

In the 1918 film *Stella Maris*, movie star Mary Pickford was double cast as wealthy, bed-ridden Stella Maris and hapless orphan Unity Blake. Decades later, Pickford was still moved as she recalled one of the film's central scenes: "I can never forget the emotion when Unity stares at herself forlornly in the mirror...slowly the tears stream down that homely little face, and Unity buries her head in her hands. I could cry now when I think of that girl."¹ Here is the scene Pickford remembered with such emotion: (Clip). The music you heard—Massenet's "Élegie"—is **NOT** music used during this film's **exhibition**. Rather, the "Élegie" was performed **on set** while Pickford **filmed** this scene. Such music was ubiquitous during the 1910s and '20s. Far from "silent," motion picture sets reverberated with music during production. Off-camera and unheard by eventual movie audiences, small ensembles nonetheless shaped gestural vocabularies, coordinated crowd and dance scenes, and coaxed credible tears from stars. For some actors, set music provided an essential aura of performative "liveness," a stand-in for older aesthetic ideologies during film's transitional years. Moreover, set music's functions—as entertainment, as "personal playlist," as emotional catalyst—reveal music's role in constructing and perpetuating stereotypes about national identity, race, age, and gender.

While the *presence* of musicians on early film sets is widely known, the principles, economics, and functions of this vital practice have received almost no critical attention—musicological scholarship on early film has largely focused on post-production elements, particularly the rich variety of musics used during film **exhibition**. In this paper, I draw on periodicals, memoirs, and other sources to analyze the use and meaning of on-set music in the 1910s and '20s. I ultimately argue that analyzing music's unexplored role on silent film sets not

only **broadly resituates** our understanding of music's connection to early film, but also connects music to emotion and meaning in the early twentieth century in important new ways.

Inconclusive accounts credit D.W. Griffith as the first person to use set music, perhaps in the 1914 movie *Judith of Bethulia*.² By 1915, film studios on both coasts used set musicians to coordinate dance scenes such as Maud Allan's *Salome* sequences in *The Rug-Maker's Daughter*.³ On the set of *Carmen* in the summer of 1915, Geraldine Farrar asked Cecil B. DeMille for music. "I was so accustomed to orchestral accompaniment for certain tempi and phrasings," Farrar recalled, "I felt I could better pantomime the rhythm of the effects." A piano was brought on the set, and Melville Ellis played while Farrar acted.⁴ Once a rarity, by the late 1910s music on film sets was ubiquitous.⁵ Nearly every production recognized the importance of this "little luxury;" a 1922 directing treatise noted that "musicians have come to be almost as vital in picture making as the cameraman or the actors themselves—at the studios in the morning [there are] almost as many men carrying violin cases as there are with makeup boxes."⁶

Live music on film sets typically comprised a small chamber ensemble of 3-4 players, sometimes including a folding reed organ or a portable harmonium. But the sobbing, emotive tones of **strings** *characterized* set music. The violin was omnipresent, sometimes joined by cello, double bass, or harp.⁷ Studios occasionally turned to other ensembles such as marching bands, or, most unusually, lap-steel guitar, such as Sol Ho'opi'i's music on the set of the 1924 film *Idle Tongues*. While **live** music was standard, recordings played on phonograph were occasionally used, particularly during wartime labor shortages in 1918.⁸ Generally, set musicians labored long hours for union wages, yet pay improved as the practice became ubiquitous in the early 1920s.⁹ Veteran set musicians Jack and Jim Brennan noted that demand exceeded supply by the

mid-1920s. The weekly salary for mood music, they stated, would “tempt a successful bootlegger to give up bootlegging and take lessons in harmony.”¹⁰

Most set musicians were little-known performers who had previously worked in vaudeville and theater; a significant number of *women* worked as mood violinists or keyboard players. Some **studios** kept specific musicians on long-term retainer, such as Max Fisher (violinist at Lasky) or Bernadine Whalen (violinist at Triangle). Other musicians partnered with **directors**; Ruth Dickey worked with Cecil B. DeMille, and the McCarger string quartet was under contract to Micky Neilan for more than seven years.¹¹ **Actors** also had their own personal musicians.¹²

Working as a set musician was a tricky job, requiring performers to know hundreds of tunes from memory and to be able to switch rapidly between pieces and styles.¹³ Sometimes performers served as both set musicians *and* on-screen extras, such as the “native” Cuban orchestra hired for John Robertson’s film *The Bright Shawl*.¹⁴ The occupation could be dangerous, requiring outdoor work on unregulated early location shoots. Cellist “Mac” Emery McCarger remembered playing mood music on location for Bill Farnum’s Westerns. After traveling to the Grand Canyon, McCarger wrote, musicians who “had never been astride a horse or mule before hung on desperately to their animals with one hand, and to their instruments with the other, as they made the hair-raising descent...once the bass player’s mule ran away, threw his rider, and smashed the instrument, and only the comedy relief of the incident saved it from being a tragedy.”¹⁵

