Sound Comes to the Movies: 
The Philadelphia Musicians' Struggle Against Recorded Music

That millionaire mob my living did rob
Just for the greed of gold.
With their canned melodies and canned talkies,
Their deception is rather bold.
They took my bread and butter,
Starving my kiddies too,
What the public should do while they're fooling you,
Keep away from their canned show.
Demand the real thing, let the human soul sing.

—Frank Barrow, Local 77, AFM, Philadelphia

FRANK BARROW WAS ONE OF OVER 15,000 musicians who lost their jobs in movie theaters after the coming of recorded sound in 1926. In the fall of that year, Warner Brothers began the "talkie revolution" by screening *Don Juan*, the first full-length feature film utilizing a synchronized musical score. A scant four years later sound completely displaced silent films, causing *Fortune* magazine to characterize the transformation of the movie industry as "beyond comparison the fastest and most amazing in the whole history of industrial revolutions."2 Members of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) understood the dramatic implications of the new technology. Using such traditional labor weapons as strikes and boycotts, musicians, like skilled workers

1 Song, ca 1930, correspondence files, Records of Local 77, American Federation of Musicians (hereafter, Local 77 Records), Urban Archives, Temple University
before them, attempted to impede the destructive impact of technology on their craft.

The musicians' struggle against recorded sound, however, had implications beyond the struggle for workplace control and job protection. Before the advent of synchronized sound, moviegoing was far from a standardized experience. Exhibitors resisted uniformity, often tailoring films, live acts, and music to local tastes. In particular, musicians viewed themselves as artists crafting a unique performance and a personal relationship with the audience. Live music, in short, allowed the audience a "margin of participation" and provided an unpredictability rooted in specific local or cultural conditions. Especially in neighborhood theaters, musicians and audiences interacted to help transform a mass cultural commodity (film) to reflect their local, ethnic, class, and gender-related experiences.

The coming of recorded sound had a major impact on the theater experience. In part, the soundtrack enabled movie producers to make the film a more complete product that would be consumed in similar fashion all over the country. At the same time, musicians clearly understood that movie producers sought to cut costs as well as gain control of their product. Consequently, musicians initially cast their arguments against recorded sound within the context of unionists saving jobs. To broaden support, however, musicians quickly shifted the debate from the issue of jobs into the arena of culture. They defined the struggle as one of local autonomy and artistic integrity against the forces of homogenization and standardization. Union president Joseph N. Weber charged that movie producers were attempting to transform music into a "material commodity." To the members of the AFM, live music was not a commodity but an art form possessing a quality of authenticity, spontaneity, and

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uniqueness that could not be mechanically reproduced. Mechanization threatened to debase the art of music and prevent the important interaction between the musicians and the audience. The mood that music added to the movie was no longer left to the discretion of local artists close to, and potentially influenced by, the audience; rather it was set by a standardized product aimed at the largest consumer markets.

A close look at the struggle over standardization of the movie industry in Philadelphia, one of America's largest and most diversified cities, brings into sharp relief both its economic and cultural ramifications. For almost a decade, Philadelphia musicians struggled to protect both their jobs and their art. Their battle for live musical performance was part of a fight for individual expressiveness and localism versus the homogenization of a national movie market made possible by recorded sound. Philadelphia theater owners, in contrast, moved to recorded sound as a means not only to reduce their labor costs, but as a way to insure a totally standardized product free from the influence and control of live performers. Exploring the resistance to this standardization in Philadelphia offers insight into the process and the impact of mass commercialization of culture.

The movie industry developed rapidly during the early years of the twentieth century. The first moving pictures were commercially exhibited as novelty acts in the late 1890s at cafés, fairgrounds, vaudeville theaters, and lecture halls. In 1902, the first theater devoted exclusively to movies opened in Los Angeles, and the following year Edison studios produced the first film with a story line, The Great Tram Robbery. Over the next few years thousands of nickelodeons opened throughout the country, typically in the form of small makeshift theaters converted from dance halls, restaurants, pawn shops, or cigar stores, refashioned in the style of the familiar vaudeville emporium.

5 International Musician (journal of the American Federation of Musicians), June 1931, 8, Feb 1929, 1, James P Kraft, “Stage to Studio American Musicians and Sound Technology, 1890-1945,” Ph D diss, University of Southern California, 1990, views the decline of musicians in the silent theater within the context of the impact of technology on a craft

Principally located in urban working-class neighborhoods, nickelodeons provided cheap satisfying entertainment to immigrant audiences. But movie producers looked to expand their market by attracting the middle class. They pursued this potential new audience with feature films modeled after theatrical productions, and middle-class neighborhoods gradually permitted the construction of theaters. Beginning about 1910, the building of ornate movie palaces testified to the growing social acceptability of movies. In 1914, in Philadelphia, brothers Stanley and Jules E. Mastbaum, operators of a theater chain in eastern Pennsylvania, opened the Stanley, a 1,500-seat theater at 16th and Market, and five years later a 3,000-seat theater at 19th and Market, giving them fifteen theaters of various sizes on Market Street alone. By 1925, Philadelphia had 171,920 movie theater seats throughout the city. Movies increasingly became a form of nationally distributed mass entertainment that, unlike many earlier forms of leisure, attracted audiences from different classes.7

While the film was a standardized product, the moviegoing experience varied from theater to theater. Exhibitors viewed themselves as showmen, who distinguished their productions and appealed to local audiences by balancing a film with live acts and musical performances. Much to the dismay of national production companies, they often tried to change the film itself to meet local tastes. Exhibitors regularly “improved” features “by recutting them and speeding up the projector during the dull parts.” While national producers denounced exhibition practices that tampered with the film, some companies conceded that projection speed was a “subjective issue,” acknowledging that a film was “an artistic presentation, and it is not necessary that it should be mechanically accurate.”8


8 Koszarski, An Evening’s Entertainment, 54-61, esp 56, Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon, 99
Live music played an important role in making the silent theater a unique experience. Almost from the beginning, exhibitors attempted to enhance the mood of the cinema with music. In the early nickelodeons, musical accompaniment generally consisted of a piano, often poorly played by a low-paid musician whose music did little to improve the product. But as competition between vaudeville and motion pictures intensified, some exhibitors hired orchestras that approached symphonic proportions. Music became an increasingly important feature of motion picture exhibition once movie producers understood that music added considerably to the mood and aesthetics of the film. Musical accompaniment could enhance, detract, or even alter the “intended dramatic context, emotional effects, filmic rhythms, scenic structure and overall pacing of films.”

