GLAMOUR AND THE TRAMP
BY IAN GREY

This September the Philharmonic performs two contrasting programs that feature film music: one of Italian glamour, the other celebrating Charlie Chaplin’s most enduring creation.

Charles Chaplin couldn’t have survived his childhood without music. Born into grinding poverty in London in 1889, he suffered the deaths of his father, a vocalist and chronic alcoholic, when he was 10, and of his mother, a singer, from catastrophic mental illness, at 14. Yet this was when the often-homeless adolescent Chaplin, who was scratching out a living as a vaudeville comedy and pantomime performer, experienced a life-changing epiphany while listening to street performers playing a popular tune. “I had never been conscious of melody before,” he recalled, “but this was so beautiful and lyrical ... I forgot my despair.”

In Charlie Chaplin’s Modern Times: The Tramp at 100, September 19 and 20, Timothy Brock, the foremost authority on Chaplin’s musical compositions, will lead the Philharmonic through the score for the auteur’s masterpiece, Modern Times (1936), as the complete film is screened. Also on the program is Brock’s own music for Kid Auto Races at Venice, the 1914 short that introduced Chaplin’s iconic creation, The Little Tramp, the everyman with the toothbrush moustache, floppy shoes, and bowler hat.

Last season’s debut of THE ART OF THE SCORE: Film Week at the Philharmonic included Alan Gilbert leading the Orchestra alongside film in hit performances of the score to 2001: A Space Odyssey. This year he is again presiding over music for film in La Dolce Vita: The Music of Italian Cinema, presented in collaboration with Sugarmusic and with images selected in collaboration with Istituto Luce Cinecittà. The first performance, September 16, is the 2014–15 season’s Opening Gala Concert. That night and the following are multimedia evenings that feature a combination of animated graphics and film clips prepared by the award-winning painter, set designer, and visual artist Giuseppe Ragazzini.

Headlined by Philharmonic favorites ranging from close associates — including soprano Renée Fleming, the soloist on the first Opening Gala of Alan Gilbert’s tenure, and violinist Joshua Bell, who is also on the Philharmonic Board — to more recent associate, singer/songwriter Josh Groban, the program celebrates the influential, iconic, and instantly recognizable scores from Italian cine-music masters such as...
whose pratfalls, pantomime, and empathy beat the most insurmountable of problems.

The Modern Times score shows how Chaplin’s music can flip despair into inspirational sentiment and even comedy. The film’s dehumanized, mechanistic world is mirrored by jaunty yet faintly sinister themes heavy on clangorous percussion. It’s pure Chaplin in that the same score finds room for big-hearted certainty with the generous strains of “Smile,” a tune that would endure through renditions as varied as those by Nat “King” Cole and Michael Jackson.

The most amazing thing was how this music was made. Although Chaplin could play piano, cello, and violin, he could not read or write a note of music. It was only the cumulative clout afforded him as an international superstar that allowed him to become accepted as a composer. He had risen quickly from a $150-per-week contract worker with Keystone Studios in 1913 to a $5 million player for The Gold Rush in 1925. And even as he resisted “talkies,” a flood of chatter — he understood the medium’s musical value immediately.

Another collaborator, Ray Rasch, explains why this music is as inspiring as The Little Tramp himself. “You think first, it’s musically wrong, but he insists it can be done, and eventually you find a way of doing it, only to agree with him. He doesn’t know, [he] just feels, but it’s fabulous!”

Nino Rota, Ennio Morricone, and Luis Enrique Bacalov (who together have created music for Giuseppe Tornatore’s Cinema Paradiso and Michael Radford’s Il Postino).

The Music Director will conduct music from Academy Award–winning films including Federico Fellini’s 8½ and La Dolce Vita and Tornatore’s Cinema Paradiso. A variation of the same program will be performed the following evening.

The Gala finds the Philharmonic pursuing its recent practice of presenting great cinematic music in vibrant live performances, rather than relegating it to inferior recordings and aging prints. From the works of Miklós Rózsa conducted by John Williams to the live performance of Philip Glass’s score for Koyaanisqatsi while the film was screened, the Orchestra has dedicated itself to creating a living home for great cinema music and a permanent can’t-miss date on New York’s cineaste calendar.

Or, in Mr. Gilbert’s words: “There’s so much great music written for film, and to hear it played live by the New York Philharmonic is simply an amazing experience. The chance to make it come alive and paint pictures for the audiences is something I relish and love.”

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