

THE CINEMA PIANIST

HOW TO BECOME ONE

BY S. TURNBULL

CINEMA playing has a great attraction for some pianists. A few remarks, therefore, on the subject by one who has experienced this branch of the musical profession for many years may be of interest.

To a number of people it may appear a simple matter to get a post as pianist in a picture theatre, but one must realise that as far as a musical career goes such a position comprises only the groundwork—the business side of cinema playing has to be learned. Apart from schools and agencies who offer various opportunities for 'learning the business'—and this often means accepting a post in a picture theatre at a lower rate of pay than usual—the only way is, of course, to begin in a small cinema and learn by experience.

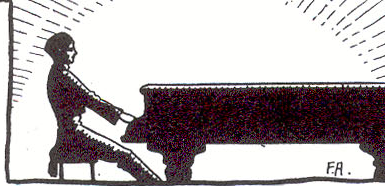
This, of course, amounts almost to the same thing; small theatres may not pay much in wages, but at least they are unlikely to pay less than their usual rate, and this is better than the pernicious practice of accepting a post in a larger theatre for low money. The latter usually means that the proprietors are paying less than their standard rate, and that there is one post the less available for an experienced musician to fill.

This fact may not, of course, be known to the 'experience hunter.' It is, however, an accepted fact among the cinema profession, and usually can only happen in a large orchestra where the inexperience of one is covered by more capable musicians.

Musical directors often have charge of the wages sheet of the band, or they may be given a certain sum to pay an orchestra—and it is not unknown for these avaricious gentlemen to obtain one or two musicians at low money 'for experience' and pocket part of the wage they should pay for an experienced man. Such individuals will often be met, and the only way to deal with them is to treat them in the same manner as they treat their musicians: learn all you can from them of the business of cinema playing, and then strike out for something better at a higher rate of pay.

For the pianist, the easiest way to obtain a post at first is as a relief pianist. Here again the best course is to start in a small place, for the relief pianist in many cinemas is expected to do practically anything within reason to make his part of the programme successful.

The musical accompaniment to the average picture-house programme, where no organ is available, is divided equally between orchestra and the relief pianist. This generally means that the orchestra accompanies the feature picture and perhaps another short picture, leaving the relief pianist to accompany the rest of the programme, often comprising the 'Gazette,' a short comedy, drama, or



'interest' film.

The pianist who aspires to cinema relief work must have a fairly comprehensive and varied repertoire. Marches for the Gazette; fox-trots or musical-comedy selections for comedy films; intermezzi, operatic selections and overtures for dramas; valse and other 'light' music for 'interest' films.

The fitting of these numbers to the action of a picture depends naturally upon experience, but quite a lot can be learned in this way from the careful study of music publishers' catalogues, a large number of which are now arranged to show the suitability of certain pieces for screen purposes.

A common fault the relief pianist often makes is to essay music too difficult to be effective in the cinema. An orchestra can play a certain composition with good effect, but as a piano solo the same composition would be either too hard for the average pianist or would not sound well—and, after all, an effective accompaniment to the film is the main requirement of the picture house. If the picture depicts a fight or a storm, heavy work at the piano is necessary, but not a discordant jangle of bass notes, such as one often hears. Never attempt music beyond your abilities; if you are enthusiastic, you can create quite as good an effect from an easier piece well played so long as it suits the screen movement.

THE ORCHESTRAL PIANIST.

From relief pianist to orchestral pianist is a step easily attainable, for, during the period served as 'relief,' much can be learned by intelligent listening to the orchestra and studying the parts played by the various musicians.

For such a post, however, a pianist must be capable and able to read practically any music at sight.

In the average cinema orchestra the pianist is the mainstay. His part, called a "piano-conductor" part, contains numerous cues, written over the actual piano part, indicating the chief passages of the leading instruments in the orchestra. These cues, at the discretion of the Musical Director, are played by the pianist in addition to the proper piano part. Flute, clarinet, oboe and cornet cues, are those usually played by the pianist, should any of those instruments not be included in the orchestra.

In making up a programme of music

to accompany a picture, the relief pianist can decide the order of pieces himself. In the case of an orchestral accompaniment, however, the sequence of pieces is decided upon by the Musical Director. Naturally, in the latter case, close fitting of the film is not always achieved at the first performance. On these occasions rapid cuts are often necessary, and it is essential that the pianist should acquire the art of 'jumping' without creating a break in the music.

Cinema playing to the general pianist is interesting work, for the average programme comprises some thirty to fifty musical compositions, not always played in their entirety. There is, therefore, plenty of variety.

It is usual in small bands for the violinist to take the lead, and so all responsibility for fitting the pictures is left to him. In some cinemas, however, the pianist director is preferred. There is much difference between the work of the orchestral pianist and the pianist director. The latter carries the added responsibilities involved in the task of leading the band and arranging programmes. A violinist can do this work more easily owing to the fact that there are usually two or more violinists in the orchestra, so that if the leader should stop playing to consult his cue sheet, etc., his silence is not noticed.

Cue sheets are mostly supplied with the film under the title of "Musical Suggestions." They comprise a list of the chief titles of the film in column form. In a corresponding column musical items considered suitable to fit the particular episode are suggested. It is the duty of the Musical Director to watch the screen until these titles appear, and then to change the music according to the suggestions given on the cue sheet. This work naturally requires quickness of eye and brain to ensure a good fitting of the picture.

Although work in the cinema is undoubtedly attractive, it does not suit everybody.

If a person has an artistic temperament of high quality, also the ability to teach or otherwise earn money, he had better leave the cinema alone. The continued and forced playing of piece after piece does not give much scope for originality, and often tends to kill interest in music—as real music. It would be better for such a musician to earn his living in other surroundings, where he can develop himself to the fullest extent and no doubt profit by so doing. But for others who have no choice, or who are not so highly developed musically or temperamentally, the cinema offers as many opportunities as any other branch of the musical profession.