

Sidedoor: S11E03 – The Devil’s Composer

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Lizzie: Imagine you're in a dark theater. In front of you, a black and white movie is projected on the screen. You watch as a dozen or so people dance around a garden. The women are in flouncy dresses, the men in dark, dapper suits. As you watch, they all take each others' hands and dance in a circle, like they're playing ring around the rosie.

Andrew Simpson: *And these are adults. These are young people in their 20s. And there's a woman in the center, her name—her character's name is Marta Van Dyne.*

Lizzie: And this is Andrew Earle Simpson. He's helping me describe the opening scene of the 1917 film, *The Devil's Assistant*.

Lizzie: *And there's kind of a jocular feel to the music here.*

Andrew Simpson: *Yep, that's right.*

Lizzie: *It's playful, it's everyone's in the garden kicking up their heels and doing little dances.*

Andrew Simpson: *That's right. And then the music kind of sounds like a jig. And now I use a xylophone in the organ to just add a little—you know, a little bit of lightness to the touch.*

Lizzie: *Uh-huh.*

Andrew Simpson: *So you can hear that.*

Lizzie: Andrew wrote and recorded the music you're hearing now, because even though *The Devil's Assistant* is a silent film ...

Ryan Lintelman: *Silent films were never meant to be silent. They were always made with this musical accompaniment in mind.*

Lizzie: This is Ryan Lintelman, entertainment curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. He also runs the History Film Forum at the museum. And he says when he talks about silent film, often he watches people kind of stop listening. They think "Silent film? Boring!"

Ryan Lintelman: *Because it's something that's seen as old fashioned and not as interesting as a modern film. But the thing about silent films is that so many people have seen them without one of the essential components of the experience, and that's the live accompaniment.*

Lizzie: Back on screen, the merry-makers continue to frolic and cavort in the garden. They run to take their seats.

Andrew Simpson: *Now they're all running to the table.*

Lizzie: *They're literally running. Why are they running everywhere?*

Andrew Simpson: *[laughs] I guess they're just super full of energy!*

Lizzie: This is actually pretty typical of the silent film era. Most early film actors came from vaudeville or theater, where you kind of had to exaggerate your gestures and expressions to be seen from afar.

Lizzie: Here the guests all take their seats around a long table on the terrace. Marta Van Dyne, the woman everyone was dancing around in the first scene, sits at the head of the table, smiling. And she holds up a card.

Andrew Simpson: *The card is announcing her engagement to John.*

Lizzie: John, a nice enough-looking guy, is sitting next to Marta. He's laughing.

Andrew Simpson: *And so this is a happy announcement. What could be wrong with that?*

Ryan Lintelman: *For a musician, this is a really unique challenge and opportunity, because you really have the viewer in the palm of your hand and, you know, you're emotionally manipulating them along the way here.*

Lizzie: But for now, everything seems fine. The guests, apparently too excited to eat, run back into the garden.

Andrew Simpson: *So the music is still bright and fast moving and light.*

Ryan Lintelman: *And the audience is just being carried along by you.*

Lizzie: Marta's friends gather around her in an excited gaggle, tugging at her. She sways in their arms

like she's so in love she can't even stand up straight.

Andrew Simpson: *But then suddenly the music changes quality.*

Lizzie: *Oh!*

Andrew Simpson: *Darkens.*

Lizzie: As the camera cuts to a man standing alone. And he's ...

Andrew Simpson: *He's not happy. [laughs]*

Lizzie: *Yeah, he's looking a little wounded.*

Andrew Simpson: *Devastated.*

Lizzie: *And he's staring off into the distance.*

Andrew Simpson: *Exactly.*

Lizzie: Remember, this movie is called *The Devil's Assistant*. It's that time of year again, the time of pumpkins, costumes, and scary movies. And while you might be planning to watch classics like *The Exorcist*, *Halloween* or *Candyman* this year, there are a whole slew of classic horror films from the silent era.

