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Pare Lorentz's American Beauties

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The term "silent film" is a convenient but slippery catchphrase to describe movies that were made in the years before Warner Bros. introduced spoken dialogue in the late 1920s. In fact, early films were rarely silent, but accompanied by music of considerable sophistication, played on the piano or organ or by full orchestra. No less distinguished a musician than Camille Saint-Saens wrote for the "silent" film; so did composers Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud and Dmitri Shostakovich.

The two short documentaries by the late poet, critic and filmmaker Pare Lorentz -- "The Plow That Broke the Plains" (1936) and "The River" (1938) -- which the American Film Institute will present today and tomorrow at its AFI Silver Theatre and Cultural Center in Silver Spring, are not technically silent films, as both feature narration and some sound effects, dubbed in after the fact. And yet their idiosyncratic twinning of music and image, combined with their lack of dialogue, infuses them with the spirit of both the silent film and the spectacular, plotless avant-garde syntheses that composer Philip Glass and filmmaker Godfrey Reggio would explore in works such as "Koyaanisqatsi" (1983) and "Powaqqatsi" (1988) half a century later.

It was Lorentz's decision to collaborate with the American composer Virgil Thomson (1896-1989) that elevated these films from visually arresting but decidedly of-its-time documentary realism into the realm of totemic American art. Thomson took Lorentz's images and set them to music that was both accessible and sophisticated, combining cowboy songs, bugle calls, Baptist hymns, hints of jazz and tangy dissonance, and then setting them all for saxophone, banjo, harmonium and orchestra. For these AFI performances, Thomson's scores will be performed live by a 40-piece orchestra, the Post-Classical Ensemble, under the musical direction of Angel Gil-Ordoñez, and the narration will be read by local actor Floyd King. Immediately after the showings, there will be an onstage discussion of the Lorentz-Thomson partnership, featuring Andy Trudeau from National Public Radio, composer Charles Fussell, filmmaker George Stoney and Post-Classical Ensemble Artistic Director Joseph Horowitz.



"The River" is a tale of the Mississippi that ends with the birth of the Tennessee Valley Authority. (American Film Institute)

It was the U.S. government itself that sponsored these two films -- \$6,000 from the Department of Agriculture for "The Plow That Broke the Plains" and, after "Plow" had been released and admired, a full \$50,000 for "The River" (the latter sum raised by undersecretary Rexford Tugwell in a half-hour, through a phone call to President Franklin D. Roosevelt).

To call "The Plow That Broke the Plains" and "The River" propaganda is to belabor the obvious. Both were lyrical exaltations of the New Deal, paid for by the New Deal -- the first a plea for desperate farmers and their families in the Great Plains, the latter a history of the Mississippi River culminating in the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority. They serve an agenda and serve it well but will seem to many rather starry-eyed and promotional to count as successful history (although the Baltimore Sun said "Plow" included "more serious drama in this truthful record of the soil than in all the 'Covered Wagons' and 'Big Trails' produced by the commercial cinema").

Judged on their artistic merits, the films make a far stronger impression. Thomson's music is wonderfully fluid and expressive, and the images Lorentz presents -- whether the Mississippi roaring along from Minnesota to New Orleans or miles upon miles of parched desert grasses -- are hauntingly evocative. (How strange to see a paddle-wheel riverboat as a form of serious transportation, rather than a day-tripper's excuse for some gambling and beer.) The texts, by Lorentz himself, combine Gertrude Stein-ian reiteration with exuberant list-making in the manner of Walt Whitman (although one of these, which refers, in stentorian fashion, to "the Wachita, the Wichita, the Red and the Yazoo" rivers sounds more like a declamation from Groucho Marx).

Thomson has left a detailed description of the working method he evolved with Lorentz. "I played to Pare on the piano all the material that I planned to use and got his acceptance of it before composing with it," he told Robert L. Snyder, who was then a professor at Kansas State University, in 1961. "After Pare had cut his film, I composed my musical sections in accordance with his timing and played them for him on the piano in front of a projection of the film. After acceptance by him in this form, I orchestrated the complete music and it was recorded.

