MUSIC FOR THE KINGDOM OF SHADOWS

CINEMA ACCOMPANIMENT IN THE AGE OF SPIRITUALISM

KENDRA PRESTON LEONARD
Music for the Kingdom of Shadows: Cinema Accompaniment in the Age of Spiritualism
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This project offers additional information on topics in the text as links. All links open in new windows. If you come across a dead link, please email me at kendraprestonleonard [at] gmail [dot] com.

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Introduction

1. In 2016, I gave a talk at the University of North Texas about the school’s unique collection of music for silent film. The collection includes a significant number of rare pieces that were indicated for use in movies depicting manifestations of the human afterlife, including Bert A. Anthony’s “The Ghost in the Haunted Room” (1924); Walter Broy’s “Ghost Scene” (1926); and “Phantom Visions; Skeleton Dance” (1920) by Ellsworth Stevenson. At the time I understood that this music would have been used primarily for “spook tales”—the forerunners of modern supernatural horror films, designed to create suspense and convey shock, the frightening, and the gruesome. Additional research led me to understand that while there were certainly plenty of such early horror films made during the silent period (1895-1927) and a large body of music to accompany them, there existed an equally large body of repertoire using rather different musical approaches and tropes for moving pictures focused specifically on ghosts or spirits. These movies telling takes of the supernatural were not horror films that featured grotesque devils or menacing demons. Nor were they in the same mold of the film adaptations of The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde from 1920, for example, which is horror rooted in science fiction, or the psychological horror of The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari, also from 1920. Lacking the violence and grotesquerie of horror, these ghost movies were clearly not horror; as Thomas M. Sipos writes, “a horror story requires an unnatural threat, which is to say, in addition to being unnatural, the threat must be a threat.” (Sipos 2010, 6). Instead, they focused on the positive, comforting, concerned, or humorous capacities in which spirits appeared.

2. The non-horror supernatural film as a genre and the music for it are closely connected to two entwined cultural phenomena of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the popularity of the Gothic aesthetic in media entertainments and the spiritualist movement. For the purposes of this project, I call these non-horror moving pictures in which the supernatural appears “spirit films.” Some spirit films, especially those that adapt plays or other works of literature, draw heavily upon the Gothic aesthetic, in which the apparitions signified the presence of harmful secrets or hidden motives among the living resulting their need to warn or protect the living and their interests. (Parkin-Gournelas 2002, 132)

3. In this book, I explore the connections between music for early movies (1895-1927) involving the supernatural in the context of the culture of the time in regard to supernatural beliefs and entertainments, particularly spiritualism. As Simone Natale has documented, the rise of the cinema is closely related to popular entertainments that relied on the uncanny to appeal to audiences. (Natale 2016, 8) The magic lantern show, a form of proto-cinematic entertainment developed in the seventeenth century, linked images of ghosts, demons, and gruesome scenes with the performance of live music and sounds designed to create a sense of suspense and eeriness. The phantasmagoria specialized in showing such images in its necromantic-themed shows of illuminated images and included music and sound effects intended to provide an otherworldly atmosphere. After the inception of spiritualism in 1848, its system of beliefs and methods of communicating with the dead influenced not only the magic lantern show and the phantasmagoria, but also the burgeoning art of photography. While spirit photography was shown to be fraudulent, pioneers of the moving picture embraced its techniques as part of creating a new genre, and this genre needed its own
musical accompaniment. Spirit mediums—individuals who claimed to contact the dead—regularly used sound and music as part of their séances, performances in the form of rituals in which they facilitated communication between spirits and the living. Just as the technology of the magic lantern slide featuring the supernatural developed into the moving picture depicting the same, so too did the music and sounds of the séance and phantasmagoria carry into the accompaniment provided for films shown in the cinema.

4. Women played central roles in spiritualism and cinema music, developing the sounds of the séance and the music that accompanied spirit films. In Chapter One, I examine the connections between mediums and cinema musicians and the ways in which these similarities contributed to the development of the music for spirit films. The roles of the séance and the cinema, and their respective live entertainers, the spirit medium and the cinema accompanist (also known as a photoplayer), had significantly intersecting elements and similar functions as professional performers during a period of transition in the United States in terms of women’s employment, social paradigms, and the development of the media entertainment industry. Both the séance and the moving picture required an audience’s willing suspension of disbelief and an open mind. Both created liminal spaces accessed through obvious physical and atmospheric thresholds. Both promised entertainments in which the audiences would experience the uncanny, the presence of something that is both living and not living, animate and inanimate.

5. The occupations of medium and accompanist were also ones in which women were not only successful but also frequently considered to be better practitioners than men. Both jobs were populated by roughly the same demographic of educated, Protestant whites from the middle and upper classes. The highly gendered educations and expectations of these classes of white women developed in the late nineteenth century, intended to prepare women for domesticity, were, ironically, exactly the training they needed to succeed as professional public entertainers in the early twentieth century as mediums and musicians. (Leonard 2018) The assumption that women had a more sensitive nature than men informed the idea that women were inherently better conduits for spirit communication and selecting appropriate music for film. (Gutierrez 2009, 4) Women’s education and training, based on the fin-de-siècle code of morals that held up accomplished women—that prepared for domestic responsibilities, which included music-making—as respectable models provided mediums and cinema accompanists with considerable power in determining the ethics and practices of their workplaces. Both cinemas and spiritualists sought to imbue their entertainments with respectability, which they achieved in part by employing or promoting women who exhibited the traits of “true womanhood” instilled through this training. At the same time, women working as mediums or accompanists could, as Susan M. Cruea writes, “exploit their moral empowerment” and become autonomous forces within their entertainment communities, using their positions to articulate political and social platforms. (Cruea 2005, 190)

6. The performance of mediumship and cinema accompaniment also intersected in ways in which other professions taken up by women did not. Schoolteachers, nurses, stenographers, and secretaries were always on view in their employment, and their visibility was often crucial to their success in those roles. Both mediums and cinema accompanists engaged in physical performance as well, but at the same time had to give up the appearance of physical autonomy and embodiment as part of their work. This phenomenon of being both present and absent contributed to the uncanny in mediums’ and accompanists’ work, and speaks
to the transitional and mutable aspects of women’s work outside of the home during this period.

7. Finally, both mediums and cinema accompanists were in unique positions to function as tastemakers, innovators, and technological and artistic leaders. Working in their respective genres of entertainment, women mediums and accompanists developed new practices in their fields that can be traced to the present day. They created new forms of and uses for technology to aid in their work, which has similarly endured; and established rituals and standards still obvious in present-day supernatural entertainments.

8. In Chapter Two, using sheet music, cue sheets, photoplay albums, and music from journals that was employed for the silent film, I examine the sources for music used for spirit films and analyze three works that exemplify how new pieces written for the cinema seek to reference the established sounds of the séance and ghosts on stage.

9. Sound has always been an integral part of the séance: the first American spirit mediums, Kate, Margaret, and Leah Fox, communicated with spirits through rapping sounds starting in private in 1848 and in public the following year, and before long others began doing the same. Spirit mediums communicate with the spirit world by one or various means. There were two basic types of mediums: mental mediums and physical mediums. Mental mediums sense the spirit world and communicate through telepathy with spirits or allow spirits to take over their voices to communicate with the living. Physical mediums, also called materializing mediums, produce material artifacts from the spirit world (often called ectoplasm), manipulate physical objects (such as rapping on a table or making it float or playing musical instruments), and allow spirits to inhabit their entire bodies and use them to communicate with the living.

10. Spirit mediums held séances for both small and large audiences, ranging from a small “circle” — formed out of a group of eight to twelve friends and friends of friends — to appearances in music halls or other public venues. Attendees, known as sitters, all paid to participate.
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Mediums were responsible for creating an atmosphere conducive to the channeling of spirits; entering into a trance, either at a séance table around which the audience sat or in a curtained-off area of the room called a cabinet; and facilitating communication, either physically or mentally, between the spirits and the living. Séance sitters expected séances to include demonstrations some kind of physical activity on the part of the spirits, personalized messages from the spirits, a question and answer session with contacted spirits, or a combination of these. (Warner 2008, 288) Sound- or music-making was both an established practice in séances as a way of enticing the spirits to visit and an acceptable form of spirit activity: mediums and sitters often sang hymns, hoping to attract the attention of spirits, and spirits both played instruments themselves and guided mediums in playing instruments in which they were untrained. (Natale 2016, 25) Accompanists used this repertoire to create the sound of the séance in the cinema.

11. In the third chapter, I focus on the music used to accompany early films based on works of literature in which ghosts play an important role as signifiers of danger or messengers of warning, particularly adaptations of Shakespeare and A Christmas Carol. I examine the connections between the ghosts within classic and gothic literature, their adaptations for the screen, and the role of music in communicating with and for such spirits.

12. Shortened versions of Shakespeare’s plays were extremely popular in the early cinema: not only were the plays in the public domain, but such adaptations helped confer the imprimatur of art or high culture on the nascent cinema industry, something the industry continually sought as film as an entertainment developed.
While Shakespeare might at first seem an odd choice for representing the Gothic, Horace Walpole, author of the Gothic novel The Castle of Otranto and often credited as the originator of the Gothic entertainment, claimed that Shakespeare, particularly Hamlet and Macbeth, inspired him in creating the genre. (Desmet and Williams 2009, 3) Marjean Purinton and Marliss C. Desens have written that Shakespeare was “increasingly ‘Gothicized’ during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the visual, historical, and critical evidence from live stagings and film bears this out. (2009, 87) Filmmakers interested in the cinematography tricks developed by early filmmaker Georges Méliès such as showing spirits walking through walls, fading away, and similar actions found films of Hamlet and Macbeth ideal vehicles for using or improving such effects. Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol was a similarly popular work for filmmakers seeking to display technical skills, and was repeatedly committed to film during the silent era due to audience demand.

13. I suggest that the ghostly messengers who bring warnings or condemnations to the living bridge the gap between the contented ghost and the malevolent one. In being tasked with communicating the difference between more pleasant spirits and these apparitions, women musicians created and called upon different repertoires than those for friendlier ghosts, contributing to a distinct musical lineage for the gothic film. Although cinema musicians accompanying Shakespeare could and often did draw from pre-existing stage repertoire that referenced the supernatural (such as Faust and Der Freischütz), they had other options as well. The early modern English music revival coincided with the development of the motion picture, allowing accompanists to select music that used traditional melodies, forms, and textures from the early modern or sought to replicate them in some way, including music that signified the supernatural. Nonetheless, many composers also wrote a good deal of new music to communicate the presence and roles of ghosts who gave witness to the murky historical antecedents, mysteries, and eerie scenes in Shakespearean and other Gothicized films in which spirits play an important role.
The ghost of Old Hamlet, in a very Gothic film of the play by Cinematograph Film, 1913.

14. Finally, in Chapter Four, I undertake an assessment of the musical legacies of the work done by women mediums and cinema musicians, using the score for a modern spirit film as a lens through which their influences can be clearly discerned. The work of the spirit medium and silent film accompanist produced a rich sonic tradition for non-threatening apparitions in silent film that developed into the soundtracks for the ghosts in Topper (1937), The Ghost and Mrs. Muir (1947), Ghost (1990), and A Ghost Story (2017), among many others. I argue that the scores for these films originate from a different point than those for horror. Using textbooks for silent film accompaniment from the 1910s and 1920s, I demonstrate how the scores for spirit films and horror movies have changed little since that time.

15. Ultimately, it is my hope that this book helps contextualize, explain, and interpret the complex relationships between music, performance, gender, entertainment, belief, and media during the early twentieth century.

Spirits and Spiritualism in America

16. Interest in spirits in America can be traced to November 1849, when sisters Margaret (Maggie) and Kate
Fox held their first public séance. Americans from all classes and backgrounds were swept up in the desire to believe in and contact the supernatural. Spirit mediums, individuals—usually women—who claimed to be able to communicate with the dead, emerged in every state and town, offering private and/or public sessions in which they spoke to and for the departed. From the Fox sisters’ very first spirit communications, these séances employed sound as an essential element, and more complex sound and music soon followed as an expected part of sittings held by others. For the Fox sisters, spirits communicated through “rappings,” cracking or knocking noises that appeared to come from within walls, under floors, or on the surfaces of tables: “table-rapping” became a synonym for spirit communication. In this use of sound, David Chapin writes, the Fox sisters “created a format for spiritual manifestation that appealed to a nineteenth century audience.” (Chapin 2000, 161) The sounds—and their sources—were mysterious but not threatening, which allowed for audiences to interpret the sounds however they liked, much as they did performances of music.

17. The Fox sisters became an in-demand act in homes and theaters across the United States, and other individuals soon claimed to have similar mediumistic powers. The séance—in which mediums and a small group of audience members gathered in order to witness the medium’s communications with the dead—soon developed into a significant trade. Mediums could advertise their services anywhere and create instant businesses. Those who wished to develop mediumistic powers could receive training from established mediums or through the mail; an entire industry blossomed around the séance, selling devices through which the spirits could better speak with séance attendees and materials that mediums could use to better convince their clients of the presence of the dead.
18. The séance as entertainment became popular across the nation. Mediums soon started performing not just in dark parlors but also on the stage, and in both venues the actions that took place became more and more involved and extravagant. Spirits appeared and disappeared, touched members of the audience, and mediums produced “ectoplasm” from their bodies, evidence that the spirits had inhabited them physically. And spirits took to playing instruments in large numbers.

The Sounds of the Séance

19. The séance of the nineteenth century was by no means a quiet affair. Today we might imagine those taking part in a séance as sitting in a dark and hushed room, waiting for the sounds and appearances from the beyond to begin, but séances were more often lively events full of music and noise. While the lights were turned down so as to obscure the movements of the medium and/or their assistants in creating the performance, sound was essential and music was often expected. Steven Connor has written

As they sat in the darkness or semi-darkness, the members of the séance would see much less than they would touch, taste, smell, and, most importantly, hear. The experience of heightened and attentive listening which is
so central a part of the séance renders the participant at once passively exposed to and intimately enclosed within a shared space of audition which can perhaps be interpreted in the light of the infantile experience of the ‘sonorous envelope’ or bath of sound analysed by Didier Anzieu. (Steven Connor, “The Machine in the Ghost: Spiritualism, Technology and the ‘Direct Voice,’” in Buse and Stott 1999, 208)

20. The sounds and music for these events could lean towards the religious or delight in the profane. Many participants at more religious séances called the spirits to join them through hymn-singing, as described by “an Eye-Witness,” who chronicled a séance beginning with sacred music:

_Séance commenced at 2 o’clock. The sitters, being about 30 in number, being all seated, we commenced by singing, the medium being quickly entranced by his guide “Abram.” He told us show to regulate the light. We sat and sang at intervals for about half-an-hour …_ (Medium and Daybreak: A Weekly Journal Devoted to the History, Phenomena, Philosophy and Teachings of Spiritualism, July 8, 1881, 429)

21. In her book _Phantasmagoria_, Marina Warner relates the claim of a medium, Mrs. Deane, who “often encouraged her sitters to join in a hymn, with her, as ‘the vibrations caused by singing are helpful in the production of psychic phenomena.’” (Warner 2008, 244) Hymn-singing, in addition to helping cover any noises made by the medium in her preparation of paraphernalia for producing ocular and aural proof of ghosts, also strengthened perception of the movement as a religious one. Cathy Gutierrez argues, in her study of spiritualism as an organized religion, that it was the “religious articulation of the American Renaissance,” and thus mirrored the European renaissance in its engagement of both belief in the supernatural as a means of achieving personal happiness and satisfaction, especially during difficult times, and emerging technologies that created doubt in the paranormal. Mediums who enacted religious practices such as hymn-singing at their séances tapped into the emotions of those who feared technological and scientific progress.

22. For those who believed that technology was the very means through which spirits were communicating with the living—electricity was thought by many to be the conduit between worlds—the music of séances was more often secular in nature. Beth A. Robertson notes that playing a phonograph to attract the spirits was just as common as singing hymns. Many of the dead seemed to like popular song; Robertson documents the case of a spirit called Walter who especially enjoyed pop songs featuring the saxophone, which was played to summon him. (Robertson 2016, 76-7) Other ghosts conducted entire concerts at séances: Natale writes that at one medium’s séances, “spirit concerts, music performed with numerous instruments, including the trumpet, accordion, and percussion instruments, was attributed to spirit agency” (2016, 25) and that the performances of a medium family “could include guitars and tambourines, as well as violins, horns, and bells.” (30) Some mediums, not content with strumming a guitar or playing the piano or violin in their portrayals of spirits,
were intrigued by the phonograph, turning it on and off and using selected recordings to create spirit communications at séances. (Rotman 2008, 117) The presence of musical instruments was so common at séances that pieces of music inspired by them were popular even before the advent of the moving picture.

Cover of “The Dark Seance Polka,” c. 1880, showing mediums moving luminescent instruments in a séance

Spirits and the Early Cinema

23. The cinema and the supernatural immediately took to one another. As numerous historians have described, film provided the ultimate means of creating and displaying the uncanny, and the proto-filmic entertainments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as the magic lantern and phantasmagoria allowed for a near-seamless transition from all-live spectral entertainment to the part-film, part-live (music) of the motion picture show. Spiritualists, as Murray Leeder writes, “long used to framing new developments in science as fresh evidence for their rhetorical arsenal,” also took to the cinema. Just as they believed in spirit photography, spiritualists, always looking for evidence, were enthralled with the possibilities offered by the cinema and immediately claimed it as a site of potential religious experience. (Leeder 2015, 6)

24. Proponents and performers of spiritualism were, as Gutierrez documents, “interested in machines that could legitimize their project,” (Gutierrez 2009, 65) and Simone Natale has argued “the rise of the spiritualist movement as a religious and cultural phenomenon was closely connected to the contemporary evolution of the media entertainment industry.” (Natale 2016, 1) Photography and later the moving image were both embraced as products of “machines would both usher in the future and provide evidence of their claims,”
Although “machinery was also implicated in entertainment.” (Gutierrez 2009, 46) In 1860, spiritualism as a legitimate belief (rather than as an entertainment) was briefly advanced thanks to developing technology when William H. Mumler invented spirit photography, a technique of making multiple exposures on film, resulting in images that seemed to show the presence of ghosts among living portrait sitters. Dozens of other photographers followed suit, and while much of the public soon realized that these photographs were fraudulent, some—most famously, author Arthur Conan Doyle—refused to doubt the validity of the images. The popularity of spirit photography and the constant development of new techniques for creating photographic images meant that when film was invented in 1895 and as it progressed technologically, it too became a site of supernatural visions. Although spiritualism in America was most popular between 1849 and 1870, as Julian Holloway notes, “subsequent revivals of spirit communication occurred in the 1890s and after World War I.” (Holloway 2006, 182) Desperate to find meaning in the deaths of the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic and the Great War, the bereaved sought contact with the dead. This fin-de-siècle and early twentieth-century coincidence of belief in spiritualism and the rise of the moving picture allowed for considerable exchange between the two phenomena, including the use of sound and music. As Leeder documents, “from W. T. Stead’s citation of ‘The Kinetiscope [sic] of Nature’ and ‘The Kinetiscope [sic] of the Mind’ in 1896 to spiritualist Dr. Guy Bogart visiting the set of The Bishop of the Ozarks (1923), a film with a pro-spiritualist theme, and becoming ‘convinced he saw a real spirit manifest itself on the set to complement the film’s special effects,’ proponents of communication with the dead argued their case for the entire length of the silent era.” (Leeder 2015, 6)

24. Moving pictures, as numerous scholars have written since, are the ultimate display of the uncanny: the figures shown in them are neither living nor dead, were both objects and not, and existed in both the time the images were captured and when they were shown and re-shown. In 1896, writer Maxim Gorky attended a showing of a film made by French brothers Louis and Auguste Lumière depicting everyday life on the screen. Astonished by what he had seen, Gorky wrote perhaps the most famous response to the emerging art of the cinema, directly citing its uncanny abilities:

Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows. Everything there—the earth, the trees, the people, the water and the air—is dipped in monotonous grey. It is not life but its shadow, it is not motion but its soundless spectre. (Quoted in Mandy Merck, “The Medium of Exchange,” in Buse and Stott 1999, 168.)

25. Film provided for the existence of true revenants—defined by Derrida as those that come back—as well as those acknowledged as human creations for the purposes of entertainment. (Buse and Stott 1999, 11) It is not surprising, therefore, that some of the very earliest experiments with the moving picture should include apparitions of the dead, doubling or reiterating the medium’s uncanny effect and giving birth to the idea of hauntology, what Simon Reynolds describes as “ghostly reminders of lost time and the elusiveness of memory.” (Reynolds 2011, 329)

26. Early filmmakers were also fascinated with the possibilities of the moving picture and the uncanny. The Lumière brothers and Méliès began producing science fiction and fantasy films, including those featuring the supernatural, using various kinds of trick photography from the very beginnings of the art. These earliest supernatural films were often more invested in visual tricks than plot, and involved a variety of supernatural
figures, including witches and devils. By the end of the first decade of film, motion pictures involving the supernatural had split into two camps: those that served as the progenitors of the horror movie, featuring monsters, suspense, and violence as key elements, and those with a spiritualist bent, which while using many of the same visual effects as the monster movies, took a very different path in intention. These latter films sought to provide uplifting stories of communications with the departed in ways that assuaged grievers and counseled believers by offering examples of positive, feel-good séances. Both types of movie were plentiful: monster movies number in the thousands, and as John T. Soister, Henry Nicolella, Steve Joyce, and Harry Long note, “while not quite a dime a dozen, pictures dealing with Spiritualism were fairly plentiful during the late 1910s and 1920s.” (Soister et al. 2012, 36)

Filmmakers soon discovered that to include representations of actual ghosts, and not just what seemed ghostly, on film, could be enormously profitable, particularly given the late nineteenth century’s pervasive practices and interests in death, mourning culture, and communication with the dead. In 1898, the Lumière brothers produced a short film showing a dancing skeleton, *Le squelette joyeux*. The success of the film led to the development of a new genre, and “spook tales” quickly became a favorite topic for filmmakers. As a result, the ghosts and demons of the screen encompassed a broad spectrum of representations, ranging from the mischievous to the melancholy to the malicious, and hundreds of motion pictures involving supernatural figures were made during the silent era, roughly 1895-1927. The majority of these films, when exhibited, were accompanied by music and sound.

