

"SINS, NEGLIGENCES, AND IGNORANCES"

by John Muri

The pipe organ is generally a mystery to non-musicians, but such people have not let their ignorance deter them from making strong comments about the instrument. What can we charitably say about an individual who persists in referring to "the suppression pedal?" What was Jean Shepherd thinking when he wrote in his book *In God We Trust* of "some monster, manic pipe organ?" Who can seriously contemplate what horror-story writer H.P. Lovecraft meant when he wrote about "the croaking of a cracked bass organ," a "blasphemous organ" and "a demon organ" in his story *The Horror at Red Hook*? It is tonic and bracing to turn to Robert Browning, who speaks with some musical knowledge of "the C-major of this life."

We have to be tolerant of those who can't abide theatre organ music. It was Edith Sitwell, the English poetic genius, who wrote to a friend in December 1939: "I can't think what I am doing at the moment, as Mr. Sandy Macpherson is making that horrid cow-like noise on the BBC organ." Five years later, when her radio had broken down, she complained that "It never breaks down when . . . Mr. Sandy Macpherson is oozing out warm treacle." Basil Wright, in his book *The Long View* speaks belittlingly of "Wurlitzer-saturated picture palaces."

What can we say when a prospective student asks to be taught at reduced rates because he wants to learn only how to use "the floor-board" or when one asks what "those slats on the floor" are for? How do you talk to someone who believes that one of our famous classical organists plays with such virtuosity that attendants have to water down the hot chests and pipes with hoses after one of his performances?

Some years ago, the Carthay Circle people in Los Angeles retained a

lease on a vacant theatre by having the janitor sing one piece, accompanied by an organist, to a stooge-audience of one, who paid a dime to get in once every thirteen days. At the first show, the janitor quit singing half-way through his number saying that he was a good janitor and a better singer, but that the organist was lousy on "the groan box." He refused to sing again unless a better organist was supplied. Like him, everybody thinks that one's own criticism is important.

That being the case, I'll do a little risky criticking of my own. I have always found it necessary to study the meanings of song-lyrics, particularly modern ones, whose double-meanings could get me in trouble if I used them on song-slides. I bristle at the stupidity and grammatical ignorance of the kind of guy who would sing the words of "I Don't Know Why I Love You Like I Do; I Don't Know Why, I Just Do." He is implying that there's nothing attractive that he can see in the girl. Is it any wonder that she "never seems to want my romancing" — romancing made up of insults? That boy is lucky if she ever gives one dance to a character like him.

Then there is the musical incongruity of a tune like "Somebody Stole My Gal." It is a song of grief and lament. But how is it written, and how do we play it? Full speed ahead. Singers usually belt out the words. Its melody line demands that it be performed lustily and happily, even though the words are those of a grief-stricken lover. It is schizophrenic.

One has only to give a little thought to the tunes "Old Man River," "Tea for Two," "The Impossible Dream," "I Believe," and "I

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Want To Be Happy" to realize that every one of them consists of monotonously repeated musical figures. "Old Man River" is famous for its lyrics, not its music.

You don't agree? Then read Alec Wilder's book *American Popular Song*, pages 55 and 56. "I Believe" is nothing but an ascending major scale, with a little shake here and there. Its lyrics can't offend anybody, but is there anything to believe in them when they don't make sense? Is it really true that for every drop that falls, a flower grows? What kind of science is this? The song commits itself to no transcendental or earthly faith. "The Impossible Dream" is full of contradictions and paradoxes. You simply can't beat an unbeatable foe. The irresistible can never be resisted.

