

THE CRAWFORD STYLE

by John Muri

Describing the Jesse Crawford style in prose is dangerous. Many words can make that style seem more complicated than it actually was. By today's standards, it was quite simple in form, being no more complex than the popular orchestrations of the twenties, in which a bit of syncopation was considered quite the thing. The harmonization was not of the current style that involves loads of chromatic alterations (diminished and augmented chords) and passing and non-harmonic tones. Crawford liked to use seventh chords in the left hand, but a ninth chord was about as far as he went in harmony. Much of his playing seems dated now. The "verse" part of his "What Are You Waiting for, Mary" and all of his "When Day is Done" are too simply arranged and mechanically played for today's listening. If he were alive he would be using many more "modern" chords than he did in the fifties.

What we must take notice of is the elegance of much of his playing. His introductions could be superb. Witness those on his recordings of "Just Me and the Man in the Moon" and "My Blue Heaven." His "Valencia" and "Indian Love Call" were triumphs of arrangement as well as best-sellers. His earliest recordings were his best; much of their quality has been buried under the weight of later and less inspired work.

His most outstanding and most copied device, a Hawaiian roll, was severely criticized by classical musicians, but theatre organists have persisted in copying it. It consists of a rapid short chromatic run played as an *apoggiatura* (or a little slower on occasion) between intervals of the Melody. Usually he did the little runs with both hands moving in the same direction, upward or downward, in thirds and in sixths. Sometimes it would be done with a single hand, as when playing a second-touch melody straight with the left hand and using the roll in a counter-melody in the right. A variation would occur when

he would quickly play the half or whole tone just below or above the note he was leaving, aiming it in the direction of the next tone. Skipping the interval of a fifth or more, he would leave the melody note, play the two notes adjacent to it moving in the direction of the new tone, and then skip to the new melody-note, thus playing a partial roll that gave the impression that he had made the complete run. He kept these rolls subordinate to the melody line. The volume of the roll must be kept subordinate or, at most, equal to the melody line; it should never be louder. Some of his imitators destroy the effect by opening the swell-shades for the run and closing them as they reach the melody-tone. When played with a grand upward swoop it is a good imitation of somebody "throwing up." The success of these legato rolls is dependent upon the presence of rich solo stops, particularly a good Tibia, a decent reverberation period in the theatre, and fast tremulants. According to my stopwatch, Crawford's beat about four times a second.

He liked to use turns, grace notes, and brief little ornamental figures in his ballad playing, repeating some of them on two or three different manuals while the melody went on in a legato second-touch. It was this habit that probably led him to play thirty-second notes for sixteenths, as he did in his recordings of the "Lucia" Sextette and other compositions. On occasion, he would play two pieces at once, as when he put "Aloha Oe" as a counter-melody to the then-new piece by Milton Charles, "Hula Lou." He liked to use reeds, but he was quite sparing in his use of the Post Horn, or English Horn, as it was labelled on the original Chicago Theatre console. It was a ripper, well located to the front of the chambers, and he used it only at terminal climaxes or fanfares, never as a melody stop. In fact, he rarely used large blocks of stops except as final choruses of a solo, or for storm scenes and film-endings. Some critics felt that

the Chicago organ was too muffled in its chambers. Perhaps, but I never thought so. I remember marveling year after year at the new sounds that Crawford got out of that organ. The variety was due probably to the changes that Crawford was able to have made in the instrument. I am told that he had the Post Horn from the Uptown Theatre put into the Chicago a few years after the Chicago opened. It was a hair-raising and pleasant shock one day when he turned on two sets of Xylophones (outside the chambers) that beat out loudly above the full organ.

His classical work was mediocre. He had a set of stock pieces, operatic arias and things like "Traumerei," "Kammenoi Ostrow," "March Slav," and Massenet's "Meditation." His six-minute version of "Rhapsody in Blue" omitted all the hard parts. As he moved into the thirties, the sentimentality grew and he revelled in "At Dawning," "A Perfect Day," "Pale Hands I Loved," and the like, until someone, mistaking sentiment for artistry, labelled him "Poet of the Organ", assuming that a poet could be expected to moon around creating mournful slow tunes. My impression is that he would rather have had fun with sparkling arrangements of "Dance of the Blue Danube", "Valencia", and the "Maine Stein Song." Recordings of his radio work suggest that he was bored by the necessity of playing short sweet pieces consisting of one and a half choruses on a six or seven rank organ. His radio "My Blue Heaven" is dull compared to his lively Victor Record version. His playing of tunes like "Ypsilanti", "Take Me Out to the Ball Game", and "Shine On, Harvest Moon" is lifeless. His Mendelssohn's "Spring Song" is jerky and uncertain, and his Andante from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is severely truncated and rhythmically erratic, with, for once, poor phrasing. If one wants to get picky, we can show that his grace notes in Schubert's "Moment Musical" were played before the beat, and not on it as eighteenth century baroque and nineteenth century authority demanded.

