



The Best Film Music Never Comes

André Asriel in Conversation with Dorett Molitor

Excerpts from a 2009 interview

The composer André Asriel was born in Vienna in 1922. Already as a child, he was a musical talent and he studied piano at the Academy of Music in Vienna from 1936 to 1938. When the Nazis occupied Austria in 1938, his mother sent Asriel to England, where he had to support himself by playing the piano. Starting in 1941, he continued his musical studies with Franz Osborn and Ernst Hermann Meyer at the Royal College of Music in London. In 1946, he moved to West Berlin, where he completed his education, graduating from the Academy of Music. In the following years, he took master classes with composer Hanns Eisler and taught composition at the Academy of Music in East Berlin. Asriel has composed songs, chamber music and orchestral works, in addition to over thirty film scores. Many of his compositions are influenced by jazz.

AA: *Der verlorene Engel* (*The Lost Angel*) is especially dear to me because it is about Barlach, of whom I am very fond, and because it was my first composition for organ. I had never written for organ before. We made the recordings in Weimar because apparently it was not possible to do it in Berlin. I wanted to create music that was reminiscent of Bach, but in such a distorted way that it would be like a nightmare Bach, the flip side of Bach. A “terror Bach,” so to speak.

There are a few piercing parts. In Weimar we had a recording van and made the recordings in a church. What I was hearing in the van was not shrill enough for me. I got into an argument with the sound engineer—I believe it was already Lambert at the time—because he told me: “Well, you can turn it up this far, but you are not allowed to turn it up any further.” I argued with him until he finally just said, “Go ahead and do it yourself!” So I sat down and overmodulated the piece.

I remember that, once it was done, the finished film was shown to some young people at the DEFA Studio. In the middle of the film, a group of them rushed out of the cinema: “This music is horrible!” I felt very flattered, because it showed I had succeeded in producing an effect.

DM: *The music masterfully reflects on Barlach’s inner state, which was its purpose...*

AA: It also had something do with the fact that a lot of the story takes place in a church and that it is about an angel that is defiled. That’s why I tried to, can I say, defile Bach. I believe that was very successful. [...]

Once I knew I wanted to compose jarring music and use an organ, I thought of Barlach’s wooden sculptures. I wanted to make the music with instruments that had something to do with wood. For scenes that did not take place in the church, I used a non-church organ—that is, an accordion. Of course, an ordinary instrument like the accordion makes a crazy contrast with the dignified organ—I mean it’s such an ordinary instrument, the accordion. The organ music that I composed was later published and also released on a record as *Toccata and Fugue*.



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DM: *Were there influences or traditions that you either built on, or consciously rejected when you thought of film music in particular?*

AA: There is one thing worth mentioning. When I started writing film scores, I was familiar with Eisler's book.¹ I was particularly interested in his theory that a film score should, or must not limit itself to illustrating the image. Or even to enlivening or "elevating" scenes that were perhaps a little dull. Music should contribute an additional commentary to the film. I was especially intrigued by the idea that one might add non-illustrative music that actually conflicted with the visual picture and, in the process, revealed something about the underlying meaning of the image. The idea that music could contrast with the picture influenced me greatly. Although in time I realized that even Hanns Eisler could not help writing very illustrative film music now and then. But I found the score for *Kuhle Wampe*, for example, to be very impressive. [...]

DM: *Do you remember details of your collaboration with Ralf Kirsten?*

AA: Sure. I think I remember going to Güstrow, not once, but several times, so I could study the matter on location. What does it look like inside the church and how does the *Angel* hang there? We also went to Barlach's home. I must say, it is uncommon in the film business for the composer to go look at something like that. However, for the creation of this film score, it was important for me to get to know the history of Güstrow and the landscape there. I did not read much, but I was familiar with almost all of Barlach's sculptures. *Der lachende Bauer* (*The Laughing Farmer*), for example, is delightful. All this had a certain influence on the music.

DM: *Then there were intense cultural and political discussions about the film. You composed the music in 1965, and I noticed that as late as 1971 there was a contract for revisions to the music. Do you remember the dispute over the approval of the film?*

AA: No, that about the contracts is absolutely new to me. They went back and forth for a while, but in my view the music did not play a role at all. I was aware of the discussion; but as far as I remember, it did not affect me deeply, only in the sense that I felt sorry the film was not released the way I had wanted it to be. I am afraid that is a rather self-involved reaction. I am puzzled about the second contract. I cannot remember changing anything. [...]

Before Dorrett Molitor became Director of Collections at the Potsdam Film Museum in 2007, she was the Museum's head of programming. In this role, she curated important film projects, including: German–French Encounters in Film (2007); Restrospective: Carlos Saura (2003); Lost Memories: Chilean History in Three Film Decades (2003); and 90 Years of Babelsberg: Memories and Finds (2002). She is the co-author of Ich war immer ein Spieler: Egon Günther (trans. Egon Günther: Always a Player, 2013) and collaborated on the publication Das Prinzip Neugier. DEFA-Dokumentarfilmer erzählen (trans. The Curiosity Principle: DEFA Documentary Filmmakers Speak, 2012).

¹ Editor's note: Asriel is referring to Hanns Eisler's and Theodor W. Adorno's book *Composing for the Film* (1947).



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The complete interview with composer André Asriel by Dorett Molitor was originally published in German in *Klang der Zeiten: Musik im DEFA-Spielfilm* (trans. *Sound of the Times: Music in DEFA Feature Films*, ed. Klaus-Dieter Felsmann. Berlin: DEFA-Stiftung, 2013.)

Klang der Zeiten—the first extensive work on music in East German DEFA films—includes both extensive interviews with seven of the 145 composers who worked for the DEFA Studios, and analysis of the use of music in specific films, such as: *The Murderers Are among Us*, *Marriage in the Shadows*, *The Gleiwitz Case* and *The Legend of Paul and Paula*.

Please cite from the original book when referring to this text.

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