

Basel Cristol

Chicago Organist

compiled by Lloyd E. Klos
(June 1979)

Upon the suggestion of John Muri, the writer called Basel Cristol, former theatre organist and still a very active musician, in the hope she would share the story of her musical career with THEATRE ORGAN readers. Russell B. Joseph recorded the interview. His wife, Florence, and Edna and Barbara Sellers share the credit for asking pertinent questions.

Russ says, "I can tell you that Florence and I were deeply impressed with Basel as a person — intelligent, of high principle, gracious. In short, a person anyone would consider it a privilege to know. Our only regret is that we didn't have the opportunity earlier to know her better and enjoy her company. She still enjoys entertaining people at Math Iglar's Restaurant when most people her age would be content to sit at home and meditate." Now to the story.

"My father, Michael Cristol, and his younger brother, David, had intended to emigrate to England from Lithuania, but they got lost and wound up in Cork, Ireland. My mother remained for a time in Lithuania with a child.

"My parents were of the Jewish faith, and as there were practically no Jews in Ireland, they wrote the chief rabbi in London to find a few more Jewish immigrants to make a minyan (gathering of ten for prayer).

"My father then sent for mother, who didn't want to leave her parents and friends, but he told her that he'd move to Douglas (two blocks outside Cork) if she didn't! So, she embarked for Ireland. My brothers and sisters, save one, were born in Cork. My father used to travel throughout Ire-

land, buying ornamental brass from the churches. Eventually, the family moved to Dublin where I was born.

"When a child, I had bronchitis very badly, but being the youngest, was treated as a pet, being showered with toys while in bed. One day, I was given a toy piano. I immediately started to play operatic melodies and show tunes which my sisters and brothers

had picked up from attending the theatre, and which they sang at home.

"The natural talent in my family came from my father's side. My oldest sister sang beautifully, and my oldest brother 'played' the piano. Though his right hand played the melody, his left hand incorrectly played the harmony, because of a lit cigarette between his first and second fingers. We had a table piano and I wish I had it today. It was fun playing it.

"I played it correctly, and they couldn't believe I could pick out all the popular tunes. One of my sister's friends came by one day, and was surprised to hear my playing, not having had a lesson. She suggested taking me over to the Leinster School of Music, and that's where I got my start in musical education. They had contests, as they did in this country, and I won a bronze medal in 1909, playing a classical number. Had a wonderful teacher, Miss McCarran.

"About then, my brothers decided to go to America. The oldest had been to Africa and had enough of that. There were five girls and three boys in

Basel Cristol at the left console in the Chicago Theatre. Photo taken at about 2 a.m. during a rehearsal.

(Cristol collection)



the family, and eventually we came to the United States around 1912, and settled in Chicago.

"I learned about the Chicago Musical College, and entered on a scholarship. I studied on scholarships almost the entire time there, though I had to pay for harmony, ear-training and extra courses. A teacher, Muriel Moore, selected me as her student, and when she left to marry, I cried on the trolley car all the way home.

"Then I studied with Alma Anderson. This was when Dr. Florenz Ziegfeld, Sr. was headmaster. He had a gift for detecting talent in a child. Besides my Bachelor of Music degree, I won the Ziegfeld Diamond Medal award at commencement exercises which were held in June 1917 at the Auditorium Theatre. I played the second and third movements of Mendelssohn's *G Minor Concerto*, accompanied by 60 members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Carl Reckzy.

"I had gone through all facets of a musical education at CMC: ear-training with Edward C. Moore; harmony with a Mrs. Harris; and wound up with study of music forms with Felix Berofsky, who wrote the program notes for the Chicago Symphony. I studied with Rudolph Reuter for two years, and got a medal from him, also.

"I then entered the scholarship competition but learned that Dr. Ziegfeld was retiring, replaced by Carl D. Kinsey. Reuter and other top teachers were also leaving. Kinsey had made us pay \$10 to enter the 'free' competition, and when I found that Reuter was gone, who would take me? The people at the office said they did not refund scholarship money, but my \$10 could be used for five lessons.

"I applied the fee to organ lessons under C. Gordon Wedretz, a very nice gentleman, who had a four-stop Kimball in his teaching studio. I don't know what he taught me, but I loved it! It seemed so easy. After my five lessons, I wasn't sure what I'd do.

"In 1917, the 1780-seat Central Park Theatre on West Roosevelt Road was opened. We lived a block west of it on Millard Avenue. My parents and I (my brothers and sisters were all married) used to attend the movies there. The place was beautiful. They had stage productions, an orchestra and a 3/9 Barton organ.

