

Total performance time: approximately 60'. There is no interval.

Film with Live Music: **Charlie Chaplin's The Kid**

Manchester Camerata

Ben Palmer conductor

The Kid (1921)

Charlie Chaplin (1889–1977) writer, director, producer

Music composed by Charlie Chaplin (1971)

Music associate: Eric James

Score arranged and adapted for live performance by Timothy Brock

Cast:

Charlie Chaplin The Tramp

Jackie Coogan The Kid ('John')

Edna Purviance Woman (John's mother)

Carl Miller Man (John's father)

There was never a silent film. We'd finish a picture, show it in one of our projection rooms, and come out shattered. It would be awful. We'd have high hopes for the picture, work our heads off on it, and the result was always the same. Then we'd show it in a theatre, with a girl down in the pit pounding away at a piano, and there would be all the difference in the world. Without that music, there wouldn't have been a film industry at all.

These are the words of Irving Thalberg, the producer of countless films in the early days of Hollywood, acknowledging that music was the critical element of a film's success. 'Moving pictures' had music added even from their earliest days; at times music was even played during the filming to provide the performers with an atmosphere (this practice was dramatized in the great film-about-films *Singin' in the Rain* in 1954.) In smaller theatres, a pianist was employed – a girl, or guy, 'pounding away at a piano'. But in larger theatres, or for more popular films, a small band would be provided, and sometimes given rehearsal time the day before a film's release. Improvisation, even in bands, was sometimes required – even though scores would be provided to play from, the speed at which the film was projected would vary, and 'vamping until ready' or abrupt transitions would become necessary.* But when the 'talkies' arrived with their integrated soundtracks – beginning with *The Jazz Singer* in 1927 – several thousand musicians found themselves unemployed, though there emerged a new demand for film composers.

Charlie Chaplin wrote, produced, directed, edited and starred in *The Kid* in 1921, still solidly in the silent-film era, and it was originally accompanied at the Los Angeles premiere by cinema musicians playing a compilation score with musical pieces selected by Chaplin himself. In other theatres, the film would have had an improvised score – or one stitched together from standard repertoire. It was his first full-length film, lasting nearly 70 minutes and contains the mix of physical comedy, social commentary and melodrama that characterized much of his work.

The story is of an unmarried mother (Edna Purviance) who leaves her baby son in the car of a wealthy family, in the hope that he will have a better life than she could provide for – along with a note saying 'please love and care for this orphan child'. The car is stolen by two shady characters who, after noticing the baby, abandon him in an alleyway. Along comes the Tramp (Chaplin) who is initially reluctant to deal with the situation; but after several attempts to offload the child, he finds the note – and his heart melts. Five years later, they are living in the Tramp's tiny room in a companionable state, working a hustle together on the rough streets (the Tramp is a glazier, and the Kid (played by the extraordinary four-year old Jackie Coogan) obligingly smashes windows for him to repair). The boy's mother is now a famous opera singer, and through her charitable work encounters her long-lost child – not at first realizing who he is. The state orphanage at one point tries to take the child away, and an unscrupulous flophouse manager takes the Kid to the police station in the hope of a reward – during which the Tramp has a dream in which his street is transformed into

'heaven', complete with angels. All is resolved at the end, the Woman having realized the Kid was her kid, and both he and the Tramp are welcomed into her lavish home.

Many commentators have noted the biographical resonances for Chaplin in this story, not least the fact that – tragically – his own baby son died just a few days before filming. He had grown up in extreme poverty in London, was sent to a workhouse at the age of only seven and later to a school for destitute boys. The 'flophouse' and shabby streets of *The Kid* are depicted in unsparing visuals, and the Tramp's life is a tough, barely hand-to-mouth existence. The Woman in the film has been seduced and abandoned after becoming pregnant – though she is not judged by the film in any way for this, and is depicted as heroic and even saintly.

Some 50 years after the premiere of *The Kid*, Chaplin returned to it – editing out some of the more sentimental scenes, and producing his own score. He had been composing throughout his life (most famously the hit song 'Smile (though your heart is aching)'), and his music for *The Kid* is richly thematic, with at least 20 separate motifs. The opening theme appears when the Mother and the Kid are together on screen – a swooning melody based around rising and falling 2nds. The Tramp and the Kid have their own tune, in a jaunty, major-key waltz, symbolizing their easy domesticity – they are shown feeding the gas meter with purloined quarters, and at one point the Kid knocks up an impressive stack of pancakes for dinner. A more anguished theme (sounding rather like a tune by Tchaikovsky) accompanies the Kid's illness as well as his forced removal from the Tramp's home by the 'Orphan Asylum'. Further waltz-like melodies are deployed: in a major key depicting the Mother's wealth and success; and in a minor mode when she encounters her former seducer at a party. The 'Orphan Asylum' truck has a classic 'bad guy' theme, beginning with an ominous march before surging into full-blown melodrama. The beautiful opening theme closes the film, orchestrated fulsomely to accompany the happy ending.

Silent films are having an extraordinary renaissance, especially in recent years, with festivals, restorations of 'lost' classics, and regular screenings. And it is a particularly rich experience to see films often more than a century old projected with live accompaniment. As silent-film pianist Neil Brand, puts it the particular dynamic of synchronizing with a 'motion picture' means that there is a 'constant and concentrated engagement between performer and image for the duration of the film'. In the case of improvised accompaniments, each performance is different, and interacts with the film in a fresh way each time. But the 'constant engagement' is also palpable in live performances of scored music, alongside a powerful sense of collaboration between present and past. The characters on the screen seem to belong to now, courtesy of their real-time musical partners, rather than residing in a perpetual, black and white past.

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*For the information about silent-movie bands, I drew on Neil Brand's excellent article 'The Lost & Found Art of Silent-Movie Music', in the 2015 Aldeburgh Festival Book