

REVIEWS



Martin Miller Marks. *Music and the Silent Films: Contexts and Case Studies, 1895-1924*

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Martin Marks's *Music and the Silent Film* is the first of a projected two-volume set on the history of film music by Marks for Oxford University Press. It is both a general introduction to music for silent film (which, as the saying goes, was never silent) and a scholarly investigation into five innovative scores created between 1895 and 1924 that utilized the two principal methods of scoring silent films: compilation (assembling pre-existent pieces to make a score) and original composition.

Marks is an associate professor in the Music and Theater Arts section of M.I.T. and is one of the few musicologists thus far to have earned his Ph.D. working with a film music topic. His dissertation, "Film Music of the Silent Period, 1895-1924" (Harvard, 1990) was the basis of the present book. Marks writes and lectures about sound film as well as silents, and also performs piano accompaniments to silent films.

Music and the Silent Film contains a preface, five chapters, an appendix, extensive notes, and an index; each chapter can stand

alone as an independent study. Chapter one, "Film and Music: An Introduction to Research," is a revision and update of Marks's now-classic (though later superseded) 1979 bibliography of the literature for the Music Library Association's *Notes*.¹ Chapter two, "First Stages, Dimly Lit: Sources and Scores Prior to 1910," offers an historical overview of the origins of film music and focuses on European scores—in particular on the Max Skladanowsky music collection from Germany, used to compile scores for Skladanowsky's Bioskop (a short-lived filming device) film exhibitions beginning in 1895, and on Camille Saint-Saëns' originally-composed score for the Société Film d'Art's

L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise of 1908. Chapter three, "Film Scores in America, 1910-14," reviews developments in the U.S. during a little-understood period in film history; Marks discusses the important trade magazine *Moving Picture World* [hereafter *MPW*], the Kalem film scores series, W.C. Simon's originally-composed music for Kalem's *An Arabian Tragedy* of 1912, and the impact of both exhibitor/theater manager Samuel Rothapfel and composer/conductor Joseph Carl Breil on the music scene. Chapter four examines Breil's score for *Birth of a Nation* (1915), while chapter five returns to Europe for an analysis of Erik Satie's famous music originally composed for the film "Entr'acte"

¹ Martin M. Marks, "Film Music: The Material, Literature and Present State of Research," *The Music Library Association Notes*, Vol. 36 no. 2 (Dec. 1979): 282-325. Some of the best and most recent general bibliographies include Steven Wescott, *A Comprehensive Bibliography of Music for Film and Television* (Detroit: Information Coordinators, 1985); Gillian B. Anderson, compiler, and H. Stephen Wright, editor, *Film Music Bibliography I* (Hollywood, California: Society for the Preservation of Film Music, 1995); chapter one of Marks's *Music and the Silent Film*, and, most re-

cently, Robynn J. Stilwell's "Music in Films: A Critical Review of Literature, 1980-1996" in this issue. Mention should also be made of Clifford McCarty's *Film Composers in America: A Filmography, 1911-1970*, 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), the best source now available for information on film credits. For bibliographic information focusing specifically on silent film music, see Gillian Anderson, *Music for Silent Films: 1894-1929* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1988).

from the ballet *Relâche* (1924).

Music and the Silent Film is aimed primarily at a scholarly audience and general readers may find it a dense read. I found the print a bit small and the price (\$45) a shade high, but the book is well worth it, considering the sheer amount of information it contains. The writing itself is clear and direct, and the patient reader will discover many curious details (such as how Breil's "Perfect Song" from *Birth of a Nation*—a film controversial for its racism even in 1915—in 1929 became the theme for the radio show *The Pepsodent Hour*, a popular program that later became *The Amos 'n Andy Show*²). Musically-savvy readers will probably be happy to see a scholarly film music book with not only substantial analytical discussions but also musical examples in abundance (not a high priority in many of the more recent publications). The book includes fourteen facsimiles from the score for *Birth of a Nation*, plus ten pages and four facsimiles from the Skladanowsky collection. While such excerpts may make the text less accessible to general readers, it does allow them to see music that rarely appears in print.

