Music for Silent “Spook Tales”

in the University of North Texas Music Library Special Collections

[slide 1] The University of North Texas’s Music Library’s Special Collections is home to a collection of about 300 pieces of music written or arranged between 1895 and 1929 for silent film accompaniment. This collection includes a number of pieces exclusive to the UNT Music Library, not found in any other public institution or repository. Even more remarkably, the UNT collection’s pieces contain, in many cases, full sets of instrumental parts. With the coming of sound in the late 1920s, cinema orchestras disbanded, and many instrumental parts were lost, leaving us with only piano parts for many works of music. The collection is also strong in its representation of works published outside of the United States, particularly from France and Germany; and holds music by accomplished but little-known silent film composers whose works are not preserved in other collections.

Silent films were accompanied by a variety of kinds of music and musicians. Many cinemas employed a single pianist or organist to play for the pictures, while larger establishments hired theatre “orchestras” that ranged in size from three to thirty players.

[slide: cinema orchestra] The music for the films of this period was not standardized in any way. Pianists and organists could and often did improvise their accompaniments, frequently using leitmotifs for each major character and, over time, developing scores that were never captured on paper—a huge loss to musicologists and enthusiasts. Accompanists could also compile a score using pre-existing music drawn from the classical and popular repertoire, [slide: photoplay album] such as characteristic pieces by Grieg, Mendelssohn’s songs without words, and excerpts from symphonies and
concertos by Beethoven, Mozart, and Schumann, and Broadway and other vernacular songs. They could also use the newly emergent generic film music: short atmospheric pieces sold as individual pieces of sheet music or in photoplay albums. For bigger budget films, studios issued cue sheets [slide: cue sheet for Hula], which suggested what piece to play for what scene, sometimes even including musical incipits (as in this example).

For truly blockbuster movies, studios commissioned full scores from composers and sent the score and parts out with the reels of film. Individual movie houses could then use the parts for which they had instruments, or hire additional musicians for big epic films. But we should keep in mind that all of these were just suggestions and recommendations—there was no way for a studio to ensure that a pianist in Boise was playing the official score of a New York movie, or if accompanists in Boise and Miami who did play from the studio’s recommendations or music were playing the score the same way.

The majority of music in the UNT silent film music collection is genre music, such as [slide] Gaston Borch’s “Agitato pathetique” (1919); or [slide] Erno Rapée’s “Gruesome War Theme” (1927). But the collection also holds an unusual amount of music for portraying the supernatural on film, including “Gruesome Tales” (Rapee and Axt); “In a Gloomy Forest” (Axt); “Rage: for fiendish anger, sudden outbursts of madness, etc.” (Axt); “Mysterious furioso: suitable for infernal and wierd [sic] scenes, witches, etc.” (Langey); “Terror, hideous monster, dark mystery” (Zamecnik); and “A Skeleton Jazz Mysterioso” (Breau). Among this subset of works are several pieces for extended scenes. These pieces all depict manifestations of a human afterlife: Walter Broy’s “Ghost Scene” (1926); Bert A. Anthony’s “The Ghost in the Haunted Room” (1924); and Ellsworth Stevenson’s “Phantom Visions; Skeleton Dance” (1920).
It is likely that these pieces came from the library of the Majestic Theater in Dallas, an enormous and ornate cinema seating 2,800 people that opened in 1921.\footnote{Author conversation with Morris Martin, 23 April 2016.}

Majestic\[slide: Majestic\] The Palace boasted not only a custom-made Kilgen organ, but also an unusually large pit designed for a robust in-house orchestra for accompanying movies. Past performers’ markings in the pieces give us some hints of their performance history—musicians’ notes tell us that Bert Anthony’s “The Ghost in the Haunted Room,” was used in performance by an ensemble of piano, violin, cello, flute, clarinet, cornet and timpani, and that parts of it were repeated to extend its length to match a scene in a film. At some point, the piece was designated as ORCH 00216, suggesting it was part of a larger collection.

