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Collegium 2008

How to Watch a Silent Film: The View from the Pit

One image of Mary Pickford saturated the Giornate of 2008. Seated with her knees drawn in, head tilted upwards, her lovely face and curls softly lit, she gazes intently at something in the distance; becoming for once watcher as well as watched. Emblazoned on posters, bollards, leaflets, not to mention the biblically important festival program, this figure of Mary was representative of the position that we all, after our own fashion, repeatedly settled into throughout our stay in Pordenone. Sitting in the theatre, our eyes focused on the screen, lit (perhaps not quite so aesthetically) by the projection of the film, our role too was that of Watcher.

I am the first to agree with the oft-repeated claim that to watch a silent film is anything but passive.¹ It demands the engagement of logic and imagination, and for those with a particular 'bent' within the field of silent film, that of intellect and analysis (and the ability to scribble notes in the near-darkness). However, to argue that the role of the audience is unduly strenuous would be at odds with that experience of being intensely focused in the (almost) trance-like state induced by the particular combination of image and music which is unique to the exhibition of silent film. Coming out, from an hour or more of sitting in the warm comfort of the Verdi, the assertion that we are active viewers seems, at times, difficult to justify. This enjoyable mental exercise certainly pales in comparison when compared with the workload of the accompanists – a group whose task is to literally watch 'actively' during the festival. Before championing our own workload, take a moment to imagine, what it must be like to have to watch a film whilst simultaneously responding to it via the medium of music? Perhaps you have not even seen the film before, yet there is an audience out there who is expecting you to get right inside of that film – interpreting it in sound for their pleasure and understanding. Clearly, to watch a silent film from the pit as musician encompasses a very different set of viewing skills, concerns, strategies and abilities. The process to outsiders seems unfathomable, and yet it is one that is more than worth exploring, because of the very fact that it hinges upon the acquisition and demonstration of "an extraordinary insight into film interpretation" (as correctly pointed out in the festival literature) – something which would enrich the experience for all with a love for silent film.

This year's range of musical accompaniment was as diverse as ever. Jeffrey Silverman's score, performed by the Orchestra Sinfonica del Friuli Venezia Giulia, brought *Sparrows* to life on the opening night, whilst the closing night's showing of *Les Nouveaux Messieurs* was paired with L'Octuour de France's rendition of a composition by Antonio Coppola. Michael Nyman performed his interpretation of documentaries by Vigo and Vertov, and the 'Striking a New Note' project paired a group of young musicians with Keaton's gloriously surreal *One Week* and a miscellany of cartoons. Over in the Ridotto those of us not at its premier at Bologna got another chance to hear a recorded version of Neil Brand's much acclaimed new score to *Blackmail*.

However, the backbone of the festival's music was provided by the pool of world renowned silent film accompanists who thankfully return each year to take up residence.² Unlike those pre-composed scores just mentioned, the majority of their work allows much less opportunity for preparation – sometimes none. It is their work that I am particularly keen to consider.

But how and where to start? Although a friendly, recognisable and approachable presence around the town, the resident musicians are operating in an event which, even in its title of 'Giornate del Cinema *Muto*', seems to deny their very existence. The musician-at-work is, in the Verdi at least, buried away below the stage, the theatre in darkness, making the job of uncovering the secrets of their art and craft seem daunting to say the least.

Fortunately, our musicians contributed more than their musical accompaniment to the festival. To their great credit they also provided, in the form of daily masterclasses, a means of getting closer to the appreciation and understanding of the nature of (improvisational) film accompaniment. Aimed, in the 1st instance, at disseminating their knowledge and guidance to the 2 'chosen' students³, they also most unselfishly threw the doors open to any and every one of the festival rank-and-file who fortuitously trod that particular trail of blue and pink paving stones - a godsend to those of us new to Pordenone and not blessed with a sense of direction – that led to the Auditorium della Regione.

Here, between 11 and 1 each day, truly was 'the best show in town', as those of us present were shown how to *really* watch a silent film. Through demonstration and discussion, students and teachers explored together the methods, techniques, intentions and tasks that this profession entails. It soon became apparent that, alongside the skills of the 'pure' musician was needed the responses and inventiveness of jazz improviser combined with the actor's and director's sense of drama. Given the (puzzlingly) low attendance rate at these classes, it seemed appropriate to try and share some of the invaluable and fascinating experiences and thought processes of those who 'watch' a silent film in a way few of us have the skill, artistry or sheer nerve to do.

"Packing 'em in."

