SWITCHING TRACKS
Improvising Music for the Screen - A Discussion with Mike Cooper

Philip Hayward

Abstract

The following text is an edited version of a discussion with British musician and composer Mike Cooper that took place in October 2010 prior to his performance of an improvised score for the 1924 film Venus of the South Seas (James R. Sullivan, starring Annette Kellerman) at Griffith University’s Queensland Conservatorium of Music in Brisbane. Cooper is a colourful, iconoclastic performer and composer whose career began in the late 1960s. After establishing a profile as a folk/blues and, later, Hawaiian-styled guitarist, he transitioned into more esoteric areas of sound composition, collaboration and improvisation. He has performed with other notable experimentalists such as Mike Gibbs, David Toop, Lol Coxhill and Mike Abrahams, and released a series of recordings on independent labels and as on-demand, self-released CDs. From his home base in Rome, Cooper is now involved in recordings, performances, tours and writing around music and sound. Part 1 of this article comprises a discussion with the author on aspects of performing live accompaniments to screen media and Part 2 includes questions from other soundtrack researchers, composers and musicians present at the Conservatorium event, together with responses from Cooper.

Keywords
Mike Cooper, improvisation, silent film score, Tabu, Venus of the South Seas

Introduction

Mike Cooper came to musical prominence in the 1960s performing with British rhythm and blues bands, and singing folk and country blues as a solo artist in local folk clubs. In the 1970s, through recording four solo albums with producer Peter Eden for Pye/Dawn records, his songwriting shifted into blues and free jazz, and he commenced musical collaborations in free-improvisation and avant-garde contexts, for example, with members of the London Musicians Collective. In the 1980s, Cooper developed an interest in Hawaiian, musical exotica and lap steel guitar musics, and in the 1990s he commenced annual tours of various locations in the Pacific, Australia and New Zealand. These tours resulted in artistic collaborations with musicians, filmmakers and visual artists, including Richard Nunn (improvisations on Maori instruments), Chris Abrahams (from The Necks) and Louise Curham (New Zealand film-maker now based in Sydney), and have also led to a series of CD releases.1 Cooper’s musical work now includes ambient field

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1 The first of these released on his Hipshot Records label (self-distributed by mail order via http://web.mac.com/cooparia/iWeb/Site/welcome.html) was Kiribati (1999) discussed in Hayward, 2000.
recordings and his performances are influenced by the observations by ethnomusicologist Steven Feld of the richly multi-layered soundscapes in Papua New Guinea and his work with the Kaluli people (see Feld, 1982). Such extra-musical elements are also incorporated into his musical accompaniments for ‘silent’ (non-synchronised) films. In 1995, John McAuslan, director of the Brunswick Music Festival in Melbourne commissioned a live performance of music for FW Murnau’s *Tabu* (1931) and Cooper was able to draw on his Pacific recordings and appropriate guitar styles for this score. Cooper has developed a repertoire of music for several silent films, as well as more contemporary productions such as *Onibaba* (dir: Kanebo Shindô, 1964) and has created his own scratch videos and Super 8 films. Recently, Cooper has extended his screen score productions into collaborations with other audiovisual producers and performers, while maintaining other musical projects. He argues that performing music for film screenings offers “another way of presenting music to people... it’s actually a good way to get people to listen to music that they might not listen to in other contexts”.

In October 2010, a team of Australian film music researchers approached Cooper to prepare a score for the James Sullivan’s 1924 New Zealand silent film *Venus of the South Seas*, starring internationally famous Australian swimmer/actress Annette Kellerman. The live performance event for the 43-minute film was hosted by Griffith University’s Queensland Conservatorium of Music in Brisbane. Several sound artists, musicians and screen sound researchers who attended contributed to the pre-screening presentation, and the following is an edited transcription of the interview and discussion, chaired by Southern Cross University researcher Professor Philip Hayward.

I: Interview – Performing Live Accompaniments to Screen

Philip Hayward [henceforth PH]:

How did you begin work in soundtrack improvisation?

