


Playing The Film

PART I

by John Muri

ears ago we used to say that the organist who provided the music for a motion picture showing was "playing the film." Hence the title heading this article, the first of a series of three on film-playing. Regarding this sort of work, it has been often said — even in THEATRE ORGAN articles — that the best movie accompaniments are those of which audiences remain unaware. Any organist who has gone through years of apprenticeship and effort to improve his movie playing knows that such a generalization is too sweeping. The concept that music should enhance movie action while remaining imperceptible suggests that movie-music performs little more than hypnosis or sedation. Such a view has emerged from the floods of background music in supermarkets, arcades, and offices. If the listener doesn't know that the music is going on around him, how can it affect his emotions? What about sound effects? Are they supposed to be unobtrusive, too? Why have them at all, if an accompaniment is not supposed to distract from the film image?

It is easy to over-simplify an idea. Movie accompaniments can be quite complicated affairs with numerous themes to indicate personalities, relationships, and moods. They are properly unobtrusive if the music is worthless, but good music is worth hearing, and it enhances rather than destroys a film's impact. I remember how people were visibly moved at the Chicago Theatre in 1923 when a long storm and fire movie-scene was accompanied by the booming organ, lightning flashes, Brenograph flames, and the hissing and wailing sounds of wind, rain, and fire. Vocal soloists have been used at critical scenes with fine effect. An example still exists in the all-music sound-track of the 1928 silent, *Seventh Heaven*, in which a soprano sings Gounod's "O Divine Redeemer" during the betrothal scene. It is startling, beautiful, and dignified piece of

showmanship.

The organist can help tell a story, too, but the audience will have to pay attention. He can make clear (by playing one of the themes he has developed earlier in the picture) that something special is in the making, such as a love affair, a memory, a realization, or a deception. In the last case, he can musically suggest that things are not as they appear. Although he could do it, in a mystery film it would be improper for him to reveal the identity of a mysterious stranger through a musical identification.

In legitimate cases it is important that the organist be heard consciously and responded to emotionally and intellectually. If you don't listen with your brains, you'll miss some of the subtleties of music. You'll also miss some of the beautiful goofs organists make. If it doesn't spoil the show for you, you can have fun listening to the organist play "Linger Awhile" as the villain is dying a horrible death. A horror movie can be made laughable at the right moment if the organist plays "Strangers in the Night", but I don't recommend doing it.

The building up of emotional tension in a film character is quite easily reproduced in music. In Paramount's 1925 *The Vanishing American*, an Indian returns to his home after a war to learn that his bride-to-be has died. He has undergone many frustrations and losses, and at this point he breaks. The excellent film editing makes it possible to build up the tension to the breaking point musically and to express the wild despair. Here film and music add up to a double emotional impact. Music at such a moment should not be a zero quantity of background noise. It is a very important part of the show.

Many a poor film has taken on interest and some charm if care has been taken in providing a musical background for it. Actually, most films of the early years were over-

acted and badly edited. Some of the over-playing is still a source of embarrassment to actors who made those films. It was the music that made them worth while. Some people tell me that they do not care to look at old movies. Whenever people walk out on our old-movie organ shows before the end of the film, we need to find out why. We lose audiences when the film is not particularly good to begin with. Just because it is old or because it has a name star doesn't make it worth watching in 1974. Louise Glaum, one of the "vampire" stars of 1916, said in a telephone call just before her death a couple of years ago, "Old movies? What do you want to look at those old things for? They make much better movies nowadays." Technically speaking, yes; but I would hate to have to play organ for current films as silents. Too many of them are long-drawn-out, actionless, or meaninglessly violent, and their characterizations are too often confused. How do you turn a basically vulgar and immoral character into something decent and sympathetic in musical terms?

There is yet another kind of accompaniment. It is that in which the music is so fine that the audience realizes it is getting two shows at once, both worthy of separate attention. An orchestra of sixty or a big Wurlitzer playing for movies in the great theatres of the past produced that kind of show. They made the movies worth going to just to hear the music, and many people went regularly to a particular theatre just for that purpose. Some of the great shows of the past had so much going on at once that you could go back two or three times before you had taken in everything. You certainly were getting your money's worth.

But in spite of what I have just said, it is better in general that the music be unobtrusive, unless the movie is so bad that only music can save it. One should not be aware that the musician is making a special effort or that he is playing badly. The kind of double-feature I am talking about is one that makes the audiences respond with pleasure as they realize that they are witnessing a happy union of fine artistic media.

Incidentally, the projection methods we use to present our silent-film organ shows need more care. If we use 16 mm. projectors, we should not try to blow the image up to full-screen size. The picture breaks up and the

light becomes inadequate. The screen should be made smaller by masking it in with draperies to form an adequate frame for the smaller picture. It is self-defeating to try to make a 16-mm film fill up a Cinemascope screen. I have heard complaints about dark, hard-to-see pictures being shown to organ audiences. A small, clear picture is infinitely preferable to a large, dark, blurred one.

At the time of this writing there has been a little improvement in the quality of silent movie accompaniment on television. A good pipe organ has been used in one series. William P. Perry has done a good job playing piano for *Blood and Sand* on *The Silent Years* series even though he has a tendency

to play too much in one key and in minor mode. His work, good as it is, suggests that he has not been permitted to use copyrighted music, for which a royalty must be paid. A burden lies upon the television accompanists to produce something equivalent in musical quality or at least something that is not painful to hear. Excepting Perry, TV players have not bothered to create musical themes for characters and develop them. Long stretches of aimless chording and repeated cadences create a boredom that even non-musical ears can recognize as listless work. Comedy passages played on too heavy organ combinations, unduly protracted legato playing, and cues caught too late or ignored do not

win friends for the nostalgia movement. When a film mood changes, it is disconcerting to hear the wheels grind to a halt as the pianist or organist flounders in search of a suitable tune to improvise. It is such playing that gave us organists a bad name years ago.

Movie music should not be a nullity; it needs to be something worth listening to. It can be beautiful without detracting from the appeal or merit of a film. Our TV accompanists owe it to our fraternity to do the best job of which they are capable, for after all, they are representing a tradition, and they can do a lot of either good or harm.

(To be continued)

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