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Performing Spiritualism in the Silent Cinema

Abstract

The silent film era, usually defined as 1895-1927, coincided with a revival of belief in spiritualism in America. Desperate to find meaning in the deaths of the Great War and the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic, the bereaved sought contact with the dead and evidence of an afterlife. Given this fascination with spiritualism, it is not surprising that the topic quickly became a favorite for filmmakers. This resulted in numerous moving pictures that featured the presence of spirits, which in turn required musical accompaniment suited to the subject. Cinema musicians borrowed from the aural atmosphere of the Spiritualist Church, private and public séances, and other entertainments and experiences involving the supernatural. Both professions were ones in which women could not only fully participate, but were thought by many to be better suited than men for the work at hand. The highly gendered musical and moral educations and expectations for women in the nineteenth century, which were intended to prepare women for domesticity, were exactly the training they needed to succeed as professional mediums and cinema accompanists. The code of morals that held up accomplished women as respectable models provided mediums and accompanists with considerable power in determining the aesthetics and practices of their workplaces.

Introduction

During the era of silent cinema, women played central roles in spiritualism and cinema music, developing the sounds of the séance and the music that accompanied moving pictures in which benevolent or mischievous ghosts were present—what were known as

spirit dramas or spirit films. The roles of the séance and the cinema, and their respective live entertainers, the spirit medium and the cinema accompanist, had significantly intersecting elements and similar functions as professional performers during a period of transition in the United States in terms of women's employment, social paradigms, and the development of the media entertainment industry. Both the séance and the moving picture required an audience's willing suspension of disbelief and an open mind. Both created liminal spaces accessed through obvious physical and atmospheric thresholds. Both promised entertainments in which the audiences would experience the uncanny, the presence of something that is both living and not living, animate and inanimate. And both, as Edmund Lingan has shown in his work on occult ritual, drew on earlier theatrical practices (Lingan 2014, 13).

The occupations of medium and accompanist were also ones in which women were not only successful but also frequently considered to be better practitioners than men. Both jobs were populated by roughly the same demographic of educated, Protestant whites from the middle and upper classes. The highly gendered educations and expectations of these classes of white women developed in the late nineteenth century, intended to prepare women for domesticity, were, ironically, exactly the training they needed to succeed as professional public entertainers in the early twentieth century as mediums and photoplayers (Leonard 2018a). The assumption that women had a more sensitive nature than men informed the idea that women were inherently better conduits for spirit communication and selecting appropriate music for film (Gutierrez 2009, 4). Women's education and training, based on the fin-de-siècle code of morals that held up accomplished women—those prepared for domestic responsibilities, which included music-making—as respectable models, provided mediums and cinema accompanists with considerable power in determining the ethics and practices of their workplaces. Both cinemas and spiritualists sought to imbue their entertainments with respectability, which they achieved in part by employing or promoting women who exhibited the traits of “true womanhood.” At the same time, women working as mediums or accompanists could, as Susan M. Crucea writes, “exploit their moral empowerment” and become autonomous forces within their entertainment communities, using their positions to articulate political and social platforms (Crucea 2005, 190).

The performance of mediumship and cinema accompaniment also intersected in ways in which other professions taken up by women did not. Schoolteachers, nurses, stenographers, and secretaries were always on view in their employment, and their visibility was often crucial to their success in those roles. Both mediums and cinema accompanists engaged in physical performance as well, but at the same time gave up the appearance of physical autonomy and embodiment as part of their work. This phenomenon of being both present and absent contributed to the uncanny in mediums' and accompanists' work, and speaks to the transitional and mutable aspects of women's work outside of the home during this period.

Finally, both mediums and cinema accompanists were in unique positions to function as tastemakers, innovators, and technological and artistic leaders. Working in their respective genres of entertainment, women mediums and accompanists developed new practices in their fields that can be traced to the present day. They created new forms

of and uses for technology to aid in their work, which has similarly endured, and established rituals and standards still obvious in present-day supernatural entertainments. I examine the historical roots of music and sound for spirits developed within the framework of the *séance*, the Spiritualist Church, and other spiritualist sources, and investigate how cinema musicians used and transformed that sound and music.

The Sounds of the *Séance*

Sound was an essential element of the *séance* from the very beginnings of the genre, when Margaret and Kate Fox held their first public *séance* in November 1849. The Fox sisters communicated with spirits of the dead through “rappings,” cracking or knocking noises that appeared to come from within walls, under floors, or on the surfaces of tables, and “table-rapping” became a synonym for spirit communication. In this use of sound, David Chapin writes, the Fox sisters “created a format for spiritual manifestation that appealed to a nineteenth century audience” (Chapin 2000, 161). The sounds—and their sources—were mysterious but not threatening, which allowed for audiences to interpret the sounds however they liked, much as they did performances of music.

The *séance* soon developed into a significant trade. There are two basic types of mediums: mental mediums and physical mediums. Mental mediums sense the spirit world and communicate through telepathy with spirits or allow spirits to take over their voices to communicate with the living. Physical mediums, also called materializing mediums, produce material artifacts from the spirit world (called ectoplasm), manipulate physical objects (such as rapping on a table or playing musical instruments), and allow spirits to inhabit their entire bodies and use them to communicate with the living. Mediums held *séances* for both small and large audiences, ranging from a “spiritualist circle” (a group of eight to twelve friends and friends of friends), to appearances in music halls or other public venues. Attendees, known as sitters, all paid to participate. Mediums were responsible for creating an atmosphere conducive to the channeling of spirits: entering into a trance, either at a *séance* table around which the audience sat or in a curtained-off area of the room called a cabinet, and facilitating communication, either physically or mentally, between the spirits and the living. Sitters expected *séances* to include demonstrations of some kind of physical activity on the part of the spirits, personalized messages from the spirits, a question and answer session with contacted spirits, or a combination of these (Warner 2008, 288).

While we might imagine those taking part in a *séance* as sitting in a dark and hushed room, *séances* were more often lively events full of music and noise. Sound- or music-making was both an established practice in *séances* as a way of enticing the spirits to visit and an acceptable form of spirit activity: mediums and sitters often sang hymns, hoping to attract the attention of spirits, and spirits both played instruments themselves and guided mediums in playing instruments in which they were (ostensibly) untrained (Natale 2016, 25). While the lights were turned down so as to obscure the movements of the medium and/or their assistants in creating the performance, sound was essential and music was often expected. Steven Connor describes the sonorous experience of the *séance*:

As they sat in the darkness or semi-darkness, the members of the séance would see much less than they would touch, taste, smell, and, most importantly, hear. The experience of heightened and attentive listening which is so central a part of the séance renders the participant at once passively exposed to and intimately enclosed within a shared space of audition which can perhaps be interpreted in the light of the infantile experience of the ‘sonorous envelope’ or bath of sound analysed by Didier Anzieu. (Connor 1999, 208)

The sounds and music for these events could lean towards the religious or delight in the profane. Many participants at more religious séances called the spirits to join them through hymn-singing, as described by “an Eye-Witness,” who chronicled a séance beginning with sacred music:

we commenced by singing, the medium being quickly entranced by his guide “Abram.” [...] We sat and sang at intervals for about half-an-hour. (*Medium and Daybreak* 1881, 429)

Marina Warner relates the claim of a medium, Mrs. Deane, who “often encouraged her sitters to join in a hymn, with her, as ‘the vibrations caused by singing are helpful in the production of psychic phenomena’” (Warner 2008, 244). Hymn-singing, in addition to helping cover any noises made by the medium in her preparation of paraphernalia for producing ocular and aural proof of ghosts, also strengthened perception of the movement as a religious one. Gutierrez argues, in her study of spiritualism as an organized religion, that it was the “religious articulation of the American Renaissance,” and thus mirrored the European renaissance in its engagement of both belief in the supernatural as a means of achieving personal happiness and satisfaction—especially during difficult times—and emerging technologies that created doubt in the paranormal (Gutierrez 2009, 3).

For those who believed that technology was the very means through which spirits were communicating with the living—electricity was thought by many to be the conduit between worlds—the music of séances was more often secular in nature. Beth A. Robertson notes that playing a phonograph to attract the spirits was just as common as singing hymns. Many of the dead seemed to like popular song. Robertson documents the case of a spirit called Walter who especially enjoyed pop songs featuring the saxophone, which was played to summon him (Robertson 2016, 76-7). Other ghosts conducted entire concerts at séances: Simone Natale writes that at one medium’s séances, “spirit concerts, music performed with numerous instruments, including the trumpet, accordion, and percussion instruments, was attributed to spirit agency” (2016, 25) and that the performances of a medium family “could include guitars and tambourines, as well as violins, horns, and bells” (30). Some mediums, not content with strumming a guitar or playing the piano or violin in their portrayals of spirits, were intrigued by the phonograph, turning it on and off and using selected recordings to create spirit communications at séances (Rotman 2008, 117).



