

Did You Bring Your Music With You?

by John Muri

Theatre organists of the twenties demonstrated all kinds of talent ranging from highly-trained technical genius to insensitive clumsiness. When they were good they could be very, very good, and when they were bad they were awful. Between the extremes there was a wide range of performance. Like most people in a hurry, organists tended to classify each other by what semanticists today call a "two-valued orientation", which simply means that a fellow believes there are only two sides to a question, in which everything is either this or that, good or bad. In the twenties you were either a good solo or a good picture man. Few organists were considered as both.

Walking directly into the two-valued trap, one may describe current theatre organists as precisionists or inspirationists. The precisionists are those who play the music note for note, who put into practice what they have studied in harmony and orchestration, and who take pride in technical ease and skill. The inspirationists include those who make relatively little preparation for a concert, believing that the inspiration of the moment will bring enough of goodness to make a memorable event. Never playing a piece the same way twice, they are the despair of recording engineers who often need to make re-takes. Inspirationist programs come off badly a little more often than do those of the precisionists, but every organist knows that there are times when things don't go as planned. This was particularly true for those of us who had to undergo a change of program every other day. For years I worked in houses that changed films five times weekly and required me to perform two slide-solos a week.

I find most of the people who engage theatre-organ concert players today assume that both precisionists and inspirationists should be able to perform without sheet-music before them. I know people who think that some kind of deficiency exists in a player who doesn't play from memory. They think that he doesn't know his music as well as the fellow who has no use for the music-rack. Here is the either-or problem in operation again. I knew a fine teacher of organists who gave recitals at which he always used sheet music.

Last month I heard a organ recital by a top-name American organist, in which he used sheet-music for every piece on the program. He even had a page-turner. I suppose that he, like others, wanted to be sure that everything on the printed page was observed; he wanted to forget nothing. Special dynamic markings and registration changes or set-ups were all cued in, and he gave a beautifully correct if not spectacular performance.

The desire to see the performer play without a score comes from our television and concert-hall habits. TV singers have off-camera cue-cards (idiot-cards, they call them) to help their memories. On the concert stage, a full-time professional has been able and under the compulsion to rehearse his music for years. Very few theatre organists make a living playing popular concerts today. Most organists have to devote their time to enterprises not connected with concert-playing and do not practice to the extent required by the most rigorous concert performance.

Still, it is nice to see a good player work without having brought along his roll of sheet-music. I start to complain when players trust too much to luck and find themselves using registrations they hadn't planned for (with unhappy results) and harmonies that don't work out. It is awful to hear someone set up a harmonic progression that falls apart because the organist either doesn't know what to play as his next chord or because he has gotten himself into a bind of wrong chords out of which he has to batter his way with musical violence. It was this sort of thing that set the organ fraternity apart from other musicians in the old theatre days. Our general lack of musicianship made most orchestra players (who had to read and play any kind of music at sight) express contempt for organists. That they were also concerned that the organist might replace the orchestra had something to do with their dislike, but it was well known that many organists were fakers — fakers of harmony, fakers of interpretation, and distorters of melody. The undisciplined maverick at the console whose performance was one thing one moment and another the next could not be expected to be welcomed into a fraternity whose requirements were

subordination to the written instructions of a composer whose credentials were genuine. Many of the organists did not read music sufficiently well to be able to play in an orchestra. They played "by ear", which meant that they could memorize a melody and harmonize it as they went along. I can't remember ever seeing an organist's picture on the cover of the musicians' union newspaper. A pianist might get on occasionally, but not an organist.

It probably doesn't matter much whether a fellow puts some new and wild harmony into "Limehouse Blues" or "Tea for Two". Pieces like these are little more than brief and pleasant melody, harmony does not have much to do with their appeal. Actually a good new harmonized arrangement of a popular tune can be delightful, as George Shearing has proved, but it had better be good. It is a rarely talented organist who should try that sort of thing in public trusting only to the inspiration of the moment. Bad harmony is not good entertainment.

I know I am dealing here with something disputable. Consider the strength of the jazz aficionados who make a virtue of improvisation in which all the players go their own ways and "ride". As exhibitionists, those fellows can be good, and they don't play from sheet-music. Their playing is careless, and there is usually a cold heartlessness in their music as they ride toward their goals of cleverness, variety, elaborateness, and noisiness.

So back to our question then; is the fellow who plays from the sheet music inferior to the one who prefers to work before an empty music-rack? Although I favor the precisionists, I must admit respect for anyone whose performance shows either careful preparation or extempore skill. As audiences, we are complimented when a performer takes pains to be good; we are insulted when he plays for us casually without preparation. Let those who play from memory be sure that they are giving us something that they have thoroughly assimilated and prepared. Wild improvisations in which the player isn't sure how things are going to work out are submitting both the player and the listener to risks that should not be taken in the concert-theatre. □

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