Set music was not an occasional isolated tune. Musicians often played continuously during shooting—one player described it as “virtual scoring of the entire picture” (just as the finished film would have a *different* nearly continuous musical accompaniment in the theater).¹⁶ Types of set music varied; the most typical were old-time melodies, Tin Pan Alley hits, and emotive 19th century tunes like Massenet’s “Elégie.” Genre (both musical and film) also mattered. A 1922 directing manual noted some actors preferred “slow, tearful” music to bring out the burlesque elements in comedic scenes, while *Photoplay* claimed *jazz* was the best fit for modern comedy.¹⁷ Conversely, using uplift rhetoric common to both art music *and* early film, director William De Mille forbid the use of jazz on his sets. De Mille felt only the “best” music (classical) would help films “attain their best artistic achievements.”¹⁸

Set music generally did **not** match diegetic film soundscapes—during the Babylonian scenes of D.W. Griffith’s film *Intolerance*, for example, a brass band played Sousa marches and “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” outside the walls of Babylon.¹⁹ There were occasional attempts at more “authentic” aural setting, but these were mostly exoticized representations of non-Western musics. A shamisen played “Japanese airs” written by Westerners during production of *The Mikado*, for example, while a snare drum, cymbals, and bass drum were used to produce “strange combinations typical of Arabia and Persia” on the set of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* in 1918.²⁰ Even these attempts at local color were often nixed by other requests; the orchestra leader for Douglas Fairbanks purchased \$75 worth of “Oriental” sheet music to play on the set of *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), but director Raoul Walsh insisted on Irish tunes instead.²¹

For roughly fifteen years, ubiquitous music making on set served at least **seven** different functions (Fig. 2). In addition to helping set rhythm and tempo, music served as a kind of sonic veil, helping mask the bangs of construction, the whispering and talking of other actors, and (to some extent) the grinding of the camera.²² Before soundproofing, multiple sets adjoined each other within a single studio; bleed-through of *music* from contiguous sets thus created its own problems. For example, poignant music played for actress Doris Kean's tragic scene, only to be ruined by a saxophone blaring on the adjacent set. Noise complaints often *singled out* jazz; despite enthusiasm for this genre, the predominately white filmmaking milieu responded affectively to these musics in markedly racialized ways.²³

Music also provided entertainment on set. It promoted good feeling and camaraderie; it was refreshing, relaxing, an invigorating [almost narcotic] substance. Musicians sometimes served as comic relief; when on-set arguments arose between husband-and-wife director and actor Mickey Neilan and Blanche Sweet, for example, the house ensemble would launch into the 1923 fox-trot "Mamma Love Papa, Papa Loves Mama."²⁴ The McCargar quartet was especially adept at comedy; they assigned musical "themes" to each actor, creating a musical meta-commentary throughout a shoot.²⁵ For certain musical groups, however, the "comedic" role was inflected with racist discourse from minstrelsy. In the mid-1920s, a group of African American musicians played jazz for Harry Carey's Westerns. Speaking possessively of "his" musicians, the director described them as "natural comedians"....to have them with us is like carrying a full vaudeville."²⁶

Crucially, set music provided both verisimilitude and an aura of liveness. Music helped construct a simulated realness, a critical sonic element in the pretense that a studio set meant to

be a church chapel, for example, was actually a “real” place. Set music also offered the *illusion of immediacy* and *liveness* for film actors, a vestige of the real in the midst of the noisy deadness of film cameras.²⁷ Philip Auslander has analyzed liveness as “bound up with the history of recording media,” not an “ontologically defined condition but as a historically variable effect of mediatization.”²⁸ At this *precise* historical moment in the 1910s and 1920s, the first generation of movie stars, who nearly all had their roots in other types of stage work, found music *particularly* useful in bridging this newly significant divide between “live” and filmed performance. Early film stars testified that *set music* **somehow** helped “fill in” the “**great gap**,” i.e. the symbiotic relationship between the actor and the audience in live theater.²⁹

I would like to spend the rest of our time delving more deeply into one specific aspect of mood music: the role set music played in generating *emotion* for actors. Music generally played *first* to set a mood—typically sad, dramatic, or joyous—*then* the cameras rolled. Tunes were especially useful in assisting with *rapid* shifts of emotion or lightening-fast changes of tone, such as an abrupt transition from an amorous mood into abject terror. Actor Conrad Nagel commented music made it easier to jump “headfirst” into a scene, “right into the *climax* of the emotion without any gradual working up to it.”³⁰

Sometimes directors selected mood music, other times musicians themselves picked the numbers, but most frequently, it was *actors* who forged personal “playlists” of preferred pieces.³¹ These “playlists” bridged the personal and professional, the private and the public, the past and the present; indeed, the most successful mood music selections were often connected to real, *personal* memories of stars. Actor Monte Blue noted that certain songs were “indissolubly connected with dramatic moments of my own life—hearing these will bring back all the haunting

memories of those moments.”³² For Pola Negri, the Polish song “The Last Sigh,” reminded her of the **trauma** of her exile; when played on set, the music served as a sonic trigger yielding a ‘sincere grief.’³³ Mood music—perhaps more than other elements—helped actors bring traces of their own pasts to their diegetic characters. Indeed, a 1926 *NY Times* article argued the musician behind the camera was “the *soul* of the picture.”³⁴