A significant amount of music for the early cinema arranged to match the onscreen action of spook tales—as early horror or ghost films were termed—drew from and/or was influenced by musical conventions from opera or well-known classical pieces that depicted ghostly or diabolical scenes. Tremolos, the use of very high pitches and harmonics on strings, and bass lines that quoted the Dies irae from the Catholic funeral mass were established as hallmarks of the supernatural in the early modern period and were carried forward to music for early cinema. As Mario Bellano has written, the two constants in music for horror are ambiguity and dissonance; thus chromaticism, irregular rhythms, and close intervals were also signifiers of horror, the unnatural, or supernatural.\footnote{Marco Bellano, “I Fear What I Hear: The Expression of Horror in Film Music,” in \textit{Fear Within Melting Boundaries}, ed. Lee Baxter and Paula Braescu (Oxford: ID Press, 2011), NA/ebook.} However, the technical innovations used in creating spook tales required new sensibilities in its accompanimental music. Analysis of Anthony and Stevenson’s pieces, along with the viewing of extant spook tales, provides us with an idea of how music for the
supernatural needed to be constructed to fit new filmic technologies and give audiences the aural cues they needed and expected in works involving the supernatural.

In his 1896 spook tale [slide: illustration] Le Manoir du Diable (1896), French filmmaker Georges Méliès’s used new film techniques to create illusions of witches, demons, ghosts, and other supernatural figures moving in truly uncanny ways. These apparitions were not the [slide: Willis] balletic wilis of Giselle, entering elegantly on pointe from the wings, nor the urbane Mephistopheles [slide: Mephisto] of Faust, appearing from behind a piece of scenery or a trap in the floor. Instead, thanks to stop-motion and double-exposure processes, Méliès’s characters appeared and disappeared without warning, emerged in blasts of smoke and fire from a cauldron, and moved through solid walls. [slide: clip, c.40 secs]

Such technical filmmaking virtuosity demanded accompanying music that could convey surprise, the mysterious, and the eerie. It also needed to be sectional, so that the accompanist could stop short or repeat material to match the length of a scene. In fact, scenes were not always the same length even in showings in the same picture house; projectionists could run a film at higher or lower speeds as they saw fit, sometimes running films quickly to fit into a specified time or in order to fit more showings into a day. Pieces designed to accompany spook tales shared a number of characteristics. In a 1910 Carl Fisher photoplay collection, works by Mayhew Lake, “Essence Grotesque (for depicting mysterious scenes, grotesque, comedy, etc.)” and “Mysterioso (for depicting stealth, gruesome scenes, etc.)” employ a shared vocabulary of motifs, textures, and harmonic structures, closely associating music for scenes of suspense and criminal behavior with the unnatural or grotesque and confirming that spook tales needed music
that was not just comprised of tremolos or chromatic passages.³ By 1920, the concepts of sudden dynamic changes, abrupt or interrupted phrase endings, and the timbres of certain instruments and organ stops, like the flute, clarinet, and horn representing suspense and the supernatural could be accounted standard for film music. In their manual on playing for moving pictures, Edith Lang and George West provide a list of repertoire suitable for

[slide: Lang and West] “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.⁴

Anthony and Stevenson’s pieces are deliberately written so as to fill these needs and meet contemporary aesthetics for spook tales. In Stevenson’s 1920 “Phantom Visions: Skeleton Dance,” the composer calls on musical memories of Saint-Saëns’s “Danse Macabre” to reference animated bones. [slide: sheet music] Stevenson marks the piece “misterioso” and calls for special instrumental effects, including the use of col legno (using the wood of the bow), mutes in the brass, muffled drums, “castanets or bones” in the percussion, and a “wind whistle” to create an especially eerie sound. Set in F minor, “Skeleton Dance” starts quietly with staccato quarter notes outlining the tonic, followed by weak beat eighths, often including minor seconds. A long, low horn line moves from 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. The pianissimo of the beginning allows Stevenson to surprise the audience with carefully

³ Mayhew Lake, *Carl Fischer’s Loose Leaf Motion Picture Collection: For Piano Solo* (New York: C. Fischer, 1910).
placed accents. As in the “Danse Macabre,” Stevenson uses dotted rhythms to create a sense of the dance and a chromatic line to indicate that the piece represents an otherworldly scenario. However, rather than giving the melody to the violin, Death’s traditional instrument, 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. Swelling dynamics add to the effect of instability and unpredictability. [slide: sound clip, c. 45 seconds]

