

The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra, *The Pioneers of Movie Music: Sounds of the American Silent Cinema*

Rick Benjamin, director. Liner notes by Rick Benjamin. 2014. New World Records 80761-2.

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As the academic world continues to expand its knowledge of film exhibition in the silent era, a handful of performers and ensembles have taken the initiative to reassemble film and music in a historically informed manner. Despite the growing interest in silent film accompaniment and the prevalence of live screenings, we possess regrettably few recorded samples of this distant repertory, let alone examples of entire film score reconstructions. Making up for this lack is Rick Benjamin's Paragon Ragtime Orchestra, which has earned a reputation for preserving the music of the silent screen through their countless live presentations, and two impressive DVDs: *The Charlie Chaplin Moving Picture Show* (1999) and *The Mark of Zorro* (2007). Their recent CD, *The Pioneers of Movie Music: Sounds of the American Silent Cinema* (2014), continues this work by focusing on the generic cue music that exhibitors assembled to accompany moving pictures. The high-quality performances found throughout the album not only provide the film music scholar with aural examples of representative composers and titles, but will also prove to be a powerful classroom aid for courses relating to film music and American entertainment.

Since its inception in the mid-1980s, The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra has played an active role in presenting and preserving historic music of the American stage. The present recording carries on this mission and follows a series of other valuable contributions offered through their collaboration with New World Records, including *Black Manhattan: Theater and Dance Music of James Reese Europe*, *William Marion Cook*, and *Members of the Legendary Clef Club*

(2003); *Midnight Frolic: The Broadway Theater Music of Louis A. Hirsch* (2010); and *Scott Joplin: Treemonisha* (2011). In *The Pioneers of Movie Music*, Benjamin and many skilled ensemble performers continue their mission to revitalize distant American traditions and, more importantly, entertain audiences with music that was intended to do just that.

In his liner notes, Benjamin expresses his intention of providing a broad survey of music used in silent film accompaniment. Accordingly, the album's 33 tracks feature 17 of the era's leading film composers and "as many of the basic photoplay descriptive categories as possible" (liner notes, 7). Most, if not all, of the selections on the album originate from Benjamin's 1992 acquisition of a large silent film music library (liner notes, 5). Much like the composition of the CD, the library contained numerous pieces of generic music that adhere to descriptive categories, such as "agitato," "hurry," and "mysterioso." Having accompanied "nearly 650 silent-film screenings" since the late 1980s, the ensemble once again demonstrates their deft ability to elicit great drama from these silent pages of stock music. Throughout the recording, the ensemble shows considerable dynamic control and rhythmic precision. The virtuosic violins and woodwinds bring added enjoyment to the tracks, as do the strong brass performances and effective balance of percussion and sound effects.

Pioneers of Movie Music opens boldly with the thrilling "Appassionato No. 1" (1923), written by prominent silent film figures Erno Rapée and William Axt. While working at the Capitol Theatre

in New York, these two composed the tune for the *Capitol Photoplay Series*—a multi-volume collection of incidental film music (liner notes, 8). The ensemble plays up the piece’s inherent drama during its menacing descending lines in the low brass and its use of tremolo in the strings. Four additional *Capitol Photoplay* selections appear on the album, two of which are by the same Rapée/Axt duo: “Savage Carnival” (1923) and “Western Allegro” (1923). The former is a dissonant, percussive number that brings to mind Danny Elfman’s idiosyncratic film scores, and the latter is a flashy, energetic work that allows the ensemble to shine, especially in the rapid flute passages that close out the piece. The other two items from the series are Axt’s tender “Emotional Andante” (1925) and the relentlessly frantic “Mystery-Hurry” (1925) by Irénée Bergé.

As the main hub of the early film industry, New York garners much scholarly attention; yet influential motion picture exhibitors and composers resided throughout the country. *Pioneers of Movie Music* features two notable publishers of photoplay music—Oliver Ditson in Boston and Sam Fox in Cleveland—that demonstrate the industry’s reach far beyond the picture houses on Broadway. Three pieces on the album were written for *Ditson’s Music for the Photoplay*: “Novelty Hurry” (1920), “Grandioso” (1918), and “Furioso” (1918). The orchestra helps Otto Langey’s “Grandioso” live up to its name through exciting dynamic contrasts and a liberal use of rubato, which add great pomp and ceremonial flair. From Sam Fox are two works by the illustrious Czech-American film composer J.S. Zamecnik. The melodies and orchestration of his “Storm Music” (1919) recall the undulating waves of Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade*, replete with skillful violin solo passages and the added excitement of thunder and lightning effects. Zamecnik’s “Hindu” (1924) is the only exoticist title on the album (though the period generated hundreds of other examples), and features one of its most infectious melodies.

