

AN OUTLINE FOR A COURSE IN THEATRE ORGAN - 3

Function in Theatres

by John Muri

In 1903, as the movies were just getting under way as mass entertainment, Dr. George Ashdown Audsley was severely criticizing tremulants and high wind pressures in his now historic work, *THE ART OF ORGAN BUILDING*. Since then his followers haven't let up in their hue and cry. On April 25, 1931, an article called "The Bumbulums" written by Eliot B. Spalding appeared in the *BOSTON EVENING TRANSCRIPT*, heaping protracted abuse upon theatre organists and their instruments *a la* Audsley, calling the organs "monstrous offshoots of the calliope, the brass band, and the riveting machine." It's a little late to get excited over Messrs. Audsley's and Spalding's remarks, but examination of their philosophy will reveal that they, like others, have maligned an institution because of the transgressions of a faction within it.

The heart of their argument is that a noble instrument has been inadequately built and jocosely treated. Such a view is a fine example of what the British critic, John Ruskin termed "the pathetic fallacy," the endowment of an inanimate thing with the qualities of a living being. In this case, the organ is supposed to have innate nobility and dignity. As a matter of fact, an organ has no life of its own; the only dignity it can achieve is that which man gives it. Its use in churches has led many to believe that it is the highest, if not the holiest, of instruments, but insofar as dignity of function is concerned, many forget that the earliest organs were used exclusively in places of amusement. Audsley admits finding the first organist living in 200 B.C., while the first church organ he can find appears in the middle of the fifth century, six hundred years later. It was a long primary interval in which the organ served an original function of strictly popular and secular nature.

We encounter more temperate

attitudes when we turn to Chapter Six, "The Theatre Organ," in Barnes and Gammons, *TWO CENTURIES OF AMERICAN ORGAN BUILDING*, in which we read "... a good theatre organ is a musical form unto itself and pleasant to hear."¹ The authors have given accurate treatment to a subject that had been previously discussed with little more than ignorance and prejudice. The authors credit Robert Hope-Jones with perfecting the Tibia family, the Diapason phonon with leathered lips, the Diaphone and colored reeds such as the Orchestral Oboe and the Kinura², and with developing stops of extreme scales (large and small) voiced on high wind pressures, producing "a collection of powerful, distinctive, and colorful voices — almost every one a solo stop."³ The blend produced a unique pleasing tone that won widespread acceptance. Although sound-effect percussions were "not strictly speaking organistic"⁴ they were valuable in silent movie scores. Dr. Barnes was well aware of all this in 1925, the year Dr. Audsley wrote *THE TEMPLE OF TONE*. I know, because I talked with the former about it then; I was a pushy 18-year old, who dared to visit the great man because Arthur Gutow had told me (correctly) that Barnes was a kind and considerate gentleman.

Barnes and Gammons recognized that the theatre organ had made a valuable contribution to the entire organ world. Item: "The theatre organ has introduced many people to the joy of organ music who have later developed a taste for church and concert music."⁵ "The theatre

1 William Harrison Barnes, Mus. D. and Edward B. Gammons, *TWO CENTURIES OF AMERICAN ORGAN BUILDING*. J. Fischer and Bro. Harristown Road, Glen Rock, New Jersey, 1970. P.61.

2 *Ibid.*, P. 52.

3 *Ibid.*, P. 54.

4 *Ibid.*, P. 55.

5 *Ibid.*, P. 62.

organ was a special breed of organ that was used as much as 10 hours every day, and was usually used as much in a month as a church organ would be used in a year... Consequently mechanical defects, such as burned contacts, would show up ten times as fast in a theatre organ as they would in a church organ. They were a good test ground for weak or deficient design concepts."⁶ "The demands of the theatre organist for excessive speed in the key, stop, and expression pedal action in the organs they play, have resulted in mechanical improvements in all classes of organs."⁷ The sober, documented judgements of Barnes and Gammons stand in polar contrast to the vituperation of authoritarian critics.

The introduction of Kinuras, Post Horns, percussions, and their use for comic effects were not vulgarizations *per se*; the vulgarity came from occasional tasteless human application. In this connection, one wonders if the monkeyshines of Charles Ives' "Variations on *America*," played frequently by "legit" organists, are any more dignified than some other comedy pieces played by theatre organists. Many theatre organists used their resources with good taste. A well-planned movie accompaniment could and can be as inspiring and dignified as any "legit" concert. It is the organist, the human being at the console, who creates the nobility and dignity with which the instrument speaks. The music is truly *his* voice.

