



## MAKING MAGIC: 100 YEARS OF DISNEY

# Disney's Silly Symphonies

### The Skeleton Dance

Director: Walt Disney  
USA 1929  
5 mins

### The Pied Piper

Director: Wilfred Jackson  
USA 1933  
8 mins

### The Grasshopper and the Ants

Director: Wilfred Jackson  
USA 1934  
8 mins

### The Wise Little Hen

Director: Wilfred Jackson  
USA 1934  
8 mins

### The Goddess of Spring

Director: Wilfred Jackson  
USA 1934  
10 mins

### The Tortoise and the Hare

Director: Wilfred Jackson  
USA 1935  
10 mins

### Elmer Elephant

Director: Wilfred Jackson  
USA 1936  
8 mins

### Three Blind Mouseketeers

Director: David Hand  
USA 1936  
9 mins

### The Old Mill

Director: Wilfred Jackson  
USA 1937  
9 mins

### The Ugly Duckling

Directors: Jack Cutting, Clyde Geronimi  
USA 1939  
9 mins

Total running time 84 mins

With thanks to The Walt Disney Company

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**SIGHT AND SOUND**

Carl Stalling, a musician whom Walt Disney had known in Kansas City, and who came to Hollywood in 1928 to become the studio's first official music director, reportedly became involved in heated discussions with Disney over the limitations imposed on his scoring by his employer's insistence on giving the animation pre-eminence over the music in the first Mickey Mouse shorts. As a result of these altercations and at Stalling's suggestion, a second series of shorts was conceived. In a *Funny World* interview, Stalling reminisced about the birth of the Sillys: 'After two or three of the Mickeys had been completed, Walt talked with me about getting started on the musical series that I had in mind. At first he thought I meant illustrated songs, but when I told him that I was thinking of inanimate objects like skeletons, trees, flowers, etc., coming to life and dancing and doing assorted actions fitted to music more or less in a humorous and rhythmic mood, he became very interested. Concerning a name for the series, I suggested not using the words 'music' or 'musical', as they sounded too commonplace, but instead using 'symphony' together with a humorous word. At the next gag meeting – I don't know who suggested it – Walt asked me, "Carl, how would 'Silly Symphony' sound to you?" I said "Perfect!" I then suggested the initial subject, *Skeleton Dance*, because ever since I was a kid, I had wanted to see real skeletons dancing.'

The division of Disney's 1930s output into two separate series meant that in the plot and gag-oriented character shorts the animation was given priority, while in the Sillys music was pre-eminent. The preproduction gestation period for a typical character short (e.g., a 'Mickey Mouse') was devoted mostly to developing story, gags and idiosyncratic situations. Such shorts as *Mickey's Orphans* (1931), *The Klondike Kid* (1932) and later, more technically refined pictures such as *Mickey's Garden* and *Mickey's Fire Brigade* (both 1935) are good examples of the studio's increasing attention to sustained plots and sophisticated comic business in projects which rendered music subservient. Though the scores of these films contributed much to their total impact, music served primarily as background for the choreography of action and characterisations; should any element in the short's construction require modification in the interests of a more fluid continuity, it was usually the music which bore the changes.

The Silly Symphonies, of course, always derived from a musical concept, and every attempt was made to accommodate the music score's development and realisation in the most expressive manner. Early shorts in the series, including the original *Skeleton Dance* (1929), were minimally plotted at best, designed rather to showcase the novelty of animated figures performing in perfect time to a specially composed or adapted musical score (this representing a step up from the practice of simply superimposing music on to a completed cartoon which had otherwise been conceived and produced as a silent).

Many of the earliest Mickeys and Sillys admittedly did little more than exploit their visual/musical pairings, but as the initial novelty wore off Disney and his story-men evolved more sophisticated methods for co-ordinating image and sound while maintaining in the Sillys an emphasis on fluid, cohesive scoring.

The first Technicolor Silly Symphony, *Flowers and Trees* (1932), conformed more or less to the same pattern, but added a bastardised classical score featuring excerpts from Rossini, Schubert and Anton Rubinstein. Besides providing ample opportunities for imaginative animation, this half-and-half structure also served a functional purpose: since each Silly introduced a set of hitherto unknown characters, the meandering musical first-halves allowed an audience time to empathise with these new personalities before the 'plot' itself took over.