Beginning about 1910, movie producers tried to gain greater control over the type and quality of musical accompaniment by distributing elaborate cue sheets suggesting melodies to match particular scenes. Some producers, like D.W. Griffith, even commissioned original scores for their films.9

Still, in most cases musicians retained responsibility for the music, and their artistic ability (or lack thereof) figured prominently in audience response to the story. Musicians took great pride in the direct and creative relationship they had begun to develop with the film. Most rejected the cue sheets or scores as an infringement on their artistic domain. In 1921, organist M.M. Hansford argued that “simply sitting day after day and playing made-to-order scores would not be interesting.” Musicians, he continued, gained the “satisfaction of creative work” from score-making. Cue sheets promoted standardization, according to Hansford, who felt that “music, as well as life” suffers “from too much standardization.” Similarly, L.G. Del Castillo feared that “a universal use of these deadly

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hack programs would cast us all in the same mold." Cue sheets, musicians argued, were only helpful to inexperienced movie players. Accomplished organists were proud of their ability to improvise. Conductors of cinema orchestras also took great pride in compiling and arranging their own accompaniments, which they usually drew from existing musical texts. At times, particularly for transitions from scene to scene, conductors composed parts of the scores themselves.¹⁰

By the twenties, it was possible to divide theaters into three distinct groups: the small neighborhood picture theater, the combination moving-picture and vaudeville theater, and the downtown deluxe first-run movie palace. Neighborhood houses, often holdovers from the nickelodeons, typically offered a piano or a small instrumental group of perhaps three or four pieces. Organs, like the Wurlitzer, introduced in the mid teens, later enhanced the accompaniment of neighborhood houses with their ability to imitate the sounds of an entire orchestra or a single instrument. Moreover, they could reproduce varied sound effects, such as the sound of surf, fire bells, bagpipes, or thunderstorms. At combination theaters, small orchestras of seven to thirty-five pieces provided background music for both the motion picture and small-time, low-cost vaudeville shows. In deluxe first-run theaters, exhibitors integrated symphonic excerpts with vaudeville acts and films, attempting to appeal to the broadest possible audience. Combination and first-run theater owners included vaudeville and other live acts in recognition of the audiences' continued enjoyment of live performances. No deluxe theater was complete without its orchestra. When the Mastbaum, Philadelphia's "largest, fanciest, loveliest and most ornate theater" opened in 1929, its symphony orchestra of seventy-five musicians was a featured component of the show, sharing billing with other stars. The orchestra provided overtures and musical

solos in addition to accompanying the elaborate stage shows hosted by a master of ceremonies that preceded the feature film.\textsuperscript{11}

The tremendous growth in the number of movie theaters created an attractive new job market for musicians. At the turn of the century, theaters had employed about 3,000 musicians. By 1926 the number of theater musicians had grown to at least 20,000, representing over one-third of all full-time, professionally employed musicians.\textsuperscript{12} Theater work appealed to musicians because it offered steady year-round employment for workers suffering from a notoriously casual labor market. For violinist James Zenker a position in a movie theater "was one of the best jobs in Philadelphia because constantly we worked, worked, worked." Although wages varied considerably from lower-paying small neighborhood houses to the lucrative jobs at a deluxe central city theater, musicians could make between $50 and $90 per week at a time when the average annual income for skilled workers stood below $2,000. Some organists and concert masters did even better, commanding from $6,000 to $20,000 a year. As a result, talented musicians often chose to work in theater orchestras rather than symphonies with their short thirty-week seasons and lower pay. Philadelphia movie theaters, for instance, employed many former members of the prestigious Philadelphia Orchestra.\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{12} International Musician, June 1930, 1, June 1931, 1, Hugo Riesenfeld, "Music and Motion Pictures," in "The Motion Picture and Its Economic and Social Aspects," \textit{Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science} 128 (1926), 61-62, \textit{Variety}, Aug 15, 1928, Minutes, General Membership Meeting, Local 77 Records (hereafter, Membership minutes), Sept 6, 1927, March 16, 1928, Vera C Mastimer to Charles J McConnell, May 5, 1929, Correspondence files, Local 77 Records

The lucrative job market increased the power of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM). Without high quality mechanical substitutes, theaters depended on musicians, and in large cities most qualified musicians were members of the union. This, according to union president Joseph Weber, gave the AFM a “strike power far in excess of that enjoyed by other workers.” In 1929, the *North American Review* asserted that the union was so powerful that it was a “virtual dictator,” able “to force theaters to accept its terms.”

By the twenties, theater musicians dominated the union by virtue of their hold over the steadiest and most desirable jobs. The ability of a local to obtain favorable theater contracts was recognized by its members as the barometer of its success. Philadelphia AFM Local 77, like other powerful big city locals, negotiated every aspect of working conditions in the theaters, including wages, the size of orchestras, the length of the season (often compelling theaters to accept fifty-two-week contracts), the length of the performances, and even the length of intermission, protecting its members from unpaid overtime. The union arbitrated musical disputes between employers and members. In 1929, for example, Local 77 selected a committee of organists to listen to a member’s performance after complaints from the management of the Plaza Theater. Finally, the Philadelphia union fought to protect its members against automation. It required theaters to hire musicians to operate non-synchronized music machines, such as phonographs, and attempted, although with less success, to prevent neighborhood theaters from replacing small orchestras with organs, a battle the national union had been waging since the teens.

