

Oberlin students add their personal touch to silent films at the Birenbaum (Feb. 15)

by Stephanie Manning



What do you get when you combine the sounds of an organ, accordion, guitar, violin, and piano? A creative soundtrack to *Les Vampires*, of course.

This unusual ensemble made up one of three groups from “Performing Silent Film Scores from Historic Photoplay Music,” an Oberlin Conservatory Winter Term project led by Oberlin musicology professor Emily Laurance with the assistance of Rodney Sauer, director of the Mont Alto Motion

Picture Orchestra. Using resources from Sauer and his group, the students in the project compiled their own scores to a variety of silent film selections, culminating in a performance on Tuesday, February 15 as part of the inaugural Cleveland Silent Film Festival & Colloquium.

The Birenbaum Innovation and Performance Space created the perfect theater-like setting with room for both the screen and the musicians. Each group was given around 30 minutes of silent film material to work with, and the *Les Vampires* group scored the oldest selections — a brief episode from that 1915 serial as well as three short films by Georges Méliès made in 1905 and 1908.

The story of *Les Vampires* focuses on the activities of the vampires in question, who are actually a criminal gang. Though there was some context missing, “It’s the mood of the thing we’re after,” Sauer explained to the audience.

Violinist Johnum Palado, accordionist Lena Yang, guitarist Grant North, pianist Aitong Zhang, and organist Miles DeMille certainly delivered, with Palado in particular giving a standout performance. The organ and accordion emphasized the comedic nature of both

the episode and the three Méliès shorts, where a little editing and movie magic made fantastical happenings come to life.



The opening two groups accompanied excerpts from films made towards the end of the silent era: *Why Be Good?* and *Blackmail*, both from 1929. The former allowed for a range of musical styles, from frantic jazzy dancing to slow, romantic tenderness. Violinist Erin Koo, flutist/trombonist Cal Ransom, alto saxophonist Sofia Mitchell, hornist Kassi Wilson, pianist Sofia Chen, and drummer Nick Osborn gave life and character to the exaggerated facial expressions and movements on screen.

Long considered a lost film until it was fully restored in 2014, *Why Be Good?* follows flapper girl Pert Kelly's budding romance with Winthrop Peabody Jr. She also rebels against her father, who is unhappy with her fashion and behavior, prompting the memorable line "This is 1929, not 1899!"

This group's musical selections stood out for how they were incorporated into the story on screen. Peabody Jr.'s disgruntled buddies, left by themselves in the car while he romances with Pert, begin to sing loudly off-key — mimicked by the trombone — and proceed to repeatedly honk the horn — precisely imitated by the saxophone.

In contrast to that romantic comedy, Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail* was full of drama and suspense. Violinist Kate Wyly, cellist Justin Epstein, bassist Curtis Bird, clarinetist Zachary Slotkin, and pianist Norah Han used their music as an effective foreshadowing tool. Rather than creating a scene-by-scene score, this group matched the music to the larger story, subtly preparing the listeners for the surprise twist. Full of intrigue, a quality

that was elevated by the music, this brief excerpt from *Blackmail* likely left many wanting more.



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