

# Making Organ-Playing for the Movies an Art

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 Conspicuous—“Highbrow” Music Does Appeal—The Player’s Equipment

Boston, Jan. 12, 1920.

WE recently caught the young man who drives the elevator in our apartment house in the act of studying a 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 may shock the pious and delight the ungodly, but it has a much farther reaching significance. It shows the rapid rise in the musical standard of motion picture music.

As yet, however, there seems to be no school for picture players,—organ instruction is all given from the religious viewpoint and pianists devote themselves to technical studies which do not synchronize with the human drama portrayed on the screen. The question arises, how far is the typical musician’s training adequate for the picture player? Can an organist, for example, step without more ado out of the chancel into the orchestra pit?

The person to answer these questions came to mind at once. A short time ago Boston knew Edith Lang only as a church organist of recognized ability. Then it began to be noised abroad that besides these activities she was playing for the movies—business of eyebrow raising by the chorus of highbrow musicians!—and not only that, but she was said to be making more money in a year than several of her high-brow confreres put together. This was taking place at the aristocratic Exeter Theater, which is patronized not only by T. B. M’s but by the nabobs of both sexes and all ages within motoring distance.

We made our way to the stage door of the Exeter during the intermission preceding the evening performance. In the



Edith Lang at the organ of the Exeter Street Theater

green room we found a black-haired, mercurial little lady just parting from a young person with shell-glasses, a music portfolio and a determined expression.

“What am I to do!” exclaimed the black-haired, mercurial one, no other than Miss Lang herself, as she gazed quizzically after her departing visitor. “The sixth this week!”

“The sixth what,” we said, “solicitor for the starving Hottentots?”

“The sixth ‘high-brow’ musician who wants to play for the movies and wants me to give her lessons between shows.”

“Then you think ‘highbrowism’ and movies do 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 stop to think that this understanding must cover childhood, adolescence, maturity and old age it becomes quite a study.”

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 Movie 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 was only the beginning of movie work. Church work, you see, is not apt to develop the theatrical sense unless you happen to play in a high-voltage evangelical 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 accompanying the pictures is a fusion of music and action such as you get in a good opera. Take ‘Carmen’ for instance—Bizet gets local color by having a predominance of Spanish rhythms. Then you remember how well the music suits the excited crowds in the first act, the hilarious dancers in the second, the mysterious smugglers in the third, the stately and gay procession in the fourth. The characters, too, are practically labelled with fitting themes: *Carmen* has voluptuous arias in contrast with 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 should aim for.

“As a rule, however, the organ should suggest its presence rather than be overpoweringly felt. The music must vitalize the action on the screen, but not absorb the attention of the spectator, or deaden his ears. A picture should be carefully ‘set’ by means of a definite list of pieces varying in light and shade according to the picture’s progress. These pieces should be played correctly and preferably from the printed page since careless memorizing and playing by ear, namely, playing a more or less accurate melody and faking the accompaniment, are greatly to blame for the up-to-the-present low standard of motion picture accompaniment. I may say here that playing for the pictures means a never-ending search 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; notice, I say ‘try not to’ for this is difficult to control. ‘Atmosphere’ is the thing—not noise! It is a curious fact that the more 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 of entertainment. Many a manager thinks that jazz is the only thing that will hold a ‘downtown’ crowd. This is not true. While getting my experience I had occasion to play a Sunday night show in a large theater where the gallery was packed with urchins, newsboys, and the like. What was my dismay to see bashed on the screen a semi-sacred picture, ‘The Light at Dusk.’ How could I hold that seething mass of small 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 for the house police, I ‘went to it’ and played with all my heart everything I could think of with an appeal and throb and tune in it: Rubinstein’s ‘Kammenoï Ostrow,’ Rachmaninoff’s C Sharp Minor Prelude; parts of Tchaikovsky’s Symphony Pathétique, ‘William Tell,’ introduction and the Storm music; ‘If With All Your Hearts’ from the ‘Elijah,’ the ‘Legende’ of Wieniawski, etc., and instead of losing my crowd, those youngsters were as quiet as mice and at the close of the picture leaned over the gallery and yelled and clapped their enthusiastic approval.

“If the managers can be made to see that good music correctly played with rhythm and emotional appeal ‘goes’ they will be only too quick to take it up.

“A keen sense of dramatic values, lively emotions, a practical and sympathetic knowledge of human nature, as I have said before, acquired either by actual experience or close observation, a buoyant and cheerful heart, and an eye and ear for genuine melodies are the secrets of success in picture playing. You should be able to improvise well when necessary and be a rapid sight reader. Theatrical work is the antithesis of church playing. The modern orchestra should be the model of the motion picture organist.”

“Since you obviously cannot teach more than a few of the people who apply to you, why don’t you write a text book for picture players?” we suggested.

“The fact is that’s just what I’ve done,” admitted Miss Lang, extracting a bundle of papers from her music bag, “these are the final proof-sheets and the book is in press. I’m not the sole author. As you see, I’ve collaborated with George West, an experienced man, on the subject of movie music, but it contains all I’ve learned from actual picture playing, that I wish I had known when I started.”

CHARLES REPPER.

Mildred Wellerson, Nine Years Old, ‘Cellist, To Give a Recital in New York

Mildred Wellerson, nine year old ‘cello prodigy of New York, who has been heralded by many prominent musicians and conductors as one possessing extraordinary talent, will be heard in her own recital at Aeolian Hall on March 22. Recent concerts where she scored emphatic success with her twin sister, Eugenia, violinist, included appearances in Carnegie Chamber of Music Hall and in Palisade Park, N. Y.

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