Ryan Lintelman: *You know, horror was one of the major genres of silent film. It's something that really still resonates with people.*

Lizzie: So in honor of the season, Ryan is screening some of these spooky silent classics at the National Museum of American History through the museum's History Film Forum, with live musical accompaniment by composer Andrew Simpson.

Ryan Lintelman: *It's kind of like a film screening and a concert at the same time.*

Lizzie: But since not everyone can get to the museum in person, this time on Sidedoor, we're going to the movies—the silent movies, bringing you your own personal showing of *The Devil's Assistant*.

Lizzie: We'll go behind the scenes to explore how music can create the tension and suspense that can make horror films such a thrill ride. So grab your popcorn, get snuggly under the blanket, and

meet me back here—after the break.

Lizzie: Let's get one thing straight. I'm a big weenie when it comes to scary movies of any kind. Even most dramas are too much for me—I feel like the drama of my life is enough, thank you. But back in college, I let myself be talked into watching *The Shining* with a bunch of friends in my dorm. And the only way I could get through that movie was by covering my ears. It was the first time I remember noticing how different the movie felt without the piercing violin strings and brass, which I hadn't even consciously registered through most of the movie. But without sound, the movie changed completely.

Lizzie: The best scores are intentional and subtle, and perfectly fine tuned to support the action of a movie.

Andrew Simpson: *It's true, especially if you're scoring a silent film, which you are essentially the only sound that's taking place.*

Lizzie: So it surprised me to learn that no film score actually exists for the 1917 film, *The Devil's Assistant*. And it's not like there was one and it got lost in the sands of time. Composer Andrew Simpson says there's no reason to believe there ever was a score.

Andrew Simpson: *And in fact most of the time, films from the silent era didn't have a score that was created at the same time as the film.*

Lizzie: Now as a creator of things, this boggles my mind. So I asked curator Ryan Lintelman about it.

Lizzie: *When you put the time and effort into creating a work of art like a film, to sort of cede half of the creative control to an unknown source seems just crazy to me!*

Ryan Lintelman: *I think that you use an interesting term, right? "A work of art." Which is how we often think of films, and especially films of this, like, sort of classic period in Hollywood history. But that wasn't really how they were considered at the time. They were disposable.*

Lizzie: Moving pictures were first invented in the 1890s. Early films were short—a couple minutes at the most. They were shown in dancehalls, fair grounds, anywhere a screen could be set up in the dark.

Lizzie: In the 19-teens, the silent movie era exploded. Going to the movies was how many Americans got information about what was going on in the world—the sinking of the Titanic, the start of World War I. Without TVs or smart phones, people would head out to the movies three times a week for newsreels, comedy shorts, romances and dramas. And Ryan says people were ravenous for new things to watch.

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Ryan Lintelman: *And studios at this time are really becoming factories for content. You know, creating an assembly line for films, right? So you've got, like, you know, the stars that you know are gonna bring in this much money, you put them in this plot that, you know, was written by the screenwriter who had another success, and let's get that going. We've got all these props and sets on hand here, so just throw those together, make sure they look good and let's get this film out.*

Lizzie: They'd practically shoot a film in California one day and send it off to New York the next.

Ryan Lintelman: *You know, they even had, like, trains where they'd process film on the way as it was coming over from the West Coast to the East Coast, so everything is about speed and economy.*

Andrew Simpson: *Films were created so quickly and distributed within a matter of weeks, or sometimes even, you know, a few days. You could shoot a film in a couple of days, and there simply wasn't time for a musician to create a fully-composed score to go along with a film.*

Lizzie: Especially because at this time, composing music meant handwriting out all the musical notation, and then getting it printed up and distributed.

Andrew Simpson: *It was simply the practicality of it wasn't—they couldn't keep pace.*

Lizzie: It didn't make sense to invest that time because the films themselves would only play for a few days, and then tossed into the warehouse on top of the heaps of other film canisters.

