

## BEN HUR (1925) - EXPANDED PROGRAM NOTE

Today, to accompany a two and one half hour feature film, composers may have five weeks to write twenty minutes of music which then has to be orchestrated, recorded, mixed with dialogue, sound effects and ambient noise and put onto the 35 mm film stock. Between 1892 and 1929 a composer or music director had about the same amount of time to supply nine times as much **live** music to accompany every screening of a moving picture at a first run theater. Whereas a modern film has dialogue and ambient noise and sound effects, in a predialogue film the music alone created the acoustic universe, and except for places where silence was used for dramatic effect, the music had to cover all the images. The result was a more imaginary, abstract, even poetic world.

The organizations which developed to handle the pressure of providing so much music week after week mirrored the industrial nature of the task. At first, whatever was at hand or in one's fingers would do. Every kind of sound effect or musical repertory was used from pop to classic, formal to improvised, regardless of how it fit or didn't fit the image. Gradually, however, certain conventions were established about what music was best suited to accompany every possible dramatic situation, and by the time *Ben Hur* was released in late 1925, there were about 500 full orchestras, over 2,000 ten piece ensembles, and many smaller ensembles, solo pianos with a drum set or theatre organs to accompany the movies. In the big picture palaces, these performing organizations were supported by vast libraries of printed music and sets of orchestral parts, by librarians and music directors. The accompaniments were assembled from preexisting music, divided by mood, dramatic situation and duration. In smaller neighborhood theatres where the picture might have changed every two days, the accompaniments would have been improvised. Today, there is one composer whose music is heard at every screening. In the predialogue days the musical accompaniment differed from theater to theater, or theater chain to theater chain throughout the country. A movie's presentation and impact were extremely variable.

By the 1920's if a studio wanted a picture to have the highest prestige value, it would hire a composer to assemble a musical accompaniment and would circulate the music with the film. Rarely, this accompaniment was a totally new, composed score (like the Mortimer Wilson score for the *Black Pirate*, heard by San Diego Symphony audiences last season). More commonly, a composer would write new music for fifty percent of the film and assemble the rest of the score from preexisting compositions, writing transitions and reorchestrating where necessary. It is this kind of composed and compiled score which William Axt and David Mendoza assembled to accompany *Ben Hur*.

Trained in New York and Berlin, composer/conductor William Axt was the music director at the Capitol Theater in New York and later was the head of the music department at the MGM Studios in California. His compositions included the score for *The Big Parade*, *Don Juan*, *Grand Hotel*, *La Boheme*, *Jimmy Valentine*, *Dinner at Eight*, *Madame Curie* and many others. His score for *Don Juan* (1926) made history as one of the first recorded "sound on film" scores.

Composer and violinist David Mendoza received his musical training in New York from Franz Kneisel, Rubin Goldmark and Percy Goetschius. He was the concertmaster of the Victor Talking Machine Orchestra, the Russian Symphony and the New York Symphony. He was the music director at the Capitol Theater, also at the Radio City Center Theatre in New York. He collaborated on a number of film scores with William Axt and seems to have been the part of the team that synchronized the score to the film and helped with the selection of preexisting music.

Today the director and composer watch a film together and decide which places need music and what kind of music it should be. In 1925 the directors rarely had anything to say about this process. The composers or compilers would break the film into scenes, in the US usually very small blocks of 30 to 150 seconds (in Europe 3 to 14 minutes), and write or assign themes for the major characters or major ideas. In *Ben Hur* there is music for Mary and Christ, for Ben Hur and Messala, for the passage of time, for the three Kings, a love theme for Ben Hur and Esther, brass fanfares for martial situations, music suggesting the rhythm of horses' hooves in the chariot race, music reflecting the drum driven choreographed motions of the slaves aboard the Roman galley and so forth. Then preexisting music would be chosen which captured the mood and kinetic motion of all the other scenes. In *Ben Hur* the result was a mosaic of 145 pieces, an anthology of music from diverse repertoires which represented the unifying tastes of Axt and Mendoza.

This tradition of writing and choosing music which reflects the mood and kinetic energy of a scene has led to the establishment of a set of conventions so strong that we can close our eyes, listen to the music and accurately imagine what kind of image is on the screen. We can listen to television and know what is happening without watching. Alternatively, we can watch the images and not **hear** the music as it merely duplicates what we are seeing. Do not be surprised, therefore, if you forget that there is a live orchestra playing to *Ben Hur*. The music was supposed to make your seeing more acute but was not necessarily meant to call attention to itself.

Fifty percent of the original score for *Ben Hur* was composed by William Axt. The rest was taken for example from the operas of Massenet, Wagner, Borodin and Nougues. Although the Axt/Mendoza accompaniment would have been for full orchestra, all that remained of the original work was a piano/conductor score and a violin part. To reconstruct the original full orchestral version, therefore, it was necessary to identify and locate the preexisting orchestrations that were used in the score and to reorchestrate the rest. Some of Axt's own orchestrations had been published as separate pieces so it was possible to use these, but much of his part of the score remained unpublished. With Stephen Burton, Ms. Anderson reorchestrated these sections. The preexisting music was identified with the help of a vast list of music appropriate for the movies, compiled by Hans Erdmann in the 1920's and also a cue sheet for a 1930's sound reissue of the film. The original orchestrations for the preexisting music, thus identified, were located at the Library of Congress, the Chicago Public Library, the Marine Band Library, the Bibliotheque nationale, and the Boosey and Hawkes Archives in London. After gathering the preexisting music and the reorchestrated sections, it was then necessary to cut and paste all the bits together using the piano/conductor score as a guide.

Gillian Anderson, 2006

### **Ben Hur (1925) Fun Facts** – courtesy of Wikipedia

- ∞ Forty-eight cameras were used to film the sea battle, a record for a single scene.
- ∞ A staged fire on one of the ships got out of control. Armor-clad extras had to jump in the water. There is conflicting information about whether any of them were killed.
- ∞ The first attempt to film the chariot race was on a set in Rome, but there were problems with shadows and the racetrack surface. Then one of the chariots' wheels came apart and the stuntman driving it was thrown in the air and killed.
- ∞ The set was abandoned and a new one built in Culver City. 42 cameras were used to film the race and 50,000 feet of film was used. Second unit director B. Reeves Eason offered a bonus to the winning driver.

The final pile-up was filmed later. No humans were seriously injured during the US production, but several horses were killed.

- ∞ The religious scenes, plus Ben Hur's entrance into Rome and some interior scenes that occur afterwards, were shot in two-strip Technicolor.
- ∞ The famous chariot scene was filmed at what is now the intersection of LaCienega and Venice Boulevards in Los Angeles.
- ∞ This production used more than 600 gallons of Max Factor's Liquid Body Make-up.
- ∞ According to The Guinness Book of World Records (2002), the movie contains the most edited scene in cinema history. Editor Lloyd Nosler compressed 200,000 feet (60,960 meters) of film into a mere 750 feet (228.6 meters) for the chariot race scene - a ratio of 267:1 (film shot to film shown).
- ∞ Both Rudolph Valentino and Buck Jones were considered for the role of Judah Ben Hur.
- ∞ All the religious scenes are in Technicolor, but the chariot race is not - an intense amount of lighting was required to shoot Technicolor, making it extremely difficult.
- ∞ Among the extras in the chariot race scene: actors Douglas Fairbanks, John Gilbert, and Harold Lloyd; actresses Mary Pickford, Lillian Gish, and Marion Davies; theater chain owner Sid Grauman.
- ∞ Clark Gable, Joan Crawford, and Myrna Loy were among the thousands of hopefuls who got bit parts or extra work in this film.