The musical accompaniment to films, however, had cultural benefits beyond the work it afforded musicians. Many observers noted that the theater orchestras, many of which compared favorably with the best
symphonies, introduced younger audiences to classical music, suggesting that the film industry could serve as an agency for spreading one aspect of "high culture." It also allowed older working-class audiences, who could no longer afford the increasingly expensive symphony or opera hall, access to the classical music and opera they already loved. According to music critic Henry T. Finck, movies exposed thousands of people who had no access to symphonic experiences to "good music" and popularized masterpieces of orchestral music. In 1922, the Philadelphia Public Ledger praised the public's expectation for good musical performances in the movie theater and asserted that its "level of critical appreciation [of music] constantly rises and is very much higher than it was even a decade ago." As critics saw it, movie theaters also played a crucial role in the development of American musicians. They envisioned movie houses as practical training schools for musicians, singers, conductors, and composers. The Public Ledger thus commended the practice in Philadelphia movie theaters of featuring solo performances by musicians before and between films. Movie theater orchestras also enabled conductors, such as Eugene Ormandy, who would lead the Philadelphia orchestra, to gain valuable experience and to test new compositions.

Obviously the quality of movie music varied. Neighborhood houses often suffered from ill-trained musicians playing pedestrian works. In 1921 Fred Nixon-Nirdlinger, president of the Philadelphia Theatrical Managers Protective Association, complained "that in the average run of theatres where all sorts of musicians plied their trade, they ceased to be musicians and became wind-jammers and nerve-wracking noisemakers." Reaction to the music was not limited to professional critics. Audiences

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often were keenly interested in the music. Organist Mirabel Lindsay asserted that it was “a known and proved fact that the public becomes attached to the manner used by different musicians in ‘putting over’ their pictures—it being a common thing to hear the remark that one goes to a certain theatre to hear certain musicians.” While the film distanced the actor from audience reaction, musical accompaniment provided an area of interaction between consumers and performers. Musicians adjusted the performance and musical interpretation of the film to the reaction of the audience. One musician reported watching “the attitude of the audience” to see if they were “following the picture closely.” If they seemed restless, he changed the tempo of the music or used another theme or passage. Another urged musicians, particularly those in smaller towns and neighborhood theaters, to “get in touch with your patrons and learn their likes and dislikes musically” to ensure that the musical accompaniment was “not only appropriate to the subject, but satisfying to the hearers.” In general, musicians argued that the “picture takes on added interest for the audience if a well chosen familiar melody is worked in at the point where it will have special significance.”

Working-class audiences in particular brought traditional patterns of public sociability and boisterousness into the theater. Like earlier vaudeville, minstrel, and burlesque audiences, plebeian moviegoers made clear their approval and disapproval through boos, catcalls, whistling, stamping, and hand-clapping. The cinema was not a passive experience; moviegoers interacted with each other and with the entertainment, creating a sense of community with surrounding neighbors, friends, and strangers in the local movie halls. In some theaters, audiences asserted their presence by participating in sing-alongs, and while the audience response could have no impact on the film, it could help shape the music and other forms of live entertainment. Some theater owners recognized the audience’s desire for interaction and emphasized community participation. Walter Wild advised his fellow exhibitors to instruct their organists to lead community sings of some “well known and loved songs each week.” He found it “amazing how quickly the audience will respond to the lure and

lilt” of the music. Organist James Thomas asserted that “if we are to keep the people interested, we must give them a part in the show” for they “are as important a part in the proceedings as is the silver screen.”

The importance of musicians and the association of movies with live acts testified to the incomplete control that movie producers and theater owners had over their product. On the one hand, many exhibitors resented the tremendous expense of paying for music with each performance and the power of the musicians’ union, while smaller cinemas, unable to present live acts, had difficulty competing with first-run theaters. On the other hand, producers resented exhibitors physically tampering with their films and, in some cases, giving the movie a subordinate role within the show. They also disliked the influence that musicians exercised over the audience reaction. Rudolph Berliner, musical director for Cecil B. De Mille studios, noted that “we are forced to a keener realization of the vital importance of theatre music each time we visit a theatre.” He continued, “we must admit that any inferior element can wreck the whole structure as easily as poor mortar between the stones could render a mighty edifice valueless.” As a result, some movie producers and exhibitors became determined to complete the process of standardizing movies.

The expansion of regional or national theater chains during the twenties was the first step towards total standardization of the moviegong experience. Chains, like Balaban & Katz of Chicago, or the Stanley Company,
which owned or controlled many of the major theaters in Philadelphia and eastern Pennsylvania, standardized shows, giving audiences throughout a region or the nation the same programs despite resistance from musicians. The growing vertical integration of the movie industry during the late twenties strengthened the power of the chains.22

The real key to standardized moviegoing, however, was the development of recorded sound. Inventors and businessmen had experimented with recorded sound since the beginning of motion pictures. Generally their systems for synchronizing pictures with sound were expensive and unreliable. Early experiments demonstrated public resistance to the poor quality of recorded sound and helped sour movie picture executives on its commercial viability. Nevertheless, experimentation continued and by the mid-twenties engineers at Western Electric had solved most of the technical difficulties.23

The immediate impetus behind the utilization of recorded sound on a commercial basis was Warner Brothers's desire to improve its competitive position. Principally a distributor to small independent or neighborhood theaters, the company hoped that recorded sound would compete with the stage shows of the opulent downtown movie palaces and with radio. Sound movies would enable smaller theaters to offer filmed versions of vaudeville acts, dance, and other musical programs to neighborhood audiences without the expense of live performers. Moreover, synchronized sound made tampering with films more difficult, ensuring a standardized speed of projection. While the initial investment in new projectors and sound systems was expensive—between $7,000 to $24,000 per theater—the savings from musicians’ salaries allowed the exhibitor to recoup his investment quickly, making the conversion to sound a “classic case of the substitution of capital for labor.”24

In August 1926, at the premiere of *Don Juan*, Warner Brothers successfully demonstrated its sound system, Vitaphone, and began offering it to movie theater operators. Initially the demand for recorded sound grew slowly as the major movie companies, MGM, Paramount, Universal, and First National, feared it was a passing attraction. Most had large inventories of silent films, and their studios and theaters were designed only for producing and screening the silents. The success of *The Jazz Singer*, which opened October 6, 1927, in New York City, silenced most critics, and Warner's enormous profits on its early sound productions forced the major studios to begin converting.