Mother used to say, 'If you could play in a theatre like this, I wouldn't mind it.' Originally, I had an idea to go on concert tours.

"I asked around where one could learn to play for silent pictures, and someone suggested I try a little theatre on Clark Street. At this time, I got to know Helen Anderson, the future Mrs. Jesse Crawford. She was playing a Barton in one of the Clark Street theatres.

"Located on West Roosevelt was the 707-seat Circle Theatre, the very first decent house which Balaban & Katz owned. It showed movies, had a Kimball organ, and featured many song pluggers, including Sophie Tucker. I was still in McKinley High School when one Saturday, I went to the Circle.

"Having patronized the house, I knew who the manager was, an Irishman, Freddie Cleveland, though I didn't know him personally. After an usher referred me to him, he kindly listened to me. I told him I was studying the organ, had no place to practice, and would he allow one to come in and practice?

"He looked at me woefully and replied, 'Girlie, I have a very fine organist here, the organ is taken care of the way it should be, and I wouldn't want anything to happen to it.' I told him of my musical background, that I would certainly not do any harm to the instrument, but I had to learn to play a theatre organ.

"Being a very kind and considerate gentleman, evidently he took pity on me and said, 'Girlie, what do you do on Saturday and Sunday afternoons between five and six-thirty?' When I replied, 'nothing,' he said, 'I'll pay you \$1.50 each day to substitute for the regular organist when she goes to dinner.'

"I didn't walk home; 'Girlie' flew home!

"I went in and played everything: overtures, mood music, selections, you name it. When I finished the first day, Freddie said, 'Girlie, you're good! I want you to come in and listen to our regular organist because she is excellent and you will learn just what to do.' At \$3.00 a week, I nearly went nuts over that!

"After a few weeks, Freddie said, 'I think my organist is lovesick. So, if she leaves, I want you to be ready to take over.' I went nuts altogether! She

did leave, marrying Roscoe Major who developed the enormous switchboards used backstage for lighting all the B & K theatres.

"The Balabans used to come in and see Freddie quite frequently, and they liked what I was doing. They said to him, 'We ought to put her into the Central Park.' Freddie replied, 'Oh, no you don't! If she has to stay on the street, she stays here. If you want to put her elsewhere, I'll let her go.' I wound up with the 9-12 morning shift at the 1535-seat Roosevelt on North State, and took the elevated train to the 1943-seat Riviera on North Racine for the afternoon shift there. The former house had a Kimball, the latter a Wurlitzer. This occurred in the early '20s; the Tivoli and Chicago had been built, but not the Uptown.

"I progressed very well. Later, I had the second shift at the Tivoli when Milton Charles had the main. When Jesse Crawford left for New York in November 1926, they transferred Milton to the Chicago, to be succeeded by Albert Hay Mallotte at the Tivoli. I served as his assistant, and he was magnificent. What an organist! An absolute dream.

"Amusingly, he had his eye on our little chorus girls! They had started with Publix in New York, went to Detroit, then to Chicago, and the whole circuit. One day he said to me, 'Listen, can you play the movie until I get back? I'll be in for the solo.' I was already warned: 'Don't you dare play for him. It isn't allowed.' So, I told him I couldn't do it.

"But he was tremendous. When I found out about his putting the Lord's Prayer to music, I just couldn't believe it! It is such a gorgeous thing — so beautiful. And another one which he did, 'Song of the Open Road,' was also great.

"I remember we had two units then. I worked with Benny Kreuger who had his band on stage, playing popular things. Milton Charles worked with Ulderico Marchelli (who followed Leopold Spitalny), and the units alternated, a week at the Uptown, a week at the Tivoli. That was an interesting experience. I also worked with violinist Victor Young who did all the arrangements for Benny Kreuger."

When Basel had a week at the Uptown in 1927, *Exhibitors' Herald* had this to say: "Basel Cristol offered 'Under the Leaves' and Drigo's 'Sere-

nade' for the musical theme of the Castle Scenic called 'Men of Yosemite.' These numbers were well fitted for the artistic backgrounds and the plot of the film."

"Once Paul Whiteman had a one-week engagement at the Tivoli. Pianist Roy Barge played 'Rhapsody in Blue.' Mr. Whiteman, using his 30-piece orchestra on stage, the 25-man band in the pit, and me at the 4/32 Wurlitzer, closed the stage program with the '1812 Overture.' My part included playing the Russian National Hymn. The percussionists worked the bells, gongs, guns, etc. The walls shook, it was so tremendous!

