



SAN FRANCISCO SILENT FILM FESTIVAL PRESENTS

VAMPYR



SAN FRANCISCO SILENT FILM FESTIVAL

CARL THEODOR DRYER

VAMPYR

FRIDAY, JANUARY 12, 2023

CASTRO THEATRE, SAN FRANCISCO

**TIMOTHY BROCK, CONDUCTOR
SAN FRANCISCO CONSERVATORY OF
MUSIC ORCHESTRA**



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TIMOTHY BROCK, CONDUCTOR

FIRST VIOLIN

Jessica Folson
Darren Sagawa
Kate Mayfield

SECOND VIOLIN

Katie Allen
Asuka Yanai
Tabitha Mason

VIOLA

Connie Song
Yun Liu

CELLO

Eric Yang
Elmer Carter
Weian Gu

DOUBLE BASS

Carlos Valdez

CLARINET

Liam Cameron

ALTO SAXOPHONE

Kiyomi Sakuta

BASSOON

Fabio Valery Villanova

TROMBONE

Austin Talbot

TUBA

Person

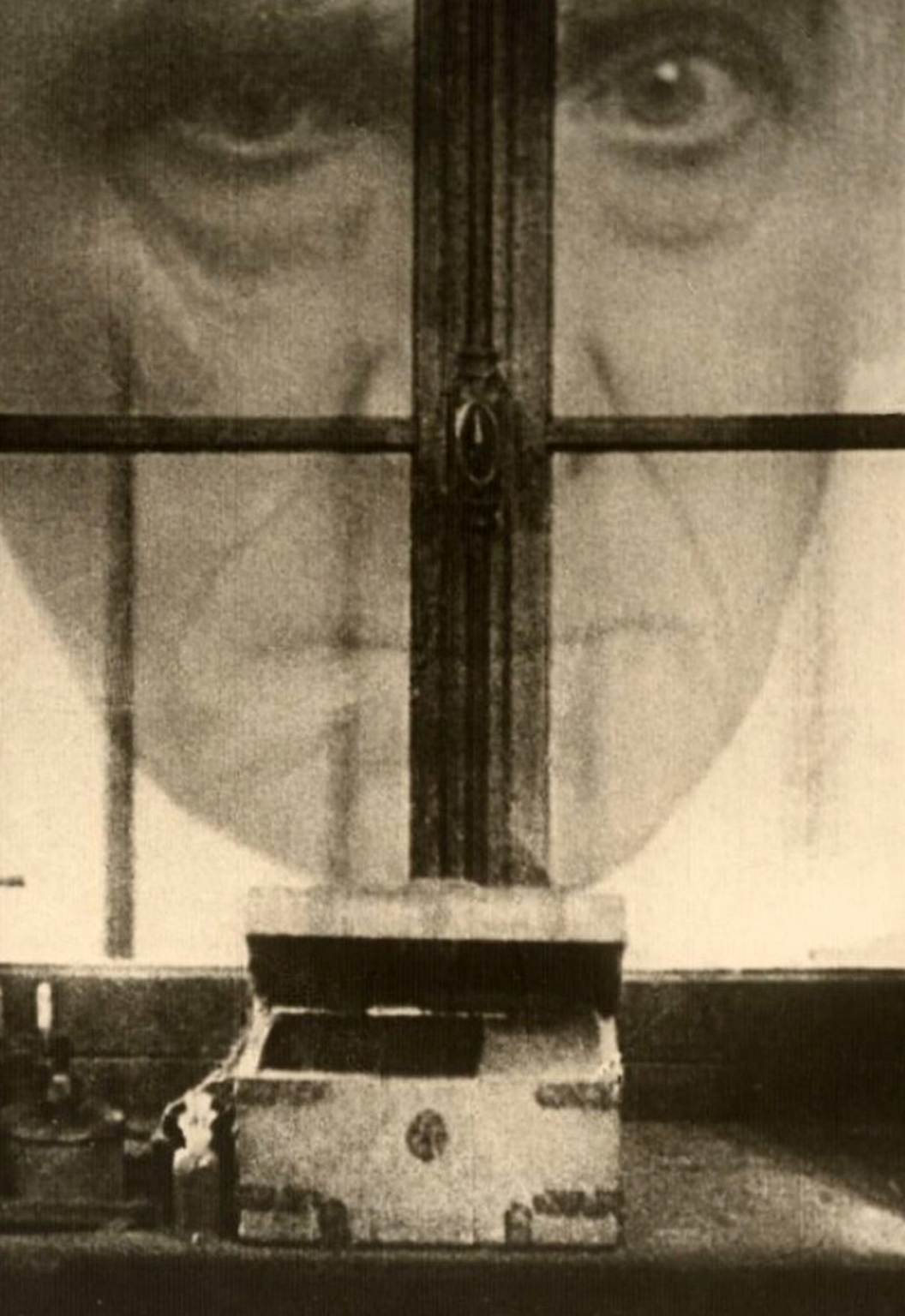
PERCUSSION

Brandon Topolski
Jonas Koh

HARP

Vicki Chen

Music by Wolfgang Zeller, restored by Timothy Brock



DREYER'S WAKING DREAM

GEOFFREY O'BRIEN

A good many years ago, while I was watching a videotape of Carl Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), my eight-year-old daughter came into the room and glanced at the screen for a few moments. What she saw unsettled her so much that she quickly walked away. She was disturbed not by any of the film's more elaborately nightmarish details—the giant head of a murder victim hovering outside a window or the shadow of the one-legged soldier creeping back into his body—but simply a few frames of a face, without a mask or outré makeup, encountered outside of any narrative context.

The face is that of Sybille Schmitz, who had previously made a brief but impressive appearance in G.W. Pabst's *Diary of a Lost Girl* (1929), playing a housemaid driven to self-destruction. Her performance in *Vampyr* as Léone, a young woman fallen victim to the vampire Marguerite Chopin, would be the most lasting legacy of a troubled life. (Her catastrophic final years, wracked by addiction and ending in suicide, provided the direct model for Fassbinder's