

REVIEWING REVIEWED

An Irishman's Reflections On Reviewing Theatre Organ Concerts and Recordings

by Rodney Bambrick

Having travelled a long way to attend last year's ATOS Convention in Chicago, I read with great interest the concert reviews which appeared in *THEATRE ORGAN*. The spate of rather one-sided correspondence which the reviews provoked in the subsequent issue raises some important and fundamental questions about the whole matter of musical criticism in relation to theatre organ music.

As an ardent theatre organ devotee for many years it has often occurred to me that one of the reasons why theatre organ music is sometimes dismissed out of hand by classical musicians is simply because many performers and listeners in the theatre organ field fail to

recognize that the same musical standards which apply to classical music can and must also be applied to the performance of popular music.

Furthermore, I believe that performers and reviewers alike must realize that musical criticism is a much less subjective exercise than they sometimes like to imagine. There are, I would argue, at least some objective criteria by which performance can be judged. Let me mention just five. First, **ACCURACY**. Playing the right notes in the right place at the right time will not of itself produce a magical performance — but it's a good start. In any event, this deceptively simple prerequisite

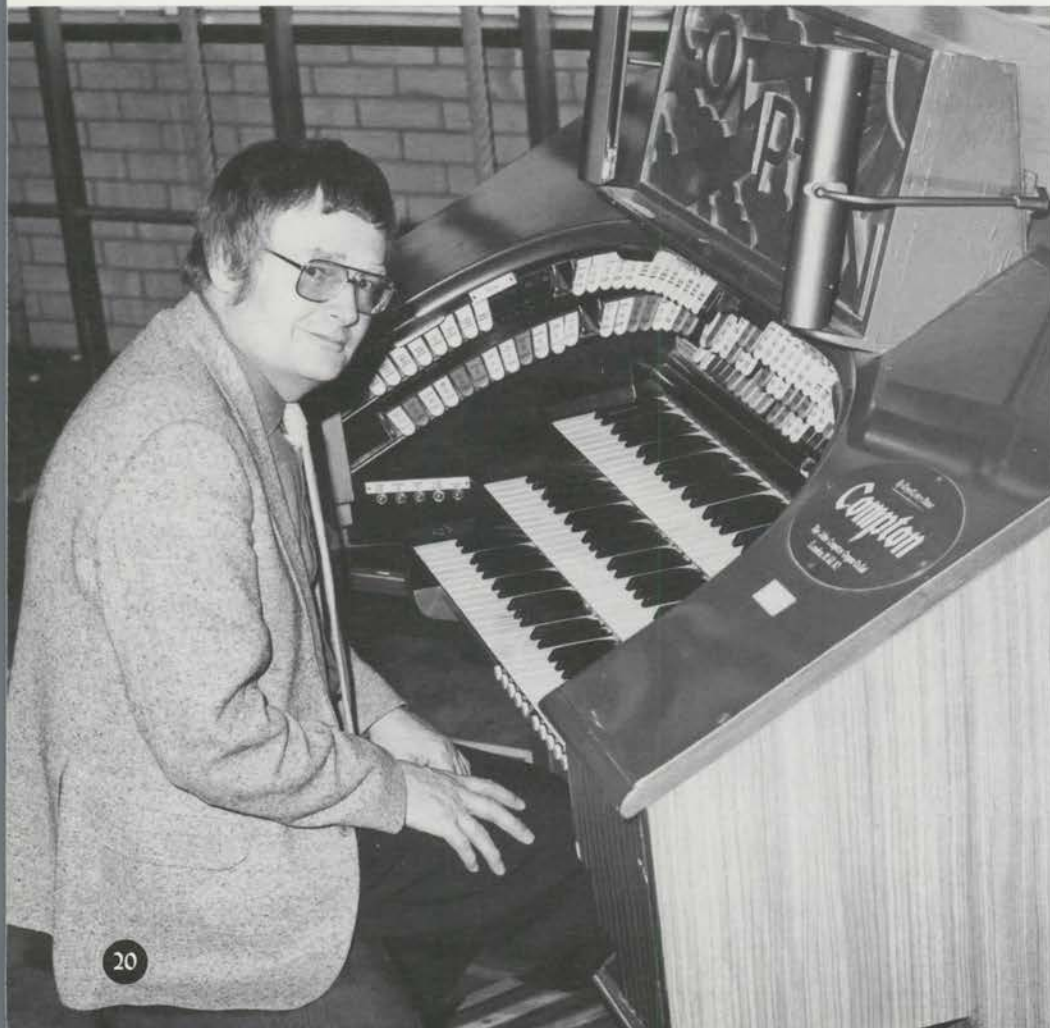
raises some tricky questions. When, for instance, is a performer entitled to take liberties with the music as written? In popular songs (the staple diet of so many theatre organists) quite a lot of freedom is normally acceptable, though I suspect that the odd variants we occasionally hear in both melody and harmony are as much due to blissful ignorance as to artistic licence. In transcriptions of orchestral or instrumental music there is clearly less scope for deviation from the text. John Seng's transcriptions of "An American in Paris" and "La Valse" on a recently issued recording are remarkable examples of what can be done by a performer prepared to respect the composer's intentions.