According to early 20th century social constructs, not all groups responded to music equally. A 1918 *Photoplay* article noted children were “more responsive...than most adults;” commenting particularly on music’s impact on child star Jackie Coogan.³⁵ Oddly, other reports claimed mood music had a strong affect on *animals*. Conway Tearle believed the song “Pony Boy” put his horse in a better mood; other stories noted the famous dog “Keystone Teddy’s” reactions.³⁶ Hollywood’s lions allegedly “became as playful as kittens and as docile as lambs” while ‘under the influence’ of mood music.³⁷

In a toxic conflation of ethnic stereotypes, “emotional susceptibility,” and music, actors from outside of Western Europe or the United States were seen as especially responsive to mood music. Music “playlists” of some actors were dominated by tunes reflecting national identity; upon hearing “Macushla,” for example, Irish actor Thomas Meighan’s face would “light up.”³⁸ While stars may have genuinely connected with national melodies, this discourse also reinscribed stereotypes conflating music and certain ethnic groups. In his 1922 directing treatise, Peter Milne noted that once “stirred to the very depth of their souls by the familiar notes of some ancient folk song or dance... ‘Latin and Slavic’ people would forget their surroundings and break into abandoned actions.”³⁹

One function of set music in Figure 2 is crowd control—loud sounds are helpful in organizing movement of masses. Yet rhetoric about mood music for crowds likewise reaffirmed stereotypes. Music was configured as a sort of universal language able to “communicate” with large multi-ethnic casts of extras. In Cecil B. DeMille’s *Feet of Clay* (1924), a *Motion Picture Magazine* article described a crowd scene as comprised of “men and women of every race and every grade of intelligence...none of whom spoke a common language.” During filming, DeMille’s set musician Ruth Dickey and her ensemble played “Song of the Volga Boatman;” the article noted these “weird, low, penetrating chords....spoke to all and swayed them *unconsciously* into the mood.”⁴⁰ During the making of the 1923 Western *A Covered Wagon*, jazz violinist Babe Egan’s orchestra *allegedly* defused a physical altercation between the filmmakers and the Arapaho, Shoshone, and Bannock extras.⁴¹ These bigoted descriptions demonstrate the ways set music—and a perceived vulnerability to emotional excess and control—intertwined messily with contemporary ideas about race.

Women were likewise strongly shaped by the intersection of set music, emotion, and social constructs. An article entitled “You Have to Weep to Be a Star” noted “as a rule, it is left for women to do the crying.”⁴² Indeed, tears were crucial—*real* tears, not artificial weeping obtained by glycerine drops.⁴³ (Primarily) male directors employed a variety of tactics to obtain these fetishized visual spectacles of female emotion—tactics which fell along the spectrum from controlling behavior to verbal and physical abuse. Some directors lied to their actresses, screamed or browbeat them, even withheld food or sleep; once the performer finally “cracked,” the director gazed upon the actress—and cameras rolled—as the desired tears trickled down women’s faces.

Mood music played a complex role in this nexus of gendered emotion, directorial tactics, and personal relationships. A 1918 article commented that “D.W. Griffith relies *less* on music” than others; instead, he elicited emotions by “sheer mental domination; in fact it has been said that his direction is a near approach to hypnotism.”⁴⁴ Director Edward Sloman noted actress Mary Philbin always “craved” music, but stated that “hard-riding direction did her more good than all the music she ever listened to.”⁴⁵ Set musicians, therefore, served almost as intercessors: minimizing abusive directorial tactics by eliciting emotions through *music*. Women directors—such as Alice Guy or Elsie Jane Wilson—were equally invested in female emotion and the efficacy of mood music, though at times they embraced different *tactics* than male directors.⁴⁶

But if mood music *could* break up this gendered dynamic, mood musicians themselves were also emotionally manipulative. The large number of women who worked as set musicians add additional complexity to this gendered space. Violinist Ruth Dickey recalled having trouble getting Betty Compson to cry. Dickey remembered Compson had mourned the death of [director] George Loane Tucker, “so I tried playing one of his favorite old melodies—and Betty broke down and wept like a baby. We have to be cruel at times, we musicians.”⁴⁷

This complex early twentieth-century intersection of music, emotion, race, and gender was never stable, due to anxieties over music’s unpredictable affective power. Some stars claimed emotions piqued by music were *subconscious*; the music simply “carried them away” with emotion.⁴⁸ Betty Compson wasn’t even sure why “Susannah” affected her so strongly.⁴⁹ Questions of *control* pervaded this discourse; mood music affected everyone on set, from the crew to the extras to the stars to the directors.⁵⁰ Some actors [falsely?] protested music didn’t affect them—a 1926 article noted “House Peters, one of the rugged he-men of the screen, pays

little attention to what music is played.”⁵¹ On the other hand, Cecil B. DeMille sometimes stuffed cotton in his ears, lest he feel his own eyes fill with tears. Actor Percy Marmont admitted mood music could prompt an emotional overflow.⁵²

Early film sets were noisy, bombastic places which marked a generation of actors, directors, and technical personnel. Indeed, many in the business were confounded by the switch to “talkies” at the end of the 1920s; actor Ben Lyon stated that producing sound films in “‘complete silence’ left us at a loss; it took a long time to get used to it.”⁵³ When we watch films of the 1910s and 1920s, we see *visual* traces of a vanished sonic past. A film fiddler called attention to these lost sounds, explaining that when watching a completed film, “you can *see* the results, but cannot *hear* how *I* worked to get the desired effect.”

