

Dennis James Scores Again

SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA JOINS PIPE ORGAN FOR SILENT MOVIE

So much of the past has been lost . . . It was indeed a miracle that one of the film accompaniment techniques of the silent era was recently rescued and given a new chance to live. Dennis James, one of the most talented of the young organists, saw an excerpt from the now lost original orchestral score of the 1919 D.W. Griffith film *Broken Blossoms* in Ben Hall's *The Best Remaining Seats*. Seeing that music impressed Dennis in such a way that he was motivated to contact Mary Bowles, National ATOS Secretary-Treasurer who found a copy of the original piano score in the Ben Hall collection. Paul Killiam of New York City offered to lend a new 16 mm print, color toned to capture the essence of the original release. With these tools the monumental task of translating the piano part into full orchestral score for symphony and organ began, and the marvelous result is now a matter of history. On Saturday March 25th, nearly 2,000 persons gathered in the auditorium of the Indiana University to hear Dennis James and the 55 piece Bloomington Symphony Orchestra accompanying *Broken Blossoms* with live orchestra, for the first time since the sound era began.

The film and the music seemed to captivate the audience, but few were really aware just how great an accomplishment they were experiencing.

Many problems arose for Dennis and symphony conductor Geoffrey Simon as they expanded the piano score into a fully orchestrated symphony and organ work. Hundreds of man hours of labor were involved in the orchestration, transcription and copying of parts for the thirteen major themes in the 187 page open score. A further effort was necessary when the two realized that some of the original music would not be received properly by a contemporary audience, meaning that new music, still in keeping with the rest of the work, had to be written.

To those of us who had not experienced the silent films in the twenties, the opportunity of hearing organ

and orchestral accompaniment seems even more intriguing. Throughout the score there is a musical dialogue between organ and orchestra, the orchestra providing the basic thematic background while the organ acts primarily as the transitional element between themes. As a solo instrument alternating with the orchestra, the organ would often start in one key and end in another since the organist was often required to fill the space between themes, compensating for orchestral passages that ran "over" or "under" the timing required, as dictated by the action on the screen.

In order for the members of the orchestra, who could not see the screen, to be aware of what was happening in the film, each theme was given a number, and a person seated in the middle of the orchestra pit held up numbered cards indicating the theme number and therefore the mood of the next scene. Prior to the performance, Dennis was unaware that movie theatre orchestras during the period of silent films were informed of the "theme to follow" with numbered lights in much the same manner as the numbered cards used at Bloomington. Dennis was prepared to take over should the orchestra get into trouble. With a preplanned wide sweep

of the conductor's left hand — a signal to the orchestra to stop at once, the organ would take over with no apparent loss of musical accompaniment. At this performance, the need never arose, certainly a credit to both the conductor and the organist for their advanced preparation. It is difficult for the layman to comprehend that the entire film and score was coordinated to the fraction of a second.

So that more people will have a chance to hear organ and orchestral accompaniment for *Broken Blossoms*, Dennis has donated the complete score to the national ATOS library. Any chapter with a community orchestra can make the presentation with only a few rehearsals. A tape of the Bloomington program is available and Dennis suggests that interested chapters secure the tape and a print for a screening to see just how the orchestra and organ compliment the film.

The response to *Broken Blossoms* was so great that Dennis plans to repeat his efforts and score other twenties films for orchestra and organ and they too will be made available for performance, so that audiences of the present can experience and appreciate the same variety of entertainment that charmed movie goers during the Golden Age of the Movie Palace. □

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