

WHAT GOOD ARE CRITICS?

by John Muri

Musical criticism usually leaves something to be desired. When written by incompetents, it is empty and ridiculous. When written by competent, prejudice or even jealousy enters. Sadistic streaks appear in critics who think they can get away with their habit in public. For years in Chicago I read criticisms that were little more than attempts to display erudition and to curry favor. Most contemptible are the critics who pick on younger artists just breaking into the big time or upon some established performer whose reputation they think is not too big to attack. They carefully leave the giants alone, no matter how they perform.

Audiences are critical, too, but in their own way. They don't profess great musical knowledge, but they let you know what they like. Often they applaud wildly because they think it is the right thing to do, even if they would rather not make so much noise. How often do generous audiences applaud poor work!

At its worst, criticism can be all wrong. If John Barrymore's word can be taken, the London critics were all wrong when he played Hamlet. Barrymore said he was drunk and barely able to stand throughout the entire performance. The next day's reviews were marvelous in their praise. "Every one of my drunken staggers, my exits to vomit in the wings, my reeling into a chair to recite 'To be or not to be' were hailed as brilliant artistic interpretations . . . I've kept those notices as a reminder of the foolishness of fame — and the lunacy of life in general."

A devastating adverse criticism of a symphonic work appeared in a Detroit newspaper in 1975. The critic said that he could not find "words capable of expressing the hideous depravity" of the music. He took the audience severely to task. "Instead of chasing conductor and players off

the stage with boos and hisses . . . those unfortunate ones who genuinely enjoyed the work (perhaps five or six persons) clapped with fervor, the mindless sheep (comprising about half the audience) applauded politely, while the more sensible individuals sat in bewildered silence."

It's easy to sit back and say that somebody else's playing is bad. The possibility of hitting things just right and sustaining a perfect performance for an hour and a half is almost too much to hope for. Everybody has too many bad nights. Training helps, but that is not enough. Too many things can go wrong: temperature, barometric pressure, current world or local news, the state of one's health, worries, fatigue, etc. all make their contributions. Isn't it a wonder that fine or great performances are something to shout and dance about? Perfectionist critics can aim too high; carping critics are always nuisances.

Our own ATOS critics are uncommonly generous and kind; exceptions are few. Our journal usually contains rave reviews, like the following taken from only two issues: "spectacular display of musicianship", "accomplished to perfection," "nothing short of sensational", "superb in every way", "exquisite registration", "sheer delight", "magnificent performance", "incredibly talented", "superb registrations", "resounding success", "scintillating", "true professionalism." I have never read musical criticism as exuberant as this anywhere. Much of the time our critics don't care to tell the whole truth about a performance because they have had a hand in inviting the performer to play. They do

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

not feel it proper to speak in dispraise of someone they have engaged. In the early part of this century, stern criticism of organists and composers was in order. Examine some of the 1941 issues of *The Diapason*. Prominent composers like Sowerby, Copland, etc. got severe raps. The reviews of American performances by the German organist-composer Sigfrid Karg-Elert were gentle while he was in the States, but after he returned to Germany, they were very disparaging. Nineteenth century criticism was extremely caustic. Somebody has counted two hundred put-down phrases in the literature, like "cat music", "blasphemy", "vampire", "pest", "epidemic", "brainless phrases", "executioner of art", "festival convulsions," "rancid music," "tempest in a cuspidor," and "hell noise." It was harsh criticism, but it was also lively, forthright, and unmistakable.

The extremes of critical hatefulness opposed to extremes of generous praise must warn any concert organist not to take criticism at face value. One widespread superstition of our time is that bursts of applause and standing ovations are signs of legitimate appreciation that testify to the height of the performer's artistry. He must read between the lines for the truth which may or may not be there, but he should learn early in his career to detect incompetent critics, flatterers, and laudatory gushers.

It is not wise to underestimate the extent of an audience's musical knowledge or appreciation, although there are a few communities in which a low grade of music is desired. (By "low grade" is meant loud, jazzy, rock-style with excessive dynamics.) But there are others. It isn't quite true that the untrained listener prefers junk music. Give him a chance (several revealing questionnaires have been offered audiences over the past fifty years) and he will give you some surprisingly mature musical choices. For one thing, the ordinary theatre audience-listener likes to hear a tune, a melody. He is not much interested in esoteric harmonies, in contrapuntal developments, or in fugal improvisations. Theatre organ, which appeals to all ages, is irrevocably linked to melody.

Does criticism have any good use? One critic in a 1931 issue of *The*

Golden Book (his name was Frankenstein, by the way) said that the only useful criticism is that of recordings and motion pictures, because the performances may be repeatedly studied after the criticism is read. Criticisms of concerts, etc. are time-wasting and useless because they come after the fact. I think they help build or destroy reputations; in that, they are dangerous.

