

“...a film of Charlot will be  
projected in the first scene...”

# A cinematic opera

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#### ABSTRACT

The twentieth century was the backdrop to a sociological and aesthetic process in which the invention of film firmly established itself as an art form. It was not until the second wave of the avant-garde burst onto the creative scene during the 1920s that the aesthetic importance and transcendence of film began to be reconsidered. Few creative genres were impervious to its influence, but opera was and is one of them. This research reflects on how an opera, *Charlot*, by Bacarisse and Gómez de la Serna, used film as a valid aesthetic element for the first time; an action which enabled film to be seen as a transcendent event within the bounds of high European culture. In 1932, the aesthetic communion between Ramón Gómez de la Serna and Salvador Bacarisse resulted in an opera with not only a filmic plot line, but whose dramaturgy even dictated that projected scenes had to be employed. As part of the transition from silent to talking films, the opera *Charlot* is a work of vital importance when attempting to follow an unbroken line of research on the aesthetic interaction between film and music. The opera by Bacarisse expertly unfolds using a bold and contemporary neoclassical and polytonal language. Gómez de la Serna focused his plot on a conflict of aesthetic weight involving Charlie Chaplin the filmmaker, his character, and the issue of the disappearance of silent film. Analysing the aesthetic aspects of *Charlot* and its intense relationship with film in depth is essential for film musicology as the two genres exist in a shared space that is as important as it is rare, and which therefore must be broached.

## Introduction

“Rustic furniture and, hanging across the stage from a cord, a sheet, on which a section of the film *The Tramp* should be seen and which will be projected during the first scene, and some women’s undergarments (...)”

This annotation by Ramón Gómez de la Serna in the libretto of the opera *Charlot* is probably the first reference to the use of a film projection within a musical work, in this case specifically an opera, with real dramatic weight. This noteworthy event brought with it a series of aesthetic factors that elevate the opera by Bacarisse and Gómez de la Serna to the status of historiographical milestone in the worlds of both music and film. During the first decades of the 20th century, film was still a long way from being considered an Art in its own right, and so its inclusion within an art form of the resonance and aesthetic transcendence of opera had a significance that went beyond being used as a scenic effect, quite apart from the colouristic and contemporary angle it afforded the work. The modern audiovisual approach implied by this annotation positioned the work’s creators at the forefront of both opera and theatre at the time, and its universal aspirations are clear as soon as the main character appears, played as he is by a world-famous celebrity.

Combining film with such a paradigmatic and increasingly rigid genre as opera<sup>1</sup> was in itself a hugely ambitious exercise in the avant-garde. Aspirations and an inertia towards the outside world

had always been part of the spirit of the Generation of the Republic, in contrast to the narrow provincial perspective that became the stylistic norm of Spanish nationalism. For this reason, the ill-fated episode that is *Charlot* represents a paradigmatic chapter that cannot be overlooked.

### Ramón Gómez de la Serna. Film, literature and the avant-garde

As the dramatist himself says in his memoirs<sup>2</sup>, in which he dedicates an entire chapter to *Charlot*, the idea and its development were entirely his own work. The writer from Madrid was no novice when it came to film, although he was unfamiliar with issues of musical dramaturgy, this being his first and last libretto.

Ramón Gómez de la Serna had the same poor, or at best uninspiring, relationship with music as most Spanish men of letters. His writing did not deal with music or musicians in any kind of detail, although he did make particular references to jazz and included his *Jazzbandismo* – a text with a clear connection to film – in his essay entitled *Ismos* (1931). At the première of *The Jazz Singer* (1927)<sup>3</sup> in Spain, paradoxically released in a silent version due to the

1 In the 20th century that same film industry would replace opera as a popular genre of entertainment par excellence. This brings about a cultural shift that positions opera at one extreme of the collective imagination.

2 (1970) *Nuevas páginas de mi vida*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.

3 In the text entitled *The traumatic transition undergone by Spanish film from silent to sound pictures*, Román

lack of technical equipment necessary to reproduce the sound, Gómez de la Serna had to go on stage to give a talk focusing on jazz rather than film. This became his article entitled *Jazz-bandismo* and was included in *Ismos* shortly afterwards. He soon became an advocate of sound pictures, as noted by an outraged Juan Piqueras in the magazine *Popular Film* (1929). The argument for sound in film been made during the famous gathering in Café Pombo, in the process sowing the idea of the plot for *Charlot*. In *Cinelandia* (1923), Gómez de la Serna had already presented a panorama of the world of film as godless and false.