Early film actors argued music provided “authenticity and sincerity,” provocative statements given the the semi-public nature of filming and the repetitiveness of mood music.⁵⁴ If the same musical selection caused an actor to *repeatedly* cry on cue, did that music operate as a sort of memory trigger? Perhaps music worked as a cognitive cue to produce a physiological manifestation such as tears? Or were these “performed” emotions? Where *is* the line between *performed* and *real* emotion, and how was music implicated in these questions?

While we are far from the noisy sets of early film, questions about music’s role in mood and affect remain essential.⁵⁵ Today’s streaming services such as Apple Music and Spotify are packed with playlists aimed at *matching* preexistent emotional states, *prolonging* emotion, or *prompting* a cathartic release of tears. These playlists bridge the public/private divide in new ways, yet force us to confront recurrent questions about performance, repetition, music, and emotion.⁵⁶

¹ Pickford noted that she carried herself differently as Unity than as Stella—"Unity Blake would probably have one shoulder dropped and one hip high from having carried younger children on the other hip in her formative years. . . . As Unity, I also plastered my hair with Vaseline in order to take out the curls, and make it look dark and scraggly in contrast to Stella's curls." Pickford, *Sunshine and Shadow*, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954, p. 148. Calling Pickford's performance "one of the most vivid, imaginative and intelligent performances ever witnessed on the screen," *The Dramatic Mirror of Motion Pictures and the Stage* described the "infinite pathos" of the role(s), and a corresponding emotional response on the part of motion picture audiences, writing that "indeed, there were few dry eyes at the Strand, where a large audience sat enthralled by the compelling portrayal of little Unity Blake."

² The Griffith idea is repeated in "What Makes Them Cry." Several other notes suggest that Griffith may have done this several years earlier, around 1909 at Biograph. These accounts are not easy to verify, but it's possible Griffith was using set music that early.

None of the *Judith of Bethulia* accounts are easily verifiable; Brownlow notes "*Judith of Bethulia* (1913) is acknowledged as the first to employ an orchestra on set. D.W. Griffith, the historians allege, used it to help Blanche Sweet through some emotional scenes. But Blanche Sweet could not remember musicians being present at any stage of the production. As she pointed out, Griffith used music less than practically any director. He once said he would never employ a player "who could not feel the role enough to weep at rehearsals."

A much later recollection comes from Lillian Gish in Stuart Oderman's text: "Lillian remembered that some of the music that accompanied the showings of *Judith of Bethulia* was hummed by Mr. Griffith during the actual shooting of the film: 'Mr. Griffith would talk/direct us through out actions and movements, and then sometimes gesture with his arms and start to sing or hum a phrase of music. It was never a distraction, because we had become used to his work habits, and his humming gave an added emotion to the scene. Nowadays, everyone can hear classical music on the radio or television, or go to concerts, but we were working before phonograph records were so common to find in every home. You couldn't take this sort of luxury for granted in those days. Culture was something only for the very wealthy or educated.' (Stuart Oderman, *Lillian Gish: A Life on Stage on Screen*. —the footnote notes the original source is Lillian Gish, a conversation with Oderman in March 1963.

³ In his 1922 treatise on acting, Peter Milne also notes that (without providing specifics) that "a large ballroom scene was being photographed at the old Thanhouse studio in New Rochelle. Invitations were sent to members of the press to attend and watch the work. A rare innovation was promised. The innovation turned out to be the fact that the ballroom dancers actually danced to the strains of an orchestra! Previously picture dancers had been forced to rely on their own sense of rhythm." Milne, *Motion Picture Directing: The Facts and Theories of the Newest Art*. New York: Falk Publishing Co., 1922.

Maud Allan's film (dir. Oscar Apfel) was released in July 1915. See "When Maud Allan Danced" from *Picture-Play Weekly*, 21 August 1915.

Heart Beats was directed by John G. Adolphi, and a reported anecdote involving him asking for German music on set. See *Picture-Play Magazine*, April 1915.

⁴ "I was so accustomed to orchestral accompaniment for certain tempi and phrasings, I felt I could better pantomime the rhythm of the effects. A little piano was hastily wheeled on set, and Melville Ellis inspired all my scenes with his impromptu playing." Geraldine Farrar, *Such Sweet Compulsion: The Autobiography of Geraldine Farrar*. New York: Da Capo press, 1970 (originally 1938). The participation of Ellis was also widely reported in press coverage of *Carmen*; see, for example, *The Evening World* (14 July 1915), *The Sun* (1 Aug 1915), *Photoplay* (November 1915).