Marks's thorough knowledge of the secondary film music literature is impressive, but *Music and the Silent Film* is perhaps most notable for the specifically musico-

logical methods Marks applies to the primary material. Though large, much of the secondary literature up until the late 1980s was written by non-musicologists—mainly by film composers and specialists in film studies and comparative literature; it is characterized by practical "how to" manuals, interviews with composers, chronological histories, bibliographies and finding tools, and, more recently, theoretical analyses. The detailed, meticulous accumulation of empirical data characteristic of positivist historical musicology—structural analyses, inventories, and documentation—was not a priority,³ one important reason being that access to film music sources and scores to analyze was, and remains, difficult. Not only have some studios been reluctant to open their music libraries to outside researchers; presumably more accessible libraries (e.g., academic ones) that carry boxes of silent film music have not yet catalogued their collections.⁴

Earlier studies of silent film music based on inventories and other collected data are not entirely lacking, however. Besides Charles Berg's pioneering *An Investigation of the Motives for and Realization of Music to Accompany the American Silent film, 1896-1927* (1976), the work of Gillian B. Anderson is most notable here. A conductor and musicologist

known for her reconstructions of silent film scores and a former librarian at the Library of Congress, Anderson was in an ideal position to document the silent film music holdings of that and several other institutions. In 1988 she compiled and edited the source guide *Music for Silent Films: 1894-1929*, which includes an introductory essay presenting an overview of silent film practice.⁵ Anderson discusses music for early silent films, working conditions in theaters, and even the music played during the shooting of silent films. She also holds certain approaches in common with Marks—e.g., an especially strong focus on orchestral scores for large theaters and presentations, and an interest in discussing the roles of particular theater managers and music directors.

As a conductor and researcher, Anderson is especially interested in, and adept at, providing information of practical use to musicians and researchers in tracking down material. Her historical essays are broadly written and do not concentrate on detailed structural analyses of individual scores—again, an approach that seems designed especially for practicing musicians, those assembling silent film presentations, and researchers or general readers seeking a general overview. As mentioned earlier, however, Marks

² The publisher, Chappell, continued to publish new editions and arrangements of "The Perfect Song" at least until 1953. Marks, *Music and the Silent Film*, 128.

³ It is never entirely absent, however. For differing examples, see, e.g., discussions in Hanns Eisler's (and Theodor Adorno's) *Composing for the Films* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947) and the first edition of McCarty's *Film Composers in America* (1953).

⁴ As mentioned in the text, *Music and the Silent*

Film is based on Marks's dissertation in musicology at Harvard. The dissertation was completed in 1990, at a time when postmodern theory had yet to make much of a dent in musicological writing, and film music was not yet accepted as a proper area of musicological study, even at major universities. Based on my own experience of writing a musicology dissertation in film music a few years later (University of Michigan, 1994), I can report that at the time attempting such a project was still highly unusual and that the

legitimizing presence of positivist values and goals did make acceptance more likely. It is not unusual, then, that Marks's dissertation, and the book based on it, are firmly rooted in those values.

⁵ Anderson, *Music for Silent Films: 1894-1929*. The introductory essay to this book is an expanded version of Anderson's earlier "The Presentation of Silent Films, or, Music as Anaesthesia," *Journal of Musicology* (spring, 1997): 257-295.

has a different audience in mind for his book—one primarily made up of (though not limited to) musicologists and theorists.

Historical musicologists, especially, are adept at recovering information from notated scores (as opposed to say, recovering information from oral traditions, usually considered the job of the ethnomusicologist). This focus on notation creates a concern for finding the earliest extant (i.e., “original”) texts and, if possible, the earliest definitive texts for performance, which can give insight into a composer’s creative process and original intentions, the composer’s organizational strategies, and the aesthetic aims of the music. It is not surprising then that Marks, a historical musicologist writing for musicologists, chooses to work with definitive versions of notated scores, five “special scores,” to use the terminology of the period. Marks points out that between 1910 and 1914 the term “special scores” took on a specific meaning apart from musical content—“it came to designate scores that were created for and distributed with particular films, as opposed to accompaniments that were improvised or prepared by musicians within individual theaters” (p. 62).

These scores represent both original composition and compilation practices. Saint-Saëns’s music for *L’Assassinat*, W.C. Simon’s music for *An Arabian Tragedy* and Satie’s music for “Entr’acte” are originally composed; the Skladanowsky collection was the source material from which scores were compiled, and Breil’s score for *Birth of a Nation* is a combination of the two, made up of originally-composed music and pre-existent pieces. What makes the scores by Saint-Saëns *et al.* “special” is not

that they used original-composition more than compilation or vice-versa, but that they were fully notated in a definitive form by the studios, to be distributed to theaters along with the film. Ideally, this would allow theaters across the nation to play the same music—or various “official” arrangements of the music—for the same film, and a certain uniformity (not to mention studio control) would be achieved (p. 62).