For many of their predecessors of the early 1900s the 1st (& sometimes only) task of the pit musician was taking care of "packing." They would be expected to keep the audience entertained before the film started, playing their instruments at preferably a loud enough volume to entice further potential customers from the street outside. [Altman, 197]

Whilst today's musicians are spared this duty, the 'collecting together' of the audience remains the accompanist's initial concern. It is hard for visuals to command instant and unified attention as effectively as sound can, although the darkening of the auditorium lights conveys to some extent the need for the audience to physically and audibly settle down. Although we were not quite as badly behaved as the rowdy, big-hat-wearing audience Charles 'Chic' Sales' character had to contend with in the 1920-1 film, *His Nibs*, these first notes from the pit do act as a musical 'ssshhhh', reminding us that we are there to watch a film, politely explaining that, if we are sitting comfortably, then the film can begin.

The precise question of 'when to start?' elicited various responses. Some took their cue from the appearance of the new animated Giornate logo that immediately preceded each screening, others choosing to wait until the credits of the advertised film started rolling. Either way, the function of these first few bars was likened in the Masterclasses to that of the overture in opera; Donald Sosin spoke of trying to achieve a "coherence of brain waves, a group of people all thinking at the same time," indicating the ongoing aim of the accompanist to draw us together as an audience whose focus is united on the performance.

"You should not do everything – you make a decision" [Günther Buchwald]

So now that the audience is comfortable and under control, what next for the musician who, for the duration of the film, cannot sit back and relax?

The preoccupation of the masterclasses was with the accompaniment of the narrative film, in which the likelihood is that the first images seen will be "a title....a cast list...that is when 'the plot' begins." [NB] 'The Plot', the scene with which the film proper begins, may invite a very different musical response than that of the overture. Using sections from the 1928 Vidor film, *The Patsy*, as grounds for experimentation, one student chose spirited 20s ragtime to accompany the jazzy-looking credits, a style that became too big for the intimate, 4-headed domestic scene to which the title cards gave way. The need here is to 'set up the world' – to join in with the 'once upon a time' nature at a film's beginning, which might demand a quick change of musical direction.

These masterclasses, remember, are predominantly about equipping students with the skills for *improvisational* accompaniment, and so it is worth reiterating that we are exploring the experience

of the musician who is seeing the film he is accompanying for the first time as it unfolds in performance.

Overture over, now begins a period of continuous, sustained decision-making that must last for as long as the film is running. The hardest decisions required of most of us at the festival were of the variety of agonising over whether to watch the curiously hilarious *His Nibs* in the Verdi, or to steel yourself to watch the monumental *La Roue* showing at the same time in the Ridotto next door. For the musician in the pit, making constant, rapid and, most importantly, well-informed decisions is the lynchpin of the job. It is for this reason that these masterclasses are such an invaluable resource for learning how to 'read' silent film. Right from the 1st scene, the musicians have to look intently at the *mise-en-scene*, the actors, the interaction between characters, the editing; indeed any and every visual clue to allow them to understand and make valid judgements about the film and what it is trying to say. Not only are they doing this for themselves, they then must 'translate' these decisions musically, helping the audience understand and 'feel' the film as intelligently as they have. Through the masterclasses, experiments demonstrated how decisions relating to pitch, timbre, tempo, rhythm, affected our impression of a scene. Here are musicians with a heightened awareness of possible music-image relationships: picking up, for instance, on the rhythmic nature of characters eating soup round a table as being inspiration for a way for music to reinforce and draw out the movements of the actors. Always alert to signals, they also have to quickly assess what is of primary focus within shot, scene and film. You cannot play everything, nor should you, was the guidance given.

This flags up a major choice the musicians must make: to respond to a moment, so as to flag it up to the audience, or to contribute continuity by creating and maintaining a more overarching relationship between music and image. For our musicians, both approaches have merit. Creating a flow with the music is a way of giving more unity to a disjointed film, something which Laura Rossi, commissioned to provide a score to *The Battle of the Somme*, noted and made use of. The long-established convention of utilising library pieces and cue sheets is one that shares this ethos: making use of collections of passages of music, usually 16 or 32 bars in length, which clearly would not always be in strictest harmony with each instant of the film. Demonstrating the opposite tactic, in *The Battle of the Sexes*, Phylis Haver's trembling hands – the clue with which she showed to the audience her character's inward emotional state - was underlined and conveyed aurally by Stephen Horne's quivering piano accompaniment.

