

## “The Sounds of Silent Films”: an interview with Claus Tieber and Anna K. Windisch Manuel Deniz Silva<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1: Live orchestral accompaniment of a Chaplin movie  
(c) Paragon Ragtime Orchestra

Over the last few years, sound and music practices during the silent film period have received an increasing attention from the academic community, both in film studies and musicology. The emergence of interdisciplinary networks, such as “*The Sounds of Early Cinema in Britain*” (Brown and Davison 2013) and the “*Cabiria Research Project*” in Italy (Colturato 2014), have contributed to widen the frame of this field, revealing the importance of national, regional and local specificities in the construction of early cinema as an auditory experience. In the context of the thematic issue on “Music, sound and cinema”, *Aniki* interviewed Claus Tieber and Anna K. Windisch, researchers at the University of Salzburg and editors of *The Sounds of Silent Films: New Perspectives on History, Theory and Practice*, the proceedings of an international conference held in 2013 at Kiel University. Tieber and Windisch are, respectively, principal investigator and research assistant of the project “The Sound of Silents. Sound and Music in Viennese Cinemas, 1896-1930”, funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF). In this conversation they insist

---

<sup>1</sup> Universidade de Aveiro, INET-md, 3810-193 Aveiro, Portugal.

on the necessity of collaborative work between film and music scholars in order to overcome the traditional disciplinary divide. According to them, the focus in film music studies must be shifted away from single films and from textual analysis to encompass a broader cultural-historical perspective of cinema as "an event" (Altman). This would also entail an interest in the modes of exhibition and performance, on the historical or geographical idiosyncrasies, and on the social and economic conditions of film production. The study of film music and sound should thus be integrated in a more general "cultural media history" of cinema, taking in consideration the complex "inter- and transmedial processes of negotiation, amalgamation, hybridization" that define the cinematic experience. The interview was conducted via email, between November and December 2017.

**Aniki:** Together, you have recently edited a collective volume, which results from a research project on the sound and music in Viennese Cinemas between 1895 and 1930. What was the origin of this project and how did you design it? What were the main challenges and difficulties you faced during the implementation of the project?

**Claus Tieber and Anna K. Windisch:** The aim of our first project was to trace the acoustic performance practices in Viennese cinemas (and other locations where films were shown), and the developments of local cinema music in terms of their social, economic and aesthetic contexts. Generally speaking, literature on Austrian silent film music is very scarce – there's not more than a few sentences here and there. This disregard is particularly problematic for a place like Vienna, where as it turned out, neither film producers nor exhibitors tried to control the music performed in cinemas through the dissemination of musical suggestions, as was the case in the American and German context. Instead, in Vienna playing for silent films was first and foremost influenced by the practitioners themselves; by the pianists, Kapellmeister (band leader), and orchestra musicians. These are only some of the reasons why it is so difficult to detect sources addressing silent cinema music in Vienna.

We thus relied heavily on reports from the trade and daily press, as well as on archival collections. Due to this dire source situation, we adopted a cultural-historical focus on the exhibition context. To put it differently, the sources consulted for silent cinema music research may not have necessarily disclosed the actual music that was played for individual films, but they still offered insights into vital aspects of film exhibition and thus on the music – who performed, how was it perceived, why was it chosen, who chose it, and so forth.

One goal of our project was to identify idiosyncratic local developments, which as it turned out differed at times significantly from other national cinema music practices. For example, we discovered an exceptionally high number of “music films” produced in Austria, which refers to films in which music plays a significant role, such as biographies of famous composers, musicians or singers, as well as films based on operas, operettas, songs, and other musical works. Some of these films are well known and made by famous directors, but many are little known and neglected. Most of the films we examined are Austrian, but through focusing on the film exhibition instead of a national production canon, we were also able to bring foreign films (i.e. German or Scandinavian) to light. To shift the focus away from single films and their directors, towards the cinemas and other exhibition venues of a specific town in a delineated timeframe, led us to the discovery of films with diegetic music, which had been mostly overlooked so far.

