

## Unheard music Notes on silent music moments

Stephan Ahrens (Berlin, Germany)

### I

From today's perspective, John M. Stahl's choice to make a melody the key to his film *Memory Lane* (1926) seems rather odd. *Memory Lane* is a silent movie and for us, the audience, the ballad sung in the film is inaudible. Nevertheless, the affective impact of the song catches us like the female protagonist who, seduced by nostalgia, elopes with on her own wedding day with her childhood sweetheart.

The festival *Le Giornate del cinema muto* offers a wide range of musical accompaniment to silent films. We are able to experience different ways of creating an atmosphere, of changing the mood of a scene, through the deployment of a different key or narrative developments. Music is the basis of the exhibition of a silent film. In this essay I will focus on those moments in a silent film which depict the performance of a piece of music, a performance from which we are cut off. We witness actors opening their mouths wide, a greedy captain playing surprisingly the violin or an organ during a wedding. In these moments, it is impossible to speak about music as merely a backdrop. In the course of the festival, one could explore a great variety of filmic music performances and different ways to close the split between the encounter of music in the film and the experience of a silent movie in a theater. It is an ambivalent place the music occupies in these moments. It is as if the music is generated by the films but it is obvious that the music is outside the visual universe of a film.

### II

The title of Stahl's film is the very title of a song: *Memory Lane*. On the night before her wedding, Mary meets Joe, an old friend and childhood flame. They walk past places in the small town where they used to play and fell in love. While they are going down memory lane, a group of young men start singing *When You Were Sweet Sixteen*. They are shown with instruments and the intertitles present some of the verses. Then, the group sings *Memory Lane* and we read the lyrics: "Though my dreams are in vain, my love will remain. / Strolling again, memory lane with you." The words give rise to the supposition that the sound is also sentimental. Mary and Joe can't evade the sentimental effect of the song and she doubts that the man she is to marry is 'right' for her. As saccharine as this scene may sound, Stahl creates a touching episode through the use of this song. The American pianist Donald Sosin transferred the affective impact of the song into the theatre. He sang the lines of *When You Were Sweet Sixteen* with a sad, cracked voice and performed *Memory Lane*<sup>1</sup> parallel to the musicians on-screen. The music conjures up a melancholic feeling of an irretrievable past. The live performed music in the theater is in company with the film. The backing performance of an on-screen performance is an approach to harmony. But Sosin approaches a vanishing point. We can't ignore the break between the silent screen and the live music, the mute images of the singing boys and Sosin's voice.

### III

---

<sup>1</sup> Both songs are still available on record, even in vintage performances. *When You Were Sweet Sixteen* was written by James Thornton in 1898. *Memory Lane* was written by Buddy De Sylva, Larry Spier and Con Conrad in 1923.

Harmony tends to be the norm in music accompaniment creating one universe or one illusion. Martin Justice's *Melodie* (1929) and *Les rameaux. Hosanna! (de Faure)* (1909) by Gaumont are such examples. These films were distributed with a sound shellac disc. *Les rameaux. Hosannah!* depicts Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In the left corner a man with a long beard faces the camera and opens his mouth while in the background people are welcoming Jesus on a mule. The man moves his mouth parallel to the hymn *Hosanna* from Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem in D minor*. The film was distributed with a corresponding disk with a prerecorded performance. In the course of the scene the audience mutates into listener-spectators. Despite the presence of Jesus riding a mule, it is the singer in the foreground who is the center of attention. It seems as if the bond between the image and the parallel off-screen music is much more fascinating to us than the divine. One of the reasons why we are so intrigued by the singer is his position in the image. He addresses the audience. Another reason we can find is the ambivalent position of the actor in the scene. He is inside and outside, he neither belongs to the fictive scene nor to the world of the audience. He is dressed like the other actors playing citizens of Jerusalem. In contrast to them he is not waving palms which give the film its title and he does not look at Jesus but he narrates the scene with the hymn and invites the audience to share the experience:

Join all and sing, His name declare,  
Let every voice resound with acclamation.  
Hosanna! Praised be the Lord!  
Bless Him whom cometh to bring us salvation!<sup>2</sup>

While the singing group of boys in *Memory Lane* is part of the world of Mary and Joe, the actor/musician in *Les rameaux* performs a song which is not part of the world of the citizens of Jerusalem. He performs a chant for the intrigued audience. At the same time the singer is an on-screen character and we know that the tune is added from the outside. We even hear that it is an old performance being mono and cracking. He imitates a singer and he opens his mouth fruitlessly. *Les rameaux* makes great efforts to close the gap between screen and sound. There is still a risk of silence. At the festival the film was shown two times: a silent 35mm print and a DCP with a digital recording of the original shellac disc. Musical performance in a silent movie is always an invitation to match a pitch - a mute pitch.

