ALTERNATE SOUNDTRACKS
Silent Film Music for Contemporary Audiences

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Abstract

The Moving Pictures Show is a contemporary Australian 'silent' film company that screens films produced in the period from 1912 to 1929, with a 9-piece orchestral accompaniment. This article explores the ways in which music is chosen for the show both to heighten the audience's aesthetic experience of the film and to abide by historical practice. It also describes the ways in which improvisation can be accommodated within these boundaries. The Moving Pictures Show uses recognisable music from the non-synchronised sound (or 'silent' film) era, including 'classical' music that is well known to audiences through previous association with the animations of Disney, Warner Bros and Hanna-Barbera studios; mood music that was purpose-composed for the films of the silent era by composers such as John Stepan Zamecnik; and leitmotifs to alert the audience to repeating themes in the narrative. Around these music components, improvisation provides a degree of flexibility of tempo necessary to fit the music with the film and allows the performers the freedom to musically respond to the onscreen action in a spontaneous manner.

Keywords
Film music, silent film, improvisation, John Stepan Zamecnik, The Moving Pictures Show

Background

> *Change the score on the soundtrack, and the image track can be transformed.* (Gorbman, 1987: 30).

Since the 1980s there has been increased interest in the non-synchronised sound ('silent') film era as a subject for performance based research. Festivals such as the Pordenone Silent Film Festival and the Avignon/New York Film Festival, featuring the screenings of silent films accompanied by orchestras, have become annual events. The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) film department has collected and commissioned scores to be performed as accompaniments to the films in the MOMA collection. The National Library of Australia houses the State Theatre collection of scores and parts for cinema use and has almost fourteen thousand charts. Modern production houses have revived films of the silent era to make them accessible to contemporary audiences by creating historical reproductions of original films and the music that accompanied them, for example *Napoleon* (Abel Gance, 1927 – French release) has undergone a number of reconstructions, most recently in 2000 by film historian Kevin Brownlow, with music scored by Carl Davis. Other composers have attempted to bring films from the 1920s and 30s in

line with modern tastes by marrying them with contemporary style scores, notable examples being Philip Glass's score for *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931 – US release) and Giorgio Moroder's soundtrack for *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1928). When not paired with historical or contemporary scores, film screenings have been accompanied by an improvised performance using the musician's direct response to the action on screen.[1]

The Moving Pictures Show is a contemporary Australian silent film presentation company that screens films produced from 1912 to the end of the silent era in 1929, with accompaniment performance by a nine-piece chamber orchestra. The Moving Pictures Show came into being five years ago when its creator, (co-author) Jan Thorp, discovered the sheet music collection of the Theatre Royal in Bradford, Yorkshire in northern England. She was intrigued by the fact that much of this collection was dance styles such as the foxtrot and the cha cha so she bought the collection, started researching its origins and discovered that the Theatre Royal was built in 1864 and showed silent films with orchestra accompaniment for the whole thirty years of the silent era. On the strength of her work with the Bradford collection, Thorp was given access to the Sydney State Theatre silent film music library.

The State Theatre collection consists of published orchestrations, band arrangements and instrumental music, most of it composed or arranged to accompany silent movies produced in Australia, the UK and the USA. The music was from the State Theatre's lending collection and was used by the theatre, and by other film distribution companies throughout Australia, from 1900 to 1930. The music in this collection often carries the name-stamps of these companies and this charts the evolution of these music collections within Australia. Some of the scores and parts include performance annotations and historical information. It was originally a library collected for use by Sydney theatres that needed access to music to accompany the films they screened. At the end of the silent era it was stored at the State Theatre and, when the venue came to be restored in the 1980s, this whole collection was donated to the National Library who then collated and preserved it.

Studying these collections raised many interesting questions: was there a full orchestra or just a small ensemble? Did it perform each film in popular, 'classical' or a mixture of both styles? Did it play continuously throughout the film? How did it handle repeats? Did it finish all numbers? How closely was the music synchronised with the rhythmic movement of the film? Was every show accompanied? What was the quality of the performances? It is impossible to answer all of these questions with certainty, however, in exploring these issues, The Moving Pictures Show began.