Although theaters were being wired for sound, it was not clear that the talkies would supplant the silent film and its live musical accompaniment. In the midst of the conversion Paramount Pictures's vice-president Jesse L. Lasky asserted that “the talking picture has its place but this doesn't mean that the silent picture is doomed. On the contrary, it will remain the backbone of the industry's commercial security.” The doubts about sound movies rested in part on the poor quality of sound reproduction. Many theaters had poor acoustics, drawing complaints from the audience about the hollow and unnatural sound of the actors' voices and the monotone of canned music. The *Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger*, for example, found canned music less effective than live because it lacked “the tone qualities of the music that comes from the orchestra pit.”

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25 Vitaphone synchronized a disk of phonographic music with the action of the picture by an attachment placed in the operator's booth. In 1928, Fox Film Corporation began producing sound newsreels using Movietone, an alternative system that recorded sound on the same film as the motion picture. Balbo, "Struggles for Control," 117, Ewen, *American Popular Music*, 381.


27 For Lasky quote, see *Evening Bulletin* (Philadelphia) (hereafter, *EB*), May 29, 1926. Despite the advantages of recorded sound and Warner Brothers's enthusiasm, in mid 1927 there was still no consensus among movie producers that audiences would accept the talkies. In a *Motion Picture Magazine* interview Lasky and eleven other prominent Hollywood producers and directors, including Irving G Thalberg, Cecil B De Mille, and Samuel Goldwyn, rejected the possibility of sound pictures totally displacing silents. Thalberg, for example, asserted that the "talking motion picture has its place, as has colored photography—but I do not believe the talking motion picture will ever replace the silent drama any more than I believe colored photography will ever replace entirely the present black and white." "When We Will Really Have Talking Movies," *Motion Picture Magazine*, June 1927, 32-33, 96-99, Seldes, "The Movies Commit Suicide," 708-12.

28 *New York Times* movie critic Ohn Downes also contended that the movie orchestras could not "be replaced by machines with anything but a great loss of musical quality and effect. The machines still transmit music imperfectly, with imperfections so obvious that no ordinary ear can fail to note them, and immediately distinguish between the real thing and the fake substitute."
Even as audiences flocked to the talkies in larger numbers, some viewers expressed a certain ambivalence about this innovation. Clara Zatzman of Philadelphia recalled that it was “exciting to think the movie talks,” but when the orchestra went away she “missed the human contact.” Surveys also reflected these feelings. In one, 56 percent of the 250 people questioned favored the talkies, but nearly 80 percent preferred live orchestral music. The message of the survey was mixed, but some viewers clearly resented entertainment that impeded interaction between audience and performers. Indeed, theater owners felt obliged to instruct audiences in the proper etiquette for viewing talkies, including the need for absolute silence. As one film historian has observed, the complete subordination of the audience to the film eliminated the “conditions around which local, ethnic, class, and gender-related experience might crystallize.”

Viewers may have missed certain aspects of the silent theater, but they did not reject talkies altogether. In August 1928, in Philadelphia, audiences gave a warm reception to the Lights of New York, the first full-length all-talking film. The continuing refinement of sound techniques helped ensure growing audience acceptance and encouraged the major studios to join Warner Brothers in completing the conversion process. By 1931 only a few independent studios were producing silent films.

Fearful of the possible impact of recorded music on jobs, the AFM established a Theater Defense Fund of $1.5 million in 1928. It did not ban its members from recording for movie studios for fear of alienating possible supporters; instead locals adopted a variety of tactics to protect jobs. Musicians in various cities planned parades to protest sound motion in late 1928, Universal Films placed an ad in daily papers asking for the public’s reaction to a complete transition to talking pictures. Seven hundred people responded and over 60 percent opposed “canned music.”

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29 Walker, *The Shattered Silents*, 98-99, Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 44, Clara Zatzman, interview with author, Sept 30, 1987, *Variety*, Jan 30, 1929, reported on a similar survey in Syracuse where 50 percent of those surveyed preferred talking pictures but 93 percent did not want to see the silent film eliminated. Seventy-seven percent wanted the organist to accompany the synchronized score. In late 1928, Universal Films placed an ad in daily papers asking for the public’s reaction to a complete conversion to talking pictures. Seven hundred people responded and over 60 percent opposed “canned music.” *Variety*, Jan 9, 1929

pictures and even filed suit to hold "talkie" theater operators liable for damages to members of the union. In other localities, musicians staged unsuccessful strikes against individual theaters and theater chains that typically ended with union concessions in wages and the number of musicians employed. The number of theater musicians working dropped rapidly from over 20,000 in 1928 to less than 10,000 three years later, although the movie industry as a whole was relatively stable until 1931. This represented a loss of a large percentage of the permanent full-time jobs available to musicians. Organists and musicians employed in small orchestras in the neighborhood theaters suffered most, but even downtown movie palaces cut the size of orchestras, and many dropped vaudeville and other live acts entirely.

Philadelphia musicians were luckier than most, however. A two-year contract with the theater chains, signed in the fall of 1927, protected most movie musicians from early conversion to sound. Three theater chains, the Stanley (owned by Warner Brothers), the Fox, and the Friehofer, controlled most of Philadelphia's moving picture theaters, including the deluxe downtown houses. Many of the theater orchestras were highly acclaimed. Their prestige and the integral role of the musicians in the success of each movie helped make their local union one of the most powerful in the country. In the late twenties, Philadelphia Local 77 had contracts with 133 theaters, including the chain-owned houses and some independent theaters. Altogether these theaters employed 486 musicians in orchestras and 104 organists. Generally, Local 77's contract with the Stanley chain established wages and conditions across the city.