⁵ Ernest A. Dench's 1915 monograph *Making the Movies* noted the recent initiative of a big film producing company who "regularly employs an orchestra of several pieces to dispense appropriate music in such dramas." Dench, Ernest A. *Making the Movies*. New York: the Macmillan Company, 1915. Dench asked other companies to follow suit. It's difficult to state the exact date this practice becomes widespread—may be as early as 1916, but seems like 1918 is more likely. Many of the accounts are a little retrospective and come from the 1920s. Apparently visitors to the studios found musicians on set quite intriguing.

⁶ Stated verbatim in "A Tune for a Tear" in 1924. The little luxury comment comes from Allan Dwan, "A Tune for a Tear." There were a few holdouts (could name them). See Peter Milne, *Motion Picture Directing: The Facts and Theories of the Newest Art* (New York: Falk Publishing Co., 1922.[Includes selection on "Music in Picture Production"]).

⁷ The *NY Times* 1926 article noted that Thomas Meighan's favorite combination was reed organ, 2 violins, and a cello, with strings muted.

I believe reed organ/pump organ, harmonium, and melodeon are all basically the same. Millions of these were made in US and Canada in late 19th and early 20th century: Estey Organ and Mason & Hamlin were major manufacturers.

⁸ Alice Guy may have used a phonograph on set as early as 1906's *La vie du Christ* (although I haven't verified this particular source).

D.W. Griffith also used the phonograph in rehearsal. See "What Makes Them Cry" (1918) for reports on Griffith and other phonograph use on set.

Constance Talmadge allegedly irritated the live musicians by *only* crying to phonograph records (instead of live music).

⁹ The *NY Times* 1926 article by a film fiddler mentions "all-day work on a union wage and 'no hope of glory.'"

¹⁰ These brothers sometimes worked for Eric von Stroheim. See "A Tune for a Tear."

¹¹ Check pronunciation of Neilan's name. It is probably Kneel-in.

I have listed the directors I've come across who used this: list includes Commodore Blackton, Herbert Brenon, Edwin Carew, Harry Carey, James Cruze, Allan Dwan, J. Gordon Edwards, D.W. Griffith, Rupert Hughes, Rex Ingram, Rupert Julian, Adolphe Menjou, Cecil B. DeMille, William De Mille, Marshall Neilan, Eric von Stroheim, King Vidor.

As far as set musicians, we could also include Babe Egan in this list (favorite violinist of James Cruze), or Efreim Zimbalist, Sr., who worked for William de Mille.

¹² Fairbanks had a small orchestra led by "Miss Douglas," a violinist, and Tina Marinelli worked for Adams. Bernard Browne's trio played for Irene Rich for several years.

¹³ The *NY Times* 1926 article noted "they have to be versatile and alert, so that at a signal from the director they can change from Wagner to jazz and play from memory."

¹⁴ Might also think of the French tunes used on the set of Allan Dwan's *Zaza* in 1923.

¹⁵ "A Tune for a Tear." See also *Musical America* for images of McCargar quartet. There is also a funny anecdote about "hiding" musicians off-camera, sometimes requiring contorted performance positions (one anecdote even claimed the musicians were hidden in a bathtub!). See "A Tune for a Tear" for the bathtub anecdote.

¹⁶ According to Frank Bahr in *NY Times* 1926. "To What Music do the Stars Emote" noted that music changed from one old-time melody to another constantly during all her acting." See *NY Times* 1926 for discussion of "virtual scoring." In isolated instances, a piece played on the set might make it into the music used for exhibition of the film as well; one example of this is the use of the "Marseillaise" on the set of Geraldine Farrar's *Joan* and Mary Pickford's *The Little American*.

¹⁷ Milne, "there are comedians, too, who employ musical inspiration. However, when they are playing a burlesque scene they often call for the slow, tearful music that is used for the serious scene. It gives them a better slant on the burlesque element in the scene" *Motion Picture Directing* (New York, 1922). *Photoplay* magazine in 1927 claimed jazz was the best fit for modern comedy.

¹⁸ "A Tune for a Tear." Hungarian actress Maria Korda allegedly prejudiced against jazz and asked for classical music as well. *Photoplay* magazine 1927.

¹⁹ "What Makes Them Cry." The music on the Griffith set may have been primarily used for crowd control. As another case study, the "Egyptian chant" played on the set of *Cleopatra* (1917) was actually by 19th-century French composer Jean Gabriel- Marie (1852-1928), a piece called "la Cinquintaine" as an air in the ancient style. A periodical report on *Cleopatra* noted "an Egyptian chant dug up in an Oriental tomb along the Nile. But a musician one day claimed this was actually Gabriel-Marie's 'La Cinquintaine.'" See "What Makes Them Cry."

²⁰ For the Robertson film, there was a Spanish string orchestra, the Cuban orchestra, and a theater orchestra for theater shots. *Zaza* was the version was directed by Allan Dwan (there are earlier versions of this Belasco drama). For other “French” music, see the lost 1917 film *Madame Du Barry* used a minuet, but the 1887 one by Paderewski—note that this film was the Theda Bara one (not the Pola Negri version). *Ali Baba*, see 1918 “What Makes Them Cry.”

