

# SILENT MOVIES WEREN'T SILENT

by John Muri

While the custom of revealing the inside workings of theatre organs (the "organ crawl") began in this country in the sixties, it is essentially an adaptation of an old Japanese custom in the showing of silent films. The Nipponese had a unique film figure called the benshi, or narrator. Often he was a local star greater than any of those on the screen. His job was to explain and interpret the film; not only that, he explained how the film was projected. At least one theatre owner placed the projectors on the right side of the stage and projected upon a screen to the left. The Japanese thought the mechanics of the operation were as much a part of the show as the film, and they wanted to see the projection machinery in operation. In the tradition of the kabuki, the benshi explained and dramatized with sound effects and dialogue. In their book *The Japanese Film*, Anderson and Ritchie state that the benshi was "practically the Japanese version of the cinema organ, holding in reserve a repertoire of noises which would unquestionably have embarrassed a Wurlitzer." One very bad film had a scene of a sinking submarine clearly a tin model sinking in a bathtub. Bubbles and dreadful gurglings highlighted "a symphony of aquatic noises interspersed with fiendish screams which suggested all to realistically the agony of dying men." I am not recommending that enterprising theatre organists introduce such techniques into their silent-film performances. All it shows is that there are different customs in the presentation of theatrical realism.

Actually, there were almost never any silent films. Practically all of them were intended to have musical accompaniment, from a single piano to a symphony orchestra and a great pipe organ. Then, too, children's matinees were anything but silent. You were expected to be quiet during performances, except on Satur-

day afternoons, when the kids took over. Sunday afternoon was noisy too, if there were enough kids present. They cheered the hero, booed the villain, screamed during the chases, kissed their elbows when the hero kissed the girl, and stamped and howled when the film broke. Sam Levenson says that during love scenes everybody went to the bathroom. A blind man could follow all the action by just listening to the kids. I remember vividly the outcries of "That's my seat!", "Gimme back my candy!" or gentilities like "It stinks in here!"

Playing for very young children is a joy. I remember two shows at the Indianapolis Rivoli Theatre for 1200 elementary school children, most of whom had never heard a theatre pipe organ. This called for a demonstration of organ stops and effects, with the usual exhibition of Clarinet, Trumpet, Kinura, etc. (In this case it was warranted; for today's theatre organ shows, the organ demonstration is old-hat). There were imitations of ducks, pigs, and other barnyard noises. Then the organist said he could make more noise than all the kids could — all put together. After that, there was a little Grieg, with music from *Song of Norway*. The music supervisors liked that. An old Keystone comedy had the kids screaming with laughter in a way that one doesn't hear from audiences. What beautiful, innocent laughter! After a few tinkly pieces and a patriotic march, the youngsters went back to their school to draw pictures about the event and write letters. The school authorities were pleased, and the Rivoli management received letters of appreciation. One thing remains to be said: those shows were anything but silent. We need

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

to do more of this kind of thing in order to reach the youngsters who don't know that we're alive. If we give them some good shows, they may be better equipped to demand something worth while when they get older.

What about the organs? Aside from the music they made, they weren't particularly quiet either. The piston-noises of some of our theatre organs were enough to keep anyone from claiming that any movie was "silent." The "ka-thump" of those good old Wurlitzer pistons made everyone in the theatre aware that somebody was at the console, even if the music didn't. Wurlitzers made the most noise; Kimballs probably made the least. Somehow, everybody liked the Wurlitzer ka-thump. It sounded as if the organist meant business.

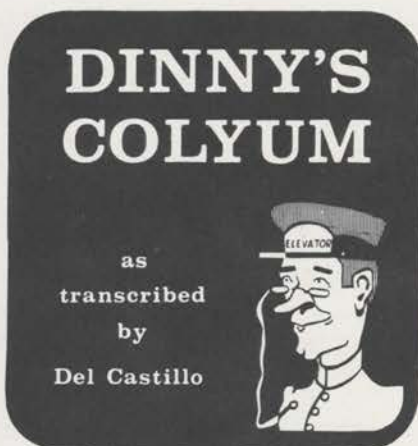
Then there were the too-loud organs, usually small ones in small theatres, equipped with overbearing Diapasons, shrilling Tubas, too-thick Flutes, and gurgling Voxes in chambers with shutters that slammed shut with a crash. Starting up an organ in 1920 could result in an unholy series of squawks, beeps, and burps as the chests filled with air. Some tremulants could be heard all over the theatre the moment they were turned on. There were usually two in the smaller organs, but they were real shakers. Even the organ grilles and the plaster trembled to their convulsions.

Noisy backstage or projection-booth conversation was prohibited. It was understood that no professional would disturb an audience. Mothers with crying babies were requested to take the children to the lobby. Occasionally an employee would get out of line. In one theatre the janitor got drunk regularly, and he would then go up to the picture booth and start cursing the lady-manager of the theatre. One night his timing was wrong. I had just stopped playing and was going out for a rest period. The janitor was delivering his loud and uncomplimentary descriptions of the lady to the projectionist. It was all heard down in the auditorium where the lady was watching the movie. She sprinted up to the booth, made her own loud remarks, and fired the mouthy offender. The next day she hired him back.



