

Scoring Silent Films with the *Photoplay Music Starter Kit*

by Rodney Sauer, director of the Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra

This *Photoplay Music Starter Kit* is a collection of orchestral “photoplay music” from the libraries of silent film theater musicians.

It is intended for students, music historians, chamber ensembles, freelance musicians, community orchestras, symphonies, or anyone wanting to experiment with this remarkably efficient and flexible approach to orchestral silent film scoring.

The *Photoplay Music Starter Kit* has over 90 orchestrated pieces that I have found useful in creating compiled scores. It should provide you with all of the music you need for scoring a typical silent film. If you enjoy these projects, you can expand your music library with more pieces from archives.

In this article I will discuss

- What photoplay music is
- How compiled scores differ from composed and improvised scores
- How photoplay music accommodates a variety of orchestra sizes
- Categories of music included in the *Photoplay Music Starter Kit*
- Tips on creating, rehearsing, and performing your score
- How to find more music from archives
- References and sources for further research

What is “photoplay music”?

The term “photoplay” to describe the cinema and its music was fairly common during the silent film era, but fell from favor shortly afterwards. So I find that “photoplay music” is a useful term to describe the repertoire of music that was collected and used by silent movie theater orchestras.

The use of scores compiled from photoplay music was nearly universal during the silent film era. Considering that this was—for about fifteen years—perhaps the most widely-performed genre of music on Earth, this rich and extensive repertoire has been surprisingly neglected. Only a handful of ensembles today revive it in performance.

I believe that there are two reasons for this neglect.

First, the practice died overnight in 1929 as theaters converted to sound and laid off their orchestra musicians, leaving modern musicians unaware of the practices and repertoire of the live-music movie theaters.

Second, it has been difficult to find the music required for creating compiled scores, since it has been out of print since 1929 and most of the original theater libraries were thrown out.

The *Photoplay Music Starter Kit* is intended to help overcome those problems by providing enough music for anyone to assemble and perform a film score.

A very brief historical context

The music for silent films was a local concern, managed theater by theater. Today, if you see a play, the script comes from the playwright, but the sets and costumes are the responsibility of local set and costume designers. In a similar way, in the silent film era, the movie came from the studio, but the musical accompaniment was left to the local theater musicians.

So if you saw the same film in 100 different theaters, you'd likely hear 100 different musical scores.

When you compile film scores using this collection, you are stepping into the role of theater music director. Even though you may not be writing any new music, you are taking on a creative role. You will be creating a new score.

And your score will be just as legitimate as anyone else's.

What is a “compiled score”?

There are three kinds of film scores used in silent film accompaniment:

- *Composed* scores
- *Improvised* scores
- *Compiled* scores

A *composed score* is made up of fresh music composed specifically for a film. This is how most film music has been created since 1929.

Composed scores can track the film very closely, but they take a long time and a lot of effort to create. Silent films often showed in one theater for a week or less, and were not expected to return. So it was simply not practical to compose new music for each film. Which is why there were very few composed scores produced during the silent era.

An *improvised score*, where musicians make up music as they watch the film, is the most common form of accompaniment used for silent film revivals today. A good improviser can sit down and play music for a film, even one they've never seen before, matching the mood of the score to the film as it runs. But improvisation was not commonly taught in classical musical education in the 1920s, so it was a rare skill. Also, improvisation works best with a solo artist on piano or theater organ, and that does not provide the "orchestral" sound experience that was expected in the finest movie theaters.

A *compiled score* is assembled from a library of pre-existing music. When a new film arrived at the theater, the score compiler selected a piece for each scene from the theater's library.

Since the pieces are already composed and orchestrated, the compiler has no composing or arranging work to do: just choose the pieces, fit them to the scene, and hand out the parts to each musician.

After the film's run, the music was sorted back into the library for future re-use.

The compiled score technique is impressively efficient. When under time pressure, I've put together an entire two-hour feature film score in just two days, with a third day to copy and mark the parts. Which is approaching the speed that the musical directors in the 1920s must have accomplished routinely.

The drawbacks to compiled scores are probably obvious: over time, the music can become repetitive, especially if you have a small library. Also, the music was not composed for any specific film, so it may not track the arc of a scene as closely as a composed score would. With careful score compiling, these drawbacks can be minimized.

The use of compiled scores, using pre-recorded compositions, continues even today, especially in television series and documentaries.

The variable theater orchestra

The size of movie theater orchestras varied considerably. A small theater might have a solo pianist or a trio of piano, violin, and drums; while the large theaters in big cities competed with each other on their musical presentation and boasted orchestras of 70 or more players.

Photoplay music, including the pieces in this starter kit, was carefully arranged so that the same orchestration could be used by all of these ensembles. This is very convenient, because it gives a lot of flexibility in designing a performance ensemble. And once you've created a compilation score, it can be scaled up or down as needed for groups ranging from solo piano to large orchestras.