“The Ghost in the Haunted Room” [slide: Ghost music] (published posthumously in 1924) is marked “Misterioso” and begins in A minor with a series of pianissimo staccato eighths outlining the 7-1-2 scale degrees, followed by “stingers”—forzando B-flats immediately followed by repeated staccato sixteenths in the strings and rolls in the timpani—close neighbors of the tremolo and a motif that would continue in film to represent tip-toeing and suspense. Throughout, quick changes of dynamic from loud to soft suggest surprises, rapid movement or camera cuts, and overall unpredictability. Likewise, chromaticism, a signifier of magic in works by Liszt, Berlioz, Bartok, and Stravinsky, indicates here that normal conditions—those of the natural world—may not apply. Close dissonances, like the seconds assigned to the violas and cornets or the tritones that support the chromatic passages, provide nearly constant harmonic tension. The use of low tessituras in many parts also suggests the uncertain or eerie, as it does in the Grieg “Hall of the Mountain King,”—a favorite piece for accompanying the dangerous—while the unexpected especially high interjections of the flute in measures 23-24 mimic shrieks. In these first ten measures, Anthony establishes...

---

5 David E. Schneider, Bartok, Hungary, and the Renewal of Tradition; Case Studies in the Intersection of Modernity and Nationality (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 133.
the character or mood of the piece and sets up the audience for a haunting in which supernatural elements may appear and disappear suddenly. The obbligato first violin part provides additional indicia of the developing sound of the spook tale. Anthony sets the tessitura of the part at the bottom of the instrument’s range, and twice asks that the performer play on the violin’s lowest string in order to create a specific timbre. [slide: sul G] The rising and falling dynamics add to the atmosphere of liminality between the natural and supernatural worlds. In several places, the viola and flute are paired together in parallel minor thirds, a common marker of sadness—here perhaps redefined as ghostly melancholy—in music and even in speech. Similarly, the violin and clarinet play in unison, creating a timbre that could be interpreted as an attempt to create an otherworldly voice. [slide: blank]

In a number of ways, these pieces are modeled on previous kinds of music for the stage: ballet, melodramatic theater, and vaudeville. They are designed for mimetic synchronicity, in which action is choreographed to the music—such as in ballet—or the music was written to match the action of an already extant set of motions, as in vaudeville, in which we see music created to mimic popular stage gestures and elements of physical comedy. The rich heritage of these genres informs much of the early music for film, and a great deal of music from those venues was used to accompany silent film; even today, film soundtracks often include pre-existing works from pre-cinematic genres, including opera, ballet, and instrumental forms.

But that this repertoire was specifically designated for the emergent cinema is particularly important. “Skeleton Dance” and “The Ghost” were neither excerpts from

---

pre-existing music nor ephemeral improvisations, but newly composed specifically for the cinema, to be used and re-used as appropriate with a number of films. As works for the cinematic supernatural, these two pieces have a number of things in common: minor keys; sudden dynamic changes; stepwise, chromatic melody lines; and the use of unusual instruments or instrumental timbres; staccato articulations; and slurred faster passages.

The instrumentation is not for full orchestra, but for the kinds of smaller ensembles employed by movie theaters in the pre-sound era. 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. In “Ghost,” the viola and clarinet can double for one another; the cornets are given second clarinet cues in the even that there is only one clarinet available; the trombone has bassoon cues; and even the timpani are given cues from the strings in places where, if there are enough drums, they could help fill in for a missing or weak bass line. 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.

The pieces are sectional and usually 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 is 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 found in larger movie palaces weren’t so 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.

“Skeleton Dance” is divided into sections ending at measures 20, 37, 53, and 71, and can be performed with or without a Trio section in which Stevenson embellishes the primary motives of the first part of the piece. There is evidence that conductors also used the trio separately or repeated it in performance. “The Ghost in the Haunted Room” 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 measure 16, 52, or 70—all of these allowed for a final cadence in the tonic, while ending at the double bar at measure 36 provided for ending on the dominant without resolution. 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. In fact, handwritten markings in the piano and first violin parts indicate that this particular set of music was used in circumstances that called for lengthening the music by returning to the beginning from measure 62 and playing it through again until the marked end.

In this sequence from “The Haunted House,” a 1908 film, I’ve accompanied the filmic action with “The Ghost in the Haunted Room.” [slide: clip, 1:30]

---

7 Based on my personal copy of the piece from the Mirskey Collection, University of Pittsburgh.
Stevenson and Anthony’s pieces are only two of the atmospheric works in the UNT Special Collections that employ both pre-existing techniques and new musical ideas to signify the supernatural on film. I look forward to exploring the other works in this genre at UNT in the future. [slide: contact info]