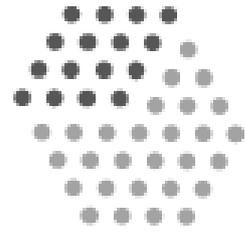




Arts & Humanities  
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BEYOND TEXT

# The Sounds of Early Cinema in Britain: Textual, Material and Technological Sources

7-9 June 2009

Stewart House, University of London and  
The Barbican Centre



UNIVERSITY OF LONDON · SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDY



# PROGRAMME

## Sunday 7 June 2009 at The Barbican Centre

- 3.00 – 3.15pm** Welcome  
Introduction to D.W Griffith and *Way Down East* by  
Professor David Mayer
- 3.15 – 6.15pm** *Way Down East*: original score by William Frederick  
Peters and Horace Silvers, reconstructed and conducted  
by Gillian Anderson (programme includes a short interval)
- 6.30 – 7.00pm** Gillian Anderson in conversation with Professor Ian  
Christie
- 7.15pm** Optional dinner

## Monday 8 June 2009 at Stewart House, University of London

- 9am** Registration
- 9.15am** Welcome: Julie Brown and Annette Davison
- 9.30 – 11.15am** **Film Lecturers**
- Joe Kember (University of Exeter), 'The lecture is the  
thing': Traditions of Lecturing and Film Exhibition  
in Britain before 1907
- Judith Buchanan (University of York), 'Don't miss this bit':  
Declamation and Attempted Crowd Control in Lectures  
for Early Shakespeare Films
- Trevor Griffiths (University of Edinburgh), 'Sound' and  
Silent Cinema in Scotland
- 11.15 – 11.45am** Coffee

**11.45am – 1pm Early Musical Practices**

Ian Christie (Birkbeck, University of London), 'Motivated Music': the Evidence for Accompaniment Practice in London Cinemas, 1896-1913

Vanessa Toulmin (National Fairground Archive, University of Sheffield), Music in Mitchell and Kenyon Shows

**1 – 2pm** Lunch

**2 – 3.45pm The 1910s: UK and US Practices**

Jon Burrows (University of Warwick), 'Merely Incidental': How Licensing Regulations Affected Musical Practices in Pre-War Metropolitan Cinemas

Jim Buhler (University of Texas at Austin), The Sound of the City: Music, the Show, and the Picture Palace

Andrew Higson (University of York), 'The efforts of the wretched pianist': Fiction as Historical Resource

**3.45 – 4.15pm** Tea

**4.15 – 5.15pm Resources I: Film and Documents**

Phil Wickham (The Bill Douglas Centre, University of Exeter)

Luke McKernan (Curator, Moving Image, British Library)

Bryony Dixon (Curator, Silent Film, British Film Institute)

David Sanjek (University of Salford)

**5.15 - 7pm** **End of day discussion** followed by buffet supper

**7pm** Travel to The Barbican Centre

**8pm** **At The Barbican Centre, Cinema I**

*The Flag Lieutenant*: original score by Albert Cazabon. Reconstructed and performed by Philip Carli (piano) with Günter Buchwald (violin) and Paul Clarvis (percussion)

**Tuesday 9 June 2009 at Stewart House, University of London**

**9.30 – 10.45am Music and/as Transition Practice**

Julie Brown (Royal Holloway, University of London),  
Preliminary Observations on 1920s Trade Paper Music  
Columns

Fiona Ford (University of Nottingham), Another Mystery  
from the Pen of Mr Edgar Wallace? The Case of the  
Vanishing Part-Talkie, *The Crimson Circle* (British Talking  
Pictures, 1929)

**10.45 – 11.15am Coffee**

**11.15 – 12.30pm Retrospective Research: Early Sound Films and  
Silent Practice**

Ian Gardiner (Goldsmiths University of London), Scores  
in Early Sound Film as Sources for Silent Film  
Accompaniment Practices

David Neumeyer (University of Texas at Austin), The  
Development of Dialogue Underscoring in Sound Films in  
the Early 1930s

**12.30 – 1.30pm Lunch**

**1.30 – 2.45pm Resources 2: Technology and Ephemera**

Phil Wickham (Curator, The Bill Douglas Centre,  
University of Exeter)  
Mike Allen (Birkbeck, University of London)  
Donald MacKenzie (Organist, Odeon Leicester Square)  
Len Rawle (Cinema Organ Society)

