

# REGISTRATION AND RELATIVITY

by John Muri

**Y**ou would think that the number of possible sound-combinations on any organ would be limited by mathematical permutations and combinations, but it is amazing how different organists get new sound effects out of the same old combinations. The variety comes, of course, from the method of attack — staccato, legato, etc. — and the use of swell-shades. Often a well-chosen sequence of combinations makes new effects possible. For instance, we can make an interesting contrast by alternating flue and reed stops.

In effect, good registration is a matter of coordinating and subordinating compatible sounds and suppressing incompatible ones. Sounds are compatible when they do not clash in their bid for listener attention. A good accompaniment never competes with or overshadows the main or solo line; therefor specialty stops like the Kinura or the Trumpet are best heard alone in single melody lines. When used with other stops they should assist only in relatively bright or brisk passages.

Freak registrations are sensational listening, but they should be used sparingly. I am thinking of 16 and 2 foot stops, particularly reeds without tremulant. Sometimes anything goes, and you're likely to hear anything. Believe it or not, I once heard a player accompany a right-hand Tibia 8-foot solo with a Flute and Kinura played in left-hand arpeggios. The Kinura or Krumet, used with a 4 or 2 foot Tibia, may be used for bouncy melodies only if the reed is not too raspy. Sentiment goes out of the window when Kinuras begin snorting. That stop is best suited for comic effects. It is invaluable for playing animated cartoons, where one can hardly use it too much, but it does practically nothing for a full organ ensemble. The vox humana may be given a special treatment by playing it in chords. If the vox is decent, the effect will suggest massed human voices. Even poor voxes do not come off too bad with this treatment.

The organist who has a favorite stop and over-uses it by putting it into practically all of his combinations is reducing the value of his other stop-changes. Perpetual Tibia becomes cloying. It is very effective when brought on after a combination of strings or light reeds has been used. Some of us are prone to over-use twelfths and other strident mixture sounds that quickly tire the ear. I save those for the moments when I want to shake up my listeners. I never set up twelfths on pistons but add them by hand when the infrequent need arises. And let me here parenthetically pronounce curses upon the Post Horn addict who can't leave that thing alone.

On the arty side, I urge organists playing transcriptions of instrumental music to use organ stops equivalent in sound to the prescribed instruments. Massenet's "Meditation" from "Thais" is a violin solo; it should be played on string stops. If Massenet had wanted thick sounds for his melody, he would have ordered horns or woodwinds. Piano pieces like "Rhapsody in Blue" and "Second Hungarian Rhapsody" need large blocks of piano sound, if the organ includes a piano. It is better to have a pianist play the solo parts and the organist play the accompaniment. In the absence of a piano, the organist must try to get the percussion effect as well as he can.

The beauty of any registration is affected by the player's musicianship. When playing a one-fingered melody in the right hand using accompanying chords in the left, one ought not to make the top note of the left hand the same as the one being played in the right. This means, of course, that since every chord has three forms (two inversions), the player will use one of the alternative two forms. The right choice must be determined by the ear. For a thicker or a darker texture, the accompanying chord will be that which contains the lowest note. If one is playing chords in both hands, then one would never play the same chord

in both hands at once. In such a case, why not just flip on a coupler?

Reeds like English Horn, Saxophone, Krumet, etc. should not be played in chords. They are best as single-note melody stops. I once heard a player (in the Chicago Theatre, of all places!) use the Saxophone as an accompaniment stop. An exception is the Clarinet, which I find quite pleasant when played in double notes or chords as an accompaniment with a Flute or a string.

Large organs, like the Wanamaker or Atlantic City behemoths, do not require combinations made up of great bunches of stops. Big organs should be played as if they were small ones. We can begin with small combinations — say, a single solo stop (like Clarinet 8, Tibia 8, or Sax 8) accompanied by Flute 8 with a pedal Bourdon 16. Play on these for a while; then gradually add for a very pleasing effect. I once heard Jesse Crawford use a nice simple plaintive combination (Tibia, soft Diapason, string and Clarinet 8 with an accompanying Diapason and Flute 8) for a neutral scene in a movie. The tune was a slow, bouncy thing named "When I Am with You", and it certainly helped make the organ sound magnificent when he later brought on more stops for scenes with livelier action.

Some players are duds in public performance because they put on everything at the beginning. Full theatre organ doesn't sound too impressive unless you build up to it. The way pipes were selected and installed in the old days more often than not militated against the production of good ensembles. You can't throw bunches of theatre stops together without getting much more than loudness. If one has two or three Tibias, there is no need to use them all at once. I like to use them singly or play them antiphonally, if they are located on opposite sides of the theatre. One can do that with voxes too. I know few organs where two Tibias played together sound as good or better than one played alone. I know one big Wurlitzer in which the Tibias playing together cancel each other out and become a thick Flute Celeste.