Mike Cooper [henceforth MC]:

I saw Friedrich Murnau’s film *Tabu* (1931) on the television in Italy one afternoon in the early 1990s. I was already playing Hawaiian slide and slack-key guitar music and I had an interest in Pacific culture and that general area, and I just suddenly thought, it’d be really great to play music to this film. It was made without a synchronised soundtrack but it now has this orchestral score on it (by Hugo Resenfeld) that does make some kind of vague reference to Polynesian music but in a very Germanic way. I thought that I could remove the soundtrack (ie just switch it off) and use some of my knowledge of Hawaiian guitar and ‘play across’ this movie, which I did. I performed it once in Italy then I was booked to play at the

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2 See, for instance, his work with Grayson Cooke.
3 Information about Mike Cooper’s various projects and recordings is available at: www.myspace.com/cooparia
4 See YouTube clip ‘Mike Cooper TABU Maria’s Blues’ available at http://tendaysonthisland.org/_webapp_727982/Live_Music_for_Silent_Films
5 The event was part of outcomes of Australia Research Council Discovery Project Grant DP 0770026 ‘Music production and technology in Australian Film: enabling Australian film to embrace innovation’, led by Rebecca Coyle, Michael Hannan and Philip Hayward.
6 The film was provided by the National Film and Sound Archive, Australia.
7 Thanks to Melissa Carey for transcribing the event recording.
Brunswick Music Festival in Melbourne (which I had played at before as a solo singer/guitarist). The festival director, John McAuslan, asked me if there was anything else that I could contribute to that festival and I said I'd really like to accompany a silent movie with live music. John agreed and asked me to return the next year (1995) with a film and I took *Tabu* - and I've been back there fifteen years running, doing a different film every year. So it's thanks to John McAuslan that I actually got involved in improvisation to the screen as a continuing activity.

PH:

So, the first time you began working with *Tabu* you basically improvised a musical score for the film based on the stylistic work you'd already done in that idiom.

MC:

Yes, I had this kind of 'bag-of-licks', as you say, these Hawaiian guitar stylings. Hawaiian music's kind of like blues – songs are kind of interchangeable, even though they're all different, if you get my meaning; you know, they all sound the same but they don't... and there are these kind of musical loops that go round in Hawaiian music, and in blues, and you fit them all together. So, if you take three Hawaiian songs, take bits out of all three and join them altogether you have another song, and another tune. So this is basically what I did with *Tabu*. I should also say that was the beginning of my use of pre-recorded parts because when I looked at that film, and thought about it, I realised that, in its time, it was an extremely avant-garde film. First of all, it was actually made at the time when synch-sound had come in but Murnau decided that he wanted to make a silent film that didn't require any inter-titles. *Tabu* is one of those silent films that, afterwards, you don't realise you've sat through without actually reading anything on screen apart from two entries in a journal, which are part of the action that goes along (you see this white colonial guy writing in his journal, and that's the only thing you read through the whole film). So the whole film's motivated by the acting and visuals and, in my case, by putting this other bit of music to it. I wanted to make a score which made reference to Polynesian culture but at the same time was very modern, so I used some electronic pieces in it as well – I made some loops up and things and I had them on mini-disc, which I used to play across the top of.

PH:

So, in terms of what you were doing, you weren't so much re-scoring it as creating an improvised soundtrack for visual/narrative sequences that had a thematic link to the musical style.

MC:

Absolutely, I mean I was re-scoring it in a way, because I turned the existing soundtrack off.

PH:

But the traditional approach to writing a score would be to write cues of fixed durations on film cut points and narrative accents. Your work doesn't do that.

MC:
Well I did do that to an extent in *Tabu*. There are a couple of themes that run through *Tabu* that I would use, and I use them in probably what you would call a traditional manner, in that I’ve changed the key of them, or slowed them down, or sped them up. They come in two or three places all through the film. More recently I have just totally improvised *Tabu*. After a while I got bored with the way I was doing it and I actually improvised it all the way through and those themes sometimes disappeared completely or, came back in a totally open procedure.