**2.45 – 3.15pm Tea**

**3.15 – 4.30pm Musical Performance on Film**

Chris P. Lee (University of Salford), Silent Mancunians:  
Overcoming Silence in Silent Operas

Derek B. Scott (University of Leeds), Variety  
Performance as Captured in Early Film

**4.30 – 5.30pm Open Forum and Conference Closes**

## ABSTRACTS

### **Julie Brown (Royal Holloway, University of London), Preliminary Observations on 1920s Trade Paper Music Columns**

Key sources for anyone writing about musical practices in the exhibition of silent and early sound film are the music columns in the trade journals. In this informal presentation of work in progress I share some observations about the changing shape of the music columns in *Kinematograph Weekly*, and to a lesser extent *Bioscope*, during the 1920s and transition to sound. Where possible, I provide details about the people writing these columns as well as a sense of the texture, tone and emphasis of their contributions.

### **Judith Buchanan (University of York), 'Don't miss this bit': Declamation and Attempted Crowd Control in Lectures for Early Shakespeare Films**

Taking as its case study slide sequences and early films on Shakespearean subjects, this paper looks back to the practices of nineteenth-century lantern lecturers and considers how these lecturing conventions were adopted and adapted by the film industry of the early cinema period for its own purposes. It tracks some of the contemporary trade press debates about the purpose and varying quality of accompanying lectures for moving pictures and reports on a particular Shakespeare lecture from 1912 whose transparent failure to illuminate the film is, from our perspective at least, amply compensated for by the insight it provides into the linguistic and social register in which lectures were sometimes conducted.

### **Jim Buhler (University of Texas at Austin), The Sound of the City: Music, the Show, and the Picture Palace**

This paper examines how exhibition practice in the U.S., especially with respect to music and live performance, responded to the introduction of the multireel feature in the mid-1910s. During this period, theatres in larger cities rapidly grew in size, the added receipts permitting the installation of ever larger theatre organs and/or orchestras and the hiring of other live entertainment, often drawn from the vaudeville, operatic and theatrical stage. In smaller communities, where larger theatres were economically unsustainable, the change had the primary effect of reducing revenues, as

longer programmes meant fewer shows; such theatres could hardly hope to compete with those in the urban centres. Consequently, these changes ultimately led to a marked stratification of cinema leveraged on the basis of live performance. Where deluxe performance in a picture palace consisted of an increasingly large orchestra and elaborate stage productions, the rural and even suburban theatres had to make do with a much smaller orchestra – often only a piano or organ – and a far less ambitious show (if there was any show at all). The exhibition practice of the small theatre, however, was understood not as a distinct but rather as a diminished form of the ‘show’ in the downtown picture palace. The ideological effect of this arrangement was to inscribe the urban practice as the dominant cultural form, mirroring the rapid post-bellum transformation from rural, agrarian to urban, industrial society.

### **Jon Burrows (University of Warwick), 'Merely Incidental': How Licensing Regulations Affected Musical Practices in Pre-War Metropolitan Cinemas**

I will address the intriguing question of whether particularly distinctive musical practices accompanied the screenings of silent films in Britain – posed as part of the ‘mission statement’ for this AHRC Network project – by examining the degree to which the peculiar forms of entertainment licensing which existed in the UK during this period shaped the development of film music. Rick Altman’s groundbreaking work on *Silent Film Sound in America* suggests that the more typical practices of musical accompaniment which became established by the mid-1910s only emerged after a prolonged and contested period of development in which the place of music in the film show slowly shifted from a highly autonomous role (providing accompaniment to live singers rather than films at first, then upstaging narrative meanings with the rhythms of vaudeville effects and popular songs) to a subordinate position to the projected image, ‘invisibly’ supporting the goal of efficient storytelling. I would argue that this model cannot adequately describe the evolution of musical accompaniment in Britain during the same period because of the impact of legal systems for regulating the performance of music, derived from the 1751 Disorderly Houses Act. The provision of musical entertainment in Britain during the silent era technically required a music licence. Many licensing authorities attached safety regulations to music licences which the majority of the first generation of cinemas could not satisfy, and so the latter’s capacity to provide a musical dimension to their film shows depended on fostering a perception that the music was purely incidental to the screenings, and thus did not resemble any form of musical entertainment which required a music licence. When legislation directly addressed to the regulation of cinemas was passed in the form of the 1909 Cinematograph Act, its ordinances were not as strict as those typically applied to the licensing of musical entertainments, but the bill made no reference to film music, and therefore effectively served to

enforce the same restrictions. My paper will attempt to assess the extent to which these legal constrictions influenced the musical practices documented in both the reports of licensing authority inspectors and the musical advice columns printed in film industry trade papers. It will also consider whether or not it is appropriate to suggest that this system of regulation stimulated an accelerated process of subordinating sound to image as compared with the U.S.