The characters, of course, are frequently the core of the action, and so unsurprisingly take up much of the musician's consideration. As each character is introduced and woven into the story, decisions must be made about their relationships with each other and their journeys throughout the film. Making use of leitmotifs is one possibility; musically 'name-tagging' each so as to aid the audience in identification and comprehension. This is not always practical however, and certainly not on a consistent basis. Attempting to give each character his or her own 'theme' when accompanying a segment of Duvivier's 1925 film, *Poli de Carotte*, in one workshop proved impossible for one of the students when the film simply did not allow the time for each motif to be heard.

Integrating or separating the intertitles is yet another decision to be made. An option is to break away from the music in order to 'play the speech', giving a flavour of the rhythm, tempo and tone of the written words. For comedies in particular, the genre which Andrew considered the most challenging for the accompanist, this can potentially add much to the film, if timed effectively. However, even the necessary possession of comic timing is beat when the film's titles are translated piecemeal – as was often the case with the electronic subtitling solution that is the Giornate's answer to Silent Film's erroneous claims of universality.

Add to all of the above choices about which musical style, genre, and period to couch your music, and you can appreciate why a tendency to procrastination would be a serious disability for any would-be accompanist.

"What if, all of a sudden, you don't know what's going on?" [Andrew Simpson]

The skill of improvisational accompaniment does not only involve identifying and capitalising on expressive opportunities. It is also about spotting and coping with the many potential pitfalls with which this job is littered.

The work environment, at the Verdi at least, is problematical in itself: situated away from the big screen, they have to work from just a small monitor, much of which may be taken up by the dual English-Italian intertitle translations already mentioned. Again, this is nothing new in this profession: one organist playing in Oxford in the 1920s had to make the best of reading intertitles backwards; the location of his instrument in relationship to the screen requiring the services of a strategically placed mirror.⁴

Vision (and therefore understanding) can also be hampered by the nature of much of the material. We are treated at the festival to some triumphs of restoration: breathtakingly fresh and immaculate prints that, in true Hollywood style, barely betray their not inconsiderable age. However, today's silent film fan demonstrates a level of tolerance probably far above and beyond anything that of a viewer of 80-odd years ago would have possessed. On the theory that anything is better than nothing, sometimes the only print available is one that is battered and worn. The grotesque faces of the nitrate-damaged victims at the start of *His Nibs* demonstrate how bad things can get, and yet the audience still expect music. In fact, they *need* music. Music is needed more than ever when a film is in some way 'difficult', and it is a big part of the music's (and musicians') job to hold our hands through both good and bad parts of the film. *Tutto per mio Fratello*, the 1911 film that it was Touve Ratovondrahety's challenge to accompany, contained several instances where the print was frankly unfathomable, and yet his continued and confident music kept us with the film even where the images failed. Clearly he had taken on board Neil Brand's observation that "“Even if you don't know where the film is going [if you play like you do] the audience relaxes.”"

Maintaining this aura of control, however, is subject to avoiding the minefield that a silent film can prove for the musician accompanying it. It has already been said that not all 'moments' in the film can or should have a musical counterpart. However, missing out certain moments could lead to what one theorizer of the 1910s called "The worst mistake that a musician can make....to dispel the illusion." [Altman, 244] The most obvious thing to miss is the musical accompaniment of music, for music (and sound) is frequently alluded to within the 'silent' film. And not just miss, but also miscalculate. Throughout the week we heard horror stories about experiences of playing one style of music alongside, for instance, the image of a spinning gramophone record (only to discover in close-up that the music on that record was about as far away musically as it was possible to get). And we saw first-hand how assumptions can be wrong. The shot of a finger pushing the doorbell in another workshopped scene from *The Patsy* saw one student, quite logically, create a musical tinkling to match. However, it subsequently turned out that the doorbell was broken, and thus, logically, soundless. On a 1st viewing it would be impossible to anticipate this, but if your 1st viewing is 'the performance' then you just have to plough on and hope that you can win back the audience's confidence as the film goes on.

And what if there just simply doesn't seem to be 'a moment' at all? In the fluctuating relationship between sound and music in silent film, sometimes the image steps back, and seems to invite the music to do the talking; as when a performer deeply internalises his or her emotions, leaving it to the audience and music to fill in the repressed histrionics. However, for the musician, there may be times when the vacuum on the screen is not caused by the poor quality of a print, but is a result of the film being, at that point, just plain empty – the historical tableaux being Neil Brand's particular pet hate, allowing as it does for so little empathy.

The ability to respond imaginatively is also demanded when a film is anything but boring, and the accompanist is likely to be handed some frankly mystifying moments to portray in sound (recreating submarine depth charges on a piano anyone?).

