CHAPTER 7

Women at the Pedals
Female Cinema Musicians during the Great War
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The image of a white woman seated at a cinema organ, usually dressed in modest clothing and with her hair up, was a popular trope that developed early in the history of motion picture music, even when most theater musicians were still men. Advertisements for pianos, organs, sheet music, and other accoutrements of silent film accompaniment regularly featured illustrations of women at the keyboard. Later ads suggested that the job of cinema accompanist was a serious and respectable one for women, and it was compared positively with secretarial work, teaching, and nursing. The woman at the pedals—who truly came into her own when male cinema musicians were called up for service in 1917 when the United States entered the Great War—was the arbiter of morality and taste in the cinema, a performer and composer whose roles are inextricably entwined, a writer of patriotic songs, an inventor and innovator within the film industry.

The histories of these women are faded, far-flung, unpreserved, uncollected, unheard—an ironic fate considering that they provided sound for a supposedly soundless medium: music for and as motion, emotion, amusement, and cultural commentary. Although no census of cinema accompanists was ever taken, reports from trade and industry publications suggest that while white male musicians were in the majority in the early days of cinema accompaniment, women, both white and of color, soon equaled or outnumbered them. Women were particularly important as cinema accompanists during the First World War, when movie theater orchestras...
were dissolved and male musicians left their positions to join the military.\(^1\) There is no question that such women were often at the center of cinematic music making, particularly in smaller towns and cities and communities. Nor should there be any doubt about the importance of the work these women did. Their performances for newsreels, animations, live-action shorts, and feature films frequently served in multiple ways: to suggest, shape, and help define the musical tastes of the time; to educate listeners; to show how music could serve as a creative, narrative, and interpretative force in the cinema. But there has been little print dedicated to these important musicians and their work. As Ally Acker has written about women in other aspects of the film industry, “Women are as integral and transformative to the cinema as [well-known men], and yet their stories have consistently remained untold.” The influence of these women, particularly during the Great War and its immediate aftermath, cannot be understated; as Acker continues, “More women worked in decision-making positions in film before 1920 than at any other time in history.”\(^2\)

Acker’s claim certainly includes female musicians. As I will show here, women filled a number of roles in the American cinema music industry, particularly during the Great War. In addition to serving as cultural barometers for cinematic music and accompaniment, women were at the heart of innovations in cinema sound and composition. Yet the scholarly bibliography on women musicians in the silent cinema is essentially nonexistent. There are a number of reasons for this. In an era

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**Figure 7.1.** An advertisement for Bell Electric Pianos, showing the stereotypical woman at the pedals, published in *Motion Picture Magazine* 9, no. 1 (1915): 145.
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when women were often named only as “Miss [last name]” or “Mrs. [husband’s last name]” in print and those who wished to publish songs or other kinds of music still often had to do so under pseudonyms or with their first initials in place of their names in order to be considered seriously, only a limited number of female composers and performers were easily identified through or recognized for their work. Most research that has been done on silent film music has focused on male performers and composers active in New York and in Hollywood, in part because the trade magazines, house publications, and other necessary documents for study both were focused on activities in those places and were held by institutions there. These resources generally lack coverage of the activities of women in the profession. In addition, film music scholars have focused on the primarily male cadre of published composers of silent film music active first on the American East Coast and later in Hollywood. The lack of information and research on women in silent cinema music is also due to an overwhelmingly canonized music history narrative, in which successful women musicians were somehow “extraordinary.” Women working in cinema music came from a variety of ethnic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds and were not, in general, members of the elite, male-mentored group of female art-music composers and performers of the period, exemplified by Amy Beach and Maud Powell.

Further limiting research on female cinema musicians, much of the music from this period has not survived. In the late 1960s, MGM, among other studios, decided that it was not necessary to keep musical materials from the silent era and later periods and sent its entire music library to a landfill. Even the films for which these women composed, played, or created early recordings have not survived in great numbers: in 2013 a report by film historian David Pierce reported that of the more than 11,000 films made in America during the silent era, only 2,749 (about 25 percent) are still extant. Many of these still remain on nitrate stock, which is both highly flammable and rapidly disintegrating; we will lose a certain amount of that 25 percent before those films are ever preserved. There is equally great loss in what experts on antiques term “paper ephemera.” Sheet music that does credit women as the lyricists and composers goes uncataloged in archive basements or attics. Periodicals from the silent era demonstrating the activities of women in the cinema and film industry are discarded every day. Patents and other documents illustrating the creative and scientific contributions women made to the technology and practice of film accompaniment have disappeared into archives unseen by film historians and musicologists. And as is often the case with materials from segregated America, we have much less documentation about women of color than we do about white women.

It is important to both music and cinema history, therefore, to develop a basic history of who the women involved with music for silent films were, what roles
they played, what we know about them and the music they played, and what we might do going forward to find and preserve more of their histories. Here I examine each of these roles in the context of the Great War with the purpose of providing springboards for further research.

**Keyboardists**

As the image in figure 7.1 suggests, women were often hired as film accompanists at the piano or organ for the sake of a theater’s propriety even before managers seriously considered their musical abilities. A woman accompanist was viewed as an imprimatur of morality and cleanliness in a cinema. A properly “accomplished” pianist—in which “accomplished” broadly signified the gender (female), class (middle or above), and relative musical skill (a basic facility with the instrument and the ability to read music) of the performer—was a boon to any establishment wishing to distinguish itself as a proper place of family entertainment. As R. H. Pray observed in July 1914, a theater with a “slovenly outward appearance,” and posters that were “of a vulgar and suggestive type,” where music, “furnished by a piano and violin, gave vent with a tin-pan crash to all the ragtime pieces which were known as popular among the [young] people [mostly men] who visited the place” was put out of business as soon as “a large, neat and commodious building,” with a “pipe-organ, as fine as any church in the neighborhood could boast of, was installed, and good music beside this was also furnished in the way of an accomplished [female] pianist” opened in the same neighborhood.5

Once hired, cinema accompanists had a variety of tasks as part of their jobs. Very few films had full scores of either original or a mix of original and preexisting music created specifically to accompany them. (Perhaps the two most famous of these from the period before the US entry into the war in 1917 are the 1908 film *L’assassinat du Duc du Guise*, directed by Charles Le Bargy and André Calmettes, which had an original score by Saint-Saëns, and D. W. Griffith’s 1915 epic, *The Birth of a Nation*, which was accompanied by a mix of preexisting and original music by Joseph Carl Breil.) Rather, the vast majority of movies distributed during this time were sent to theaters without any suggestions or indications for accompanying music. Thus, cinema accompanists were responsible for creating their own scores in whatever manner they preferred.