The shows started experimentally as screenings at a local club and originally comprised a feature film screening accompanied by an orchestra using music devised from both the Bradford theatre and the State Theatre collections. The historical context is provided as information from several sources: the available research (much of it from the USA) about screening conditions; the music of the State Theatre Collection itself, as the markings on the music provide much information as to its use in Sydney; and, in addition, recollections from family

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[1] See articles elsewhere in this issue featuring interviews with Jen Andersen about her score for the Australian digitally restored *The Sentimental Bloke* DVD, and Mike Cooper on his contemporary live musical performances incorporating improvisation for silent films including *Tabu* and *Venus of the South Seas*.

members of musicians who played for theatres in the silent era in Sydney have been informative. For example, when we first screened *The Kid Stakes* (Tal Ordell, 1927), we had family members of the pioneering Australian cinematographer Arthur Higgins in the audience and the Higgins family has been very generous with their records to aid our research. In addition, we recently acquired a collection of glass slides from a local theatre that have been a rich source of information, as they advertise movies shown in NSW in the 1920s as well as provide information on advertising and songs used during film screenings.

Through this research, the shows have evolved into a programmed event commencing with a rendition of 'God Save the King', followed by a newsreel from the era accompanied by a march, then a short US film comedy, followed by a feature film screening. Music is performed to accompany the newsreels and shorts although, due to their duration, this consists of one dance number expanded to fit the length of the short through the use of extra improvised sections in the choruses.

We have shown Australian features, such as *On Our Selection* (Raymond Longford, 1920) and *The Kid Stakes*, but most of the feature films are US productions. This reflects the way in which US productions dominated in the 1920s. Between 1911 and 1913 feature films were being produced in Australia at the rate of one a fortnight (Reade, 1970: 6) but this situation changed markedly[2] until, by 1923, 94% of films screened in Australia were US productions (Moran and Vieth, 2005: 10). The Moving Pictures Show stages events at various venues, most recently at the Chauvel Theatre in Paddington, Sydney and a special screening for the New South Wales Model T Ford Association, which was presented at a drive-in theatre in Windsor, New South Wales.[3] Most of our events are one-off presentations although in 2011 the Sydney Fringe Festival has commissioned a short run of three presentation/performances at the Newtown Theatre in September.[4] The films screened are either owned by The Moving Pictures Show or hired through the National Film and Sound Archive, depending on whether the film in question is out of copyright.

The creators of the show are the authors, Jan Thorp and Eleanor McPhee, along with Ian McPhee. Jan Thorp holds a Master of Music (Honours) from the University of Western Sydney and is a music education specialist who located and identified the Bradford collection as an interesting project for senior students and teachers.[5] Ian McPhee holds a Bachelor of Arts (performance) degree from the University of Western Sydney, is the Drama master at a private Sydney school and an award-winning filmmaker, and creates the live sound effects and MCs for the show (Fig 1). Eleanor McPhee is currently completing her PhD in music at the University of Western Sydney and provides the research material for the show. She is also a music teacher and performer who plays flute, sax and clarinet in the show's orchestra.

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[2] The reasons for this change are not directly relevant to this article, but relate to several factors including production versus import costs, resources required for the World War One war effort, and exhibition deals between cinemas and film distributors.

[3] Details about upcoming events is provided at http://www.movingpicturesshow.com.au/Home.html.

[4] See http://thesydneyfringe.com.au/content/festival-program-2011.

[5] The Moving Pictures Show holds special events for school students.

Figure 1: Ian McPhee at the sound desk.

In this article we describe how The Moving Pictures Show approaches the difficulties of devising a musical accompaniment that both appeals to contemporary audiences while addressing historically accurate recreation. This article considers specific aspects of these larger issues, namely, a contemporary audience's experience of the silent film diegesis, and the role of improvisation in directing the audience's narrative engagement.