Indeed, how the cinematic undead were presented and received relied not only on the connections between spiritualism and the theater and popular print culture, but also the music used to accompany films dealing with the supernatural. Robert Alford has noted the importance, in this genre, of making “visual components of the [silent] cinema […] understood through sound” in films featuring the uncanny. (Alford 2015, 186) The public’s desire for magic to be real heavily influenced the development of the spirit film and the music that accompanied it in the cinema.

Music in the Silent Cinema

By 1908, the cinema industry, after considerable debate about whether moving pictures should be accompanied by music at all, had largely decided that doing so was not only acceptable, but essential. Although debates about what kinds of music were appropriate for film lasted well into the sound era, filmmakers and others agreed that accompanimental music served a narrative function and assisted in establishing geographical, chronological, and other loci both acousmatically and within the diegesis of a film. New musical industries sprung up to serve the needs of cinemas and motion picture production houses. As Richard Abel, Rick Altman, Julie Hubbert, Martin Marks, and other scholars of silent film music and sound have documented, there were no standardized practices for supplying music for films. (Abel and Altman 2001; Altman 2004; Hubbert 2011; Marks 1997) Music for accompanying films initially came from vaudeville music libraries, popular song, pre-existing 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. Works for “hurry” or “gallop” were quick in tempo, mimicked the sound of hoof beats 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. (Rapee 1970, 2)

30. At the same time, some accompanists—also known as photoplayers—improvised throughout an entire film, created their own motifs to use for each picture they accompanied, and essentially 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. (Simon 2006) 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 (“Edison Issues Music Cues” 1913); Mutual Film Company did so in 1917 (“Mutual to Provide Music Cue Service with Features” 1917); and other companies followed.

31. These suggestions from Edison were not terribly sophisticated: the recommendations for a nine-scene film titled *How the Landlord Collected His Rent* were “1. March, brisk; 2. Irish jig; 3. Begin with Andante, finish with Allegro; 4. Popular Air; 5. Ditto; 6. Andante with Lively at finish; 7. March (same as No. 1); 8. Plaintive; 9. Andante (Use March of No. 1).” (Marks 1997, 68) The Cameo Music Service Corporation, based in New York City, issued somewhat more sophisticated “Thematic Music Cue Sheets” for more than twenty movie studios (Altman 2004, 353), and the Chicago-based Synchronized Scenarios Music Company also offered cues for numerous filmmakers. (*Music Trades* 1921, 39) These cue sheets included not just the name of the piece for each cue, but also a short incipit of the melody for the accompanist to harmonize and extend as needed. [See Fig. I.3] Around the same time, film magazines also began publishing cue sheets created by the editors of their music columns or music departments. Cue sheets in magazines include those by Ernst Luz for *Motion Picture News*, which began publishing them in 1915; George W. Beynon in *Moving Picture World*, starting in 1919; and Lloyd G. DelCastillo, who started creating cue sheets for publication in *American Organist* in 1922. (Leonard 2016, 45, 63, 74)
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<th>Music by</th>
<th>Duration</th>
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<td>AT SCREENING</td>
<td>Value Dramatique (Rapée)</td>
<td>1½ Min.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>HAVING DISCUSSED WILLS</td>
<td>Huetamo (Ancliffe)</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>JUNE DARCY</td>
<td>Deux Petites Danseuses (Levy)</td>
<td>3½ Min.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>WALLY ENTERS LUNCH ROOM</td>
<td>The Girl Friend (Rodgers)</td>
<td>1¾ Min.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>FARBER ENTERS SALOON</td>
<td>A Mysterious Event (Zamechik)</td>
<td>2¼ Min.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>HERE'S WHERE I GET MYSELF A WALTON</td>
<td>Affollement (Ourdine)</td>
<td>2 Min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>WALLY JUMPS OVER COUNTER-ESCAPES</td>
<td>Pursuite (Fasse)</td>
<td>3 Min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>WALLY SNEAKS INTO BARN</td>
<td>Agitated Misterioso (Rapée)</td>
<td>½ Min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>THE RECEPTION COMMITTEE</td>
<td>Rodeo Love (Raymond)</td>
<td>2 Min.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A typical cue sheet, showing cue number, visual or intertitle cue, musical incipit, and duration

32. During the silent era, 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 pre-existing music of any kind, although some did contain a single notable pre-existing theme or popular song, often included for marketing purposes. Nathaniel D. Mann composed the first such score for the 1908 film *The Fairylogue and Radio-Plays*. (Dienstfrey 2014, 43) As 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. (Marks 1997, 62) 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.

33. The leitmotif approach would gradually take over as the dominant method of scoring a film, but 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 pre-existing 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. By the time it was clear that the “talkies” were here to stay, most films were scored with original music, albeit often including some pre-existing pieces.

41. In composing original scores and short, atmospheric pieces such as “misteriosos,” and “Spooky Spooks,” composers often borrowed musical ideas, textures, and other materials associated with the supernatural from pre-existing works like, as mentioned earlier, the operas *Die Freischütz* (Carl Maria von Weber and Friedrich Kind, 1821) and *Faust* (Charles Gounod and Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, 1859) and from shorter works like Camille Saint-Saëns, whose highly influential 1874 concert piece *Danse Macabre* musically portrayed Death playing the violin amid a cemetery of dancing skeletons. Inspired by the experiences of mediums and séance-sitters, cinema musicians accompanied such films with music that often also drew on memory and reminders of the past. But silent film composers also developed new musical gestures, textures, and timbres to signify various types of supernatural beings in film scores, reflecting beliefs of the time. All of these approaches to creating musical accompaniment shaped the way spirits on screen were presented to audiences.

34. Now, imagine it is 1920. Your friends and neighbors have told you of the magic of the séance and the moving picture show. You have a ticket for an entertainment tonight, and when you arrive at the venue, you are shown in to a slightly darkened room. You sit, perhaps with a companion, or perhaps in the company of strangers. A woman appears and takes what is obviously her accustomed seat for her performance. You might be at either a séance or the cinema: in the following chapter, I will show just how much these entertainments and their performers’ work intersected.

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A Note on Race and this Study

1. This study draws primarily on the experiences of and information about white women. There are several reasons for this. The first of these is the institutional racism present in the historiographies of the United States. Just as the hierarchies of historiography have traditionally privileged historical records documenting men’s work and lives over women’s, they privilege the work and lives of white women over those of women of color. Despite the efforts of archives to preserve the documents of black, Asian, Latinx, Native American, and other communities of color, the fact remains that primary source materials in the cultural history of the United States are overwhelmingly those of white people. Thus, while scholars have digital and physical access to both large and small white newspapers from all over the country, for example, we have only limited access to even the most important black newspapers. There is even less archival material related to spiritualism or photoplaying in Asian, Latinx, or Native American communities. Roma and Sinti women, often portrayed in popular media as dishonest fortune-tellers or psychics, make no obvious appearances in the primary or secondary sources regarding cinema musicians or spirit mediums, perhaps due to the insular and often itinerant natures of these communities. Likewise, I have found no references to female practitioners of vodun and santeria among extant accounts of spiritualists or film accompanists. However, I am always seeking contemporary accounts of women of color who performed as mediums or as cinema musicians, and I ask that readers contact me with resources and suggestions for locating further information. Census records, often an excellent source of information about occupational training and employment, include more detailed and correct information on white residents of the United States than those of color (Shryock and Siegel 1980, 262), and other government sources have only very limited materials documenting the lives of people of color. The National Archives only began to collate information on its holdings regarding black Americans in 1947, and has been woefully underfunded (Hill, Jr. 2016). The multiple diasporas of people of color, such as the Great Migration, which took place between 1916 and 1970, caused the displacement and loss of many records and histories.

2. Cultural differences also account for the disparity between whites and people of color in spirit mediumship and cinema accompaniment. Women of color were relatively rare as spirit mediums during this time period. Elizabeth Pérez, whose work tracks unique cultures of religious hybridity in Afro-Cuban religions that allow for spirit communication, notes that for many black Americans whose religious upbringing was Christian, spirit mediumship was a direct contradiction to Biblical edicts. (Pérez 2011) This is not to say that there were no black female mediums. Hoping to revive earlier, short-lived black spiritualist movements and to take advantage of renewed interest in the religion in the 1910s, medium Leafy Anderson founded the Eternal Life Christian Spiritualist Association in 1913. (E. S. Clark 2016, 5) Anderson’s activities led to the development of the spiritual church movement, in which precepts of spiritualism, black Baptist and Pentecostal worship practices, and Catholic tenets, such as the belief in and praying to saints, are all used. Facing institutional racism from the National Spiritualist Association of Churches in the 1920s, however, the black spiritualist movement splintered into various factions and dissolved; today only about a dozen black spiritualist churches are in operation, most founded after 1930. (Baer and Singer 2002, 194) Where contact with the spirits was sanctioned in religion, such as in hoodoo or Obeah practices—there is a considerable musical tradition, but it
does not intersect, as far as I have found, with music to signify the occult in film of the silent period.

3. Political ideologies also contributed to discouraging women of color—black women in particular—from becoming professional cinema musicians. The philosophy of “racial uplift” was omnipresent in black communities during the time period considered here, and as Kevin K. Gaines has written, this ideology meant that that simply matching the artistic successes of whites was not enough for Americans of color to be considered equals: they had to be better. (Gaines 2012, 13) Playing for the pictures was a reputable and desirable job for white women, but black musicians—both men and women—were taught to aim for more traditionally elite careers in their musical ambitions. W. E. B. DuBois’s periodical *The Crisis* continually championed black composers and performers of art music and heralded their successes in its “Uplift” section, which was dedicated to demonstrating the value of black America as a whole through the work of educated blacks. DuBois specifically highlighted the ways in which black musicians received more effusive critical praise, were contracted for or programmed on more performances, or were otherwise more successful than their white colleagues. Managers of black composers and musicians worked tirelessly to promote their clients and book them into concert venues that could house mixed-race audiences, frequently sending them to Europe, where black musicians were given positive receptions they would not have experienced in much of the United States. American musicians of color adopted and advocated for music composed by Europeans of color, creating considerable transatlantic support for composers Samuel Coleridge Taylor and Amanda Aldridge.

Image not found

*Black concert pianist Helen Hagan, who was encouraged to perform at the highest levels. (1891-1964)*

4. Because of the much higher value the black community placed on concert performance, black American musicians did not generally view playing in the cinema as a profession of status for women. A report in the *Crisis* from January 1911 decried the conditions that forced a woman who was a recent graduate from the Chicago Conservatory of Music to take a job playing “in a low concert hall in one of the worst sections of the city, from 8 in the evening till 4 in the morning” for just $18 a week, when other female musicians of color were touring in Europe and making recordings. (‘Employment’ 1911, 24) In comparison, a church organist could reasonably to make $500 a year for playing services only, and up to $1200 a year if they also taught music at the church or directed the choir. (“Church and Parish” 1909, 639) The *Chicago Defender*, a leading black newspaper, also stressed the greater significance of concert appearances and performances of classical music over those of cinema musicians or those performing in vernacular traditions. It was not until the very end of the silent era in 1927 that the *Defender*’s music critic began discussing musical accompaniment for film as an acceptable form of employment in music for men and a legitimate topic of discussion for readers interested in the arts. (Peyton 1927)

5. The fact that black women do not seem to have worked as photoplayer as frequently as white women did
could also stem from the fact that in much of the country, cinemas there were far more white-owned and
–operated theaters than those owned and/or operated by blacks. These white-managed cinemas hired white
musicians and, while they allowed black audiences, they kept audiences segregated by relegateing people of
color to the balcony. Black vaudeville houses began showing films in the 1910s, where the house musicians,
usually all-male bands, accompanied them. In addition, black cinemas were often the targets of community
and competitor discrimination and more extreme forms of mistreatment. In 1914, the Crisis wrote that
despite the outstanding new theaters being built for black audiences in black communities, they were not
always safe places. “A crowd of two hundred white men wrecked a moving picture house for colored people
in Jackson, Miss.,” reported the journal. “They ran the ticket seller out of the office, cut the wires,
Disconnected the moving picture apparatus and locked the doors.” (“A crowd” 1914, 168) Events like this
were not uncommon, and as a result, cinema employment became viewed as potentially too dangerous for
women of color.

6. Documentation suggests that black cinemas employed individual men as pianists or organists and men and
boys’ bands to accompany films. These bands, many of them developed out of the male confraternities that
were active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in black communities, consisted of players
from a wide range of musical training and aptitude. These confraternity bands—which might be a brass band
with vocal soloists one day and an ensemble of singers with a pianist the next, depending on the
event—performed for weddings, funerals, cotillions, parades, charity fundraisers, and in the theaters. Although
many of the musicians in the confraternity bands and the groups that came out of them remained amateurs,
those with talent and drive became professionals. These gigging musicians performed throughout the
Midwest in ensembles of three to eight players, providing music for black cinemas, sometimes alternating
parts of a screening with professional male pianists or organists. All-male military bands also participated in
community music-making, including playing for the cinemas. Chicago’s Eighth Regiment Band, comprised
of soldiers in Illinois’ African-American military regiment, made itself available for engagements in the
movie theaters, at dances, and other gatherings, and members of the regiment bands formed independent
ensembles to play for the pictures as well.

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Chapter 1: Spirit Mediums and Cinema Musicians

1. The occupations of spirit medium and cinema musician intersect in significant ways, and it is no coincidence that women began performing in public as spirit mediums and film accompanists (often called photoplayers) at the same time. Both professions were ones in which women could not only fully participate, but were thought by many to be better suited than men for the work at hand. The highly gendered educations and expectations of middle- and upper-class American women in the nineteenth century, intended to prepare women for domesticity, were, ironically, the very accomplishments they needed to succeed as professionals in the early twentieth century as mediums and silent film accompanists. (Leonard 2018b) The sensitive nature assumed of women by spiritualists in America and Great Britain contributed to the idea that women were inherently better conduits for spirit communication and selecting appropriate music for film. (Gutierrez 2009, 4) The fin-de-siècle code of morals that held up accomplished women—that is, those properly trained for domestic responsibilities, which included music-making—as respectable models provided mediums and cinema accompanists with considerable power in determining the ethics and practices of their workplaces. (Cruea 2005, 190) The physical practices of these professions allowed for both embodiment and disembodiment on the parts of the women who performed, and this liminal state created new kinds of influence and the capacity for taste-making in heretofore concealed ways. Finally, the public interest in new technological developments was essential for the creation of the cinema musician and assisted mediums in attracting those who wished to mechanically verify their activities. Ultimately, the emergence of mediumship and film accompaniment as respectable entertainment-industry professions, in which women’s participation was unexpectedly allowed and even vehemently supported, created a sphere in which women shaped the way filmic supernatural entertainments developed.

Conventions of Womanhood

2. Female mediums and cinema musicians used pre-existing social conventions regarding “true womanhood” to imbue them with both authority and competence in their chosen vocations, and relied on progressive beliefs and shifting attitudes to turn the restrictions or limitations of those conventions into means for developing their respective arts independently. In Susan Cruea’s 2005 article “Changing Ideals of Womanhood,” Cruea examines Barbara Welter’s 1976 scholarship on “true womanhood” and demonstrates that the ideals identified by Welter were in constant flux, changing to meet new societal demands. Welter documented the ways in which middle- and upper-class white women growing up in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in America were expected to attain what Welter calls “true womanhood,” which “sought to assert that womanly virtue resided in piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.” (Welter 1976, 21) Women who were “true,” as displayed through their speech, dress, accomplishments, religious habits, education, and general decorum, could be entrusted with a home’s spiritual life and maintenance of its economics, hygiene, and servants; the raising and teaching of children; and the ability to positively influence those around them in regard to taste and the appreciation for the arts, primarily those of the established Western European canon and its legacies. Cruea accepts Welter’s findings on these issues, but also provides evidence for “women’s increasing involvement in the moral and cultural welfare of their
3. While in the nineteenth century the true woman was not, generally speaking, allowed employment outside of teaching, nursing, or religious work, the women of the early twentieth century experienced more freedom in career choices and opportunities that still allowed for them to maintain their status as morally upright. These new professions and the assumption of true women as guardians of morality became symbiotic: women needed work that would not compromise their reputations, and emerging forms of entertainment needed employees whose presence bestowed an atmosphere of respectability on the endeavors. Cruea notes that women entered into “the cultural realm through publishing, performance, and participation in public rituals.” (Cruea 2005, 194) Both movie theaters and spiritualist séances fell into the categories of performance and participation in public rituals, both of which took place within the entertainment industry. In the case of performing as spirit mediums, as Molly McGarry writes, women “appropriated the characteristics that had been used to deem women unfit for public life—piety, passivity, and purity, and transformed them into ideals of spirituality.” (McGarry 2008, 44) Cinema musicians did much the same, becoming the symbol of a superior movie theater and turning “women’s music” into the sound of the cinema. As a result of this employment in the entertainment industry, mediums and photoplayers had the opportunity to influence public taste and expectations in their specific areas of entertainment, and to contribute to the broader concept of the supernatural entertainment in general.

4. In the early twentieth century, more than half of all spirit mediums in the United States were female, and, particularly after the United States entered the Great War in 1917 and many all-male cinema orchestras were disbanded, it is likely that the majority of cinema accompanists were women. (“Abandon Orchestras” 1918) The spiritualist movement allowed middle- and upper-class white women to have a voice in religious and other matters as yet unaddressed by Progressive Era maternalist politics. As Seth Koven and Sonya Michel document, maternalism “promoted the private virtues of domesticity while simultaneously legitimating women’s public relationships to politics and the state, to community, workplace, and marketplace.” (Koven and Michel 1990, 1079) Women seeking careers as spirit mediums or cinema musicians benefitted from this duality. Women had long been keepers of supernatural practices and knowledge; one need only look, though, at the history of cunning women to see how this information was used against women. The relatively broad acceptance of spiritualism at least as an entertainment if not as a religion among the white middle and upper class made it safe in both theater and parlor for women to participate in activities that might have been deadly only decades before. (Natale 2016, 1) In much the same way, female musicians—mostly keyboardists—had been the designated performers and keepers of specific kinds of music. While some women in art music had careers as singers, pianists, and violinists, proper, well-to-do women did not take up careers in popular music. Music composed for women, including parlor songs and short, characteristic pieces meant to musically describe specific things or ideas, had been relegated to the home: its practitioners did not perform this repertoire in public or for pay. In her forthcoming Women, Music, and the Performance of Gentility in the Mid-Nineteenth Century South, Candace Bailey traces this tradition of restricting the music-making of the middle and upper classes. Bailey describes the apparent dichotomy between socially acceptable professional women musicians who participated in the western European art music tradition and those for whom playing...
outside of the home was inappropriate as being rooted in structures of misogyny and male control of female creativity and self-reliance. (Bailey 2019) “Divas”—professional female musicians with substantial fan followings—such as singers Adelina Patti and Jenny Lind, pianist Fanny Bloomfield Zeisler, or violinist Maude Adams received accolades for their performances of opera and concertos, but women who performed more popular musics professionally in public in the late nineteenth century were, as Beth Abel Mcleod writes,

initially associated with “low-brow” entertainments, such as vaudeville and burlesque; in addition, the average nineteenth-century theatergoer suspected that many actresses were prostitutes. [...] Contemporary magazine and newspapers sought to reassure readers of the “normalcy” of female artists, and did so by describing their traditional marriages and family lives. (Macleod 2015, 2)

Female cinema musicians rejected the complete control of men both in taking on jobs in theaters and in creating their own musical accompaniments to film.

**Technology**

5. Neither the spirit medium of the 1900s nor the photoplayer would have had the opportunity for careers without the technological advances of the late nineteenth century. Although mediums had been practicing as entertainers in America since the Fox sisters’ founding of the form in the middle of the century, new technology helped revive flagging interest in spiritualism. With the coming of greater—but not exact—public understanding of electricity and other natural phenomena, Americans sought quantifiable systems of belief. The desire for such understanding often overlapped with long-standing non-scientific beliefs that refused to die. As Gutierrez has documented, many people believed that electricity was conducted differently through men and women. Women, being “naturally weaker” and “more excitable” overall, were therefore negatively charged. This made them more appealing to spirits than men and explained why so many more women practiced as spirit mediums. (Gutierrez 2009, 53) As interest in electricity grew in the public, spectators began to see women spirit mediums as almost mechanical, their actions being made possible by the electricity provided by the spirits possessing the mediums’ bodies. (Natale 2016, 38) In order to encourage audience interest, mediums used readily available machines like phonographs to demonstrate the presence of spirits and eventually sought to prove their credibility through the many mechanical devices invented to trace electrical, spiritual, and ectoplasmic currents. (See Fig. 2.2.)

A spirit medium displays glowing ectoplasm that suggests her ability to conduct electricity
At the same time, the rapid spread of moving picture technology created the need for cinema musicians. Although a few early film critics believed that music and sound detracted from the experience of watching motion pictures, most industry figures had come to an agreement in the 1910s that music, sound effects, and sometimes the performance of voices were crucial elements of successful movie shows. As the popularity of movie theaters grew, so did the need for accompanists and for musical instruments suited to the cinema. Women who played the piano and organ easily found employment in theaters, as did those who could quickly learn to handle the many varieties of electronic instruments developed for moving picture accompaniment. Carrie Hetherington, a classically trained musician, helped invent and sell the American Photo Player Company’s Fotoplayer, a mechanical instrument that incorporated a player piano, a violin, whistles, and various percussion instruments. (See Fig. 2.3, “Ghost Parade,” played by Joe Rinaudo on a style 20 Fotoplayer.) With the Fotoplayer or similar instruments, theaters could boast of being the most technologically up-to-date venues for the world’s newest form of mass entertainment.

Joe Rinaudo at the Fotoplayer

Audiences for the movies were enormous, and managers and owners responded by increasing their use of technology throughout their theaters. Organists playing enormous Wurlitzer organs rose from the floor on hydraulic lifts; performers using the Fotoplayer or similar instruments had interludes between reels of film or between films in which they gave featured solos for the audience; and photoplayers used a mix of pre-recorded sounds with live playing to create a mosaic of music and effects, all carefully selected to match the movement and emotion on the screen.

The technologies used by (and on, in the case of “test” mediums, who tried to prove their mediumship scientifically) women in these professions were crucial in providing them with work. They permitted women to undertake specialized performative jobs at a time when most new technology remained firmly in the hands of men and male-dominated institutions. Women’s use and promotion of new technologies clearly enhanced their performances and contributed to their professional successes and influence.

Piety, Purity, Submission, and Domesticity

Both spirit mediums and photoplayers were subjected to the same social standards as other middle and upper class white women of the period. However, as performers, they were scrutinized with extra intensity. Because they were in the public eye, mediums and cinema musicians had to demonstrate their true womanhood through their professional work. This could be a burden on top of their other responsibilities, but could also have a positive effect on their careers, and, broadly speaking, women in both fields became signifiers of morality in the entertainment industry, widely considered to be corrupt and degrading.