Figure 1. The Dark Séance Polka was published for piano in the late 19th century to represent the sounds of the séance. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Spirits and the Early Cinema

The cinema and the supernatural immediately took to one another. As numerous historians have described, film provided the ultimate means of creating and displaying the uncanny, and the proto-filmic entertainments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as the magic lantern and phantasmagoria, allowed for a near-seamless transition from all-live spectral entertainment to the part-film, part-live (music) of the motion picture show. Spiritualists, as Murray Leeder writes, “long used to framing new developments in science as fresh evidence for their rhetorical arsenal,” also took to the cinema (Leeder 2015, 6). Spiritualists were enthralled with the possibilities offered by the cinema and immediately claimed it as a site of potential religious experience.

Proponents and performers of spiritualism were, as Gutierrez documents, “interested in machines that could legitimize their project” (Gutierrez 2009, 65), and Natale has argued “the rise of the spiritualist movement as a religious and cultural phenomenon was closely connected to the contemporary evolution of the media entertainment industry” (Natale 2016, 1). Photography and later the moving image were both embraced as products of “machines would both usher in the future and provide evidence of their claims,” although “machinery was also implicated in entertainment” (Gutierrez 2009, 46). In 1860, spiritualism as a legitimate belief (rather than as an entertainment) was briefly

advanced thanks to developing technology when William H. Mumler invented spirit photography, a technique of making multiple exposures on film, resulting in images that seemed to show the presence of ghosts among living portrait sitters. Dozens of other photographers followed suit, and while much of the public soon realized that these photographs were fraudulent, some—most famously, author Arthur Conan Doyle—refused to doubt the validity of the images. The popularity of spirit photography and the constant development of new techniques for creating photographic images meant that when film was invented in 1895 and progressed technologically, it too became a site of supernatural visions. Although spiritualism in America was most popular between 1849 and 1870, as Julian Holloway notes, “subsequent revivals of spirit communication occurred in the 1890s and after World War I” (Holloway 2006, 182). Desperate to find meaning in the deaths of the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic and the Great War, the bereaved sought contact with the dead. As Leeder documents:

from W. T. Stead’s citation of ‘The Kinetoscope [*sic*] of Nature’ and ‘The Kinetoscope [*sic*] of the Mind’ in 1896 to spiritualist Dr. Guy Bogart visiting the set of *The Bishop of the Ozarks* (1923), a film with a pro-spiritualist theme, and becoming ‘convinced he saw a real spirit manifest itself on the set to complement the film’s special effects,’ proponents of communication with the dead argued their case for the entire length of the silent era.” (Leeder 2015, 6)

This fin-de-siècle and early twentieth-century coincidence of belief in spiritualism and the rise of the moving picture allowed for considerable exchange between the two phenomena, including the use of sound and music.

Moving pictures, as scholars have written since, are the ultimate display of the uncanny: the figures shown in them are neither living nor dead, were both objects and not, and existed in both the time the images were captured and when they were shown and re-shown. In 1896, Maxim Gorky attended a showing of a film made by French brothers Louis and Auguste Lumière depicting everyday life. Astonished by what he had seen, Gorky wrote perhaps the most famous response to the emerging art of the cinema, directly citing its uncanny abilities:

Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows. Everything there—the earth, the trees, the people, the water and the air—is dipped in monotonous grey. It is not life but its shadow, it is not motion but its soundless spectre. (Quoted in Merck 1999, 168.)

Film provided for the existence of true revenants—defined by Derrida as *those that come back*—as well as those acknowledged as human creations for the purposes of entertainment (Buse and Stott 1999, 11). It is not surprising, therefore, that some of the very earliest experiments with the moving picture should include apparitions of the dead, doubling or reiterating the medium’s uncanny effect and giving birth to the idea of hauntology, what Simon Reynolds describes as “ghostly reminders of lost time and the elusiveness of memory,” particularly on stage and in film (Reynolds 2011, 329).

Early filmmakers were also fascinated with the possibilities of the moving picture and the uncanny. These earliest supernatural films were often more invested in visual tricks than plot, and involved a variety of supernatural figures, including witches and devils. By the end of the first decade of film, motion pictures involving the supernatural had split

into two camps: those that served as the progenitors of the horror movie, featuring monsters, suspense, and violence as key elements, and those with a spiritualist bent, which while using many of the same visual effects as the monster movies, took a very different path in intention. These latter films sought to provide uplifting stories of communications with the departed in ways that assuaged grievers and counseled believers by offering examples of positive, feel-good encounters with spirits. Both types of movie were plentiful: monster movies number in the thousands, and, as John T. Soister, Henry Nicolella, Steve Joyce, and Harry Long note, “while not quite a dime a dozen, pictures dealing with Spiritualism were fairly plentiful during the late 1910s and 1920s” (Soister et al. 2012, 36). *The Mistletoe Bough* (1904) shows a ghost leading her husband to her body, and *The Phantom Carriage* (1921) depicts a man whose ghost must become the collector of souls for a year. In the cinema, these films were accompanied by music and sound. Live music for film reinforced the perception of the uncanny and added to the perceiver’s experience thereof.



Figure 2: The ghost of a woman appears in *The Mistletoe Bough* (1904) to help her husband locate her body. Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lo1HkQ2hNA8>

Indeed, how the cinematic undead were presented and received relied not only on the connections between spiritualism and the theater and popular print culture, but also the music used to accompany films dealing with the supernatural. Robert Alford has noted the importance, in this genre, of making “visual components of the [silent] cinema [...] understood through sound” in films featuring the uncanny (Alford 2015, 186). The public’s desire for magic to be real heavily influenced the development of the spirit film and the music that accompanied it in the cinema.

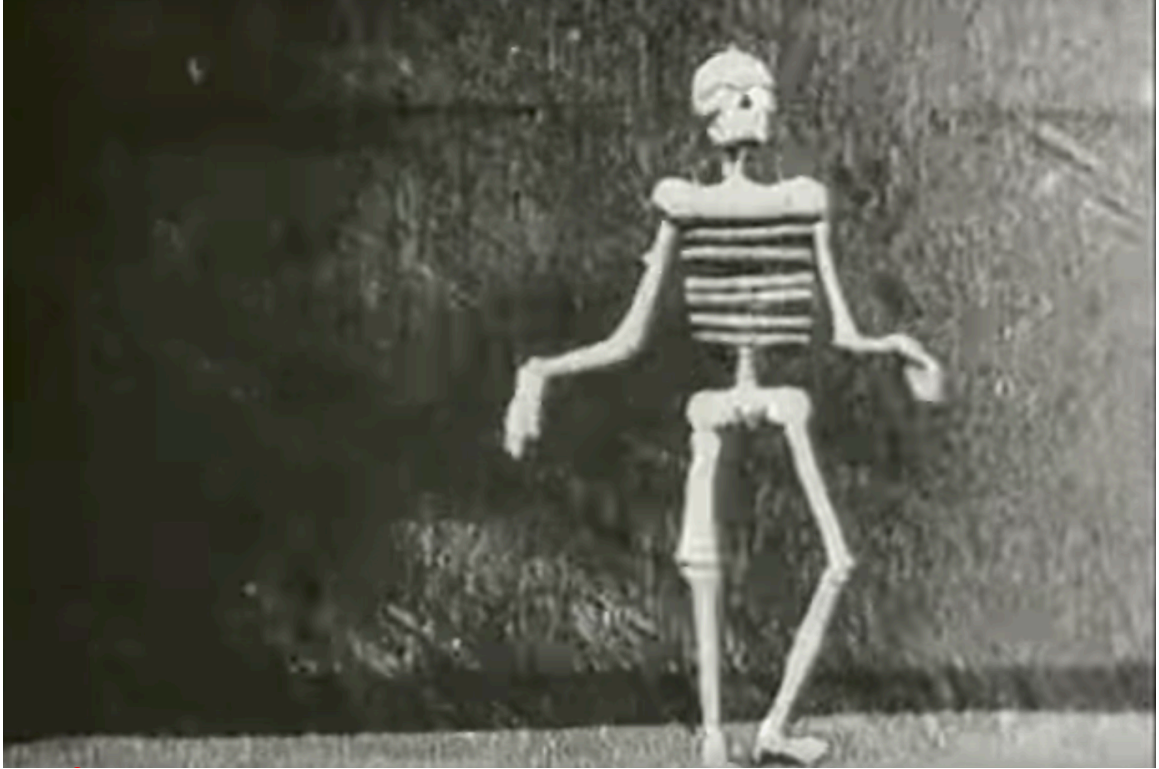


Figure 3. The Lumière brothers' *Le squelette joyeux*. In this video, a modern soundtrack has been added in the style of period accompaniment, using the sounds of a mallet instrument to represent bones. Watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNReoA8BV_Y

Music in the Silent Cinema

By 1908, the cinema industry, after considerable debate about whether moving pictures should be accompanied by music at all, had largely decided that doing so was not only acceptable, but essential. Although debates about what kinds of music were appropriate for film lasted well into the sound era, filmmakers and others agreed that accompanimental music served a narrative function and assisted in establishing geographical, chronological, and other loci both acousmatically (off-screen) and within the diegesis of a film. New musical industries sprung up to serve the needs of cinemas and motion picture production houses. As Richard Abel, Rick Altman, Julie Hubbert, Martin Marks, and other scholars of silent film music and sound have documented, there were no standardized practices for supplying music for films (Abel and Altman 2001; Altman 2004; Hubbert 2011; Marks 1997). Music for accompanying films initially came from vaudeville music libraries, popular song, pre-existing art music, and original compositions—only some of which were committed to paper. In the 1910s, publications of music expressly for film accompaniment began to proliferate, offering what is called genre music or mood music for specific actions, events, and emotions commonly found in film scenarios. Using published collections of genre music, called photoplay albums, cinema musicians could put together a handful of pieces to create a compiled score that broadly matched the action on screen. For example, works for “hurry” or “gallop” were quick in tempo, mimicked the sound of

hoof beats or heartbeats, and employed short note values, all of which suggested the associated speed of motion given in the title.

