THE POLYSYNCHRONOUS FILM SCORE: Songs for a Contemporary Score for F.W. Murnau’s Faust (1926)

Phillip Johnston

Abstract

Contemporary scores for silent film more often than not adhere to traditional assumptions about the relationship between music and image/narrative. This article proposes a ‘polysynchronous’ approach, which it defines as being wider and more investigative/experimental than the traditional dichotomy between synchronous versus asynchronous framed in much discussion of film music. The addition of the element of songs with words gives the composer (and librettist) an even more powerful tool to engage with the narrative. The article looks in detail at Phillip Johnston’s contemporary score for F.W. Murnau’s Faust (1926), which he has performed live in sync with the film in Australia, USA and Europe. The author shows how he and his librettist, Australian playwright Hilary Bell, use original songs in combination with instrumental music to further engage with the narrative and significantly reinterpret the ending.

Keywords

silent film, Faust, Murnau, songs in film, polysynchronous, libretto

Introduction

Composers in both the silent and sound film eras have done much creative and original work. However, it is only in rare cases that the relationship between music and image/narrative has been questioned at its most basic level. Of film music from the non-synchronised sound (‘silent’) film era, more is known about general practices than about the music itself, as the few notated scores that survive present only a partial record of the music, both notated and non-notated, that would have been performed (Marks, 1997: 26). Furthermore, the vast body of work of improvised scores for silent films, performed live by both professionals and inspired amateurs, is lost forever. But since the beginning of the sync-sound era, basic assumptions about the relationship between music and film have largely gone unquestioned. It is these assumptions that most contemporary composers who write music for silent films carry into their work when creating original scores for silent films.

This article provides a detailed study of the use of songs, and of my own silent film-scoring aesthetic, as expressed in my collaboration with Australian playwright/librettist Hilary Bell in creating a contemporary score for the silent film...
masterpiece *Faust* (F.W. Murnau, 1926). Songs were combined with instrumental underscore to create a live performance with the film.¹

I propose that the contemporary score for silent film provides unique opportunities for composers to investigate alternative possibilities for the relationship between music and image/narrative in film music, opportunities that have not been widely adopted. In addition, I suggest that the use of songs as part of the score also provides unique opportunities. It gives the composer/librettist the additional tool of lyrics to comment on and interact with the narrative, and it adds a powerful instrument—the human voice—to the instrumentation.

This article begins with some background on the film, and on the composer and librettist. It provides examples of some possibilities for the expansion of the music/film relationship that I describe as the ‘polysynchronous’ film score, a practice that I contextualise with reference to additional work in the field. It then focuses on the score for *Faust*, most particularly in relation to the use of songs in a contemporary silent film score.

**Composer Background**

I began my career as a performer and composer of jazz and New Music but from very early on I was drawn to film music. Bernard Herrmann, Nino Rota and Ennio Morricone were some of my earliest influences as a composer and consequently filmmakers began to approach me about writing music for their films. My first feature film score was *Committed* (Lynne Tillman and Sheila McLaughlin, 1984), and from that time on I practised parallel careers as a jazz musician and film music composer.

In 1993, I was drawn to writing a score for a silent film for several reasons. I was looking for an outlet for some of my ideas for film music that I had not been able to express within the conventional role of film score composer, and I had long been drawn to the beauty and seeming ‘strangeness’ of the world of early films. I approached David Schwartz at The American Museum of the Moving Image in New York about commissioning me to compose a score, and AMMI ended up sponsoring a festival called ‘Silent Movies/Loud Music’ featuring silent film scores by composers associated with New York’s Knitting Factory,² including Don Byron, Amy Denio, Tom Cora, Samm Bennett, Christine Baczewska and myself. This experience was the beginning of my fascination with contemporary scores for silent film that has continued to this day. I perform these scores live, with ensembles of varied instrumentation, which change from film to film (Fig 1.)

---

¹ The score was commissioned by the New York Film Festival and premiered on 5 October 2002 at the Lincoln Center’s Walter Reade Theater. It has subsequently been performed at the German Film Festival in Sydney in 2007 and at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, as part of the 2008 Melbourne International Festival of the Arts, as well as in the US and Europe.