Historical Context

From the earliest days of film, music played a part in its presentation. Originally introduced to mask the noise of the projector and audience, the usefulness of music as a vehicle to illustrate and explain the action became apparent (Palmer, 1980: 549), resulting in the growth of a silent film music industry. This industry resulted in an increased demand for pianists in the many thousands of small movie theatres that sprang up. Anthologies of music were published to cover emotional contexts and provide cue sheets, and indexes helped in the compilation of music to fit each film (Marks, 1997: 10). As films increased in length and complexity, the music fulfilled further functions; it bridged reel changes and provided cohesion to the succession of scenes appearing on screen (Boller, 1992) and, more interestingly, it helped to create a mood that served the needs of the narrative. Irving Thalberg, the production head of Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, went so far as to say:

> *There never was a silent film. We'd finish a picture, show it in one of our projection rooms, and come out shattered. It would be awful. Then we'd show it in a theatre, with a girl pounding away at a piano, and there would be all the difference in the world.* (Thalberg, cited in Vieria, 2010: 90).

Early twentieth century American film music began as a relatively open and improvisational response to the onscreen narrative, often by a single pianist. In time this approach shifted towards nationally distributed scores as the film

industry became more concerned with film music's social and affective influence and musicians vanished from the theatres completely with the onset of synchronised sound in film. Movie theatres were no longer places of live musical performance.

The first movie to be projected onto a theatre screen in Australia was at the Melbourne Opera House on 17th August 1896 and this began a practice of screening short films as an item in vaudeville productions (Long and Whiteoak, 2003: 281). The popularity of this screening heralded the arrival of an entertainment medium particularly suited to Australia as a conqueror of isolation as 'traveling picture show men' took films to the outback.[6] Live accompaniment to silent films was accomplished in the style suggested in the music hall and instruction books such as *Musical Accompaniment of Moving Pictures* (Lang and West, 1920) that indicated the techniques and themes of cinema keyboardists of the era. Journals such as Sydney's *Photo-play* and the *Australian Kinematograph Journal* in Melbourne illustrate the pervasive influence of American film culture from before World War One and US cue sheets, orchestrations and collections of 'mood' music all influenced the types of music heard in Australian cinemas (Long and Whiteoak, 2003: 282).

Claudia Gorbman notes that the music that accompanied silent films was pivotal to the performance because

> *it had semiotic functions in the narrative and it provided a rhythmic "beat" to complement, or impel, the rhythms of editing and movement on the screen. As sound in the auditorium, its spatial dimension compensated for the flatness of the screen, and, like magic, it was an antidote for the technologically derived "ghostliness" of the images. Finally it bonded the spectators together.* (1987: 53)

In light of Gorbman's arguments, it seems a strange oversight that music of the silent era has been investigated by relatively few scholars when one considers the considerable amounts of research that explores motion pictures of the synchronised sound eras. In relation to silent film music, researchers have examined the use of music (Altman, 1996; Boller, 1992; Gorbman, 1987; King, 1984; Marks, 1997), the role of the audience (Altman, 2004; Gunning, 1995; Hansen, 1991) and silent film as it relates to American society and culture (PM Cohen, 2001; Everson, 1998; Ross, 1999). However the music as it responds to the narrative and the role of music in the Australian performance context are under-investigated lines of enquiry.

The Moving Pictures Show – Choosing the Music

Effective musical accompaniment can provide an emotional bridge into an historical film genre that may otherwise prove to be inaccessible to present day audiences. In this way, the music can act, as Annabel Cohen (2001) suggests, as a pre-attentive step to lead the audience into the film's diegesis. Gorbman regards this function as a form of mediation

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[6] See fictional representation of this in the Australian feature film *The Picture Show Man* (John Power, 1977).

> *between film and older dramatic traditions, between spectator and circumstances of projection, between spectator as living being and the cinema as 'ghostly'.* (1980: 186)

Music for The Moving Pictures Show is chosen with 'music as mediator' always in mind and consequently we choose music that is 1) recognisable for an audience; 2) is closely aligned to the mood and emotional content of a scene; and 3) is thematically associated with characters or places. Within these requirements we create space for our musicians to improvise to allow the music to closely respond to onscreen movement.