#### IV

Every music accompaniment wakes emotions in an overwhelming way. Overwhelming like the pianist in *Gontran et la voisine inconnue* (1913). Gontran sits at a piano focusing on a sheet of music. He moves his fingers slowly. Although we can't hear his performance, it is obvious that it is dreadful. One finger jumps up and down on one key. His fiancée covers her ears and she finally drags him from the piano and leaves him. Without informing Gontran, she moves into the house next door which is separated from Gontran's house by a wall. Obviously, she is a great pianist. She plays smoothly and by heart. Hearing her performance through the window Gontran is captivated. He falls in love with the supposed unknown woman. One can say that *Gontran et la voisine inconnue* is a mirror of the silent film exhibition. While he can only hear his mysterious neighbor, the audience is not able to hear the performance and can only see the woman. He uses big gestures to show that he is moved by the sound. In order to create harmony between screen and music, the music accompaniment has to be clumsy for Gontran's performance and appealing while we see his fiancée playing. This bridge is important for the understanding of the film because we are

---

<sup>2</sup> Peuples, chantez, chantez en chœur / Que votre voix à notre voix réponde: Hosanna ! / Gloire au Seigneur ! / Béni Celui qui vient sauver le monde !

confronted with two moments where the protagonists can't stop listening. His fiancée is forced to listen to his performance and he listens to her performance involuntarily. *Gontran et la voisine inconnue* sketches the force of music: We can't close our ears, the music enters our body directly. Don't we also experience this unintentional process of listening in a theater watching a silent movie with music accompaniment? The scene with Mary and Joe in *Memory Lane* is touching because the musician in the theater reproduces the song being referred to in the movie. We become sentimental like the protagonists listening to the music of *Memory Lane*. The musicians can transform the theater into a hall for resonances. The German movie *The Ancient Law* presents life in a German Shtetl. Seeing the villagers celebrating Purim in the traditional way with ratchets, we generated that sound with ratchets. Do we become a part of the universe of the film? With the ratchets in our hand we banish the silence. At the same time the audience can decide to bring silence back to the theater - and to the movie.

## V

The overwhelming power of music can be dangerous and unpleasant. In Louis Feuillade's *La Vengeance du sergent de ville* (1913) a young couple is being tortured by their trombone playing neighbor. The director visualized the deafening effect of his performance by shaking the whole set. Every time the neighbor starts playing the young woman has to guard the dishes from falling from the cupboard. In the theater, a musician plays the trombone. There is no way out. They can't live in the apartment just as we couldn't enjoy a silent film with bad music accompaniment.

A greedy sailor tries to seduce the female protagonist by playing the violin in *Captain Salvation* (1927). Even without sound, his performance displays his abusive personality. He forced her into his cabin. She is cowed by his behavior but she holds out. Suddenly he plays the violin (we have never thought of him as a musician before). It is obvious that director John Robertson chose the musical performance in order to display the violent come-on in the most poignant way possible. These films warn us of the inescapable effect of music and we should heed the warning. They display the mesmerizing effects of sound which can be found in 1930s fascist and war propaganda as well.

Hotei Nomura gives his film *Tokyo Ondo* (1932) the title of a popular song. The melodramatic dramaturgy of the film culminates in a dance to the circling and soothing song. The film tells the story of a boy and a girl, a relationship which is forbidden by their parents because of their social differences. Throughout the film the melody of *Tokyo Ondo* is played fragmentarily and in different variations. It is a silent movie which was post-synchronized after the shooting (a *saundo-ban*). Image and sound are one whole composition of the year 1932. The historic context becomes chillingly obvious when the father talks about his business in Manchukuo, a Chinese puppet state under the control of Imperial Japan. The film from Shochiku studio addresses the contradictions of Japanese society but dissolves them in a final mass dance scene. *Tokyo Ondo* demands a fixed choreography with no touching. The song celebrates Tokyo as a center for happiness and harmony: "Dreams spread / Bearing on the longing of Japanese culture / from the sky / and the port / today." In the synergy of music and image the film creates a restricted harmony. Comparing *Tokyo Ondo* to *Memory Lane* we see the boldness of a silent movie performance. The harmony is always fragile and is not forced upon us. The *saundo-ban* can be like a neighbor playing the trombone. In *Tokyo Ondo*, there is no way out, no melancholic vanishing point, more a feeling of totality than harmony. The music is inevitably audible.