

The Tramp in Transition: The Musical Movements of *City Lights*

Jim Lochner

jim@jimlochner.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Beginning with *City Lights* in 1931, every Chaplin film bears some form of the controversial credit—“Music by Charles Chaplin”. Yet Chaplin could not read or write music. Instead, he employed a string of “music associates” to help him arrange and orchestrate his musical vision into a proper orchestral score.

In his review of *City Lights* titled “The Chaplin Buncombe,” noted critic George Jean Nathan ridiculed Chaplin as “a very shabby musician.”¹ And Chaplin didn’t help matters. In an interview about the score, he gave full credit to his music associate, Arthur Johnston, and humbly remarked that he himself did nothing more than “la la” the music. This modest appraisal of his own abilities unfortunately set the tone for a lifelong critical dismissal of Chaplin’s film music. It also raised questions about his actual musical contributions that haunt his reputation as a composer to this day. But Chaplin did far more than simply “la la”—he had definite ideas about what he wanted musically and communicated those ideas down to the smallest detail.

A complete analysis of the *City Lights* score goes beyond the scope of this discussion, but I will be covering it in more detail in the book I am writing on Chaplin’s film music to be published by McFarland & Co. Instead, I will dispute Nathan’s slur—and even Chaplin’s opinion of himself—by looking at three areas related to Chaplin’s new role as composer:

1. How his musical background influenced his compositional methods,
2. How the use of select popular tunes enhanced the character of the Tramp, and
3. How Chaplin’s original themes gave the Tramp a personal, new musical identity.

2. BACKGROUND

When work began on *City Lights* in 1928, Chaplin and his beloved Tramp character were caught in the middle of a cinematic revolution. The release of *The Jazz Singer* the year before had ushered in the sound era and audiences were eager to hear the Tramp speak. While the rest of Hollywood was scrambling to convert to sound, Chaplin refused to give up what he called “the eloquence and beauty of pantomime.”² However, he was willing to bow to the new technology through the use of sound effects and recorded music. From this point forward, the actor, writer, director, and producer added yet another role to his job description—composer.

But *City Lights* was not Chaplin’s first foray into music. In 1916, he co-founded the Charlie Chaplin Music Publishing Company. Chaplin called the venture “collegiate and mad,” and joked they sold only three copies of what he described as “two very bad songs and musical compositions of mine.”³ And within three months, the misguided enterprise shut down.

Though he had composed some original themes for *The Idle Class* and *The Kid*, Chaplin faced the task of writing 82 minutes of music for *City Lights*, a daunting prospect for even the most seasoned composer. And since he couldn’t read or write music, Chaplin was forced to convey his musical vision by whatever means necessary.

2.1. Chaplin’s Compositional Methods

Chaplin had taught himself to play the violin and cello long before he began in films. During his stage career, he would drag his cello along on tour. He later had a special violin made, reversing the fingerboard because he felt he had greater dexterity in the fingers of his right hand. So it was only natural for Chaplin to compose by scratching out his melodies on these particular instruments. His fondness for the violin and cello also led to orchestrations that relied heavily on

the string section. Eric James, who was Chaplin's music associate the last 18 years of his life, believed Chaplin would have used the strings "in every conceivable passage of the music," had James not taken a firm stand and pointed out that "their repetitious use would destroy the validity of all that [they] had done."⁴ In addition to the violin and cello, Chaplin would pluck out melodies on the piano with the first three fingers of his right hand. If all else failed, he would sing, hum, or whistle musical fragments.

According to David Raksin, who served as an orchestrator and arranger on *Modern Times*, Chaplin "knew a good deal about music. And what he didn't know, he would pick up from everybody."⁵ What this meant in practice is that Chaplin would sometimes compile melodies by jotting down the names of established pieces of music that contained the notes he required. For example, one melody could begin using the first two notes from an orchestral work by Grieg, the next four notes from the opening bars of a Liszt piano piece, another three bars from something else, and so on.