There are also numerous references to film in Gómez de la Serna's *Greguerías* and throughout his written works, although there are fewer references to music.

Gómez de la Serna could be expected to be involved in any event involving technology. When Unión Radio was established he became a member of the discussion panel in addition to writing for the spin-off magazine *Ondas*. This magazine contained *Greguerías*; aphorisms by the writer dealing with the subject of radio and the media jostling for position in the new social order. It was most likely there, in the corridors of Unión Radio, that the professional relationship between Salvador Bacarisse and Ramón Gómez de la Serna began to take shape.

One document testifying to their good relationship has survived from the *El Sol* newspaper, started by Nicolás Urgoiti, in which Ramón Gómez de la Serna voices his literary and journalistic opinion of the performance by the *Grupo de los Ocho de Madrid* as an aesthetic group in his article *Los Ocho en pie y en fila*:

“...The persistence of the artistic spirit is one of the miracles of modern life... Everything had seemed to be closed off to a new generation of Spanish musicians; but the new generation, standing by as if receiving an inalienable legacy, was near to emerging as the like-minded generation it was, made up of just enough, 8 as it happens. (...)

....It had to happen, they needed to take part in the new task at hand, and their names should appear in all the programmes to justify the legitimacy of the time, which without them would be barren and sterile. We now have professed brothers in the other art! (...)”<sup>4</sup>

Despite Gómez de la Serna's references to Charlie Chaplin being spread anarchically throughout his work, there is always a clear distinction between the character and his idi-

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Gubern presents the story of the difficulties faced by the first North American sound, or partial sound, pictures in Spain at the end of the 1920s. There is no information available about the release of the film *Don Juan* (1926) by Alan Crosland, which was the first film to synchronise sound effects with moving images. There followed thwarted attempts to release *The Jazz Singer* (1927) by Alan Crosland in the *Cine Club Español* in Madrid in 1929 and finally shown under the title *El ídolo de Broadway* in 1931, and *Love Parade* (1929) by Ernest Lubitsch, which was released with sound during the musical numbers but was silent during the dialogue (in English and French because of the multi-language filming of the time). The first film released in Spain with full sound was *Innocents of Paris (La Canción de París)* (1928) by Richard Wallace, released on 29th September 1929 in the *Teatro Coliseum* in Barcelona. Retrieved from [http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/la-traumatica-transicion-del-cine-espanol-del-mudo-al-sonoro--o/html/ff8a9d5e-82b1-11df-acc7-002185ce6064\\_2.html](http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/la-traumatica-transicion-del-cine-espanol-del-mudo-al-sonoro--o/html/ff8a9d5e-82b1-11df-acc7-002185ce6064_2.html).

4 [Translated from the original.] Ramón Gómez de la Serna in the article “*Los Ocho en pie y en fila*” in newspaper *El Sol*, año XIV, nº 4156 from 7 December 1930, page 3.

osyncrasies and the aesthetic transcendence that he has over his time. There is a reference to the character in the novella *Cinelandia* (1923)<sup>5</sup>:

–Make mine a Charlot<sup>6</sup> cocktail

(Drinking the Charlot cocktail makes them start to involuntarily imitate Charlot; whoever drinks it becomes possessed by a terrible St Vitus dance in the style of Charlot, hooking a walking stick around the neck, the leg or the arm of an unsuspecting passer-by.)

Perhaps one of the most judicious moments related to aesthetics is when Gómez de la Serna coins the term *Charlotismo*, dedicated to Chaplin, in his book *Ismos* (1931, pp. 256-263). The first mention of *Charlotismo* appeared in the magazine *Le Disque Vert*<sup>7</sup> in 1924, the text showing Gómez de la Serna’s obvious aesthetic appreciation of Chaplin and the revolution engendered by his artistic approach.

