

# WHAT'S THE SCORE?

by John Muri

The other day a friend told me that he was tired of theatre-organ shows offering films, and that on more than one occasion he had seen people walking out before the end of the presentation of an old silent. He didn't say whether the walkouts were caused by the films or the organists, but he did say that silent films would have to be mighty good before he would sit through one of them.

It might be well to pay some attention to the future of the silent-film business. For over fifteen years a few of us have been offering silents with organ shows to the general public. Each year a couple of fledgling organists make film-accompanying debuts, but the nostalgia movement doesn't show signs of growth, much less of durability or permanence. We have given *Phantom of the Opera* and a few other films a long run. Such films may be revived years from now, but we have to face the fact that there is not a great deal of attractive silent product to offer, barring sudden discoveries or releases of concealed treasures. The likelihood of finding new silent material is remote, since old film has been (and still is) decomposing beyond retrieval. Almost all of the Pathe company's films were destroyed by fire. Chemical firms have been buying old film for the silver in the emulsions. Our only hope is the release of MGM, Paramount, and Warner silents, but don't hold your breath waiting for them.

If we are going to keep seats filled, particularly seats that will be emptied by the desertion or death of our nostalgia customers, we'll have to corral a younger audience. John Barry, who wrote the score for *Goldfinger*, believes that current sound-film audiences are over ninety per cent young and that the kids have strong leanings toward modern pop music. Can we learn to play their kind of music! I think we'll have to.

If the theatre organ can't make the sounds the kids like, we'll have to add them electronically. Imagine magnificent pipes supplemented by the electronic goodies that are being invented faster than you can report them. If you don't like the electronics, you can occasionally turn them off and sneak in a seductive tibia-vox interlude.

One thing will have to improve: our film-scoring. Theatre organists have used (and still are using) musical patterns that have been standard for two hundred years, clichés that no Hollywood scorer would use for a modern film. For example, there is the rapid "chase" staccato figure of the minor tonic chord alternating with the minor sub-dominant. Organists caught in simplistic figure-traps like this ought to work their way through some of Scriabin's tritone studies. There they will find really useful excitement and originality.

Here we get into an argument. While film producers have often depended upon musical scores to carry or even save their weak pictures, they have not had much confidence in variety or innovation in scoring. Dore Schary, the late MGM executive, believed that all picture music had to be cliché to be effective, like always playing "Anchors Aweigh" for the beginning of Navy pictures. Even today most producers feel that original, subtle, or clever music hurts a film.

While there are many differences in scoring techniques for sound and silent movies, there are similarities in philosophy and technique. Philosophically speaking, most modern

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

composers believe that scores are to be heard, consciously attended to, and not subconsciously suppressed. Elmer Bernstein (*The Man with the Golden Arm*) and Lawrence Rosenthal (*The Miracle Worker*) want no part of the kind of scoring that can't be noticed, of background noise. Particularly, Bernstein is impatient with the unobtrusive, the delicate, the small, or the innocuous. Alex North (*Cleopatra*, *Viva Zapata*) has the idea of the "dramatic visual instinct" with which he plays with the scene or against it, the former reinforcing the depicted mood and action, and the latter reflecting the real meaning of a scene when something in it is obscure or duplicitous.

Today's movie scorers have gotten away from the big orchestra sound; they are emphasizing small groups and individual, different, and interesting voices like harpsichords, zithers, etc. They have discovered that the results are just as good as if they had used a symphony orchestra. We can learn from them. You do not need a big wall of organ tone all through the picture. Use solo voices and small combinations, saving the heavier combinations for the big scenes. This applies particularly when we play films on small instruments. Whenever possible, contrasting styles should be used.

Most scorers detest the practice of writing an attractive pop tune for a love-theme, with the intention of making it a top-forty hit providing extra profits for the producers, but the practice is widespread. Organ scores should serve a dramatic function; if you want to sell a new tune, that's another function and you've created something that is a non-score. Richard R. Bennett (*Murder on the Orient Express*) thinks love-theme pop writing is a moronic approach to film music. Dimitri Tiomkin has written beautiful themes for years, but the new styles of composers like North, Bennett, Schifrin, Raksin, etc. are giving new answers to the question: what is our music supposed to do to the audience? Every organist has another question to answer for himself: shall we continue to create Mickey Mouse scores (David O. Selznick created the term) in which every cue on the screen is given its auditory reproduction, or shall we make our scores in something approaching symphonic

form?