² New York’s Knitting Factory opened in Manhattan in 1987 originally as an art gallery but evolved into a performance space for experimental music.
It was also the beginning of an ongoing investigation into the relationship between music and image/narrative. One observation I made, not only as a practitioner, but as a listener/viewer of contemporary silent film scores, was that basic assumptions about the relationship between film and score were rarely challenged. Modern instruments (electric guitar/electronics) or modern musical styles (jazz, rock, electronica) might be used, but the way in which they related to the film remained the same. Sad scenes still were supported by slow, lugubrious music; chase scenes were still accompanied by fast and frantic scores. Time tested techniques, such as the use of leitmotifs associated with characters, places or ideas were still commonly used, and most of Claudia Gorbman’s ‘Classic Principles of Film Music’ (1987) were still followed rigorously. The details had changed, but the basic idea remained the same for the majority of narrative silent films.

In my scores I tried to investigate possibilities to see what would happen if these principles were not followed. What if a fast frantic scene was accompanied by slow, melancholy music? What would that feel like to a spectator? What if music were suddenly stopped at an unexpected point in the film, and, rather than using the continuity of the music to sustain the illusion of the film, the sudden lack of it highlighted the artificiality of the viewer’s situation? I continued to experiment with different ideas in my subsequent silent film scores.

It was in The Unknown (Tod Browning, 1927) that I first experimented with using music to alter the interpretation of the narrative of the film, inspired in part by once seeing pianist Joel Forrester play piano for a Laurel and Hardy film and for Nosferatu (F.W. Murnau, 1922). With his accompaniment, Forrester made Laurel and Hardy a horror movie and Nosferatu a comedy.

In The Unknown, Alonzo (Lon Chaney) plays an escaped killer, hiding himself in a circus by pretending to be an armless man who does a knife-throwing act with his feet. The target of this act is the ringmaster’s daughter, the beautiful Nanon (Joan Crawford), who has an obsessive fear of men’s arms. Afraid that she will discover that he has arms, Alonzo blackmails a corrupt surgeon into cutting off his arms. When he returns from a lengthy convalescence, he discovers that she has gotten
over her phobia, and is now planning to marry the circus strongman, Malabar (Norman Kerry). Alonzo goes mad, and while pretending to be pleased for them, he engineers a circus accident in which Malabar’s arms will be torn off by wild horses. But at the last minute Nanon runs in front of the horses to try and save her lover and, in saving her, Alonzo is trampled to death. In the final scene, after the moral is summed up in a last title card, Nanon and Malabar are in each other’s arms, and Alonzo is dead.

Watching The Unknown, I felt (as I often do) that the ostensible villain (Chaney) was not only the most interesting character but the most noble as well. Both Malabar and Nanon are oblivious to Alonzo, blind to both his devotion and his pain. He is willing to make an incredible (if insane) sacrifice for his love, while they have sacrificed nothing. In the end he dies to save his true love, even though it means his own undoing and losing his carefully plotted revenge.

So in my score I decided to make Alonzo the hero, and Nanon and Malabar the villains. At the climax of the film, as Alonzo carefully executes his plot and Malabar comes closer and closer to dismemberment I wrote fast, exciting music, a mad polka that celebrates Alonzo’s triumph. It gains momentum and complexity with virtuoso unison passages over a fast beat as his murderous plot advances toward its completion. But once the plot is foiled and Alonzo dies, that music ends. The last scene of the moral (expressed in a title card), and the lover’s embrace, features the most sinister music in the film: a slow-moving dirge of chromatic counterpoint, ending on an unresolved dissonance. The image and title card say that this is a resolution and a happy ending, but the music is funeral music for Alonzo and does not give its blessing to this undeserving union.

**Faust Commission**

In 2002, I was commissioned by the New York Film Festival to create an original score to accompany the premiere of a new print of Faust (F.W. Murnau, 1926). I had tried to make each of my silent film scores different from the preceding ones in some basic way: not just different music, but to engage the relationship between music and image/narrative in a different way. My first silent film score was an homage to classic film music (with some of the basic devices turned inside out), my second a collection of short films, in which each functioned as a study of possible alternative relationships between music and film. My third used group improvisation, but carefully scored to the film by use of synchronized stopwatches, and in combination with composed material.

Murnau’s Faust is one of the masterpieces of German silent cinema. However, while much has been written about its “fugues of light” (Eisner, 1964: 165), the script itself, by Hans Kyser, is a mash-up of Christopher Marlowe, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Charles Gounod. Film historian Siegfried Kracauer finds its depiction of the metaphysical conflict between good and evil “thoroughly vulgarized” (1947: 148) and most critical writing about the film focuses on the cinematography, the use of light and shadow, and the painterly imagery, and not on the narrative intent of the storytelling (Fig 2). And while I chose the film for scoring because of its

---

3 This was the result of a fruitful relationship we had enjoyed beginning with their premiere of my scores for The Georges Méliès Project (Georges Méliès, 1899-1909) in 1997, and for Page of Madness (Teinosuke Kinugasa, 1927) in 1998.