The ways in which mediums and photoplayers exhibited their true womanhood differed somewhat, but their practices were always designed to lead audiences to the same conclusions: that these women were representatives of morality and that their participation in their chosen spheres of entertainment imbued those spheres with propriety for their audiences. Photographs of spirit mediums depict a number of tropes that denoted visible means of identifying true women. Images of spirit mediums from the 1910s and 20s show
women in conservative, often white, dresses, with their hair up. They wear clearly corseted dresses; many spirit appearances tried to convince séance sitters of their authenticity by letting the sitters feel their hips, proving that they were not wearing corsets. They wear no apparent makeup and, in an attempt to emphasize their youth and innocence, frequently wear large bows redolent of the nursery in their hair or on their clothes. Some mediums went barefoot, ostensibly to show that they had nothing hidden in their shoes, but in many cases really in order to untie knots or open locks when they were bound up prior to a séance.

Image not found

In 1909, a medium wears conservative dress and her hair up as she demonstrates techniques of her trade

11. In addition to asserting their morality through the theoretical argument that only women practicing the principles of true womanhood could be mediums, women’s performances at their séances often emphasized feminine traits. The semiotics of these physical gestures assisted mediums in gaining the trust of their audiences and of putative believers. Among female mediums, the young and those who had experienced lengthy and/or serious illnesses were favored as innocent and sensitive conduits for spirit communication. McGarry has documented that young girls “held a privileged and foundational place in Spiritualist practice.” She continues

at a moment when their childhood dreamscapes of night visitors should have been fading into the decidedly unfanciful realities of work and marriage, Spiritualism offered a different vision. As mediums, girls in particular occupied a privileged place as intermediaries between this world and the next at the very moment when their possibilities for power, speech, and imagination were fast diminishing. (McGarry 2008, 28)

12. Older women who were frequently ill or prone to swooning were also considered to be prime candidates for mediumship. Mediums Minnie Harris Wallis and Edward Walter Wallis, for example, noted that women who tended to faint were more suited for “trance mediumship,” in which the medium falls to sleep for a time and regained consciousness having obtained messages from the dead. While at one point sickly women would have been ensconced in the care of a male doctor, rest home, or other limiting convention or institution, as mediums they could escape patriarchal limitations: “For many Spiritualists, small-group communalism took the place of institutionalized religion; alternative healing replaced male-dominated medicine; and the voices of priests and ministers were drowned out by those of the spirits themselves,” states McGarry. Women who found their way into spiritualist circles rather than hospitals and sanatoriums were participants in a social movement that allowed them to deny “basic categorical binaries the distinctions between men and women, science and magic, life and afterlife, the past and the present. They repudiated the
power of experts and the necessity of mediating hierarchies at a time in which these forces were taking on a renewed cultural importance.” (McGarry 2008, 19) This gave them agency where none had existed before, permitting them to make decisions about their own lives and bodies.

13. Acquiring the trappings of the elite classes also signified true womanhood status and the moral authority it bestowed. Women wishing to become “speech mediums” were encouraged to take elocution lessons, a popular pastime for ladies of the middle and upper classes, so that even if the spirits with whom they conversed did not speak English well or have thick accents, the medium would always be able to communicate clearly with her audience in a pleasing voice. (McGarry 2008, 158-9) Mediums were further directed to avoid “promiscuous” séance groups and to avoid communicating with vain, sinful, and negative spirits, just as they would avoid having interaction with such people in their everyday lives. Instead, they were expected to converse with only the dead of their own class or above. (McGarry 2008, 161) By presenting themselves as genteel and non-threatening true women, spirit mediums relied on communal expectations for proper ladies to ensure that they created and maintained good reputations even while they broke societal taboos.

14. Demonstrating these attributes of true womanhood helped overcome potential controversy about mediums’ physical activities while in their trance states. As Judith R. Walkowitz has written, “trance conditions legitimized a wide range of ‘bad behavior’ on the part of women, allowing them to engage in a subtle subversion—but not repudiation—of the ‘separate sphere’ construction of ‘true womanhood.’” (Walkowitz 1988, 9) A woman of good standing in the community who began each séance with hymns was certainly not behaving poorly if, when she was under the control of the spirits, she was flirtatious and sat in the laps of the male séance attendees; nor was the true woman betraying her upbringing and ideals if she wrote of intimate details while in a trance.

15. However, spiritualists had to be very careful in walking the line between spiritualist beliefs and the code of true womanhood. Julian Holloway has written that despite free love being a frequent tenet of spiritualism in the nineteenth century, “spiritualists wished to project a respectable image for the movement wherein spirituality and sexuality must be diametrically opposed.” Thus, mediums “continually negotiated an empowered/powerless duality” in which they had to be unquestionably moral individuals, even as their performances were “infused with and achieved through embodied relations, performance, and affectual sensations.” (Holloway 2006, 183) Laurence Moore has found that when opponents of spiritualism suggested that mediums were unnatural or that mediumship was improper for women to participate in, spiritualists responded by claiming “successful mediumship grew from the cultivation of specific traits that in the nineteenth century defined femininity.” Indeed, the “success of spirit communication depended on the ability of mediums to give up their own identity to become the instruments of others. Self-sacrifice and passiveness were among the things that made for the moral superiority of women over men.” (Moore 1975, 202–3) A guide for mediums from 1910 warned would-be practitioners that they must come to the faith honestly, for otherwise they may make contact with dangerous, dishonest spirits or—worse—make no contact at all and be taken for a fraud. (Wallis and Wallis 1976, 47)

16. Modeling the behaviors of true womanhood also protected female mediums against skeptical men
looking to spend time with young women for prurient reasons rather than because they believe in spiritualism. “Women who are truly pure and intuitive,” wrote one early guide for mediums, would know when “lecherous hypocrites” sought them out for immoral pleasure and would know to turn them away. (U. Clark 1863, 184) Wallis and Wallis stressed that mediums should strive for the same attributes that all women did in hoping to attain “true womanhood.” They were to be “high-souled”: to cultivate compassion and pious belief in spiritualism; to be pure in belief and behavior; to keep records of their professional activities; to create safe and welcoming spaces for their clients and see to the needs and wants of that space and its inhabitants; and serve others before themselves. (Wallis and Wallis, 49)

17. While the true woman was expected to have a basic education and be literate and numerate, a formal education was not considered necessary for spirit mediums. Many mediums However, mediums who read widely and were up-to-date on current events, gossip, and popular culture had an advantage over those who did not. Mediums were to be “developed,” to use the language of the day, not educated. Indeed, the believability of a medium often rested on her lack of known or formal education: to be known to speak or write well and in multiple styles suggested cunning rather than authenticity on the part of the medium. McGarry has observed that “little girls were seen as ripe for mediumship in part because of the cultural assumption that they were passive, guileless, and incapable of producing feats of skilled speech or writing through normal means,” and any (known) advanced schooling cast doubt on their truthfulness in claiming to communicate with the dead. (McGarry 2008, 32) The wise medium, though, was well-informed on a wide range of topics that would assist her in giving convincing performances. Writing in 1920, Hereward Carrington described mediums using popular assumptions about their lack of skills or education to deceive séance sitters: “The medium often assumes a certain ignorance of events and languages, etc., so that when the se events are given through the ‘spirits’ at the séance, they will have the appearance of supernaturally imparted information.” (Carrington 1920, 62)

18. Mediums needed to be able to recite large portions of the bible and hymns, as these sources confirmed for many audiences that the mediums were both honest believers and passing on messages from religious spirits to their families. Families often found solace in receiving biblical scripts from deceased loved ones. For audiences committed to spiritualism as a religion, spirit mediums who sang hymns from the spiritualist repertoire assured families that their departed ones were indeed happily enjoying the spiritualist afterlife, known as the Summerlands. Mediums also used their educations in penmanship, literature, and languages to help convince audiences: a spirit medium who could write in different handwriting styles and languages constituted proof that she was in contact with multiple entities. Mediums who were ambidextrous were even more convincing; those who could write with both hands at the same time demonstrated contact with multiple entities simultaneously. It was also crucial for mediums to read the local newspaper, especially the obituaries, in order to gather information on the recently deceased and their mourning families. Trade publications gave mediums additional information their clients assumed they would not have. (Farrington et al. 1922, 14–15, 196) Mediums who could refer to a spirit’s close friends, business associates, and recent life events were highly persuasive performers.

19. Mediums’ undisclosed skills in the arts also helped convince audiences that the dead physically guided them. Spirits who had in life been able to draw or play musical instruments used untrained mediums in
making portraits of sitters’ loved ones and playing music. Spirits particularly liked to play the guitar, the violin, and percussion instruments, if accounts of séances are to be believed. Even spirits who were not musical in life were likely to shake a tambourine if the medium made one available, or strum the open strings of a guitar or other string instrument. Numerous mediums took dictation from famous dead writers and composers, drawing on their own educations while presenting themselves as lacking any knowledge of literature or music. English spirit medium Rosemary Brown, who claimed to have had very little musical training but was in fact the pianist daughter of musical parents, wrote dozens of pieces dictated to her by Franz Liszt, Johannes Brahms, Franz Schubert, and other composers. (Parrott 2001)

Image not found

_The Bangs Sisters made a living as mediums who could create spirit portraits. (Reason Magazine, November 1905)_

20. Women also used what they had learned from household training in their performances to solidify their reputations as mediums. Domestic science, in particular, helped mediums develop and perform physical effects during séances. They knew how to use lemon juice and bluing to create invisible messages that they alone could make legible. They borrowed cheesecloth, gelatin, and other kitchen supplies to make ectoplasm. Having basic sewing skills meant that it was easy for women to design and make clothes from which it was easy to escape, ghostly shrouds to wear, hidden pockets in which to conceal supernatural artifacts, and figures that resembled spirits. (Warner 2008, 245) Women who were expected to engage in child and elder care and so had a basic understanding of anatomy and the placebo effect performed convincingly as healing mediums. Those who knew how magnets worked developed ways of moving items without touching them. The 1915 book _Secrets of Clairvoyance: How to Become an Operator_ provided mediums with the means of making writing magically appear on a slate, make colored smoke appear and disappear at will, and to create fire they could handle with bare hands, all from everyday materials. (_Secrets_ 1915, 37–38) The author of _Revelations of a Spirit Medium_ specified the recipes for unguents mediums could use to walk safely—albeit briefly—on red-hot iron bars and other tricks. (Farrington et al. 1922, 98)

21. Spiritualism allowed women to be independent, to speak out, to travel, to associate with others who held beliefs like their own. By demonstrating that they too followed the path to and practiced the various aspects of true womanhood, they benefitted from a social model that could have limited their activities and suppressed their activities. The case is remarkably similar to that of female musicians. Women used the gendered education and training allowed them as means with which to rise to the top of the profession and remained there in a position of unique power.

22. Contemporary sources positively compared the status of the professional cinema musician with those of schoolteachers, nurses, stenographers, and executive secretaries, and women working as film accompanists made, on average, twice that of a stenographer and 20-25% more than public high school teachers. ("Union
Like mediums, photoplayers were expected to exhibit true womanhood. Again, image played a role in establishing a photoplayer’s morality. Photoplayers also tended towards conservative dress and hairstyling; a 1925 article in *American Organist* jokes about the bobbed-hair trend among women organists, suggesting that it is a distraction. (“Modernity Complete” 1925) The stock image of a woman dressed in long sleeves and skirts with her hair up became a stereotype for cinema players nationwide and persists today. In the large, ornate theaters dubbed “motion picture palaces,” where photoplayers were celebrities and a large part of the draw for audiences, women dressed in fashionable evening gowns or other clothing that communicated their elite status.

Celebrity photoplayer Rosa Rio at the Mighty Wurlitzer

23. Period articles, directories, advertisements, and testimonials about and of female photoplayers include information on their church or synagogue memberships, jobs, or activities, signifying their piety. The criteria used to judge women is epitomized in this short article from *The American Organist* from September, 1918, that lists the subject’s church and civic activities and her good taste:

One of this Chapters [sic] busiest members is Miss Wilhelmina Woolworth, our present secretary. As organist and musical director of All Souls’ Church, Watertown, she is continually busy with her chorus choir the weekly service list at this church being well arranged and appropriate in the selections used for both choir and organ. In addition to her church duties Miss Woolworth is a very active member of the Watertown Morning Musicales Society, taking some part in most of its monthly concerts, and is also organist of the Olympic Theatre, Watertown, where she plays a three manual Austin organ. In this field Miss Woolworth displays both skill and good taste in “playing” the pictures, a most desirable accomplishment not invariably found in the “movie” palaces. (“Central New York” 1918)

The periodical also emphasized the value of other aspects of true womanhood, such as a willingness to work hard: “An organist who enters the portals of cinema house leaves leisure behind—no more afternoon siestas,” wrote the *American Organist*. “An organist who sits down and plays ninety minutes without interruption has done more actual playing than most church organists do in a much longer period. An organist who plays twenty-eight shows per week works harder than one who plays two services and one rehearsal and who does not practice regularly.” (“Photoplay Accompanying” 1919.) The periodical—an influential one among cinema musicians of all kinds, not just keyboard players—followed its own criteria closely when evaluating cinema performers. In his review of her playing, *American Organist* writer Roy L. Metcalfe describes Kathryn Flynn.
of the Florence Theater in Pasadena, California, as “a vigorous worker, never relaxes her attention, [and] uses a great deal of excellent music.” (Medcalf 1925) Jessie Gunn, whose true womanhood had landed her the position of chairman of the hospitality committee of the Woman Organ Players Club of Boston, was hailed as a model organist in her position at a cinema in New Bedford, MA (“Woman Organ Players” 1926); a review of Vera Kitchener noted her sense of purpose, diligence in preparation, duty to the picture, and dedication to her work. Miss Esther Staynor, a cinema organist in Spokane, WA, is heralded for her devotion to practicing: “in fact after playing her 7 hours a day she lingers for an hour or two of practice after the audience has gone home.” (“News and Notes” 1922)

24. The social paradigms for moral purity for female photoplayers were very similar to those for mediums. Theater managers and the performers themselves both used them to construct the nascent cinema as a morally healthy place of entertainment. As I have written elsewhere, 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. (Leonard 2018b) A woman accompanist was viewed as an imprimatur of morality and cleanliness in a cinema, and 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 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 of 1914, a theatre 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 that were known as popular by the young people [mostly men and boys] 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. (Pray 1914, 102)

25. Tasteful piano or organ playing of limited virtuosity was a marker of domesticity and a proper upbringing, and thus also part of true womanhood. Photoplayers displayed this training by selecting for film accompaniment music that was of classical origin and morally appropriate; that is, music that did not, like many claimed of swing and jazz, enflame lust, celebrate the discarding of traditional gender roles and behaviors, or promote or glamorize other misdeeds. The presence of appropriate music in the movie theater, like the woman who made it, was intended to convey morality and social uprightness. Writing in 1919, the American Organist wrote, “The work of the organist in the cinema field is equally important with that in the churches so far as cultural influence goes: possibly it is even more important, when we consider the freer reign and broader audiences of the former. Just how any healthy influence can be organized in support of this vital work is still a process very much in the dark.” (Webbe 1919, 113.)

26. Cinema musicians were expected to play music that had an obvious connection to the scenes shown, and were expected to draw from the classical canon; to rely too heavily on popular song or jazz was to corrupt the picture. “This thing about playing ragtime in all theatres is rot,” wrote agent Sidney Steinheimer, who frequently advertised for “organists of high-class ability” who could bring a “better class” of music to the
picture palaces. (Steinheimer 1919, 301) The musical education of middle- and upper-class American women had prepared them especially well for this kind of work. While only a handful of women trained and were successful as concert musicians, almost all women of these classes received musical training in which the Western art canon and a body of music known as “parlor songs” made up the curriculum.

27. The cultivation of musical and other artistic talents, such as elocution or writing and painting, was an essential part of a young woman’s education. Such abilities were meant to be practical in nature, rather than fulfilling on a personal level. As Petra Meyer-Frazier has documented,

American girls—or, to be more specific, white middle- and upper-class girls—of the nineteenth century learned to play the piano. It was an expected social skill and was considered a necessary preparation for courtship and marriage. The music they were expected to play was, by and large, of the parlor song variety. (‘Parlor song’ is a term used to connote popular piano-vocal sheet music from the nineteenth century intended for home use.) The songs are melodically and harmonically straightforward and short, three to five pages. (Meyer-Frazier 2006, 46)

Such music was intended for in-home use, with groups of friends singing or performing privately for one another. Parlor songs were also frequently instructional, teaching young women how to achieve “true womanhood,” the process through which they became prepared and suitable for marriage and motherhood by addressing courtship rituals and behavior. Songs commented on the proper way for men to ask for a date, acceptable activities for courting couples, and other topics in social etiquette. E. Douglas Bomberger has further observed that the editors of The Etude magazine, among others, believed that “salon music was a step in developing taste just as pedagogical music was a step in developing technique.” (Bomberger 2004, xiv) Salon music thus served as a threshold for women in performing more sophisticated works. Women also contributed a significant amount of music to the magazine, some of which was then used in cinema accompaniment.

28. Through their study of the piano or voice, cookery, and keeping household accounts—both in prose and in numbers—women were thought to have attained states of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, all of which, as Meyer-Frazier notes, gave women authority in “nurturing children and instructing and guiding religious morality.” (Meyer-Frazier 2006, 47) This authority contributed to the ability of women to take on the roles of arbiters of morality and taste as spirit mediums and photoplayer; the repertoire women learned prepared them to succeed as musicians as well. As Julie Hubbert has written, 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. (Hubbert 2011, 22) Women whose upbringing 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
Music for the Kingdom of Shadows: Cinema Accompaniment in the Age of Spiritualism

Chapter 1: Spirit Mediums and Cinema Musicians

repertoire of popular songs at hand, as music publishers marketed these for women to play at home. 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. Rather than being limited in their music-making careers because of the gendered restrictions to their repertoire, they instead had learned a repertoire of music perfect for film accompaniment at their disposal. (Tick 1986, 327) (Chapter 2 discusses this repertoire and its use in the cinema in greater detail.)

29. The same gender essentialism that paradoxically helped create women as the ideal cinema accompanist by hindering their careers as concert musicians carried over into their critical reception as musicians. Here women were both hailed as indispensable to the success of moving pictures and labeled as “girls,” a revealing term that speaks to their relative place in the hierarchy of power and influence within cinemas. In an 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. Film, he claimed, needed performers with three essential skills found primarily in female accompanists: technical skills, a sensibility about romantic and dramatic repertoire, and a willingness to put the success of a picture before personal ego. Reporting from Denver, he noted that the

theatres are large, the entrances dazzlingly brilliant, and like as not you will find 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. (Todd 1914)

A theatre manager 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.” (Anon. 1914a) Some critics derided the “hammering” aspect of cinema players, but they could not deny the need for capable performers.

30. Clarence E. Sinn, who edited the “Music and the Picture” column for *Motion Picture World*, also hinted that female performers, because of their suitable taste in music, could elevate both a picture and the audience, culturally speaking. “Your remark that the character of your music depends on the taste of your public is well put,” he wrote in response to a female organist’s query about what to play for certain pictures. “But I think that we should cultivate that taste so far as possible. […] When your audience likes a better grade of music, give them the best you can.” (Sinn 1914) 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 Leipsic [sic] conservatory of music. She has made the incidental music accompanying pictures a matter of neighborhood comment.” (“His Three Rules” 1914b) That women were “entrusted” with the musical accompaniments in a movie theatre, 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.

31. Evidence in the form of 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 testify to the extent to which women were the arbiters of musical accompaniment in the cinema. Accompanist Alice Smythe Jay’s suggestions for scores appeared in multiple issues of Motion Picture News (Jay 1916, 1917); in 1921 she patented her own invention for creating piano rolls for individual films and started a business to record her own selections and improvisations for movies. Kitty Meinhold, a cinema orchestra leader and violinist who programed all of the music for pictures for her employer in upstate New York, published her suggestions for scoring historical pictures. (Meinhold 1915, 1917) Carrie Hetherington began by offering score suggestions in magazines and later invented the American Fotoplayer, an automated accompaniment instrument (shown in video above). Hazel Burnett, who performed for both cinema and live theatre as an organist and pianist, created unique scores using clippings from The Etude and Melody magazines, pieces from music collections including Albert Ernst Wier’s 1913 The Ideal Home Library, hundreds of character and salon pieces, and short works by Amanda Aldridge, Carrie Jacobs Bond, Esther Gronow, and Mae Davis, as well as Mendelssohn, Grieg, and others. Burnett was a local celebrity accompanist in Austin, Texas, where the theaters at which she played—the Majestic (now the Paramount) and the Aztec—had seating capacities of at least 750 and held at least three showings per day, suggesting that thousands of people heard Burnett’s film accompaniments every month. Accompanists Claire H. Hamack and Adele V. Sullivan used cue sheets as the starting point for their scores, but frequently departed from the suggestions on the cue sheets and substituted works from their own collections. Hamack’s music collection, held by the American Music Research Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder, also includes original themes composed by Hamack for films. Sullivan used selections from salon music albums, concert works, and pieces from the musical theater stage to accompany movies. (Leonard 2018)

Image not found

Substitutions made by Claire Hamack in a cue sheet (American Music Research Center, University of Colorado at Boulder)

32. When the United States entered the war in November 1917, women were afforded additional opportunities as cinema musicians as male musicians went to war. In August of 1918, The 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 theatre managers came to a decision last week and will hereafter retain but one man in each house to furnish music.” (“Abandon Orchestras” 1918) Moving Picture World reported similar measures in Missouri, where “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 to go to the front.” (Beynon 1918b, 1120.) As men left the cinemas, women entered them in even greater numbers than before, taking up positions as piano or organ accompanists, instrumentalists, and orchestra leaders. Women helped create the soundscape of war movies: 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 theatre in New York, performed Victorian art songs in English to footage of troops in Europe (Beynon 1918a, 399-400); Maleta Bonconi, a violinist in the Strand orchestra, offered contemporary art music by European composers Hubay and Drdla. (Beynon 1918b, 1120-1) Women composed instrumental works and songs about the war specifically to be performed in cinemas as accompaniment for feature films, short films, cartoons, and newsreels. (Leonard 2019) From within the profession, Vera Kitchener, a highly regarded cinema organist, promoted photoplaying as an “excellent field for feminine activity,” and, as a member of the American Guild of Organists, helped convince other members of the value and respectability of the job. (“Miss Vera Kitchener” 1923, 173)

33. After the war, their professional positions solidified, women stayed on to develop original accompaniments for other films as well. They created scores and cue sheets for themselves as individual accompanists and as the leaders of cinema ensembles and improvised and composed new music for accompaniment. Cinema organists Edith Lang, Mary Tower, and E. L. Bowman in Boston; Mildred Fitzpatrick, Helen Searle, and Gertrude Bailey in Chicago; Vera Kitchener and Ruth Barrett in New York; Katherine Flynn in Pasadena, California; May Mills in Omaha, Nebraska; and dozens of other women in cinema accompanist jobs were positively reviewed by The American Organist between 1918 (the year the publication commenced) and 1929 (the year it ended coverage of live cinema music) for their original film scores. Theodora Dutton (Blanche Ray Alden), Patricia Collinge, Irene Varley, and Alma Sanders all published music for accompanying films. When the men who became the celebrated film composers of the early sound era went to the movies as children, it is likely that many of the film accompaniments they heard were those by women.

