Art or Artlessness?

by John Muri

Should an organ movie accompaniment be conspicuous enough to call attention to itself, or should it be performed so as to render the audience unaware of its presence? The differing views were discussed in a 1974 article in this journal, but recent press interviews with solo organists keep bringing up the issue. A syndicated piece in the *Detroit News* of August 26, 1979 quoted an organist as saying: "My theory is three minutes after the film starts the audience shouldn't be aware that music is going on." I wonder what film scorers like Jerry Goldsmith, John Williams, David Raksin, Alex North *et al.* would have to say about that. Academy awards for the best musical scores were not given to self-effacing music, just as they are not given today to the kinds of music we played in 1925. Times and musical styles change.

An examination of a couple of Hollywood's film scores of recent years is revealing. Take the film *Murder on the Orient Express.* Richard Rodney Bennet's music represents the train's movements in a lovely waltz theme played in several tempos. The kidnapping music (dissonants played with muted bowed tremolo) appears not only in the kidnapping scenes but reappears during the train action to suggest memories of an old crime and even give clues to the killing on the train. Study the scene of the Orient Express departure from Istanbul: hear the securing of the train doors, the turning on of the engine lights, the slow movement down the terminal track — all done with music. It is excellently done.

Now let us turn to Jerry Goldsmith's score for *Logan's Run.* It begins with ugly, buzzing repeated sounds. Throughout an hour and a half of the action, the score is made up of dissonant, almost computerized music, representing the heartlessness of life in an underground city where everyone is executed on his thirtieth birthday. Near the end of the film, when there is a confrontation between masses of young people and a sole "ancient" man, the amazed realization by the young of the wonders of aging and of human kindness is audibly overpowering as the music transforms through a series of three grand chords into a sweeping romantic melody, indicating momentous changes in attitude. Suddenly coldness has turned to warmth, and it's all in the music. The score is not unobtrusive; it commands attention. The film would be much less without it.

Why do fine scores get recognition and Academy awards? Is it because they are so unimpressive that nobody pays any attention to them in the theatre? Of course not. They are recognized because they are fine in and of themselves in addition to their contributions to the moods of a film. They are good music and they are good listening.

Silent movies called for just as much careful scoring as sound films. I am not talking about the old "love theme," which was a simple device of repeatedly playing some sentimental new tune and drilling it into the public mind. It took little brains to do that kind of work. It took more brains to devise themes representing relationships and conflicts, the culmination of which was some kind of structure using major and minor variations, depending upon the way the action was moving.

Sometimes music is more important than the picture. In the final scene of Louise Brooks' old German silent movie, *Pandora's Box,* a Salvation Army band is marching through a town at Christmastime just after the heroine has succeeded in ruining the lives of all her lovers, including her own. At this moment, I play "Joy to the World" loudly as the filmed band marches in step with the music to the fadeout. The irony is obvious. Are scenes like this to be underplayed? I doubt it. The ordinary audience was (and is) affected by this kind of musical treatment; we organists knew that it was so because of the audience reactions. Careful scorers made good reputations for themselves among musicians and the organ crowd.

Longer and more developed film stories brought out the differences between imaginative and mediocre organ-playing. In Paramount's *The Vanishing American,* several Indian characters are well enough developed to call for separate theme treatment. "From the Land of the Sky-blue Water" does well for the George Stevens love sequences. "Pale Moon" or "By the Waters of Minnetonka" point up the basic sentimentality of Richard Dix's Indian role. In the film *Wings,* Clara Bow plays the role of a bright little girl in love with a young fellow (Buddy Rogers) who is too busy with cars to bother with a love-struck girl. Clara appears throughout the film in more or less serious situations. Her frustration and steadfastness call for a brisk little tune with a tinge of melancholy; so I used "See You Around," a pop tune of the twenties for her. For Richard Arlen, a more serious character than Buddy Rogers', I used Rachmaninoff's "Seventeenth Variation on a Theme by Paganini" to show his serious and ultimately tragic nature. When Buddy returns from the war and visits Arlen's parents, the sad reunion is accompanied by the memory-tune of the "Seventeenth Variation." I find that passage moves audiences today just as it did in the twenties. Earlier, there is an episode that takes place in Paris during World War I where all our young characters are serving in the armed forces. A subtitle flashes on: "Paris" for a night club scene. Does this call for music from *An American in Paris* or does it not? I find it most appropriate. It is 1924 music for a 1927 film. Gershwin's jazz tunes are just the thing to enhance the gallows-humor of dancing in the middle of a great war, and his melancholy passages delineate homesickness and the dread of tomorrow.