death-haunted *Veronika Voss*.) In that moment dominated by her face—the tail end of a sequence lasting barely two minutes—Schmitz enacts, in almost medimistic fashion, the mortal combat between desire and revulsion as Léone tries to resist the vampirism that has already infected her and that finally asserts its full power.

The film that Dreyer described as a "waking dream" remains as labyrinthine as it was in

1932, perpetually forcing questions about what exactly is seen and who, in landscapes filtered through screams of mist, is seeing it. The film invents its own language for mapping the intermingling of different worlds as the dead prey upon the living and the living behave like sleepwalkers under perpetual siege. Yet, for all the mist and splintered spatial continuity, everything feels uncannily palpable. The supernatural combat plays out not on fantastic sets but among grittily real locations: an abandoned chateau, an abandoned factory, an abandoned abbey, an abandoned mill.

The vampire who feeds on Léone's lifeblood is no flamboyant Dracula or ogre-like Nosferatu but a white-haired woman who walks slowly with a stick; she might be a prosperous burgher of another century. We see little of her and hear less—her single line of dialogue being "Silence!" as she interrupts a supernatural dance party—but no spectator is likely to forget her stony, un pitying face. She delivers not a performance but a presence. Under her influence the human world becomes a zone of powerless entrancement.

The crucial moment—the momentary interruption of the trance—comes when Léone, rescued from a vampire attack, is swaddled in a blanket and propped in a chair. For two minutes the visual field is dominated by Schmitz's face: her eyes open slowly, and she stares wildly up and around; her hands are clamped over her mouth, then slip away to reveal her face in a new light; her neck turns

“IF ONLY I COULD DIE!”

