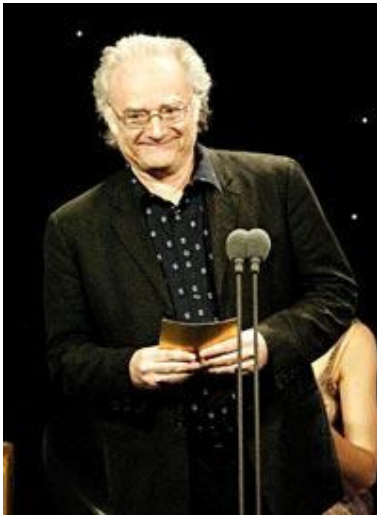


## Interview: Carl Davis

**From period dramas to big-screen epics, he has provided the music that make the movies memorable**

By Jessica Duchon, December 22, 2010



Carl Davis says he regards film scores as "opera without the singing"

Carl Davis has spent the past half-century specialising mainly in music for film and television, creating characterful and beautiful scores that often have helped to carry the movies they enhance to legendary status.

Think of the BBC's *Pride and Prejudice*, almost as famous for Davis's sparkling pastiche forte piano concerto as it is for Colin Firth in his wet shirt; *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, with Meryl Streep's mysterious hooded figure reflected to perfection in a passionate viola solo; or the classic silent movies that Davis's scores have

transformed into a cult concert experience, among them the epic silent film, Napoleon.

It is a staggering amount of work, but Davis has no intention of stopping. "I'm not interested in retiring," he declares. "I love my work and I want to keep doing this for as long as I can."

Davis and his wife, the actress Jean Boht (who starred in the sitcom Bread), set up their own record label, The Carl Davis Collection, in 2009. "It's a response to the situation in the recording industry, which in its familiar form has collapsed," Davis explains. "People are still buying CDs, but not in shops: now everything is internet-related. This has opened up the market to small, independent companies like ours. It seemed a pity to allow good music to disappear with the films it accompanied, so we created a label to give it a new lease of life."

Their newest CD is Carl's War - a compilation from his scores for films associated with World War II, with suites from The World At War, Goodnight, Mr Tom, the 1972 classic, The Snow Goose, and Echoes That Remain, a documentary commissioned by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre about pre-war life in the shtetls of eastern Europe.

Snapshot

**Born:** October, 1936 in New York.

**Career:** Based in the UK since the early '60s. Composed the music for BBC's version of Pride and Prejudice. Won a Bafta award for his music for the film, The French Lieutenant's Woman.

**Personal life:** Married to actress Jean Boht

But perhaps the most remarkable is Anne Frank Remembered, a documentary which included the only known film footage of Frank in her pre-war childhood. "It shows a wedding party outside the house in Amsterdam," Davis says, "and Anne runs out onto the balcony to see the bride emerging. It's extraordinary - I have no idea where this footage was found or how it survived."

Davis's story began nearly 75 years ago in New York. He was born there in 1936, a third-generation American. "My grandparents were immigrants, moving to the US from somewhere in Russia and a corner of the shtetls in the Pale of Settlement," he says. "During my childhood nobody around us was practising as Jews in any sense, but we were surrounded by a very strong secular Jewish community; this meant a lot to us."

Early music and film inspiration came from Disney's *Fantasia*: after seeing it, aged seven, little Carl promptly "sacked" a piano teacher who refused to let him study Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor, a piece which featured prominently in the film.

As he grew up, Davis's musical ambitions grew too, but he nevertheless elected to keep his feet firmly on the ground. "My mother was tremendously supportive when I wanted to become a musician, but I was determined to carve out a living in a field where there was a very practical need for music."

He started playing and conducting for opera, choral music and ballet, touring with the New York City Opera. But he wanted to compose, so in 1959 he left America to seek his fortune in what he considered to be the more congenial musical atmosphere of Europe.

He was lucky enough to land in London just as the 1960s were beginning. After two revue shows he had written at college were staged, a positive review from the critic Richard Buckle opened doors into radio and TV work. The Royal Shakespeare Company engaged his services to provide music for theatrical productions; so did Jonathan Miller at the National Theatre. And after a breakthrough in 1969 with Alan Bennett's *Forty Years On*, he was welcomed with open arms by the BBC.

Enthusiasts of Davis's live music for classic silent movies will flock to the South Bank next month to see Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*, restored to its original 1925 version with the score reconstructed and adapted by Davis and performed by the Philharmonia Orchestra. "My first score for a silent movie was *Napoleon*," he laughs. "Five hours of it!" The first performance, in 1980, caused a sensation: "It was such a success that we needed a second one. And we just kept going."

What music and film have in common, says Davis, is existence in real time. "Each moves from A to B in time that can be precisely measured ; for this we use a digital clock we call Timecode. Once you know how long your scene is, you can begin to make decisions about the type of music you'll write for it.

"You have a choice between music that is descriptive of the events on screen, such as an explosion in a war film, or something as obvious as a dance or a march, which are always in relation to a picture. You can follow the physical or emotional incidents which fall into place in a continuous way. Then there's the kind of music that Chaplin used for comedy, which is rather like cartoon music, following every physical action - they call this "Mickey Mousing".

Here the film seems almost choreographed to the music - it's like composing a continuous ballet or an opera."

Indeed, like the founding father of film music, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Davis says he regards film scores as "operas without singing". "It's similar to Puccini or Wagner - music that unfolds continuously and events take place within that."

His great gift is in capturing exactly the right sounds to match the images, the deeper story and the themes of the narrative: "Music can evoke emotional nuances under the scene in a way that the image alone can't, especially in a silent film."

His attitude is ever practical. For instance, he says: "The difference in working with the old movies by Chaplin, Buster Keaton et al, is that the films themselves are complete. You're not evolving them, as you might be with a new film; you're simply working with what there is. That makes it easier. You know that you have x number of seconds in which to create music that hopefully does capture the right mood."

Davis's music is by no means confined to film scores. He is currently writing a Ballade for Cello and Orchestra which he says is "modelled after Fauré's short song-cycle Poème d'un Jour, in which the first song says 'boy spots girl', the second says 'I'll love you forever' and the third says 'Goodbye!'" The piece is due for premiere in April, with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and cellist Jonathan Aasgaard. He is also embarking on a cantata about the Kindertransport for performance in Manchester in 2012.

He has come a long way since Fantasia.

*Charlie Chaplin's 'The Gold Rush', with Carl Davis conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra, is at the Royal Festival Hall, London SE1 on January 3. Box office: 0844 875 0073*