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Photoplay Music: A Reusable Repertory for Silent Film Scoring, 1914-1929

Although silent films were accompanied by music, they did not always have definitive scores. As in a classical ballet production, where choreography, set design and costuming are left up to local talent and budget, the music for silent films was left up to the talent and budget of each individual theater. With 15,000 movie theaters in America alone, each with its own live music ranging from solo piano to full orchestra, and an attendance of almost half the nation's population every week, the silent film era represents a period of remarkable creativity, productivity and attendance at live musical performances.

There are three fundamental kinds of silent film scores: improvised scores, composed scores and compiled scores. Improvised scores are created off-the-cuff by a musician while watching the film. Composed scores are made of new music written freshly for a specific film. Compiled scores are assembled from previously written music. In practice, many scores combined these three approaches.

Short, descriptive musical pieces intended for film score compiling were referred to by various terms, including photoplay music, motion picture music and incidental music. Modern film technicians call such pieces cue music or cues, but those terms were not common in the silent era. I use photoplay music here because the term photoplay for movies fell out of use at the end of the silent era; thus its use precisely coincides with the practice that I discuss in this overview.

The era of silent films lasted from 1895 to 1929, but almost all photoplay music was published in just the last fifteen years, from 1914 to 1929. *The Jazz Singer*, the first successful synchronized sound picture, appeared in late 1926, and with a few exceptions the last silent films were released in 1929.¹ While scholars have occasionally discussed the phenomena of silent film music presentation, not much attention has been given to photoplay music itself.² Photoplay music was a unique international genre consisting of around 10,000 short works that were once far and away the most frequently performed genre of classical music. A survey of the use of photoplay music in compiled scores

both during the silent film era and in current revivals provides insight into an important forgotten American musical practice.

In the early days of cinema, most movie theaters were small storefront operations and, despite much experimentation, the accompaniment of choice was solo piano. By the mid-teens, these theaters created a huge demand for pianists of any caliber, even mere amateurs. There is much anecdotal evidence that many—perhaps most—of them were women.³ Then as now, classical piano training did not cover improvisation as a skill, so most pianists required printed music for the films. With new films arriving in theaters every few days, a vast amount of music was required to avoid repetition (although contemporary complaints from listeners indicate that plenty of pianists were content to depend on a handful of pieces⁴). In the early days, musicians played whatever music they could find, usually standard classical piano works and popular hit songs. Thus the idea of the compiled score arose. As theaters grew, the same technique was used to compile full orchestra scores.

By the mid-teens, music distributors had settled on a pattern of issuing a “cue sheet” (Figure 1) for each major film, which contained a list of the scenes in the film and recommended music for each scene. These pieces were usually available for purchase from a central office or exchange. Theater music directors were expected to maintain a library of music, and either use the music suggested on the cue sheet or substitute similar pieces from their collections. The cue sheet is often treated as an “authentic” score in modern-day revivals, but there is little evidence that the pieces listed were considered anything more than suggestions. Some cue sheets provide alternative pieces, the director’s choice depending on whether he wanted to pay licensing fees or not. Many surviving cue sheets, including the two reproduced in Anderson, 1988, p. xxx and 32, show multiple changes from the printed score penciled in by a theater music director.⁵ Some theater musicians resisted using cue sheets altogether, since many theater directors had obtained considerable experience in background music scoring for live melodramas. The perspective of these veterans was that only rank beginners would need such a crutch as a cue sheet.⁶ A person creating revivals of silent film scores from cue sheets nowadays should not be at all shy about making substitutions to the cue sheet; it was an accepted practice.

Compiled scores constitute a remarkably efficient way to assemble impressive movie accompaniments. Typically the score compiler received the film or cue sheet “a week or three days before the picture [was to be] shown” and was able to have the film score arranged and the orchestra rehearsed by opening night while still exhibiting the previous film.⁷ For this reason, the compiled score technique is used to this day in time-sensitive productions such as television shows and movie promotional trailers (although now *pre-recorded* music is used, not merely *pre-composed* music).

Film scoring requires music suitable for diverse scenes, including races, fights, heavy romance, light romance, comic chases, dramatic chases, fires, tea

Thematic Music



Cue Sheet

M. J. MINTZ (MYNBY)

JULY 31, 1913

WILLIAM FOX PRODUCTION

BUCK JONES

in

"THE DESERT'S PRICE"

Music compiled by Michael P. Krueger

The timing is based on speed of 12 minutes per reel

1 AT SCREENING

Morning on the Plains (Wheelock)

36 Min

2 (Title) ANGERED BY THE

Evil Plotter (Zamecnik)

34 Min

3 (Title) THE STARKE RANCHO

Pollywog's Frolic (Rapee-Axt)

1 Min

4 (Title) YEARS OF STRUGGLE

Romance (Grunfeld)

1 1/4 Min

5 (Title) THE SHEEP

Cup of Bitterness (Zamecnik)

1 Min

6 (Title) GRIEF HAS ITS HOUR

La Mouche du Coche (Mouton)

1 1/4 Min

7 (Action) MAN JUMPS ON CARRIAGE

At the Shrine of Love (Kempinski)

3 1/4 Min

8 (Title) FIVE MILES NORTH

Incid. Symphony No. 7 (Kempinski)

1 1/4 Min

9 (Action) MAN WAVES GREETING TO JONES

Allegro Moderato (Lake)

1 1/4 Min

10 (Title) THE MARTIN BROTHERS'

VILLAIN THEME: Misterioso No 1 (Rapee-Axt)

1 1/2 Min

11 (Title) ANOTHER STOP-OFF

Angela (Durand)

1 1/4 Min

12 (Action) JONES GETS ON HORSE

Presto (Brockton)

1 1/4 Min

13 (Action) JONES RECEIVES MONEY IN HANDKERCHIEF

Western Scene (Berge)

