

# Meet Mildred Alexander - Via Video Tape

The announcement that Mildred Alexander's methods of learning to play the organ are now available on video tape comes as no surprise to those who have observed her remarkable career, which is divided among teaching, philosophy, writing, composing and concert engagements. It is one of the most fascinating success stories, and one which validates the musical scene in the USA in recent years. Millie has been in the vanguard of American musicality since her earliest days, and she couldn't have been more than three years old when she first picked up finger exercises she heard her older sister playing, and plunked them out with great accuracy on the family piano. That was in Durham, North Carolina, Millie's home town.

This writer's first encounter with the Alexander magic came about by happenstance. He had just returned from living for many years in Europe, and wanted to catch up on the current American scene. As his port of entry was New York, what better cross section than the Radio City Music Hall?

He caught the last showing of a forgettable movie, and then it happened. The little curtain which then masked the organ console opened and the theatre was flooded with organ music for exiting patrons. The organist was a girl and she was pedalling with spiked heels! I edged down to the wide orchestra pit and simply gaped; no theatre in the USA had featured an organ "march out" for many years. I soon caught the attention of the chief usher, an elderly man whose attention at that time was focused on clearing the auditorium of stragglers, sleepers,

drunks and organ fans.

"Sir, we're closing now."

"But I just returned from overseas, and I haven't heard music like this since before the war."

The chief usher was not unsympathetic. "You're not the first one to linger. In fact there's someone down here nearly every night — with their ears wide open."

"Who is the organist? I didn't know the Hall presented gal organists."

"They don't. She's the first one."

"Her name?"

"I dunno — Mildred something. She's new here. Been playing about a week — and she'll keep it up all night."

I looked at that lovely mop of auburn hair and the spiked heels as my ears soaked up the music. The gal undulated slightly as she played. I never saw her face. She was unaware of a worshiper across the expanse of the orchestra pit. The usher glanced at his

A student follows Millie's instruction, via video tape.





watch. Sadly, I left, but with the lift only good organ sounds can generate.

That was my first sampling of the Alexander styling and it made a permanent impression, yet I didn't learn the full name of the organist until ten years later. But we are getting ahead of our story, so back to Mildred, the child, in Durham, North Carolina, a town remembered largely for that daring (for that time) billboard picturing a very complete bull and plugging Bull Durham "pipe terbacky." The trademark caused a furor among '20s bluenoses. No matter, tobacco country survived, and one happy by-product was Mildred.

At the age of 12 she made her piano concert debut before an admiring audience of Durham parents. During the same year she discovered another musical wonder — an organ in a church. This little wheezer had to be her dream instrument, so she switched her studies to classical organ. Before long she was an accomplished church organist, capable of belting out hymns, spirituals and a few pieces of classical organ literature.

She began to feel that she had learned all she could in the old home town — but not quite.

On the radio and on records she was hearing a quite different type of organ music. Broadcasts by names such as Jesse Crawford, Eddie Dunderstedter and Ann Leaf were brought to Durham by network radio. The music they played from studios far from Durham was very different from what young Mildred had been taught

was proper. So were the instruments they played. When Mildred tried some of their tunes on her church organ, the results were far from satisfying.

She asked her teacher about the great difference, and was told in scornful tones that those people played on those god-awful theatre organs, and that their music was an abomination.

She lost no time in tracking down one of those "abominations." It was during the '30s when many theatres sold their unused organs to churches. One was located in the recreation hall of a Durham church, a sweet little two-manual Wurlitzer graduated *cum laude* from a movie house which no longer needed it since the installation of "Photo-phone" — "talkies," that is.

It wasn't long before Mildred was broadcasting the Wurlitzer over WDNC, CBS radio outlet in Durham. She was hired sight unseen, through an audition record. She didn't dare approach the manager in person because she knew he would not hire a child!

She graduated from high school at 15 and was immediately hired by the station as musical director. On learning that Duke University had a pop organ course, she enrolled, but also continued her classical studies. Why was the opportunity to learn to play the organ so rare? Mildred vowed that one day she would do something about it.

Then the "big time" called and Mildred moved to New York. Long before that historic move she had discovered the pioneer electric organ, the Hammond. It would change her life. In New York, she scored, arranged, conducted, played and was musical director for many network TV shows.

Then Mildred's artistry came to the attention of the Hammond Organ Company and an association started which would benefit both artist and manufacturer over a period of many years. The Hammond is still her favorite electric organ, although it has changed considerably over the years, discarding Laurens Hammond's original tone wheel generating system for solid-state oscillators.

The electric, and later the electronic, organ made the instrument available for home use. And the initial price was right — \$1,250.00. Many people bought them but were unable

to get adequate instruction. Mildred was well aware of this; on her numerous Hammond demo concerts she was approached many times by people asking for instruction. She examined the teaching material then available. Most was warned-over courses by pianists and pipe organists, and much of it was over the heads and abilities of home organ purchasers, or simply inadequate. Mildred recalled the difficulty she had in her early years obtaining organ instruction, not to mention the narrow range of that instruction when available.