PH:

So, there’s a classic film such as *Tabu*, screened as a ‘fixed text’ with a specially-composed score that’s meant to have an organic interrelation with the film, then Mike Cooper comes along, strips away the sound artifice and puts something else in. What do you regard yourself as doing? Making a radical re-interpretation? An intervention into a classic work? Do you see *Tabu* as open for a whole number of audio-musical readings as a ‘heritage’ object? What’s your approach to the authorship issues involved?

MC:

Those issues have always been interesting points of discussion. People have said to me, why do you do that? There are several reasons why I do it. One is for my own pure pleasure and secondly, I think it’s a way of presenting cinema history in a modern context, especially with the music. You can get a lot of people who’ll watch these movies because they’ve come to see your music. They wouldn’t go and see that movie otherwise. I’m re-contextualising the film completely, absolutely.

PH:

So, would you like to have the film available on DVD with a Mike Cooper score? Or is it something that’s about the live moment, the improvised elements of it, so that you don’t want to release it in that way?

MC:

About three years ago I actually made a CD of the *Tabu* soundtrack, and I’ve done that to two or three of the other films I do, but they’re only kind of demos, in a way. They’re never the fixed end product that you’ll hear when I screen the film and perform.

PH:

So, having done *Tabu*, and presumably seeing it as a successful project, what guided your selection of the next films you did? What were you looking for? Were you looking for thematics you could identify with, narrative visual aesthetic things etc? What attracts you to a film?

MC:

I have two or three reasons for choosing a film and it was great that I had this open-ended invitation to Brunswick to do a film every year because I really had to go and find a film for each event. Obviously, the Polynesian thing attracts me, so I looked for films about Polynesia – but these are very difficult thing to find. The second thing was that I was very interested in Russian cinema as well, Eisenstein,
Dziga Vertov and those people, and I was also very interested in politics and films. And so politics is one of the factors that I look for in a film. Then I decided I can take this approach with a more modern film, and I tried that recently as well, so then I had to go and find modern films that were made in the manner of a silent film. Modern contemporary cinema is completely different to films from the 1920s and 1930s. They’re edited totally differently, they’re narrative-montage driven. Eisenstein pioneered montage, but I don’t think he envisaged what it would end up as it is today. Contemporary cinema is just edited so fast that I personally find it very difficult to think of doing a live score on my own to a contemporary film.

Having said that, I rediscovered *Onibaba*, a Japanese film by Kaneto Shindo, a few years ago. I recall watching it when it first came out in 1964 and I realised about five years ago that it was actually made like a silent film and I could turn the soundtrack off - and thanks to the technology of DVD you can activate the subtitles, so you still had the story underneath - and I could play across the top of that. And I actually do *Onibaba*. I have also had some disasters, I must admit. I tried to improvise to a surf film called *Big Wednesday* (1978), directed by John Milius, but that is edited very fast. I did come up with a score for it, but I was never really happy with it. It was too fast, and unrelated, too jumpy (and I dumped it).

PH:

In your approach to film did you consciously refer to, or build on, previous approaches to producing music for film? In the ‘silent’ era pianists would often have books of motifs, some of which they knew, some of which they could flick through, and then they’d work around those, improvising to the screen. Did you see yourself as working out of that tradition? Or were you bringing your more free music improvisation skills from the free music tradition into the cinema?

MC:

Vertov’s *Man With A Movie Camera* (1929) is the first film that I did that I improvised completely live and I did that because when I watch that movie, I see it as like a piece of music, or as a piece of improvised music that had been (shall we say) ‘recorded’, had been captured in images. And so I felt it was kind open to total free improvisation I and found that I could bring in a lot of language that I had gathered from free improvising. It was very interesting for me that after a number of years with that movie I discovered that Vertov in fact wrote somewhere that he had wanted to be a musician, he wanted to compose and he wanted to make music that was as contemporary as the films that he made but the technology didn’t exist for him to do that. They didn’t have recording studios that could do that at that time. His film *Enthusiasm* (1930) actually has a soundtrack that he assembled made from location recorded sound. He was eventually able to put his own sound composition to a film, and *Enthusiasm* is the film, and so I should say something: there are some films that I would never mess with and *Enthusiasm* is one of them. And I would never mess with a film that Toru Takamitsu wrote the score to either because I just think that’s too much.

