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*Composer Notes on The Spanish Dancer Score*  
by Bill Ware

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In creating the score for *The Spanish Dancer*, I found myself with a rare opportunity to create a musical composition that provides the complete sonic palette for a full-length feature silent film. I wanted to bring a modern movie sensibility with multiple layers of sounds woven into my score. The sound palette for the score was created by combining period instruments like harpsichord, and exotic instruments like the oud, with Romani-gypsy themes and elements of jazz that surprise the audience and enhance the comedic drama of this wonderful film.

I began my effort by first watching the film in silence with no prior research. My wife, Dana and I watched and took notes, chuckling at the comic elements and riveted by the strong female characters and the male roles as buffoons. After the first viewing, I began researching the film and learned that the dominant female roles may stem from the contributions of co-screenwriters Jane Mathis and Beulah Marie Dix. I also read how the original concept of the film was to feature Rudolph Valentino, but he was suspended by Paramount Studios because of contract disputes, and the film was reimagined to feature Pola Negri as the lead instead.

According to film reviewer Jason Day, the Eye Filmmuseum collected several disparate prints from around the world, of varying lengths and quality, and after locating the original treatment script, they discovered that what they assumed was a poor and fairly standard costume drama was actually a saucy comedy.

In his review on [Cinesocial](#), Day wrote:

Whether painter Velazquez valiantly tries to capture the King's portrait with increasing desperation as the monarch's concentration is increasingly interrupted, or when Moreno jokes about impending death after his nuptials or Beery's merry monarch satirizes his own insatiable lustings, the film is peppered with a bawdily sarcastic wit throughout

My score attempts to articulate the humor, drama, suspense, and action, all through musical instruments, song, themes, and accents.

I approached the score to this silent film with the concept of four layers to the composition. First is the underscoring, which includes the songs and pieces of music that enhance the emotions and drama playing out in the video. The second layer is the source music, which represents the music heard as an element of the scene, (such as the eight guitar players playing music in the first dance scene). On top of those two layers are the sound effects, or the sonic representation of actions or motions taking place in the film, such as wind, animals, body movement, doors opening and closing, etc.... Then finally, the fourth layer is the music representing the dialogue of the characters when they speak to each other on screen or through intertitles.

As I worked on these layers, I became conscious of the intensity of it all, and to be mindful of the audience's capacity to absorb the score without losing the visual elements, I began to adjust the mix to provide ducking during the inter-titles (screen narrations) and in the transitions between indoors and outdoors, and from scene to scene.

The Music – underscoring and source music alike — are built upon a set of my compositions from my archive. To set the right tone for the music, I immersed myself in study of baroque music of the 1600s and arranged my compositions in this style. I also explored Romani music, listening to a variety of inspirational examples, such as the Gypsy sounds featured in *Latcho Drom* (1993).

In my experience, all films have a rhythm or pulse — and *The Spanish Dancer* is no different — as I had learned that the editing was done to the rhythm of music. To ensure that my music respected the rhythm of *The Spanish Dancer*, I carefully watched and measured the film numerous times to create a tempo map that I could use to mold my songs into the rhythm of the film without suffering any damage to the musical lines or form of each song. I let the movie tell me what to write, by considering the hints in the story. For example, like the eight guitarists, there were other numerical cues that guided my writing. Eleven chimes open the festival party which occurs at eleven o'clock — and the twelve bullets in Lazarillo's hand after Bazan is shot are represented by twelve bells. I also looked for elements in the film that I could have fun with by inserting musical quotes from the American songbook.

One such quote being “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” when the king attempts to “blow smoke” by lying to Bazan in the closing scene.

For source music, where musicians appear on the screen, I wrote parts in the score to represent the music I imagined they were playing. I then thought about how each dominant character could be represented in the score, both in terms of the underscoring and the fourth layer of dialogue between the characters. The orchestration is created to represent the characters on the screen, and the dialogue between characters is represented by those dominant instruments trading lines in the arrangement, as would two jazz improvisers trading lines in a solo.

To decide upon the instrumentation for *The Spanish Dancer*, I referred to my score for the 1926 silent animated film, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, which features my quintet that I call the Achmedians (with yours truly on vibraphone, and Steven Bernstein (trumpet) John Murchison (gimbre), Sam Bardfeld (violin) and Philip Mayer (percussion)). My *Achmed* score was centered around John Murchison’s performance of the gimbre, a three-stringed hollow-bodied bass lute common in north Africa. Similarly, the score for *The Spanish Dancer* score features John’s masterful playing on the oud, an ancient stringed instrument similar to the lute. I chose the oud, with its exotic and mellow tone, to evoke the strength, beauty, and independence of Maritana, the Gypsy band leader, fortune teller and star of *The Spanish Dancer*.



Bill Ware and the Achmedians performing his score to *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* at Roulette in Brooklyn in 2021

Steven Bernstein on trumpets represents the voice of Bazan with a variety of timbres, using slide trumpet and occasionally mute. The court characters are represented by a grouping of virtual woodwind instruments (plugins by Native Instruments) that are intentionally piercing and annoying. In some scenes, Steven and Sam Bardfeld on solo violin give a voice to the young apprentice, and Sam and Sara Wollan on cello are used, along with additional virtual string instruments to portray drama in emotional and suspenseful scenes. John Wechsler’s flute is a dominating instrument in the source music, and Rez Abbasi’s electric guitar provides an out of worldly vibe in occasional scenes, as my nod to Ennio Morricone’s iconic spaghetti westerns scores. Philip Mayer’s middle eastern percussion provides an exotic flavor throughout the score, and Bobby Previte’s drum set provides swing for the bizarre baroque jazz set at Bazan’s castle and action throughout the festival of Madonna scene. Rhythmic clapping and a sample of Kazu Kumagai’s tap dancing represents the gypsy band and brass choirs are used for the royalty in entry calls.

I am truly grateful to my dear friends Dennis Doros and Amy Heller for the opportunity to create a musical score for Milestone Films and Eye Filmmuseum’s *The Spanish Dancer*.

#### Credits:

Composed, engineered and mastered by Bill Ware  
Engineering Advisor: Hugo Dwyer  
Bill Ware, vibraphone, midi orchestra and acoustic bass  
Rez Abbasi, electric guitar  
Sam Bardfeld, violin  
Steven Bernstein, trumpets

Curtis Fowlkes, trombone  
Philip Meyer, percussion  
Bobby Previte, drums  
Sara Wollan, cello  
John Murchison, oud  
David Wechsler, flute  
Kazu Kumagai, tap dance sample