

Playing The Film

CONCLUSION

by John Muri

There are some important requisites that anyone attempting the playing of films must observe. (1) He must have a good-sized repertory of music of all kinds. This library will be accumulated over a period of years and should be classified and filed according to its value as romantic, turbulent, Chinese, Indian, sacred, etc. The subdivisions can become numerous; so a filing and cross-indexing system is necessary. It should be needless to say that he will be able to play it well and have the greater part of it memorized.

(2) He must be able and willing to immerse himself in the emotional field of the movie. Even if he is sick or unhappy, he must have the resources to play joyfully for a comedy. Invariably, he should make the music-moods fit the movie-moods. This involves making concessions to the intentions of the film director or producer. Some directors, like D.W. Griffith, were quite sentimental in their film treatments, and the organist should be willing to go along with the feeling being presented, even though he may consider it mawkish or overdone. To burlesque or make musical fun of the action is to create a new theatrical event that the producer never had in mind and to distort the image of entertainment enjoyed by an older social order. What is left, then, is a momentary snicker, whatever that is worth. Over-sentimentality, of which the early films had too much, is annoying, but we shouldn't use silent movie shows to display how cynical we have become. Let the audiences display their sophistication in these matters. Let the organist stick to the script. A dignified scene requires dignified music, while a comic scene requires sprightly, happy music. Of

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course, the player will be careful to avoid anachronisms, even simple ones like playing a tune written after 1930 for a 1924 film.

(3) He must plan his programs. He knows what he's going to play because he will have prepared a cue-sheet incorporating a sequence of music that displays variety in tonality, mood, and rhythm.

(4) He must be able to improvise well during those moments when he is waiting for a cue to appear on the screen. Such improvisations will be musical passages, not mere chordings.

(5) He must be able to modulate from one key to another with facility. This requires mastery of the harmonic circles of fourths and fifths, and consistent practice in making key-changes interesting, using sevenths, ninths, and passing tones. A sure sign of an amateur is his inability to make a smooth key-change.

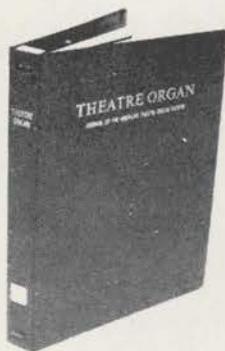
(6) He must be able to avoid or counteract the danger of going stale. In the old days, anyone playing for many hours came to the point where his musical well was running dry, and special efforts had to be made to do better work. However, aridity may appear today in the middle of a performance to any organist who has not prepared his program or who has

to perform for a restless audience. It is unforgivable to let the music get listless or soporific when organists are currently asked to play only one performance a day, particularly when the accompaniment has been featured in the press. Whenever one feels himself going stale, it is better not to over-react either in panic or enthusiasm. It often helps just to change the rhythm or the key. I find the latter the better of the two. A quick glance through a list of pieces (kept for inspirational purposes at the console) will assist in getting things moving again. He will not try too hard to be clever — all he needs is to be competent.

(7) He needs to be tactful. He will not use music that has traditionally been used to ridicule people of certain religions and races. His presence can be too prominent in a movie if he tries to comment on what's on the screen with old stuff like "Ain't She Sweet?" for the heroine, or "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead" for the villain. "How Dry I Am" for a saloon scene is just too corny. Comic sound effects must be drawn from the organ by experimentation. Some Kinuras make good duck quacks; some don't. Some voxes make good hog grunts and burps; others don't. Some bird whistles (especially those that aren't working right) will make funny sounds; others won't. I have had hilarious fun with bad bird whistles. The loudness of the bass drum determines whether or not you can use it effectively to punctuate a kick or a fall.

(8) He exercises good showmanship. I know the word "good" can mean all kinds of things. So does "showmanship." Some people think that showmanship is something above

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and beyond the highest levels of musical competence, a kind of charisma that permits the organist to "do his own thing" with any kind of music, change his tempos, harmonies, and melodic lines, stand on his head, and play in his underwear, because if he gives a "good" show and the applause is loud, he is a great organist, if not the greatest. I was mildly impressed by organists' clowning and pandering when I was seventeen, but over the years I think I have learned something about musical integrity. There are two rules of performance that seem to me fundamental: (a) you play a composer's music the way he wants it played, and (b) no matter how fierce or tormented the music may be, it must always be music first and noise second. A storm depicted musically must first of all be good to hear. You don't have to bring down an avalanche upon your audience to create a tonal image of catastrophe. Realism can become too much to bear in the name of entertainment. In first-class theatre work, suggestion has much more impact than actual representation. The farce of Laurel and Hardy's silent films slowed down considerably when sound was added to make the films more realistic. Realism destroys fantasy, and fantasy is the essence of much fine theatre.

It takes a degree of maturity to understand the power of understatement. "In youth," Bruno Walter said, we are "apt to love the shout and the great gestures." For young people, Mozart can be too quiet, too tranquil, and Beethoven can be too regular or square. The enormous power of these composers is lost when a listener's emotional scope is limited by youth or inexperience. It is reassuring to know that we can always grow spiritually if we will, that we organists who play for movies can help others grow in understanding of the intensity of emotions felt and shared with others in tranquillity, and that through good music we are expressing, in the only way humans can, the ineffable and the eternal. So, a movie accompaniment that moves with reserve power, suggestive but clear understatement, interlocking themes, and lovely harmony toward a transcendent summarizing conclusion can be a deeply moving experience. It will assist greatly in making patrons of our film shows, as they depart, say "Gee, that was a good show!" □

In Australia . . .

FIRST ATOS INTERNATIONAL CHAPTER

Upon signing chapter charter No. 47 on June 15, ATOS President Erwin Young officially installed the Southern Queensland Chapter ATOS in Brisbane, Australia.

With this charter, ATOS is now represented half way around the world with an active chapter. Formation of the chapter was sparked largely by Mrs. Beryl Jensen, her son Neil, and the Len Herds, who attended the ATOS National meeting in Portland last year.

While in Portland the Australian group received many invitations to visit members' homes in various parts of the country. They accepted all that time would allow and returned home with unbounded enthusiasm for ATOS. The thought of an Australian chapter was formulated and culminated in a request for a chapter charter. The application bearing twenty-one members names was received by ATOS President Young. Upon receiving the charter application and finding all in compliance with ATOS by-laws, the charter was signed.

The officers are: Chairman, Wilbur Kentwell; Vice Chairman, Lionel Jensen, and Secretary, Beryl Jensen.

Our congratulations to the new chapter. We have had a good rep-



Chairman Wilbur Kentwell and Secretary Beryl Jensen sign Chapter Charter Agreement.

resentation from Australia for many years in our national roster. All are dedicated to the cause of the Theatre Organ sound.

The Southern Queensland chapter will be another step in making ATOS truly a world-wide movement. □

A group of members in attendance at the meeting held on May 25 at "Wilbur Kentwell Theatre."

