

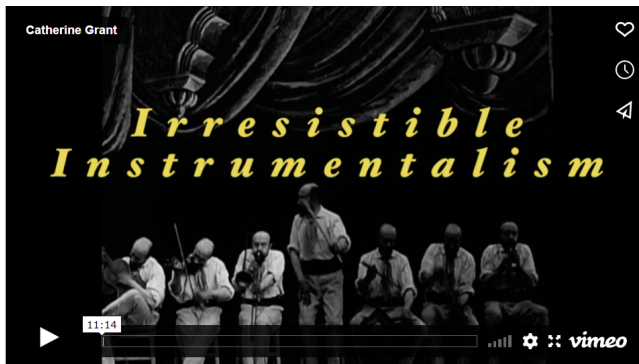
Irresistible instrumentalism: Materially thinking through music-making in the story worlds of silent films

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...the image of musical sound itself becomes contagious...[1]

Irresistible Instrumentalism, the video essay embedded above, explores the somewhat paradoxical depiction in early cinema of the visible playing by onscreen musicians of music that makes no sound in the world beyond the film's diegesis – the portrayal of music, in other words, that cannot be heard by the cinema audience without supplement. This is, after all, the era of what is retronymically, if not accurately, called 'silent cinema'. Rick Altman writes that the cinematic popularity of such mute music-making depictions and the forms of live and recorded 'audiovisual matching' they seemed to solicit came about because, in the very early 1900s, producers rushed 'to satisfy exhibitor demand for films that would justify musical accompaniment' in the movie theatres.[2]

The silent French moving pictures my video features (*Le Piano irrésistible*, Alice Guy, 1907; *L'Homme orchestre*, a 'trick' film featuring its director Georges Méliès, 1900; and the extant fragment of *Lully ou le Violon brisé*, also by Méliès, 1908) were all part of the cycle to which Altman refers. Each of them, therefore, turns on the precise onscreen performance of what Julie Brown, following Isabelle Raynauld, describes as music that is (only) 'visually materialized as a "shown sound"'. [3] That these unheard films were all made at a time when the clear possibility of synchronised cinematic sound already existed, [4] alongside the much more common contemporaneous options for live musical accompaniment, was just one of the aspects that struck me as especially curious – and even uncanny – when I came across some of these films while researching how musicians are figured in cinema. This also made them a particularly ripe area for videographic investigation through remix-based play, given the latter modality's own possibilities for sound-image alteration and audiovisual matching.

In all three of the early films or cinematic fragments on which I draw, we watch characters using musical instruments and, with them, making movements that evoke capable if very spontaneous recitals. In two of them, the musicians are also playing to the interpellated members of a mostly appreciative diegetic audience, one whose animated and entranced bodily reactions clearly testify to the presence in their story world of infectiously hearable music. [5] In this silent subgenre of musically themed films, as Brown astutely notes in her valuable study of how early cinema narratives and 'trick' films engaged with the idea of visualising inaudible onscreen music and sound, 'music was a kind of mysterious force', frequently resulting in 'immediate, and often involuntary dancing as a response to [its] playing'. [6]

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The early cinematic figuration of this contagious and ultimately distracting musical effect is the first and most obvious of the three kinds of 'irresistible instrumentalism' implied by my video's title, as well as by that of Alice Guy's *Le Piano irrésistible*, one of its featured films. As Maggie Hennefeld writes of this 1907 moving picture,

In *Irresistible Piano*, the mere image of a polka note is enough to set a body in motion, disrupting everyday life and domestic labor while bewitching the entire neighborhood into a collective dance around the piano. [...] Although the lures of the polka are hypnotic, their effects on characters' bodies instead give way to spastic convulsions – unpredictable and uproarious gestures...[7]

Both Guy's film and the sole surviving scene from Méliès's 1908 film *Lully ou le Violon brisé* that I also feature play out a story of attempted silencing of musical noise by bosses, angered by their employees' 'unproductive' abandon into energetic dancing. My third featured extract from Méliès's earlier trick film, his 1900 'direct-address' work *L'Homme orchestre*, turns on a different figuration of musical proliferation, followed by a more gradual, and consensual, extinguishing. It deploys its techniques of multiple exposure and superimposition in the service of a 'musical visualization' of an 'imaginative futurist vision of how sound might one day be subject to similar techniques to moving pictures'. [8] All three film works connect, I would argue, in their thematic and figurative interest for any scholarly exploration (and particularly for my performative one [9]) of how early cinema 'conceptualizes music, how films represent music as a phenomenon, and how films position music and musicality as parts of, or apart from, a fictional world'. [10]

