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Research article

Giving Voice to Silent Film: Iraida Yusupova's Music for “Space Flight” (1935)

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Abstract

The practice of adding a new musical score to old silent films is common among modern composers. This is due to the desire to modernize old cinema, as well as the fact that the music accompanying silent films during their creation was often random, improvised, and therefore easily replaceable. But for successful dubbing, it is necessary to accurately understand the specifics of silent films, their artistic structure, which is fundamentally different from sound cinema. An example of successful work is the music by Iraida Yusupova for the film *Space Flight* (1935). This is the first Soviet science fiction film about the conquest of the Moon, with eminent scientist Konstantin Tsiolkovsky participating in its creation. In this work, the composer follows the rules of silent film, creatively reinterpreting them. The soundtrack to this film is a multi-layered score consisting of orchestral music, vocals (solo and choral) numbers, electronic sounds imitating noises or forming melodies, and even cues. Each of these layers is characterized not only by a specific timbre, but also by leitmotifs that run through the whole picture in a modified or unchanged form. The way this multicomponent canvas is organized is a total counterpoint at all its levels. This is a polyphony of samples – sound, arbitrarily short units of meaning that are accelerated, decelerated, superimposed on each other, and combined with other elements of the musical canvas. The second level is the polyphony of the noise layer and orchestral music. Another contrapuntal pair is a sound sequence and a video sequence. And finally, the fourth is the polyphony of styles. Stylizing the music of the 30s, Yusupova resorts to the technique of ironic detachment from the original, which shows the author's handwriting as a composer. This postmodern aesthetic makes this work original, witty, and combines the past, present, and future in one space.

Keywords: Silent film; Film music; Artistic space-time; Film dubbing; Total counterpoint; Postmodernism; Iraida Yusupova

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Научная статья

Музыка И. Юсуповой к к/ф “Космический рейс” (1935) как опыт озвучания немого кино

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Аннотация

Практика озвучания старых немых фильмов распространена среди современных композиторов. Это вызвано желанием осовременить старое кино, а также тем, что музыка, сопровождавшая немые фильмы во время их создания, часто была случайной, импровизированной, а значит, легко заменимой. Но для удачного озвучания необходимо точное понимание специфики немого кино, его художественной структуры, которая принципиально отличается от кино звукового. Пример успешной работы представляет собой музыка Ираиды Юсуповой к фильму “Космический рейс” (1935). Это первый советский научно-фантастический фильм о покорении Луны, в создании которого принимал участие выдающийся ученый Константин Циолковский. В этой работе композитор следует правилам игры немого кино, творчески их переосмысливая. Саундтрек к этому фильму представляет собой многослойную партитуру, состоящую из оркестровой музыки, вокальных (сольных и хоровых) номеров, электронных звучаний, подражающих шумам или складывающихся в мелодии, и даже реплик. Каждый из этих слоев характеризуется не только специфическим тембром, но и лейтмотивами, проходящими в измененном или неизменном виде через всю картину. Способ организации этой многосоставной ткани – тотальный контрапункт на всех ее уровнях. Это полифония сэмплов – звуковых, сколь угодно коротких единиц смысла, которые подвергаются ускорению, замедлению, наложению друг на друга и сочетанию с другими элементами музыкальной ткани. Второй уровень – полифония шумового слоя и оркестровой музыки. Еще одна контрапунктическая пара – звуковой ряд и видеоряд. И, наконец, четвертый – полифония стилей. Стилизуя музыку 30-х годов, Юсупова прибегает к приему иронического отстранения от оригинала, в чем проявляется авторский почерк композитора. Такая постмодернистская эстетика делает эту работу оригинальной, остроумной, позволяет соединить в одном пространстве прошлое, настоящее и будущее.