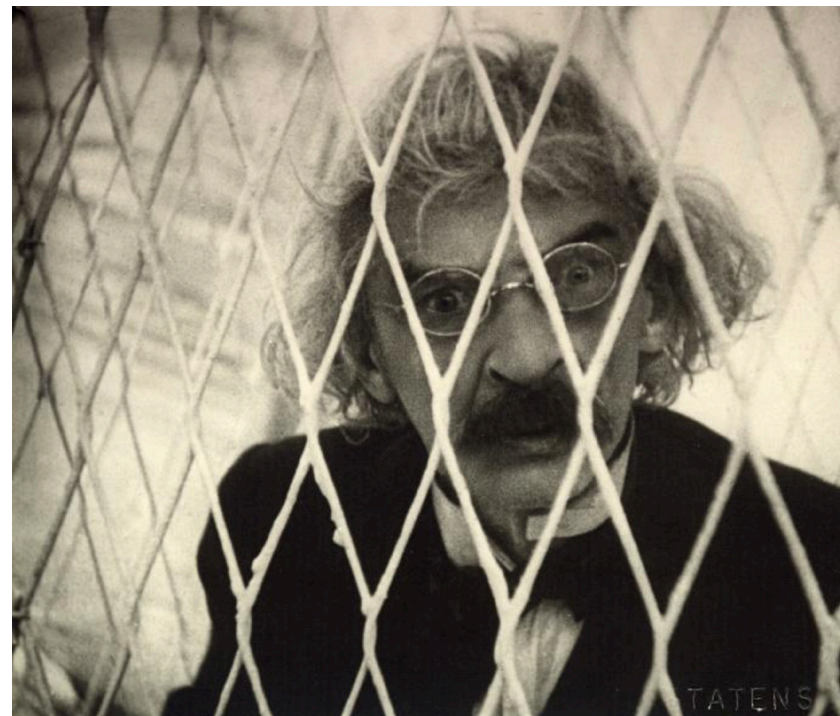
to expose the vampire’s puncture mark; her lips mouth words that do not emerge. Rapidly changing expression, she manages to cry out, “If only I could die!” Convulsive inner changes are conveyed through fleeting tics, tremors, hesitations. At last, as if under pressure, her mouth forces itself into a grin, and with bared teeth her face becomes a mask of predatory lust.

Add fangs and more lurid staging, and the scene is a template for many a vampire film to come. As filmed by Dreyer, it is like a sudden intrusion of fully expressed anguish, breaking through the prevailing somnambulist lull. Invaded by a dark foreknowledge, Léone is at once possessed and fighting against possession. It is not the first or last time in Dreyer’s work that a woman’s face is the site

of a life-and-death struggle, from Falconetti in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) to Birgitte Federspiel as the resurrected Inger in *Ordet* (1955). In the case of Sybille Schmitz, he found an actor more attuned to that role than he or she was likely to have realized.



Geoffrey O’Brien’s piece was originally published on the Criterion Collection website in October 2022 as part of “Playing the Vampire: Six Performances That Draw Blood.” A poet, critic, and essayist, O’Brien has written extensively about cinema and its place in our culture. His books include *The Phantom Empire: Movies in the Mind of the 20th Century* and *Arabian Nights of 1934*, a novel set in a Pre-Code America, released this month.