At the same time, some accompanists—also known as photoplayers—improvised throughout an entire film, created their own motifs to use for each picture they accompanied, and essentially composed entire scores that often went undocumented or committed to paper. Cinema organist Rosa Rio, for example, often had to accompany films without previewing them, so while she accompanied a movie for the first time, she worked to compose motifs or themes for the characters or events in the picture, upon which she would then improvise and elaborate in following showings, ultimately creating a consistent score that she would play from memory each time she accompanied the picture (Simon 2006). Other performers preferred to work from a list of suggestions for music, known as a cue sheet, which lists a film’s major events or cues next to the title or incipit of a piece that would go well with the action. As the demand for music for film grew, studios began issuing cue sheets for individual films, prepared by in-studio composers or score compilers. The Edison Film Company began issuing cue sheets with all of its feature-length films in 1913 (“Edison” 1913); Mutual Film Company did so in 1917 (“Mutual” 1917), and other companies followed.

These suggestions from Edison were not terribly sophisticated: the recommendations for a nine-scene film titled *How the Landlord Collected His Rent* were “1. March, brisk; 2. Irish jig; 3. Begin with Andante, finish with Allegro; 4. Popular Air; 5. Ditto; 6. Andante with Lively at finish; 7. March (same as No. 1); 8. Plaintive; 9. Andante (Use March of No. 1)” (Marks 1997, 68). The Cameo Music Service Corporation, based in New York City, issued somewhat more sophisticated “Thematic Music Cue Sheets” for more than twenty movie studios (Altman 2004, 353), and the Chicago-based Synchronized Scenarios Music Company also offered cues for numerous filmmakers (“Chat” 1921, 39). These cue sheets included not just the name of the piece for each cue, but also a short incipit of the melody for the accompanist to harmonize and extend as needed. Around the same time, film magazines also began publishing cue sheets created by the editors of their music columns or music departments. Cue sheets in magazines include those by Ernst Luz for *Motion Picture News*, which began publishing them in 1915; George W. Beynon in *Moving Picture World*, starting in 1919; and Lloyd G. DeCastillo, who started creating cue sheets for publication in *American Organist* in 1922 (Leonard 2016, 45, 63, 74).

Thematic Music Cue Sheet

M. J. METZ (1900-1971)

“THE ACE OF ACTION”
Music compiled by James C. Bradford

1 AT SCREENING	..... Valse Dramatique (Raper)	..... 1½ Min.
2 (Title) HAVING DISCUSSED WILLS	..... Huotano (Ancliffe)	..... 1¾ Min.
3 (Title) JUNE DARCY	..... Deux Petites Danseuses (Ley)	..... 2¼ Min.
4 (Action) WALLY ENTERS LUNCH ROOM	..... The Girl Friend (Rodgers)	..... 1¾ Min.
5 (Action) FARBEE ENTERS SALOON	..... A Mysterious Event (Zamerlik)	..... 2¼ Min.
6 (Title) HERE'S WHERE I GET MYSELF A WALTON	..... Affolment (Ourdine)	..... 2 Min.
7 (Action) WALLY JUMPS OVER COUNTER	..... Pourouille (Fasse)	..... 3 Min.
8 (Action) WALLY SNAKES INTO BARN	..... Agitated Mysterious (Raper)	..... ½ Min.
9 (Title) THE RECEPTION COMMITTEE	..... Rodeo Love (Raymond)	..... 2 Min.

Figure 4. A typical cue sheet, showing musical incipits for each cue, cue length, and the title and composer of each cue.

During the silent era, only the most prestigious films with the largest budgets received fully original, completely synchronized scores for their presentation in cinemas. These “special scores,” as they were marketed, generally eschewed pre-existing music of any kind, although some did contain a single notable pre-existing theme or popular song, often included for marketing purposes. Nathaniel D. Mann composed the first such score for the 1908 film *The Fairylogue and Radio-Plays* (Dienstfrey 2014, 43). As Marks notes, the genre blossomed in the United States between 1910 and 1914, and following the success of Joseph Carl Breil’s fully synchronized (but not wholly original) score for Griffith’s 1915 picture *The Birth of a Nation*, more studios began producing full scores for their pictures (Marks 1997, 62). Breil applied a Wagnerian approach to scoring his films, assigning leitmotifs to characters and places as a means of connecting all of the elements of the film through the music and developing a coherent musical narrative that was carried throughout the score.

The leitmotif approach would gradually take over as the dominant method of scoring a film, but of the full-length film scores produced during the late teens and early twenties, many remained compiled scores with only a few original sections: that is, they were comprised of pre-existing pieces that were connected to one another with original transitions and sometimes contained a new song or tune for a romantic or climactic scene. Photoplay albums and single-work generic music and cue sheets continued to be used by most motion picture accompanists until the coming of sound between 1927 and 1929. By the time it was clear that the “talkies” were here to stay, most films were scored with original music, albeit often including some pre-existing pieces.

In composing original scores and short, atmospheric pieces such as “misteriosos” and “Spooky Spooks,” composers often borrowed musical ideas, textures, and other materials associated with the supernatural from pre-existing works like the aforementioned operas *Die Freischütz* (1821) and *Faust* (1859), as well as from shorter works like Camille Saint-Saëns’ highly influential 1874 concert piece *Danse Macabre*, which musically portrays Death playing the violin amid a cemetery of dancing skeletons. Inspired by the experiences of mediums and séance-sitters, cinema musicians accompanied such films with music that often also drew on memory and reminders of the past. But silent film composers also developed new musical gestures, textures, and timbres to signify various types of supernatural beings in film scores, reflecting beliefs of the time. All of these approaches to creating musical accompaniment shaped the way spirits on screen were presented to audiences.

Spirit Mediums, Cinema Musicians, and Conventions of Womanhood

The occupations of spirit medium and cinema musician intersect in significant ways. As I note in the introduction to this essay, in both professions women could fully participate and were thought by many to be better suited than men for the work at hand. The highly gendered educations and expectations of middle- and upper-class American women in the nineteenth century, intended to prepare women for domesticity, were, ironically, the very accomplishments they needed to succeed as professionals in the early twentieth century as mediums and silent film accompanists (Leonard 2018b).

Female mediums and cinema musicians used pre-existing social conventions regarding “true womanhood” to imbue themselves with both authority and competence in their chosen vocations, and relied on progressive beliefs and shifting attitudes to turn the restrictions or limitations of those conventions into means for developing their respective arts independently. Susan Cruea, examining Barbara Welter’s scholarship on “true womanhood,” has demonstrated that the ideals identified by Welter were in constant flux, changing to meet new societal demands. Welter documented the ways in which middle- and upper-class white women growing up in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in America were expected to attain what Welter calls “true womanhood,” which “sought to assert that womanly virtue resided in piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (Welter 1976, 21). Women who were “true,” as displayed through their speech, dress, accomplishments, religious habits, education, and general decorum, could be entrusted with a home’s spiritual life and maintenance of its economics, hygiene, and servants; the raising and teaching of children; and the ability to positively influence those around them in regard to taste and the appreciation for the arts, primarily those of the established Western European canon and its legacies. Cruea accepts Welter’s findings on these issues, but also provides evidence for “women’s increasing involvement in the moral and cultural welfare of their communities,” and that the tensions between “true womanhood” and women’s professional needs and desires prevented the strictures regarding women’s activities to be as rigid as Welter might have believed (Cruea 2005, 193–94). This mutability allows for the acceptability of what might have otherwise been considered unacceptable behavior.

While in the nineteenth century the true woman was not, generally speaking, allowed employment outside of teaching, nursing, or religious work, the women of the early twentieth century experienced more freedom in career choices and opportunities that still allowed for them to maintain their status as morally upright. These new professions and the assumption of true women as guardians of morality became symbiotic: women needed work that would not compromise their reputations, and emerging forms of entertainment needed employees whose presence bestowed an atmosphere of respectability on the endeavors. Cruea notes that women entered into “the cultural realm through publishing, performance, and participation in public rituals” (Cruea 2005, 194). Both movie theaters and spiritualist séances fell into the categories of performance and participation in public rituals, both of which took place within the entertainment industry. In the case of performing as spirit mediums, as Molly McGarry writes, women “appropriated the characteristics that had been used to deem women unfit for public life—piety, passivity, and purity, and transformed them into ideals of spirituality” (McGarry 2008, 44). Cinema musicians did much the same, becoming the symbol of a superior movie theater and turning “women’s music” into the sound of the cinema. As a result of this employment in the entertainment industry, mediums and photoplayers had the opportunity to influence public taste and expectations in their specific areas of entertainment, and to contribute to the broader concept of the supernatural entertainment in general.

