

# FINDING THE RIGHT TEACHER

by John Muri

Selecting a teacher of theatre organ is a process offering a number of alternatives and problems for students. To begin with, the student must have some idea of his own talents and of his willingness to work. The latter can be easily determined, for interest and motivation usually impel the talented student to successful achievement in spite of his natural inertia and apathy, while the former is often over-rated and sometimes under-rated. The prospective student should decide early which level of achievement he hopes to reach. Is he willing to learn to read music fluently? Is he willing to practice the scales and exercises that he must make a part of his being if he is ever to play with ease? How much practice time is he able and willing to give? Finally, what exactly is to be the end-result of all the training? A certain amount of self-knowledge is essential in making a wise choice of a learning program, particularly if the student is a self-taught player with a lot of bad musical habits. To engage a teacher just to have fun learning to play an organ might not be the worst way on earth to spend money and time, but it will end fairly soon in some questions being asked about one's progress and its value.

An adequate teacher can usually be found without much effort; but the more-than-adequate or superior teacher will require some searching-out. Such a teacher is sensitive to student needs and development. He is able to analyze deficiencies and prescribe effective teaching devices (and I'm not talking about special visual aids, pointer systems, and play-time games.) He will certainly try to keep his pupil interested, but he will do more than that. He will see that the pupil gets something from each exercise, lesson, or piece that can be used afterward in other playing. I favor the early learning of scales and arpeggios and in the development of full control of both hands and feet as soon as possible. Such development can be the center of attention for serious students, but since many do not care to achieve high musical proficiency, the teacher must try to make every lesson-experience contain elements of lasting value, if it be only a right-handed scale-run in the

key of C, buried in a pop-tune.

If the student wants to do serious work, he should associate himself with a teacher of some reputation and perhaps some academic background, which is to say that the teacher should have credentials from a music school or university music department. Many fine teachers do not have credentials, and some very bad teachers do have credentials; but, generally speaking, teachers who have certified training are to be preferred. Legitimate music schools (that is, schools that are in business to teach music and not to sell musical instruments) are most likely to have a number of superior instructors who are disciplinarians of high standards. They are excellent for the self-taught players who have been careless of rhythm, harmony, fingering, and phrasing. After a thorough workout with such a teacher, one may consider moving to other instructors who specialize in styling and interpretation. One should not hesitate to quit studying with a teacher; you have to quit sometime anyway. Those who plan to move upward beyond the level of elementary playing should plan to study with at least two good instructors. More than two would be quite in order.

The beginner should be wary of teachers who teach in neighborhoods, going from house to house, professing to teach all instruments. They can be really bad. These teachers often accept very low fees. It is well to keep in mind that a fee less than five dollars per half-hour is too low and that there is probably something wrong somewhere. Sometimes teachers affiliated with music schools will operate independently and try to get commissions selling organs without the student's being aware of the financial tie-up. The free-lessons deal with the purchase of an organ is generally to be avoided, although one may get some idea in a few sessions about one's potential in organ-playing. Especially to be avoided by all serious students are the teachers who use pointer systems (devices that show you where to place your fingers) and teachers with major character disorders. The latter may often be discovered in a pre-

liminary conversation. One should never mistake aberration for "musical temperament."

Surely the teacher ought to be able to play as well as the student hopes to play after a few years' practice. The student will have to learn to keep his ears and brains open. He must listen to his teacher in several different ways. Does the teacher frequently play wrong notes? I know one teacher of electronic organ who can't play pedals even with his left foot, and he has made his living teaching organ for the past thirty years. I have heard of another teacher who plays only two pedal notes, C and C sharp. Sometimes the notes fit the music.

I find it hard to believe that good teachers of theatre, church, and concert organ are very far separated musically in anything other than the kinds of music they play in public. I have heard more than one classical specialist swing out with popular tunes at rehearsals and organ try-outs; they seem to enjoy it as much as the rest of us. Likewise, good theatre organists have collected and used libraries of pieces that included much of the so-called high-class music. Passages from symphonies, operatic selections, and light concert pieces made up the major part of their scores for dramatic movies, for you couldn't play such films using only popular music. They spent much time looking over new music of all kinds and were occasionally serious students of harmony and technique. It took years to accumulate a fine library of music suitable for theatre work, and there has never been a shortage of new titles to add to a collection. A good teacher is familiar with most of the theatre organ repertory, has it in his library, and can make valuable recommendations. Obviously the remaining old pros of the theatre organ are the most competent in this area.

To summarize, the choice of a teacher depends upon what one wants to do in music. If all that is desired is the fun of amateur playing, almost any teacher will serve, provided he enjoys the same kind of playing that the student does. On the other hand, such a student won't have much fun going to a teacher who believes in a solid foundation of technique; but if the student hopes ever to be able to study independently without a teacher, he'll have to go through the program that all good players have undergone. □