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# Between Theater and Cinema: Silent Film Accompaniment in the 1920s

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For the first thirty or so years of the cinema's existence as a medium, virtually all films were accompanied by musicians. This meant that film viewing was a distinctly uneasy marriage between the "live" and the "mechanical," between the theatrical and the strictly cinematic experience; for, wherever theatrical presence is concerned there is a glorious, built-in tension between performer and audience, each being aware of the other, that the cinema can never hope to achieve. The rush of applause as a symphony comes to a close or the last curtain comes down, is in some ways a needed release of this very tension, as if to say that performers and audience have made it through yet another ever precarious experience without a mishap. Theater is about attentive wakefulness — while the peculiarly soporific power of film lies in the fact that the motion picture projector is a mechanical and therefore always perfect interpreter. Its very inanimate dullness lulls us into a purposeful state of imaginative "distraction" as we sit alone in the dark.

Art thrives on the embracing of such built-in oppositions and it is worth considering that the 1920s is an especially fecund decade with respect to the large number of innovative and compelling films it produced, in part, because the decade represented the apex of a unique confluence of dream-inducing, mechanical shadowplay and real theatrical presence—a confluence which the advent of the sound film would destroy in a way that could never be recaptured on so wide a scale.

From a strictly musical point of view, the trend towards a complex and sensitive approach to film accompaniment was, not simply, a gradual, evolutionary process. The first projected films (i.e. not the “peep shows”) were accompanied by a solo piano player who usually improvised, often mixing snatches of popular songs and passages from “the classics.” Eventually, films were distributed with published cue sheets suggesting what the piano player (or possibly an organist) would ideally perform in this same “checkerboard” fashion. By the 1920s, a major film released in a large city might be accompanied by a full orchestra, but since orchestras can't improvise, complete scores became a necessity. Yet again, these were most often a mixture of current hit tunes and classical favorites. Conductors who specialized in cinematic accompaniment would compile the scores and usually compose original “bridge” material themselves since synchronization was an immense tricky problem.

Eventually, serious composers began to see respectable possibilities in the new upstart “merely-for-the-masses” art form, especially after the general disillusionment in “high” cultural values immediately following the First World War. But most film producers, who were first and foremost businessmen after all, rarely commissioned orchestral scores from composers with a reputation outside of solely cinematic circles. Despite the fact that some kind of effective music was desirable, the score itself was still looked upon as a merely secondary and functional consideration which any cheap hack could more than adequately accomplish, i.e. why hire a Rembrandt simply to paint your dining room? And legitimate composers naturally enough tended to be fussy about the integrity of their orchestration, an attitude which ran up against the fact that the wide and rapid distribution of films necessitated great flexibility with respect to just what kind of ensemble might be playing on any given night in any given town. If producers had to commission a number of optional, authorized performing versions of a single score, hiring the real thing could be costly indeed.

The net result of these factors is that there were only a few silent film scores written by major composers and they were generally the result of special collaborations done outside of mainstream, popular fare. Camille Saint-Saëns is usually credited with the first “significant” one: a score for *L'Assassinat du duc de Guise* (1908), one of a series of French productions under the aegis “Film d'Art.” Other than Richard Strauss's score for *Der Rosenkavalier*, others worthy of mention include: Arthur Honegger's for *La Roue* (1923; Abel Gance, Director) and *Napoleon* (1927; Abel Gance); Darius Milhaud's for *L'Inhumaine* (1924; Marcel L'Herbier); and Dimitri Shostakovich's for *The New Babylon* (1929; Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg). There were two notable cases in which the idea for the music came first and subsequently a short film was commissioned to accompany it: Erik Satie's score for *Entr'acte* (1924; Rene Clair and Francis Picabia) and George Antheil's for *Ballet Mecanique* (1924; Dudley Murphy and Fernand Leger). These latter two examples illustrate quite directly how much more crucial a role music could assume during the screening of a so-called “silent” film than, paradoxically, might be the case in the later sound era. Indeed, the lack of major scores notwithstanding, some commentators on silent film insist that it is impossible to understand the experience of this “lost” medium without taking into large consideration the place of the accompanying music.

One notable score I have yet to mention was Arnold Schoenberg's *Begleitungsmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene* (1930), written for an imaginary film as a characteristic act of radical idealism on the part of the composer and one which today shows the considerable impact of cinematic form on the other arts in the 1920s. The titles of the three, brief, seamless movements in Schoenberg's piece “Danger Threatens” – “Panic” – “Catastrophe” – illustrate his grasp of a principle of film accompaniment which was at first not self-evident to practitioners. That is, an effective score should aim at producing interiorized psychological moods and feelings and not necessarily aim at displaying specific external “visual” effects, i.e. as if somehow literally to make up for the image's lack of naturalistic sound. By the former means, a generalized emotional weight and dramatic depth could be given to the flickering, ghostly image on the screen; in the latter case, the music would, in effect, compete with the image and only serve to remind the audience of the inadequacy of the cinematic illusion in the first place. This explains why silent film did not take advantage (except in its infancy) of one obvious and easily achieved representational device: live actors who would speak lines behind or beneath the screen. The gap between the space of theater and that of cinema would seem unbridgeable but for the fact that a great tradition of musical expression stood for largely abstract, non-representational forms of flowing

emotion and thought-process which seemed perfectly compatible with the ever-moving dreamscape of cinematic continuity. By being true to itself, so to speak, musical accompaniment had a unique capacity for being both present and yet "somewhere else" at one and the same time. Thus could a potentially uneasy marriage ultimately prove successful.

Of course, the terms of effective accompaniment could work both ways. Sergei Eisenstein, perhaps the most aesthetically sophisticated of silent film artists, and an ingenious theorist, was one of the first to understand that the silent pantomime of the cinematic image demanded a studied, rhythmic –to wit, a musical –treatment, one that was executed through mastery of highly formalized, photographic composition and so-called metric editing. Although Edmund Meisel's score for Eisenstein's *Potemkin* (1925) was not of musical interest in its own right, it is not surprising that it achieved the strange distinction of being the only film score which was ever banned. Presumably, it made *Potemkin's* revolutionary theme simply too volatile; having worked with the director himself during its preparation, the music was sensitive to the consciously operatic design of the film as a whole. Indeed, Eisenstein himself subsequently wrote a famous analysis of his own film in which he divided the narrative into five acts (identified as such in the intertitles), each of which ends with a stirring "curtain closing" finale. In other words, by way of brilliant architectonic strokes, *Potemkin* was made to be accompanied. Incidentally, even less musically sophisticated filmmakers in the silent era were enough aware of the value of musical rhythm and mood in their craft that it was a common practice to have musicians actually play on the set during the shooting to help the actors shape a scene.

For those of us who hold the silent film era in high regard, it is ironic that just when these experiments in film and music were really getting under way, the silent film was doomed to extinction. In the very year, 1926, that *Der Rosenkavalier* came out, Warner Brothers distributed its first feature, *Don Juan*, with a recorded soundtrack. The forging ahead of popular fashion is a ruthless enterprise. So quick and complete was the total abandonment of the silent film, that many important works and scores from the era were simply neglected and then irretrievably lost. Or, like *Der Rosenkavalier*, they only exist now in fragmented form. Yet it is important to consider that the reconstruction and performance/screening of *Der Rosenkavalier* brings with it more than the obvious historical interest, as momentous as that might be. Given the recent video/music experiments of Steve Reich, say, among others, or the frequent use of slide and film projections in the major opera houses, it is clear that the experience of live music alongside a mechanically reproduced image is an ongoing aesthetic enterprise and concern which may still bear fruitful results.

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