

THEATRE ORGAN

Guidelines for Reviews: Reviewers

In the past, reviews in THEATRE ORGAN have received criticism for various things. While some criticism is to be expected—reviews are, after all, nothing more than opinions—it is important that we adhere to certain standards in reviewing submitted material.

For this discussion, when we refer to a CD, that will also include DVDs and printed material.

What follows are general guidelines; we do not want to turn out “cookie-cutter” reviews. At the same time, there are some things that should be addressed in every review. How you address them is up to you.

It is worthwhile to acknowledge that the theatre organ world is rather small and somewhat “clannish.” As such, the market for theatre organ recordings is limited, and production of a CD often represents not just a significant outlay, but a relatively substantial financial risk for the artist. We have an obligation to review a submission fairly, with commentary based solely on the content of the submitted piece—not what the artist may have done on another disc, or at a different point in his or her career.

We ask artists to submit just one copy of any CD they want us to review. Unless you are asked to return it after review, you may keep if you wish. You may not always receive the jewel case or original cover; we use the original for the illustration that goes in the Journal. From time to time, you may receive a copy of the CD instead of an original, (usually if we are either sending the disc internationally, or sending it to more than one reviewer). These discs do not need to be returned at all. You may also receive more than one piece at a time. We ask that you review them as soon as possible after receipt. The issue in which a review will run may be determined by space considerations. The more we have to choose from for any issue, the easier the graphic designer’s job becomes.

The editor(s) have some guidelines about who may review a submission:

1. If you are a current performing artist (or an artist whose own CDs are still sold) you will not be asked to review a submission from another current artist.
2. If you have a relationship with an artist (personal friend or professional colleague) you will not be asked to review that artist’s submissions. This is, admittedly, a small world, and simply being acquainted with an artist does not necessarily count as a “personal friendship.” We may ask you to make the judgment, and ask that if there is any question, you consider the potential for an allegation of bias on the part of the reader. You should

never be in a position where you might feel you have to be more critical of the submission in order to “prove” you are unbiased.

3. If you were involved in the production of the disc in any way (editor, author of the album notes, composer or arranger of any of the content, recording engineer, producer, etc.) you are not eligible to review that CD.

In writing the review, please keep the following in mind:

1. Reviews should not exceed 1,200 words. A double-disc release may run longer if needed.
2. You are not obligated to review any piece you are sent. If you feel that there is no redeeming quality to a CD, you can return it with a note to the editor(s) as to why. We'll reassign it to someone else. If the second reviewer agrees that there is no redeeming quality, the artist will simply be told that we've decided not to review the submission, which is the editor's prerogative. We won't throw the reviewer under the bus.
3. The review must never become personal. You may not care for an artist personally, but that should never be discernible from reading a review of his or her work. If you feel you cannot be objective with a particular artist, let us know and we won't ask you to review material by that artist.
4. The editor(s) will not discuss the recording with you prior to receiving your review, so please don't ask. You are expected to be able to form and communicate your own opinions and not be influenced by those of the editor(s). If you are having trouble wording something, we'll address that in the editing process after you submit the review.
5. The review should be primarily about elements affecting the listening experience (the music, the performance, the organ, and any recording or engineering issues). The histories of the organ and venue are legitimate topics to include, but they should not be the main focus of the review.
6. The organ, as noted, is a legitimate subject for critique. However, if you have a bias for or against a particular manufacturer or type of instrument, we ask that you discuss it with the editor(s) prior to accepting the disc for review. A specific example: one reviewer expressed the opinion that any recording made on a digital or virtual organ would not be worth reviewing, regardless of any other qualities. We feel that would put an artist who released such a recording at a serious disadvantage even before the first note was heard. The objectivity of the review could easily be challenged. We elected to have a different reviewer handle that disc.
7. Be careful about including comments on what you wish had been included; the focus should be what is there, not what you think is missing. For example, if a CD contains 18 ragtime pieces with nearly identical registration on every one that is a reasonable point to make. But don't put it in terms of “I wish he had included a classical number and a couple of ballads.”

8. If the album notes are misleading or seem to promise something that isn't delivered, it is appropriate to comment on the fact. In the ragtime example, if the title of the album was "Oscar Organist Plays Favorites from the 1930s", it might be appropriate to point out that the heyday of ragtime ended in the 'teens, and in the '20s and '30s other genres were more popular.
9. Don't dwell on the arcane, or spend too much space on peripheral issues. Keep the focus, so the reader remains interested. You may love the sound of the Blatophone on a particular track, and that's fine to mention; just don't explain how the construction of the pipe and the unique formulation of the metal achieved that sound. (Compliment the artist on his choice to feature it instead.)
10. We use a zero- to five-star rating system, with five being the best. We don't define the rating levels, other than to say three stars would be about average. Beyond that, what qualifies for any particular number of stars is up to you. Keep in mind that you can assign half-star increments if you want.
11. We will generally only review new releases. However, some older material is periodically put together on a compilation album ("greatest hits," perhaps) and issued as a new release. In such cases, it is important to (a) point out that it is a re-release of previously published material (if the names of the albums on which the material was originally released are available, it will be a good idea to include that in the review), and (b) keep in mind the state of the recording art at the time of the original release, and review accordingly.
12. Please refer to the Writer's Guide and adhere to our conventions, usage guidelines, and formatting requirements.

The review should adhere to the following structure and sequence:

- Introduction of the artist and any information about the instrument or venue you wish to include—general comments may go here, or may be included in the narrative;
- Narrative—this is the body of your review, containing specific observations;
- Recap and conclusion, including total running time of the disc (you may have to time it out yourself);
- Star rating—include a brief discussion of factors that led you to rate it as you did. It's worthwhile to let the reader know why a recording received a very high or a very low rating;
- Ordering information.