Ryan Lintelman: *Never to be shown again, essentially. There was no idea that there would be a rerun or anything. And so it wasn't really like, you know, you had the time to create that work of art that we had that vision of now that this is something that's going to last and that people will want to return to. I think it's much better to think of silent film actually as like social media content today. I mean like TikTok or something like that.*

Lizzie: *Wow! That's—okay, so silent films were like the Instagram reels of the early 1900s.*

Ryan Lintelman: *Totally, yeah. You know, just gotta keep it rolling. You know, just make sure that people have enough content that they're gonna want to come back to your theater again.*

Lizzie: But some of these movies became like a back-of-the-napkin sketch by Picasso. Something slapdash and of the moment. But in retrospect, precious.

Ryan Lintelman: *It's funny because we do think of these films as works of art, and they certainly are when we see them now, but it's almost like an after effect of these people being so good at what they*

did. [laughs]

Lizzie: And because film with sound wouldn't be invented until the late 1920s, the audio that accompanied films varied a lot, and often depended on what was on hand at whatever theater you saw the movie in.

Andrew Simpson: *Films might have been shown without any music at all. Or they might have been shown with someone narrating, reading a script to help describe what's happening on screen. Sometimes there were live sound effects crews that would come in and, you know, work behind the screen and try to match things that are seen on the screen.*

Ryan Lintelman: *Things like creaking doors or, you know, footsteps or wind machines even.*

Lizzie: *Whoa!*

Ryan Lintelman: *Lightning sounds with saws.*

Lizzie: *This is like 3D IMAX territory where they blast the wind in your face like you're flying!*

Ryan Lintelman: *This is where it all comes from. And even just like cymbals crashing and things like slap sticks, for instance, that's just like a hinged piece of wood, but you could make it sound like somebody's getting slapped by hitting that against your leg.*

Lizzie: *Wait, is that where the term 'slapstick comedy' comes from?*

Ryan Lintelman: *Yeah. Yeah, it's pretty fun.*

Andrew Simpson: *So there were lots of strategies but yes, eventually by the end of the first decade of the 20th century or so, it came to be more or less expected and standardized that music was going to be the main accompaniment to films.*

Lizzie: But there was still a lot of variation in what that music sounded like. In the major movie palaces, lavishly decorated theaters in New York City or LA on par with the Paris Opera House, you'd be treated to a full orchestra and maybe even a whole chorus. But in your hometown theater down the street, it might be your cousin's husband Eddie, plinking away at the upright piano in the corner every night. And if you think about it, if you're the pianist and there's no score, you're basically making up original music for new films coming out every few days! And that is not a skill every musician has.

Andrew Simpson: *Not everyone could do that. Not everyone in every venue across the United States and the world could create a score in real time.*

Lizzie: *Mm-hmm.*

Andrew Simpson: *So what they would do is sometimes they would just bring their personal musical library with them and they would, you know, put something up on the piano bench and play a piece and, you know ...*

Lizzie: *"This scene is right for 'The Entertainer!'"*

Andrew Simpson: *Exactly, exactly. And in fact, there are lots of complaints in the trade press in the silent era, about the pianist played something totally inappropriate. You know, you have a death scene, you know, and there's "The Entertainer" or, you know, what have you being played.*

Lizzie: *Yeah. The pianist turned this, like, high drama moment into irony.*

Andrew Simpson: *Yes, right. Unintentionally ironic.*

Lizzie: *Right, right.*

Lizzie: That would really stink, and it happened a lot. Music could make or break a viewer's experience of silent film, and producers were leaving half the audience's sensory input up to chance—who also goes by cousin Eddie. But the technology simply didn't exist to standardize the musical experience for audiences on such short timelines, so to help tackle the problem, trade journals started publishing suggestions.

Andrew Simpson: *So columnists would, you know, say, "Well, here are some pieces that we suggest would be appropriate for film X. And this film is coming, and it has 12 scenes and, you know, for the opening scene we suggest this piece and for the next scene we suggest this piece." And it was just a list of pieces. So that was kind of step one.*

Lizzie: Making music an intentional component of the movie would improve the viewer's experience. And gradually, this process got a bit more refined.