4 Lotte Eisner barely mentions this aspect of the film in her published works (1964; 1974).
visual imagery and fantastic tableaux, it was the narrative that I chose to engage in a ‘polysynchronous’ way with my score. (Indeed, I deliberately chose not to listen to or source information about original scores or compiled musical accompaniments used in early screenings, as I wished to approach it afresh.) Once again, I wished to tackle a particularly challenging approach.

Figure 2: Faust still. (Image courtesy of Kino International.)

For Faust, because of the complexity of its themes and its supernatural subject matter (Jan Christopher Horak calls it, “an uncompromising art film made with the massive budget of an international blockbuster”), I decided to use a new instrumentation: ‘cello, piano-accordion, saxophone, piano, ukulele, and a singer. The resonances in the heightened style of dramatic expression suggested to me that working with a librettist to combine a substantial number of original songs with instrumental underscore would give me a powerful new tool with which to interact with the narrative. As I did with my non-vocal musical instruments, I would strive to use the voice in every possible way: the score includes songs in a number of styles, including classical art song, cabaret, jazz & blues, ballads, and hymns, as well as instrumental underscore. It also includes vocal improvisation (both jazz and New Music), vocals, and a small amount of spoken text.

For my librettist, I chose Australian playwright Hilary Bell. She has an extensive profile as a librettist in a wide variety of forms and we had an effective collaborative relationship. Bell’s work includes musical theatre (Wedding Song, with composer Stephen Rae), song cycle (Talk Show, with composer Elena Katz-Chernin), and opera (Mrs. President, with composer Victoria Bond). Bell often uses songs in her plays, and I had written the music for a number of them, as well as the underscore.

---

5 From the essay by film historian Jan Christopher Horak accompanying the Kino release.
music (Wolf Lullaby, The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Ruysch, The Falls). For Faust, we worked together to develop a libretto that would create multiple levels of meaning, based on our individual reactions to various narrative elements in the film. From there we chose the topics for songs, and the places to use them, and Bell commenced writing the libretto. As I set her words to music, I began using that thematic material in the instrumental underscore that connected the songs as well.

My research shows that songs with lyrics have rarely been used in contemporary silent film scores. One of the most obvious reasons is the belief that listening to words in a song, while having to read words in the inter-titles, would be confusing for the audience, and that the solution of fitting the songs between the inter-titles is not practical—they occur too often, songs tend to be longer, and it would be an inconvenient structural limitation.

We decided to turn this liability into a strength, and assume a certain amount of sensory overload as part of our conception: from the beginning we decided that the audience would be taking in information on four levels at the same time: the visuals, the music, the lyrics, and the inter-titles. At some times they would have to take an active role in deciding what to ‘pay attention’ to, as opposed to the more usual cinematic approach of being led to the prioritised sound. Most filmmakers decide at all times what the audience should pay attention to, and take care not to confuse the audience. One of the most important parts of the composer’s usual brief is to avoid this conflict by not drawing attention to the music, but rather to use the music to support the image track.

The Polysynchronous Film Score

The ‘synchronous’ film score, which is presently the dominant model in both commercial (Hollywood) and independent films, refers to a relationship between the music and the image/narrative whereby whatever is on the screen is being reinforced or echoed by the music. The Hollywood ‘Golden Age’ scores of Steiner/Newman/Rosza et al, or some of the more popular scores of John Williams exemplify this approach.

It is worth recounting Gorbman’s ‘Classical Film Music: Principles Of Composition, Mixing And Editing’ from her much-cited Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music:

1. ‘Invisibility’
2. ‘Inaudibility’
3. Signifier of emotion
4. Narrative cueing (referential narrative & connotative)
5. Continuity

The ‘asynchronous’ model refers to music that appears to be at odds with the image/narrative. Examples include the use of Samuel Barber’s ‘Adagio for Strings’ in the opening of Platoon (Oliver Stone, 1986), or Pietro Mascagni’s ‘Cavalleria Rusticana’ in the final murder scenes of The Godfather, Part III (Francis Ford Coppola, 1990); this technique, too, has become somewhat clichéd.

