

Carl Davis: The Napoleonic Gesture

by John C. Tibbetts

When Greta Garbo fiercely kisses John Gilbert in *Flesh and the Devil* (1927), Buster Keaton dives off a cliff in *Our Hospitality* (1923), and Lillian Gish goes mad in *The Wind* (1928), it is composer Carl Davis who supplies the accompanying musical gestures. “It’s very hard to get emotionally engaged with a silent image,” he says, “unless you can bring to it music that informs the picture, enhances it, brings out the viewer’s intuitive and emotional responses.”

Davis’ career as a silent-film composer began in 1980 with his music for the five-hour restoration of Abel Gance’s 1927 masterpiece, *Napoleon*. Since then, he has composed scores for dozens of silent classics, many of which are available on videocassette on the Thames Video and MGM/UA labels. He can point with pride to the many other classically-trained composers who have preceded him in silent film scoring, like Camille Saint-Saens (*L’Assassinat de duc de Guise*, 1909), Eric Satie (*Entr’acte*, 1924), Paul Hindemith (*Krazy Kat at the Circus*, 1927), and Jacques Ibert (*The Italian Straw Hat*, 1927), to name just a few. However, Davis belongs to a far more select handful of composers, those who have composed for *both* silent and sound films. With the music for Karel Reisz’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1981), Ken Russell’s *The Rainbow* (1988), and many television series, like the recent *Pride and Prejudice* (1996), he joins Dimitri Shostakovich, for example, who not only worked in the silent period on *The New Babylon* (1929) but who scored Grigory Kosintsev’s sound film, *Hamlet* (1963).

“From my first movie at age four, I have been interested in films,” recounts Davis.

“Which to me meant being also interested in film music. Even in the so-called silent movies, which I saw at the Museum of Modern Art, the idea of accompanying music fascinated me. Now, in addition to my concerts, ballets, and recording projects, it’s a regular part of what I do for a living.”

It’s an uncharacteristically bright January day in the suburb of Barnes, just over the Hammersmith bridge from South London. Davis lives here, in what he calls “an odd corner of London,” tucked in among the winding streets and picturesque houses. History drips from its pores. Portions of the local church preserve the original Norman architecture. Nearby dwellings date back to the early seventeenth century, to the days of cloaks and daggers, when Queen Elizabeth and her entourage would sail up the river in her barge for a game of bowls. Up the street is the Olympic Building, where the early “flickers” used to flash across the big screen at the turn of the century.

Carl Davis’ home is itself a cross-section of local history. Its rambling structure dates back to 1910, but its interior has been recently refurbished into living rooms and working areas ideally designed for both the family man and the working professional. Here, in the top-floor study, sunlight pours through the windows, burnishing the large black concert grand and glancing off the glass-framed wall poster announcing the 1980 London premiere of *Napoleon*. Look twice at the picture and you realize there’s something amiss: That’s *Davis’* face beaming wryly at you from below the brim of Napoleon’s three-

cornered hat!--the first inkling of this eminent composer/conductor/showman's puckish sense of humor.

As we share our mid-morning tea, bookshelves crowd around us, bulging with thousands of items, ranging from recordings of Bix Beiderbecke to opera scores by Bellini and Delibes. A BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) award, in recognition of his score for *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, adorns a side table. Strewn across the piano are manuscript sketches for a new work for Channel Four television, *A Dance to the Music of Time*.

Poised between history old and new, music classical and pop, movies silent and sound, the sixty-year old Carl Davis keeps his options open. Although he's a native of Brooklyn, New York, he's been living in London for many years. Yet—"I am emphatically *not* an English citizen," he declares. "I don't want to close the door. I still have very strong emotional ties to America."