Special scores were considered so important—or so novel—that they were often mentioned by name in the surviving literature (e.g., MPW); fortunately, some of these scores survive today. It is important to recall, however, that these scores were relatively rare and that silent films were normally scored by musicians in the theaters who improvised or prepared the music themselves, either by composing it or (more likely) compiling it from extant pieces. These individually crafted scores were prepared from music collections owned by the theaters or the musicians themselves. Cue sheets (titles of musical pieces arranged in the order in which they are to be played) are the main sources we have for specific examples of how pre-existent music was put together at particular theaters or by certain musicians.

A problem with Marks’s approach, then, is that individually compiled scores were by far the most common in the silent era, yet these scores and the methods used to assemble them are the least discussed in *Music and the Silent Film*. To be fair, the citation of silent film music literature in the first chapter, and later discussions of the Skladanowsky music (which is a collection, not a single score) and Carli Elinor’s cue sheet for *Birth of a Nation*⁶ do point out the existence of individually compiled scores. But the majority of examples discussed are the more atypical commissioned scores put out by the studios.

This is a case, then, where musicology’s preference for definitive notated scores can skew our notion of how music was normally produced for silent film. Marks also shows a musicologist’s tendency to privilege orchestral scores over arrangements for smaller ensembles or keyboards as being inherently more interesting, even though film accompaniment by a single keyboard player was common. He also aims specifically, as many musicologists have done, at learning more about the creative processes of the composer, as opposed to concentrating on, say, audience reception or performance.⁷ This is not a fault in itself,

⁶ See Marks, *Music and the Silent Film*, 131-135. Marks notes that there is some doubt as to who actually arranged the Elinor score; although Elinor refers to it as “his” in a memoir, others may have been responsible. When interviewer Irene Kahn Atkins asked film composer Hugo Friedhofer (whose career began during the silent era) about Elinor’s association with *Birth of a Nation*, Friedhofer expressed doubt with a characteristically trenchant comment: “Well, Carli couldn’t write his name, frankly. And I know that he had on his staff a pianist, and a couple of arrangers, and a copyist. Reginald Bassett, or Rex, as he was known, used to do all

the writing. He used to compose the incidental music that was required that they couldn’t find in the library, and used to orchestrate.” The interview is included in Linda Danly, *Hugo Friedhofer: The Best Years of His Life: A Hollywood Master of Music for the Movies*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999), 34.

⁷ In defining cue sheets in chapter one, Marks writes: “Since the composer often works from these cue sheets after viewing the film, they become important clues to the compositional process, telling us what details were thought by the composer to deserve musical emphasis” (6).

but it serves to illustrate how musicological studies often have “built-in” preferences—preferences that need to be continually brought to the surface and evaluated for their usefulness in discussing such a relatively new area of music.

Of course, to study notated musical texts one must first find them. In a field often characterized in the past by undocumented anecdotes and information and still struggling with the inaccessibility of scores, it is a pleasure to see Marks’s thorough documentation of information, his habit of stating the location of scores in the text, and the extensive, precise lists of information found in the appendix—which includes, for example, an inventory of the Skladanowsky collection, a list of the special scores from the United States ca.1910-1914, a list of the known scores in the Kalem series, a checklist of *MPW* literature on Rothapfel and Breil, and indexes of borrowed tunes, symphonic excerpts, and recurring themes used in Breil’s score for *Birth of a Nation*.⁸

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Marks never pretends to be writing the definitive history of silent film music; rather, he expresses the hope that his studies “will be taken as a useful prelude to further research” (p. vii). Along the way, the questions he raises—

and does not raise—suggest directions for further study. The discussion and appendix of scores cited in *MPW*, for example, hint at the massive amount of information still to be mined from that magazine, while the score analyses (e.g., for “Entr’acte”) illustrating and explaining intricate relationships between score and film model a potentially fruitful approach to other film music.