Nevertheless, it is probably in the opera *Charlot* itself that Gómez de la Serna is most seriously concerned with unravelling the spirit of Chaplin’s character by providing a wide range of possibilities and perspectives. In his book *Ramón y el Teatro (La obra dramática de Ramón Gómez de la Serna)* Muñoz-Alonso upholds this hypothesis: “...*Ramón approaches Charlot with the intention of revealing the many facets that combine in this figure who blurs the line between man and artist...*”<sup>8</sup> (Muñoz-Alonso López, 1993, p. 222).

### **Bacarisse, a state musician**

Although Salvador Bacarisse did not have as much contact with film en route to *Charlot*, he was involved with the new media that were starting to change society in the 1920s. Salvador Bacarisse (1898-1963) was part of the so-called Generation of the Republic, a group of young creatives with superior intellectual training to their teachers, which led them to get involved in issues outside music such as politics. A composer with a traditional training but clearly avant-garde aspirations, Bacarisse was a respected musician even during his youth. In the weekly publication *Tararí*, Conrado del Campo (1930) declared: “...*Salvador Bacarisse one of the most contemporary musicians in his avant-garde style, but underline that, truly avant-garde, not a sham, as it leaves a strong after-taste...*”<sup>9</sup>

5 [Translated from the original.] Gómez de la Serna, R., *Cinelandia*, Valdemar, Madrid, 1995. Specifically, in chapter 12: *Los cocktails absurdos*, p. 81.

6 [Translator’s note: As mentioned in the title of the text, Gómez de la Serna uses the French name *Charlot* here to refer to Charlie Chaplin.]

7 The pretext of the original text, *Le Charlotisme*, was a homage to Charlie Chaplin promoted by the Belgian magazine *Le Disque Vert*, no.4-5 published in 1924. This article uses that contained in the text: Arconada, C.M., *3 cómicos del cine. Biografías de sombras*. Editorial Renacimiento, Sevilla 2007

8 [Translated from the original.]

9 [Translated from the original.] Interview with Conrado del Campo by Prudencio Muñoz Delgado in *section La Música y los músicos*. This was a weekly entertainment and sports magazine published in Madrid on Saturdays.

In an article entitled *Nuestro concierto del martes* [Our Tuesday concert] in the magazine *Ondas*<sup>10</sup>, Gustavo Pittaluga introduced his peers in a familiar and even comic tone, referring to Bacarisse in these terms:

Salvador Bacarisse, with Rodolfo Halffter, is the physical embodiment of the duo Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. All that is joyful, being apparently carefree, sincere, acting on a whim for the sheer pleasure of it, is evident in Bacarisse more than anyone... If in Bacarisse this new music is more disagreeable, it is because in this group of boys enjoying themselves, Bacarisse is the one who cries with most impertinence.<sup>11</sup> (*Ondas*, 1931)

Almost from the moment it launched with Ricardo Urgoiti at the helm in 1924, Unión Radio epitomised a type of broadcasting characterised by the essential role music played in the schedule. Salvador Bacarisse took an active part in scheduling at Unión Radio in the Music department from 1926 to 1936. There he often met with Ramón Gómez de la Serna, who worked as a correspondent and panellist (sometimes from his own home) for the station during the 1920s and 30s.

On 21st July 1931, The Second Spanish Republic issued a decree creating the *Junta Nacional de la Música y los Teatros Líricos* [National Board of Music and Lyrical Theatre]. The functions exercised by this Board had an immediate impact on the creative process, as state support provided a security unmatched since the times of royal patronage. However, political acrimony and partisan accusations did not take long to flourish; issues that only grew when the first financial aid, sponsorship, grants and prizes were awarded. Bacarisse managed to ensure that his own project, *Charlot*, was at the top of the list of projects given awards by the Board, of which he was a member. The grant<sup>12</sup> he received was one of several awards of 385,000 pesetas to subsidise new works of “comic opera” designed to promote the genre and undiscovered writers. Accusations of corruption partly arose from the fact that recipients of these awards were not exactly undiscovered; they included big names from the music scene and moreover, were all members of the Board allocating the grants. In addition to *Charlot* by Bacarisse and Gómez de la Serna, other subsidised works were *El Talismán* by Amadeo Vives and the Fernández Shaw brothers; *La bella durmiente* by Oscar Esplá and Alfonso Hernández Cata; *La montaraza* by Facundo de la Viña, Espresati and Pérez Dola; and *Fígaro* by Conrado del Campo and Tomás Borrás. As noted by Heine<sup>13</sup>, all the

10 Spin-off programme guide of Unión Radio.

11 [Translated from the original.] This text is a summary of that written by Pittaluga himself and published in two parts in *Ritmo* magazine in editions 27 and 28 which came out in the last fortnight of December 1930 and the first of March 1931, pages 2-3 and 5-6 respectively, under the title *Música moderna y jóvenes músicos españoles* [Modern music and young Spanish musicians].