The key to this flexibility lies in the use of “cue notes.”

Important musical lines for less common instruments are included in the parts for more common instruments as small cue notes. This way, no important musical ideas are missed just because an orchestra lacks that instrument.

As an example, here is an excerpt from the piano/conductor part to *Groteske No. 40*, one of the pieces in the starter kit. Note how the melody line starts with oboe (“Ob.”), then is taken over in turn by clarinet, violin, and flute/piccolo.

Musical score for piano/conductor part of *Groteske No. 40*. The score is in 3/4 time, key of A major, and marked *Andante*. It features a piano part with a bass line and a conductor part with a melody line. The melody line starts with an oboe cue note (labeled "Ob."), then is taken over by clarinet (labeled "Clar."), violin (labeled "Viol."), and flute/piccolo (labeled "Fl. picc."). The piano part includes dynamics such as *p espressivo* and *pp*, and a *crescendo e stringendo* marking.

As you would expect, the oboe line appears in the oboe part as full-sized notes.

Musical score for oboe part of *Groteske No. 40*. The score is in 3/4 time, key of A major, and marked *Andante*. It features a solo oboe line with dynamics such as *p espressivo* and *pp cresc. e string. molto*.

The oboe line also appears in the clarinet part as small cue notes, labeled “Ob.” (It is transposed a minor third higher, since this piece calls for clarinet in A; but the resulting notes will sound the same.)

Musical score for clarinet part of *Groteske No. 40*. The score is in 3/4 time, key of A major, and marked *Andante*. It features a solo clarinet line with dynamics such as *p espressivo* and *pp cresc. string. molto*. The oboe line is transposed a minor third higher and labeled "Ob."

If there is an oboe in the orchestra, the clarinet should not play the cue notes, because the oboe will play them. But if there is no oboe, the oboe cue becomes the clarinetist’s line, so that the piece can still be performed successfully.

The same cue notes are also put in the violin part. That way, if there is no oboe and no clarinet, the violinist can play everything.

Musical score for violin part of *Groteske No. 40*. The score is in 3/4 time, key of A major, and marked *Andante*. It features a violin line with dynamics such as *p espressivo* and *pp cresc. e string. molto*. The oboe line is transposed a minor third higher and labeled "Ob."

So, inform your musicians that if there are cue notes for an instrument that is missing from your ensemble, it is probably more important than their part, and

they should play the cue notes. This can sometimes lead to doubling, so resolve any problems in rehearsal, if you have time, on a case-by-case basis.

The piano serves as the catch-all instrument, covering the bass and inner strings and anything else that's missing in a small ensemble. By the time you have a large enough orchestra, you don't need the piano at all, except for its other roles: bridging gaps in the orchestral score (more on that later), and playing during any scenes with on-screen pianists.

What instrumentation is typical for photoplay music?

The collection of instruments called for was remarkably consistent across different publishers, which makes sense given how they were intended to be assembled to create a larger work.

The arrangements were commonly sold in three ways: the piano/conductor part could be bought alone for use by solo pianists or organists; and the orchestrations could be bought in "small" or "large" orchestra configurations.

The parts were identical in the "small" and "large" orchestra editions, but the parts with asterisks in the list below were omitted in "small orchestra" editions. This reflected the reality that most theater orchestras were small, and did not have oboe, bassoon, 2nd clarinet, and French horns.

The parts provided in a standard photoplay music arrangement are:

Piano/conductor reduction score

Violin 1

Violin 2

Viola

Cello

Bass

Flute

Clarinet 1 (in B \flat or A)

Clarinet 2* (in B \flat or A)

Oboe*

Bassoon*

Trumpet/cornet 1 (in B \flat or A)

Trumpet/cornet 2 (in B \flat or A)

Trombone

Horns 1 and 2 (in F), usually on one part*

Percussion, usually one part, sometimes there's a separate part for tympani

Harmonium or organ*

* These parts are only found in "large orchestra" editions.

Photoplay music arrangements have no full conductor score. The piano or violin part serves as a “reduced” conductor score. So, if you are conducting, you’ll have to trust your musicians to play the notes they’ve got, and conduct the ensemble based on the reduced score and its cue notes.

Pencil marks in surviving collections of photoplay music indicate that small ensembles were typically led from the violin or piano. An ensemble larger than about a dozen players would likely have had a dedicated conductor.

Whether a particular archival collection has large orchestra editions, small orchestra editions, or a combination, depends on the theater that originally purchased the parts.

This starter kit contains as many “large” orchestrations as possible, but for some very useful pieces I could only find the small orchestra parts. As time goes on, I hope to update this starter kit to include “large orchestra” parts for all of the pieces that originally had them.

The *Photoplay Music Starter Kit Catalog* has a column listing the orchestration for each piece as “small” or “large.” Sadly, it sometimes also lists parts I am currently missing from a particular arrangement. Let me know if you find them.