Andrew Simpson: *Into the 1920s, you see film studios working to create cue sheets.*

Lizzie: Basically a stripped down road map of the film, with suggestions for what music could go where. But even with this guidance, Andrew says accompanying silent films was still incredibly challenging for musicians. First, you never knew how fast a silent movie might be playing.

Andrew Simpson: *In the early days, in the nickelodeon era, which was in those first years of the 20th century, the films were shown on a rotating program. And the theater managers, wanting to get as many people in during the course of the day, learned that if they just sped up the projector and showed the film a little bit faster, they could get in one more film, you know, one more audience before*

the end of the day.

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: And here's something I learned: that word 'nickelodeon?' The Odeon was the theater in Ancient Greece. And 'nickel' means five cents. So nickelodeons were silent film theaters that charged five cents. Not just a television network in the '90s like some people might have thought.

Lizzie: And another challenge for musicians in the Nickelodeon era was censorship.

Andrew Simpson: *You were never sure what version of a film you might be seeing, because censorship was a huge factor in distribution.*

Lizzie: Local censorship boards could look at a film and demand that certain scenes be cut. Imagine you're cousin Eddie and you're getting ready for the scene when the long lost lovers spot each other across a train platform and they run to each other for a passionate embrace ...

Andrew Simpson: *And then suddenly the scene isn't there!*

Lizzie: *There's no scene.*

Andrew Simpson: *Right. So that's a surprise. That's a challenge. And mind you, it's not as though they had six months of rehearsal time, or even, you know, a week of rehearsal time for this.*

Lizzie: *Right, right.*

Andrew Simpson: *So they were really doing it on the fly.*

Lizzie: Once talkies came out in the 1930s, those films included recorded dialogue and music, many of these problems were solved. But that also meant pretty much the end of musicians providing live accompaniment to films. Sorry, Eddie. Andrew says it's too bad most of us won't get to experience seeing a silent film with a live score that hits all the right notes—pun intended. That's why he composed his own score for *The Devil's Assistant*. Unlike musicians of the silent era, Andrew Simpson has had plenty of time to compose the score—over a hundred years after the film first came out. With the luxury of time, he's made careful decisions about the kind of music that would best support the story.

Lizzie: *So this is kind of a dark movie.*

Andrew Simpson: *[laughs] Yes.*

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Lizzie: *What makes a certain kind of sound, like, spooky? If spooky is what you were going for, you know, what was the quality of sounds you were looking to create as you took stock of this film?*

Andrew Simpson: *That's a really great question. One of the things that to me makes horror films work is that you're often taking something natural or normal, and then it's just getting twisted in some way that makes it horrifying or unsettling.*

Lizzie: Take the 2012 horror film *Sinister*. So much of the score from that movie uses natural sounds like a film reel spinning or the human voice, but it twists it to create this creepy sense of dread.

Lizzie: But Andrew was creating a score that could be performed live by one person. And he figured the most practical instrument for that would be the organ.

Andrew Simpson: *The theater organ has lots of potential for interesting or unusual sounds.*

Lizzie: He recorded this version of the score on the organ at the Library of Congress's National Audio-Visual Conservation Center in the Packard Campus Theater. He says one advantage of the organ is that it can make percussive sounds and tremulants, and has continuous sound.

Andrew Simpson: *Unlike a piano where the sound decays, you can sustain. So the organ has a very wide, expressive potential to do this, and it works, I think, quite well for films like this because you have the organ sound but then you also can do very unusual things with the sound to make it match and reflect what's going on in the film.*

Lizzie: *Should we hear some of those?*

Andrew Simpson: *Sure.*

Lizzie: *All right, let's dive in.*

[organ score]

Lizzie: Remember where we left off watching *The Devil's Assistant*? We'd just met a group of friends in a garden. The hostess, Marta, announces her engagement to John, a smiling young man apparently heir to his father's millions. But while most of the revelers dance around in celebration—again, there's really a lot of dancing around in circles that happens in this film, that must have been a thing that people really did. Anyway, two people seem less than thrilled.

