

Jerry Nagano Concert Review

21 November 2009

Review written by Mark Dresden

This was Jerry Nagano's first concert at Dickinson and judging from his performance I rather suspect there will be more. He seemed to enjoy the organ and the audience, and the Dickinson audience enjoyed him.

His program consisted primarily of popular songs, mostly written in the nineteen thirties for Hollywood films and Broadway musicals. In addition, there were a few other pieces including short light orchestral works and a couple of Tin Pan Alley novelty tunes. His program material, while maybe not as challenging as some, made for good listening.

Also making for good listening was the fact that Jerry is a very skilled theater organist. His playing was flawlessly accurate. His arrangements were fresh and imaginative. He employed a great variety of pleasing solo voices which were beautifully presented and highlighted by the careful selection of accompaniments. His registrations were perfectly suited to the mood of his musical selections and they brought forth the very best in the organ including the effective but judicious use of both tuned and non tuned percussions. His tempos and rhythms were interesting and varied and while generally on the fast side were well suited to the music. The organ was always under his control -- no problems with finding the right stop combinations and no problems with dynamics -- never too loud, never too soft but always appropriate for the selection being performed; and for every selection.

Jerry opened his program with a peppy upbeat arrangement of the Ray Henderson tune "Keep Your Sunny Side Up" from the 1929 film of that name. This was followed by a mysterious "Girl Friend of the Whirling Dervish" from the 1938 film "Garden of the Moon." His presentation of this piece conjured up mental images of exotic dancers from the Far East. This image was enhanced by the featured use of the Kimball's very rare Egyptian horn stop.

The mysterious East was followed by conjuring up an image of a smoke filled night club with a beautiful and sultry arrangement of Jimmy Van Heusen's 1939 tune "Darn That Dream." This was followed by an upbeat rendition of the 1919 "Capitol March" followed by an almost down and dirty arrangement of the Richard Rodgers tune, "Ten Cents a Dance."

For a change of pace, Jerry next played a pleasant arrangement of the 1887 orchestral piece "Pavane in F# minor" written by the French composer Gabriel Faure. Then back to the U.S. with a medley of Richard Rodgers tunes – "Isn't it Romantic" written for the 1932 film "Love Me Tonight" and three tunes from the 1937 Broadway Musical "Babes in Arms,"

Our musical journey took us next to Burma with "On the Road to Mandalay" and then to end the first half, a rousing "Dambusters March: written for the film "Dambusters" in 1955 by the British composer Eric Coates.

The second half of the program opened with a toe tapping rendition of "Seventy Six Trombones" written by Meredith Wilson. for the 1957 Broadway Musical "Music Man." Jerry's arrangement featured the sounds of the band instruments from the tuba to the piccolo along with marching band percussions.

Next on the program was a medley of tunes from Gershwin's 1930 Broadway musical "Girl Crazy." The first tune in the set was an interesting arrangement of "Embraceable You" played at quite a fast upbeat tempo and featuring the stage piano. The other tunes were "But Not for Me" and "I've Got Rhythm." The latter of which, as might be expected, was also played at a fast upbeat tempo. From Broadway and the '30s we vault ahead in time to the seventies with the theme music written for the TV series the "Odd Couple."

Then for another complete change of pace, Jerry presented the novelty tune “Baby’s Birthday Party.” This tune was written in 1930 by the U.S. composer Ann Ronell and it was popularized later by the British pianist Billy Mayerl who specialized in such music techniques as ragtime and stride piano and who, no doubt, provided the inspiration for Jerry’s arrangement. This was followed by “My Special Angel” written in 1957 by Jimmy Duncan and revived by the Vogues in 1968. Lavish use was made of the stage piano along with a pronounced string like bass line. It was an interesting and effective arrangement.

The concert ended with a lengthy, over 20 minutes, medley of music from the 1939 film, “The Wizard of Oz” for which the audience gave him a well deserved standing ovation. He then played a final encore piece – the aptly named novelty piece “Finger Fling.” Needless to say, this piece requires substantial finger dexterity and on this score Jerry did not disappoint.

It was a pleasant evening of good music beautifully performed on a great organ. Who could ask for more? mk