Full organ should be used sparingly, never more than a few times during a concert. More than that and the listener gets tired; his psychological mechanism turns off the noise. This is especially important to remember

when one is playing a small organ. Use only a few stops for most of the program. Then, when you open up later, the audience will feel a "big" sound. A respectable program may be done on even a five-ranker, but it requires special concentration by playing in different keys and tempos to make the few stops hold interest until the moments when you can use the weak full organ and make it actually sound impressive.

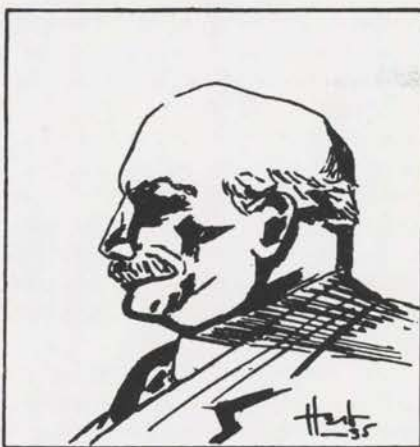
The key-word here is obviously *relativity*. You can make a small organ sound big by holding it in check and letting it roar infrequently. You can make a big organ sound harsh and noisy through over-play. You can't afford to let the instrument intoxicate or master you into a public indulgence of mawkishness or exuberance. You have to show it who's boss — all the time. □



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**THE ART OF FIRMIN SWINNEN AT LONGWOOD GARDENS.** Available at \$5.95 postpaid from Swinnen Art, 1907 Veale Road, Wilmington, Delaware 19810.

Firmin Swinnen is best remembered as the organist at the Longwood Gardens estate of Pierre Dupont at Kennett Square, Penna., where he spent nearly half of his long life (87 years) playing for the gunpowder



Swinnen

magnate, his friends and family, mostly on the 4/177 Aeolian organ installed on the grounds in 1929. Swinnen and his wife, Augusta, came to the USA in 1916 after their native Belgium had been overrun by the "Huns." He had been in New York only a week when he was hired by Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel to play a huge (3/56) Austin in the Broadway Rivoli. But it was later at the Rialto that he came more into the public eye with spectacular organ/orchestra show pieces, playing an Estey church organ (which was discarded for a Wurlitzer in 1925). In addition to solo work, Swinnen gained a name as a film accompanist. In the days before the widespread installation of sound effects on organs used in theatres, Swinnen used his pipework and a fertile imagination to conjure up such sounds as train wrecks, sneezes, traffic jams, and even uncorking a bottle — on an Estey yet! Actually he was somewhat out of place as a film accompanist; he was basically a skilled concert organist with a record of hundreds of recitals in Europe. As an immigrant he needed work and for a time he confined his effort to cueing films and doing it well. His last theatre job was at the Philadelphia Aldine in 1923, where he quit to take the job offered by DuPont. This proved to be his niche; his name as a concert organist grew among the DuPont circle of friends, and by occasional public recitals. Strangely, Swinnen was not interested in making commercial recordings but he allowed his friends with amateur equipment to make occasional cuts. This recording consists of an assortment of such tracks, all made between 1950 and 1969 when Swinnen was 84. The technical quality varies from fair to good and the

presence of considerable surface noise on some cuts indicates they were probably dubbed from acetate discs. Loud passages suffer most with a sometimes high distortion content.

However, the platter serves to provide a profile of the organist and an absorbing picture it is. From the first track, Swinnen establishes himself as a master of the romantic style orthodox organ. Some selections illustrate his flair for showmanship, especially the opener, his own improvisation, "Daybreak," with its off-mike percussions, lush Vox chorus and bright brass. Five of the selections are Swinnen originals. These provide the best representation of the organist's theatrical style. His Saint-Saens, Brahms, Dvorak and Schubert go strictly by the book and the instrumentation is usually austere, but the originals reveal a theatrical leaning despite the limitations of an orthodox organ, although we noted a few luscious crash cymbal liberties during "Eastern Romance" by Rimsky-Korsakoff. Among the classical renditions are Schubert's "Ave Maria," Dvorak's "Humoresque" (with T.O. registration) and Saint-Saens' "The Swan," all in the easy listening class and making no great demands on the player. However, the skills are showcased during Brahms' "Hungarian Dance No. 6" and moreso during Tchaikowsky's dramatic "March Slav," a real zinger. Playing is technically correct and the over-all renditions warm. Swinnen's originals include "Soir d'Automne," "March Talleyville," "Aria," and "Soir de Printemps," with "Daybreak" the most like silent movie accompaniment. The sound of the 7-division organ is often lush, despite its "straightness," but by no means theatrical. Some interesting solo reeds show up with pleasant regularity.

This sampling of the work of a

**moving?**

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