²¹ “After I had thoroughly familiarized myself with the script of *The Thief of Baghdad*,” said Miss Douglas, “I bought seventy-five dollars worth of Oriental music—tunes full of the poetry and romance of the mystic East, yet with plenty of vigor and vim to appeal to Doug. But no sooner would my orchestra swing into this music than Raoul Walsh would come over sauntering over and say, “Now play “My Wild Irish Rose” or let’s have “Mother Machree” or “Macushla. It was perfectly remarkable how his face would light up and how dreamy his look would become at the sound of some beloved Irish melody, such as “When Irish eyes are smiling.” So if there is a bit of blarney in *The Thief of Baghdad*, you will understand why. You will also understand how tactfully I had to shift from Oriental to Celtic tunes to keep both the star and director happy. See “A Tune for a Tear”

²² See Norma Talmadge in “What Makes Them Cry,” Billie Burke, Alice Terry, and Madame Nazimova in “A Tune for a Tear.” Terry noted music covers up the sound of whispering or talking behind the lights and helps one concentrate, but I do not like to be conscious of the music itself—it must only be background.”

²³ A solemn wedding scene, accompanied by melodeon, struggling to ignore the din of as a cabaret scene, accompanied by a 10-piece jazz band, filmed on the adjacent set. Some primary sources that deal with this issue: See *Photoplay Magazine*’s 1920 piece on Doris Keane, “who is making one picture for the screen, certainly turned things topsy-turvy at the eastern studio where she worked...she had an orchestra playing sad music all through her own personal sets. An adjoining set had to make so many scenes one morning—and a jazz band was imported to play. It was a Y.M.C.A. hut “over there”. But the star, after one moan of the saxophone, threw up her hands and announced that either her orchestra or the jazz band would have to cease playing.”

Allan Dwan notes in “A Tune for a Tear” that four scenes were being made in the studio, each with its own bit of music.”

Peter Milne’s 1922 acting manual notes: “In a studio where two or three companies are working at the same time it must be confessed that the effect of the various orchestras is more or less confusing...I was in a large studio in the west only recently when a cabaret scene was being filmed on one set to the wildest of jazz tunes. Immediately to one side of it there was a subduedly lighted church scene, wherein hero and heroine were, for purposes of pictures, going through the marriage ceremony. The man who was playing the melodeon for this scene was having a furious time trying to make himself heard above the ten-piece jazz band only a few feet away.

²⁴ Reported in Brownlow, although he doesn’t get the title quite right. The tune, by Cliff Friend and Abel Baer and published by Leo Feist, became a Dixieland standard thereafter.

²⁵ See “A Tune for a Tear.” Some of these anecdotes are very funny; see, for example, the quartet playing a funeral march whenever Mary Pickford’s mother would arrive on set.

²⁶ “These darkies of mine are a bunch of comedians themselves, and to have them with us is like carrying a full vaudeville.” The previous paragraph is also clearly racially inflected: “Harry Carey’s colored jazz orchestra follows his camera as faithfully as the cub follows the old bear. Harry is quite certain he could not make a Western picture without them. ‘It isn’t only that I like jazz myself,’ he explains, ‘but my pictures have action as their key-note. The music helps to give it.’” See “A Tune for a Tear,” part III.

²⁷ See Dench’s 1915 acting manual, which noted the “legitimate stage actor has a real human audience in front of him to stir him on—but the photo player has only the cold clicking camera and the loud-voiced, businesslike director.”

²⁸ See Philip Auslander, “Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 34, no. 3 (September 2012): 3-11. Auslander notes that the earliest forms of sound recording, such as Edison’s cylinder, were intended to serve as secondary adjuncts to live performance by preserving it. The ways early sound recording was used respected and reinforced the primacy of existing modes of performance. Live and recorded performances thus coexisted clearly as discrete, complementary experiences, necessitating no particular to distinguish them (until radio). See also Peggy Phelan’s 1993 book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* and also an essay by Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe called “Liveness: Phelan, Auslander, And After”

²⁹ George Beban, a Broadway star who began acting on film in 1915, noted music helped him “get into it,” because as a stage actor he always “had music.” See Beban’s anecdote in “What Makes Them Cry” (1918). See also “A Tune for a Tear,” which describes music as “filling in the great gap in pictures—the lack of the audience, which one has on the stage, to give back their reaction to your interpretation of a character.”

³⁰ See *NY Times* 1926 and “A Tune for a Tear” *NY Times* 1926. Director and musician Victor L. Schertzinger created a book of 50 themes a year to be used in pictures. “A Tune for a Tear.”

The example of rapid emotional shifts was given by *NY Times* 1926: “it is often necessary to change the character of the music in the middle of the scene. For instance, we may be playing a soft, dreamy air for a love scene when the heroine suddenly sees a child in danger of being struck by an automobile and screams to her companion to save the youngster.” “A tune for a tear” also notes how in *The Lost World*, the expression had to change immediately from calm investigation to transfixed terror.”

Conrad Nagel, “A Tune for a Tear.”