1 1/4 Min

Figure 1. First page of a cue sheet for *The Desert's Price*, a “lost film.” This cue sheet, with its snippets of plot and scene durations, is one of the few surviving records of its character. The incomplete snatches of music are not meant to be played, but intended to give the flavor of the pieces, so that music directors could find adequate substitutes if they do not have the exact piece that titles called for.

parties, deathbed farewells, weddings, storms, war, scenes of danger, suspense, mystery or meditation—week after week without too much repetition. The classical repertoire contains music suitable to all of these scenes, but not in the profusion that a music director might require. A typical compiled film score uses from thirty-five to seventy pieces of music. From experience, I would estimate that a practical theater music library would require at least 500 to 1000

varied compositions. Even with this many, however, the most useful tunes would need to be repeated often. Large theaters boasted of libraries with 15,000, or some few with as many as 50,000 scores, typically a mix of classical movements, popular dances and songs, and new photoplay music.⁸ Erno Rapée's 510-page *Encyclopedia of Music for Pictures* lists around 10,000 pieces (presumably from Rapée's own collections in about 500 descriptive categories).⁹ This need for thousands of pieces—fresh, descriptive, in a classical vein but not too long—was the mother of photoplay musical invention.

Failings of Improvised and Composed Scores

Anderson dwells on some of the shortcomings of compiled scores—the necessity of a large library, the inevitable repetition of material, and the lack of graceful harmonic transitions between pieces—but the popularity of the compiled score technique resulted from the even greater shortcomings of improvised and composed scores.¹⁰ Improvised scores were acknowledged and discussed in the literature of the time and are the most prevalent kind of score in use today in silent film revivals.¹¹ At small movie houses where the film program changed every night, improvised (or “compiled from memory”) scores were probably the only option, as the performer had no chance to preview the films and select printed music. Improvised scores are extremely flexible, and can be pulled off with little or no preparation, but the nature of improvisation limits the accompaniment to a piano or organ soloist, or in rare cases to small, experienced ensembles with, say, piano, violin and drums. Orchestras were considered the accompaniment of choice for high-class theaters, and orchestras (at least in the European tradition) could not improvise.

Some early attempts were made to publish composed scores for films, but film distribution companies soon gave up on the idea. Publishing a dedicated score (even a compiled one) was not profitable, though such scores were still sometimes created at a loss to enhance the prestige of a film or a theater.¹² A brief run of a single film shown in a typical theater for a few days a week at the most, and unlikely to return, did not justify the expense of even renting scores. Once they became accustomed to compiling their own scores, however, directors preferred to invest in photoplay music and its ability to be recycled. Presumably it would be useful for the rest of their careers. Of course, no one anticipated the disastrous advent of talking pictures. An advertisement printed on a folder holding a photoplay music orchestration made the case in blunt terms:

2+2=4. An indisputable fact. Factory-made music scores offered with certain films *cost money*. Selected musical numbers if purchased for your library *cost money*. A rented music score serves *one film*. Your music library serves *forever!* Moral: *Why work for the landlord? "Own your own."*¹³

In addition, Hollywood's output of features, newsreels and short subjects was vast, and finding enough composers to produce "disposable" composed scores for all of these films would have been difficult. As Hugo Riesenfeld (a fine composer of short, reusable photoplay music as well as complete scores) wrote:

The average super-film, which lasts about two hours, requires as much music as an opera. Think of the physical effort of writing such a work! The life of even important films hardly exceeds two years. It is then put aside and forgotten, except for rare revivals. Will the composer of first rank be willing to devote his best effort and energy to something whose death is doomed before its birth? From what I know of composers, they would rather starve with the hope of creating a great symphony that will live through the ages, than grow fat off the proceeds of an excellent but short-lived film score.¹⁴

Unlike composed film scores, photoplay music could have been expected to "live through the ages," as a good piece might be reused indefinitely in newly compiled scores to new films. J.S. Zamecnik, a prolific photoplay music composer, was hired to create a composed score for the New York opening of the "super-film" *Wings*. He described another pitfall of composed scores—tight schedules.

I wrote the score of *Wings* in four weeks, which was less time that I would have liked to do the job in. Originally, I was scheduled to have eight weeks and it was my intention to compose an entirely original score for the picture. However, the opening date was put forward four weeks and I had to do the best I could in half the time . . . I immediately saw that I would not be able to write a complete original score, so I chose those episodes which most imperatively called for original music and used other compositions for those parts of the film which they fitted.¹⁵

When writing photoplay music, composers were under no such deadlines and could presumably take adequate time to write and develop themes to their satisfaction.

The most prestigious films, notably D. W. Griffith's epics and Douglas Fairbanks's adventures, had new scores specially composed (or partly composed) for their premieres.¹⁶ This trend increased towards the end of the silent era. But as the films moved from the big city movie palaces to smaller houses with smaller musical budgets, the specially composed scores were often abandoned as too expensive or unplayable by reduced orchestras, and the local musicians used their familiar compiled-score technique for these same films. The music exchanges recognized this, so that even films with specially composed scores supplied cue sheet compiled from standard photoplay music for those theaters that opted not to use the composed score. Consider the late silent-era film *Redskin* (1929), for which one could obtain, variously, J.S. Zamecnik's complete score as printed orchestra music, a piano conductor score

apt for expansion on the theater organ, the score recorded in two different ways (sound-on-film or on disks), and a cue sheet to create one's own compiled score. Besides standard photoplay music selections, the cue sheet called for nine excerpts from Zamecnik's complete score, available for purchase separately.¹⁷

The use of cue sheets and compiled scores meant that a film score might contain the work of fifty or more composers, from Edvard Grieg to Jerome Kern; because the score also varied from theater to theater, it was impossible to give the composers public credit for their work. Even though their music was very widely performed, the names of prolific composers, such as Gaston Borch and J. S. Zamecnik, would not have been recognized by anyone but the musicians. In the words of Gordon Whyte:

