

THE BLENDING OF TRADITIONS

by John Muri

A remarkable concert was played last November 22 at the Detroit Theatre Organ Club. After an absence of eight years, John Seng returned to play a program that included transcriptions of Tchaikowsky's "Nutcracker Suite", Debussy's "Festivals", Ravel's "La Valse", Gershwin's "An American in Paris" and a set of Bach variations on "Wachet Auf." There were no abridgements or short-cut easy adaptations. It was a *tour de force*, the like of which I haven't heard since the days when Arthur Dunham and Albert May Malotte set a pace for theatre organists in Chicago in 1925. The registration changes were frequent, dazzling, and correctly orchestrated. When a clarinet was called for in the orchestral score, it appeared in the organ transcription. The scales, runs, and glissandos were a delight to hear — smooth and even, for a change. Whatever mistakes were made were trivial in a performance played almost entirely from memory. When one considers the playing that one famous flamboyant is currently purveying, Seng's performance calls for special praise. It was so good that it made me wonder whether or not such playing was in the theatre organ tradition.

It was not. Most of the organists of the twenties couldn't play such a program if they wanted to, because they didn't have the time to get it ready. Working seven days a week from one to ten p.m. (as most of the big-time organists did), there wasn't much time left for practice to the level of virtuosity. Seng worked six hours a day for a week at the Detroit Club console before the concert, registering and polishing. Not all artists can afford to spend so much time in preparation for a concert, particularly one that can be given only on organs large enough and in perfect working condition, like the one in the DTOC. I estimate there are less than five theatre organs in the United States capable of presenting such a program. A wide range of orchestral tone-color is needed, and pistons in good working condition are indispensable. The program, heavily weighted by Ravel, Debussy, and Bach,

had no counterpart in theatre organ days, and this brings up an important matter.

There is a current tendency to bring AGO-type material into ATOS programs. Such programs are unique to our time, and are more in the AGO tradition than that of the ATOS. Standards for AGO performance were established many years ago, when the ability of the artist to play exactly, easily, and artistically what the composer had written on the printed page determined his standing in the fraternity. Theatre organ demanded originality and showmanship (even if it often had to be of low grade), but it did not demand strict accuracy or fidelity to a composer's ideas. The audiences for the two groups made different demands. Theatre audiences applauded lush tones, sentimentality, simple melodies, and tinkling dance tunes. Marches were appreciated, and an overture, particularly one with a lot of noise and a big finish, was tolerated with respectable applause. But it was all your job was worth to play Debussy, Bach, or Ravel except as accompaniment for a film.

Occasionally an organist would try to bridge the gap and got away with it. Jesse Crawford once used Tchaikowsky's "March Slav" as his solo for the week at the Chicago Theatre. Classical organ music was frequently played in theatres before 1920, but afterward it dwindled rapidly and vanished when the leading of community singing became the organists' job in 1925. Now we see the reverse happening as organists bring AGO-type programming into theatre organ concerts. Those who have done their musical homework can enjoy the efforts of these performers, but a note of caution needs to be sounded to the organists: be careful not to play over the heads of your audience too often. An ATOS audience appears in a large degree to be uninterested in the refinements of musical theory and performance. This is not to say that they are musical slob; it means that they have taken up the organ for enjoyment, not "culture." Many of them do not

understand nor enjoy involved harmonic progressions, particularly when these progressions are applied to familiar pieces. We cannot afford to alienate the laymen who complain about us when we play too many of those "far-out chords." Musical tastes in 1972 haven't changed much from 1922 among the general public (except the young, who have had little or no option among styles), and listeners have a way of turning themselves off with very little encouragement. Seng's transcription of Ravel's "La Valse" is a delight to hear when you already know it, but it doesn't register with a crowd that includes numbers of people like the lady whom I heard say that she couldn't tell whether the organist was playing the right notes or not.

All right, then. What's a fellow to do? Should he play for the least informed in the audience or the most informed? It seems as if you can't win any more than partial victories. The safest course would probably be that which avoids the over-loading of programs in any one direction. Variety in programming is essential. We need to play a substantial amount of the toe-tapping kind of music, and we'll have to reduce the amount of time given to those draggy stretches of ballad-playing. We need large doses of popular and semi-classic materials, for it was on them that the success of the theatre organ, was built in its short life. A maximum of two heavy works is about all that the traffic will bear right now. I can't prove it, but I think that beyond a certain point the finest virtuosity based upon serious musicianship is wasted in theatre organ work.

But I can't forget Johnny Seng. Maybe the effort was worth making, after all. In this age of sloppiness and incompetence in everything from politics, merchandising, engineering, and government to musical art it is good to see an example of Man striving toward perfection and getting close to it. It helps prove that we are more than mere animals at a time when we need public evidences of it. And it sure is a relief from the perennial "Tea for Two" and "Everything's Coming Up Roses." □

to . . . **STU GREEN**
from . . . **ALL OF US**
a big . . . **THANK YOU**
for that great . . .
HARRY BLAIR LEGEND
ROSE DIAMOND, for L. A.
ROSA RIO, for N. Y.