Director Allan Dwan concurred that since actors had to plunge into an emotion “headfirst,” “a mournful tune helps a lot.” Longer quote by Dwan, “Camera acting is a spasmodic affair at best. The artist is not permitted to work up into a climax gradually, nor has he the inspiration of an audience to throw him into the mood. He must simply plunge into it head-first. He arrives of a sunny morning, feeling very much in tune with the world, and I say ‘do the death scene.’ Register the agony of a soul in torment. We can’t take time for him to go out on the lot and gradually work himself up into a fine frenzy of emotion. He has to show it on the spot. A mournful tune helps a lot.”

³¹ Gladys Brockwell, Fox actress, “believes music is almost a necessity in dramatic scenes but has no preferences. She leaves it to the musicians just so that the tempo of the action is maintained. “What Makes Them Cry.” J. Gordon Edwards as director ‘would never suggest what music to play; he would say to an assistant, ‘Ask Miss Blythe if she wants a change.” (Brownlow). Theda Bara had strong feelings and would make specific suggestions.

³² Although its resonance with her life is unclear, Geraldine Farrar was typical in choosing melodies from earlier eras, such as Charles Gardner’s 1880s tune “The Lilac.” Other related references include Bill Hart: Perhaps it is some memory of his youth that makes him particularly susceptible to “Sweet Bunch of Daisies” (“What Makes Them Cry” 1918) Constance Talmadge, who couldn’t cry to live music, remembered that she had run across an old talking machine and a few old records popular in her childhood days.

See also “A Tune for a Tear.” Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford were known for hiring set musicians to come play parties at their mansion.

Norma Talmadge: “When I was a little girl, a young friend very dear to me died. I went to the funeral, and at the same time I must have heard “Ben Bolt,” for whenever I hear this old piece all my sorrow at the time comes vividly back to me. It was my very first experience with death, and everything seemed very mysterious and terrible to me and my grief was deep and sincere.” (A Tune for a Tear”)

³³ “There is one little Polish song, “The last Sigh,” which never fails to bring sincere grief to Pola Negri. When she was leaving her home in Poland, leaving the great tragedy of her life behind and starting forth without a friend upon the career she felt rightfully was hers, she heard this folk song played in a peasant’s cottage. “it seemed to me then,” Miss Negri said recently, “as if it were the end of everything. I had been bowed in grief, in great sorrow, and starting off with that lilting tune. ‘The Last Sigh,’ coming from a lowly cottage, seemed to portend something. I knew not what.” (“To What Music do the Stars Emote?”). This is also mentioned nearly word-for-word in “A Tune for a Tear”). Pola Negri mostly preferred Russian classics on set.

³⁴ The quote continues: “the motif, the allegro, the crescendo of every little scene that goes to make up a feature film.” The piece was written by an anonymous “film fiddler.”

³⁵ “What Makes Them Cry 1918,” which mentions “Fox Kiddies” specifically. Jackie Coogan (1914-1984) appeared in Chaplin’s *The Kid* (1921) among many others.

³⁶ Conway Tearle noted “finally, in desperation I had the musicians play “Pony Boy” and the atmosphere was great! By the twentieth bar I was usually on top of the animal’s back. The music seemed to put the long-suffering animal in better spirits, too. So now we are the best of friends, and I mount with a jaunty air to the strains of “Pony Boy.” “A Tune for a Tear.” Other accounts cited music’s influence on Tony “the Wonder Horse.” Tony was associated with actor Tom Mix, and starred in around 34 silent and sound films. Teddy was an early dog actor (allegedly a Great Dane) who appeared in many Mack Sennet comedies for Paramount.

³⁷ This may have been in reference to a specific Harry Langdon film, but I have not been able to locate the reference. The music which calmed the lions was specifically violin and piano music. See “A Tune without a Tear.”

³⁸ “Macushla” was an Irish song copyrighted in 1910; Meighan evidently also liked “My Wild Irish Rose” and “When Irish Eyes are Smiling.” See “A Tune for a Tear.”

There are many additional examples; actress Lya de Putti, for example, preferred Hungarian music. For other sources on national identity, see *NY Times* 1926 and “To What do the Stars Emote?”

³⁹ Milne, 1922.

⁴⁰ In *The Ten Commandments*, director DeMille allegedly was “able to sway them [the thousands of Hebrew extras] perfectly to his desires by the use of a 12-piece orchestra which played their own Hebrew music—music which instilled in them the mood he wishes them to interpret.” See “A Tune for a Tear”
See “What Makes Them Cry,” which mentions D.W. Griffith and *Intolerance*.

⁴¹ “At length Colonel McCoy came rushing over to us. ‘They’ve got beyond me!’ he cried. I can’t stop them; they are killing mad over some imaginary offense. What shall we do? Suddenly I remembered how they loved American jazz. So we hastily organized the orchestra, and with fingers so cold we could scarcely pluck the strings, made such gay and lively music as we had never made before. And within fifteen minutes, old chief Standing Bear was appeased and all his tribe were standing around crying for more music.” See “A Tune for a Tear”

⁴² “In most cases screen acting has developed to a point where actresses have teardrops, real ones, at their command. At least, it takes only a little coaxing by a proficient director to conjure these forth. Such directors are often successful even in making men register sorrowful emotions—although, as a rule, it is left for women to do the crying. (“You Have to Weep to Be a Star”).