32 "Effects of Technological Change," Monthly Labor Review (Aug 1931), 262-64, NYT, Sept 3, 1928, Jan 26, 1930, Robert D Letter, The Musicians and Petrillo (New York, 1953), 57, PL, March 28, 1929 In 1928, 60,000 of the 140,000 members of AFM were full-time musicians, one-third were employed in the theaters International Musician, Oct 1929, 1, June 1931, 1 The 1928 Chicago strike by 750 musicians sought to protect the jobs of musicians in the neighborhood houses, NYT, Aug 29-Sept 9, 1928
At times, however, the union was able to negotiate better contracts with
the independents. 33

Nevertheless, Philadelphia theater owners began wiring their theaters. By late 1929, 170 of the city's 200 theaters had some sort of sound
system. Although musicians were not laid off, because of the existing
contract and the continued need for live music at the downtown deluxe
theaters, in many theaters the musicians were reduced to playing overtures
and during intermission. At the Aldine Theaters, for example, as early
as 1927 the orchestra played for ten minutes twice a day. 34

Audiences accustomed to live music helped the AFM. Indeed, in
1929 some theaters were advertising themselves as "silent houses" to
attract those dissatisfied with recorded music. 35 The key for the theater
managers was to impose standardization on markets where it would have
the least impact on attendance. The movie chains believed that the talkies
would make their greatest inroads in the neighborhood theaters, in part
because live music provided by organists or small ensembles may not
have been particularly effective in setting the mood of the film, and partly
because demand in the inexpensive neighborhood theaters was less elastic.
Theater owners feared, however, that they could not attract audiences to
the more expensive center city houses, which traditionally had the best
orchestras, without offering live music. Accordingly, the Stanley and
Fox chains first dropped vaudeville and live music at the neighborhood
theaters. In the center city houses, owners tried to wean the public over
to a program of totally canned music by reducing orchestra size and
playing time and by consciously encouraging "a slack and poor quality
of performance." 36

When Local 77's contract expired in 1929, the Stanley Company tried
to reduce its house orchestras and organists from 256 musicians to 75.

33 Membership minutes, Aug 27, 1929, McConnell to Zuck, June 20, 1929, Correspondence
files, Local 77 Records, Philadelphia A Guide to the Nation's Birthplace, comp by the Federal
Writers' Project (Philadelphia, 1937), 233
34 The Film Daily Year Book (New York, 1930), 755-56, 763, The Film Daily Year Book (New
York, 1929), 701-2, Stanley Company to Joseph Weber, May 10, 1927, in Membership minutes,
May 11, 1927, C J McConnell to Fred N Zuck, June 20, 1929, Correspondence files, Local
77 Records
35 EPL, July 24, 1928, April 11, 1929
36 Membership minutes, Jan 6, 1930, Exec Comm minutes, June 4, 1930, Moving Picture
World, Sept 10, 1927, NYT, Jan 26, 1930, Joe Milekoff, interview, Sept 30, 1987
It demonstrated the superfluity of live musicians to both the union and the public by refusing to allow musicians in two theaters to play for several days. Only after a formal complaint from AFM president Joseph Weber did the Stanley Company allow musicians to return to the pits. The AFM's threat of a nationwide strike of theaters temporarily prevented wholesale reductions in the number of musicians, but Stanley still extracted an agreement to drop fifty musicians from Local 77's neighborhood houses. During the spring of 1930, after concessions from the union, the Stanley and Fox chains began to consolidate their remaining musicians into orchestras at five center-city theaters: the Mastbaum, Earle, and Fox, all of which continued to present live stage shows, and at the Stanton and Stanley theaters. The owners' eventual goal was to employ musicians only at the first three houses. 17

The struggle intensified in the fall of 1930 when theater owners, feeling confident about audience acceptance of recorded sound, planned to dismiss three-quarters of their musicians and obtain the right to fire players with only two-weeks notice. After lengthy negotiations, Local 77 refused to accept the companies' terms and struck on September 11, 1930. Local 77 president Adolph Hirschberg asserted that the chain's canned music policy was gouging movie audiences and charged that the "public is hearing poor music and is not benefiting by reductions in prices." William Goldman, district manager of the Stanley chain, retorted that "we cannot set back the wheels of progress and substitute silent pictures, which our patrons do not want. Nor is it possible for this company to pension indefinitely the musicians who thus find themselves out of work." 38

The theaters remained open during the strike, the downtown houses substituting Vitaphone shorts for stage acts. The Philadelphia Central Labor Union urged all trade unionists to provide moral support by patronizing only the independently owned theaters that had already signed contracts ensuring the employment of a full complement of musicians.

37 EB, Aug 31, Sept 3, 5, 1929, PL, Sept 12, 1929, EPL, Sept 12, 1929, Membership minutes, Aug 27, Sept 3, 10, Oct 1, 8, 1929, Jan 6, 1930, Exec Comm minutes, June 4, 1930
38 PL, Aug 27, 1930, EPL, Aug 26, 1930, EB, Sept 13, 19, 1930, Union Labor Record, Sept 12, 19, 1930, The Stanley-Warner Company demands in Philadelphia were part of a coordinated nationwide drive of theatrical corporations to cut musicians and to obtain wage and working condition concessions Membership minutes, Aug 12, 26, 1930
To sway public opinion, the union inaugurated a radio publicity campaign, broadcasting special Sunday musical concerts and speeches against canned music. In early October, as theater owners remained steadfast, the union threatened sympathy walkouts by projectionists, which would close the theaters, and by Local 77’s members from the city’s night clubs, dance halls, cafés, radio stations, and restaurants.39

Attendance dwindled in the deluxe theaters, which generated most of the profits for the large chains, as audiences refused to pay high prices for movies without supporting stage shows and live orchestras. Theater owners had evidently underestimated the appeal of live music. The *Evening Bulletin* found there was a feeling of “something dead” at the theaters during the strike, noting that a poor screen show needed a good stage show and orchestra if the box office was not to suffer. Canned music, added the *Bulletin*, had not yet replaced musicians “in the affection of a public which has been accustomed to both seeing and hearing” first rate orchestras in the deluxe theaters like the Mastbaum. While the *Bulletin* found that canned music was actually superior to live music in some of the inferior neighborhood theaters, audiences willing to pay the palaces’ higher admissions expected to retain their traditional interaction with performers.40