In the early twentieth century, more than half of all spirit mediums in the United States were female, and, particularly after the United States entered the Great War in 1917 and many all-male cinema orchestras were disbanded, it is likely that the majority of cinema accompanists were women (“Abandon Orchestras” 1918). The spiritualist movement allowed middle- and upper-class white women to have a voice in religious and other matters as yet unaddressed by Progressive Era maternalist politics, which held that women had innate qualities that authorized them for certain jobs based on their abilities in domestic and child-rearing areas. As Seth Koven and Sonya Michel document, maternalism “promoted the private virtues of domesticity while simultaneously legitimating women’s public relationships to politics and the state, to community, workplace, and marketplace” (Koven and Michel 1990, 1079). Women seeking careers as spirit mediums or cinema musicians benefitted from this duality. Women had long been keepers of supernatural practices and knowledge; one need only look, though, at the history of cunning women to see how this information was used against women. The relatively broad acceptance of spiritualism as at least an entertainment if not as a religion among the white middle and upper class made it safe in both theater and parlor for women to participate in activities that might have been deadly only decades before (Natale 2016, 1). In much the same way, female musicians—mostly keyboardists—had been the designated performers and keepers of specific kinds of music. While some women in art music had careers as singers, pianists, and violinists, proper, well-to-do women did not generally take up careers in popular music. Music composed for women, including parlor songs and short, characteristic pieces meant to musically describe specific things or ideas, had been relegated to the home: its practitioners did not perform this repertoire in public or for pay. Candace Bailey traces this tradition of restricting the music-making of the middle and upper classes. Bailey describes the apparent dichotomy between socially acceptable

professional women musicians who participated in the western European art music tradition and those for whom playing outside of the home was inappropriate as being rooted in structures of misogyny and male control of female creativity and self-reliance (Bailey 2019). “Divas”—professional female musicians with substantial fan followings—such as singers Adelina Patti and Jenny Lind, pianist Fanny Bloomfield Zeisler, or violinist Maude Adams received accolades for their performances of opera and concertos, but women who performed more popular musics professionally in public in the late nineteenth century were, as Beth Abel Mcleod writes:

Initially associated with “low-brow” entertainments, such as vaudeville and burlesque; in addition, the average nineteenth-century theatergoer suspected that many actresses were prostitutes. [...] Contemporary magazine and newspapers sought to reassure readers of the “normalcy” of female artists, and did so by describing their traditional marriages and family lives. (Macleod 2015, 2)

While they could not control audience reactions and critical responses, female cinema musicians rejected the complete control of men both in taking on jobs in theaters and in creating their own musical accompaniments to film.

Technology

Neither the spirit medium of the 1900s nor the photoplayer would have had the opportunity for careers without the technological advances of the late nineteenth century. With the coming of greater—but not exact—public understanding of electricity and other natural phenomena, Americans sought quantifiable systems of belief. The desire for such understanding often overlapped with long-standing non-scientific beliefs that refused to die. As Gutierrez has documented, many people believed that electricity was conducted differently through men and women. Women, being “naturally weaker” and “more excitable” overall, were therefore negatively charged. This made them more appealing to spirits than men and explained why so many more women practiced as spirit mediums (Gutierrez 2009, 53). As interest in electricity grew in the public, spectators began to see women spirit mediums as almost mechanical, their actions being made possible by the electricity provided by the spirits possessing the mediums’ bodies (Natale 2016, 38). In order to encourage audience interest, mediums used readily available machines like phonographs to demonstrate the presence of spirits and eventually sought to prove their credibility through the many mechanical devices invented to trace electrical, spiritual, and ectoplasmic currents.



Figure 5. A medium controls electricity during a séance.

At the same time, the rapid spread of moving picture technology created the need for cinema musicians. As the popularity of movie theaters grew, so did the need for accompanists and for musical instruments suited to the cinema. Women who played the piano and organ easily found employment in theaters, as did those who could quickly learn to handle the many varieties of electronic instruments developed for moving picture accompaniment. Carrie Hetherington, a classically trained musician, helped invent and sell the American Photo Player Company's Fotoplayer, a mechanical instrument that incorporated a player piano, a violin, whistles, and various percussion instruments. With the Fotoplayer or similar instruments, theaters could boast of being the most technologically up-to-date venues for the world's newest form of mass entertainment.



Figure 6. The American Fotoplayer in action, playing “Ghost Parade” by John Scott. Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SF4BWIIUEOQ>

Audiences for the movies were enormous, and managers and owners responded by increasing their use of technology throughout their theaters. Organists playing enormous Wurlitzer organs rose from the floor on hydraulic lifts; performers using the Fotoplayer or similar instruments had interludes between reels of film or between films in which they gave featured solos for the audience; and photoplayers used a mix of pre-recorded sounds with live playing to create a mosaic of music and effects, all carefully selected to match the movement and emotion on the screen.

The technologies used by (and on, in the case of “test” mediums, who tried to prove their mediumship scientifically) women in these professions were crucial in providing them with work. They permitted women to undertake specialized performative jobs at a time when most new technology remained firmly in the hands of men and male-dominated institutions. Women’s use and promotion of new technologies clearly enhanced their performances and contributed to their professional successes and influence.

Piety, Purity, Submission, and Domesticity

Both spirit mediums and photoplayers were subjected to the same social standards as other middle and upper class white women of the period. However, as performers, they were scrutinized with extra intensity. Because they were in the public eye, mediums and cinema musicians had to demonstrate their true womanhood through their professional work. This could be a burden on top of their other responsibilities, but could also have a positive effect on their careers, and, broadly speaking, women in both fields became signifiers of morality in the entertainment industry, widely considered to be corrupt and degrading.

The ways in which mediums and photoplayers exhibited their true womanhood differed somewhat, but their practices were always designed to lead audiences to the

same conclusions: that these women were representatives of morality and that their participation in their chosen spheres of entertainment imbued those spheres with propriety for their audiences. Photographs of spirit mediums depict a number of tropes that denoted visible means of identifying true women. Images of spirit mediums from the 1910s and 20s show women in conservative, often white, dresses, with their hair up. They wear clearly corseted dresses; many spirit appearances tried to convince séance sitters of their authenticity by letting the sitters feel their hips, proving that the spirits were not wearing corsets and thus could not be the same entity as the medium. They wear no apparent makeup and, in an attempt to emphasize their youth and innocence, frequently wear large bows redolent of the nursery in their hair or on their clothes. Some mediums went barefoot, ostensibly to show that they had nothing hidden in their shoes, but in many cases really in order to untie knots or open locks when they were bound up prior to a séance.



Figure 7 A séance in progress, showing women in typical daywear.

In addition to asserting their morality through the theoretical argument that only women practicing the principles of true womanhood could be mediums, women's performances at their séances often emphasized feminine traits. The semiotics of these physical gestures assisted mediums in gaining the trust of their audiences and of putative believers. Among female mediums, the young and those who had experienced lengthy and/or serious illnesses were favored as innocent and sensitive conduits for spirit communication. McGarry has documented that young girls "held a privileged and foundational place in Spiritualist practice." She continues:

At a moment when their childhood dreamscapes of night visitors should have been fading into the decidedly unfantastic realities of work and marriage, Spiritualism offered a different vision. As mediums, girls in particular occupied a privileged place as intermediaries between this world and the next at the very moment when their possibilities for power, speech, and imagination were fast diminishing. (McGarry 2008, 28)

Older women who were frequently ill or prone to swooning were also considered to be prime candidates for mediumship. Mediums Minnie Harris Wallis and Edward Walter Wallis, for example, noted that women who tended to faint were more suited for "trance mediumship," in which the medium falls to sleep for a time and regains consciousness having obtained messages from the dead. "For many Spiritualists, small-group communalism took the place of institutionalized religion; alternative healing replaced male-dominated medicine; and the voices of priests and ministers were drowned out by those of the spirits themselves," states McGarry. Women who found their way into spiritualist circles rather than hospitals and sanatoriums were participants in a social movement that allowed them to deny "basic categorical binaries the distinctions between men and women, science and magic, life and afterlife, the past and the present. They repudiated the power of experts and the necessity of mediating hierarchies at a time in which these forces were taking on a renewed cultural importance" (McGarry 2008, 19). This gave them agency where none had existed before, permitting them to make decisions about their own lives and bodies.

