

# Film Music in the Levi Family Salon

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**Abstract** One of the lesser-known yet highly significant editorial formats of film music is that of the so-called "miniature scores," which became part of a lasting editorial tradition in the post-World War II era. Designed for domestic performance, these materials played a key role in popularizing the themes of famous films among broad audiences. This article examines the phenomenon by focusing on its presence within the musical life of Palazzo Giustinian Lolin in Venice, the residence of Ugo and Olga Levi.

**Keywords** Film music. Charlie Chaplin. Musical salon. David Raksin. Levi.

Palazzo Giustinian Lolin, the residence of the Levi family and the current seat of the musical foundation bearing their name, in the early decades of the twentieth century, appeared to Venice as a place where music was constantly present. "The most musical of Venetian salons" during those years hosted concert evenings, various types of gatherings, even after performances at the Teatro La Fenice, and a precious library born from Ugo Levi's love for music, which led him to acquire valuable volumes and scores. In fact, he nurtured a passion for collecting sheet music, which gave rise to "a rich musical library [...] that [made] Palazzo Giustinian Lolin a center for high-level music studies" (Zorzi 2012, 214). These books were used during musical evenings, in the spirit of *Hausmusik*, where he would present his guests with music of all kinds, ranging from operatic transcriptions to chamber music and symphonic reductions.<sup>1</sup>

In such a context, it is surprising to note the presence of film music, evidenced by a series of 'small scores'<sup>2</sup> (piccoli spartiti) still preserved

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**1** A first description of these materials can be found in Calabretto 2011 (11-12). Their bibliographic description, instead, appears on pages 122-43. Throughout the volume, there are references to the musical life of the Levi household salon and, in particular, to the presence of Gabriele d'Annunzio, who enlivened the soirées held at the residence.

**2** We use the term 'score' in the sense of "a composition for voice(s) or solo instrument(s) and orchestra, in which the orchestra is reduced to a keyboard instrument" ([https://norme.iccu.sbn.it/index.php?title=Guida\\_musica/Appendici/Appendice\\_VII](https://norme.iccu.sbn.it/index.php?title=Guida_musica/Appendici/Appendice_VII)). Given their size, we have defined them as 'small scores'.

in the Gianni Milner Library of the Foundation. These scores, a clear testimony to the popularity of film music in the post-World War I and II years, are very particular documents. They consist of piano reductions of well-known themes from film soundtracks or equally famous songs that have immortalized the history of cinema. They were intended for domestic use, with the piano typically serving as a substitute for the orchestra or as an accompaniment for the solo voice, and sometimes for the violin or another instrument, following the most common and appropriate form for this kind of operation. Published in small booklets, usually four pages – the cover, two pages with the music, and the final page with an announcement of upcoming releases – they were sold in record stores, instrument shops, and music stores at affordable prices. As Elena Mosconi writes,

l'aspetto seriale della loro produzione e le finalità commerciali cui erano destinati si evincono dal tipo di carta su cui venivano stampati: fogli di poco valore e fragili – ora ingialliti dal tempo – frutto di una strategia di vendita che doveva colpire nell'immediato, con immagini a colori sgargianti, potenziali acquirenti nelle vetrine dei negozi musicali, ma certamente non concepiti per sopravvivere a lungo. (Mosconi 2012, 19)

the serial nature of their production and the commercial purposes for which they were intended is evident from the type of paper on which they were printed: low-quality and fragile sheets – now yellowed with age – the result of a sales strategy aimed at immediately capturing the attention of potential buyers in music shop windows with brightly colored images, but certainly not conceived to endure over time.

In this way, they were accessible to amateur musicians who played this music for pleasure and entertainment. We like to imagine Ugo Levi at the piano, recalling a cinematic vision and reliving film sequences by playing themes and motifs that had accompanied Hollywood movies, masterpieces of Italian cinema, and of various European schools. In this way, he 'internalized' the emotions of the movie theatre and had the opportunity to share them with his friends who frequented his salon.

