

EDITOR'S
NOTE:

The following article appeared in the December 6, 1924 issue of the Better Theatres Section of the EXHIBITORS HERALD, published and edited by Martin J. Quigley. It is reprinted here with the permission of the Quigley Publishing Company, Inc., of New York City, presently publishers of a number of motion picture and television magazines. The company also furnished the photo of the author of the article which is used below. Our sincere thanks to the Quigley Publishing Company.

The 1924 issue of the EXHIBITORS HERALD was found by ATOE member Johnny Ferguson of St. Louis, Mo., on the chamber walls of a small picture and television magazine. A number of issues of the magazine were found nailed to the walls to cover large cracks, and the December 6 issue, which Ferguson very kindly sent to THEATRE ORGAN, has the nail holes to prove it!

The magazine is very interesting to read, carrying as it does advertisements of many of the motion pictures, and photos of many of the stars, of some 40 years ago, plus Marr & Colton and Robert Morton theatre organ advertisements. And the article itself very interestingly presents at least one old-time theatre organist's system of preparing for, and accompanying, silent films.

Organ Accompaniment of Motion Pictures

By IRIS ETHEL VINING

Organist, Granada Theatre, San Francisco, California

Have you ever seen a woman stir up a cake with a handful of this and a pinch of that and a dash of something else -- no exact quantities of anything -- all by feeling? Organ accompaniment is like that. The art of illustrating motion pictures on the organ, of making them live and breathe, is at once the most inexact and exacting of any of the arts.

Organ technique can be learned; pictures can be seen. But I doubt if there is any way in the world in which the two can be joined successfully and artistically except by feeling.

The organ makes a motion picture a thing which lives, breathes and has its being, laughing and weeping, talking, sighing. It endows the picture with life. Without accompaniment a picture is like a pantomime. It may be clever, tragic, delightful, but it lacks the vital spark, the charm which the human voice conveys.

* * *

Organ interpretation of pictures is inexact because everything depends on the person at the console, upon that person's artistic sense and ability to express on the pipes of the organ the ideas conveyed by the picture, and to do that instantly, so that the music shall have a sound of spontaneity and naturalness.

The musician in the orchestra pit has direction. Every note he is to play is to play is printed plainly and set before him. There is the leader with his baton, impressing, suppressing, marshalling all his instruments to an effect he desires to produce. For the concert organist, pianist or performer on any instrument there are the printed notes to follow if that is necessary. But the organist in the pit of a picture theatre, following the

action of a film, can have no such aid. At least, I could not possibly read music and follow the picture at the same time.

The first requisite of a motion picture organist is a full size order. One must have mastery of the instrument and an exact knowledge of all kinds of music. Memory, adaptability, the power to shade from theme to theme and make instant changes, to play everything necessary to one's program "by heart," the ability to feel a picture, and, above all else, a love for one's labor, the most exacting I know, compelling a person to divide his days, working afternoons and evenings seven days a week, with only fleeting hours for diversion or one's friends -- and these hours so often falling when one cannot enjoy the companionship of friends.

* * *

I have been in the organ interpretation of pictures "game" for seven years, and today I am as enthusiastic and devoted to my work as I was at the outset. I began my career as an organist in the Old Mill theatre in Dallas in 1917. For the past year and a half I have been the leading organist of the Granada theatre in San Francisco. It is my life, and while the work is exacting, sometimes almost wracking, it is the joy of my existence and riches could not induce me to relinquish it.

How I go about the preparation of a program for a picture, how I carry that program out, may be of interest and benefit to other organists. To begin with, my repertoire numbers more than eight hundred compositions, ranging from operatic, symphonic, classics of the masters down to popular jazz. I do not mean by this I am able to play on the organ more than eight hundred



IRIS ETHEL VINING

numbers -- I mean these are mine, that I know them so well I can play any one desired instantly, without the sheet music before me. And this equipment is the foundation of what success I have enjoyed in my profession.

The first step in my program, and the hardest, of course, is when I sit in the projection room and see a new picture run off "cold." I see it but once before the first of the week's performances, when I must accompany it. So I must have a clear mind and act swiftly. I make notes as the picture flashes across the screen, dividing it into episodes, deciding on thematic interpretations, jotting down effects for this action and that. By the time the preview is finished I have my mind pretty well made up as to what I have to do to make the picture sound as it should.

* * *

The rest is just hard work. I begin preparing for next week's picture Tuesday night after the close of the show, which at the Granada is any time between 11 and 11:30. The new week begins at 1 p.m. Saturday. From Tuesday night until Saturday morning I am preparing for the new feature picture, the comedy, the newsreels, occasional

theatre organ

solos with the full orchestra, in a darkened house, without the inspiration of audience laughter or gasps or applause of any sort, with nothing to guide me but my scribbled notes, my memory and my imagination.

The organist who accompanies and interprets motion pictures finds a real inspiration in what is transpiring on the screen. Full realization of that comes occasionally when we play in entertainments away from the theatre, on a strange organ. In such circumstances it is extremely difficult to find any sort of inspiration, especially if the audience is unresponsive.

I think the first requisite to success in accompaniment and interpretation of pictures is a natural and well developed sense of the theatrical. One must be able to analyze the scenes which flit rapidly across the silversheet. A native and intelligent comprehension of values plus long experience makes the interpretation of cinematographic action easy. It is a gift.

* * *

Anyone of ordinary intelligence reacts to the moods of a picture, which may be tragic, pathetic, burlesque, gay, sad, full of ominous foreboding. The thing to do, naturally, is to define in your own mind the various qualities of a picture, and then set about to find the sorts of music which will harmonize with the action. Remember that you are playing, in a motion picture, to all kinds of an audience -- that is, to all sorts of persons. Their emotional reactions to the picture and your music will be in direct ratio to what you play and how you play it, and to your audience it will sound furious, pathetic, tragic, light and frivolous, sparkling, "sneaky," as the case may be.