In mid-October, a compromise settlement in which the union accepted a cut of 75 musicians, instead of 178, ended the strike. Theater owners, who had lost money in their most important houses during the strike, realized that they had to continue offering live music at center-city houses. According to the *Evening Public Ledger*, the results of the strike showed that the “public has clearly made no critical judgement as yet concerning the adequacy of mechanical substitutes,” which, the paper hastened to add, had not yet been totally perfected. If, however, “screen music is materially and rapidly improved, it will very likely hold its own.” The *Ledger* further speculated that if canned music was “already near its limit of perfection, it is possible that an enterprising showman of the future

40 *EB*, Oct 18, 1930
may steal a march on his competitors by restoring the full orchestra to its former prestige and prominence in his programs.”

Local 77 concluded from the strike that the public held the balance of power. The union, said an optimistic Hirschberg, was counting on “an aroused public demand for real music in the motion pictures of Philadelphia.” According to Hirschberg, everybody “wants music, with the artist behind the instrument, injecting his soul inspiring personality, instead of the phantom, the robot, or canned music that represents an adulterated form of music and debauches the art.” To maintain support for live music, the union continued its radio broadcasts (an ironic use of one technological form to combat another) and other educational efforts. It asked the public to act as a “jury” in a series of neighborhood theater demonstrations. Orchestras visited various neighborhood theaters to assess the public’s taste and preference in musical entertainment. Good attendance at these theaters, according to union secretary Albert J. Callahan, would show that the “people demand the human element in preference to robot musicians.”

Local 77, however, failed to convince the movie chains that the public still demanded live music. The Stanley Company, for example, continued its slow but steady phasing out of remaining live music by reducing the size of the deluxe theater orchestras and eliminating the last of the small orchestras in its neighborhood theaters. To achieve this goal, it attempted to buy up competing independent neighborhood theaters, some of which, because they were unable to obtain first-run films, competed with the chains by offering small vaudeville shows. After gaining control of such theaters, the Stanley company eliminated vaudeville.


43 Membership minutes, Sept 10, Oct 18, 1930 *EPL*, Oct 16, 17, 24, 1930

44 *EPL*, Sept 10, 1936, *EB*, Dec 20, 1932, July 30, 1936, Nov 30, 1939, Sept 6, 1940, Gomery, "The Coming of Sound,” 283, Membership minutes, Nov 4, 1931, Aug 23, 1932, July 25, Aug 29, 1933, Nov 6, 1934, Aug 20, 1935, April 7, 1936, Feb 21, 1938 In 1936, for example, the union had contracts with the Fay Theater to employ eight men and the Carmen to employ ten Both were independents
In late 1931, the Stanley Company asserted that it employed twice as many musicians as it needed. Since many of their players were used “for so short a time that the value of their services were practically negligible,” the company offered to retain only fifty musicians in two theaters, down from 165. As a result, on September 8, 1931, the union again struck the chain. Local 77 president Adolph Hirschberg declared, “We are prepared to stay out forever, if necessary, for we certainly have nothing to lose.” The union contended that the public had “The Whip Hand,” and wanted “not hurdy-girdies, or canned music, but real honest-to-goodness soul inspiring music as produced by the Musician in the flesh.” Again it sought to generate public pressure against “adulterated canned music” by sending out thousands of letters, sponsoring radio broadcasts,
and placing musicians in strategic independent theaters to compete with the canned Stanley houses. Again, the critical center-city houses soon lost enough patronage that the chain settled with the union. The owners agreed to employ 100 musicians, some of whom continued to work in the neighborhood theaters.45

The chain’s strategy of substituting machinery for labor, however, had an immediate and profound effect on movie musicians. Many never played professionally again. Some lacked the versatility to make the transition into other fields of music. Philadelphia violinist James Zenker recalled that “theater men were theater men—they didn’t know anything else but theater work.” For others, the depression intensified the job shortage by reducing the number of miscellaneous engagements usually available to musicians. Symphony orchestras, a natural home for these musicians, were unable to absorb the displaced players. Before recorded sound, symphony managers had difficulty enticing good theater players to accept positions in their orchestras, but in 1929 there were twenty applications for each vacancy. There were some new opportunities for symphony players in radio orchestras and film studios, but not nearly enough. There were almost no opportunities, however, for organists, especially those thrown out of the neighborhood theaters. Local 77 secretary A.A. Tomei recalled that a few despairing musicians, including one of his friends, a clarinet player who “couldn’t see his future,” committed suicide.46

During this period of retrenchment, Philadelphia musicians joined in a concerted cultural campaign against mechanical music in the theaters. Local 77’s radio broadcasts and letter campaigns were part of a broader effort directed by the national union to shift the struggle from an economic to a cultural basis. The musicians linked their economic battle for employment, which drew on traditional trade union tactics, to what they argued was an equally important cultural battle to protect their art. The AFM asserted that its struggle against canned music was not simply one of

46 "Effects of Technological Changes Upon Employment in Motion-Picture Theaters of Washington, D.C.,” 1,005-8, Zenker interview, Tomei interview, International Musician, June 1931, 16
workers fighting machinery to save jobs. That the musicians shifted the
debate into the arena of culture reflected both their dual vision of them-
selves as artists, as well as workers, and their judgment that a cultural
argument would resonate with the public. Union president Joseph Weber
asserted that canned music was a degradation of culture, and that "art
cannot be mechanized."47

To the musicians, live music for an audience was a work of art
possessing a quality of authenticity and uniqueness that could not be
mechanically reproduced. They believed that recorded music destroyed
this uniqueness, turning music into a commodity to be bought and sold
as part of a standardized mass culture. Thus to Weber, music represented
the poetic side of the soul that was indispensable to society as a cultural
agent. It did not lend itself to mechanization because "its loftiness, its
spirit and soul-inspiring qualities preclude this. Through mechanization
it is reduced to emotionless, rasping sound, standing in even less valuable
artistic relationship to real music than a cheap chromo of one of Raphael's
masterpieces stands in relation to the original."48

