

In 1946, a small book was published in England to benefit a fund for organists. This book is entitled *Theatre Organ World*, and is a collection of articles by people involved in the field, among whom is an organist, Louis Mordish, whose career spans more than half a century. The first selection below was written in 1946; the second in 1990 for *Cinema Organ*. Mr. Mordish has been a participant in and observer of the theatre organ world since he was 14 years old. While his comments in the more recent article are specifically related to a somewhat controversial review of the 1989 Safari, we felt that our readers would enjoy sharing this gentleman's philosophy of theatre organ derived from his many years of experience. —Ed.

Reflections of Louis Mordish . . .

[1946] An Organist Looks at His Public

How many members of the public, as they sit more or less comfortably in their local cinema listening to the magical, marvellous, musical strains which come pouring, thundering, gurgling, oozing, screaming, whining, sighing, sobbing, trickling or lumbering from the "Mighty Organ" (it all depends on how they feel about it!) — ever give a sympathetic thought to the mortal responsible for these noises.

This poor soul, in his efforts to achieve the impossible, which in this case is the musical satisfaction of 100 percent of his audience at each performance, becomes more and more convinced of one thing only . . . and that is . . . that it is impossible to achieve the impossible because the possibilities of it being possible to achieve the imposs . . . of dear! . . . do you see what I mean? That's how it affects me!

When he (the organist) presses the button which will shoot him breathlessly to dizzy heights and which will leave him exposed to the cold mercy of the cynical listener, he is well aware of the different reactions which his sudden dynamic appearance will awaken in the bosoms of his public. He knows that on the one hand there will be the people who always say or think, "I do hope the organist isn't going to play any of that jazz stuff — we get enough of it all day long on the radio."

On the other, he knows the younger members of the audience will say, "Come on . . . give us some 'swing' . . . let's have some 'jive.' None of that dreary old-fashioned stuff for us." . . . And what about the vast multitude of people who are not really sure what they do like . . . so long as "it's something nice." And we organists, the dispensers of popular music, have to study the musical susceptibilities of the 1/- patron as well as those of the 3/6. Which brings us to the root of the matter.

Mention the word "music to the layman and he immediately thinks of the particular type of music in which he himself is interested. Talk to one man about symphonic or chamber music, oratorio, opera, etc., and mention Stavinsky, William Walton, Shostakovich or Sibelius and he'll stare at you and think you're mad.

Talk to another about "Swing," "jive," "in the groove," "riffs," etc., and mention Benny Goodman, Teddy Wilson or Gene Krupa and he in his turn will probably begin to edge away from you or get himself ready to restrain you by force if necessary! . . . Yet we, the long-suffering tribe of cinema-organists are supposed to know and play everything that has ever been written — from Handel's "Water Music" to "I've Got a Yen For My Rag-Cuttin' Baby" — or whatever the latest popular song is called — and what's more, play it just when it is asked for!

Which organist is there who has never yet met the man who modestly says: "Although I don't know a note of music, I have a good ear because I can always hear a wrong note. I always know a good piece of music when I hear it — I know what I like!" While not wishing to disparage the claims of the non-musician, I think all organists will agree that it is not a case of the man in question knowing what he likes — **he likes what he knows** — which is a very different matter indeed.

So here is our problem. Should the organist play "down" to his audience by playing only "popular" music, should he try to "educate" them by playing something a little more "highbrow" or should he ignore everybody and play just what he himself pleases?

We have the young enthusiastic "jive-hounds" in the front rows, the dear old ladies and gentlemen who come in for a nice rest, the harassed mothers and fathers taking their offspring for an outing to the "pictures," the romantic young couples in the romantic back-stalls awaiting their romantic love song of the moment, the cynical blase patrons in the front circle, etc., etc.

Yes . . . they all have their likes and dislikes and the organist has to try and please everybody, which, as I said at the beginning, is impossible.

So please, next time you go to the cinema and hear an organ interlude, spare a kind thought for the poor chap in his dilemma. Don't shoot the organist, he's doing his best . . . to please you all.