This unique circulation of film music in private homes, not only of an aristocratic family but also of the less wealthy classes, is a phenomenon of great interest and has long been dismissed by studies on film soundtracks. However, in recent years, we are witnessing a progressive rediscovery and enhancement of these materials – posters, postcards, photos, and various types of memorabilia – which the *New Cinema History* has accredited as “vehicles for the most fleeting remnants of the film experience, an indirect survival often questioned in its epidermic evidence of data content (stories, texts, images, formal evidence, descriptions)” (Dotto, Mariani 2020, 68). These small scores, very similar in format to those of the song industry, which likewise flourished during those years, are in fact precious documents that lend themselves to an analysis of the forms of film dissemination that, in our view, can be understood within the changes that have affected film theory and history since the 1970s. These changes, as Simone Dotto and Andrea Mariani well point out, have brought to light “three fundamental fields of investigation: the phenomenology of film, the cinema of attractions, and studies on audience and spectatorship” (63). A series of situations have led to the redefinition of the relationship between the public and the cinema

screen, which is no longer limited to mere viewing and deconstruction of the film but rather involves a series of relationships concerning the circulation of the same films in a myriad of materials such as postcards, various objects, images of movie stars, and musical scores. These are the so-called *ephemera* that cinema scholars have recently begun to examine with research projects and publications, redeeming them from their presumed marginality.<sup>3</sup>

This broadening of perspectives is particularly needed for the study of film music. It must not be forgotten that this genre of music, thanks to the success and popularity a film could have gained among wide segments of the public, then and still today through different means and methods, continuously became part of new contexts and situations unrelated to its original function. The intended recipients of these 'musical sheets' were, precisely, amateur musicians and small dance or variety orchestras that mediated film music for the audiences they performed for. The themes of a film score are also used in symphonic and theatrical settings, today even in advertisements and TV jingles, and can even be used as background music for parties and gatherings in various public squares, accompanied by clarinets and brass instruments in brass bands. They could also take the form of a symphonic suite, as was the case with much film music composed by academically trained composers like Ildebrando Pizzetti, or be a generic compilation presented in concert halls and theatres. Film music could lend its themes to theatrical works,<sup>4</sup> stage music, or ballets.

These small scores display well-defined characteristics:

le dimensioni vanno da 24 × 17 centimetri fino al più ampio formato di 33 × 24 [...]. La copertina è a colori forti e riassume in una o più immagini il riferimento al film da cui la canzone è tratta [...]. Le tinte sono quasi sempre brillanti [...]. Oltre al disegno e alle immagini, la copertina riporta un numero cospicuo di scritte che assolvono a svariati compiti informative.

their dimensions range from 24 × 17 centimeters to the larger format of 33 × 24 [...]. The cover features bold colors and summarizes the reference

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**3** "A first wave of interest in ephemera emerged in the 1970s, driven by Maurice Rickards, founder of the Ephemera Society: the experience highlighted, on one hand, the difficulty of cataloging 'ephemeral' materials in archival and bibliographic terms, and on the other, emphasized their importance as sources for social, cultural, and economic studies. It was during this phase that the now-classic definition of ephemera as 'fragmentary and transient documents of everyday life' (Un primo fuoco di interesse verso gli *ephemera* si accende negli anni Settanta per impulso di Maurice Rickards, fondatore dell'*Ephemera Society*: l'esperienza da una parte evidenzia la difficoltà di catalogare i materiali 'effimeri' sul piano archivistico e biblioteconomico, dall'altra ne sottolinea la rilevanza quali fonti per gli studi sociali, culturali ed economici. È in questa fase che viene prodotta la definizione ormai classica degli *ephemera* come "documenti frammentari e transitori della vita di ogni giorno") (Rickards 1977, 7) was produced, a term that came to be associated with manuscripts (such as diaries, agendas, or scrapbooks), 'non-publishing' prints (tickets, flyers, postcards), and advertising materials (advertising ephemera), eventually extending to include non-paper forms of broader material culture (commemorative objects). Immediately, some thorny issues emerged, such as the heterogeneity of ephemeral documents, their relation to the dimension of time and their connection to the space of the everyday, the difficulty of retrieval, the heterogeneity of corpora, and the archival status of ephemera as cult materials (Young 2003, 17)" (Comand, Martin, Vitella 2024, 1).