In its defense of live movie music, the AFM also drew on earlier
arguments of the cultural importance of the theater orchestra. Weber
asserted that these orchestras had aided the musical growth of the United
States, drawing "literally millions of Americans . . . out of a state of
complete indifference to the meaning of music." Weber also pointed to
the role of theater orchestras as training schools for musicians, composers,
and conductors, and predicted that without these vehicles symphony
orchestras would suffer. In addition, "embryo musicians" would be dis-
couraged from pursuing the vocation because of the lack of a broad field
of employment, leading to eventual restriction of the art. Canned movie
music, combined with the radio and phonograph, would result in the

47 International Musician, Feb 1929, 1, May 1929, 18, NYT, June 30, 1928, Letter, The
Musicians, 58-60

48 NYT, Oct 10, 1928, International Musician, Sept 1929, 9, June 1931, 1, April 1930, 1,
June 1930, 10, 13 Essayist Walter Benjamin contended that "even the most perfect reproduction
of a work of art is lacking in one element its presence in time and space, its unique existence
at the place where it happens to be " Benjamin, like the supporters of live movie music, noted
that filmed or recorded performances prevented the actor or musician from interacting or adjusting
to the audience. This interaction permitted "the audience to take the position of a critic, without
experiencing any personal contact" with the performer. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in
the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Hannah Arendt, ed, Illuminations (New York, 1969),
220-29
mechanization of cultural production and music would no longer be a participatory art. Eventually, Weber believed, without easy access to live performances, most Americans would become mere listeners to machines and cease to be creators of "real music."\(^\text{49}\)

If genuinely fearful about the implications of the centralization of culture for their art, why did the musicians fail to oppose the record industry or radio? In the twenties, these forms of mechanization did not appear to be a threat. They had created new musical markets and had not undermined employment opportunities. Live musicians performed on the radio, while records were played in the privacy of the home. Neither seemed to undermine the existing relationship between the musician and the audience. Musicians perceived that recorded sound in the movie theater was the first concerted attack on their jobs and on live music as an integral part of American culture.\(^\text{50}\)

Asserting that culture was being sacrificed to profit, the AFM believed that it had a duty to make the public aware of the implications of substituting "factory-made" art for living music. The federation believed that an aroused public would eventually resent movie chains for using inferior machine music while charging the same price paid for live performances. In a sense, the union was trying to create and intensify audience resentment over the loss of traditional entertainment patterns. Therefore, in 1929, the union began its "cultural battle" by launching a systematic advertising campaign to generate independent audience resistance to canned music. It released news stories to the press and bought advertising space in 798 newspapers and 24 magazines to present its arguments and cartoons ridiculing sound pictures.\(^\text{51}\)

In early 1930, looking for tangible evidence that the public wanted live music in theaters, the union began the Music Defense League campaign, which cost the organization nearly $1 million over a two-year period. To join the league, it was necessary only to sign a coupon expressing opposition to the elimination of live music from theaters. Blank coupons were distributed to local musicians and published by the union in hundreds of newspapers and dozens of magazines. Eventually,\(^\text{49}\ EPL, \text{June 6, 1930}, \text{PL, July 16, 1928, NYT, Oct 27, 1929, International Musician, July 1928, 1, Feb 1929, 1, April 1930, 1, June 1930, 1, June 1931, 1} \text{50} \text{Leiter, The Musicians, 54-55, Kraft, "Stage to Studio," 38-40} \text{51 International Musician, July 1928, 1, Feb 1929, 1, May 1930, 3, June 1930, 1, April 1932, 1}
three million people demonstrated their “cultural consciousness” by joining the league. With these coupons the union hoped to impress theater owners with the large demand for live music.52

During 1931, the AFM continued its campaign for live music by sponsoring Living Music Day with the cooperation of local newspapers. Many papers were eager to participate because of relationships built

52 International Musician, March 1930, 1, Feb. 1930, 1, June 1930, 1, June 1933, 9; Leiter, The Musicians, 59-60; NYT, March 1, 1930.
during the advertising campaign. On the selected day, union bands and orchestras gave free concerts in stores selected by the participating newspapers. Papers in over 120 cities publicized the event in Living Music Day supplements that carried concert advertisements paid for by the store owners.\footnote{International Musician, Dec 1931, 1, Feb 1932, 1, April 1932, 1, Dec 1932, 1}

Local 77 was a key participant in the cultural battle for live music. Union officers continually sent letters to the newspapers attacking canned music. At the same time, Local 77 rank and file encouraged fellow Philadelphians to join the Music Defense League. On May 3, 1932, the local joined with the \textit{Philadelphia Daily News} to sponsor a Living Music Day. In addition, the union tried to expose the public to live music both outside the theater and within the movie houses in direct competition with canned sound. It assembled a symphony orchestra designed to "make the public realize the harm mechanical music is doing to music as an art and profession." The union agreed to alterations in movie house contracts to gain more exposure for movie musicians, allowing the Aldine Theater orchestra to tour theaters that ordinarily used canned sound in order to get "humanized music in the theater." It also allowed the Fox Theater orchestra to combat management cuts in the length of the overture by playing overtime without pay.\footnote{International Musician, Dec 1932, 1, Membership minutes, Aug 7, 1928, Nov 21, 1929, Feb 4, 1930, Feb 15, 1931, Exec Comm minutes, Dec 20, 1929, Sept 18, Oct 6, 1930, William Edward Leine to John Bassle, March 8, 1930, McConnell to Joseph Weber, Feb 21, 1930, Local 77 Records}