This is a field of musical writing in which the composer may not be known to the outside world, as the composer of popular songs or musical comedies may be known, but if he is able to write the sort of music which is demanded by the pictures it is safe to say that no other branch of musical writing will yield more performances of his works than this. The picture theaters all over the world are continually searching for new music adapted to picture requirements. This music is none too easy to find, for the composer who can write melodies may not necessarily knit them together in the form desired by the motion picture conductor. Besides melody, he must have a distinct feeling for drama and the ability to set down his music to reflect this. Mr. Zamecnik has done this so successfully that no motion picture theater library is considered complete without a very generous selection of his compositions. Go to Paris and see a picture and the chances are much in favor of your hearing a Zamecnik number in the score. Go to London, Berlin, Melbourne or Moscow, and the same thing is likely to happen. In other words, Zamecnik's music is played internationally and is relied upon by motion picture conductors the world over to heighten the effect of their film presentations.¹⁸

The Indefinite Orchestra

The American theater orchestra was anything but standard in the silent film era. Large orchestras of up to one hundred players in the big New York movie palaces are well documented because the theater directors were proud of them. But smaller movie houses had anywhere from three to thirty players, and in smaller towns, the theaters had to settle for whatever musicians were available. This could result in some strange combinations. Table 1 shows Gaston Borch's observations on the variety of theater orchestra instrumentation in 1918, and Table 2 shows Erno Rapée's recommended instrumentation for orchestras ranging from three to seventy-two musicians in 1926.

Obviously, successful marketing of photoplay music would be easier if all of these orchestras could read from the same published music scores. In a 1922 survey of movie theaters by *Motion Picture News*, exhibitors were asked about the musical accompaniment in their theaters.¹⁹ Fifteen percent failed to respond, which could mean they used no music at all, used mechanical instru-

Table 1: Gaston Borch Dismantles an Orchestra

Borch first gives the instrumentation for standard American concert orchestras (pointing out that they are smaller than European orchestras—“of course, such works as the symphonies of Richard Strauss or Gustave Mahler had better be left alone”). Then he lists which instruments smaller orchestras typically do without, from which I derived the last two columns.

Instrument	“American” Concert Orchestra	Typical Theatre Orchestra	Reduced further for small theaters
1st Violin	2 ^a	2 ^b	1
2nd Violin	2	1	
Violas	2	1	
Cellos	2	1	1
Bass	1	1	1
Flute	1	1	1 ^c
Oboe	1		
Bassoon	1		
Clarinet ^d	2	1	1 ^c
Horns ^d	2		
Trumpet/cornet ^d	2	2	1
Trombone	1	1	1
Drums/tympani	1	1	1
Piano			1

a. Borch specifies “at least two 1st violins,” four firsts was also common (See Anderson, 1987, page 265).
b. Borch specifies “Two 1st violins, often only one.”
c. Borch’s reduced orchestra has either a flute or a clarinet.
d. The two clarinets are usually given separate parts. Two trumpet parts are sometimes on separate pages, sometimes together on a single score. The two horn parts are usually on the same score.

ments or phonographs, or just ignored the question. Of those who answered the question, 46 percent used theater organ, 25 percent used piano only, and 29 percent had an orchestra. But of these orchestras, only 6.6 percent had more than ten players, 29 percent had from six to ten, and the rest were “orchestras” with five (18 percent), four (13 percent), three (22 percent), or two (11 percent) players. The unscientific nature of the survey makes extrapolation from this data risky, but if it is assumed to be roughly accurate, 15,000 theaters would have supported 3700 “orchestras” of which around 250 would have numbered more than ten players, 1100 six to ten players, and 2000 with three to five players. This was the American market for photoplay music.

Composers and arrangers solved the problem of the indefinite orchestra by “cross cueing,” which meant that an important musical line in one instrument

Table 2: Erno Rapée Builds an Orchestra

From 11 to 25 musicians, Rapée gives the leader discretion about which instruments to add depending on whether the theater needs “stringy or brassy” music. The last two columns give instrumentation for his larger orchestras—at New York’s Rivoli Theatre and Capital Theatre, respectively. His largest orchestra has a larger brass section than could make use of a typical photoplay music orchestration, but Rapée was very ambitious in introducing his audience to the classical repertoire and wanted to be able to present Wagner and Richard Strauss in his pre-movie overtures.

Instrument	Number of musicians										
	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	26	40	72
1st Violin ^a	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	6	8	16
2nd Violin									2	4	10
Violas									2	4	8
Cellos	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	4	7
Bass									1	3	6
Flute			1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2
Oboe									1	1	2
Bassoon									1	1	2
Clarinet ^b							1	1	2	2	2
Horns									2	2	4
Trumpet/cornet				1	1	1	1	1	2	3	4
Trombone						1	1	1	1	2	3
Tuba											1
Drums/tympani					1	1	1	1	1	2	3
Harp ^c									1	1	1
Piano	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			
“Leader” ^d									1	1	1

a. The Second first violin is an “obligato.” The job of the obligato violin was to play cues for missing instruments rather than doubling the first violin or playing the second violin part.

b. The author finds Rapée’s delay in adding a clarinet odd. A typical orchestration uses clarinet as a harmonic foil to the violin, and also gives it prominent solos. My own preference would be to add clarinet before flute, certainly before trombone.

c. Rapée recommends a harpist who can double on piano. Good advice—there may be harp parts for the classical works used as overtures, but harp parts for photoplay music are extremely rare. There are also many film scenes that—due to an on-screen piano—call for a piano being played.

d. It is noteworthy that Rapée does not explicitly add a “Leader” among the first 10 musicians. Presumably the violinist or pianist is “leading” from the instrument.

would be placed, in small “cue” notes, in parts for other instruments. In the absence of one instrument, another of a similar range could play the line. Using a piano to cover the usual “filler” work of the basses, violas and second violins allowed an ensemble as small as a piano trio to play almost any piece in the literature! Gaston Borch instructed aspiring arrangers how to do this in his instrumentation manual (see Figure 2 for “Example 91” alluded to in this passage).