12 Dr Christiane Heine refers to this in her article: Heine, C., *Charlot de Ramón Gómez de la Serna con música de Salvador Bacarisse: El nuevo género de la “ópera cómica” española*, *Journal of the Sociedad Española de Musicología*, vol. XXI, 1998 no.1, pp. 37- 63, citing an article by Oscar Esplá, president of that first board at the time, published in *El Sol*, 16 October 1932, talking about the awarding of these grants.

13 *Ibid.*

works had their problems; the work by Vives was cut short due to his death and the rest, with the exception of *Charlot*, remained unfinished.

This erratic beginning hampered the development of the score, which was put on hold for a short while directly afterwards. In 1935, the Board was reconfigured as part of the right-wing coalition government and became CEDA. It should come as no surprise that the première of *Charlot* went no further than the published but thwarted notice in 1933 in the Teatro Calderón.

### Chaplin-Charlot

Charlie Chaplin is without a doubt one of the central figures in this operatic escapade, both as an actor and for his defence of gesture over the spoken word, and so a historical approach would be impossible without examining this issue. Chaplin was undeniably the number one star worldwide during the 20th century, an era predisposed to creating idols. Until then, the magnitude and universality of the gesture had only been achieved through music, but silent film enabled a little tramp with a bowler hat and over-sized shoes to connect with the entire world. The production of a film with partial sound such as *The Jazz Singer* did not bode well for talking films, but in reality it was a resounding success; by January 1929, the main Hollywood studios worked entirely in sound.

Without question, only a genius such as Chaplin could have remained committed to his aesthetic ideas. His character, The Tramp, did not need to speak to express himself in his own language. Following the success of *City Lights* in the United States, Chaplin began a tour of Europe. In 1931, it was impossible to ignore The Tramp, whose incarnation may coincidentally have been a reflection of the global middle class, which had lurched from the carefree 1920s to the much darker 1930s without time to shift its priorities following the financial crisis of 1929.

On 1st April 1931, the Spanish newspapers reported the big news of “*Charlot* in Europe”. When *City Lights* premièred, Charlie Chaplin enjoyed a great deal of public attention and his status grew exponentially. There was widespread confusion in the press, and some journalists even expressed disappointment when noting the understandable differences between The Tramp and the real Charlie Chaplin (ABC, 1931, April 1). Chaplin’s presence was front page news, and his fame meant the media followed his every move. The best example of the impact produced by Chaplin’s quest for the validity of silent film was undoubtedly the opera, an opera in which the main character did not make a single sound.

### A chronicle of thwarted first nights

In the chapter titled *Una ópera malograda* [An ill-fated opera] of *Nuevas Páginas de mi vida*<sup>14</sup>, Ramón Gómez de la Serna, recounts how *Charlot* began:

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<sup>14</sup> This masterpiece and the key to understanding Gómez de la Serna’s personality calls itself the second part of his idiosyncratic autobiography, *Automoribundía*. The part we are interested in appeared in the collected works of Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1970.

In 1932 Salvador Bacarisse suggested I create an opera in three acts, which he would set to music. So I came up with the opera Charlot in Free Operatic Verse in which I proposed that the famous screen comic, who at the time did not wish to speak or sing in films, should appear with a double or singing character who would follow him like a shadow and sing as if he were Charlie.<sup>15</sup>

The creative process advanced very quickly judging by the dates written on Bacarisse’s original part manuscripts. These place his composition in Madrid from September 1932 to June 1933. The first act was finished on 15 January 1933, the second on 2nd May 1933 and the finale on 15th June 1933<sup>16</sup>. To this we have to add the completion of the orchestration, dated by Bacarisse on his own complete score as 10th July of that same year. The score is dedicated to Bacarisse’s wife.