These results led us to our current follow-up project, in which we look at the musical numbers in Austrian silent and early sound cinema, not only as a precursor to the Hollywood film musical (several key figures of Austrian/German cinema went to work in the US), but also to develop a new form of analysis of these films based on extensive archival research and including the context of the musical live accompaniment of the film exhibition in the analysis.

**Aniki:** In the introduction of the volume you pay special tribute to Rick Altman, who is also the author of the book’s foreword. What was the importance of Altman’s pioneering works and theoretical framework for your personal research and for the project as a whole?

**Claus Tieber and Anna K. Windisch:** The notion of “cinema as event” which Altman put forth in 1992, is particularly pertinent to the study of silent cinema. The whole point of our project was to shift the focus away from analysing single films, towards examining the historical practice of film exhibition. In terms of music, this meant moving from film music to cinema music. This perspective also allowed us to better understand the shifting relationship of Austrian cinema in general, and film exhibition in Vienna in particular, with established cultural practices, enabling us to discover the significant material upon which the project results are based. For example, we came across a full orchestral score penned by a Viennese bandleader for *Pax Aeterna* (1917), a Danish anti-war film that was shown at the Wiener Konzerthaus in early 1918. Only by researching venues that included films in their programs (such as the Konzerthaus and the Wiener Urania, the city’s adult education centre), were we able to locate this kind of material.

This particular methodological shift was heavily influenced by Altman’s work, who personally supported the project from the very

beginning. His notion of a crisis historiography, in which he advocates for a thorough understanding of a given socio-cultural and local context of a technology as the premise for its historical study, provided the framework for our research. Particularly for Vienna, an awareness of the historical changes in film exhibition due to local authorities and the expansion of the cinematic landscape, turns out to be fundamental for understanding the dire situation of local cinema musicians during the mid to late 1920s.

Altman's permanent emphasis on the historical changes pertaining to the use of terminology was also helpful in dealing with historical texts about cinema music and reminded us that the meaning of accepted terms and notions could be very different depending on the time and place they were used.

**Aniki:** Rick Altman points out, in the opening pages of the volume, that "not so very long ago, a foreword to a volume on film sound could be counted on to begin with a lament about sound's 'poor relation' status", but the situation has changed greatly since the turn of the century. Do you agree that we are facing an important moment in music, sound, and moving images studies, and that this research field at last has acquired the recognition it deserves, both by musicology and film studies?

**Claus Tieber and Anna K. Windisch:** The rising academic interest in early cinema since the late 1970s resulted in the surge of film music as an academic field and has since produced a substantial body of literature on silent film sound, especially in English-speaking countries. The situation truly gets better every day. The special interest groups/working groups within the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) and the European Network for Cinema and Media Studies (NECS), for example, are evidence that the interest in film sound and music is growing further. Several academic journals are now solely focused on this field, and last but not least, the large number of presenters for our upcoming conference on musical numbers in film and television, in Salzburg in March 2018, are all indicators of the new status of the field.

However, the establishment of film music research as an academic field that has its own theories and methods is far from complete. Film music research, as we understand it, is looking for the production of meanings and effects of music in film, broadly speaking. It is not (only) the formal musicological analysis of music, which can certainly add insights, but only when properly contextualized.

Film music research is an interdisciplinary field; it should not be divided into a musicological and a film studies wing. The standard literature is accepted by both disciplines and no one is asking about the disciplinary affiliation of the leading scholars in the field.

**Aniki:** The aim of your research goes well beyond the sole study of the interactions between music, sound, and the moving image, and you suggest in the introduction the need for a “new kind of cinema history”. Nevertheless, the majority of the participants in the volume are musicologists and specialists in music theory. What has been the reaction of the film studies community to your research and how do you envision the necessary debate between music, sound, and film scholars on these subjects? Do you think that the recent development of film music studies is changing the way film scholars relate to film?