34. Just as mediums had used the knowledge they gained from their gendered educations to develop successful performance skills and materials, so too did female photoplayers. Both mediums and photoplayers used the social construction of the true woman as a moral figure to make their professions eminently respectable during a period when public opinion often condemned female performers in non-elite arts. The books and other materials they read, the music they played, and the activities they participated in under the rubric of becoming true women in domestic settings became resources they relied upon professionally and that helped them succeed in their careers. The shifting industrial, financial, and moral landscape of the period—described as an era of “incredible contradictions” by jazz historian Mitchell Newton-Matza—also contributed to the success of mediums and cinema accompanists. (Newton-Matza 2009, xiv) During the 190s and 1920s, women joined the workforce in greater numbers than before, and 73,000 women were employed.
as musicians or music teachers in 1920. (“Vintage” 2013) The post-war financial boom, the regulating of the industrial work week to forty hours, and the wider availability of technology for both household work and amusement all led to increased demand for entertainment. Youth culture developed a significant amount of influence over the entertainment industry, encouraging interest in live theater, including séances, and cinema, and in adjacent areas, including sheet-music publishing, recordings, and live bands.

Dis/embodiment and Bodily Absence

35. There were, however, drawbacks to sustaining the true womanhood paradigm as a performer, even as it changed to accommodate different models of life and work. For women who took up professional careers in the 1910s and 1920s, the expected submission of the body and mind to the larger task at hand made the work of mediums and photoplayers nearly imperceptible in their own performance spheres, leading to contemporary and present-day ignorance of their effect on supernatural entertainments, particularly in film. The demands of true womanhood meant that despite the public nature of their work and the fact that their physical presence denoted morality, photoplayers and mediums had to make their individual selves secondary or even tertiary to the primary spectacles of their performances. While they evinced their piety and purity through their spiritual activities and modest behavior and demonstrated their domesticity through their abilities to play music and create welcoming spaces for entertainment, they were nonetheless independent working women, and had to play down that independence in order to assuage public fears of and assumptions about white middle- and upper-class women in the workforce. This meant assuming or being forced into the same kind of bodily inconspicuousness such women outside of the commercial workplace experienced during this period: that they should be essentially unseen except in certain domestic settings or activities, should be decorative but not ostentatious, and should restrict their gestures and movement to acceptable norms as dictated by society. While the growing role of dance and the changing fashions of the 1920s allowed for some leeway among mediums and photoplayers, many women in these professions were nonetheless judged by more conservative standards.

36. Although the physical presence of the medium and photoplayer lent their respective entertainments the air of morality, their independent and performative use of their bodies remained problematic. The primary way in which both mediums and photoplayers manifested their submission was through metaphorical disembodiment. Although women in both professions remained physically present and often in full view of their audiences, their bodily agency was abnegated by the requirements of their work. Mediums who stayed at a table during a séance and those who were closed up in “spirit cabinets”—often just areas of a room that had been curtained off, rather than the elaborate boxes meant to restrict movement that are cited in the “scientific testing” of mediums—gave their bodies over willingly to spirit use or even full possession. In doing so, they submitted their bodily autonomy to the control of the spirit(s) they channeled, allowing the spirits to use the mediums’ bodies as tools for communication, movement, and touch. The spirit who inhabited a medium’s body or took control of her voice was the focal point of a séance, and therefore commanded the attention of the audience over and above attention to the medium herself. Even in séances where mediums became physical with the séance sitters, stroking or caressing them, sitting in their laps, allowing or encouraging them to touch the medium’s body, or otherwise interacting with them physically, it was the spirit that was in control, using the body as a prop. The actions of the spirit were what mattered in
these supernatural entertainments; all else was superfluous. The body itself did not matter: the presence of the spirit did.

37. Likewise, cinema musicians were assigned the role of being the unseen conduit of equally unseen music in the service of the visual medium of film. Although at some of the large motion picture palaces the musicians became celebrities in their own right, the vast majority of cinema musicians were tucked away out of view of the audience, leaving sound as the only evidence of their presence. Pianists and organists had to see the screen and had to be visible enough that the audience knew that there was a woman present, but they were shunted to the side of theaters or the wings of the stage, where they were camouflaged by curtains or consoles. Ensembles, too, were situated far to the side of the screen or placed in a small pit, usually located far below the stage so as to be virtually invisible. Logistically, part of this placement may have been meant to ensure that the audience had a clear view of the screen from all vantages in the house, but multiple theaters built for all-male orchestras placed the musicians front and center without destroying sight lines. Women musicians in particular were conceived of as transmitters and reproducers of music composed and/or selected by men, even when that was not the case. As Macleod documents,

women’s potential as composers was not nurtured with the same seriousness as their playing ability. The words creative and reproductive were frequently invoked to distinguish the composer from the interpreter, the general assumption being that it was of more value to create than to interpret. Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler’s teacher, Leschetizky, expressed an extreme version of this belief when he said that immediately after an orchestra plans a piece of music, the room should be darkened and a picture of the composer displayed on a screen, which the audience could then applaud. […] Well into the 1900s, the periodical Musical American regularly featured articles that solidified the idea that women were incapable of musical composition, with titles like “Women Composers’ Limitations” and “Women Composers: Walter Damrosch Doubts If They Will Ever Achieve Greatness.” (Macleod 2015, 62–63)

As such, they were, like mediums, often reduced to props or automatons through which the messages and creations of others were transmitted to audiences. Only in a handful of cases were the women themselves credited with and commended for the original creative work they did as accompanists for the silent film, and they were exceptions.

38. Cinema organists were further disembodied by their own industry by the emphasis placed on the instruments in the cinema. Numerous reports in American Organist that mention women in cinema jobs describe the instruments—make, model, number of manuals (keyboards), and other features—installed in the theaters, ignoring the performer’s musical selections, playing abilities, or other artistic issues. The AGO, at least, was more interested on keeping current with what theaters had what kinds of organs than who was playing them and how. We know, for example, that Gertrude Dowd played a Wurlitzer at the Albee Theater, that Grace Madden played a three manual Moeller at Loew’s Brevoort Theater (“General Notes” 1927, 210,
212), and that Josephine Whitney of New York played a Miller instrument at her job at an unnamed theater (“General Notes” 1920, 222), but the American Organist did not deem it worthwhile to discuss their musical selections, accompanying philosophies, or recent activities, all of which it did when it profiles male performers.

39. Women who played in ensembles were widely considered novelties. Their appearances in cinemas were publicized, but press coverage of women in instrumental or conducting positions in theaters generally focused on how unusual the woman or women in question were, focusing on costumes, for example, in all-women’s orchestras, or on how such women maintained both performance careers and their home life. An article on the film The Good Little Devil, for example, essentially classified an all-woman orchestra as a “stunt” (an event or element of an event designed to be a curiosity and create marketing excitement) for the film’s premiere: “The large stage of the Belasco Theatre was crowded with floral decorations, where were seated a large orchestra, comprised entirely of women, who rendered appropriate music that harmonized with the picture.” (“Belasco” 1913) No names of the performers were given, and no music was identified. Another news story in The Film Daily told of a similar stunt, in which, while showing films that included information on the role of women in the military, the cinema owner “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.” (“Rapf’s” 1918) Again, no specific women were mentioned. The conundrum of women’s dis/embodiment in the séance and the cinema meant that even as women were championed as the most appropriate people to serve as mediums and photoplayers, their actual labor was relatively invisible.

40. Society and even their own professions supported female mediums and photoplayers as being suitable for their jobs, but did not actually pay much attention to their work. Critical reviews of photoplayers are scarce, and while spirit mediums were often in the press, period sources describe the physical appearance and family background of the mediums, also citing famous people the medium had contacted or had as sitters. Some descriptions included the medium’s process—going into a trance or a cabinet—and practices, such as contacting a spirit guide, channeling the voices of spirits, or doing cold readings of objects, but they only rarely mentioned the performance as a performance. Instead, contemporary media reported on séances as they did fires, graduation ceremonies, and news of other events: with apparent facts, but no criticism or analysis. Mildred Fitzpatrick, one of Chicago’s busiest and best-advertised cinema organists, was reported merely to have “played on the pipe organ,” at a show (“Tribune to Give” 1920), just as Mrs. Wilson, a spirit medium, was described simply as to have “obtained [information] clairvoyantly” (Lethem 1920) and Mrs. Lena Z.’s séance included “the usual phonograph solo and singing of songs by mezzo-sopranos and bassos,” after which Mrs. Z paced the floor, guessed the author’s first name, and made several predictions.

41. Because of the lack of critical structure, mediums and film accompanists were able to develop supernatural entertainments as they saw fit rather than trying to fulfill expectations. They did not have to offer new or thoughtful interpretations of works audiences already knew, or live up to the spectacle of nationally known professionals in their fields. Instead, drawing on their own experiences, beliefs, and expertise, mediums and photoplayers could invent their arts as they went along, and could continue to develop those arts as technology and tastes matured and changed. Mediums and cinema accompanists
selected their own music for performances, and the connections they made between subject matter and music led to permanent musical significations of the supernatural that were adopted by composers and performers regardless of gender.

Confluences

42. Séances and the scoring of films were jobs in which women, working under similar conditions, had critical input. Individuals in each profession helped shape the expectations for performances in these fields of entertainment, creating tacit standards and expectations for both séances and the musical accompaniment of moving pictures. Because women in both fields functioned first as authentifiers of morality, they were able to develop the creative aspects of their work autonomously; at the same time, this meant that their influences on supernatural entertainments have been unrecognized from both popular and scholarly points of view. Close study of the power dynamics and practices of the séance and silent cinema, however, reveals that women working as spirit mediums and photoplayers selected their own sonic and musical accompaniments to represent the presence of the spirits in both the séance and on film. Female mediums chose the hymns they used, the tunes the spirits played and on what instruments, the records the spirits selected for the phonograph, and any other sounds used by the dead to communicate with the living. Photoplayers did the same: even in cases in which films were shipped to theaters with cue sheets, the women in charge of creating the scores for films edited or ignored such suggestions, relying on their own knowledge of what music and sound effects would work best to accompany the action or mood onscreen. Together, mediums and photoplayers developed a set of sonic and musical signifiers for the supernatural and supernatural entertainments.

43. There is little question that many of the musicians who rose to prominence as composers for Hollywood movies in the early sound era had at some point attended a film in which music influenced by the séance was used to signify the supernatural. In numerous cases of music for the silent spirit film, it was female mediums who had originated the sounds and music, and female photoplayers who used, elaborated on, or further developed that material into scores for a wider public. Although there were more musical works for the cinematic supernatural published by men, women accompanying spirit films were in charge of making the selections for their scores, and applied their aesthetic judgment in deciding that those works were representational enough of the medium’s art to communicate the right atmosphere or setting to an audience. As music magazines and journals began to publish more works by women, those chosen to appear in print often referenced areas in which women had dominion—including the nursery, the schoolhouse, and the séance. In addition, because women, when encouraged to compose, were encouraged to do so in the style of the short, characteristic, technically moderate manner of the works that had been prescribed as appropriate for them to play, their works were frequently selected by female photoplayers as appropriate for cinema work: short, easy to learn, and well-suited for setting a mood or describing a time, place, or character. In Chapter Two, I examine individual pieces of music used in séances and cinemas, and analyze the sounds of the spirit in the theater.

Sources


Chapter 2: Spirits and Music on the Screen

1. Spirit films—also called “spirit dramas” or “spirit comedies” in newspapers of the period—were fairly numerous. John T. Soister, who has indexed early American science fiction, fantasy, and horror films, writes, “While not quite a dime a dozen, pictures dealing with Spiritualism were fairly plentiful during the late 1910s and 1920s” (Soister et al. 2012, 36). Soister identifies dozens of films from throughout the silent period that involve spiritualist séances, ghosts, and the trappings thereof. The Mistletoe Bough (1904) shows a ghost leading her husband to her body, and The Phantom Carriage (1921) depicts a man whose ghost must become the collector of souls for a year. Period newspaper articles make note of the popularity of “psychic” films and describe the related events and music surrounding them, including séances and musical performances. Although it is difficult to match any particular pieces of music with individual films, extant materials show that spirit films were often accompanied by “special music.” Advertisements reveals that the Tully Sisters’ Orchestra accompanied the 1922 film Whispering Shadows, and Adele V. Sullivan’s music library indicates that she accompanied spirit films The Thirteenth Chair (1929) and Halfway to Heaven (1929), two “part-talking” films that had mediums as characters (Adele V. Sullivan Papers). Hazel Burnett’s music library similarly includes music for accompanying spirit films, such as pieces for the “fantastique,” witches, “enchantment,” and “visions” (Josephine Burnett Collection). Handwritten indicia show that she used Edward MacDowell’s “Will O’ the Wisp” and excerpts from Der Freischütz for at least one motion picture that would have involved spirits. This conflation of the spirit or ghost and other supernatural being is common in all of the music meant to accompany such things.

[ Hear Edward MacDowell’s “Will O’ the Wisp” ]

2. Silent film accompaniments depicting real-life activities and events often referenced the existing music used for those events: parades were accompanied by marches; children were accompanied by nursery rhymes, and so on. Thus films involving ghosts required music that matched public expectations for what ghosts sounded like, as established by earlier stage works and the sounds of the séance. Thanks to the popularity of Spiritualism and the documentation of séances in the public press and other outlets, performers knew how to accompany films that incorporated Spiritualist elements. At séances, ghosts spoke and sang through spirit trumpets—long cones that muted and distorted sound (Connor, in Buse and Stott 2002, 212). Spirits playing instruments—either themselves, through unseen means, or by taking control of a medium’s body and using it to play—was common. Violins emitted both pleasant and eerie sounds, the latter being created by playing tremolo, or a very rapid repetition of the same pitch, and sul ponticello, or near the bridge of the instrument (Adorno and Eisler 1947). Strummed guitars and other stringed instruments signified ghostly appearances and interaction with musical technology. Mediums used glass harmonicas to signal the presence of spirits and to communicate their messages; sudden sounds, such as the breaking of glass or sudden low noises also contributed to the soundscape of the séance (Mannoni and Crangle 2000, 141). Spirits also engaged with mechanical forms of musical reproduction, playing or interfering with phonographs and music boxes.
3. Music for spirit films was relatively easy to source and replicate. There was a large body of preexisting music as well as new works that could create the sound of the Spiritualist church and séance. This repertoire included Spiritualist hymns or pastoral songs, indicating a Spiritualist service or individual. Widely known pieces included “Lead, Kindly Light,” “Sweet By-and-By,” “The Land Beyond the River,” and “Auld Lang Syne,” which appears in *The Spiritualist Hymnal* in a version with different lyrics (National Spiritualist Association 1911). Music for Spiritualist services was modeled on Protestant church music. It employs multi-verse hymn forms and often borrows the music of preexisting Christian hymns while giving them new words. But the repertoire for the Spiritualist Church is intended to be reassuring and promising to its congregation of life beyond death and the possibility of communication between the living and the dead, and in fulfilling this mission, it is rather staid. In addition to the *Hymnal*, accompanists could use such works as *Messages from spirit land in song form*, published in 1910 (Beebe and Legg 1910); *The Spirit Minstrel* (Packard and Loveland 1860); *The Golden Echoes* (Tucker 1897), and many more books of music used in séances or services or attributed to spirits. Screenings of *Do the Dead Talk?* (1920) were accompanied by séances by practicing mediums before and after the film as well as a choir that sang spiritualist songs (“Do the Dead Talk,” 1921; “At the Majestic” 1921). However, none of the repertoire from the Spiritualist Church or other organizations were used frequently at séances; they were intended instead for large gatherings of Spiritualists at services where leaders spoke about the beliefs of the religion rather attempting to contact the dead.

4. Just as mediums performing in séances borrowed from the operatic and vaudeville stages, where tremolos and high pitches or harmonics on the strings had been used for a long time as signifiers of the otherworldly, so did cinema accompanists. Writing his instruction guide for cinema piano and organ accompanists in 1914, London-based accompanist W. Tyacke George suggested that keyboard accompanists mimic exactly this, as well as use “Oriental” music for anything “weird” or “mysterious”: “Pictures showing ghost or magic scenes require something weird, say the First Movement from Bendix’s “Pasha’s Dream’ or Schubert’s “Erl King” (George 1914, 17, 25). George also advised performers on creating sound effects, noting that the tom-tom, “when struck softly […] gives a mysterious, evil-boding tone, highly suitable for ghost scenes” while poltergeists and other noisy spirits could be aurally represented through the use of a box filled with broken glass or china tipped from side to side. (George, 34, 36) Celebrated film accompanist Edith Lang, writing in 1920, described using the organ to create raps, unclear voices, and stingers—sudden loud chords—to represent breaking glass and other sudden movements or appearances on the part of a spirit. She and George West also recommended accompanists used organ stops and instruments that sounded like the instruments used in séances: by the late 1910s, the timbres of certain instruments and organ stops, like the flute, clarinet, and horn, had come to represent the supernatural (Lang and West 1920: 54-55). Lang and West provided a list of repertoire suitable for “scenes of ‘mystery, or suppressed alarm, sinister forebodings, ghost scenes, supernatural apparitions, etc.,’” stating that such music should be “Misterioso” in nature, with tremolo and either sudden silence or stingers (sudden loud chords) for the best effect in horror. (Lang and West 1920, 54-55) A spirit strumming the guitar or playing a run on the piano in the séance was transformed in the cinema into several quick grace notes; the coming and going of spirits at a séance represented by rapid and dramatic shifts in dynamics; and the sounds of muted brass suggested distant heralds from the afterlife. Because of widespread notions that black Americans were more susceptible than whites to believing in the supernatural, including “‘conjure’ men and ‘spiritualists’,” accompanists may also have used black
spirituals to suggest a character’s belief in ghosts (Reed 2003, 98). Finally, film accompanists were encouraged to use both popular and classical songs to create supernatural atmospheres, even when there were no vocalists to sing them in the cinema. They selected songs that were popular locally or nationally, or had been in existence long enough for the public to become familiar with them. Songs about ghosts, both humorous and serious, made their way into the photoplayer’s repertoire. Schubert’s “Erl King” was recommended frequently for ghost films, even if the ghosts were benevolent and not threatening like the phantom king of the title. Robert Schumann’s “Widmung,” in which the narrator sings of love beyond death, was also popular (Leonard 2019).

[ Hear a transcription of Schubert’s “Erl King” for piano here on a Duo-Art piano roll. ]

5. Both new songs and new instrumental music about ghosts were composed for the cinema as well. These fall into several broad categories: ghost pieces and songs for novice performers and audiences (often specifically children), which were often repurposed for the cinema by experienced players; pieces about phantom musicians; works called “misteriosos” in which the music mimics gestures that might be found in ghost stories, such as creaking stairs, finding an open window, the presence of a breeze or the wind, heartbeats, trembling, and other physical elements, or creates suspense; and, finally, works that borrowed or were influenced heavily by preexisting works representing the supernatural.

6. Between 1900 and 1927, more than 100 pieces with “ghost” in the title were published (not including references to the “Holy Ghost”), most of them for piano and all of them suitable for use in cinema accompaniment. Ghost pieces are characteristic works that evoke a sense of ghostly presence through texture, timbre, rhythm, and harmony. These works, often composed by vaudeville and cinema accompanists or written for photoplay albums, include pieces like Cora Salisbury’s “Ghost Dance: a Dainty Novelette” (1911); “The Phantom Melody,” by Albert Ketelbey (1912); Mathilde Bilbro’s “Ghost Tales” (1918); Charles Tomlinson Griffes’s “Phantoms” (1918); and N. Louise Wright’s “The Ghost” (1924). Many of these were sold as individual pieces and also published in magazines like The Etude and Melody Magazine. In 1911, an article in The Etude suggested that for Halloween, piano students be encouraged to learn a variety of pieces referencing the supernatural that were widely available, including Horvath’s “Mystic Procession” (published in The Etude in 1910); “Ghosts” by Schutte; “By Lantern Light” by Rockwell (published in The Etude in 1911) and “Will-o-the-Wisp” by Behr (Watson 1911, 699). These pieces include various musical signifiers of the ghostly gleaned from séances and the stage, including rapping or knocking, a hymn-like section use of a minor key, tremolo, motifs emulating the strumming of strings, and stingers. Works for ensembles also include calls for special string and brass effects to emulate the sounds of séances and the presence of spirits.

Image not found

This introduction from the piano reduction of Walter Broy’s “Ghost Scene” includes numerous characteristics of music for spirits: tremolo, stingers, chromaticism, and minor key, and use of the lower register.
7. Numerous works also reference ghosts playing instruments, as they did in séances. Composers developed a subgenre that depicted the musical abilities of spirits, including pieces like Ted Snyder and Bert Kalmar’s “The Ghost of the Violin” (1912); “The Ghost of the Saxophone” by F. Henri Klickmann (1917); and Fred Rose’s “The Phantom of the Blues” (1927). These pieces were designed to a sense of nostalgia and eeriness at the same time. Even more common were works designed to accompany spirits dancing. These relied on audience familiarity with French composer Camille Saint-Saëns’s well-known 1874 concert piece *Danse Macabre*. Works intended for accompanying both grotesque or monstrous body horror and ghosts or spirit-animated figures like skeletons were common, as demonstrated by the moods indicated on sheet music: pieces like ‘Gruesome Tales’ (Rapée and Axt 1923) and ‘Rage: for fiendish anger, sudden outbursts of madness, etc.’ (Axt 1925) could be used for introductions; for setting a scene in a convent, manor house, or slum; or to accompany the actions of a phantom, monster, or person possessed. Other pieces were clearly composed with particular images in mind: ‘Mysterious furioso: suitable for infernal and wierd [sic] scenes, witches, etc.’ (Langey 1919); and ‘Stealthy Escape: Terror, hideous monster, dark mystery’ (Zamecnik 1927) both make reference to specific figures and elements found in spirit films and horror movies. Many misteriosos were appropriate for and used to accompany spirit films. I’ve chosen three that were widely available, were published with orchestral parts, and are significant in length to analyze here.

