

# Edmund Meisel a composer for the silents

An introductory analysis of his music as evidenced in his score for  
**Battleship Potemkin**, (1925) a film by Sergei Eisenstein



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## Introduction

It is a dare task for a music student to explore the unknown area of film music studies during the silent era. My interest in this essay will be focused on the studying of an original score written near to the end of the silent period: Edmund Meisel's score for the first release in Berlin of **Battleship Potemkin** (1926) and a brief commentary on a second score written by Nicolaj Kryukov, for the thirtieth anniversary release of the film in Moscow, in 1956. Kryukov's score is not the only one to be written after Eisenstein's death in 1948. For instance, for the fiftieth anniversary of the revolution in 1967 Grigori Alexandrov reconstructed the original version of the film "*October*" on the basis of Eisenstein's notes with a new score by Shostakovich.<sup>1</sup>

## Edmund Meisel



It is necessary to develop a specific methodology of music analysis to study the specially composed scores beyond an historical or sociological point of view. Nevertheless, some historical reviews are considered here in order to understand better the music context in films at that time. The music for silent films works differently in relation to the pictures when compared to the talkies. Two facts stand out as obvious remarks: music was the only element to fill the sonic space for the whole duration of the film and secondly, it was the norm to be performed live rather than recorded and dubbed to the picture as today, or reproduced using a gramophone.

The first problem to face to carry any research in the specific field of music specially written during the silent era, is the lack of material to study and its accessibility. Music scores remain uncompleted or lost. We have to base the analysis on bad sound quality recordings. Another issue is the qualification of what is really intended by a final print and the difficulty to make an absolute judgment about the music in the film. Sometimes it is usual to find out that the music has been cut for the different copies of the film and therefore it makes difficult to asses the music on its own right as a completed work. It is hard to say which is the final version of the music to base any further research, or even worse, in relation to the film under the circumstances of film production at that time.

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<sup>1</sup> pag. 187. a history of narrative film. Cook, David A

Meisel's case is particularly sad. His ephemeral contribution to Eisenstein's films *Potemkin* and *October* is scarcely mentioned in a footnote in most film books. He was a very imaginative and experimental composer for films, who died very young, yet lived to see the transition to sound films. He was based in Berlin and worked during the twenties at the time of an explosion of creativity: the time of Brecht, Weill and Hindemith.

## Sergei Eisenstein

## some film music history background



The first attempts of original scores in film history were mostly over scored, i.e. alienated from the film requirements as a specific art form. The music material was taken from the opera, stage and concert repertoire. Film conventions and codes were slowly developed. Composers such as Gounod, Saint-Saëns or Mascagni failed in their attempts to write music for the new medium. The common practice at that time was merely live improvisations or compiled scores performed by a single pianist or even a full orchestra if the exhibitor had the budget. On the other hand, Eisenstein's well known intellectual montage was a decisive step in history towards the independence of film language.

There was an interesting controversy between those who preferred incidental music rather than specific written scores. It was an aesthetic issue at that time. To demonstrate the difference some writers used the example of film colouring. *"They made an analogy between hand-coloured images and specially composed scores imposing strong musical interpretation on action and it was not always considered the right way to do it. On the other hand they would prefer compiled music because it did not interfere with the image by highlighting separate gestures but rather added an even emotional 'hue' to the scene as a whole".<sup>2</sup>*

A further controversy was given by Sabaneeyev who denied that cinema music was a legitimate form of improvisation. He believed that specific composed music should be reproduced by mechanical instruments to match a mechanical art such as film. Towards the end of the silent era, the specially composed scores would remain the exception rather than the rule. However, remarkable artistic accomplishments flourished during the twenties. Among these scores are:

- |   |                       |                     |        |                                       |
|---|-----------------------|---------------------|--------|---------------------------------------|
| • | Edmund Meisel         | Battleship Potemkin | (1925) | Sergei Eisenstein                     |
| • | Edmund Meisel         | October             | (1928) | Sergei Eisenstein                     |
| • | Darius Milhaud        | L'inhumaine         | (1925) | Marcel L'Herber                       |
| • | Arthur Honegger       | Napoleon            | (1926) | Abel Gance                            |
| • | Gottfried Huppertz    | Metropolis          | (1926) | Fritz Lang                            |
| • | Dimitri Shostakovitch | New Babylon         | (1928) | Grigori Kozintzer and Leonid Trauberg |