Ex 91 (Clarinet Solo)

Flute

Oboe

Clarinet I in Bb

Clarinet II in Bb

Bassoon

Horns in F

Cornet I in Bb

Cornet II in Bb

Trombone

Timpani and Triangle

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

Contrabass

Example 91 is an illustration of cross-cueing. The solo line is for the Oboe, and it is cued-in to the 1st Clarinet, Flute, and 1st Violin. The substitute which you would naturally prefer in this instance is the Clarinet. Write, then, over the small notes of the clarinet part, “Oboe.” Over the same small notes given to the Flute (in case the Clarinet is missing) write “Clarinet,” not Oboe;” and over the same solo passage cued-in to the 1st Violin part, write “Flute.” If you do not proceed in such a manner, [in the absence of an Oboe] you will hear the Oboe solo simultaneously played by all the instruments to whose parts that solo has been cued in!²⁰

Figure 2. Gaston Borch’s Example 91, an illustration of cross-cueing. Note that the first violin part has two significant lines. In a small group (like the four-piece ensemble in Table 2), the second violin would be playing the cues on the first violin’s part rather than doubling the main notes or playing from the second violin part, which doubles piano.

Borch has unfortunately omitted the all-important piano conductor score, but it would contain the chord played by the lower strings as full sized notes, and the violin and oboe lines would appear either in the treble clef or on the cue staff. The bassoon line might appear as cues in the bass clef staff.

The final catch-all instrument was the piano, which, in addition to covering the notes of the accompaniment instruments, has all of the significant solo lines written in cue notes or, in deluxe editions, on a separate staff above the piano part. This part, called the “piano-conductor” score, is used by the conductor as well, since there was no full score published. Considering that most conductors were playing an instrument, a full score would have had an unwelcome number of page turns. Sometimes a “violin conductor” part was indicated instead of “piano conductor,” since violinists often assumed the leadership role. As indicated in Tables 1 and 2, if an orchestra were large enough, all of the piano’s notes could be played by other instruments, and the piano omitted entirely. Most photoplay music was sold in “large orchestra” and “small orchestra” versions, whose lines generally match the instrumentation given in the Concert and Theatre Orchestra columns of Table 1. The “small” orchestra’s parts consisted of violin 1, violin 2, viola, cello, bass, flute, clarinet 1, trumpets/cornets 1 and 2 (sometimes on the same score), trombone, percussion and piano/conductor. The “large” orchestration added oboe, bassoon, 2nd clarinet, two horns (usually on the same part) and sometimes harmonium. The parts are identical: a cellist would read from the same part whether in a piano trio, a small orchestra, or a large orchestra. The piano/conductor score was also sold separately, and theater organists played from these parts, using cue indications to choose appropriate stops.²¹

So, how small could a silent film orchestra get and still play the pieces? Advertisements for the *Sam Fox Photoplay Editions* state, “Arranged for full orchestra and effective in any small orchestral combination which includes violin and piano.” The folder containing *Carl Fisher’s Loose Leaf Motion Picture Collection* reads, “All parts are carefully cued and specially arranged so as to be playable for violin and piano trio, quartet, or any other combination of instruments with violin and piano.”²²

In many small orchestras there was no conductor—the orchestra leader conducted from his or her instrument, usually piano or violin (see Table 2). In the three “working” collections that I have looked at, those of Alfred Layton, William Swain and Jason Brueggemann, the orchestra appears to have been led by the first violinist, because all of the hand-written screen cues were written on the sole first-violin part.²³ I deduce from the lack of any marks that the second violin and viola parts were never used—not surprising, because the piano made those parts redundant. Swain routinely cut the title from each viola page to paste as a label on the outside of his folders, letting us know how important he found the viola part. This is not true of all collections, of course.

Piano

Berg's Inc. Series

22

All^o giusto

pp

p

fz

mf

cresc.

f

fz

p

GASTON BORCH

Revised by Sol P. Levy

Figure 3. Piano conductor score for *Misterioso Dramatico*, 1916, by Gaston Borch (1871-1926). A student of Jules Massenet, Borch was one of the cue sheet compilers' most popular composers. His musical approach is often classical and polyphonic, as shown here. Note that there are no cue indications at all on the piano/conductor score, leaving the conductor at the mercy of his musicians' ability. The numeral "22" shows that this was the twenty-second in Berg's Incidental Series, a collection of photoplay music by various composers published by S. M. Berg. Courtesy of the American Music Research Center.

The author's Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra uses an instrumentation of piano, violin, cello, clarinet and cornet. We find these five instruments rarely double each other, can cover all of the needed solos and cues, and give the most "orchestral" sound obtainable from five musicians. It is a tribute to the resourcefulness of the arrangers that virtually all of the repertoire, even arranged compositions of Tchaikovsky, Beethoven and Sibelius, works adequately with this small combination.

It should be noted that the "indefinite orchestra" was not limited to motion picture orchestras. The same principles operate in arrangements marketed to dance bands and salon ensembles.

What the Music Is Like

A musical example is worth a thousand words. Figures 3 through 6 show the piano-conductor scores of some representative pieces of photoplay music.