Audience conversation and commotion by adults were always present. It has never ceased. You can hardly see and listen to a film today unless you sit in your own car at a drive-in. In the old days, some people would read the sub-titles out loud, particularly for the illiterates in their families; sometimes they did it just for fun or because they became emotionally involved in the film. During boring scenes, kids would drop popcorn and bags filled with water from the balcony. There was always a certain amount of destructiveness on the part of younger theatre-goers. Broken and slashed seats have always been, and are, perennial.

The only really silent film I ever heard about was a two-minute segment in a 1924 British film *Reveille*, in which the two-minute pause of respect on Armistice Day was represented in a score that directed complete silence by the organist and orchestra. The effect was emotionally overwhelming. It was a truly silent film for one-hundred and twenty seconds. The French sound-film *Rififi* had a long half-hour sequence without a word of dialogue. It was a bank robbery scene. There were only subdued sounds, no music. Outside of these, and perhaps a few others like them, movie theatres showing "silents" were anything but silent. □



Now is the time of the year when us ritters has to rite about the Xmas season and Santy Claws and presents and Jingle Bells and all like that there. And all the stores they start doin a lot of advertisin in October about Do Your Xmas Shoppin Early and they have a lot of Xmas decerations and the windows all fixed up

speshal and then they got canned music with Xmas Karols and they got big ads in the papers and if you aint enspired to get out and start buyin stuff for Xmas why you just aint with it to coin a phrase. And then they is a lot of speshal concerts with the big choruses singin Handels Messiah and the Ballet Companey doin the Nutcracker Sweet and Santy Klawses at all the street corners ringin little bells sos you will give them your loose change.

I spose maybe they was a time in the past when they was a real Sperit of Xmas as you mite say, but I guess it must have been before my time because the only Sperit of Xmas I ever seen was everybody in a hurry and gettin impashent if youre in the way and lookin kind of worrit because they is so many people and evrythin costs so much and then on all the vacant lots they is Xmas trees that dont look like the Xmas trees I use to see because they is all colors like pink and white and purple and I guess they never heard of Mother Nature Knows Best.

So I thought well everybody else is talkin about Xmas and mostly they is sayin the same things they say every year so why dont I shut up about Xmas and talk about sumthin else. I spose the subjeck that is the furthest away from Xmas would be the Forth of July so I will talk about that instead. Of course I aint really any better off because every July all us ritters says the same thing about the Sperit of Independents and the Liberty Bell and the Sperit of the Revolushun and Yankee Doodle which goes with July the Forth the same as Jingle Bells goes with Dec. the 25th, but anyways I will be talkin about sumthin the rest of the ritters aint talkin about.

Back in Boston where I grew up we had a kind of a double barrel as you mite say because we didnt get only the Forth of July but we had a kind of rehearsal of it on April the 17th which was the Battle of Bunker Hill. I think they called it Patriarts Day to distingwich it from Independents Day but it turned out like it was about the same thing with the perades and the bands and stayin up all nite to have bon Fiers. I dunno whether they still have it on acct I aint been back there on one of them holidays, and anyways they keep changin the dates on all the holidays

so as they can come on weak ends. Come to think of it semms to me I read somewheres that Patriarts Day is on a Monday. I even got to makin a speshul trip to the Liberry to have somebody look up holidays on acct they got a speshul department in the Los Angeles Liberry where they look up anythin for you and you would be serprised at how many holidays we got. Of course evrybody knows about Thanksgivin and Xmas and Labor Day and Noo Years Day, and then they is not only Washingtons Birthday and Lincolns Birthday but in Texas they is Johnsons Birthday and Huey Longs Birthday in Louisiana and of course they is Robert E. Lees Birthday in the South.

I dunno about other countreys but we are certainly hipped on patriartic holidays. I spose every country probily does the same thing but we got not only Independents Day on the Forth of July and Patriarts Day in Noo England on the 15th of April and then we got Flag Day and Memorial Day and Veterans Day and Arm Forces Day and Loyalty Day. Betcha you never knew about that. The Congress they made it on the 1st of May but it dont seem like people pay much attenshun to it.

And I aint through yet. We Got Mothers Day, and so on top of that we have to have Fathers Day. And on top of that we got Forefathers Day. And then we got Arbor Day and Fast Day and Prayer Day and Bird Day and Child Health Day and Ground Hog Day and Halloeen and Aviation Day and Valentines Day. Want some more? How about Susan Anthony and Will Rogers and the Wright Brothers and Gen. MacArthur and Sadie Hawkins and Gen. Pulaski and Gen. von Steuben and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frances Willard whoever they are. They all got Days. Looks like everybody got a Day for theirselves except Jesse Crawford and Dinny Timmins. How about that? □

