

Symphonic Visions: Silent Film Music by Ed Hughes

Commissioned by the Brighton Festival to mark its fiftieth anniversary, Lizzie Thynne's **Brighton: Symphony of a City** was first screened in the Brighton Dome Concert Hall on 11 May 2016, on which occasion Ed Hughes's specially composed orchestral score was premiered by the Orchestra of Sound and Light, conducted by the composer. The film offers a vivid portrait of the great English coastal town from dawn to dusk, brilliantly edited by Phil Reynolds so as to incorporate historic footage from Screen Archive South East in the creation of sometimes startling and always thought-provoking juxtapositions of old and new. Both in the film's basic structure, which falls into seven distinct 'movements', and in the very wording of its title, the project pays explicit homage to the genre of film known as the 'city symphony', which peaked during the 1920s as the silent film reached its artistic high point and extended into the 1930s as the synchronized-sound film quickly established itself as the industry norm.

The generic label 'symphony' reflected the fashion during the silent era for directors to link the visual grammar of their filmic art with the characteristics of musical composition. Abel Gance felt the multi-screen presentation of his epic *Napoléon* (1927) was a kind of 'visual harmony' and the film as a whole analogous to a symphony. Similar parallels were drawn by other French *cinéastes*, such as Emile Vuillermoz ('a film is written and orchestrated like a symphony'), Léon Moussinac ('cinographic rhythm has an obvious counterpart in musical rhythm'), Germaine Dulac ('the visual idea is inspired by musical technique far more than any other technique or ideal') and Léopold Survage, who declared the structural functions of musical and cinematic rhythm to be inherently similar. Ed Hughes, too, has said that 'while film is definitely not music, it can in certain conditions become a metaphor for how certain kinds of musical processes function'. Not surprisingly, then, the more enterprising makers of city symphonies have always been very much aware of the powerful role music might play in their films. The city symphonies of the 1920s which were boldest in their editorial methods – utilising sophisticated relational editing, dark humour, surrealism and startling visual metaphors, for example – cried out for inventive sonic accompaniments which might leave the clichéd music of conventional narrative cinema far behind.

The genre's most ambitious conjunction of music and image was the brainchild of Walther Ruttmann (who, in addition to being a filmmaker, painter and architect, was also a trained musician) for his hour-long *Berlin: die Symphonie der Großstadt* in 1927. Thynne and

Hughes have both paid tribute to this extraordinary film, citing it as a significant source of inspiration for their Brighton project. Ruttmann pursued the symphonic analogy by structuring his Berlin film in five ‘acts’, which also describe a chronological trajectory from dawn to dusk. Controversially, he commissioned a score from Edmund Meisel – the Marxist composer who had two years before earned a *succès de scandale* with his viscerally agitational music for Sergei Eisenstein’s hard-hitting epic *Battleship Potemkin* (a film for which Hughes composed an original score in 2005). Meisel’s music for *Berlin* was conceived for a large orchestra, including a quarter-tone harmonium, a jazz band, and devices for generating urban sound effects (which he termed *Geräuschmusik*, or noise music). Although widely praised, when the film and its music reached London in 1928 the press was not convinced by the overall experience: the critic of *The Times* felt Meisel’s score was ‘as restless and cruelly ironical as the picture itself... the mechanical monotony of urban existence becomes, with the music, an intolerable rhythm.’ Another high point of the city-symphony genre was Dziga Vertov’s *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), which offered a slice of everyday life in a composite Soviet city through virtuosic relational editing and witty symbolism. Vertov, who described his film as a ‘visual symphony’, wrote detailed notes on his avant-garde ideas about how sound and music should be used to accompany the images. These notes were intended to guide the three musicians from the state film industry’s Music Council who were to be responsible for preparing the film’s cue sheets, but they completely ignored him and used gobbets of hackneyed classical music instead. Dating from the same year, Joris Ivens’s short experimental film *Rain* (1929), compiled from shots of rainy Amsterdam, was in 1941 furnished with a dissonant chamber score composed by Schoenberg’s pupil Hanns Eisler as part of a film-music research project funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Co-incidentally, this was one of the first silent films for which Hughes was to compose original music, his score premiered – under the more evocative title *Light Cuts Through Dark Skies* – at the Bath International Festival in 2001.