Ключевые слова: Немое кино; Киномузыка; Художественное пространство-время; Озвучание фильма; Тотальный контрапункт; Постмодернизм; Ираида Юсупова

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The late 19th and early 20th centuries brought the history of cinema a huge number of silent films, many of which are true masterpieces. However, over the 130 years of cinema's existence, its language has changed significantly, and silent films often seem anachronistic to modern audiences. Therefore, attempts are being made to bring them back to life in various ways. One of the first is to recreate the soundtracks that accompanied silent films. This is driven by the fact that the music that accompanied silent films over a hundred years ago has, in many cases, not survived. That which has survived to this day is generally inferior in artistic quality to the visuals. It usually consisted of improvisations by the pianist or compilations of well-known musical works. And although Camille Saint-Saëns was one of the first to specifically compose music for the silent film “The Assassination of the Duke of Guise” (Le Bargy & Calmettes, 1908), the vast majority of soundtracks were incidental and easily replaceable. Therefore, modern composers strive to create a soundtrack that is both congenial to the visuals and more contemporary. However, this task is far more difficult than it might seem at first glance, and the fact that there are few successful modern scorings for silent films only confirms this. We would like to present a rare example of a successful and quite witty soundtrack for a silent film, created by Russian composer Iraida Yusupova (von Xylander, 2025).

However, in order to appreciate Yusupova's work, it is necessary to have a good understanding of the initial conditions for the realization of her task, that is, the features of the artistic structure of silent films. As we know, it originated as a moving photograph, that is, a sequence of two-dimensional images mounted with each other. The shocking effect that the first pictures by the Lumière brothers had on the audience is well known: at the sight of a moving train, the audience screamed and jumped up from their seats (“Arrival of the train at La Ciotat station,” Lumière & Lumière, 1896). But it is rarely mentioned that the shocking effect was caused not only by the illusion of a moving object approaching the viewer, but also by the silence of this movement, as the Lumière brothers' first films were accompanied only by the crackling of the projector. The unnaturalness of the silent moving image was soon recognized and eliminated by available means, the most available of which was music. It solved several problems for silent film, but least of all were they related to plot or emotions – from this perspective, the image in silent film is completely self-sufficient. Music, firstly, as the only sound element of film, created a spatial correlate for the moving images, thus shaping the spatiotemporal structure of cinema as a specific artistic language. “The material of screen art consists of real space, given in sound, and time 'imprinted' in the image” (Irza, 1992, p. 100). The main task of music in silent film was to create a third, spatial dimension for a two-dimensional, flat image.

Secondly, music made the moving image audible, and therefore real, for everything in motion, according to psychology, must sound. This explains the continuous, non-stop performance of music in silent films. Changes in rhythm, tempo, melodies, and so on were primarily correlated with the changing shots and the movements of figures within the frame, rather than with the story or emotions of the film. Thirdly, it ensured the coherence of both individual fragments and the whole, constructing its form. As Leonard Rosenman points out, “what we are dealing with, then, is basically a literary form, not a musical form. Certainly, the music can contribute a great



deal in supporting an overall form, but this form originates with the film itself, not the music” (Burt, 1994, p. 5). It must be remembered, however, that music in film becomes part of the cinematic structure and exists according to its laws, and not vice versa. Thus, at all three levels of cinema's artistic structure – ontological, conceptual, and psychological – the role of music in silent film is fundamentally different from its function in sound cinema. Specifically, its connection to the story, conceptual, and emotional aspects of the work was minimal, which explains the replaceability of music in silent film, which is impossible in sound cinema.

Creating a soundtrack that does not destroy the structure of the artistic language of silent films is just one of the tasks that the composer solves when re-sounding it. Another task is the stylistic non-contradiction of the visual series to the auditory one. Its difficulty lies in avoiding banal stylization, in which the meaning of re-sounding is lost, by creating a modern score in style and sound that would overcome archaism without breaking the integrity of the entire work. Before proceeding with the consideration of how Iraida Yusupova coped with these tasks, it is necessary to say a few words about the film itself.



Figure 1. Film still from “Space flight” @Mosfilm Studio.
<https://youtu.be/ZcABqUOb3Dw?si=yJZZthZxQ6RBMSdz>



“Space Flight” is the first Soviet science fiction film about lunar exploration. The film takes place in 1946. Soviet space explorers attempt to conquer the Earth's satellite by launching spacecraft carrying animals, but these attempts prove unsuccessful. Then, despite his advanced age, the team leader, Academician Sedykh, decides to fly to the Moon himself, along with his colleagues and the young pioneer Andryusha, who has secretly boarded the ship. The cosmonauts land on the far side of the Moon and attempt to cross to the Earth-facing side. Along the way, they encounter unexpected obstacles and difficulties, but the brave cosmonauts successfully overcome them and return safely to Earth, where they are greeted with a ceremonious welcome by their compatriots (Zhuravlev, 1935).



Figure 2. Film still from “Space flight” @ Mosfilm Studio.