[Hear Camille Saint-Saëns’s *Danse Macabre* arranged for piano on a Duo-Art piano roll here.]

Three Case Studies

8. Two frequently used misteriosos, Thomas S. Allen’s “Dance of the Skeletons” (1901, republished for cinema accompaniment in 1916), and Ellsworth Stevenson’s “Phantom Visions: Skeleton Dance” (1917), include elements that call on perceivers’ memories of pre-existing pieces dealing with Death and skeletons and ghosts, but also adhere to the aesthetic conventions for the grotesque in general. This made them useful beyond simply accompanying images of dancing skeletons or mischievous or malicious ghosts, just as the piece on which they are patterned, Saint-Saëns’s *Danse Macabre*, came to be employed as a generic signifier of ghosts and ‘spooky’ situations itself. In the third piece I analyze here, Paul Levy’s “Sinister Theme” (1918), many of the same aesthetics apply even though the work does not name or directly cite the supernatural. Further, while it is titled “Sinister,” Levy’s piece can be performed to signify ghostly presence without overtones of evil thanks to the wide use of misteriosos to accompany benelovent spirits.

[Hear Thomas S. Allen’s “Dance of the Skeletons” performed by The Nashville Mandolin Ensemble.]

9. Most music for the cinematic spirit was composed over a fairly long time, most pieces nonetheless adhered to stylistic conventions established in the 1910s or even earlier, such as in the Gothic-themed works by Camille Saint-Saëns, Franz Liszt and Hector Berlioz. In 1911, cinema accompanist and author of the column “Music and the Picture” for *Moving Picture World* Clarence Sinn made recommendations for *The Ghost of the Vaults*. (Sinn 1911, 32) Having already attended one showing of the film in which the accompanist used a number of cues from Wagner’s opera *Tannhäuser* and Chopin waltzes for happy scenes and Beethoven’s
“Funeral March” (from the composer’s Third Symphony) for the spooky scenes within the titular vault, he endorsed the use of this funereal music, writing that “first [Beethoven’s March] was given as a funeral march befitting the ghostly character of the scene; then a mysterious character was given to the number;” that is, the accompanist modified or extemporized on the “Funeral March” to make it sound more “mysterious” or “creepy,” perhaps by adding tremolos, sudden changes of dynamics, and/or altering the tempo.

10. In both Allen’s “Dance of the Skeletons” and Stevenson’s “Phantom Visions: Skeleton Dance,” the composers call on musical memories of Saint-Saëns’s *Danse Macabre* to reference animated bones, phantoms, and an embodiment of Death himself, including the use of tremolo, grace notes, dotted rhythms, chromatic passages that suggest instability, and an overall narrative that ends with the coming of dawn and the gradual creeping away of the dead. Saint-Saëns himself was inspired by a poem by Henri Cazalis in which Death, playing the violin, calls forth the dead to dance on Halloween night. Incorporating the *Dies irae* motif and a tritone—the so-called “devil in music,” the interval of an augmented fourth or diminished fifth (for example, A to D-sharp/E-flat)—Saint-Saëns’s piece contains two distinct themes, first presented separately and then in various forms of contrapuntal interaction. The work ends with the break of day and the crow of the cock, sending the skeletons back into their graves for another year. By 1922, *Danse macabre* was referenced as a work “every musician should know” by film music columnist Norman Stuckey, who advised that it should be used to accompany the “weird.” (Stuckey 1921, 778) Allen’s and Stevenson’s earlier homages are clear presages of the long and storied career the French work would have in influencing music for accompanying spirits.

11. In Allen’s reissuance of “Dance of the Skeletons” for cinema use in 1916, the composer also provided a textual program in the music to help the performer understand exactly what is going on in the piece by adding parenthetical notes under the treble line. “Dance of the Skeletons” begins with an introduction, two bars of tremolos in the middle of the piano’s register and a quickly rising and falling melodic runs an octave above these, marked “wind; skeletons arriving in the storm;” all of these emphasize D minor. Allen alternates these two bars with two bars of heavy fortissimo chords outlining the subtonic, marked “thunder.” The skeletons continue to arrive throughout the eighteen bars of the introduction, then politely “line up” as the thunder crashes in A major, and the dance proper begins. Like in Saint-Saëns’s piece, Allen creates two separate themes and textures, which are then interwoven. He begins with two repeated sections of eight bars each: the A section introduces an unequal, dotted rhythm to indicate the jerking motions of the skeletons, while in the B section, “little ones” and “big ones” take turns dancing with one another. Here both sizes of skeletons are signified by an augmentation of the earlier dotted rhythm, but the little skeletons are represented by a higher pitch and lower volume—mezzo forte—while the big ones dance more heavily in a lower register and at fortissimo. After these two passages, the skeletons start ‘getting excited’—the dotted rhythms speed up, and there is a mix of musical materials from the “little ones” and “big ones” until, with a sudden crescendo ending abruptly with a long rest, “they all fall.” Together the various skeletons resume dancing, and in this C section the “dance goes smooth.” Allen incorporates a new rhythmic motif of triplets that he uses for sixteen bars as the skeletons enjoy their party. At the end of this section, however, there is sudden “confusion,” complete with descending chromatic sixteenth notes and an accented and fortissimo bass line. The reason for this confusion is soon given, musically and in words: “dawn [is] approaching.” The music depicts the skeletons’ mix of continued dancing (continued smooth eighth note triplets) and panic (the
dotted rhythm that led to their earlier falling returns). Both rhythmic motifs become less frequent as the
dynamic fades to piano, and, with a few last stingers, as prescribed by Lang and West, the skeletons are
“going, going, gone.” Allen’s “Dance” is descriptive both musically and textually. Although he does not
employ the common *Dies irae* motif, his use of minor key areas, chromaticism, and rhythmic instability are
all musical signifiers of danger and death and correlate with the Gothic affiliations created in the Saint-Saëns
work.

12. Allen’s “Dance” was recorded by an ensemble called Sodero’s Band for Edison first in 1904 and again
in 1915 on an Amberol, or cylinder record, for use in the cinema. (*Edison Phonograph Monthly*, October
1903: 12; *Edison Kinetograph Monthly*, October 1915: 10) The Walter Jacobs Company of Boston purchased
the rights to the sheet music in 1916, and advertised it as music cinema musicians could perform without
having to pay additional tax or fees to the composer. (*Motography*, January 12, 1918: 57) Film music critic
and cue sheet compiler Clarence Sinn recommended “Dance of the Skeletons” as non-taxable music in
*Moving Picture World* (January 26, 1918: 510), which almost certainly resulted in the continuing use of the
piece. “Dance of the Skeletons” had a long life in the cinema: it was likely performed in cinemas for the first
time in the year it was published, and The Film Daily records it being performed before and during the
picture at a showing of an unidentified film at the Roxy Theater in New York in November 1927 (November
20, 1927: 5)

13. Stevenson’s “Phantom Visions: Skeleton Dance” (1920) also borrows from Saint-Saëns’s music to
depict skeletons animated by spirits. Stevenson marks his piece as “‘misterioso’ and calls for special
instrumental effects, including the use of *col legno* (using the wood of the bow to tap the strings), mutes in
the brass, muffled drums, “castanets or bones” in the percussion, and a “wind whistle” to create an especially
eerie sound. The *Dies irae* motif is set between various voices, sometimes has other pitches interpolated
between its four pitches, and appears in inversion and retrograde, making it less obvious to perceivers.
Stevenson’s only other deviation from the skeleton dance as established by Saint-Saëns and imitated by
Allen is in his orchestration. Rather than giving the melody to the violin, Stevenson assigns it—as Lang and
West advise—to the winds, starting with the bassoon before handing it off to the oboe, the clarinet, and flute.
Like Allen’s “Dance,” however, Stevenson’s is structurally similar to the *Danse macabre*: a quiet
introduction with staccato quarter notes outlining the tonic—F minor—leads into an A section of twenty bars
that uses a rhythmic figure of triplets on the upbeat followed by dotted rhythms. A long, low horn line moves
from scale degrees 5 to 6 and back, not only providing additional emphasis on the key and key relationships
but also a funeral march-like complement to the constant octaves in the bass line.

14. The sixteen-bar B section abandons the jerky dotted rhythms for longer and more even note values in
suspenseful progressions in A-flat major over three and four bars that move from tonic to subtonic to
dominant and back to tonic. Over each progression, the dynamics grow from pianissimo to a sforzando on the
return of the tonic and short forte before dropping to pianissimo and beginning the progression again. While
the sforzando chords soon become predictable, they nonetheless adhere to Lang and West’s good practice
guidelines for stingers and allow the performer to add anticipation and surprise for the perceivers of the film.
The A sections returns and segues into the C section, a Trio. The Trio, like the passages of confusion in
Allen’s “Dance,” offer highly chromatic motifs in the upper winds which crescendo rapidly from pianissimo
to forzando and then drop again, suggesting, again like Saint-Saëns and Allen, a period of chaos as dawn
approaches. The performer then has the option of repeating either just the A section or the A and B sections
before bringing the piece to an end in which the skeletons offer one last sudden stomp before disappearing
into their graves. Stevenson’s piece was frequently recommended for use in a variety of films, including
those not in the Gothic genre. Within the genre, however, it was a favorite recommendation of Max
Winkler’s for films involving all kinds of secret, stealthy evildoing and murder, including the 1921 The Price
of Silence (Winkler 1921, 591).

15. Paul Levy (a pseudonym for prolific early film arranger and composer Sol P. Levy)’s “Sinister Theme:
for scenes of impending danger” was composed in 1918 and was published in 1925 in the photoplay album
The PianOrgaN Film Books of Incidental Music, Vol. 1: Misteriosos, which contained seven such generic
pieces by a number of well-known film composers. Vely’s piece is marked “Andante molto e misterioso,”
becoming faster in tempo throughout its A section until it becomes “piu animato” at the beginning of the B
section. The A section offers suitably dramatic, suspense-building left-hand motifs that are staccato eighths
followed by two chromatic sixteenths slurred to an eighth an octave above the initial eighth and accented,
creating frequent but irregularly spaced stingers, contrasted with syncopated sustained chords in the right
hand. At bar eleven, this motivic arrangement is interrupted by a series of dramatic sustained chords tied to
falling sixteenths that bring the A section to and end at bar fourteen. The B section consists primarily of
running chromatic sixteenth and thirty-second notes, evoking a feeling of excitement or confusion, not unlike
the chaos created when the dancing skeletons fall down. The piece returns to the A material at bar thirty-two,
where the initial motif returns. In this piano score for the piece, Vely offers cues as to which instruments are
playing when, and, following West and Lang’s advice, gives the A motif to the low winds and strings, while
the upper winds and violins are assigned the more chromatic passages that suggest the otherworldly.

**Performance Practices**

16. While all of these pieces are influenced by earlier works, it is also important to note the ways in which
these later works were designed for use specifically in the cinema. All three—and the majority of works in this
genre—are highly sectional and non-developmental. This is particularly cinematic. Music for the ballet
engages in fairly simple forms, but includes variations and even sonata form; music for vaudeville was
usually designed to fit a single sketch or act. Cinema allowed for multiple acts without pause, but, in its
earliest days, could also be unpredictable in duration because of varied film speeds. Thus an accompanist
might fit Piece A to Film A at Cinema A, but in Cinema B, the same film might take an additional thirty
seconds to show, or, more likely, took thirty seconds less. Single pianists or organists could easily jump to a
cadence as needed, but the ensembles of 3-30 musicians common to larger movie palaces weren’t as nimble.
The result was cinema music with multiple subdivisions and cadential points that could be rapidly and easily
edited for films as they came to the theater. Allen’s “Dance” could easily be ended at bars 16, 34, 50, 66,
and 74. Stevenson’s “Skeleton Dance” is divided into sections ending at bars 20, 37, 53, and 71, and can be
performed with or without the Trio section. There is evidence, based on the copy of the work held by the
Mirskey Collection at the University of Pittsburgh, that conductors also used the trio separately or repeated it
in performance. Vely’s “Sinister Theme” is similarly repetitive and sectioned so that performers using it to
accompany a film could easily stop at several different points to fit the projection. Musicians could end at bar
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14, 29, or 31, in addition to the written end—all of these allowed for an accompanist or ensemble to play a final cadence in the tonic. They could also end more abruptly for the purposes of suspense or interruption. Accompanists could thus play any scene for which this was the music as a complete and finished encounter, could leave the audience in suspense, or could segue directly into another work for the following title card or scene.

17. In addition, these works were composed for variable instrumentation. All have parts for piano, which could be used alone, and for a variety of instruments. In most cases, the instrumentation for this genre was that of the standard classical orchestras, but sometimes also included the banjo, saxophone, and other instruments not typically found in classical orchestras. Most if not all of the instrumental parts include cues for other instruments, so that one instrument could double for a missing one in performances, a practice that was common because of the small sizes of cinema orchestras. In “Skeleton Dance,” the piano-conductor and violin-conductor parts both include full cues, including expression and timbre markings, for every instrument that carries the primary theme of a dotted rhythm preceded by stepwise ascending eighth note triplets, plus percussion and many supporting instruments. Cues in each instrumental part are extensive and indicate that the published anticipated a variety of ensembles using the music. The second violin can fill in for the clarinets; the viola for the bassoon; the cello for the viola or bassoon; the clarinet for the oboe, violin 2, and viola; and so on.

18. Despite the apparent popularity—as judged by the sales, recordings, and published recommendations—of misteriosos like these works, many recommendations for spirit films still relied on pre-existing works with equally pre-existing connotations. Musicians using such pre-existing pieces and hoping to evoke these connotations—what Anahid Kassabian calls “affiliating identifications”—assume that perceivers bring with them a shared understanding of the works’ “histories forged outside the film scene.” (Kassabian 2001, 3) For cinema accompanists who had little time to learn new pieces, it is easy to understand why older and better-known music remained in circulation even as new pieces composed specifically for the genre were hailed as appropriate and effective in use. This likely explains why, in recommending music for The Haunted House (1917), accompanist and columnist Ernst Luz prescribed older and more established musical signifiers for the supernatural for the film, including Schubert’s “Erl King.” He did recommend some newer pieces, including generic “misteriosos,” leaving the exact title for individual performers to select from the dozens available in new sheet music publications or photoplay albums. (Luz 1915, 2417)

19. Archived music libraries like Sullivan’s and Hamack’s contain numerous pieces to be used in conjunction with the supernatural, including several of the pieces listed above. (Sullivan Papers; Claire H. Hamack Papers) Hamack’s repertoire also included pieces titled “Meditation;” “Ominous Forebodings;” “Dance of the Devils,” which was specifically intended for accompanying “sprites;” “Enchanted Forest;” and various misteriosos. Sullivan’s library contained music for “celestial visions;” “death bed scenes;” “magic;” “mystique;” and the “fantastique;” and works called “Haunted House;” “Lure of Souls;” “Mysterious Event” (marked for “Foreboding” and “Eastern mysticism”); “Queer Antics” (for “phantom”); as well as multiple misteriosos. As in many music libraries for silent film, the pieces in these libraries are not arranged in a particular order and do not always bear markings that enable researchers to connect them with specific films. Burnett owned additional pieces that could have been used to accompany spirit films,
including “By Moonlight;” “After Sundown;” and “Moonlight Sketches.”

[Hear Gaston Borch’s “Creepy Creeps,” a frequently-used mysterioso, played by the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra.]

20. In creating new works, composers developed a rich and deep body of sounds and music signifying the supernatural that extended from the séance to the repertoire for silent films. Because they were not expected to follow any particular existing sonic conventions in their performances but were trusted as inherently capable of selecting the perfect sounds and pieces from existing sources and creating original soundscapes, mediums and film accompanists developed and expanded sonic representations of kindly or mischievous ghosts. These representations were widely circulated and heard. When sound arrived, spirit films like Topper (1937) were supplied with soundtracks that emulated the scores silent spirit films had received, with musical motifs and effects right out of Lang’s recommendations and the compositions that emulated the soundscapes created by women for séances. These elements created by mediums and cinema musicians are still present in the scores for films with ghosts today: as I will demonstrate in Chapter 4, we can hear nostalgia and humor in the scores for movies such as Ghost (1990), The Haunted Mansion (2003), and Cabin in the Woods (2012).

Sources

Archives

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Chapter 3: Case Studies in Musical Cues

1. While there are numerous very early spirit films, such as those by Méliès and the Lumières from the late 19th century, there is little or no reliable evidence of what music was played for those, although we might make educated guesses that accompanists drew from the soundscapes of both séances and phantasmagoria shows as well as relying on well-known operatic and orchestral works like Camille Saint-Saëns’s *Danse Macabre* and similar pieces. But by the mid-teens, when musical suggestions for films became more popular and as studios and independent companies began to issue cue sheets, information about accompaniment creates much more of a paper trail, offering scholars a glimpse of how musicians were treating spirit films. Here I provide case studies for four films involving spirits: two films in which the spirits are intended to be quite real, and two in which it’s made clear that they are not. For all of these films, there is at least one extant document about the music for the film.

**Ghosts**

2. The first case studies involve music recommendations for two films in which there are actual ghosts, as opposed to burglars or others posing as ghosts. In the first of these, I focus on music for *The Ghost of the Jungle* (1916), in which in one version, a woman’s spirit rises from her body and then returns to it, and in another version, the ghost of the same woman leads her lover to his death. In the second, I examine music used for *Earthbound* (1920), a highly acclaimed movie in which the ghost of a murdered man becomes involved in improving the lives of those he hurt in life. The second set of case studies encompass music recommendations for two films in which the “ghosts” prove to be living people: the 1911 film *The Ghost of the Vaults* and *The Ghost of Rosy Taylor* (1918). Music columnists Max Winkler, George Beynon, and Clarence Sinn all wrote columns for their respective trade magazines discussing music for or offering recommendations for accompanying these films. These recommendations, some in the form of cue sheets without musical incipits, demonstrate how Winkler, Beynon, and Sinn were influenced by the sounds of spiritualism and draw from the established conventions of music for spirits in séances and elsewhere on the stage and in the cinema. The cues for these films also show how cinema musicians might display sympathy for and belief in spiritualism or their disdain for the movement. In addition, the cues allow accompanists to both capitalize on and satirize the popularity of spiritualism and spirit entertainments in the early twentieth century.

3. The two-reel *Ghost of the Jungle* has a fascinating history that illustrates some of the difficulties in doing research on early film and early film music. Made by Bison/Universal and released in 1916, the original version of the film featured a plot in which Anna, a young woman, is seduced away from her family’s African farm by Egbert, a man who has stolen from her family; when she takes ill in the jungle, he leaves her, and she dies. Some time later, Egbert gets lost in the jungle, and is guided by Anna’s avenging spirit down a river and into a deadly waterfall. Early announcements of the film focused on this aspect of the picture: the “supernatural and life after death enter in a large measure into the” film, wrote *Moving Picture World*. (“Stars” 1916, 2245) However, censorship caused the plot to be changed before the film could be
exhibited in some cities. In the revised version of the film, Anna, instead of dying, is shown being nursed back to health in the jungle by a black woman (in the racist “mammy” mold popular in white movies of the time); when Egbert encounters her several years later, her father’s leopard kills him. A synopsis in *Moving Picture World* describes the original film:

A great deal of double exposure work was done in the picture and some of the “supernatural effects” have been admiringly commented upon. In one scene the heroine does of fever in the African jungle and her spirit is seen leaving her body when death comes. Her spirit again plays an important part in the development of the plot when it leads the man who left her alone to die to his own doom. She is seen leading the way down a raging torrent which ends in a waterfall and over this waterfall the man who has deserter her finally plunges to his death in a frail canoe. (“The Ghost” 1916, 2266)

*Motography*’s synopsis is even more blunt about the vengeful role of the ghost: “Egbert induces the daughter of a South African miner to rob her father and elope with him. After the elopement Anna is taken with fever and Egbert leaves her to die. Years later justice overtakes the unmanly deserter when Anna’s spirit form leads him to his death.” (“Brief Stories” 1916, 1465)

4. The film was not censored in all locations. For example, the Pennsylvania State Board of Censors of Motion Pictures approved the film in late 1915 for showing in its original form. (“List of Films” 1918, 148) But when the movie opened in Baltimore six months later, exhibitors showed the revised version, described here in the *Baltimore Sun*:

Charles Egbert, a handsome young prospector, makes love to Anna, daughter of Alhert DeWitt, a South African miner. Egbert persuades Anna to disclose the place where her father has his store of diamonds hidden and induces the girl to run away with him. The old man sets out on the long search for his daughter and his gems. Egbert and the girl are lost in the jungle. When she seems to be dying of fever Egbert deserts her. She is eventually nursed back to health by a kindly black woman. A year passes. One day while riding along the road Drake, a hunter, and Egbert see a wild man poised on the edge of the cliff, raising a huge rock to hurl down upon him; but the ground upon which he is standing gives way and he is pitched forward and falls to the bottom of the cliff. Though unconscious the man still lives, so Drake picks him up and carts him away to his cabin.

The fall has restored the old man’s memory, which for the past few years had been an utter blank. He tells his story to Drake and his partner. Egbert is horrified to find that it is DeWitt, father of the girl he had ruined and deserted. Egbert determines to take the bag of diamonds and escape. A baby leopard, which has been his pet, has followed DeWitt to the cabin. As Egbert starts to run out Anna rushes into the hut. Terror-stricken he stares at the girl. Her father takes her in his arms. As the deserter and thief breaks the door the leopard springs upon him. (“Ghost” 1916, 39)

Even in this revised version, the scene in which Anna’s soul appears to leave her body is retained, although the changes eliminate the scenes showing the spirit’s agency in killing Egbert. In this version, she is a benevolent—and temporary—spirit, rather than a frightening or grotesque one.
5. As a result of the censorship, it is not always apparent what music was used for what version of the film. Max Winkler made musical recommendations for *Ghost of the Jungle* in *Moving Pictures Weekly* in June 1916, when both versions of the film were in circulation. (See Fig 3.1.) Winkler refers to intertitles in his cues, but because of the versioning issue, it’s unclear whether these intertitles were the same in both versions or whether they were changed for the revision. (Winkler 1916, 40.) Winkler’s selections seem suggest that he had the revised version of the film in mind when writing, as he refers to “The fight” as a cue that comes late in the film and which I take to mean the leopard’s attack.