Principal Cast and Crew

Director Carl Th. Dreyer

Screenplay Dreyer and Christen Jul

Camera Rudolph Maté

Art Direction Hermann Warm

Music Wolfgang Zeller

Julian West as Allan Gray

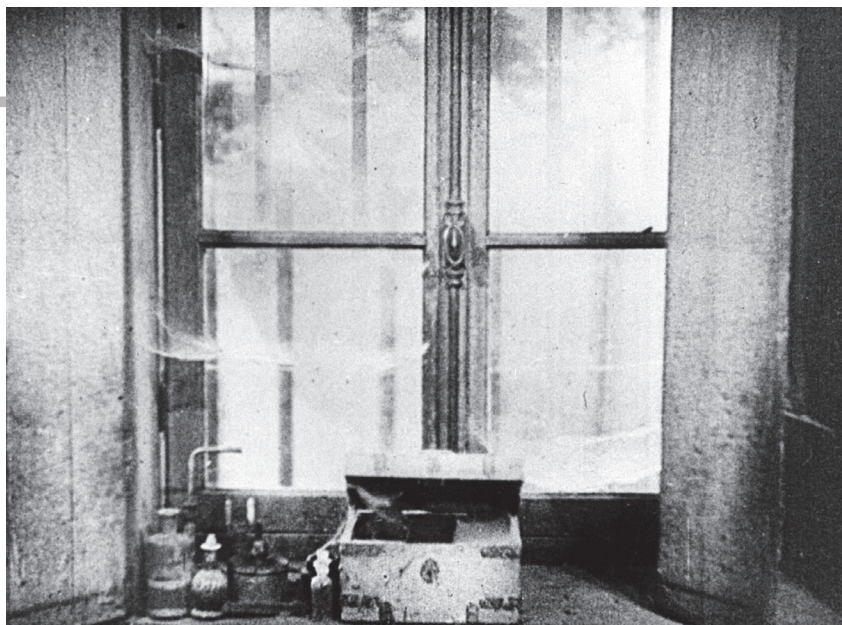
Henriette Gérard as Marguerite Chopin

Jan Hieronimko as the Doctor

Maurice Schutz as the Lord of the Manor

Rena Mandel as Gisèle

Sybille Schmitz as Léone



THE RESTORATION

Almost every time one takes a closer look at a film that is world-famous one has to face the sad fact that the film does not really exist in a form that seems acceptable. This is true also for Dreyer's *Vampyr*.

The original elements (i.e., camera negative for the image and sound negatives for the three original soundtracks in German, French, and English) are presumed lost. There are a number of original prints left (i.e., nitrate prints of the German and French versions struck in 1932 from the original negatives), but wear and tear over several decades have made them incomplete and quite damaged. Worse, most of them have subtitles, very much against

Dreyer's concept—to ensure widespread distribution, he produced the film with three different soundtracks so as not to disrupt the images with text.

Previous duplications did not do justice to the extremely delicate sfumato images or to the con sordino sounds captured on the variable density track. Some of the existing prints (nitrates or safety duplicates) are bastards, representing not one integral version, but a mix of two, or even three of the original versions, compiled in a desperate attempt to somehow restore the complete film out of elements that didn't really belong together. Not much seems to remain of the English version, except what's included in the version distributed by American

collector Raymond Rohauer in the 1960s, which we did not have access to, and another bastardization from the 1930s titled, *Castle of Doom*, which we were not aware of at the time.

Dreyer shot the film in France, edited it, and then brought it to Berlin to post-synchronize it in German, French, and English. Though shooting silent, he had made alternate takes of the few scenes with the actors speaking in the three languages. From what we can detect from the few surviving original prints, there was only one original image negative, which was printed, and then changed by cutting out the dialogue scenes of the first language (presumably German), splicing in the alternate takes, then printing again, and so forth until a sufficient number of prints was produced in all languages. Obviously, this archaic technique, probably due to the extreme poverty of the production company, presented problems whenever a new print had to be made. Any change in the image negative presented a risk of losing the synchronism with not only one, but three sound negatives.

Complicating matters, the German censor required trims to the scenes with Allan and the servant driving a stake through the vampire and of the suffocation of the doctor, which shortened the last reel of the German version by fifty-four meters. The cut scenes survive in the French version but are impossible to reinsert into the German one, because the continuity of images and sounds is different. Thus it was decided to preserve the longer French ending on a separate reel.

Many questions about the integrity of the surviving versions remain, however. Every reel of the German version, for example, is still missing twenty to thirty meters, which adds up to nearly an entire reel of missing footage. Why then does the film still seem complete, after one has put the surviving scenes together, as we have done? We can only speculate. My personal opinion is that Dreyer reworked the film entirely in the process of fulfilling the censor's requirements. Most likely larger pieces from the previous edit and sound mix were kept, and that would explain why some of the music-changes are rather abrupt in the recorded score and occur in all versions at the same point. Another possibility is that he chopped out entire scenes after the audience booed at the film's Berlin premiere. There is an article in the trade paper, *Film-Kurier*, suggesting that such an operation took place as early as after its first two showings on May 6, 1932.

Condensed from a longer piece by Martin Koerber originally published in Danish (*Film*, 2000), in Italian (*Close-Up*, 2001), and in English as part of the Criterion Collection DVD release booklet (2008). It can be read in its entirety at carlth-dreyer.dk. Former curator at Berlin's Deutsche Kinemathek, Koerber completed the restoration in 1999 with the close collaboration of Nicola Mazzanti, former head of L'Immagine Ritrovato.

THE SCORE

Ever since he saw *Vampyr* back in the mid-1980s, composer and conductor Timothy Brock has wanted to play the score live. He had been impressed in particular with the “fragility of the strings” and how German composer Wolfgang Zeller perfectly complemented what he calls the “fog” of the film. “It was the first time I heard music that actually sounded like a dream,” he told an audience at the 2021 Il Cinema Ritrovato, where decades later he was finally able to accompany the film with an orchestra.

