Bellano, Marco. "Valse triste Op. 44 No. 1." : *Bruno Bozzetto's Animated Music*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 177–184. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501350894.ch-008>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 10:00 UTC.

Copyright © Marco Bellano 2021. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

8

Valse triste Op. 44 No. 1

Description

The smoke from the cigar of the conductor transitions into the landscape imagined by the animator, who keeps coughing for a few instants, while the music starts. Among the mist, a bird's-eye view of a city emerges. It is a grey expanse of squarely arranged blocks of flats, all identical. Among the dull parallelepipeds, however, there is a small free area. A wrecked house seems to be there, faintly glowing in the fog. A series of zoom-ins and cross dissolves reveals that it is a ruined tenement with communal balconies—a kind of popular housing typical of Italian urban areas in the first half of the twentieth century.¹ Only a single wall of the house still stands; the rest has collapsed.

There are broken toys in the inside of the house, as the camera slowly reveals; then, a dramatic shot shows the remaining wall from a low angle.

Two eyes peek from inside what once a fireplace was. They belong to a thin tabby cat. He stretches and licks his fur, then he starts looking around.

He wanders around the ruins. He jumps on a cornice, and he almost falls, but he is quick to regain his balance. Suddenly, he turns his head; his big eyes reflect something green. On a previously empty wall, a ghostly vision of a cage with a canary appears. It is not an animated drawing but a colored live-action picture, just like all the ghosts he will see in the remainder of the short film. The cat joyfully attempts to reach for the bird, but the image soon vanishes, leaving him alone and sad.

However, it happens again. The reflection in his eyes is now magenta; he sees a man on a rocking chair in mid-air, near to the wall. The cat is about

¹It was Nichetti who suggested to Bozzetto this kind of old-style Italian house; Bozzetto in the documentary “Ricordando *Allegro non troppo*,” in the *Allegro non troppo* DVD, part of the DVD collection “Tutto Bozzetto (o quasi)” (Roma: Multimedia San Paolo, 2005).

to approach him, but he sees a dog near to the chair. He reacts by ruffling his hair and running away to hide behind a corner. When he looks again, the ghosts fade away.

The visions are not over, though. Now looking toward the camera, the cat sports purple reflections in his eyes. A reverse shot shows that from the wrecked wall a whole room literally “pops up”; the furniture gradually takes its pristine colors. The cat goes to rub against the leg of a table. Next, a kitchen appears, in the same fashion of the previous room. The cat runs to three milk bottles, then he gets distracted by something off-screen: an open oven. He jumps over it and tries to peek inside.

Other rooms sprout from the wall. One by one, like jigsaw pieces, they fill up all the empty spaces in the house remains. What finally appears is a colorful section view of the three-story place, with six rooms full of life. The cat jumps on an armchair and curls up, but soon everything disappears again; the animal is left in mid-air. He barely makes it to the wall nearby, casting a worried glance to the vertiginous height below him.

After licking his fur, he sadly strolls around again. New ghosts come forward; announced by a reflection in shifting color in his eyes, a woman ironing clothes appears. She does not stay much though, to the cat’s dismay. However, a few instants after, the cat sees the rooms popping up again. Each one of them gets populated by colorful spirits: two girls playing with toy boats near the bathtub, a man sitting on the armchair, a group of friends playing cards at a round table, a woman cooking in the kitchen.

The rest of the house appears; it is no more a section view. A threefold axial cut on the happy face of the cat introduces a montage of the merry activities now making the house a joyful and warm place. The woman keeps cooking and then serves something to the cat on a plate; the sudden arrival of a child on a tricycle gives the animal a fleeting start. Another triple axial cut, synchronized with the music, shows the girls with the toy boats; they sprinkle some water on the delighted cat. At an increasing pace, we see the guys playing cards, two children laughing together, and a girl who blows soap bubbles that the cat bursts with his paws. A happy couple spins around hugging, while the image of two hands clinking glasses during a toast superimposes over them. A birthday cake full of burning candles appears on a table, and the cat licks his lips in anticipation. But the candles get put out and the cake dissolves into thin air. Everything does the same: the children, the toasting hands, the cooking woman, the girl blowing bubbles, the friends. Only the table and the cards remain; while the light changes and colors fade away, they start to swirl around, spinning into a dark void.

The house is now just a wrecked wall and a bunch of ruins. The sad cat makes a few steps more, but then he vanishes, too: he was a ghost of times past as well.

The music ends. The wall is again shown from a low, ominous angle. With a clattering sound, a crane with a wrecking ball approaches. The ball is

thrown at the wall by the machine: the action freezes one instant before the demolition; however, the roar from the collapsing building is heard.