Mr. Muri's opinions expressed herein are his own and do not necessarily reflect the policies of ATOS or THEATRE ORGAN Magazine.

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Whatever music is used, it should always help tell the story. If you don't care for the Rachmaninoff, you can transcribe the Adagio from Bruch's "G Minor Violin Concerto." It will have the same effect on an audience. Whatever it is, it ought to be good music.

Films varied in the depths of their plotting and characterization. Trivial or silly plots called for frothy, light scores. Pictures with stock characters having little relation to real life offered the organist little to do other than fill up time with pleasant noises. A special problem existed in the original published score to *The Phantom of the Opera.* It was a bad piece of work. The film clearly opens with scenes from the ballet in Gounod's opera, *Faust.* Isn't it proper to play Gounod's ballet music, especially when the screen-dancing fits in perfectly? Later on, the unmasking scene was weakly scored. Such work demanded re-composition. Comedies varied greatly in their possibilities for good scoring. When their action moved briskly to some sort of wild climax, they were fun to play. It was when dull spots appeared that comedy-playing became a chore. I suspect that those who did a good job of film-cutting and editing must have had an inner ear for the kind of musical development needed. Editors without a musical ear would put in long, arid stretches of film that made pacing erratic. Competent film editors spoke of the "rhythm" of a film. Amateur editors had no idea of it.

In the light of the scoring I have been talking about, mere cueing (fire gongs, bells, clocks, etc.) is a gesturing at realism. The Photoplayer apparatus could provide that kind of thing satisfactorily. We didn't need a large, expensive organ to play only trivial tunes and badly organized improvisations.

With the wealth of fine music to choose from, what need is there to write new scores for old movies unless they add something to the film? What's wrong with playing the fast parts of Liszt's "Second Hungarian Rhapsody" for a Buster Keaton comedy chase? The Ralph Kinder and Theodore Dubois toccatas do very well as chase music. Selection may be made of musical elements giving clues to character (frivolity, stupidity, nobility, etc.) and clues to action (guilt, connivance, hatred, altruism, etc.) When all of these have been taken care of, there will then be time left for the mickeymouse cueing of doorbells, sirens, and drumrolls. Music is music and noise is noise. In picture playing, the noises should be made as musical as possible.

Good silent accompaniment took all the musicianship you could display in technical skill, in registration, and in a repertory in good taste. Improvisation was almost always inferior to composition. Faking (even when we have to create scores for film companies that insist on our using non-copyrighted music) is almost always an abomination. My employers (even in second and third rate theatres) demanded that I play good music. I was "spoken to" and reminded to hold doodling to a minimum whenever I slipped into boredom or carelessness. I'm sure the audiences appreciated the better stuff, anyway. □

Mr. & Mrs. John Simpson at the L.A. Convention. Why the smile? When asked why she doesn't give her husband an organ for Christmas, she replied, "Why, he doesn't play. He would just take it all apart and see if he could put it back together."

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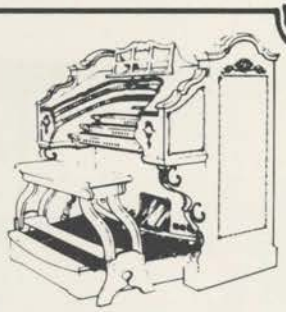

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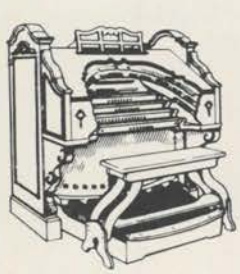

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