

[Interview: Jane Gardner \(for 'Dragnet Girl' movie\)](#)

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Silent Japanese classic 'Dragnet Girl' is coming to Eden Court Cinemas next Sat with a new score to be performed live...

One of Yasujiro Ozu's most popular and critically acclaimed films on its release in Japan but little known in the UK, *Dragnet Girl* [*Hijôsen No Anna*] is coming to **Eden Court Cinemas** on **Sat 14**

Jun with a "*sensual, sumptuous and shape-shifting*" new score by (Musical Director) Composer and Pianist JANE GARDNER.

Commissioned and premiered at the *Hippodrome Festival of Silent Cinema* in March 2014, this inaugural Hippfest Scottish tour of *Dragnet Girl* features live music performed by Jane Gardner (Piano), Hazel Morrison (Percussion) and Roddy Long (Violin with special effects), reinterpreting Ozu's beautifully composed neon lit crime drama for a new generation.

Ahead of her performance in Inverness, **Georgina Coburn** (GC) spoke with **Jane Gardner** (JG) about composing and performing music for silent film:

GC: Dragnet Girl has been described as Ozu's take on the American gangster genre; "following tough-talking good-time gal Tokiko and her small-time hoodlum boyfriend Joji through the smoky pool halls and boxing clubs of Yokohama." How did Eastern and Western styles of music inform your score for the film?

JG: Although the film is set in Japan, the director was clearly inspired by the American genre. Underpinning the stylish choreography of the gang members, the music is often hard-hitting and dissonant, or assumes 'cool' quasi-free jazz improvisational dialogue between the three musicians. As would have been in Tokyo in the early 1930s, there are scenes in a night club where the characters are dancing to a Western style swing band. In these scenes we 'become' that band, and play a pastiche foxtrot number.

There are also more Eastern characters and aspects to the film, for example the beautiful Kazuko, who wears Japanese dress and represents typical traditional values. Her rather melancholic theme is based around the pentatonic scale, and fluctuates between major and minor harmonies.

GC: What were some of the visual qualities of the film that inspired you most and how did they influence your approach?

JG: The photography is stunningly powerful and atmospheric with artistic lighting, shadows and images seen from unusual angles. The 'pillow shots' (still images which punctuate the film) help by giving us breathing space to anticipate the mood of the next scene. The editing is cyclical, in that some scenes or events occur more than once in different ways. The music usually follows in this way too.

GC: What are the dynamics of masculine and feminine in the score?

JG: There are three particularly melodic themes – for the two main female characters, and another for general use through the soundtrack. They are played sometimes gently (femininely?) and other times more strongly, and as themes we manipulate them in various ways to reflect the changing emotions in the plot. The 'gangster' music is most of the time dissonant harmonically and angular in line, but with a groovy rhythm. It is used mostly for groups of men, but the female character Tokiko also takes part in their operations, and she is a mean snooker player too!

GC: Were you familiar with the film prior to the commission? What was the process of creating the score like? How did it evolve into a trio?

JG: I decided on *Dragnet Girl* as per commission for the *Hippodrome Festival of Silent Cinema* 2014. It is the one I felt most inspiring and suitable of the three Ozu Gangster Films in the British Film Institute collection that I was asked to choose from. To begin preparing a score, I usually first gather musical ideas together and link these up with sections and approaches that are more improvisational. I bring these to the other musicians and we then separately and together adapt and fit them to the film. Hazel and I had worked on many films before Roddy joined us for the first

time last year. We have all known each other for many years and making music together feels easy and natural. We have a good laugh in rehearsals too!

GC: How does the music reinterpret Ozu's visual storytelling on an emotional level?

JG: Our score is quite emotionally charged and varied. It is quite cinematic in a Western sense. It was a conscious decision to approach the film in this way, to bring the audience into the plot and to help make the film as accessible as possible to a contemporary audience.

GC: You've worked extensively in theatre, dance and cinema, composing for Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, acrobatic string group The Gogmagogs and on arrangements for Disney Pixar's "Brave" soundtrack. How did you first become involved in silent film accompaniment?

JG: I fell into it completely by accident. Back in 2005 a friend who owns a restaurant with performance space invited me to perform some of my piano compositions, and accompany what I thought would be his artist friend's short experimental film. I arrived at 11pm the night before, to see a beautiful old projector in the corner of the room and to be told that the film would be the 95 minute feature *He Who Gets Slapped* (Victor Sjöström, 1924) starring Lon Chaney as a circus clown. With only a day to prepare – and with very little prior experience in improvising in public - I spent many hours trying to figure out how to play for that length of time, never mind what the quality of the music would be like! I pretty much made it up on the spot during the screening, using a few prepared 'hooks'. I was surprised to discover that I could sort of do it, and had a very good time too! I was lucky to have such a great film to work with.

GC: There is an immediacy that is unique to screening silent films with live music. How does this translate to your experience of each performance? Are there elements of improvisation or nuances of expression between the three musicians that alter each performance?

JG: Yes – every time we play it's slightly different. A good audience really helps us along too.

GC: Why do you think there has been such a resurgence of interest in films of the silent era?

JG: I think people are gradually realising how good and sophisticated a lot of these films are. Even with no special effects/computer animation, a blockbuster movie from the silent era can be as enthralling as any modern one. Many have been masterfully restored using digital technology, and so the experience is often of a high quality print - not all scratched and grainy like people might expect.

GC: What are some of the challenges of composing for and accompanying silent film?

JG: Keeping going for sometimes 2 hours or more with no real break can be quite physically exhausting. *The Black Pirate* (dir. Albert Parker, 1926 starring Douglas Fairbanks) has long scenes where the percussionist Hazel and I needed to play fast and loud. At the end of the 90 minutes I felt quite weak!

In every moment I try to avoid musical 'waffle' i.e. where the music stops having any musical or dramatic function other than just being there for the sake of it. This needs absolute concentration during a screening to ensure that the music sounds fluent and consistent with its own dialogue.

Watching the film all the time whilst also playing and reading notation can be awkward. In *Dragnet Girl* there are a few scenes in which the timings are pre-worked out, enabling the

violinist Roddy and me, in particular, to focus on reading the sheet music for these more technically complex notated passages, without having to watch the screen constantly.

GC: Is there a silent film in particular that you're dying to score?

JG: I'm a big fan of the actor Lon Chaney and would love to accompany another of his films. (Oscar-winning director and eminent film historian) Kevin Brownlow is sure there's a lost one that will be found some day... It's just a dream, but would be very exciting and such a privilege.



More about Jane [here](#)

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