Acquiring the trappings of the elite classes also signified true womanhood status and the moral authority it bestowed. Women wishing to become "speech mediums" were encouraged to take elocution lessons, a popular pastime for ladies of the middle and upper classes, so that even if the spirits with whom they conversed did not speak English well or have thick accents, the medium would always be able to communicate clearly with her audience in a pleasing voice (McGarry 2008, 158-9). Mediums were further directed to avoid "promiscuous" séance groups and to avoid communicating with vain, sinful, and negative spirits, just as they would avoid having interaction with such people in their everyday lives. Instead, they were expected to converse with only the dead of their own class or above (McGarry 2008, 161). By presenting themselves as genteel and non-threatening true women, spirit mediums relied on communal expectations for proper ladies to ensure that they created and maintained good reputations even while they broke societal taboos.

Demonstrating these attributes of true womanhood helped overcome potential controversy about mediums' physical activities while in their trance states. As Judith R. Walkowitz has written, "trance conditions legitimized a wide range of 'bad behavior' on the

part of women, allowing them to engage in a subtle subversion—but not repudiation—of the ‘separate sphere’ construction of ‘true womanhood’” (Walkowitz 1988, 9). A woman of good standing in the community who began each séance with hymns was certainly not behaving poorly if, when she was under the control of the spirits, she was flirtatious and sat in the laps of the male séance attendees; nor was the true woman betraying her upbringing and ideals if she wrote of intimate details while in a trance.

Spiritualists had to be very careful in walking the line between spiritualist beliefs and the code of true womanhood. Julian Holloway has written that despite free love being a frequent tenet of spiritualism in the nineteenth century, “spiritualists wished to project a respectable image for the movement wherein spirituality and sexuality must be diametrically opposed.” Thus, mediums “continually negotiated an empowered/powerless duality” in which they had to be unquestionably moral individuals, even as their performances were “infused with and achieved through embodied relations, performance, and affectual sensations” (Holloway 2006, 183). Laurence Moore has found that when opponents of spiritualism suggested that mediums were unnatural or that mediumship was improper for women to participate in, spiritualists responded by claiming “successful mediumship grew from the cultivation of specific traits that in the nineteenth century defined femininity.” Indeed, the “success of spirit communication depended on the ability of mediums to give up their own identity to become the instruments of others. Self-sacrifice and passiveness were among the things that made for the moral superiority of women over men” (Moore 1975, 202–3). A guide for mediums from 1910 warned would-be practitioners that they must come to the faith honestly, for otherwise they may make contact with dangerous, dishonest spirits or—worse—make no contact at all and be taken for a fraud (Wallis and Wallis 1976, 47).

Modeling the behaviors of true womanhood also protected female mediums against (male) clients looking to spend time with young women for prurient reasons rather than because they believe in spiritualism. “Women who are truly pure and intuitive,” wrote one early guide for mediums, would know when “lecherous hypocrites” sought them out for immoral pleasure and would know to turn them away (U. Clark 1863, 184). Wallis and Wallis stressed that mediums should strive for the same attributes that all women did in hoping to attain “true womanhood.” They were to be “high-souled”: to cultivate compassion and pious belief in spiritualism; to be pure in belief and behavior; to keep records of their professional activities; to create safe and welcoming spaces for their clients and see to the needs and wants of that space and its inhabitants; and serve others before themselves (Wallis and Wallis, 49). This is not to say that some female mediums didn’t capitalize on the male gaze and/or audience desire for the salacious, or present themselves in radical ways that were intended to show that they had nothing to hide—some female mediums performed in the nude to “prove” that their physical manifestations were created and controlled by spirits and not the women themselves—but many sought and exhibited typical social respectability.

While the true woman was expected to have a basic education and be literate and numerate, a formal education was not considered necessary for spirit mediums. Mediums were to be “developed,” to use the language of the day, not educated. Indeed, the believability of a medium often rested on her lack of known or formal education: to be

known to speak or write well and in multiple styles suggested cunning rather than authenticity on the part of the medium. McGarry has observed that “little girls were seen as ripe for mediumship in part because of the cultural assumption that they were passive, guileless, and incapable of producing feats of skilled speech or writing through normal means,” and any (known) advanced schooling cast doubt on their truthfulness in claiming to communicate with the dead (McGarry 2008, 32). However, mediums who read widely and were up-to-date on current events, gossip, and popular culture had an advantage over those who did not. Writing in 1920, Hereward Carrington described mediums using popular assumptions about their lack of skills or education to deceive séance sitters: “The medium often assumes a certain ignorance of events and languages, etc., so that when these events are given through the ‘spirits’ at the séance, they will have the appearance of supernaturally imparted information” (Carrington 1920, 62).

Mediums needed to be able to recite large portions of the bible and hymns, as these sources confirmed for many audiences that the mediums were both honest believers and deliverers of messages from religious spirits to their families. For audiences committed to spiritualism as a religion, spirit mediums who sang hymns from the spiritualist repertoire assured families that their departed ones were indeed happily enjoying the spiritualist afterlife, known as the Summerlands. Mediums also used their educations in penmanship, literature, and languages to help convince audiences: writing in different handwriting styles and languages constituted proof that mediums were in contact with multiple entities. Mediums who were ambidextrous were even more convincing; those who could write with both hands at the same time demonstrated contact with multiple entities simultaneously. It was also crucial for mediums to read the local newspaper, especially the obituaries, in order to gather information on the recently deceased and their mourning families. Trade publications gave mediums additional information their clients assumed they would not have (Farrington et al. 1922, 14–15, 196). Mediums who could refer to a spirit’s close friends, business associates, and recent life events were highly persuasive performers.

Mediums’ undisclosed skills in the arts also helped convince audiences that the dead physically guided them. Spirits who had in life been able to draw or play musical instruments used untrained mediums in making portraits of sitters’ loved ones and playing music. Spirits particularly liked to play the guitar, the violin, and percussion instruments. Even spirits who were not musical in life were likely to shake a tambourine if the medium made one available, or strum the open strings of a guitar or other string instrument. Numerous mediums took dictation from famous dead writers and composers, drawing on their own educations while presenting themselves as lacking any knowledge of literature or music.

Women also used what they had learned from household training in their performances to solidify their reputations as mediums. Domestic science, in particular, helped mediums develop and perform physical effects during séances. They knew how to use lemon juice and bluing to create invisible messages that they alone could make legible. They borrowed cheesecloth, gelatin, and other kitchen supplies to make ectoplasm. Having basic sewing skills meant that it was easy for women to design and make clothes from which it was easy to escape, ghostly shrouds to wear, hidden pockets

in which to conceal supernatural artifacts, and figures that resembled spirits. (Warner 2008, 245) Women who were expected to engage in child and elder care and so had a basic understanding of anatomy and the placebo effect performed convincingly as healing mediums. Those who knew how magnets worked developed ways of moving items without touching them. The 1915 book *Secrets of Clairvoyance: How to Become an Operator* provided mediums with the means of making writing magically appear on a slate, make colored smoke appear and disappear at will, and to create fire they could handle with bare hands, all from everyday materials (*Secrets* 1915, 37–38). The author of *Revelations of a Spirit Medium* specified the recipes for unguents mediums could use to walk safely—albeit briefly—on red-hot iron bars and other tricks (Farrington et al. 1922, 98).

Spiritualism allowed women to be independent, to speak out, to travel, to associate with others who held beliefs like their own. By demonstrating that they too followed the path to and practiced the various aspects of true womanhood, they benefitted from a social model that could have limited their activities and suppressed their activities. The case is remarkably similar to that of female cinema musicians. Women used the gendered education and training allowed them as means with which to rise to the top of the profession and remained there in a position of unique power.

Contemporary sources positively compared the status of the professional cinema musician with those of schoolteachers, nurses, stenographers, and executive secretaries, and women working as film accompanists made, on average, twice that of a stenographer and 20-25% more than public high school teachers (“Union Scale” 1921; “Letter” 1920; “Trade Notes” 1920). Like mediums, photoplayers were expected to exhibit true womanhood. Again, image played a role in establishing a photoplayer’s morality. Photoplayers also tended towards conservative dress and hairstyling; a 1925 article in *American Organist* jokes about the bobbed-hair trend among women organists, suggesting that it is a distraction (“Modernity Complete” 1925). The stock image of a woman dressed in long sleeves and skirts with her hair up became a stereotype for cinema players nationwide and persists today. In the large, ornate theaters dubbed “motion picture palaces,” where photoplayers were celebrities and a large part of the draw for audiences, women dressed in fashionable evening gowns or other clothing that communicated their elite status.



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Figures 8a and 8b. The image of a woman in conservative dress with her hair up became a trope in depicting silent film accompanists.



Figure 9. Photoplayer Rosa Rio became famous for her original accompaniments for film.