My ensemble, the Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra, is a quintet of piano, violin, cello, clarinet, and trumpet/cornet. I recommend this instrumentation as giving a large, full sound, while being small enough to play chamber style without a conductor, and not too cumbersome for touring and recording.

You are free to build your ensemble using the talent and budget you have available, but it should have at least one violin and a piano.

The *Photoplay Music Starter Kit* pieces

I have chosen the pieces in the *Photoplay Music Starter Kit* to reflect a broad selection of styles, composers, publishers, and moods. Any collection of this kind reflects the taste of the curator, so I make no pretense of impartiality. I included many of the pieces that first got me hooked on this genre, and others that I’ve only discovered recently.

The pieces in this collection were copied from a variety of archives. The originals were often printed on cheap paper, well-used, torn, folded, written on, stored carelessly, and (in some cases) damaged by mold.

Expect to encounter typos from time to time, mislabeled clefs and key signatures, and hard-to-read copy-work. Sometimes I’ve had to assemble these PDF files from several different editions of the same piece in order to get all of the

parts. The S.M. Berg/Belwin pieces, in particular, went through two or three editions over the course of their publication. I had access to large orchestra versions of the early, hastily-copied editions; but only the small orchestra versions of the later, cleaner editions; so the quality of notation varies from part to part.

Since many of these come from working theater music libraries, you'll see player's marks, scribbles, and cuts that were made on the originals before I copied or scanned them. Ignore those or remove them digitally if you have time. Occasionally you'll see handwritten screen cues at the top of the piano or violin part, giving a glimpse into a scene the piece once accompanied, at least in one theater.

I have scanned or converted the pages to black-and-white so that they print cleanly. I've also eliminated duplicate parts, arranged the parts in a consistent order (piano, strings, woodwinds, brass, percussion, harmonium), and where possible, cleaned up stray marks and scribbles where they interfered with reading. Where possible I've also scaled them for printout on standard US letter-sized paper.

I do not use a classification system for my own library, but many of the music directors in the 1920s did. I have created a classification column in the *Photoplay Music Starter Kit Catalog*. Although the terms in that classification system are historical, my assigning of pieces to classes is merely a matter of my opinion. I hope that the classifications will help you focus on pieces that are likely to work for a particular scene, since the entire collection can be a bit daunting at first.

With practice, you can get a good idea of how to use a piece by looking at the piano/conductor part, examining the accompaniment style, and quietly humming the melody to yourself. I encourage you to practice that whenever encountering a new piece. It is a very valuable skill to have when looking through archives.

The Mont Alto quintet has recorded some of the pieces in this starter kit for various film scores, and several appear on our albums *Entreaty* and *Love, Betrayal, and Redemption*. However, others may have never been recorded.

You do not need to refer to how other people recorded these pieces. Interpret them in whatever way you are inspired. All the information you need to play them is on the page.

Some outlier pieces

Most of the pieces were composed specifically for film use. However, every collection of photoplay music I've come across has other kinds of music as well, so I've included some outliers to represent that.

Dance Music. I have included quite a few popular dance pieces, because there are dance sequences in many films, and these pieces work well for other scenes too. For instance, you can use a waltz or a foxtrot as comedy background music or as a light romantic theme. The “one-step” is an early dance form that is played very fast, so use those for ballroom scenes where people are dancing very fast (especially in films from 1910 through 1919), or for comedy chase scenes.

The 1920s were a time when dance music and classical music ensembles were starting to diverge, so some of the dance numbers lack full strings and include saxophone parts. But remember, if people play their cue notes, you do not need all of the instruments for which you have parts in order to perform these pieces.

Operetta/Musical Excerpts. Cinema music libraries contain numerous “selections” or “overtures” from Broadway musicals, operettas, and even grand opera. Though intended as concert pieces, these were also used for film scoring. To represent this category, I’ve included the “selections” from the operetta *The Rainbow Girl*. Each of the sections of the medley is a song from the show, short and melodic, usually with a verse and a chorus; and there are short composed transitions between them. I used a number of excerpts from this arrangement, including some of the transitions, in our score for the film *Gribiche*.

Classical Works. Standard classical pieces arranged for theater orchestra are very common in these libraries—usually there’s a heavy helping of Grieg, Beethoven, and Tchaikovsky re-orchestrated for the variable-sized theater orchestra—but I’ve not included many here, because they are familiar and can be distracting. To represent this genre, I have included two “overtures” by the French composer Gabriel-Marie, *La Forêt Perfide* and *La Rançon de Bonheur*. These overtures were popular for film scoring (these two are called for in several historical cue sheets I’ve come across). They both start as sustained dramatic action pieces, then have very moody lyrical sections in the middle. *La Rançon de Bonheur* has a weird *mysterioso* section I’ve used—by itself—in several scores, including *Beggars of Life*. Think about how you could dissect these longer works for the parts you need in your film, or try using a long excerpt that bridges several sections, aiming to have the mood changes in the piece match mood changes in the film.

