

# MORE PROBLEMS

by John Muri

Last year in the *New Yorker* somebody said that if you were serious about serious things, people would dislike you. You're supposed to be serious only about unimportant things. Oh, yeah? Then how are we ever going to get action on our perennial gripes? Take one problem that some of our members are having. Since they have pipe organs installed in their homes they never know when someone will be pounding on the door asking to come in and try the organ, without calling earlier to find out if the owners are busy. One fellow informs me that people come in without notice, plop themselves down at the organ and blare away for two hours. They don't care whether he wants to read, see TV, go out to the movies, or go to bed.

It is the same lack of consideration that prompts people to rush up to an organist before he has had a chance to leave the console for his intermission. They follow him to his dressing room and remain until it's time to return to the auditorium. Some groups brush off these conversation-ists by using a flying guard to escort the organist to his dressing room and stationing interference at his door. It ought always to be a standing rule: no visitors backstage. While we're on the subject, we must mention that a few of the newer organ auditoriums have no backstage dressing rooms. Some of the new-comer entrepreneurs (as well as some of the old-timers) are asking the organist to walk through the audience, out the lobby, and upstairs to a makeshift rest-room, with only cold water. That ought not to be!

Another problem is the bustling about of personnel before a show, back and forth in the auditorium, on and off the stage, with last minute pounding and yelling to the balcony and hasty re-arranging, done sometimes with a display of either desperation or considerable importance. A

quiet auditorium when an audience enters creates an aura of expectancy; arrangements made while the audience enters suggest confusion and uncertainty.

A related problem is the master of ceremonies who gets microphone-happy and talks too much. He helps wreck the aura by giving substantial commercial pitches about the society putting on the show and about the next concert, sounding something like this: "Folks, tonight's show is going to be great, but wait until you hear our artist next month!" That's a dandy morale builder for the soloist of the evening.

A real killer is the local organist who marches down to the console at the end before the soloist has left the auditorium, sits down, and starts doing his thing. In an instant he has destroyed any effect the soloist has created. Every group putting on concerts should make sure that the organ is turned off the instant the concert is over. It might be a good idea to pull the fuses.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: programming is a problem. If you're a soloist and have put together a good arrangement, work up something else like it as a substitute, because sure as shooting somebody is going to steal it and use it on his own programs. Very likely he will over-use it, so you'll have to write it off for keeps. One joke circulating among us is: "If you stop stealing my George Wright arrangements, I'll stop stealing your Buddy Cole arrangements."

I think soloists ought to respect each others' repertoires. They should not use pieces that they know someone else is using as a specialty, par-

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

ticularly a medley, a novelty, or an arrangement. One might play a given composition, like "Quiet Village"; Wright's recording has had a long run now, but one should still avoid being a copy-cat and use one's own registration, tempos, dynamics, and interpretations. It's time also that we play "I Love to Hear You Singing" in a version other than Crawford's.

The same goes for the Jig Fugue and the Prelude and Fugue in D minor, too. We've been having a rush or a rash of Bach lately, and I wonder if somebody isn't selling us a bad bill of goods. Bach is decidedly NOT theatre organ. It never was; organists playing that material would have been fired in a hurry. Bach at our concerts is a new phenomenon — an old composer sold in a new format dressed up in rhinestones. The Bach influence has been strictly AGO for many years. In the forties, *The Diapason* printed an annual list in March of the performance-frequency of organ music. A typical entry appeared in the 1948 issue. There were 2328 Bach performances contrasted with 434 of Handel, 319 of Franck, and 312 of Vierne. It is the same story in all the other years. There is a Bach cult, if not an obsession. Study the files over the years and see how often Virgil Fox has played "Come Sweet Death," "Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring" and the D minor pieces. You have to see it to believe it. It comes down to this: you can get away with playing the same stuff for forty years if you become part of a cult. Theatre organ buffs don't make up a cult yet. They haven't yet established a canon of repertory.

How do we develop it? I don't know. One of our staunch followers tells me that he sits down at the organ at home, looks around for a chord, and when he finds a good one holds on to it for a while. In 1943 a young lady went up to an organist in a saloon and asked him to play the theme of "Dad's Old-Fashioned Root Beer." Recently I heard an organ arrangement of the Mickey Mouse Club song. Of such stuff is our tradition made.

But we must not be too serious. After all, we must remember what the man said in *The New Yorker*. So let us quote from *The Diapason*, which in 1940 reported the manager

of a Kansas City (Mo.) chicken-house (population 10,000) saying that not only do chickens like pipe organ music, but that the music improves their egg-laying capacity. In 1938 we read (again *The Diapason*) about the installation of a small electric organ in a fine new home. A visitor asked the lady of the house whether she played; she said she didn't. The guest then asked if it was the children who were learning. She answered in the negative, but then she added, "But the Fuller Brush man comes in and plays quite often." Oh yes, Oscar, our tradition is growing by leaps and bounds. □



**JUST PLAYIN' JANE.** Jane McKee Johnson at the 3/17 Wurlitzer in Tacoma's (Wash.) "Pizza & Pipes." Angulus (stereo) No. WR-5144 \$5.95 postpaid from McKee Organ & Piano Center, 5915 6th Ave., Tacoma, Wash. 98406.

The USA's Pacific Northwest has always been an inspiring source of theatre organists — Oliver Wallace, Jesse Crawford, Don Simmons, Jonas Nordwall, "Ron and Don," and Dick Schrum, names which come immediately to mind, belong in a list which could go for pages. While many, in the past, sought their fortunes far away, others did their playing at home, as did Jane McKee Johnson, our "Playin' Jane." On hearing this recording, her initial disc release, we can't help asking — where has Jane McKee been all these years?

The instrument, too, has had a long career. Originally installed in the Fort Wayne (Indiana) Paramount in 1930 as either a style 235 or 240 (11 or 12 ranks), it came to Tacoma via Dallas. Along the way somewhere, it was enlarged to 17 ranks, the added pipes most likely being solo and color reeds. Whatever the changes were, the instrument, as recorded, exhibits none of the blatancy of the usual pizzery organ. Or perhaps its the organist who knows how to make it speak with warmth and tenderness, as she does during "Yellow Days." This selection alone is worth the price of the record. On some tunes she plays "pizza style" with all the noisemakers in evidence, but mainly she presents concert arrangements of the varied selections. Her one tango is pure "Valentino," the polka potpourri ("Whoop de Doo") is solid corn, and her marching band ("Under the Double Eagle") might be led by a guy named Sousa. Each tune is treated individually and delightfully, with much registration and mood variety. What we believe to be 2nd touch leakthroughs result in

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what seem to be unplanned "emphasis effects" which may have some shock effects but in no way mar the music. Jane's playing is always neat and accurate.

We are informed that most of the excellence of the Tacoma installation is due to the combined skills of Terry Hochmuth and Bill Carson, who set the organ up in a building especially designed to show it off to best advantage. They have succeeded admirably.

The other selections are "It Had to Be You," "Fiddle Fiddle," "Feelings," "The Nearness of You," "Music Makes Me," "Ecstasy Tango," "It's Impossible," "Don't Blame Me" (a beauty), "June is Bustin'



Jane McKee Johnson at the 3/17 Tacoma Wurlitzer. She plays the Sunday-Monday stint at "Pizza & Pipes."