Don't do too much improvising. Your audience is mixed, it is true, but it will appreciate good music well played. Too many organists playing is just so much aimless wandering, interrupted now and then by a fight or a fire. If you don't know what it is all about you have no right to sit at the console. Your playing can mar a picture as well as make it seem a thousand times better than the same picture would be without music.

All trades have their tricks, and while motion picture accompanying is not a trade but an art, it has its tricks and they have their uses. Your audience is apt to burst into laughter, for no reason in the world, in the midst of a tragic scene. I have in mind Charles Ray's picture, "The Girl I Loved," in which scenes of supreme dramatic beauty were of long duration. It was altogether a lovely picture but not at all the popular success it deserved to be, because the average picture theatre audience is more concerned with the story than the artistic manner with which it is treated. In such a situation the organist can save the day by working to the picture -- playing softly, loudly, *dimuendo*, *crescendo*, working to a climax, coming to a pause. Unwelcome laughter can be suppressed by letting the

audience HEAR the emotions. Suspense can be accentuated by playing one or two detached bass notes, followed by a long pause, then the same two notes in another part of the organ, or on the echo organ.

* * *

It is not always desirable to play a selection the title of which happens to fit a scene. It is too apt to be overdone. Fruit on the queen's table does not call for "Yes, We Have No Bananas." It is dreadful to hear popular things worn threadbare by constant repetition. I know very decent people who are ready to do murder if an orchestra or a singer commits "Silver Threads Among the Gold." Tosti's "Good Bye" scarcely ever gets a night's rest, while "Kiss Me Again" makes one abhor the act of osculation, and "I Love You Truly" almost inspires hate. "Just a-Wearyin' for You" makes one blue, while "How Dry I Am" is almost enough to drive one forever from drink, and "He's a Jolly Good Fellow" makes you despise the person hailed as such.

Instead of "Good Bye" so eternally, why not Greig's "The Last Spring" now and then? And if one must have a kiss song, there's "A Kiss in the Dark" that's not hard to hear. "I Love You Truly" and "Just a-Wearyin' for You" are not the only melodies obtainable to express that mood. "At Dawning" and "Absent" are superior. And what a relief it is to hear "It's Always Fair Weather When Good Fellows Get Together" after the usual "dry" and "gang" bellows.

Accompanying comedies is the most difficult thing the picture theatre organist is called on to do -- that is, to do properly. It calls for lightning thinking, an Irishman's own sense of humor and the ability to guess faster than the camera moves -- to anticipate the scene to follow the one flitting across the screen this second. While you are accompanying a comedy scene your mind should be a scene or two in the future.

* * *

The modern picture theatre organ is an instrument to conjure with, and given technique plus temperament you can accomplish marvels, for in addition to the pipes with their range of golden tones you have bells to jingle, gongs to sound, sirens to screech. Jove himself cannot storm more than you, for you have at your finger tips the rain, the winds, the thunders and lightning, if you do but know how to use them. And you can make a dog bark, you can simulate the roar of an airplane motor, but only from the pipes of an organ proper can these sounds be wheedled. And they have everything, these pipes, from weird groans to humorous squeaks, tuneful whistles and the sudden announcement of the koo koo clock, good for a laugh.

**READ THE CLASSIFIEDS
ON PAGE 26!**

BLUE NOTES

The following excerpt was taken from a column entitled BLUE NOTES in the September 4, 1963 issue of the Guerneville TIMES (California). The column carries the by-line of Alice Blue.

"Remember a couple of weeks ago I wrote about the Marysville National Theatre, now the State, and the big WurliTzer organ I played there back in 1927? And how the organ had been ripped out by the roots and nobody knew where it had gone -- to the dumps maybe?

"Well, there's a fella named Dewey Cagle, a Berkeley scientist who dotes on theatre organs -- and organ music in general. He got himself involved with the Pacific Council of Organ Clubs and before he knew it he was putting out a little paper called "Tabs and Drawbars" -- all about electronic organs. He is the editor of the interesting monthly and does the job for love and nuthin' else. The paper has grown to formidable size, and Dewey is stuck with it.

"He also got himself snared by another organization of national scope called "American Theatre Organ Enthusiasts," or "ATOE." This wonderful outfit keeps track of where the discarded theatre organs landed. Some in warehouses, some in junk heaps, some in private homes, some even in public auditoriums.

"All I had to do was ask Dewey if he knew where 'my' WurliTzer is -- if it still is. Of course he knew. First it went to Mr. and Mrs. Stewart in Mill Valley. They installed it in their home. But Mrs. Stewart discovered that a theatre organ isn't right for Bach, and she prefers classical music.

"So recently the WurliTzer became the property of Dr. Robert Mowry, in Los Altos. Joyously, I wrote to tell him how happy I am to know that somebody loves that beautiful instrument and told him why I love it. I sent him a photostat copy of the letter from the WurliTzer Company, complimenting me on my good job with it, and sent him also a copy of the Grand Opening of the National Theatre. And it WAS grand, believe me.

"Dr. Mowry was delighted to meet me on paper and has invited me to play the WurliTzer when he gets it installed in the addition to his home. I'm looking forward to it with leaping heart, and it's OK with me if you think I'm batty. About music, yes.

"There just isn't enough music in this world. Plenty of noise and racket under the guise of music -- juke boxes blating -- sound tracks cracking ear drums -- TV commercials -- but music in the home almost isn't. Dr. Mowry says he has been sold on organ music since he heard it in the big theatres when he was six. Now he's a 'youthful 47.' He

*Please turn to page 16