Characteristic Suites. A lot of thematic suites were published, containing national anthems, patriotic songs, or folk songs from a particular country. I have included the “Silhouettes” suite by Henry Hadley as an example. It contains six composed movements that are intended to reflect different national characters. So, if you need to introduce a scene change to Italy, Spain, or Egypt; try out the appropriate movement. And if you need more folk songs from a particular country for your movie, look for an appropriate “characteristic suite” in the archives.

Synchronizing Suite. I’ve included one of M.L. Lake’s “synchronizing suites.” He wrote six of these, and J.S. Zamecnik wrote several similar ones (with names like *Theme: Norma*). These never seem to have taken off, but it’s a logical idea—

the first piece contains two musical ideas intended to be “leitmotifs,” and then four variations re-work those musical ideas into different moods for different scenes. The drawback is that each section is fairly short, so you can only score so much film with them. We used various portions of this suite in our score for *The Flying Ace*. The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra has also recorded this suite, on *The Pioneers of Movie Music*.

Tips for practical compilation scoring

First, watch your film in silence. What do you think of it? What are its strengths and weaknesses? Think of what the director intended the film to say. Above all other considerations, aim to support that intention with your choice of music.

Take note of any places that need special musical treatment: dance sequences, parades, musical performances, a scene-change to an exotic location, trumpet fanfares, someone playing a popular song on the piano.

You may be watching the film many times, but most of the audience will only be seeing it once. Can you use music to steer their experience of a scene in a way that will assist their understanding of how it contributes to the arc of the story? Can music help sculpt the storyline to help it make more sense, by using foreshadowing, or by making one scene lighter, or another more serious?

Is there a scene or theme early in the film that is echoed later in the film, and could you effectively use the same music both times to help make the parallel stand out?

Try out pieces for each scene. Like the choice of music, the scene divisions are part of your creative process, and the final decision is with you. Use fade-outs, scene changes, and titles that indicate a new “chapter” to determine how to divide the film into scenes. Any major change in mood, even within a single shot, is a logical place to start a new piece.

Don’t over think. There will always be more than one piece that suits any scene. When you’ve found a piece that works, write it down and move on.

Character themes and “film” themes. It is tempting to assign a particular piece to each character in the film. Some of the manuals on film compilation (like Erno Rapée’s *Encyclopedia of Music for Pictures*) see Wagnerian “leitmotif” scoring, with one theme per character, as an ideal. But I’ve had mixed luck trying it in practice. Character themes in compilation scores rarely track the emotional arc of a character well: when a character is happy and playful they need different music from when they are moody and depressed. I’ve learned that it is usually better to score to the mood of a scene than to use music to catalog who is on screen.

However, I do find having a love theme or “film theme” useful. Look for a piece that represents the tone of the film well, and try it as title music, maybe also as ending music, and for key scenes across the duration of the story.

Don’t judge a piece by its title. The titles of these pieces are evocative, but don’t let them mislead you or restrict you. A piece called *Storm Music* doesn’t have to be used for storms; it can also be useful for battles, fires, fights, or chases. No one in the audience will know that it’s called *Storm Music*.

Occasionally a piece may be poorly titled: for instance one of the pieces in this kit, *The Furious Mob*, starts like a typical battle agitato, but has a perky, cheerful strain running through most of it. It’s great piece, and particularly useful for a playful fight scene, for instance, the sort of stunt-filled swashbuckling romps you get in a Douglas Fairbanks film. But I’d pick something else for a movie that actually has a “furious mob” in it.

Use the same pieces several times. Feel free to repeat pieces through the score, within reason. In the days before photocopiers it was tough to repeat a piece in a film score, unless you bought more than one copy of each piece. But it is actually quite common in historic cue sheets to have recurring themes, and it certainly helps the musicians. Erno Rapée even gave pre-photocopier methods for repeating musical themes in his *Encyclopedia of Music for Pictures*.

If you put the same misterioso in a score three times, it becomes familiar much more quickly than if you use three different misteriosos. Recurring pieces also help give the score some unity, and you can save the other misteriosos for other films.

In fact, when I’ve finished a score, I look through it for pieces that I’ve only used once. Would it make sense to replace that piece with a similar one I’ve used elsewhere in the score?

Make the cues long. Scores that change pieces every 30 seconds are harder to listen to, and certainly harder to perform, than scores where the pieces can stretch out and last for several minutes. If the film allows it, play each piece for quite a while. Many of the pieces in this collection change mood part-way through, and it is often possible to time them so that the mood change falls at the right spot in the film, allowing one piece to cover several distinct scenes.

Don’t make the cues too long. Because of the intended use of these pieces, the arrangers often included hints about how to make them longer or shorter. There’s often an optional D.C. or D.S. printed near the end in case you need to go through some or all of the piece a second time. Several of the pieces have optional “cuts” indicated so that you have easy ways to shorten them. I find that if you’ve played a piece twice through and still need more music to fill the scene, you should probably pick a longer piece, or divide your scene into smaller parts.

