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IMPROVISATION AND SCORING OF THE SILENT FILM

Clark Wilson

The following deals with a different, yet historically important aspect of improvisation: that of the silent film accompaniment. It is somewhat of a parallel to the extemporizing during worship that warms up extended pauses or that joins segments of a service together. The actual type of improvisation spoken of could be considered a cousin to what we might do with improvising based on the text of a hymn tune.

ONE OF THE most legitimate, complex, and misunderstood of musical art forms is that of scoring for the silent film. Since the majority of this work was performed by organists (more than 10,000 of them) in the heyday of the silent cinema, we will briefly discuss the historic methods, including improvisation, that made it the most successful. This was the same type of basic scoring that has carried through to the Hollywood product of today; the musical aim remains the same as it was in the silent days.

Above all else, the most important word to bear in mind as we proceed is *respect*—respect for the music, respect for the actors and the film itself, and respect for the audience. How do we give a historically accurate presentation? How do we do our job of heightening the action on the screen, magnifying mood, manipulating the audience's emotions, and adding a third dimension, yet not become obtrusive or call undue attention to ourselves? How do we create a film score that may be a lasting piece of sensible, musical art?

It might surprise the potential scorer to learn that there should be little, if any, wholesale improvisation utilized in a good picture. While much "off the top of the head" playing might work for a fast-paced short comedy in which there is no time to develop complex musical themes, such will not be the case for a feature or serious film. Let's call what we are about to deal with limited or "controlled improvisation" that we include around a solid set of selections drawn from a library of good music. This will be the basis for our discussion.

Iris Vining, the legendary organist of the flagship Granada Theatre in San Francisco (and later the Fox Theatre, Atlanta) and one of the top film accompanists of the age, said the following to her peers in the December 1924 issue of *Exhibitors' Herald*: "Don't do too much improvising. Your audience . . . will appreciate good music well played. To too many organists, playing is just so much aimless wandering interrupted now and then by a fight or a fire."

In an article from the February 1976 issue of *Theatre Organ* magazine,¹ John Muri, one of the finest masters at scoring from the 1920s also admonished:

Anyone who finds it necessary to improvise for long stretches simply has been too lazy to learn good music. A large, well-absorbed film-music library is one of the most—if not the most—distinguishing marks of a fine motion picture accompa-

nist. . . . A good accompaniment has unity and continuity. The pieces cohere. Tempos are smoothly developed. While computers and incompetent organists can devise musical patterns, only an inspired human can create music that works artistically upon emotions. Good scores are the results of talents and sensitivities that are largely innate.

By the mid-1910s, the early haphazard playing of most anything that came to mind (or putting on an automatic piano roll) for the short films that were produced had been supplanted by a very specific art form aimed at adding in large measure to an epic picture (such as D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*), as well as making possible the complete immersion of the audience into the story. Certain techniques were used by every type of important musician and ensemble in America, and several were transcribed into necessary and required collections of "mood music" that made theater musicians' libraries complete. Additionally, there were method books sold and courses taught on the accepted ways to cue, create effects, and "put over" a performance. Motion picture courses flourished in institutions such as the Del Castillo Organ School in Boston, the Sherwood School of Music and American Conservatory in Chicago, and the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y. For the serious musician—and there were many—little was left to total chance or inspiration of the moment. Such would have been unthinkable even for the likes of Alexander Schreiner, Dr. C.A.J. Parmentier, Dr. Melchiorre Mauro-Cottone, or Albert Hay Malotte, all of whom were gifted composers and film organists in the earlier days. Also, these organists were considered a scoring wing of Hollywood and, in the big theaters at least, there were high expectations. Eventually, some of the best went west and lent their talents and styles as foundations for the new sound-on-film processes. Among others, Oliver Wallace (Disney films) and Carl Stalling (Warner Brothers cartoons) represented theater organists who practically became household names. Their work established standards for most everything that followed.

Today we live in an age that makes it easy to obtain a DVD of almost any silent film for our extended use in preparing the music. Some of these feature recordings of the original scores that are invaluable for learning what was intended. In any case, a thorough knowledge of every aspect of the picture, its characters and action, is necessary. We should know it like the back of our hand.

