

AN OUTLINE FOR A COURSE IN THEATRE ORGAN - 5

Registration

by John Muri

It is impossible to give prescriptions concerning registration other than in general terms. We remember a grand lady of the organ who, when being helped to set up a combination on an unfamiliar instrument, asked the resident musician to "Give me two black ones, a red one, a yellow one, and three white ones." The reason for generality is the lack of uniformity in stop-lists, voicing, placement, and acoustics. One can only judge whether stops blend or not after one has tried them out. At worst, there are stops so badly voiced that they should remain permanently unused. There are organs in which the Tibia is louder than the Tuba, in which the Flute can barely be heard accompanying a solo stop, in which strings are virtually inaudible.

One needs to keep in mind the demands of what may be called balance. Perhaps the term ought to be dynamics, but then we might not be talking about registration. Organists have a tendency, particularly on unfamiliar large instruments, to see-saw back and forth between loud and soft playing, in the same manner as they frequently pump the swell-pedals open and shut, without having any real purpose for doing so. There is a tendency to over-register, to use too many stops in a sudden change to a crescendo, or too sudden a drop to quietness. Gradual crescendos and diminuendos are much more effective than sudden ones. They make the organ sound powerful and much less shocking. Shock values have theatrical validity, but they needn't be turned on every minute or so. Gradual changes will be effected by pistons or the crescendo pedal, of course. In any event, one will not play a ballad like "Old Man River" or "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" with full organ.

Sentimental songs should not sound like a boiler factory in operation.

Since the foundation stop of the theatre organ has come to be the Tibia and not the Diapason, one must be careful not to over-use the Tibia. The combination of 16 and 8-foot Tibias with Voxes played as single-note melody can easily become too heavy or thick in texture. Ordinarily one will not need to use 8-foot Tibia in left-hand accompaniments; it can over-ride and blur the melody line.

In determining accompaniment registration, one may begin with a quiet 8-foot Flute. If that is not enough, add a 4-foot coupler. For more volume, a soft Diapason may be added, followed by strings, a heavier Diapason, and reeds: Clarinet, Oboe Horn, Tuba, and Trumpet, in that sequence. Many Diapasons and Clarinets on small organs are too loud to be used for accompaniments. One may use an Oboe Horn in desperation, but they are more often too loud than not. The orchestral Oboe is ordinarily useless for the purpose. Soft Diapasons are satisfactory as part of an accompaniment set-up, provided the upper manual registration is not overwhelmed by them.

A serious problem exists when one is called upon to play on small organs made up of ranks that are hideously out of tonal balance. No amount of registrational ingenuity can make an ugly Tuba or a gargling Oboe-Horn attractive. One can try

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to improve matters by playing counter-melodies and variations against the melodic line, the object being to distract attention from the tonal defects.

In playing larger instruments, one should give attention to using single stops for solo melodies. They can be charming and they make ensuing ensembles and crescendos impressive by contrast.

Twelfths, particularly the Tibia twelfths, used in the solo line call for taste and judgement. Many organists over-use them. One wonders if this tendency is a carry-over from electronic organ experience, in which tonal intensity can be as strong in twelfths as it is in fundamental tones. Perhaps not; even in the twenties (before electronics) many organists doted on the twelfths. To generalize, one may say that any Nasard or Tierce is at its best when used to brighten up, not to thicken a tone. It is most useful in creating sounds appropriate to oriental music, or (without tremulant) in establishing a mood of horror or threat. A Quintadena, if present, will do the job very well. At issue here is the theory of what constitutes "theatre sound." Imitators of the playing styles of the twenties would not emphasize twelfths, particularly in ballad work.

If one likes to use traps with organ pipes, additional flexibility may be secured by registering the melody or solo stops on the accompaniment manual, where traps like the Chinese Block, Tambourine, etc. may usually be found and added to perform in time with the melody notes. A suitable accompaniment for this set-up may be put on a piston for the great or solo manual. Thus, a piece like "Dancing Tambourine" can be played with a truly dancing tambourine, one that leaps along with the melody.

Nothing is more annoying and less useful than badly-wired crescendo pedals. The pedal should bring on the 8-foot stops first, then the soft 4's, followed by the *mf*'s and louder 4's, after which come the 8-foot reeds, 4-foot reeds, and finally the *ff* reeds. Couplers should be wired into the pedal only in the very last stages. Manual-to-manual couplers should never be wired in; they might bring in a solo manual percussion that has no place in the ensemble.

