

The 1-2-3 of Music

by Ray Gingell

Most of us are probably aware that many of the people who attend theatre organ concerts are not organists, or for that matter, musicians at all. They are just people who enjoy hearing theatre organ music.

For the non-musician, a little understanding of basic music construction can greatly enhance their enjoyment, not only of theatre organ, but of all musical performances.

To understand basic music construction, it is not necessary for the non-musician to learn to read music. All one has to learn is how to listen, and for what to listen.

The theatre organ sometimes is referred to as an "orchestral unit" organ, since in effect its pipes and percussions do imitate various instruments of an orchestra. As the organist has these many sounds at his command, he is really not playing just a single instrument, but many instruments. Actually, he is sort of a "one-man band." In theory then, the music he plays is an orchestration.

What is an orchestration? It is here we discover the 1-2-3 of basic music construction. Music is divided into three parts (or sections): 1, Melody; 2, Counter-melody; and 3, Bass (or rhythm). The *melody*, often called "the first part" (or the lead), is that part of the music by which we follow or recognize as "the tune." It is when we hear the melody that we are able to identify the song. The *counter-melody* gives tonal support to the melody, embellishing it in harmony. The *bass* section completes the ensemble by providing the rhythm.

For complete music we must have the three basic parts: melody, counter-melody and bass. The smallest possible orchestra group is a trio of three instruments, each assigned their respective part of the music. One instrument carries the tune, another plays the counter-melody and the third provides the bass.

Starting with the three basic sections, an orchestra can be built up to any number of instruments, with each player being assigned to his particular section of the musical score.

An orchestration (often called "an arrangement") divides the musical score into its three basic parts, giving each instrument its individual part to

play in the ensemble. For greater variety and effect, players may often be called on to alternate playing melody and counter-melody. For example: A clarinet may carry the lead, with a violin playing the counter-melody. Then, they may alternate with the violin now playing the melody and clarinet doing the counter-melody.

With the three basic sections of an orchestration in mind, let us turn to the theatre organist. He has available all of the various "ranks" of the organ — the pipes that imitate sounds of various instruments and percussions. It is the job of the organist to put it all together to perform complete music.

Theatre organs always have at least two manuals (keyboards). This is for a very good reason. Two manuals are required to create the necessary division between melody and counter-melody. On small organs the top keyboard is usually called the Solo manual and the lower is the Accompaniment manual.

In simple, uncomplicated theatre organ playing, the organist follows the basic 1-2-3 orchestration pattern. With his right hand he plays the melody on the top manual. His left hand plays the counter-melody on the lower manual. His left foot takes care of the bass on the pedals. Thus, the organist makes "complete" music by playing the three basic parts individually.

On the larger theatre organs with more than two manuals, the additional keyboards are for the convenience of the organist in giving him greater control of the various ranks without having to re-set the stops, which would be necessary if using a single manual. The playing technique remains the same.

Except for classical organ music, very little music is composed especially for the organ. Publishers very seldom bother to print "organ arrangements" of popular songs. There is not great demand for such copies anyway, as most musicians prefer to do their own arrangements from the regular piano score.

The organist creates his own "orchestration" by dividing the score into the three basic parts, providing notes for the melody, counter-melody and bass. He arranges the music for

right hand, left hand, and foot.

The piano is thought of as being closely related to the organ since the keyboards resemble each other, and many musicians play both instruments. The playing technique is, however, actually quite different.

Many musical instruments are not really "complete," in that they require the support of other instruments. This is especially true of one-note instruments, those capable of producing only a single note at a time, for example, a clarinet or a trumpet. Single-note instruments need the backing of other instruments to provide counter-melody and bass.

The piano is popular and versatile in that it, like the organ, is a "complete" musical instrument. The piano can provide all three parts of the music. With his right hand, the pianist plays the melody. The left hand does "double duty" by providing both counter-melody and bass. Notice how a pianist swings his left hand, playing counter-melody near the center of the keyboard and then reaching far to the left to pick up the bass notes. He is achieving the 1-2-3 of "complete" music.

A piano does not need the support of other instruments. This is why a piano is so often used to accompany singers and instrumental soloists. The singer, or soloist, performs the melody, the pianist provides counter-melody and bass. This completes the 1-2-3 pattern giving us "complete" music.

When a pianist, untrained on the organ, attempts to play a theatre organ, his music will tend to be "choppy." This is because he will try with his left hand to play both counter-melody and bass. On an organ, of course, the bass should be played on the pedals, which he cannot do because of his lack of training in this technique.

The next time you hear a theatre organ, or an orchestra, listen for the 1-2-3 basic parts of the music — melody, counter-melody and bass. What instrument or pipes are carrying the "tune"? Listen! That's the first part, the melody. Listen for the counter-melody and how it supports the tune. Then, become aware of the low notes and thump of the bass (and rhythm). Now you are listening to "complete" music.

Remembering the 1-2-3 basic parts of music, you will increase your enjoyment of theatre organ by being aware of the skill of the organist as he creates his own individual "orchestration" of the music. □