

“The Golem” - A Silent Film Score for Double-Reed Quartet

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Recently, I composed a score for a great, classic silent film called “The Golem,” for an ensemble of two oboes, English horn and bassoon. My quartet performed this score with the film at this year’s IDRS conference.

The complete title to the film is “Der Golem: Wie Er Kam In Der Welt.” The film is considered to be a masterpiece of the German Expressionist school, and is famous for its striking visual design. The film is also known for influencing the “Frankenstein” movies which followed. The story is based on the legend of the Golem of Prague, a man-like creature made of clay, magically animated by a Rabbi to protect the Jews of Prague from persecution. It was made in 1920, in Germany, directed by Paul Wegener, who also acted the part of the Golem in the film.

I had been arranging music on and off for a double reed quartet for several years, and wanted to use what I had learned to write some original music for the ensemble. While viewing a silent film at the Fine Arts Cinema of Berkeley, it struck me that a live silent film score was a real possibility. My first instinct was that a classic horror film could work quite well. I approached Fine Arts Cinema co-owner Emily Charles, and she suggested I take a look at “The Golem.”

I was impressed by the strong story line with its clear dramatic climaxes, as well as the striking visual design for which it is famous. Certain scenes, especially the casting of the spell, with its pyrotechnics and dancing flames, were particularly promising. It is not every day one gets a good excuse to compose a “magical fire dance”. Thus, I had a film to score, and a theater to perform it in.

The main question, then, was whether or not a quartet of double reeds could carry it off. I suspected they could, but as it had never been done before, I wasn’t sure. I knew from *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* and other classical works that double reeds would readily be able to handle the macabre humor and mysterious atmosphere of the film. Mike Curtis’ *A Klezmer Wedding* gave me the confidence that double reeds could handle the Klezmer style. I felt, from having arranged some Chopin mazurkas for double reeds, that I could draw on their stylistic elements to set some of the action of the Prague court characters. One of the clinchers in my decision was seeing a consort of renaissance double

reeds providing court music in the Emperor’s castle! At that point, the idea of an all-double-reed setting became quite compelling.

IMPROVISATION VS. A COMPOSED SCORE

We tend to associate silent films with piano or organ improvisation, as this had been by far the most common practice since the end of the silent era, but this practice had as much to do with practicality as esthetics. For one, the performers often did not get many chances to view the film before it went before the public, and thus had little or no time to compose. Also, it is far less work and expense for a single person to improvise than to arrange or compile a score for an ensemble. Expense became a big issue when the silent films lost their mass audiences to the “talkies.”

But while certain films play just fine with keyboard or organ accompaniment, many are much more suited to chamber music, and some truly cry out for a full orchestral treatment. Many people do not realize that in the 1920’s, the silent film industry was the single largest employer of musicians, that ensembles of all sizes were accepted by audiences, and that scores were usually composed or compiled from classical repertoire rather than improvised.

There is an undeniable thrill in having a musician improvise to a film. It can be an entertaining display of skill and ingenuity in its own right. However, where an improviser is often reacting to the screen, a composer, now with the help of a VCR or DVD, can anticipate and set up events in a way that heightens the film’s dramatic intensity to its fullest potential, can catch the action and dramatic gestures to a degree that was previously just not practical. And audiences are responding positively.

HOW SILENT FILM IS LIKE BALLET

I think of silent film scoring, esthetically, as somewhere between modern film scoring and writing for dance. In both silent film and dance, the composer has responsibility for providing music pretty much continuously from start to finish. Without action-appropriate sound, a film audience often has a difficult time keeping their attention on the screen. Every sound in the theater, every cough or rustle, draws attention away, making concentration difficult. A well-conceived score aids concentration, allowing the audience to see nuances they might otherwise miss.