Period articles, directories, advertisements, and testimonials about and of female photoplayers include information on their church or synagogue memberships, jobs, or activities, signifying their piety. The criteria used to judge women is epitomized in this short article from *The American Organist* from September, 1918, that lists the subject's church and civic activities and her good taste:

One of this Chapters [sic] busiest members is Miss Wilhelmina Woolworth, our present secretary. As organist and musical director of All Souls' Church, Watertown, she is continually busy with her chorus choir the weekly service list at this church being well arranged and appropriate in the selections used for both choir and organ. In addition to her church duties Miss Woolworth is a very active member of the Watertown Morning Musicales Society, taking some part in most of its monthly concerts, and is also organist of the Olympic Theatre, Watertown, where she plays a three manual Austin organ. In this field Miss Woolworth displays both skill and good taste in "playing" the pictures, a most desirable accomplishment not invariably found in the "movie" palaces. ("Central New York" 1918)

The social paradigms for moral purity for female photoplayers were very similar to those for mediums. Theater managers and the performers themselves both used them to construct the nascent cinema as a morally healthy place of entertainment. A woman

accompanist was viewed as an imprimatur of morality and cleanliness in a cinema, and women were often hired as film accompanists at the piano or organ for the sake of a theater's propriety even before managers seriously considered their musical abilities (Leonard 2018b). A properly "accomplished" pianist—in which "accomplished" broadly signified the gender (female), class (middle or above), and relative musical skill (a basic facility with the instrument and the ability to read music) of the performer—was a boon to any establishment wishing to distinguish itself as a proper place of family entertainment. As R. H. Pray observed in July of 1914, a theatre with a "slovenly outward appearance," and posters that were "of a vulgar and suggestive type," where music, "furnished by a piano and violin, gave vent with a tin-pan crash to all the ragtime pieces that were known as popular by the young people [mostly men and boys] who visited the place" was put out of business as soon as "a large, neat and commodious building," with a "pipe-organ, as fine as any church in the neighborhood could boast of, was installed, and good music beside this was also furnished in the way of an accomplished pianist" opened in the same neighborhood (Pray 1914, 102).

Tasteful piano or organ playing of limited virtuosity was a marker of domesticity and a proper upbringing, and thus also part of true womanhood. The presence of appropriate music in the movie theater, like the woman who made it, was intended to convey morality and social uprightness. Writing in 1919, the *American Organist* held that "The work of the organist in the cinema field is equally important with that in the churches so far as cultural influence goes: possibly it is even more important, when we consider the freer reign and broader audiences of the former. Just how any healthy influence can be organized in support of this vital work is still a process very much in the dark" (Webbe 1919, 113). The musical education of middle- and upper-class American women had prepared them especially well for this kind of work. While only a handful of women trained and were successful as concert musicians, almost all women of these classes received musical training in which the Western art canon and a body of music known as "parlor songs" made up the curriculum. As Petra Meyer-Frazier has documented, American girls—or, to be more specific, white middle- and upper-class girls—of the nineteenth century learned to play the piano. It was an expected social skill and was considered a necessary preparation for courtship and marriage. The music they were expected to play was, by and large, of the parlor song variety. ('Parlor song' is a term used to connote popular piano-vocal sheet music from the nineteenth century intended for home use.) The songs are melodically and harmonically straightforward and short, three to five pages (Meyer-Frazier 2006, 46).

Such music was intended for in-home use, with groups of friends singing or performing privately for one another. E. Douglas Bomberger has further observed that the editors of *The Etude* magazine, among others, believed that "salon music was a step in developing taste just as pedagogical music was a step in developing technique" (Bomberger 2004, xiv). Salon music thus served as a threshold for women in performing more sophisticated works. Women also contributed a significant amount of music to the magazine, some of which was then used in cinema accompaniment.

Through their study of the piano or voice, cookery, and keeping household accounts—both in prose and in numbers—women were thought to have attained states of

piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, all of which, as Meyer-Frazier notes, gave women authority in “nurturing children and instructing and guiding religious morality” (Meyer-Frazier 2006, 47). This authority contributed to the ability of women to take on the roles of arbiters of morality and taste as spirit mediums and photoplayers; the repertoire women learned prepared them to succeed as musicians as well. As Julie Hubbert has written, the classicization of moving picture music came about under the leadership of European-trained cinema composers and orchestra directors such as Samuel L. Rothafel (later Rothapfel) and Hugo Riesenfeld, but the highly gendered training of female pianists in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries clearly also played a role in this process (Hubbert 2011, 22). It is ironic that women accompanists, initially hired for their gender and the social signifiers it conveyed, were uniquely qualified as cinema pianists and, later, organists, partly because of the gendered treatment to which they had been subjected. Rather than being limited in their music-making careers because of the gendered restrictions to their repertoire, they instead had learned a repertoire of music perfect for film accompaniment at their disposal (Tick 1986, 327).

Evidence in the form of letters from female accompanists to the popular film magazines’ columns on photoplay music, published accounts of their scoring suggestions, reports on performance practice by critics, and reviews of accompanists across the United States all testify to the extent to which women were the arbiters of musical accompaniment in the cinema. Accompanist Alice Smythe Jay’s suggestions for scores appeared in multiple issues of *Motion Picture News* (Jay 1916, 1917). In 1921 she patented her own invention for creating piano rolls for individual films and started a business to record her own selections and improvisations for movies. Kitty Meinhold, a cinema orchestra leader and violinist who programmed all of the music for pictures for her employer in upstate New York, published her suggestions for scoring historical pictures (Meinhold 1915, 1917). Hazel Burnett, who performed for both cinema and live theatre as an organist and pianist, created unique scores using clippings from *The Etude* and *Melody* magazines and multiple other sources. Burnett was a local celebrity accompanist in Austin, Texas, where the theaters at which she played—the Majestic (now the Paramount) and the Aztec—had seating capacities of at least 750 and held at least three showings per day, suggesting that thousands of people heard Burnett’s film accompaniments every month.

When the United States entered the war in November 1917, women were afforded additional opportunities as cinema musicians as male musicians went to war. In August of 1918, *The Film Daily* reported that the state of Wisconsin ordered “a general suspension of all orchestras,” noting that this was “being done as a war measure to release every available man for war work. The theatre managers came to a decision last week and will hereafter retain but one man in each house to furnish music” (“Abandon Orchestras” 1918). *Moving Picture World* reported similar measures in Missouri, where “Musicians Must Work or Fight.” “Every professional musician who is not engaged in connection with legitimate concerts, operas, or theatrical performances,” read the act, “will be forced to enter other vocations to go to the front” (Beynon 1918, 1120). As men left the cinemas, women entered them in even greater numbers than before, taking up positions as piano or organ accompanists, instrumentalists, and orchestra leaders.

Both mediums and photoplayers used the social construction of the true woman as a moral figure to make their professions eminently respectable during a period when public opinion often condemned female performers in non-elite arts. The books and other materials they read, the music they played, and the activities they participated in under the rubric of becoming true women in domestic settings became resources they relied upon professionally and that helped them succeed in their careers. The shifting industrial, financial, and moral landscape of the period—described as an era of “incredible contradictions” by jazz historian Mitchell Newton-Matza—also contributed to the success of mediums and cinema accompanists (Newton-Matza 2009, xiv). During the 1910s and 1920s, women joined the workforce in greater numbers than before, and 73,000 women were employed as musicians or music teachers in 1920 (“Vintage” 2013). The post-war financial boom, the regulating of the industrial work week to forty hours, and the wider availability of technology for both household work and amusement all led to increased demand for entertainment. Youth culture developed a significant amount of influence over the entertainment industry, encouraging interest in live theater, including séances, and cinema, and in adjacent areas, including sheet-music publishing, recordings, and live bands.

Dis/embodiment and Bodily Absence

There were, however, drawbacks to sustaining the true womanhood paradigm as a performer, even as it changed to accommodate different models of life and work. For women who took up professional careers in the 1910s and 1920s, the expected submission of the body and mind to the larger task at hand made the work of mediums and photoplayers nearly imperceptible in their own performance spheres, leading to contemporary and present-day ignorance of their effect on supernatural entertainments, particularly in film. The demands of true womanhood meant that despite the public nature of their work and the fact that their physical presence denoted morality, photoplayers and mediums had to make their individual selves secondary or even tertiary to the primary spectacles of their performances. While they evinced their piety and purity through their spiritual activities and modest behavior and demonstrated their domesticity through their abilities to play music and create welcoming spaces for entertainment, they were nonetheless independent working women, and had to play down that independence in order to assuage public fears of and assumptions about white middle- and upper-class women in the workforce. Although mediums were effectively in charge of the narrative they created, including the subversive appropriation of a male persona, the medium’s own self—and the bodies of most photoplayers, who also determined their own scores and musical personas—they had to assume the same kind of bodily inconspicuousness such women outside of the commercial workplace experienced during this period: that they should be essentially unseen except in certain domestic settings or activities, should be decorative but not ostentatious, and should restrict their gestures and movement to acceptable norms as dictated by society. While the growing role of dance and the changing fashions of the 1920s allowed for some leeway among mediums and photoplayers, many women in these professions were nonetheless judged by more conservative standards.