If the organist has no control over the wiring of the crescendo pedal, he will have to be wary of what's set up on the manuals. A chime on the solo manual brought down to the great by a crescendo pedal can produce a horrible clanging.

We can learn registration from other organists. George Wright has shown us the tartness of a good 8-foot Krumet, Kinura, or Oboe when used with a 4-foot Piccolo of about equal volume. Leon Berry has shown us the merit of a heavy reed pedal for roller-rink work. Numerous organists have created ethereal effects by using Voxes with Strings in close harmony, creating an effect of a choir of voices. We can also learn from them what not to do. The old trick of ending a quiet ballad with a single-stroke chime is now too *deja vu*. Meaningless sudden shifts from big loud combinations to small quiet ones in ballad-work are unimpressive, if not stupid. This is not to deny that theatricality demands contrast. Indeed, monotony in the theatre is unforgiveable; what is necessary to hold audience-attention is frequent (but not frenetic) changes of registration, remembering that we can weary an audience with stop-tab flipping every few bars as much as we can by playing a whole program on one or two combinations.

Organists who use very small instruments can make imitations of a few stops they do not have. We can suggest a Clarinet by putting an 8-foot Vox together with an 8-foot Flute and a 2 2/3-foot Nasard, provided the Vox is not too fluttery. An English Horn may be approximated by adding a string that will give body or weight to the tone of the Orchestral Oboe. The standard synthetic Orchestral Oboe is made up of a string plus a Flute Nasard. A Saxophone may be approximated by using the above English Horn combination and adding a Vox Humana, again one that is not too fluttery. The Quintadena may be suggested by taking the synthetic Orchestral Oboe combination and adding a Flute-Piccolo to it, with perhaps a string that is not too prominent, to give it body.

Care should be taken not to make the pedal section too heavy. Visiting organists have a tendency to use too many heavy pedal stops when playing the larger instruments. Big Dia-

phones and Tibias can send unpleasant vibrations through an auditorium. Pedal parts in theatre organ work should usually include the 8-foot Tibia, unless it is too heavy for the hand-work. It often obviates the need for 16-foot pipes and creates a nice clean bass.

Before committing one's self to any registration, one ought to listen to what it sounds like in the auditorium. When in doubt, have someone play it for you as you listen in different parts of the building. Watch out for oppressive vibrations, for bad voicing, for poor tonal balance — for too much or too little of anything. The test of all registration lies in the ears of sensitive and perceptive auditors. □

Closing Chord



D.E. (Woody) Wood

D.E. (Woody) Wood, organist, owner of a Wholesale Sporting Goods Company in Saginaw, Michigan, died suddenly at the age of 67. Woody was a Charter Member of the Temple Theatre Organ Club of Saginaw, long time member of Wolverine Chapter, also the Saginaw Local 57 of AFM.

He is survived by his wife Helen. His loss will be greatly felt by his many friends.

On October 4, tragedy struck the Lance Johnson family of Red River Chapter.

Their daughter, **Nichole**, was struck and killed by an auto in front of the family home.

Nichole, although only 2½ years old, had already shown consider-



Nichole

able interest in Theatre Organ. She would listen attentively when Lance practiced and would seat herself at the residence Robert Morton, playing the keys as if she were an organist.

Lance Johnson has been most active over many years in his area for the ATOS cause. All ATOS members and friends extend heart felt condolences to the Johnson family.

George W. Baylor, pianist, organist, composer and teacher, died recently in Chicago at the age of 83. He was a graduate of the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, and studied at the American Conservatory of Music and Northwestern University. In Indianapolis, he played piano and organ for many years, performing for silent movies, comedy shows and hotel audiences.

Moving to Chicago, Mr. Baylor played organ at the Hollywood Roller Rink and the North Avenue Rollaway for 18 years. A private music teacher, he was organist for several churches, and wrote a number of organ compositions.

Tony Little (Anthony Malecki), one of Pittsburgh's most celebrated and popular organists, died on July 18. During his career, he played and arranged for some of the leading bands in the country. He was staff arranger for Pittsburgh's WCAE, and performed at the Ankara, a night club, for 7½ years. He was appearing in Fort Meyers, Florida when he died.

Harold W. Luebke, chairman of the Rocky Mountain Chapter in Denver for the past year, suffered a heart attack and passed away in his sleep September 4, 1975. He was