Image not found

Fig. 3.1. Winkler’s suggestions for The Ghost of the Jungle

If he is writing about the revision of the film in which Anna lives, Winkler appears to be proposing that the accompanist for the picture use “Rosemary” for the part of the film including her apparent death. “Rosemary” is appropriate and in keeping with cinema musicians’ musical preferences for spirits. Winkler doesn’t list a composer for “Rosemary,” but it’s likely that he’s referring to Edward Elgar’s “Rosemary,” the English composer’s 1915 revision of his 1882 *Douce Pensée* for piano trio. “Rosemary” was also published in 1915 for use in the theater in several arrangements by film composer and arranger Albert Ketelbey, so it would have been known and widely available to cinema musicians. Elgar’s piece is subtitled “That’s for Remembrance,” quoting English flower lore and Ophelia’s mad scene in *Hamlet*, and is certainly a work that could be used to indicate death and the presence of a spirit. Of the two possible pieces for representing Anna’s spirit leaving her body—the other is Theodore Bendix’s “Sweet Jasmine”—“Rosemary” seems most likely, both in terms of the title’s significance and the music itself. Although Elgar had composed it early in his career, he returned to it to revise it during the First World War, when many of his works addressed the losses of the conflict. Marked “Andante,” Elgar’s short piece opens with a four-measure introduction that consists of a repeated descending dotted-eighth and sixteenth-note gesture that appears again briefly in the middle of the piece and at the very end. It then settles into a through-form series of a statement of a primary theme followed by the theme taken up an octave, the metrical displacement of the theme, a con passione section in which there is a change of texture in the left hand, and a final iteration of the theme. Elgar calls for rolled chords, which mimic the glissando of a harp and are, as noted earlier, a frequent signifier of death and afterlife in music for silent film, and almost constant sostenuto, which contributes to a languid, serene, floating character. The piece’s sectional and non-developmental form would allow accompanists to stop the piece at several points and add on their own cadences for closure to a scene.

6. "Rosemary" is exactly the kind of salon music Meyer-Frazier describes as an essential part of a woman’s repertoire during this period (See Chapter Two), and much of the music Winkler recommends for accompanying the film would have been easy to source from a woman’s personal music library. He suggests a generic “Intermezzo” for the beginning, a piece-type frequently gendered as women’s music for its brevity, lightness, and lack of technical demands; he also suggests Theodore Bendix’s “Sweet Jasmine,” which was
originally published in 1906 and was republished several times thereafter. It was a popular piece: it appears in several archives of music from silent cinemas, and Winkler recommends it for accompanying numerous other films. In addition to suggesting it for *Ghost of the Jungle*, Winkler also recommended “Sweet Jasmine” in his columns for *Moving Pictures Weekly* that it be used for the themes for the 1917 films *The Forbidden Game* (Winkler 1917a, 40), *Man of the Hour* (Winkler 1917b, 40), and *Flame of Youth* (Winkler 1917c, 40); and others. These many uses of “Sweet Jasmine” document its availability and playability for cinema musicians. Similarly, “To a Star: Romance,” which Winkler intends for the end of the film after the leopard attack, was originally composed as a salon piece by H. Léonard, but was adapted for theater musicians by film composer and arranger Richard E. Hildreth and published in *Jacobs’ Orchestra Monthly* in 1912; it may have been republished in piano albums of character pieces in 1914 and 1914 edited by Nicolo S. Calamara. “To a Star” was advertised as “movie music” for love scenes in *Jacobs’ Band Monthly* in November, 1919. (*Jacobs’* 1919, 19) Carl Kerssen’s “Hurry” is from the composer’s pieces for the operetta stage, while Bendix’s “Meeting” is a generic piece written specifically for the cinema.

7. *The Ghost of the Jungle* appears to be a lost film, in both its original form and in the revised version created after it ran afoul of the censorship boards, and while a single photograph of the set circulated in some publications, there also seem to be no extant documents showing the double exposure effects of Anna’s spirit leaving her body or guiding Egbert to his death. However, Winkler’s cues survive and provide a glimpse of how this early spirit film would have been accompanied, and that accompaniment is very much in keeping with the strategies developed for musically indicating the presence of spirits in the séance and other theatrical traditions, as well as the practice of drawing from the salon repertoire so often targeted at women. The use of “Rosemary”—and its genre—as a typical signifier of spirit presence is further confirmed and reified in the musical recommended and used for *Earthbound*.

8. Directed by T. Hayes Hunter for Goldwyn Pictures in 1920, *Earthbound* is one of the best examples of a feature-length spirit film. It cannily tapped into the interest in spiritualism without satirizing or mocking it, as many of the fake-ghost films do. Writing of the film’s popularity, *Motion Picture Magazine* noted, “this production comes at an opportune time, too, when people everywhere are extremely interested in this phase of living—or dying.” (“Across” 1920, 76) *Motion Picture News* agreed, writing, “Press and public, despite difference of opinion as to the meaning, the aim and varied qualities combined in the production of *Earthbound*, agree that it is a milestone. In film circles it is one of the most prevalent subjects of conversation, argument and general discussion. It has supplied food for thought,” later reaffirming its place as, “The picture for the hour dealing with subject all are interested in.” (“Hayes Hunter” 1920, 1911; “What the Big Houses Say,” 1920, 2979) The plot, based on a novel of the same title by Basil King, is simple: Jim Rittenshaw discovers that his wife Daisy is having an affair with Jim’s friend Richard Desborough. Enraged, Jim murders Richard, but Richard soon learns that he cannot go straight to an eternal reward, but must first make amends by positively influencing the lives of those he has hurt during his life. Double-exposures were used to create images of Richard’s ghost. (See Fig. 3.2.)

*Image not found*

*Fig. 3.2.* Richard’s spirit in *Earthbound*. 
9. *Earthbound* premiered simultaneously in New York at the Astor, one of many theaters run by Samuel “Roxy” Rothafel in the city, and at Chicago’s Playhouse theater in August 1920. It was an enormous success. Goldwyn Pictures heavily promoted the spiritualist angle of the film, writing that

The public, the critics, the producers and the exhibitors are agreed that it is the big success which the advance notices of the photodrama of life after death predicted it would be. Never has picture called forth such words of praise as have been accorded to Earthbound. Its theme, life after death, or the continuity of consciousness as the psychologists phrase it has a universal appeal. (“Earthbound is Approved” 1920, 1696)

The film was held over for multiple weeks in New York and Chicago, and was given special screening nights for American and foreign dignitaries in those cities. (“Extend” 1920, 1891) In Oregon, when the film opened two days before its originally scheduled screenings, the theater hired a woman to call “a thousand patrons, clergymen, Christian Science practitioners, spiritualists and others especially interested in stories of this type,” resulting in full houses. (“Stunts,” 1920, 59) Interest in the picture caused Mayflower Photoplay Corporation president Benjamin A. Prager to write an op-ed declaring that while in the past filmmakers shied away from religiously themed movies, films like *Earthbound* and others made the same year, such as *The Miracle Man*, these films proved that audiences would support “skillfully handled ‘religious pictures,’” in which they were neither preached to nor subject to the “dramatization of a sectarian creed.” (Prager 1920, 90)

10. To achieve this kind of success with the film in other locations, exhibitors were told, theater managers needed to take advantage “of all of the unusual and unique angles for exploitation which *Earthbound* enables.” Goldwyn Pictures published a “campaign book” of ideas and tactics to bring audiences to the film. (“Feature”1920, 2074) Theaters used “unique effects, lighting, draperies, fixtures, etc.,” in keeping with the film and its themes to advertise the picture. (“Earthbound Opens” 1920, 2433) Miller’s Theater in Los Angeles closed for four days before it screened *Earthbound* for the first time in order to make “special arrangements for the presentation, arranging the stage, lights, music, etc.” (“*Earthbound* is Booked” 1920, 2436) When the Capitol—one of Rothafel’s New York cinemas—scheduled its first screening, between 16-18,000 people saw the film on its first day. (“The sale of tickets,” 1920, 2651)

11. Rothafel, whose publicity, marketing, and “stunting” of films—what we might call gimmick or viral advertising today—was unsurpassed, created not just one unchanging musical accompaniment for the film but a mix of pieces that he changed, added to, or subtracted from based on external factors. He initially developed a score that was based on three themes: the harvest song from Verdi’s *Forza del Destino*; the popular song “*Oh Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms*,” which was a staple of cinema accompanists for a wide swath of sentimental scenes; and “*Kamennoi-Ostrow (Rocky Islands)*,” a piano piece by Anton Rubenstein that uses several devices associated with the benevolent supernatural: tremolo; a minor key with occasional forays into the relative major; high, oscillating pitches that accompany the melody; and a dramatic, rhythm-driven, lower-pitched section that eventually rises to resolution in a higher
tessitura. ("Earthbound is Approved") Only a few weeks after the film’s premiere, however, Goldwyn changed the score slightly to try to appeal to an even wider audience than those already targeted.

*L. Rothafel has arranged a special musical setting for the picture, which includes numbers presented last week, a Festival Chorus is offered in appreciation of Yom Kippur. The Andante and Allegro Marziale from Tschaikowsky’s “Symphonie Pathetique” is another of the orchestral overtures and there is also a ballet solo by Mlle Gambarelli." (Advertisement 1920, 2520)

In including the festival chorus—which is unidentified but may well be Max Bruch’s well-known and popular *Kol Nidre*, a piece often identified with Jewish life in the cinema—Rothafel was covering all his bases with the musical program leading up to the start of the film and the music that accompanied it. And while the film was most often praised for its moral message from a Christian point of view, acknowledging Yom Kippur was a canny way of suggesting that the film might appeal to more religiously diverse audiences. Rothafel continued to make adjustments to the accompaniment as the film continued to play to sell-out audiences. Rothafel’s success clearly inspired theater managers and musical directors in other cities. Miller’s Theater in Los Angeles gave the film “an atmospheric presentation patterned on the one at the Astor theater,” including vocal solos by Melba French Barr, a California-based soprano who often performed for Hollywood events. (“With First Run Theaters” 1920, 2975)

12. Other theaters sought to introduce and accompany the film with different musical fare: in Chicago it was accompanied at Barber’s Theater by an orchestral performance of the overture to von Suppe’s *The Poet and the Peasant* and von Nikolai’s *Merry Wives of Windsor* overture on the organ. (“Chicago,” *Motion Picture News*, October 2, 1920, 2596) The New Theater in Baltimore was also reported as having “shown *Earthbound* with a special musical presentation.” (“Baltimore,” 1920, 1648) In Salt Lake City, there was extensive religious and musical staging for the film:

*It was opened by dimming up blue footlights in an absolutely dark house. Then a harpist played “For All Eternity” very softly, swelling in volume to the chorus, which was picked up by the orchestra, with harp and orchestra continuing until the end. The entire song was repeated by a quartette back stage, with full musical accompaniment from the orchestra pit. As the quartette started the song, the front curtain rose very slowly, disclosing a cross on the left of the stage. As the curtain rose, the blue border lights were dimmed up. At the conclusion of the song, a halo appeared at stage right. [...] Then all lights out amid the rumble of thunder and the flash of lightning which continue until the first title is thrown on the screen, when the orchestra comes in with a heavy selection from *Forza del Destino* on the last thunder crash.* (“Fine Earthbound Prologue” 1921, 1628)

The creators of this musical accompaniment were canny, catering to those who believed in spiritualism and those who did not. In this instance, the unseen vocalists function as the originators of spirit voices, just as a medium’s voice might in a séance. The vocalists—like the originators of sound in the séance—are disembodied (much like cinema organists) and it is only through sound that the audience would have known of their presence. That the singers remain unseen while the orchestra accompanies them from the pit suggests that their presence could well be entirely spiritual, for they remain invisible all while the orchestra recognizes
their presence through the accompaniment.

13. The version “For All Eternity” used in this presentation was most likely an English translation and publication of “Eternamente,” (1891) by Italian composer Angelo Mascheroni (1855-1905). “For All Eternity” and been made popular by famous opera singers Adelina Patti and Enrico Caruso, who recorded the song in 1902 or 1903. The song was available in multiple keys; with and without violin obbligato, for piano solo, duet, cornet and orchestra, and military band; and appears in a number of American sheet music collections. The English lyrics of the song, written by S. A. Herbert, reference spells, magic, spirits, and an afterlife in which the dead can communicate and control a living person, all parts of spiritualist belief. For the (non-spiritualist) Christians in the audience, the harp connotes the heaven of the Christian afterlife. The music itself contains common signifiers of the supernatural: sustained chords with arpeggiated or scalar melodic lines floating above; sudden dynamic and textural changes to mark works like “shadows;” an intense middle section propelled by unceasing eighth note triplets for passages explicitly about death; and, after some minor key excursions, an end in the major key. Like Rothafel’s incorporation of the Kol Nidre as a way to appeal to Jewish patrons, the use of “For All Eternity” allowed the Salt Lake City theater to cater to both spiritualist and Christian audiences, including its leading local demographic, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

14. Similarly, the Isis theater in Lynchberg, Virginia, used a presentation developed by the theater’s manager and a Goldwyn Pictures “exploiter,” or marketing employee.

Colored light effects were used, red and blue alternately, on the hangings until the scene in which the wronged husband shoots his closest friend. At that point the entire house was plunged into darkness and from the pipe organ a human voice was released. A tenor with a beautiful lyric voice was placed in the organ chamber at the rear of the screen. The sounding of his voice in the auditorium of the theater was controlled by the organist by means of the shutter pedals. The tenor sang Massenet’s beautiful “Elegie.” The organist used the Vox Humana stop, playing in unison with the singer, so that the audience was unable to tell which was singer and which was organ. It gave an unusually eerie effect to the singing of the “Elegie.” (“Barrett” 1921, 2930)

This entire scenario is borrowed from the séance, including the use of a piece associated with death, disembodied voices, the voice-like organ effect, and the enveloping darkness.

15. Max Winkler published a set of cues for Earthbound in the October 16, 1920 issue of Motion Picture News (3067) along with cues for another Goldwyn film, Prisoners of Love, and two other features. Winkler, like many music columnists for the film trade publications, was certainly not beneath promoting his own generic works and pieces by his colleagues for the movie, and so his cue sheet lists several pieces by prolific film composers Maurice Baron, Sol Levy, Sol Levy’s alter-ego/pen name Paul Vely, Gaston Borch, and himself. Winkler recommends as the main theme “Romusical Thought” by Titlebaum. This unusual title is likely the result a typographical error: Titlebaum copyrighted a piano piece called “A Musical Thought: Reverie” in 1917, and this is probably what Winkler intends as the theme for Earthbound. The other recommendations are as follows (“T” indicates an intertitle):
1 — Theme (1 minute and 10 seconds); until — S: At screening.

2— Continue to action (3 minutes and 30 seconds), until — T: “In Jim Rittenshaw’s office.” 3 — Theme (3 minutes and 25 seconds), until — T: “At the Rittenshaw home.”

4 — “Queen of My Heart” (Sentimental ballad), by Baron (2 minutes and 45 seconds), until — T: “The De Windt home where.”

5 — Theme (6 minutes and 5 seconds), until — T: “The love call.”

6 — “Dramatic Suspense,” by Winkler (2 minutes and 50 seconds), until — T: “And dearie, if people.”

7 — “Cavatine” (Dramatic), by Bohm (4 minutes and 40 seconds), until — T: “No man has secrets from.”

8— “Dramatic Recitative No. 2,” by Levy (3 minutes and 15 seconds), until — T: “When Caroline misused love.”

9 — “Tragic Theme,” by Vely (4 minutes and 5 seconds), until — T: “When Daisy used love wantonly.”

10 — “Andante Dramatico” (For dramatic emotion), by Borch (3 minutes), until — T: “When Jim’s love turned.”

11 — “Andante Doloroso” (Depicting pathetic emotion), by Borch (4 minutes), until — S: Dick falls downstairs.

12 — Theme (4 minutes and 10 seconds), until — T: “An earthbound presence.”

13 — “Dramatic Tension” (Moderato agitato, descriptive), by Borch (6 minutes and 35 seconds), until — T: “Spirit moves with the.”

14 — Organ solo improvise, “Nearer My God to Thee” (2 minutes and 25 seconds), until — T: “Seeking the way of the.”

15 — “Dreams of Devotion” (Sacred dramatic), by Langey (2 minutes and 50 seconds), until — T: “The impulse of the evil.”

16 — “Omnipotence” (Sacred dramatic), by Schubert (5 minutes and 25 seconds), until — S: Flashback to interior of cathedral.

17 — Theme (2 minutes), until — T: “Your struggles with conscience.”

18 – “Twilight Reverie,” by Berge (5 minutes and 10 seconds), until — T: “We know, fellows, we can.”
19 — “Poeme Symphonique” (And quasi adagio), by Borch (4 minutes and 50 seconds), until — T: “Within an hour I should have.”

20 — Theme ff (3 minutes and 20 seconds), until — T: “Take me home, Harvey.”

16. Titlebaum’s piece, published in a variety of arrangements in the 1920s, appears in the 1922 Belwin Folio of Melodic Gems, Vol. 1, alongside Cecil Kappey’s “Indian Reverie;” Maurice Baron’s “Song of Zion: Hebrew Lament” and “Lamento;” “Baby Dreams, Petite Reverie” by S. Boyaner; and Al Morton’s “Golden Morning, Reverie.” All of the works in this collection, while categorized by the publisher as “melodic,” are also connected through their self-declared melancholy and dream-like or liminal moods. Titlebaum’s “Musical Thought” in particular is appropriate for associating with a spirit film. In E minor, it begins with a dirge-like introductory motif that rises melodically and then falls, with the fall accompanied by syncopation, which here destabilizes the regularity of the first three measures. (See Fig. 3.3.)

Image not found

Fig. 3.3. Mm 1-4 of “Musical Thought” by Titlebaum.

The syncopation moves to an inner voice and is repressed by the outer lines, which move in steady, on-beat progressions, all while the melody continues to replicate the funereal motif of a dotter quarter followed by an eighth note, ghosting famous funeral marches from the concert repertoire. A B section offers some slightly different textures, but no real development: the harmony moves along the cycle of fifths, and the piece remains focused on the funeral march motif. Rising staccato eighths lead to the return of E minor and the repeat of the A material; a short cadenza for a solo violinist outlines the dominant before the coda returns to an ornamented version of the A section and the end of the piece. “A Musical Thought” is ideal for cinema use: it is brief, contains numerous repetitions, moves in a harmonically predictable way, lacks significant development and correlating technical difficulty, and was available in several arrangements appropriate for cinema ensembles. The piece’s inclusion of stingers, phrases that increase in tension and are resolved quickly, and staccato gestures are all representative of Lang and West’s recommendations for supernatural films. If the performer leaves out the syncopations in the A section and modifies the harmony slightly, the result is a hymn-like excerpt that could signify the final departure of the film’s spirit.

17. Although “Queen of My Heart” is only listed once in Winkler’s cue sheet once, it’s likely that accompanists used it or a short excerpt of it at other places during the film to represent the women of the film. With both words and music written by film composer Maurice Baron, “Queen of My Heart” is remarkably like many spiritualist songs of the period, referencing the wonders of existence and the permanence of true love, even beyond death. Lines about magic and power and those like “I have chanted the joys of my dreamboat a-sailing/Out beyond the blue mists/Where the sea meets the sky” suggest afterlives and reunion in an afterlife. And like contemporary songs that signified life after death, Baron’s contains
languid melodic lines, chords to be rolled like the strumming of a harp, and near-continuous sostenuto. Baron includes some moderate text painting and creates a musical atmosphere suitable for a spiritualist service and perfectly apt for accompanying the mourning wives of *Earthbound*.

18. “Nearer, My God, to Thee” was a popular and well-known hymn in 1920, and was included in both Methodist hymnals, whence it had originated, and in the Spiritualist Hymnal published in 1911 by the National Spiritualist Association. It would have been very familiar to the film-going public: it was played at the funeral of President William McKinley in 1901 and then achieved even more fame as supposedly having been played by the ship band while the RMS *Titanic* sank in 1912. Edison released a recording of the hymn in 1913 to capitalize on this story, which remains apocryphal, and multiple composers created new arrangements and even entirely new settings of the text around the same time. It became a popular piece for improvising musicians to use in concerts, particularly among organists.

19. Aside from the art song by Franz Schubert composed in 1825, the other pieces Winkler recommends are newer works written specifically for the cinema. These do what the titles indicate: provide suspense, tension, or a sense of tragedy. Like Titlebaum’s “Musical Thought,” they are sectional, tonal, and easily understood as representative of on-screen emotions and actions. Borch’s “Andante Doloroso,” which accompanies Richard’s death, mimics the action of his fall down the stairs with a descending, rhythmically irregular melody line accompanied by descending eighth notes, and Berge’s “Twilight Reverie” incorporates tremolo, quickening eighth notes mimicking a racing heartbeat, and pitches in a high tessitura at the end, typical of music representing spirits.

20. The various musical selections recommended and used for *Earthbound* indicate that the public was aware of the music and sounds of spiritualism to the point that these pieces, techniques, and effects could be used to accompany spirit films without the need for explanation. The pieces referenced by the press on Rothafel’s accompaniments, those listed in Winkler’s column, and the others mentioned in trade magazines and papers all suggest that scoring for spirits developed from the sounds and songs of the séance, from the recommendations of accompaniment textbooks like Lang and West’s, and from selected musical tropes also shared by early horror films—tropes that also overlap with melodrama (Leonard 2018).

Not Ghosts

21. *The Ghost of the Vaults* is one of the earliest films involving the idea of ghosts for which we have musical recommendations from a published magazine. The first mention of the music for it comes in a column by Clarence Sinn, and the same column addresses the then-still-ongoing debate about whether “silent dramas” should be accompanied at all and provides general advice to cinema musicians about accompaniment practices. (Sinn 1911, 32)

22. Made in Denmark, *The Ghost of the Vaults* was released in the United States in June 1911, where a reviewer for Moving Picture World remarked that “The whole film is ghostly but perhaps will be more popular for that,” suggesting that the demand for anything with spirits in it, real or not, was high. (“The Ghost of the Vaults” 1911, 1587) The film’s plot focuses on a love triangle. A young woman wishes to marry a
blacksmith, but her father wants her to marry her cousin. The cousin discovers that the father keeps his gold in a vault beneath his house and follows him to steal it. As the cousin begins to dig out the gold, the woman appears, walking in her sleep, and the cousin takes her for a ghost. Surprised, the cousin falls into and is trapped in the vault; the blacksmith and father then appear, and the cousin is denounced.