However, he ruefully admits his education in America was a "checkered" affair. Years spent at one of the city colleges in Queens he refers to as a "disaster" But later at the New England Conservatory of Music he met two men who were to become influential mentors, Boris Goldovsky and Robert Shaw. "I was impassioned about opera in those days, and Goldovsky had a special talent for making it accessible to general audiences. That's something I've never forgotten. Then, in 1954 Shaw came up to prepare a chorus for a recording for RCA. I was only eighteen and very bold. So I got a job with him as accompanist. We toured the States and did a lot of recordings. I learned a lot about blending the popular and classical repertoires (which, come to think of it, I've been doing ever since!). We continued to work together

in the early '60s when he toured Eastern Europe and when he went to Moscow to do the first performance of the Bach B Minor Mass. There are a lot of negative things you could say about Shaw, but he was brilliant at getting a chorus to *sing*. There was always that distinctive sound, no matter how large or small his forces, or whose voices were performing. He was able to impose his personality on the chorus, and I think that was a very good thing."

A defining moment for Davis came one day when the Shaw Chorale arrived in Philadelphia for a concert date. "It was a sort of mystical thing," he recalls, "—at least for me. I was downtown, standing in the center of a music store where a lot of blank manuscript pages were laid out on a table. I looked at the white pages, and it suddenly struck me—'God, I want to fill that *up*; that looks very attractive to me! To this day, I can't stand to see empty staves! I'm superstitious about it!'"

After scoring the now-legendary Thames Television documentary series called *The World at War* in the mid-seventies, Davis met the famed historian/filmmaker Kevin Brownlow. History was made—and re-made, as it were—when the two collaborated in 1980 on another Thames documentary series, *Hollywood*, a thirteen-hour celebration of the glory days of the American silent film. "It was an immediate success all over the world," says Davis. "In the euphoria of all that, I thought, 'Now that I've composed music for three-or-four hundred movie excerpts, why don't I try to score a complete silent film?'" Kevin, meantime, had restored the complete *Napoleon*. Eventually, there would be two rival versions of his restoration—Francis Ford

Coppola's American version, scored by his father, Carmine [who had scored *The Godfather*], which had to be cut down to around four hours; and ours, the complete one, which would clock in at five hours. We got the 'okay' for the funding from Thames in August, and the premiere was to be on November 30. So I had to put together five hours of music in just three months!"

A daunting challenge, indeed—the longest score ever composed for a film. "It's very hard to get emotionally engaged with a silent image," Davis says, "unless you can bring to it music that informs the picture, enhances it, brings out the viewer's intuitive and emotional responses."

I glance once again at the afore-mentioned *Napoleon* poster on the far wall, the one with Davis' own features peering out from under the hat. Methinks this is no whimsical piece of identification. Davis, the upstart American, like the legendary Corsican, is capable of some "Napoleonic gestures" of his own.

Under the supervision of producer David Gill and Brownlow, Davis worked in the fashion he continues to pursue to this day: For *Napoleon's* strictly historical sequences he wrought an eclectic blend of classical quotations from composers contemporary to Napoleon's time, like Mehul, Gretry, Gossec, and, of course, Beethoven. He culled authentic tunes and folk songs from the Revolutionary period. And he included a *homage* to Napoleon's original composer, Arthur Honegger, appropriating Honegger's setting of Mehul's 'Chant du depart' in counterpoint to the Marseillaise. "I knew that silent film composers always drew upon the classics," Davis says, "so it seemed a valid thing to do." Indeed, amassing the score was a veritable "research project," as he calls it. "I learned all sorts of things. For example,

when I found out that Napoleon once remarked he could listen to an aria from Paisiello's opera, *Nina*, every day of his life, I decided to use it in the picnic scene in Corsica." For scenes of a more subjective nature, Davis composed original music of his own, such as the "Eagle" theme, a recurring *leitmotif* in tandem with Gance's repeated imagery of the Napoleonic bird as a symbol of the French "spirit of freedom."

Napoleon premiered on a Sunday morning, November 30, 1980, at the Empire Theater in Leicester Square. "It seemed like all of London was there," recalls Davis. "The Wren Orchestra was in the pit and I conducted with my back to the audience, facing the screen. Even after our rehearsals, no one knew if we would be able to stay in 'synch' with the film. I tried to cover that by including some 'escape hatches' in the score—fermata where a tympanist or somebody would cover a gap if the music arrived ahead of a particular scene, for example. I'll never forget that day. It was momentous. People were amazed at the freshness and power of the total experience."

