

Charlie Chaplin's Music

When you think about Charlie Chaplin, the first image that comes to your mind is the little tramp, with his raggedy unkempt clothes, proverbial black cane, slightly crooked hat, and Hitleresque mustache. Chaplin was the master at presenting the human social and political condition of his time, disguised cleverly with humor tinged with sadness. But Chaplin wasn't only an actor, he was also a composer. His musical talents as a composer are not as well-known. Charlie Chaplin's later films, black and white and silent, were almost always accompanied by Chaplin's own music. His musical scores not only accompanied the films, but intertwined with the hope, sadness, joy, and pain of Chaplin's memorable characters. His music covered a gamut of styles, from sweet themes of love and youth and innocence to more intense rhythmic music to popular dance numbers.

But his abilities as a film score composer were considerable and haven't been given due appreciation. In point of fact Chaplin was the PERFECT composer for his films. Chaplin grew up in a family of performers. Both of Chaplin's parents were singers and actors. Growing up in a performing family gave Chaplin the strong creative background he needed to succeed later on in life with his films. He recalled that in his early childhood his mother, a music-hall singer, would take him with her to the theatre, where he would stand in the wings listening to her and the other acts that made up the show. He also recalled seeing his father, a well known vocalist also called Charles Chaplin perform at the Canterbury Music Hall; and recounted how at home, in the happier times, his mother would regularly entertain him and his step-brother by singing, dancing, reciting and imitating other artists. Aside from the experience of growing up surrounded by the songs of the music hall, Chaplin later often told the story of the revelatory day that "music entered my soul". Returning home from school to an empty house, he waited for hours for someone to arrive, then wandered off into the streets, where: "Suddenly, there was music." Chaplin himself was an amateur musician and played the violin, among other instruments. He was to remain in the theatre, alternating various jobs and periods of unemployment, until he ended up as one of the stars of Fred Karno's comedy sketch companies.

Charlie Chaplin was one of the first film makers to compose music for his own films. His first film scoring efforts came in 1921 with the initial release of "The Kid", well before the advent of talking pictures. He composed three themes used in the score to the film, otherwise comprised of classical and other popular music of the day whose selection he probably supervised. Chaplin had learned through years of experiment that in his style of comedy emotional content was crucial, and that his control over mood and emotion were essential to the audiences' appreciation of his character and his story. Therefore it was essential for him to carefully choose and later compose the music for his creations.

The music that Chaplin composed for his silent films, that is from "A Dog's Life" through "Modern Times" is markedly more of a factor in its influence on the films. The music which underscores the talkies necessarily had competition in the soundtracks from dialogue and sound effects and was in many cases less prevalent and influential. However that is not to say that music did not play key factors in all of those films. There are however, longer gaps without music, and those sections which required underscoring beneath dialogue required a more neutral approach, as opposed to the music from the silents which play an almost equal role to that of the visuals.

Chaplin's ability to tug at the heart strings through film is also exhibited in his musical output. Whether one listens to the ostensibly romantic theme, "Smile", or the excitable, almost toreador sounding theme for "City Lights Boxing", one can hear the masterful Chaplin at work creating a sonic world as poignant as his screenplays. Without even knowing the movie plot, a single listening to "Circus Swing Little Girl" betrays the naive idealism and hopefulness of the circus girl, despite a less than ideal situation. For film and music lovers who want to bask in the sorrows and triumphs of an era long gone by, watching Charlie Chaplin's films and listening to his touching music will quickly transport the audience into a black and white world where the little guy always manages to get the girl.

Watching "Modern Times" recently, paying particular attention to the music, I came to a stunning realization. The film is 80% ballet, and the balletic feel of the film is due in no small part to the music score. His classic song "Smile" which began its existence as key theme in "Modern Times" have become part of the standard pop repertoire. One who listens for the first time the song is impossible for that someone not to be touched in every way and tells you to cheer up and that there is always a bright tomorrow, just as long as you smile.

Chaplin's music reflects this endearing hopefulness in its most tender and most triumphant musical moments. Throughout his career, Chaplin always insisted that the music "must be never more than the voice of that camera". However, after his death Chaplin's family archived all of his music, and many orchestras have taken the music outside of the theater and into the concert hall despite their creator's insistence that the music, being film music, should not exist without the films. Other professional orchestras have heeded the filmmaker's wish, presenting both the film and the music simultaneously.

Charlie Chaplin was beyond great, masterful or genius. He represents the model of true artist in every way. His music represents the true music a person must live to hear and not only, to feel the passion and the sensitiveness of every song. I have choose to discuss about this theme only because I really believe the British people has a lot to learn, explore and fallow as an example from this great man, called SIR Charles Spencer "Charlie" Chaplin.

Bibliography:

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2. Phil Posner - The music of Modern Times
3. www.charliechaplin.com/biography/articles/26-Chaplin-Music