Use silence. Silence itself is a useful musical tool. It can be used for dramatic effect (after a gun shot or a death, or after an ill-considered kiss is suddenly broken off); or for comic effect (such as when a character is making a speech that is going flat with an audience, and you want to emphasize the awkwardness).

Transitions between cues. The most difficult part of performing a compiled silent film score is the transitions between scenes. You need to end a piece, check the film to see you're in the right place, and have the tempo of the new piece in your mind as you start it. In recordings of our live performances, the transitions are usually the roughest part.

If you leave no space between cues, it's hard to make page turns, and easy to get "behind" the film and not be able to catch up, which is stressful. On the other hand, large gaps of silence in the score are noticeable to the audience and will start them thinking that something has gone wrong.

I have tried, without much success, to figure out what historic silent film orchestras did between the "scored" pieces. It seems to have varied by theater, and I expect local audiences quickly got accustomed to, and accepted, how the local musicians handled this.

With the Mont Alto quintet, because I am comfortable improvising on piano in a classical style, I often leave some sections of the film for piano improvisation. I intentionally score some of the orchestra pieces "short," then fill the gaps with improvisations, usually repeating themes from the piece we've just finished playing. This gives the score some breathability, so that we can get back in sync with the film if we played a piece too slowly.

But I am not aware of any evidence for or against the use of this particular technique by historic silent film orchestras.

Not every piece needs a screen cue. I sometimes find it useful to use "Segue" as a cue. That means finish playing one piece, bring it to a close; then start the next as soon as everyone is ready, without bothering to check in with the film.

Creating the cue sheet. This should be a numbered list of screen cues, each followed by musical instructions.

The screen cues can be either an action or title card text that indicates when to start playing the piece. Try to make the cues clear and unique: it will come back to haunt you if you write "Boy waves" and then in rehearsal you find that he's waving a lot and you don't remember which wave you meant.

Below the screen cue, write the name of the piece you've selected, and what the "road map" will be: where to start, whether each repeat is to be taken or skipped, are there any cuts or added repeats, and where to stop.

Historic cue sheets (see Appendix I) do not give road maps, only a rough duration in minutes. Projection speed and performance speeds would vary from theater to theater, so specific directions probably would not have worked well everywhere. But you can usually make a piece fit the scene better by making some edits.

As an example, here are the first six cues from my score for Douglas Fairbanks' *Robin Hood*. Cues in quote marks show the text from a title card, and cues without quotes are an on-screen action to watch for.

Robin Hood

1. "Douglas Fairbanks in Robin Hood"

Three Irish Pictures No. 1. Start at top. At double bar after bar 28, cut to following double bar. Play eight bars, cut 32 bars, stop downbeat of last bar before D.S. Add a rall. in last two bars.

2. "Stately castles..."

Solemn Scenes from Nature. Start at top. Cut from (A) to the grandioso eight before (B). Play to the end.

3. "Richard of the Lion Heart..."

Mardi Gras. Once through as written.

4. "The other contender..."

Three Irish Pictures No. 3. Start at the top, end at the key change. Piano fill.

5. Trumpets being blown

Short fanfare as arranged, then segue

6. Segue.

Three Irish Pictures No. 1. Play the pickup note, then cut 18 bars. Play to D.S., move the segno to 8 bars before the coda jump, and take the coda. Cut the last two bars of coda.

Managing long films. If the film is long and the performance won't allow an intermission, consider scoring some scenes with reduced instrumentation to give the others a break. For instance, for one emotional scene in *Ramona* (1928) I use a piano-cello duet. Not only did it work well for the scene, but it also let the violin, clarinet, and trumpet rest and get ready for the massacre music in the following scene. Or, even plan a section of the film for the pianist to improvise for five minutes while everyone else stretches their fingers and hydrates.

Using modern scoring tools. I do not use click tracks or most other modern movie scoring tools, because I don't find them very useful (or very fun) in live performance. Compiled scores do not usually track the film so closely that you need to match musical "hits" to on-screen actions. In fact, many of the early instruction manuals on film scoring recommend that you avoid using sound effects or scoring closely to the action: it becomes distracting, and draws inappropriate attention if you get it wrong.

However, several modern tools that were not available in 1920 have become important in my workflow.

My photocopier, printer, and scanner allow me to make and keep dedicated parts for each film, instead of using my originals and re-filing them after each film like the original orchestra leaders did.

I find digital audio workstation software very useful for working out film scores. By recording a rough MIDI performance from a keyboard that tracks the film, you can quickly see how much of each piece you need. If the piece doesn't fit, count exactly how many bars off it is, and add a repeat or make a cut of the appropriate number of bars, and try it again until it fits.

