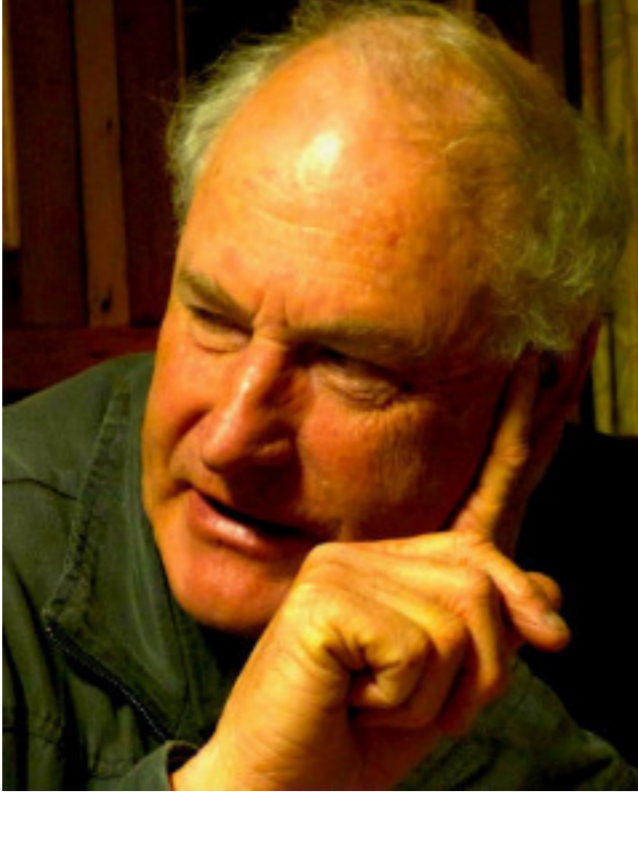


Encounters

Being Buster's Buddy

by Robert Constable (Published on October 11, 2020)



Robert Constable is an Australian composer, pianist, chamber musician and educator, and has held the positions of Professor and Head of Music at three Antipodean universities: Newcastle (New South Wales, Australia), Auckland (New Zealand) and Canterbury (Christchurch, New Zealand). In his younger years, he made his name as a piano recitalist and composer, creating works in a variety of genres including solo piano, chamber ensemble and music for spoken and sung theatre. In more recent decades, he has developed a highly successful career as a silent film specialist, performing to considerable acclaim in festivals across the globe, as well as in his hometown Kangaroo Valley, NSW. Here, in conversation with Davinia Caddy, he recounts his experience playing for the pictures, particularly those of renowned actor-producer-director Buster Keaton.

DC: What or who attracted you to the genre of silent film?

RC: I was thrown in at the deep end. Some friends and colleagues at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, as well as members of our chamber group Musica Viva, decided to have a silent film night as a fundraiser, with me improvising at the piano. Despite never having attempted any such thing, I figured I'd give it a go. I had written lots of scores for theatre and so fitting music with action, characters and moving images was something I was relatively familiar with. So I accepted the challenge. I found some suitable films in the University Library: three Keaton comedies, in fact, *One Week* (1920), *The Blacksmith* (1922) and *The Navigator* (1924). I watched them a few times and then, at the piano, started formulating musical ideas I might use.



Advertisement for Buster Keaton's first film, the silent comedy *One Week* (1920).

Family enough, one of the first questions that came to my mind was copyright. So I telephoned APRA (the Australasian Performing Rights Association) who advised me that the Keaton films were probably out of copyright as they were over 80 years old. APRA also held the view that if I was going to be improvising original music and performing it live, then I would probably hold copyright of the soundtrack myself: the film could be construed as a 'prop' for my piano improvisation.

As for the first performance, I remember that, within about thirty seconds, the audience was in stitches. I realized that this was probably what it would have been like all those decades ago in movie theatres, when the films were first shown. Laughter is highly infectious, especially that of three or four hundred people. I think it was the immediacy of the experience that compelled me to keep going. The night was a huge success - and there began my career as a silent film specialist.

