Helen van Dongen and the “Noise-Music” of Oil in Louisiana Story

Society for American Music Annual Meeting – 16 March 2012 – Charlotte, NC

Blake Howe [bhowe@lsu.edu]
Louisiana State University

---

**Louisiana Story (1948)**

Robert Flaherty (director and co-writer)
[pictured standing]

Frances Flaherty (co-writer)

Helen van Dongen (editor)
[pictured seated]

Richard Leacock (cinematographer)

Virgil Thomson (musical score)

Standard Oil of New Jersey (commissioner)

As a result, Mr. Flaherty is now convinced that he can make a film which will be a revelation to the layman of what oil means to the world and which will also be such an absorbing human story that it can stand on its own feet as entertainment anywhere. [...] Mr. Flaherty’s projected film would, we believe, present the story of oil with the dignity and epic sweep and assure the story of oil a lasting place on the highest plane in the literature of the screen.


Our story, of course, grows out of our theme. Our theme seems obviously to be the contrast between a group of primitive people and the world of science that impinges on their lives; the conflict that grows out of this contrast and the resolution of that conflict. Their resolution, of course, can be anything your artistic heart desires.


*Louisiana Story*’s music is of three kinds—folk music, scenery music, and noise-music. The Cajun people are represented by their waltzes and square dances and the tunes of the songs they sing. Natural scenery is depicted through musical devices adapted from Mendelssohn, Debussy, and other landscape composers. The noise-music used is the recorded sound of the oil-well-drilling machinery. I call it music because, as compounded and shaped by Helen van Dongen into a rich and deafening accompaniment for a passage of well digging one whole reel (nine minutes) long, these noises make a composition. Also, I find this composition more interesting to follow than almost any of the industrial evocations, including my own, that musicians have composed with tonal materials.

After Thomson accepted to write the score, I went to New York and completed the editing there. Flaherty + crew remained in Louisiana several more months. The silent film, during its final editing, was screened for him as often as he wanted so that he could penetrate the atmosphere and plan his music accordingly. **He would often ask me to come to his home at the Chelsea Hotel so that he could play the themes he had chosen for different sequences.** [...] I prefer to have the presence of the composer in a Virgil Thomson…while making alterations. **Virgil Thomson was always willing to come to the cutting room to study the problem with me and to watch the process of adjustment.** He left most of the time happy that the problem was solved to his satisfaction.


Even a scream, like one of the screams in *Spanish Earth*—there were two or three different sounds to give that horrendous scream of the woman when the bombardment comes. And that is what really does give it this quality. I think, although I don’t like electronic music, that [sound design] is a little like that—a combination of things that you have to invent and make, reassemble, and finally you get the effect which is what you want. [...] 

If, for instance, you walk over a bridge in Amsterdam you would hear general city noises. If you record that on film you have only a general noise. **But if you record separately, in close-up so to speak, a streetcar passing over the bridge, clanging of the bicycle bells, whistle of the streetcar conductor, claxons of cars, the tune of a street fiddler, a fish vendor hawking his wares, tooting of boats passing underneath, urchins yelling, squeaking brakes, crackling of sparks on the electric wires, a train coming out of the station—then you have so many components with which to orchestrate the sounds of a city and give them meaning and dramatic impact.**
6. Helen van Dongen describes musical elements in the “Ballet of the Roughnecks” (nine-minute oil derrick sequence in *Louisiana Story*). Excerpts from Helen van Dongen, working notes (in pencil, pen, and typed drafts) for *The Technique of Film Editing*, ed. Karel Reisz (New York: Focal Press, 1958). Helen van Dongen Papers, Film Library, Museum of Modern Art. (These notes do not appear in the published version of this essay.)

(a) In composition total soundtrack very alike orchestration. General accompaniment (general sound), development of theme (group B) mostly block up and down—complete orchestra—then again some of the instruments (effects) prominent. [pencil draft]

(b) Track 1: A complete track of the continuous general noise prevalent on a derrick in operation. It could be called the “accompaniment-track” against the other “solo-tracks.” [typed draft]

“theme song” of the derrick, brought back in other tracks in variations. [note in margin, pen draft]

(c) Loop #1. Contains the constant breathing of the pumps, the “heart-beats”, recorded louder or softer, disappearing or brought to the foreground again as the occasion demands. [typed draft]

(d) Track 3. [...] If you want an especially loud effect during a big close up you could obtain it by mechanically increasing the sound during the mixing, but you would also get so much more surface noise and it soon would become distorted. Double tracks do not need so much mechanical forcing. They also have the advantage that a particular effect gets more “body.” (On the same principal as four violins each playing normal achieve more sound and more body than one violin scratching as loud as possible.) [typed draft]

(e) Still to be added however is the harmony between all the instruments, or in our case the sound effects composition. The separate elements just spoken about are to be regarded as primary instruments— [pencil draft]

(f) Track 6. [...] These [duplicated] sound-effects are not always placed in exact synchronization with each other. At times they may be a few sprocket holes out of sync with the corresponding track. This gives a peculiar effect which I find impossible to describe. [...] Some of the duplicating sounds are in a slightly different pitch, but they have to be in tune with each other. The peculiar bronze-like hollow sound of the dangling pipes in the beginning of the drilling sequence has been achieved by combining the single effects from two original recordings, but not until I had one re-recorded a fraction slower and the other one a fraction faster. [typed draft]

Reel 4. No music during the entire next reel. Only natural sounds all taken from the sounds you made there, had a mixing of 4 separate tracks plus three or four loops, **sound is now fantastic and effective as hell, but if you ever detect any gray hairs on my head then some have been cause by this mixing. Leopold Stokowski, that’s me.**

[...] And that is a very inadequate description of a full thousand feet of pipes in. I think you will like what has happened to your material when you see it. It is one of the most impressive sequences of the film. Everyone who has seen it (including the oil-men) like it very much. Benji saw it the other day and commented to me: “I did not think you could do it.” He thought it was good beyond description.