To my knowledge, his movie accompaniments at Chicago were never long enough to include music for a full feature picture. His first session began at about 2 p.m. after the orchestra had already played for the picture for ten or fifteen minutes, and he was usually

relieved by the orchestra a half-hour or so later. I never was able to hear him develop themes for a picture because of this switching back and forth. Actually, he played about two-thirds of the film, once in the afternoon and once in the evening. What I did hear, though, were subdued melodious tunes which often were newly published material.

He didn't have much to say, although his relations with the orchestra musicians must have been congenial enough. I remember one day when Balaban and Katz stock was a matter of interest to theatre employees. I was sitting near the console. Crawford came out to play his solo and said loudly to the drum section, "Well, boys, stock is up another five points!" I heard him speak to an audience only once, though, and that was when he called for silence in the auditorium.

I cannot recall his ever playing anything demanding very rapid sustained finger work or pedal virtuosity. Whether this was a matter of choice or necessity, someone other than I will have to say; but I knew then as I know now (and as did thousands of others) that we had in him an entertainer who could be depended upon for a tuneful show full of delightful little tonal surprises. Much of his charm depended upon maximum use of the beauties of single stops or single-stroke percussions. A Chime or Bell-note in just the right place worked wonders. His pedal notes and left-hand accompaniments were usually short and often staccato, more suggestive than assertive. In fact, his habit of cutting notes short can be termed one of his major characteristics.

It was his phrasing, his flair for novel registration and ornamentation, his close harmony, and his Hawaiian roll that gave him popular distinction. What made him an organist's organist was his feeling for structure and form that turned his popular arrangements into artistically unified works. Other organists, like Albert Hay Malotte, Preston Sellers, and Arthur Gutow, displayed more consistently good musicianship, but Crawford held top theatre jobs for years, and when you do that you can get away with a little more than other people can. Anyway, his playing of popular music was excellent, and to this day no one has succeeded in doing as well with so much economy of style. □



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In the April issue we reviewed *The Golden Years of the Theatre Organ*, starring the late Leonard MacClain. We warned that supplies were limited, but between the time Dottie Whitcomb (MacClain's widow) provided the review pressings and our publication date, supplies ran out completely. The Mobile Music Mart, which had handled previous MacClain records reviewed here, was left handling several hundred dollars worth of orders and no merchandise. To make matters worse, the price we gave was incorrect — a dollar too low! Our apologies to the Mart and to those we inconvenienced. Now to the good news. "Golden Years" has been reissued on the Vantage label. Chuck Schrader of the Mart advises that the sets are available at \$11.00 postpaid. They are delivered less the jacket but with a brochure with equivalent information and a listing of additional MacClain records available. Schrader, who is Delaware Valley's Chapter Chairman, advises that all proceeds go into the chapter's 3/19 Moller (formerly in the Sedgewick Theatre, Philly) restoration fund. Send orders to The Mobile Music Mart, Box 195, Abington, Pa. 19001.

TINY JAMES AT THE ORPHEUM, Doric stereo No. DO 1405. Available at \$5.50 postpaid from Doric Record Sales Co., Box 605, Alamo, Calif. 94507.

Gather 'round Robert Morton enthusiasts! Here's Tiny James playing San Francisco's last remaining organ on "theatre row," the 4/22 in the Orpheum. This is Tiny's first recording since the memorable "Farewell to the Fox" series, not counting the recently reissued "Intermission Time." His big, broad style is best demonstrated in the acoustic environs of a large theatre; he was the Bay Area's most active organist in the '30s and '40s when film exhibitors used organs to fill the "popcorn breaks" between double features. There was no time for an organist to explore the subtleties of the instrument in the short performance time available. He had to make his mark quickly, before the Disney cartoon started. The arrangements presented here are all reflective of that period — the brief choruses, big organ sound — "get on and get off in a blaze of glory." Yet there is a smoothness in Tiny's style that avoids any sense of haste. The selection of tunes is naturally nostalgic, ranging from the 'teens



Tiny James at the Orpheum console.

through the '30s. "King Chanticleer" is a fast moving novelty tune often used as an "audience chaser", a fitting console riser. Perhaps the most recent selection in the list is "Lights of Roma," which features a baritone Tuba solo of great beauty. Tibia and Vox carry much of "Over and Over," a non-Strauss waltz in the grand style. There is much corned-up barnyard frolicking during "Goofus" with the "pedal Kinura" replacing the Tuba for laughs, some glock plinking which