Ballet can be thought of as a set of dances with intervening sections of pantomime, much like opera

Example 1: Three Worlds

1A. Magical

Black, stars wipe *molto adagio* ♩ = 50 **Title** *slight accel.* ♩ = 52 **Rabbi Loew**

Ob1
Ob2
F.H.
Bsn

1B. Jewish Ghetto

Star field ♩ = 56 **Famulus** *Adagio* ♩ = 56 *a little faster* **Miriam** *still faster* ♩ = 80

Ob1
Ob2
F.H.
Bsn

1C. Prague Court

Knight Florian ♩ = 108

Ob1
Ob2
F.H.
Bsn

Example 2: Synchronization

push through door

1 $\text{♩} = 88$

Ob1 *fp*

Ob2 *fp*

E.H. *sfz*

Bsn *sfz*

5

mf

mf

mf

mf

stabs Golem

8

f

f

f

mf

f

f

f

f

f

mf

f

can be seen as a back and forth between arias and recitatives. In silent film, it may seem like the pantomime or recitatives predominate, but one can also spot scenes that can be treated like dances or arias. Where choreography works hand in hand with established musical forms, or is created to music that has already been written, the silent film composer must write to fit the film "as is," using a style that allows the music to follow the film's action wherever it might lead, without giving away any more about what happens next than the images do. For example, in ballet, a dance will be accompanied by music that is constructed of musical phrases which usually proceed with a smooth symmetry. In silent film composing, the repeating musical phrases may only fit with some skillful manipulation of the rhythm and melody, a 2-beat extension of a motif here, a diminution of a phrase there, not to mention liberal use of *ritenutos* and *accelerandos*, pauses and *rubatos*. Classical music's flexible use of time makes it a great tool for giving every moment in a film its due.

In a film score, you don't have the opportunity to work out musical ideas at will, but you do have opportunities for development. There are often recurring ideas or images in a film that a composer can highlight. In "The Golem," I made use of the recurrence of fire, which first appears as dancing flames during the magical spell that allows the Golem to be animated, and returns in the conflagration of the ghetto. I use the same essential theme, binding the two scenes in a way that I think fits the symbolism of the film. The specifics of settings vary to match the differing contexts, and these differences can be thought of as a form of development.

MORE ON COMPOSITIONAL STRUCTURE

In my conception, "The Golem" can be seen as taking place in three worlds: one magical, one the Jewish ghetto, and one the ruling Court, each with its own distinct musical needs. For the "magical" world (see example 1A), I used a harmonic texture with a floating tonality composed primarily of augmented triads and half-steps. The music could be either quiet and mysterious, as in the example, or aggressive, as in the sections where the Golem is on a rampage.

For the ghetto characters and action (see example 1B), I stuck to a system of tonality based on two scales characteristic of Klezmer music: the "freygish" and "Ukrainian Dorian" scales, which can be looked at as modes of the harmonic minor. If we use A harmonic minor as the basis (with F-natural and G#, i.e. A B C D E F G# A), Ukrainian Dorian uses the same notes from D (D E F G# A B C D), and freygish from E (E F G# A B C D E). I also made use of the existing folk melody "Miserlou," inspired by Mike Curtis' arrangement in his set of "Ten Klezmer Duos" for two oboes.

For the Prague court characters and action (see example 1C), I used the standard scales and forms

typical of European classical music. In the example, Knight Florian was set with a mazurka-like melody in e-minor. I also inserted a renaissance dance composed by Jacques Moderne for a court dance at the "Rose Festival."

A danger of having diverse styles is that it could make for a patchy, eclectic score, with jarring transitions. I think I was pretty successful in conveying a "sense of whole" from this diversity by creating motivic links between the melodies used in the disparate styles. The three selections from the example demonstrate how one motive is used in the three contexts.

The very opening shot contains what I conceived as a stem motive in the score, a descending major third followed by a return to a half step below the original note (Example 1A, ms. 2). These intervals appear inverted in the 2nd oboe counter-melody (ms. 3), with the notes D-F#-Eb (rising a major third, followed by the return to a half-step above the first note). A short while later in the film, the 2nd oboe version is picked up by the English horn in the theme for Famulus (1B) in the motive E-G#-F, but in the tonal context of the Klezmer freygish scale. The G#-F-E at the end of Miriam's theme (ms. 2) can be seen as an "answer" or resolution to Famulus' "question".

In the theme for Knight Florian (example 1C), the opening B-E-C is closely related to the opening of Famulus' theme, but in the context of a "normal" minor scale. In addition, the descending chromatic sequence (ms. 6-8) also uses this construction of an interval followed by a return a half-step short of the original note, reminiscent of the opening. Most of the themes in the film make use of this construction in one form or another, contributing a sense of unity to the score as a whole.

