

RESPECT FOR MUSIC

by John Muri

Do you ever read the words to popular tunes? Here are a few recent treasures: "I'm gonna kill myself"; "Cancel my subscription to resurrection and send my credentials to the house of detention"; "I don't know the difference between right and wrong"; "I'd rather be wrong than right if I can't have you"; "Rip this joint." Setting mood-music to such lyrics would give me problems. The defeatism, self-indulgence, and lack of self-respect shown in this form of folk-art are matched only by the writers' disdain for language, for logic, and (I suspect) for music.

I have just finished reading *Respect for Acting*¹, a fine book by a great actress, Uta Hagen. In it the author confesses that for a time in her life she unknowingly lacked proper respect for her profession because she was believing a number of untrue clichés about it. The same can be said for a lot of theatre-organ addicts. Some of our bromides are that people don't like to hear classical music; that they prefer to hear tunes they know rather than tunes they don't know; that because a player is well-publicized he must be good and making a lot of money; that if the organ is a Wurlitzer it has to sound great; that a big fancy console denotes a big beautiful organ, etc.

Parts of Miss Hagen's book read as if they were written for us. Witness: "A performing musician . . . is extremely fortunate in that he is presented with specific exercises from the time he decides to pursue his chosen art form. He must use them daily and they stay with him until the end of his career."² Anybody want to argue about that?

Concerning imitation, read this: ". . . there is a point in the life of any young artist in any art form when someone he comes in contact with, whom he idolizes, influences him so

strongly that the need to emulate is almost a reflex, almost a subconscious procedure. This is true of the most gifted artist (and) is not to be belittled or minimized. We must pray that we are influenced by the best. But try to inherit the inner work and not the outer shape (the concept, not the form)."³ We have players who slavishly copy other organists' devices, particularly Crawford's glissandos and Wright's rhythms, key-changes, and endings. Miss Hagen's idea on imitation is important for those who are anxious to excel; the heart of it is that while we can emulate as much as we like, we should imitate sparingly.

It is enlightening to learn that in the early stages of her professional development Miss Hagen experienced a loss of her love of acting and adopted what she calls the methods and attitudes of the "pro", by which she means that she adopted a bag of tricks that worked on-stage. Many organists travel this road. We all know fellows who play loud because they expect to get a hand for it. In the early pro stages we are concerned about big responses from audiences. I haven't researched the matter, but I've long felt that veteran pros don't care much about the applause they get so long as they perform well. They must be embarrassed to acknowledge applause when they have played badly — and we all do on occasion.

Real pros have style, but they don't worry about it. Hagen thinks that *style* is the dirtiest word in an actor's vocabulary, that nowhere in the act of creation can one pre-determine style of shape, sound, or form.⁴ Still, we can wish for it and lament with old Madame Armfeldt (in "A Little Night Music") "Where is style? Where is skill? Where is forethought? Where's passion in the art?"

Some of our young members complain of stage-fright. Their salvation is practice to the point of infallibility. They should not fall for the advice to take it easy (Why do people insist on giving that devil's advice anyhow?) and belittle what they are doing. Miss

Hagen once tried to cure a case of nerves by telling herself that the affair was ridiculous and that the audience was made up of dopes. The result was a bad performance; as she says, she might as well have stayed home.

After you have really learned your music, then you have to make sure you don't dry up and play perfunctorily. ". . . Something gets stale or dries up *only* when I become aware of outer effects or of *watching* my actions rather than staying involved . . ."⁵ For us, this means we don't worry about appearance or other problems at the moment of performance. We think of nothing but the music!

Miss Hagen favors Eleonora Duse's concept that the only thing she had to offer as an artist was the revelation of her soul. If we find in this something approaching the best meaning of the word *artistry* (not just using the word as a compliment), then we can to some extent measure what we as players have achieved. Hagen's definition of an artist is "One who professes and practices an art in which conception and execution are governed by imagination and taste."⁶ Artistry does not consist in banging away at things, even though a certain element among music patrons is impressed. Artistry is not only technique, either. It consists in doing a thing correctly, inspiringly, and honestly. It does not matter that acting and music are largely selective and representational fantasy-worlds, special brands of make-believe. Ephemeral as they are, fine performances demand integrity.

Artistry in an actor, she says, requires not only talent, but character, ethics, and education — plenty of it. So it is with good organists; artistic maturation requires a lifetime's dedication. If you frequently doubt whether it's practical for you to work at music for years, you'd better take Hagen's advice: "Don't." If you have to ask that question, you are ready to quit.

Ethics, too, bear watching. In that area, Hagen sees sloth and egomania as deterrents to artistic development. Here she brings to mind the lazy organist who won't practice, the fellow who thinks he's tops when he isn't. She believes that the low repute actors have had comes from inferior work resulting from insufficient preparation. The same can be said of

¹Uta Hagen with Haskel Frankel, *Respect for Acting*, copyright 1973, The Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. New York, N.Y. 10022.

²Page 81

³Page 32-33

⁴Page 216

⁵Page 205

⁶Page 220

unprepared organists. It was not merely envy that induced the low regard organists often received in musicians' union halls in the twenties. It was not ignorance or indifference or technical difficulty that prompted recording companies to keep small catalogs of organ records.

Very important is Miss Hagen's belief that the theatre should contribute to the spiritual life of the nation. Theatre organ music, too, should contribute to that spiritual life. Its best functions are to elevate, refresh, and inspire those who are closest

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and dearest to us. National spirit (call it nationalism if you like) is not always chauvinism; it is sometimes a defense against subversion. Our task is to conserve and strengthen, not weaken or debilitate. As organists we daily help develop a world-view of our culture, and I kid you not, that's important. □



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Here is a theatre organ used in a novel way. The composer/organist has conjured up a host of tunes to aid the professional (or amateur) magician in making his presentation more effective with an often esoteric musical accompaniment. Here is a theatre organ (size and location unspecified - apparently to heighten the aura of mystery) used quite differently. Verne Langdon is well equipped to handle the chore from the magician's standpoint; he is, in conspiracy with Milt Larsen, associated with the Magician's Club which meets at the obviously haunted Magic Castle, a brooding relic of another era which is perched on a hill overlooking Hollywood. On moonless nights it seems to provide its own luminescence. Verne has been heard previously as a wind merchant playing the "Circus Clown Calliope" release, and he produced the "Phantom of the Organ" record starring the diabolical "Erik," both by Electric Lemon. So, it