"But, I must tell you what a dum-dum I was! Just a kid and so ridiculous. Paul Whiteman was as nice a gentleman as I ever met. He was so appreciative of everything done for him, and he complimented me, which made me feel good. One evening, he and his manager, named Gillespie, were nearby when I came out of my dressing room. He said, 'Miss Cristol, tonight Mr. Gillespie and I are going around, looking for talent. Wouldn't you like to join us?'

"I could kick myself when I think of my reply. I said, 'I'm sorry, Mr. Whiteman, but I'm not allowed to go out with people with whom I work in the theatre.' Such an opportunity to see a real pro scout talent! This man was such a gentleman. I was afraid because one heard things concerning other show business people which didn't suit me.

"In 1925, I went to the Chicago Theatre to do Sunday concerts. The first was a children's Christmas concert. One of those on the program was local personality Greg Connell, who died in 1979.

"As I recall, I put in more time at the Uptown than the Tivoli. Jesse Crawford had some time at the Uptown, when Helen was expecting, they played the Tivoli when I was on second shift. After they went to New York, he returned for a week at the Oriental, as a guest artist, playing solos only. He would not play the movie, insisting that I do it.

"I mentioned some of the people with whom I worked in the theatres. I also worked with the gentleman who was famous for his singing and dancing to 'Once in Love with Amy,' Ray Bolger. He came to the Tivoli, and you wouldn't believe how disheveled he was the first time I saw him! Then

in his twenties, he asked me to go out with him. I refused, telling him I had a steady boy friend. You see, 'Girlie' was getting smart! The result was he wouldn't look at me the rest of the week. But when he danced, he was magnificent. Still is!

"Another fellow who came in, but who didn't ask me out or even talk to me, was Victor Borge. Talk about teeth; his were so black you couldn't see them. When I first saw him, he had on a hat and an overcoat. In the side pocket was a bulky, folded newspaper. I wondered who in the name of God was that! But when he touched the keyboard, what a talent! He first came to the United States in 1940, not knowing a word of English, and I saw him at the Chicago.



"We also had Buck & Bubbles at the Tivoli. The tall one said to me one day, 'I dreamt about you last night. I thought you were stuck on me!' From there on out, you can imagine the conversation with a fellow who dreams about you!

"A group of midgets were booked, and one day when in my beautiful dressing room (complete with piano), sitting on the couch reading, in walked a midget. In a thick German accent he said, 'You should come out mit me some night.' Asking him where he wanted to go, he replied, 'I vant to take you for a good time.'

"Another organist with whom I worked was Arsene Siegel, simply a wonderful man.

"When setting up shifts for us, they always saw that there was an organist with the group of entertainers. I liked

working at the Chicago because you played the acts with the orchestra. It wasn't always necessary for me to be in the pit, such as when I worked with Benny Kreuger for vaudeville. At that time, we had silent movies. In the Chicago, there was always something to do — rehearsals, overtures, cueing music for silent films, etc. However, I believe there was a lot of hooey about some organists' playing the Chicago. I'm sure some of them never did.

"The organs were always kept in good condition. I was a great one, however, for climbing ladders to the chambers to silence ciphers. One New Year's Eve, with a packed house, I was playing the Chicago and the Ritz Brothers were on. Up in a top chamber, there developed a cipher. The brothers started talking in Yiddish, which I didn't understand. They got one of the ushers to remove the pipe. Such a situation was murder!"

Edna Sellers interjected that she once had a Tuba Mirabilis cipher during a solo. "I played it through, changing keys, so the offending pipe would sound better."

In a February 1930 *Exhibitor's Herald* appeared a review of Basel's organ program at Chicago's Tower Theatre: "Basel Cristol presents her usual entertaining solo this week, by offering several request numbers of which three are the featured songs of the talkie list, *Sunny Side Up*. She opens with 'Turn on the Heat,' follows with 'Dreamer, Aren't We All,' 'Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life' and 'Singing in the Bathtub.' Miss Cristol closed her program with the popular 'Sunny Side Up.' She was greeted with her usual applause."

From the April 1930 *Metronome*, we glean the following: "For the past year, Miss Basel Cristol has been playing at the B & K Tower Theatre in Chicago, a sound house. Needless to say, she is the only human on the program. Despite the marvelous success of the talking pictures, the audiences still acclaim the organ solo.

"Miss Cristol believes the most entertaining type of organ solo is the one consisting of community singing, built around a theme, using for material a subject of general or timely interest. She avoids solos written in the first person, for they are uninteresting, and she also avoids annoying gag slides, especially the type which nag the audience to sing. Not to let her public forget the good music entirely,

she inserts occasionally a popular classic, which meets with their hearty approval.

