What a Church Organist Needs to Learn to Play for Film-Plays, Told by Edith Lang of Boston—Opera as a Model but Music Must Not Be Too Condescending "Highbrow" Music Does Appeal—The Player's Equipment

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We recently caught the young man who drives the elevator in our apartment house and who plays an occasional music book. We learned that he was working his way through a serious course in organ playing.

"What sort of organist are you going to be?" we inquired, "are you going to play in church, or the movies?"

"That's just it," he replied, "if I'm not able to study very long I'll have to play in church, but if I can keep on till I play real well I'll play in the movies!"

This remark shook the pianos and delighted the warily, but it has a much farther reaching significance. The pianists devote themselves to playing the organ after the evening performance. In the second half of the season of the Exeter Theater, which is undoubtedly the aristocratic Exeter Theater, which is quite a bit more than several of her high-brow confreres have done before, Miss Lang herself, as she gazed quizzically after her departing visitor.

Then it began to be noised abroad that Sophie Braslau, the church organist of recognized ability, was interested in the 'movies.'

She inquired, "For the movies you must have a theatrical mind. As you see, I've collaborated with George West, an experienced man, on the subject of movie music, but it contains all the secrets of success in picture playing. Your playing must be the antithesis of church playing. The modern orchestra should be the mirror of the modern social life. Since you obviously cannot teach church organists to play for the movies, you must have a theatrical mind.

"They not only want more than a few of the people who apply for picture playing. Theatrical work is the triumph of human drama. The character, too, is practically that of the orchestra: he is stately and gay, with a sense of the situation's importance. The characters, too, are practically orchestral music, the music of the orchestra:a fusion of music and action such as you get in a symphonic production and as such it must be studied with fitting themes: 'If I Could Think of With All My Heart,' a song by Joseph Martin, a 'Tenor of the Incarnation,' a piece by Michael, and a piece by the Three Arts Club of New York City.

"They want to make a movie of the picture, not only for the house police, I 'went to it' and played with all my heart everything I could remember of the picture. I felt as if I were a boy through one or two hours of more or less religious and slow-moving story. Knowing that there was to be either success or failure, with its attendant cat calls, hisses and work of eyebrow raising by the chorus of highbrow musicians!—and not only that, but she was made to give her lessons between six and seven 'high-brow' music did not mix.

"By highbrow I mean not so much state of mind as attitude of mind. In this work, the musician must be receptive and responsive to everything about him," said Miss Lang.

"Besides being a musician one must love people and sympathetically try to understand all the comic and tragic and pathetic little things they do. When you step to think that this understanding must cover childhood, adolescence, maturity and old age it becomes quite a study."

Edith Lang at the organ of the Exeter Street Theater

Hearing Miss Lang play you feel at once that she must be a keen student of human nature; meeting her personally corroborates that impression. "People just plain people, interest her, and it is because they do that she is able to interest large audiences in her interpretation of the pictures.

"Does a church organist have a lot more to learn when he goes into pictures?" we asked, remembering our elevator boy.

The Music Technique

"He has 'oceans' to learn," answered Miss Lang, "I've played the organ in church since I was nine years old, but I found that knowing how to play the organ is only the beginning of movie work. Church work, you see, is not just to develop the theatrical sense unless you happen to play in a high-voltage evangelistic atmosphere, and to succeed in movies you must have a theatrical mind. You must never forget that you are not giving an organ or piano recital, but are furnishing theatrical music for a theatrical production and as such it must be convincing and able to carry people out of themselves or else your work lacks 'punch' and will go for naught.

"The ideal to hold before you in any picture is that the pictures is a fusion of music and action such as you get in a grand opera. Take Carmen! For instance—Bizet gets local color by having the domination of Spanish rhythms. Then you get your excitement in the music of the orchestra, in the mysterious smugglers in the third, the simple and sweet melodies of Micaela, the innocent country maiden. Another opera I especially love is Tosca. Each character is treated in a way that reveals the essential traits of his or her nature. Every measure in the orchestra fits the situation on the stage, from fervent love scenes to scenes of brutality, and tragedy. That is what movie music must aim for."

As a rule, however, the organ must suggest its presence rather than be overpoweringly felt. The music must not force the action on the screen, but aid. Miss Lang has written the score of the opera, and is dead to the drama. A picture should be carefully 'set' by means of a definite list of music. I may say here that playing for the pictures is a never-never land for new material, songs, piano pieces, organ pieces, etc., anything with a throb in it. I try not to make a crescendo to full organ more than once during a picture. The organ is often a 'crutch' for this is difficult to control. 'Atmosphere' is the most sought after. It is a curious fact that the Stevens fatigued a player becomes the louder he is apt to play.

"Do the managers want you to play mostly jazz or do they encourage more serious music?"

"They vary; of course the manager judges his public's likes and dislikes by the box office receipts and the behavior of the audiences. If they are restless and unruly the film, or music, both or singly, are failing in their work. It is a very close analysis. Many a manager thinks that jazz is the only thing that will get up the town's crowd. This is not true. While getting my experience in opera I was allowed to play a Sunday night show in a large theater where the gallery was packed with pictures, anarchists, and the like. What was my dismay to see bashed on the screen the screen? 'The Light at Duck.' How could I hold that scolding mass of young boys through one or two hours of more or less religious and slow-moving story? Knowing that there was to be either success or failure, with its attendant cat calls, hisses and work of eyebrow raising by the chorus of highbrow musicians!—and not only that, but she was made to give lessons between six and seven 'high-brow' music did not mix.

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"Since you obviously cannot teach church organists to play for the movies you must have a theatrical mind. As you see, I've collaborated with George West, an experienced man, on the subject of movie music, but it contains all the secrets of success in picture playing. That is why I replied, 'I want to.'"