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Film Music Cues: Visualizing Social Reality Through Music and Film (Paper)

Abstract: Taxonomies may contain functional vocabulary and display relationships among concepts to facilitate the work of a domain. Silent film music is a work-based genre of musical performance. Musicians worked from cue-sheets of musical terms. This paper describes the conversion of a working list of musical cues into a taxonomy. Results show the taxonomical differences that arise from a work-based vocabulary. Also, the social realities of the time are reflected in this vocabulary of music for silent film from the 1920s.

Résumé:

1. Introduction: The Uses of Taxonomy

Taxonomies take different forms in different domains reflecting epistemological realities inherent in the work of the domain. Work-based taxonomies are especially likely to reflect both specific tasks and the circumstances surrounding their implementation. We can say that, in general, taxonomies gather concepts pragmatically from an easily definable domain and arrange them, usually hierarchically (Smiraglia 2014, 54-55). In organizations or domains taxonomies contain the functional vocabulary and display relationships among concepts to facilitate the work of the domain.

Silent film music is a work-based genre of musical performance that is associated with the screening of silent films in theaters where pianos or organs were available to produce musical accompaniment. This music—sound—was considered a form of visualization, or illustration. Musicians worked from cue-sheets that listed musical terms alongside time segments, which were designed to match the changing action on the screen. For example, these are cues from Douglas Fairbanks in The Thief of Bagdad (Wilson 2012, 62):

Action	thief grabs man at well	Overture comique	1 ½ mins.
Action	thief walks away laughing	Carnival march	2 min.
Action	magician with basket	Orientale	1 ½ min.

Research in the intersection of musicology, film music history and information science has led to the use of the term *topoi* to represent the characteristic musical cues that were used in the performance of silent film (Plebuch 2012). *Topoi* are habitual and symbolic terms. In the example above, "comique," "carnival," "march," and "orientale" all are *topoi*. Notice that "Carnival march" combines the concept of carnival (noisy public revelry) with the concept of marching to indicate both the amusement of the community of onlookers and the marching aspect of the action.

In 2015 Smiraglia presented preliminary results of an attempt to extract the taxonomy of *topoi* from the Eyl Collection of silent film music at the EYE Film Music Institute in Amsterdam for

comparison to one of the era's working taxonomies by Erno Rapée ([1925], 1970). An immediate problem was how to grasp the totality and complexity of the Rapée term list, which was developed as a working silent film musician's guide. The present paper is a report about how we extracted Rapée's terminology and represented it as a taxonomy. One recurrent finding was the extraordinary cultural view of the society of the time that emerged from the musical terms. In the rest of this presentation we will discuss our taxonomic representation of Rapée's terminology, and discuss some of the more interesting social phenomena observed.

2. Rapée's *Encyclopedia* becomes a taxonomy

Erno Rapée's *Encyclopedia of Music for Pictures* was developed in book form to serve as a keyboard manual for working musicians. Cues are centered in bold type under which is found a list of musical works by title, composer and publisher. References, both "see" and "also see" occur as appropriate. As an example, Figure 1 is a reproduction of page 54 of the book.

[insert Figure 1 here]

The functional aspects of the volume can be seen in this one page. In the upper right corner we see the first and last terms from the page; these corner summaries are to facilitate flipping quickly through the book to locate a desired term. Several musical works are listed under each term with the dotted lines for local check-marks and notations. "Alpine" is not a preferred term, so the user is directed to "Austrian," "Swiss," and "Yodel," as potential representatives of Alpine musical concepts. We take space to demonstrate this in order to make the point that Rapee's work was a real, on the job, working tool.

The first step in taxonomic representation was to array the preferred terms in a spreadsheet and to track simultaneously the non-preferred and related terms, which present a beginning visualization of the social realties of the time period of the silent film. Hobos and rubes and dwarfs are just three of the social groupings that occupy this musical landscape alongside clowns, witches and tin soldiers. It is at once the province of motion pictures and at the same time a reflection of the culture of the period. It is easily a characterization of entities featured in film as well as their musical representations, thus creating a multi-tiered visualization of the social reality of the 1920s.