"At this point arrived the event which Pare had been working toward and waiting for all the time. He likes to cut his film to an existing musical background. But since a background cannot be composed, orchestrated and recorded until the film has been cut and the lengths of the shots and sequences fixed, Pare has to go through a cutting for the visual narrative, but his heart is not fully in it. When he gets the final recorded music track, then he goes back to the cutting room, finds inspiration for expressive visual narration through the musical detail, and wholly recuts his film."

In short, the film fed the music and the music fed the film -- a true collaboration.

Lorentz went on to make several more films, but none was as powerful and influential as these first ventures. Upon Lorentz's death in March 1992, the radical historian Patrick Renshaw, writing in the London newspaper the Independent, noted that "no other

filmmaker has been able to secure such a high international reputation as Pare Lorentz did on the strength of just two films.

"Since first seeing them 40 years ago at the Walthamstow Film Society I have been haunted by their images of the devastation caused by natural calamities, and the heroic efforts made during the New Deal to provide answers," Renshaw continued. "Generations of my students watch them enthralled. Other feature films -- John Ford's version of Steinbeck's novel 'The Grapes of Wrath,' or Elia Kazan's 'Wild River' -- help us to understand the same issues. But neither does so with such imagination and economy."

As for Thomson, he went on to compose for another half-century, while distinguishing himself as perhaps America's wittiest and most perceptive homegrown music critic during his tenure at the New York Herald Tribune from 1940 to 1954. In 1948, for the first and only time in the history of the Pulitzer Prize, the composition award went to a film score -- Robert J. Flaherty's "Louisiana Story," with music by Virgil Thomson.

The Plow That Broke the Plains and *The River* will be presented by the Post-Classical Ensemble today and tomorrow at 3 p.m. at the AFI Silver Theatre and Cultural Center, 8633 Colesville Road, Silver Spring. Call 301-495-6720 or visit <http://www.AFI.com/Silver> . Tickets are \$25 and available online.

 **baltimoresun.com**
<http://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/music/balto.music014jun14,1,2549322.story?coll=bal-artslife-music>

Music Column

Livening up the local scene

By Tim Smith
Sun Music Critic

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The continuing struggle to reinvigorate the classical-music scene has led to some interesting and rewarding new vehicles for the art form.

A notable example in Baltimore is the Soulful Symphony, founded in 2000. This orchestra of African-American musicians plays an imaginative mix of repertoire, much of it freshly written to the strong beat of the contemporary world.

In the Washington area, the Post-Classical Ensemble, formed in 2001, has been livening things up with an embrace of a broad cultural spectrum, including film, dance, folk music and poetry.

In one program earlier this season, the group celebrated the vibrant music of Mexican composers; another offered traditional Chinese music and a chamber version of Gustav Mahler's Chinese poetry-inspired *Das Lied von der Erde*.

On Saturday, the group presented its audience with a rare opportunity to see two acclaimed New Deal-era documentaries by Pare Lorentz, performed with live orchestral accompaniment at the American Film Institute's Silver Theatre in Silver Spring.

The Plow That Broke the Plains (1936) studies the slow erosion of the Great Plains that led to the catastrophic 1930s drought. *The River* (1938) traces the equally worrisome history of the Mississippi River and offers a spirited defense of the Roosevelt administration's dam-building efforts.

Post-Classical's artistic director Joseph Horowitz, author of this year's provocative must-read *Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall*, devised the event as a means to revive appreciation of the scores Virgil Thomson wrote for these films, scores that can't make their full impact in the original mono soundtracks.

The documentaries rose far above the slick and shallow level of most propaganda. Thomson's contributions helped in that elevation, his distinctive brand of Americana, leaner and a little rawer than Aaron Copland's, underlining their uncluttered visual beauty.

Angel Gil-Ordonez, music director of the Post-Classical Ensemble, led a tightly in-synch performance that unlocked the score's expressive potency. The original, often quite poetic narration of both films was also performed live, delivered by Floyd King, a veteran of the Washington Shakespeare Company.