have been really inspired by reliving that historic Clapham Junction sound. Naturally, an organ designed for a 2,500-seat cinema can't sound the same in a 400-seat hall, but there was no mistaking the fact that it is the same instrument. Robert and Abi had worked hard in the days leading up to





the event, and their labour were fully justified by the result. The organ sounded in tip-top condition – dramatic and even frightening at times, but smooth and smoochy when required. It was uncanny listening to this iconic instrument live once again.

The audience for this show was not necessarily typical of a British theatre organ audience. The age-range was much broader than I had expected, and included some families with young children – impeccably behaved – even though the show lasted for two hours without an interval; I was certainly aware of the hardness of those wooden seats by the end of the concert!

I also had the sense that the audience was broadly aware of the genre of music on offer. I found myself thinking that they were akin to the audience you might find at a John Wilson orchestral concert in Britain. They even laughed during the silent comedy! I wondered if one reason for this is that, without a past history of theatre organs in Switzerland, prejudice had had no opportunity to build up amongst those who enjoy popular theatrical music: I am sure there is still a degree of vague snootiness about the theatre organ at home, based on folk memories of it being 'downmarket', even in the popular music world.

Anyway, the show was a great success, and people were eager to find out more about

the organ, with inspections of the console and visits to the chambers aplenty.

The evening also saw the launch of Simon's new CD, recorded on that organ, and I had the impression that a roaring trade was being done at the sales desk!

I was invited to join the team for a meal in the College Dining Room afterwards. By team, I really do mean team. With the Association members were staff from the College, technical operators from the hall, catering people from the kitchen – which stayed open until after midnight. They all mucked-in and I found it difficult at times to tell who were organ folk, who were lighting operators, College staff, or whatever. I had the impression of a seamless group with a common understanding, any one of whom could and would do whatever was necessary to make things happen. I was delighted to note Robert and Abi are as much part of the team as anyone else, and I am sure any future involvement will be welcomed.

Next morning the amazing Martine was back on the hotel doorstep to drive Simon and me to the airport, even though she hadn't managed to get to bed until 3am! The whole team were exemplary in their care, courtesy and thoughtfulness, as well as providing an enjoyable and perfectly managed weekend.

Long may they thrive! 🎵