Recognisable Music

In choosing music for the shows that we produce, we are particularly aware of the historical context of the films' production and narrative setting, and the fact we are using music that was actually played as an accompaniment to the films shown in Sydney theatres during the silent era. If they were devised as strictly musically accurate, the shows would risk offering little emotional engagement for a modern audience. We therefore made several choices. One was to use music that a modern audience recognises as belonging to the era of the film. Thus in Harold Lloyd comedies of the 1910s and 1920s we use music such as 'What'll I Do' by Irving Berlin that was used in *The Great Gatsby* (Jack Clayton, 1974 – US release) and is recognisable as belonging to the 1920s. For earlier comedies we use rags such as 'Twelfth Street Rag' by Euday Bowman, composed in 1914. This was one of the best selling rags of the World War One era and the style and, to a large extent, the tune is familiar to contemporary audiences.

Popular music of the period does not fit as well with the silent dramas but the available collections offer many classical pieces, often in a severely edited form. Several well-known themes from these pieces, such as the gallop from Franz von Suppé's *Light Cavalry Overture*, have been ringed in red, or have several arrows drawn on the original music in the library collection. From this, we surmised that these were the only parts of these long pieces that the silent movie orchestras played and now these are the parts that are well known today. Carl Stalling (1891-1972) and Scott Bradley (1891-1977) are composers whose work is recognizable to contemporary audiences from the context of Disney, Warner Bros and Hanna-Barbera animation productions. By these films and television series, audiences recognized that, when they hear Rossini's *William Tell Overture*, the heroine is about to be rescued, or that Lange's 'Flower Song' suggests sadness. This is a clichéd but humorous method of showing the on-screen emotional content but, thanks to early American animation and well-used musical themes, audiences are cued to laugh at the overblown acting paired with this music with its cartoon associations.

Annabel Cohen notes that "logically music should detract from, rather than add to, the sense of reality in a film" (2001: 253) and filmmakers are adept at mobilising this paradox for comic effect by using music to cause the diegetic and non-diegetic realities to collide. This was evidenced in the silent era by the music compilers' love of puns. Music was sometimes inappropriately chosen for the sake of the joke (Altman, 2004; Marks, 1997) but it was a practice that continued long past the silent era, as discussed in the screen composition analysis of Carl Stalling's and Scott Bradley's work (Goldmark, 2005, 2007; Goldmark and Taylor, 2002). With that in mind, we often try to find a musical item whose lyrics or title directly

narrate the onscreen action. Thus for *Big Business* (Horne and McCarey, 1929 – US release) starring Laurel and Hardy, when the actors appear together onscreen, we included 'Side by Side' as one of the accompanying songs, and in *The Blacksmith* (Keaton & St Clair, 1922 – US release) starring Buster Keaton we opened with 'The Anvil Chorus' from *Il Trovatore* by Verdi.

Mood Music and Zamecnik

Much of the music used in our performances is taken from the vast selection of 'mood music' kept in the State Theatre collection. One of the main composers of theme music of the era was John Stepan Zamecnik (1872-1953) and because of recent research interest in his work (Altman, 2004; Hubbert, 2005; Marks, 1997), his music has been more carefully edited to modern expectations compared with many other composers of the era. Zamecnik was a major composer of 'photoplay' music (the genre of music used by silent film theatre orchestras). He composed in many genres including songs, dances, salon music, and mood music, that is, items to be used in compiled silent film scores. In 1907 Zamecnik was appointed musical director of the newly constructed Hippodrome Theatre in Cleveland, Ohio, and he began composing for film at this time. His compositions were published by Samuel Fox whose company was the first to publish original film scores in the USA. Zamecnik was one of the few film music composers who continued to work through the entire period spanning vaudeville through silent film to the coming of synchronised cinema sound.

The National Library in Canberra, Australia, has a major collection, numbering 524 Zamecnik scores. As a comparison, the Balaban and Katz Theatre Orchestra Collection of Chicago, which has been described as "extraordinary" Altman (2004: 354), has 141 separate scores by Zamecnik. He composes in a style that is understandable to modern audiences but also very useable, for example, incorporating a system of repeats so the orchestra can devise a perpetual loop of music that continued until the narrative of the film indicates a musical change. The orchestra then plays to the next 'perfect' cadence (dominant chord to tonic chord ending) and segue to the next musical item. Zamecnik's music was titled to describe the intended mood, for example 'A stealthy escape' or 'The Tempest', and these titles create a guide to their application.

