

## The Many Moods of Melodrama: Sentiment, Satire, Horror, and Noir in silent film

by Mike Telin



When we think of modern-era film composers, the names Hans Zimmer, John Williams, Danny Elfman, and Howard Shore immediately come to mind. But who was responsible for creating the music that accompanied films during the silent era?

During the past three and a half months, a group of Oberlin students have been diligently learning how to create film scores from a historical perspective.

Emily Laurance, a visiting associate professor of musicology at Oberlin Conservatory and executive director of the Cleveland Silent Film Festival and Colloquium, said during a telephone conversation that one of the objectives of her class — Music and Melodrama on Stage and Screen — was for the students “to get a feeling of music in melodrama, and to get a sense of the history of the silent film genre by learning how to compile a musical score.”

The class will culminate in a performance on Friday, May 10 at 7:00 pm at the Cleveland Museum of Art’s Transformer Station. “The Many Moods of Melodrama: Sentiment, Satire, Horror, and Noir” will feature five short silent films exploring the melodramatic mode, with original scores performed by students.

The program includes a new restoration of *An Arcadian Maid* (1910), the historical drama *The Assassination of the Duke of Guise* (1908) featuring an original score by Camille Saint-Saëns, the 1928 film adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*, episode 2 of the French proto-noir crime serial *Les Vampires* (1915), and Charlie Chaplin’s comedy *The Face on the Bar Room Floor* (1914). The event is sold out.

With hundreds of silent films to choose from, Laurance consulted with Rodney Sauer, pianist and music director of the [Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra](#), to determine which films would be a good fit for the class. “The students had around ten films to choose from. The five that were selected included one that had a score by Camille Saint-Saëns, the other four scores were compiled from photoplay music.”

During the semester students also had access to [videos](#) created by Sauer as an introduction to creating silent film scores from photoplay music.

So what is photoplay music? “It was called a whole bunch of things back in the day,” Sauer said during a 2022 [interview](#) with this publication. “I didn’t invent the term but incidental music is a little more vague. There were other terms that were used but ‘photoplay music’ pegs it.”

Sauer explained that three types of music were utilized during the screenings of silent films. “Composed scores” comprise music written for a specific film, “improvised scores” are made up by a musician in real time, and “compiled scores” are assembled from a library of pre-written music that depicts certain scenes or moods such as chases, storms, or romance.”

During that interview Sauer noted that it is important to know just how flexible this repertoire is. “You can play it with any size orchestra. It was designed that way because it was a commercial business. You wouldn’t have a 40-piece orchestra in a small town, so what do you do? You use the same music, just simplify it.” Click here to access Sauer’s [Photoplay Starter Kit](#).

Why did students decide to take the class and how did they find the experience of creating a score for their selected films?

Thomas Roddy-Johnson, a first-year piano performance major from Washington, D.C., said that he was looking for a music history class and while he had no idea what it would entail — he thought it would be musical theater — he has found the process, and the class, to be very interesting.

“I chose D.W. Griffith’s *An Arcadian Maid*. Griffith is the same guy who directed the controversial film *The Birth of a Nation*. It took a long time for me to find the right music because I kept looking for the perfect match — now I’m less of a perfectionist. But in the end I chose Albert E. Matt’s *Rural Scenes No. 1*, a piece called *Morning Adagio*, and parts of Bach’s Cantata BWV 26 *Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig*.” Roddy-Johnson’s score calls for piano, oboe, violin, and accordion. “This was the first time I’ve worked with instruments and that was very interesting.”

Miguel Arroyo, a first-year oboe performance major from Ithaca, New York, said that he too was looking for a music history class, read the course description, and thought it sounded interesting. “I never knew that melodrama was a genre.”

Arroyo chose the Charlie Chaplin film *Face on the Bar Room Floor*. “It took me a while to decide what to use — I was not expecting to have to use so many pieces for a film that only lasts twelve minutes. But the film has a lot of mood changes and I wanted to make sure the music advances the action, because a lot of photoplay scores can be repetitive.”

Why did he select an ensemble of piano, oboe, violin, and electric organ/accordion? “In the tradition of photoplay I used the instruments that were available.”

Both Roddy-Johnson and Arroyo agreed that when it comes to comparing silent film music and today’s film scores, the latter tend to be more atmospheric. “In melodrama, the music becomes another character,” Arroyo said. “But once talking became part of movies, the music began to serve other purposes — like creating atmosphere.”

Laurence said that she’s very pleased with the students’ final projects and hopes that people will enjoy the show.

*Photo courtesy of Cleveland Silent Film Festival*

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