As a result of the efforts of the Philadelphia union and other locals across the country, the AFM helped inaugurate a nationwide debate over the merits of canned music. Numerous editorials supported the union's contention that the public should shun mechanical music in the theaters. Newspapers like the \textit{Trenton Times-Advertiser} and the \textit{Providence Journal} feared that mechanical music "would lead to standardization in an art whose chief inspiration lies in its individual quality . . . It will increase our complacency, our tendency to mass acceptance of anything good, bad or indifferent." Movie critic Constant Lambert believed that musical accompaniment played a large part in audience enjoyment of films. To her, live music was clearly superior and "no mechanical music can ever provoke so strong a reaction as music actually played at the time by
an orchestra." In late 1930, Dr. Theodore Feinmann, director of the Philadelphia Philharmonic Society, asserted that he could already see the larger impact of mechanized music. "I notice that many local studios are closed," largely because students "are hesitating to complete their course—because they feel such efforts will be futile in view of the reign of what may be called evaporated music."55

Those on the other side of the debate supported canned music and condemned the union's efforts. Such critics found synchronized music tracts superior to live orchestras. Why, puzzled Maurice Mermey, should the public not "prefer fine music produced by genuine artists, even though reproduced by a machine, to the scratchy variety provided by too many fiddlers, is not clear." While concerned about the plight of theater musicians, conductor Walter Damrosch found their struggle "as futile as the efforts handweavers once made to stop the development of the machine age." He believed that mechanized music would actually aid the musical development of the American people. The music magazine, The Etude, agreed that by making good music accessible to the masses, the phonograph, radio, and canned movie music were of "inestimable value" in the elevation of public taste. Superior, mechanically reproduced music was actually encouraging rather than discouraging the study of the art. Most critics agreed that mechanization would improve the quality of music and force the "old-fashioned 'business musician,' who with his hammering and sawing was sometimes even more mechanical than a machine itself" out of the trade.56

In Philadelphia, the drop in box office receipts during the strikes indicated that some audiences were receptive to the union's message and still wanted live music in the theaters, even if played only during overtures and intermission. This continued appreciation for live music would somewhat retard standardization within the movie industry. In the early thirties, after the novelty of sound had worn off, audiences throughout the country dwindled, making some theater managers uncertain of the level of public

acceptance of a totally canned movie format. Theater owners complained in *Variety* about lowered revenues as attendance dropped from about 90 million per week in 1930 to 60 million in 1932 and 1933.\(^\text{57}\)

The coming of the Depression, coinciding with the conversion to sound, made it unclear to theater owners whether people were expressing a resistance to mechanization or whether they simply could not afford mass entertainment—or both. This uncertainty encouraged theater owners to return to live acts. Beginning in 1930, some theaters reinstalled orchestras and organists. In 1934 over 4,000 musicians were still employed in movie houses. As theaters throughout the country reemployed musicians, one manager explained “we know beyond doubt that the audience will welcome the musician back to the theatre.” The “atmosphere of the theatre today lacks movement, action, life—and the indefinable something only flesh and blood can give it,” he concluded. In May 1930, the *Exhibitors Herald-World* reported that one organ builder had recently sold fifteen organs to theaters. Theater managements, the paper observed “are learning daily that despite the popularity of the talking picture, the public demands the personal element.” About the same time *Variety* contended that general demand for “ ‘something in the flesh,’ now that the novelty of ‘talkers’ has worn off, is resulting in a comeback for the theater organist.” The organist, according to Jim Thomas, who played for the RKO 86th Street Theater in New York City, was important to the audience because he was “playing to them—to them alone, and actually asking them to participate.”\(^\text{58}\)

Other theater owners, fearing that talkies had reached a saturation point, considered reviving vaudeville in an attempt to regain audiences. Vaudeville, which had already suffered competition from silent movies and radio, had declined even more rapidly with the advent of talkies.


But in late 1931 such theater chains as RKO and Publix tried live acts and orchestras to build up business. Most of the experiments with vaudeville, however, failed to achieve the higher grosses necessary to cover the increased costs.\(^\text{59}\)

The inability to revive vaudeville also forecast the slower decline of live music. Despite some initial resistance, especially in the more expensive downtown theaters, audiences came to accept a totally canned format. In Philadelphia, during the latter part of the thirties, movie attendance was less affected by Local 77's strikes. Thus, the union's 1939 strike that lasted almost ten months resulted in the employment of only twenty-eight musicians at the Earle Theater and twelve at the Stanley in Camden, New Jersey. By comparison, during its height as a movie palace in the twenties, the Earle had boasted a symphonic orchestra of over seventy members. The *Evening Public Ledger*, which in 1930 was uncertain about the future of theater musicians, declared in 1939 that "they were as necessary as a relief check to J.P. Morgan." It further asserted that the public had "quickly discerned that the average theatre orchestra couldn't produce the symphonic effects of a rapidly improving sound screen."\(^\text{60}\)

By the end of the 1930s, the struggle over recorded music in the movie theaters in Philadelphia, as elsewhere in the nation, was over. Musicians had failed in their attempt to maintain control of their jobs and to protect their art in movie houses. Through mechanization, movie producers had succeeded in making the theater experience as standardized as the films. They had also succeeded in narrowing the debate over the impact of mass culture. At the beginning of the struggle, musicians and their supporters feared the loss of "human contacts between the artist and the public" and worried about the impact of standardization on American culture.\(^\text{61}\) At the end, however, the debate became one simply of quality.


\(^{60}\) *EB*, Sept 2, 10, 11, Oct 3, 14, 1936, Nov 30, 1940, *EPL*, Sept 10, 1936, Dec 1, 21, 1939, Sept 4, 6, 1940

\(^{61}\) *International Musician*, May 1929, 20
A number of factors helped destroy the world of the movie musicians, including the rise of the chains, the centralization of musical opportunities, and of course the development of labor-saving machinery. But the musicians' attempt to defend live music also failed due to the increasing acceptance by audiences of standardized cultural products, encouraged perhaps by the diffusion of the radio and phonograph that emphasized uniform quality as opposed to the hazard of live performance. As a result, movie audiences heard what might have been a superior uniform product, but lost the ability to participate in or influence an important area of leisure. In other words, as culture became industrialized, the exigencies of centralization and standardization reigned over the forces of localism and spontaneity.

West Virginia University

Elizabeth Fones-Wolf