

Letters To The Editor

Dear Editor:

As a former resident of Danville, Illinois, I would appreciate any information on the Fischer Theatre and its pipe organ. I worked in that theatre many years ago.

Thank you,
John W. (Bill) Fischer
15780 Via Represa
San Lorenzo, CA 94580

(Can any of our readers help Mr. Fischer? Ed.)

Dear Editor:

This letter is to follow up on our discussion regarding reviews in THEATRE ORGAN. Pardon me for trodding over familiar ground, but for completeness' sake, it is necessary.

Reviews probably ought to consider six basic areas:

1. Concept and material.
2. The artist's success or failure in carrying out the above.
3. Organ and acoustic selection: were they right?
4. Packaging.
5. Technical considerations of recording.
6. Summary opinion.

Concept and material are probably the most fundamentally important considerations of any recording. While not all recordings are theme-oriented, many are, even those which are potpourri are usually structured as mini-concerts within that context. Consequently, a reviewer's first obligation is to clearly discern what the artist's intent is and then to determine just how well he pulled it off.

Notice that I said that it's the reviewer's obligation to understand the intent of the artist, not the other way around. I've read many reviews in THEATRE ORGAN in which the reviewer brought a great grab-bag of preconceived notions to his reviews — few of which ever came close to producing a perceptive review, and most of which obfuscated the intentions of the artist behind a barrage of hot air. As they say in the trade, "Let's get to the point."

The artist: I'm starting with the assumption that the recording is being made by a professional performer — one about whom no questions of technique need be discussed. What really counts now is style, arrangement abilities and interpretation within a totally musical context. It would seem entirely appropriate to discuss an artist as against himself — his own record of performance both in concert as well as in prior recordings.

On the other hand, it seems inappropriate to discuss an artist mirrored against another performer whose style may be completely different: to clarify, how in the world would you review the work of Jesse Crawford if you use Buddy Cole as the litmus of true genius? Can you truly assess the impact and performance of

Billy Nalle, Ashley Miller, Don Baker, Ann Leaf, George Wright, Lyn Larsen and countless others if you play one off against the other and do not understand the uniqueness of each? Does not the reviewer make an ass of himself continually trying to fit a round peg into a square hole?

The same holds true for the organ and the acoustic used for the recording. Is it right within the context of intent? Certain organs work best for certain performers and certain pieces of music. Organs are like people — they can't be all things to all men.

Ditto for the "hall" sound selected for the recording. With modern recording techniques, an organ installed in a studio or a theatre can be made to sound as though it is located in some other kind of setting. Therefore, the question is this: Does that setting, whether natural or artificial, suit the intent of the recording? Naturally, if the record is made as a memorial to some particular organ, in and of itself, then how successful was the recording engineer in capturing that special sound which makes a particular theatre and its organ unique?

Additionally, whether or not the reviewer is a fanatic for a certain brand of organ is beside the point; how it worked for the performer is what matters. (Parenthetically, it is also beside the point, and frequently in error, to speak of an organ as a "purebred" or as being *mostly* this brand or that brand. How in the world does the reviewer know what it is unless he is told, and frankly, who cares, it's the music that counts!)

Package: This little item often gets completely swept under the rug. But the next time you have a chance, ask someone who has made a record, and they'll tell you that frequently the package produced more grief and cost than the actual work of recording the tracks. Outside of its mere physical function, packaging is essential to give the customer the *modus operandi* of the producer or performer. It tells us what the artist's intent is, gives us the selections and their background and generally informs us of the cosmology of the recording — it gives us context. If we pay no heed to this, we are in the proverbial boat without an oar.

Technical considerations: With today's plethora of available recording techniques, at the least it would seem quaint to discuss whether or not an LP is punched on center. Serious centering problems haven't truly been an issue with any major pressing plant for years.

The same holds for surface noise. With rare exceptions, most noise produced physically on an LP is the result of random dirt picked up in the manufacturing process during packaging and is not replicated from one pressing to the

next. True surface noise is most readily related to a complex equation of a particular disc-cutting system's signal-to-noise ratio, the freshness of the master blank, the condition, temperature and alignment of the cutting stylus, the program's running time, the selected groove density and the signal levels necessary to produce an LP of a given length, without groove overshoot, NOT to today's generally very high quality of vinyl. They don't recycle used vinyls anymore — this isn't the 1950s.

Also, provided that the original recording was done with care, and that subsequent transfers were handled professionally, any reviewer's discussion of distortion most likely more accurately describes faults in the reviewer's equipment and hearing than what is on the grooves. Take, for example, the comment of an acquaintance of mine who is not an "organ person" and who never heard a particular organ live before. "It sounds distorted," he said. That remark is patently ridiculous. By definition, the organ itself cannot be distorted — what is distorted is the listener's hearing and uneducated mental impression of what he heard.

It should be pointed out that over the past few years the LP has commercially taken a back seat to the audio cassette, and this year, for the first time, the CD has outsold the audio cassette. At this point in time, LPs are third in commercial importance in the retail market. The handwriting is on the wall for the eventual and total demise of the LP. Prospective theatre organ record buyers *must* equip themselves with CD players if they expect to remain current with new products. It's time to recognize what's happening out there — mechanically, artistically and commercially.

In summary, take artists for who and what they are. Interpret their work within the context of their intent. Consider them and their instruments for what they are worth, not for what you would like them to be. Consider the distribution media for what it is, not for what it is not. Take a recording as a totality, including the package. And, finally, never underestimate the intellect and taste of the buyer.

Sincerely,
Ralph Sargent
Hollywood, California

Opinions expressed in this column are those of the correspondents, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or the policies of ATOS or THEATRE ORGAN. Letters concerning all aspects of the theatre organ hobby are welcome. Unless clearly marked "not for publication" letters may be published in whole or in part.

Address:
Editor, THEATRE ORGAN
4633 S.E. Brookside Drive, #58
Milwaukie, Oregon 97222
Phone: 503-654-5823