As Richard Abel, Rick Altman, Julie Hubbert, Martin Marks, and other scholars of silent film sound have documented, there were no standardized practices for supplying music for films. Music for accompanying films initially came from vaudeville music libraries, popular song, preexisting art music, and original compositions, only some of which were committed to paper. In the 1910s, publications of music expressly for film accompaniment began to proliferate, offering what is called genre
music or mood music for actions, events, and emotions commonly found in film scenarios. Using published collections of genre music, called photoplay albums, cinema pianists, organists, or ensembles could patch together a handful of pieces to create a compiled score of generic pieces that provided music that broadly matched the action on-screen. These pieces provide the earliest documentation for the use of musical mimesis in films. Works for “hurry” or “gallop” were quick in tempo, mimicked the sound of hoofbeats or heartbeats, and employed short note values, all of which suggested the associated speed of motion given in the title. In *Motion Picture Moods*, an enormous collection of generic pieces selected and arranged by film-score composer and arranger Erno Rapée, “Aeroplane” is represented by Mendelssohn’s “Rondo Capriccio,” in which a three-measure passage of rapidly alternating thirds in the piano’s right hand is apparently meant to stand in for the sound of high-speed propellers; one entry for “Sea Storm” is Grieg’s “Peer Gynt’s Homecoming/Stormy Evening on the Coast,” which musically imitates choppy seas through the use of alternating low and high As in the bass in sixteenth notes.6

At the same time, some performers improvised throughout an entire film, created their own motifs to use for each picture they accompanied, and composed entire scores that often went undocumented or committed to paper. Cinema organist Rosa Rio, for example, often had to accompany films without previewing them, so while she accompanied a movie for the first time, she worked to compose motifs or themes for the characters or events in the picture, upon which she would then improvise and elaborate in following showings, ultimately creating a consistent score that she would play from memory each time she accompanied the picture.7 Other performers preferred to work from a list of suggestions for music, known as a cue sheet, which lists a film’s major events or cues next to the title or incipit of a piece that would go well with the action. As the demand for music for film grew, studios began issuing cue sheets for individual films, prepared by in-studio composers or score compilers. The Edison Film Company began issuing cue sheets with all of its feature-length films in 1913,8 Mutual Film Company did so in 1917,9 and other companies followed. Around the same time, film magazines also began publishing cue sheets created by the editors of their music columns or music departments.10

During the 1910s and early ’20s, only the most prestigious films with the largest budgets received fully original, completely synchronized scores for their presentation in cinemas. These “special scores,” as they were marketed, generally eschewed preexisting music of any kind, although some did include a single notable preexisting theme or popular song, often for marketing purposes. The special score existed from the beginnings of film and film music, but, as Martin Marks notes, the genre blossomed in the United States between 1910 and 1914, and following the success of Joseph Carl Breil’s fully synchronized score for Griffith’s 1915 picture, *The Birth of a Nation*, more studios began producing full scores for their pictures.11 Breil applied
a Wagnerian approach to scoring his films, starting with his now lost score for *Queen Elizabeth* in 1912, assigning leitmotivs to characters and places as a means of connecting all of the elements of the film through the music and developing a coherent musical narrative that was carried throughout the score. This practice was immediately hailed as highly effective and widely adopted.

Nonetheless, as the cue sheets for even large-budget films produced during the 1920s indicate, the completely original and synchronized score remained far from the norm. Of the full-length film scores produced during the late teens and early twenties, many remained compiled scores with only a few original sections: that is, they were comprised of preexisting pieces that were connected to one another with original transitions and sometimes contained a new song or tune for a romantic or climactic scene. Photoplay albums and single-work generic music and cue sheets continued to be used by most motion picture accompanists until the coming of sound between 1927 and 1929, although original full scores became increasingly common as the 1920s progressed.

Most of the moving pictures of the 1910s were quite short, generally ranging between fifteen minutes and an hour, so the process of creating a musical accompaniment for a film could range from finding a single piece that would work for the entirety of a short film to compiling a list of up to thirty or more individual pieces from which brief passages would be used. The vast majority of preexisting works collected for film accompaniment, whether in a publication for that purpose or by an individual performer, were almost uniformly classical in nature. Julie Hubbert has written that the classicization of moving picture music came about under the leadership of European-trained cinema composers and orchestra directors such as Samuel L. Rothafel (later Rothapfel) and Hugo Riesenfeld, but the highly gendered training of female pianists in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries clearly also played a role in this process. Women whose upbringing during this period had included traditional piano lessons and who had been taught song and opera repertoire and short, descriptive, characteristic pieces that worked well in cinematic accompaniment were especially well prepared for the work. Such pianists also often had a repertoire of popular songs at hand, as music publishers marketed these for playing at home by women. It is ironic that women accompanists, initially hired for their gender and the social signifiers it conveyed, were uniquely qualified as cinema pianists, and, later, organists, partly because of the gendered treatment to which they had been subjected.