3.0 A Plethora of realities

Although a plethora of cultures and countries appear, the distinctions among them are blurred because of the extensive use of "Also See" references. For example, "Armenian," "Persian," "Siamese," and even "Desert Music" are all terms that also point to "Oriental," and "Oriental" also references "Egyptian," "Arabian," "Turkish," and "Hindu." This web of references blurs all of the Orient, Middle East, and some of Africa, not to mention any desert no matter its location, into one (perhaps "foreign" or merely "exotic"?) musical culture. Further adding to this confusion is the preferred term "Chinese-Japanese." This term in the encyclopedia is complicated because it is not referenced by or referenced to the twenty-first century term "Oriental;" rather it condenses two cultures into one. Although China and Japan are part of our Orient, the lack of references to "Oriental" indicates these counties' cultural autonomy from the rest of the Orient of Rapée's time.

A similar homogenizing yet complicated web is created for Latin American countries. The preferred term for "Cuban Music" is "Spanish," and the terms "Argentine," "Bolivian," "Brazilian," "Chilean," Mexican," "Peru," and "Porto-rican," [*sic*] all point to "Spanish." Cuba is the only country to be subsumed under "Spanish" as a non-preferred term, which means that the

other countries at least have some distinguishing cues. Yet, the "Also See" references allow a musician to use cues under "Spanish" for all of these countries. This might be a useful choice at smaller theaters, but it also represents a blurred impression in the audience, of "Spanish" and with Latin America. Although many Latin American countries reference "Spanish," there are several more that do not, including "Columbian Music," "Costa Rica," "Guatemala," "Nicaragua," "Panama," "Paraguay," "Uruguay," and "Venezuela."

The appearance of African terms is very sparse. The term "African" itself is a lead-in term for "Cannibal." Therefore, it should come as no surprise that independent African countries are extremely limited in the encyclopedia. As mentioned earlier, "Egyptian Music" references the Orient, and the only other African terms listed are "Abyssinian," ""Liberia," and "Zanzibar."

European countries are treated much differently. Scandinavia was grouped under "Northern," but "Daenish" (also given as "Danish"), "Finnish," "Norwegian," and "Swedish" appear as subheadings. Yet, these appeared only after the subheading "Concert," meaning that "Northern-Concert" music cues could be used for any of the four Scandinavian countries. The only other European countries to be blurred by "Also See" references are Switzerland and Austria. European regions also are sometimes identified. "Bavarian Music" is a preferred term that references "German," but nonetheless, it was a region deemed autonomous enough not to be a lead-in term for "German." The term "Bohemian" is also independent, but has no references to other terms such as "Hungarian." Tyrol, a region of western Austria, has an "Also See" reference to "Swiss Music," but like "Bavarian Music" it was still deemed distinct enough to warrant a preferred term. The independence of most of the European countries in comparison to the compression of Latin America and the Orient is likely due to the Eurocentricity of American film of the time. The United States also is represented granularly. Not all states appear, but "Illinois," "Indiana," "Mississippi," and "New York" are present.

Certain races are also blurred in the encyclopedia. The non-preferred term "Indian' points to "American Indian," "Oriental," or "Hindu." Of course the appearance of "Oriental" in this list further contributes to the web previously discussed, but now American Indians are mixed with the Orient. This reference also indirectly acknowledges the distinction between American Indians and Hindus while at the same time blurring the two. The term "Hindu" is problematic, because it often refers to culture, ethnicity, and religion. These references seem to indicate "Hindu" being used as a cultural (reference to "Oriental") or ethnic (reference to American Indian) term. Although these races are blurred, it is surprising that the term "Maori" appears as a preferred term. The Maori are a group of people indigenous to New Zealand, a country that the term "Maori" references.

It is important, of course, to remember that Rapée was not developing a taxonomy, per se, but rather was creating a commercially-viable (i.e., publishable) working tool for film musicians. In that, the outcome is remarkably useful. It would be interesting to find several of these among the archives of musicians of the period to see what annotations appeared on the dotted lines and which musical works were written onto those blank lines. Still, the published list can be seen as a sort of base-line visualization of music for film of the time. And the film of the time is a visualization of the culture and community of the time.

References

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Figure 1. Alabama to American from Rapée's *Encyclopedia* page 51.