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<sup>2</sup> Pag. 97 Tsivian, Yuri *Early cinema in Russia*

A curious testimony that shows how music for silent films was perceived is an orchestral piece by Milhaud which is a proof of how “*silent films indeed had an influence on ‘pure music’*”. His suite “*Newsreel*” (1929), is a piece written for a non-existent film. Fast changes of musical sequences and throughly pre-meditated alteration of tempos and timbres create the sonic equivalent of sighting film shots”.<sup>3</sup>

### **Synchronization and projectionists**

The absence of synchronized sound recorded to picture is another particularity to take into account when, looking at the music in silent films. In his monograph on Abel Gance, Kevin Brownlow mentions that some projectionists used to synchronize the film with the accompanying musical score following the conductor’s baton rather than watching the screen, however, for rapid edit it could be disastrous. Music for the silents was part of the exhibition rather than film production. In his memories Eisenstein wrote: “*ruined a public showing of Potemkin in London in 1929, by having the film projected slightly slow than normal, without my agreement, for the sake of the music. They destroyed all dynamics of the rhythmic relationships to such a degree that for the first time in Potemkin’s whole existence the effect of lions ‘jumping up’ caused laughter*”.<sup>4</sup>

### **Looking for the right print: the problem of censorship and exhibition on Eisenstein’s silent films**

Ian Christie talks about the problem of researching a “textual estabiltiy” throughout the silent period. “It makes little sense to search for the unique or authentic version of each production. Today it is possible to seek for the longest or the earliest version of a silent film, but this may not represent the final wishes of the maker(s) or indeed what any actual audience saw. Christie pointed at distinct processes of textual variations in Eisenstein’s films.

1. Politically motivated alterations before and after domestic release.
2. Foreign distributors’ changes as demanded by local censorship.
3. Changes arising from translation, projection practice and commercial judgment.
4. Eisenstein’s own revisions when the opportunity or need presented itself.
5. Deliberate ‘modernisation’ specially when synchronized sound was added, that included step printing, which consists of printing every second frame twice to ‘stretch’ a film originally intended to run more slowly than 24 frames per second, thus enabling a modern soundtrack to be added.

### **Battleship Potemkin: Eisenstein montage and its musical implications**

Eisenstein was well aware of the importance of the music in films. *Potemkin* belongs to a particular movement of cinema in Russia during the late twenties involving directors such as Pudovkin, Kuleshov and Eisenstein interested in a new concept of montage. In contrast to the existing metric montage, he introduced with *Potemkin* a new form, the rhythmic montage. It was based - as it happens in music language- on the perception of qualitative inner time or virtual length that provokes in the audience, the feeling that pieces of the same duration are in fact perceived differently. “*Two linked themes which recur frequently in his writings over 20 years are the semantic potential of montage and the narrative or ‘musical’ import of film*”.

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<sup>3</sup> pag. 100 Tsivian, Yuri *Early cinema in Russia*

<sup>4</sup> pag 27 Eisenstein Sergei *Immoral memories*

These are most obviously brought together in the concept of counterpoint which serves a bridge between silent and synchronized cinema. Eisenstein montage is often understood as an elaborate counterpoint of signification. Music, meanwhile, comes to stand for what lies beyond verbal signification. He writes of the musical line of landscape begun by *Potemkin* and he analyses the 'Odessa mist' sequence in terms of a type of post painting passing into a distinctive type of premusic (proto music)".<sup>5</sup> "It is well known that he was already looking forward to sound as a new montage element while working on *The General Line* which he also considered turning it into a sound film with music by Meisel".<sup>6</sup>



# Battleship Potemkin

## The film structure

Potemkin belongs to the category of epic films and for the first time in cinema it represents the mass as a hero as opposed to the individual. The film is based on a real episode of the revolution which occurred in Odessa in 1905, although the Odessa steps scene was created to enhance the dramatic climax. The director describes the structure of the film as events divided into five acts conforming to the requirements of classical tragedy.