**Claus Tieber and Anna K. Windisch:** Again: we are struggling with the division into the two disciplines. In our experience, it is not so important from which discipline (or practice) one hails, but which field he/she is interested in. For those working within the field of silent cinema, this approach is not as innovative as for those dealing with sound cinema. The lack of material and “texts” to be analysed almost automatically leads to new approaches in historical research that may be closer to those in theatre studies. It is just a shift away from textual analysis towards examining modes of exhibition and performance.

We never had to explain to experts of silent cinema what we are doing. The questions about what we are examining when there is so little sheet music to be found, come from traditional musicologists. Film music researchers, at least since Altman's work, are aware of this cultural-historical focus.

In addition, discourse analysis is an accepted and respected method, even in musical historiography. Since sheet music and hard facts are often missing, discourse analysis is one way to reconstruct, or at least get a better idea of, production, reception, and performance contexts. That most contributors of our book are musical theorists, is not representative of the whole field and this relation will hopefully be more balanced in our next edited volume.

**Aniki:** One fascinating aspect that the volume addresses is the place of specific genres in musical accompaniment throughout the silent period. Marco Targa's contribution shows the pre-eminence of the “*musica per orchestra*” in Italy's film exhibitions, and in your own article you stress the importance of the “highly popular tradition of waltzes, Wiener Lieder and operettas” in the Viennese film soundscape. Do you think that research on film music practices can contribute to a better understanding of these genres, often neglected by music history? And what consequences can the study of these repertoires have for the more general analysis of “entertainment music” and the “highbrow” and “lowbrow” divide in musical history?

**Claus Tieber and Anna K. Windisch:** In film studies there is no such divide. Not even the Hollywood – Arthouse duality that can

be detected in some discourses can be compared with this general and misleading dichotomy of music history. As film music scholars we don't ask ourselves, "is it high or lowbrow," but "what does it mean?" Why was this music used for this film? What does it communicate? Silent cinema music was always a mix of popular and classical music, precisely because some classical music was very popular at certain times. Cinema, in this respect, has always been a medium that was able to transcend or bridge these hierarchical cultural boundaries that are fragile to begin with.

There is also a growing interest in operetta, which was one of the main influences on Austrian and German cinema. Since the 1990s, operetta films from various historical periods have attracted more scholarly attention (i.e. the CineGraph book series), but in general, they are still in the shadows of more canonical films. Again, this divide is highly problematic and ahistorical – it was invented at a moment in history in order to distinguish and evaluate different modes of culture. Silent cinema used music that was popular and that came from different sources and musical genres, drawing on both so-called high and lowbrow culture. The key issue was often that the music had to be well known. The use of specific music had its sociological reasons, but most cinemas wanted to bridge gaps between classes and attract different audiences. The music performed in Viennese cinemas during the silent era was able to please middle and working-class audiences as well; one of the reasons why the stylistic range of cinema music was so wide.

**Aniki:** Your volume also provides a major contribution to studies in music and silent film, as you displace the focus from the dominant production centres (USA, Germany, France, and Italy) to more peripheral and local contexts (the UK, Sweden, Austria, Poland, or India). You also stress the importance of studying the circulation of musicians between different geographies. In your view, what were the main lessons of this displacement? Do you think that it allows us to rethink the relation between the centre and the periphery in film music? And do you feel that the conditions for a broader comparative study of silent film music and sound practices have now been created?

**Claus Tieber and Anna K. Windisch:** The situation gets better, but there is still not enough research available for bigger comparative studies. The American context is the best researched because there are comparably many more sources available. In other countries, especially in Europe, film archives started to preserve material pertaining to film music and sound decades later. In the meantime, tons of important material, both films and written documents, were lost forever. Scholars have access to their national archives, yet often need grants for research at other institutions. In addition, there is also a language issue. With the digitalization of

archival material and more research being published in English, trans-national projects can and should be conducted.