The Use of Leitmotifs

Music can become integrated with the film and assist the representation of past and future events within the narrative through the use of leitmotif (AJ Cohen, 2001: 258). Throughout the late 1910s and 1920s, cue sheet compilers were seeking new methods of establishing musical continuity and, influenced by the expressive qualities of Wagner's use of thematic material, recommended that musical leitmotifs or themes be assigned to the major characters (Altman, 2004). For The Moving Pictures Show presentations, this is a device that we use to alert the audience to repeating themes in the narrative. In *The Black Pirate* (Albert Parker, 1926 – US release) we chose two musical themes to represent the pirates, namely, *The Corsairs* by Hugo Riesenfeld arranged by Zamecnik and 'Ballet Barbarian' by Zamecnik. Other narrative themes in that film were: the desert island for which we used *Algerian Scene* by Albert W Ketèlbey; Douglas Fairbanks as a pirate was represented by part of *Danse Bacchanale* by Camille Saint-Saëns; and love scenes were portrayed using Ständchen (serenade) by Franz Schubert. This

love theme was first played by a solo piano, the next time by piano and muted trumpet and the last time—for the finale—by the full ensemble.

These changes in orchestration, increasing in complexity, were intended to illustrate the developing emotional attachment between the lovers, and this is a device that Deutsch (2007: 9) recommends to allow film composers to illustrate place and mood. Varied uses of leitmotif fulfill important functions because they allow particular musical themes to be continuously paired with a character or event so that the theme itself conjures up the concept of the character or event in the absence of other audiovisual narrative clues (Palmer, 1980: 550). This is particularly important in silent films because leitmotifs allow the audience to follow the narrative and emotional content of the film when there is no dialogue or inter-title slides. Although cue sheet compilers devised leitmotifs to represent different characters, we have found the cue sheets themselves to be almost impossible to employ effectively. They changed music so often that it left little flexibility for working with an ensemble and many of the music choices seemed to be inappropriate for the film for which they are intended. This is a conclusion also made by Altman (2004) who regarded the cue sheets as little more than revenue raisers for the publishing company that produced them.

Figure 2: Performance for *The Sun Down Limited* (Robert F McGowan, 1924) screening at St George Masonic Club, Sydney, June 2011, as the feature in the *Chasing Choo Choos* program staged by The Moving Pictures Show.

The Role of Improvisation

In The Moving Pictures Show presentations the role of improvisation is twofold. First, it allows some flexibility to adjust the pace of the music to fit the film in a seamless manner. Second, it allows the music to respond more closely to the onscreen action, thereby providing the audience with the aural information to generate the emotional content they need to make a coherent story from the diegesis (AJ Cohen, 2001: 254).

Although our music has been chosen very carefully to fit the films, within much of this music there is space for improvisation. We use improvisation to allow flexibility within our chosen scores and help create a relatively seamless musical accompaniment to the film. As we do not use a click track, our choice of tempi can vary slightly from one performance to the next so we need to create a means by which our music can be adapted on a moment-by-moment basis. This is done in part by marking a series of musical elements that can be frequently repeated when the piece is played. In feature films, where more classical pieces are performed, the pianist, Glenn Amer, is usually required to improvise at the end of each section, often up to an inter-title where the music will change. He will then start the new piece and the rest of the orchestra will join in after the first phrase. At various times through the film the pianist improvises alone. This follows the usual practice of the era (Altman, 2004) and gives the other musicians a chance to rest. It also allows more flexibility where there are quick changes of mood, as the pianist is able to improvise within the set music and can play tiny segments from various pieces in response to the action on the screen. When the orchestra is performing the passages that allow improvisation it must play bigger segments of music, and the pencil markings on the State Theatre collection indicate that this was also a usual practice in the silent era.

