

AN OUTLINE FOR A COURSE IN THEATRE ORGAN - 4

The Musical Knowledge Required

by John Muri

Facility at the keyboard is obviously essential in theatre work. One cannot be concerned with finger-technique while watching for cues in a movie or a live act on-stage, manipulating stop-tabs and pistons, reading music-script, and thinking about what to do next — all at once. It ought to be self-evident that the best musical training a theatre organist can absorb should be the object of his efforts, despite the opinions of those who say that his work should be unobtrusive, simple, and subdued. It is almost as hard to play slowly and simply with artistry (by which I mean the ability to perform in a manner notably superior to the average with taste and elegance) as it is to display flashy technique. Whatever we perform in music, be it simple or complex, needs to be done with concentration and calculation, unhampered by technical difficulty.

Technical competence that permits the organist to observe whatever is going on about him on-stage or in the audience is required. If he must play for vaudeville or other stage events, he will be called upon to do one of two things: either (1) play music he knows, the only specification being that it be appropriate, or (2) play from a manuscript brought by the variety artist on the day of the performance, perhaps an hour before the performance begins. There is no time to go home and practice. The manuscripts are usually mutilated by scribbled cues, scratched-out passages, and other near-illegibilities. One is expected to pick the desired music out of the mess and play it correctly. That it can be done has been proved consistently by organists and orchestras, but it has been accomplished only by musicians who trained themselves to read music with ease and speed. Reading facility came in the old days, as now, only with diligent practice.

In the beginning, then, there will be a rigorous course of finger-training, basically piano technique. The

player will work through at least a book of Czerny, Hanon, or something like it and will learn to play music through the level of Grieg's "To Spring." Piano technique must be developed to the degree that common musical figures can be performed correctly up to tempo. Complete proficiency is perhaps an impossible goal, but one can work a long way toward it.

A second essential will be a course in harmony: intervals, triads, altered chords, suspensions, and key-relations to the degree that the student can modulate readily and interestingly from one key into any of its five related keys. An occasional gifted student may be able to modulate intuitively, but a knowledge of what is going on in music won't hurt him. If he isn't aware that he should not play successive 6/4 chords or jump to or from the basses of 6/4 and 4/2 chords, he has some studying to do. He will acquire some facility with the "modern" harmony of 9th, 11th, and 13th chords. He will learn the importance of keeping all the voices speaking, which means that if one begins playing in four-part or four-voice harmony, he will not introduce intervals or chords with only two or three voices except at the ends of phrases or when it is necessary that two voices resolve momentarily upon the same note.

The organist will develop a ready feeling for rhythms and their applications. He will know the properties of common rhythms, namely 4/4, 3/4, 2/4, and 6/8. His work demands knowledge of continental dance patterns, such as the polka, laendler, and the hora. In this group, Offenbach's "Apache Dance" is an essential part of the repertory. He

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will be familiar with Latin-American rhythms (tango, samba, etc.) and with oriental scales, differentiating between the musical styles of China, Japan, and India. He will understand syncopation, recognizing it when he encounters it, even in the works of J.S. Bach. He will be grounded in the popular-music styles of the United States, understanding the kinds of harmony that were current at different periods.

During practice sessions he will guard against wasting time. Practice is not a matter of "so-much-time-a-day." He must be in the mood for it. One should not practice when bored. Sustained concentration is essential to progress. One cannot let the mind wander. Some students daydream while practicing and keep repeating what has been mastered because it sounds good. Intense concentration on difficult passages for short periods of time gets better results than long stretches of desultory practice.

Practicing should be done slowly. One should never go so fast as to play wrong notes. The playing should always be correct, no matter how slowly one needs to play in order to be correct. Some teachers will dispute this as a working-principle; therefore the student should experiment to see which will get the best results: deliberate, correct playing, or playing up to tempo regardless of mistakes. In any event, the practice should always be done in strict rhythm, slow or fast. In the study of very complicated passages, one should try to play only a part of the passage at first. If it is a difficult sequence of chords, one may play only one or two of the notes of each chord until it can be played up to tempo; then the other notes may be added as skill grows.

One of the most difficult problems in organ-playing is the accurate execution of dotted-eighth and dotted-quarter notes. The slowness of organ response can prevent the actual sound from being the intended one. A dotted quarter can be too long or too short as it comes out of the pipe. Successions of clipped or protracted notes produce a ragged effect, particularly if the player is careless. He should try to make all his dotted notes come out equal in value; the effect is smooth and pleasing.

As study progresses, experiments

will be made with portamentos and rubatos, with observations of how good organists use them with restraint. Embellishment, involving the use of grace notes, turns, etc., is a complicated topic worthy of study. The large section devoted to it in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* indicates its importance. Prominent theatre organists have used embellishments frequently and with singular devotion.

Sight-reading should be practiced regularly. Piano duets at sight from the very beginning of training are excellent media for the purpose. They will be increased in difficulty until one can sight-read duets of the difficulty of Chabrier's "Espana Rhapsody" or Rimsky-Korsakow's "Dance of the Tumblers." Memorizing will also be a regular part of the study-program.

Improvisation and composition need considerable attention as early as possible. Movies are rarely made to fit musical scores, and silent films are run at varying speeds; so advance

planning and timing can never be more than tentative, if not impossible. There is often need for "filler music" to bridge gaps between specifically cured passages. A small field for organists exists in the making of sound-tracks for silent films issued by commercial filmmakers. Since royalties must be paid for the use of copyrighted music, producers usually insist that non-copyrighted (which is to say improvised or specially written) music be used. To do good work of this sort, the organist needs to know harmony, improvisational theory, and form. While computers and incompetent organists can devise musical patterns, only an inspired human can create music that works artistically upon emotions. Good scores are the results of talents and sensitivities that are largely innate and rarely transmittable by teachers.

