

JESSE CRAWFORD—An Appreciation

by John Muri

The influence of Jesse Crawford has diminished but little in the decade since his death on April 28, 1962. Pronounce his name *Jessie* as many people did and still do, or *Jess*, as people who knew him and worked with him did — that name, if nothing else, has remained a somewhat awe-inspiring symbol of something not completely understood by those who never saw him or heard him play. Two contemporary organists have tried to reproduce his playing by copying the registrations, tempos, and arrangements of some of his recordings, but none has been able to assume the smoothness of style, the deceptive simplicity that covers a real complexity and apply them in new, original work. Next to Crawford's, most of the playing of his imitators thumps along like a square wheel, even though the imitations are good.

How could such relatively tame-sounding music ever become so popular? At the Chicago Theatre, Crawford was consistently a big box-office draw. Organists flocked to listen. The first afternoon show (with Crawford soloing at about 1:30) was notable for its daily row of organists sitting before the console. Many a time did I sit there myself, although I usually preferred the third row in the balcony for better sight and sound. It was fun to see the organists bending over and craning their necks to see Crawford work. I did my own share of it, and it became a real problem to decide where to sit when the second console was added for Mrs. Crawford. Jesse had a way of switching back and forth between consoles when playing for pictures, and you never knew whether you would be lucky enough to be close to him. Since the theatre is extremely wide, you might as well have been a city block away if you had picked the wrong console to watch. When he played for a feature picture, you generally heard ravishing solo stops putting out catchy melody — never too loud, and usually quite subdued. I never heard him make the organ distract attention from the film. It was all the more effective later when he cut loose on his solo.

The nature of the music business made Crawford's job a natural success. Music publishers courted him to feature

their new songs, for they knew the value of getting ten thousand people a day to hear their new tunes. The Lyon and Healy music store often had a window display of the new song Crawford was currently featuring, and they sold lots of copies during the run. To get your song featured at the Chicago Theatre was a big step toward success in the Chicago music market. There were plenty of new tunes from which to select — more than enough good ones — so Crawford didn't have trouble finding material.

Once in a while he went classical, but it wasn't often. Most of his classical work was adequate, but not particularly well done. He schmaltzed up the "Meditation" from *Thais* on occasion, and he put together an easy version of the then-new "Rhapsody in Blue." Audiences would sit still for Tchaikowsky's "March Slav" because the organ sound was big and the electricians would change the colors of the house-lighting to match the music: blue for peaceful, red for violent, and full-up golden-white for a big sunburst finish. It was a light-show in the early twenties, demonstrating again that the modern psychedelics and strobes are nothing new. They weren't even new in 1924. The whole theatre was equipped with multi-colored cove dome lights wired in multi-circuits, so that one could always use the lights or the revolving or sliding pillars when things got a bit dull. Crawford always put some classical material in his Sunday noon one-hour organ concerts, but he didn't have to play those very often, since other organists from the B and K Theatre circuit were engaged to perform. Many jealous organists often accused him of not being able to read music and of being a musical faker, but their carping was never documented and their sniping didn't hurt him a bit.

He must have hated the community-singing movement. There is no use trying to play with style when accompanying four thousand untrained voices singing songs like "Sweet Adeline" or "Singing in the Rain." In 1926, Henri A. Keates did little other than accompany singing at the Oriental Theatre (around the corner from the

Chicago), and the practice was spreading to all the theatres that could feature an organist — except the Chicago. When Crawford returned for a week's run after he had opened the New York Paramount, he played a straight solo, made for listening. I was sitting in the balcony at a matinee, when a number of people tried to sing along with the organ. Crawford stopped playing, turned around on his Howard seat and said, "I will not finish the solo unless the hoodlums in the balcony stop the singing." He got a good hand of applause for that, and he was able to finish the solo. He could get away with it, but not the rest of us. We played for community singing — and how I hated the low standard of work it demanded — till we all got chased out of the theatres. I'm sure Crawford would have agreed that song-leading is expendable but that showmanship involving art and serious preparation is always rare and a better commodity.

I met him but once. It was in 1925 at his office backstage on the third floor of the Chicago Theatre. It was large enough to contain a large roll-top desk with telephone, a long settee, chairs, a piano, and dressing facilities. He was very business-like and reserved with me, but not aloof. I had gotten to know Arthur Gutow (second organist at the Chicago) fairly well and often visited the theatre mornings before it opened to sit in on Gutow's practice sessions, after which we went out for breakfast. Crawford was obliging, but he did not encourage familiarity or further contact. He was too busy a man for small talk. He would help you if he could (as he did me when I was trying to locate E.R. Howard, inventor of the organ seat), but that would be the end of it. At the console he rarely and sparingly smiled at his audiences, but that was acceptable in the "carriage trade" house that the Chicago was. Unprepossessing in appearance (I never saw him in anything other than a dark suit) and unpretentious at the console, he was a model of dignity and poise. He never played the clown. I wonder if show business today would have a place for such a performer with such a manner. That it seems not to have one is but one more sounding of the depth of our cultural degradation. As Mark Antony said of Caesar, we have to say of Jesse Crawford: "When comes such another?" □