Irresistible Instrumentalism is a work that forms part of my practice-based research for a longer archive-filmmaking project on cinematically depicted musicians and the musical cultures of cinema in its first five decades. The project as a whole – and this component in particular – thus connects with a significant tranche of my earlier audiovisual essay-based work that has also focused on cinematic scenes of musical performance. [11] Like much of that work, and of my videomaking in general, *Irresistible Instrumentalism* is a product of audiovisual material thinking, [12] involving 'a particular responsiveness to or conjunction with the intelligence of materials and processes in practice' [13] in the context of what the pre-eminent theorist of film music Michel Chion calls 'the art of precision and of vibration that is cinema'. [14] It was made using a process of responsive and associative montage involving exclusively 'found' materials: digitised film excerpts, music composed and played by others, and shared online under licenses permitting non-commercial re-use, some found sounds and poetry extracts, and short quotations from the published work of theorists and

historians of early and silent cinema, and film sound.[15] As much as it is a piece of editing-based filmmaking research, involving scholarly questions I set myself and forms of argumentation I elaborated as the project emerged, because none of the components were created by me I also experienced its making as a work of constraint-based audiovisual synthesis and curation, entailing the discovery or retrieval, collection, exploration, association, organisation, and presentation of its materials. As Joey Orr writes, ‘working in a cloud of activities, [...], the curator for research tries to expand the surface area of engagement [with the materials] to increase the possibilities for multiple, undisciplined contact with the inquiry’.[16]

Given that each part of my video brings together ‘found music’ and other sounds with found footage from silent films depicting musical production, the act of making this work specifically necessitated – and generated – editing-based practice-research into synthesis through synchronisation, and thus into ‘synchresis’ (synchronism plus synthesis), the well-known audio-visionary concept elaborated by Chion. He coined synchresis specifically to name ‘the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time’.[17] In his book *Uncanny Aesthetics: Synchronization in Sound Film*, Kevin Donnelly also brilliantly conveys the feel of the spatiotemporal precision of synchresis when he describes it as ‘a lock that magnetically pulls together sound and image in the same perceptual space’.[18] It is this compelling but illogical psychological phenomenon that provides the second irresistible instrumentalism of my video’s title.

I have written before about how Chion-like ‘forced marriage’ experiments, in which actual film soundtracks are replaced with alternatives for knowledge-generating purposes, can be very fruitful in the videographic research field.[19] As Chion writes of this proposed investigative method, in which he has engaged so fruitfully himself,

Changing music over the same image dramatically illustrates the phenomena of added value [of film sound], synchresis, sound-image association, and so forth. By observing the kinds of music the image ‘resists’ and the kinds of music cues it yields to, we begin to see the image in all its potential signification and expression.[20]

With the films featured in my video there was no ‘original soundtrack’ to substitute. So my research method in this work was less a kind of experimental re-scoring (although I will return to this possibility, briefly, below), and more like the work of a Music Supervisor, a common role in contemporary film and television production (and post-production),

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locating and selecting tracks, playing with their congruence and incongruence with what is synchronously figured onscreen. For example, it is quite likely that a polka is what is 'playing' (silently) in the scenes from both *Le Piano irrésistible* and *Lully ou le Violon brisé*. Indeed, Hennefeld argues that this is the case with the former film.[21] But only one part of my playings-through of those scenes (in *Lully*...) syncs with a polka that I was able to find online. The other music I chose works more in an affective counterpoint to the scenes.

My methods, then, were more akin to the practices of producing original scoring for old silent films, such as that which often takes place in the contemporary context of the re-distribution of programmes of silent movies. As Ann-Kristin Wallengren and K.J. Donnelly write of these practices, 'in recent years, there has been something of an explosion in the performance of live music to silent films'.[22] But my musical marrying also harked back, even more precisely perhaps, to practices that were part of the silent era exhibition context, involving the use of pre-existing music in cinematic accompaniment, what Rodney Sauer calls 'compiled scores', ones 'assembled from pre-written music', which were often used alongside cue sheets to further aid the live musicians.[23] In this regard, in particular, I was keenly aware that there was one very significant impetus at work in this research for me, connected to the historical practices of film music accompaniment. My video is dedicated to my grandfather Joseph S. O'Brien (1883-1961), a lifelong musician and music educator in Ireland. I recently discovered that he had worked as an accompanist and orchestra leader in silent and early sound cinema in Derry and Dublin between 1914 and 1932. As a result, he would almost certainly have been involved in the activities of score compiling and cue sheets, as well as in freer forms of musical improvisation. My longer archive filmmaking project, in part, explores this aspect of his musical career, and both that project and *Irresistible Instrumentalism* were impelled by my quite personal acts of historical imagination and identification.

Editing the work together was undoubtedly a process of experiment with and discovery of the cues that might best bind certain visual movements with musical notes or obvious instrumental rhythms. Some of these effects turn on rather conspicuous forms of mickey-mousing and thus have likely produced a very tight weld between sights and sounds, while other editing choices draw on the effects (and affects) of far looser forms of synchronisation, or even comment ironically on a lack of synchresis at given points (especially in Part III *Violino Tacet*).

