

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC REVIEW

Brilliant Score Enhances Film

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Form follows function. This is true whether you are writing a review or composing a symphony or blowing a glass vase. No matter how elegant or violent the creation, success comes by the degree with which an object fulfills its purpose. In the case of Carolyn Yarnell's new score to *The Smiling Madame Beudet*, a classic black comedy of the silent era screened last Friday night at the University of Santa Cruz Music Recital Hall, the function of inhabiting silence with laughter, pathos and tension was fulfilled with confidence.

Silent film scoring is a most consuming yet rewarding task for the film composer. The absence of speech and sound effects allows for a continuity of artistic presence that parallels the vision of the filmmaker. The choice of Yarnell was a happy one, as she is at least as talented as avant-garde pioneer Germaine Dulac, and brought her images to life with empathy and emotional candor.

The film is a simple and deadly tale of domestic unhappiness. Madame Beudet, a virtual shut-in by the whim of her dominating, intemperate husband, seeks solace in playing Debussy on the piano. Her husband acts out his periodic frustration with both world and wife by putting an unloaded pistol to his head and pulling the trigger — an act which gives him no end of amusement. When Mme. Beudet refuses to accompany him to see *Faust* at the Opera, he locks her piano and the door to the apartment and leaves her to stew. Her despair drives her to load her husband's pistol secretly, which in turn drives the rest of the movie to its conclusion with irony, suspense and emotion.

Now Menacing, Now Charitable

Director Dulac's style was plain and unadorned, using special effects like double images, mirror shots and fades only when it served the plot. So too was Yarnell's accompaniment, a flowing commentary that provided an emotional contour, sleek in its understatement yet generous in a musical content which gave as much underlying energy to the film as its plot twists. Touches of additive sound spattered the musical score: a line of Debussy's *Minuet* following the heroine's fingers, a rattling can of dice aping the distortion of a phone conversation, a trombone slide groaning at the constant readjustment of a vase of flowers. Yet these touches were compositional elements, merging into that fabric of the score, to return with menace or charity at chosen points.

The score revelled in its contradictions to standard film music conventions. The cheery and inviting outdoors that opens the film sops with tension and longing. The madness of the abandoned wife, bridging its middle, is fraught with developing, overlapping polyphony. The long musical approach to the moment of truth at the end heightens the suspense with loving,

ever-intensifying romanticism. At the apex of this, Monsieur Beudet, on a whim, points the pistol at her as a joke and nearly kills her. When he kneels at her side and begs forgiveness for driving her to attempt suicide (as he ironically misinterprets it), the music clangs and clashes to the look of despair and amazement on her face. And yet there is truth in these appositions. The final scene in which we see the couple finally out in the sun is imbued with real hope and resolution, a binding truth between the two of them revealed and accepted.

Yarnell's style in this work differed little from her characteristic musical language, which has remained recognizable throughout her career, even from her salad days long ago at the San Francisco Conservatory. Her signature command of instrumentation and textural coloration was at its height in the manipulation of the resources of her musicians, the Conservatory's own New Music Ensemble of five strings, three winds, three brass, three percussion and piano. With a typical Yarnell twist, the ensemble was made to feel as full as an orchestra and as intimate as a chamber ensemble — simultaneously!

But the most outstanding quality was self-reliance. As powerful as it was as accompaniment, the score could easily have been subtracted from the supertext of the film and performed as a concert work with few if any cuts or alterations. And that is more than just good business sense, it is mastery.