

KEEPING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

by John Muri

Somebody has said that any man who has no regard for the history of the human race can have no understanding of the present. A proud and ignorant man's head can be full of misconceptions, untruths, and anachronisms. He may think, as some organ fans do, that the old days were populated by geniuses, the like of which no longer exist. He may get sentimental and think that ancient movies were better than modern ones. While it is obvious that too many current films are over-long and trivial, it is certain that many films of the past were afflicted with the same defects — and more. Did you ever see that 1915 film that had a band of primitive Indians with vaccinations? There is a classic old scene in which a girl is scribbling a note in pencil, after which we see the note written in ink in a man's handwriting. The numerous misspellings in the subtitles of *The Perils of Pauline* help relieve some of our pangs of nostalgia, and we ought not to forget that some of the older theatre organs were dogs, too.

On the other hand, one may think that the quality of present achievements was never matched in the past. There is a rather widespread idea that movie music of the early days was corny in conception and weak in execution. A glance at some of the recommended musical scores in old files of *Moving Picture World*, say around 1913, indicates that decent classic and semi-classic music was often prescribed. There may have been a lot missing from performances in the smaller theatres (which have always constituted the great majority) because of the small number of musicians they employed. Most houses used a pianist, with some of them providing him the luxury of a Bartola. Pipe organs came in early, with the pianist doubling on organ for serious films and piano for the comedies. Throughout the years I have consistently found a few superior artists, a large number of satisfactory but undistinguished players, and a smaller number of downright bad play-

ers. Nevertheless, it can be demonstrated that from the very beginnings in 1908, serious musicians and theatre managers were concerned with the quality of music used in scoring.

There is a likelihood that an even larger misconception is growing, and it has to do with the meaning of the term "theatre organ." The theatre organ was not used to provide dinner music in restaurants or pizza-parlors; that is a recent development. A more nearly traditional use of the theatre organ was to be found in the skating rinks, for a number of them had theatre organs installed during the thirties through the sixties, finding in them a way to get loud and satisfactory music for their necessarily noisy and dusty enterprises. The wear and tear of the years, the clouds of dirt that daily pour into the chambers, and the costs of maintenance are slowly reducing the numbers of rink installations. Besides, a new group of skaters is asking for a kind of music that the theatre organ does not seem capable of supplying and which organists seem reluctant to perform.

In the strict sense, the theatre organ was used primarily to accompany movies for about three and one-half out of every four hours of its playing time. The other half hour was devoted to spotlight soloing or to intermission playing. Anyone who understands and respects theatre organs cannot help stopping his ears as he listens to old silent movies accompanied on television by electronic organs. Electronic instruments, as they are widely used today, were never used in movie work; they weren't even on the market in 1930 when we were all being fired out of the theatres. I have no objection to electronic organs being used whenever there aren't any pipes. In fact, I'm grateful that they opened up whole new areas of listener-appeal and income for organists. The pizza-parlor organ, electronic or pipe, is certainly better listening than a rock band. My point is that the electronics are not putting out theatre-organ music. What

they are giving us is the informality of home-organ, the strict rhythmic of rink-organs, the sentimentality of night club-organ, and the community-sing happy music of pizza-organ. They are all different.

I am sure many young people today think that the television silent-movie shows are representative of the old performances, and they couldn't be more wrong. The films are run at too fast a speed (for reasons too technical to go into here) and the organ playing is most of the time unrepresentative. Any organist who can't get out of the key of C for half an hour at a stretch is either incompetent, sadistic, or lazy — maybe all three. We are hearing too much of this kind of thing. The "Film Odyssey" series on television deserves a little faint praise for its presentation of old silents, but its music has not been distinguished. In no case on TV have I seen or heard a silent full-length feature accompanied on a real theatre organ. The unique atmosphere, with its delightful blend of sight and sound, has yet to appear. With their emphasis upon simplistic primitive accompaniment, TV people have done no good service to silent movie appreciation. Invariably, the technicians I run into haven't any idea of the nature of theatre sound and they stand agape at what is to them a brand new experience. One could forgive them more easily if they were not working so hard to develop the idea that older musical practices were amateurish and not very musical. Their stereotype of what movie music used to be is perpetual out-of-tune-piano hurry-music for Chaplin comedies.

Is the next generation never to know the beauty and power of good theatre organ? There is a danger that the unauthentic silent-movie music of TV will become the accepted idea of historical accompaniment. We need to have TV shows of fine theatre organs playing backgrounds for excellent silent films, using a variety of soloists. Think of it! What a relief such a program would be from the incessant yacking of masters of ceremonies, "hosts", "guests", and miscellaneous loudmouths! It is probably a group like ours that will have to sell the idea to the TV people, for they have proved that they know practically nothing about theatre music other than its use for titillation, excitement, and background noise. Any institution that regularly cuts off music in

the middle of a phrase must be made up of tone-deaf personnel. Its commercial obsessions make no provision for entertainment that relieves its audiences momentarily from the burdens of life. Its moments of beauty and fine craftsmanship are rare.