There were and are primarily three ways of putting together a film score that should be discussed. In each case, we must provide the basic elements, such as themes for important characters, places, and action. There can easily be 20 or more of these. They must be developed, or twisted and turned as necessary to fit the progressing plot. And we must be able to back-

reference or “resolve” themes at important junctures as the story advances, and as we reach the climax. Screen characters frequently require musical development as the action unfolds toward a final resolution. It generally holds true that our first two methods provide the only way of accomplishing these requirements. No matter what the course of action, however, also incumbent on us will be at least the following:

- The cueing of any printed music that is shown onscreen.
- The playing of any nationalistic or holiday music required.
- The playing of specific titles as required. In *The Phantom of the Opera*, we must have the correct *Faust* excerpts ready for close cueing. *The Merry Widow* and *La Bohème* are full of specific music that must be prepared exactly.
- Familiarity with the musical style of the time or place in which the picture takes place.
- A comprehensive understanding of the nature of the picture, whether comic or serious.
- The providing of sound effects in places where called for. This must be done sparingly and with ultimate good taste; a clock seen chiming requires an effect, the simple appearance of an automobile does not. The use of prominent effects, whether the real thing or simulated, may be considered secondary to the score, and decisions must be made as to how many effects will be attempted without getting in the way of the music. On the other hand, we should stay well away from the antiseptic and historically erroneous belief that effects have no legitimate place in a picture.

Of greatest importance, the first step in preparing any film should be the due diligence of research to see if the original score is extant. We shall consider the playing of such a score as our first method of accompaniment. Numerous of these do exist, both privately and publicly, and many can be quite fine. While this is not always true (and in some cases a score may actually be inappropriate today or particularly weak), one should invest the time to see what the original thought was in musically portraying the film. Should the decision be made to play the entire score, one must have the absolute ability to read (and frequently reduce) the music, manipulate the organ adequately, and constantly watch the screen, so as to not miss important action and cues. Few organists were (or are) able to do this, and there is relatively great danger of getting off with the action or getting lost. Iris Vining again stated that she knew of no one who possessed the ability to pull this off well. A partial playing of the complete score or the utilization of its important parts and themes, along with a good deal of memorization, might be the best way to do justice to the original music. In this case, we will create a cue sheet.

The cue sheet will be considered the second method for accompanying. It is a series of pages that are “road maps” of important cues and all of the primary and secondary themes that will keep us on track throughout the film. It consists of notation of all major titles and action and will give a lead line of perhaps four or more measures of suggested music for the scene. We can create

and compile this ourselves with music extracted from a library, usually inclusive of much opera, ballet, and orchestral transcriptions. Or we may find first-generation sheets that came with the films—far more often than a full score. Many originals survive today and provide perhaps the easiest, most effective way to really “stay with” a film. One has everything needed to satisfy the basic scoring requirements; musical selections are listed for us to find and use (or parallel), yet we are given some freedom to create. This is where controlled improvisation becomes important. It is used to link together all of the music chosen as the backbone of the score. It goes without saying that one must have full ability to extemporize exceptionally in getting seamlessly from theme to theme, scene to scene, tempo to tempo, key to key in major and minor, and all in the style of the written music. Quite an order, to be sure, and it must be carefully rehearsed! But this method allows one the freedom to “close cue” everything, get around the organ easily, and develop the score naturally and emotionally to its fullest.



It should by now have become readily apparent that our third method of scoring, that of wholesale improvisation with no music on the rack, will be extremely difficult if not impossible in satisfying all of the above requirements. It is a rare improviser who can create inspired music for a full picture without preparation. Moreover, one courts the ever-present danger of getting stuck in a thematic or rhythmic rut with no way out when using this method. It is certainly not to be recommended unless one is the equal of a Swinnen, Malotte, or Wallace. Most attempts at this style turn out to be momentary or slovenly at best and damaging to the picture at worst, and they run the risk of harmfully misrepresenting the entire silent film art form to a new audience.

Let us now address a few specific situations and challenges of picture playing.

Comedies, Shorts, and the Use of Title Recognition

While a serious film requires a serious accompaniment, light comedies and shorts can introduce the opportunity to utilize more popular music, the title or rhythm of which fits the scene or situation. Some feel that any tune that is rec-

ognizable acts as a distraction, but it is often a fact (as in later Warner Brothers cartoons) that a familiar melody can have a positive effect on a comic scene. One might automatically think of Richard Whiting’s “Horses” when that animal appears on the screen. As always, however, restraint and good taste must be exercised in seeing that this doesn’t go too far. For instance, one would certainly never play “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” during the catacomb boat scenes of *The Phantom of the Opera*! Unless it was some sort of burlesque performance! Musical clichés must be carefully and sparingly used.

We once again hear from Iris Vining as she suggests, “It is not always desirable to play a selection the title of which happens to fit a scene. Fruit on the queen’s table does not call for ‘Yes, We Have No Bananas.’” And John Muri echoes, “In every instance, (the organist) ought to avoid becoming a player of musical clichés.”