Mayhew L. Lake—prolific composer, arranger, and editor affiliated with the prominent film music publisher Carl Fischer—appears most frequently on *Pioneers of Movie Music* with nine tracks that span 1914 to 1928. These pieces chart his development as a composer from the relatively simple “Agitato” (1914) to the sophisticated blending of melodies and clever orchestration in “The Funny Guy” (1928) from Carl Fischer’s *Film-O-Grams* series over a decade later. The ensemble’s exaggerated interpretations of “The Funny Guy” and Lake’s “Grotesque Elephantine”

(1918) from Carl Fischer’s *Loose Leaf Motion Picture Collection* bring added humor to the numbers and album as a whole. In the early 1920s, Lake developed a series of “Synchronizing Suites” that provided “all the necessary material for any given picture.”¹ Lake linked his suites via key area in an effort to maintain aural continuity throughout a film accompaniment and included for each a major and minor love motif, a sinister motif, an *agitato*, and either a hurry or *furioso* cue. The album presents one of these suites in its entirety, allowing the listener to experience Lake’s understanding of “synchronization” across a long-form selection as it might have been heard accompanying a short subject film.

In addition to featuring prominent composers and publishers, one of the album’s strengths is its presentation of multiple examples from each characteristic mood category, thereby demonstrating the great variety within a single generic family. The three “mysterioso” works, for example, range from the delicate yet sinister “Pizzicato Misterioso” (*Berg’s Incidental Series*, 1916) to the ominous low strings of “Creepy Creeps: Mysterioso” (*Cinema Incidental Series*, 1922). Of the four “*agitatos*,” Domenico Savino’s “*Agitato Drammatico*” (*Descriptive and Dramatic Series*, 1925) and Adolf Minot’s “*Dramatic Agitato No. 38*” (*Berg’s Incidental Series*, 1917) stand out for their balance of constant tension with memorable melodic material. Finally, while not a generic mood in itself, the album features two preludes from Maurice Baron’s *Screening Preludes* (1924), a series of descriptive works intended for use before a feature picture. “Prelude to ‘Western American Drama’” encapsulates many of the musical qualities that have come to signify the American West, from trotting horses and whips to open, angular melodies. “Prelude to ‘Romances of the Seven Seas,’” on the other hand, recalls Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* overture in its grandeur and orchestration.

The Pioneers of Movie Music closes triumphantly with the dramatic fanfare of Hugo Riesenfeld’s “Old Ironsides March” (1926)—the only track composed for a specific film (*Old Ironsides*). The expanded performing forces on this number add to the work’s overall exuberance and help bring the recording to a strong conclusion. On the whole, the album provides a generous sampling of silent era music performed by a capable and talented ensemble. Rick Benjamin and The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra offer polished performances, which, at times, verge on sounding too controlled. This is especially apparent in the

¹ Mayhew L. Lake, *The Synchronizer: Six Synchronizing Suites for Motion Picture Settings in Loose Leaf Form* (New York: Carl Fischer, 1924), 1.

restrained tempo choices of the various “hurry,” “furioso,” and “agitato” titles. That the hurries were not hurried enough is an admittedly minor criticism for an otherwise stellar compilation of silent film music. Their considered realization of this forgotten repertory brings with it the same energy and magic that once brought vitality to the silent screen. Adding to the many merits of the album are Benjamin’s extensive liner notes, which contain an abbreviated history of silent film accompaniment and valuable biographies—many of which exist nowhere else—for each pioneer of movie music featured on the album. The recording will remain an important resource as the popularity of film music studies continues to expand in the academy and in the classroom. One

hopes that this is only the first in a line of additional early film music volumes, because these 33 tracks only scratch the surface of the tremendous outpouring of incidental music in the silent era.

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