The music for silent films ranges, as one would expect, from the sublime to the ridiculous. There are soulful nostalgic themes and inventive "dramatic tensions," romantic mush and pseudo-Indian drones and tom-toms. All of this can be embarrassing to jaded modern ears, but it must be remembered that some film scenes do, in fact, call for sounds evoking overwrought sentimentality, and the orchestra had to play *something* when the Apaches rushed down the hill to fight the cavalry. The composers of photoplay music emulated romantic European composers, and the influence of Beethoven, Grieg, Wagner and Dvořák are all felt in the more serious pieces. A fascinating sub genre is the "international" category, including wildly imaginative pseudo-oriental pieces and ethnic melodies (including "actual" Native American tunes) adapted for the theater orchestra.

The first "moving picture music" collections appeared around 1910, mostly for piano solo. Why was almost no motion picture music published in the first fifteen years of the silent film era? Despite a common belief that "silent films were never silent," there was no standard presentation before 1910.²⁴ Some shows had no music whatsoever, some used sound effects, some used music in some scenes but not others, most had pianists but many played only for sing-alongs during reel changes (with one projector, only about ten minutes of film could be shown continuously) and took a break during the film. Different regional practices abounded. It may not have been until about 1910 that audiences became accustomed to hearing music as anything other than a distraction. The powerful novelty of the moving image itself having become familiar, viewers found their experience enhanced when the music corresponded to what appeared on the screen.

The first photoplay music anthologies were published sporadically, often by regional presses, from 1909 to 1913.²⁵ Some of the early works were by M. I. Lake (who mostly arranged classics and "regional" songs) and J. S. Zamecnik (who wrote original pieces, often consciously echoing classical works. See his

Andante Doloroso

Piano
(Conductor)

M.L.Lake

Con espress.
Sul G

19

Più mosso

Tempo I.

Viol.

Cello

p.c.

Figure 4. Piano conductor score for Andante Doloroso, 1916, by M. L. Lake. Lake was one of the earliest photoplay music writers, and a prolific arranger of classical works for theater orchestras. This piece is short and sweet, and can be very moving, especially with the violin/cello duet in the last statement of the theme. The Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra has used this for death scenes in two film scores. Courtesy of the American Music Research Center.

REDEMPTION THEME
from Fifth Symphony by Tchaikowsky.

PIANO & HARP
ANDANTE
Arr. by ERNST LUZ.

Note: This piano part can be used ad lib. In small combinations the organ part should be used for piano when no organ is used. With Organ, Piano can be omitted. Solos are for Oboe and Cello. When no Oboe and Cello, muted Cornet and Clarinet can play Solos. When Organ is used the above arrangement is well adapted for strings with Harp accompaniment.

Figure 5. Piano/harp/conductor score for Redemption Theme, 1916, arranged by Ernst Luz from Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony. This excerpt—shortened and adequately cross-cued—would have been more adaptable to film scoring than the entire movement as written by Tchaikovsky. Note the use of a (rather poorly-labeled) cue staff and the absence of any harp notation. The unusual footnote to the orchestra leader describes Luz's cross-cueing strategy. Courtesy of the American Music Research Center.

NYDIA

PIANO

J. S. ZAMECNIK

Moderato con anima

PLEASE HANDLE CAREFULLY

Vio.

SOLO

TUTTI

poco meno mosso

a tempo

mf

p



Figure 6. Piano/conductor score for Nydia, 1922, J. S. Zamecnik. By 1922, “photoplay music” had become a respected field, and the quality of publication had much improved. This piece is a fairly deluxe edition, with a cue staff, clearer cue indications, and fewer typographical errors. Courtesy of the American Music Research Center.

Chopinesque Funeral March in *Sam Fox Moving Picture Music Vol. 1*, for example). In keeping with the films of the early teens, the pieces in these collections were suited to chases, sword fights, Western shoot-em-ups and other staple scenes of early comedy and melodrama. The pieces were presented in simple arrangements to aid struggling musicians playing in the dark with little time for page turns.

Much of this early photoplay music is derivative and unambitious. It stands in the development of film music as most of the movies in 1913 stand in the development of cinemas. Most, though by no means all, 1913 motion pictures are stagey and melodramatic, and the music is appropriate for them. J.S.

Zamecnik's *Sam Fox Moving Picture Music Volume 1* is available online, both as MIDI performances by the author and as a printable Acrobat PDF file at www.cinemaweb.com/silentfilm/music/.

By the 1920s, both films and film music had developed a remarkable emotional depth. Zamecnik's music after 1918 is dramatically more sophisticated than his earlier *Moving Picture Music*, and it is a shame that he is remembered today, if at all, only for his more primitive earlier works.

Photoplay music pieces are short by symphonic standards, lasting from two to five minutes, usually with an optional *da capo* if one needed to make the piece longer, and often with several places where the piece could be ended earlier for shorter scenes. This procedure gives the composer enough time to expose one or two themes and often the opportunity to develop each. Typically whole parts fit on single pages, although the violin parts (with their extra cue lines) often take two or three, and the piano-conductor score up to five. To be useful to a score compiler, the piece must not wander too far from its emotional character, although this rule is often broken and—should a film scene happen to change character at the right moment—can be extremely effective.