A moment's thought will reveal that the complaints about vulgarization are really directed at the audiences. Theatre organists were not the sole arbiters or judges of theatrical taste. They provided a service that was prescribed by managements, who in turn were influenced by the demands of their customers. One of my employers wouldn't let me play Bach or avant-garde composers. Some managers disconnected stops that they didn't like; one ordered me never to use the Tuba. I know a manager who thought rhythm was "ribbon." He thought that "modulations slow up the ribbon." Significantly, though, it was

6 *Ibid.*, P. 64.

7 *Ibid.*, P. 62.

a rare manager who demanded only popular music for serious films. The exhibitor's position as cultural monitor has always been shaky, affected as it is by mass and mob psychology. Many a time have I heard good organists in third-rate movie houses playing Grieg or Beethoven for uninspired and uninspiring Western films.

Good players, "legit" or theatre, have never been very far apart, except in the kinds and amounts of music they played. Classical specialists have often swung out with pop tunes at rehearsals and try-outs. Theatre organists possessed (and used) libraries that included much so-called high-class music. Opera, symphony, and light concert material made up the larger part of movie scores. Most theatre organists were students of harmony and technique. They spent much time looking over new materials. Few of them were either organ jazzers or strict classicists; their work covered too broad a spectrum.

The organist was continually making decisions affecting taste. Should he cater to the lowest elements of his audiences? He was obligated to entertain the ignorant and the semi-cultured. How should he do this? Should he always play the overworked, familiar pieces? Should he ignore the immature and the untrained listeners and cater to the small minority that professes superiority in musical taste? They haven't been large enough in numbers or affluence to support music of the kind they like. There is hardly a symphony orchestra in the country without a deficit. Opera is always in danger of financial collapse. Organ recitals are few and far between, although we can fill Detroit's auditoriums any night with thousands of screaming fans of raunch who will pay five dollars and more for their tickets. We organists are apologetic when we try to get three dollars for an organ program. How can we attract the youthful audience that apparently has a lot of money for music? With Bach, Irving Berlin, Bacharach, or what?

The organ has been used to accompany vaudeville and even circuses. After sound-movies came in, it was frequently used during the opening and closing of films. It has been used effectively at style shows,

but the organist must be able to play with facility and know a large amount of music by memory. The organ has been used with orchestras. At the Fort Wayne (Indiana) Jefferson Theatre, two organists used to play along with the orchestra for film accompaniments. At the Chicago Theatre, the organ was almost invariably used to play the closing chord of the orchestral overture. On a small radio station in Indiana, an electronic organ was used to augment a hill-billy barn-dance band. Occasionally, the organ and orchestra would alternate and answer each other with dialogue-words flashed on the screen. It was called "The Battle of Music" or some such thing. The units would make fun of each other, do separate specialty numbers, and then join for a big finale. Sometimes the "battle" was between the classics and jazz. The idea was not particularly clever, but it worked with audiences. The organ is unexcelled at smooth backgrounds for skating, acrobatics, and magic acts.

There's a lot more. It can be used for public-relations events. Special showings, free or otherwise, can be arranged for school-children during late afternoon hours. If the program is educational, it may be done during school hours. Silent-film festivals conducted by theatre departments at universities or colleges can be the settings for film-accompaniments on electronic instruments. With proper amplification, this kind of music can be quite effective.

Those who would criticize the theatre organist's musical standards should be willing in fairness to consider two things:

1. Organists played many hours seven days a week, performing a variety of services. The demand upon repertory was large. Transcriptions of every conceivable kind of music were necessities. Organists had little time or strength to polish great music for virtuoso performance. Quantity was a requisite. Quality was desirable, but it had to give way to necessity.

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

2. Audiences were heterogeneous. Organists entertained the very young in great numbers, particularly on weekends. The measure of the organist's competence was his ability to select and play good music that would appeal to the best in human nature. Functionally, he was at his best when he was inspiring and elevating. As he performed inside the movie-palace mystique, little did his listeners know about the things he had to worry about. A few of the problems are memorialized in the following excerpt from "An Organist's Prayer," by John Hutchings, organist at the Lyric Theatre, Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, long ago:

From those pious noble brethren of the church who say "That fellow plays too much jazz," from those joykillers who complain to the manager that "those fool effects spoil the music" when they never fail to bring a laugh; from engagements in theatres that run tear-jerking pictures and are attended mostly by rowdies and jazz-fiends who never hear enough "rough music" at the dance hall; from managers who know more about music (?) than we do, Great Orpheus, Deliver Us! □

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