The same gender essentialism that paradoxically helped create women as the ideal cinema accompanist carried over into their critical reception as musicians. Here women were hailed as indispensable to the success of moving pictures while simultaneously being labeled as “girls,” a highly revealing term that speaks to their relative place in the hierarchy of power and influence within most cinemas. In an
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issue of *Motion Picture Magazine* from March 1914, Stanley Todd, a regular commentator on music for the cinema, described women as more emotional and passionate players, making them appropriate accompanists for film. Reporting from Denver, he noted that the “theatres are large, the entrances dazzlingly brilliant, and like as not you will find within a wonderful pipe-organ, ready in an instant to change its song of sadness to paeans of joy. It is in Denver, too, where a mere slip of a girl presides at the console of one of these great instruments, and each night plays, with her heart and soul, to the finest of screen projections. . . . In this way, music lends its valuable aid in interpreting the gamut of emotions, which only the picture can bring into play with that subtle power that has been one of its secrets of success.”

J. J. Raymond described a theater manager who noted that good playing could bring in audiences for even poor pictures: “I’ve got a little girl in front of that music box that can shake out more ragtime a minute than any two others. The way that girl can hammer the ivory is marvelous.” Some critics derided the “hammering” aspect of cinema players, but they could not deny the need for capable performers. Performers that were even better prepared, wrote Raymond, could do additional wonders: “Spend a few dollars more a week, get another violinist . . . make them look over the reels before they’re put on at a regular show, and have them pick out the music that is best fitted to the pictures.”

Many managers found that a thoughtful, competent female pianist would draw in bigger and (socially) better audiences than many male organists or ensembles who were more interested in displaying their technical skills and less interested in the art of playing to the picture. Reporting on the success of the Madrid Theater in New York City, *Motion Picture News* noted that the “musical program of the Madrid is entrusted to Miss Lillian Greenberg, who is a graduate of a Leipzig conservatory of music. She has made the incidental music accompanying the pictures a matter of neighborhood comment.”

That women were “entrusted” with the musical accompaniments in a movie theater, including newsreels, shorts, and feature films, suggests that while they may have been looked upon as “girls” lacking in experience and wisdom, they were nonetheless responsible for crafting the tone in which audiences received news, enjoyed humorous animations, and understood drama and action on the screen. The evidence—letters from female accompanists to the popular film magazines’ columns on photoplay music, published accounts of their scoring suggestions, reports on performance practice by critics, and reviews of accompanists across the United States—all testifies to the extent to which women were the arbiters of musical accompaniment in the cinema. Collections of cue sheets and other materials owned by professional female accompanists such as Claire H. Hamack and Adele V. Sullivan demonstrate that they frequently made changes to printed cue sheets and magazine recommendations to incorporate repertoire they already
owned and knew. Accompanist Hazel Burnett compiled her own scores using sheet music and pieces cut from *Melody* and the *Etude* interleaved between pages of her photoplay albums.\(^{18}\)

When the United States entered the war in April 1917, male musicians entered the military, and women were afforded additional opportunities as cinema musicians. In August 1918, *Film Daily* reported that the state of Wisconsin ordered “a general suspension of all orchestras,” noting that this was “being done as a war measure to release every available man for war work. The theater managers came to a decision last week and will hereafter retain but one man in each house to furnish music.”\(^{19}\) *Moving Picture World* reported similar measures in Missouri in the article “Musicians Must Work or Fight.” “Every professional musician who is not engaged in connection with legitimate concerts, operas or theatrical performances,” read the act, “will be forced to enter other vocations or go to the front.”\(^{20}\) Women created scores and cue sheets for themselves as individual accompanists and as the leaders of cinema ensembles, improvised and composed new music for accompaniment, and engaged equally in the debates surrounding the kinds of repertoire best suited for motion picture accompaniment.

These debates about “appropriate music” could be exceptionally heated, and the energy expended on them came straight from the class anxieties of America’s moneyed classes and traditionalists who strove to keep their society modeled as closely to European aristocracy as they could while building new dynasties in the United States. Having acquiesced to the fact that motion pictures were here to stay, women’s clubs and other civic groups implored theater managers and musicians to use only “high-class” music in film accompaniment.

Cue sheets provided by female accompanists to the trade magazines and scoring suggestions made by women whose performances were hailed as “high class” indicate that “high class” equated with accompaniments using a mix of opera and ballet themes. The exception to this was the critical acceptance of a scattering of new generic works that served for scenarios specific to the new medium: “hurry” music, “mysterious” music, and similar specific generic pieces, then, were suitable in small amounts. Carrie Hetherington’s suggestions—deemed “appropriate” by Sinn—for *The Clutching Hand* (1915) included works by Schubert, Gounod, Verdi, Wagner, Saint-Saëns, and, for short scenes, Zamecnik.\(^{21}\) Kitty Meinhold, a cinema orchestra leader who programmed all of the music for pictures for her employer in upstate New York, wrote in 1915 that in creating the music for *Du Barry*, she used two works by Chaminade, selections from Gounod’s *Faust*, the wedding march from *Lohengrin*, the march from *Aida*, a waltz from *Il Trovatore*, selections from *Lucia* and *Rigoletto*, and Elgar’s “Salut d’amour.”\(^{22}\) Reviews show that accompanists used this combination of traditional orchestral and operatic repertoire and generic music that mimicked its harmonic language and form
throughout the 1910s and 1920s for feature-length comedic and dramatic films, animations, and shorts.

For the first three years of the Great War, American cinemas offered just a handful of war movies; in fact, movies about the Spanish-American War remained more common than those about the European conflict. Films that were about the Great War were mostly imported from Europe, and for these film music critics recommended for the accompaniment the use of traditional, classically based “national” music such as national hymns, anthems, and dances. At the end of 1917, though, after America had become involved in the war, studios suddenly found themselves in the business of producing war films, such as the fact-based memoir My Four Years in Germany, The Legion of Death (in which women fought in the trenches), and Her Boy (about the sacrifices of American mothers). While escapist films like Tarzan of the Apes and romances were also popular fare, the war film became an important part of cinematic offerings. The trade magazines’ columns on music for the moving picture presented suggestions of serious, classical music for dramas and music from light opera or new music in classical styles for comedies.