PH:

One of the ways that composers who work in the commercial industry know that their score has been successful is that the production company accepts it and, at the end of the production process and negotiations they have a fixed score. Future successes could be the recognition of the score through a CD release or by film
awards. So they have those paths. When you do a score for a film, the sense of success must be in your perceptions of how it went, and some degree of audience feedback, but what kind of loop do you have to ensure that your work is succeeding in various contexts?

MC:

I don’t have any at all, other than those you’ve just mentioned. I was talking about this to my friend (media artist and academic) Grayson Cooke earlier on today, and I said, in fifteen years of doing these films in Australia, no-one’s ever written a review of what I do. So, I don’t know, maybe that’s the height of success, when no one writes a review about you. That’s a kind of Zen thing, isn’t it?!

PH:

I guess the fact that you keep being asked back and keep selling out venues is a statement of success?

MC:

Yes and I get audience feedback afterwards, people come up and say, ‘I hated that’, or they walk out halfway through, or, people come up and say, ‘that was great, I really enjoyed that’. That’s ok. That’s good enough and I get asked back each year to Brunswick.

PH:

In terms of other approaches to film music you mentioned Toru Takamitsu, who is a very accomplished Japanese composer who has worked in a number of popular film genres. Who are the other composers that you find interesting, and how do you contrast their approaches to the kind of industrially formulaic Hollywood scoring approaches?

MC: I think probably my favourite film composer is John Zorn, for several reasons, one being that John will score a film for anybody as long as he gets to keep the tape afterwards... And I like the way he approaches scoring a film. He'll go into the studio and get the guys to play live over some small motifs and ideas that he's written, all of which can disappear during the recording session if the other guys get better ideas. And I think he's probably my favourite film scorer at the moment.

PH: You use electronics as part of the performances, even though the focal instrument there is the guitar. In terms of electronic music composition, is there anything in there you think that has worked well either in the history of cinema or in the current approaches?

MC: I don’t really listen to electronic music but, to answer that, I think *Blade Runner* (1982 – directed by Ridley Scott and scored by Vangelis) is probably the most interesting film score in that it was all electronic, even though it sounds like something else. All the sounds – all the ambient sounds and everything in that film, are all ‘fake’, they’re all electronic. So maybe that’s my favourite electronic film score.

PH:
Increasingly screen soundtrack composition is something taught in institutions such as conservatoria and other places. Your approach to making music for films is very much based around your career and your sense of a kind of organic relation to music making, where you don't see yourself or your practices as pigeonholed, which is great for Mike Cooper. In terms of teaching, how would you think of going about teaching aspiring people to do that? I mean, what principles might you have and what approaches?

MC:

That’s really difficult for me to answer being as I was never taught anything that I do, so I don’t know. I think maybe perhaps I would try and teach people how to improvise (which is a kind of contradiction in itself). I think that’s a really important element in what I do – I improvise. This evening you have put me in the position where I’ve got to actually come up with the goods because I offered you the film I am touring Australia with, Que Viva México (1932) by Eisenstein, and you sent me an email asking me to do Venus Of The South Seas instead. I’d only ever seen this film once before, when I did it in New Zealand last year, and before I did it they sent me a DVD of the film, but it only had about 15 minutes of the film on. Something happened to the DVD, so that I actually didn’t see the whole film until it was screened. And I’d completely forgotten the film until you mentioned it again. So, I’m going to have to improvise it again tonight.

PH:

I asked you to perform a score for Venus tonight on account of its slow pace, its Pacific exoticist elements and its stylish and inventive underwater ballet sequences. I felt that it would offer another engagement with a dialogue we began ten years back. I wasn’t aware that you had performed to it before. On that, how many of the approaches of your original music to Venus are you going to try to recoup from your memory tonight? Or are you going to start from scratch?

MC:

I can’t remember anything I did last time. I barely remember the film, actually. I remember it’s got this woman, swimming in a tank and mermaids...

PH:

So meticulous research isn’t really necessary for an improvised score?!