We should add that the short comedy of 18 or 20 minutes’ duration is the place where full ability at improvisation is a huge asset, there being no time to establish highly developed and complex themes. The playing, however, should be in a light, lively, and brisk style representative of 1920s music. Typically, the protracted use of block or church-style chords should be avoided, and there should be sufficient ongoing key and tempo changes to keep the score from becoming monotonous. It might also be noted that a recital of ragtime tunes played one after the other during a comedy is not musically appropriate.

Use of Effects and Tricks

We again caution the player against the overuse of noise-makers and spending too much time trying to make clever sounds at the expense of a fluid accompaniment. This restraint should also govern the use of the percussions. It is good to remember that a general audience may laugh at or approve of most anything we do, but we also can lead and even teach a bit as we perform. A high standard doesn’t hurt, and it also helps to keep the playing from resembling the proverbial boiler factory in operation.

If one is playing on other than a genuine theater organ, there are several method books that offer advice on the creation of many effects solely from the organ’s pipes. The church organ sounding like a dog, cat, chicken, or storm can be most interesting!

Use of Silence

Silence is traditionally the most powerful weapon in our arsenal and must be used sparingly. It is principally brought into play to denote death, unless specifically noted on the screen for something else. One cannot caution too strongly against its haphazard use.

Appropriate Rhythms and Styles

We ought to keep in mind that all score playing should be in the context of the picture. One does not use progressive ’50s jazz or exaggerated modern percussion rhythms for a ’20s picture if the player has any respect for his art. It is best remembered that we work with a powerful and historically important medium, even if it is dated, every time we attempt to score a film. We ought not feel, as one band leader recently mentioned, that “those people are all dead, so we can do whatever we want.”

Timing and Lagging Behind

Every film has a rhythm that makes it easy or difficult to play. If it is good, our job becomes easier, as we can virtually feel what is coming next and plan accordingly. By always keeping a close eye on the screen we can keep our timing exact and stay "on" with the film from start to finish. This helps prevent lagging behind, which should be avoided in all cases. Should one momentarily get behind the action, it is then better and less obtrusive to skip an obvious cue or effect rather than perform it after the fact. Total familiarity with the film is the best insurance against miscues.

Building of Mood

Some films contain lengthy scenes in which the mood or tension builds for a long period, and we must be ready with good themes and solid improvisation techniques to escalate the music accordingly. The flood scenes in *The Winning of Barbara Worth* are masterpieces of dramatic tension that require tremendous surging and building without reaching full organ until the very climax. *A Woman of Affairs* requires hinting over and over at a powerful love theme that finally breaks forth in full bloom as we see a ring drop in close-up from the seduced star's finger. Effective mood is heightened by the gradual escalation of musical intensity.

Development of the Music

A longer feature offers myriad opportunities to introduce good selections and to build on them in many rhythmic and modal ways. As moods change and develop on the screen, a tune can be altered to follow, as well as be understated, hinted at, or combined with another theme to indicate irony, pathos, or supreme sadness. The recurrence of "My Buddy" in a heavy pattern as the lad is fatally shot down in *Wings* can have an overpowering effect. And one might sometimes have opportunity to save the full playing of the entire big love theme until the very apex or end of the film, when the audience will respond wildly. No matter what the picture or situation, a great deal of thought and preparation must go into deciding exactly how to have the music progress along with the plot. One will find that "every trick in the book" comes in handy in preparing a fully effective score.

Getting in the Way of the Picture or Making Fun

The effective accompanist will become invisible as the film gets under way. The best compliment is one that confirms that the patrons forgot that the musician was there. Conversely, if we give the impression that we are the star of the evening or that we are more important than the film, then we run the risk of upstaging, burlesquing, and potentially ruining the picture's impact. We should under no circumstances make fun of or try to "outrun" a serious film, such practice being looked down upon in the extreme. We should observe that the playing of a particular theme every time a character appears can become boring and obtrusive and should be avoided. And we must stay away from music that automatically makes the audience think of something, someone, or somewhere else. Our axiom should be that we are there to serve the picture, not the other way

around. This does not mean that one has always to play softly or shrink into the background, yet it does mean that we should not blast the audience incessantly. It also means that the accompanist must work overtime to heighten, yet remain subservient to, the film.