Hughes’s music for *Brighton: Symphony of a City* is scored for a medium-sized conventional orchestra (including alto saxophone), plus a rock band (comprising three electric guitars, electric bass and drums) to lend a contemporary resonance to certain scenes. An important aim was to bring together both professional and gifted young performers from the region’s sixth-form colleges and schools in a sonic celebration of the city’s vibrant cultural life. As with the other Hughes film scores included on this disc, the music avoids obviously pictorial effects, preferring to explore an aesthetic of contemplative repetition which encourages spectators to absorb the often striking images as they unfold. Slowly moving harmonies are

animated by more rapid figurations, a strategy which allows the music to operate on more than one temporal level simultaneously; the harmonic and thematic materials are generally simple, and expressed with textural clarity and readily comprehensible contrapuntal techniques, all of which can speak directly to listeners from widely differing backgrounds. Hughes's gently pulsating cross rhythms and subtle dislocations of the metre, combined with long-breathed dynamic ebbs and flows and vividly contrasting orchestral colours, wonderfully capture not only the broad sweep of the city itself, but also – as with the juxtaposed images in Jean Vigo's silent city symphony, *A propos de Nice* (1930) – the alluring expanse of the open sea beyond its shore.

Central to Hughes's musical language in his *Brighton* score are his exploration of the tension between chromatic contrapuntal textures and contrastingly lucid open sonorities, and the strategic use of what he terms 'anchor points'. The denser polyphonic writing is generally associated with the city as a complex organism, while its sensual character and the power of both the urban setting and the adjacent seascape are captured by simpler, more tonal gestures, as are the film's portrayals of intimate human interactions (for example, the café culture depicted in the third movement). The concept of anchor points suggests a parallel with Eisenstein's deployment of visual accents (which, intentionally, do not always coincide with the accents in a film's musical score); Hughes believes that 'the music should converge with the picture at certain key points but should not simply mimic intensities in the picture...' As he further explains, the music 'expresses both balanced and conflicted experiences through harmony without necessarily mimicking the tempo of the action as it is visually documented'. Nevertheless, at key moments the music does play a decisive role in linking otherwise disparate images, as in the first movement where the dynamism of the sea is reflected in the energy of trains approaching the city, or when later in the same movement the cross-cutting between the activities of a fisherman and a baker are given thematic ideas interlocking in canonic counterpoint. Apart from the sparing use of the rock band, there are few allusions to culturally suggestive musical styles, though there is a clear hint of the experimentation with quasi-mechanical music which characterised the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s in a memorable sequence using archival footage of Communist and Spanish Civil War parades in the 1930s, for which Hughes provides a compelling march.

As well as invoking the great city symphonies of early cinema by taking the form of a silent documentary with continuous musical accompaniment, *Brighton: Symphony of a City* also serves as a reminder that Brighton was at the very forefront of film production in the United Kingdom during the earliest years of silent film. In March 1896, the Pandora Gallery by the West Pier was the venue for the first British film screening to take place outside

London, and soon afterwards Esmé Collings shot several short films recording pleasure-seekers enjoying themselves on Brighton's beach and seafront during the summer months. Collings was one of several local film-makers, including James Williamson and George Albert Smith, who later became retrospectively dubbed the 'Brighton School' by French writer Georges Sadoul (in an essay published by the British Film Institute in 1948), and who were to remain active until around 1910. Williamson recalled that film producers from London also frequented Brighton in order to capitalise on the possibilities it offered for impressive location shooting. The narrative methods developed by the Brighton School influenced the pioneering American film-maker Edwin S. Porter (whose most famous film was *The Great Train Robbery* of 1903), and he in turn influenced the British directors Cecil Hepworth and Percy Stow.

In 1903, Hepworth and Stow made ***Alice in Wonderland***, a landmark production both on account of its (for the time) relatively substantial length, and for being the first attempt to transfer Lewis Carroll's much-loved Alice stories to the silver screen – with the aid of some highly effective camera trickery, and a production design heavily based on the popular illustrations by John Tenniel which had enhanced Carroll's books. As was typical of the era, the film is a succession of self-contained tableaux: this structure facilitated distribution, since exhibitors who balked at the idea of showing the full 12-minute picture could instead be supplied with a single individual scene (or as many such segments as they wished), which could more readily be incorporated into what were then still essentially variety shows. Only one copy of the film survived, in lamentable condition, and when restored by the British Film Institute in 2010 – at a somewhat reduced length, owing to the print's incompleteness – it was impossible to rectify all the deficiencies. Hughes's music for the film, however, has a mesmerising quality which readily draws the viewer into its fantasy world in spite of any visual shortcomings that may remain.