### PART I

#### MEN AND MAGGOTS

1. Exposition of the action
2. The conditions aboard the battleship
3. Meat with maggots
4. Unrest among the sailors

### PART II

#### DRAMA ON THE QUARTER - DECK

1. The refusal to eat soup
2. The tarpaulin scene
3. Refusal to fire
4. Mutiny

### PART III

#### THE DEAD MAN CREIS FOR VENGEANCE

1. Mist
2. Vakulinchuk's body in Odessa port
3. Mourning over the body
4. Meeting. Raising of the flag

### PART IV

#### THE ODESSA STEPS

1. Fraternalization of shore and battleship
2. Yawls with provision
3. Shooting on the Odessa steps

### PART V

#### MEETING THE SQUADRON

1. Night of expectation
2. Meeting the squadron
3. Engines
4. The squadron refuses to fire

<sup>5</sup> Pag. 18 Christie & Taylor *Eisenstein rediscovered*

<sup>6</sup> Pag. 182 Christie & Taylor *Inside the film factory*

The film was shown in Moscow but relegated to second category theatres and it was banned in many European countries. Meisel's music was often censored as it was argued that the abruptness of the music and its rhythmic roughness was more dangerous than the images, propelling into the public an active participation in revolution. In Berlin the film was cut from the original length twice, but it was a big success.

## The composer: Edmund Meisel (1894 - 1930)

Meisel is almost unknown and neglected composer. His relationship with Eisenstein goes beyond the pure artistic collaboration to a shared political ideology. He started his career as a composer collaborating in political theatre. He engaged contacts with the *Communist International of help to the worker*. He was a sort of shooting star not only because of his premature death but also because of his tempestuous musical contribution to the Theatre and Films. He could be related to the Italian Futurism movement; he invented a noise machine, a sort of keyboard that reproduced all sort of sounds, the *Geräuschmaschine*, and gave concerts playing it in orchestras. Later on he used it in films like *Potemkin* to create wind and ship engines noise.

The 'noise-music' is decisive to understand his music conception in *Potemkin*. The reason is that he was trying to reach musical drama by looking for the rhythm and sound of nature. The most important step in his career was *Potemkin* and his contact with Eisenstein. Their relationship was very short but it was a fruitful mutual exchange. As Ian Christie wrote: "*Meisel broke decisively the pot-pourri tradition of film music and launched boldly into a musical architecture that responded to the challenge of Eisenstein's non-narrative montage construction*".<sup>7</sup>

He wrote both scores for *Potemkin* and *October* in a very short time. He had only 12 days and nights to compose the whole score for *Potemkin* including rehearsals for the *Potemkin's* Berlin performance. Ernest Boreman wrote in 1934 an article in *Sight and Sound* about Meisel's method of composing. "*Meisel analyzed the montage of some famous silent films in regard to rhythm, emphasis, emotional climax and mood. To reach separate shot he assigned a certain musical theme. Then he directly combined the separate themes using the rhythm, emphasis and climaxes of the visual montage for the organization of his music. He wished to prove the experiments that the montage of a good film is based on the same rules and develops in the same way as music. The result of this experiment was the some so-called 'good' films did not in any way produced music but merely a chaos of various themes unordered and unorganized. Other of the films he chose, however, resulted in a kind of strange rhapsody unaccustomed and extraordinary to the ear but nevertheless not without a certain musical continuity. By far the best result was Potemkin*".<sup>8</sup>

### Meisel film credits

Battleship Potemkin	1925	Sergei Eisenstein
Überflüssige menschen	1926	Alexander Rasumny
Der Heilige berg	1926	Arnold Franck
Berlin, die symphony der Großstadt	1927	Walter Ruttmann
Die kleine schraube	1927	V. Tvardovskij
October	1928	Sergei Eisenstein
Deutscher rudfunk (experimental sound film)	1928	Walter Ruttmann
Der rote kreis	1928	Fricich Zelnik
The crimson circle	1928/29	Sinclair Hill

