

Playing The Film

PART II

by John Muri

What did the organist who had to look at the same movie two or more times a day for weeks think about? In most cases he had probably decided in advance what music he was going to use. These pieces would serve as his major themes. For the rest of the time he would rely upon inspiration and memory to fit the movie with decent tunes and listenable improvisations. If he was a well-trained musician, improvisation would not give him any difficulty other than that occurring on the days when his spirits were low or when the audience was cold and unresponsive. Small audiences on off-days had a way of drying up one's musical faculties and you would then have to rely on pieces drawn out of the filing case of memory. It got boring at the console hour after hour, day after day, especially if the organ was out of tune, was ciphering, or had dead notes. Many organists brought food, candy, and drinks and stored them in the ample handy side storage-coves of Kimball consoles. Wurlitzers didn't have quite so much room for goodies. Most organists I knew played with the console lights on, but some played in the dark, and it was they who probably had easiest and most frequent access to the *nosherei* while working. When there was a blizzard outside and business was bad (the Fourth of July was always a ghastly day of empty seats) inspiration was at its lowest ebb.

A good film for organists was one that had been edited so that a mood could be sustained for a reasonable amount of time. Many film editors did not have the gift of timing a film or giving it the tempo necessary to provide a fine musical background. Frequent and unmotivated shifts of mood were deadly to play for, but a film that properly sped up or slowed down in action was excellent for organists.

The cue sheets provided by the film companies were usually quite poor. In 1918, a writer in the MOTION PICTURE WORLD complained that some of the sheets had produced "a travesty

of a picture rather than a portrayal." Recognized musicians hired to work on the sheets were said "to slump into a well-beaten rut." One critic was judging fairly when he said, "We find the sheets pretty much the same for every picture . . . same numbers, same variety, same manner of handling cues, same quantity, and same quality throughout." At that time, the faults of the cue sheets were listed as (1) their too frequent use of favorite tunes, (2) their use of themes too often repeated, and (3) their use of music issued by a single publishing house. Many of us used the sheets only to establish timing and to become aware of mood-changes; the music was of our own choice. The sheets did not improve any during the twenties. Organists threw them away as soon as the little benefit they provided was extracted. That is probably why so few of the sheets are in existence; organists didn't think they were worth keeping.

Even some of the original complete scores left something to be desired, for they suffered from the defects to be found in the cue-sheets, but they were always welcome and made the scoring job easier. Speaking of original scores, I would not try very hard to write new music for a film unless I were absolutely sure that I had a special talent at composing and that music now available was not suitable.

There are three ways to score a movie. The first, the classical method, can be used when the film has been made as a series of well-defined and somewhat lengthy mood-sequences. The scorer will pick an appropriate set of pieces, assign them to different parts of the film, and play them through, sometimes more than once. When preparing to play for *Blood and Sand*, I pulled out the following titles, among others: Bizet's "L'Arlesienne" suites and selections from *Carmen*; Moszkowski's "Malaguena" and "Spanish Dances"; Chabrier's "España Rhapsody"; "El Relicario" and Kreisler's "La Gitana." These formed the nucleus of my score. I am positive I

couldn't write music to equal it. People need to hear this music, since the movies and TV have abandoned them for rock and synthesizer whooping. A few sessions of refresher practice on a dozen or two of pieces like these and you are ready for the screening.

