

# AN OUTLINE FOR A COURSE IN THEATRE ORGAN - 1

by John Muri

On several occasions young organists have asked about the business of learning theatre-organ playing-techniques — that is, the playing of solos and accompaniments to silent motion pictures. Answering their questions is usually unsatisfactory, because good answers in this field are too complicated for brief replies made while friends and fans converse at the console after a performance. In the silent movie days, organists were not required to know all there was to know about their trade; they could develop skills on the job while getting paid for it. A young musician has no such opportunity today. He may well wonder how much time and effort he should give to learning a craft that no longer exists except as nostalgia.

This article is the first of a series intended to suggest answers to questions and to point out roads to pursue. Full treatment would require a volume; these articles will touch upon the following:

1. History of Theatre Organ
2. The Nature of the Instrument
3. Its Function in Theatres
4. The Musical Knowledge Required
5. Registration
6. Repertory
7. Playing the Film
8. The Organ Solo
9. Special Effects
10. Concert

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We shall begin with a brief history of theatre organ in the United States. When Tally's Electric theatre opened in California in 1902, the motion picture industry made its public bow. The first Nickel-Odeon opened in 1905 using piano music to accompany films. One can not be certain where or when the first pipe organ was installed in a picture theatre, because many stage and concert halls (later converted to movies) were built with church-style pipe organs. The DeLuxe Theatre (originally named the Towle Opera House) in Hammond, Indiana had a small draw-knob two-manual organ

that was played during serious movies in 1915; the organist used a piano when playing for comedies. Almost all organ companies built theatre organs; there were organs by Estey, Hillgreen-Lane, Kilgen, Page, Skinner, and Moller in theatres. The companies doing the largest amount of theatre work were Wurlitzer, Robert Morton, Barton, Kimball and Marr and Colton, with the first three leading the parade. Robert Morton was strong in all areas except the Midwest. Barton started early by installing organ ranks in small chests that could be played from a two-octave manual swung over the top end of a piano keyboard. These pipe-boxes, together with boxes holding percussions (bells, xylophone, and drums) made up the Bartola, a device that hit the market in 1913. Barton organs were installed mainly in the Midwest. Wurlitzer installed its Opus 2 in the Cort Theatre, a legitimate stage house on Clark Street in Chicago, in 1912. The Cort organ was a small two-manual job with a weak sound that must have been buried behind a great deal of plaster. It had no Tibia or reed sounds; it was all flutes. In 1920, Kimball was beginning to hit its pace as a leading competitive theatre organ builder, but Wurlitzer was already leading the field with contracts for 121 new organs. With the introduction of talking pictures, business fell dramatically. According to Walton's list, Wurlitzer sold 77 organs in 1929; 56 in 1930; 27 in 1931; and 8 in 1932. There are records of Wurlitzer organs being made through 1939, but the end was in sight. The operation closed in 1943.

Theatre owners were not a sentimental lot. They sold or virtually gave away their organs as soon as they were sure there was no more use for them. Some organs were destroyed by vandals and theatre employees who had nothing better to do. Organs were available for the taking until about 1964, when the extent of the demand suddenly inspired theatre owners to raise their prices and investigate the

tax advantages in donating instruments to civic auditoriums. Since 1970 prices have doubled, partly because of scarcity and partly because of the popularity of organs in pizza parlors. At present there are not many organs left to buy. A few of the largest are still in their original locations, but there is the possibility that they will soon be bought or pirated, broken up, and sold in parts. While most organ purchases have been properly negotiated, others have left scarred human relations. More than once has a group of workers spent time and money on theatre instruments repair, only to have the management sell the organ to a non-involved purchaser. Many organs have been hastily and carelessly removed; damage by unskilled movers has destroyed much good organ pipe-work. Amateur voicers have ruined many a set of pipes. Things can get ridiculous, as in the case of the "mechanic" who silenced a squeaking tremulant by pouring a can of oil into it; he used the top of a brass trumpet as a funnel to pour the oil. It's a rare city in which one doesn't hear about some local organ butchery.

The questions about where all the organs have gone and who owns them will make formidable historical research problems for anyone with time, hardihood, and postage stamps. Many instruments have changed owners and locations several times, in toto and in parts. Some organs today are hodge-podges of pipes taken from other instruments.

Like all great men who have made history, the number of influential organists is small. We now have a biography of Jesse Crawford, one of the most influential. I am not sure that any of the other organ stars warrant or would even care to have a volume dedicated to themselves; but, at the risk of censure for having left someone out, I suggest that any theatre organ history would have to give primary emphasis to Crawford, C. Sharpe Minor, Henry B. Murtagh, Lloyd G. del Castillo, and Henry Francis Parks. Minor is remembered for his organ stunts and his numerous important theatre assignments. Murtagh held many of the biggest and best jobs.

