

DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v9i1.2391

Citation: Kostogryz, S., Myslavskiy, V., & Cherkasova, N. (2020). Development of Film Music in Ukraine in the 1920's. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 9(1), 477-483. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v9i1.2391>

Development of Film Music in Ukraine in the 1920's

Sergii Kostogryz¹, Volodymyr Myslavskiy², Nataliia Cherkasova³

Abstract

The objective of this study is to explore the interactions between music and films, the progress, styles, forms, and means of film scoring, as well as to analyze the trends in the development of film music in Ukraine in the 1920s. The article outlines the array of challenges associated with the formation of various approaches to film scoring in the Ukrainian cinematography. Different styles and forms of film scoring molded in the 1920s in USSR in general, and in Ukraine in particular, are investigated. Analysis of the contemporaries' debate in specialized magazines showed that three types of film scoring prevailed at those times: improvisation (music reflects the external action of the movie, the atmosphere where that action is happening); compilation (music is used as an illustrative tool to render the sentiment of each separate episode, without plotting a seamless musical piece for the entire movie); and composition (thematic musical illustration for the entire movie). The article also addresses major means of musical scoring for cinema shows — “complex”, “orchestra”, “piano”.

Keywords: Film, Improvisation, Cinema, Composition, Film history, The USSR, VUFKU, Film music.

¹ Ph.D. in Arts, Senior Lecturer of the Department of Folk Instruments, Kharkiv I. Kotliarevsky National University of Arts. E-mail: serg@ukrinternet.com

² Doctor in History of Arts, Professor of the Department of Television, Kharkov State Academy of Culture, Faculty of Cinema and Television Art. E-mail: cinema2@i.ua

³ Ph.D. in Arts, Senior Lecturer of the Department of Television, Kharkov State Academy of Culture, Faculty of Cinema and Television Art. E-mail: kinonat.kh@gmail.com

Introduction

The formation of musical illustration of films in the 1920–1930s and mutual interaction of music and cinema still remains an underexplored chapter in the history of the Ukrainian cinematography, although much has been written about this period in cinematography overall. Therefore, this issue has not been specifically researched, although the authors believe that musical scoring played a significant role in the viewers' perception of films, development of cinema in general, and formation of expressive means in the Ukrainian cinematic art in the 1920s. All of the above points confirm the relevance of this study.

Methods

The research methodology used by the authors is based on an integrated approach, which allowed reviewing all aspects and interactions that affected the process under study. Comparative and systematic historical methods were employed. The comparative analysis method is used to summarize the connections between musical thinking and cinematographic concepts.

Discussion

The role of musical illustration in films came into the spotlight in the early days of cinematography. The role of musical scoring (illustration) and film music raised much debate in the press in the 1920s. Music becomes an essential part of movies as an additional tool that arouses certain emotional states in the viewers. However, this type of film scoring soon proved to be untenable. The increasing rate of cross-cutting, rapid change of shots, the use of close-ups and so-called "American picture editing" precluded successful usage of existing musical compositions (even if the beginning of such compositions matched the illustrated scene, the middle and especially the end of those usually fell into a sharp dissonance with the picture on screen). Cinema musicians proceed from haphazard music selection to performing specifically chosen music for every movie, mainly written by famous composers.

The next phase in the development of musical scoring in the Ukrainian cinematography in the 1920s was the introduction of musical improvisation. Pianists, or as they were called at those times, "accompanists", "illustrators", "compilers" used to compose and perform suitable music on the spur of the moment while looking at the screen.

The musical illustration of films had its own strengths and weaknesses. The good thing was that the "accompanists", when creating a piece of music on the spot, would embody their initial, instantaneous artistic perception of the film, which was synchronized with the viewer's perception. Film scoring was turning into an "interlinear translation" of the movie scene. However, the drawback of improvised musical accompaniment was that it heavily relied on the pianist's talent, skills, and mood, so the scoring was inconsistent at different film shows, and could sometimes be quite disappointing.

In view of this, music theorists in the mid-1920s recommended the following:

- "1) Carefully select the improvising pianist;
- 2) Contemplate the musical score prior to the first release of the film;
- 3) Record musical improvisation for the motion picture;

4) Sophisticate the recorded improvisation” (Boyler, 1926, p. 28).

Besides, the public was increasingly demanding and willing to hear more than one piano score the film — they wanted an orchestra to play, and the orchestra was, for obvious reasons, incapable of improvisation.