When the score is complete, you can convert the MIDI data to audio, sync it to the video, and you'll have a movie file with a draft piano reduction score as a reference that you can share with your musicians.

Making parts. When your cue sheet is done, print, copy, or assemble a set of PDF files for each of your musicians. Mark them up, or assign your musicians the job of marking them according to the cue sheet, before the first rehearsal. Some of Mont Alto's musicians prefer paper scores, others have moved to using electronic tablets with a page-turning foot pedal.

I use "tabloid" 11x17 binders that allow me to create a paper piano score with four pages per spread, which greatly reduces the number of page turns needed.

When creating parts, if a piece starts in the middle, make sure not to lose important information from the top of the page: time signatures, key signatures, tempo indications, and what transposition the clarinet and trumpet use.

Rehearsing tips

In rehearsal, start by reading each piece, fixing note-doubling problems, deciding who plays cue notes for missing instruments, making sure road-maps are marked correctly, and getting used to the tempos. As your ensemble plays more films, the players will get better at guessing correctly which cue notes they need to play, and this will go more smoothly.

Then play each piece along with its scene.

Expect that during the first rehearsal you may adjust the road maps for some pieces to make them longer or shorter once you figure out how fast the ensemble likes to play them. From experience, I know it's more reliable to let the piece go at the natural speed that the ensemble "feels" it should go, than to try to get

them to play faster or slower to match how you envisioned it when scoring the film.

Then it is *very* important, as soon as possible, to switch to playing to the film without stopping.

I cannot emphasize enough how important this is. The movie will not wait for you, and you need to get used to that early on. And you won't know how long you've got between pieces, or whether your tempos are really correct, until you're playing the whole film.

An orchestra in the 1920s had the luxury of playing the same score for a week, so opening night served as a kind of dress-rehearsal and the pacing would get better as the week went on. Today, silent film screenings are much more likely to be one-time events, or only repeated weeks or years apart. The more you've played the score in "real time," the more smoothly your first performance will go.

We keep a stack of sticky notes handy during these "straight run-throughs," so that musicians can flag problem spots without stopping. Then when we're done, we look back and address the problem represented by each sticky note.

Performance tips

On long films, remind the musicians to pace themselves. If you've got a battle scene coming up, the trumpet player can skip playing horn cues and rest up a bit, saving their chops for the noisy stuff.

I like the vibe of playing to actual film when possible, but that introduces some risks. Film projectors can vary in speed from each other, and from a digital video transfer of the same film. If possible, rehearse to the film (or a portion of it) in the actual theater, with the actual projectors, ahead of time so that you know whether projection speed will be a problem.

We've also learned the hard way that even digital video doesn't necessarily solve film-speed problems: be sure that you are scoring and performing to the same video that will be used for projection.

We have had experiences where a film was run at the wrong speed, and we have played to films where a scene that was in the video we practiced to was missing from the film print. Once, some of the reels of the film were projected out of order.

If this happens, stay calm, and make changes on the fly as necessary. Whisper instructions to the ensemble about which cue to jump to, or which repeats to skip. The audience is distracted. You'll be fine. And you'll have a story.

How to get more music

This collection has a lot of music, but if you continue scoring silent films, you will want to increase the size of your collection. You don't want to keep using the same pieces over in each film.

Also, you may find yourself asked to score a film that requires special music: a film set in Arabia, or Spain, or among Native Americans, or a film based on an operetta where you want to play music from the original score. There were a lot of pieces published in these sub-genres, but I've put very little of this "characteristic" kind of music in this starter kit. So for that kind of project, you'll need to look elsewhere for enough appropriate music.

Some archives of silent film music are becoming available online, and others allow you to order scans of photoplay music for a fee.

The number of pieces originally published in this repertoire is unknown, but I estimate that it must be at least 10,000 pieces. I've been at this for 25 years, and every new cue sheet or archive I come across contains pieces I've never seen before. You're not going to exhaust the repertoire.

Many popular classical works were issued in theater orchestra arrangements, with cue notes to make them accessible to the variable orchestra. So, if you know a classical piece you'd like to use, even it was originally a piano solo, see if a theater orchestration exists. I would avoid really familiar works, unless used ironically in a comedy, because they can "pull" the audience out of the film. If you play Wagner's "The Ride of the Valkyries" it may hijack your audience's brain to *Apocalypse Now* or *What's Opera, Doc?*, and the current film has been upstaged.

Take note of composers you like. Search for more pieces by them. If you hear a great piece in someone else's compiled score, ask for the title. Heck, ask for a copy or a scan of it, and add it to your library.

Look for historic collections at local archives: museums, university music libraries, and so on. Be friendly with the archivists. They are protective of their delicate originals, but they also want the collections to be used. Let them know about your performances, and give them credit when you make use of their collections.

The internet is a wild and disorganized place, so it can take a little digging, and a lot of the available music is in incomplete orchestrations, or sometimes just the piano/conductor score. But the availability of on-line archives means that you can expand your collection more easily now than at any time since 1930.