---

6 One significant exception is Richard Einhorn’s transcendent score for Carl Dreyer’s The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928). The score also functions as a stand-alone piece of music: Voices of Light, an oratorio for solo voices, chorus and orchestra.
Further, Gorbman writes her final principle:

\[ A \text{ given film score may violate any of the principles above, providing the violation is at the service of the other principles. (Gorbman, 1981: 73) } \]

The ‘polysynchronous’ film score is one which is not limited to synchronous or asynchronous, but chooses freely between them, and includes a third category. This accommodates, first of all, music that does not clearly express an easily defined point of view (happy or sad, safe or threatening), but is rather more complex and open, invoking “affiliating identifications” (Kassabian, 2001: 141). Second, a polysynchronous film score is free to make more playful juxtapositions between music and image/narrative, including, but not limited to, irony, historical references, puns, asides, parallel narrative and other forms of subtext.

\[ \text{Affiliating identifications track perceivers toward a more loosely defined position that groups, or affiliates, several different narrative positions within the fantasy scenario together... Affiliating identifications open outward. (Kassabian, 2001: 141) } \]

The contemporary silent film score performed live with the film provides a unique opportunity for this kind of free play. Contemporary sound film composers are bound by allegiance to two masters: first, their employer, the director of the film (as well as the producer, the editor, the music editor, and the music supervisor), and second, showing ‘competence’ in speaking a musical language that will communicate the required information/emotions to the audience.

\[ \text{Competence is based on decipherable codes learned through experience. As with language and visual image, we learn through exposure what a given tempo, series of notes, key, time signature, rhythm, volume, and orchestration are meant to signify. (Kassabian, 2001: 23) } \]

But contemporary composers of music for silent film do not need to please director or audience, and are only bound by self-censorship, driven by perceived expectations, and their imaginations.

It is not that ‘polysynchronous’ composing ideas are never used in contemporary film scoring: there are a variety of innovative practitioners who at times create original and thought-provoking juxtapositions of film and music. But they themselves would be the first to admit that, due to a combination of commercial pressures, cultural assumptions, and corporate imperatives that carefully control all aspects of film production (both in Hollywood and beyond), the opportunities for this kind of free play are rare, and, more often than not, are integrated without anyone noticing. Silent films have music more or less throughout the film (although there are exceptions to this), and, because of the absence of a living director and of most commercial pressures, these scores more often tend to be composer-driven ‘art’ projects, at least those that are performed live.\(^7\)

However, because of the pervasiveness of these unquestioned codes, begun in the pre-sound film era, continued through the ‘Golden Age’ of film music and still adhered to today, one rarely sees most of the basic tenets outlined by Gorbman questioned, at least in mainstream Hollywood feature films. One routinely sees a

---

\(^7\) Scores composed for DVD releases are bound by a different set of limitations—the producer of the DVD takes on the role of the original director/producer in giving or withholding approval.
chase scene with fast, frantic music (although it may be rock music played on electric instruments), or a scary scene with ‘mysterious’ music (although it may be provided by synths and software samplers). One still sees the ubiquity of the ‘motif’ device, utilized since the silent film era and then codified by Golden Age composers like Max Steiner and Erich Korngold, which was derived from Richard Wagner and Giacomo Puccini’s 19th century practices.

All of these are effective, time-tested and pleasure-giving techniques. However, in the form of live performances of contemporary scores for silent film there are opportunities for some alternatives that are not being exploited. And the use of songs with words, long used in sound films, provides an even more articulate tool for engaging with the heretofore taken-for-granted narrative.

Songs in the Score for Faust

Murnau’s Faust has, as of 2012, been released on two DVD sets. Initially released by Kino Films (USA), with a score by orchestral composer Timothy Brock, performed by the Olympia Chamber Orchestra, a new two DVD set was released in 2006 by Eureka Video, which contained the original international distribution print, and a newly discovered German release print. The 2006 release contained the Timothy Brock score, plus a new score for solo harp by Stan Ambrose. It has not been scored by as many contemporary composers as some films like Metropolis (Fritz Lang, 1927), The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene, 1920) or Murnau’s own Nosferatu (1922), but Willem Breuker, Robert Bruce, and the Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra, among others, have all done Faust scores.

The Australian premiere of our score took place on 10 September 2007 at the Everest Theatre in the Seymour Centre in Sydney as part of the 2007 German Film Festival sponsored by the Goethe Institut (Fig 3).8 The musicians for all three performances were John Napier on cello, Elizabeth Jones on piano-accordion, myself on soprano saxophone, piano and ukulele, and Lauren Easton singing the very demanding vocal part. My score requires a strong music reader who can sing in a legitimate classical voice (art song), as well as sing jazz, cabaret and folk songs. In addition she must be able to improvise in a jazz style over chord changes (‘scat singing’), improvise freely (improvised music), create sound effects, deliver dialogue, and sing long written vocalise passages. She also has to be able to act and have a sense of humour.9

---

8 It was subsequently performed on 10 and 11 October 2008 at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image as part of the 2008 Melbourne Festival of the Arts.