The Emotional Player

It is practically a requisite that an effective scoring organist must be an emotional player. If such is lacking, there is little chance that a good translation of the film, which is emotion on the screen, can take place. Additionally, the organist should be able to observe action and have matching music come immediately from his fingers; he must be able to see it and play it. Instant recall of memorized music is a handy ability in the business: the more one knows by heart, the better. The accompanist will be challenged by the roller coaster of emotions ap-

Thematic Music Cue Sheet
W. M. W. P. 1921
DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS
"THE THIEF OF BAGDAD"
A Fantasy of the Arabian Nights
Music compiled by James C. Bradford
Released by
UNITED ARTISTS CORPORATION

1 PERSONNEL OF DIRECTION, ETC. Midsommer Night's Dream (Mendelssohn) 2½ Min
NOTE: If the personnel of direction and cast are not shown, omit this selection and start at No. 2.

2 (Title) DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS IN THE THIEF OF BAGDAD Balhama (Vitalia) 1½ Min

3 (Title) A STREET IN BAGDAD Balhama (Vitalia) 1½ Min
NOTE: Play first strain only.

4 (Action) THIEF GRABS MAN AT WELL Overture Comique (Kaiser Bala) 1½ Min
NOTE: Start at 2nd movement.

5 (Action) THIEF WALKS AWAY LAUGHING THIEF THEME: Carnival March of the Gnomes (Schroeder) 2 Min

6 (Action) MAGICIAN WITH BASKET Orientale (Aman) (Oboe Solo) 1½ Min

7 (Action) WOMAN APPEARS ON BALCONY In Minor Mode No. 2 (deKoven) 1½ Min

pearing in lightning succession in many films, and the capability to quickly change the music and mood will be one of the player's biggest assets.

The Library and Musical Sources

As previously mentioned, a comprehensive library of all kinds of music is most important in the preparation of scores. Music from the opera, ballet, great symphonies, overtures, vocal and sacred music, piano and organ music, and descriptive pieces form the backbone of a good library. In addition, original scoring material featuring all types of film music can still be found. A few of these sources include the following:

Motion Picture Moods, Erno Rapee, 673 pages, G. Schirmer, 1924.

PianOrgan Film Books of Incidental Music, 22 volumes, Belwin, 1925.

Sam Fox Moving Picture Music, J.S. Zamecnik, multiple volumes, 1914.

A small sample of musical headings from these includes: Oriental, Chase, Love, Western,

Rural, Traffic, Fire, Panic, and Dramatic Tension. Original method books include:

Theatre Organist's Secrets, C. Roy Carter, c. 1928.

Musical Accompaniment of Motion Pictures, Edith Lang/George West, Boston Music Company, 1920.

General music suitable for pictures is contained in such collections as the Carl Fischer Album of Overtures, multiple volumes featuring the works of famous composers and compiled by Charles J. Roberts, varying copyright dates.

One cannot possess too much music for preparing meaningful scores. First-generation players noted the need for every type of music and source imaginable, as well as the requisite abilities to compose, compile, reduce, transcribe, and improvise in any style. The requirements are the same for us today. The plus might be that we no longer have to perform five times a day, seven days a week.

This article merely touches on a very extensive subject. As may be seen, however, the serious work of photoplay scoring is complicated, exacting, and time-consuming. It will demand much study if the organist wishes to become fluent or even adequate. One who is already experienced can easily plan on 20 to 40 hours of preparation time for an average film, a good deal longer for complex and epic pictures. No organist should ever expect to simply walk in and play whatever comes to mind. And while "controlled improvisation" plays an important part in linking other musical elements together, it is not the main ingredient in a fine score.

Finally, we should always remember that the pictures with which we work represented the world's biggest stars and much of the finest of what Hollywood was capable. While we may not reach the same lofty heights in our own scoring, and while no two performances may ever be exactly the same, we should strive to make a lasting contribution. Whether our efforts stand on their own or simply become musical fluff will be the final answer to the question.

Note

1. Used by permission, reprinted from *Theatre Organ Journal*, www.atos.org.

Original articles on motion-picture styling in the author's collection by first-generation film scorers include those of Iris Vining, John Muri, Oliver Wallace, Lloyd Del Castillo, Esther Stayner, Harry Jenkins, Gaylord Carter, and Hugo Reisenfeld.

Clark Wilson has been organ conservator and resident organist at the Ohio Theatre for the Columbus Association for the Performing Arts since 1992. He has led courses in theater-organ styling and silent-film accompaniment at the Indiana University School of Music and is involved in developing a similar program at the University of Oklahoma. The recipient of the ATOS Organist of the Year Award (1998), he has also been professionally involved with more than 200 pipe organ installations and has earned the ATOS Technician of Merit award.