In Parts I, II and III of my video, this experiment with sound-image synchronisation and musical cueing extends into spatiotemporal play with the appearance onscreen of the captions, which, in large part rhythmically, impart the blocks of quotations from the work of

film music scholars.[24] The video endeavours throughout to treat caption text as a time-based image, potentially able, therefore, to generate a kind of musical syncretic effect alongside that provoked by the moving figures in the remixed films. In Part IV Tutti Muti this material thinking through synchresis moves even further into the realm of interaction and interoperability, now between two sets of motion-picture moving images, reframed by their unfolding juxtaposition in a side-by-side split-screen layout. This act of defamiliarising visual material from silent films that we have already seen, and of (re-)scoring it with different music this time,[25] potentially generates new cues, new meanings, and an even more complex and rich set of possibilities for synchronisation and commentary on the depiction of music as an ‘impelling force’ for cinema, as Chion puts it,[26] playing paradoxically and somewhat *avant la lettre* with all the compulsions, pleasures, and other affects of synchresis and synchronisation.

My final ‘irresistible instrumentalism’, then, is the power of editing-based creative research, and specifically of remix as a playful practice-research tool in film studies. Remixing offered me multiple possibilities for performative explorations of what Brown calls “‘fort/da’ approach[es] to materialized music’, that are often so ‘self-reflexive of the silent-cinema on-screen/in-theatre situation of the theatrical moment of moving picture exhibition’.[27] Alongside my preparatory research on the large corpus of scholarship on early cinema soundscapes and technologies, on cinematic musical depictions, and on questions of the power of musical synchronisation and asynchrony in the cinema, the process of making my video essay helped to generate a substantial material exploration of Chion’s important question: ‘What did music bring to [silent cinema]?’;[28] and through its practical and playful explorations of various kinds of ‘audiovisual matching’,[29] this audio-visionary work also reaches a similar conclusion to his: ‘quite simply the beat on which to inscribe its rhythms, hence the possibility of a kind of simultaneity’.[30]

Author

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Notes

[1] Hennefeld 2016, p. 76. I would like to extend my warm thanks to Liz Greene for commissioning *Irresistible Instrumentalism*, as well as for offering very helpful feedback on it, and to Denis Condon for sharing some of his inspiring work on music and early cinema with me in advance of its publication. Many thanks, also, to Chiara Grizzaffi and Christian Keathley whose feedback on the video was much appreciated, and to Evelyn Kreutzer for her highly generative videographic research on musical performance in the cinema (Kreutzer 2019).

[2] Altman 2017, pp. 198-199.

[3] Brown 2021, p. 93, citing Raynauld 2004, p. 216.

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[4] Many films in this era did have synchronised recorded sound, even as early as 1900, and Alice Guy worked a great deal with this technological affordance at Gaumont. See McMahan 1999; McMahan 2014; and Altman 2004, p. 158.

[5] Alessandra Campana draws wonderfully on Althusser's concept of interpellation as she explores the links between (and the relative interchangeability of) figuring and sounding (Campana 2021). Her discussion has been very generative for my own consideration of such links in silent cinematic depictions of musical performance and 'synchresis'.

[6] Brown 2021, p. 103.

[7] Hennefeld 2016, p. 76.

[8] Brown 2021, p. 98.

[9] I refer here to my work on 'The Audiovisual Essay as Performative Research' (Grant 2016) in which I explored the question: 'what if the creative production of audiovisual material centrally constitutes the research into audiovisuality?'

[10] Goldmark & Kramer & Leppert 2007, p. 3.

[11] That earlier audiovisual essay work is gathered in a Vimeo showcase here. On videographic approaches to film sound, music, and listening see Grant 2015a.

[12] On videographic material thinking, see Grant 2014.

[13] Bolt 2007, p. 30.

[14] Chion 2021, p. 222.

[15] Irresistible Instrumentalism uses the quotations it offers up in its captioning as forms of epigraph – in other words, as relatively open or poetic forms of directive framing for its viewing. The videographic epigraph has emerged as a common focus of practice in my own work as well as in the scholarly video essay. On this form see Keathley & Mittell 2019; Grant 2015b.

[16] Orr 2018, np.

[17] Chion 1994, p. 63.

[18] Donnelly 2014, p. 16.

[19] Grant 2015a.

[20] Chion 1994, pp. 188-189.

[21] Hennefeld 2016, p. 76.

[22] Wallengren & Donnelly 2016, p. 1.

[23] Sauer 1998-199, pp. 56-57.

[24] On the potential modality of ‘rhythmized perception’ in caption based audiovisual work, see Grant 2015b.

[25] Part IV uses two tracks, which are basically the same piece of music (aptly, one led by a violin, the other by a piano), but which I have doubled up and synchronised together.

[26] Chion 2021, p. 236.

[27] Brown 2021, p. 103.

[28] Chion 2021, p. 338.

[29] To use Altman’s early cinema term once again (Altman 2017, p. 198).

[30] Chion 2021, p. 338.