Program Notes

The *Valse triste* is the *Allegro non troppo* episode that differs the most from the rest of the film. The contrast is chiefly provided by its mood. While it seconds the pattern of contrasting pairs that appears throughout the six musical shorts, being the low-key emotional counterpart to the flamboyant *Boléro* (and also complementary to it in its audiovisual functions, as the temporal perceptive function that dominated the *Boléro* is here scarcely present and substituted at large by the emotive function, relying on the musical atmosphere and not on the rhythmic synchronization), the *Valse triste* is the only short in the whole work that features no comedy whatsoever. After all, this is a “sad waltz,” as the title literally says; so, Bozzetto wanted to stay as true as possible to that indication, even by restraining his co-screenwriter, Guido Manuli, who wanted to add in some of his typical absurdist gags. In fact, the episode is the one that most closely follows the narrative content of its source, maybe just on par with the *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, in this respect.

On several occasions,² Bozzetto reported that he was aware of the story that Jean Sibelius had in mind, when devising his short film. His recollections of that story, though, have always focused on a scene that is not in the original sources: a man “goes up to the attic and finds a trunk containing his dead wife’s clothes, that come out of it and start to dance on their own.”³ Bozzetto might have based this image on a detail of the program notes that Rosa Newmarch, an English poet and music writer who was also a longtime correspondent of Sibelius, wrote for a 1904 edition of the *Valse triste* piano reduction: the mention of the long white garment of a bedridden woman that transforms into a ball dress in a dream vision.

It is night. The son, who has been watching beside the bedside of his sick mother, has fallen asleep from sheer weariness. Gradually a ruddy light is diffused through the room; there is a sound of distant music; the glow and the music steal nearer until the strains of a valse melody float distantly to our ears. The sleeping mother awakens, rises from her bed and, in her long white garment, which takes the semblance of a ball dress, begins to

²For example in Valerio Sbravatti, *Allegro non troppo. Vedere la musica e ascoltare i disegni* (Roma: Il glifo, 2015), 100.

³“Lui sale in soffitta, trova un baule in cui ci sono i vestiti della moglie defunta che escono e ballano.” Bozzetto in Sbravatti, *Allegro non troppo*, 101.

move silently and slowly to and fro. She waves her hands and beckons in time to the music, as though she were summoning a crowd of invisible guests. And now they appear, these strange visionary couples, turning and gliding to an unearthly valse rhythm. The dying woman mingles with the dancers; she strives to make them look into her eyes, but the shadowy guests one and all avoid her glance. Then she seems to sink exhausted on her bed and the music breaks off. Presently she gathers all her strength and invokes the dance once more, with more energetic gestures than before. Back come the shadowy dancers, gyrating in a wild, mad rhythm. The weird gaiety reaches a climax; there is a knock at the door, which flies wide open; the mother utters a despairing cry; the spectral guests vanish; the music dies away. Death stands on the threshold.⁴

There is anyway something else that Bozzetto took from this plot, and that ended up in the short film: ghosts from distant and happy memories. The director acknowledged that “this kind of music tells about something that awakens from the past and dances, and it is fascinating, as well as sad, but engaging.”⁵ In fact, Sibelius destined the *Valse triste* to be part of the incidental music he wrote in 1903 to the drama *Kuolema* (death), by his brother-in-law Arvid Järnefelt, a tragic story about Paavali, a young man who sees his mother die, gets married, and has a child, but ultimately perishes in the fire that destroys his house, while seeing ghosts from the past. The scene detailed by Newmarch pertains to the first of the three acts of the play. The presence of a ruined house in Bozzetto’s film, just like in the third act of Järnefelt’s play, might be coincidental. The setting of the short comes in fact from a second source that Bozzetto used for his story: memories of his own family.

Bozzetto mixed the backstory of Sibelius’s *Valse triste* with the true story of his wife’s cat, who returned to the ruins of the house where he used to live before the place was demolished to make room for a new building. He opted for this autobiographical touch to be more connected with the sadness he wanted to express, but also because it allowed him to have an animal character, and not a human one, which in his opinion would have posed much more acting problems.⁶ The animated performance of the cat was entrusted to Giovanni Ferrari, who worked on a design by Giorgio Valentini. Ferrari kept the anthropomorphic behavior of the animal to a minimum; notwithstanding its loose resemblance to some cartoon cats from the Disney features of the 1960s, he has a very moderate facial expressivity.

⁴Rosa Newmarch, frontispiece notes to *Valse triste. From the Music to Arvid Järnefelt’s Drama “Kuolema.” By Jean Sibelius. From Op. 44. Arranged for Piano Solo* (New York: Schirmer, 1904).

⁵“Questo tipo di musica racconta di qualcosa che si sveglia dal passato e balla, ed è affascinante nonché triste, ma coinvolgente.” Bozzetto in Sbravatti, *Allegro non troppo*, 101.

⁶Ibid.