We will need to be aggressive in our efforts to keep theatre organ alive. Whenever one of our seasoned players dies and leaves his possessions to be scattered by unappreciative legatees, whenever song-slides are thrown out with the garbage and music libraries are left to crumble in garages, a part of the tradition dies. One of our most important immediate tasks is the education of television station programmers and operators. Their ignorance of the kind of theatre we represent is abysmal. □



Manufacturers, distributors or individuals sponsoring or merchandising theatre pipe organ records are encouraged to send pressings to the Record Reviewer, Box 3564, Granada Hills, California 91344. Be sure to include purchasing information, if applicable, and if possible a black and white photo which need not be returned.

THE GOLDEN YEARS OF THEATRE ORGAN, Leonard MacClain playing four theatre organs. Four sides, stereo. Ralbar SDLP 6300. \$10.00 postpaid from Mobile Music Mart, Box 195, Abington, Pennsylvania 19001.

In our October 1972 issue we reviewed Leonard MacClain's "Fabulous Stanton Theatre Organ" LP. It caused a rash of "where can I get more



Leonard MacClain. A fine artist remembered.

MacClain?" inquiries so our followup is a two record set we somehow missed when it was first released a few years ago. In the interim we have lost Leonard and the four organs have been either moved, dismantled, stored or scrapped and sold for parts. The only one now playing is the 4/22 Wurlitzer from the Rochester, N.Y. Palace, now in the Rochester Auditorium Theatre.

Five offbeat selections are heard on each instrument. On the Stanton (Baltimore) 3/31 Kimball it's "A Lovely Day Tomorrow", "Tell Me", "Indian Summer", "Through the Years", and a particularly lovely reading of a selection usually heard as a vocal solo because it's message is in the words; to anyone who has ever heard Campbell-Tipton's "A Spirit Flower" sung, Leonard MacClain's reading will hit with impact.

On the 4/18 Marr & Colton in Buffalo's Roosevelt Theatre, Leonard plays "I Could Write a Book", "Try a Little Tenderness", "Never on Sunday", "Call Me Irresponsible" and "I Got it Bad".

On the 3/19 Moller in the Sedge-wick Theatre (Philadelphia), Leonard offers "The World is Mine Tonight", "I Can't Begin to Tell You", "I'll Always Be in Love With You", "Sweet and Lovely", "By the Bend in the River" and "Toy Soldier March".

On side 4 Leonard plays the then 4/21 Wurlitzer in the RKO Palace (Rochester), offering such selections as "The Touch of Your Hand", "Darling, Je Vous Aime Beaucoup", "Stay as Sweet as You Are", "When You're a

Long, Long Way from Home" and "Little White Lies".

It's easy for a veteran organ fan to assume "everyone knows about Leonard MacClain," but that isn't true. Therefore, we recommend to newcomers to the hobby to get to know the artistry of this great man of the theatre organ through this fine record set, probably the most monumental of "Melody Mac's" long recording career.

Recording quality is good throughout and it's interesting to compare the four brands of organ from these representative examples as played by a master.

This set was originally equipped with an elaborate jacket, but the supply may be exhausted by the time orders are placed. We have been assured that sets sold minus jackets will be accompanied by a reprint of the 1963 THEATRE ORGAN biography of the artist plus a photo of Mr. MacClain. This is a closeout and not too many sets remain. It may be a last opportunity to hear some of the best work of a fine theatre organist.

SALUTE TO AMERICA, Lloyd del Castillo at the Giant Wurlitzer - Stereo. Available at \$5.00 postpaid from Castle Services, 229 Kenter, Los Angeles, Calif. 90049

For \$1.00 more Del will include a copy of his normally \$2.00 "Alphabetical Primer of Organ Stops," a whimsical, irreverent and delightful listing of organ voices as he sees, hears and embellishes them. Not for the humorless nor purists. Rated "G."

The organist explains the makeup of this recording as his desire to say something good about America at a time when so many people are panning it. Whether or not such a theme is timely in view of the fact that a portion of America, namely the United States, has so recently been divided into "doves" and "hawks", is something only record sales can decide. No one would deny that "America the Beautiful", Victor Herbert's "American Fantasy" and Gershwin's "Of Thee I Sing" are admirable Americana, and Del's presentation of these is tops. Yet, of the 22 titles more than half are war-associated or military-oriented to various degrees. We can't help but