**4** Significant in this regard is the representation of Napoli milionaria by Eduardo De Filippo, which was staged with pieces by Nino Rota taken from the homonymous film, along with a pot-pourri of his most famous film music from the 1960s.

to the film from which the song is taken [...] through one or more images. The hues are almost always vivid [...]. In addition to the illustration and images, the cover includes a considerable amount of text serving various informational purposes. (Mosconi 2012, 21)

The most widely used films, of course, were those most popular with the public, so their music was also known to the masses. It is no surprise, then, that at the Levi house, the music of Charlie Chaplin circulated, as evidenced by three scores from *Luci della ribalta* (*Limelight*, 1952), each exemplary: one for piano and solo voice of his most famous theme, *Eternamente*, a pot-pourri of its three famous songs (Sardine Song, Spring Song, Animal Trainer), and a rhapsody featuring the most famous themes from the original score. Published by Accordo, these scores circulated with the approval of the famous Curci Editions of Milan, who guaranteed this type of production.



Figure 1 Chaplin, C. (1952). *Eternamente*. Valzer lento. Parole italiane di Ardo. Milano: Accordo – Edizioni Musicali

Their graphic design was very refined, and the cover featured the well-known and iconic image of Chaplin.

UN FILM  
*prodotto, diretto e interpretato da* **LUCI DELLA RIBALTA**  
**CHARLIE CHAPLIN** (LIMELIGHT)

Biblioteca  
Fondazione Levi  
A  
2806  
Venezia



# 3 scherzi

PER PIANOFORTE E CANTO

1. - LA CANZONE DELLA SARDINA
2. - CANZONE DI PRIMAVERA
3. - IL DOMATORE DI PULCI

Testo originale e Musica di  
**CHARLIE CHAPLIN**  
Testo italiano di ARDO

**Accordo**  
EDIZIONI MUSICALI - MILANO  
GALLERIA DEL CORSO

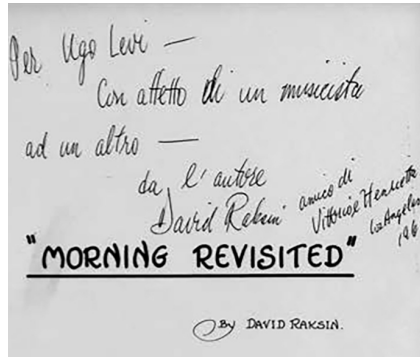
dizione autorizzata da BOURNE Inc. - New York

Per concessione delle EDIZIONI GURCI - Milano

Figure 2 Chaplin, C. (1952). *Luci della ribalta* (Limelight). *Tre Scherzi per pianoforte e canto*. Milano: Edizioni Musicali

David Raksin, one of Chaplin's musicians, will thus arrive at Palazzo Giustinian Lolin. Raksin was called to Hollywood in 1936 to collaborate on the production of *Modern Times* and soon became one of the leading figures in American film

music.<sup>5</sup> He gifts Ugo Levi a score for an ensemble of horns, percussion, and double bass, *Morning Revisited*, which carries a unique dedication: “Per Ugo Levi con affetto di un musicista ad un altro. David Raksin. Los Angeles 1961”.



**Figure 3**  
David Raksin, *Morning Revisited*.  
Dedication to Ugo Levi

At this point, after clarifying the widespread nature of such initiatives and their importance, it is necessary to address the purely musical issues they entail. “What has changed in the transition to the concert hall, and what remains unaltered?” asks Frank Lehman about the transition of film music from the cinema to the concert hall. Michelangelo Antonioni succinctly answered this question, commenting on the record and concert ventures to which film music was subjected: “As long as music can be detached from the film to be recorded on a disc that has its own autonomous validity, then I must say that music is no longer music for the cinema” (fino a quando però la musica può essere scissa dal film per essere incisa in un disco che abbia una sua validità autonoma, allora devo dire che quella musica non è musica per il cinema) (Antonioni 1994, 42). This is an irrefutable statement – the music for film only makes sense when applied to moving images – but it overlooks how the cinematic experience must be considered from other aspects that are not solely linked to the viewing of a film in a theatre.

Lehman continues with these words:

Where are there excisions, interpolations, and expansions, and how do they impact the formal argument of the piece? What will a listener who is familiar with the original movie notice for the first time (this could include freshly arranged or composed material, but also passages that were previously drowned out in the film mix)? Answering these and similar questions helps situate the work with respect to its filmic sources and provides a method for reconstructing the practical choices made by a composer and/or arranger. (Lehman 2018, 14).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “Charlie would come in with these musical ideas and we would work on them together, because he didn’t read or write music. It’s a total mistake for people to assume that he did nothing. He had ideas. He would say, ‘No, I think we should go up here, or we should go down there’ [...]. But he had fired me after a week and a half because he was not used to having anybody oppose him. And I was just saying, ‘Listen, Charlie, I think we can do better than this’. Eventually, he hired me back on my own terms” (David Raksin in Cook 2004, 29).