The idea of the film was warmly supported by the state, and the film crew involved as a scientific consultant 76-years old famed scientist Konstantin Tsiolkovsky. As the film's director Vasily Zhuravlev recalled, Tsiolkovsky enthusiastically prepared for the filming, believing that cinema, to a much greater extent than literature, was able to convey ideas about space and popularize the idea of its exploration among young people (Fiodorov, 1970, p. 89). Tsiolkovsky personally drew 30 sketches of a spacecraft, outlined the state of weightlessness, ways of human movement on the surface of the Moon, the mechanism of lunar landing, the behavior of cosmonauts inside the ship, and many other details.



Unfortunately, Tsiolkovsky died several months before the official premiere of the film, which took place in 1936 in the Kremlin. The film was a huge success not only in the USSR but also abroad, with copies purchased in more than 20 countries. Obviously, “Space Flight” continues not only the fantastic books by Jules Verne and the films by Georges Méliès, but above all the ideas of Russian cosmism of which Tsiolkovsky was a prominent representative. The concept of turning outer space into a living space for a highly developed persons of a new type, proposed by the Russian cosmists (Fyodorov, 1982), was continued in its own way during the Soviet era, as evidenced by this film.

Film Credits:

Director: Vasily Zhuravlev

Screenplay: Alexander Filimonov, with the participation and scientific advice of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky

Cinematography: Alexander Galperin, I. Shkarenkov

Art Directors: Alexey Utkin, Yury Shvets, Mikhail Tiunov

Cast:

Sergey Komarov as Academician Sedykh

Vasily Kovrigin as Professor Karin

Nikolay Feoktistov as Institute Postgraduate Student Viktor Orlov

Vasily Gaponenko as Andryusha Orlov

Ksenia Moskalenko as Marina, Professor Karin's Assistant

Sergey Stolyarov as Launch Commander

The idea to write music for “Space Flight” was suggested to Iraida Yusupova by her husband, cinematographer and video artist Alexander Dolgin, back in 1998. Based on the video material Yusupova first created a concert version of the music for this film, and only 15 years later a full soundtrack synchronized with the image was born, ideally suited to the video sequence (Zhuravlev & Yusupova, 2009). “Space Flight” is not the composer's only experience of working with silent film. In 2002, she wrote the music for Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's silent film “Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horrors” (1922), and in 2003 for his film “Sunrise” (1927). Besides, in 2017, Yusupova was inspired by another fantastic film production – the silent film by Yakov Protazanov “Aelita” (1924), based on the novel by Aleksey Tolstoy. She wrote a “Martian Opera,” which was executed as a performance and as an accompaniment to fragments from Protazanov's film. All these works are very interesting, highly professional and cinematic. But it would appear that Yusupova's work on the soundtrack to “Space Flight” is the most complex, full of original discoveries and even cultural insights.

The first thing to note when assessing the composer's work on this film is the precise adherence to the rules of silent cinema: the music is continuous, existing parallel to the image, following the changing shots, the dynamics within the frame, and the overall mood, without overstepping the boundaries of the screen or attempting to transform silent film into sound. But Yusupova doesn't simply follow the rules; she creatively reinterprets them and plays with them in an unconventional way.



The soundtrack to this film is a multi-layered score consisting of orchestral music, vocals (solo and choral), electronic sounds imitating noises or forming melodies, and even speeches. Each of these layers is characterized not only by a specific timbre, but also by leitmotifs that run throughout the whole film in a modified or unchanged form (one can single out, tentatively, the opening optimistic “pioneer song,” the “moonlight” theme – an allusion to „The Dark Side of the Moon“ by Pink Floyd – the themes of “anxiety,” “victory” and other sound symbols). The way this multicomponent canvas is organized is a total counterpoint at all its levels. Firstly, it is the polyphony of samples – a favorite technique of the composer. Samples are sound, arbitrarily short units of meaning that are accelerated, decelerated, superimposed on each other and combined with other elements of the musical canvas.

The polyphony of the noise layer and orchestral music is the second line of counterpoint, and it is precisely polyphony, since each of these elements has its own semantic role in the sound score (noise symbolizes the technogenic world, orchestral and vocal music – the human world).