Emboldened by the success of the venture, Thames Television and Channel Four commissioned Davis to score more silent film classics that were produced/reconstructed by Brownlow and Gill. Among the many were D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*, Chaplin's *City Lights*, Fairbanks' *The Thief of Bagdad*, Stroheim's *Greed*, Garbo's *Flesh and the Devil*, Keaton's *The General* and *Our Hospitality*.

"Well, it was a grand gesture," says Davis; "and what it meant was that every year from that point on we did several of these films. We're still doing it. I just finished scoring *The Phantom of the Opera*,

with Lon Chaney. It's a lot of music. Robert Shaw once told me that I'd written 'several miles of music.' I guess it really is a lot of 'mileage,' all right. But since *Napoleon*, I've gotten wise and have worked with assistant orchestrators, like Christopher Palmer, David and Colin Matthews, and Nick Raine. But I never tell them, 'Do it any way you want.' I'll prepare an elaborate short score and say, 'This is an oboe melody; this is a string passage; this is a brass, etc. I'll get back a draft and mark it up, adding, changing.'

"The man is uncanny," says Brownlow. "Carl seems to belong to that era. You listen to the music and you completely relax, knowing that he understands it, he's got it. It's not so with other composers I've worked with, believe me. And Carl's a terrific showman, very enthusiastic and completely reliable. I mean, it's amazing that he can do everything. But, he's too popular for the classical music critics. He doesn't get the recognition he deserves."

No one is more fully aware of the slight than Davis himself. "People think of me as a film composer, but I'm really a composer who writes for films. I remember Miklos Rozsa saying the same thing, that you bring all your inherited or trained baggage as a composer into film. I do think music in itself has affective properties, although I wouldn't to be too literal about that. It's a tricky issue. Stravinsky said that music in itself doesn't mean anything; but when you play it 'slowly, with feeling,' or something like that, it will elicit some sort of response. Even so, ask three different people and you get three different interpretations."

His scores for *The Wind*, *Greed*, and *Our Hospitality* demonstrate, respectively, his instrumental ingenuity, methods of paralleling and counterpointing music and image, and his use of *leitmotiv* and theme-and-variation

techniques. *The Wind* stars Lillian Gish as a woman who journeys to the desert southwest and goes mad under the pressure of the eternal wind and sands. "I wanted to express the sense of discomfort in such a harsh environment, to make the audience uncomfortable with the sounds they were hearing. So I cut out all brass and winds, anything that had color; and I limited my palette to the 'black-and-white' of strings, keyboard, and percussion. At times I used five percussionists, each with his own group of instruments. By the time you get the storm at its peak, you have five gongs being battered simultaneously, assaulting the audience. Much of the music was aleatoric, written without bar lines. The players have a lot of responsibility for making their own sounds based on just general directions, rather like a mass improvisation. But it actually is tightly controlled—I have to *teach* it rather than *conduct* it"

By contrast, scenes in *Greed* feature music that runs counter to the emotional charge of the image. "In one scene a cousin is saying goodbye to the dentist. Both are important characters and soon they will be at each other's throats, trying to kill each other. Do you forecast the oncoming villainy with your music? No, I decided to take my cue from the presence in the shot of a player piano. I just stayed with the piano sounds and seemingly ignored the action. But actually, I injected a few dissonances into the music and instructed my player to over-pedal some of it—just enough to convey a slight feeling of unease."

For *Our Hospitality*, Davis utilizes a classic *leitmotiv* technique, linking specific themes with characters and situations. There's even a "fate" theme, first

introduced in the prologue, foreshadowing the concatenation of events to come. Buster Keaton's own theme, a lovely, lyric melodic line, recurs in an endless variety of ingenious instrumental and rhythmic guises, taking its cue from and in turn enhancing the grand gestures, be they romantic, desperate, or heroic.

Davis takes time each year to conduct live screenings and concert versions of his film scores, as well as programs of music by esteemed colleagues and mentors like Franz Waxman, Max Steiner, and Dmitri Tiomkin. "You are putting on a *performance*," he says. "There is a public out there, not a select group like a film society or a university club or an art-house crowd. You're suddenly doing *Napoleon* for three thousand people in a big auditorium. I've done Chaplin reconstructions in Tel Aviv, in Los Angeles,

in Seattle, in Hong Kong for four thousand people, three nights sold out."

