

Sentiment, Satire, Horror, and Noir in silent film (May 10)

by Mike Telin



At a time when performing musical scores during the showings of blockbuster films has become popular programming for symphony orchestras, it's interesting to turn back the clock to an era when audiences never heard the actors' voices and the music was always performed live by whatever size ensemble was available.

This past semester a group of Oberlin students in the Music and Melodrama on Stage and Screen class, taught by Emily Laurance, immersed themselves in the creation of film scores from a historical perspective.

On Friday, May 10 the members of the class presented their final projects at the Cleveland Museum of Art's Transformer Station. "The Many Moods of Melodrama: Sentiment, Satire, Horror, and Noir" was a fascinating and thoroughly entertaining evening that featured five short silent films exploring the melodramatic mode, with original scores performed by the students.

Laurance, a visiting associate professor of musicology at Oberlin Conservatory and the executive director of the Cleveland Silent Film Festival and Colloquium, told the capacity audience that one of the objectives of her class was for the students to gain a feeling of music in melodrama as well as a sense of the history of the silent film genre by learning how to compile a musical score.

Keeping with tradition, the instrumentation for each score was dependent on what was available — accordion and organ (Noah Duckworth), oboe (Adriana Koch, filling in for Miguel Arroyo), piano (Thomas Roddy-Johnson), and piano and violin (Yi-An Su).

Roddy-Johnson's use of photoplay music perfectly captured the rural setting of D.W. Griffith's *An Arcadian Maid* (1910). The inclusion of Georg Böhm's setting of the chorale *Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig* added the sadness that Priscilla felt when she realized the peddler she had fallen in love with had absconded with her employer's money.

In Episode 2, "The Deadly Ring" from Louis Feuillade's French proto-noir crime serial *Les Vampires* (1915), pianist Yi-An Su's stunning performance of Ravel's *La Valse* — in its entirety — brilliantly captured the darkness of this story in which a ballerina is poisoned by a vampire.

Noah Duckworth's inventive score for James Sibley Watson's and Melville Webber's 1928 adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* highlighted the many moods of the strange film. The music ranged from contemplative, to short staccato notes, to melodic, to pounding hammer chords. The inclusion of organ added to the onscreen drama.

Charlie Chaplin's comedy *The Face on the Bar Room Floor* (1914) centers around Chaplin's signature character (a tramp) who visits a crowded bar and becomes drunk as he tells the patrons about his lost love, attempting to draw the woman's picture on the floor while getting into fights and eventually passing out. Miguel Arroyo's dramatic score paid close attention to the quick scene changes, and his use of silence added to the film's tension.

The evening also included *The Assassination of the Duke of Guise*, one of the first films to feature both an original film score (Camille Saint-Saëns) and a screenplay by a well-known screenwriter (Henri Lavedan). The film depicts the day King Henry III invited the Duke Henri de Guise to his private chambers and had him murdered.

While the score may not be Saint-Saëns at his most inspired, the excellent performance by the ensemble brought the film to life. And its inclusion offered audiences a glimpse into the rich history of film music.

Photo courtesy of Cleveland Silent Film Festival

Published on ClevelandClassical.com May 30, 2024

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