

# CHARISMA AND SERENDIPITY

by John Muri

Some smarties once got the idea that we needed more fancy words for common ideas, and they came up with *charisma* and *serendipity*. If you don't know what the words mean you're not alone, but if what I read in the newspapers and theatre-organ magazines is true, we need a lot of both of them.

Take charisma. It means special grace, charm, favor, or leadership ability, and obviously not everyone has it. It calls for strong reserves of energy. A goodly measure of brains helps, but it is not absolutely necessary. Certainly, some leadership and authority power falls upon people who secure or inherit positions of influence. No matter how good an organist you were in the twenties, you couldn't compete effectively with a fellow working a 4,000-seat house if you worked a 1,000-seater. Reputations were built along with the bigger jobs. So was jealousy on the part of the small-timers. How they used to bad-mouth Jesse Crawford in Chicago!

Getting the big jobs was largely a matter of luck (being at the right place at the right time and knowing the right people) plus playing ability. At such times, serendipity (which then was little more than dumb luck) was operating. Sadly enough, a few of the better and more fortunate players destroyed their luck with booze or something equally detrimental. You can be lucky, but that doesn't necessarily keep you lucky or prevent you from making a fool of yourself.

Jesse Crawford had more luck (or serendipity) than charisma. His was not an out-going warm personality. I am sure his busy schedules had something to do with it, but I never met anyone who admitted being a close friend of the man. The Crawford portamento (or glissando, as he called it) was a fortunate conception,

for it gave him a trademark that was more striking (and copied for years after his death) than his fascinating registrations. Parenthetically, we must note here that the portamento, which has been a matter for argument recently, is discussed and illustrated by Crawford himself in his *Advanced Organ Course*, published in 1949 by Jesse Crawford Organ Publications, Emil Ascher, Inc., New York, pages 103-107 inclusive, in which he shows how single glissandos (sequences of single notes) convey the effect of double glissandos when well played and how double glissandos (two notes moving) feel the effect of triple glissandos. He recommended playing the melody in the upper part of the harmonization on tibia or flute stops for multiple glissandos. In his *Jesse*

tion of theatre buildings continues unchecked; only a few large theatres are left, with most of them crippled by defective switchboards, vandalized fixtures, and inadequate maintenance. Ticket prices and transportation costs are steadily increasing, and hotel rooms and food for artists are costly. Word is out that concert attendance is down in several areas. Perhaps the pizza organ people, who seem to have cornered our largest instruments, can help.

In addition, the charisma (or lack of it) in each soloist determines whether audiences like the programs and indicate willingness to come back for more. Charismatic organists seem to have emerged from a favorable heredity-environment complex that no one really understands. Richard Rodgers gave a good deal of thought and study to the matters of charisma and serendipity. He studied, among others, the youthful backgrounds of George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Harold Rome, Frank Loesser, and Vincent Youmans to see what influences were operating to produce genius and creativity. He came to no definite conclusions about background and environment. For his own part, he felt especially lucky or serendipitous.

A performer's charisma does not

---

To the Editor,

After writing close to 70 articles for THEATRE ORGAN, I think it is time I took a vacation; so, the enclosed is the last I shall send you until I get my battery recharged and have something meaningful to say. Your kindness in publishing my work is a never-ending source of happy recollection for me. You have my thanks and best wishes.

John Muri

---

*Crawford Collection of Hit Solos* (Robbins Music Corporation 1953) he calls his written manuscript glissandos "cued notes."

But back to our subject. This theatre-organ movement of ours is going to need some luck (serendipity) if it is to continue. The destruc-

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

necessarily appeal to everyone. Many people, seeing the charm work on others, assume that they must participate in the idolatry. Thus popularity becomes fashionable. This sort of transfer works in the entertainment field to the financial and social advantages of its beneficiaries. For good or ill, it can be manufactured through advertising. Such promotion is expensive, but it usually pays off unless the person being promoted is utterly without quality.

Most annoying are those individ-



uals who seem to enjoy destroying charisma. One example is the frequent belittling of the Los Angeles area film industry by those who call it "Tinseltown" despite the respectable heritage of fine and great films it left us. Some theatre organ fans have delighted in showing off the interior workings of organs for reasons that baffle me. The spectacle of colored lights (sometimes fluorescents) flashing inside chambers behind flapping swell-shades distract the audience and display mighty poor taste. No individual or institution can maintain charisma by revealing everything and by exposing trade secrets. There has got to be some mystery, some reserve in anything that can be expected to remain glamorous. There is no denying the values in *panache* and *chutzpah*. □



## Closing Chord



**Roland E. Nutrell, 66, died April 4th following a brief illness. He came on the organ scene too late for silent films. His career as a theatre organist started in 1932, the year he graduated from Baltimore's Forest Park High School. Between 1932 and 1936 he mixed higher education with playing assignments at Baltimore's Century, Valencia and Stanley theatres. During this period he attended the University of Maryland, and later the Peabody Institute and Johns Hopkins University. As an organist he is best remembered from his *Nocturne* program, a midnight radio show emanating from WCAO. In**

addition to organ music, the program featured romantic poetry readings by Charles Purcell. The broadcast enjoyed a 20-year run, from 1937 to 1957. When the organ business cooled, he turned to teaching in Baltimore public schools. He taught for more than 30 years, many of them as a science teacher. He retired about ten years ago. His career included many years playing for church services and his interests included boating and restoring street cars. He was a member of ATOS since 1960.

Mr. Nutrell is survived by his wife, Geraldine. □

### TUBE DIRECTIONS . . .

Conventioners arriving at Heathrow Airport should take the Tube to Gloucester Road Station.

Conventioners arriving at the Gatwick Airport should take the Tube to Victoria Station (about 30 minutes), change to the District Tube (3 stops) to Gloucester Road Station.

At the Gloucester Station turn left, it is only a short walk to the Penta Hotel.

