

Old Ironsides

Old South Church, Boston

Wednesday, June 25 & Thursday, June 26, 2014, 8:45 p.m.

Old Ironsides (1926)

Organ accompaniment improvised by Peter Krasinski

dir. James Cruze

Organ prepared by Jonathan Ambrosino.

Program Notes

The silent film *Old Ironsides*, directed by James Cruze, is set at the time of Stephen Decatur's defeat of the Barbary pirates in Tripoli, in 1805. Decatur himself, played by comic actor Johnnie Walker, is a secondary character; most of the screen time goes to the romantic leads, able-bodied seaman Charles Farrell and damsel-in-permanent-distress Esther Ralston. Acting honors go to those inveterate scene-stealers Wallace Beery and George Bancroft, cast respectively as Bos'n and Gunner. And yes, that is Boris Karloff in a bit part as a menacing Saracen.

The film accommodates everything from outsized sea battles to a daring rescue from the clutches of the lustful pirates. A life-sized replica of the boat "Old Ironsides" (the USS *Constitution*) was built for the film; it remained a useful piece of *bric-à-brac* for many a subsequent Paramount seafaring epic.

Dorothy Arzner, credited as a screenwriter for *Old Ironsides*, was the first woman to direct a sound picture. She always credited Cruze as her mentor and role model. Tonight's version of the film is a special-tinted edition, running fifty-five minutes.

– Peter Krasinski

Over the last thirty years, film lovers have celebrated the rebirth of interest in early film, those movies produced between 1895, the beginning of the European film industry, and the release of *The Jazz Singer*, in 1926. Movies from this era are often called "silent" because technical limitations prevented the dialogue from being added to the final cut of the film. Yet, scholars note that movies were never silent, because every theater had a pianist, an organist, or a complement of orchestra musicians who accompanied the film showing. The music scholar Martin Marty notes that more than two thousand films from this era had original scores composed for them. Most of those scores have been lost, but their composition attests to the fact that early film was rich in a tradition that was lost once sound could be added to the film. For the last seventy-five years, the experience of hearing music being performed live during a film showing was reserved for those theaters that kept their organs in repair and those patrons lucky enough to hear them.

The enthusiastic reception of early film has encouraged such professional organizations as the American Guild of Organists and the American Theatre Organ Society to sponsor film showings with organists performing improvised accompaniments on local church organs and, occasionally, on restored theatre organs. In turn, this has revived one of the most unique and demanding traditions in music: that of improvising music continuously for the length of an entire film. The intellectual and technical demands of creating music in the moment, for hours on end, require an especially gifted and disciplined performer. One of the exemplars of this tradition is Peter Krasinski, who has been influential in the renewed presence of early film in New England and throughout the country, and for the last five years has been presenting the art in Japan in major venues. Mr. Krasinski has improvised accompaniments to such early masterworks as *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Metropolis*, *La Terre*, and *Old Ironsides*, as well as the comedies of Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and Buster Keaton.

Most classically trained organists adhere to the written score, carefully realizing the composer's intentions. Yet this has not always been the case. In the Baroque era, regular competitions occurred among organists. They would improvise entire works, usually fugues and similar musical forms of the day. And as recent as the early nineteenth century, Beethoven would have improvised cadenzas in his piano concertos. Mr. Krasinski takes this improvisatory tradition and applies it to film. His goal is to create an organic experience that finds new truth in the story on the screen. This demands a considerable amount of stamina and imagination. Also, film will not bend its time for anyone, a constraint that is often a blessing in disguise. Deciding about themes and sounds for characters, and finding the sub-texts, visual rhythms, and patterns to highlight, calls upon the compositional and aesthetic imagination of the organist.

In Mr. Krasinski's case, he feels that, in order to achieve the highest result, the performer must be moved by the film emotionally and aesthetically. Also, he must know the movie well, preferably by heart. Scene changes, characters, action shots, and the overall feel of the film should be studied and understood. Special sound cues, like bells, whistles, and gunshots, must be timed perfectly. All of this must occur without overpowering the film or deflecting the audience's attention. As Mr. Krasinski notes, "When an audience member says after a performance, 'I forgot that you were playing,' I feel I have achieved success."

Another element of Mr. Krasinski's work is the organ and the space it is in. The same film can often tell a very different story depending on the instrument played. A large, American, 1921 E.M. Skinner; a huge, German five-

manual Von Beckerath; a small, two-manual C.B. Fisk tracker instrument; and a powerful Wurlitzer theatre organ all have something different to say. The audience is the final element that makes the event truly exciting. Blending the fluid art of musical improvisation with the visual story frozen in time can truly move an audience. When playing and improvising for a live audience, the energy in the room helps to make the magic happen.

Anyone who has been lucky enough to hear Mr. Krasinski in performance knows his skill at presenting the essence and power of a film. Tempos, dynamics, and motivic ideas all combine to provide pacing, focus, and depth to the film in ways that surpass our current sound films, a unique combination of sound and image, different with each performance and illustrating the magic that can occur when a musical artist meets a film masterwork.

– Roger Rideout
University of Massachusetts, Amherst
Former Chair, Department of Music and Dance (Retired)