The students were, incidentally, equipped with a fail-safe way to deal with that dilemma of what to do if "all of a sudden, you don't know what's going on." The simplicity of the repeated note (non-

committal, yet full of possibilities) was given as a most efficacious emergency aid, and one which also neutered the impact of playing ‘the wrong note (for how can a note seem ‘wrong’ when it is confidently replayed?)

Of course, all the musicians shared the view that it was preferable to have at least some idea of the film they would be accompanying. Günther Buchwald explained to me that “it is ideal for the musician to be able to see the film before playing it, so that a coherent and thoughtful interpretation can be developed. When the accompanist sees a film for the first time during a performance ... the musician is always behind the film, trying to keep up, rather than guiding the viewer.” If it cannot be seen beforehand, there are other means of being prepared. As their early 20th century counterparts were also urged to do, the masterclass students were encouraged to refer to the film’s synopsis. Clearly, the wonderfully exhaustive festival guide is as valuable to the musicians as it is to the rest of us. Discovering from this that *Tutto per mio fratello* involved “the switch of identities of a pair of twins” not only forewarned Touve to be alert to exactly which brother was on screen at any time, but also provided a possible source for musical inspiration – as did the information that the film (and the play upon which it was based) was bound up in the Commedia dell’ arte tradition.

“What they want is good music” [Altman 241]

Because, of course, alongside all of this they have to provide us with *music*. Whilst the practice of playing one song after another for the duration of the film (one in common use in earlier film presentation, and on many a cheap and cheerful DVD version) has long fallen out of favour in exchange for “subordinating musical logic to film logic” [Altman243] all the musicians were aware of the importance of constantly asking themselves “is it musical what we can do?” [GB] In his session, Donald urged students to try and “make a piece that really sounds like a piece [giving it] more musical structure.” Gabriel Thibaudeau saw the injection of musicality as yet another way to respond to the requirements of the public, reminding of the need for “giving those melodic threads to help anchor the audience,” starting right from the overture.

Again, in the context of silent film accompaniment, this demands more than just musical sensibilities. Accompanists must develop a sort of “internal alarm clock” [DS], set to go off if the same tempo or rhythm is employed for too long. By allowing such steady ‘metronoming’ of a film you are in serious danger of lulling your audience to sleep. In the marathon that is the week-long festival, tiredness levels amongst the audience are at their peak, and in the cosy, dark, comfortable environment of the cinema, we are all susceptible to nodding off unless sufficiently stimulated. Responding to changes in the film’s tempo and the rhythm of the editing, to dynamics in the action, to changes in the scene, putting in a bar of 5/4 amidst the 4/4, or briefly breaking away from rhythm altogether all helps to keep your audience with both you and the film. Pity the music critic whose first experience of a nickelodeon in Cincinnati was to see an exhibition of the Kalem film, *The Stolen Turquoise* in 1910. The music apparently consisted of a 4-bar passage (which he transcribed for posterity) which was repeated continuously, though “varied occasionally” with another 4-bar passage. [Altman, 207] The twenty minutes that the film lasted must have felt more like 2 hours, and it is only to be hoped that the unfortunate critic was not deterred from the cinema altogether.

Incidentally, stamina, both physical and mental, is another requisite of the accompanist, with this year’s prize surely going to Günther who, for 165 minutes straight, provided musical interpretation for the epic 1929 Norwegian film, *Laila*. At least this festival operates a rotating system to allow each accompanist to rest – a previous study on silent film accompaniment in Oxford unearthed the pianist (no doubt one of many) whose shift was from 6pm until 10, with no breaks between films and no holidays.

As necessary as making good music is, however, all our musicians were agreed that “People are there first and foremost to see the film.” [GT] They were insistent that at no point should the music (or performer) be bigger or more important than the film. No matter how inspired a piece of improvisation you might come out with, you have to be ‘disposable’ with it: the film will plough on regardless, and will not wait whilst the musician goes off on a tangential exposition and resolution of

a musical idea, no matter how great it might be. Silent film accompaniment was not regarded as an arena to showcase their unquestionable musical abilities, but rather as an opportunity to use those abilities to 'serve' the images on the screen. The reassuring, and recurring, mantra from all the musicians throughout all the masterclasses was to 'respect the film,' and whilst they have a multitude of decisions to make about it, they have no intentions of imposing a reading of that film that is not there.⁵ The ego has to take a back-seat, as, to some extent, does personal taste. A previous collegian brought up the conundrum of what to do if you don't agree with the film you are accompanying; to which Günther replied "If I don't agree with the story, then either I decide not to accompany that film or...I will do my very best to come round."⁶ Despite (or perhaps because of) this servile relationship, I know I am not alone in admitting that on a number of occasions a great accompaniment has kept me in a film that I would otherwise have walked out of, either in disgust or overwhelming indifference.⁷ As Kevin Brownlow pointed out in the invaluable *The Parade's Gone By*, "during the Golden Era, the reputation of a theatre often depended on its orchestra. People sometimes claimed that they went to the movies "just for the music.""

