

**H**ow do you slickers do it, anyway? Whenever I hear one of you pro organists play, I could croak with combined envy, delight — and bafflement. I can't figure people with your magic, skillful, artistic, multi-keyed, clean, sure touch, because I learned from you years ago that a musical bum like me will never, could never, be one of you, a pro organist. No, after some 60 years, I'm still just old amateur, no-lessons, ear-playin' G-flat Bill, hearing in my head every note and trick and counter-melody you gifted ones perform, but sadly realizing that little of this ever travels beyond my ear to my fingers and my left foot.

In THEATRE ORGAN for October-November, 1978, in an effusion called "Confessions of an Ear Player," I recounted my early struggles to teach myself on a whistling old reed organ to play by ear, using a picture-chart of 14 chords in the mostly-black-notes key of G-flat, a chart given me by a frustrated guy who'd paid good money for it to a "play by ear" school but had never learned to hack it at all. And though "they laughed at me when I sat down" at my reed organ, I played everything I knew in G-flat for years until I gradually mastered half a dozen more common keys. Even so, when we got our first Hammond Organ, all those black pedals in G-flat were easy to find without peeking.

Envious as I am of you pros, still I can remember two times, only two, in my long, embattled ear-playing career when I ever got ahead of the game and was able to tell a real pro a thing or two about music. The first time occurred on an evening when we had invited our friend, known professionally as Esther Kahn, to join us and other friends. Esther had been a silent-movie organist who, when talkies came in, promptly and easily became a celebrity pianist in Los Angeles night clubs with her ten-finger expertise.

Now, though I usually have enough sense never to touch a note when there are real pros around, still on this evening I couldn't resist the temptation to shower myself with glory by playing a piano-organ duet with Esther. I crawled aboard our large Gulbransen Rialto theatre organ, and to Esther at our Chickering Grand, offered timidly to duet on

"Tea For Two," hoping her brilliant cover-up might make me sound good on the organ. And away we went in the original key of A-flat until we came to the bridge, where this tune abruptly changes key. Well! Right at that spot Esther suddenly shouted, "I'm stuck!" Big me, I instantly hollered back, "D-minor chord!" She got it at once, and on we went to a glorious finish. "I just got a blank spot there," said Esther.

Imagine me, the bum, "helping" a dazzling pro! Idiotically I replied, "W'y shore, Esther! Always come right to me when you need a music lesson." Boy, did our friends howl derisively at me for such a remark, certainly the bottom line in the height of the ridiculous. I've never

"Five Foot Two," "Sweet Georgia Brown," and "Ida, Sweet as Apple Cider."

The mansion we visited where Billy's friend, Pete lives contains a large 3-manual hybrid pipe organ installed in the basement. When my turn came, I boldly boarded this monster and cut loose with my favorite Christmas carol, "Cantique de Noel," in its original key of D-flat, a close cousin, of course, to my old favorite, G-flat. "Hey," declared Billy, "you play that prettier than I do. I'll have to look up the notes on it and get it right."

Ah, the second and last time in my life to give a real pro a music lesson! "Don't bother," I told him. "You probably play it the way old Adolphe

## OF PROS AND BUMS

(Musical Type)

Meanderings by Bill Reeves



"Baffled Bum Bill." He meanders among the ups and downs of organists' skills, while worrying in the key of F-sharp — or is it G-flat?

forgotten my first triumph over a pro.

The second smashing —er, I mean minor — victory of this old ear player over a seasoned pro happened more recently, near last Christmas. Our longtime friend, Billy Wright, called, saying he was picking me up to go with him to play a large residence pipe organ in nearby San Marino. THEATRE ORGAN readers will recall Billy's delightful autobiography in the April-May, 1979 issue, entitled "The Other Wright." Ol' Billy plays piano and organ like an angel from heaven. When he and his lovely wife, Irene, visit us, he always graciously permits me to play piano-organ duets with him. We go at it, changing instruments frequently, on such late hits as

Adam wrote it. But I've stuck in a few chords of my own that Adolphe didn't have."

"I like it, sounds good," said Billy the pro. "I'll play it like that from here on out. But aren't you the smart-aleck for a guy ordinarily so dumb? I suppose you'll be improving on Beethoven next."

"Aw, you're the dumb one," I retorted. "Here you've been a pro playing "Cantique" for about 50 years, and it never occurred to you to touch up old Adolphe a little. And yes, sure, I've already improved on Beethoven. I play nothing of his but "Minuet in G," but in my special Beethoven-Bill collaboration, it's called "Minuet in G-flat."