<sup>7</sup> Pag. 9 Christie & Taylor *Eisenstein rediscovered*

<sup>8</sup> pag. 21 Manvell & Huntley *The technique of film music*



The very first music piece of controlled 'chaos' sets the mood in the whole film, accompanying the visuals (waves and wind beating strongly) with the key music cell: **G-F-C#**. This section has a conclusive ending. The next scene is underscored by a continuous rhythmic pulse ostinato (see fig. 1) combining the gong with the strings building a sense of unreality (sleeping sailors.)

Then the music changes after the unexpected lash over the sailor's back underscored with a timpani beat trying to behave also as diegetic sound. The music beat changes gradually up to the micro climax with Vakulinkchuk's 'agitator speech'. The key music cell changes in tempo and rhythm, based on an augmented fifth chord (**C**). This is a musical theme often



fig. 1

used over and over throughout the whole film.



There is a subtle premonition to rebellion as we hear a reference to the theme of *La Marsellaise* when the doctor leaves the deck. Later, the sequence of the cook cutting the meat is underscored by timpani beats. Without going into details describing the musical content, the first thing to highlight is the discontinuity of the music discourse, with the new short material not developed and displaced without a logic musical sense. The longest of these truncated episodes is nearly at the end (washing the official's dishes). It is a slow march in a tonal language contrasting the modernist idiom used all through this section and the whole film. The percussion together with an ostinato on the strings (a major fourth) is again building the tension up, to the point where the plate is thrown to the floor by the angry sailor. The music has a conclusive gesture (**D**)



## II. DRAMA ON THE QUARTER DECK

The opening trumpet call is shifting between diegetic and non diegetic sound. The relationship with the picture is merely casual as the musical material is formed by four notes arpeggio **G-B-D-F**. This is certainly not a real military fanfare. Again, there is an ironic reference to captain Golivok presented in the scene. It is a phrase followed by a pause repeated twice. It makes him look like a circus character because of the syncopated notes of the trumpet and the offbeat rhythm. The sound of the timpani are perceived as symbol of power. There is an overall sense of space in all of this first section before the mutiny, created by the use of silence and other music resources such as *long tenuto* notes. As we read in the intertitles '*brothers*' the next section starts.



The music changes like in the first part. Here anger becomes agitation, movement and so the music materials does the same (C) but with martial energetic character much more defined. *La Marsellaise* is heard again as well as the doctor's ironic motiv but under a much more dense orchestral texture. The presence of the priest out of context is ironically underscored with the organ and percussion playing a light, easy listening tune. When Gilyarovskiy is after Vakulinchuk, the march heard in the first part is dramatically played slowly against the action in the film. It is an *Ouverture* for a funeral march. The music anticipates the action, giving cues to the audience about the killing of the hero before we see it (E). When the hero is rescued from the sea a second theme starts (F) linking through the music to the next sequence.



It is a melody of sorrow with no tonal harmonic internal relationship. It contains the whole chromatic scale except F. It is not strictly as a dodecaphonic row (as the notes are repeated), but the most remarkable outcome is the emotional achievement using non tonal material (except the ostinato). The Odessa mist is underscored with a tune with Russian connotations (G) which is heard in part III. There is no musical concession to finish this part and the tune is carried on to connect the same feeling up to the Odessa port. The ostinato is always present with the timpani all through the piece.



This tune (G) is the same as used by Shostakovich in the third movement (in memoriam) of his Symphony nº 11: "the Year 1905" which was written in 1956. It is a theme and variations. The only difference with Meisel's is a second counterpart played by the double basses pizzicatos that makes it lose the tonal sense of the folk tune.