Several trends in the development of musical accompaniment of film shows were becoming apparent in the 1920s. The first trend was based on the assumption that musical illustration should be purely abstractive, i. e. the music should reflect the overall sentiment of the film without attaching to its individual episodes, which, to a certain extent, allowed using independent pieces of music (movement of a symphony, overture, suite, etc.) without any alterations to it. The second trend in the interpretation of musical illustration was based on the advocacy of the figurative nature of illustration: according to it, music should express the external action of the movie, its atmosphere, the scenery where the action took place. The third trend was committed to the illustrative nature of music in the cinematographic art: the sentiment of every single episode should be conveyed without binding the illustration with any general idea or theme. And, finally, the fourth trend consisted in the concept of thematic music illustration in the movie. Illustrators and compilers representing this concept believed that main characters or action scenery had to be defined by an appropriate theme tune.

Intensive development of cinematography came amid the raising demands to the musical illustration of movies. In 1923 film musicians were surveyed about the “importance of musical art in motion pictures” and the best ways of film scoring. The opinions of the contemporaries on this issue varied. Some insisted on orchestral illustration, some stood for piano scoring, others leaned toward the so-called complex improvisation, i.e. combined film scoring by a pianist and an orchestra. However, many conductors, pianists, and directors of chamber ensembles did not attend previews of the films. That is why the music at film premieres in most cinemas not only was at odds with the picture but even contradicted the screen action.

It was believed that when planning the sound editing, the illustrator was to decide whether to make a specific illustration for each episode or just compose background music harmonizing with the subject-matter of the film, disregarding the plot twists on screen.

In the first case, music served not only to reflect the style of the film, but also to convey the characters’ mood, “be quite equirhythmic and, if possible, be in tune with the times and match the film’s storyline ethnographically” (Vladimirov, 1926, p. 9). This challenging task could be tackled by a good pianist-improviser, who would carefully follow every twist of the plot on screen. This task was much more arduous for an orchestra conductor. They would have to watch the movie in advance, carefully prepare pieces of music to match the film plot (composition, arrangement, compilation), and synchronize those with the tempo of the picture shown on screen.

Films in Ukraine were scored by:

1. Pianists-improvisers and illustrators;
2. Ensembles comprising a violin and a violoncello;
3. Chamber ensembles including 3 to 7–8 musicians;

4. The so-called “symphonic” orchestras of 12–16 musicians.

It was suggested to increase the size of orchestras in large Ukrainian cinemas to at least 40–50 players, since some musicians believed that “only a finely-selected and full-toned orchestra with an experienced and insightful conductor may set the right, vibrant dynamics to the motion picture” (Boguslavskiy, 1925). It was proposed in Odessa to extend the orchestra at Frunze cinema to 36 players, and at other cinemas — to 8–21 players, in order to create the desired artistic effect (Skvirskiy, 1927).

Cinema bureaucrats reckoned that the viewers come to cinemas to watch a movie rather than to listen to a symphony (the idea of replacing musicians with mechanical music machines even sparked a lively discussion in the press). I. Skvirskiy, one of the proponents of cutting the number of musicians in the Ukrainian cinemas, reinforced the feasibility of this initiative by the need of making film distribution more profitable. However, this opinion was publicly torn to pieces at an extraordinary meeting dedicated to film music. Most of the meeting attendees insisted that by cutting down expenses on musicians, the All-Ukrainian Photo and Cinema Administration (VUFKU) would lose even more film viewers: “Cinema music is still predominantly botched music. We need to inquire into the conditions of producing such music, and work on improving it, both in terms of quality and quantity. Economizing on the artistic aspect is unacceptable. One could only hit upon this idea if they took music as a bitter pill, as an imposed necessity, without realizing that film music should be an integral part of the overall artistic experience” (An, 1927).

Downsizing the number of cinema musicians provoked a fierce row, so the presidium of the All-Ukrainian Committee of Art Workers resolved that the “local organizations” should stop laying off the musicians and other professionals. The Central Committee of Art Workers managed to uphold some of the musicians-illustrators from firing by order of the All-Ukrainian Photo and Cinema Administration for a while. Together with the press, they successfully convinced VUFKU that film scoring is essential, that music is an important artistic element of motion pictures, and that musicians are not the item of expenditure to be cut down and neglected. However, the threat of major dismissal hung over cinema musicians again in 1928 (B., 1928).

Three forms of musical illustration of motion pictures existed in the 1920s: improvisation, compilation, and composition, i.e. music specifically composed for a certain movie. Improvisation and compilation were often criticized by the contemporaries, mostly due to the low level of professional skills in many cinema pianists. “Illustration only captures individual moments, actions, twists that can be superficially caught flying by the musician and played, often completely off the mark, contrary to the best evanescent moods. Illustration is limited in repertoire. One pianist’s play is divided into a rambling sequence of tunes. Musical illustration goes one way, and the picture on screen goes the other way. They keep out voicing each other, just like Bobchinskiy and Dobchinskiy — absurdly and aimlessly” (Lipaev, 1923). “Real musical illustration can make the film a huge success. Try launching music-centered pictures, such as ‘Battleship Potemkin’, ‘Mother’ or ‘A Sixth Part of the World’, without music — and the viewer will miss out a massive part of the experience. That is what... genuinely artistic musical illustration is needed for — to actually augment the viewers’ perception without distracting them, which is, unfortunately, a rare occasion not only in the province, but also in capitals, plagued by uncultured and amateur pianists-illustrators” (Endrzhhevskiy, 1927).

