

Music: The Language of The Artist

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Full Text:

The silent movie is an emotional cinema, it's sensorial; the fact that you don't go through a text brings you back to a basic way of telling a story that only works on the feelings you have created. It's a fascinating way to work ... I'm interested in the stylization of reality, the possibility of playing with codes. That's how this idea of a film set in Hollywood of the late '20s and early '30s, in black and white, was formed.

MICHEL HAZANAVICIUS



writer and director of *The Artist*

I will confess that I did not rush out to see *The Artist*. This despite the tsunami of critical raves for it, including the trusted, vigilantly acerbic Anthony Lane in the *New Yorker*. I will further confess that, when it comes to the cinema, my brow level is not that high. Even a casual "oh, it's okay" will usually be enough excuse to send me to an evening at the movies. But where my defences go up, way up, is for anything antique, especially the world of silent films. I can't take seriously the slightly speeded up herky-jerky rhythm of the silents, and the overstated facial and body gestures so necessary to telling the story. It's my failing, I admit it, especially when it comes to the great

classics like D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* or Abel Gance's *Napoléon* or the master comedic genius Charlie Chaplin, let alone the more conventional fare of the silent era. Still, I did go see *The Artist*, prodded by a friend who's a movie nut, and by QQ editor Boris Castel. The verdict? It won me over, completely.

Before I say why I loved *The Artist*, let me try to explain the obvious inconsistency of someone who loves classical music (that's me) having so much difficulty with the conventions of silent film. What can be more antique than classical music? True enough, but most of us hear classical music performed live in the concert hall or in beautifully recorded and reproduced sound. For the sheer pleasure of it, I would much rather hear Pavarotti sing *Che gelida manina* in rich Decca stereo than the tinny, scratchy recording of the great Caruso from 1910. Similarly, I have some, some, affection for the harpsichord, but I would rather hear Bach's *Goldberg Variations* played on a modern Hamburg Steinway any day. Most music lovers, except the early music die-hards, would agree.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

FOR those of you who haven't seen *The Artist*, it's not just about black-and-white silent movies. It *is* a black-and-white silent movie, written and directed by a 44-year-old French filmmaker, Michel Hazanavicius. As Anthony Lane wrote in his review, "*The Artist* will cleave--far more loyally than Mel Brooks' *Silent Movie* (1976) did--to the rules of the game, supplying not just printed titles, but a breathless musical score, unblushing melodrama, a bouquet of sight gags, a girl with a kiss curl, and a corpulent cop." And an Asta-like wire-haired fox terrier who almost steals the movie. It's a simple story: a silent era mega-star, George Valentin (Jean Dujardin), rules Hollywood in the late 1920s, just as the silents are about to give way to the "talkies." Valentin refuses to adapt to the coming of sound, and so, with the demise of silent films and the onset of the Great Depression, he loses everything. He is rescued in the end by the love of a talkie star, Peppy Miller (Bérénice Bejo), and the two of them tap dance off into cinematic happily-ever-after.



George Valentin (Jean Dujardin) is the star who had it all in the heyday of silent film, but he sees his fortune fading fast when the era of talkies changes the game forever. Unwilling to give up the silent artistry of which he is master, he soon finds himself a broken man - literally without any voice. The film's clever use of selected sounds expresses George's inability to come to terms with the new world around him.

The Artist has been the darling of this film award season. Most recently it won five Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor and, the one that had me holding my breath before the announcement, Best Original Music Score. In the run-up to the Oscars, it took three major Golden Globe awards, including another one for Best Original Score. At the Cannes Film Festival, where *The Artist* had its premiere, Jean Dujardin was named Best Actor. As for the critics, the Rotten Tomato Meter's top critics (www.rottentomatoes.com) gave it an unheard of 100 percent approval rating, not a dissenting voice among them. And the audience approval rating is 92 percent, this for a movie where the only sound you'll hear is the musical score, except for a few very brief and memorable exceptions.

MUSIC is almost always a key element in film (see my essay on film music in QQ 117/2), but it rarely has the glamour of the cast and director. Not so in *The Artist*, where the music is as important a character as the two lead actors and Uggy the terrier, and should receive equal billing. For the award-winning score, director Hazanavicius entrusted the work to his frequent collaborator, French film composer Ludovic Bource, and hired a fine European

orchestra, the Brussels Philharmonic, to perform it. If the whole movie is, as Hazanavicius has said, a love letter to cinema, then the music is a special billet-doux to the great composers of Hollywood, including Bernard Herrmann, Max Steiner, Franz Waxman, and Charlie Chaplin, and the longstanding tradition of film composers shamelessly lifting ideas from great composers like Prokofiev, Debussy, Ravel, Rachmaninov, and many more.