There were no women writing regularly for publication on music for the silent film during this time. But male film music critics can provide us with a historical barometer of how art music was treated and used during 1917 and 1918, probably by both male and female accompanists who preferred it to improvising or new music. For war films, film music critic and columnist George W. Beynon wrote, “Patriotism plays a big part . . . and requires many patriotic marches.” Later, Beynon stressed the positive effects of cinema accompanists and orchestras leading audiences in singing patriotic songs before the main film began and during reel changes. For Lest We Forget, which focused on the sinking of the Lusitania as the catalyst for America’s involvement in the war, Beynon and Leon Perret compiled a score that included “The Star-Spangled Banner,” used the soprano aria from Massenet’s Manon as the primary theme throughout, employed “My Heart at Thy Sweet Voice” from Samson and Delilah as the film’s love theme, used the overture to La forza del destino as music to signify German spies, and used “Le chant du depart” to characterize the French. Beynon also included the “Triumphant March” from Aida, Sousa’s “Stars and Stripes Forever,” and a number of melancholy Grieg pieces for atmospheric effect. Battles were accompanied by Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” and “The Tempest” from the overture to William Tell, a scene depicting the heroine killing a German would-be rapist is accompanied by the “Liebestod” from Tristan und Isolde, and, for a scene in which American soldiers are seen whistling, a popular song is rendered in whistles by the orchestra players.

Many female accompanists followed this application of “high-art” music to the serious film, particularly war films. Reviews of women’s performances for motion pictures provide documentation of their use of art music for war films.
Cora Tracey, a contralto employed at the Strand theater in New York, performed Victorian art songs in English to footage of troops in Europe;27 Maleta Bonconi, a violinist in the Strand orchestra, offered contemporary art music by European composers Hubay and Drdla.28 At the Rivoli, also in New York, female performers sang and played recent songs from England,29 the “Marseillaise,” and the “Waltz Song” from Gounod’s Mirelle.30 The musical treatment of newsreels, however, offered a notable contrast to this approach. Newsreels were censored and normally showed positive images of the Great War: soldiers on parade, climbing out of trenches to make an attack or take ground, having tea, polishing their shoes, doing exercises, practicing with machine guns. When the wounded were shown, they were recuperating in bed, merrily reading comics or popular magazines and joking with their young female nurses. Musicians used popular songs, new generic music for the cinema, and improvised music to accompany the news, which always contained more entertainment or quirky news items than it did serious elements. Rick Altman writes, “March music was virtually de rigueur with the weekly,” quoting accompanist and film music critic Eugene Ahern as saying that “I try to convey to the audience the idea of a band somewhere back of the crowd.”31 Altman holds that critics wanted newsreel music to “stress sound effects [and] descriptive music,” and Raymond Fielding cites Samuel “Roxy” Rothapfel on using preexisting music for the newsreels:

For the Topical Special, or as it is best known, the “Weekly,” we play absolutely according to the scenes used, the national airs of different countries and little bits of marches that will fit the scene. Here, of course, we deviate from our regular adaptation and go back to playing the pictures.

We pay a good deal of attention to this portion of our program and I attribute the wonderful successes of our Topical Review to the musical accompaniment.32

And as Fielding notes, some accompanists found material in photoplay albums useful: funeral marches; music for horse, automobile, or airplane races; and music for explosions or fire scenes were all appropriate for newsreels.

However, an interview with Harry Rosenthal, filmed in 1930, offers a different perspective, suggesting that much newsreel accompaniment was improvised, albeit drawing on individual performers’ personal memorized libraries of music.33 Rosenthal notes that newsreel music during this period was generally supposed to be upbeat and light, which is not unsurprising given that real footage was heavily censored to show positive images only and that some footage of the war was faked because camera operators were not allowed anywhere near the front lines or even general military installations; this is supported by research by Masha Shpolberg.34 Thus, Rosenthal’s improvisation—and likely those by many cinema
accompanists—included quotes of popular or national songs, original material, sound effects, and variations on generic musical tropes.

**Instrumentalists and Orchestras**

The performers in all-women’s orchestras for theaters have received treatment similar to that of keyboard performers. As Judith Tick has noted, all-women orchestras were nothing new at this time; several had been in existence as concert and touring groups since the 1880s. Yet we know little about these ensembles and their individual members, especially after they became regular cinema ensembles. Their move into the cinema, like that of female pianists and organists, was ensured for social and moral reasons as well as their usefulness as novelties. All-female instrumental groups—sometimes also accompanied by a singer—were being used as promotions for cinemas in the early 1910s, if not before. In late 1913, *Motion Picture News* ran an article about the use of an all-woman orchestra for the film *The Good Little Devil*: “The large stage at the Belasco Theatre was crowded with floral decorations,” wrote a reporter, “where were seated a large orchestra, comprised entirely of women, who rendered appropriate music that harmonized with the picture. In certain scenes the orchestra was silent and the audience was regaled with singing by an excellent quartet. The effect of the whole was one of much beauty.”

Caroline Nichols, who led the Boston-based women’s orchestra the Fadettes, quickly moved her orchestra from touring on the vaudeville circuit to playing in the cinema when she realized that doing so provided more regular schedules and incomes for her players. The Fadettes played for one of Rothafel’s cinemas in Minneapolis for six months in the mid-1910s; by the end of the decade, the vast majority of their engagements were for cinema accompaniment. Like the players for *The Good Little Devil*, the Fadettes were regularly hailed as excellent musicians; although over the course of the group’s existence Nichols was said to have trained more than six hundred women as professional orchestral musicians, we know the names of only a few.