23. Writing about the music that was played for the film at Sitner’s Theater in New York City, Sinn praised the music director’s choices of using the “Pilgrim’s Chorus” and “Song of the Evening Star” from Wagner’s Tannhauser; a Chopin waltz; generic agitato music; and what Sinn called “Beethoven’s Funeral March (“On the Death of A Hero”)” for the scene in the vault where a ghostly presence is suggested. Sinn wrote of the Beethoven that it was “handled beautifully” by the theater musicians, continuing

First it was given as a funeral march fitting the ghostly character of the scene; then a mysterious character was given to the number, running through the sleep-walking scene and changing at the last to a decided agitato effect (this last occurring principally in the second strain of the march—the three sharps strain). The finish of this scene was a melodramatic “hurry.” The manner of adapting the funeral march to several different phases of dramatic situation exemplifies what I have often contended, viz: that the manner in which your music is played is quite as important as the kind of music you play. [emphasis in original] (Sinn 1911)

All of the music Sinn cites here is in keeping with the music used for séances and spirit films, including those in which the spirits are real, as documented in Earthbound. While Chopin’s “Funeral March” was recommended or cited more often than that from Beethoven’s third symphony as appropriate for use in accompanying silent films, Beethoven’s was used extensively to provide a soundscape for death, dying, and funerals in early film. It was also, along with Chopin’s march, frequently recorded in the early years of recording technology, and was sold as appropriate for use in the cinema for death scenes and burials. Ernst Luz, writing for Moving Picture News in 1912, states he always categorizes funeral marches as “plaintive,” and should be used for “great misery, processionals to execution, funerals and burials.” (Luz 1912, 16) Funeral marches as a genre were also recommended for kidding films and for use in black comedies. In 1910, Sinn recommended the use of a funeral march in the comedy A Live Corpse, writing, “a dirge or other lugubrious tune makes a comedy duel all the funnier.” (Sinn 1910, 1285) Thus the march recommended by Sinn was doubly appropriate for The Ghost of the Vaults.

24. The Ghost of Rosy Taylor, a five-reel film starring Mary Miles Minter and based on a short story by Josephine Daskam Bacon published in the Saturday Evening Post, opened in July 1918, and its musical aesthetics recommended for it, too, are exemplary for both real ghosts and for kidding comedic scenes. (See Fig. 3.4.) The plot was summed up by Motography the month the film came out:

Rhonda Eldridge Sayles was a little American girl living in Paris. When her father died, leaving her almost penniless, she returned to the land of her birth. Convent-trained, she was an excellent little housekeeper, and when by chance a note intended for Rosy Taylor ordered someone to put Mrs. Du Vivier’s big house in order, Rhonda took the job. Mrs. Du Vivier was absent. When she returned she was delighted with the work of Rosy Taylor, until she learned that the real Rosy Taylor had died several months before. Then the mystery began. (“Mutual” 1918, 85)
In the end, Sayles turns out to be an heiress, and attracts the attention of the homeowner’s bachelor son. As Exhibitors Herald notes, the plot “cannot be said to be highly original,” but the film was deemed to have good entertainment value by the Herald and other trade journals, and was heavily advertised. The trade magazines recommended playing up the ghostly aspect of the film. Wid’s [later Film] Daily counseled exhibitors:

*If you are going to play this, I would put all of my emphasis on the ghost idea by having ads with catch lines such as: “Do you believe in ghosts?” “Have you ever seen a ghost?” “What would you do if you saw a ghost?” etc.* (Wid’s Daily 1918, 20)

As with many spirit films in which the spirits are revealed to be quite living, there is a certain amount of physical comedy in the film, even while director Henry King was praised for “successfully translating to the screen the atmosphere of mystery and romance” in the story upon which the film is based. (“Miss Minter” 1918, 75)

25. Music is referenced directly in the film at 3:05, where Stephen Foster’s “Old Black Joe” is overlaid on top of images of a door opening and shutting, while Mrs. Du Vivier and her friend seek to “rout the ghost” from the house. The overlay of the song clearly indicates that the two women hear someone singing Foster’s song, which speaks to death, dying, and going to heaven. This is confirmed when one of the women hearing the music identifies the song as “Rosy Taylor’s favorite” in the intertitles and assumes it is her spirit singing. (See Fig. 3.5a-c.)

Fig. 3.5a. Song is superimposed on the film, suggesting that the ghost of Rosy Taylor can be heard by the women. Here: “for my head is bending low.”

Image not found

Fig. 3.5b. Here: “…the voices calling Old Black Joe.”
“Old Black Joe” reappears at 41:35, where the film returns to the scenario in which Mrs. Du Vivier and her friend believe Sayles to be the ghost of Rosy Taylor. As before, the melody line and lyrics are laid over the images, which show Sayles polishing a bedframe. It’s highly likely that accompanists played at least a bit of the song at this point in showings, although it goes unremarked-on in reviews. The use of an overlay with the melody line and lyrics is reminiscent of the showing of song slides in cinemas, which showed the music and words for popular songs on a glass slide, usually along with an image. These were for singalongs, which were common in first vaudeville and vaudefilm houses and later in theaters more dedicated to moving pictures. (Morgan-Ellis 2018)

26. George W. Beynon made brief musical recommendations for The Ghost of Rosy Taylor. Writing for Moving Picture World, Beynon suggested a generic andante for the film’s theme, and made more specific recommendations of “Extase” by Louis Ganne, “The Herd Girl’s Dream” by August Labitsky [sic], and Ethelbert Nevin’s “Narcisse.” He commented that there needed to be a distinct change of musical atmosphere when the film moves from France to America, and that the film’s overall score should be “very pathetic,” with sorrowful scenes accompanied by “long selections” to maintain continuity. Beynon further noted that a cue sheet could be obtained for the film from the studio, American Film Co., but this appears to have been lost. (Beynon 1918, 677-78)

27. “Extase,” composed by Ganne sometime before or around 1900, appears in numerous editions and for various instrumentations, including a cello, piano, and orchestra version published in France in 1900 and a 1914 version for voice and piano, when it is additionally titled “reverie.” An orchestral score that belonged to the music library of the Haarlem (Netherlands) operetta society shows the piece to be similar to the generic pieces American composers were writing for the cinema. It begins with rolled chords in the harp and a melancholy, singing line in the cello. This introductory material soon gives way to a section in which the melody is transferred to the first violins and the winds play staccato eighth notes, much like the mimetic music for sneaking or tiptoeing or to create suspense. Given the piece’s slight dynamic swells from piano to mezzo-forte, stingers, and tremolo passages, it could easily have been used to accompany the scenes in which Mrs. Du Vivier and her friend sneak into the house and up the stairs, fully believing that Sayles is the ghost of Rosy Taylor. Passages later in the piece could also be easily matched up with parts of the film according to the aesthetic of the period.

28. The other pieces Beynon recommends—“The Herd Girl’s Dream” by Czech composer Labitzky and Pittsburgh-based Nevin’s “Narcisse”—were both composed for salon orchestras and, once made available in the United States, promptly became used by vaudeville and cinema musicians. Both were also recorded for home and cinema use by HMV and Victor. “The Herd Girl’s Dream” is a pastoral waltz, while “Narcisse,”
from Nevin’s *Water Scenes: Five Pieces for the Pianoforte*, op. 13, is one of a set of character pieces of the kind popular with cinema musicians. With a languid A section and a slightly more active B section, it is quiet and tranquil, and Beynon likely intended it to be used for the sadder scenes of the movie.

**Conclusions**

The music recommended for or documented as having been used to accompany these four spirit films illustrates a clear influence from the séance and “women’s music”—parlor songs, character pieces, and the like. It also shows the use of genre music for the cinema that was focused on the spirit as opposed to gruesome or body horror. Although some recommendations are for pre-existing classical works with equally pre-existing significations—the funeral marches by Beethoven and Chopin, for example—suggestions for film scores in general shift away from operatic and concert works during this period and instead promote new music for the film, even if those pieces are derivative of existing concert pieces (like *Danse Macabre* and its many imitations intended for cinematic use). This indicates that cinema musicians found much of the new generic music more suitable or easier to acquire and play (or both) than more traditional repertoire. Pre-existing classical pieces never left the cinema and remain present today, often carrying with them very long-standing meanings, but aspects of generic music were clearly more attractive to film accompanists than those of works for the stage or concert hall. These aspects included very direct musical citations of scene, in which, for music for spirits, well-established and continually reified tropes like glissandi, bell-like music in the upper tessitura of the piano and organ, hymn-like passages, and the long, dreamy melody lines of reveries; non-developmental pieces. Other factors that made generic music popular were their highly sectional forms and lack of very demanding technique. Numerous works were written to fit these preferences, as seen in Chapter Two and in the music used for spirit films analyzed in this chapter. Because of the ease of which performers could play and categorize generic music, cinema libraries acquired more of it than of works adapted from concert pieces for cinema orchestras. Ernst Luz’s color-coded system of creating scores relied on the quick and obvious categorization of generic pieces so that cinema music directors could rapidly arrange a score for films even if they didn’t have all of the pieces recommended by a cue sheet. This and other methods of categorization led to a broad set of signifiers for film music, including music for ghosts. By the end of the silent era, the repertoire deemed appropriate for spirits had become fairly codified into the tropes listed above: glissandi, bells, hymns, and the use of sentimental, pathetic, or plaintive melodies. In humorous spirit films, the exception to these was the use of overly serious or melodramatic music to kid the action. These persist into sound film and contribute to the soundscape of the comedic ghost movie, which I examine in Chapter Four.

**Sources**


Chapter 4: Silents in Sound

1. With the advent of sound-on-film technology, many cinema musicians found their positions rendered obsolete. Although pressure from musicians and the cinema music industry persuaded some theater managers into keeping in-house musicians through the end of 1929, it wasn’t enough to overcome the excitement created by the new technology, and the films that used it. A handful of accompanists found themselves both playing the organ or piano and the phonograph: Adele V. Sullivan’s collection of cinema music includes cue sheets for records to be synchronized with scenes. A number of cinema musicians found new employment in radio, where Rosa Rio, for example, became an even more famous accompanist and composer, creating the theme for Orson Welles’s *The Shadow* and other radio plays. Others sought out church jobs, teaching, or playing for live stage entertainment. Still others decided to go into different fields entirely—Hazel Burnett became a dentist—and some, unable to find work, committed suicide. (American Organist 12, no. 7 (1929), 489)

2. At the same time, the film industry on the East Coast was changing rapidly. Filmmakers had moved west to avoid copyright and other legal issues that were pursued more stringently in the east, and to take advantage of the weather, which permitted outdoor shooting all year round. It might seem natural that cinema musicians, especially composers and arrangers, would seek out work in Hollywood writing the scores for sound films. While this was true for a handful of composers and film music arrangers like James C. Bradford, Edward Kilney, Hugo Riesenfeld and J. S. Zamecnik, whose pieces and recommendations for scoring silent films were turned into scores for sound versions of those films or “part-talkie” films such as the 1928 Al Jolson vehicle *The Singing Fool*, most of the composers for new sound films were from non-cinematic backgrounds. Max Steiner, who scored *King Kong*, was born into a theatrical family in Austria and wrote classical music before joining his father and colleagues in the theater, where he composed operettas or incidental music for plays. After working in Berlin and London, Steiner went to New York where he worked on Broadway until 1929. There he came to the attention of producers of both stage plays and films, including vaudeville-turned-movie company RKO, which hired him to create scores for its shows. Moving to Hollywood, he soon became in high demand for original or arranged film scores. Steiner’s biography is echoed in those of the other major early sound composers, including composers Bernard Herrmann, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Alfred Newman, Miklós Rózsa, Dimitri Tiomkin, and Franz Waxman. Korngold was a celebrated art music composer of ballets and opera in Austria before leaving during the Nazi rise to power in the 1930s and at the invitation of Max Reinhardt to come to Hollywood to score Reinhardt’s film of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Waxman went from conducting a band to studying with conductor Bruno Walter to becoming an orchestrator in the German film business before immigrating to the United States.

3. It’s unclear why established cinema composers, arrangers, and performers weren’t wooed en masse by Hollywood when sound film was in development, or why they weren’t used to score more part-talkie films. Perhaps, as had happened in the cinema industry at its birth, when it struggled to establish film as a wholesome and employed credentialed stage actors in order to show that it was a moral art form, Hollywood studios sought out those with authority as art music composers to help establish the new sound film as an art.
Those who had pushed back against sound film, decrying it as “canned music” without emotion and without the capability to truly express the emotions or actions of the visuals, likely wouldn’t have been hired because of their attitudes, but there were countless silent cinema composers and compilers who would have been enthusiastic about the chance to create permanent scores for films. (“Canned Music on Trial,” 1929)

Nevertheless, the composers who found work in Hollywood at the beginning of the sound era were familiar with the sounds and music of the silent cinema, how that repertoire was selected and performed, and what it signified for audiences. This was true for spirit films as much as it was for westerns, romances, and other genres. Additionally, séances as a form of entertainment remained popular through the 1930s, and the sounds of the séance continued to be part of widespread general knowledge. The losses from the Great War were still in recent memory, and Spiritualist leaders remained active, seeking to resolve the conflicts between their religion and Christianity and establish more permanent centers for Spiritualist study and practice. As Jenny Hazelgrove has documented, the egalitarian nature of Spiritualist beliefs was appealing to many, and interwar belief was high:

_Hazelgrove goes on to note the comfort provided by spirit films that offered a glimpse of life beyond death:_

_A competition organized by the Sunday Dispatch in 1940 revealed that many people dreamed of postmortem survival and of reunion with dead loved ones. The newspaper offered to award a prize for what ‘readers considered the best film fade-out they had ever seen.’ Mass-Observation [a group dedicated to studying everyday life] analysts handled the findings and were struck by ‘the emphasis on supernatural endings…: 20 per cent of the votes cast were for fade-outs with the spirits of the dead living happily in the other world although they could not do so in this.’ The most popular fade-out was The Three Comrades (1938), where two dead comrades beckon the third to join them. Smilin’ Through (1932), which dealt with the theme of communication between the dead and the living, was also popular. (Hazelgrove 2000, 25)_

_Hazelgrove further documents that there was also a strong school of thought that even those who had not lived unimpeachable lives had the opportunity to improve their afterlives and move up from lower levels of the afterlife to higher, more privileged ones. This idea is an old one, rooted in Catholic belief in Purgatory: in Shakespeare’s _Hamlet_, the ghost of Old Hamlet tells his son that he is_:

_Doom’d for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confined to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away. (1.5.10-13) (Shakespeare 2006)_
4. It is not surprising, then, to find examples of this belief expressed in the spirit films of the 1930s. A 1935 cinematic adaptation of Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* titled *Scrooge* emphasizes Marley’s ghost’s lines in which he states that he must wander the Earth, carrying great chains, to expurgate his sins. This idea also drives *The Ghost Goes West* from the following year; in it, a disgraced ghost must restore honor to the family name before he can go to heaven. And in the 1937 film *Topper*, happy-go-lucky but utterly irresponsible couple George and Marion Kerby (Cary Grant and Constance Bennett) must perform a good deed as ghosts in order to be fully released from life on Earth. It is unsurprising that all three of these films have scores that tap into the sounds of the séance and the ways in which silent spirit films were accompanied.

**Ghosts from the 1930s**

5. Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, first published in 1843, was a popular source for filmmakers. It was used as the basis for one of the first feature silent films in 1901, and also served as the basis for one of the earliest surviving sound films involving spirits. There is little contemporary documentation regarding the music used for any of the silent or early sound versions of *A Christmas Carol*, possibly because it was thought to be too obvious to need recommendations or cue sheets. It’s likely, though, that accompanists employed traditional Christmas music along with stingers or other gestures or timbres suggesting the supernatural when Marley’s ghost and the other spirits appeared. In 1911, Edison’s British Amberol division released a recording of Bransby Williams’s piece “Awakening of Scrooge,” which includes a performance of “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” and some spoken text from the Dickens story; and “Street Watchman’s Christmas” by Williams and Charles J. Winter, both likely intended to be used to accompany films, magic lantern shows, or readings of Dickens’s novella. (*Edison Phonography Monthly* 1911, 19) Reviews and synopses—such as the one for a 1917 film version of *A Christmas Carol* directed by Rupert Julian—note the role of carolers in setting the scene of the film, describing “the merry voices of young and old picking up Christmas cheer and passing glad tidings in friendly salutations.” (*Moving Picture World* 1917) A brief review in Exhibitors Herald of a 1924 adaptation states that for a Chicago screening of *Scrooge*, a two-reel Art Class film, well-known Tiffin Theater organist W. Remington Welch “played ‘Christmas In the Old Neighborhood’ on the Wurlitzer organ.” (*Exhibitors Herald* 1924, 35)

6. Directed by Henry Edwards and filmed in the United Kingdom, the 1935 *Scrooge* has an original score by Dutch composer William (W. L.) Trytel. Unlike many of the film composers in sound film in Hollywood, who had not worked extensively in silent film, Trytel had served as the composer and music arranger for several silent films before becoming the music director for sound films at Twickenham Studios in London. Trytel clearly knew the musical expectations that the various earlier films and countless stage adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* had created for audiences, including carols and appropriate music for spirits. In addition to various Christmas songs, performed with deliberate woefulness by amateur players and sung by children, Trytel’s score makes use of several silent film music genres, including a misterioso, as heard at 13:15 in the film, and a hurry, which begins at 13:36.

7. More relevant to *Scrooge*’s status as a spirit film, however, is the music Trytel composed or repurposed for the appearances of Marley’s ghost and the other spirits. A stinger and a shimmering cymbal, both sonic signifiers borrowed directly from silent film, accompany the traditional shot of Marley’s face in *Scrooge*’s
doorknocker that first suggests the presence of the otherworldly in the story. Tremolos and chromaticism reflect Scrooge’s fear and anxiety as he enters his home following this fright (starting at 19:19), and when he sees his own clothes (20:46) and mistakes them for a human figure, Trytel scores the moment with another stinger followed by more tremolos. At 20:28, a bell begins to ring by itself, a common signifier of spirits in sèances that also found its way into the silent cinema. Remarkably, Marley’s ghost is unseen throughout the film, but the continuation of tremolo in the strings beneath his dialogue clearly indicates his presence using a traditional musical texture for spirits. Marley’s ghost’s music establishes the basic musical soundscape for the rest of the spirits in the film. Trytel uses typical gestures from the misterioso genre, already associated with spirits in the audiences’ ears, to emphasize Scrooge’s fears in anticipating the spirits to come. The Spirit of Christmas Past, portrayed as a human figure with a glowing aura, appears to the accompaniment of stingers and the same shimmering cymbal that indicated Marley’s ghost’s arrival.

8. The arrival of the Spirit of Christmas Present is announced through chromatic glissandos in the strings and the harp, creating a sense of eeriness. This established music for spirits is disrupted, however, when the spirit turns out to be a cross between Santa Claus and Bacchus, wearing fur-trimmed robes and a crown of vines. The eerie spirit music is replaced by a jolly march featuring the brass, confounding the audience’s expectations for a more ethereal figure. After this unorthodox spirit of Christmas Present has come and gone, Scrooge must face yet one more spirit: that of Christmas Future, who shows Scrooge his own death. When Scrooge awakens for this final visitor of the night at 39:21, Trytel scores the scene with low winds briefly oscillating to suggest instability or the unnatural and the same cymbal roll as that of Marley’s ghost’s arrival. A looming, pointing shadow, the Spirit of Christmas Future is then accompanied by a funeral march that begins at 39:37 (Fig. 4.1). Trytel then transforms the march in various ways, again upending expectations, by making it triumphal in nature and shifting it to a major key as the Spirit of Christmas Future departs and Scrooge awakens, changed, to church bells ringing on Christmas morning.

9. Throughout, Trytel’s score has brought the sounds and music of sèances and silent spirit films to the sound picture, anticipating audience expectations and creating a new accompaniment filled with the established musical tropes, textures, and techniques for spirits. Hailed as “decidedly effective,” Trytel’s score, which openly incorporated musical gestures and textures associated with spirits from the silent era, clearly communicated the presence of spirits without seeming either old-fashioned or too far removed from the accompanimental practices of the silent film. (David 1935, 15) That there was such close continuity in scoring for spirits from the silent cinema to sound films demonstrates that the sonic concept for the benevolent or warning spirit remained unchanged even as newer musical and sonic tropes developed for other genres within sound film. Scrooge was an enormously successful spirit film of the early sound era, and the positive reception of Trytel’s music for the spirits enabled other composers to continue to use similar musical approaches drawn from the silent era for spirits critically unchallenged.

10. In The Ghost Goes West, a 1936 satire about American materialism, phantom Murdoch Glourie (played
by Robert Donat), who died “a coward’s death” in the 18th century, is attached to his family castle and cannot be admitted to heaven until he convinces a member of the McClaggans family—a rival clan—to admit that “one Glourie can thrash fifty McClaggans.” When Glourie’s ancestral castle is sold to an American, dismantled, shipped across the Atlantic, and rebuilt in Florida, Glourie’s ghost goes with it.

