

LET'S COMMUNICATE

by John Muri

"... there is something wrong when the standing ovation is given for nothing in particular."

One of the most gratifying signs of the times in the field of contemporary theatre organ is the success of several of our member-artists as they give performances that are open to the general public. Numerous performers have been willing to appear for a minimum reward, and in many cases for no reward at all other than the joy and satisfaction one brings to one's self and one's listeners. Most of us are aware that the American Federation of Musicians does not look upon such service with a favorable eye; yet the members of that Union would be taking a very short-run view of the state of music in our country if they did not realize that a nucleus of people are going to have to keep the tradition of "live music" going until the day when the public demands and gets living performances again. That day may not come in our lifetime, but we cannot afford to give way to despair. Strange things happen in the entertainment world. The current rage for cacophony and kicks will surely make way for something else; whatever it is, that something will very likely be better than the present offerings, which, technically speaking, could not get much worse.

The spirit of the times determines public taste and acceptance; it is quite probable that a more serene time will arrive, bomb or no bomb. The need for group communication, so sadly apparent in today's society, has been caused in part by unimaginative and unresourceful theatre operators who don't care what happens to their audiences as long as they pay to get into the theatre.

The theatre as a community center was a tremendous social force in the early years of this century. When the entrepreneurs turned picture houses into popcorn palaces showing sexy movies, they abdicated a high social function. When television came in, the general public, not understanding or caring about the necessity for cohesiveness in our enormous society, decided to go on its own trip, using the picture tube for hypnotic stimuli. Who cared or gave much thought to what could happen to the cities and towns of the United States when the only place we could gather together was the bowling alley, the roller rink, or the tavern?

The lack of communication is real and ominous. Sometimes we under-communicate and sometimes we over-communicate. Speaking of under-communication, isn't it time we started talking about an equitable means of paying the artists who perform for us before an inflationary trend puts us out of business? It seems to me that a formula can be worked out based on seating, potential audience and costs that will be applicable and acceptable in the great majority of cases. The "name" organist may bring in a few extra dollars, although organists are not in the public eye the way they used to be. Fees that are considerably out of line with ordinary operating costs and revenue require selling techniques that go beyond our function as a group of enthusiasts; it turns us into business men. Furthermore, the higher the fees go, the more difficult and worrisome it becomes to keep the books balanced.

Organists need to be cautious about their fees; none of us should look upon ATOE service as a sole means of making a living.

For an example of over-communication, one needs only to look upon one of my pet peeves: the standing ovation. This new custom got completely out of hand some years ago when some exhibitionistic person (and there is one in every crowd) decided to jump up and over-compensate. What happened is that we complacent people all went along with the idea, and now we jump up for almost everybody, be he a visiting organist of very modest attainments or The Visiting Celebrity. Now there is nothing wrong with one's being kind and showing one's appreciation. But there is something wrong when the standing ovation is given for nothing in particular. In my youth, the standing ovation was reserved for the highest dignitaries: the President of the United States, judges, and the like. Today we get up for comedians. If we give our highest acclaim to the mediocrities in our field, what are the top performers to think when they get the same treatment? Basic to good communication is honesty, exercised with good judgment. It is not fair to applaud everyone alike, for the very good reason that such practice destroys communication between artist and audience. When the best get the same treatment as the worst, the best have no way of knowing how well they have done, and the worst have been given a reception they did not merit. If we insist on treating everybody as if they were "Somebody," then we will soon have the situation in which nobody will be anybody. Uniformity will have flattened out all of us, and the boring results of every concert will be predictable. Sincerity must be a part of intelligent audience reaction. The result will be greater efforts and finer work by performers and enhanced listening for audiences.

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