9 Singers have a tendency to be style-specific in their training, due to the physical constraints of their instruments. It is rare to find a singer who is as well regarded in both opera and jazz, although there are singers who do both.
I: Approach to Narrative

*Faust* is based on the premise that Mephisto (Satan) claims he can corrupt any man. The Angel of God and Mephisto make a bet: if the Angel can find an incorruptible man, Mephisto can rule the universe. The angel chooses Faust. The Angel wins and Good ultimately triumphs but, as the story plays out, this is not supported in the narrative.

We had two reservations about this ending. First, the bet between the Angel and Mephisto is about whether Mephisto can corrupt Faust or not. Mephisto *does* corrupt Faust, who behaves badly and only repents when he has lost everything, and then he is redeemed only by Gretchen’s forgiveness. There is no mention of forgiveness or redemption in the bet. Second, the conduct of the townspeople is much worse than Faust’s: Faust has been tricked by Mephisto, but the townspeople, with no prompting from Mephisto, behave indefensibly. Jumping to conclusions about Gretchen’s guilt without investigating the evidence, they exhibit a mob mentality (which leads to a tragic scene of Gretchen’s infant dying in the snow) and they burn her at the stake. Humanist Christian precepts of fairness, compassion and forgiveness are absent. The townspeople commit murder, which neither Gretchen nor Faust has done; Faust’s supposed ‘murder’ of Gretchen’s brother is actually committed by Mephisto.

In our interpretation Mephisto has both won the bet, and also won the souls of the townspeople as a bonus. The new score supports a parallel narrative to the one expressed by the original film. And here is where our opening song lifts the internal story of Faust into a meta-narrative. Mephisto ruins people’s lives and lets them die horribly; so does God. They are both equally unconcerned about the fate of
individuals in pursuit of their agendas. The Devil takes delight in suffering—God appears to be unconcerned about it.

However, any filmmaker has a similar relationship to his characters. He causes them to live or die, to suffer horribly or escape unscathed, to be saved or damned, all in service of fulfilling his film’s agenda. During the writing, shooting and editing process, characters are killed and brought back to life, or, after all of their trials and tribulations, they may end up on the cutting room floor, and might as well never have existed.

So the very first music in the film, ‘A Shaft of Light’\(^\text{10}\), throws down the gauntlet of the meta-narrative. In a dramatic but melancholy art song, the voice of the singer is established as a one-woman Greek chorus, who is commenting on not only the fates of characters in the diegesis, but also on ours as viewers.

\[ \text{A shaft of light:} \\
\text{From the clouds;} \\
\text{From the projector.} \]

The metaphor of the shaft of light compares the ray of light from the Heavens to the ray of light from the film projector.

\[ \text{The light of creation} \\
\text{Piercing the dark of chaos.} \]

The light of the movie projector shines through the darkened film theatre, illuminating our darkness, as we wait to be entertained by the film. The creativity of the filmmaker lightens our humdrum lives, for which solace we repair to the cinema.

\[ \text{God’s eye a viewfinder} \\
\text{Looks coldly upon his creatures.} \]

Here is the analogy of the camera and the eye of God, introducing the idea of the filmmaker’s cool regard:

\[ \text{How to heighten the stakes?} \\
\text{Tighten the screws?} \\
\text{Send a storm.} \\
\text{Kill the child.} \\
\text{Make the hero arrive too late.} \]

The filmmaker is not concerned about the consequences for his characters: all is fair game to present an engaging plot:

\[ \text{And last,} \\
\text{A casual decision:} \\
\text{To end happily, or in tragedy?} \]

\(^{10}\) All lyrics by Hilary Bell.
As in a Shakespearean drama, we are invited to participate in a little experiment using God’s eye as a viewfinder, and ours as well. We are invited to behold the state of humanity in the film title card: “the portals of darkness are open and the shadows of the dead hunt over the earth...”.