The *Alice* music is scored for flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano, and its mesmerising quality is immediately evident in the gently pulsating opening section, in which hypnotically repeating material based on static harmonies accompanies the entrance of the White Rabbit and Alice's tentative exploration of the Hall of Many Doors. As the now miniscule Alice enters the Garden and her succession of surreal adventures begins, the music assumes a quirky, scherzo-like quality, with simple repeated tonal harmonies in the piano constantly destabilised by polytonal gestures in the other instruments. The appearance of the Cheshire Cat sees a return of pulsating patterns, here more agitated and dance-like than at the opening, and these become the backdrop to the antics of the Mad Hatter's tea party, turning

yet more eccentric as the bizarre Royal Procession marches past. By turns hypnotic and disconcerting – and conceived for what (as we're reminded at the very end of the film) is only a dream – the *Alice* music was reworked by Hughes as the third movement of *Brighton: Symphony of a City*, featuring the Red Roaster coffee house.

Hughes has often been inspired by the experimental quality of early silent films. 'Looking back on them from our perspective', he comments, 'they seem refreshing in their daring, quirky and inventive story-telling methods and construction, because those early directors were inventing the grammar of film and were therefore not constrained by the dominant industry codes for visuals and music in motion pictures, which came later'. And no early film-maker was more daringly experimental than the Frenchman Georges Méliès, who specialised in the genre of 'trick' film which was also favoured by Hepworth in the early 1900s. Described by Charlie Chaplin as an 'alchemist of light', Méliès began his career as a magician and theatre owner, and his passion for mounting extravagant illusions naturally extended into his film-making, which took place in his Star Film Company's glasshouse studio in the Paris suburb of Montreuil. His most famous film was **La Voyage dans la Lune** (*Journey to the Moon*), made in 1902 and loosely based on the science-fiction writings of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells. Like *Alice in Wonderland*, it was unusually long for its time, running for around the same 12-minute duration as Hepworth's film; it was also enormously popular, and in 1903 Méliès had to open an office in the United States in order to control the numerous pirated copies then in circulation, which were being widely distributed by Edison and other American film companies.

Méliès himself provided a piano accompaniment for the first screenings of his light-hearted moon adventure, in which Professor Barbenfouillis (played by Méliès) takes five other astronomers to the moon. Hughes's score, which also exists in a version for full orchestra, is here played by the same mixed quintet as that for *Alice*, and takes the form of a slow, dream-like central section flanked by rapid outer sections. The opening segment captures the eccentric gathering of astronomers with spiky, restless music that also suggests Barbenfouillis's obsessiveness in persuading them to undertake the momentous trip; the score then becomes lighter and more capricious as the professor and his five volunteers dress themselves for the mission. With the subtlest of action-catching gestures, the lighting of the fuse on the rocket-cannon and the famous landing of the spacecraft in the eye of the man in the moon (Méliès's own face superimposed on a papier-mâché lunar surface) are emphasised with understated musical stings. The slower harmonic rhythms accompanying the adventures on the moon help the surreal images seem like an extraordinary dream, but the music

becomes cheerfully buoyant again as the explorers escape their alien assailants and their capsule plunges back to an ocean splashdown on Mother Earth – and the score finally turns luminously tonal for the public jubilation at the heroes' safe return.

While city symphonies and surreal fictional narratives both inspired a degree of experimentation on the part of film-makers in the silent era, another genre altogether could be even more spectacular in its boldness of technique. This was the field of animation, which in the 1920s and 1930s was regarded by several intellectual film-makers as a modern graphic art form rather than a commercial entertainment. Ruttmann, for example, started out as an experimental animator in his series of four short abstract films entitled *Lichtspiel: Opus I–IV* (1921–5), the third of which had a modernist score specially written for it by Eisler for a screening in 1927. In Paris in 1930, Berthold Bartosch made his hauntingly beautiful, low-budget allegorical animation *L'Idée (The Idea)*, notable in the history of film music for its 1933 synchronized score by Arthur Honegger featuring the ondes martenot – a remarkably early example of electronic sonorities being used to enhance a film's atmosphere. Bartosch's unique film made a huge impression on the Russian-born animator Alexandre Alexeïeff and his American wife Claire Parker, who also worked in Paris and originated a novel method of animation known as the 'pinscreen' technique, whereby hundreds of thousands of pins were embedded in a fabric screen, their depth and illumination altered frame by frame in order to produce various greyscale patterns.

The resulting effect, resembling an etching or engraving brought eerily to life, is particularly impressive in **The Nose**, an award-winning silent version of the surreal short story by Nikolai Gogol made by Alexeïeff and Parker in 1963. (*The Nose*, which was published in 1836, was also the basis for a satirical opera by Shostakovich, first staged in 1930.) As told in the animation, the story is concerned with the intertwined destiny of Major Kovalyov (whose nose embarks on a series of independent escapades, and ultimately attains a senior rank in the Civil Service) and the barber Ivan Yakovlevich (who first discovers the nose in his loaf of bread at the breakfast table, and unwittingly launches its adventures by throwing it away on the street). The film was originally scored with a percussion-and-zither music track improvised by Vietnamese musician Hai-Minh, in an exotic soundworld – far more alien to Western listeners at the time than it strikes us now – which was presumably intended to emphasise the eccentricities of this strange story. Hughes's very different solo-piano score was composed for performer Clare Hammond, thereby continuing the venerable tradition of accompanying silent films on the keyboard.