Most music theorists were inclined to composing special film music, as was the case in the West. In particular, the observer of the Odessa magazine "Theater, Club, Cinema" noted: "'The Great Mute' is inseparably entwined with music. Without music, the picture is empty, stale, lifeless. Good music spiritualizes the picture, deepens its expressiveness. In the ideal world, special music would be composed for each new film produced by the factory" (His, 1927).

While some musicians believed that musical accompaniment of films should become independent, that is, music should be composed specially for each film, just like opera score, other musicians found solving this task impossible due to the technical conditions of musical and cinema art. Alternatively, M. Holdstein, orchestra conductor at one of the Ukrainian cinemas, considered using specially composed music impossible: "Composing music for a finished movie is not an option: firstly, because the cinefilm gets torn, thereby reducing the footage of the picture, and secondly, because the pictures may be shown at a varying pace, so the music has to be adapted to this pace, and this is possible only when the picture is illustrated not by specially composed music, but by selected fragments from individual musical works" (Holdstein, 1926). Holdstein quite reasonably noted that high-quality musical illustration is only possible when the cinema has an appropriate music library with at least 1,500 works, since it takes 20 to 25 plays to illustrate one film, and repeating music throughout the film is unacceptable.

In the 1920s, the prospects for the development of film illustration were often a focus of discussion. There was an opinion that a composer should work on the film closely with the director's crew in order to select musical fragments, both existing and self-composed, for individual parts of the film, and coordinate this musical libretto with the director's crew when finalizing the film (Sim, 1928).

With an eye toward improving the quality of musical illustration, it was considered unwarranted for highly qualified musicians to make up the so-called "musical scripts" mentioning the titles of several plays on the same topic. Such scripts were supposed to be sent to cinemas along with the film and be used in quite common cases when the film was delivered to the cinema on the release day, which, of course, made previewing the movie and selecting a musical repertoire impossible (Prilutskiy, 1927, p. 7).

It was not until 1929 that the III Plenary Session of the Photo and Cinema Section of the Art Workers Committee adopted a decree instructing to use musical scripts and film abstracts in order to improve musical illustration in cinemas. Guided by this decree, the Music and Art Council was established under Sovkino, which was involved in preparing "musical scripts" (V. E., 1929). Subsequently, ways to improve the quality of film illustration were discussed at the All-Russian Music Conference (Krochmarev, 1929).

It should be noted that the need to establish a music department "comprising competent professionals who will either select or create new music" at the All-Ukrainian Photo and Cinema Administration was identified back in 1926 in Ukraine (Bemol, 1926). And in 1927, the decision on establishing the Music and Arts Council at the All-Ukrainian Photo and Cinema Administration was adopted (n.a., 1927).

The press also speculated on the need to introduce a special subject, Film Music (piano improvisation, composition, compilation, rhythm in motion and rhythm in music, etc.), into the

curriculum of conservatories and music colleges. Even a special commission was set up, which proceeded to an in-depth thematic study of the methods of constructing film music, and steps were also taken to practically determine the preparedness of conservatoire students to work as musical illustrators at movie shows (Insarov, 1927).

Since 1928, Ukrainian film-makers have been attempting to write music for films. The first films that were accompanied by original music composed by B. Liatoshinskiy, Yu. Meytus, V. Rybalchenko were “Two Days” (Heorhii Stabovyi) (1927), “The Night Coachman” (Heorhii Tasin) (1928), and “The Eleventh” (Dziga Vertov) (1928). In the 1929–1930s, about ten more films were shown to specially composed music. Composer I. Belza wrote music for the film “Arsenal” (Aleksandr Dovzhenko) (1929). P. Tolstiakov was more fruitful: he is the author of music for “The Rain” (Ivan Kavaleridze) (1929) and “Perekop” (Ivan Kavaleridze) (1930). L. Kaufman created expressive music for the film “In Spring” (Mikhail Kaufman) (1929). I. Vilenskiy wrote music for the films “Pest” (Konstantin Bolotov) (1930) and “Transbalt” (Mikhail Bilinskiy) (1930); L. Revutskiy — for the film “Earth” (Aleksandr Dovzhenko) (1930); N. Timofeev — for the film “Symphony of the Donbass” (Dziga Vertov) (1930).

