

## ***The Phantom of the Opera***

Music by Gabriel Thibaudeau

### **Some silent background**

The truth is . . . the silent movies never really were SILENT. Well, technically speaking, the films themselves were silent because the technology to record soundtracks did not yet exist. But it quickly became apparent that, in performance, early movie-going audiences were simply not going to sit still (and in the dark) for a silent experience. The film's title-cards supplied the words that the actors' moving lips could not. Yet something was missing, something that could complement the emotions carried in the actors' expressive faces and gestures and embody the shifting emotional atmosphere of the story as the camera captured the light and dark of the unfolding action. The missing element was, of course, music. At first it was supplied by a solitary pianist improvising in the darkened theatre, the music intensifying the audience's experience as well as helping to drown out the sound of the noisy projector. Since then, as we know, full orchestras and a multitude of other sources of sound have come to supply "the music" that accompanies the art of cinematic story-telling.

In fact, music has likely always been a part of the human craft of story-telling. So, when moving pictures emerged as a new story-telling medium in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, film makers instinctively looked to make music a partner in the new enterprise. One early successful French film, *The Assassination of the Duc de Guise* (1908), commissioned no less than the leading theatrical composer of the day, Camille Saint-Saëns, for the score. This was the first music known to be composed for a specific film. Saint-Saëns produced at least 18 minutes of music for a 15 minute film, repeatedly watching the film scene by scene and composing his music to match the action. Of course, without the invention of a soundtrack, actual performance of the film meant assembling musicians and playing the music live for each screening of the movie. Last month your Kamloops Symphony Orchestra combined live music by Stravinsky with live storytelling of *The Soldier's Tale*. Tonight, the KSO presents live music with silent film: Lon Chaney in the classic *The Phantom of the Opera* and the music of Montreal composer Gabriel Thibaudeau.

### **The composer: Gabriel Thibaudeau (b. 1959)**

The Montreal pianist and composer Gabriel Thibaudeau has had a long association with film music. The way he describes parts of his own career sheds light on the art of composing for cinema, especially for silent film, and also sounds like a description of the life of one of those silent-movie-era pianists improvising a musical accompaniment to the action on the screen. In the late 1980's, Gabriel was employed as a pianist at the Cinématèque québécoise, the film archive in Montreal which regularly showed silent films. He would screen the movies alone during the day to prepare musical ideas for his accompaniments for the evening shows. In 1990 he saw *The Phantom of the Opera* for the first time and recognized at once that it was a special movie. He admits that the story of the rejected would-be artist whose musical talent is hidden in the dark recesses of the Paris Opera House, rather reflected the circumstances of his own career at that stage. It prompted him to take special pains in the preparation of this piano accompaniment. In the event, the showing of *The Phantom of the Opera* with his music was so popular he was invited to develop his piano version into a full orchestral version, which has been performed with the film many times now.

Tonight's showing uses the reduced musical forces of a chamber orchestra consisting of strings: two violins, viola, cello and double bass; winds: clarinet, bassoon and horn, with percussion, a piano (as well as a keyboard), plus the all-important soprano heroine, Magdalena How.

Thibaudeau's description of his process of composition is a good reminder to viewers of the care film composers take to match their music to details of character and action. He gives a couple of examples. There is a long 4 minute scene in which the Phantom takes Christine down, down to his refuge in the depths of the Opera basement. Nothing especially dramatic happens on the way, but Thibaudeau recognizes that the film makers filmed it so that we constantly expect that something *is* about to happen—so he writes his music to deliberately trigger the viewers' moment-by-moment anticipation of shock or surprise. There is also the

famous scene in which the chandelier hurtles fatally into the auditorium; the soprano on stage is singing an aria from Gounod's *Faust*, the closing notes of which Thibaudeau converts into a prolonged and terrifying scream as she looks upwards towards the unfolding disaster. In similar fashion, in the scene in which Christine hesitatingly "unmasks" the Phantom, a hysterical dissonant chord from his organ playing anticipates (and punctuates) the scream of her horrified reaction.

There is an especially memorable scene about halfway through the film, the "mad" Parisian Bal Masque, notable in part because it is strikingly filmed in Technicolor, one of the earliest film sequences to use that process. Use of the technique at this point powerfully intensifies the demonic quality of the story and of the character of the Phantom, who appears as the intimidating skull-masqued spectre of the Red Death. Thibaudeau's music throughout the extended scene is equally memorable, by turns frenetic, foreboding, and tender, as the story turns inexorably towards its climax.

In our modern film viewing experience, the sound of the accompanying music, however rich and resourceful, always comes to us from an "invisible" source. Tonight though, in this showing of *The Phantom*, we become direct observers of the music-making experience, in a way that brings us closer and more responsive to its powerful effects.

## The story

The novel on which the film of *The Phantom of the Opera* is based was written by French author Gaston Leroux and published in serial form in 1909-1910. It tells of events in the Paris Opera in the 1880s and the rumours of an opera "ghost." Christine, an aspiring opera soprano, has been taking lessons from a secret "Master" and as understudy to the Diva, Carlotta, finally gets her chance on stage. "The Master" (who is also the Phantom) is a disfigured former composer who lives in (and haunts) the opera house. He has fallen in love with Christine, and lures her to his underground apartments to profess his love for her. He believes her love has the power to make his spirit beautiful in spite of his disfigurement. Though warned not to, she removes his mask and is horrified by his repulsive appearance. The Phantom agrees to release her but forbids her to see her admirer, Raoul. But she does not comply and seeks the protection of her lover. Predictably, the betrayed Phantom is incensed. He kidnaps Christine. Raoul, with the help of a mysterious police agent, comes to rescue her from his dangerous underground lair. The police have determined that the Phantom is an insane escapee from Devil's Island. He commandeers Raoul's carriage and flees, but is pursued by the opera house's stagehands and their accomplices. They catch him, beat him to death and throw his body into the Seine. Quite enough excitement for one night !

The first of the two silent film versions came in 1925, and an enhanced re-release in 1929/1930 with the same cast. It is this later version we see tonight. There have been some remakes since then, and of course the much admired Andrew Lloyd Webber musical version. At its making, there appear to have been difficulties between some cast members (Lon Chaney in particular) and the director. Not a surprise even in early Hollywood perhaps. The elaborate film sets were much admired, but the adaptation of the story less so. Some plot elements were changed, others just not satisfactorily developed. In particular, the fate of the Phantom at the movie's end was a matter of contention. One version has him die of a broken heart slumped over the organ, but some thought that too feeble. In the later version that we see tonight, he remains a wicked creature to the end, abducting Christine, escaping with her in a carriage, but caught by the vengeful mob, beaten and thrown into the Seine.

With the benefit of our almost 100 year hindsight we can see the importance of *The Phantom* in the evolution of film, in particular the horror/monster genre. There had been "horror" films before this version of *The Phantom*, but the film's relative commercial success likely paved the way for *Dracula* (1931) (by the same producer as *The Phantom*) and *Frankenstein* (1931) and their numerous successors up to our own time.