By immediately establishing the role of the music as meta-narrative, the viewer is prepared for a multi-level experience. The music neither slavishly supports the on-screen narrative, nor merely contradicts or satirises it. It will exist as another element, sometimes supporting and intensifying in a traditional manner (as it does in the scene of Gretchen’s sufferings), sometimes poking fun (as in the scene of the juxtaposed romances of Gretchen and Aunt Marthe), but often bringing in a different perspective, independent of both the characters and the original filmmaker, and thus eschewing the roles of both pure synchronous and asynchronous film scoring.

Thus, the composer and librettist of the contemporary film score also act as imperious gods, imposing their will upon not only the characters, but the original director’s vision as well. They presume to take liberties and re-interpret the film, without his consent or participation, and impose their own narrative on his, sometimes contradicting what is presumed to be his original intent.

A Brecht/Weill-style cabaret tune, titled ‘Despair’, is ostensibly a song that expresses Faust’s growing disillusionment with conventional morality.

\[
\text{Pity poor humanity} \\
\text{Life is naught but vanity.}
\]

But it also returns to the theme of ‘A Shaft of Light’—that God doesn’t care about his subjects, and that they are manipulated for his amusement.

\[
\text{God looks coldly on his creatures:} \\
\text{Bored with us today,} \\
\text{He turns away.}
\]

It expresses Faust’s disgust with Judeo-Christian morality and his turning toward the Dark Side. This, in the primary discourse of the film, is setting us up for Faust’s eventual punishment and redemption (which he achieves by turning back to the Light). But the song sets up our parallel narrative: it is the representatives of the hypocritical mainstream morality that are the real villains, and the official line is just a tool of domination for keeping credulous citizens in line.

\[
\text{The winners are the traitors} \\
\text{The despots and dictators} \\
\text{The Vanderbilts, the Boss Tweeds and the Trumps.} \\
\text{The winners are deceivers} \\
\text{The monsters wielding cleavers,} \\
\text{While all us true believers are chumps.}
\]

So it switches points of view mid-song, from Faust’s despair and disillusionment, to an indictment of false morality and it draws the connection between this ancient tale of morality and our current times, reminding us that these ‘devils’ are as active as ever.
But the voice, with its myriad possibilities, is not just limited to songs. When Mephisto ‘blows’ the plague that he uses to incubate his experiment with Faust onto the town, the vocalist uses extended vocal techniques to blend with the instrumentalists, invoking the breath of the devil infecting the town. As death overcomes an elderly woman, the singer’s voice becomes the voice of the plague, threatening, wheedling and beckoning the woman toward death. As the happy polka of the heedless townspeople (“Oh sing a song of merriment, and laugh our cares away”) turns from major to minor as the plague approaches, the singer cackles madly in hedonistic abandon.

In addition, the instrumental music functions ‘polysynchronously’, bringing in associations and subtext not connected to the original intent of the film. When Faust decides to reject God and invoke the Devil, he is instructed to go to a crossroads and perform a ritual invocation. As he does, a classic country blues begins (probably one of the few examples of ‘blues ukulele’ on record)—a clear visual pun on the song ‘Crossroads’ (1936) by Robert Johnson. This intertextual reference most often results in a knowing laugh – but there is more to it than a pun. Johnson was said to have made a deal with the Devil in which Satan tuned his guitar and gave him his legendary abilities in exchange for his immortal soul (Wald 2004: 265–276, Palmer 1981: 126–128). There is a tradition of blues songs that invoke the Devil and various business transactions with him.11 It invokes African traditions in which going to the crossroads is associated with the getting of wisdom. Bluesmen are popularly thought to have mysterious powers over women (as Faust does over Gretchen). In addition, the minor key (used in the blues) has been associated in both classical and folk music with the idea of fate.

This is just one example of a polysynchronous association of seemingly disparate film image and music that invites a deeper discourse and parallel narrative. It doesn’t support the image (in a traditional way) and it doesn’t contradict it—it causes ‘affiliating identifications’ in Kassabian’s terminology (2001: 3, 143). Furthermore, by its seeming incongruency, it draws attention to itself (breaking rule two of Gorbman’s ‘classic principles’), which causes a deeper engagement with the film, according to one recent study:

Simply put, when confronted with modern music during a silent film screening, students contemplate the anachronism, which can inspire a more critical awareness of the film (and its aesthetics, social history etc.) among those who otherwise might be inclined to dismiss it. (Davis, 2008: 92)

However, at other points in the film, the music functions in a traditional ‘synchronous’ manner, supporting and amplifying the visual and narrative. The heart-wrenching scene in which Gretchen is shunned by the disapproving townspeople and her infant child dies in the snowstorm as she succumbs to delusion is accompanied by a haunting requiem played by solo cello. This tonal music in a classical style is played at an adagio tempo, molto espressivo.