Chaplin's laborious compositional process used any and all combinations of these various methods. It was then up to the music associate to decode the list and create the melody he felt Chaplin had in mind—note by note and phrase by phrase—until every phrase had been allocated. A document located in the Chaplin Archive shows a string of musical notes written out in letters. There is no rhythm attached, but we can assume this was a result of one of Chaplin's dictation sessions with his music associate.

Raksin also remarked that not much escaped Chaplin's eye or ear. Chaplin had suggestions not only about themes and their appropriateness but also about the way in which the music should develop—whether the melodies should move "up" or "down," and whether the accompaniment should be "tranquil" or "busy."⁶ Chaplin also used the names of other composers

when he wanted a particular style. For instance, he might say, “A bit of ‘Gershwin’ might be nice there,”⁷ or ask for a phrase to be made “Wagnerian”.⁸ Paperwork at the Chaplin Archive lists pages of detailed notes on the music—reel-by-reel and cue-by-cue. (These include notes such as “On insert of Henry, begin hurry music” and “As elevator goes down with C.C. on it—run down the scale.”) These notes demonstrate not only the broader level of Chaplin’s commentary, but also the minute detail he incorporated to make sure each note and phrase was properly placed.

Eric James later called the whole process “the most arduous and difficult way” he’d ever heard of in music composition.⁹ But Meredith Willson, the music associate on *The Great Dictator* and later the composer/lyricist of *The Music Man*, said that Chaplin’s ideas “unerringly work[ed] out to be exactly what the sequence needed.”¹⁰ And sometimes a sequence needed a melody that was instantly recognizable to his audience.

2.2. Popular Tunes

On most of his previous feature films, Chaplin collaborated with various musicians to pull together compilation scores of classical music, popular tunes of the day, and stock library cues which were written to be plugged into any silent film. For instance, the program for *The Kid* shows a string of library cues with “descriptive” titles like *Dramatic Tension No. 44* alongside Bach’s “Ave Maria” and “Rock-a-Bye Baby”.¹¹ *The Circus* included everything from Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” and Irving Berlin’s “Blue Skies” to music from Victor Herbert’s *Naughty Marietta* and Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci*. Unfortunately, these compilation scores were at the mercy of the theater musicians and, as Chaplin said in an interview, one could only “hope the organist would play them.”¹² In his review of *City Lights*, George Jean Nathan incorrectly stated the score consisted of “nothing more than a cheap paraphrase of...past popular tunes.”¹³ But with

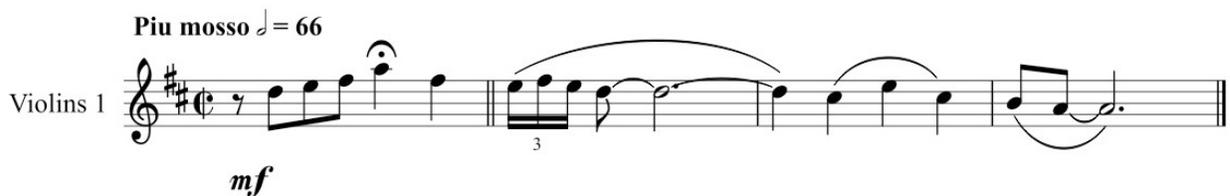
combination of the whistle and the Tramp’s peerless facial expressions. But Chaplin’s sly musical take on the song title gives the moment an extra level of clever musical wit.

Fig. 2



The most prominent use of a popular tune was supposed to be an original Chaplin theme. In October 1928, Chaplin copyrighted a song he had written called “Beautiful, Wonderful Eyes”. Though the song wasn’t used in the film, it was undoubtedly meant to serve as the theme for the blind flower girl. The song’s early copyright date further proves that Chaplin intended using his own music in the film from the beginning planning stages. Instead, Chaplin replaced that tune with “La Violetera” (Fig. 3), written by José Padilla in 1914 and also known as “Who’ll Buy My Violets”. No doubt Chaplin chose to incorporate the tune as a tribute to Spanish singer Raquel Meller, who had popularized the song and whom Chaplin had originally tried to secure for the lead role in the film. Unfortunately, the Spanish flavor of the melody doesn’t match the delicate quality of Virginia Cherrill’s performance.

