

Preview

Stambaugh Organ Series: Peter Richard Conte to improvise score to restored 1925 film, *Metropolis*

by Daniel Hathaway



Historical film buffs, Sci-Fi fans and organ enthusiasts: listen up. You're all going to find this event exciting. On Sunday, February 9 at 4:00 pm, Philadelphia organist Peter Richard Conte will improvise a musical score to Fritz Lang's 1927 German silent film classic, *Metropolis*, using the eloquent resources of the E.M. Skinner symphonic organ in Stambaugh Auditorium in Youngstown.

Filmed during the turbulent years of the Weimar Republic, *Metropolis* is set in a futuristic urban dystopia plagued by class warfare. The first full-length Science Fiction film, *Metropolis* cost about 5 million Reichmarks, making it the most expensive film made to date. The original film was accompanied by a full orchestra score composed by Gottfried Huppertz in the style of Wagner and Strauss. *Metropolis* was reconstructed and restored to its nearly-original length of 148 minutes in 2010 using recently-discovered footage from as far away as Argentina.

Peter Richard Conte divides his busy life among three posts. He presides at the famous Wanamaker organ at Macy's in center city for twice-daily recitals and regular broadcasts, he serves as organist and choirmaster at St. Clement's, an Anglo-Catholic Episcopal church, and he plays and oversees the organ series at Pierre DuPont's Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, PA. We reached him by telephone to talk about *Metropolis*.

Daniel Hathaway: How did you and Metropolis find each other?

Peter Richard Conte: It was chosen for the Philadelphia Film Festival in 2011 and we showed it in the Grand Court here at Macy's. I spent weeks preparing the music and it came off really well. The critics couldn't believe I wasn't playing the original score. When Stambaugh Auditorium invited me back after last year's recital, they suggested showing *Metropolis*. I thought that would be great. It's a classic, sort of an epic of biblical proportions that set the stage for Hitchcock and *Frankenstein*. There's a Christ-like figure and a Maria who rescues abandoned children.

I watched the film probably a hundred times with the Huppert score. During the filming, he played piano as a device to get the actors to react. Because he used *Leitmotifs* — assigning tunes to characters or themes like the underworld — I went back and picked out all his themes and made my own score out of snippets and one-bar phrases so I could keep track of the action and of what's coming up. So I improvised for two and a half hours and it was really just a lot of fun.

DH: How will you prepare for the showing at Stambaugh?

PRC: I already know the movie and I'll probably watch it again a couple of times with the sound off and my cheat sheet in hand. The Youngstown organ is the perfect resource. A wonderfully-restored E.M. Skinner symphonic instrument — it's a little orchestra in disguise. I'll assign various colorful voices to different characters.

DH: You're a very busy man. How do you divide your time between those three organ jobs?

PRC: Actually it's four — I'm also assistant professor at Westminster Choir School of Ryder University. I keep myself busy but I love it! I try not to mix things up, but if I play an opera tune at St. Clement's they don't really mind. Wherever I go I have an incredible symphonic organ at my disposal.

DH: I confess that I've never heard the Wanamaker organ. Does everything come to a halt twice a day when the organ plays?

PRC: No, people go on shopping, but that's the neat part about it. The organ has a friendly sound that transfixes people and gives them a big hug — all that 8' tone and the orchestral transcriptions we play. People come in to buy a pair of shoes and come up to the console in tears wanting to know what that last tune was. John Wanamaker was a real pioneer when he installed the organ 103 years ago — and his idea is now being copied in department stores in China.

DH: And Longwood Gardens?

PRC: I've played there for 15-20 years and was just appointed principal organist, a post they discontinued in 1973 and recently brought back. I've always loved working there and I jumped at the chance. I play on Sunday afternoons and for fun things after hours, I arrange for visiting organists and serve as *de factor* curator of the 1930 Aeolian organ of 146 ranks, which is now in mint condition again. Plus it has all the traps of a theater organ, a complete set of bells and whistles. The combination of all these jobs really makes me happy!

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