Only recently has digital technology allowed for a cleaner separation of the music from dialogue and sound effects on the soundtrack. The manuscript of Zeller’s score was also only recently found. But it wasn’t just a matter of getting musicians together to play it. Former curator at Berlin’s Deutsche Kinemathek Martin Koerber, who completed a restoration of *Vampyr* in 1999, says that the manuscript uncovered at the Deutsches Filminstitut and Filmmuseum in Frankfurt was “in fact a mess of handwritten papers, rather illegibly annotated.”

In the usual way, Zeller had improvised a lot during the recording session. With no reason to believe anyone would revisit the written score, he had covered it, as Brock’s catalogue note for Il Cinema Ritrovato explains, “in a massive assortment of tempo changes, repeat bars, scratched-out notes, and instrumental substitutions.” Zeller first made notes in pencil, which were then overwritten in pen, making for an even more difficult read, and Brock asked Koerber to help decipher some of its more mysterious scribbles.

Myriad other challenges arose. The Foley on the soundtrack—the turning of doorhandles, knocks on doors—sometimes came across “more like a hissing or scratching,” recalled Brock. “One knock sounded like someone cracking a walnut.” He could have opted to replace them live. After all, the majority of the sound effects are written into *Vampyr*’s score, but matching their tone would be difficult at best.

Take the bell rung by the scythe-wielding figure to signal the ferryman. “You could tell the ding-ing of the bell was the actual bell from the film,” Brock said. “It can’t be replicated live. These kinds of sounds are also almost impossible to synchronize while conducting.” Counting on the expertise of Gilles Barberis, head of L’Imagine Ritrovato’s sound department, Brock decided to make one or two judicious improvements in the soundtrack, like replacing a knocking on the door with a better one a bit later on.

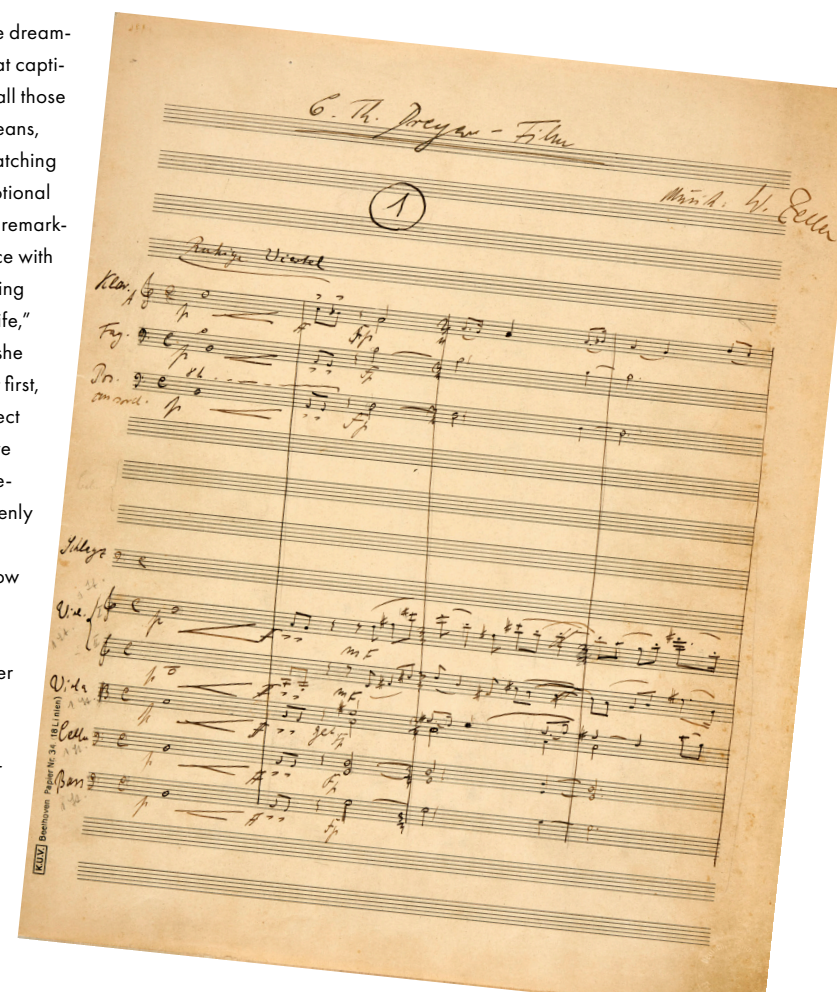
Part of what makes Zeller’s score so special is its distinctive instrumentation. When Léone lies sick in her bed, a lone saxophone alerts us that something’s off. A tam-tam later signals something’s sinister. However, some of Zeller’s choices are impractical for live performance. An accordionist plays for only thirty-five seconds in the dancing shadows scene. Elsewhere, a second trombonist plays for four measures. Live, Brock said, that trombonist would have to be counting for about sixty-four minutes before entering, hopefully, at the right moment. Zeller also had a small number of strings, which lends the recorded score an intimate feel. But live, you have to add strings for “a smoother sound.”

