

# Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* comes to Lexington, Kentucky

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The March 14 showing of Charlie Chaplin's classic 1925 film *The Gold Rush* in Lexington, Kentucky, with musical accompaniment provided by the Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra, was a significant cultural event. It was perhaps the most important performance thus far in the Orchestra's 2013-2014 season.

The film showing and musical performance met with a large and appreciative audience. The Lexington Philharmonic played to a packed house at Lexington's Singletary Center for the Arts and received a lengthy standing ovation at the program's end. One senses a real hunger for such rewarding cultural experiences. Audiences are not stupid, after all, and they do not simply "get what they deserve" when another empty Hollywood production is inflicted upon them. Presented with a film like *The Gold Rush*, and an artist with as much to say about the world as Charlie Chaplin, people respond.

Along with a reconstruction of the film, allowing audiences to see it as Chaplin (1889-1977) originally intended in 1925, the orchestra performed Chaplin's own score for the work. The Academy Award-nominated music was composed by Chaplin in collaboration with musician Max Terr to accompany a 1942 rerelease of the film. At that time, Chaplin also recorded narration for the work, in an effort to help usher the silent film into the theaters of talking pictures. The original silent film, however, minus the narration, is superior and this is what was shown in Lexington.

Chaplin's personality is unmistakable in the music. One finds in it the sentimentality and broad humor that can be both endearing and vibrant as well as an occasional hindrance in his work. But above all, something of real life emanates from this music. For all its manic twists and turns—from the slapstick sound effects of the percussion section to the tearful embraces

between violins and cellos—the score on the whole proves deeply effecting. One embraces it, in the end, as one does a flawed but well-loved friend from the old days.

The film itself is remarkable. It tells the story of a lone prospector (Chaplin's Little Tramp) who travels to the Yukon in the midst of the Gold Rush hoping to strike it rich. He soon finds himself trapped in a remote cabin with two other prospectors, during a terrible blizzard. The three nearly starve to death.

Later, Chaplin's Tramp makes his way into a small town that has sprung up around the gold mining craze. Here, he falls in love with a girl, Georgia (played by Georgia Hale), who first doesn't know he's alive and then treats him cruelly once she does. He believes all along that she loves him.

As the film progresses, Chaplin's Tramp proves his worth and Georgia lets go of her class prejudice and sees him for who he really is.

The early scenes in the hungry cabin are justly famous and a scene in which Chaplin and fellow prospector Big Jim (Mack Swain) eat one of Chaplin's shoes in order to survive is perhaps one of the most famous sequences in film history.

A scene in which the two other prospectors grapple over control of a shotgun, which always seems to find itself pointing at Chaplin's character no matter how hard he runs and hides trying to avoid it, is tremendously funny.

More than these early comedic sequences, however, which become a kind of cartoon by the end, the later scenes in town are even more powerful and tend to stay with one longer. This is the real heart of the film. It is a great comedy, but even more so, a moving dramatic film.

The sequence in which Chaplin first enters the town

lodge, where people dance and drink and spend more money than he can imagine, is extraordinary. He is the outsider, poor and alone, totally invisible to the popular Georgia. When she finally notices him and offers to dance with him, it is only to humiliate a more popular suitor. These scenes, in which class differences are so keenly felt, are a wonderfully navigated journey.

Chaplin's character eventually leaves the hall feeling more confident and believing he has been permitted entry into this appealing new world. But how solid is the ground he's standing on? And just what kind of world is it anyway? One will see as the film goes on.

The Lexington Philharmonic faced a real challenge in attempting to remain in sync with the film playing out on the screen above their heads. This was most difficult when the orchestra was tasked with providing comedic sound effects. At times, a snare drum rang out too late, just missing the cue of a gunshot on the screen.

As the film went on, the orchestra was surer and the music blended seamlessly with the action. By the time they arrived at the famous dance Chaplin performs at a dinner table with two bread rolls—which is pure magic—images combined with such force to draw out the most vigorous round of applause from the audience immediately after the dance ended.

While the performance itself was ultimately satisfying, one regrets there was not some kind of introduction of the film itself from the stage that might have provided a sense of Chaplin the artist for those in the audience. “I’ve never seen a Chaplin film before,” was something one could often overhear passing through the halls of the auditorium before the film began. A critical appraisal of his work and its significance would have been useful.

One can certainly encourage audiences to further explore Chaplin’s filmography. He is an essential figure and one whose particular themes and preoccupations hold special relevance for us today.



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