Lizzie: Off to the side, a man with a large head and dark eyebrows looks on morosely. The "inter-title"—the text that appears on screen—introduces his character as "Dr. Lorenz, a rising physician, whose love for Marta has been the ruling passion of his life."

Lizzie: Nearby, a woman sits and watches the celebrations wistfully, tearing flower petals between her fingers. The text tells us this is Marion, Marta's best friend, who has always secretly loved John."

Lizzie: *And there's a sort of yearning quality when we see Marion.*

Andrew Simpson: *Mm-hmm. Absolutely. And both of them now are, you know, in love with one of the couple to be married and are on the outside now.*

Lizzie: *Okay, so drama!*

Lizzie: In the next scene we see wedding bells ringing, and then a shot of the church. It's John and Marta's wedding day.

Andrew Simpson: *And you can hear chimes to evoke church bells, but as you can hear from the music, it's not a happy wedding.*

Lizzie: Marta and John stand at the altar, all smiles. But ...

Andrew Simpson: *Here's a close up of Marion, one of the bridesmaids, and now we see standing in the balcony, Dr. Lorenz. We're literally seeing the wedding from his perspective. When has wedding music ever sounded like that?*

Lizzie: *Hmm.*

Andrew Simpson: *And now we see a devil's face.*

Lizzie: Dr. Lorenz's face suddenly morphs into the horned head of Satan. His mouth slowly opens, and he laughs as he watches the happy couple from the balcony.

Andrew Simpson: *And you heard that chime and that gesture in the organ which used the bells again and the chimes.*

Lizzie: *Yeah, you're doing like a doo-do-doo-do-do-do to show, like, what? That twisting of reality?*

Andrew Simpson: *It's something sinister, or it takes those church bell sounds and uses them in an unusual way. That idea of taking something normal or natural and then doing something unusual with*

it. To evoke something, in this case sinister.

Lizzie: *Yeah, we get a hint that he's becoming corrupted by his grief.*

Andrew Simpson: *Yes.*

Lizzie: *And something bad is gonna happen.*

Andrew Simpson: *Exactly. It's a great foreshadowing.*

Lizzie: *You're literally bringing your hands together like some kind of evil genius.*

Andrew Simpson: *[laughs] It's true. I love it!*

Lizzie: *What will happen to these two young lovers? To be concluded after a short word from our sponsor.*

[Parody advertisement: *Kids! Are you tired of your parents making you do chores? Well, worry no more with invisibility glasses! Just put them on and disappear! Now available at Marshall Fields, next to the BB guns and fireworks.]*

Lizzie: *We're back! And we're slicing up an old horror film from the silent era to learn how the right score can make or break a scary movie. We're watching the 1917 film *The Devil's Assistant*, directed by Harry Pollard and accompanied by organist Andrew Simpson.*

Lizzie: *After John and Marta get married, we see them riding a train off to their honeymoon. Time passes, and when we next see Dr. Lorenz, he's sitting in his clinic, And his appearance has changed. He's got this pointy mustache.*

Andrew Simpson: *Yeah, he has the beard, the goatee.*

Lizzie: *His eyebrows are, like, absolutely doing something.*

Lizzie: *The inter-title tells us Dr. Lorenz has become, "A soulless caterer to the ills of the idle rich."*

Lizzie: *A man enters, sits down, and Dr. Lorenz fixes some kind of liquid for him. And as we watch, the clinic morphs into this hellscape, where a devil-like winged character stirs a steaming cauldron of*

evil elixir, showing what the doctor is doing.

Andrew Simpson: *You know, he's supplying all these patients with morphine, and that's kind of his—you know, that's what he does.*

Lizzie: Then just like that, the picture returns to Dr. Lorenz's clinic. The phone rings. It's Marion, Marta's "best friend." She tells him Marta needs something to calm her nerves. The scene cuts to Marta's bedroom, where we can see that she's given birth to a baby that didn't survive. She flails in bed, apparently delirious, as Dr. Lorenz enters the room.

Lizzie: He takes her pulse, nods solemnly, and gives her an injection of the evil elixir, and she falls still in bed. The inter-title says, "Drugs are sometimes merciful when they are properly and scientifically administered."