"On the whole, Miss Cristol believes the field for solo organists is still unlimited, for the organ is the only instrument left for sound houses.

"She says, 'I love this work. It is work — long hours of actual work, planning organ novelties or solo appearances. But when the audience applauds, even if just a little, I feel repaid.'

"From the theatre," Basel says, "I went into broadcasting. I worked at WMAQ, Chicago, doing a couple of commercials for a sister of Milton Ager. He wrote such songs as 'I'm Nobody's Baby,' 'I Wonder What Became of Sally' and 'Happy Days Are Here Again.'

"In 1954 I did an audition at WCFL for Marty Hogan and Bill Lee, and was hired. I was pleased about that, except that they wouldn't use my name. The pianist at the station was Don Artiste. The organist was yours truly and was given the pseudonym, 'Alan Whitney.' I went to Mr. Lee for an explanation.

"WCFL was on the 20th floor of the Furniture Mart on Erie Street, across the street from WBBN. The back of the floor were the studios. The front had the union offices. Mr. Lee explained, 'We cannot stand it when they come in, asking, 'Who's playing the organ? I told you my son (or brother) plays, and you never give him a chance.' We are avoiding arguments. We have to keep peace so we cannot use your name.' I worked there from 1954 to 1959, playing a Hammond.

"I was let go in 1959, at the time of my son Mike's return from the service. There were three outside persons released: a fellow who did on-the-spot news; the all-night man, Lex Barker (former husband of Susan Hayward); and I.

"I've had restaurant experience in several places. I went into the Marine Dining Room of the Edgewater Beach Hotel for Herb Foote who was scheduled for a month's vacation. He went to WBBN instead. I hadn't been working; my husband didn't want me to. But, it was across the street from us, so I took it. I had to be in at noon for lunch, back at six for a half-hour broadcast, and stay for the evening to relieve the band.

"The job lasted two months. They

had to look for a regular organist as I refused a longer tenure, and Herb Foote wasn't coming back. Mr. Weber liked what I was doing, but Mr. Dewey, the owner, said that under no circumstances would Herb Foote be brought back. He had been carried through the depression when jobs were scarce, and his going to WBBN was the last straw for Dewey.

"After that, I worked occasionally at the Chicago when they needed an extra organist. I had last performed there in 1945 for a Jack Benny stage show.

"A friend next suggested I play at the Meyer Kaplan Senior Citizens Center. Later, they met at Temple Shalom, which had a Wurlitzer but I used a Hammond. I was with this group for a year and a half when I got a call regarding playing at Iglor's Restaurant.

"It is a place with a very musical background on the north end of Chicago and has something you don't see in restaurants anymore — singing waiters. The place is over 53 years old in the tradition of an old German restaurant. I've played there for 16 years. When I had a heart attack in 1973, Edna Sellers subbed for me.

"A most embarrassing thing happened to me there in 1977. One Saturday evening, I turned to wave to somebody and missed my step. Down I went on my knee, causing a double fracture. On top of that, I broke my wrist at home, which is also bad for an organist.

"I lost my husband, a lawyer, who was a very young 45, and never remarried. My son is a CPA and an attorney, living in Chicago. After my husband's death, I had a second tenure at the Edgewater, where I played the Möller in the Marine Dining Room. I enjoyed working with the bands there."

At the completion of Basel's dissertation on her varied career, Russ Joseph and Barbara Sellers wound up the evening with some questions and comments:

RJ: Did you have a favorite theatre organ? I'm sure every organist did.

BC: No, but I believe we had more variety on the Uptown organ when it had a Tuba Mirabilis. Later, they took the rank down to the Chicago. When you're preparing a concert, all you are doing is working on special numbers and doing the best you can with registration. The one number I

played which earned me the greatest satisfaction is "Kammenoi Ostrow." I played it in one of the Chicago Theatre concerts and the organ's chimes came through, clear as bells.

RJ: The Uptown certainly had different acoustics than the Chicago. The former's chambers were narrow and deep, whereas the latter's are wide and shallow.

BC: If you had an idea of interpretation, you did the best you could. It's so easy to say, 'I like this or that organ better.' But you have to work with what you have. You do it, not the instrument.

RJ: That's why each organ sounds differently when different organists play it.

BC: Right. The organ isn't going to tell you to turn the pages or press this tab or button. You gave Crawford credit for this. I'm no organ technician, but I do know tone registration — you are the interpreter. If I can get that, I don't care what organ it was — the Circle, where you pulled out the stops, or the Tivoli. You can put some people at a magnificent Steinway, and what do you get? Junk! Mashed potatoes!

