



## The Organist at St Vitus Cathedral

Dir. Martin Frič | Czechoslovakia | 1929 | N/C 12A | 1h 19m | Czech intertitles with English surtitles

Performing live: Maud Nelissen (piano, electric keyboard)

9.45pm on Saturday 23 March 2024

Screening material courtesy of Národní filmový archiv

One night, the seclusive old organ player of the St Vitus Cathedral – a Gothic edifice towering over the rooftops of Old Prague, whose titular instrument was built in the year of the film's release – hears a knock on the door of his modest house in Prague Castle's narrow Golden Lane (Zlatá ulička). The unexpected visitor is an old friend, who passes the organist some letters and money for his daughter Klara, shortly before shooting himself in the stomach. The suicide is witnessed by the organist's prying neighbour, who blackmails the musician, threatening to frame him as a murderer unless he is paid off, and urges the organist to hide the body in the basement. Duty-bound to take care of Klara, a nun at a local convent who yearns for freedom outside the monastery, the organist provides her with shelter. Klara embraces her new, liberated life and grows fond of the organist as a paternal figure, oblivious to the fact that her father's corpse lies beneath the floor of her new home. The rest you shall discover soon.

My earlier emphasis on the locations around which the film's events take place is intentional: the simple, taciturn script of *The Organist at St Vitus Cathedral* effectively served as pretext for capturing the beauty of Old Prague and the Lesser Town, whose rooftops and winding streets are filmed in naturally lit panoramic cityscapes set in contrast with the nighttime shots of bustling avenues and chiaroscuro interiors, where the film's inspiration from German Expressionism comes to the fore. Note the cinematographer Jaroslav Blažek's striking closeups on the faces of Klara and the organist, and numerous kaleidoscopic shots created with the use of long dissolves, such as one where Klara's face is

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overlaid with the spinning patterns of metal bars in a piercing representation of a young nun's yearning for a new life outside the convent.

Received positively at the time of release, Martin Frič's second fiction feature film is notable as a collaboration between several highly influential figures in Czechoslovak cinema. Frič himself first arrived at a film set in 1919 as a simple decoration painter. By the end of his prolific career, however, he has at various points worked as a director, an actor, a cameraman, a lab technician, a documentarian, a playwright, and a mentor to the next generation of Czech filmmakers. After the success of *The Organist*, Frič became more interested in absurd slapstick comedies and social satires, the most successful of which he wrote and directed between the 30s and the 40s. Infinitely productive as an artist, he continued working even under the Nazi regime and directed films well into the 1960s, despite the political pressure to conform to socialist realism in Soviet-occupied Czechoslovakia. Frič died on 21 August 1968, taking his own life upon despondently witnessing the final day of the Prague Spring. Today he is considered one of the most significant filmmakers in twentieth-century Czech cinema, thanks primarily to his work in comedy.

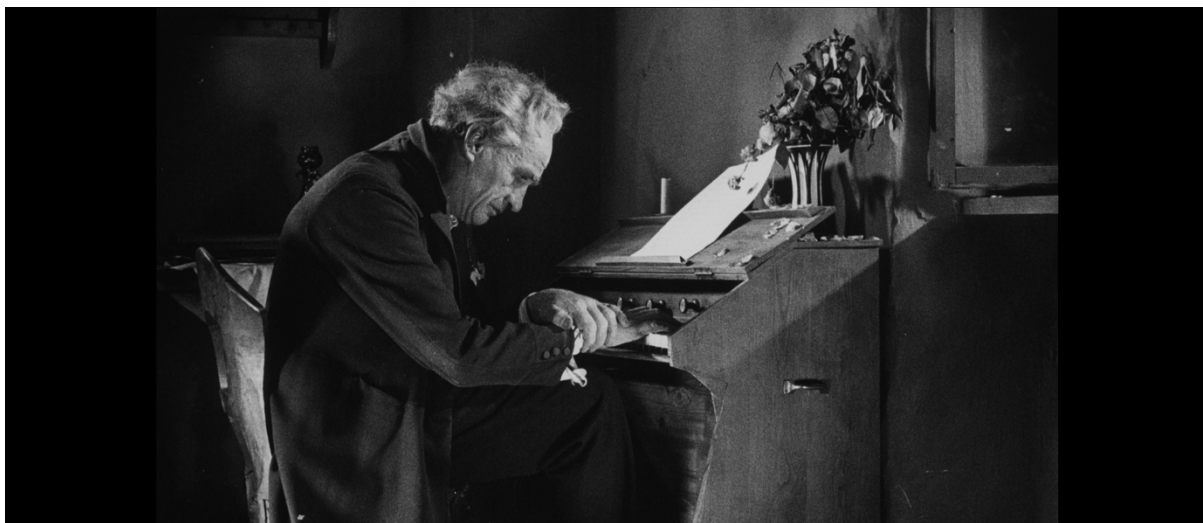
Playing Klara is the remarkable Suzanne Marwille, Frič's wife and lifelong collaborator, and the first female Czech film star. Aside from her acting work, which effectively ended by the end of the silent film period, Suzanne (whose real name was Marta Schölerová) was one of the few female screenwriters in the Czech silent film industry. Typecast as a femme fatale in her early roles, Suzanne came to be dissatisfied with the characters she had to play, gradually gaining more authorial control over the scriptwriting process. In 1922, she wrote and acted in a subversive comedy *Adam and Eve/Adam a Eva* about a pair of identical twins exchanging roles to play pranks on each other. Although Suzanne's final acting credit was in 1937, it is presumed that she remained an artistic and creative partner to her husband up until her death in 1962. I strongly recommend anyone curious about Suzanne to find out more about her creative and personal life in Martin Šrajer's expansive entry in the Women Film Pioneers Project (<https://wfpp.columbia.edu/pioneer/suzanne-marwille/>).

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The titular organist is played by the legendary Czech songwriter, actor, and director Karel Hašler. A man of many talents, Hašler was a playwright and theatre actor before World War I, at one point managing notable Prague cabarets such as *Lucerna* and *Rokoko*. Shortly after *The Organist*, with the arrival of sound film, Hašler put his songwriting and singing skills to use in cinema. In 1941, he was arrested by the Gestapo because of his patriotic songs, and subsequently sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp, where he died that same year.

A visually arresting silent film about music, and one's longing to forever remain connected to it, today *The Organist at St Vitus Cathedral* will be screened with a live score by Maud Nelissen, adding to a work so dense in expressive imagery a register of artistry that makes this gothic narrative set in 1920s Prague particularly poignant.

### ILIA RYZHENKO

*Ilia is a curator for Samizdat Eastern European Film Festival (Glasgow) and a PhD researcher at the University of Warwick.*

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