

INTERVIEW: Stephen Horne The Phantom Carriage

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As he prepares to give live piano accompaniment to the chilling ghost story *The Phantom Carriage*, Stephen Horne tells us more.

The clock is ticking and death's carriage approaches...

Based on an ancient Scandinavian legend, Victor Sjöström's classic spine tingling film **The Phantom Carriage** arrives at **Eden Court Cinema** this Halloween night, **Fri 31 Oct**, accompanied by internationally acclaimed silent film pianist and composer **Stephen Horne**.

Ahead of his performance in Inverness **Georgina Coburn** speaks to Stephen about his career in music and the shadowy appeal of silent cinema.

GC: You've had an amazing career accompanying silent film at screenings and festivals all over the world. What have been some of the highlights?

SH: So many... certain screenings stand out - a couple of standing ovations at the silent film festival in Pordenone, Italy, which is probably the most critical audience in the world. A particular favourite festival is the one in San Francisco, where the audiences are both extrovert in behaviour and refined in their tastes - a great combination!

I am very proud of the two ensemble scores that I composed for the London Film Festival screenings of 'The First Born' and 'The Manxman'. When the first one was commissioned in 2011, I hadn't written any notated music since I had studied at University in the 80s. I hadn't needed to, as I always performed alone! It was a real challenge to produce 90 minutes of ensemble music, synchronised to film, in a very short time. So it was a great relief that the event was a success.

GC: How would you describe your approach to *The Phantom Carriage*? Are parts of the performance improvised or semi improvised?

SH: Most of my performances are largely improvised, at least in terms of the musical content. Which is not to say that I don't recycle my best tunes! But I watch the film beforehand and plan what I'll do, in terms of overall style, dramatic moments and musical gestures. For the last ten years, I've increasingly been incorporating other instruments alongside the piano and I do decide ahead of time when I will use these.



GC: What is the process of creating a new score for silent film like for you? Are you lead by a director's vision or purely by the story and characters portrayed on screen? How much research is involved in preparation for composing a new score?

SH: When I started, over 25 years ago, it often wasn't possible to prepare at all. The National Film Theatre didn't show musicians the films beforehand and the material wasn't as accessible as it is now, with the internet and everything. So I developed the ability to interpret a film instantaneously, while seeing the film for the first time in the performance.

These days it really depends on the circumstances. As I said before, I watch the film and plan some things but unless I'm commissioned to write a composed score it will still be largely 'in the moment'. Basically I try to understand what effect the film is trying to have on the audience and find a musical equivalent for that.

GC: In a previous interview when speaking about accompanying dance, you also mentioned "the rhythm of film" when performing live. How would you describe the rhythm driving the *Phantom Carriage*?

SH: The rhythm is consistent and skillfully paced on its own terms. Part of my job is not to pull against this but to help the audience relax into the pace of the film and let the tempo work its magic.

GC: The film was ground breaking for its time in terms of special effects and Julius Jaenzon's multi-exposure cinematography, did this visual shifting from one world to another influence the musical layering of the score?



SH: I will try to create a different sound world for the appearances of the Carriage and the spirit world it represents, probably by switching between instruments. There will doubtless also be some special sound effects!

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

SH: You can coach someone in the art (if I'm allowed to call it that), but probably not teach them. You can only really learn by doing the job! There are multiple challenges - timing, tone, creating music that feels appropriate from moment-to-moment.

There's a lot of debate in the archive film world about whether musicians should play period-authentic scores - i.e music that was either composed specifically for the film or was contemporaneous to the film. This is not personally my approach, although equally I avoid audible anachronism.

Also, one needs to learn to play largely by touch. Not just because you're usually in at least semi-darkness, but also because you need to keep your eyes on the screen.



GC: Are there particular musical skills that are developed or enhanced by interpreting the film in the moment?

SH: You need to be able to 'read' a film - dramatically and thematically - and channel that through the medium of music. Also I think that one of the most important qualities one needs to develop is empathy - for the characters within the plot, for the vision of the filmmaker, for the audience watching.

GC: I understand that you collaborate with a group who recreate magic lantern shows, what do you think is the essential human fascination with illuminated images and shadow play?

SH: I find it intriguing that, with all the amazing special effects that are now achievable with computers, people still seem to be genuinely entranced by magic lantern shows and the earliest trick films of directors like Melies.



GC: Ironically there has been a big resurgence of interest in the earliest methods of photography and creating moving images in in our digital age. What do you feel exploration of some of the earliest forms of cinema is tapping into?

SH: I personally have a preference for contemporary films where the effects are done 'in camera' rather than through CGI. That isn't to say that this can't create increasingly amazing worlds, but I think people still instinctively know when the action has unfolded for real in front of the camera.

I think that it's a bit like the difference between hearing people play acoustic and electronic instruments. I think that the human skill involved feels somehow more direct - less at one remove. Although in reality of course, the use of computers is hugely skillful - certainly beyond my reach!

GC: There is a delicate balance to be struck between live performance of original music and music in service of the story being told on film. How do you feel this is best achieved in composing and performing accompaniment for silent film?

SH: I personally think that there are many legitimate ways to accompany silent films. I've heard some modern - even electronic - scores which I've thought have worked well. My personal style is more classical, but I do experiment in my own way. I aim for a level of discrete experimentation, always taking its cue from the film itself. The authenticity that I aim for is capturing the underlying spirit in which the film was made.

GC: What are some of the qualities of Victor Sjöström's ghost story that inspire you most?

SH: I think it's just a very satisfying piece of genre storytelling, simply made but deeply heartfelt and with enough sophistication to still work today. It's 'spiritual' rather than religious in a traditional sense, which makes the experience more inclusive, and the ending is very moving.



The Phantom Carriage With Live Piano accompaniment by Stephen Horne

Halloween, Fri 31 Oct, 8.00 pm

Eden Court Cinemas

Fancy Dress Optional

www.eden-court.co.uk

www.stephenhorne.co.uk

www.invernessfilmfans.org