Lizzie: More time goes by, and the next time we see Marta, she comes to find Dr. Lorenz in his clinic. Now she's the one who looks different.

Lizzie: *Incredibly sad, and sort of helpless and beautiful.*

Andrew Simpson: *Yes, she's very beautiful, and yet very devastated. Her head is twitching. And the doctor's looking rather happy. And now he holds up a vial of morphine.*

Andrew Simpson: *And you can hear a very slow-moving bass line that underlies, which kind of runs through the scene, conveying the sense of dread, of something ominous. But then those upper gestures are in some way evoking, while not matching her odd gestures and her strange motions and her movements, something is not right.*

Andrew Simpson: *Now he leads her off. We don't know where he's taking her. He has his arm around her. And the music still has that ominous bass, but now we have more activity in the higher register. And now we see where he's taking her. He's got her with him in the back of a car, heading off somewhere into the country. They have a chauffeur driving them. And then we see in a cutaway, we see the other two. We see John, her husband.*

Lizzie: *Her husband. And her best friend.*

Andrew Simpson: *And the best friend, who has been, we learn, kind of cooperating with the doctor in his morphine-peddling activities.*

Lizzie: The doctor and Marta drive through the night. There's a big storm. Lightning flashing, the rain is beating down as they arrive at a ramshackle cabin in the middle of nowhere.

Lizzie: *It's pouring rain, there's ...*

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Andrew Simpson: *Pouring rain. Lightning, thunder. You know, perfect for a horror film.*

Lizzie: *Mm-hmm.*

Andrew Simpson: *And ...*

Lizzie: *And he tells the driver to leave.*

Andrew Simpson: *Yeah, he sends the driver off, so now it's the two of them in the cabin.*

Lizzie: *Alone in this isolated cabin in the storm, Dr. Lorenz turns to Marta. This is all he's ever wanted, to be with the object of his desire.*

Andrew Simpson: *Marta still clearly doesn't seem fully aware of what's happening to her.*

Lizzie: *Right. She's in an almost trance-like state.*

Andrew Simpson: *Yep. And then you're gonna see that suddenly she kind of wakes up. She realizes, and there's a musical gesture, which is just a cymbal, like a rolled, suspended cymbal. Pulls away, stiffens up.*

Lizzie: *The moment of realization that she's trapped. There's nowhere to go. Lightning rages outside.*

Andrew Simpson: *The storm music has lots of jagged gestures, which are—it evokes the wildness of the scene. And the violence of the music increases as the violence of the emotion.*

Lizzie: *Dr. Lorenz draws closer. He's taller, more powerful. And Marta shrinks away as he clutches her to him. She shakes her head no, but it's of no use.*

Andrew Simpson: *And now we hear a tambourine sound in the orchestra, which to me has a kind of rattlesnake ethos.*

Lizzie: *Yeah, I was thinking that too!*

Andrew Simpson: *Yeah.*

Lizzie: *The snake has her.*

Andrew Simpson: *Now she's fully aware of what's happening, is trying to fight him off. She manages to give him a pretty good sock on the jaw, throws the candle at him.*

Lizzie: *[gasps] And it goes dark.*

Andrew Simpson: *And you hear that bash from the organ when the candle hits the wall.*

Lizzie: In the dark she tries to escape, but a flash of lightning illuminates her and she freezes. Then she grabs a chair, holds it above her head in terror. And for just a flash, the scene cuts back to her husband John and her best friend, and they're laughing, at ease and they're having this wonderful time.

Andrew Simpson: *Notice I don't change the music when we have that brief cutaway.*

Lizzie: The split screen is a contrast of joy and terror. John has no idea that his wife is fighting for her life and her honor.

Andrew Simpson: *And she's been abandoned by everyone now. She's been abandoned by her best friend, abandoned by her husband, even abandoned by her physician.*

Lizzie: Back at the cabin, Marta heaves the chair at the doctor's head and he tumbles to the ground, but then gets back up. His eyes are huge. He's smiling this crazed grin. Marta makes one more attempt to fight off the doctor, feebly pounds his chest and then collapses, unconscious in his arms. And just then ...