*Mr. Muri's opinions expressed herein are his own and do not necessarily reflect the policies of ATOS or THEATRE ORGAN Magazine.*

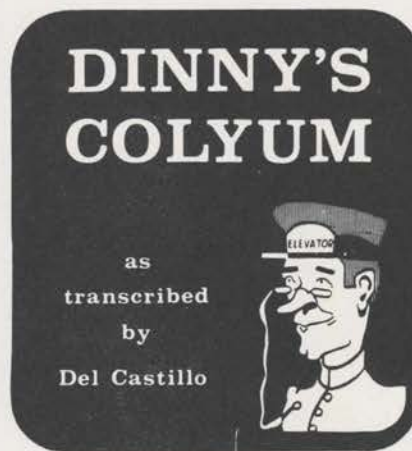
Lloyd del Castillo wrote regularly for the Jacobs music publications, influencing the work of thousands of organists. The same can be said for Henry Francis Parks. Other organists developed prestige because of the positions they occupied, but few of them influenced the trends of organ-playing as did Crawford. Emil Velaszco had the prestige of opening the New York Roxy Theatre organ, but his lasting contribution is a set of pieces intended for film-playing. The lives of most organists were relatively unromantic, because there wasn't much adventure one could pursue on a nine-hour-a-day seven-day-a-week schedule. There was some off-hours adventure, and some of it wouldn't make good reading. There were drunks, bad-check artists, and moral reprobates; you find them everywhere.

Almost invariably, organists had to furnish their own materials such as music and slides. In this they were helped immeasurably by popular-music publishers, who hired people like Murtagh to write special arrangements, which, when printed and made up into sets of slides, were offered to theatres and organists free of charge on loan.

Gradually the talking pictures knocked the bottom out of theatre organ business. Many theatres kept their organists to play for intermissions and spotlight solos between 1928 and 1932, but then the depression stopped all the motors. It is idle speculation to ask where the thousands of organists have gone. They became clerks, salesmen, and occasionally theatre managers. Their effect upon history is kept alive today only by the devotion of about six or seven thousand lovers of their instrument and their work.

History books of the twenty-first century will probably have to say that the people of the United States succeeded in destroying a culture, if not a civilization, in the forty year period 1930-1970. Cheap family entertainment went under. Cheap mass transportation that facilitated theatre-going was uprooted. Indecision about means to make streets safe for people to go to theatres at night emptied our theatres of even those who were willing to pay the high prices. Indecision about morals and civic duty produced vandalism and the most vicious delinquency yet encountered. In spite of all this and with the competition of

electronic music, theatre organ is drawing exceptional crowds in many theatres. In may be either nostalgia or novelty that is operating, but unquestionably a strong positive impression is made wherever it appears. □



Their's times a professional riter like me cant sometimes think what to rite about. You'd think a colyumist that had only have to think up somethin oncet every two months should ought to be able to think up one thought in two months. But then I get to thinkin about those noospaper fellers that has to rite up somethin new every day and I dont know how in tunket they do it. I would like to get together sometime with some of them colleegs I guess you call them that has to rite a colyum every doggone day and kind of pick there brains like. I spose one answer is they get so much money when there colyums are in a whole lot of papers every day that they can afford to get a passel of other riters to think up thanks for them.

Well, I aint never had no such luck. Mr. George Thompson who I rite for, he's a nice guy but to tell you the honest truth he just dont pay me enough for me to hire other riters to dig up ideas for me. Did you ever take a look at those list of names of riters they have on the big comedy TV shows. I seen as many as nine or ten guys who rite jokes for some of them big comedy stars like Bob Hope and Jackie Gleason. And even at that a lot of the jokes they fall flat and sometimes I think I could rite stuff as funny as that and I wouldnt have no other ten riters to help me do it neither.

I got to lookin over the last copy of Theayter Organ where I rote a peace

about all the different kinds of new music and I made a kind of a discovery like. I discovered that Mr. John Muri and me we are the only colyumists in the magazine that have to think up thoughts out of our own heads. Now you take for example Mr. Stu Green. I happen to think of him first because he has a colyum where he reviews new records, and on the same page with my puss which I admit aint very handsome they was a very cute doll name of O'lyn Callahan who according to her picshure he says is a New Breed Of Organist. Well, boy, I'm tellin you that if they is goin to breed organists who look like that they is goin to put the Atlantick City Beauty Padgent right out of business.

I guess I got kind of excited, because that wasnt what I started out to say. What I was a-gettin at was that Mr. Green he has two colyums, one of them is ritin up what is in the new organ records, and the other one is a lot of itmes that he gets sent in about what the organists is doin, which he calls Vox Pops. He even starts it out askin people to rite in what they are doin so he can put it in his colyum. And if that aint enough why then he just puts in a lot of picshures of them.

Then they is this Mr. Lloyd Klos, and all he does is to copy a lot of items from the old music magazines and he calls it Nuggets From The Golden Days. That Mr. Klos he has sure got it made. He don't even have to rite anything hisself except to say where the peaces come from. And then findly they is Mr. Lyle Nash who has a colyum he calls Hollywood Cavalcade, and I will say for him that he not only digs up items about movie stars but he also answers questions which I guess must take up quite a little work. But he gets the readers to do his work for him too because he ends up his colyum tellin people where they can send items for him, but he also says to ask him questions he will find the answers to.

Now I dont want you should think I am nocking any of these colleegs of mine, but I am just tryin to think how I can do like they do to make it easier to rite a colyum. So here goes. Anybody who has anything they want to rite about that I can put in this Colyum will they please rite it to Mr. Dinny Timmins, 223 North Kenter Ave., Los Angeles, Cal. 90049, and I will print it in this Colyum. Fair enuff? □