---

11 Just a few examples include Peetie Wheatstraw’s ‘Devil’s Son-In-Law’ (1931–41), Lonnie Johnson’s ‘Devil’s Got The Blues’ (1938), and most notably Robert Johnson’s own ‘Hellhound On My Trail’ (1937).
II: ‘For Us Christ Died Upon The Cross’

A faux Protestant Christian hymn begins in a major key, with archetypal church chords. The virtuous townspeople are on their way to church, as Faust rejoices in nostalgia for the innocence of his youth (Mephisto looks on in contempt). The traditional pieties are laid out: “the righteous and deserving will meet their happy fate.” But what of the others, who don’t follow the official Church doctrine? As the harmony turns more chromatic their fate is revealed: “they burn in hell, their screeches for mercy go unheard.”

The song returns to the major key and we see more of the townspeople, as we are promised that, “you will never falter with Jesus as your light”. Mephisto begins his plot to ensnare Faust by engineering his meeting with Gretchen and we see her for the first time, as we hear the words, “we will not stoop to help you if you fall along the way” and the harmony, while still very tonal, reaches its most dissonant. This is a foreshadowing of the future: as Faust and Gretchen look into each other’s eyes, the song warns that, “our Lord… like a loving father, will punish and reward”. This sequence is summarised in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Harmony</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“the righteous and deserving will meet their happy fate”</td>
<td>I ii iii IV iii IV iv V (v°) V</td>
<td>Major key, diatonic, pious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“they burn in hell, their screeches for mercy go unheard”</td>
<td>bVmaj7 V7 bIV6 VI+ bVII I7sus4 IIm7 V7</td>
<td>Chromatic, beginning on tritone, (the ‘Devil’s interval’), more complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“you will never falter, with Jesus as your light”</td>
<td>iii VI ii V7</td>
<td>Cadence toward original tonic, returning home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We will not stoop to help you...”</td>
<td>ii I ii VI7#11 V7</td>
<td>Diatonic, except for #11 chord, a note of dissonance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Like a loving father, he’ll punish and reward”</td>
<td>vi v I7 ii</td>
<td>Unresolved ending on ii chord, note of uncertainty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Song lyrics matched to harmony and musical description for faux Protestant Christian hymn.

The music then returns to the instrumental and a funereal (slow, minor key) theme that portends the inevitability of fate. This second theme returns a number of times throughout the score.

When Gretchen’s brother has been killed, and Faust is forced to flee, Gretchen returns to the Church to pray, and is repelled. The Hymn returns as she weeps at
her brother’s coffin, but she is shunned by the townspeople and her persecution begins. As we hear the words “You will never falter with Jesus as your light”, we see the corrupt Aunt Marthe snubbing Gretchen and piously following the coffin. Finally as we hear “For us Christ died upon the Cross” we see Gretchen in the stocks being mocked by the townspeople.

This is only one of the ‘alternate readings’ of the film that is developed in the score throughout the film. The other most important ones—that Mephisto has really won the bet, and that the townspeople are the true villains of the story—are expressed in other songs, in both the music and the lyrics. And, as in traditional film scoring, thematic/motivic material is used to draw connections between ideas. As the story comes to an end, we give Mephisto a speech we call ‘Triumph’—one of the only two places in the film where we use spoken instead of sung text. It is underscored by the music from ‘A Shaft of Light’.

III: ‘Faust’s Confession/Chaos’

As the townspeople prepare to burn Gretchen at the stake, we hear the B theme of the hymn. The townspeople have usurped God’s right to punish and reward: they are punishing Gretchen themselves. The hymn accompanies Faust’s return to Gretchen, at which point he sings ‘Faust’s Confession’.

He asks forgiveness and Gretchen gives it, as they are both consumed by flames. This moment is treated synchronously, indicating that, yes, there is virtue; this is the spirit of forgiveness.

However, the townspeople achieve no such change; they do not forgive, nor are they forgiven. They end the film with no idea of what they’ve done, and no desire to know. This is where, in the parallel narrative, Mephisto has won. Over an instrumental reprise of A Shaft of Light, the singer, now as the voice of Mephisto, rants:

Okay, okay
They’re out of the way
Now here’s what it’s really been about, my friend.
You won two souls,
Redeemed and gone to heaven,
But I won thousands more!
A city full of wicked souls
Corrupt and sanctimonious,
They drove her to insanity
Then burned her at the stake.
Is that not evil?
They acted in my name!
Take Faust with my blessings:
I’ve won countless others.
The power and the glory of the world
Are mine!