Finally, I wonder if he's ever actually sat at a piano and accompanied a silent film himself. "Yes, of course," he replies, "but not in a theater. When I was preparing for the *Hollywood* series, I'd go over to Thames Television every Tuesday around four in the afternoon and improvise in the screening room with all kinds of old films. Just to get ideas, you know?"

I wonder if any other composers or musicians have started that way.

"Well," Davis answers, eyes twinkling, "off hand, I can think of Virgil Thomson and Shostakovich. And Eugene Ormandy, too. That was in Russia, in his first years. He wouldn't talk about it, though. He never would admit it."

—John C. Tibbetts

End Notes

¹For accounts of Carl Davis' work on the Kevin Brownlow documentaries and film restorations, see Palmer, Judith, "The Sound of Silents," *The Independent*, 13 February 1999: 12; Thomas, Kevin, "Carl Davis' Forte is the Sound of Silents," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 April 1992: F16. For an overview of the Thames silent series, see Champlin, Charles, "'Third Genius' Applauds Wit of Harold Lloyd," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 November 1989: F3; Corliss, Richard, "Silents Are Still Golden: *Cinema Europe* Is an Evocation of the Time When Pictures Were Really Moving," *Time*, 1 July 1996: 64; Monaco, James, "*Cinema Europe*: The Other Hollywood," *Cineaste* XXIV: 2-3 (1999): 86-88; and Silver, Charles, "Chaplin Redux," *American Film* (September 1984): 20-34.

²Music accompanied silent films from the very beginning, with the projection of a program of films by the Lumiere brothers in the Grand Cafe on the Boulevard des Capucines in Paris on 28 December 1895. The Saint-Saens score for *L'Assassinat de Duc de Guise* was later published as a concert piece, his Opus 128 for strings, piano, and harmonium. Satie's score for Rene Clair's *Entr'acte* (1923) has been cited by historian Martin Miller Marks as "the first original film score of consequence by an avant-garde composer." (167) The film was originally inserted between two acts of the ballet, *Relache*, which premiered at the Theatre Champs-Elysees on 4 December 1924. The music is a unified, continuous piece, scored for a small orchestra and lasting twenty minutes. For a detailed account, see Marks, Martin Miller, *Music and the Silent Film: Contexts and Case Studies, 1895-1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 167-185.

Through-composed scores like these were comparatively rare, since the majority of music accompaniments in the silent era were compilations of previously published material with original composition limited to bridge passages and possibly a distinctive theme. For more information about the role classical composers played in silent-film scoring, see Kalinak, Kathryn, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1992): 48-65; Marks, Martin Miller, *Music and the Silent Film*; Prendergast, Roy M., *Film Music: A Neglected Art* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977): 3-18.

³The author wishes to thank Mr. Paul Wing for assistance in arranging the interview with Carl Davis.

⁴Charles Gross scored the film.

⁵For an overview of Ken Russell's composer biopics, see Kolker, Robert Phillip, "Ken Russell's Biopics," *Film Comment*, 9:3 (May 1973): 42-45; and Tibbetts, John C., "the Lyre of Light," *Film Comment*, 28:1 (January-February 1992): 66-73.

⁶Davis began work scoring the film in September 1980. For a full account of the collaboration on the restoration and scoring of *Napoleon*, see Brownlow, Kevin, *Napoleon: Abel Gance's Classic Film* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983). See especially 235-245. For a critical reaction to the event, see Cape, Jonathan, "Restoration Drama," *The Economist*, 28 May 1983: 99.

⁷Author's interview with Kevin Brownlow, 20 July 1999, London.

⁸For information on *Greed*, see Weinberg, Herman G., *The Complete "Greed"* (New York: Arno Press, 1972); for *The Wind*, see Tibbetts, John C., "Vital Geography: Victor Seastrom's *The Wind*, in Whittemore, Don and Philip Alan Cecchetti, Eds, *Passport to Hollywood: Film Immigrants Anthology* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976): 255-263; for *Our Hospitality* see Kline, Jim, *The Complete Films of Buster Keaton* (New York: Citadel Press, 1993): 93