The music falls into five movements which sometimes overlap the film's own sectionalised structure, and these chart the story from its opening images of dawn and the disappearance of the nose after its initial discovery, to the pursuit and then recovery of the elusive snout, and finally the advent of a new (and symmetrically framing) sunrise. The music carries clear historical allusions, notably in the neo-baroque opening with its toccata-like figurations. Gently dissonant writing conjures up an eerie atmosphere for the snowy sentry box by which the nose is abandoned, and for the rippling of the river's surface; the music's repetitive patterns suggest the inevitability of the narrative, while at the same time the poignant tonal clashes keep the viewer somewhat on edge. As we enter Saint Petersburg's magnificent Kazan Cathedral, the piano weaves delicate right-hand arabesques above stable dance-like harmonies in the left hand, resulting in a lyrical texture recalling romantic salon music contemporaneous to Gogol's story: the sonic stylisation here is a most effective counterpart to the highly stylised animation. The concluding toccata-like section, no longer neo-baroque but now pulsatingly minimalist, captures the shimmering light patterns of the new daybreak, before the score climaxes in a stark minor-key cadence as the action abruptly terminates (in a deliciously ironic departure from Gogol's cheerful ending) with the horribly suggestive image of the barber's razor poised over Kovalyov's newly restored face. If, as his nagging wife believes at the start of the story, the (alcoholic) barber had cut off the nose himself without recalling it, history might very well be about to repeat itself.

Piano textures are enhanced with live electronics in Hughes's score to **Night Music**, which was written for Richard Casey and first performed by him in London in September 2015 following the premiere at that year's Brighton Science Festival, given by Joseph Houston. Unlike the other films on this disc, the moving images for *Night Music* were selected by the composer himself, as the second of a series of works (in different formats) under the collective title *Shadows of Destruction*. The latter refers to the consequences of the Allied aerial bombing campaign in the Second World War, as photographed by the Royal Air Force on footage now preserved in the Imperial War Museum. Whereas the first work in the series, *Dark Formations* (2010), had been conceived as a chamber-ensemble piece involving still images, *Night Music* accompanies moving images drawn from archival footage of the famous Avro Lancaster bomber, depicted both in action and taking shape on the assembly line. The complete British Movietone News film *Sky Giant* (1942), from which some of this footage was drawn, is included as an extra on the present disc; as a sound film, in its original form it included narration by Leslie Mitchell, stirring sound effects and patriotic title music typical of such wartime productions. The briefing for the notorious 'thousand-bomber' raid

depicted in this film gets underway to the jaunty strains of Sir Henry Walford Davies's *Royal Air Force March Past*, written for the formation of the RAF in 1918 and still the service's official march. As might be expected, there is no place for such rousing jolliness in Hughes's musical response to the same footage.

Conceptually, Hughes has likened the musical language of *Night Music* to that of *Brighton: Symphony of a City*, since in both projects a central strategy is the contrast between dark and light, expressed musically by chromatic density and harmonic limpidity. Also similar in both works is the use of harmonic anchor points which aid the listener's grasp of their overall structures. The score falls into three principal sections, which are largely autonomous, their content not directly tied to the filmic images. Thus the graceful lines of the opening section, entitled 'Flowing' in the score, begin with an evocative sequence showing the bomber in flight but continue directly into the factory interior, imbuing the rhythm of the workers' and machines' repetitive activities with the same lyricism. The second part, 'Machine Song', starts as the extraordinary footage of a nocturnal raid begins – this was the first time such a sortie had been captured on film by RAF cameras – and the music is here an evocative mix of ascending and descending figurations (many featuring chains of parallel harmonies), stabbed chords, and luminously expansive flowing gestures; once again, the scoring is continuous across both aerial and factory domains. Finally, 'Night Toccata' is characterised by the pulsating energy encountered in many of Hughes's film scores, and is again articulated by long-term considerations of tension and release. Paradoxically, 'Night Toccata' – and indeed much of the *Night Music* image track as a whole – is played out in daylight; yet it was in its relentless night-time bombing that the RAF both endured and inflicted huge casualties. The nocturnal dimension of this work is but part of a more complex meditation on general issues of darkness and light, both moral and musical.

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