With the entry of the United States into the war, women suddenly became even more viable resources for cinema accompaniment and began replacing men in theater orchestras on a regular basis. *Motion Picture News* regularly listed the names of film stars and workers who had enlisted, and in 1918 *Wid’s Daily* ran a story focusing on the work women were doing in cinema music. Titled “Rapf’s All Women Feature,” the film described a project in which women alone wrote, directed, produced, and accompanied a seven-reel film highlighting the work of women in the army, navy, and police forces. At screenings, “Rapf has made arrangements for a showing
of the picture at one of the big Broadway houses and during its run the entire staff of the theatre will be composed of women, including the publicity staff, orchestra, and attendants.” 39 As with female pianists and organists, female orchestral players were seen as improving the morals and class status of a cinema. Like keyboardists, they functioned as performers, chaperones, and arbiters of taste and values. While these roles were highly gendered, they also made headway for women’s equality as professional musicians performing “high-class” art music.

In response to the calls for high-class or already canonized classical music, however, there was an equally vocal contingent of both keyboard and orchestral accompanists advocating for the use of new music for the new medium. Over the course of 1917–18, film music critics, writers, and, gradually, more and more music directors and orchestra leaders were slowly moving to the other side of the aisle in the old-music versus new-music argument. Beynon began publishing cue sheets by S. M. Berg that increasingly included music by Berg and his colleagues such as Sol Levy, Gaston Borch, Maurice Baron (who also published as Morris Aborn), Adolf Minot, Otto Langey, and Irénée Bergé (a man, despite any confusion over his name). Despite his own art-music score for Lest We Forget, Berg was endorsing cue sheets containing entirely new music for films by September 1918.

Figure 7.2. Film music critics slowly shifted from recommending classical art music for the accompaniment of film to new pieces written specifically for use in cinemas. Cue sheet for Johanna Enlists (1918), by S. M. Berg, published in George W. Beynon’s “Music for the Picture,” Moving Picture World 37, no. 11 (1918): 1580.
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Performer-Improvisers and Performer-Composers

When cinema managers and critics of film music began to encourage the use of new music composed specifically for the medium, in addition to or in place of improvisations, they inadvertently created a new means for women to enter into composition. The female cinema musicians who used composition or composition-improvisation as their means of accompaniment were much like those who preferred preexisting music. They knew the same basic repertoire and were of the same socioeconomic class; they read the same trade publications and accompanied the same films; they were from the same geographical distribution. However, performer-improvisers strongly felt that the signifiers associated with preexisting music, particularly that from narrative works such as opera or ballet, brought unwanted cultural knowledge into the cinema. They wanted to provide music that was entertaining and communicative of a film’s plot without overshadowing the narrative on the screen. In 1915 Vermont, for example, Florence L. Currier prescreened all of the films she was to accompany, composing new musical themes for each character. Once she had created a set of basic themes for a film, Currier made detailed cue sheets for the whole movie, reiterating the themes as she saw fit and improvising, often using those themes as the basis for her improvisation. She did admit to occasionally using new generic music designed for cinema accompaniment much in the same way that accompanists who employed high-class music did—as necessary for storm scenes, battle cries, and other set pieces—but the majority of her scores were improvisations based on original ideas. In addition, Currier played the themes for each main character during the changing of reels in order to keep the musical connections fresh in the audience’s mind.

One of the most vocal proponents of original or improvised music was Alice Smythe Burton Jay. While she recommended that accompanists have both a thorough classical background and improvisatory skills, Jay was insistent that music for cinema accompaniment should closely fit the music to the action and emotions depicted on the screen without bringing any previous emotional associations with it. Jay’s position, that “music to suit the picture must not conflict” with it either by mood or because of previous associations, was one that caused frequent argument in a time when many accompanists did not see any need to correlate the music with the action, or felt that “gigging” or “kidding” a film, in which music was used as a satirical commentary on the film, was more entertaining. Jay participated in a heated exchange with composers, score compilers, publishers, and even equipment dealers. She made clear her own views on the need for matching, characteristic, instrumental music: “I fail to see where operatic selections fit any picture. . . Opera brings the words to a person’s mind, and seldom if ever fit the scene. . . My idea of music is that tones from two notes to the entire scale express life.
in every sphere, and a person to improvise correctly must have a natural dramatic ability combined with the study of the great masters." However, she found some preexisting music useful in its place:

Can we find any more fitting music for certain dance scenes than the Anitras [sic] Dance by Grieg or Asa’s Death by the same master, suited to intense classical dramatic funeral scenes, like “Valse Parisian,” by Lee S. Roberts, a modern composer, suited to light child or garden scenes. Two vastly different styles of composers, yet each one perfect in their place.

... Why not select from the cue sheet, but be wise in your selection and do not fit a western drama with society music, or Traumerie [sic] to anything but a church scene.42

Jay and her suggestions were taken seriously; she received coverage in the trade journals equal to or more than many male composers, compilers, and accompanists did during the period between 1913 and 1918. She was so devoted to the creation of new music that fitted individual motion pictures that in 1916 she established the Symthe-Jay Music Company with offices in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco for the production of music rolls that could be played in automatic instruments such as the Fotoplayer instruments (about which more below).

Of the keyboard performers who followed Jay’s philosophies of accompanying, perhaps the most famous in the United States was Rosa Rio, who died in 2010 at the age of 107. Rio began playing in her teens, mostly improvising her scores. In a 2006 interview with NPR, she said of her process:

I didn’t have a chance to see [the films] in advance. We had the new film; we ran it always on Monday mornings, generally a one o’clock show. And I faked it through. Then I would run out and get my music, or get ideas that I’d write down as I played. And then the next show, I did a good job. The next show I did a better job. By the time you played three shows a day, seven days a week, at the end of the week I really had it down perfect. And that was the end. And then I’d start over, all over from Sunday night, Monday again.

... With the theater here, I generally think about it. I go to bed and I’ll wake up around four or five o’clock in the morning with themes running through my head. And I’d grab a piece of paper and write down enough to, what I call a springboard.