But the Angel asserts victory, saying that the forgiveness of Gretchen for Faust undoes everything that Mephisto has achieved, invalidating the original parameters of the bet. This is not argued or supported by any reasoning except the power of
God to enforce it. As is so often the case, whoever is more powerful makes the rules.

In the original, the angel denies the bet:

\begin{quote}
Mephisto: My pact is binding
Angel: One word breaks thy pact.
Mephisto: What word is that?
Angel: The Word that rings joyfully throughout creation. The Word that appeases pain and sorrow; the Word that absolves all guilt, the Eternal Word, dost thou not know it?
Mephisto: What is the word?
Angel: Love!12
\end{quote}

The music that follows ‘A Shaft of Light’ in the opening, which accompanies Mephisto’s initial reign of evil in spreading the plague (‘Chaos’), is played forte and is aggressive and dissonant. It is reprised here, under a dramatically spoken monologue, as Mephisto, in the parallel narrative, has the last word:

\begin{quote}
Liar!
Cheat!
Use your power, change the rules.
Invent your reasons: ‘Love’?!
Curse you!
Chaos! Chaos!
\end{quote}

Conclusion

Over the last 30 years or so, the form of contemporary scores for silent film performed live with the film has grown into a unique art form, performed in many styles and orchestrations throughout the world. Groups such as The Club Foot Orchestra, The Alloy Orchestra, and Melbourne’s Blue Grassy Knoll devote themselves primarily to composing and performing original scores for silent film and touring them widely. Festivals such as the Pordenone Silent Film Festival in Italy (founded in 1981), routinely feature a wide variety of live performances of original scores for silent film, as do contemporary film and arts festivals, such as those in Adelaide, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth.

This wealth of creative outlets makes space for a range of approaches to the relationship between music and film. While the majority of scores hew fairly closely to the traditional role and practices expected for silent film music, there are opportunities here for experimental practitioners to challenge the conventional relationship between music and image/narrative.

In the score discussed above, the composer and librettist have used songs to create a parallel narrative, which has a complex relationship to the original: at times supporting, at times contradicting, at times adding subtext, at times poking fun, at times connecting to other ideas/references. Murnau’s Faust is an appropriately complex film; it is moral and moralistic, brutal and horrific, comical and parodic, romantic and suspenseful. Its imagery is expressionist, surreal, medieval and

12 English inter-titles are by John Stone.
modernist. The Eureka and Kino DVDs contain effective and admirable synchronistic scores by Timothy Brock and Stan Ambrose.

But the ‘polysynchronous’ score aims at something quite different from the traditional film score: the creation of a hybrid of old and new. It rejects the presumption that the primary goal of all film music is to support the director’s vision. The original film ends with the triumph of the angel of God (Good) and the banishment of Mephisto (Evil). The film with the polysynchronous score/libretto ends with a howl of outrage at the lack of justice (the townspeople are not punished for their misdeeds, the Angel cheats at the bet), and the reaffirmation by the indomitable Mephisto of his mission statement: Chaos!

The polysynchronous film score functions as an equal with the film it ‘accompanies’. It creates a new art form that is not a film-with-supporting-score, but a time-travelling, international, inter-generational collaboration, in which film and music function as two parts of a new multimedia piece. The film loses none of the wonder and mystery characteristic of the silent film era oeuvre. But it is also opened up to a new form of collaboration. All film scores ‘interpret’ the films they accompany, and there is no way for a composer to truly know the ‘intention’ of a director of a film from a previous century. There is not even a way to know if the film itself, as it exists without music, realises the director’s original intent. The polysynchronous film score merely embraces this ‘unknowing’, rather than denying or ignoring it, and uses it as a licence to engage the film directly on a different level of interaction.

The addition of songs gives the polysynchronous composer a uniquely powerful tool with which to express alternative interpretations of the original text (the film). The addition of words can be used in myriad ways—song lyrics, poetry, dialogue—to comment on the action, express a parallel narrative, or even articulate the ‘original intent’. The human voice and the power of song have long been used in film (and other art forms) to express heightened emotion, and are particularly compatible with the expressionist and poetic style of silent film. And original songs written expressly for the film (as opposed to the licensed songs often used in contemporary films) facilitate the creation of a completely integrated score in order to serve whatever end the composer (and librettist) intend, be it synchronous, asynchronous or polysynchronous.

References


Filmography