Andrew Simpson: *Suddenly, there's a tremendous lightning strike on the cabin, and the roof of the cabin collapses. And it collapses onto Dr. Lorenz and onto Marta.*

Lizzie: They lie motionless under the rubble. And then the movie cuts to a salon, where John sits reading the paper. A servant of some kind brings him a handwritten note from Marta. She writes, "For weeks now, Dr. Lorenz has been giving me a terrible drug. He has made me his slave and I am helpless. John dear, I know you don't love me anymore. I know. But oh, pity me! I can't think clearly now. I guess my heart is breaking. I am going away on a long, long journey in the land of gray shadows."

Lizzie: Reading this, John gets up from his chair, fists clenched, and rushes off to the clinic, where he finds, of course, both the doctor and his wife are gone. But just then, the telephone rings. It's Dr. Lorenz's driver, who has seen the cabin collapse and is calling to say what's happened.

Lizzie: Meanwhile under the rubble, Marta stirs.

Andrew Simpson: *And Marta, who is seriously injured, says, "Let me die."*

Lizzie: *She's lost the will to go on.*

Andrew Simpson: *And suddenly, Death shows up.*

Lizzie: *Oh! Death on a white horse!*

Andrew Simpson: *And notice how the music suddenly becomes just a single note.*

Lizzie: *Yes.*

Andrew Simpson: *Everything stops for death. She's died. We see her soul come out of her body.*

Lizzie: *Yeah, we see her—we see a ghost-like figure of her all in white, kind of rise out of her physical form.*

Andrew Simpson: *Right.*

Lizzie: *Marta climbs onto Death's horse and rides with him to Hades.*

Lizzie: *Everything turns red!*

Andrew Simpson: *Yes, so this is a tinting. So film stock was often tinted in the silent era, and it would be tinted different colors to represent different things. So blue, for example, was often used to represent nighttime scenes. Amber or gold might have been used for daytime scenes. And red was fire.*

Lizzie: *Death ushers Marta into a little rickety boat, and a ferryman paddles her through a steaming red river churning with lost souls, thrashing and reaching for the gunwales of the boat.*

Andrew Simpson: *The complete chaos and the wildness of the scene is echoed in the organ, which is just completely, you know ...*

Lizzie: *Were you just doing whatever you wanted at this point?*

Andrew Simpson: *Well, a little bit. I had a sense of gestures. I was basically yes, you know, like,*

getting into the moment. However, in the pedals, there's still a steadiness, right? There's still a steady pattern that's underlying it all in the bass. It's a—it's a repeating pattern over and over.

Lizzie: The little boat makes it to the devil's mount. The devil himself is silhouetted in the distance. Guarding him, we see the mythological, terrifying ...

Andrew Simpson: *Three-headed dog of Cerberus.*

Lizzie: *Okay. [laughs]*

Andrew Simpson: *[laughs] It's probably the director's dog.*

Lizzie: Cerberus looks like a beagle wearing two papier-mâché heads, because I think it is.

Andrew Simpson: *Yeah, he's just a pooch guarding the gates of hell. [laughs]*

Lizzie: The dog's tail is wagging.

Lizzie: *The dog's just, like, happy to be there. [laughs]*

Lizzie: But you know who's not happy to be there? Marta. As she gets closer to the winged devil on his perch, where he's forking bodies into the abyss with his pitchfork, she decides this is not where she wants to be or where she wants to go.

Andrew Simpson: *Marta takes matters into her own hands. She starts choking Death, and she manages to beat him down. In her grips, she throws him onto the bottom of the boat.*

Lizzie: Then suddenly the scene transforms again and she's not fighting death anymore. She's thrashing in the arms of John.

Andrew Simpson: *Now she's back on Earth. She's alive, and her husband has come. Everything's okay. It's morning.*

Lizzie: *You go from this turbulence. There's like a thinning of the sound into these more pure organ strains that have this feeling of deliverance.*

Andrew Simpson: *John lifts her.*

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Lizzie: Carries her away.