I enjoy being a part of a picture. I love going into a trance and being inspired by little tiny themes. I write out everything and memorize it.43

Rio’s biography is a perfect example of the ways in which the expectations of an “accomplished” American woman, combined with the need for cinema musicians in the late 1910s and individual talent for composition and technical skills, came to influence the hybrid classical-improvisatory sound of American cinema. Born
Elizabeth Raub in 1902 in the American South, Rio was initially limited in her career choices. Rio’s parents were vehement that being a performer in the cinema was not an acceptable occupation for a woman. However, as Margalit Fox wrote in Rio’s New York Times obituary, “She persevered, and her parents relented a little. Playing in church would be fine, they decided. So would the genteel life of a children’s piano teacher.” But when, at the end of her first year of classical piano studies at Oberlin College, the dean suggested she focus her efforts elsewhere, Rio enrolled at the Eastman School of Music, which had a program in silent film accompanying. “I had gone into Cleveland,” she explained, and fallen in love with the motion picture palace:

We had gone to one of the great theaters that they were building at that time. They were absolutely gold-gilded, red carpet, green carpet. . . .

Being a southerner, I had never been into such a theater. And I was just floored. I don’t know what the picture was today, and I don’t think I was interested. But I heard a sound I had never heard before. I saw the pinpoint of a light grow larger and a console came from out of the pit, on the right hand side of the theater. And I heard theater organ for the first time in my life.

I stayed for the second show just to hear it again. And when I walked out on the street, I looked up at the sky as if to say a prayer. I said thanks. I now know what I want to be in my life. I laugh and say, as long as I can play, lift me on the bench. I’ll play. And I just couldn’t be happier.

Her combination of traditional in-home piano lessons, conservatory training, and natural imagination propelled her into cinema organist stardom. Such improvisatory practices held true for war pictures as well and provided women who lacked formal composition training a way into composition of either or both popular or art-influenced music. One composer, described as “a soldier’s mother,” Mrs. A. S. Watt, “improvised the theme which is heard in her famous march . . . ‘Pershing’s March.’” “Pershing’s March” went on to become one of the top sheet music titles of the war, was endorsed by film music critics on both sides of the old music–new music debate, and became known across the country.

Violinist Helen Ware—not to be confused with the actor of the same name—also argued that improvisation is a form of composition and that improvisers, regardless of whether they consider themselves composers, were just that. Ware wanted to revive the tradition of classical improvisation in the manner of the Romantic composers and to see the movies benefit from original music arrived at by way of improvisation as practiced in the Romantic era. Born in 1887 in Philadelphia to communist organizer Ella “Mother” Bloor, Ware studied with Sevèik and Hubay in Europe, where she became an expert on Hungarian art and traditional musics. She made her professional debut in Budapest in 1912 and was the first American
Figure 7.3. “Pershing’s March” came out of film improvisation by Mrs. A. S. Watt. Like the advertising for many pieces by women during this period, the first advertisement lists no name for the composer, and the second does not include the composer’s full name, suggesting that the work is by a male composer. From *Moving Picture World* 37, no. 11 (1918): 1579 (left); and *Moving Picture World* 37, no. 13 (1918): 1891 (right).

violinist to tour Hungary. A frequent recitalist in concert with her husband, pianist Lazlo Schwartz, Ware toured the United States twice, playing the 1684 “Soames” Stradivarius, which she owned from 1912 until 1972. Ware was positively reviewed by the *New York Times*, hailed as one of the “world’s greatest violinists” and the “Poetess of the Violin,” and the natural successor to Maud Powell.

Ware’s formally composed music—predominantly character pieces—was published by Carl Fischer along with that of Leopold Auer, Fritz Kreisler, and Maud Powell, but she, like Currier, Jay, and Rio, was foremost an exponent of improvisation in the cinema. Her advice was published in *Motion Picture Magazine* in 1919, where she, like Jay, argued for music and improvisation that followed a film’s events and dramatic trajectory and helped convey the emotions portrayed on-screen by the actors. She wrote that she had originally become interested in improvisation as a musical skill because it had been a trademark of the European composers she studied, and she saw improvisation for film as a method of composing in itself, one that worked in parallel with viewing and understanding a film.

The other day, while viewing one of the Shakespearean classics thrown on the white sheet, my attention was distracted . . . by . . . a “movie pianist,” who, truly inspired
by the changing scenes and the dramatic play of emotions, fell into improvising in a most spirited and expressive manner. . . Madame Remenyi . . . [t]he widow of the famous violinist[,] sadly commented on the fact that improvisation is a lost art in our days. . . According to Madame Remenyi, Liszt, Chopin, and Rubenstein were the great masters in the art of improvising. . . Since then, I have devoted considerable time to the study of this matter. . .

If we proceed from the theory that improvising is the musical description of mental vision, or the expression of our emotions, then we are bound to appreciate the important part that the movie may play in the revival of this lost art. . .

As the plot of the play unfolds . . . he enters into its spirit, and through the vision of it all his emotional powers are awakened, enabling him to express in music a grand, harmonious climax with as little effort as if reflecting in a gentle tonal picture the advent of the evening or the jingling of a mountain stream.

It is this logical conclusion that points to the wonderful possibilities which the movie reaches out to all aspiring musicians who wish to develop within themselves powers of improvising. . .

With the mechanical device already on the market which would record the worthiest of these improvisations, such experiment may help us to discover many a slumbering talent of great composers-to-be. Our young artists would receive encouragement by realizing the fact that they are not merely parrots in the realm of music, but have ideas of their own and a new mode of expressing the worthiest within themselves.51

Ware’s arguments that improvisation led to composition and that improvisers were composers in their own right suggest that many accompanists, particularly women, did not see themselves as creators of a new genre. Prior to the war, women published far less music than did their male accompanist counterparts, who often began their careers playing to the pictures and later left to become full-time composers of film music. There is little evidence that women followed this path from performer to (exclusive) composer. But although they were referred to or thought of themselves as accompanists rather than composers, women who created their own music for accompaniment were significant contributors to the development of the sound of the moving picture. Performers like Rio, who played in the largest picture houses for several hours a day, offered a consistent approach to scoring film, even if such scores weren’t captured on paper. In silent film accompaniment, the line between improvisation and composition thinned, recalling the compositional practices of much earlier composers.