The program briefly sketched here is long and hard, but tedium may be relieved by changing from one kind of study to another during work-

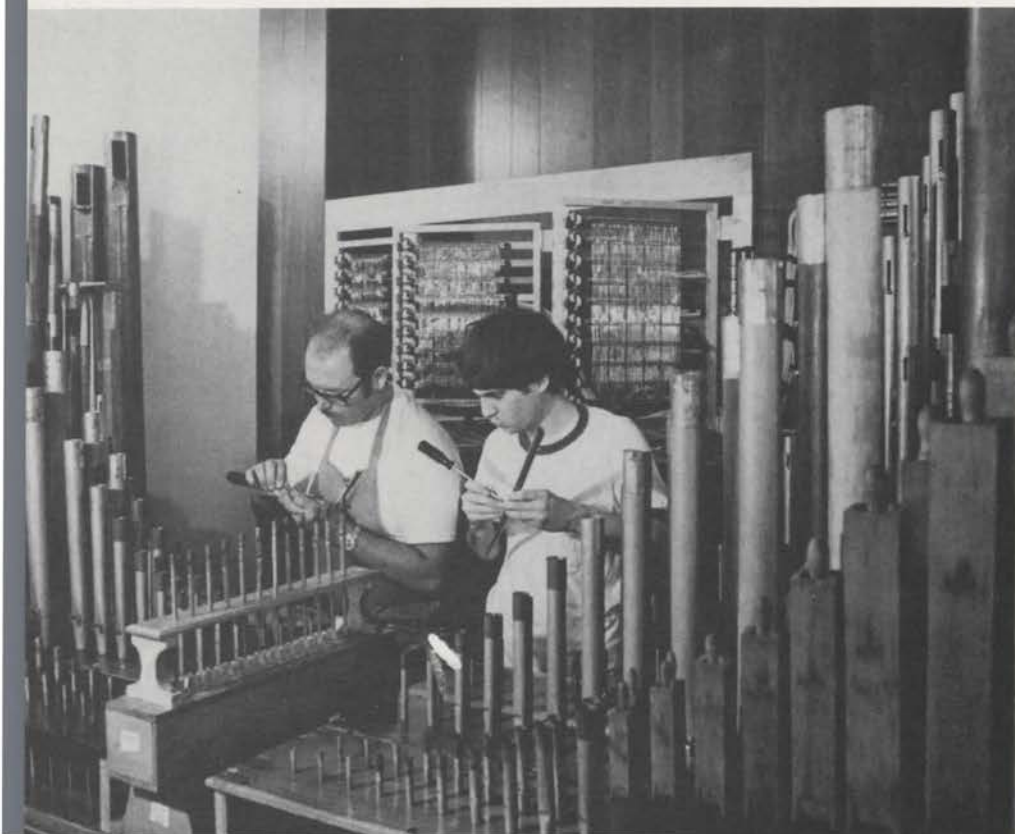
sessions. One will practice finger exercises for a while, then study some harmony, then try a little improvisation, then work some rhythm and syncopation studies. One may devote a little time to a new popular tune, being sure to *read* the music. The hours will fly, and suddenly the learner will discover that his progress has been very swift.

Actually, the many hours will have been none the shorter as time and nature produce their changes for good or ill. We note, with a smile, one of the occasionally unexpected and undesired results — organ-sprawl. This is a growth particularly disagreeable to ladies whose concern for their figures is only slightly more intense than that of men. It doesn't matter much to most of us; we didn't have too much badly-distributed avoirdupois when we were young. If the prospect is bothersome, you might consider that we pay for everything we get in one way or another; so it's a matter of deciding what we want to get out of life. □

AIR FORCE INSTALLS SECOND NEWPORT

The organs in armed forces chapels have been noted for their poor quality and limited size. Only a half dozen have pipe organs and these are giants like West Point and Colorado Springs. The Air Force is doing something to improve this by adding Newport pipe attachments. Already they have installed two at Patrick in Florida. These are connected to existing electronic consoles, adding a variety of genuine pipe tones as well as doubling the power.

Robert Eby, owner of Newport Organs, was one of the first to mix oscillators with pipes. Installations range from one to eight ranks dating back to the 40's; many of these are still playing. Harry Ingling, head voicer, is shown on the left in front of the diode coupler panels.



PLANNED OVERSEAS TREK WINS PRELIMINARY APPROVAL

ATOS conventioneer reaction to the planned First ATOS European Organ Safari, tentatively set to follow the 1976 convention in Philadelphia, is one of overwhelming approval according to the questionnaires filled out and returned to the "Crawl Headquarters," says Dick Simonton who is helping organize the expedition to visit English and French organ installations. Of the brochures handed out during the 1975 convention, more than 100 questionnaires were returned. Ninety-eight percent fully approved the plan and stated they would participate. Individual answers to the six questions were still being tabulated at press time, but one trend is definite; those planning to go want more time for sightseeing.

A copy of the brochure/questionnaire was inserted in each copy of the August-September issue of *THE-ATRE ORGAN* and Dick anticipates a flood of questionnaires from this source. He is encouraged by the first 100 "joining up." It's a good start, and the more who sign up, the lower the over-all cost to each voyager. □