Then there is the matter of taste. Ben Hecht reports that the first session of the United Nations at San Francisco was not permitted to open with music by any composer like Tchaikovski, Sibelius, Chopin, or Beethoven — too nationalistic. You know what the music was? Hold on now: it was "Lover, Come Back to Me." For more rubbish, listen to the PBS TV networks theme music for that excellent show *Washington Week in Review*. It is a mess of electronic gibbering, wind-whistling, and woodpecker-tapping, suggesting that the fine commentators on the show are no more than wooden-headed windbags, if you'll pardon the mixed metaphor. On an October 13th a few years ago (on *The Philadelphia Report*, TV Channel 3) I witnessed with hilarity a group of politicians sitting high in a bank of electronically-created clouds. The idea was pretty good, but I'm sure it was accidental.

I am quite suspicious of the large amounts of ineptness and double-talk in our media. Among other things, somebody must have a very low regard for the brains of American audiences. Mick Jagger summed it up nicely when he allegedly said in 1964: "Dumb American birds digging dirty rock stars. That's what they wanted and that's what we gave them . . . we're giving the stupid birds what they want so why shouldn't they pay for it?"

We hear a lot about the necessity to clean up physical pollution, but

we hear very little about mental pollution of the kind detailed above. The evil shows itself in at least eight ways:

1. Mental laziness that fosters vagueness, cuteness, and half-truths.
2. Willingness to take less than the best. This is at its worst when people get cynical enough to accept inferiority without complaint.
3. Unwillingness to express displeasure with inferiority because of timidity and an over-developed idea of good manners.
4. Ignorance of the values of self-control.
5. Obsession with bigness and money, even though efficiency and quality drop.
6. Willingness to hurt one's self rather than give up a vicious practice.
7. Indifference to the spiritual needs of others.
8. Vulgarity and exhibitionism producing "Superstars" in an entertainment world without real stars.

The title of this piece is a quotation from the Litany of "The Common Book of Prayer." I thought of it in my reactions to stories told me by friends and to books I have read. The German poet Schiller once wrote, "With stupidity the gods themselves struggle in vain." Can we whip it? I wonder.

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SPECTACULAR SOUNDS: ASHLEY MILLER AT THE ORGAN OF THE RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL. Allen GA-1090 (stereo). Available by mail from Milco Music, Box 32, Closter, New Jersey 07624. \$6.50 postpaid.

Here's a treasure which escaped us during its initial distribution. Released by a small label circa 1960, its distribution was limited. This re-release is a multiple plus, one because it has been remastered to include its full frequency range. Says Ashley Miller: "I'm very happy with the results of the remastering, as well as the musical content." He has considerable reason to rejoice.

First, the technical end is exceptional, especially the miking. The RCMH organ is not an easy one to record. Besides being located in a block-wide "barn," there are four chambers to pick up, plus some unenclosed percussions. It would be very easy to settle for an "average" pickup, but luckily the uncredited original recorder was adept at taping the quiet, intimate passages as well as the massive ones. Therefore the

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subtleties are retained, a point very important to the Miller arrangements and interpretations. There have been other recordings of this 4-manual, 58-rank instrument, but we believe the miking here is far better than even Ashley's Columbia label releases.

The program consists of: "Slaughter on 10th Avenue," "Blue Moon," "Masquerade," "La Vie en Rose," "Granada," "It's De-Lovely," "September Song," "Vanessa," "Reflections in the Water," and "Ritual Fire Dance" (DeFalla).

True, "Fire Dance," "Granada" and "Slaughter" have perhaps been added to the "overdone" list since this recording was made, but the freshly different Miller interpretations maintain interest throughout. Or, strike these selections and it's still a topnotch program.

The arrangements, abetted by fine shading and skilful instrumentation, often seem to soar.



Ashley Miller

A few highlights: the telling use of "emphasis" brass during "Slaughter"; the color reeds and counter melodies of "Blue Moon"; the "Chopinesque" interpolations heard during "Masquerade," as well as the "opposing" harmonic ornamentation; the bull fight music superimposed on "Granada"; the old RCMH intermission "one-two" applied to "De-Lovely"; the reflective and nostalgic inferences which make the mostly understated "September Song" so dramatically meaningful (those Tibias never sounded sweeter); the chromatic opposites countering the melody of "Reflections," as well