

FORGOTTEN MELODIES

by John Muri

In a 1923 article, Chicago organist D. Kenneth Widenor gently criticized Jesse Crawford for continually improvising during picture accompaniments. Crawford often played new popular tunes during serious films, and the cause may have been that he was trying to memorize the pop material for solo use later. Widenor complimented him for invariably playing solos from memory. Others of us, the small timers, would play many hours a day, during which steady improvising would have been deadly. I know of no movie organist who did not possess a large musical library; the hours passed much faster at the console when one played legitimate music.

Since we are no longer asked to do marathon stretches, there is little or no need to know large amounts of good music. Consequently, there now exists a huge library of good material that no one plays. Part of the blame rests upon television and radio programmers, whose formats have become so rigid that little more than background noise is needed for anything other than shows like the *Boston Pops*, *Lawrence Welk*, and the like. FM stations get somewhat monotonous with their over-play of old musical comedy material, but most AM music is beneath contempt.

There was a standard repertory of material that every theatre organist needed to know. It fell clearly into nationalistic categories and mood groups. One had to have a few marches for newsreels, some light, capricious material of the sort available in the fine Schirmer Library of Musical Classics, some catastrophe music, and an ample quantity of romantic pieces. Operatic selections (mostly from *Carmen*, *Faust*, *Trovatore*, and *Aida*) were staples. Victor Herbert's music ("Gypsy Love Song," "Kiss Me Again," "Ah Sweet Mystery") was very popular. Everybody

played Rudolf Friml. Wherever you went, you could hear "Allah's Holiday," "Giannina Mia," "Rose Marie," and "Sympathy." His numerous suites were standards for both theatre orchestras and organists. Fine waltzes like Linck's "Spring, Beautiful Spring" and Waldteufel's "Skater's Waltz" were backgrounds for travel films, as were Edvard Grieg's shorter pieces, particularly the first Peer Gynt suite. The part of it called "Morning" was so overworked that orchestras used it for ridicule and comic effects. The list of ballads was interminable. One had to know dozens of songs like "Roses of Picardy," "Song of Songs," "On the Road to Mandalay," "Oh Promise Me" and "Because" for sentimental scenes. Offenbach's "Apache Dance" was needed so frequently that it would be a disgrace not to know it.

There were many fine album collections. Very good material was to be found in *Piano Pieces the Whole World Plays* and in Erno Rapee's 1924 volume, *Motion Picture Moods*. The latter volume, together with M.L. Lake's "Mammoth Orchestra Collection: Songs of the World," provided all the nationalistic material likely to be needed. The numerous Sam Fox Orchestra Folios included pieces that everyone had to play, like "Japanese Sunset," "Sparklets," and the unsinkable "Nola."

Classical material made successful solo work in many theatres, depending upon the cultural make-up of the community. Jesse Crawford used classics like Tchaikowsky's "March Slav" and Massenet's "Meditation" whenever he felt that the current

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week's popular output wasn't worth playing in the spotlight. Bach, Vierne, Guilmant, etc. were out, however, as being too heavy or distasteful to theatre audiences, or too hard to play on small organs.

Operatic repertory was limited to a few works, because there was no popular radio before 1924 and no television before 1947. The prestigious Victor Red Seal Records, featuring the best-selling Enrico Caruso, Amelita Galli-Curci, and Luisa Tetrazzini (among others) made Donizetti's sextet from *Lucia* and Verdi's *Rigoletto* quartet so well known that organists could successfully play the transcriptions as solos for audiences that ordinarily did not care for classical music. Victor artists like Fritz Kreisler made their own recorded compositions famous, so that organists could transcribe "Liebesfreud" or "Caprice Viennois" to good response. Kreisler wasn't above recording pop tunes like "On Miami Shore," "Indian Love Call," "Deep in My Heart," and "Songs My Mother Taught Me."

A strange phenomenon was the widespread use of Ponchielli's "Dance of the Hours." It is not an easy piece to play, but the more unskilled the organists were, the more often they tried to play the piece (and mangle it.) There was a high correlation: the worse the organist was, the more he liked to attack the "Dance of the Hours." You categorized yourself by playing it.

There are hundreds of fine popular compositions that have gone unplayed for years. Many were the top tunes of their day. "Leave Me with a Smile" was an enormously popular hit in 1918. "Some Sunny Day" was a top tune on what would have been called the hit parade of 1924; it was played to death on the crystal-radio sets that were burgeoning all over the country. Chicago station KYW was on the air only one hour a night, from 8 to 9, and "Some Sunny Day" was played on it every night for a time. Few people today know of its existence. Walter Donaldson's "Changes," Mack Gordon's "There's a Lull in My Life," Louis Alter's "My Kinda Love" — all are too good to forget.

There is little valid excuse for performing repetitions of too-familiar material. A few years ago, organists went on a binge playing "Raindrops

Falling on My Head." It got so monotonous that one theatre organ club requested organists not to schedule the tune on their programs. It would be of benefit to everyone, players and listeners alike, if lists of selections played (instead of subjective reviews) were printed in our publication in the way that *The Diapason* did with classical programs for years. Performers could learn therefrom what they should refrain from playing in the interests of freshness and variety. Prospective employers could learn a great deal more about players by studying their programs than they would from reviews too often expressed only in exuberant general terms. It might not stop some determined players from beating old musical horses to death, but it might make others give more serious thought to programming.

It is everyone's loss that much great and not-so-great music is no longer played. Theatre music was mostly second or third-rated material, but it pointed the way to more extended and better things. The pop music of the theatre age was of relatively high quality because the other music that was played in profusion was respectable, even if not of the highest quality. Today's pop music is what it is because there is little else with which to compare it. It illustrates again a truism that is now a cliché: if we neglect something, it will deteriorate. A legion of forgotten melodies could bear revival. □

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THEATRE ORGAN
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The Significance of the Mightiest Wurlitzer

When The Wurlitzer Company announced the construction of a theatre organ for their new corporate headquarters, theatre organ enthusiasts sensed something significant was happening. Indeed, the excitement has generated almost as many rumors as questions. Still, two questions remain unanswered. How significant is this instrument? And why is it being built at this time?

The answer to both questions lies in the history of The Wurlitzer Company. The Company can point to a long list of pioneering achievements in the American music industry. For example, Rudolph Wurlitzer was one of the first to streamline the distribution of musical instruments from manufacturer to customer, thus making music affordable to all Americans. At the turn of the century, the Wurlitzer Tonophone, which made automatic music at the drop of a coin, won a Gold Medal at the Pan American Exposition. We all know about Wurlitzer's leadership in theatre organ design and construction. Wurlitzer juke boxes set the style for public music from the thirties right through the sixties. And today, Wurlitzer is one of the world's leading manufacturers of

Huge cables snake out of the wall and into the orchestral chamber of The Mightiest Wurlitzer. Over 342 miles of wire have been laid to connect the console with relays, boards and chests.