The notion of periphery and centre is nevertheless problematic, because it implies a somewhat teleological, linear development in which the centre is leading and the periphery follows with delay. We assume that the processes were more complex and less linear. The key intent of comparative studies is to find out how structural, social, economic, political etc., conditions of filmmaking and reception shaped artistic outcomes and how these conditions differ(ed) in various geographical and historical contexts. To achieve this, it is pertinent to shift from textual analysis to a broader cultural-historical approach.

**Aniki:** Several contributions to the volume greatly emphasise the social condition and professional status of musicians, as well as their organizations and unions - aspects rarely discussed in music history. Do you think that the study of film music production can contribute to addressing the question of artistic practices as labour in a broader context?

**Claus Tieber and Anna K. Windisch:** The social conditions and the organizations of the creative personnel within the film industry is still an under-researched field. There are some studies about screenwriters, mostly in Hollywood, but very little has been done on other groups. So, there is still a lot of work to be done to get this topic on the map, not just as an essential part of social-cultural history, but also because the working conditions of filmmakers (in the broadest sense) are influencing the production and reception mode of films.

The public discourse on film exhibition in the trade and daily press has emerged as a crucial aspect throughout our research. Altman and others have shown that the trade press had an enormous influence on the standardization of film accompaniment, and in Vienna, for example, a regular discourse on cinema music practices did simply not exist. There were thus fewer norms to oblige by and some exhibitors considered music a “necessary evil”, rather than a means by which to elevate the artistic status of their venues. This attitude obviously influenced the social conditions and status of cinema musicians whose work was classified as labour by local law.

The existence of a historical discourse about film music has a lot to do with the organizational status of the film industry as a whole, with the situation of the print media and the trade press at the time, but also with the social status of cinema musicians and their cultural capital (or lack thereof). The professionalization of creative jobs like cinema/film musician, screenwriter etc., is an important topic that should also be recognized as a way to understand recent developments in creative and academic jobs between professionalization and precarity.

**Aniki:** What are your thoughts on the recent increase of live performances during silent film screenings and on multi-soundtrack DVD's? Do you think that the possibility of choosing different musical scores for the same film will prompt, as Marco Bellano foresees, a new field of "comparative studies" and the development of a new "history of interpretations"? And what do you think will be the effect on research of the increasing number of musical performances in silent film projections?

**Claus Tieber and Anna K. Windisch:** There being many different musical accompaniments for one film is nothing new. The same silent film sounded different at each screening depending on the time of day, the venue, etc. The only difference to the historical situation is that many of today's performances are documented, and thus the research on silent film music after the silent era has only just begun (Donnelly et al. 2016).

Every accompaniment is an interpretation of the film. The interesting point in silent cinema is that this interpretation is not controlled by the director or producer, but by someone outside of the actual production, decades after the film was made. What can thus be found in these scores or performances are different readings depending on the time and place of the performance, as well as on the musical background of the performer(s).

Today, we can broadly define three modes of musical accompaniment of silent films: (1) the reconstruction of historical scores; (2) modernizing the film with the help of contemporary music, no matter what genre, and (3) "improvisation", which generally means to illustrate the images with the recycling and reuse of proven musical material. The bandwidth from compilation to improvisation is broad. Whereas the first two modes are used by larger ensembles and full orchestras, the third is carried out by smaller groups or single musicians and it is also the most common mode today. All of these modes could be further differentiated into sub-categories according to their use of pre-existing music, their relationship to the narrative etc.

Live performances are of great importance to us, because they give us an impression of the historical problems of live cinema music and we can observe the different ways in which a film is received with or without live music. There are a number of research questions in this topic – comparative studies of music for the same film is just one of them.

**Aniki:** The title of your introduction to the volume is "The Birth of Cinema from the Spirit of Music", paraphrasing a famous Friedrich Nietzsche quote and taking over an idea already evoked by Theodor Adorno in his essay on Wagner. In that sense, you underline that "cinema is much more dependent on music and



musical formats than is generally acknowledged”. What are, in your opinion, the main consequences of this perspective for film history?