"Keep 'em Happy" [Donald Sosin]

'The End!' when it comes is the cue for the audience to play their most demonstratively active part in the performance. The applause ambiguously given to both musician and film is clearly more than deserved by the former, and marks the end of what has been an amazing (& exhausting) set of creative, logical, processes. They have shown us (one way) of watching that film, holding our hands throughout, leading us through, their confidence (bluffed or otherwise) allowing us to relax and engage with a movie that, thanks to them, seems made afresh, even though it may have been 80 or more years since its premiere.

Whilst one accompanist of the 1920s claimed that in accompanying Laurel and Hardy films he sometimes "laughed so much [he] had a job to play!,"⁸ it is hard to evaluate just how much a Giornate musician would have felt they had a chance to 'enjoy' (as a viewer) the film they have just accompanied. It is the enjoyment of the audience that they are concerned with. The direction to the students to, above all, "keep 'em happy" [DS] serves also as a timely reminder to us all that these films, about which some become so serious about analysing, dissecting and evaluating were, after all, designed to keep us as an audience entertained.

The approach that our musicians take is not necessarily either historically authentic, or representative of how all silent film accompanists operate today (more is the pity). The historical development of the job is the subject of a number of studies; such as Rick Altman's *Silent Film Sound* which reveals the varied, evolving and diverse (& sometimes, frankly worrying) practices and aims of bygone cinema-accompanists and is useful in giving context and comparison with the way that the Giornate accompanists operate. Much rarer is the opportunity to be able to see at work the methodology and impact of silent film accompaniment laid bare. A fascinating process in itself, the level of understanding of and engagement with silent film that our musicians demonstrate and share within these masterclasses means that they are ably and entertainingly teaching us nothing less than 'how to watch a silent film,' & it is to be hoped that these masterclasses continue as long as the festival itself.

Resources:

- The Masterclasses, and the Musicians and Students involved in them – both of which also generously gave me their time in subsequent interviews and discussions.
- Victoria Sturtevant, "As if it is a masterpiece": Conversations with the Giornate Accompanists", *The Collegium Papers III* (2001)
- Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (2004)
- Oral History Collection at the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies.

¹ Edward Wagenknecht, in *The Movies in an Age of Innocence* (1962) protests himself “quite unable to understand what anybody means by speaking of the “passive absorption” which is supposed to have been encouraged by the silent films. Silent films seem to me to have required far more active and uninterrupted concentration than sound films do. We had to put a great many two-and-twos together which the author and the actor and the director put together for the audiences of today; we collected materials from a rapid-fire hail of images, made in our own mind combinations which left considerable room open for individuality of interpretation, and drew our own conclusion...”

² Neil Brand, Günther Buchwald, Phil Carli, Stephen Horne, Donald Sosin, John Sweeney & Gabriel Thibaudeau. When quoting them I have indicated authorship via their initials.

³ Touve R. Ratovandrahety & Andrew Simpson – both accomplished musicians with an already considerable experience of professional silent film accompaniment. Again, when quoting them I have indicated authorship via their initials.

⁴ H. G. Welch, organist at *The Palace* in Oxford in the 1920s. Transcribed from a recording in the Oral History Collection at the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies.

⁵ Although it is inevitable and unavoidable that the choices the accompanists make will have an impact upon how we view a film and the characters within it. This is a phenomenon I have been encouraged to explore further, thanks to the fascinating demonstrations of ‘interpretation and effect’ in the masterclasses.

⁶ “As if it is a masterpiece”: Conversations with the Giornate Accompanists’ by Victoria Sturtevant

⁷ In one showing of Douglas Fairbank’s swashbuckling adventure *The Black Pirate* some years ago, it was only thanks to Neil Brand’s intervention (& music) that the event was not a complete washout. A technological hitch having rendered the film unwatchable not long after it had started, Neil finished it for us by continuing to ‘accompany’ the now-absent visuals as though they were still running. With the odd explanation of plot and character development thrown in as he went along, this condensed ‘version for the visually impaired’ was remarkably entertaining, and certainly a novel way of experiencing a silent film.

⁸ H. G. Welch