DC: Did you have any mentors or models to relate to? Were there any other silent film specialists active at the time whose methods and practices you wanted to emulate?

RC: There were no models back then in Australia. Perhaps this was a blessing, as it added to the surprise or excitement felt by audiences at my performances. I was a novelty, I think. The one or two 'old timers' I spoke to who had played for the movies earlier in the century told me that they had simply sight-read sheet music without paying too much attention to the plot, character development, genre, tone, etc. It had seemed, to them, that anything they dished out would have to do, as long as there was some kind of soundtrack to accompany the film. Also, they seemed to think in terms of a limited number of scenes or character types: fast and dramatic in a minor key for frantic and somewhat terrifying scenes; slow, sentimental and in a major key for love scenes; and something light and bouncy, in a major key, for lighthearted comic scenes and slapstick chases.

My mother (born in 1909) was a youngster when silent films were just starting. She told me in the 1990s of going in a horse and sulky to the pictures in Kogarah (a Sydney suburb) to see Charlie Chaplin movies and that the pianist would play the latest popular songs (mostly World War I songs one would suppose). She said that when they heard these the audience would burst into spontaneous singing. This tells me that an audience in those days was not only there to witness the latest breathtaking technological marvels on the screen, but that these occasions had a strong social interactive basis and regularly brought people together. To me, this underlines the idea that what was often played was not really an accurate soundtrack to the film but was merely background music put there to plug the gap because the films had no soundtrack of their own.

There were many more questions in my mind than ready answers, so I found almost immediately that I had to confront these head-on. One was the notion of 'accompaniment'. When I improvise for silent films, I don't think of my role as simply to 'accompany' the images on screen. Rather, I try to fashion a soundtrack that will be a true partner to the succession of shots; I strive to make a musical partnership in which the elements are so interwoven that it is difficult for the audience to distinguish them as separate entities. I like to think that I invent music that the audience can 'see' while at the same time encouraging a seemingly reverse response: that is, at some level the visual elements themselves appear as having sonic qualities.



To achieve this co-dependence of elements I am very particular about the music itself, so that whatever I produce doesn't overload the visuals with too much aural messaging. This, incidentally, is what tends to happen when a symphony orchestra accompanies a silent film; the musical texture, colour, style and volume all combine to dominate to the extent that, for the audience, the experience becomes that of an orchestra playing music accompanied by a film. The only way the film-makers can combat that imbalance is by using a very large screen. But then the problem is transformed into another problem, one in which vision and sound are trying to outdo one another and this very quickly produces overload and tiredness in the audience because there is too much information for them to concentrate on.

Achieving balance between visuals and sound: this is my goal, but the balance shifts constantly. I am very fussy about things like musical texture (thinner is usually more effective), the size of the screen in relation to the size of the auditorium and that of the instrument I am playing. Volume is also an important factor. One way to think of this is to regard the visuals and music as combining in such a way as to become a single polyphonic entity: the film provides one contrapuntal layer, and the music the other. Think of a Bach two-part invention: my music is one voice, and the other voice is the image.

DC: You've spoken previously about having an endless store of music in your head, from which you dip into for different films.