### III. AN APPEAL FROM THE DEAD

The funeral march is repeated over and over to build the sense of fraternity as the mass comes together to the shore. F is heard again with people's close up. Some people have thought that there was a reason less poetic which due to the fact that Meisel had little time to write the score, and therefore he decided to repeat long sections of this music. The theme F is developed gradually from sorrow to fury. The tempo accelerates changing the mood from calmness to agitation. When the crowd reappears marching to a third theme (H) is played at the moment of raising the red flag (not coloured in this copy). It has certain resemblance with Prokofiev's music because of the major chords relationships and melodic shape. This theme serves to connect the following section IV.



### IV. THE ODESSA STEPS

With the intertitles we have a new musical theme in 2/4 (I), a joyful march underscoring the scene's mood: fraternity between the rebels and the Odessa People. The structure is a sort of Rondó as it is shown below. G is a short reference to the previous section, working as a pivot by linking the two.



The logical continuity in the structure is abruptly interrupted with the intertitles "suddenly" which breaks into the second section in an opposite emotional tone, the famous Odessa steps sequence. The whole scene is carried by an oppressive martial ostinato played by the percussion. The music language was quite modern at that time for a piece of film music. The ostinato represents the tonal centre of the piece, while the brass and strings play a non tonal melody with predominant cells in a descendent scale as the army goes down step by step as an effective machine to kill, (there is something mechanical in the music as well). He uses the tritone (augmented fourth), a static interval against the people's movement and fast editing. The attack from the battleship Potemkin is underscored just with drums which is very unusual but quite effective and powerful. There are also reminiscences with the fourth movement of Shostakovich's 11th symphony.

### V. MEETING THE SQUADRON

There is no much surprise in this section. The music material is taken from the first part as a big recapitulation (music themes that provokes agitation). For the first time the music changes to a more polyphonic texture with a series of cells repeated like a fake canon. When the flag goes down the music gets slower and more static. The march theme from part I changes its rhythmical energy to a more lyrical one as the scene is a peaceful sleeping interior scene. The music gets faster from the engines shot. A cell is repeated by chromatism over and over. The sequence seems shorter thanks to the music, creating expectation, changing the tempo through a slightly accelerando up to the climax. The drums roll drives the music to the final scene "brothers". The music finishes with a coda. This is the same theme used in part I after the rebels had the battleship won. It is a sort of victory hymn.

## Kryukov's score

Before making any comment on the music itself the first thing that stands out from this print is that looks as pure propaganda. The voice over at the beginning and the end is in the style of documentary rather than a feature film. It is not necessary to be an expert to notice that we are certainly dealing with a poor music contribution to this film. The music language is more orientated towards Russian folk music as it happens on the opening theme.

There is no dramatic structure in the music. It does not seem to be written for this film because of its distance in relation to the events 'development', rhythm, drama and mood. It is just bad and tedious music and does not engage the viewer into the film experience. There are a few interesting moments but they are the exception. Others, on the contrary, are clumsy and disorientating. For instance, there is an attempt of a three voices fugue exposition without further development and written with no relation to the film without empathy with the narrative, editing or the images. The climax is achieved by loud sound not with musical resources. There is no point in making a further music analysis, in comparison to Meisel's version.

## conclusions to Meisel's score for Battleship Potemkin

- There is a perfect symbiosis of visual and musical images closer to the model of sound film rather than music used as simple illustration.
- It is sensitive to the internal dramatic structure of the film and in particular to the rhythmic montage.
- Well balance mixture of tonal and modernist musical language corresponding to different moods.
- The noise is part of the music and incorporated into the score as an expressive device. Consequently, there is a marked presence of percussion instruments from the gong to the timpani, sometimes trying to replace non existing diegetic sound.
- Flexibility in the rhythmic pulse, from continuity (ostinato with martial connotations) to discontinuity (long notes with spare silences). Overall rhythmic power.
- A thematic unity without long developments; instead we find short themes in closed intervalic relationship, giving a sense of continuity. Special attention to the tritone and chromatism.
- Spare music acts as an external commentator to certain characters and their implications, with a special sense of humour and irony with influences of popular music, jazz, cabaret and music hall. **Political** (the captain) who represents the oppressive power. **Religious** (the priest) as the composer expresses by a comic tune, his marxists ideology, and finally **Institutional** (the doctor) who represents doctrinal dictatorship.



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