Fig. 3



On the other hand, the habanera rhythm in the accompaniment (Fig. 4) can be interpreted as the Tramp’s courtship dance. The habanera’s weight on the downbeat followed by a lift up to the first quarter note and back paints a subliminal impression of his shy reticence in pursuing her. In other words, there is hesitation in the musical rests, followed by a slight “step” forward, then

boys on the corner. Chaplin also uses this “Promenade” theme as a springboard for other themes, which also incorporate bright major key signatures and dotted rhythms, and provide further musical confirmation of the Tramp’s innocence and essential good nature.

Fig. 5



The second half of the Tramp’s promenade music is a waltz (Fig. 6), one of several Chaplin composed for the film and a musical genre he used in nearly every score. The “Valse ‘Promenade’” immediately follows the earlier “Promenade” theme as the Tramp eyes a naked mannequin through a store window. The melody line mimics the Tramp’s back-and-forth steps as he comes perilously close to falling into the elevator shaft in the sidewalk. The use of caesuras, which are musical markings that indicate a complete pause, give the theme a halting quality. These are particularly effective as we can almost see what the Tramp is thinking during these musical rests. The theme, which plays in straightforward three-quarter time in later scenes, is marked *gracioso*, another strong musical clue of Chaplin’s view of the character.

Fig. 6



These two “Promenade” themes are associated with the Tramp’s elegant view of himself, at least as seen through the eyes of his creator. An outsider’s view of the Tramp, however, whether from the viewpoint of other characters or from us as audience members, is decidedly different. Chaplin neatly presents the more obvious bumbling side of the Tramp’s personality with a loping, staccato theme in the bassoon (Fig. 7). Though it is not a strict interpolation of the first

“Promenade” theme, the dotted rhythms and triplets also relate this theme to its predecessor.

Fig. 7



The final theme under discussion basically bookends the score and is heard only twice within the body of the film at moments of maximum emotional impact. The first instance occurs after the Tramp drives the blind girl home in the millionaire’s car. On the steps to her flat, he seals his affections with a kiss of her hand. In the memorable finale, the blind girl touches the Tramp’s hand, finally realizing that he provided the money for the operation to restore her sight. In both cases, the glacial pace of the melody hovering over sustained chords gives the theme an ethereal quality and adds greatly to the poignancy of the scenes. In its earlier incarnation, the theme is scored softly for nearly the entire orchestra, with gentle, syncopated afterbeats in the accompaniment. For the emotional final scene, the *pianissimo* melody (Fig. 8) is delicately orchestrated for violin quartet and appropriately marked “tenderly” in the score.

Fig. 8

Teneramente $\text{♩} = 44$

Violins 1

As Chaplin fades the film to black, he scores the music against our expectations. After such a delicate and heartbreaking visual and musical finale, why did Chaplin choose to close the score so forcefully in the full orchestra? Was it to cap off the film on a grand, dramatic scale? Or does it add even further to the ambiguity of what happens to the two characters after the final shot? The final A-minor chord does not lean toward a happy resolution. But in the 80 years since it was first shown, this classic ending is still open to interpretation and discussion, which has as much to do with Chaplin's music as his memorable visuals.

3. CONCLUSIONS

After filming on *City Lights* ended on October 4, 1930, Chaplin immediately started work on the score. Beginning in November, and for the next two months, he collaborated with music associate Arthur Johnston and conductor Alfred Newman on the music. Recording sessions continued through most of January 1931, with some sessions lasting until two in the morning. Even following preview screenings, Chaplin and his associates still tinkered with the score to match newly edited scenes. This level of commitment, especially when paired with our previous discussion of Chaplin's attention to detail, strongly contradicts George Jean Nathan's criticism of Chaplin as a "shabby musician."

