

# OUR NATIONAL MUSIC

by John Muri

Regularly, for twenty-four years I played "The Star Spangled Banner" in a five-thousand-seat sports arena before basketball games and other more or less human events. The crowds of young people were usually decently respectful during the playing, but the middle-aged and older people, particularly those attending wrestling matches, were noisy and talkative. There is nothing new or startling in the thought that there has long been apathy about — and vague dissatisfaction with — our national song and anthem. The music is not particularly inspiring, and it is difficult to sing. Even lowering its key from B flat to A flat has not helped.

The piece suffers particularly from its lyrics. I used to ask high school and university students to tell me in their own words what the first stanza says. Rarely did they succeed, because they didn't visualize the pictures that the words create. The trouble with the first stanza is its indecisiveness and insecurity. The speaker asks, "Does the flag still wave?" He isn't sure, and he's worried because he can't see through the morning mists. The third stanza gloats in hateful triumph ("their blood has wiped out their foul footsteps' pollution.") Neither one deals with matters of present concern. Neither expresses a national philosophy or policy, and their subject-matter, other than the prayer of the fourth stanza, is outdated.

"America," a fine tune, suffers by being a borrowing and a re-setting of "God Save the King." The British connotation is too strong for the music to be adopted as our national anthem. That is unfortunate, for the song is dignified and easy to sing.

What seems to have been an act of desperation, the nation pounced upon a 1918 song by Irving Berlin, rewritten in the thirties after he had

allegedly rejected it, titled it "God Bless America" and elevated it to high acceptance as national music. The words are cliché-ridden: "light that shines down from above," "oceans white with foam," and "my home sweet home" ring no bells as poetry.

"America the Beautiful" is the best of the well-known songs. Its images are clear and impressive. Its prayers for God's blessing and for brotherhood "from sea to shining sea" are moving and sincere. The poem is fervent and devotional, but it falters, like "The Star Spangled Banner," in the obsolescence of its images. It is no longer true that "alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears." The cities are too dirty and polluted to be called "alabaster," and the urban bee-hives are full of the tears of poverty, violence, and corruption.

There is little that one can say in praise of modern patriotic music. Musical settings of quotations from Abraham Lincoln have usually been expressed in such dissonances that listeners find them uninspiring. Aaron Copland's "American Portrait" (of Lincoln) has always left me cold; parts of it are downright ugly. Whatever basic simplicity and dignity there is to be found in the human condition (or in great men, for that matter) can be properly expressed in simple, dignified musical terms, not in elaborate polyphony or dissonance. Phony emotions stand out prominently in much current patriotic music, as in "This Is My Country," a banal choral piece with whole octave jumps, trite figures, and awkward accents. In all my experience, I have never seen an audience moved by it. Part of its trouble

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

lies in the words, which lack fervency and conviction. Another weak one is Sigmund Romberg's "Your Land and My Land," which is now mercifully almost forgotten.

Since we now have "The Star Spangled Banner" and will probably be playing it for a considerable time to come, we should do the best job on it of which we are capable. The piece should be played briskly as a token of our national vigor. Careful attention to the dotted-eighth and the sixteenth notes will help in creating the effect. The words of the first stanza give clues to interpretation. "Whose broad stripes" should be played broadly, almost rubato. "The rockets' red glare" may be followed by a cymbal crash on the following beat, as should "the bombs' bursting in air." The last sentence should be played *maestoso*, with a moment of silence after the words "land of the free." In this piece, as in all others, we do well to follow the principle of "the sound must be an echo of the sense."

We need a national anthem that will humbly represent decent aspirations, worthy faiths and commitments. To create this in words that are not clichés or that are not too high-flown for credibility require more skillful hands than those of amateurs. We need a prayer for deliverance from two kinds of evil: those our enemies create, and those which we create ourselves. It ought to pray for moderation, honor, and justice. A composition calling for dignity and integrity will not be written in strains of cacophony.