<sup>6</sup> I thank Angelina Zhivova for bringing this quotation to my attention.

The manner in which Chaplin's music was performed at the Levi house is telling. On one hand, we have the piano transcription, which inevitably impoverishes the original score; on the other, the reduction for voice and piano of its most famous theme, which brings that very theme into a formal universe highly appreciated and practiced in the early twentieth-century *Salonmusik*. Lastly, a suite rhapsodically reinterprets the themes of the original score. Thus, film music undergoes a process of reduction, or one might even say impoverishment, in order to conform to the standards that would render it accessible for enjoyment in the salon by a broad audience of music and cinema enthusiasts.

In the Levi family's library, we also find a series of themes from other famous films, such as *Exodus* by Otto Preminger (1960), with music by Ernst Gold. The main theme, based on two distinct melodic ideas that reappear throughout the film, won the Academy Award and became a bestseller, a testament to how Gold captured the spirit of the times by following the usual clichés of film music. We also find the two themes from *The Third Man* by Carol Reed (*The Third Man*, 1949), featuring Orson Welles and Alida Valli, whose main theme, performed on the zither by Anton Karas, becomes a signature tune of the film. Both primary themes from this score, Harry Lime Theme and Mozart's Coffee House Waltz, achieved remarkable success on record, radio, and even in dance halls. It is therefore logical that they were published by Milan's Music Union, which at the time was located in the Galleria del Corso in the city.

Lastly, there is a small section dedicated to children's music with *Songs of Snow White*. In this case, the Suvini Zerboni editions created a small booklet with drawings and key moments from the dialogues of the film's characters, bringing the musical fairy tale to life for children through its most famous themes, such as *One Day My Prince Will Come*, *Heigh-Ho*, *Someday*, and *Whistle While You Work*, a delicate foxtrot sung and... whistled by generations of children.



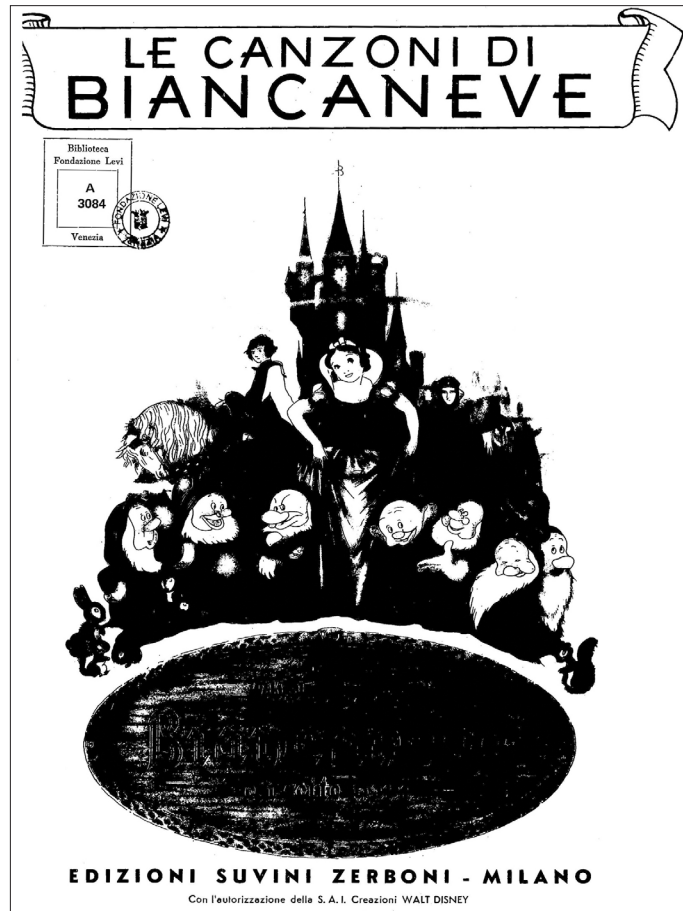


Figure 4 *The Songs of Snow White*. Milan, Suvini Zerboni, 1938

Moreover, the sheet music, published by Suvini Zerboni, was released in 1938. The film (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937) premiered in Italian cinemas in the same year, so the musical publication served to promote the distribution of the film, much like the records containing the themes of movie soundtracks still do today.