The sudden need for female musicians to replace men who joined the war effort, combined with the rapidly growing popularity of film, enabled many women to publish their compositions, which might not have been written or sold if not for film. Over the course of the silent era, more works by women composers—who may
or may not have begun their musical careers as accompanists—were included in collections and sheet music offerings for the cinema than before the war, although they never came close to equaling the output by men. Nonetheless, it is possible to assemble a list of the more prolific female composers for the cinema, and more are being discovered as research in this area continues. Theodora Dutton (Blanche Ray Alden), Patricia Collinge, Irene Varley, and Alma Sanders all contributed to the published body of work designed to be used for accompanying films. Their works were included in photoplay albums of generic music alongside those of male composers, but as yet very little additional information is known about them beyond some basic biographical data. Dutton/Alden (1870–1934) is known for being the only female composer in the Suzuki Piano Repertoire; Collinge (1892–1974) was an Irish American actress who made her American stage debut in 1907, eventually appearing opposite Douglas Fairbanks onstage and in a number of sound films starting with The Little Foxes in 1941; Varley (1876–1975) appears to have been a pianist, originally from England, who registered a number of compositions with the US Copyright Office between 1917 and 1941, and Sanders (1882–1956) composed songs in the 1910s and 1920s and nine full musicals that were produced on Broadway between 1918 and 1947, some of which set texts by her husband, Monte Carlo (Hans von Holstein). These women, their careers, and works deserve full research consideration, and they are undoubtedly just a few of the female performer-composers who wrote for silent film music and other genres in the first part of the twentieth century.

Other Contributions to Silent Cinema Sound

In addition to purely instrumental music for film accompaniment, many pieces intended for descriptive use in the cinema were published with a set of lyrics—usually related to a film or used as part of a film’s intertitles—for the primary melody line, in the hopes that attaching a song or several songs to a particular film would make the sheet music for that film more marketable. Silent films were often promoted through the publication and sale of these songs for voice and piano: movie stars’ photographs or stills from the film were prominently featured on the covers of songs to strengthen the connection between a film and the music.

The war effort encouraged women who had not previously composed for the cinema to do so. Indeed, the cinema constantly needed new music. Predictions by film music critics that that no one would be playing German music in concert halls or cinemas came true to a certain extent, and this was seen as particularly dire, as an enormous amount of the preexisting music packaged into albums for film accompaniment was German. There was, therefore, a tremendous need for
politically acceptable music and generic music, and women contributed significantly to this repertoire, particularly in the form of songs. The resulting body of work includes a large subgroup that directly addresses the events in Europe through patriotic songs, marches, and dances.

The works of female songwriters whose works were performed in the cinema were well known during the war. Triangle Films even produced a five-reel feature featuring Alma Rubens as a New York songwriter in the 1918 film *The Love Brokers*. War songs by women tend to fall into several subgenres. Some titles indicate the force of popular belief in the war by having narrators proudly announce the participation and sacrifice of their sons, husbands, or sweethearts. There were also calls for women to aid the effort. And yet another subgenre by women is narrated by young women waiting for their soldier boyfriends or husbands to return. But the importance of women’s compositions does not lie in any radical divergence from mainstream songwriting or a new sensibility applied to the war song. They are much like other war songs and conform with codes of women’s war songs—the song of the lover/wife/sister/mother who yearns for/prays for/misses/mourns a man in the military—established by the Civil War. What is crucial is that such songs enabled female lyricists and composers to seek and receive some of the same performance opportunities and patronage enjoyed by male composers.

Women also contributed to silent film music through new inventions and innovations. In the period publications, two women in particular stand out: Alice Jay, the improviser-composer mentioned above, and Carrie Hetherington. Jay, in her zeal for attaching appropriate music to a film, rightly discovered that there was a market for music that was professionally matched to films and distributed in a way that did not allow for alterations to the cue sheet or poor performances. On the heels of the positive reception of Joseph Carl Breil’s fully synchronized score for *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915, Jay announced that she would begin producing sound recordings synched to individual films. “Pictures will be screened in the factory,” wrote a journalist on Jay’s venture, describing the process in which Jay created an individual accompaniment for each film and had it replicated for playing in mechanical pianos, “and music made to fit the pictures prior to release.” Jay herself composed and improvised themes and incidental music for individual film titles and recorded them using a Masteroll perforated machine. (Saint-Saëns also recorded using this machine, and Arthur Nikitsch and many other conductors, composers, and performers recorded using them as well. And player pianos are not quite dead as technology goes: you can even get John Adams’s *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* on a piano roll.)

The *Music Trade Review* believed that this practice would surpass even Breil’s foray into synchronized scoring accomplished through the distribution of full orchestral
parts for a fully synchronized score for *The Birth of a Nation*. In a notice titled “The Smythe Jay Patent,” its reporter wrote:

Now comes Alice Smythe Jay, organist, of Aberdeen, State of Washington, with patents on a method for recording suitable music. The patents develop means for keeping the film operator and the music together by means of cueings displayed on the film. The inventor’s claims include those of piano or orchestra scores developed from the record made by the musician while playing the picture in the first place. It should seem, therefore, that everything has been thought of.