**Ian Christie (Birkbeck, University of London), 'Motivated Music': the Evidence for Accompaniment Practice in London Cinemas, 1896-1913**

The paper aims to summarise what is documented about accompaniment for film presentations in London up to 1914, beginning with the celebrated account of Paul's *Persimmon Derby* being vigorously accompanied by the Alhambra orchestra in 1896. Early accompaniment clearly depended on existing customs and available resources in different kinds of hall, ranging from solo piano to pit-band. But what developed in the new custom-built cinemas from c.1907 onwards, especially as films grew longer? Evidence from trade journal and other sources will be considered, alongside consideration of contemporary audience expectations, and new musical technologies.

**Fiona Ford (University of Nottingham), Another Mystery from the Pen of Mr Edgar Wallace? The Case of the Vanishing Part-Talkie, *The Crimson Circle* (British Talking Pictures, 1929)**

Almost eighty years ago, on 21 June 1929, *Blackmail* had its London trade show. This film, Hitchcock's first foray into sound, has rightly earned its place in history as one of the first British features with talking sequences and one of the earliest examples of expressionist sound. But what about the other part-talking features made in Britain around the same time? This paper will focus on the sound version of *The Crimson Circle*, reworked from a German silent film *Der rote Kreis* (directed by Zelnick in 1929) through the addition of dialogue scenes directed by Sinclair Hill and a synchronised musical score by Edmund Meisel, who gained notoriety as a result of his score for the German release of *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1926). No footage or sound (the latter was recorded using a sound-on-disc process) from *The Crimson Circle* has survived. Apart from a few trade reviews and an esoteric article in *Close Up*, the only tangible evidence is an original invitation to a *Crimson Circle* trade show from August 1929, held in the BFI Special Collections. I will wade through the murky waters of early sound technology in British film with its plethora of competing sound-on-film and sound-on-disc systems, and its many

fledgling sound-film companies, in order to chart the meteoric rise and fall of British Talking Pictures, based at Wembley Studios, and the probable fate of *The Crimson Circle*. The usefulness of the meagre contemporaneous material found will be assessed, alongside standard literature, such as the work of Rachael Low.

### **Ian Gardiner (Goldsmiths University of London), Scores in Early Sound Film as Sources for Silent Film Accompaniment Practices**

In their 1950s survey of *The Technique of Film Music* (London & NY: Focal Press, 1957) Roger Manvell and John Huntley recollect that the music found in Britain's 'first talkie', Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (1929), recreates 'the type of sound that used to accompany films in the largest West End cinemas of the late 'twenties.' Credited to a principal publisher of cinematograph music, Campbell & Connelly, and compiled out of cues written by a variety of composers/arrangers, *Blackmail's* patchwork score (like those of other films of this transitional period) provides a potential source for evaluating late silent film accompaniment practices in Britain, at least in the major metropolitan cinemas. By cross-referencing with published 'accompaniments' and contemporary writings on theatre music composition and orchestration, it reveals aspects of construction, placement, synchronisation, style, and orchestration that remain characteristic of dramatic scores in British film throughout the 'thirties and even beyond. Using *Blackmail* as a case study, alongside other British film dramas of the early 1930s, this paper examines methods of retrieving echoes of the unrecorded performance practices in the silent cinema through analysis of the synchronised scores of this period.