Critics are everywhere; not all of them get into print. There is the Canadian organist who said in 1942, "Any fool and an organ can produce a large and imposing noise." A New Orleans church in the same year advertised for an organist, saying "Musicianship is desirable." That job couldn't have been too tough. One writer said that an organist's playing drove him to drink. That's not a bad recommendation for an organist willing to play in a saloon.

Come to think of it, our modern eateries might advertise: "Franck with your frankfurters, Bach with your beer (Bach beer?) and Puccini with your pizza" (played pizzicato, of course). The organist must be capable of including thirst.

Seriously, we have to do the best we can. To me, the one great and enlightening moment in Leonard Bernstein's "Mass" comes just after the priest has torn off his robes and sunk into despair at the degeneracy, ridicule, and criticism of his people. He feels he cannot communicate God's messages. After a moment of deep silence, a flute call and a plaintive song of praise by a child are heard. It is then that the priest (and we) rise above earthly criticism. Then we hear the transcendental voices again. The prayers and the songs were not useless. In our best playing, we hear the eternal voices. □

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION
(Required by P.S.I.C. 106)

1. TITLE OF PUBLICATION: Theatre Organ
2. NUMBER OF ISSUES: 6
3. DATE OF FIRST ISSUE: 10/1/77
4. DATE OF THIS STATEMENT: 10/1/77
5. LOCATION OF HEADQUARTERS OR GENERAL BUSINESS OFFICES: 1212 1/2 E. 10th St., Vancouver, B.C. V6L 1A1
6. LOCATION OF THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLISHER: 1212 1/2 E. 10th St., Vancouver, B.C. V6L 1A1
7. NAME AND ADDRESS OF THE PUBLISHER: Reginald Foort, 1212 1/2 E. 10th St., Vancouver, B.C. V6L 1A1
8. NAME AND ADDRESS OF THE EDITOR: Reginald Foort, 1212 1/2 E. 10th St., Vancouver, B.C. V6L 1A1
9. NAME AND ADDRESS OF THE BUSINESS MANAGER: Reginald Foort, 1212 1/2 E. 10th St., Vancouver, B.C. V6L 1A1
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Reginald Foort to Play Farewell Concert in Vancouver

On November 12 and 13, Reginald Foort will play the opening organ concerts on the Style 240 Wurlitzer Opus 1746 at the Vancouver Orpheum.

As Mr. Foort plays the first chord, two events will simultaneously occur. First, the music will herald the climax of a great career. Secondly, it will be the opening organ concert at the refurbished Vancouver Orpheum. Each event is a complete story, therefore, the combination should prove to be a top theatre organ gala for 1977.

Reginald Foort began his career cueing silent films in England. The story of his famous traveling Moller (THEATRE ORGAN, October, 1973) is a saga of imagination and skill.

Mr. Foort has received honors wherever he chose to perform, and has held some of the most coveted posts for entertainment organists. The list covers most of the important theatre organs in England, the Times Square Paramount, the Century II Wichita (present location of New York Paramount organ) and very recently he again played the "traveling" Moller which has now found its way to Spaghetti & Pizza Pavilion

in San Diego.

It seems appropriate that he began his career in England and has chosen to play his farewell in British Columbia, a portion of the British Empire half way around the world from where he started.

The Vancouver Orpheum has been renovated for the purpose of being a concert hall and home of the Vancouver Symphony. (See THEATRE ORGAN, December, 1974). The organ was saved in the process, although the stage was enlarged and covered the pit. A special canopy was built which allows the console to be raised for recitals. The instrument has been thoroughly renovated by a volunteer crew, most being ATOS members. It is reported to be in tip top shape and because of excellent acoustics it sounds far larger than its actual size.

Mr. Herbert McDonald of Vancouver has been selected to arrange for organ recitals, at least four per year, and his mission, as he sees it, is to provide for top grade talent to insure good public response and to perpetuate the theatre organ as a form of musical art.

The Foort farewell concerts are being held immediately following

one of Canada's most important holidays (Armistice Day, November 11) which will mean that Vancouver will be in holiday spirit for the weekend and anyone planning to attend should make flight and hotel arrangements early. Since the city is an important West Coast metropolis, it is well served by major airlines and most major hotel chains are represented.

Tickets for each concert will be priced at \$4.50, \$5.50 and \$6.50. Mr. Foort will play completely different programs at each concert, therefore, many will probably want tickets for both. Tickets may be obtained by mailing requests to:

Vancouver Ticket Centre Ltd.
630 Hamilton Street
Vancouver, British Columbia

Be sure to add 50 cents for mailing charges.

Producer of the Wurlitzer concerts at Vancouver's Orpheum is Herbert L. McDonald, 1070 Grove-land Road, West Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, V7S 1Z4 (Telephone (604) 922-5600), who says he welcomes presentations from organ concert artists. Publicity portrait, background, reviews and a recording should be included if possible. □