Although the physical presence of the medium and photoplayer lent their respective entertainments the air of morality, their independent and performative use of their bodies remained problematic. The primary way in which both mediums and photoplayers manifested their submission was through metaphorical disembodiment or absence of bodily presence. Although women in both professions remained physically present and often in full view of their audiences, their bodily agency was often abnegated by the requirements of their work. Mediums who stayed at a table during a séance and those who were closed up in “spirit cabinets”—often just areas of a room that had been curtained off, rather than the elaborate boxes meant to restrict movement that are cited in the “scientific testing” of mediums—gave their bodies over willingly to spirit use or even full possession. In doing so, they submitted their bodily autonomy to the control of the (frequently male) spirit(s) they channeled, allowing the spirits to use the mediums’ bodies as tools for communication, movement, and touch. The spirit who inhabited a medium’s body or took control of her voice was the focal point of a séance, and therefore commanded the attention of the audience over and above attention to the medium herself. Even in séances where mediums became physical with the séance sitters, stroking or caressing them, sitting in their laps, allowing or encouraging them to touch the medium’s body, or otherwise interacting with them physically, the medium encouraged the sitters to perceive that it was the spirit that was in control, using the body as a prop. The actions of the spirit were what mattered in these supernatural entertainments; all else was superfluous. The body itself did not matter: the presence of the spirit did.

Likewise, cinema musicians were assigned the role of being the unseen conduit of equally unseen music in the service of the visual medium of film. Although at some of the large motion picture palaces the musicians became celebrities in their own right, the vast majority of cinema musicians were tucked away out of view of the audience, leaving sound as the only evidence of their presence. Pianists and organists had to see the screen and had to be visible enough that the audience knew that there was a woman present, but they were shunted to the side of theaters or the wings of the stage, where they were camouflaged by curtains or consoles. Ensembles, too, were situated far to the side of the screen or placed in a small pit, usually located far below the stage so as to be virtually invisible. Logistically, part of this placement may have been meant to ensure that the audience had a clear view of the screen from all vantages in the house, but multiple theaters built for all-male orchestras placed the musicians front and center without destroying sight lines. Women musicians in particular were conceived of as transmitters and reproducers of music composed and/or selected by men, even when that was not the case. As Macleod documents:

women’s potential as composers was not nurtured with the same seriousness as their playing ability. The words *creative* and *reproductive* were frequently invoked to distinguish the composer from the interpreter, the general assumption being that it was of more value to create than to interpret. [One influential performer] expressed an extreme version of this belief when he said that immediately after an orchestra plans a piece of music, the room should be darkened and a picture of the composer displayed on a screen, which the audience could then applaud. [...] Well into the 1900s, the periodical *Musical*

American regularly featured articles that solidified the idea that women were incapable of musical composition, with titles like “Women Composers’ Limitations” and “Women Composers: Walter Damrosch Doubts If They Will Ever Achieve Greatness.” (Macleod 2015, 62–63)

As such, they were, like mediums, often reduced to props, vessels, or automatons through which the messages and creations of (often male) others were transmitted to audiences. Only in a handful of cases were the women themselves credited with and commended for the original creative work they did as accompanists for the silent film, and they were exceptions.

Cinema organists were further disembodied by their own industry by the emphasis placed on the instruments themselves. Numerous reports in *American Organist* that mention women in cinema jobs describe the instruments—make, model, number of manuals (keyboards), and other features—installed in the theaters, ignoring the performer’s musical selections, playing abilities, or other artistic issues. The American Guild of Organists, at least, was more interested on keeping current with what theaters had what kinds of organs than who was playing them and how. We know, for example, that Gertrude Dowd played a Wurlitzer at the Albee Theater, that Grace Madden played a three manual Moeller at Loew’s Brevoort Theater (“General Notes” 1927, 210, 212), and that Josephine Whitney of New York played a Miller instrument at her job at an unnamed theater (“General Notes” 1920, 222), but the *American Organist* did not deem it worthwhile to discuss their musical selections, accompanying philosophies, or recent activities, all of which it did when it profiled male performers.

Women who played in ensembles were widely considered novelties. Their appearances in cinemas were publicized, but press coverage of women in instrumental or conducting positions in theaters generally focused on how unusual the woman or women in question were, focusing on costumes, for example, in all-women’s orchestras, or on how such women maintained both performance careers and their home life. An article on the film *The Good Little Devil*, for example, essentially classified an all-woman orchestra as a “stunt” (an event or element of an event designed to be a curiosity and create marketing excitement) for the film’s premiere: “The large stage of the Belasco Theatre was crowded with floral decorations, where were seated a large orchestra, comprised entirely of women, who rendered appropriate music that harmonized with the picture” (“Belasco” 1913). No names of the performers were given, and no music was identified. Another news story in *The Film Daily* told of a similar stunt, in which, while showing films that included information on the role of women in the military, the cinema owner “has made arrangements for a showing of the picture at one of the big Broadway houses and during its run the entire staff of the theatre will be composed of women, including the publicity staff, orchestra, and attendants” (“Rapf’s” 1918). Again, no specific women were mentioned. The conundrum of women’s dis/embodiment in the séance and the cinema meant that even as women were championed as the most appropriate people to serve as mediums and photoplayers, their actual labor was relatively invisible.

Critical reviews of photoplayers are scarce, and while spirit mediums were often in the press, period sources describe the physical appearance and family background of the mediums, also citing famous people the medium had contacted or had as sitters. Some

descriptions included the medium's process—going into a trance or a cabinet—and practices, such as contacting a spirit guide, channeling the voices of spirits, or doing cold readings of objects, but they only rarely mentioned the performance as a performance. Instead, contemporary media reported on séances as they did fires, graduation ceremonies, and news of other events: with apparent facts, but no criticism or analysis. Mildred Fitzpatrick, one of Chicago's busiest and best-advertised cinema organists, was reported merely to have "played on the pipe organ," at a show ("*Tribune to Give*" 1920), just as Mrs. Lena Z.'s séance included "the usual phonograph solo and singing of songs by mezzo-sopranos and bassos," after which Mrs. Z paced the floor, guessed the author's first name, and made several predictions (Lethem 1920).

Because of the lack of critical structure, mediums and film accompanists were able to develop supernatural entertainments as they saw fit rather than trying to fulfill expectations. They did not have to offer new or thoughtful interpretations of works audiences already knew, or live up to the spectacle of nationally known professionals in their fields. Instead, they could invent their arts as they went along, and could continue to develop those arts as technology and tastes matured and changed. Mediums and cinema accompanists selected their own music for performances, and the connections they made between subject matter and music led to permanent musical significations of the supernatural that were adopted by performers regardless of gender.

Confluences

Séances and the scoring of films were jobs in which women, working under similar conditions, had critical input. Individuals in each profession helped shape the expectations for performances in these fields of entertainment, creating tacit standards and expectations for both séances and the musical accompaniment of moving pictures. Because women in both fields functioned first as authenticators of morality, they were able to develop the creative aspects of their work autonomously; at the same time, this meant that their influences on supernatural entertainments have been unrecognized from both popular and scholarly points of view. Close study of the power dynamics and practices of the séance and silent cinema, however, reveals that women working as spirit mediums and photoplayers selected their own sonic and musical accompaniments to represent the presence of the spirits in both the séance and on film. Female mediums chose the hymns they used, the tunes the spirits played and on what instruments, the records the spirits selected for the phonograph, and any other sounds used by the dead to communicate with the living. Photoplayers did the same: even in cases in which films were shipped to theaters with cue sheets, the women in charge of creating the scores for films edited or ignored such suggestions, relying on their own knowledge of what music and sound effects would work best to accompany the action or mood onscreen. Together, mediums and photoplayers developed a set of sonic and musical signifiers for the supernatural and supernatural entertainments.

There is little question that many of the musicians who rose to prominence as composers for Hollywood movies in the early sound era had at some point attended a film in which music influenced by the séance was used to signify the supernatural. In numerous cases of music for the silent spirit film, it was female mediums who had

originated the sounds and music, and female photoplayers who used, elaborated on, or further developed that material into scores for a wider public. Although there were more musical works for the cinematic supernatural published by men, women accompanying spirit films were in charge of making the selections for their scores, and applied their aesthetic judgment in deciding that those works were representational enough of the medium's art to communicate the right atmosphere or setting to an audience. As music magazines and journals began to publish more works by women, those chosen to appear in print often referenced areas in which women had dominion—including the nursery, the schoolhouse, and the séance. In addition, because women, when encouraged to compose, were encouraged to do so in the style of the short, characteristic, technically moderate manner of the works that had been prescribed as appropriate for them to play, their works were frequently selected by female photoplayers as appropriate for cinema work: short, easy to learn, and well-suited for setting a mood or describing a time, place, or character.

Music for Cinematic Spirits

Spirit films—also called “spirit dramas” or “spirit comedies” in newspapers of the period—were fairly numerous. John T. Soister, who has indexed early American science fiction, fantasy, and horror films, has written, “While not quite a dime a dozen, pictures dealing with Spiritualism were fairly plentiful during the late 1910s and 1920s” (Soister et al. 2012, 36). Soister identifies dozens of silent films that involve spiritualist séances, ghosts, and the trappings thereof. Period newspaper articles make note of the popularity of “psychic” films and describe the related events and music surrounding them, including séances and musical performances. Although it is difficult to match any particular pieces of music with individual films, extant materials show that spirit films were often accompanied by “special music,” and were often accompanied by women. Advertisements reveals that the Tully Sisters’ Orchestra accompanied the 1922 film *Whispering Shadows*, and Adele V. Sullivan’s music library indicates that she accompanied spirit films *The Thirteenth Chair* (1929) and *Halfway to Heaven* (1929), two “part-talking” films that had mediums as characters. Hazel Burnett’s music library similarly includes music for accompanying spirit films, such as pieces for the “fantastique,” witches, “enchantment,” and “visions.” Handwritten indicia show that she used Edward MacDowell’s “Will O’ the Wisp” and excerpts from *Der Freischütz* for at least one motion picture that would have involved spirits.

