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The Goat: Rescoring a Buster Keaton Classic

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The Goat: Rescoring a Buster Keaton Classic

A Thesis Project

Presented to the Faculty of the

Wells School of Music at

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of

Master of Music with a Concentration in

Music Theory and Composition

By

Shannon Rose Bradley

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Abstract

This thesis examines Buster Keaton's *The Goat* (1921) and provides insight into the methods used to rescore the music of this classic silent film. After a brief review of Keaton's life and career, I will discuss each step in the process of understanding this film and determining the best methods of implementing music to enhance the film. This process includes creating detailed spotting notes for each scene, sketching most of the central musical themes using my preferred traditional composition software, Sibelius, and finally transferring this musical information into my preferred digital audio workstation, Logic, in order to sync all aspects of the music with the film.

Each theme will receive a thorough dissection to analyze the compositional techniques used to implement each creative decision. These include the "Downtrodden" theme in the opening scene, the "Deadshot Dan" theme in scene 2, the contrasting "My Lucky Day" and "Tough Luck" themes, the "Sweet Lady" theme for the police chief's daughter, as well as any areas of chase music, including the final train scene. Lastly, I will reflect upon my process and the choices made. I will also consider how the rescoring might be performed by live musicians in the future.

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Introduction

Buster Keaton was born Joseph Frank Keaton on October 4, 1895, in Piqua, Kansas. His parents were vaudeville performers, which necessitated Keaton's introduction to the world of performing at a very early age, first as a toddler in the wings and later as a young child actor. His career in film began in 1917 with a chance to meet Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, an ex-vaudevillian and comic film actor. The friendship and partnership between Arbuckle and Keaton would catapult the latter into stardom as a director, writer, and actor in Hollywood.

The majority of Buster's films were produced between 1920 and 1928, a short time frame for the creation of more than 30 silent films. *The Goat* (1921) precedes some of Keaton's more well-known films, such as *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) and *The General* (1926). Most of Keaton's works share a few key characteristics. Throughout his acting career, Buster performed all of his own stunts, a constant source of pride and injuries for Keaton. His love of trains is also reflected in many of his films, including *The Goat*.

At the end of this period of growth and success, Keaton made what he would later describe as the worst mistake of his career. Keaton's producer, Joe Schenck, convinced Keaton to sign a deal with MGM, rather than continue producing independently. This decision would strip Keaton of his creative control, causing his films and career to decline in popularity and individuality. Keaton, Chaplin, and Lloyd all seemed to lose their momentum as the 1930's brought the advent of sound in film. Keaton's personal life also suffered as a result, leading to divorce, alcoholism, and depression. It was not until 1949 that Keaton would again enjoy the success and notoriety that he continues to receive today.

Chapter 1: The Process

Selecting *The Goat*

When approaching my thesis, I had first considered a number of ideas for projects that would both fulfill some aspects of my professional growth and spark my creative interests. After much deliberation, I decided that my thesis would involve creating a musical score for a short film. At first, the option of seeking out an original or new short was considered, via connection with a film or animation school such as the Ringling College of Art and Design, but it seemed more efficient to work with an existing film.

As the basis of this project, the existing film needed to be something within the public domain and preferably without other sounds such as spoken dialogue or effects. These sounds would have provided additional challenges beyond the compositional focus of the project, requiring the removal or circumvention of these sounds, and such removal would, in my opinion, have been a detriment to the final product. Upon Professor Stahl's suggestion, I began searching through the copious amounts of silent films available via the Movie Archive at Archive.org. This site contains free books, movies, software, music, and other media, and by using the search filters available, I was able to find a selection of works that might fit the needs of this project.

A few titles that were considered for this thesis were *Nosferatu* (1922), *Private Life of a Cat* (1947), and an Inuit documentary titled *Nanook of the North* (1922). I decided to use *The Goat* (1921) for a number of reasons. First, *The Goat* is driven by a clear storyline, whereas *Nanook of the North*, for example, is more of a series of scenes that generally have no chronological connection. Secondly, *The Goat* contains the most physical action, and

indeed the most comedy, of all the titles considered, making for a more diverse arena of points where the music and motion could connect, as will be discussed in the following section regarding spotting notes. Lastly, I felt that *The Goat* has the most compelling characters, and the relationships between these characters were the more interesting and entertaining. Although not one of Keaton's most popular, there are multiple copies of *The Goat* on Archive.org, some containing different musical scores than others, although no composer is named in any edition.

First Viewings and Notes

After watching the entirety of *The Goat*, I began creating spotting notes, attaching musical ideas to the emotions and actions of each scene in order to guide my composition process. My first draft of these notes was dense and generally too focused on the specific movements of individual characters, especially involving the slapstick comedy for which Keaton is known. I repeated the process while focusing more on the emotion and setting of each scene, deciding which actions to accent musically.

