

Mlle. Alain Treats Audience On New Methodist Organ

By ORVIS ROSS
Guest Music Critic

A thousand lucky persons escaped last night's spooky goings-on, the sheeted mock-monsters, the peripatetic pixies with their plaintive cries of "tricks or treats" — the entire phantasmagoria of Halloween — for the more sophisticated scene of Marie-Claire Alain's recital at the First Methodist Church.



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The famous French organist's appearance was made possible through the co-operation of the church with the Southeastern Minnesota chapter of the American Guild of Organists.

The Methodist organ, recently reconstructed by Robert Sipe of Dallas, had previously been heard to advantage when played by the minister of music at the church, the Rev. Robert Scoggin, as well as by other local organists, but this was the first time that an artist of international repute had taken over the console.

ASIDE FROM Mlle. Alain's indisputable virtuosity, the main subject of interest on this occasion was the amazing Cinderella transformation of the organ, from the loose-jointed, creaky sluggard which used to try the patience of everyone who tried to squeeze a wheeze out of it, to the present brilliant instrument of infinite musical capacity and reliable mechanical equipment.

Old-timers still cackle over the story of Dupre, the eminent organist, who barn-stormed through the Midwest years ago and attempted a pedal solo on the moth-eaten Moller at the Methodist Church of that day, the progenitor of the present radically revised instrument, only to realize, too late, that only the tapping of his feet on the rattly pedalboard could be heard in the audience — not even a rumor of tone was going out!

THERE WAS PLENTY of tone coming from the pedalboard of the new organ last night; in fact, in the skillful

hands — and feet — of Marie-Claire Alain the considerable resources of the instrument were exploited to their utmost limit.

Not that there was anything flamboyant about her playing: there were no fraudulent flip-flops, no meretricious stunts for stunts' sake, no playing down to the crowd, or up to the intelligentsia, no cheapening of either the program or its presentation; neither was her artistry frigid or routine, the kind of thing which starts out with a bit of bogus baroque and ends up with a dollop of dodecatheonism, laced with a deluge of decibels that shatters the chandeliers and puts the roof in imminent danger of collapse.

NONE OF THIS sort of obsolete trickery had to be tolerated last night. Mlle. Alain's style is classically contoured and restrained, perfectly suited to her program, made up, understandably, exclusively of music by her compatriots, since her father was a well-known French organist, and her brother's "Litanies" is one of the "best-sellers" of organ literature.

The opening three numbers were of ancient origin, of historical interest only — "caviar to the general," and, since such scores are of benefit only to other organists, perhaps only to musicologists, is it not permissible to imagine that the time devoted to their unfolding might be given more profitably to works of more wide-spread appeal?

WITH THE PROFOUND and deeply-felt "Chorale in B Minor" of Cesar Franck, things took a different turn. The audience began to prick up its ears and take a more than polite interest in the proceedings — increasingly so, as the subsequent program ranged through the big, brooding Langlais "Poem of Life," a brace of chorales by the organist's brother, Jehan Alain, and the breath-taking, toccata-like "Dieu Parmi Nous" of Oliver Messiaen, contemporary Paris organist.

At this point, the Rev. Mr. Scoggin stepped to the console to hand Mlle. Alain the improvisation theme he had selected for her, which turned out to be the familiar old hymn, "O God, Our

Help in Ages Past," which was identified as No. 28 in the Hymnal, whereby we were able to follow the organist's skillful manipulation of the grand old tune through some six or seven variations, including a brassy snarl from the balcony trumpets and a clever two-voice canon, culminating in a heaven-storming pedal trill which surely shook the roof-beams. For encore, the artist forsook her Frenchmen and came up with Bach's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

THROUGHOUT the evening, Mlle. Alain exhibited flawless technique, exquisite taste and an almost masculine command of the complexities of the instrument before her, at the same time reflecting in her playing the truly feminine — and French — grace and charm which are so much a part of her personality.

That bane of the organist's existence, a squawky cipher, made several uninvited appearances during the evening — every time during the softest and most affecting passages of the music. Technician David Kemmer was on hand, at the ready to leap to the organ loft if his services should be required; but since Mlle. Alain played imperturbably on, Kemmer retained his cool, leaving us the impression that the intrusive Cromorne — or was it a Rohrschalmel? — or maybe a Trompette en Chamade?—had merely added an appropriate touch of Halloween with which to round out the evening.