HANDLING SYNCHRONIZATION

Early in the composition phase, I convened a rehearsal to check out what I had written. One of the first things I discovered was that it was impossible to read my part, lead the ensemble, and stay in synch with the film, even with the entire ensemble facing the video. I came to the realization that one would have to virtually memorize the entire score to be able to lead properly, since one needs to keep an eye on the film in order to stay in synch.

It was then I decided to hire a conductor. Fortunately, John Kendall Bailey of the Berkeley Lyric Opera both owed me some favors and had an interest in film conducting. That he is also an oboist and composer was a definite plus, as he was able to make useful suggestions on all levels as we worked with the score.

Having a conductor makes a world of difference. The biggest thing is that we could now play at the foot of the stage, facing the audience naturally, with John facing us and observing the screen, solely responsible for keeping us in synch with the film. With a conduc-

tor, we could simply focus on reading and playing together--normal stuff! The only technical problem we had with this set-up was with the stand lights shining onto the screen, but this was successfully minimized by taking the time to position the lights optimally, and by taping blue filters over them.

Even with the best conducting and lots of rehearsal, it is not always easy to nail a cue. Fortunately there are many composing "tricks" one can use to make landing cues more secure. The easiest and most useful compositional tool is to have either silence or a hold precede the visual cue. The start of Example 2 makes use of this technique, with a G.P. just before the Golem pushes through Miriam's door. The silence or hold can vary in length to keep things on track without calling attention to itself.

If the music is moving at a fixed tempo, it is very helpful to have "sign post" cues along the way so the conductor can tell if the pace is going too fast or slow, and make adjustments. A tougher situation is trying to hit a precise cue after a passage that is difficult to time, such as one with a poco a poco accelerando or ritardando, or one with no opportunity to "sign post." In Example 2, in the end of measure 8, Florian stabs the Golem with his knife, but the knife fails to penetrate the Golem's clay surface. The action leading up to this is rather frenetic, with no good "sign post" cues to help with the timing. I wanted to set off the knife blow precisely with a dramatic chordal "hit," but knew the synchronization would be difficult. Taking advantage of the energy of Florian's lunge and recoil before and after the knife blow, I wrote two pairs of hits close together, the second landing on the downbeat of measure 9. Thus there were four chordal strikes, any of which would work if it synched with the image. This way the conductor has some wiggle room, and we were able to accompany this important dramatic point with confidence, even if not with precisely the same synchronization, every night.

While the overall score must run continuously from start to end, many moments can be set with silence. At the end of a dramatic struggle, when the Golem throws Florian off a roof, the director cut to a long shot. To set this, I went to silence, and the effect was quite eerie, after all the noise of their chase and struggle. In an earlier shot, Florian and Miriam give each other a conspiratorial and worried look when they are nearly caught in a romantic encounter. This also worked well with a compositional silence that was like the catching of a breath. These moments allowed the musicians to catch their breaths, too, which was quite important.

HANDLING FATIGUE

The problem of fatigue became quite evident during the first full run through. My scariest moment was only a third of the way through the score, during the build-up to the magic spell. My lip was almost entirely gone, and I was wondering how in the world I would be able to play another 40 minutes. Yet somehow, with a few breaks here and there, the lip came back and I was able to finish the work. The key to managing fatigue, I came to realize, is to avoid writing sections that require continuous playing. With this understanding, I rewrote many sections to include more rests and breathing points. I found that in every case where I went back to add "air," the musical content improved.

Playing for a full 68 minutes without break is intense, even with lots of rests and breaks. It is perhaps even more so for double-reed players more used to solo than tutti action. However, a composer can take advantage of this by scoring many solo and duet episodes, which has the side benefit of providing breaks for the resting players. In the end, our group did manage to get through the film just fine, improving with each performance. I believe experienced ensembles will be up to the challenge, and that this will be fully evident at the 2001 IDRS Festival showing.

CONCLUSION

A double reed quartet is a wonderful ensemble for accompanying silent film. As an ensemble, the instruments blend beautifully, with strong vocal qualities. And, they are first-rate solo instruments with a tremendous expressive range. Double reeds are equally at home with the warm and heartfelt, the chill and sinister, the humorous, the melancholy, the rude and the refined. This remarkable diversity makes a double reed ensemble an excellent resource for accompanying a silent film. I hope double reed players will be inspired to perform, and composers will be inspired to write more silent film scores for double reed ensembles.

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