... Certainly it appears that a step forward has been taken and that the long-prophesied art of synchronizing the film with suitable and universally available music has been worked out. How far it will be practical no one can say without seeing the whole process. But evidence is presented which appears to demonstrate that the idea is sound and that it can be made completely commercially practical.55

![Figure 7.4. Alice Jay's patent application for her piano roll system for providing original synchronized music for individual films. From US1381641A, US Patent Office, patented June 14, 1921.](image)
Jay officially went into business with Masteroll in 1915, when she recorded a score for *The Bank Messenger* and a selection of generic incidental pieces. However, according to Jay, Masteroll disagreed with her film-projection speeds and other details of her recordings, and the company destroyed some three hundred piano rolls—each for a particular film title—without Jay’s permission. According to the *San Jose (CA) News*, “A nervous breakdown followed this incident and during the time [Jay] was ill the company . . . did a flourishing business” using unharmed rolls made by Jay prior to her collapse. Jay sued Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the eventual owner of Masteroll, for $1 million in damages, but she was unsuccessful. Nonetheless, cinema managers eagerly embraced Jay’s method. Her proposed solution to poorly played accompaniments, nonsynchronized music, and theaters lacking the funds or desire to hire a live accompanist helped push the development and distribution of fully synchronized scores for film and the further exploration of sound-on-disc technology for providing music, sound, and speech for film.

Like Jay, Carrie Hetherington began her career as a performer-composer and cue sheet creator. Hetherington helped invent the American Photo Player Company’s Fotoplayer. She described the instrument in *Moving Picture World*: “This instrument is composed of piano, reed-organ, pipe-organ, chimes, orchestral bells and all necessary drummers’ traps; is played by regular 88-note player rolls, but has two separate tracker boards which enables the operator to make the quick changes without stopping the music. An expert operator can follow the picture so closely as to make a photoplay almost talk.”

As cinema orchestras began to shrink due to the war, Hetherington’s remarkable instrument became popular, allowing a single operator to run a prerecorded roll, add in additional musical material using the keyboard as desired, and provide orchestral sounds, percussion, and sound effects. Hetherington’s company made between ten and twelve thousand Fotoplayers between 1910 and 1928, and Hetherington was an important part of the instrument’s success, traveling the country to provide demonstrations, oversee installations, and work with cinema managers to

**Figure 7.5.** The American Fotoplayer as advertised in *Moving Picture World* 21, no. 3 (1914): 495.
customized their instruments. Rolls for the Fotoplayer included popular marches and generic titles, such as “Mushy Music,” “Fire! Fire! Fire!,” “Drunk Soused Spree,” “A Rustic Festival,” and “The Roaring Volcano.”

Conclusion

The information I present here is only the beginning of a much larger and deeper inquiry into the roles of women as cinema musicians. Already, it is clear that women played an important part in shaping the sound of the early cinema and the sound of patriotism during the Great War. Their accompaniments, which used already existing music, new compositions by themselves and others, and their own improvisations, shaped and helped define the musical sensitivities of the time. Accompanists created music and approaches to using music, and these became part of the audience's expectations for film music, established musical standards for film scores that would carry through into sound films, educated listeners as to different types of music and musical genres and to musical traditions relating to affect and meaning, and demonstrated how music could serve as a narrative and interpretative force in the cinema. Women designed methods of matching music to the action on the screen, developed ways of supplying cinemas with synchronized sound for pictures, and invented machines that allowed a single woman to represent the sounds of an orchestra for accompanying a film. Further research will undoubtedly uncover more documentation and materials related to women’s musical careers in early film and the effects women’s creativity had on cinematic music as a whole.

Notes


3. While periodicals such as Exhibitors Herald, Motion Picture Magazine, Moving Picture News, Moving Picture World, Universal Weekly, and Moving Picture Weekly occasionally included news about, reviews of, and materials by female cinema organists, other forms of documentation suggest the wider scope of women’s activities in film music. American Organist ran a number of articles and reviews by and about female film accompanists. Music periodicals for more general audiences, such as the Musical Courier, and music magazines aimed directly at women, including Melody, which specifically marketed itself as “for the Photoplay Musician and the Musical Home,” frequently include mention of women cinema musicians. Advertisements in newspapers listing the musicians employed by various theaters attest to the numbers of women performing as film accompanists. For detailed indexing of these resources, see Kendra Preston Leonard, Music for Silent Film: A Guide to North American Resources (Madison, WI: Music Library Association and A-R Editions, 2016).


5. R. H. Pray, “Good and Bad M.P. Theaters,” Motion Picture Magazine 7, no. 6 (1914): 102–3. Material in brackets is from the original source, albeit in different lines, and added here for clarity and brevity. The term accomplished was overwhelmingly applied to women musicians of this period and rarely used to describe men.


10. Early cue sheets in magazines include those by Ernst Luz for Motion Picture News in 1915, George W. Beynon in Moving Picture World starting in 1919, and L. G. Del Castillo in American Organist in 1922.


12. As musical accompaniment for moving pictures became more popular, cinemas often invested in sheet music anthologies containing generic pieces appropriate for typical movie scenarios. Theaters accumulated significant libraries of music, many of which were discarded or lost after the transition to integrated sound. For examples of these, see http://www.sfsma.org/ARK/22915/tag/album/.


31. E. A. Ahern, “Play with Your Brains as Well as Your Fingers,” *Motion Picture News* 11, no. 7 (1914): 47, quoted in Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 382. For other perspectives on marches as upbeat signifiers, see the chapters in this volume by Patrick Warfield and William Brooks.
35. Bowers and Tick, *Women Making Music*, 329–31. Women’s string orchestras were also widespread in Britain; see Christina Bashford’s chapter in this volume.
46. Rio made a career in the silents until the talkies arrived, both playing and composing, and then she went into radio and television. While she played for screenings of silent films her entire life, she also worked as an accompanist, often for Broadway shows, for government programs during the Second World War, and as the staff organist at NBC Radio and ABC Radio, where she played for *The Shadow* and various soap operas. With the revival of interest in silent films, Rio began playing for them once again both in live showings and on recordings, which were featured on DVD releases of silents.
53. For a related discussion of women composers, genres, and significance, see William Brooks’s discussion in chapter 9 of this volume.
55. “Securing Suitable Music for the Motion Picture,” *Music Trade Review* 73, no. 9 (1921): [15].