In an interview for the soundtrack recording Bource describes his approach to writing the music for *The Artist* :

In a silent movie, music is essential for telling the story and accompanying the emotions. And it's present pretty much all the time. In *The Artist*

there's almost twice as much music [as in most contemporary films with dialogue].... The hardest thing wasn't accompanying the emotions music is the ideal vehicle for that. No, the hardest thing, particularly with Jean's character George, was to respect the combination of comedy and emotion. With the extravagant George at the beginning of the film, we couldn't have music that killed his decline by the chaos it contained.... As a result, rather than pastiche or spoof, we worked--a bit like Chaplin--along the lines of a light sophistication.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]



Screen idol George has a chance meeting with a young fan early in *The Artist*, and cannot know how his life will be changed by the irrepressible Peppy Miller (Bérénice Bejo).

"A light sophistication" is a perfect description of the overall effect of the music.

When we first meet George Valentin, he is attending the premiere of his latest movie and signing autographs for fans. The orchestral music that accompanies this part, the Valentin theme, has a kind of sophisticated, up-tempo, bon vivant character that underlines a '20s Hollywood star: dashing, devilishly handsome, ready to give the first beautiful lady he sees a quick twirl on the dance floor, but no more; there's limitless dalliance and sparkle available in each succeeding frame. By contrast, when Valentin's fortunes are sinking fast, after he's been thrown out of his mansion, lost his wife, has had to fire his chauffeur, and is pathetically reduced to pawning his formal wear, the music changes dramatically. For it Bource wrote a solo piano piece (*Comme une Rosée de Larmes*), inspired, he says, by Brahms' song *The Sapphic Ode*. I also hear echoes of Satie in it. This music radiates decline and fall, loneliness, and loss.

Watching the movie, I found all my defences against the conventions of silent film falling away. I kept wondering why that was so. Sure it's beautifully made, with an exceptional cast, with a certain French grace gilding the Hollywood lily, and with a genuine outsiders' love for the period and its films. But still, I said to myself, the story,

boiled down, is a very conventional Hollywood melodrama. There is, of course, an eerie contemporary resonance in the story of a man being brought down because he won't embrace a new technological revolution. As Rick Groen so eloquently put it in his *Globe and Mail* review: "Now, lots of once-venerable institutions, and the folks who inhabit them, are feeling the pain of that haplessly silent actor, faced with rapidly evolving technology that liberates and enslaves but, either way, issues a non-negotiable demand: Learn and adapt or fade into irrelevance and die." Groen goes on to say: "The result, then, is a silent film that dramatizes, wonderfully, the inevitable demise of silent film--that is a picture that uses old technology to dazzling effect to illustrate the insistent conquest of a new technology. It's like encountering a Proustian tome about Twitter. Suddenly the charming gimmick seems to cut more deeply and closer to home."

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

All true and well said. But, for me, it's the music, the music, the music that elevates and deepens the story of *The Artist* at one and the same time. Music here has gone from a craft element--like special effects or cinematography or editing--to an art form. Most film music now is employed to manipulate or direct our emotions, to tell us what to feel, like the laugh track in a TV sitcom tells us when to laugh. But in *The Artist* music is perhaps the most authentic storyteller of all, the omniscient narrator we trust. Without the music, the part of the movie where Valentin hits bottom would seem insincere, grossly sentimental, superficial, cliché. The music gives it gravitas and richly evokes the particular character of a man who once owned Hollywood and now lives on nothing but whisky and memories. The music authenticates our emotional grasp of a high flyer brought down by his own blind hubris; the pain, the loss, the loneliness we feel are as genuine as if they were our own. And if, as Hazanavicius insists, the silent movie is an emotional cinema, a sensorial event, then music is the silent movie maker's most powerful tool, because, at its core, music is pure emotion in sound. Music moves us more powerfully because, as Rilke says, music is "language where language ends." Where language ends we move into another dimension of feeling, of experience, not of the intellect but of the heart.

ULTIMATELY, we receive and we believe the message of *The Artist* as a *cri de coeur*. In having commissioned music which exalts his story of *The Artist*, Hazanavicius has made a conventional Hollywood melodrama into a love story for the ages, and a moving cautionary tale about the price we pay for refusing to change.



John Goodman as studio boss Al Zimmer, who sees the future of talkies, but takes some convincing before he first believes in Peppy, and believes again in George.

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