

HE WRITES! HE SCORES!

By Rick Peterson

The classic silent film “The White Sister” will be silent no more, thanks to the musical talents of **Garth Neustadter ’10**.

For the second time in a year, the Lawrence University senior has put his composer’s pen to work on behalf of Turner Classic Movies, writing a 134-minute musical score for the 1923 movie starring silent screen legend Lillian Gish.

As part of an ongoing restoration of silent films, Warner Brothers has been converting the original “The White Sister” into digital format. When the studio went looking for someone to write a musical score for it — most silent films were originally shown with live music performed in the theatre — it turned to newcomer Neustadter rather than the usual cadre of composers in Hollywood, where union regulations have made it increasingly expensive to produce film scores.

Neustadter was on TCM’s radar screen after earning first-prize honors (second place behind the grand prize winner) in the 2007 Young Film Composers Competition. Sponsored by the cable television network, the 8th annual international competition drew more than 800 participants, each of whom had to score a 90-second clip from the 1924 silent movie “Beau Brummell.”

“This is the first score Turner Classic Movies has recorded outside of Hollywood,” said Neustadter. “I tried to match the quality of sound they’re used to getting for these projects.”

“The White Sister,” the first American movie to be filmed overseas (Italy), was originally scheduled to be the film project for the 2008 TCM composer’s competition, but last year’s writer’s strike put the annual event on hold. Some gentle lobbying by Neustadter with contacts he had made previously resulted in an August request asking if he would like to tackle the entire film, not just a short clip.

“I was totally surprised,” said Neustadter, who is pursuing a double major in violin and voice performance, not composition. “I never anticipated it would work out the way it did. It turned into a great opportunity.”

And a time-consuming one, too. Beginning in early September when he received a copy of the film, Neustadter devoted 10 hours a day to the score to meet an end-of-December deadline. He took a reduced class load Term I.

“I knew I would need all the time available to finish it,” said Neustadter, 22, of Manitowoc, Wis., who conservatively estimates he logged more than 1,000 hours on the project.

Before writing a single note, he prepared for the project by reading the book on which the film is based, researched the history of the film’s settings and time period, read several books on film scoring, architecture, and composition, and studied numerous professional orchestral scores.

In the process of writing his score, Neustadter wound up watching the film some 300 times. Along the way, he could “hear” the characters “talking” to him. “Characters were explaining what kind of music they needed on screen or revealing what type of emotion they needed,” he said.





Left: A scene from "The White Sister," starring Lillian Gish and Ronald Colman

Neustadter's previous composition experience involved writing one to two minutes of music a week. Given his time frame for this project, he was forced to compose two to three minutes of music a day.

"To write more than two hours of music was a daunting task. I couldn't afford to have any bouts of writer's block," said Neustadter, who won two *DownBeat* magazine awards for composition while in high school. "The difficult part of writing for film is that all the music has to synch with the exact part of the film so that it clicks with every nuance. When you watch these silent films, it's amazing just how silent they really are. You really need the right music to tell the story and pull the film along."

Adding to the overall challenge of the project were several scenes in the film involving musicians. Neustadter wrote what he felt they were playing, including an up-tempo waltz in a gypsy style. "I had to convince the audience that the music they heard is what the musicians on the screen were actually playing," he explained.

"The size and scope of this project would challenge any professional film composer, let alone a heavily engaged college student like Garth," said **Fred Sturm '73**, Kimberly-Clark Professor of Music and director of jazz studies at Lawrence — and an award-winning composer himself — who has served as a mentor to Neustadter on the project. "Professionals strive to compose about two minutes of film music per day, and most contemporary feature films typically use about 45 minutes of music. Garth wrote almost three times that amount."

Sturm, who taught film scoring for 10 years while at the Eastman School of Music, said Neustadter "is right there with the best young writers I've taught. He's got the talent and discipline to be a superb film composer. Folks are going to be amazed by the beauty and quality of his work."

The restoration team originally wanted only a piano score for the "The White Sister," which, at two hours and 14 minutes, is nearly twice the length of most silent movies, but told Neustadter he could add additional instrumentation if he wanted to. He quickly took them up on their offer, soliciting the musical talents of nearly 20 Lawrence conservatory faculty and students to perform. "I wanted to do as much with it as I could," said Neustadter. "I felt the film really needed a full orchestral score."

Neustadter laid down the tracks for the score in December during marathon recording sessions in the Lawrence Memorial Chapel, sometimes in the middle of the night to accommodate the building's heavy use. In a race against the clock, he literally put the finishing touches on the project hours before his Dec. 31 deadline. TCM has tentatively scheduled to air the restored version of "The White Sister" with Neustadter's soundtrack Sunday, May 31.

"It was an enormous challenge to tackle this project from start to finish in the time frame I had," said Neustadter. "Along the way, I learned it's good not to encounter writer's block, that I truly enjoy film score writing, that professional writers employ assistants for good reason, and that there are never enough hours in the day."

"I was very fortunate to get to do something on this scale," he added. "As a young composer, it's so tough to find these kinds of opportunities. It's a great start for me." ■

SILENT NO MORE

It seems that scoring silent films for the early 20th century is becoming au courant at Lawrence.

Alexander Boostrom '09 recently finished composing music for Georges Méliès' 1909 silent film, "Le Locataire Diabolique." The film is six minutes, 10 seconds long, and Boostrom's classically orchestrated score runs throughout. Boostrom said he hopes to pursue a career in film scoring after graduate school, and this project was "a great way to get my feet wet."

For a *Senior Experience* project, **David Werfelmann '06**, composed 12 minutes of music to accompany the 1926 silent movie "The Black Pirate," starring Douglas Fairbanks. To record his original soundtrack, Werfelmann conducted 52 of his fellow student musicians. The soundtrack was then edited to fit the action scenes of the silent film. Werfelmann said the project "combined my passion for filmmaking with my love of music."

To see an excerpt of Werfelmann's project, visit: morelight.lawrence.edu/seniorexperience.aspx