



FILM music nowadays is music written for the cinema and emanating from the sound track. But there was a time, not long ago, when it was music played by an orchestra in the theatre. To have shared this experience you had to be born at least 40 years ago. The best days of the silent film did not cover more than about 10 years; but they were lively years, and in New Zealand they supplied an interesting chapter of musical history.

The subject was raised in this office when a catalogue of film music, much worn and a little tattered, was discovered unexpectedly. At first it could not be taken seriously. The "Hints for Screen Directors" had a slightly comic flavour. Among the pieces suitable for concluding there were, for instance, "At Thy Side," "My Girl" and "Will You Forgive?" But older members of the staff began to show signs of nostalgia. It had not been as funny as it sounded, they said. And enquiries soon showed that music-making for the silent films had been a large and serious undertaking.

Each city in New Zealand used to have cinema orchestras and some of them became local showpieces. There were, for instance, the orchestras at Everybody's and the Crystal Palace in Christchurch, and at the De Luxe and the King's in Wellington. In charge of each of these orchestras was a musician with the title of Musical Director. When sound came along the Musical Directors all lost their jobs. Many of them took up music-making in another form, others entered new fields. In Wellington we recently talked to two of the leading Musical Directors of the twenties, L. D. Austin, who conducted the orchestra at the De Luxe, and Archie Jerome, who conducted at the King's.

Mr. Austin started his association with cinema music in Australia, and his arrival in New Zealand he puts down to an accident. He was playing the piano for an out-of-doors cinema at Manly, near Sydney, when, during the performance, a southerly buster blew up and the music disappeared into the air. The orchestra stopped playing, but not so the piano, for here Mr. Austin's gift for improvisation came to the fore, and he managed to keep going on his own. This incident led to an offer of an appointment in New Zealand—as pianist in what was advertised as "A Grand Symphony Orchestra," consisting of cornet, violin and piano which played in the old skating rink at Vivian Street. Here on crowded nights the screen was

placed in the middle of the rink, and patrons sat both sides, those on the wrong side holding up mirrors to the screen to reverse the image. His career in cinema playing reached its peak when he was appointed Musical Director of the De Luxe Theatre, now the Embassy, which opened in Wellington in 1924.

"Its acoustics were simply wonderful," said Mr. Austin. "You'd have sworn there was an orchestra of 30 or 40. The cinema opened with a performance of *The Ten Commandments*. The film company had sent out a score of their own which I had decided not to use, substituting my own specially-prepared score. Just before the opening night two Americans arrived at the theatre and insisted that the company's music be played. 'There'll be no show if you don't play our score,' was their ultimatum. I had no alternative but to play their music, but I refused to rehearse it. I had perfect confidence in my players and told them we would play it at sight at the opening performance. The Americans didn't know what to say. Crowds of people attended the opening. It was a difficult evening, but the music went through without a hitch and you'd have sworn we'd rehearsed it. At the end we played the march from Wagner's *Tannhauser*, and when we'd finished we found the audience still sitting in their seats demanding an encore. The film ran six weeks, but in two weeks I'd gradually substituted the original music and cut out the American score. Nobody ever knew."

Mr. Austin's orchestra reached a point where they knew instinctively what was wanted, and along with many Musical Directors he raised the art of silent film music to a high level. "I once played the whole of Wagner's 'Siegfried Idyll,'" he said, "and was able to time it each night to a second. It took exactly 20 minutes, and I never had to spoil it." Certain scenes still remained in his memory. There was the one in Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* where the girls are invited to supper and nobody arrives. "As he entertained himself with a little dance with his fingers I played the foxtrot out of Rudolf Friml's comedy 'I Was Only Dreaming,'" said Mr. Austin. "It might have been written for it. We were never stuck for the right music, we played all kinds, but we never used jazz."

Mr. Jerome spoke enthusiastically of his work at the King's, and remembered many fine musicians who had played with him. He told us how he used to synchronise the film with the music. "I

usually had a preview of the film the day before," he said, "and would make a note of the sequences. If there was no preview then I would work from the synopsis. It's safe to say I was never stuck, and I would always use my imagination. I was lucky to have a feeling for the mood of the film, and always tried to fit film and music together properly. The first evening was always the heaviest. Then I got so used to it it was no trouble at all to me—just like falling off a log. I always regarded it as a compliment when people told me that during the film they hadn't noticed the music." Mr. Jerome also used to run a film library, which contained "anything a man could wish to see on a screen."

We discovered as well an orchestral player—a former member of the celebrated orchestra at Everybody's in Christchurch, Mrs. Frank Drewitt, of Wellington. "People used to go to Everybody's just to hear the music," she said. "The Overture and Entr'acte were the highlights. The first night was

always a bit of a picnic, as you could easily make a mess of it, but it was a good job and we enjoyed it."

The cinema pianist has often had cruel words flung at him—there was the man who, at the end of a film, as the heroine was preparing for a watery grave, shouted: "Take the pianist with you while you're about it." No such experience marred the working life of Mrs. Doreen Turton, a pianist who played at Everybody's in the afternoons. Each Monday she used to arrive at the cinema and sort her music out into various piles—light, serious, dance and "padding," with a separate pile for current hits such as "The Whispering Baritone." Her eyes on the screen, she synchronised her music, in difficult moments striking a chord with her left hand while her right hand groped for the music. From books of theme music came galloping horses, trains, storms (with plenty of rumbles in the left hand), and in long death scenes she would play "Valse Triste"—over and over again.

When the orchestras went the audiences missed the brilliance of real sound. They missed the tuning of the orchestra and the arrival of the Musical Director. A gramophone record was no substitute for a live "Merry Wives of Windsor," and travelogues, two-reel comedies and gazettes were never the same. Gone for ever was the lushness of muted G strings as the hero embraced the heroine, the pizzicato of the bass as the villain stealthily entered the sanctuary. Storms dwindled in size without flashing chromatic scales from the orchestra, and there was nothing stirring about walking out of the cinema to a record.

"I think honestly that since those days the cinema has declined artistically," concluded Mr. Austin. "I don't think it is on the same plane as it used to be. . . In those days one could use one's imagination."



THEDA BARA—SILENT SCREEN STAR
"At Thy Side," "My Girl," or "Will You Forgive?"