

## CHAPLIN SCORES

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**B**EFORE saying what I have on my mind about Mr. Chaplin as a musical engineer, I should like, with all apologies to persons more skilled than I in judging films as literary and pictorial art, to register one vote of approval for *The Great Dictator*. It seemed to my lay eye and taste as nearly perfect a creation as I have ever witnessed in that medium, up to the point, six minutes from the end, where Mr. Chaplin steps out of character, comes right down to the foot-lights, so to speak, and makes a recruiting speech for the British army. I think that if the film were cut short at that point, the rest would turn out to be a sort of truncated masterpiece like the Venus de Milo.

As we know, Mr. Chaplin, though no musician, plans his own musical scores, working through a trained composer of course. In this case, the musical direction is credited to Meredith Willson. It is to be presumed that the opening fanfares and such occasional bits as occur throughout the film that are not recognizably quotations are of his composition. They are not very good; they are musically uninteresting.

What is good and extremely interesting is Mr. Chaplin's way of using music in films. This concept has been clear since his first sound film, *City Lights*. His way of integrating music with animated photography is to admit auditive elements to the rank of co-star with the poetic and visual elements in the final unified effect.

He does not try to use music as mere accompaniment, as neutral background. He knows that a well-cut film can get along without that. Nor does he try to drag in tonal appeal by making one of his characters a music student who can go into a song if necessary. Unless he can coordinate music with the action in such a way that the two play a duet, each commenting upon and heightening the other, he leaves it out altogether. For the same reason, he has hitherto omitted the speaking voice from his own characterizations, because there was no need of it. It would have introduced a jarring naturalistic element into his far from naturalistic acting-style.

The Mayor's wordless speech, sounded on a trombone, in *City Lights*, is one of Chaplin's procedures. The dictator's speeches in semi-nonsense German are the same trick done with his own voice. His bubble dance (to the *Lohengrin Prelude*) and the shaving scene (to a Brahms *Hungarian Dance*) are a different form of musical integration. The first procedure is a substitution of stylized sound for naturalistic speech. (Note then when he is acting naturalistically he speaks naturalistically.) The second procedure is not a substitution; it is an adding of stylized sound to stylized movement without speech, to pantomime. He has here introduced the straight music-hall turn he was brought up to, as artificial a thing as the classical ballet, into movies, the most naturalistic form of theatre that has ever existed. The result is artistically successful.

Mr. Chaplin has not made a complete musical film. He has made a silent film with interpolated musical numbers. But he has obviously reflected about the auditive problem, and so far as he uses music at all, his use of it is unfailingly advantageous. He uses all the auditive effects correctly. He employs very little naturalistic noise, for instance. He takes as his basic esthetic principle the fact that movies are pantomime. Anything expressible by pantomime is not expressed otherwise. He introduces speech, music and sound-effects only when they are needed to do something pantomime can't do. There is a little bombing in the war scenes, a strict minimum. When he belches after having swallowed three coins, he lets the coins jingle. But nowhere does he overlay the film with speech that says nothing, with music that just accompanies, with noises that merely express hubbub.

This is the proper way to integrate auditive elements into any visual spectacle, not to use them at all unless you can use them to heighten the visual effect directly. The Hollywood idea of using background music for its emotional value without anybody ever noticing it is there is nonsense. Because music has to be either neutral or expressive. If it is neutral it has no expressive value. If it is expressive (in the same way and at the same time as the incidents of the photographic narrative; that is to say, accurately expressive), then it is not neutral. It is very noticeable indeed and must be well written and correctly integrated with the action.

Nobody knows how to write neutral music nowadays anyway, as I have explained elsewhere. Bromides are all that ever result from that effort. And bromides solve no esthetic difficulty. They merely obfuscate expression.

There are others in the world beside Chaplin who have sound instincts about musical usage with films. The wailing Russian locomotive at the end of *The Road to Life* was a case of what music and sound-effects can do together. René Clair too has often used music and sound to advantage as a substitute for complete visual depiction. Chaplin has not included in *The Great Dictator* every device known to film art of incorporated auditive effect. That was not his aim. But in no other film that I have seen are speech and music and sound incorporated into a photographed pantomimic narrative with such unvarying and deadly accuracy, nor omitted from the spectacle so rigorously when no way seems to present itself for using them to advantage.