“What Makes them Cry” notes that Mickey Neilan’s studio ensemble could elicit tears, no matter how reluctant, from almost any actress’s—and some actors’—eyes.” Without him [the musician] tears would not flow so easily from the beautiful eyes of the fascinating star, and there would, of course, be a perceptible slump in the dramatic action. (NYT June 1923) There is likewise lots on this in “A Tune for a Tear.”

⁴³ Throughout the period, glycerine is mentioned as a bad way to cry and even likened to counterfeit money. See “What Makes Them Cry,” among others.

⁴⁴ “What Makes Them Cry” 1918. Note that these directorial tactics were not *limited* to women. In the 1919 film *The Miracle Man*, Thomas Meighan found it “unmanly” to cry and was only able to summon tears through having his nerves worn down by director George Loane Tucker. Meighan went on a walk with the director. No music was used, but Tucker did keep Meighan from sleeping or eating for almost two days or nights (according to Tucker). See “What Makes Them Cry,” 1923

⁴⁵ Quoted in Brownlow. Probably in reference to the 1927 film *Surrender*. The rest of the quote is “The fallacy of music on the set was proved, of course, by the untalented or unexperienced actors. To my mind they were just kidding themselves. I tolerated it only because I didn’t like to see the musicians lose their happy jobs.”

⁴⁶ For a description of Elsie Jane Wilson, see *Photoplay Magazine* April to June 1918: “Lights! Camera! Quiet! Ready! Shoot! By Frances Denton. Article on woman director Elsie Jane Wilson. Really fascinating article about whether directing is women’s work. “Leaving her set, I walked down the big stage, past a child’s blue and white bedroom, a log-cabin room, a ballroom, and a New York tenement-room, until the strains of a slow waltz led me to a living room exquisitely furnished in red and gold. Three very blasé-looking musicians were playing this sad music while a young woman with big blue eyes, very fair skin, and very red hair, was directing some “sob stuff.”....[this is E.J. Wilson]. “A little sad music here, please,” said Director Wilson. Then to her company, “All ready, everybody? Music, camera, GO!”

⁴⁷ “A Tune for a Tear.” The article misstates Tucker’s name. He had died in June 1921 at the age of 49. Compson was trained as a violinist and married director James Cruze in 1925. She had likely met Tucker in 1919 when they both worked on *The Miracle Man*.

⁴⁸ NY Times “Film Fiddler”, noting that in this state, “you can easily understand what a discordant note will do!” Madame Nazimova also claimed her own musical experience meant that a missed note would distract her.

⁴⁹ “I cannot explain what there is about “Susannah” which appeals to me so strongly, I only know that no matter where I hear that melody, something grips my heart and I experience a multitude of emotions. Perhaps, in my subconscious mind I connect it with the heroic struggles of men and women who crossed the great country by the Oregon Trail. Whenever I have a strong scene to do which requires unusual concentration, I always ask for “Susannah” to be played.” See “A Tune for a Tear”

⁵⁰ A 1918 article noted “even the stage hands passing in the vicinity ‘got it’ and went about on tiptoe like ushers at a fashionable funeral. See “What Makes Them Cry”

⁵¹ “To What Music do the Stars Emote?” *Picture Play Magazine* 1926. Director Allan Dwan also claimed he was no longer affected by music, due to its ubiquity on set.

⁵² DeMille: “DeMille does admit that music so plays upon his emotions that in strong scenes he has had to stuff his ears with cotton to concentrate on his directing. ‘Music helps everyone but the director, he aid, noting his own eyes fill with tears and that may not be helpful.”

Marmont (1883-1977) (also an English film actor) noted “there is a danger than the music might make you feel more emotion than the actual situation demands.” See “A Tune for a Tear.”

⁵³ Huge numbers of accounts stress this. For a secondary source, see *Douglas Fairbanks* (Jeffrey Vance, p. 274). Rest of the Ben Lyon quote: “In silent pictures, you’d hear the grinding of the camera quite loud through the music. For the final rehearsal we sometimes asked the cameraman, ‘Will you give us the camera’ No film—but it was an inspiration to hear that grinding. And the music was a great help. If I had a scene that required me to be emotional, I always had them play ‘My Buddy,’ ye gods, it was effective!” Then suddenly talkies came in and everything was soundproofed—everything was silent. The camera was sealed in a soundproofed booth and everybody kept absolutely silent until the end of take.”

⁵⁴ “A Tune for a Tear.”

⁵⁵ I’m also thinking of music to drown out noise—a very contentious issue in contemporary culture, where we are both plagued by omnipresent sonic pollution yet also acknowledge the existence of music that is specifically marketed as “study aids,” or other background sounds which potentially aid the creation of a “mood” of concentration.

⁵⁶ Perhaps these online playlists lack the aura of liveness generated by set musics in the 20th century, as well as the communal aspect? But they do *have* a communal aspect, and of course we understand liveness much differently today than in the 1910s and 1920s.