[1990] A Variety of Styles

Every individual has, of course, the right to like or dislike certain types of music and ways of playing the organ. What is pleasant and enjoyable to some listeners can be positively painful to others and no one has yet found the magic secret of pleasing everybody at once. While it is the ambition of some of the younger performers to slavishly try and copy the 'Blackpool sound' which for them is the acme of musical achievement, it is equally the desire of others to try and emulate the playing of the 'other school' — to each his own! (Have I said too much?)

However harsh Ian MacNaught may seem to have been, I think in all fairness to him, he was expressing a personal and honest opinion and I'm sure he was not trying to be vindictive. As a performer myself, it would be quite wrong for me to express an opinion as to whether or not I agree with him. Obviously I have strong views about the performances of some of my colleagues (haven't we all?) — but I keep them to myself!

I suppose I ought to feel flattered that Ian's only adverse comment about my contribution at the Kiburn Top Rank Theatre was the fact that he had heard me play some of the items in my programme before.

Whenever I give a concert, I always assume that the majority of the people in the audience are newcomers to my performances, and I play what is primarily an unknown programme for them; at the same time I realise there are bound to be some 'old faithfuls' among them. I had no idea that Ian had been following me around and had heard me on at least six occasions!

I can assure him that having been a professional musician since I was a boy of 14, I do know lots and lots and lots of music of all kinds and if he will let me know when he intends coming to my future concerts, I will gladly change part of my programme for him to prove it (which I think is what he's after!).

As regards his remarks about some of the items being repeated by different organists during the week of the Safari and the desirability of someone to check with the artist the contents of their programmes to prevent this sort of thing, surely the artist has the right to choose his own programme! Do 'serious music' concert-goers say to the London Philharmonic Orchestra or to people like Vladimir Ashkenazy — "You can't play that particular symphony or that particular concerto at your concert because we heard so-and-so play them yesterday!" Surely hearing the same pieces played by different organists on various instruments provides an opportunity to compare performances.

All of this brings me to another point. One might well ask "What is the prime purpose of organ concerts as given by different performers?" Is it to play music in a pleasing manner so as to give pleasure to the listeners — is it to 'entertain' — or is it to show the public how clever they are? . . . "Look, I'm playing all four manuals at once with lots of notes and my feet are playing both pedals and the effects pistons and giving you drum rolls and cymbal crashes all at the same time — and I can play as loudly as anyone else — and I don't like this piece of music as it was originally written so I'm going to up-date it with my very own harmonies — all 7th and 9th and change all the tempos which will make it much better than the composer's version and then for my next trick I'll play the organ while riding a unicycle!" I suppose that could be termed 'entertainment.'

The above thoughts and comments have been prompted by the conviction that every performer — obviously — plays in the style which he likes and thinks right for the music — and who is to say whether he is right or wrong? He or she will undoubtedly please the listeners who like that particular style while at the same time displeasing others. I think experience — the magic word — is all important as is the ultimate aim of the performer. If he or she wishes to be acclaimed as a 'popular' organist and have a big following, then they will choose one particular style. If on the other hand he or she wishes to be a 'selective' kind of player, then they will adopt a different approach and be content with a 'minority' following . . . each to his or her own!

In the course of a very long career embracing all kinds of music, I have met and worked with many fine professional orchestral musicians and I have to say, with very great regret, that most of them do not like the theatre organ. When asked why, they say something like, "It's just a noisy mixed-up jumble of sound," or "It's loud, vulgar, muddy and tasteless," or "It's not a musical-sounding instrument — it's a mushy noise" — further examples of different musical tastes!

I've have many a difficult task trying to convince them it's not the organ which is at fault and that their opinions are what they are as a result of the way they've heard it played. Many of these musicians said they didn't know that solo individual tone colours were possible or that an organ could be played softly!

I realise I have probably stirred up a hornet's nest, but as I have already said, each person has his or her own ideas of what constitutes good organ playing and good taste. Like everybody, I have mine, which have been developed and moulded over a lifetime's experience of playing many varied types of music to all sorts of kinds of audiences — from 'classical high-brow' through the worlds of light music and show business to the frankly 'popular' listeners.

No doubt I shall be severely taken to task by some of your angry readers!