Praise for the specially composed film music for “Arsenal” (Aleksandr Dovzhenko) (1929) was published in the “Soviet Art” journal: “The first attempt was not successful enough, and although the temper of music in some fragments matches the impetuous ‘Arsenal’, the composer failed to master the rhythmic of the movie and at the same time produce some serious music” (Kaufman, 1930, p. 12). According to the author, music for “In Spring” (Mikhail Kaufman) (1929) turned out to be the most interesting and compliant with the agenda for Soviet film music: “Kaufman’s music is not a musical mosaic from illustrations of individual pieces, but a solid, multifaceted musical reflection of that very spring in nature and Soviet construction. Music meets all our requirements, both in terms of synchronization (in tune with the screen), depth of the music piece, and excellent orchestration. A glorious motif of youthful enthusiasm resonating in the machine labor and cheery smiles of the youngsters, is competing with the motifs of the old days — ringing of the bells, carousing, babbling of a priest. These beautiful moments of imitation — so numerous they are: murmur of water, rattle of the machines, ringing of the bells, even squeal of the piglets. We should celebrate the music from “In Spring” as a totally new experience, a completely different kind of film music. This music is the first real victory over obsolete musical traditions in the cinema, over this typical “cinema accompanist” who used to poison the Soviet viewers with utterly alien music for years and years” (Kaufman, 1930, p. 13).

Conclusion

Film scoring in the Ukrainian cinemas in the 1920s was, for the most part, at a pretty low level. Whereas musicians’ work in cinemas was considered to be an applied occupation having little to do with the art of music, professional musicians who worked at cinemas were often ashamed to confess that. This was primarily caused by most conservatoire, musical college and school teachers’ conviction that the students working at cinemas as illustrators (improvisers) reduce their studies to naught and harm their musical career. Due to such disdainful attitude towards film music borne by the musicians themselves, poor-quality musical illustration often ran counter to the subject-matter of the film and discorded with the visual part, and thus contravened its principal function — arousing the plot-relevant emotions in viewers.

By the end of the 1920s, the musicians' opinions on cinematic music changed. A special field of applied music art — movie illustration — had to be created, and a special subject, “Film Music”, had to be introduced in the curriculum of conservatories and music colleges. The leading Ukrainian composers burst into cinematography in the mid-1930s. This was the beginning of a new era in the history of this merged art on the edge of music and cinematography.

References

- An, H. (1927). For the better, not for the worst. Theatre. Club. Cinema, 9. Odessa, Ukraine.
- B. (1928). The New Policy of VUFKU. Rabis, 31. Kharkov, Ukraine.
- Bemol, L. (1926). Cinema and music. Theatre – Music – Cinema, 42, 7-14. Kiev, Ukraine.
- Borisov, P. (1929). Glaviskusstvo on musical illustration of films. Rabis, 12. Kharkov, Ukraine.
- Boytlar, M. S. (1926). Cinema. Organization and Management. Moscow, Russia.
- Buhoslavskiy, S. (1925). Music in Films. Art of the Working Class, 6. Moscow, Russia.
- Buhoslavskiy, S. (1925). Music in Films. New Viewer, 8. Moscow, Russia.
- N.a. (1927). City Council on the work of VUFKU. Theatre, Club, Cinema, 21. Odessa, Ukraine.
- Endrzhhevskiy, V. (1927). The art of ‘bad tone’. Kino-Front, 7/8. Moscow, Russia.
- His, N. (1927). A pianist or an orchestra? Theatre. Club. Cinema, 9. Odessa, Ukraine.
- Holdstein, M. (1926). Music in Films. Cinema, 4. Kiev, Ukraine.
- Insarov, M. (1927). Cinema and music schools. Kino-Front, 7/8. Moscow, Russia.
- Kaufman, L. (1930). Real film music. Soviet Art, 2. Kiev, Ukraine.
- Krochmarev, K. (1929). All-Russian Music Conference. Rabis, 27. Kharkov, Ukraine.
- Krochmarev, K. (1930). Music in Films. Rabis, 20. Kharkov, Ukraine.
- Lipaev, I. (1923). Music in Films. Cinema, 4. Moscow, Russia.
- Matsehor, I. V. (1927). Cinema music. Culture and Daily Life, 35. Kiev, Ukraine.
- Prilutskiy, V. (1927). Burning question. Kino-Front, 2. Moscow, Russia.
- Sim. (1928). On music in films. Cinema, 3. Kiev, Ukraine.
- Skvirskiy, I. (1927). More on music in films. Theatre. Club. Cinema, 10. Odessa, Ukraine.
- Skvirskiy, I. (1928). Keynotes on film music in the cinema. Kino-Front, 2. Moscow, Russia.
- V. E. (nickname) (1929). Theatre-cinema-print is in a hurry. Rabis, 20. Kharkov, Ukraine.
- Vladimirov, M. (1926). On musical illustration in the cinema. Art Life, 3. Moscow, Russia.