Next followed the first attempt to stage the work in the *Teatro Calderón* in 1933 according to the guides and press of the time, but interestingly not referred to by Gómez de la Serna in his memoirs. The second attempt directly involved Gómez de la Serna himself, as in 1935 the writer travelled to Buenos Aires for the opening of the *Libro Español* with the new opera under his arm. The librettist’s friendship with Victoria Ocampo, director at the time of the prestigious Buenos Aires theatre *Teatro Colón*, led to a reading in the Argentine writer’s house attended by musician Juan José Castro in which the three acts of *Charlot* were “hummed”. This supposed reading in Buenos Aires is not supported by any documentation, nor does it appear in the Colón archives nor the memoirs or accounts of those who were there, with the exception of Gómez de la Serna, who also noted that during the gathering it was debated whether Chaplin should play the part of himself for the potential première of the work. What we do know is that the work was not staged.

The Civil War steamrolled over the Spanish and over *Charlot*. In the midst of the fighting a third attempt was made to stage the work that was directly linked to Bacarisse’s activity in Barcelona from where he published *Música* magazine. The first performance of *Charlot* was planned for the 1938-1939 season in the *Gran Teatre del Liceu* in Barcelona. According to Gómez de la Serna, the offer arrived in a letter from his brother José in which he urged the writer to sign:

(...) I don’t know what, and it would be performed in the Liceu in Barcelona. I replied that I would not sign and the Charlot opera vanished into the dark night of the days to come. I don’t know if Bacarisse will have it in Mexico. It was a gilt-edged dream, another grain of hope.<sup>17</sup> (Gómez de la Serna, 1970).

15 [Translated from the original.]

16 This information is written in ink at the start of the opera, in the first parts version (for piano or string quartet), on the start date and the completion date of each part the same as at the end of each double bar line in the score. These parts do not appear in the original orchestral version of the composition.

17 [Translated from the original.]



The document that had to be signed was undoubtedly an endorsement of the legitimate government of the Republic by the exiled writer. In reality, Gómez de la Serna protected himself in the event of a possible return, which would have been affected by this explicit endorsement.

The last chapter of the *Charlot* story to date took place in 1988, the centenary of the writer's birth, when the *Centro de Documentación de la Música Española Contemporánea* of the Juan March Foundation rescued the opera from papers Salvador Bacarisse left to his son, publishing the parts in a copy of the composer's edition and organising a first public reading of part of the opera with the aim of bringing it to public attention. This was an opportunity for the aesthetic nature of *Charlot* to be seen and for it to become known for its intended purpose: as a work for the stage; an opera.

### Film in opera

*Charlot* has a score and libretto of undeniable quality, even if the feasibility of staging it is a pipe-dream that has never quite been realised. But it is also true that there are a series of inescapable aesthetic issues that should be brought to light. Using a film projection at the start of an opera was a rare event in theatres staging musical works during the 20th century.

From the very first forays into the seventh art, the commercial nature of film meant falling back on operatic plot lines as a dramatic device, but reversing this logic was a completely new idea. Although projection is documented as having been used for backdrops in some operas such as *Christophe Colomb* (1931) op. 102 by Darius Milhaud and Paul Claudel to show a dove in flight or an image of the cross, it did not have such an obvious dramaturgical presence as it did in *Charlot*. It should also be noted that projections were filmed on an ad hoc basis for opera, and so this device was used to project scenic effects rather than independent commercial material.

The scenery represented a sort of large black cabin, a tumbledown bungalow where only the white window and door frames could be distinguished, two at the sides and one at the back.

Rustic furniture and, hanging across the stage from a cord, a sheet, on which a section of the film *The Tramp* should be seen and which will be projected during the first scene, and some women's undergarments (...)<sup>18</sup>

The projection in *Charlot* directly affected the contemporary aesthetic universe in a very significant way. Both the libretto and the music abound with these keys to modernity, to which the reality of the storyline of the time must be added. In *Charlot*, therefore, we see a series of factors that were rare in musical theatre during the 20th century and that have rarely been repeated.

<sup>18</sup> [Translated from the original.] Annotation on the original text of the *Charlot* opera in *Obras completas XIII, Novelas V - Teatro de vanguardia*. Galaxia Gutemberg, 2002.

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