### **Trevor Griffiths (University of Edinburgh), 'Sound' and Silent Cinema in Scotland**

This paper examines the place of sound in changing modes of cinema exhibition across Scotland in the first thirty years of the twentieth century. The Scottish experience, hitherto largely overlooked, merits attention because of the country's unusual depth of attachment to the medium, claiming more cinemas and cinema seats per head of population than the United Kingdom as a whole, and the potential it offers for studying a variety of cinema settings. By the 1920s, this encompassed the largest purpose-built cinema in Europe and a range of small, rural halls. A variety of sources are employed to capture aspects of the cinema-going experience, from trade and mainstream newspapers to the records of individual businesses. The latter, comprising directors' minutes, cash books, accounts, and diaries, not only assists in the reconstruction of the performances accompanying the exhibition of silent

films, but also places practice in a broader economic context, reflecting the changing fortunes of the areas within which cinemas operated and the financial circumstances of individual enterprises. The paper pays particular attention to the practice of 'talking to' pictures by elocutionists, a mode of presentation employed in Aberdeen for much of the silent era, and how this is to be understood: whether as a response to limited levels of literacy within the audience, an attempt to enhance the emotional impact of the films, or as a cheaper alternative to live music.

**Andrew Higson (University of York), 'The efforts of the wretched pianist': Fiction as Historical Resource**

A short story published in *The Strand Magazine* in 1912 provides a wonderfully detailed account of a visit to a small cinema in London, ostensibly by someone unaccustomed to visiting such places. The description of the cinema and of the experience of watching films there includes commentary on the music being played and the quality of the musicianship: 'The hall was very much the usual sort of place – long and narrow, with a floor sloping down from the back. In front of the screen, – was an enclosed pit containing some artificial palms and tin hydrangeas, a piano and a harmonium – I was entirely engrossed with the efforts of the wretched pianist to play tremolo for ten solid minutes – The execution got slower and slower and more staccato as her hands grew tired, and at the end I am sure she was jabbing the notes with her aching fingers straight and stiff. Poor girl! What a life!' This is not journalistic reportage but fiction – yet it is still able to tell us a great deal about musical accompaniment, musicianship, instrumentation and other sound effects for silent films in Britain in the early 1910s. This paper will examine the evidence of this particular short story, but also explore the insights that fiction can provide alongside other archival evidence of early film music practices, including photographs, journalistic accounts, trade paper discourse, reminiscence etc.

**Joe Kember (University of Exeter), 'The lecture is the thing': Traditions of Lecturing and Film Exhibition in Britain before 1907**

This paper returns to the question of early film lecturing in relation to earlier entertainment forms. The picture in the UK is a complex one. Richard Crangle has demonstrated that the transition from magic lantern lecturing traditions was in fact a piecemeal and problematic affair. My own research supports Crangle's position, and in this paper I will describe a wider variety of professional lecturing practices, derived from institutional contexts in the late nineteenth century, from civic institutes to touring panoramas. Drawing especially from the popular entertainment trade press, and from the research

derived from the current University of Exeter-based research project, 'Moving and Projected Images in the South West, 1820-1914', I will suggest that the varied professional practices of public speaking in the late nineteenth century need to be understood in their own right, before an inclusive understanding of the interaction of early film and the lecture can be gained. My broader suggestion is that, although, as numerous critics have suggested, this period was characterised by a further expansion of a highly mediated visual culture, it also remained a resolutely aural culture, in which traditions of face-to-face public speaking and listening retained a dominant communicative role.

What unites these extremely varied traditions is the fluid, responsive, and highly adaptable professional practice of public speaking: a practice that Erving Goffman has described as the expert creation of 'an audience-usable self to do the speaking' while at the podium. Applying this notion to film shows preceding 1907, it becomes clear that the relationship between lecturer and screen was a remarkably varied, nuanced affair, and one which had a wealth of longstanding public speaking traditions to draw upon.

### **Chris P. Lee (University of Salford), Silent Mancunians: Overcoming Silence in Silent Operas**

People are becoming more aware of the Mancunian Film Company and its contribution to the world of comedy via the feature films it produced of George Formby, Frank Randle, Norman Evans, *et al*, but very little is known about the studio's activities during the silent era. The Company, under its founder John E. Blakeley, was actively busy in that period producing fifteen movies that can only be described as 'silent musicals'.