MC:

Meticulous research is not my forte...

II. Audience Discussion – Improvisation in Screen Scores

Tungi Beyer:

I think that improvising with film is a fantastic thing to do, I have had some experience in that area with a 1920s’ film as well. The film that I worked on was an old film called Shiraz (1929, directed by Franz Osten), which was an Indian and British co-production, relating a sort of tragic love story that led to the building of
the Taj Mahal. The live score was commissioned by the Sydney Film Festival. During the festival, audiences vote on the films they attend and the film was rated up in the top five. Do you have ratings from film festivals?

MC:

No, I don’t. I’ve never done film festivals. I’ve never been so lucky. But I have worked with filmmakers in Sydney, doing a similar thing to their short films. Maybe I should talk a bit more about improvising to the movies. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t improvise every movie that I do live the first time. I did that with Man With A Movie Camera but with most of the other films that I do, I work out what I’m going to do before I do it and I also have a lot of pre-recorded pieces that I use. Having said that, if I do the film enough, I can actually change it all. When I become familiar with the movie, and familiar with the music that I’ve chosen to do in that film, I can change it around quite a lot. And that’s something I really enjoy doing, it’s like, how can I do this different tonight? I only realised I could do that when something went wrong with the gear I had, and it went completely out of sync, and I had to suddenly do something, otherwise it was just going to stop. And so, I discovered, then, at that point you don’t need to panic about this; when it goes wrong, you do something else. As long as you’ve got something else that you can come up with and do, and you can grab something quickly out of your musical brain/’book’/baggage and put it in there you’re ok. And no one knows you’ve made a mistake, of course, unless they’ve seen you do it before but then, when they’ve seen you do it before, it’s probably different anyway, and so they never know when you’ve made a mistake.

TB:

Shiraz was a pretty long film, two and a half hours long, so there’s so much film that you often think ‘how am I going to get through this film?’ I performed it in a duo with a wind instrument player and there was so much to do. What we ended up doing was to categorise it in scenes to start off with and then we selected moods and instruments for each scene, and that’s all we fixed in advance. I was going to play a particular instrument, or, to a particular background loop, and improvise over the top of that. So every time we did it, it was fairly different.

MC:

I use a lot of looping nowadays, practically in all my music, and the beauty of using looping is that you can put this thing on and sit back and think for a little bit. So if you ever want to have a pause, you just put a loop on and no one notices if you’re rolling a cigarette or something under the table! I don’t use gaps very often. Sometimes the whole lot stops, and there’s a gap, but that isn’t intentional, it just happens sometimes.

TB:

I think one can overdo it with film, I think that because I think as a player, as a musician, one forgets that there’s already so much going on, there’s already so much that the brain’s taking in visually, and it’s easy to overplay.

Joff Bush:
Do you consider story structures and how you approach the film from a real macro-perspective? How much is that part of your work?

MC:

It depends on the film. Again with Eisenstein’s film about Mexico that I’ve just done, there are some parts in that, for instance, where there’s this huge dancing scene going on, and I could have ‘gone against the grain’ and not played some dance music in that but it was just more fun when you watched it to hear dance music. You get the movie going and you get into that part of it. So from that point of view, I sometimes go with it, and sometimes I just go contra, go against what’s going on on-screen, and leave it to the visual thing to get it going.

Rebecca Coyle:

When you started doing work with screen music, as distinct to music in other contexts, did that enable and/or enthuse you to take on instruments or new textures and timbres that you hadn’t explored previously?

MC:

Yes, initially I started to use small keyboards and some homemade string instruments as well. I’ve used those in a few films but it’s not something that I use live very often to do movies with. I sometimes do some of the pre-recorded parts, if I’m using pre-recorded pieces with small keyboard or some homemade instruments, things like that.

RC:

So those would be the composed elements, would they be fairly extensive? What kind of duration are we talking about?

MC:

No, nothing lasts that long in my film scores. It tends to move on, you know, depending on what’s going on on-screen and if I use it to fill a certain section. There’s a part in Tabu, for instance, where this guy swims out to a boat in the night. He’s trying to escape from this island, and he swims out to a boat, and I’d use a kind of electronic bird sound piece that I made and it just lasts the length of the scene.

