

Cleveland Silent Film Festival double bill features soundtrack by pianist Mike Petrone

by Stephanie Manning



In 2001, pianist Mike Petrone helped director John Baumgartner create the soundtrack to a silent film called *War Story*. Then he shelved the recordings and never thought about them again. Until last year.

When a friend directing a show at Clague Playhouse reached out to ask if they could use some of the recordings, Petrone dug them back up and listened to them for the first time in decades.

This summer, he's found himself studying that score again. That's all thanks to the Cleveland Silent Film Festival, who decided not only to screen

Baumgartner's film, but also ask Petrone to accompany it.

On Saturday, August 9, *War Story* and Charlie Chaplin's *Sunnyside* (1919) will be presented as a double feature at the main Cleveland Public Library, with Petrone providing a live score from the keyboard. The 3:00 pm concert in the Louis Stokes Wing Auditorium is free.

The pianist said he has fond memories of the recording session for *War Story*, which was scored for "a little teacup orchestra." Baumgartner, who grew up in Northeast Ohio and is based in Los Angeles, flew out for the occasion, and the director and musicians assembled at Suma Recording Studio in Painesville.

"It was the craziest day," Petrone said. In the pre-digital era, the group recorded directly to a time code while the film played — carefully syncing up the music and action with no way to go back and edit.

Lev Polyakin, then the assistant concertmaster of The Cleveland Orchestra, coached his fellow string players on how to create that characteristic whine heard in soundtracks

from the silent film era. “I was like, ‘Wow, that is so authentic and so cool,’” Petrone said. “I was so grateful for him.”

Creating the score came somewhat naturally to the pianist. “My parents had done live TV in Cleveland going back to the ’60s,” he said. “So I had some experience accompanying stuff on the fly.” While his performance at the Cleveland Public Library will draw on the material he originally created, there will be plenty of room for improvisation as well.

To prepare, he’s been re-watching *War Story*, a romantic comedy of errors set in 1918 about a gay man who falls for a soldier about to be sent overseas to serve in the First World War. The short film — which Baumgartner wrote, directed, and starred in — draws inspiration from the style of Charlie Chaplin films like *Sunnyside*.

Petrone said it’s important to make the music accurate to the era when the story takes place. “Compositionally, you try to keep it true to the period, rather than throwing some curveballs. You can have Debussy in there, but you can’t have Bernstein.”

The pianist has never played to *Sunnyside* before, so he said he’s still considering how to prepare. “I’m treading the line between: am I actually going to compose some stuff for it, or am I just going to let it happen?”

Most likely, the result will be a mix of both. “Whatever happens, happens,” he said. “I’m hoping to have some ideas in my pocket for the different energies of the piece, and just let it fly from there.”

Published on [ClevelandClassical.com](https://clevelandclassical.com) August 6, 2025.

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