

Balancing the Audio and Visual

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To write music for a play or narrative film is a relatively clear-cut kind of composing: You have certain cracks to fill in and moods to set, and when it doesn't work the director says so and you do it over. What the composers and film makers at the Non-Sequitur Festival attempted—brought together by curators Bradley Eros and Brian Frye—was a more delicate balancing act, a collaboration between theoretically equal components, audio and visual. Only theoretically equal, however, for our culture is heavily visually oriented. One would think that would mean that visuals would always dominate, but actually music's very invisibility offers the opportunity for the composer to exert a powerful unconscious influence.

For example, in a film-with-live-music collaboration called *1933*, Elaine Kaplinsky's gorgeously sad synthesizer melodies over slow cello pizzicato chords utterly shaped our perception of Brian Frye's static images of Depression-era gangsters. It hardly mattered what the pictures were: With that music, any silent image from babies to massacres was going to come off as tragic, poignant, all too human. *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, accompanied on piano by Jed Distler, was quite the opposite: The film (about a man who shrinks after a mysterious dose of radiation) was so absurdly silly, and so linear, that the music went unnoticed; I don't remember it.

The '70s spawned an ongoing collaborative movement to try to subvert the imbalance between audio and visual, to fuse different media by structuring them so analogously that they blend in the imagination. Several works here tried that strategy, including "Scraatch & Screetch": Tom Chiu's squeaks on a fiddle exactly matched Bruce McClure's scratches whirling by on a piece of film, but the attempt at similarity only exaggerated the disparity. More successful was *3 Operations of Optics*, in which slowly transforming natural images by Bradley Eros seemed contrapuntally mimicked in their behavior by Andrea Parkins's pulsating electronic tones. Likewise *Circumscriptions* by filmmaker Lisa DiLillo and composer Douglas Geers; the various images were unified through the motif of the pupil of an eye, just as the shimmering electronic textures were held together by recurring ostinatos.

Sometimes the music could drown out the film, as in *Parched Lips/Lusted Coal*; Molly

Thompson's gripping performance of an odd rock song relegated Stom Sogo's static images of kayaks and swans to an ambient accompaniment. At other times, the music seemed out in left field. Kenji Bunch and Brian McWhorter showed found film footage of a '50s-era man dressed in an apron and making eggnog, while playing a desultory modal improv on viola, trumpet, and electronics that didn't seem to have anything to do with anything.

But in the two works that stood out as really special, it was because the film, though foregrounded, wouldn't have meant anything without the music. One was (*Parenthesis*) by David First and Brian Frye. The film—a girl in a scarf slowly changing expressions from fear to pleasure to sadness—would have been unwatchably meaningless except that First's glowingly prickly drones seemed to be coming from inside her head and imparting some inscrutable motivation to every twinge. The other was *Marietta's Lied* by filmmaker Lewis Klahr, who wove animated images of people and objects around a soprano aria from Korngold's opera *Die Tote Stadt*. The images seemed to meander pointlessly until you gradually realized that they were a kind of visual love poem to Korngold's sentimental aria, which gradually crept under your skin and made you love it, too.

It was self-indulgent, on this three-hour, intermissionless, audience-squeezed-in-like-sardines concert for Composers Collaborative director Jed Distler to add in his own filmless string quartet, a set of variations on the Mister Softee Ice Cream jingle that pinned my cutesiness meter. For the record, though, the work's final fugue did audibly bring together the jingle itself, the theme song from the *Mr. Ed* TV show, and bits of Beethoven's *Grosse Fugue*. Thank goodness someone finally did it, and let's hope no one ever thinks of it again. More reassuring was to see a younger generation of composers—Thompson, Geers, Chiu—becoming active in Manhattan's new-music scene, at last providing an answer to all the forties-types like me who sit around grouching about how there aren't any young composers coming up.

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