Andrew Simpson: And now suddenly, the music becomes something much more recognizable, much more directed, more tonal. But it's not exactly happy. It's still dark.

Lizzie: On the screen are the words, "Out of the abyss of darkness comes the promising light of hope." And as the sun rises in the field, John and Marta embrace.

Andrew Simpson: And yet the music, you'll notice, as we see the rising sun, is not going to end in a major key, but in a minor key. As if to say, "All is well, but not quite."

Lizzie: But that's your—Andrew Simpson's interpretation of this.

Andrew Simpson: Correct. That's true.

Lizzie: You as the musician are indicating how we should feel about this ending. I mean, this could have ended on a, like, "And everything is great!" You know, a major note. We would have thought, like, "Well, nothing more to think about here."

Andrew Simpson: Exactly, you're right. And I think there is something to think about here. There is something still to take away from the story. Because you're absolutely right. As a musician, we're thinking about the story. We're telling the story along with the film. So it's a huge responsibility, and it's something that I feel is the most important thing that I do is let the audience experience that story as the director seems to have wanted it to be told, And don't call attention to myself unduly.

Lizzie: Andrew is kind of like a musical interpreter, discerning a director's intent over a hundred years ago, and supporting that message through sound. Just enough for us to feel the joy or dread or fear or sorrow, without drawing attention to the music itself.

Andrew Simpson: So it's a strange thing for a musician to, you know, seek to perform and create music, and to have people experience it without knowing necessarily that it's there.

Lizzie: Yeah.

Andrew Simpson: But that's the nature of it. In a certain way, you're a co-partner. It's a partnering art.

Lizzie: Ironically, you are like a silent partner.

Andrew Simpson: *Oh, very good! [laughs]*

Lizzie: *Yeah! Because ideally, we're not really paying attention to the music.*

Lizzie: To do his job well, Andrew has to turn himself into a musical ghost of sorts. Not fully visible or detectable to the conscious mind, but always lurking in the background, ready to twist your expectations.

Lizzie: Film scores have evolved a lot since the silent film era. But today, music is one of the best parts of good horror. And that's because it's not just tacked on at the end—though Cousin Eddie, we do thank you for your service. It's made to enhance the story, even be a part of the story.

Andrew Simpson: *It's really the other half of this expressive whole.*

Lizzie: So this spooky season, think about the music when you're watching your favorite horror films. Maybe mute the sound for a few moments just to see how different it feels, then turn it back on and enjoy feeling unnerved.

Lizzie: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

Lizzie: To learn more about the History Film Forum at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, check out our newsletter, or the link in the show notes. We have shows every few months, so if you're in the DC area, come see for yourself.

Lizzie: We'll also include a photo of the real film star: that pooch guarding the gates of hell!

Lizzie: For help with this episode, we want to thank Andrew Simpson, Ryan Lintelman, Fiona Meagher and Valeska Hilbig.

Lizzie: Our podcast is produced by James Morrison and me, Lizzie Peabody. Our associate producer is Nathalie Boyd. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant. Mimi Plato writes our newsletter. Russell Gragg writes our transcripts. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder. Extra support comes from PRX.

Lizzie: If you have a pitch for us, send us an email at [Sidedoor\(@\)si.edu](mailto:Sidedoor(@)si.edu). And if you want to sponsor our show, please email [Sponsorship\(@\)prx.org](mailto:Sponsorship(@)prx.org).

Lizzie: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[Announcer: And now through new technology, we are able to give voice to our young lovers from the film. Now that Marta has been rescued, she and John are able to finally reconcile!]

[John: Marta my dear, I am so happy to have you now in my arms safe and sound.]

[Marta: John, dear, I'm so happy you were looking for me. I thought you might be laughing and at ease with my best friend while I was fighting for my life with the devil himself!]

[John: Um, don't you worry your precious little head about what I was doing.]

[Marta: Okay, I won't.]

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