**Claus Tieber and Anna K. Windisch:** Film is a composite art form. It takes elements from other art forms and/or media and is heavily influenced by the development of these. Film history should thus be conceived as media history and some colleagues have already begun to include music as a “medium” into the discourse on media history (see Staiger/Hake, 2004; but also Wedel, 2007; or Brewster/Jacobs, 1998). Music might not technically be considered a “medium”, but if we understand the term not as a device to deliver information, but as *a semantic system, a specific mode of communication* (see Wedel 2007, 36), then we should consider music as such a mode that is integrated within the superordinate semantic organization of film in this context, keeping in mind that the history of this integration is one of ruptures and discontinuities.

Especially when looking at the 20<sup>th</sup> century when music entered into diverse relations with other media, film music research should go beyond formal analyses of musical structures and focus on the role music plays in the inter- and transmedial processes of negotiation, amalgamation, hybridization, etc., that shape and change cinema. Film history as media history thus has to include opera, operetta, the stage musical, and recorded music, for example, with which cinema shares thematic, stylistic and narrative elements. Such a study on the converging historical relationship between music and cinema from an intermedial and intertextual perspective, that surveys the way cinema shaped the development of music (i.e. filmic devices such as montage used in music), music history influencing film, from Neue Musik to jazz, to musique concrète and electronic music), not just as film music but as discourses, as ways of making meaning, is still missing.

On the level of textual analysis, the whole notion that everything in fictional film is, at least in its classical mode, subordinated to the narrative led to an approach towards analyses and readings of filmic texts that focuses too much on narration and representation. This is changing, but there is still no “equality”, so to say, regarding the research on the various elements of a film. Too little attention is given to the production process and its organization, which heavily shapes creative decisions, and thus also to issues regarding the music. Music in a cinematic context – although not exclusively – often lacks a “text” for analysis, which creates a particular challenge in certain scholarly traditions where textual study dominates. Instead, music should be read as one element in a network of meanings and medial relations, which also includes the production and reception of media within socio-historical contexts. Understanding music in this way might help to incorporate musical contexts, practices, genres etc., more strongly into film history as a form of cultural media history.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Altman, Rick. 1992. "General Introduction: Cinema as Event." In *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, ed. by Rick Altman, 1-14. New York: Routledge.
- Brewster, Ben and Lea Jacobs. 1998. *Theatre to Cinema. Stage Pictorialism and Early Feature Film*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, Julie and Annette Davison. 2012. *The Sounds of the Silents in Britain*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.
- Colturato, Annarita, ed. 2014. *Film Music: Practices, Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives. Studies around Cabiria Research Project*. Torino: Kaplan.
- Donnelly, Kevin J. and Ann-Kristin Wallengren, eds. 2016. *Today's Sounds for Yesterday's Films: Making Music for Silent Cinema*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Staiger, Janet and Sabine Hake, eds. 2009. *Convergence Media History*. New York: Routledge.
- Tieber, Claus. "Silent Singing: Diegetic Songs in Austrian Silent Cinema." *Imagine*, no. 14 (Autumn 2016): 91–110.
- Tieber, Claus and Anna K. Windisch, eds. 2014. *The Sounds of Silent Films. New Perspectives on History, Theory and Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wedel, Michael. 2007. *Der Deutsche Musikfilm: Archäologie eines Genres, 1914-1945*. München: Edition Text + Kritik.
- Windisch, Anna K. and Claus Tieber. 2015. "'Silent' Films, Singing Voices: Vocal Accompaniment in Viennese Moving Picture Exhibition, 1913-1923." *Music and the Moving Image* 8, no. 1: 19–36.
- Windisch, Anna K.. "... Anything but a Film!' Vocal Music in Viennese Lecture Films of the 1920s." *Imagine*. no. 14 (Autumn 2016): 111–28.

Email interview made in November and December 2017.