

## On Playing for Silent Films

### Introduction: playing the piano by ear

Much of my 40-year career has been devoted to leading large university conservatoriums, both in Australia and New Zealand. These jobs are much the same anywhere in the world: if you wish to transform your institution and leave it much better than you found it, your job will absorb most of your time and energy and there will be little to spare for your own creative work. I eventually found a solution to this dilemma: what little time I had for my own music would be devoted to something that came naturally – improvising at the piano. To be specific, over the past 28+ years I have become adept at improvising silent film soundtracks. I commenced in the mid 1990s when a colleague suggested I try it for a fundraising event. I found it an absorbing artistic challenge, and since then have continually honed my craft playing for a large number of silent film screenings, including as a guest at various festivals in Australia and internationally.

I have always played the piano by ear; as far back into my childhood as I can remember I could replicate at the piano, music I had heard once or twice before. In the 1950s what I heard was mainly via the radio. Developing this ability to imitate over many years has enabled me to have a ready store of music - other people's and my own - and musical styles, filed away inside my head, which I can pull out and perform at any time. A mix of talent and acquired skill, improvising like this is becoming rare among professional classical musicians, most of whom struggle to play with confidence anything not printed on a page. There was a time, not many generations ago, when professional musicians, particularly keyboard players, were expected to be able to improvise. It was part of their training and professional skillset and most could do it well. For me, improvising is indispensable for my work with silent film; I simply couldn't do it without this skill.

When I took up the role of playing with silent films, their screening was a rare event and the art of performing with them had all but disappeared, which meant that I had to reinvent it. As it turned out, my silent film events proved very popular, even with young audiences who were growing up with high tech movies such as *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings*. I quickly found myself in demand, not just for one-offs, but for festivals as well. Initially I was concerned that what I was doing might be thought primitive and dull. I need not have worried; my audiences in the 1990s seemed to love them.

### Historical

Musicians who played for silent films in the 1920s usually used some form of sheet music. The theatres of the silent era had pianists or organists, and a few had chamber ensembles, jazz combos or small orchestras. They usually played with either complete sheet music, or printed cue sheets for each scene in a film. In addition,

most theatre pianists had worked out a small number of musical snippets which could be played for a standard group of emotions and types of on-screen activity: happy/sad, slow/fast, and from gentle romance to nail-biting drama. Many also had a few classical pieces up their sleeve to portray the same emotions and action. Of course, some improvising would have occurred during a film, but mostly the musician(s) read from a printed music score. Some theatres had small instrumental ensembles but adding a mix of instruments came at the cost of the flexibility needed to improvise music that closely followed the on-screen action. Very occasionally, feature-length films, particularly on serious subjects, were released with complete musical scores, some by famous composers.

While modern films use the latest complex technology to create the final product, silent films don't have this going for them. They are much simpler in the way they utilise acting - often closely related to vaudeville and live theatre acting - and props. These are combined with the skills of the director, camera operator and lighting director. The list of credits for a silent film is often very short. In the 1920s, when a film was completed it was shown with the addition of live music, which was intended to make up for everything an audience might consider necessary for a total theatrical experience. This may tempt one to consider silent films as primitive and therefore less important compared to their modern-day counterparts, but this would be like saying that the music of Bach is inferior to later music, such as Wagner or Debussy.

Just a few years before her death, my mother told me that when she was very young, in the early 1920s, she was taken regularly to see silent films. She said that the audiences at Sydney suburban picture theatres would often sing the popular songs of the day as soon as the theatre pianist played something familiar; moreover, she recounted that this happened both when they were changing reels and during the film itself, which must have been very discombobulating for anyone who wanted to concentrate on what was happening on the screen.

Standards of music would have varied greatly between major cities and country towns. In places such as Sydney, professionals were employed in the theatres; in more far-flung places, amateurs often filled the role. A connection with picture theatres of the era links with some of my forebears on my mother's side. My mother's slightly older cousin, Olive Atkins, was a young pianist in Bathurst, New South Wales in the 1920s. According to my mother, Olive played the organ for church on Sundays and the piano for silent films on Fridays and Saturdays. Olive also bought and drove her own car, which, for a female, was considered fairly daring in the 1920s. Indeed, a number of my forebears on my mother's side came from Bathurst where they were regarded by the local citizenry as leading amateur musicians of the town. My mother's older brother, my uncle Harold, played the piano quite well by ear and did so in my presence once or twice when I was very young.

