

JOHN MURI: Prime Judge For The 1989 Young Organist Competition

by Dorothy VanSteenkiste

John Theofield Muri is one of those special persons who brought the silent clowns Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd and Harry Langdon to musical life in movie theatres across the country. The era of the silent movies is only a memory now, but the 82-year old Muri, who has been playing theatre and concert pipe organs since he was 17, continues to carry on the tradition. To see his magic at the keyboard and listen to the sound he brings forth on the pipe organ is the reason critics across the country have called him one of the top theatre organists in the country. Some have said Mr. Muri is the best. John has been a soloist at four national conventions of the American Theatre Organ Society and in 1977 was enrolled in the ATOS Hall of Fame and named "Organist of the Year."

Muri will tell you that his career as an organist started in 1922, faded out in 1931 with the advent of talking pictures and was reborn in a wave of nostalgia in 1962. Now semi-retired, this Hall of Fame organist remains in demand at theatre organ concerts and silent film showings.

His early training was at the Chicago Temple and the Sherwood Music School. He holds three university degrees: University of Chicago, Indiana University, and Wayne State University. He taught in the Hammond (Indiana) Public Schools (1937-1968), at Indiana University, Gary Campus (1964-1968), and Wayne State University in Detroit (1968-1973). He passed his doctoral examinations in French and German in 1971. He is now studying Chinese.

John has been a writer for Encyclopaedia Britannica Films (1954-63; 1976) and for Scholastic Publications, Inc. (1964-67). He wrote a page of commentary in the THEATRE ORGAN for twelve years.

He was consultant to the Wurlitzer Company during the building of the great organ in their national headquarters and played the first public program on it. He has made numerous sound-tracks for movies released by Blackhawk Films.

When John describes the air battle scenes in *Wings*, winner in 1927-28 of the first Academy Award for production, he details the shaking, quaking roar you can achieve on an organ by opening the low foundation pipes and hitting a C or E-flat on the manual.

Muri remembers playing for *The Phantom of the Opera* with Lon Chaney in the original silent version in 1927 at the Indiana Theatre. Muri brought the audience to their feet when he hit the crescendo pedal to jolt the silence as



Chaney was unmasked as the hideous Eric in the movie. He refers to the silent movie past as "FUN YEARS."

John Muri served as musical director of two radio stations, WIND, Gary, Indiana, and WWAE, Hammond, Indiana, and at one time was an ABC radio network pianist. John states, "Working is meaningful to me. I still love the organ and I'll play until I lose it in my hands."

Those silent movies, those silent clowns — someone once said "Silence is golden." Men like John Muri are, too.

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