

Music for the Eyes

By: jessica del mundo | Posted: Wednesday, November 9, 2005 12:00 am

Beth Custer, the leader of the San Francisco-based The Beth Custer Ensemble, takes the soundtrack she composed for the Russian silent film *My Grandmother* - screening at Cornell Cinema on Saturday, Nov. 12 - on the road beginning this week. By the time it makes its way to Ithaca - after stops in New York City's Merkin Concert Hall and Baltimore's Charles Theatre - Custer says "it'll be good...it'll be the one that's best."

Directed by Kote Mikaberidze, *My Grandmother* - which is Russian slang for a comeuppance or an "in" to land a job - was released in Russia in 1929 but banned for more than 40 years because of its anti-Soviet content. When the Pacific Film Archive brought the film to the United States in the 1970s, it was accompanied by a Georgian score that was "really eerie and beautiful," says Custer, who bought the States-side rights to produce the DVD on her own label. The film's soundtrack by Custer and company now has a lively mix of jazz, blues and even a bit of folk.

Scoring silent films is nothing new for Custer. She is a founding member of the notorious Club Foot Orchestra, a purveyor of silent film soundtracks, and has other notable musical projects - Trance Mission, Clarinet Thing and Doña Luz 30 Besos.

In a phone interview with Custer, she shared her thoughts on the importance of improvisation, writing music for film and hydrogen cars in 2005.

* * * *

Ithaca Times (IT): How did you discover the film *My Grandmother*? What about it appealed to you most?

Beth Custer (BC): I was commissioned by the Pacific Film Archive of UC Berkeley. Steve Seid of the PFA knew of my work with Club Foot Orchestra and gave me a copy of *My Grandmother*, and I thought it was just amazing. ... The film has techniques that are far ahead of its time - stop-motion, puppetry - and it's comparable to films of Buster Keaton or Harold Lloyd in its slapstick comedy content and is rife with commentary on the workplace. It's very anti-bureaucratic, which I was thinking about today. I'm very anti-bureaucratic. I don't understand why things take so long - like "hydrogen cars in 2040." Why can't we have better cars now? ... The project for me sort of became like the film, this bureaucratic nightmare of getting the rights; it was a very slow process. We premiered my score with it here at the historic Castro Theatre in 2002 and people really enjoyed it.

IT: The film was banned in Russia for more than 40 years. How relevant do you think this film is today? How significant is it for you?

BC: I think it's really relevant. It shows how the workplace works - how people can be spinning like

namsters in their cages in the workplace, now getting a job can be all about who you know.

IT: I noticed that the music for the film is tinged with a mix of American jazz, blues, a bit of bluegrass. How important was it for you to "Americanize" the music for My Grandmother?

BC: I didn't know this when I scored it, but the director, Kote Mikaberidze, was a descendent of the FEKS or Soviet Eccentric Cinema movement. They were '20s-era artists who were doing radical theater and were into industrialization and American culture, including American jazz. I just tried to underpin what was in the movie, like when you see the wife of our main character coming home from a shopping spree dancing the Charleston while her husband is attempting to hang himself after being fired from his job, so I composed a fast-twisted Charleston.

IT: Are there parallels you are drawing between Russian and American life?

BC: I grew up in the Cold War when we were taught that the Russians were evil and were going to nuke us at any moment. Then I see this film and think these people were doing slapstick just like us! I have a few close Russian friends and when I told them we were taught to hate you - you were gonna bomb us - they just laughed and told me that's ridiculous! People are people the world over, there's the government and there's the people.

IT: When scoring for a silent film, are you trying to "translate" images to music as faithfully as you can or do you try to add a new dimension to the image?

BC: For me, the film is king - or queen - and I'm just trying to enhance what's going on in the film. The film always dictates what I write in style and tempo. Also in this film, I assigned characters or moments in the film to members of the ensemble. For instance, the receptionist is played by our trumpet player, Chris Grady, who mimics his antics with little trumpet lines; our drummer Jan Jackson follows the punches that the wife lays on her just-fired husband. Another unique aspect of this score is the spoken word. I've included the spoken translation of the intertitles by our actor Nils Frykdahl. So you're hearing the text with the music and Nils really acts along with the film.

IT: In performing your film scores, how important is improvisation?

BC: In most of my scores, whether it's live to film or not, I always include some improvisation - it's the style of my music. I'm not strictly a jazz composer; I have other influences like contemporary classical and world music. ... With this film, for many reasons it's important to improvise. I would say about 85 percent [of the film] is scored out; the other 15 percent is improvised. This gives us flexibility, like when the film's running in a different rate or someone forgot a cue and we have to catch up. I like for people to be able to express themselves when they're playing, put their own ideas into it. It keeps them engaged with the film rather than only having their noses in the music.

IT: What is the most challenging thing about scoring music for silent films?

BC: It's that fine line of you don't want to take over - you want to be enhancing what's up there. It sort

or crosses over to performance art because you're playing live and people watch the band as well as the film. But I don't want to detract from the film.

IT: You also wrote the music for *Unoccupied Zone: The Impossible Life of Simone Weil* by local filmmaker Cathy Lee Crane. How did you get involved in that project?

BC: We are old friends. I happened to be in Spain on vacation when she was filming, so I joined her in Marseilles and helped film it, doing hair and makeup and performing a small part in it. It's a beautiful film. Cathy and I have worked together for years where she's used a lot of pre-recorded music of mine and of Trance Mission, one of my former ensembles. *Unoccupied Zone* is the first film that I actually scored; that score is the best thing I composed last year.

IT: What was the first silent film you saw with musical accompaniment? How was that experience?

BC: Club Foot Orchestra was the first band that started doing this in the United States in 1985. Our first silent was *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, and at that point I wasn't writing for the group yet. It wasn't until *Metropolis* that I started composing for silent films. We premiered it here at the Roxie Cinema, a small funky theater, and it was an amazing experience; people went nuts. Composing for Club Foot Orchestra began my composing career.

* * * *

The Beth Custer Ensemble plays music for *My Grandmother* on Nov. 12 at 7:15 p.m. at Cornell's Willard Straight Theatre. Tickets are \$12/general and \$8/students and seniors. Advance tickets are available at Ithaca Guitar Works in Dewitt Mall.