

# Letters To The Editor

Dear Editor:

This letter is submitted as yet another opinion and some thoughts on the subject of young peoples' interest in the theatre organ. When this subject is brought up, there are really two different problems that sometimes get interwoven as if they are one in the same. The first problem is, where are the young organists? Given the scarce exposure most young musicians get to the theatre organ, the combined efforts of individual organists, teachers, enthusiasts and certainly of ATOS have done a respectable job of nurturing a lot of fine young (under 40) talent in the last ten to fifteen years. The second and really much bigger problem at this time, and that will be even more so in the next ten to twenty years, is, where is the audience of young people? Most of us who wonder what the future holds for the theatre organ must agree that given the age composition at most theatre organ concerts, problem number two is the really scary one, and that is the subject of this letter.

Before proceeding it is always helpful to know the perspective of the writer so the reader may ascribe the appropriate amount of bias and/or credibility to these thoughts. On the one hand, at age forty and having been in love with the sound of theatre pipes for over thirty years, I am both part of, or at least near to, the "young side" of this avocation, and also a longtime enthusiast. On the other hand, at age forty I have grown up during the the era of, and as a listener to, rock n' roll and, further, have spent the last fourteen years working in commercial radio broadcasting. Since the success of a radio station depends largely on playing music that people want to hear, a great deal of my effort has gone into analyzing and anticipating what people want to hear and why. This is not to declare that these are necessarily the thoughts of an expert in musical tastes or trends, if there even is such a thing, but certainly does bring a perspective that I do not recall seeing in this magazine.

While my thoughts are not all doom and gloom for the theatre organ, I do not believe we will ever see anything more than a trickle of young people under the ages of the early thirties attending concerts or buying recordings. To see any significant numbers of these "youngsters" under say, thirty-two or thirty-three, would indicate some massive cultural upheaval that would have dethroned the thirty (plus)-year reign of the lyric-with-rhythm based music that includes all the various forms and styles of rock n' roll. Ever since the emergence of mass-appeal pop music in the 1920s, young

people have tended to be, and probably always will be, under the influence of the peer group pressure that makes most of them want to hear the same thing that everybody else is listening to, and that same thing, rock n' roll and its many variants, is proving to be very durable.

However, even if we concede that young lovers nestled in a darkened movie palace enthralled by the mellifluous renderings of a Jesse Crawford may never happen again, there are some forces at work that *may* lead to some opportunities for widening future exposure of the theatre organ.

This opportunity lies with the early thirties to mid-forties folks who are now A) old enough to be out of the extreme peer group pressures and B) are among the quickly growing ranks of those "discovering" the satisfaction of listening to, not the vocal-rhythmic based music that they grew up with, but instrumental music through the rising tide of what the recording industry has tagged New Age music. The rapidly emerging popularity in the last couple years of New Age music is a very significant development because it marks the first emergence in both recording and radio airplay of mass-appeal, original composition instrumental music since the late fifties when the last permutations of Big Band enjoyed a brief revival brought on by hi-fi and stereo (Jazz certainly is original composition instrumental music but, except for specific instances, remains on the sidelines of mass appeal). Also, despite sixty-odd years of co-existence, jazz has not accepted theatre organ into its idiom (Dan Bellomy's new album gives some hope in the jazz direction).

Until last year, New Age music was the domain of small record labels, most notably the Windham Hill label which has now reached \$50 million sales at retail solely on New Age music. Until this year no major radio stations gave much airplay to New Age music, but with the astounding success of KTWV in the trend-setting Los Angeles market, several major stations in other major cities are, or will soon be, airing New Age music exclusively.

So where is the theatre organ opportunity? There are still many hurdles to cross before you will find a recording featuring use of a theatre organ in the New Age section of your local record store. But remember, the first and really major hurdle has been crossed — this is purely instrumental music and is the first time that this "baby boomer" crowd has ever been interested in purely instrumental music. Second, much of the New Age music is composed of sustained notes

and harmonies and is arranged for organ-like textures. The remaining hurdles have yet to be crossed. As of this writing, I am not aware of any use of any kind of pipe organ in New Age recordings. The synthesizer is the primary keyboard instrument in much New Age material. Further, the theatre organ, if used in New Age music, would most likely be part of the three- or four- to ten-instrument combos that constitute most performances. Finally, like in all music and entertainment endeavors, there will have to be the "breaks." The breaks are largely a matter of luck and/or influences beyond control of the musicians that determine if their music reaches the acceptance level to enable ongoing concerts, recordings, and airplay.

If the theatre organ is to become a part of the New Age genre, there will need to be experimentation with different styles than we are used to hearing, possibly along the lines of what both Buddy Cole or Paul Beaver were doing years ago and some of the ideas recently heard on Rob Richards' album. As for the nature of the theatre organ itself, no big changes may be necessary although it is possible that an instrument with the sonic clarity and tonal innovation of George Wright's new organ may lead the way.

"There now exists the best opportunity in thirty years ..."

Aside from the now nearly extinct pizza parlor phenomenon, there now exists the best opportunity in thirty years for new exposure and appreciation of the theatre organ by a whole new, and possibly very large, audience. Hopefully, the myriad of inspiration, talent, events and the "breaks" that will enable this to happen will all come together.

To close, I want to state that I am in no way advocating the abandonment of any of the past music and traditions of the theatre organ. All of the efforts at presenting traditional organ programs and silent movie accompaniment, particularly in the setting of the remaining movie palaces, should go on in parallel to any development of new audiences.

Sincerely,  
Randy Warwick  
Bakersfield, California

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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.

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