

Organ Scoring for Silent Motion Pictures

by Gaylord Carter

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Blackhawk Films.

Many years ago a top composer who was engaged in preparing scores for silent movies told me that the most important quality such a person must have is "musical imagination," the ability to describe in musical terms the action on the screen. That image and the audience reaction to it should be tied together by the music, and if the music is right it will not be an intrusion but rather an extra dimension which becomes a part of the whole. Thus, there is a happening in which everyone participates.

There are several approaches to this ideal. Some who are at the same time organist-composer-arrangers claim that the music sets the scene. Others contend that it is the other way around — the movie sets the scene and the musician simply fits the proper music to it. Depending on the scene, the music will be happy or sad, dramatic or humorous, light or heavy, long or short and so on and so on. When I am scoring a silent film there are several steps toward getting the music on the sound track. First, whoever is interested in getting the score made, joins me in looking at the whole picture and we discuss the trend the music should take. Then I set about preparing it. One of the first considerations is what parts of the score I will compose and what parts I will arrange and adapt from existing music. When there are direct cues such as in *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, when Buster Keaton sings "The Prisoner's Song" with the words on the screen or in *The Phantom of the Opera*, where portions of Gounod's "Faust" are being performed, there is no doubt what the music should be. But in other cases where the scene is neutral I would compose or in many cases extemporize what I felt to be the proper thing.

There is some argument as to whether familiar pop tunes should be injected for comedy response as in the case of Harold Lloyd hanging

from the hands of the huge clock in *Safety Last*. My impulse is to play "Time On My Hands" and when I do audiences love it. But Harold Lloyd, who was a dear and valued friend, objected. He felt that the scene needed no musical embellishment — and I'm sure he was right. Along this line, Harold Lloyd once told me to play soft when the people were laughing. "It's when they are not laughing that I need you," he said. In reality I don't ever have to play very loud for Harold. His films are one continuous big laugh. And this goes for Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, too. The music enhances but never dominates a scene. Especially comedies. I have in my collection many films that are essentially just big chases. Naturally, I use chase music and after all these years I'm able to grind it out by the yard.

Another instance of adapting music concerns the score I did for Blackhawk's *Siegfried*, a Fritz Lang film made in Germany in the mid-twenties. The story for this film was devised from the same sources that Richard Wagner used for *The Ring*, namely the Niebelungen Legends. Now it is my feeling that Richard Wagner wrote better dramatic music than I or anyone else could devise for this story. And another compelling fact is that the Wagner scores are in the public domain and no royalties are involved. Carrying all this a bit further I would feel cheated if I were looking at *Siegfried* and not hearing the glorious Wagnerian music. I used the music from *Siegfried* and *Die Walkyrie* and *Gotterdammerung* in every way I could.

So now getting back to scoring. After deciding what kind of music to use we break down the picture into ten-minute segments and get to work. With the music sketched out, we rehearse with the film to perfect the timing — making sure that the music fits. Then we record the ten-minute segment on synchronous tape

as many times as is required to have everyone satisfied. Sometimes we get it the first time. Sometimes it requires several. One time, on the first rehearsal of the final reel of *Siegfried*, I felt inspired and knew we had a good one, only to discover that the tape wasn't running. We missed it. All rehearsals since then are taped — just in case.

Selecting themes to fit the various characters or ideas in a movie is most important. Themes not only serve to identify a person or a scene but tend to heighten the dramatic impact as the movie develops. Who can deny the feeling we get as the music swells for the final kiss and the sun sets over the happy hero and heroine with the love theme tying it all up in grand style. What a spot for the organ to spell out all this happiness in a big crashing finale!

One of the most fun short comedies to score is Buster Keaton's *Cops*. I use this film to teach young players the techniques of silent movie accompaniment. Made up of sight gags and situation humor with almost no dialogue — what there is being expressed in sub-titles — *Cops*

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