Alteration of the harmony is a more subtle matter. In an extended arrangement of a popular song I think there is room for fresh thoughts once the original chord sequence has been established, but the harmonic idiom introduced must be used consistently. In other words, a touch of modal stuff in one bar should not be followed by sliding chromatics in the next. At the Chicago Opera House recital last year Hector Olivera's performance of two standards was exemplary in this respect — one garbed in the harmonic language of Louis Vierne, the other presented in the style of a French toccata. For me, the journey to Chicago was worth making for those two performances alone.

The second basic essential which determines the quality of performance is **APPROPRIATE** and **STEADY TEMPO**. By appropriate I mean well matched to the style of the music and to the capabilities of the instrument being played. In rhythmic numbers steady tempo is not usually much of a problem, but in slow ballads a firm underlying pulse is sometimes lost and the music merely meanders. The skillful use of well-judged rubato is of course a characteristic feature of ballad playing but it should never become the excuse for self-indulgent straggling. If at any point in the performance the listener starts to wonder what the time signature is, the rubato has gone too far!

For the theatre organist, the third criterion by which his performance should be appraised is **REGISTRATION**. It has to be both well chosen and well varied. Here it is not easy, I admit, to establish generally accept-

Rodney Bambrick at the console of the 3/8 Compton he helped rebuild for the Gransha Boys' High School, Bangor, Northern Ireland.



able standards, but the ear is not deceived. I have listened to a cassette produced by one of last year's convention participants and on one entire side I can detect little fluctuation in volume level, few telling changes of registration and throughout every bar the tremulants palpitate perpetually. Inexcusable surely on a large instrument! On all but the tiniest of organs, I think it is reasonable to expect the organist to produce a fairly wide range of dynamic levels, to use both solo and ensemble effects, to display at least occasional differentiation of the stop families, and to recognize the fact that tremulants can be switched off as easily (well, almost) as on. Perhaps it should also be said that stop changes should not be made at the expense of accompaniment chords sustained well beyond their normal life span, and that never, never should stop changes affecting the manuals being played be made in the middle of a phrase. It does happen!

Please vote. Your **BALLOT** is in this issue.

The fourth criterion I want to mention is **INDIVIDUALITY**. This is not easy either to achieve or indeed to define, and yet the best performers do undoubtedly have it. For the theatre organist it is probably not quite so difficult to acquire as it is for his classical counterpart, because most of his material has to be adapted and arranged, and it is in the art of arrangement that his musical individuality can be revealed. Here again, some measure of objectivity is not out of the question. Does the arrangement, we can ask, present the music attractively? Does it reveal new insights? Does

it contain some touches of originality? Is it well matched to the instrument on which it is being performed? There is, of course, the danger that in seeking to establish an individual style, the performer will develop and then deploy a favourite device *ad nauseam*. For my own taste, Jesse Crawford did sometimes slither about just a little too much (though he did it very nicely!) and for some of our contemporary organists that wild chase in chromatic thirds to the top of the manuals at the end of every number has become an equally tiresome cliché.

The fifth and final reference point on which I believe useful criticism might be based is **PROGRAMMING**. Here variety is very much the name of the game. Variety in the type of music being played, variety in tempo, in rhythm, in mood and in key. At the Chicago convention I would regard Lew Williams' Mundelein recital as a model in this respect: some classics, some novelty numbers, some jazz, some big band blast-off, some film music, some standard ballads, even a touch of humour. And all played with impeccable precision. Not every organist can match Mr. Williams' technical prowess, but even within a less ambitious range of material, careful programming can ensure the variety that is needed to sustain an audience's interest — to say nothing of their pleasure.

These then are some of the more important criteria by which I believe performance (either in concert or on record) should be reviewed: accurate realisation of the composer's intentions, suitable and steady tempo, imaginative registration, well-balanced programming, a touch of individuality. It takes a very good organist to score highly on all five. As to who should act as assessor, my own view is that this is best done by experienced reviewers. Audience reactions are not without interest, but I would maintain that a professional journal as beautifully produced as **THEATRE ORGAN** should also include informed criticism by writers who fully appreciate the niceties of theatre organ performance.

In conclusion, let me add just two reflections on the Convention itself. Amidst a feast of enjoyable and sometimes excellent performances there were undoubtedly at least two which were embarrassingly bad. But responsibility for this, I think, must lie with the organizers rather than with the organists; they should know who can play!

The other much more encouraging aspect of the convention which impressed me was that three quite outstanding recitals in the programme were all given by *young* organists — Hector Olivera, Jim Riggs and Lew Williams. Judged by the criteria suggested above, all three come out with flying colours. This surely augurs well for the future of the theatre organ on at least one side of the Atlantic.

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Thanks

Paul and Jan Van Der Molen wish to thank the following artists and friends for helping to make our God-given dream become a true and living reality. Whether in full concert or as a guest and visitor passing through, we have enjoyed your contribution to our efforts.

Leon Berry	Bob Maes
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We apologize in advance if memory failed us and we overlooked someone whose name should be included here.

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