Detractors of nationalistic patriotic expression have pointed out a couple of its dangers: (1) the possibility of carrying chauvinism too far with resultant arrogance, foolishness, or tyranny, and (2) the exploitation of patriotism for commercial interest. Vaudevillians and some organists have been known to wrap themselves in the flag (one way or another) to get applause. But there is another danger: the danger of becoming so sceptical of our national and social heritage that we throw away our good feelings with the bad. For the organist, the middle ground between the two extremes is a narrow one, but it is one he will do well to keep. One of these days — not too far off, I hope — some new composer will, in a moment of inspiration,

produce a work that will provide a rallying-call for national feeling and an inspirational philosophy for a great nation. I dare hope that it will be moving, both when sung or played as an instrumental solo, particularly on the organ. □

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON THE TECHNICAL SIDE

by Lance Johnson

Do you have any questions?

Send them direct to:

QUIZ MASTER  
And Organ Builder

LANCE JOHNSON  
Box 1228  
Fargo, ND 58102

**Q.** I have a four-rank unit Kimball organ. In order to get a greater variety of stops, I disconnected the string stop wires from the unit chest and wired them to a four-rank vent straight chest. I would now like to add still another set of pipes. Can I just add the disconnected unit chest to the vent chest and somehow energize the new stop by using the ground wire as the vehicle? Will the use of two magnets simultaneously per note cause any problems?

**A.** I assume you mean to divide your chest wires from the console so one runs to the vent chest and the other to the unit chest. I don't see that this would overload your contacts. In order to shut off the unit chest, you will either have to break the cable with a gang switch, or run your cable right into the unit chest

and install diodes between the chest magnets and negative common. You will then need a relay for the stop action which would have the primary holding coil wired to the stop key and the secondary wired to the negative common. I would suggest a 12 v. DC Potter-Brumfield relay which would be available at most wholesale electronic outlets.

**Q.** Since my organ is in a basement, I have a height problem. If I were to cut an 8-foot pipe in half and put a cap on it, would I get an 8-foot sound? I tried putting a cap on a 4-foot pipe and it refused to speak.

**A.** I do not recommend cutting any pipes in half. Halving the length of an open pipe by the use of a cap will drastically alter the tonal character of that pipe. The pipe will become a quintedena in that it will have a very pronounced twelfth tone speaking with the fundamental tone. My recommendation would be to remount the longer pipes and tube them off their respective chests. Use Orgafelx which is available at a modest cost from Durst Organ Supply, Erie, PA.

**Q.** At present we are rebuilding a 3/10 Wurlitzer in the south of England. On this organ we are putting the bass off-note chests on separate untremmed regulators. I should be most grateful if you could advise me of the correct procedure for setting the regulator valves. I understand this involves adjusting the length of the two flap-valve stickers with felt spacers after initially adjusting the cone valve. We wish to set the Tibia tremulas for maximum "throb" as per your lovely American Wurlitzers. Is it possible to achieve this condition and also stop the regulator being unsteady with the tremos off? I have noticed that on many Wurlitzers that the basses cause wind unsteadiness in the treble ranks taken from the same regulator, particularly on the main chest which has five ranks on one regulator.

**A.** Since you are wisely putting your basses on separate regulators, I can not see why there should be any

unsteady wind in the trebles with tremulants off. There are examples of theatre organs with bass notes winded off manual chest regulators and these regulators then become overloaded.

To achieve your Tibia "throb" I am assuming that your Tibia is being winded from its own regulator. This regulator then, should not be larger than 20" by 30" and should be tremmed with the largest size tremulant. All Tibia notes from 8-foot B on down should be on a separate regulator.

Do not make any further adjustments with the flapper valves or cone valve. Regulator pressure must be established by spring tension only.

**Q.** I am helping install a 2/7 Kimball theatre organ in my friend's basement. The ceiling height is 7' 6". The only way the pipes will fit on the manual chests is if we mount the manual chests 8" off the floor. In order to avoid mitering pipes, I plan to jack the chests off the floor after removing the longer pipes when removing chest bottom boards for service. What do you think of this idea?

**A.** Manual chests that are this difficult to service generally get less servicing. You will find that in order to avoid having to jack up your chests, every time you get a dead note or cipher, you will allow maintenance problems to accumulate which lead to a poorly maintained organ.

Better to raise your chests off the floor at least 14" for easy service access and remount your longer pipes horizontally winding them to their respective chest holes.

**Q.** How much ceiling clearance is necessary over the lowest C of an 8-foot Diapason pipe that is scroll tuned?

**A.** 3 inches.

**Q.** How much ceiling clearance is necessary for an 8-foot Tuba pipe?

**A.** 4 inches. □