The second device, which I shall call the excerpting method, is used when the film is made up of sequences that are short (as in slapstick comedies) or in films where excitement is built through increasingly rapid changes of scene. D. W. Griffith created excitement in his 1911 film *The Lonedale Operator* by making sixty-six changes of scene in his final sequence, with each scene lasting from two to six seconds. Tension is heightened in movies by alternating ("crosscutting" they call it in the trade) different kinds of action. One variation of the trick is to show someone in deadly peril alternating with shots of someone else who is able to relieve the situation but is unaware of its existence. There is no use in trying to change the music in sequences like these; all you can do is close the swell-shades for the less active part of the crosscut and open them up for the critical action. Most of the time, crosscuts are relatively long in duration and it is possible to play them using parts of musical compositions that are adaptable to fragmentation. There is a multitude of good composers whose work can be used in pieces. I have even used Ravel. The semi-improvisational compositions of the movie-music writers for publishing houses like Sam Fox, Belwin, Carl Fischer, and Schirmer are quite worth-while. J. S. Zamecnik's mood-pieces are tuneful if not inspired music. They always make better listening than a badly improvised "hurry" or "mysterioso." The advantage in music like this is that you can use small stretches of it as the occasion calls for. As a matter of course, all abridgements of compositions should be brought to a satisfactory closing cadence before the organist shifts to a new mood. It is disconcerting to hear an organist stop crudely in the middle of a phrase in order to start another tune. The player should know how long his scene will last and what he will have to do to get ready for his next mood-sequence, making sure that his modulation into another key will be pleasant and that his tempo-change, if any, will be

smooth.

A third method may be called improvisational. H. C. Macdougall, who wrote a book on extemporizing for G. Schirmer, Inc. in 1922, called it the art of inventing and playing "on the spur of the moment and without specific preparation, an unwritten piece of music . . . conforming reasonably to the principles of musical composition." Few theatre organists should try this method in public without a lot of practice, if the performances now being heard in theatres and television are indicative of current levels of ability. A good improviser thinks in phrases or blocks of music, which he manipulates in ways that have been frequently described in musical literature. Books on improvising have been written; theatre organists need to study them more than even church organists, because we have more occasions on which to improvise. Briefly, the technique involves handling the phrases or blocks by adding variational notes to them, changing their rhythms, changing their harmonies (but not too much), and inverting them by putting the melody into the bass and imposing a structure of harmony above it. Mere chord-sequence playing is a burlesque of improvisation.

If the organist can make up decent themes for each main character or situation in the film and can develop them in different keys, variations, inversions, and moods, he is then ready to play films in anybody's theatre. He has then only one more thing to remember, which is that all his playing, even his hurries and his catastrophe music, ought to be listenable. He ought always to keep in mind that his primary job is the production of music, not noise. Sound effects are in a class by themselves, and crashes, bumps and burps are legitimate on a theatre organ; but whenever the organist is called upon to play, he should keep in mind Otto Klemperer's thought that any idea expressed in musical terms, even turmoil, must always be music. A good organist practices restraint (how well Jesse Crawford did it!) and he works hard. A fellow named Francis Quarles, way back in the seventeenth century, roughly expressed the need for hard labor in the production of a fine product: "I see no virtues where I smell no sweat."

(To be continued)

New York's Loss - Wichita's Gain

Organist Billy Nalle will be moving to Wichita in early 1975. While continuing his concert and recording career, Nalle will collaborate with Wichita Theatre Organ, Inc. in musical projects centering on the four manual, 42 rank Wichita Wurlitzer theatre organ at Century II, the civic/cultural complex in Wichita.

While living in New York, Nalle for 16 years covered a wide range of engagements on national network television involving well over 5,000 telecasts. In early 1958, he made his solo recording debut on the RCA label, an album made at the Times Square Paramount Theatre on the same world famous instrument now in its new home at Century II. Representing a new musical approach to popular music on the theatre organ and establishing Nalle as an artist of top rank, the recording was unusually successful.

In 1966 he made his theatre organ concert debut at the Atlanta (Ga.) Fox

Theatre, the first concert of popular music ever to be sponsored officially by a national convention of the classical organ society, the American Guild of Organists. During the past eight years, his musical firsts have set a record on the theatre organ.

Michael Coup, W.T.O.'s president said, "We will be pleased to have fine musician/showman Billy Nalle living in Wichita. The cultural climate will certainly be enhanced even though it is apparent that Wichita has a fine cultural community as evidenced by the fact that Billy Nalle has chosen to move here."

Nalle authors a regular theatre organ news column for *Music* magazine and writes musical articles and reviews for other publications. He has been a composer member of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers since 1956. Nalle, from Fort Myers, Fla., was graduated in piano and organ by the Juilliard School, New York. □

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