RC:

You mentioned before that you’ve worked with some young filmmakers, is that a collaborative arrangement where the image is informed by the film music? I’m just wondering to what extent you have intervened in the image track in any of your projects so far?

MC:

I should mention one filmmaker in particular, Louise Curham, who I found through a piece in RealTime magazine. I read a review of something she did and I thought that what she was doing sounded really great. She was working with Super 8 film and during a live screening she would often degrade these films, and so the
whole thing would fall apart, and it would end up as a different film from what she had originally intended. I wrote to her and said, I'd really like to work with you if an opportunity arises, and she lived in Sydney at the time and so the next time I went to Sydney we did a live concert together. So, basically, what she was doing was improvising with her own material, as a screening, and I was able to improvise the music to her improvised film. I really enjoyed working with Louise.

I've done something similar with another filmmaker, an English guy called Greg Pope, who lives in Norway (and we are doing something in Manchester when I get back). Greg performs what he calls 'expanded cinema', a term that I believe has a history of its own. What Greg does is that he has three 16mm projectors and he runs blank (ie unexposed) film through these projectors, and as they loop from one to the other he basically attacks the film with electric drills and various implements that will scrape off the emulsion. So when they go through the projector, the screen starts off completely black, and over a period of time, of course, where he's attacking it, these specks of light start to appear. And the whole idea is that he eventually fills the whole screen with just white light, pure light, and I do music to that. Most of the time the music is supposed to be the sound from the projectors. He has three contact microphones on his projectors, and he puts it through my equipment there, and I digitally process the sound of those projectors.

We did the Rotterdam Film Festival in September and when we did a sound check everything was fine but when we came to do the live performance, we cranked the projectors up, and the sound was going away there but I suddenly realised that none of the sound from the projectors was coming into my equipment. And I pulled out one of the jack plugs on the projectors that was going into my little mixer there, and there was a huge spark. This thing's live! There was electricity coming somehow through this thing! And there were three of them. I pulled out all three of them and the same thing happened. There was electricity going into my stuff. I actually could have died at any moment, I realised, and I had no sound coming from him at all. The sound guy was sat right by the side of me and I tapped him on the shoulder and showed him what was happening and he went, 'I have no idea'. I said, 'what are we going to do'? And he said that we'd have to stop. And I said, we're not going to stop. If we stop, Greg'll have a heart attack, because he hasn’t realised yet that it's not happening. We’re not going to stop, so, I'll just pull the whole lot out, and improvise – make something up. Of course after about five minutes Greg realised that what he was getting sound-wise had nothing to do with him, and he’s just looking at me, and I’m going like, ‘don’t worry about it, just keep going’. So we do the gig, and we finish it and there's huge applause, and they loved the whole thing. If something goes wrong just do something, basically, that’s what it comes down to in the end.

PH:

Following on from Rebecca’s question, you also were telling me earlier that you’ve been working on the visual text yourself, for example with regards to Frank Hurley’s *Pearl of The South Seas* (1927) in which you’ve taken some of the original footage of the 1920s’ silent film about the Torres Strait and you’ve inserted contemporary elements. Can you tell us a bit about that process?

MC:

Helen Miller, who was at Central Queensland University, Rockhampton, at the time, I think, gave me a copy *Pearl Of The South Seas*, the film that Hurley made in
the Torres Strait. It's kind of really bad B-movie that he made when he thought that he was going to be a feature film director. I watched the film and I thought, this is a really bad film, and then it occurred to me that I could chop it up, and make something else out of it (retrieve it from the ‘garbage bin’, so to speak). So I cut it up, and I inserted pieces of contemporary film into the action. For instance, when this couple row out to this sunken boat, climb on to it and open a doorway they step through into the video for Tom Waits's 'In The Neighbourhood' (1982) and there's this whole thing going on. And then the next scene they come out of the door. The Tom Waits's clip finishes and they just stand and look at each other, with this completely perplexed look, as if they really had gone in and watched that film, and out with, 'what was that'? And I did that to the whole thing, and inserted material from Peter Greenaway, Derek Jarman and other filmmakers that I like. It livened the whole thing up and made it more watchable although I don't know whether Frank Hurley would have liked it or not though!