RJ: It's like what they say about computers: garbage in and garbage out. The computers don't make the mistakes. It's the humans who program or feed them.

BC: That's true.

RJ: There is another aspect of registration: use of tremulants. Hector Olivera, for one, uses them very judiciously. He doesn't have them on constantly. An important technique is involved in where in the selection he turns them on and off. It adds a lot to the effectiveness of the program. I heard a church service on television recently where the Hammond organist kept the deepest tremulant going for the full service, choral and postlude.

BS: I'd like to say something about Basel's ability. I can't think of anyone who plays as well on both instruments, organ and piano. In our business, it is very difficult to find someone of that nature. She plays the legs off both instruments. Some people can play the right pedals all the time, but they still bore me to death.

BC: One thing which is very predominant is the way some fairly good organists handle the pedals, and they

should know better. Instead of playing a tonic pedal where it belongs, and a dominant where it belongs, they reverse them! That drives the buttons off of me! I can't stand it!

BS: Good, precise pedaling, all the way up the range, separates the men from the boys.

RJ: All your professional career was spent in Chicago?

BC: Yes, I never left. Never wanted to leave home. Even after my husband died, I went down to Lyon & Healy's and got introduced to the Hammond. This led me into the Svithoid Club, a rich organization, and you always were assured of a good tip there. Has good food, too, the best.

Milton Charles remembers Basel quite well. "She was one of the young organists on the scene in Chicago when Jesse Crawford and I arrived from California in the early '20s. I was impressed with Basel as being most eager to learn, and I found her to be an excellent musician and a lovely person. She went on to do real well in the Chicago area, but I lost track of

her after 1929 when I left for the coast for the first time (before my Philadelphia engagement at the Mastbaum Theatre).

John Muri has this to say: "Basel Cristol is one of the very few theatre organists who have been able to maintain a career through the years. She plays regularly at Iglar's fine restaurant, and at lunch time recently (1979), she brought in some biographical material at my request. Several of the restaurant personnel became excited over the photos and newspaper clips which we were examining. Whereupon there was a hasty conference by employees who vied to come to our table and meet the distinguished guest. It reminded me of the old days when the theatre organist was a local celebrity, recognized by almost everyone on the streets and in the shops.

"Basel today is a beautiful, poised and elegant lady. She doesn't bear an iota of the vulgar temperament which some of our other women organists display. Basel is gentle and kind, modest and unassuming . . . and a fine musician." □

count 2. Strike the alternate pedal on count 3 and again strike the chord on count 4. This may be diagrammed as follows:

1	2	3	4
	C		C
P		P	
R		5	

As this basic 4/4 pattern is very repetitive, you may wish to consider studying the following variations, suitable for up-tempo or swing type songs. In the example, R = root and 5 = fifth of chord (alternate pedal).

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
		C	C			C	

P				P			
R				5			

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
		C	C			C	C

P				P			
R				5			

1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4
C	C	C	C			C		C
P		P			P	P	P	P
R		5			R	R	5	5

Try this rhythm on a 4/4 ballad which requires a more subtle accompaniment:

1	2	3	4
	C	C	----
P			P
R			5

For more current tunes where a simple "rock" feel is appropriate try:

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
C	-----						
P		P	P			P	
R		R	5			5	

or

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
		C				C	
P			P	P		P	
R			R	5		5	

The above is a representative sampling of 4/4 rhythms — by no means the definitive source. Remember any alternation or combination of chords and pedals that represent four beats per measure is a 4/4 rhythm. Use your imagination — invent your own rhythms!

Next time, we will finish our study of rhythms with a summary of Latin rhythms. □

KEYBOARD TECHNIQUES



by Cheryl Seppala



4/4 RHYTHMS

In the last issue we began a study of rhythm patterns with emphasis on the basic waltz (3/4) rhythm and some suggested variations. As we continue now with 4/4 rhythms, please keep in mind these preliminary suggestions:

- 1) Except where otherwise indicated, pedals and chords should be struck staccato (lightly).
- 2) Tempo should be kept steady. If necessary, use a metronome or au-

tomatic rhythm device to help you maintain a constant speed.

- 3) Vary the rhythm pattern every 8 to 16 measures for added interest.
- 4) Spend adequate time rehearsing the left hand and pedal before attempting to add the melody.

Now let's study the basic fox-trot 4/4 rhythm. Strike the root of the given chord in the pedal on count 1 of each measure. Strike the chord on