

# The American Theatre Organ As A Part of American Culture

by John Muri

The theatre organ flourished for a brief time, lasting only from about 1920 till 1929 when the Depression marked the end of theatre organ installations. The earliest theatre organs, installed during the second decade of this century, were church-style instruments using low wind-pressures and standard church stops. The installation of big-scale, high pressure instruments by the Balaban and Katz corporation in Chicago in the early twenties resulted in an avalanche of imitators, and the term "Mighty Wurlitzer" and "Golden Voiced Barton" were on their way to becoming two of America's greatest trademarks. Many of the companies that specialized in the building of church organs, such as Kimball, Kilgen, Marr and Colton, entered the lucrative theatre field. Even Estey and Skinner made a few theatre installations.

While the general public was deeply impressed by the sobbing and hooting tibias, the quacking kinuras, and the snarling post horns (plus all the percussions), the "legitimate" organ-playing fraternity was not. *The Diapason*, a magazine devoted largely to the affairs of the American Guild of Organists, paid scarcely any attention to theatre organ. Its aloofness over a long period of years was mute testimony to a deep-set disapproval of the kind of music that was being played in theatres. So far as I could ascertain, there were two major objections. The first was aimed at the unification principle, which a number of organ-makers considered a fraud and a perversion. They expressed open contempt for ten or twelve-rank organs controlled from mammoth and gaudily decorated consoles, with small and shrill sounds coming from huge facades of grille-work. Many so-called "legitimate" organists were particularly critical of the theatre organists' use of the vox humana stop, even while virtually all of their organs included a vox humana. Much organ literature was written using the stop, and it was a rare classical concert in which the stop was not used somewhere.

The second objection was to the music being used and to the manner in which it was played. Theatre organists were certainly sentimental in their over-use of the tibia, vox, and chimes, but it was possible to get most of the customers into a spirit of a sentimental movie with them, and one could tell that large numbers of people enjoyed it. Funny and grotesque sounds could

be made with kinuras and post horns. I am lowbrow enough to enjoy them, particularly when they are cleverly done, but I have had mixed feelings about using an organ for comedy since I read a sketch in the Chicago Daily News forty years ago that said: "Abe, some of them organists are very expert about making the music fit the picture. Take a scene where a fat man falls downstairs and it's wonderful the way a high-grade organist can make you think you can actually hear the actor's pants ripping. The Chicago Opera House ought to install one of them big organs for giving imitations of fire whistles, steamboat whistles and automobile horns, horses galloping and fat men falling downstairs, to say nothing of cathedral chimes and tornado effects." To the classical organ group this use of the instrument was desecration, defilement, and damnation.

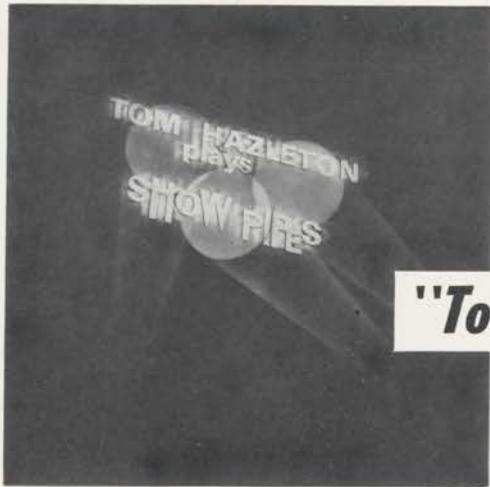
I think a case can be made out for the use of the King of Instruments as a general entertainment device. The teacher of literature knows that he cannot expect a youngster to read Spenser or Browning with pleasure; the beginner must be led to the more substantial, more artful, and more lasting literature by steps from the simple to the complex. In spite of the fact that one can do anything better on a higher art-level than on a lower one, one is nevertheless whistling in the wind when he performs for people who cannot understand what he is trying to do, even if it is the finest in organ-playing. The best is always in order when the audience can be expected to be knowledgeable, and, amazingly enough, fine musical playing is more often enjoyed than not, but one can not expect wholesale acceptance of artistic playing from a group as heterogeneous as the average theatre audience. One had to remember that children had paid to get in; they had their rights to some entertainment on their own level.