Andrew Hall:

I have a friend who is a member of an online avant-garde cinema discussion board and a young student had posted that he wished to create a soundtrack to a well-known silent film by Stan Brakhage, who was an early avant-gardist direct contact screen printmaker. He was hoping to make the soundtrack, and Tony Conrad, who was also a member of the discussion board, ripped into this person quite severely. Conrad argued that to create a soundtrack to this film forty years later, and a digital synthesised soundtrack at that, would be so aesthetically wrong it would debase the film every time it was shown with this soundtrack. A very interesting point was raised after that by someone whose name I've forgotten - they said that there's already inherent music every time you watch this film, because when you watch the 16mm print there's the sound of the projector in that room, and it's this Cagean kind of listening that opens up. So I was wondering, in all your considerations that you go through when formulating a work, or formulating ideas for improvisation, does that kind of Cagean listening, or effect come into play? What kind of role would that have with you, as an improviser, or comproviser?

MC:

I guess if you were listening – if you were watching that film as it ran through on film, and not on DVD, then you’d get the sound of the projector. But if you don’t have the film on film, you’re not going to get that Cagean effect. And if I could make a comment about doing music to Stan Brakhage, I think Stan Brakhage made it quite clear in his writings that he didn’t want people to do music to his films. An ensemble named Text of Light (after Brakhage’s eponymous 1974 film), featuring Lee Ranaldo from Sonic Youth, has performed since 2001, improvising scores to classic US avant garde films from the 1950s-1960s. They had lengthy discussions with Stan's wife about doing this to his films. She actually objected but eventually they worked out some deal. I would think twice about doing music to Stan Brakhage’s films though because, you know, I think his films are music... how Cagean is that?

AH:

Do you think that aesthetic is only key to certain directors or film artists, or do you think that there is this wider kind of listening that occurs every time a screen work is presented?
MC:

Stan Brakhage is a good example. When you watch Stan Brakhage’s films you get some music going on in your head. I have never really understood why there’s that soundtrack on Murnau’s *Tabu*. You know, he wanted some music going on, otherwise he wouldn’t have had that score written in the first place. So in terms of it being a silent film, his idea of a silent film is, I guess, one in which there’s no dialogue, not one in which there’s no music. I don’t know how many people made silent films that were meant to be totally silent. Maybe there were some, I just don’t know them. Maybe they were into Cage before us.

PH:

I think there’s one problem, and I’m speaking as an academic rather than a musician here; I am always very wary when we say certain filmmakers’ stuff shouldn’t be done and certain ones can be interpreted. Surely there’s a general principle. If we accept we have some kind of cultural creative rights to put other sounds with audiovisual texts, this applies to everything. Whether the individual chooses to work on a particular film is where that comes in but I don’t think you could say there’s any absolute moral sense in that you can’t do Brakhage but you could do, for instance, Michael Snow.

MC:

No, it’s just a personal thing. It’s like I said, I wouldn’t mess around with a film that Takamitsu had done the score to because I think he made perfect scores for those films. That’s only a personal thing. A lot of people might hate Takamitsu.

PH:

It’s interesting in copyright terms. There’s nothing to stop you doing any musical score to anything you want. The issue comes when you try and release - or otherwise exploit - that as a product. If you were to put out an established film with a new score on DVD, then it’s obviously an issue. It’s interesting because there’s nothing firmly in place to stop live substitutions (and you could also play over the top of the score that’s on there as well). I guess it would make an interesting test case if any copyright holder wanted to pursue it.