These films, going under the banner 'Cameo Operas', and a final three being called 'Song Scenas', were made at a variety of locations around Britain and Ireland and feature actors performing scenes from Classic Light Operettas, or vignettes to accompany travelogue style narratives. The first twelve, all made in 1927 are two reel, twenty minute versions of productions such as *Carmen*, *Faust*, *Il Travatore*, and a twenty minute version of Wagner's *Ring!*

Adapted scores were produced for audiences to sing along to, and, where the cinema could afford it, trained singers and musicians could be added. These movies were so successful that Blakeley used the profits to fund a dramatic silent feature film *Two Little Drummer Boys* in 1928.

Until just over a year ago all of these films were presumed lost. Now a print of *La Traviata* has surfaced. Extracts from this, and the story of the silent Mancunians will be the content of my paper.

## **David Neumeyer (University of Texas at Austin), The Development of Dialogue Underscoring in Sound Films in the Early 1930s**

Dialogue underscoring (background music playing while characters speak) represented a special problem for early sound film in both technological and aesthetic aspects. Although it might seem obvious that the issues were unique to sound film (since silent-film exhibition of course did not include recorded speech), in fact the situation is considerably more complicated and the relation between silent-film and early sound-film practices considerably richer than one might expect.

This paper follows on and extends work I published in *Current Musicology* (1995), where I identified melodrama as the source of film composer Max Steiner's method of writing musical accompaniment under dialogue scenes, the underscoring technique of which he was a pioneer (in films from 1932-35) and for which he was especially known in the 1930s and early 1940s. I have recently updated this work in an essay for the anthology *Wagner and Cinema*, eds. Joe and Gilman (Indiana: forthcoming) by making a distinction between operatic and melodramatic styles of dialogue underscoring.

Here, I refine the categories further and consider placement or 'spotting' practices for dialogue underscoring using information drawn from a variety of films in the decade 1926-36. These include Warner Bros. *Don Juan* (1926) and *The Jazz Singer* (1927), which represent the highest quality performance practices for film in New York theatres during the mid-1920s; about three dozen A- and B-films with scores by Max Steiner and released by RKO between 1931 and 1934; a handful of films released by other American studios in the same period; and several British films from 1929-37 as they were available to me.

## **Derek B. Scott (University of Leeds), Variety Performance as Captured in Early Film**

This paper examines the various opportunities and limitations of the medium of film as it attempted to capture theatrical performances in the early days of sound. During this period, that of the early 1930s, it is particularly interesting to see the impact on performers when they move from a theatre stage to a film studio and are faced with a camera instead of a live audience. As my examples, I am taking three Pathé shorts showing the music-hall comedian Gus Elen, the light operatic tenor Richard Tauber, and the Austrian cabaret artist Greta Keller. My intention is to contribute to the crossover that has been taking place since the 1990s between theatre semiotics and film semiotics, and to accomplish this objective by focusing on song performance.

These short films show performers confronting a new audio-visual medium and trying to mould their performances accordingly. Elen is trying to adapt his performance to the demand that he stay in frame. Tauber does not have this problem being seated at a piano; yet, his theatrical style jars with the film-oriented acting of the rest of the cast. Keller courageously directs some of her singing to camera, but has trouble keeping to exactly the same movements in different takes, thus creating continuity problems for the editor. We also see how the authority and control of the performer, as well as that of the audience, has been eroded in the new medium.

**Vanessa Toulmin (National Fairground Archive, University of Sheffield), Music in Mitchell and Kenyon Shows**

The relationship between the 'local film' and the dissemination early film has been highlighted by the Mitchell & Kenyon Collection. This paper will demonstrate how these local links were further strengthened by live musical performances that accompanied the exhibition of these films. Supported by local silver or brass bands, or military orchestras, exhibition often not only showcased the filmic presentation of the marching bands but also used them as a musical accompaniment to the exhibition itself.

The Sounds of Early Cinema in Britain research network is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, under their Beyond Text programme. For further information please see [www.ahrc.ac.uk](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk) and [www.beyondtext.ac.uk](http://www.beyondtext.ac.uk).

The research team are: Dr Julie Brown (Royal Holloway, University of London), Principal Investigator and Dr Annette Davison (University of Edinburgh), Co-investigator.

### **Further ‘Sounds of Early Cinema in Britain’ events:**

2009 October (date t.b.c.) Sound Effects Workshop (University of Edinburgh, in conjunction with the Cameo Cinema)

2010 (date t.b.c.) Conference II: Performance, Realisation and Reception

2010 October (date t.b.c.): Performance Workshop (Royal Holloway, University of London)