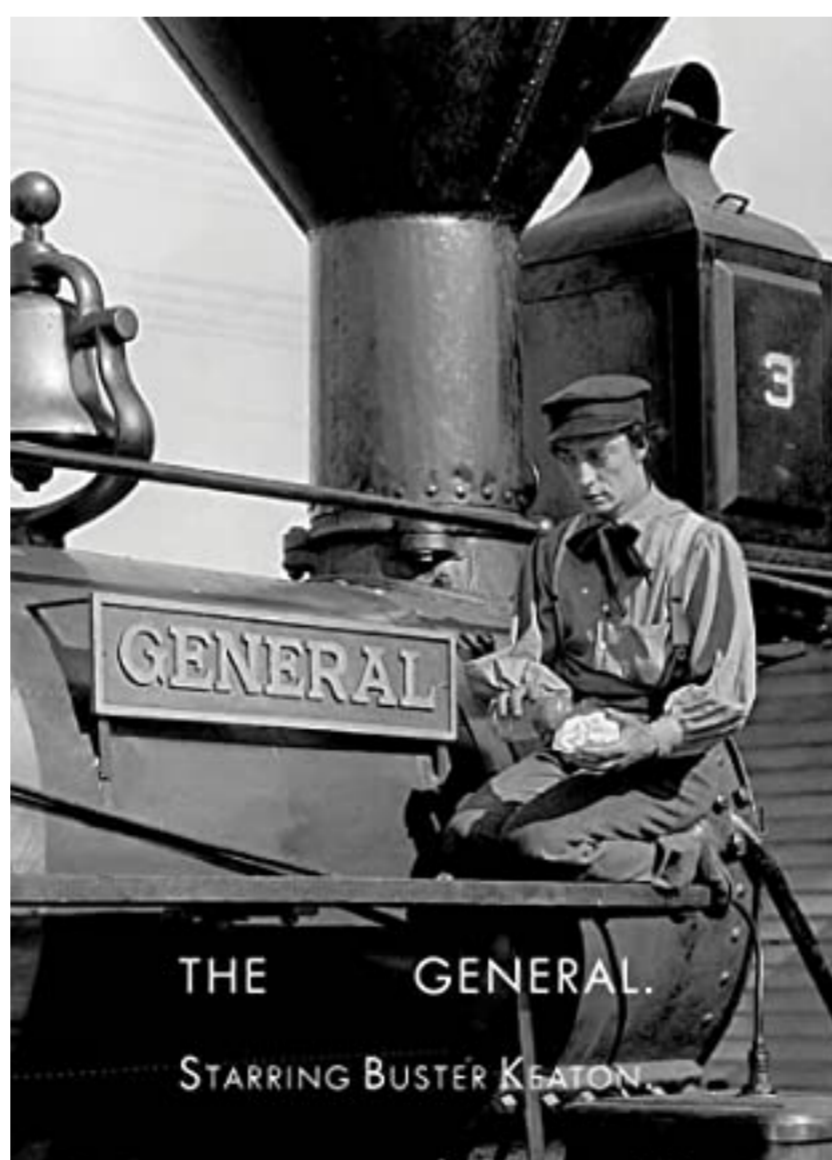
RC: Yes, this is true - it's the end result of doing this sort of gig for a few decades now. But, even though I'm improvising, I still plan very thoroughly: the style, tonality, key changes, rhythms, etc. I just don't write the music down. In terms of form, particularly if I am working with a feature-length film, I usually aim to create a musical structure that lasts for 80-90 minutes with recurring thematic ideas. This musical structure, though intimately related to the film, may not follow it exactly. For example, film tends to progress through a one-directional story line (or sometimes two stories at once), but my music might contain a repetition of ideas. This principle applies to talkies as well of course. The music has to unfold with a logic of its own and this might transcend the duration of individual scenes or it might fit neatly within scenes. Working out which it is, well, this is part of the planning I do ahead of a performance. It sometimes involves amalgamating scenes: that is, joining scenes with overarching musical ideas. What this means, of course, is that the performer has incredible power and impact at their disposal. A bit like Keaton himself.

DC: I might pick up on this idea, your comparison with Keaton. You're a buddy of his, you might say?

RC: Yes, I definitely see myself as living in the moment along with the actors on screen. In a sense this is absurd, because they are all dead and gone. But, in another sense, it is logical to be part of the acting troop - a bit like a circus musician - who plays along while the actors do the acting.

So I always invent musical styles that the actors themselves would recognize. You might call this a kind of historical authenticity. I imagine that the actors are able to hear and identify with what I'm doing and, in that sense, my silent film music becomes like a ballet score to which the actors 'dance'.

Periods of music can also be important when dealing with period films, such as Keaton's *The General* (1926). I've performed to this film several times and I always go for a style of music that was popular in American music halls in the 1860s, because this is the time in which the film is set. I like to use known Civil War tunes or songs by Stephen Foster. Mostly I make up my own music in a similar historical style: that is, music that might have been heard in mid-nineteenth-century America.