Why not a practical course which would instruct beginners, intermediates and advanced students and at the same time maintain a high interest level? A course based on her experience, with easy-to-understand instruction books plus a network of teaching studios staffed by instructors well-versed in the Alexander accumulation of music styling started to take shape in her mind. The course would eliminate most of the rigid and tedious formalities connected in times past with organ instruction. Instead, her courses would follow an informal approach. Emphasis was put on the ease of playing organ, be it a parlor spinet or a four-manual giant.

Mildred had always kept notes concerning her observations, impressions, shortcuts, musical values and talent quotients of interested parties. She outlined her courses to fill several short volumes, designed to accommodate the students' levels of accomplishment. Then to find a publisher who could be convinced of the value of her approach. There were then on the market a number of hastily assembled, simplistic books on how to play the organ, but they rarely went much beyond a rudimentary version of "Long, Long Ago" and similar easy ones. Mildred was determined that her courses would not be self-limiting just to show fast progress. After many disappointments she located the right publisher, Charles Hansen Publications, Inc.

One of Mildred Alexander's most notable traits is her ability to establish rapport with an audience immediately. She soon has each individual feeling as though she is addressing him personally — and she is. Two of the reasons she has been able to establish arrangements with nearly six hundred music studios across the country to

"Omgawd, it's the President!" cries an excited Millie as she rallies the troops to greet a presidential look-alike during a Home Organ Festival concert. The lady obliged with a majestic "Hail to the Chief."

(Stardust Photo Service)







Millie with Leroy Davidson. She recorded her "Sweetest Sounds" album in his studio. Leroy is a former Alexander Method student who now teaches by the Method in southern California. (Stardust Photo Service)

use her *Mildred Alexander Method of Organ Mastery* are the common sense applied to her approach to learning and the personal magnetism she projects from the podium or stage. That latter quality is an immeasurable asset. To say that she charms members of both sexes in her classes and audiences is putting it mildly. After a couple of learning sessions with Millie many are so mesmerized by her engaging personality that they trade in their spinet organs for larger models. A number of merchants will testify that "trading up" is especially noticeable after a visit by Millie.

On the personal side, life hasn't been too kind to Millie. The constant travel was one hurdle. Three marriages — one ended in death, one in divorce, and one in separation. One ex-husband, a well-known TV game show MC, insists he's always been a bachelor, although Millie just might show you their marriage certificate when the wind blows just right and the moon is full.

The lady is on good terms with the children which resulted from her marriages. She adores her daughter and eldest son, who is a doctor. But her favorite has got to be her younger son, Milo, the only one of her children to become a professional musician. Milo is an orchestral percussionist who, on occasion, plays drums to accent his mother's organ music during concerts. They're a team!

So the dream of teaching thousands to play the organ has come true for Millie, but not without certain travails. Because of the warmth inherent in her personal appearances, either as

teacher or concert player, her schedule calls for frequent travel to anywhere in the USA and sometimes outside. It's a red letter day for a local studio to be able to present Mildred Alexander in person, and the local teachers who use her *Mildred Alexander Method* are glad to have her appear. After all, she is a star and a glamorous one — also the author of the lessons they have been struggling with. One of her favorite devices is to connect with one of the "extravaganzas," "adventures" or "festivals" staged by the electronic organ societies for a usually three-day music jamboree. Some of these associations are national in scope and hold several widely-separated weekend sessions a year, often in some elegant metropolitan hotel. Such is the Amateur Organists Association International, the brainchild of perennial AOAI officers, Crane Bodine and Ernest Sampson, who cut his editorial teeth on the long ago *Hammond Times*. The two are dedicated organophiles. "Ernie" Sampson is the editor of the association's bi-monthly *Hurdy Gurdy*, which is eagerly devoured by the large membership, especially coverage of the most recent "extravaganza" combination learning and socializing session. These events provide a perfect setting for the Alexander talents. In fact, Millie has been one of the star attractions since the AOAI started the various "extravaganzas," "minishows" and week-long sea cruises during which enrollees are transported on an organ-equipped "love boat" to romantic landings in the West Indies. If there is a constant star

of these often very commercial events, it's Millie. She provides the human touch.

Millie's instruction in person is so much in demand that she often arranges for some classes to be held after the "extravaganza," holding the dedicated students in her spell usually for a one-extra-day cram session. She calls such extensions "happenings" but they are actually well-planned, intensive learning sessions, attended mostly by advanced students of the *Method*, or those who simply want to bask longer in the Alexander charisma. She also runs teacher qualification exams during these extra days. Not all who try pass the tests; Millie can be an exacting taskmaster where the quality of teaching is involved.

The constant travel to and from concerts and teaching sessions precludes much home life. Home life? When Millie gets to her home in Oceanside, California, does she relax? Nope. She writes a chapter for a new teaching manual, answers correspondence, and then it's time for another of her frequent newsletters which go out almost monthly to the many teachers who live by her teaching methods. "Just Between Us" is the title, and it's self-explanatory; in a chatty style she tells about her adventures on the concert circuit, gives some playing pointers (illustrated with notation), offers notation for an organ arrangement by one of her method teachers or students (the writer once offered his ear-caught notation for the *Mary Hartman* TV soaper, and she ran it).