Most photoplay music composers were serious concert musicians, working in what they felt was a novel (and economically viable) new field. Gaston Borch had studied with Jules Massenet. J.S. Zamecnik, who studied for two years with Dvořák at the Prague Conservatory, voiced the attitude of many composers:

I believe the biggest composers will be attracted to this field, for there is a scope to it hitherto unknown to music. If the great composers only realized the opportunities in the motion picture field they would be knocking on the door for an opportunity to write this music. I am of the opinion that essentially dramatic composers, such as Wagner and Tschaikowsky, would have been vastly attracted by the motion picture. Wagner's ideas were always dramatic and always conceived on a tremendous scale. They were so vast and called for such technical resource that he had to have a special opera house constructed to properly present his music dramas. The motion picture has no such limitations as the stage. Nothing is too vast for the screen. I think that Wagner would have reveled in the idea of fitting his music to the motion picture for that reason alone. Then there was Berlioz, whose ideas were even vaster than Wagner's. Had he been able to he would have used thousands of people in tremendous musical spectacles and he could have done this in the films. As it was, he died without realizing any but a small part of his vision. Again, take Tschaikowsky. His music is always dramatic and always emotional. It is also most melodious. I believe that he would have written unparalleled music for the screen and would have been enchanted by the problems the pictures set up for solution. Likewise, I believe that any future Wagners, Berliozs and Tschaikowskys will be led instinctively to the screen for the proper exploitation of their talents.²⁶

In reality, classical composers such as Stravinsky, who tried their hand at motion picture scoring, often did as poorly as famous novelists did with screen

writing. Although scholars of silent film music have tended to characterize compiled scores as potpourris of the standard classical repertoire, usually mentioning Breil's use of the *Ride of the Valkyries* in his score for *Birth of a Nation*, such classical pieces are quite rare on actual cue sheets. Zamecnik did not realize that his broad experiences in both popular and serious music had made him much better equipped for the task than the great composers he admired.

Occasionally ambitious musical tricks were attempted, such as the *leitmotif* idea wherein single themes attached to specific emotional treatments (jubilant, sorrowful, quiet, dramatic, etc.) were created for use consistently and repeatedly at appropriate places throughout a picture (see Domenico Savino's *Symphonic Love Theme No. 1* and Zamecnik's *Theme "Doris"*). But these pieces don't appear to have caught on (I have yet to find a *Symphonic Love Theme No. 2*). I suspect that, much as composers aspired to Wagnerian heights, most musical directors would just as soon have had five different pieces than the same piece five ways.

Prevalence and Influence of Silent Film Music

We think of music in the days before radio as taking place in churches, community band stands, vaudeville stages and dance halls. But for a limited period the most active musical venue was the movie theater pit, entertaining up to twenty-eight audiences a week. A few contemporary observers saw silent film music as the perfect vehicle for advancing the cause of serious music in general. Some pundits, for instance, encouraged film musicians to play standards of the classical repertoire as overtures before the film program. Erno Rapée attributed the increasing number of American symphony orchestras to the exposure to good music that people were getting in the movie theaters.²⁷

Considering that America alone supported some 15,000 movie theaters, many giving two to four daily programs, it is clear that the presentation and attendance at films vastly surpassed the presentation and attendance of opera, ballet and classical music concerts.²⁸ Weekly attendance in 1926 has been estimated by Johnston at 47 million people, or about half the population of the country!²⁹ ASCAP reported that silent film orchestras were responsible for more royalties than any other type of musical performance.³⁰ Hugo Riesenfeld observed:

With the exception of the Metropolitan, the Chicago Opera Company, and one or two touring companies, we have no organization which furnishes us with operatic performances. We have twelve symphony orchestras of first order for a population of one hundred million.

Were it not for a substitute that has sprung up in the last twelve years or so, a vast number of Americans would never hear the finer musical works. This substitute is our motion picture theatre—an institution in which the United States rules supreme. . . . Whenever there is a film theatre of any size, there is now a good orchestra. When one considers that there are about 18,000 such

theatres in the country, one realizes what an influence the industry can exert on the musical life of America.³¹

In addition to the vastly greater number of movie theater orchestras, each theater orchestra usually gave more performances in a month than a symphony orchestra gave in a year. Zamecnik noted:

No one can deny that more good music is being heard in the motion picture houses than anywhere else in this country. Where else can you hear orchestras of symphonic proportions playing the best music of the past and present to the extent that it is heard in these theaters? Here is where the young people congregate and here is where their musical tastes are being formed. In the larger houses the musical level is being pushed up all the time and it is no uncommon thing to hear movements from the great symphonies, tone poems and the big overtures in such houses. Invariably, such compositions are pleasing to the audiences and familiarity with the best in musical literature is bound to raise the musical level of all who listen to it.³²

The End of the Era

Photoplay music did not die—it was killed. The talkie revolution did more than just move the musical accompaniment to a recorded soundtrack; it fundamentally changed the character of the movies, thrusting them into a new realm of realism. The reimposition of audible dialogue radically shifted the function of other sounds. Photoplay music was cut off at a time when it was still artistically productive and breaking new ground.

After the runaway success of *The Jazz Singer* in late 1926, many silent films still in production were adapted with recorded musical scores to be released in both silent and “sound” versions. (Often the “sound” version still had intertitles; the sound track was equipped with a post-synchronized musical score and sound effects but no dialogue.) These hybrid pictures are the one type of surviving document showing how the top-notch silent film orchestras sounded in the late 1920s. Riesenfeld, in a tragic bit of hopeful denial, observed:

It is not probable that the Vitaphone will ever entirely replace the orchestra, but it does make it possible for certain films requiring the finest musical accompaniment to be shown in places where there is no orchestra available.³³

Riesenfeld failed to recognize the overwhelming attraction of the synchronized, and therefore more lifelike, human voice. Riesenfeld and Rapée were two of the lucky ones; their reputations guaranteed them a spot in Hollywood, where making scores for the talkies began. Eugene Ormandy moved from an intense period of movie theater experience—as a violinist and conductor—into an illustrious classical music career. His apprenticeship, having to conduct the same Beethoven symphony several times a day, six days in a row and then duplicating the feat with dozens of other pieces, must have given him unprecedented

familiarity with scores. But for the average theater musician, one of the best-paid jobs in history simply evaporated overnight. Hundreds of players were left saddled with vast collections of useless music. Of an estimated 22,000 theater musicians at the height of the silent era, only 4,000 were left in 1932.³⁴