Another contrapuntal pair is a sound sequence and a video sequence. Their interaction is non-trivial: on the one hand, it does not violate the basic principles of combining music and images in silent films described above, on the other, techniques not typical for silent films are introduced here, for example, the performance of songs and other vocals, which creates a kind of parallel plot to the image. Indicative of this is the episode when academician Sedykh packs a suitcase before his expedition to the Moon. It is accompanied by a tango paraphrase of the popular song “Oblivion” (music by G. Vars, (aka Henry Varshavsky) & F. Refrain (aka Felix Konarsky)) from the late 1930s, exaggerating the sentimentality of the situation and thus creating a comic effect. In the concert performance, this song is performed by the soloist of the choir who comes to the proscenium with a dance movement, further enhancing the comic connotation.

The use of noise is equally non-trivial: in a number of episodes, they claim to be sound correlates of events occurring in the frame, but they only claim this and are not. The viewer and listener are made to understand that the electronic noise is not the sound of what is shown on the screen, but only its sound image. This creates a distance between what is shown and what is heard, and this is a very subtle and suitable technique: while remaining within the framework of silent film, the composer distances herself from it, looking at silent film from the perspective of the future.

Finally, the fourth type of counterpoint is the polyphony of styles. The composer makes no secret of the fact that virtually all of the music written for the film is stylized. This includes the opening choral song, set to the most popular Soviet composer of the 1930s-1950s Isaak Dunaevsky, who worked extensively in film; it also features dances fashionable at the time, such as the tango, waltz, and foxtrot; and jazz, which was rapidly sweeping the globe. Stylization extends beyond sounds to lyrics, using original lyrics from songs of the time and adapting them to the context of the film (for example, the lyrics to Dunaevsky's famous Soviet song “Captain” with poetry by Vasily Lebedev-Kumach). The traditionally used cosmonaut lines, “Key on launch!” and “Let's go!,” are also adapted. But all these stylizations share one important and fundamental nuance: while remaining as faithful to the originals as possible, they contain something that



indicates the author's stance on them. The optimistic opening chorus, stylized as Soviet anthems, acquires a “too Soviet” character through persistent repetitions and ostinatos; the deliberate simplicity of the pioneer songs makes them a bit naive; and the intentionally sentimental tangos and waltzes evoke irony toward the film's characters. It is very important to emphasize here that the composer does not stoop to caricature and does not pretend to criticize the events depicted – this would be both rude and dishonest. We are talking about light irony, which gives a certain detachment, a look from the outside at what is happening on the screen, and at the film itself as a whole, and such a result in terms of wit and skill of execution is a great achievement of Iraida Yusupova. Firstly, it does not contradict the film, since the script, the mise-en-scene, and the dialogues contain a lot of humor and self-irony (it is not known, however, whether this corresponded to Konstantin Tsiolkovsky's plan). Secondly, it reveals the author's origin: if the music is stylized, then where is the author? Within this creative method, the author reveals herself in the gap between the stylization and the original, just as a pause in music is not an absence of sound but its continuation. The author's statement here lies in her detachment. This creative method is typical not only for the composer Iraida Yusupova but also for the mainstream aesthetics of the second half of the 20th and early 21st centuries, associated with postmodernism. The presentation of art as a game with meanings and established forms, reinterpreted in an ironic key, “intertextuality turned to the past” (Andreeva, 2007, p. 23), a mixture of genres and styles, mass and elite, serious and funny, “one’s own” and “someone else’s” – all these generic features of postmodernist art can be found in Yusupova’s soundtrack to the film “Space Flight.”

This work by Iraida is performed in three versions: as a concert piece, as the film’s soundtrack (Zhuravlev & Yusupova, 2009), and in combination, when a screening is accompanied by a live performance synthesized with recorded orchestral and electronic parts, and this latter option seems to be the most interesting. The Pokrovsky Ensemble acts as “live” performers, with whom the composer has been working fruitfully for a long time and whose folklore sound sharpens the ironic overtones of the vocal numbers. In this case, there is a double effect: on the one hand, such a presentation of the film brings it back to the days of silent films, the screenings of which were accompanied by live (solo or orchestral) music. On the other hand, the presence of performers on stage introduces an element of theatricalization and enhances the feeling of detachment, turning cinema into a game of cinema as part of a meta-performance.

Thus, Iraida Yusupova managed to do the seemingly impossible in this work: stay in the past, within the framework of silent cinema, without ever violating them, without breaking the aesthetics and imaginative system of this art, and at the same time transfer it to the present, create a space-time continuum in which the past and present are connected as well as the future shown in this wonderful film.

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