Accompanying films of this era, according to Brock, is like being “locked in a time capsule”—to capture that bygone sound, musicians have to be coached before rehearsals can even begin. “A modern orchestra simply does not play the same way orchestras did a hundred years ago ... I tell the violins I need a sort of intense, burnished vibrato. I want to hear that slide into the next note.”

Achieving the dream-like sound that captivated Brock all those years ago means, above all, matching the film’s emotional tones. In that remarkable sequence with Léone—“feeling damned for life,” said Brock—she cries softly at first, trying to collect herself, before falling into despair and openly weeping. In describing how the orchestra supports her throughout her breakdown and then in her surrender to the vampire, Brock revealed

the delicate alchemy between *Vampyr* and its score: “I love this scene so much. What a great actress Sybille Schmitz is, to be able to turn like that. And Zeller was clever enough to know how to do that musically, by doing these high-note trills on the violins. She becomes a different person, both musically and visually.”

Based primarily on a presentation at Il Cinema Ritrovato given by Timothy Brock after the premiere performance of the live score in 2021.



TIMOTHY BROCK

Since composing his first silent-film score for orchestra (*Pandora's Box*) in 1986 at age twenty-three, Timothy Brock has written more than thirty silent-film scores and has accepted commissions from some of the most prestigious orchestras and film institutions in the world. His work as a score preservationist has included restorations not only of Wolfgang Zeller's *Vampyr* but also Dmitri Shostakovich's *The New Babylon*, Erik Satie's *Entr'acte*, and twelve Charles Chaplin scores, among others. timothybrock.com

SF CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC

With roots in the Ada Clement Piano School begun with five instructors and four students, the San Francisco Conservatory of Music expanded to teach voice, theory, composition, and other instruments when it officially incorporated in 1923. Now celebrating its centennial, the conservatory has since become a vibrant world-class institution providing musicians a place to achieve their best possible selves. sfc.edu

WOLFGANG ZELLER

Conductor A violinist first, Zeller was house composer and conductor at Berlin's Volksbühne when he met Lotte Reiniger, and her animated feature, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926), became his first film score. Specializing in what one historian has called "somber, melancholy

music," he thrived in the waning years of Weimar cinema, composing for *Vampyr* as well as Walter Ruttmann's first full-length sound picture, *Melodie der Welt* (1929); Augusto Genina's *Prix de Beauté* (1930); and G.W. Pabst's epic in the Sahara, *L'Atlantide* (1932). He continued working in Germany with the rise of the Third Reich, scoring some of the era's most notorious anti-Semitic propaganda and, by 1944, was on the government list of "irreplaceable artists." After the war, Zeller worked primarily on documentaries at the East German state studio, among his last scores was for the Oscar-winning *Serengeti Must Not Die* (1959).

SF SILENT FILM FESTIVAL

San Francisco Silent Film Festival is dedicated to the presentation and preservation of silent cinema, and to demonstrating silent films as a relevant art form for modern audiences and as culturally valuable historical records. SFSFF presents live-cinema events that showcase important titles from the silent era, often in restored or preserved prints, with superb live musical accompaniment. SFSFF not only supports film preservation efforts by exhibiting major restorations but also partners with archives around the world to restore films, adding to the SFSFF collection held at the Library of Congress. silentfilm.org