Photoplay music composers, whose names were never publicized, were easily and quickly forgotten. Talkies finally allowed screen credit to be given to some, but many more silent film music creators were dismissed as hidebound and out of date, lost in a medium that rejected not only their presence but even, to some degree, their style. Most symphonic composers had no interest in the hot new sounds called “blues” and “jazz.” Most of these prolific and influential movie tunesmiths remain outside the history books. Erno Rapée and J. C. Breil are the only photoplay music composers to have found their way into the *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, included there chiefly because of their classical music endeavors. Their arguably more influential silent film work is noted as a sideline.³⁵

The Current State of Silent Film Music

The majority of silent films has been lost. Because of the instability of nitrate film stock and the carelessness of the studios that owned them, few prints survive.³⁶ Photoplay music, although not as fragile as film, is threatened by a similar fate, made worse by the musical community’s ignorance of the genre. The original manuscripts were often disposed of, most of the publishing companies that issued the music have long since disappeared, and the companies that currently own the rights to such pieces still under copyright often do not even possess copies of the music. Many of the published scores were printed on cheap paper that disintegrates with even the most careful handling.

When theater music libraries became obsolete, they were dismantled and their music was discarded. A few theater musicians saved personal collections, either because they hoped someday to see their value increase, or because they could not stand to throw away their life’s work. In recent years, a few musicians’ legatees have donated material to archives such as the Eastman House (Rochester, New York) and the American Music Research Center at the University of Colorado (Boulder). In one case, an alert film fan noticed an old house whose basement was being cleaned out after its owner had died, and she managed to save about half of William Swain’s music collection from the garbage heap—the first half having already been hauled away. But even the collections that do not survive tend to be haphazard assemblages based on the taste and budget of the collector. Some arrangements have missing parts, and none of these collections contains the complete works of any one writer. It is impossible, therefore, to observe or study the full range of accomplishment for even a single silent film composer in one place.

Even for J. S. Zamecnik, an imaginative arranger and a prolific composer who stayed with one publishing company for his entire career, I have been un-

able to find out even such basic information as a full list of published pieces or the sales figures for his most popular collections. Of course, the economic incentives for retaining such information have long since disappeared.

That some silent films survive at all is a fortunate happenstance. A handful of people who care about their craft and history have rescued old prints and passed them on. Archives such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Library of Congress made an effort to restore and preserve them. The music for these films must also be restored. If silent film music is to survive and be appreciated in its original setting, it is important for the music itself to be played and heard as well, both with and without films. The craft of silent film scoring once moribund is again a living tradition, and it is important that screening happen where new music is improvised or composed. In order also to revive the art of the compiled score, we must preserve and make available the music from which scores can be compiled. Photoplay music can be performed in concert suites showcasing eight to twelve good pieces by a particular composer, and Mont Alto's experience suggests that audiences will be receptive to such experiments. I would be happy to work with any orchestra director who is interested in finding appropriate music, and recommending composers and pieces appropriate for concert revivals.

Musical groups with access to photoplay music collections will find that silent film score compiling is creative and rewarding project, not as daunting as it might at first appear. On the contrary, the necessary skills lie well within the capability of good musicians and are aided by the use of photocopy machines and videocassette players. Such modern electronic conveniences allow the performance of fresh, accessible music from a rare and charming genre by moderately competent players. Nearly all arrangements can be accommodated by ensembles of widely varying instrumentation. Given the widespread renewal of interest in classic silent films, a tremendous opportunity for performing musicians has arisen. Supplying appropriate music for these landmarks of film history can lead to highly satisfying esthetic results as well as very popular performances.

Notes

1. Although a surprising amount of silent film music was published in 1929, including much from Germany where the silent era lasted slightly longer, I have not encountered any photoplay music published in 1930 or later.

2. Martin Miller Marks, *Music and the Silent Film, Contexts and Case Studies 1895-1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) presents a detailed analysis of early "composed" scores, although it largely ignores the major photoplay music composers and concentrates on well-known composers like Erik Satie, Saint Saëns, and J. C. Breil whose work in the field, though interesting, was neither prolific nor widely heard. By stopping his study in 1924, Marks also omits the most productive period of film score composition. Gillian Anderson gives background material on silent film music presentation with an emphasis on composed scores and the state-of-the-art film

presentations in New York theaters in, "The Presentation of Silent Films, or Music as Anesthesia," *Journal of Musicology* 5 (1987): 257-295. The title refers to an amusing editorial on how most films are so bad an audience would not put up with them without the "anesthesia" of music. Anderson discusses this issue again in the introduction to *Music for Silent Films 1894-1929: A Guide* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1988). This book lists the collection of film scores and cue sheets at the Library of Congress in Washington and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Phil Carli discusses modern (1990s) scoring and performance practices, including resurrections of original scores and modern composed scores in "Musicology and the Presentation of Silent Film," *Film History* 7:3 (1995): 298-321.

3. More people have told me "my grandmother used to play for the movies" than "my grandfather used to play for the movies." Solo accompanists pictured in films that depict movie theaters are frequently women (see *Those Awful Hats* and *Mabel's Dramatic Career*). Silent film music may represent the first mass opportunity of paid work for women musicians, although these jobs disappeared following the transition to sound. I am unaware of any studies of this topic.

4. Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture 1915-1928*, vol. 3, *History of the American Cinema* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 45.

5. For example, see the two reproduced in Anderson, *Music for Silent Films*, xxx and 32.

6. Anderson, *Music for Silent Films*, xxxi. An account of Hugo Riesenfeld's compiling method occurs in both Anderson, "Presentation of Silent Films," 271, and Anderson, *Music for Silent Films*, xxii.

7. Edith Lang and George West, *Musical Accompaniment of Motion Pictures* (Boston: The Boston Music Company, 1920). This book is aimed at beginning theater pianists and organists.