11. The score for the film is by Michael Spoliansky, who grew up in a family of professional classical musicians and composed for cabarets in Berlin before fleeing to London when Hitler came to power. Once in the United Kingdom, he began scoring films for British filmmakers, eventually composing numerous scores for directors including Otto Preminger and Alfred Hitchcock. Like Trytel, Spoliansky uses conventions from silent film accompaniment for the spirits in *The Ghost Goes West*, reifying the persistence and familiarity of these techniques in the early sound period. His score also, again like Trytel’s, includes other generic music clearly derived from silent film accompaniment like hurries, mysteriosos, and music for comedic scenes. The influence of silent film accompaniment techniques is also obvious in Spoliansky’s use of highly mimetic music, a common device in which the music parallels the actions of the actors. (For more on mimesis in silent film, see Leonard 2018)

12. *The Ghost Goes West* opens with a prologue that illustrates just how Murdoch Glourie became a ghost by hiding from his rivals behind a barrel of gunpowder, which is then shot and explodes. This prologue is accompanied by an orchestral score that establishes the setting as Scottish through the use of bagpipes, drums, and gestures from traditional Scottish music. After the barrel explodes (11:26), the music shifts from the bagpipes to a modern flute, which plays a long line that mimics the actions of the surrounding men as they watch Glourie’s cap rise high into the air and fall again. While the flute’s ascending line is a straightforward scale, it trills at the top of the ascending line, as if trying but unable to rise any higher, and its descending line is chromatic and full of sequences that emphasize its downward movement, indicating that Glourie hasn’t risen to heaven, but is remaining on earth as a spirit. In the following shots, which show spinning circles surrounded by clouds and are accompanied by static strings, Glourie’s father tells him that they are in limbo, and cannot move on until Glourie’s ghost has avenged the family honor, smudged through his “cowardly” means of dying. Although bells and trumpets follow, they herald only the return of Glourie’s tam—all of him that remains—to the castle, rather than signifying his spirit’s arrival in heaven. After his tam is laid in state, Glourie’s ghost appears for the first time, to the sound of shimmering cymbals—the same instrument and technique used to betoken the ghost of Jacob Marley on film in *Scrooge* just a few months earlier. As Glourie begins his nightly walks through the castle, the score provides signifiers of the spirit straight from the séance and the silent cinema: bells ring and the clarinet has a wandering, unsettled, chromatic melody.

13. Once the film has jumped to the modern setting, the ghost’s nightly arrival begins with the clock striking twelve (33:08), a glass shattering, a descending line in the piano and then orchestra, (33:28), and rapping. The camera then cuts to Peggy Martin (played by Jean Parker), the daughter of the rich American who will buy the castle and take it and its ghost to America, who hears the sounds of the ghost walking about the castle. The music changes: the upper winds have a melody accompanied by tremolo violins and a strumming harp. So while the initial scoring suggests that the Glourie ghost’s reputation is frightening, the shift to music indicative of heaven tells the audience that he is not. Indeed, his appearance is so innocuous that Peggy
mistakes him for his living descendent, Donald Glourie (also played by Robert Donat). Spoliansky’s use of these established sounds of the séance and of the afterlife from silent film accompaniments demonstrate the ubiquity of these signifiers for the supernatural, and for the benign spirit in particular. The castle staff admit to never having stayed late enough at night to have actually encountered the ghost, and once Peggy has met the spirit, it’s clear that the ominous scoring at the beginning of the scene reflects their fear of the ghost rather than the ghost’s actual appearance or purpose.

14. While the castle’s parts are being transported by ship to the United States, Murdoch Glourie’s ghost rises from the neatly wrapped packages of stone to the accompaniment of flute trills, plucked strings, harp, and celesta, affirming his non-threatening status (44:36). The following scene, which depicts Murdoch’s nightly walking and rapping, is scored with low pitches on the piano, low brass, and repeated short crescendos. This more traditionally mysterious music again suggests that Murdoch the apparition could potentially be frightening to those who associate spirit rapping with malevolent phantoms, but Murdoch’s behavior—which is habitually flirtatious—is far from mysterious. He spends most of his time either playing a kissing game with young women or explaining how he is tied to the castle until he can lift the curse.

15. After the castle has been rebuilt, the Martins hold a grand dinner at which they promise Murdoch’s ghost will appear, secretly dressing Donald Glourie as his ancestor in cases the spirit is a no-show. And while Murdoch initially resists making an appearance, he finally does so after a guest, Bigelow, proclaims that he is the last living McClaggan. Murdoch’s entrance (1:14:23) is signified by whistling, the sound of wind, and chromatic, metrically irregular tremolos in the strings, suggesting that Murdoch will be rather more sinister now that his chance to get to heaven has arrived. But this typical ghost-music soon becomes comedic, as Murdoch chases Bigelow around the castle, popping up right in front of Bigelow at every turn. The mimetic quality of the chase music, while not linked to the sounds of the séance or more mournful spirits, is directly from the silent cinema: using the upper winds and quick motifs, Spoliansky creates an antic atmosphere that culminates in a line that descends through the ranges of the winds as Bigelow falls down in front of Murdoch (1:15:19).

16. Music indicating Murdoch’s scarier side comes into play again, however, as he tries to make Bigelow swear that Glouries are better than McClaggans (1:15:28). Crescendos rise to shrieking figures that prefigure the score for Psycho (1960), and drums thunder beneath tremolos and trilling winds. Although Murdoch’s appearance doesn’t change—he’s still full-bodied and gore-free—he is clearly terrifying to Bigelow. Murdoch pulls Bigelow out of the castle through the walls and into the open sky to force Bigelow’s concession about the value of MacClaggans relative to Glouries. A descending chromatic line in the flutes mimics Bigelow’s return to the castle, where Murdoch has vanished. Murdoch appears for a brief moment to bid farewell to Bigelow, and the strings and winds’ rising figure in a major key suggest that he will now at last rise to heaven; this is confirmed by the spirit-voice of his father. Swelling strings, harp, and bells (1:16:27) accompany Murdoch as he also says goodbye to his kinsman Donald, and Murdoch’s spirit fades away with the music’s cadence.

17. The Glourie ghost was a familiar kind of spirit to audiences conditioned to the concept of spirits made to wander—or who wanted to—until some final wish or task was complete. Murdoch Glourie, like many a spirit
who spoke at séances, only wanted to fulfill the condition needed for him to move on to a different realm. Although he is at times threatening, and treated as such musically, these moments are scarce and dissipate quickly, becoming comedic or triumphant. For most of his appearances, Murdoch is just another lonely spirit passing time on earth while pining for heaven, and the audience is told just that through Spoliansky’s references to traditional signifiers: bells, shimmering percussion, chromatic lines in various instruments, and the harp.

18. Composer Marvin Hatley also drew on the sounds of the séance and the music for silent spirit films in scoring the 1937 film *Topper*. His employment of the same musical tropes and techniques that both Trytner and Spoliansky used testifies to the continued recognition of silent film accompaniments for spirits, as well as the ongoing practice of relying on musical meanings established in the silent cinema.

19. Directed by Norman Z. McLeod, *Topper* was described by film critic Mildred Martin as a new entry in the genre established in the silent era of “gentle ghosts, romantic ghosts, tragic and bewildered ghosts,” comparing its “gay ghosts” with the “irresistible phantom lady killer of *The Ghost Goes West.*” (Martin 1937) A wealthy, irrepressible, fun-loving couple, George and Marion Kerby (played by Cary Grant and Constance Bennett) die in a car accident and, finding their spirits still on earth, decide that to get to heaven, they must do a good deed. They decide to haunt their friend, the staid Cosmo Topper (Roland Young) and make his life happier and more carefree. Episodes of comedic misunderstanding follow until finally Topper and his wife relearn to have fun, and the Kerbys depart.

20. At the beginning of the film, Hatley establishes Hoagy Carmichael’s “Old Man Moon” as a primary musical theme of the score. Carmichael himself plays it once at the beginning of the film, and different dance bands play it in later iterations as the Kerbys go club-hopping. This provides metadiegetic musical continuity for *Topper*, with the source of the music coming from inside film’s doxastic world. While today we might read the song’s lyrics are problematic—the singer asks the moon to help him seduce a woman by dazzling her with its light and drugging her drink with “stardust”—at the time it was promoted as a fun and romantic song.

21. Carmichael’s mother was a silent film accompanist, and it is possible that he too played piano for the movies growing up in addition to playing for dances and at clubs both as a soloist or part of a small band. He began writing songs for films in 1936, composing “Moonburn” for *Anything Goes* and joined Paramount Pictures in 1937 as an in-house songwriter for the movies. Carmichael’s “Old Man Moon” is used much in the way that popular songs written for silent films were employed as themes and as marketing tools. The sheet music for the song shows the car accident that kills Marion and George, and their ghosts walking with Topper (Fig. 4.2). The focus on the names of the film’s stars and title threaten to overwhelm the song title, which is pushed to the very top of the cover page.

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Fig. 4.2. “Old Man Moon”

22. Although “Old Man Moon” doesn’t address the spirit world, plenty of other music in *Topper* comes
The score and instrumental sound effects for *Topper* suggest that George and Marion Kerby will become ghosts well before their actual deaths: George plays notes on the rim of a glass while at the Rainbow Club, referencing the eerie sound of the glass harmonicas used in séances and on stage and in silent cinemas to indicate the presence of the unworldly. He sings and hums without seeming to notice what he’s doing, much like a medium demonstrating contact with or control by a spirit.

23. When the Kerbys do die, George waits to hear trumpets—another sound repeatedly associated with both séances and death—but none come. It is this lack of music that suggests to the Kerbys that perhaps they can’t ascend to heaven until they’ve done something worthwhile on earth. Their assumption of this condition only makes sense to audiences familiar with the concept, either through literature (like *Hamlet*, as cited above) or through Spiritualist beliefs and earlier spirit films like *Earthbound*. Sound and music continue to play a large part in both the diegesis and metadiegesis through the end of the film. The human-based sonic abilities of the ghosts, including singing of popular songs, children’s songs, and Marion’s whistles after Topper requests that she “make a noise every now and then so I know where I’m talking to,” imbue them with audible capabilities familiar from séances and keeps the ghosts (and the film) in the genre of mischievous and benevolent spirits and the spirit film.

24. *Topper* score composer Hatley worked in silent film prior to his employment as a composer for sound films, so it is not surprising that the score for *Topper* is constructed much like a compiled score for silent film in its use of generic, mimetic musical pieces. There is fast-tempo chase music for scenes of the Kerbys driving, and hurry music for Topper as he runs to catch a train. There is not always music for the ghosts—the first time they appear to Topper, there is only the sound of their voices to precede their becoming visible—but where there is underscoring for the ghosts, it is in the established mysterioso style, albeit sometimes in a major key. In the scene in which an invisible George and Marion escort Topper through the lobby of their building, Hatley uses pizzicato strings and short motifs alternating between the upper and lower winds to create an accompaniment that nods to both the classic mysterioso with its pizzicatos and descending lines and to comedic genre music that relies on contrasting registers and timbres.

25. When the police search for George at 1:30, the diegetic music of the ballroom—“Old Man Moon” again—falls silent and the score takes over. The score begins with a standard mysterioso in a minor key using low-pitched instruments and at a walking tempo with staccato chords that mimic the policemen’s movement. After about sixty seconds, however, the search for George becomes more madcap and the music changes to suit. While Hatley doesn’t make it as comedic as the scene in which Topper stumbles through the lobby, he does change it to indicate the presence of the fantastic through trills and glissandi. The texture lightens so that instead of low-tessitura winds and brass, the violins and flutes now have the primary motifs of trills followed by brief descending and ascending lines. By the time Topper’s driverless car pulls up for the main characters’ escape, the pace of the music has quickened and the glissandi—now with harp—are clearly intended to signify the magical, as interpreted through the stage and silent cinema. Shortly thereafter, following a brief scene of wild driving with chase music, Topper’s car crashes, knocking him unconscious. As his spirit rises away from his body (1:32), he is accompanied by a rising and falling motif in the bassoon that suggests his liminal state. When the Kerbys notice his spirit, a stinger chord in the brass followed a descending third in the oboe mimics their surprise. As Topper expresses his desire not to go back to his life,
Hatley gives the bassoon a longer descending line, suggesting Topper’s desire to be dead.

26. However, Topper’s spirit returns to his body and wakes up at home, where he finds that his unpleasant, disapproving, and stodgy wife has changed into a far more supportive and loving companion. A rising string figure accompanies Marion’s and George’s faces as they dangle form Topper’s roof to bid him farewell through the window, indicating that their “good deed” in enlivening Topper’s life has been accepted by heaven and that the Kerbys will now be admitted.

27. There are also a number of visual references to mediumistic tricks in Topper as well: George writing his name upside down and backwards at his bank meeting and slithering in and out of his seat are both nods to the abilities of spirit mediums (beginning at 14:45). Once dead, both ghosts manipulate physical items while unseen, mimicking the floating items seen at séances, and in the scene beginning at 33:06, George tells Marion he “won’t waste ectoplasm” to be visible while changing a car tire. Later in the scene, two passers-by are frightened away by the sight of floating car tires and the sound of Marion’s voice and whistling; later, a man is taken aback to see Topper’s car apparently being driven by no one. Taken all together, Topper offers a catalogue of séance activities transposed to the sound film.

Legacies of the Silent Spirit Film

28. The spirit is a disruptive force, regardless of its intent, and spirits demanded music and sound that was equally disruptive of normate music for accompanying non-supernatural moving images. As cinema musicians developed a soundscape for haunting, they were themselves creating a haunting (as defined by Carlson) of the cinema by the sounds and music borrowed or replicated from the séance and the opera, which were themselves haunted by sounds created in the natural world that spoke to audience desires to hear the unnatural. (Carlson 2003) Mediums and musicians listened closely to each other for musical means that would compel audiences to hear what they thought being haunted sounded like. The resulting body of tropes, gestures, and textures has been used whole-cloth and in select bits to the present. Although some musical tropes from spirit films have been co-opted by horror media and others by gothic works—the sounds of a music box, organ, or music played autonomously by other devices, for example, for all of the supernatural, not just spirits—much of the music composed more recently for spirit films is similar to that of the 1910s and 1920s.

29. Edith Lang and George West’s recommendations, the borrowing of music and sound from séances, genre music for the mysterious and unworldly, hymns and songs sung by Spiritualists, and musical signifiers associated with various kinds of afterlives have been resilient in film scoring. The ghost-comedy genre, which developed from films like The Ghost Goes West and Topper, and films about gentle or needy ghosts have continued through the twentieth century into the twenty-first, where audiences can still hear organs, bells, celestas, self-playing radios, and other devices, all descended from silent cinema. The trope of the haunted organ—which overlaps with both the haunted instruments and the haunted technologies of the séance—has become a cultural icon for hauntings, most often of the benevolent-ghost type, and sometimes of the not-ghost-but-presumed-to-be-a-ghost type, seen in numerous film versions of The Phantom of the Opera and in Scooby-Doo. As Isabella van Elferen has noted, the organ as a whole has become closely associated
with spirits of both the benevolent and malevolent kind: “Organs, in cinema or in other contexts, always stir
associations not only of sacred music, but also of their traditional location in churches and cathedrals, near
crypts and graveyards.” (Elferen 2012, 38) Even modern horror scores use select sonic tropes from silent
spirit films, often in explaining the origin of a spirit. Modern spirit films, generally featuring traditional
ghosts with unfinished missions, are accompanied by scores that offer bells, instruments or musical
technologies played by unseen forces, mimesis for the appearances, disappearances, and actions of ghosts,
religious music, romantic songs or numbers, shimmering percussion, tremolo, sul ponticello, and gentle
stingers that are intended to point out a scene and the information it transmits rather than create a jump scare.

30. The 1947 spirit film The Ghost and Mrs. Muir, in which the ghost of a sea captain and a young widow
fall in love, is scored by Bernard Hermann, who would have attended silent films as a child and frequented
the opera in his youth. Hermann uses multiple techniques for accompanying spirits from silent film practices
in his orchestral score for this spirit film-romance. Violins playing high in their ranges, shimmering cymbals,
and the occasional dissonant chord suggest early on that there is something mysterious and likely
supernatural about Gull Cottage, the house Mrs. Muir rents that is home to Captain Gregg’s ghost. A light
stinger accompanies Mrs. Muir as she opens a door to see the painting of Gregg for the first time,
foreshadowing his later arrival as a spirit. For the most part, Hermann’s dissonances, tremolos, and
chromatic lines resolve into brief sections of major key ordinariness, telling the audience that the spirit, when
he arrives, will be like the Glourie ghost or the Kerbys: entirely human in appearance, a bit mischievous, and
decidedly non-gory. In fact, the ghost (despite his astonishing chauvinism) is attractive enough that Mrs.
Muir falls in love with him and happily joins him in the afterlife on the day she dies.

31. Following a storm outside, which is accompanied by generic storm music that could have come straight
from a photoplay album, Mrs. Muir addresses the ghost, whose presence she feels in the cottage. (18:00) The
music that accompanies her request for the ghost to speak is limited to upper winds and strings, and while a
little eerie is not indicative of horror but of a roguish spirit. Captain Gregg’s first lines—heard while he, like
Jacob Marley’s ghost in the 1935 Scrooge, is off camera—are accompanied by contrasting low winds. As the
Captain and Mrs. Muir speak for the first time, the score disappears only to come back near the end of the
scene. The same forces are in use, but the eerie sustained flutes and violins have shifted into a more active
line that is pastoral in nature. Soon the clarinets and lower strings have taken over as the dominant
instruments, and the audience is to understand that the agreement between the two characters will lead to a
pleasant relationship. At the end of the film, when Mrs. Muir joins the Captain in death, she is accompanied
by sweeping strings and harp, followed by a dramatic rising figure in the brass that ends with trumpet
fanfares signifying their transition to heaven as the two walk away together from the cottage.

32. The Ghost and Mrs. Muir is just one of many such spirit films made well after the advent of sound that
rely heavily on the musical and aural signifiers developed by silent cinema musicians to accompany spirits.
Such films include the 1966 The Ghost and Mr. Chicken, which uses the haunted organ; spirit/horror-comedy
Trick or Treat (1986), in which the spirit of a rock star controls a record player and other instruments; Ghost
(1990), in which a spirit possesses technology and rises to heaving to rising string and wind lines coming out
of the film’s main theme, pizzicato simulating a harp, and, finally, rising harp arpeggios; 1998’s Beetlejuice,
in which the ghosts realize they are dead to the sound of several stingers of which Edith Lang would surely
have approved (Halfyard, 2010, 23).

33. In *The Muppet Christmas Carol* from 1992, the score employs traditional spirit music for Jacob and the created-for-film Robert Marley (played by Muppets Statler and Waldorf), including oscillating pitches at the door-knocker scene and the use of with whistles and xylophones as “bones” for the appearance of the Marleys’ ghosts. String trills and tremolos, rising harp figures, shimmering cymbals, high-register violins, winds, and percussion, and automated music from a clock signify the arrival of the Ghost of Christmas Past. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come enters with high strings, shimmering cymbals, and low brass, strings, and rolls on the tympani and bass drum. Pizzicato in the mysterioso tradition accompanies Scrooge as the Ghost leads him through time. When Scrooge visits his own grave, the scene begins accompanied by high, sustained strings and a wandering, chromatic line in the winds that is a variation on the film’s primary theme, along with bells and distant horns. As Scrooge realizes that his life “can be made right,” the strings are given a rising figure, followed by a trilling, ascending line throughout the entire orchestra with emphasis on the sleigh bells and harp. According to the score, Scrooge’s spirit—still inside of his body—is nonetheless now destined for heaven.

34. More recent films also demonstrate the continued use of musical tropes from the silent spirit film as well: *Stardust* (2007); 2009’s *Coraline*; the 2016 *Ghostbusters*; the *Harry Potter* films; numerous *Scooby-Doo* movies; and other cinematic dramas, comedies, and fantasy productions featuring the supernatural all have scores that include the sounds of the séance and silent spirits. Even as of this writing, in late 2019, séance attendees (and ghost hunters, who seek out the paranormal through the use of light- and sound-sensing equipment) expect a soundscape of rappings, instrumental music played by unseen hands, interference with sound-(re)producing and other technologies, and additional forms of unexplained or sudden music or other sound.

35. That the sounds of spirits created by mid-nineteenth century mediums and later expanded upon and reified by both mediums and cinema musicians are so persistent suggests several things about these sounds and their transmission. To begin with, it is clear that mediums and early film accompanists had tapped into a cultural zeitgeist, as it were, in which the sounds they developed for spirits clearly met audience expectations or reified previous audience experiences. Particularly for cinema audiences in the early part of the twentieth century, the use of audience-anticipated sound, judged to be appropriate for the images being shown, was essential for not only communicating a film’s intent, but also for providing verisimilitude for the situations shown. An audience wouldn’t believe the scene or the music if the two aspects of the film didn’t match what the audience expected. This is why playing inappropriate music that “gigged” or “kidded” a film was so often decried in film music criticism of the silent era—it went against all audience expectations and was disrespectful of the apparent intentions of the film. As the séance was the most widely known source for the sounds of spirits, film accompaniment for spirit films had to have been convincing to audiences familiar with the conventions of séances. As film accompaniment became more specialized and sophisticated, spirit music also developed into its own genre, overlapping in some cases with mysteriosos, hurries, and suspenseful pieces. That specific kinds of music for spirits were regularly (re-)published and recommended indicates the genre’s success in fulfilling the anticipations of audiences of both séances and spirit films.
36. The longevity of this repertoire and pieces written to join it is significant as well. As I’ve demonstrated, a substantial number of musical signifiers that developed out of the séance and silent cinema are still very much in use. This suggests that early cinema musicians created accompaniments that were not only apposite representations of the séance, but that their accompaniments for spirits resonated strongly enough with early cinematic audiences to cement the connection between specific musical material and the supernatural on screen. That sound composers continued to use the same materials indicates that this connection was deeply embedded in public consciousness and that to replace it or alter it significantly was unnecessary if not unwise. Many composers for the early years of sound film grew up attending silent cinemas where cinema musicians constantly reified the musical conventions for numerous genres, including the spirit film.

37. The history of women as film music tastemakers in spirit films has also continued to the present day. Scores by women, drawing on traditional music and sounds for spirits and incorporating more recent signifiers of ghostly presences—such as electronic sound and music—have led and influenced the ongoing development of the sound of spirit films (as well as horror). Daphne Oram’s electronic soundscape for The Innocents (a 1961 adaptation of Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw) uses musique concrète—found, recorded sounds—along with the manipulation of electronically-created sounds to create an atmosphere redolent of the séance and early spirit film. Oram used the sound of a music box, the sound of wind, continuously oscillating sine waves—similar to the oscillations often used in the strings in generic music for the silent spirit film—that are ended with glissandi, and fragmented, musical laughter from unidentifiable sources. And although their scores were for movies generally regarded as closer to horror than spirit films, Delia Derbyshire, Wendy Carlos and Rachel Elkind (The Shining, 1980), Elisabeth Lutyens, and Shirley Walker (Final Destination, 1990) all composed music for ghosts that use and continue the tropes that originated in silent spirit films.

38. Although Spiritualism has receded from public view, its practices and their depictions in silent film music remain an integral part of how composers and audiences understand spirit presence and communication in movies. Few filmgoers today will have attended a séance, but most will be familiar with the sounds of spirits in attendance: it is a soundscape that persists, resists, and endures.

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A Note on Race and this Study


**Chapter 1: Mediums and Musicians**


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Chapter 3: Case Studies in Musical Cues


**Chapter 4: Silents in Sound**


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Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci — Horace