Even as a teenager I was always hopelessly in love with the theatre or-

gan and spent many an hour in the old Strand Theatre in Pasadena sitting right behind the organist, watching him, listening. One evening two incidents, baffling to me, occurred there. First, while the head organist was accompanying the picture, the second organist appeared, entered the pit, slid on to the organ bench from the right, reached under the other organist's hands while that one slid out of the way, took right over in the middle of the same number without missing one note. These dextrous, miraculous pros again! Amazing! But that wasn't all that happened that same night.

The head organist resumed his seat and went on with the picture when it suddenly blanked off the screen and the house lights flared up. We all heard some kind of uproar going on at the theatre entrance and there came marching in, down one aisle, across and up the other, the whole Pasadena High football team, who'd won their game that day, followed by the cute cheerleaders and the school band lustily blaring forth with some march I didn't know. But, oh boy, the organist knew it, and though he hadn't been tipped off to this invasion, he took one startled look around, never paused, understood at once, floored his throttle, and roared right along full blast, note for note with the band's march. It was a wild, if ear-splitting thrill for me. I took considerable comfort in the fact that only a good ear player could have chimed right in with the band like that, impromptu, without notes or notice.

I took further comfort and reassurance to realize that sometimes, if rarely, even one of the best pros will louse it up a little. One evening we were invited to a private recital starring the aging but still fabulous and tremendously respected classical pianist, Arthur Rubinstein. I looked forward to this with excitement because, though I can't play classics, still many of them are familiar to me from the years I'd heard my older sister practicing them. Well, bless my soul, horror of horrors, I distinctly heard the great Rubinstein make an occasional clinker in his Chopin and a boo-boo here and there in his Liszt. I couldn't believe my ears until an organist friend also present told me later that sure, Rubinstein cheerfully admits making mistakes, he values

feeling and emotion in his playing above strict perfection. "In every fine musician," our friend told us, "there is an interpreter trying to break away from the technician." So whenever I miff it I think of Rubinstein, that towering pro, and consider my frequent clinkers, ahem! — "interpretation!"

But alas, my comfort in the rare vulnerability of some of the best pros was short-lived when we heard the late, great Richard Ellsasser play "Flight of the Bumblebee" without a single flaw as a pedal organ solo. Look, Ma, no hands! Incredible! And in time I began to get wise to the fact that pros, too, have their own special problems. Lounge organists no sooner play a number than some drunk requests it. The lush has been so busy talking and drinkin' up that this number registers only subconsciously, and soon it pops into his conscious mind and he requests it. That's just what happened the evening we and friends went to a Los Angeles cocktail lounge to hear former theatre organist Eddie Horton. A gal in our party, who'd had a drink or three, or four, left our table and lurched up to Eddie to request "Sleepy Lagoon." Courteously Eddie told her, "Madam, I just played that a few minutes ago." Unruffled, she snapped, "Well, play it again and play it better!" Eddie obliged, did "play it better" with a dazzling exhibition, like Ellsasser, of his fast and accurate footwork which I noticed had actually worn holes in the black pedals. It's a fact! I never knew till then that Hammond black pedals

were not wood, but seemingly hollow composition. A great showman, Eddie!

A little old silvery-haired retired church organist, too, baffled us in our home one evening, not only when he turned off the tremolos on our Rialto and gave us an inspiring two-footed Bach recital, but also when instead of joining other friends singing around the piano while I offered organ obligatos, he busied himself going through our foot-and-a-half stack of ancient sheet music and picking out special numbers. I thought he was selecting his favorite old pop tunes, odd for a church organist. Oh my no, it was worse than that! After the singing and playing were over and we had all sat down to some serious drinking (Sanka), this saintly-looking old boy, off-beat for a churchman, seemed to have a touch of the bawdy on his mind. Yes, he told us that he was never shocked, only amused, at all the racy, suggestive, sexy song titles and lyrics of today, especially those in the rock world.

I'd always thought he spent his time tip-toeing piously around thinking of church music! No way. "Listen to this," he told us. "I've just been collecting from Bill's old sheet music a group of song titles for us old fogies which, taken in sequence, tell almost as hot a love story as this modern stuff." He read, "You Made Me Love You (I Didn't Want to Do It)," "Taking a Chance on Love," "I Used to Love You But It's All Over Now," "Something to Remember You By," "Baby, Baby, Baby," and "If I Had My Life to Live Over." Here a dreamy look came into the old gent's eyes as he added, "in fact, taken in this order, I'm reminded of a lovely girl I used to know years ago."

The look in his wife's eyes could hardly be described as "dreamy." A powerful soprano outweighing her shorter husband by maybe 40 pounds, she barked, "All right, Grandpa!" Here she gave the dear little old guy a sharp hitch on the arm. "You left out the payoff number in your hot love story. Now get over there and see if you can find "Thanks For the Buggy Ride!"

Considering the quirks I've noted among the pros, maybe I'm not such a musical nonentity as I initially stated. □



from  
Connecticut Valley Chapter