My mother studied piano herself and by the late 1920s was good enough to enter the Conservatorium's diploma programme. When I looked her up in the

Conservatorium's records, I discovered that Phyllis Green did exceptionally well, usually receiving very high marks in all subjects. However, the Depression cut short her Conservatorium career when she was in her final year. Her brother Harold, who had been paying her fees, lost his job and my mother had to give up her beloved music studies. She re-trained in shorthand and typing, and, strange to say, then connected herself with the film industry, becoming a secretary at Paramount Pictures in Sydney, where, among other things, she ran the Australian branch of the Bing Crosby Fan Club sending out signed photographs of the idol to adoring Australians.

### **How I work with silent films**

Back in the mid 1990s, when I started playing for silent films, the first and most important artistic choice I had to make was what to play. My decision - one that I have never altered - was to play a mix of well-known 1920s and earlier songs, snippets of well-known classical pieces, and my own original material in the same styles. In fact, most of what I played in my first performance was my own music, and this established a pattern that I have maintained. The reason I favour the 1920s and earlier styles is that I want my audience to experience each film with what appears to be its own soundtrack; my quest is to make it look and sound like a live event with the actors moving with the music. This means creating the illusion that these long-dead performers, seen in black and white, can actually hear what I am playing. Over time I have become increasingly adept at this. My role is like that of an orchestra conductor at the ballet; like ballet, silent films require non-stop music.

What I play is improvised to match as closely as possible the action on screen. However, as with most forms of improvisation, my music is not completely created in the moment; there is always a framework that I put in place before a performance. For example, I watch each film many times and make detailed notes on visual structure, while at the same time making up musical ideas which will work with the changing action. I also decide how and where musical and visual structures will connect and where they don't need to correspond; and I consider volume levels and tempo and how to manage tempo changes. I also come up with an overall harmonic plan including a sequence of key centres for the entire film. In effect, my music planning turns the film into a single, continuously unfolding musical structure. For some films I plan recurring musical contexts and themes (leitmotifs) for characters and situations. While a film's story usually unfolds in a single linear direction, musical ideas may be repeated to explain the story with greater complexity (reflection and recall, anticipation, and in the present moment) and to tie together the fabric of the whole in ways that the film alone cannot readily achieve. When I sit at the piano to present the film live, I don't have anything written in front of me; I simply recall the various parameters I have decided for the soundtrack, that is, I create my music score out of my head and insert it as a live element into the film. Around all of these predetermined parameters I improvise 'in the moment'. As the film unfolds, it acts as

a series of visual cues for my improvisation. Presenting films in this way seems logical to me because it allows the greatest scope for extemporising.

To me, there are only two essential components in a silent film: the images (story) and my music. I avoid adding extra sound effects as I find them an unnecessary encumbrance. Viewing the film in silence, without any sound, is like watching a ballet without music. I don't see my music as providing mere accompaniment; rather, I see each of the two components as co-dependent contrapuntal lines. As with a piece of contrapuntal music, I want my audience to experience the whole as a single entity rather than as two separate (and separated) parts. The essential thing is that the two components must always achieve a balance. But the vision to music balance is rarely 50:50; often it is 70:30 or even 80:20. Because the film is fixed and unalterable, it is only the music that can be manipulated to achieve the balance I am looking for. I regard it as a serious error of artistic judgement if the music is ever allowed to swamp the visual material. When this happens, the overall effect is that of music brought into the foreground while being accompanied by a film that has been relegated to the background. In the worst examples it is the equivalent of the film having the status of a string quartet at a cocktail party. Creating a musical soundscape that facilitates proper balance requires a great deal of care of the musical parameters. In my film improvisations I constantly judge and adjust the balance between what the audience sees and hears.