The comedy films allow us greater scope for improvisation because we use the dance numbers of the era rather than classical or mood music as was the usual practice with this genre (Altman, 2004: 260) and many of our performers are specialist jazz musicians. We sit the orchestra at 90 degrees to the screen so they can see the film and be seen by the audience. The orchestra members are given the music and lead sheets for each item, plus the approximate times that we need each piece to last for. This has required us to create modern lead sheets from the original scores, as the contemporary jazz musicians are unable to improvise upon the music in its originally notated form because no chords were provided. The players watch each segment of film and work out an appropriate order for improvisational solos according to what is seen on screen. The orchestra improvises in the styles of the 1920s and the musicians are careful to ensure that they do not revert to the more familiar swing of the 1930s and later. This has allowed us to perform each piece in larger segments and yet still create musical variety because each performer responds to the film in a unique way. The music is chosen to follow a structure built around the narrative of the film. This means there is an agreed 'shape' that would be lost with totally improvised accompaniments to films. Deutsch (2007: 10) notes that musical acceleration can provide trajectory and increase tension and the comedies of the 1920s used this strategy to poke fun at farcical situations of physical mishap and indignity with a pace that moved more and more frantically toward the finale. With this in mind, we usually use Zamecnik mood music such as 'Hurry Music' as these pieces are structured around short segments and offer easy alternatives for repetition and continuation while gradually speeding up the tempo. This builds tension as the aim is to aurally indicate the mayhem at the end of the film. We have found that our audiences enjoy this form of accompaniment as they are aware of the virtuosity of the musicians and treat it as a varied audiovisual entertainment comprising music and film.

An example of how this system of improvisation works in The Moving Pictures Show can be illustrated through a recent production of *Hot Water* (Harold Lloyd, 1924 – US release). We chose a series of popular pieces that gradually increased in speed and energy to illustrate mounting tension in the film scene. Each section of each piece was timed and then the performers sat and watched the film. With

reference to the onscreen action, they decided the order in which they were going to improvise and the broad structure of the improvisations. Some choices were closely dictated by the film action, for example in a scene where an elevator causes a car to be lifted up, they used a trombone soloist because of his ability to glissandi. Each soloist incrementally increased the tempo and the performers chose to end with a trumpet solo as this instrumentation choice allowed greater volume to assist the accelerated pace of the scene.

Conclusions

The Moving Pictures Show aims to be as historically accurate as possible, while offering an entertaining presentation. To this end the music has been selected from the State Theatre collection with additional input from the Bradford collection. As there is a substantial overlap of music between the two collections, the styles match relatively seamlessly. In the context of historical performance practice and in relation to these two music collections, The Moving Pictures Show aims to engage contemporary audiences with the diegetic world of the silent film by: choosing music that is recognizable to audiences as being from the era of the film; using 'classical' music that is well known to audiences through previous association with the animations of Disney, Warner Bros and Hanna-Barbera; incorporating mood music that was purpose-composed for the films of the silent era by composers such as Zamecnik; and mobilising leitmotifs to alert the audience to repeating themes in the narrative.

In addition to these music choices, The Moving Pictures Show uses improvisation to allow a degree of flexibility when adjusting the tempo of the music to fit the pace of the film. The use of improvisation also allows our performers the freedom to directly respond musically in a spontaneous and unique manner to the onscreen action. This is of particular importance in the slapstick comedies of the 1920s in which music that very closely follows the physical movements of the actors lends itself to the frenetic pace and farcical situations of the narrative.

As there is little available research on the ways in which silent film orchestras performed in Australia, much of our information has been acquired from primary sources: the families of filmmakers and musicians from the era and the markings on the music of the State Theatre collection. While these provide rich sources of information regarding the performance practice of silent film in Sydney, they also suggest avenues for further research. If film music, as Annabel Cohen suggests, acts as a pre-attentive step to lead the audience into the film's diegesis, the goal of The Moving Pictures Show's musical choices must be to contribute to the emotional expression and experience of the film by providing continuity, directing the audiences' attention, creating mood, cueing inter-textual associations and communicating meanings. The resultant musical performance expresses emotion that supports the film's diegesis and heightens the audience's aesthetic experience of the film presentation.

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