8. Anderson, "Presentation of Silent Films," 273.

9. Erno Rapée, *Encyclopedia of Music for Pictures* (New York: Belwin, 1925; reprint New York: Arno Press, 1970). This book provides directions on operating a movie theater, assembling an orchestra, scoring films and also categorizes 400 pages of some 10,000 titles of music. The number 10,000 comes from an advertisement for the book appearing on a folder which contains Morris Alborn's photoplay piece *Farcical Allegro* (New York: Belwin, 1923). This number may be an exaggeration—another part of the ad copy reads: ". . . as essential to the musician and the music clerk as are his physical and mental powers in the performance of his daily duties"—however the number of titles in the book is impressive.

10. Anderson, *Music for Silent Films*, xxxi.

11. Lang and West, *Musical Accompaniment*, 7; Rapée, *Encyclopedia*, 17.

12. "In the late teens Paramount entered into an arrangement with the music publisher Schirmer to print scores for 116 films. All lost money because of lack of support from exchanges and exhibitors" (Koszarski, *Evening's Entertainment*, 43).

13. Undated advertisement on music folder from unspecified supplier; in the Alfred Layton Collection, American Music Research Center, University of Colorado, Boulder.

14. A film would not run two years in one theater; rather it would start in the big theaters of New York and Los Angeles, and then over the course of two years it would make its way through second- and third-class theaters in progressively smaller towns where the "composed" score would be less likely to be used. As for Riesenfeld's "revivals," there are many films for which the score survives but the film itself has been lost. The chances of these "orphaned" scores ever being revived are pretty hopeless. Hugo Riesenfeld, "Music and Motion Pictures," in *The Motion Picture in its Economic and Social Aspects* issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 128 (1926): 58-62; available from http://www.cinemaweb.com/silentfilm/bookshelf/1_hreis1.htm, accessed 19 October 1999.

15. Gordon Whyte, "J. S. Zamecnik," *The Metronome* (September 1927): 41; an interview with Zamecnik who was in New York for the premiere of his score for *Wings* comprises the bulk of this article.

16. Anderson, *Music for Silent Films*, xxxii-xlii.

17. The thematic cue sheet for *Redskin* is located in the personal collection of Susan Hall in Boulder, Colorado; see also, J.S. Zamecnik's *Nine Character Themes from Redskin* (New York: Sam Fox Publishing, 1929).

18. Whyte, 41.

19. Koszarski, *Evening's Entertainment*, 41.

20. All Gaston Borch quotations are taken from his *Practical Manual of Instrumentation* (New York: G. Schirmer and The Boston Music Company, 1918). Gaston Borch is literally treated as a footnote in music history. The only biographical information I have been able to find is in a footnote in a biography of Jules Massenet which indicates that Borch, a cellist, was the son of a woman once engaged to Massenet and a student of Massenet.

21. Rapée, *Encyclopedia*, 17.

22. Located in the Alfred Layton Collection, American Music Research Center, University of Colorado at Boulder.

23. Part of the charm of a "used" photoplay music collection lies in the movie cues penciled on the parts, reminding the conductor when to begin the piece. These range from "Mix unloads dynamite," presumably from a Tom Mix western, to "fade to elephant" or "identity of gardener is discovered," whose film source may be impossible to identify.

24. Rick Altman, "The Silence of the Silents," *Musical Quarterly* 80 (1996): 648-716.

25. J. S. Zamecnik believed that his 1913 *Sam Fox Moving Picture Music* was the first photoplay music published according to Whyte, "Zamecnik," 41; however, Gregg Frelinger self published *Motion Picture Piano Music* in 1909. This was probably not as widely distributed as Zamecnik's music. Advertisements for M.L. Lake's dance pieces date from 1912 (see Marks, *Music and the Silent Film*, 68).

26. Whyte, "Zamecnik," 41.

27. Rapée is also proud of "the chance given . . . young American composers, such as Griffes, Mortimer Wilson, and others to have their works performed. . . . While symphony orchestras will perform a new work once or twice a year, the same work on the program of the movie theater will be heard by 24 to 28 different audiences in one week" (Rapée, *Encyclopedia*, 24); "Never lose sight of the fact that you are placed in a position of extraordinary advantage to raise and to improve the musical taste of your audience" (Lang and West, *Musical Accompaniment*, 62).

28. William A. Johnston, "The Structure of the Motion Picture Industry," *The Motion Picture in its Economic and Social Aspects*, issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* vol. 128 (1926): 217. Koszarski places the number of theaters in 1919 at 15,000 (*Evening's Entertainment*, 13). As larger theaters were built they put small nickelodeons out of business, but apparently keeping the number of theaters roughly constant.

29. Johnston, "Structure of Motion Picture Industry," 217.

30. "The motion picture industry is the foremost employer of musicians and music—it pays more money for music than any other industry in the world. Almost more than all others put together" E.C. Mills, "The Musician, the movie and the music tax," *Metronome* (15 September 1926): 26.

31. Riesenfeld implies that there were 18,000 theaters with orchestras, as opposed to theaters with piano or organ, but this figure is almost certainly wrong (Riesenfeld, "Music and the Motion Picture," 58-62). Johnson's figure of 15,000 is more realistic, and probably fewer than a third of these theaters had orchestras. Nevertheless, theaters with orchestras would have played more frequently and to larger audiences, thereby exhibiting more influence than smaller theaters (Johnson, "Structure of Motion Picture Industry," 217).

32. Whyte, "Zamecnik," 41.

33. Riesenfeld, "Music and the Motion Picture," 58-62.

34. Kevin Brownlow and David Gill, *The End of the Era*, from the series *Hollywood* (n.p.: HBO Video, 1980).

35. *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, s.v. "Rapée, Erno," and "Breil, Joseph Carl."

36. David Pierce, "The Legion of the Condemned—Why American Silent Films Perished," *Film History* 9 (1997): 5-22.