These records, during the same period, similarly filled the windows of stores and were purchased by the same audience that played the sheet music. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the discographic production of film music had reached impressive figures: Hundreds of kilograms of vinyl are dedicated weekly to soundtracks", we read in a cinema magazine: "now both good and mediocre records are published, the ones worth saving and even those that, after all, could be lost without too many regrets" (Quintali di vinile sono settimanalmente dedicati alle colonne sonore - troviamo scritto in una rivista cinematografica -: si pubblica ormai il buono ed il mediocre, i documenti discografici che vale la pena di salvare e anche quelli che, dopotutto, si potrebbe perdere senza troppi rimpianti) ("*Dischi*" 1961, 256).

Also, in the library of the Levi Foundation, we find several records containing themes and motifs from famous film soundtracks within the



Grimani collection. These are LPs from well-known record labels such as Columbia, Philips, Victor, and Cetra, which, like the sheet music, can be categorized into specific types. On one hand, there are records with the soundtracks of famous films – such as *White Christmas* by Michael Curtiz (1954), *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Elia Kazan (1951), *Pia de' Tolomei* by Esodo Pratelli (1941), and many others; on the other, there are records with thematic compilations, which feature a large prevalence of songs, and in some cases, jazz music, which the Italian public had come to know and love. A large portion of the production naturally focused on American repertoires, particularly jazz, which had literally invaded the musical life of Italy and Europe and which the public had experienced in cinemas as well. “These pieces of overseas origin all sound terrifyingly alike [...]. It is now the traditional style, and it seems that dance music can no longer be conceived outside of this type”, (*Queste musicchette di stampo oltreoceanico si somigliano tutte spaventosamente [...]. È il tipo tradizionale, ormai, e sembra non si possa più concepire il ballo e il ballabile fuor da questo tipo*) wrote Tibaldi (1937a) in *Cinema*, which, in those years, published a weekly column, “*Dischi di Film*”, in which the latest discographic-cinematic releases were introduced. This column not only mirrored the music for films of the time but also highlighted the ways in which it was ‘consumed domestically’. The words with which Tibaldi almost always accompanied his reviews – “a good record suitable for dancing” – already suggest how these records were listened to: “We are in the peak season”, writes Tibaldi in December 1937,

and while the new releases fill the cinemas, record companies are launching the latest film records. You don’t always have an orchestra at hand, and it’s quite pleasant to dance to the tunes you’ve heard during the screenings. We recommend some excellent records for this purpose.

(Siamo in piena stagione e mentre nelle sale dei cinematografiche si avvicinano le nuove produzioni, le case di dischi lanciano gli ultimi dischi di film. Non si ha sempre a disposizione un’orchestra ed è assai carino ballare al ritmo delle melodie che si sono udite durante le proiezioni. Vi segnaliamo alcuni ottimi dischi allo scopo) (Tibaldi, 1937b).

These words reflect a phenomenon experienced by Italian musical culture between the 1920s and 1930s, when these repertoires filled the traditional gathering and leisure places of society. It remains a peculiar circumstance that these repertoires circulated through their use in the cinematic realm. Beginning with the tango, which arrived in Europe at the turn of the century, Italy became acquainted with the foxtrot, the Charleston, the rumba, and other dance tunes. The years immediately following the Great War marked the full and definitive establishment of jazz, which was a subject of controversy for the fascist regime, determined to ban this ‘Negroid music’. Film music, of course, had been subject to these types of restrictions, and its records could not fail to reflect and promote the most successful motifs of this genre. The records in the Grimani collection also testify to this situation and contain many soundtracks performed by Artie Shaw, Paul Whiteman, and other famous musicians from the early postwar years. These records therefore reflect an interesting mode of consumption of film music during the first decades after World War II, when the soundtracks of famous films were listened to on the stereo systems of many households, a testament to

the popularity these themes and songs had achieved in Italian society at the time.

The sheet music and records of cinematic music, which we have analysed starting from the library of one of the most prominent Venetian musical institutions, reflect a specific historical moment in film music and its impact on society around the years of the Second World War. As we have seen, these seemingly insignificant or secondary materials are actually quite important for capturing a moment in the continuous transformations of film music and for understanding the ways in which both music and cinema spread beyond traditional circuits.

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