Ramona (1910)

About the Music:

The score for *Ramona* is by Charles Shadle—his third for *Treasures III* and the most complex. (For the other two, see the opening films on disc 2.) It is also his most unconventional in style, due in part to the instrumentation. The four instruments are flute, violin, cello, and harpsichord, played by Sarah Brady, Krista Reisner, David Russell, and Jean Rife, respectively. (All are Boston-area professional musicians; Jean is also a colleague at MIT.) If the music has little in common with silent period traditions, it nonetheless has ample drama, pathos, and beauty. Charles has provided the following account:

"I approached the task of composing a score for D.W. Griffith's historically important 1910 version of *Ramona* with some trepidation. Being of Native American descent myself, I wanted to pay due respect to a work that helped to bring the plight of our Native peoples to public attention. I believed it important to treat the film as a serious work of art, and so wanted to compose a score that provided more than mere background illustration; partly for that reason I chose to avoid the numerous, if often amusing, clichés of 'Indian' music. There was also the challenge of narrative compression: the film abbreviates Helen Hunt Jackson's novel in drastic ways, so it seemed important to compose a score that would impart a feeling of continuity throughout the work.

"My choice of instruments is explained by their aptness for the film's major characters. In Jackson's novel, the surprisingly cultivated Indian hero Alessandro is depicted as an accomplished violinist; so he is here associated with that instrument. The fragile, mercurial grace of Mary Pickford's Ramona requires the airy charm of the flute. Griffith's film downplays the crucial role of the Californio aristocrat Felipe, but I have chosen to restore some of his dignity with a cello theme of some nobility and compassion. His mother, the formidable Señora Moreno, is characterized by the harpsichord, the quintessential instrument of aristocratic Spain, in part through its association with the eminent eighteenth-century composers Domenico Scarlatti and Antonio Soler. The harpsichord also serves as an effective stand-in for the lute or guitar, in such scenes as Alessandro's **serenade**.

"The musical themes likewise are intended to provide characterization, but they also evoke the film's settings and narrative incidents. The various Spanish dance rhythms, for example, suggest nineteenth-century California, while the three scenes with religious doings feature music that is based on the 'Pange lingua' **plainchant** (long part of the Spanish church music tradition). Ramona's music often employs the whole-tone scale, reflecting the ambiguity of her position between White and Indian worlds, while driving rhythms and extreme dissonance characterize the violence of the Anglo villains. In particular, a grotesque deformation of Stephen Foster's "Camptown Races" provides the proper sense of menace as well as ironically suggesting racial attitudes of the era. This is first heard when the Whites destroy Alessandro's village. Alessandro is arguably the film's central figure, and his own theme pervades the score in many guises. One key instance is its use as the basis for the **funereal march** of the dispossessed couple; later it becomes the theme of the atonal fugue that underscores Alessandro's madness.

"Throughout the score I have regularly combined and superimposed my themes. These techniques are designed to suggest the thoughts and desires of the characters—and beyond that, both to clarify the story and deepen the impact of this important, moving film."

—Martin Marks

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