Generosity is an Alexander failing, or strength, if you prefer. For example, when she started publishing her teaching manuals, she made them available to both teachers and students instead of selling them through teachers. Thus she had to forego any

Mildred Alexander originated the concept of high heel pedalling when the Music Director at the Radio City Music Hall insisted. Her pioneer effort has since been imitated by several other gal organists — but Millie did it first! (Stardust Photo Service)







A wistful Mildred Alexander muses beneath the chandelier in her San Diego Studio complex.  
(Stardust Photo Service)

profits other than royalties from the publisher. It has cost her plenty. Even so, she has been plagued by plagiarists who have issued books and arrangements lifted from her copyrighted work. Does she take them to court? Not necessarily; she usually grins and bears it; she is most interested in advancing the art of organ playing.

But the "lifting" of material does not stop with simple piracy. She charges each teacher who teaches by her method a small annual license fee. Actually, she has no way of insuring payment; her books are sold on the open market. So she sometimes sees a sign in a music studio window stating that "This Studio Teaches by the Mildred Alexander Method," which may be the first the author knew about it. She tolerates such freeloaders although she could have tied up the loose ends through an exclusive distribution arrangement. It's all for the advancement of playing know-how, and where, she reasons, could better instruction be found? She recently moved her publishing effort to the Bradley Publishing Company. Typically, Richard Bradley is a Millie protege.

The frequent travel has been tiring,

of course, but Mildred finds that even billeting away from home can be almost as dangerous to her health as her constant cigarette smoking. On one Canadian concert stop near the end of 1969, she checked into a convenient motel and went to bed. She was awakened by the smell of smoke. The structure was on fire! Millie donned her slippers and staggered out into the hall only to find the stairwell ablaze. She was aware that the smoke was lulling her so she went back to the room and tried to open the balcony window; it opened to three inches, blocked by a limiter! She was very near oblivion when firemen broke the window, wrapped Millie in a blanket and took her down the outside stairway. She recovered quickly in the cold air, just in time to watch the motel burn to the ground. Part of the fuel; her clothes, music, records, handbag and suitcases. Her garments for the next few hours (until she could wire for funds) were her flannel nightshirt and a blanket. A magazine news item was headlined "Millie Nearly Fried!" But she played her concert!

Air travel has also threatened her on occasion. One time she gave an assistant her plane ticket so he could sub for her in a distant city. The airliner was involved in a minor crash. No one hurt, but Millie couldn't help wondering if there was a message in all the negative happenings.

Yet, she keeps up her sunny demeanor. One thing she employs as a trademark is her southern origin, emphasized by frequent playings of "Dixie" and her "magnolias and mint julep" speech patterns. On one occasion she was introduced to the late Randy Sauls, a long-ago silent film accompanist, who was also the author of a course in organ technique. Randy was born in Mississippi, which is far south of Millie's North Carolina. The intro went something like this.

Millie: Ahm Millie Alexandah. Wheyah yew fum?

Randy: Ahm fum Mis'sip, Millie. Wheyah yew fum?

Millie: Ahm fum Nawth Car'lah-na, Rayendy.

Randy: Dayamn yang-kee!

Both "rebs" had kept their speech and southern beginnings well honed and after that encounter both broke into laughter at the lengths they had gone to prove it — especially since they were meeting on yankee territory.

Millie's fans are always after her to make recordings. Unfortunately, the lady has a hangup when it comes to grooving; she insists that she can turn out a satisfactory LP only if it is played in the presence of an audience. Thus, her two most notable recordings were made during a concert at the Los Angeles Wiltern Theatre, where she temporarily abandoned the familiar drawbars for the stopkeys of the Wiltern's 4/37 Kimball pipe organ. The records were good sellers but a later try proved a technical disaster. The taping was done during a morning concert during which bright sunlight had warmed up the pipe chamber on one side of the theatre but not the other side when the weather turned cloudy. Because heat raises the pitch of organ pipes, the sunlight left the pitch higher in that chamber than on the side with merely house temperature. The results didn't sound so bad to the concert audience, but the pitiless microphone made a point of showing up the pitch difference. Somehow the record got into mail circulation and was a cause of embarrassment to Millie until she disposed of remaining stacks in a novel way. One of the organ magazines tells us that she loaded cartons of grooved vinyl onto a friend's boat and got herself piloted out into the Pacific Ocean off San Diego, then had herself a great time scaling the records across the whitecaps, until all had sunk into the briny. That's Millie!

More recently she cut a fine record on a Hammond X66 in Leroy Davidson's West Covina studio (he's also one of her protegés), and to remain true to form she filled the studio with invited guests to help raise the adrenalin. It worked! *The Sweetest Sounds* is one of her most popular releases.

There is so much more to say about Mildred Alexander. She's a colorful woman. With the completion of six hours of video teaching cassettes, now anyone interested in learning to play the organ can study with Mildred Alexander practically "in person." You can come under the spell of this magnetic personality and at the same time learn to play. So we won't write any further about her. It's better that you meet her on your home screen. You, too, may fall under her spell. And who knows? She just might make an organist of you!

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