My complaint against theatre organists is that they often phrased badly. An unconscionably large number of the old-timers played as if the music had no phrasing-lines. The result was a steady roll of tiresome organ tone in which the melody got lost. Apparently not knowing what to do about it, the hapless organist tried to make things interesting by adding extempore embellishments, most of which had no relationship to each other and served only to divert the listener's minds from

the basic tune. Some of the attempted virtuosity came off decently, but it was froth, to be forgotten as soon as heard. Even today, some players overlook the fact that music, like people, has to breathe; too many players make us suffocate when we try to follow the words that go with their melodies.

One can sympathize with the well-trained organists who went into theatres and listened to the house-organists mangle the classics. One favorite piece was Ponchelli's "Dance of the Hours." There was something about this piece that attracted organists like cheese attracts mice, and many of the organists didn't have enough finger-technique to play the piece in rhythm. They even butchered the slow passages. Almost everybody attacked "Nola", "Valencia", and "Dancing Tambourine" with results that were in turn amusing, fantastic, and horrendous. Even Jesse Crawford, honor to his name, took great liberties with his operatic transcriptions, liberties that made the legitimate players tear their hair.

Still, what could you expect from a medium that demanded that you please everybody, particularly when the organist was manipulating the most complicated musical machine ever devised? I marvel today how we get such beautiful music out of such a remote-control apparatus that separates the organist from his tone-sources. I have high regard for all those players who can adjust themselves to the acoustic demands of large theatres. Think of what the differences in reverberation time required of an organist. One can play "Kitten on the Keys" in many an average-sized theatre with ease, for there is very little echo in most of them, but what does one do in such houses as the Chicago Piccadilly and the Detroit Fox with their long reverberation periods? One can play very fast music in the Fox, but it takes a conditioning of the hearing and muscles that many organists are unwilling or unable to accomplish. I could agree with the purists if I felt that the theatre was primarily an educational institution. Strictly speaking, education does go on in theatres, whether we like it or not; but we have the choice to educate purposefully or accidentally. Years ago I thought the theatre at its best was a place of recreation and inspiration. That was function and justification enough. I still think it is, even though theatres now have taken on a new function: eroticism. In the twenties, the theatre organ was used to transport people out of a presumably dull world for a couple of hours to forget worries and to laugh a little. I don't think that the highest levels of



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art-work were called for in those places, and I think that the criticism directed against people who made no pretensions to excellence in art was gratuitous. The fact that memorable performances were sometimes given in theatres was a testimony to the ambitions and integrity of theatre people who, after all, could make a handsome living without kow-towing to the purists. I remember one week at the Chicago Theatre when the stage consisted of the presentation of the complete song-cycle of Liza Lehmann, "In a Persian Garden." With beautiful voices, a forty-piece orchestra, lavish settings, and the organ, it was an unforgettable thing of beauty — all for fifty cents.

Not all theatre organists were untrained exhibitionists; there were many talented organists. In New York there were Mauro-Cottone, Firmin Swinnen, Deszo d'Antalfy; and Buffalo, Chicago, and on the West Coast Albert Hay Malotte upheld a high standard. Wilhelm Middelschulte and Arthur Dunnam, among others, taught theatre organists in Chicago to make honest and authoritative transcriptions of orchestral music, to register effectively and tastefully, and to play so as to please not only the customers, but the composers.

Our fraternity has suffered along

with others from the evils of over-generalization. Our profession, like others, is often judged in the light of the worst of us. There were probably more bad theatre organists than there were good (although that is nothing unusual as workers of the world go), and their derelictions, deficiencies, and distortions made the purists (and I mean no disrespect to them in this term) groan with dismay. Still, what group of musicians ever had such a variety of demands made upon them by such a varied audience?

If the theatre organ were functioning in public today, it would be making an important contribution in unifying the American people, reducing the feeling of alienation in many of our young, and in holding up the lamp of beauty. In the twenties the lamp flickered a good deal, for there was then, although in smaller degree than now, a little more vulgarity, immaturity, and incompetence than one would wish for. Nevertheless, the local theatre was a non-political community center, a place where young and old came together to be entertained. Most of the time it was the pipe organ that made the music. The theatre organist not only affected single listeners; he produced audience-reactions. At his worst, he led community singing. At his best, he played

on hearts and minds so as to elevate and inspire. There was a performance long ago at the Fox in Detroit when Sousa's Band was on the stage. The final number was "Stars and Stripes Forever," in which the big house-orchestra in the pit joined in playing with the band. On the final refrain, as a large United States flag was lowered into sight on-stage, the great Wurlitzer organ joined in. The sound was overwhelming. The audience went wild. Even the dullest clod could not escape the power of this music. Our culture needs that kind of inspiration today, badly.

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