FIGURE 6 *The tabby cat from the Valse triste sequence in Allegro non troppo was designed by Giorgio Valentini and animated by Giovanni Ferrari. While the big eyes are clearly exaggerated (and they make for a very important visual and narrative device, as the ghostly apparitions are usually announced as reflections inside them), Ferrari animated the cat in a realistic way, on the basis of memories from his own pet.*

The exaggeratedly big, deep eyes alone convey a feeling of loss, while being also a reflective element, used in many instances to create visual tension by showing in them the colored light coming from the ghosts, before those appear on screen. Apart from the face, the cat is otherwise animated in a realistic way: the elasticity and subtleness of his movements, while being in accordance with the furtiveness of many passages in Sibelius's score, are the result of Ferrari's familiarity with his own pet (Figure 6). He did not use him as a life model, though, nor he used reference footage; he based his animation on memory and experience only.⁷

Some live-action footage, however, participated in the making of the *Valse triste*. The wrecked house where the cat dwells, as well as all the ghosts, is based on photographic references: the house was drawn and painted after some pictures Bozzetto found in the outskirts of Milan, while the ghosts are the director's friends, his four children, his wife, and himself, who appears on a rocking chair near to a dog. Such elements were supposed to invite the

⁷Bozzetto in a personal communication to the author via Skype, March 14, 2019.

spectator to feel a stronger empathy with the memories of the cat, being more lifelike and making thus the sad story more grounded in reality.⁸ At the same time, it could be said that the photographic elements reinforce the unbridgeable gap between the present and the past. The sentiment of loss is the key theme of Bozzetto's *Valse triste*, and it gets tangibly paralleled by the aesthetic divide existing between animated drawings and live-action footage: they can coexist on screen, but their pertinence to separate visual domains cannot be hidden. Actually, the "ghosts" also get manipulated with visual effects that brightly tinge them with monochromatic hues. This makes them more "otherworldly," but at the same time it creates a positive contrast with the bleak palette of the wrecked house. The house itself gets revamped in vivacious colors as it is seen "sprouting" its old rooms back in place. The distance between a joyous past and the mournful emptiness of the present gets thus reinstated also with the color dynamics throughout the short film.

As in the previous episodes of *Allegro non troppo*, the narrative structure of the *Valse triste* directly translates the formal scheme of the music. The piece by Sibelius alternates between a brooding idea, mostly played in the low register, that does not concede anything to melody except a short, noble cadence at the end of each phrase. It is contrasted with a much more spirited episode, faster in its tempo and dominated by the high pitch of violin, with a rapturous melodic attitude. This second episode is alternated twice to the first one: in the film, it plays when the visions overwhelm the cat and the house returns back to its ancient appearance. This emotional alternance makes the music an agent of an emotive function, which works both at a macro level (the whole "sadness" Bozzetto aimed for) and a micro one, that operates within the single sequences. Basically, the doleful mood of the first idea of the Valse is the emotional confirmation of the melancholy of the cat in the present, while the second idea goes well with the satisfactory happiness of the colorful memories. The synchronies that create temporal perceptual functions are decidedly less important; there are several of them that almost go unnoticed. They are implicit, just like in the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. The movements often are perfectly choreographed to the single notes of some passages, but the lack of strong accents and distinct musical timbres makes this accuracy almost inconspicuous; it anyway serves its purpose, which is to create a rhythmic tie-in between the timing of the animation and that of the music that has an organizational meaning (to elegantly fit the action within the phrasing of the music) more than a spectacular one.

There are, however, some moment where the spectator can perceive a functional link between single sounds and actions. The temporal perceptual function becomes evident when the cat starts strolling through the ruins for the first time: the music plays staccato, and as such with short, well-isolable

⁸Bozzetto in a personal communication to the author via Skype, March 14, 2019.

notes. The movement of the cat's leg is in visible synchrony with the staccato. Another instance, instead, reiterates Bozzetto's taste for making an expressive use of his camerawork: during the "happy" sections of the music, a rapidly flowing phrase gets introduced by three bold chords that are played rubato, which is to say by "holding back" the tempo for better emphasis and contrast with the fast passage that ensues. This happens twice; in both instances, the three chords are synched with a triple axial cut, the first one on the happy face of the cat, the second one on the "ghosts" of the little girls playing with her toy boats.

The *Valse triste* is thus the place of *Allegro non troppo* that mostly fuels its audiovisual strategy with the emotional link between images and music. The taming down of evident synchronies is a sensible choice, which implicitly acknowledges the long-standing connection that the cartoon practice has established between comedy and temporal perceptual functions, since the first Mickey Mouse cartoons.⁹ The audience is accustomed to laugh at mickey-mousing; a wider use of that in a melancholic animated short could have elicited wrong emotive responses, hindering thus the pathos that the story intended to convey.

⁹Daniel Goldmark, *Tunes for 'Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 6.