My website, www.mont-alto.com, has a growing list of archives in the "About Photoplay Music" page.

The *Silent Film Sound and Music Archive* (sfsma.org) has, as its mission, making silent film music available online. The collection is large and wide-ranging, so it helps to know what you are looking for. They have a lot of piano solo material and variously-sized orchestral pieces: download the pieces that match your ensemble's orchestration, and add them to your library. The sfsma.org site is also a good source for historic cue sheets for films (see Appendix I).

The University of North Texas has the "UNT Digital Library." The collection called "Silent Film Music Collection" has large orchestrations of over 300 photoplay music pieces, though they need to be downloaded page by page.

The University of Colorado at Boulder has many collections of orchestrated photoplay music, including the Layton, Swain, LaVigne, Hank Troy, and Grauman Theatre collections. Most of the pieces in this starter kit come from CU Boulder's collections. The Layton Collection is a particularly strong collection of small orchestrations, and is where I got my start compiling film scores.

Other photoplay music collections are at UCLA, George Eastman Museum, the National Library of Australia, the Library of Congress, the University of Illinois, the University of Pittsburgh, the Chicago Public Library (which has the vast library from the Balaban & Katz theater chain), and the University of Kansas at Lawrence.

Good luck, and do tell me what you've accomplished!

Appendix I: Historical Cue Sheets

Many silent feature films were released with a "cue sheet" that lists the scenes in the film and suggests an appropriate piece of music for each. In some theaters, the print of the film would arrive on opening night from its previous engagement, so a cue sheet allowed a musical director to create a score before the film was even available to be viewed.

Here is the first page of the cue sheet from the 1928 film *Beggars of Life*. Note that a musician penciled in alternate pieces for cues 4 and 5 at some point. When I scored this film, I couldn't find those pieces either, and made my own substitutions.

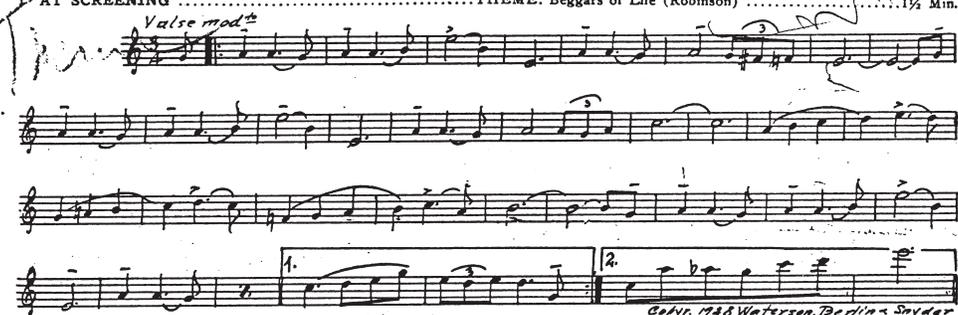


ADOLPH ZUKOR and JESSE L. LASKY
 present
“BEGGARS OF LIFE”
 with
WALLACE BEERY
 Richard Arlen and Louise Brooks
 A William A. Wellman Production
 Story by Jim Tully
 Adapted and Supervised by Benjamin Glazer
 B. P. Schulberg, Associate Producer
 Footage 7504 feet

A Paramount Picture

1 AT SCREENING THEME: *Beggars of Life* (Robinson) 1 1/4 Min.

Valse mod^{to}



2 (Action) BOY KNOCKS AT DOOR OF FARMHOUSE... *Conspiration* (Fosse) 1/4 Min.

mod^{to} mist.



3 (Action) BOY KNOCKS DISH ON FLOOR *Bientot Libre* (Gabriel Marie) 3 Min.

Con fuoco man non troppo



4 (Title) YOU AIN'T FIGURIN' ON STAYIN' HERE... *Affolement* (Andrieu) 3/4 Min.

All^o Agitato



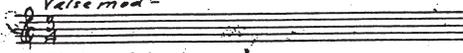
5 (Action) FREIGHT STARTS AGAIN *Ou Hur* (Gabriel Marie) 1 1/4 Min.

Agitato



6 (Action) NOTE: Imitate freight train effects. BOY OPENS HANDKERCHIEF AND PRODUCES FOOD Repeat Theme No. 1 1 Min.

Valse mod^{to}



NOTE: Play refrain only, expressive.

Thematic

D Brakeman appears

It appears that the cue sheet compilers worked for music publishers, not the film production companies. So cue sheets tend to be rich in recent pieces from that publisher, or pieces composed by the cue sheet compiler himself (looking at you, James Bradford).

If you can find the cue sheet for your film, look it over. I find them helpful, especially when they call attention to pieces of music I haven't come across before,

because then I know what to look for in the archives. And often the cue sheet compiler makes excellent suggestions.