Those interested in pursuing this subject must get a copy of Irving Bazelon's *Knowing the Score* (Van Nostrand-Reinhold Company, \$12.50) in which several of the ideas expressed above are discussed. Mr. Bazelon, like Bernard Hermann (*Psycho*) feels that film music is often part of the current ear pollution. He does not seem to care for the romantic style of composing (e.g. Tiomkin), but he enjoys innovative sounds and effects, with subtle relationships between scene and music, and more complicated forms. Despite his prejudices, his book should inspire those who want to improve their movie-playing.

It is fun listening to newcomers try their darndest to copy old-fashioned theatre organ style, whatever they think that was. In the early twenties we had the relatively new works of Ravel, Debussy, Grieg, and Rachmaninoff to draw upon. Such composers gave us interesting harmonies for new pop tunes and accompaniments. Since then there hasn't been much worth copying or adapting. This may be the prejudice of age, but we had all better remember that everybody has to move along with the times one way or another or get left. Steadily increasing audiences will prove that a correct formula is operating; shrinking ones warn us that something is not right, that what we are doing is obsolete, poorly done, or improperly promoted.

Our scoring and presentation need constant evaluation. One watchword in show business is *novelty*. We can't go on doing the same things forever. Although good music can help bad films, it takes a lot of bad music to hurt a good film. Good films inspire an organist to do his best, because their scenes are long enough for sustained musical development. With such films, scores can become worthy of permanent recording, but few scores reach that point. Those of us who have no opportunity to produce classic scores, particularly those of us whose work can be labeled no higher than mediocre, may take heart from Jerry Goldsmith (*Planet of the Apes*) who said that "No music has ever saved a bad picture, but a lot of good pictures have saved a lot of bad music." Thanks to the powers that be, good pictures have saved a lot of bad organists. □



## the letters to the editors

Letters to the Editor concerning all aspects of the theatre organ hobby are encouraged. Send them to the editor concerned. Unless it's stated clearly on the letter "not for publication," the editors feel free to reproduce it, in whole or part.

Address:

George Thompson  
Editor  
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Dear Sirs:

Recently, the NBC-TV Network presented its "50th Anniversary Party" purporting to present radio and TV broadcasting for the past fifty years — but not a mention of theatre organ or organists.

How could they fail to give credit to the people who not only presented daily concerts for several years, but also played background for practically all of the "soap operas?" These organists deserved at least a few minutes of recognition on the program.

I hope, as I did, that many organists and organ enthusiasts wrote a letter of protest to NBC. Such an oversight is unexcusable. It seems to be a common practice in presenting the "old days of radio" to disregard the contributions of the theatre organists.

Sincerely,  
Robert V. Longfield

Dear Mr. Thompson:

I am happy to respond to member Needler's request for financial statements to be published in THEATRE ORGAN. Personally, I would regret the inclusion of any more than a

small summary capsule — surely not the five pages required for the full rendition given to the National Board and Chapter Representatives annually.

We have elected a Board whose responsibilities include being our watchdog on fiscal matters, and I believe we should let them fulfill that role without heckling from the membership. There is today an increasing trend to carry "consumerism" too far, and it may come to the time when able candidates will be unwilling to serve on positions of leadership for fear of the harrassment which accompanies the office.

Although a Certified Public Accountant myself, I have no desire to receive detailed financial statements because I am quite happy with the bargain I receive for my \$15. It is a wonder to me that we can publish such a splendid magazine to a limited circulation for such a low cost, and when you add the cost of other administrative services necessary for an organization like ours, we surely get our money's worth. Let's get on with the enjoyment of the music.

Sincerely,  
John M. Gogle

Dear Mr. Thompson:

I am writing in response to your request for comment from members on the letter from Mr. Timothy Needler which appears in the Dec. 76-Jan. 77 issue of THEATRE ORGAN. I believe Mr. Needler's comments are well taken and I support the disclosure of financial information in the Society's journal. It is consistent with good accounting and business practices that any organization, regardless of size or tax status, prepare a detailed financial statement at least annually. This, of course, is a minimum requirement of

### EDITOR'S NOTE

A financial statement of National ATOS funds will be printed in the April-May issue of THEATRE ORGAN.