



In the January 1991 issue of *Lights!*, we learned from David Lazell of the early experiments in music and light carried out by Professor Wallace Rimington. Here, the doyen of the lighting world, FRED BENTHAM, puts the record straight.

NO PROBABLE POSSIBLE SHADOW OF A DOUBT

'There seems little doubt that Professor Rimington's keyboard concepts were the forerunners of the Strand keyboard controls for theatrical lighting coming years later.' Coming across this in *Lights!* Vol. 2, Issue 1, in January 1991 I felt I should respond.

There is grave doubt – but no need to speculate. As the man who joined Strand Electric in June 1932 with the idea firmly in his head and a photo of a Light Console scale model in his pocket, I know what had influenced me. It was the cinema organ console with its rows of stop keys.

Select and play from keyboard-masters plus pistons as presets.

Hence the John Compton console and relay to control a Mansell-clutch dimmer bank. I shall not go into detail as there have been many descriptions since it was launched in June 1935 in our Floral Street demonstration



Finsbury Park Theatre.

theatre. Items played then included: Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* overture, *Twelfth Street Rag* and Tchaikovsky's *4th symphony (1st movement)*.

Officially it was to facilitate the control of stage lighting by a single operator seated

with a good view of the stage. That was what got the three directors to spend the t h e n unheard-

of sum of £1000 on it. Unofficially it was to pursue 'Light as an Art' – the title of my long article in *The Builder* of September 2, 1932. Why that Journal? The answer is that my own theories covered the whole visual ambience. The

architecture of the auditorium was as important as the set on the stage.

Ultimately all this was incorporated in a veritable temple to my colour music in the form of the King Street Strand Electric theatre of 1939. After this was bombed in May 1941, the console and its dimmer bank went into the London Palladium that December for Robert Nesbitt's new show, *Gangway*, proving itself in its other role of stage-switchboard.

Where does Professor Rimington's influence as a 'patron saint' come in all this? The answer has to be: nowhere at all! That young Fred Bentham was intolerant of the theories of Rimington, Adrian Klein and the rest, when he read Klein's book: *Colour Music: The Art of Light*.

Visual equivalents of 'music notes' and like theories never had appealed. What some music inspired was a varying picture evoked by its changes of mood using mainly (but not always) dimmers. One was



Portrait of the author as a young man.

playing lighting variations on a suitable set of drapes, or whatever, as a theme.

In this, the ideas of Appia in the Wagner context were exciting. I suppose my earliest encounter with 'mood' lighting as a boy would have been the cue: 'Down to blues' for romantic numbers in musicals and variety acts on the stages of theatre or super-cinema. Or long before, when the sun happened to come out and shine through the tall church windows at just the right music cue during Sunday Service!

'Also it led directly to the Strand Light Console' – more nonsense. This time from Klein himself in the 1937 edi-

tion of his book. This was a reprint of his original colour music book of ten years earlier, with a 13-page 'Introduction' added, to bring it up to date.

In the latter, four pages and three full-page plates were devoted to my original light console. In strict fact Klein staged a trial of his colour organ as an interlude at the Finsbury Park in London.

He says 'The show was a middling success'. Fiasco would seem to have been a more appropriate description.

The audience at this kind of super-cinema were not likely to be receptive to such high-brow theories anyway. However, the event was used by me to pretend that Strand Electric had a rival experimenter in the field of organ control of lighting.

There had been some dithering, particularly on the part of the third director (Mansell – of clutch fame) about spending all that money on my novel notion for control. To quote his own words in a memo to me: 'I think it hardly

likely the directors will go to this expense. Certainly I would not be prepared to recommend it.' Dated 16th June 1933 and attached to his works quotation, that was that. Except that it wasn't.

Using press cuttings of the Klein experiment at Finsbury Park and stressing the connection between Major Bell and Strand's rivals, Major Equipment, I proved we had competition. That it only operated in conjunction with a very special projector was omitted.

A wily trick, perhaps, but it worked. The Light Console order went ahead, thereby proving that a lie can sometimes be a good thing. But it has to be a good one! ■