Postmodern theory suggests themes and directions for future research that have often fallen outside the scope of musicology in the past—i.e., the study of the cultural and socio-economic contexts of film music. Evidence from *MPW* and elsewhere, for example, indicates that women often accompanied films in small theaters. Women accompanists who read *MPW*’s regular music column wrote in with suggestions, including their own cue sheets. See, for example, the cue sheet from Carrie Hetherington (“who has contributed to our department many times in the past”) for *Lady Audley’s Secret* in “Music for the Picture,” *MPW* (October 16, 1915): 459, and Retta Hellman’s cue sheet for *The Secret Orchard* in “Music for the picture,” *MPW* (December 4, 1915): 1824. Though not part of the large (male) orchestras of the big movie palaces, in 1926 women remained conspicuous (and competitive?) enough in the field of accompaniment to be singled out for disdain;

in commenting about Warner Bros.’ *Don Juan*, which contained a recorded musical prelude synchronized by Vitaphone (and which premiered August 6, 1926 – before *The Jazz Singer*), film critic Perceval Reniers declared his approval by writing: “The knell has rung, I take it, for the electric or woman-handled piano that whangs out, ‘Yes Sir! That’s My Baby’ and ‘The Blue Danube’ with complete disregard for what is passing on the screen.”⁹

Over the years, however, with the growth and economic success of the movie palaces and their large orchestras, women dropped out of the picture. Obviously there is a story here: How many women were involved in making film music earlier and why did they disappear? (Did they really vanish from the profession or just disappear from the written literature?) Could this disappearance be related to the larger trend of women leaving the music professions in droves after 1910, as documented by Catherine Parsons Smith?¹⁰ The answers will most likely be found through the study of film music practices in individual small theaters where these women worked, rather than in the study of special scores that were put together by men in the studios and played and conducted by men in the theater orchestras. In other words, there is a gender issue buried within film music studies that are limited to special scores.

⁸ One implication of this book, in fact, is that silent film music studies may offer more research and publishing opportunities—or at least fewer problems—than music for sound films. Not only are there pieces cited in cue sheets for silent films that are now in the public domain (and therefore easily published in analytical articles), but much music for silent films sits uncataloged in libraries across the country. Once known, this

music could become more accessible than the scores for sound films that are held by the studios. For dated but still helpful information on these uncataloged collections, see D.W. Krummel, J. Geil, et al., *Resources of American Music History: A Directory of Source Materials from Colonial Times to World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981).

⁹ Quoted in Preston J. Hubbard, “Synchronized

Sound and Movie-House Musicians, 1926-29,” *American Music* (winter, 1985): 431.

¹⁰ Catherine Parsons Smith points out that the number of American women in the music professions reached a high (relative to the overall population) in 1910, but by 1920 the number had drastically declined. See Catherine Parsons Smith, “‘A Distinguishing Virility’: Feminism and Modernism in American Art Music,” in

Most certainly Marks did not intentionally leave women out of his study—but this illustrates the danger, once common in musicology, of setting up hierarchies based on “the most important” notated scores and rendering other “lesser” scores invisible, together with the people, male and female, who arranged and played them.

The silent film music industry’s connections with corporations, specifically music publishers, and the use of film music to promote these interests are other possible angles of study. In 1915, for example, *MPW*’s music column “Music for the Picture” stopped publishing cue sheets compiled by readers and instead offered cue sheets by S.M. Berg, “who is today recognized as one of the leading experts and

authorities.” The column explained that Berg’s suggestions were those of an expert meant to help others achieve “the proper musical interpretation of the films,” and it drew attention to the fact that “a number of producing companies and exchanges are supplying to every exhibitor a number of cue sheets.”¹¹ Perhaps by way of example, the Berg cue sheet that follows is made up entirely of music published by G. Schirmer. Clearly an arrangement was made (by *MPW* or by Berg) with Schirmer to promote the latter’s music (other such Schirmer cue sheets followed in ensuing columns), but the details have yet to be unearthed. If those cue sheets were often used by readers (it seems likely, given the popularity of the column, but there is

no way to know for sure), entire audiences would have been exposed to scores showcasing the Schirmer catalogue—a potentially valuable marketing approach. Again, one would probably need to work with cue sheets rather than with fully-notated special scores to learn more.

Problematically then, *Music and the Silent Film*, which is intended to be an overview of music from the silent film era, gives more attention to commissioned scores than to the more common individual compilation scores. Nevertheless, it is one of the most substantial studies of silent film music available, and it constitutes both a useful reference work and a solid inquiry in a field only just beginning to open up to historians.

Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music, Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1994), 98.

¹¹S.M. Berg, “Music for the Picture,” *MPW* (December 11, 1915), 2018.

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