Unfortunately, over the years music critics have dismissed Chaplin's musicianship because of his lack of formal musical education or ignored it altogether. This has harmed his place in film music history. But from the beginning of the sound era through today, Hollywood film composers by and large have used orchestrators and sometimes arrangers to help flesh out their scores—like Chaplin did—though how much of that is primarily due to the rigorous film schedules is up for debate. In addition, thanks to advances in technology, many film composers today who are not trained in composition and may not even be able to read music—again, like Chaplin—can now use sophisticated software to help them create their scores. Yet Chaplin's film music and his reputation as a composer are still rarely given the recognition they deserve.

But no one knew the Tramp better than Chaplin. And as one newspaper article noted at the time, there were many fine musicians in Hollywood synchronizing music to picture, but could they interpret the personalities of the stars as well as Chaplin had done for himself?¹⁵ David Raksin admitted that “no informed person” ever claimed that Chaplin had any of the essential techniques of composing, but neither did he feed his music associates a tune and let them take it from there. Chaplin and his associates spent hours, days and months in the projection room, running scenes and bits of action over and over, until he had shaped the music exactly the way he wanted it.¹⁶ And in that age of cinematic transition, Chaplin took on a role few filmmakers have had the audacity to attempt even today. Chaplin continued to compose the music for his films for the rest of his career. In the last decades of his life, he also re-released his earlier features from the silent era and many of his shorts, composing new scores for them as well. The result is an astonishing body of music composition unmatched by any other filmmaker.

Eric James wrote in his autobiography that “[Charlie] always wanted music that was tuneful even if a little old-fashioned. He once commented that if the public didn't like his picture they

should be able to close their eyes and enjoy the music!”¹⁷ But Chaplin also believed that the combination of pantomime and music formed what he called “the finest screen marriage.”¹⁸ Sure, you can close your eyes and enjoy Chaplin’s music without watching the Tramp’s endearing antics on screen. But why divorce yourself from this loving marriage?

1

George Jean Nathan. *Passing Judgments*. Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1970. 211.

2 “Chaplin in Role of Composer as Well as Actor in *City Lights*,” Uncited newspaper, 1931, in the *City Lights* file, Performing Arts Library, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center.

3 Charlie Chaplin. *My Autobiography*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964. 226. Print.

4 Eric James. *Making Music with Charlie Chaplin: An Autobiography*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2000. 71.

5 David Raksin. *Modern Times*. Video Interview. Criterion Collection, 2010.

6 David Raksin. “Life With Charlie.” *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Summer 1983), 243–244.

7 Raksin. “Life with Charlie,” p. 243.

8 Charles Chaplin, Jr., Margaret Rau, and Neil Rau. *My Father, Charlie Chaplin*. New York: Random House, 1960. 229.

9 James, p. 72.

10 Meredith Willson. *Photoplay* (December 1940).

11

“Musical Score Synchronized by Rene Williams, Conductor of the Kinema Orchestra, for *The Kid* from the Score Selected by Charles Chaplin,” n.d., provided by Kate Guyonvarch, Association Chaplin.

12 “Chaplin in the Role of Composer as Well as Actor in *City Lights*.”

13

Nathan, p. 212.

14

David Robinson. *Chaplin, His Life and Art*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985. 412.

15 “Charlie Chaplin Uses Knowledge of Music to Enhance Pantomime,” Uncited newspaper, n.d, in the Charlie Chaplin Archive, Cineteca di Bologna Library, Bologna, Italy.

16 Raksin. “Life with Charlie,” p. 243.

17

James, p. 71.

“Chaplin in the Role of Composer as Well as Actor in *City Lights*.”