Kim Cunio:

Mike, one of the things I really like about your approach in this whole ‘movement’, if you could call it that, is that it sidesteps what happens to musicians in the screen process, which is often that we get – or we feel that we get - treated badly; that is, that we become functionaries who have to sort of ‘join the dots’ and do someone else’s bidding, and we have to become very unattached to our themes and our ideas. I am interested in what happens when the so-called professional screen soundtrack writer who’s trained in the leitmotifs and cues and the stingers and all of that, what happens when they own up to the fact that there’s almost as much improvisation in their stuff? I think it’s dressed up as something else, quite often, because so often the writing process occurs on an instrument in real time. And then it’s just a matter of what happens after. It might be different for you because it’s a performance, as opposed to a reconstruction of that idea. Anything to add on that?
MC:

I think probably Ry Cooder does that. He did that with his work with Wim Wenders, but they don’t work together anymore. I think perhaps in the end Wim Wenders didn’t like improvisers actually, which is why Ry Cooder doesn’t work with him anymore.

RC:

I wonder whether it’s about the lack of constant synchronisation, so that you get the same soundtrack every time that movie is played, whereas, as you’ve pointed out, in some of your performances, sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t, sometimes the equipment fails you in some way. So it’s going to be different every time. It’s very much ‘of the moment’, even though you have some composed elements that you bring in.

MC:

Absolutely, my ultimate way of working would be that I don’t even see the movie beforehand and I go in and do it. I could do that, I guess – depending on what the movie was.

RC:

Which returns you to the so-called ‘silent era’ because even with films that had scores, they weren’t necessarily synchronised the same in every cinema, or at every performance, because there would have been different performers and different performance conditions every time it was shown on a different screen, in a different town.

MC:

Different musicians, films broken down, films different each time probably as well. I am aware that they had books of music available for the pianist to flick through and choose from. Apparently there were records as well, that they sent round with some films, and you’d put the record on and watch the movie. I’ve no idea what was on those records, and I’ve never ever seen one, but I’ve read that the film arrived with a box of 78s and someone put the record on as the film went on.

PH:

I think one of the important points you hit on there is the synchronisation aspect, because if any of you have worked for film, you’ll know that you write something that’s, say, one minute forty-three seconds long, and it works perfectly and then the editor comes back and says, no it’s got to be one minute thirty-seven now, and it has to be precisely synched so just chop a bit out. And the composer says, no, you can’t just chop a bit out...

MC:

Yes, that’s it, synching to scenes is only one way of working. I spent two or three weeks working on Que Viva México and I used this old wind-up stopwatch and when I’d finished everything and thought I had it timed perfectly, I sat there fiddling around with the stopwatch, just clicking and thinking probably, in front of
the computer, and I suddenly noticed when I did five minutes on the stopwatch it wasn’t five minutes on the computer. And I went, ‘Oh my God!’ it’s an old Russian stopwatch, and it’s totally wrong, and I’ve been using this thing for the last fifteen years. I had no idea. Perhaps when I started it was ok... but it’s gone completely now, and it’s like, five minutes in its ‘real time’ is about seven minutes now in reality. So that was fun!

PH:

I remember seeing one of your film performances. You were working on an interesting bottleneck guitar motif that you obviously liked because the scene changed but the motif lingered on. And it was actually quite liberating because it wasn’t the kind of metronomic ‘chop’ approach on an image cut. It supported the notion that the film soundtrack doesn’t have to be precisely synched, it can ‘sway’ either side of the hard visual edits. You were liberating the score from the tyranny of the real time of the film’s edit sequences and allowing it a less restricted ‘reel time’ and space. And that’s probably a good note to end on.

Conclusion

Mike Cooper’s approach to musical improvisation for screen media is one that draws heavily on his prior experience in European ‘Free Music’ improvisation and his collaborations with sound and performance artists. His musical improvisations rely less on careful synchronisation of motifs and sequences to on-screen action and more on creating musical themes and textures that weave in and out of the screen narrative (and its diegetic ‘logic’), creating a parallel sonic text with points of overlap and divergence. This serves to undermine the primacy of the visual-narrative text in the performance (and the subservience of music to the pre-existent themes and moods of the former). Cooper’s approach, instead, offers a performance space and context where a (silent or silenced) audio-visual text is treated as the pre-[text for a distinct type of audio-visual event where strategic intent and performer sensibility combine with circumstance and accident to create an unpredictable musical improvisation to image.

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Bibliography