

Cleveland Silent Film Festival opens with *Phantom of the Opera* centennial screening

by Mike Telin



The Cleveland premiere of *Phantom of the Opera* starring Lon Chaney lit up the screen at the Stillman Theatre on Sunday, January 17, 1926. In his *Plain Dealer* review W. Ward Marsh wrote “if your heart is strong, I recommend it to you. If your heart isn’t so strong, go see this film

anyway, to find out how strong it is.”

On Sunday, September 14 the Cleveland Silent Film Festival & Colloquium will open its 2025 edition with that iconic film. The special screening at 3:00 pm in Gartner Auditorium at the Cleveland Museum of Art will celebrate *Phantom’s* 100th anniversary and feature its original score, performed live by American Musical Productions’ 17-piece orchestra conducted by Joseph Rubin.

Lon Chaney’s performance as the Phantom still captivates a century later, while the music of the original 1925 orchestral score brings the gothic grandeur of Gaston Leroux’s tale to life.



“It’s a lurid melodrama with a lot of universal themes and production values, including an amazing technicolor scene for the masked ball,” CSFF founder and director Emily Laurance said during a Zoom conversation. “There are also human elements like individual ostracization and other kinds of rejection and revenge fantasies — things that still inspire powerful human emotions.”

The score is for a large ensemble, and will incorporate Gartner Auditorium's McMyler organ. "We chose the film because it's celebrating its centennial and Joseph Rubin wanted to pair the film with the original 1925 score. And for the first time in a hundred years, it's been edited to match the 78-minute run time of the restored print for this special anniversary screening."



The Festival will continue in Gartner Auditorium Friday, September 19 at 7:30 pm with *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1925). This adaptation of Oscar Wilde's sharp-tongued comedy of manners will be accompanied by an original score compiled and performed by Rodney Sauer and members of the Cleveland Photoplayers

How do you turn an Oscar Wilde play into a silent film? "At the time people did wonder how you could do that without losing all the Wilde aphorisms," Laurance said. "To a large extent, the director Ernst Lubitsch, viewed it more as translating Wilde's inimitable language into a visual language. Finding subtle ways of making points about society's judgment and sexual secrets, but communicating them through visual markers rather than with words."

The music will feature a compilation score assembled by Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra music director Rodney Sauer. Performers include Sauer on piano and members of the Cleveland Photoplayers.

"I always trust Rodney because he puts together such great compilation scores, that language of movie music that was developed in the teens of short cues that craft a musical narrative that echoes the dramatic movement of the film."

On September 20 at 1:30 pm in Gartner there will be a free panel discussion on silent film music, moderated by Eric Charnofsky. Panelists include David Blazer, Philip Carli, Donnie Rankin, and Rodney Sauer

Following the discussion at 3:00 pm there will be a René Clair double bill: *Entr'Acte* and *Paris qui dort* (Paris Asleep) with piano scores performed by Philip Carli and Eric Charnofsky.

“I saw both of these films in spring of 2006 in the East Wing of the National Gallery when they were presented as part of a shorts program that was connected to an exhibit on Dadaism and they’ve both stuck with me,” Laurance said.

“*Entr’Acte* has an original score by Erik Satie, and we will be showing it with the original score, but in a piano four-hand reduction.” Laurance said that for *Paris qui dort*, the performers will use a compilation score that quotes a lot of French music including parts of Gustave Charpentier’s opera *Louise*.



“I have a very soft spot in my heart for *Paris qui dort*, which I think is delightful. It’s comedy, sci-fi, and fantasy. It’s also a meditation on modernism, on speed, on a new mechanistic society, but also on the whole metaphor of how we’re living our lives — asleep or awake.”

At 3:00 pm on September 21 in Gartner, you can catch Buster Keaton’s *Go West* (1925) with an original score compiled and performed by Rodney Sauer and members of the Cleveland Photoplayers, with live special effects performed by Radio on the Lake Theatre.

“The nice thing about *Go West* is there are a lot of good opportunities for live sound effects in addition to the live score. So these two groups are coordinating to create a rich comedic soundscape for the film.”



The Festival will conclude on September 27 at 9:00 pm with F. W. Murnau’s *Faust* (1926) at the Cinematheque at the Cleveland Institute of Art. The musical score will be performed by the LA-based metal band The Silent Light as a special presentation for Silent Movie Day 2025.

“I don’t know the score, but they’ve gotten some really good responses around the country,” Laurance said. “They have some clips posted on their website and I asked a board member who is a big metal fan to check them out and she told me, ‘they’re fabulous, we’ve got to do this.’”

Tickets for all events and Festival Passes are available [online](#).

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