For me, inventing music for silent films is really a type of composition exercise; it is very much like the counterpoint assignments I undertook as a Conservatorium student in which I would take a line of pre-composed music (e.g., Palestrina or Bach, for example) and then add my own line(s) to match the given part in terms of style and effectiveness. With silent films, the fixed part is the original film itself; my musical response has to complete it in such a way that doesn't turn it into something that is at odds with the original.

### **The Silent Film Collection**

As I have noted, a silent film without music will struggle to make a full impact. However, the reverse is not necessarily true; if the musical ideas are of sufficiently good quality, they can be extracted from the film and turned into stand-alone concert pieces. This is what I have done to create this collection: it is a group of pieces I have composed from all the music I have in my head from my silent film improvisations over the past two and a half decades. I think these pieces represent some of the best musical moments I have come up with in silent films, but are also only a fraction of the music I have created overall in my silent film work since the mid 1990s. With the exception of *A Slinky Foxtrot- Nocturne*,

which is music for an imaginary silent film scene, everything in this collection started life as a keyboard improvisation for a silent film. This means there is an immediate association, at least in my mind, of each piece with its original visual context. Accordingly, I decided that it would be useful to make the original context known by including program notes as well as titles which often refer in some way to the where the music came from. But even with the addition of the programme notes, my intention is that these pieces can now stand apart as concert works and will no longer need the original imagery to be complete.

The formal structures I have used in these pieces are simple and straightforward, in keeping with the 1920s styles of music they imitate. Many are in ternary form (ABA), some are binary (AB); I use theme and variations occasionally (A *Slinky Foxtrot*) and sometimes extended forms, such as AB:A<sub>2</sub>B<sub>2</sub>:A<sub>3</sub> coda (*Alice's Lament*). Mostly, I have followed the forms, structures and sounds of the 1920s: Foxtrot, Charleston, Ragtime, Cakewalk etc. There are some exceptions such as my *Barcarolle*, which, because I wanted the style of 19<sup>th</sup> century French music, was designed to sound like something Offenbach, Saint Saëns or Fauré might have penned. For the supper scene when Bill meets Doreen's mother (Ma) in the Australian classic *The Sentimental Bloke*, I originally improvised an Irish song-without-words, which I called *Doreen's Ma Thinks Longingly of Home*. It is in the style of *My Wild Irish Rose* and other Irish songs which have lots of pathos and nostalgia. My *Tarantella* was improvised for a dramatic chase on horseback and is deliberately in the style of one or two well-known Beethoven sonata finales (opus 2 no 1 and opus 47).

A film festival director once told me she could 'hear the film and see the music' when she attended my presentation of Buster Keaton's *The General*. While this is a great compliment - it meant I had succeeded in integrating image and music to the extent that they appeared to have merged - such a statement is also contestable: can you really 'see' music? It might be possible to 'see' music when you are listening to it as part of a film soundtrack, but can you actually see the music once the visual props have been removed? Perhaps it is true that listeners can 'see' some types of music better than others: the moonlight in Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, for example. In addition, many music lovers like to be given extramusical clues as to what a piece is about. For example, *Sonata Appassionata* is usually preferred as a title to Beethoven's *Sonata opus 57*, even though it is the same piece. While music is highly logical in its organisation, it is, essentially, an abstract language, and because of this, listeners often appreciate having a written or visual clue to help with their understanding of what they are listening to.

Is it possible to put these pieces back into their original context and play them alongside the film scenes where they started life? The answer is, of course, yes, but some serious modifications would be necessary to make them fit once again. In their original context the music had to conform to a set of images which were already established and could not be changed; the only changes that are ever possible with silent films is to the music itself. However, in setting them down on paper, these works are now stand-alone concert pieces, which are no longer constrained by the duration of the scenes in the films themselves.

My website ([www.robertconstable.com](http://www.robertconstable.com)) gives some additional information about my journey as a silent film pianist, including extended interviews with musicologists, Dr Davinia Caddy and Dr Jane McKellar dealing with composing in general and how I grapple with important artistic issues in my silent film work.

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