More specifically, for scene 1, I wanted to capture the depressing mood of 1920's America, wherein our protagonist Buster could scarcely hope to find a roll of bread. There are a few moments that I accented musically, such as when Buster trails down to the end of the queue for bread, or when Buster sticks a mannequin with a pin. Otherwise, the music ebbs and flows with the emotions of the scene, the anxiety and disappointment as Buster rushes to the window but is finally denied.

In scene 2, the audience is introduced to the first antagonist character of the film, Deadshot Dan. Here again, there were very few points that needed accents. The goal of the

music was to create an aura surrounding this quirky and smug villain. The only points that I felt deserved more focused attention were when Dan and then the photographer each pulled on the camera's chain, first opening the shutter to Buster's face, and then again to the inside of Dan's hat. This is the crux of the conflict that Buster will encounter in the second half of the film, which was not rescored as part of this project. The photograph of Buster's face, taken clandestinely by Dan, will cause Buster to be mistaken for Dan in many tragically hilarious ways. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2, the closing music in this scene shifts to a frantic pace as Dan makes his escape, a policeman fumbling in the dark in search of him.

For scene 3, the audience is returned to Buster, and the real fun begins. Buster tries his luck by tossing a horseshoe over his shoulder, accidentally striking a policeman. A chase ensues, eventually involving multiple officers, and Buster manages to escape behind a passing train. However, his worries are not over. Almost immediately, Buster manages to get himself stuck to a telephone pole, briefly attracting the attention of yet another policeman. Buster frees himself and carries on, only to be spotted again by the original officers, who give chase once more. Finally, Buster lures the police into a truck, which he closes up before it drives away. The music in this scene alternates between variations on Buster's theme and frantic textural chase music.

In scene 4, the audience is introduced to the female lead, known only as the police chief's daughter, something of a spoiler for those who have not watched the film. She receives her own theme, but it is demented at first, given the uncomfortable situation the woman faces as a man heckles her and her dog. Buster comes to her aid, knocking the other man unconscious before fleeing from yet another cop. In the final scene of this first half,

Buster accidentally and hilariously encounters the very same policemen that were trying to catch him in the first place, leading to another chase scene. This time, however, Buster boards a train rather than hiding behind one. The chase music here shifts to a more rousing mood as Buster eventually succeeds in leaving the cops behind.

Sketching

After outlining my notes for the film, I identified some of the key characters or emotions that would drive my themes, much like the identifiable themes used in the “Star Wars” movies. The majority of these themes were composed using traditional music software, which in this case was Sibelius along with the NotePerformer plugin. Only one was created via direct MIDI input into Logic.

All of the sketches in Sibelius were written for solo piano in order to focus exclusively on the melodic and harmonic content before manipulating the time and rhythm of the theme and eventually orchestrating it. The specific ideas behind each theme will be discussed and dissected in Chapter 2.

Implementing Logic Software

With most of the themes written and manipulated in Sibelius, I began transferring this musical information to my preferred digital audio workstation, Logic. There are multiple methods by which I notated in Logic. For most of the score, I entered notes manually via the piano roll, sometimes copying and pasting MIDI regions from one track to another, in order to achieve precise pitch and rhythm detail. For certain sections, I would play the notes directly into the program via MIDI keyboard. This method was preferably for sections that I

found easier to play but which required more humanistic rhythms or movement. Lastly, for the train music in the closing scene of this score, I recorded myself playing violin in order to accurately capture the sound. The sample libraries available to me did not include the harsh, sliding fiddle sound I sought.

Once the MIDI notes or audio information were entered into Logic, I would begin the mixing process. First and foremost, I utilized two sends to create a different reverb effect for short and long sounds, allowing the different instrument tracks to blend more cohesively, as if in a real physical space together. I would also ascribe a velocity to each MIDI note before contouring the region's dynamics and expressions via the BBC Orchestral Sample Library plugin, which I purchased from Spitfire Audio. Lastly, I chose to pan the instruments according to the general location each instrument would be placed during a live performance, as well as following certain production best practices. For example, the first double bass pizzicato track is panned right in order to imitate the panning of a traditional orchestra. However, the second double bass pizzicato track, pitched one octave below the first, is panned center in order to fill out the overall bass sound of the digital score.

Chapter 2: Development of Themes

“Downtrodden”

I felt that the first scene in *The Goat* was worth exploring emotionally in order to plant the listener in the setting of the story, the contextual time and place that was America in 1921. While generally in a minor key, the harmonies used in this theme are constantly moving from one tonal center to another at irregular intervals, emulating a sensation of unease given the unstable economic situation of this era. The melody also follows waves of crescendo-decrescendos as well as ascending and descending motion, meant to mirror the waves of emotion one might feel if they were to find themselves in such a difficult situation.

