

MUSIC FOR SILENT FILM
A GUIDE TO NORTH AMERICAN RESOURCES

by

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PREFACE

In recent years, interest in music for what is widely referred to as “silent film” has enjoyed a renaissance. Performers, including organists Ben Model, David Drazin, and Stephen Horne, and ensembles such as the Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra and the Peacherine Ragtime Orchestra, accompany silent-film screenings to packed houses every weekend of the year, playing scores created from music of the period or written specifically for silent films. At the same time, groups like the Berklee Silent Film Orchestra and the Alloy Orchestra offer up mixes of old and newly composed music for silent films. Silent-film festivals and screenings are popping up across the United States and Canada, drawing large and enthusiastic crowds.

The drive to preserve and study these films and their music is also intensifying. In 2011, a cache of some 850 scores was discovered at the Birmingham Library in England, where they are now being cataloged and, in some cases, digitized for public and scholarly use. In the United States, the Silent Film Sound and Music Archive (www.sfsma.org) is digitizing and documenting individual pieces of sheet music, photoplay albums, and full scores for silent film, and the Media History Digital Library (mediahistoryproject.org) is digitizing fan magazines and other materials related to silent film that occasionally contain references to the music for the silent cinema. And while there has always been general and scholarly interest in these materials, there has not been a single reference resource for information on primary sources (the music itself) or secondary sources (articles and books) about silent-film music until now. *Music for Silent Film: A Guide to North American Resources* is intended to collect the major resources in the United States and Canada into one volume that can be used by enthusiasts, performers, and scholars—anyone with an interest in music for the silent screen.

SCOPE

When I began research for this book, I was pleasantly surprised to find that my own local public library system—at the time, the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County (Ohio)—had a small collection of silent-film music hidden away in its larger, more general music section. Not only did the main library in the system have volumes of silent-film music, but even some of the branch libraries—predictably, those that were in neighborhoods with old cinemas and theaters—had sheet music and other print materials related to music for the silent screen. In some cases, these pieces of music and books had never been checked out or were last documented as having been checked out in the 1920s.

This isn't an unusual story. I found small collections like the ones in my local library in public libraries in other cities across the United States and Canada, and in college and university

INTRODUCTION

Between 1912 and 1929, more than eleven thousand motion pictures were made in the United States. While we call these works “silent films,” they were accompanied by an enormous body of music, both adapted or arranged from preexisting compositions and newly written for theater orchestras, organists, or pianists. A recent study by David Pierce and the National Film Preservation Board, in conjunction with Council on Library and Information Resources and the Library of Congress, found that only thirty percent of these presound films are still extant, with many incomplete or in poor condition.¹ For a time, music for these films seemed destined to a similar fate: in the 1960s, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios deaccessioned its entire collection of scores and orchestral parts and sent them to a landfill in an event known to industry insiders as the “MGM purge.” Since then, however, studios and archives have increasingly valued the historic importance of their holdings of silent-film music, and scholarly and general interest in these works has grown significantly. The ongoing digitization of archival materials as a practice of preservation has also helped save music from this period and has made some collections more easily accessible to scholars and performers.

Instruction books for pianists and organists provide the first look at how performers for the silent screen selected their music for scenes and made decisions about sound effects. Authors had strong opinions as to how motion pictures should be accompanied, and their publications often approach the topic with a scholarly tone. In his preface to *What and How to Play for Pictures* (1913; item 41), for example, Eugene Ahern writes “in the hope of assisting others in this particular occupation, I offer the result of my own observations and study.” Ahern’s advice includes matching the tempo of the accompanying piece to the motions and activity of the characters and scene, playing quietly so as not to divert the audience’s attention from the film, and not to switch from one piece to another too frequently. He then provides case studies, analyzing the mood, action, and content of a scene and suggesting appropriate music for it, including his reasoning behind selecting the pieces he does.

Other instruction books focus more on practical aspects. George Tootell’s *How to Play the Cinema Organ: A Practical Book by a Practical Player* (1921; item 59) is designed to teach pianists of either amateur or professional skills how to play the theater organ, starting with basic information about how theater organs work, from stops to knee-swells (the control of volume through panels pressed by the player’s knee). C. Roy Carter’s *The Theatre Organist’s Secrets* (ca. 1928; item 46) gives specific musical cues and lists the stops to be used for sound effects like a policeman’s whistle, a snore, and a grunting pig. Because the authors include their theories and justifications for the employment of certain pieces or sounds to accompany certain

CHAPTER 1

ARCHIVES

This listing includes major North American English-language archives holding music for silent cinema. Archives that contain music for sound films but not music from the silent period are not listed. Collections that allow materials to be rented or checked out appear in chapter 2, “Rental and Lending Libraries.” Online-only archives are listed at the head of the chapter. The entries for physical archives are organized alphabetically by country and then by state or province. Many of these archives and libraries hold not only sheet music, photoplay albums, and instruction books, but also valuable ephemera, such as company catalogs from the Carl Fischer Company, which list new music for theater orchestras; guides to instruments for theaters, such as the Fotoplayer; and lists of cinemas and their music personnel from specific years.

Researchers interested in using silent-film-era magazines and other publications to track publicity or advertising for music should also be aware of the Media History Digital Library (<http://mediahistoryproject.org>), whose staff is digitizing silent-film-related periodicals, including *Motion Picture World*, *Photoplay*, and *Screenland*. Its listing of magazines for fans, which occasionally include materials related to music, is available at <http://mediahistoryproject.org/fanmagazines>. *The Bioscope* (<http://thebioscope.net/journals/usa>), a now-dormant blog devoted to silent-film history and artifacts, offers links to digitized issues of American silent-film magazines. Additional silent-film periodicals are available online at <http://www.taylorology.com/ia.php>. Although the magazines and other periodicals listed by these sites are not specific to film music, many of the publications often ran irregular columns or articles on cinema music, and there is advertising for motion-picture music in many issues that is useful for studies of marketing and reception, and for tracking the careers and popularity of musicians and works.

WEB RESOURCE

1. Silent Film Sound and Music Archive

<http://www.sfsma.org>

An online repository of full scores, sheet music, instruction books, and other resources for silent-film music performance and research. Most materials are downloadable as PDFs, and new materials are added frequently. Current holdings include Erno Rapée’s *Motion Picture Moods* (1924) and *Encyclopedia* (1925), photoplay albums published by Carl Fischer and Sam Fox, sheet music by many of the major composers for silent cinema, and cue sheets. Examples include cue sheets for *Beau Geste* (1926) and *Get Your Man* (1927), publications of the PianOrgaN Film Books series and the Eclipse Motion Picture Music Folio, scores for *Phantom of the Opera* (1925) and *The Crippled Hand* (1916), and descriptive mood music from “Oriental Dances” to “Spring Flowers.” The site also posts audio and video interviews and recordings of cinema pianists and organists.