Silent film accompaniments depicting real-life activities and events often referenced the existing music used for those events: parades were accompanied by marches; children were accompanied by nursery rhymes, and so on. Thus films involving ghosts required music that matched public expectations for what ghosts sounded like, as established by earlier stage works and the sounds of the séance. At séances, ghosts spoke and sang through spirit trumpets—long cones that muted and distorted sound (Connor, in Buse and Stott 2002, 212). Spirits playing instruments—either themselves, through unseen means, or by taking control of a medium’s body and using it to play—was common. Violins emitted both pleasant and eerie sounds, the latter being created by playing tremolo, or a very rapid repetition of the same pitch, and *sul ponticello*, or near the

bridge of the instrument (Adorno and Eisler 1947). Strummed guitars and other stringed instruments signified ghostly appearances and interaction with technology. Mediums used glass harmonicas to signal the presence of spirits and to communicate their messages; sudden sounds, such as the breaking of glass or sudden low noises also contributed to the soundscape of the séance (Mannoni and Crangle 2000, 141). Spirits also engaged with mechanical forms of musical reproduction, playing or interfering with phonographs and music boxes.

Music for spirit films was relatively easy to source and replicate. There was a large body of preexisting music that could create the sound of the Spiritualist church and séance as well as new works. Preexisting music for spirit films including hymns or pastoral songs, indicating a Spiritualist service or individual. In addition to *The Spiritualist Hymnal*, accompanists could use such works as *Messages from spirit land in song form*, published in 1910 (Beebe and Legg 1910); *The Spirit Minstrel* (Packard and Loveland 1860); *The Golden Echoes* (Tucker 1897), and many more books of music used in séances or services or attributed to spirits. Screenings of *Do the Dead Talk?* (1920) were accompanied by séances by practicing mediums before and after the film as well as a choir that sang spiritualist songs (“Do the Dead Talk,” 1921; “At the Majestic” 1921).

Just as mediums performing in séances borrowed from the operatic and vaudeville stages, where tremolos and high pitches or harmonics on the strings had been used for a long time as signifiers of the otherworldly, so did cinema accompanists. Celebrated film accompanist Edith Lang, writing in 1920, described using the organ to create raps, unclear voices, and stingers—sudden loud chords—to represent breaking glass and other sudden movements or appearances on the part of a spirit. She and George West also recommended accompanists used organ stops and instruments that sounded like the instruments used in séances: by the late 1910s, the timbres of certain instruments and organ stops, like the flute, clarinet, and horn, had come to represent the supernatural (Lang and West 1920: 54-55). A spirit strumming the guitar or playing a run on the piano in the séance was transformed in the cinema into several quick grace notes; the coming and going of spirits at a séance represented by rapid and dramatic shifts in dynamics; and the sounds of muted brass suggested distant heralds from the afterlife. Because of widespread notions that black Americans were more susceptible than whites to believing in the supernatural, including “‘conjure’ men and ‘spiritualists’,” accompanists may also have used black spirituals to suggest a character’s belief in ghosts (Reed 2003, 98).

Film accompanists often used both popular and classical songs, even when there was no vocalist to sing them. They selected songs that were popular locally or nationally, or had been in existence long enough for the public to become familiar with them. Songs about ghosts, both humorous and serious, made their way into the photoplayer’s repertoire. Franz Schubert’s “Erl King” was recommended frequently for ghost films, even if the ghosts were benevolent and not threatening like the phantom king of the title, as was Robert Schumann’s “Widmung,” in which the narrator sings of love beyond death (Leonard 2018b). Composers writing characteristic pieces favored by cinema accompanists and those established as cinema composers contributed instrumental works like Cora Salisbury’s “Ghost Dance: a Dainty Novelette” (1911); “The Phantom Melody,” by Albert Ketelbey (1912); Mathilde Bilbro’s “Ghost Tales” (1918); Charles Tomlinson Griffes’s

“Phantoms” (1918); and N. Louise Wright’s “The Ghost” (1924). For showings of *The Avenging Conscience* (1914), soprano Edna Little selected songs to accompany the film for every performance (“Mishler Theatre” 1915).

Between 1900 and 1927, more than 100 pieces with “ghost” in the title were published (not including references to the “Holy Ghost”), most of them for piano and all of them suitable for use in cinema accompaniment. Many of these were by women, and were sold as individual pieces and also published in magazines like *The Etude* and *Melody Magazine*. Composers—many of them vaudeville and cinema accompanists—N. Louise Wright, Cora Salisbury, Anna Caldwell, Mathilde Bilbro, Mamie Williams, Kathleen Lockhart Manning, J. Rosamund Johnson, Kathleen Kelly, Freida Peycke, Maud Wingate, Marie Crosby, and others contributed to this body of works. These pieces include various musical signifiers of the ghostly gleaned from séances and the stage, including rapping or knocking, a hymn-like section use of a minor key, tremolo, motifs emulating the strumming of strings, and stingers. Works for ensembles also include calls for special string and brass effects to emulate the sounds of séances and the presence of spirits.

Numerous works also reference ghosts playing instruments, as they did in séances. Composers developed a ragtime subgenre that depicted the musical abilities of spirits, including pieces like Ted Snyder and Bert Kalmar’s “The Ghost of the Violin” (1912); “The Ghost of the Saxophone” by F. Henri Klickmann (1917); and Fred Rose’s “The Phantom of the Blues” (1927). In 1911, an article in *The Etude* suggested that for Halloween, piano students be encouraged to learn a variety of pieces referencing the supernatural that were widely available, including Horvath’s “Mystic Procession” (published in *The Etude* in 1910); “Ghosts” by Schutte; “By Lantern Light” by Rockwell (published in *The Etude* in 1911) and “Will-o-the-Wisp” by Behr (Watson 1911, 699). Cinema accompanists often used music recommended by or published in *The Etude* as part of their scores, and these and other recommended pieces fit with an emerging collection of attributes for cinematic ghosts. They were designed to create suspense, and did so through the use of mimetic musical shapes and gestures. These might imitate someone creeping along on tiptoes, creaking stairs, finding an open window, the presence of a breeze or the wind, heartbeats, trembling, and other physical elements. Such pieces were used by a number of female photoplayers, as seen in the music libraries of Claire H. Hamack, Adele V. Sullivan, and Hazell Burnett.

Sullivan and Hamack’s music collections contain numerous pieces to be used in conjunction with the supernatural, including several of the pieces listed above. Hamack’s repertoire also included pieces titled “Meditation;” “Ominous Forebodings;” “Dance of the Devils,” which was specifically intended for accompanying “sprites;” “Enchanted Forest;” and various *mysteriosos*. Sullivan’s library contained music for “celestial visions;” “death bed scenes;” “magic;” “mystique;” and the “fantastique;” and works called “Haunted House;” “Lure of Souls;” “Mysterious Event” (marked for “Foreboding” and “Eastern mysticism”); “Queer Antics” (for “phantom”); as well as multiple *mysteriosos*. As in many music libraries for silent film, the pieces in these libraries are not arranged in a particular order and do not always bear markings that enable researchers to connect them with specific films. Burnett owned additional pieces that could have been used to accompany spirit films, including “By Moonlight;” “After Sundown;” and “Moonlight Sketches.”

The spirit medium and the cinema musician used their once-limiting training to develop a world of work for which they alone were particularly skilled, and made themselves indispensable within their professional spheres. In doing so, they developed a rich and deep body of sounds and music signifying the supernatural that extended from the séance to the repertoire for silent films. Because they were not expected to follow any particular existing sonic conventions in their performances but were trusted as inherently capable of selecting the perfect sounds and pieces from existing sources and creating original soundscapes, mediums and film accompanists developed and expanded sonic representations of kindly or mischievous ghosts. These representations were widely circulated and heard; when the men who became the celebrated film composers of the early sound era went to the movies as children, it is likely that many of the film accompaniments they heard were those by women. When sound arrived, spirit films like *Topper* (1937) were supplied with soundtracks that emulated the scores silent spirit films had received, with musical motifs and effects right out of Lang's recommendations and the compositions that emulated the soundscapes created by women for séances. These elements created by mediums and cinema musicians are still present in the scores for films with ghosts today: we can hear nostalgia and humor in the scores for movies such as *Ghost* (1990), *The Haunted Mansion* (2003), and *Cabin in the Woods* (2012). Music for cinematic spirits today bears the soundscapes created by canny mediums and photoplayers a hundred years in the past.

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