“Deadshot Dan”

The theme for Deadshot Dan, introduced in scene 2, was one of the only themes which I performed directly into Logic via MIDI keyboard, with some adjustments thereafter. I believe I chose this method of input because the theme was straightforward and generally easy to play. I also wanted to manually input the exact length of certain “anxiety” notes, the penultimate notes of each phrase which would either ascend or descend by a semitone to the final note of the phrase.

The clarinet and oboe sample instruments from the BBC Orchestra library were perfect for the muddy timbre that I wanted to achieve with this theme while also maintaining rhythmic clarity. These instruments combined with the double bass pizzicato created a perfectly quirky tip-toeing effect, as intended for this comical villain. The melody tip-toes up and down the G minor scale before finally descending into a flurry of strings as Deadshot Dan escapes in the dark.

“My Lucky Day” and “Tough Luck”

Previewed in the titled card and fully introduced in scene 3, the “My Lucky Day” theme embodies the quirky and comical nature of Keaton’s character. The swingtime rhythm and constant skipping intervals create a dance-like quality comparable to ragtime. Generally staying within a major mode, “My Lucky Day” is harmonically easy to follow, much like a popular song. In the opening of scene 3, the xylophone is included as a melody instrument in order to create a bright articulation.

Conversely, the “Tough Luck” theme is meant to characterize the comically sad things that befall Buster in his adventures. It is very similar to the “Lucky Day” theme in rhythm and intervallic patterns. However, using a faster tempo and a straight feel, as opposed to swing, cause this theme to feel more rushed and anxious. This theme is also the basis for some of the chase music, but for the majority of the music during any chase scenes, I did not create a Sibelius sketch because it was almost purely textural. Typically, I manually input groups of notes via piano roll, then copied and pasted them to different instrument tracks.

“Sweet Lady”

This theme is for the main female character, the police chief’s daughter. While only appearing in one scene during the first half, this character becomes much more important as Buster’s love interest. The melody and rhythm of her theme are something of a waltz, tumbling over itself in triple meter as the rude man in scene 4 trips over her dog’s leash.

Train Music

The timbre and perpetual rhythm of this section is inspired by Johnny Cash's "Cherry Blossom Special", another train-related work of music. I recorded myself playing the solo violin or fiddle sections since there were no comparable sample sounds available to me. After recording some of the desired sounds, I first attempted to make a sample instrument using Logic's Quick Sampler and splicing the audio file, but these spliced notes did not have a realistic release in order to create the perpetual rhythms I sought. Therefore, I chose to record the phrases completely on their own and align the MIDI instrument tracks afterward.

Chapter 3: Reflections

Choices in Spotting

In modern cinema, the drama of a scene is the most important aspect in relation to the music, whereas in silent movies and even modern animated films, the action takes a more important role. When scoring a film, the goal of creating spotting notes is not only to identify a mood or a hit point; the goal is to reframe the action, connecting the physical motion with the emotional “movement”, so to speak. If I were to begin this project again, or approach a similar project, I would first prioritize making multiple drafts of my spotting notes with these facts in mind.

Challenges in Production

The greatest challenge when producing digital music is to create a life-like performance of the digital information. As discussed in Chapter 2, I employed a number of production techniques to create the most life-like performance of my music possible given my skills and resources, and these resources are the first and foremost aspect of my rescoring which could be improved in order to create a more life-like sound in this and future projects. Generally, improving one's resources would require increasing one's budget and using these funds to acquire better samples of live instruments, as well as other plugins to create life-like effects.

Regarding plugins, one of the most important things I have learned from this experience is the importance of creating a solid structure from which you can grow, which in this context requires understanding how to set up plugins as efficiently as possible.

Live Performance Capabilities and Considerations

A live performance of my film score would be possible, but for the best results, I would reorchestrate certain parts of the score. For instance, there are multiple sections where the oboe track has a melody in two different octaves. The sample instrument being used creates a completely different timbre at these different octaves, such that in a live performance, it would be more accurate to score the higher octave for oboe and the lower octave for bassoon in order to achieve the most playable and timbrally accurate performance.

In addition, a live performance of this score would require combining certain tracks into a single instrument. For example, there is a track dedicated to a pizzicato violin sound, another to the bowed violin sound, and a third for the tremolo violin sound. All of these tracks could be simplified to a single line of music for violin, requiring only the appropriate notations and symbols for each technique or expression.

Conclusions

I plan to continue working on my score for the first half of *The Goat* for a few more weeks before turning my focus to the final half. I have been informed by my professor that these are the types of projects one can spend their entire life endlessly editing and adjusting, so I intend to follow his advice and provide myself with a deadline to complete the work. I see this as the first of many learning experiences in my journey as a composer, whether for concert music or film. I intend to seek out more projects both similar and different from this one so that I may continue improving on my new and existing skills.