

# Playing In the Picture Houses

## HELPFUL IDEAS FOR MUSICIANS AND EXHIBITORS

*Editor's Note: The following article was written by Mildred Maginn Fitzpatrick in 1917 and appeared in *Motography* magazine.*

Next to good films, the most important feature of the picture theatre is good music. Of course, it is very important to have good pictures, but very often an inferior picture will be shown. It is then more necessary to make your music more interesting than the picture, so that your audience will be pleased by the music and overlook some of the faults of the film.

Some of the smaller houses employ only pianists, but the pipe organ seems to be the favorite instrument at the present time. We can readily see the reason for this. It not only does away with paying salaries to several musi-

cians, which would be the case if an orchestra were employed, but it also gives much better satisfaction for the pictures.

First of all, I am going to talk to the picture organist. This discussion will also apply to pianists.

### Importance of Following Pictures Closely

If it is possible to view a certain picture before you play for it, do so by all means. You have no idea how it helps you, unless you have done so before. Very often, this is impossible. After you have had enough experience, you will find you can play a picture, following it properly, just as easily as you would read a sheet of music.

The first time you play a new picture, pay strict attention to the story. If it is a dramatic picture with little or no comedy running through it, introduce some light number whenever you have the opportunity so that the monotony will be broken.

I have gone to see very gruesome pictures and thought if the organist would only stop that draggy-drawn-out music and play something with a little life and color in it, what a relief it would be. Now, by this, I do not mean to play "Yankee Doodle", for a funeral procession.

While you are playing the picture the first time, think of what music you will play for each particular scene the next time. You are then able to arrange your music so that when a hurry scene appears, you won't have to stumble into your hurry music.

Someone in the audience is sure to be disappointed at this sort of thing. Instead of breaking off so suddenly, omit part of the piece you are playing and go to the finale so that it will sound finished. You will find this an easy plan when you have practiced it.

Whenever you can connect a subtitle with the name of some particular song or piece, play that song or piece. But do not carry this idea so far as to burlesque a dramatic picture.

### "Faking" Time Has Passed

Whenever I go into a picture house, I can tell in a minute whether the musician is really a musician or just one of those fakers, who used to get by, but who now is nothing more than someone sitting at the organ or piano, just making a noise to get a salary at the end of the week.

Don't forget that your employer hears other players and some day may hire one whose playing he likes better than yours, and if you are not able to produce, you will find it hard to find another employer as easy to please as the one who once thought you wonderful.

Now a few words about the kind of music to be played. Audiences expect to hear really good music nowadays. I remember when I began to play for pictures, eight years ago, (the days of the one and occasional two-reel pictures) I thought if I played a couple of good waltzes, that was all which was necessary.

Very soon this became monotonous to my own ears, and something had to be done to make my work more interesting, so I went exploring the music stores in search of better music for the pictures. I have been exploring ever since and have not found the end of the trail — because there is no end.

During the course of a picture, you would please your audience very much if you would play one or two or more, if possible, good standard numbers. I have never seen a picture in which there was not an opportunity to play at least one real good number. Try to play things which have not been played to death. If you will spend a little of your leisure time hunting for good

Mildred was featured at the Chicago Ice Arena from 1943 to 1954. Here she poses at the 3/18 Wurlitzer, installed about 1913. She was offered the organ as a gift when the arena closed, but had no place to install it.



music, you will find it.

I expect if some of you would look among your old music, you would find things which have been almost forgotten by everyone.

Most of the music used by the film organist is written for piano, which can be easily adapted to the organ. It may help you to know that there are a great many beautiful things written only for orchestra. If you will buy the piano part of the orchestrations, you will enjoy it very much. They are a trifle more difficult to read, but practice them and your reading will be developed wonderfully in little time. What you want to do is to improve yourself. Do not stand still.

#### Hear Others Play

Make yourself acquainted with other players' work, and see where you can better yourself the very next picture you play. If you hear someone make what you consider a mistake, see that you do not do the same thing. There are a great many of us who will think we can do better than some others and very often we do not do as well as we think.

In any case, the thing you should do is the best you can at all times, because you do not know who is listening to you. Do not stall on the job, and then the minute the boss comes around, fire up as though someone had thrown a five dollar gold piece at you.

Try not to have people say, "Oh, he is a pretty good player when he feels like playing, but he does not feel like playing very often." You know, if you never do any more than you are paid for, you will never be paid for any more than you do.

#### Church Organists

There are some, comparatively few, church organists anxious to enter into the business of playing for pictures. They find it very difficult at first, but if they would stick to it and not give up, their success would be assured.

My very first organ experience was church work. It is the best foundation a film organist can have, because those who have done church work have been started on the instrument properly. But one who has had no experience except in church work, has to drop that "churchy way of playing" (as the theatre manager would say) if he wants to make good. His repertoire must be entirely different.

#### Orchestras and Pictures

I have noticed that in most theatres where the orchestra alternates with the organ, there is very little judgement used in playing for the pictures. They just take turns in rendering a few selections and each one seems to be playing at the wrong time.

Once I saw a picture in which was portrayed an Easter morning scene in a church. The organist had been playing about 10 minutes up to this time, possibly a little longer. Instead of continuing to play during the church scene, he stopped at the beginning of the scene and the orchestra relieved him, playing something inappropriate. This sort of thing is very noticeable and with a little careful attention, could be easily overcome. What if the organist did play a little over the time he was required, would it not be worth while?

No matter how large or small your audience is, there is always someone who appreciated your efforts. The more effort you make to please your audience, the more praise you will receive from them.

#### Have a Large Repertoire

To be a good picture player, you must have a large repertoire. There are so many pictures which call for character music of all descriptions. This part of your music library should consist of Mexican, Oriental, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Indian etc.

Each week, buy a little music and in a short time, you will be able to go to your music cabinet and pick out music to fit almost any picture you may happen to have. You will find it more interesting to play the pictures when you keep your repertoire up to date. Do not neglect your popular music, because you know there are a great many people who prefer it. If

you use good judgment in selecting your standard music, I am sure it will please every one in your audience. The first thing they listen for is pretty melody. It is not always the difficult things which please.

Now, a word about "hurry music." This is where so much faking is heard when there is a battle scene, or fire scene, or some other hurry scene. There is really no more reason to fake this part of the picture than to fake a love scene, which, of course, you would not think of doing.

There is not an operatic selection printed which does not contain a little bit of music which can be used very nicely for hurry scenes. There are all sorts of ballets which also may be used. Take a day and devote it to looking up ammunition for your work.

#### Playing for News Pictures

I would like to say a few words in regard to playing the weekly news pictures. There seems to be more uneasiness felt in playing these films than any other. The secret of playing news films is to have plenty of music stored up in your brain so that it is ready at a moment's notice. The moment the sub-title changes, change your music to fit the picture.

Now is the chance to use your popular music and a chance to put some life into the evening's entertainment, if you had not had the opportunity before the weekly was flashed on the screen. I have never found a topic in the weekly to which I could not fit an appropriate number.

Sometimes, the instrument upon which you are playing is located in such a position that it is almost impossible to view the picture. In this case, arrange a mirror so that you may follow the picture by its reflection. □

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