Some feel that the cue sheet should be regarded as the “official” or “original” score. I don’t agree with that. It is clear that many, probably most, musicians did not use them; and even the cue sheet compilers said that it was fine to substitute different pieces. I believe that the compilation of a film score is an important creative part of silent film accompaniment, and is rightly the purview of the theater’s musical director.

Don’t feel an obligation to follow the cue sheet rigidly, or even to use the same scene change points.

And sometimes the suggestions are terrible.

A silent film has no definitive score. That’s what makes it a silent film. Any accompaniment is valid, though some scores may be better than others. The compilation score is your creation, so enjoy the opportunity to explore and find the best piece of music you can for each scene.

Appendix II: Copyright

I am not a copyright lawyer, so obtain better advice if you need to rely on it.

Your new compilation scores are copyrightable, even if they are made of public domain material. Others cannot make use of your compilation scores without your permission.

In the United States, these pieces were published as “works for hire.” Until 1978, this meant that their copyright lasted for 28 years, unless it was renewed. If renewed, copyright was extended to 95 years.

So, in the year of this writing, 2020, all pieces published in 1924 and earlier are in the public domain. Next year, the pieces from 1925 will become available, and so on, unless the law changes.

Pieces published after that year may still be under copyright.

Since it was possible to renew the copyright a year early, you’ll need to check the edition of the *Catalog of Copyright Entries (Renewal Registrations: Music)* for 27 and 28 years after the piece’s original copyright date. For instance, for a piece published in 1926, look in the 1953 and 1954 editions.

The *Catalog of Copyright Entries* is found in most university libraries, and can be found online as scanned PDF files. Each year has two volumes, so check both volumes.

If a piece is listed, it was renewed, and is still under copyright. If not, you can use that piece however you like.

Even if it is under copyright, there is a “fair use” exception, so you can still use these pieces if you and your lawyer determine that your intended use falls under “fair use.”

In addition, the piece had to have a copyright notice to be protected. If you come across a piece with no copyright notice, it’s in the public domain.

In countries other than the United States, the law is entirely different.

It is common for works to go in the public domain a certain number of years after the composer’s death (for instance, 50 years in Canada, or 70 in the European Union). Composers who died in the 1920s (like Gaston Borch and Irénée Bergé) are fair game under these copyright laws; but a surprising number of photoplay, ragtime, and jazz composers lived long lives, and their work is still copyrighted in countries with these copyright laws.

Since some photoplay music composers were obscure, or worked under pseudonyms, or composed in groups of two or three, death dates can be tricky to establish. The *Catalog of Copyright Entries (Renewal Registrations: Music)* can be useful to disentangle pseudonyms, since renewals were done under the composer’s real name.

Appendix III: Other resources

Visit the *About Photoplay Music* page at www.mont-alto.com for more links and sources. I have also posted my biographies of a few composers there.

The best book I know of about photoplay music is *Silent Film Sound*, by Rick Altman, 2004. Note that Altman covers a lot of accompaniment practices over the entire duration of the silent film era. Compiled orchestra scores like those described here are covered in Part VI, “The Golden Age of Silent Film Music.”

There are not many recordings of photoplay music.

My chamber quintet, the Mont Alto Motion Picture Orchestra, has two recent CD recordings, *Entreaty and Love, Betrayal and Redemption*; as well as older recordings *Cinema: Silent Film Music* by J.S. Zamecnik and *Cinema 2: Destiny*.

The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra has recorded *The Pioneers of Movie Music*, using varying instrumentation from track to track, but some of the tracks give an idea of what the “small” and “large” orchestrations sound like.

Some silent film music by Victor Herbert and Jerome Kern was recorded by full orchestra on *Our Musical Past Volume 2*, published by the Library of Congress.

To know what orchestras sounded like at the height of the silent era, listen to late silent films that were released with recorded scores in the early talkie era. I recommend *When a Man Loves, Seventh Heaven*, and *Sunrise*. The score on the recent BluRay release of *Wings* is the original J.S. Zamecnik part-composed, part-compiled score, but recorded by a modern Hollywood orchestra. (Zamecnik's *Battle Music* and *Storm Music*, which are included in this starter kit, can be heard in that score.)

And there are many home-video releases of silent films with compiled-score music. Some of Mont Alto's recent releases are *Blackmail*, *Beggars of Life*, *Children of Divorce*, *L'Argent*, *Filibus: the Mysterious Air Pirate*, and the new Cohen restoration of Buster Keaton's *Go West*. Mont Alto's self-released DVDs *The Mark of Zorro* and *The General* include a "live cue sheet" option: if you turn on "subtitles" on your DVD player, the title and composer of each piece appear as it starts.

Also, on the "Recordings" page of our website, I have posted cue sheets for a number of the silent films released with our scores. Feel free to contact me about pieces you are interested in from our recordings, or for cue sheets for our recorded movie scores.

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