Keaton in *The General* (1926).

I recall another experience which connects with this topic, showing that there can be exceptions when it comes to placing a film with historical accuracy from the musical perspective. For example, in the Australian Silent Film Festival in 2010 I had the pleasure of performing a soundtrack for a film that had been lost for decades. In fact, I think this was the first time the entire resurrected film had been seen since the mid-1920s. This was *Bardleys the Magnificent* (1926), which was directed by the great King Vidor. It starred the swashbuckling movie legend of the 1920s, John Gilbert, in the title role of Monsieur Bardleys. The film is set in court of King Louis IV, that is, the mid-seventeenth century, but is very much a 1920s Hollywood take on that period. The question for me, therefore, was what style of music would suit this film. Somehow the harpsichord and lute style of Louis Couperin didn't seem right. I decided that the way to do this was to invent something that resembled late nineteenth-century French salon music. For this, I made up (and appropriately harmonized) melodies that were very much in the style of Fauré and Duparc, without actually being either. It seemed to work very effectively. What I think this reflects is that I was looking for styles of music to which the actors on screen would react positively and which would fit not only with the characters being portrayed but with the way they are portraying them.

DC: So, in a sense, there's a distinct historicist aspect to what you're doing? You're formulating musical themes that signal specific historical periods and events?

RC: Yes, I never attempt to bring the films up to date by using modern-sounding music, because that would rob each film of its 1920s aura. It would attempt to make it 'modern' in an antithetical way. I want the films to come alive as though they are happening at that very moment. Take another example, the early Hitchcock films of the 1920s. I started my preparation for these by looking over the soundtracks Hitchcock authorized for his later pictures; and I tried to think in terms of the same style parameters. The first time I worked with the silent film version of *Blackmail* (1927). I based my musical ideas on the sorts of styles that Shostakovich, Berg or Prokofiev might have used: hard-edged, almost atonal, with leitmotifs for scenes and for characters running through the length of the film.

DC: You're not just trying to be inventive, then; the sort of mimesis that you're aiming for is much broader than slapstick 'mickey-mousing' or basic mood painting. You've got a musical encyclopedia - of styles, periods, even particular composers - in your mind.

RC: Yes, and I tried to cultivate this, you might call it an encyclopedic tendency, many years before the prospect of playing for the movies came up. In my student days, I would write fugues, canons and other short pieces of counterpoint (in anything up to 8 or even 10 parts) every day for several years. The range of musical styles I was imitating was quite broad and included counterpoint from the sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries as well as various nineteenth- and twentieth-century styles. I suppose I had a natural flair for style imitation and over time I became quite adept at it. I would set myself tasks: say, taking one of Bach's fugue subjects and writing my own fugue on the same subject.

Why did I put myself through such a regimen of study and what effect did so much style imitation have on my music-making? It always seemed to me that to really understand great music, it was worth the investment of considerable time trying to get into the composer's head - not to try to become the composer, but to 'shadow' him (historically it was usually a 'him') in order to understand everything he did (and didn't do) when he wrote his music. This form of musical immersion suited my personality and involved spending vast amounts of time analyzing and then writing similar music - that is, imitating a master, gaining not just knowledge of his music, but real skill and experience in creating it. If my subject was Bach, I had to develop a similar skill set as relates to voice-leading, harmonic language, texture, rhythm, overall structure and so on, and I had to become fluent to the point where I could create music quite quickly, as the composer had done. I was forcing myself to go through the same processes, confront the same issues, and hopefully find similar solutions to the multiple compositional problems that were constantly thrown up.

I should say, though, that as a composer I never wanted to be regarded as a mere imitator of the great composers. I just wanted to learn from regularly 'dwelling inside their music'. Of course, the idea of spending an extended apprenticeship copying from a master (or many masters) is an age-old method of studying an art form in order to eventually become a professional. It's been around since the time of the ancient Greeks. At some point, of course, you have to break away and become your own person. I like to think that, of all the music I compose now, that constitutes my portfolio of creativity, what I write displays originality as well as its pedigree - and with a sense of pride.

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