As the Sillys moved through their Golden Age from 1932 to 1939, they displayed countless inventive variations on the basic formula. From essentially simple, not specifically music-oriented shorts such as *Autumn* (1930), *The Fox Hunt* (1931), *The Bears and the Bees* and *Babes in the Woods* (both 1932), some Symphonies

## **MAKING MAGIC: 100 YEARS OF DISNEY**

### **Disney's Silly Symphonies**

Sat 1 Jul 13:00; Mon 3 Jul 18:20

### **Dinosaur + Get a Horse!**

Sat 1 Jul 15:20; Sun 23 Jul 18:15

### **Tangled + Tangled ever After**

Sat 1 Jul 17:50; Sun 23 Jul 13:10

### **Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs +**

### **Thru the Mirror**

Sun 2 Jul 13:20; Sat 22

Jul 17:45; Mon 24 Jul 14:20

### **Who Framed Roger Rabbit + Tummy**

### **Trouble + Rollercoaster Rabbit**

Sun 2 Jul 15:40; Sat 22 Jul 20:30

### **Splash + Sea Scouts**

Wed 5 Jul 20:30; Mon 10 Jul 18:00

### **Disney at 100**

Thus 6 Jul 18:15

### **UK premiere of 4K Restoration:**

### **Cinderella + Trailer Horn**

Thu 6 Jul 20:30

+ intro by season curator Justin Johnson;

Sun 9 Jul 12:20; Tue 25 Jul 14:20

### **The Black Hole + Lifted**

Fri 7 Jul 20:50; Sat 15 Jul 13:00

### **Sleeping Beauty + Magician Mickey**

Sat 8 Jul 12:20; Sun 16 Jul 16:00; Wed 26

Jul 14:20

### **The Princess and the Frog + Babes in**

### **the Woods**

Sat 8 Jul 12:30; Thus 18 Jul 18:00

### **Fantasia + Toot, Whistle, Plunk and**

**Boom**

Sat 8 Jul 15:00; Thu 27 Jul 17:50

### **Fantasia 2000**

Sat 8 Jul 18:10; Sun 30 Jul 10:30

### **Dead Poet Society + Geri's Game**

Sat 8 Jul 20:20; Thu 20 Jul 17:50

### **Alice in Wonderland + Pluto's Party**

Sun 9 Jul 15:30; Thu 13 Jul 18:10

### **Frozen + Frozen Fever**

Fri 14 Jul 20:45; Sun 30 Jul 12:40

### **TRON + Smash and Grab**

Sat 15 Jul 15:10; Fri 21 Jul 18:00

### **TRON: Legacy + Sanjay's Super Team**

Sat 15 Jul 17:45; Fri 28 Jul 20:20

### **WALL-E + BURN-E**

Sat 15 Jul 20:45; Sat 29 Jul 12:30

### **Funday Workshop: Encanto Sing-along**

Sun 16 Jul 11:00

### **Funday: Encanto Sing-along**

Sun 16 Jul 12:30

### **Hocus Pocus**

Sun 16 Jul 18:10; Wed 26 Jul 20:40

### **Moana + Inner Workings**

Mon 17 Jul 18:00; Sat 29 Jul 13:00; Mon 31 Jul 14:20

### **Beauty and the Beast + Tick Tock Tale**

Sat 22 Jul 11:50; Mon 24 Jul 18:05; Thu 27

Jul 14:20

### **Once Upon a Time: A Disney Day**

Sat 22 Jul 12:00-17:00

### **Toy Story + The Adventures of Andre &**

### **Wally B. + Luxo Jr. + Red's Dream**

Sun 23 Jul 12:50; Sat 29 Jul 16:00

### **Toy Story 2 + Tin Toy + Knick Knack**

Sun 23 Jul 15:30

### **Pocahontas + Lava**

Sun 23 Jul 15:40; Fri 28

Jul 14:20; Sat 29 Jul 20:40

moved on to become virtually self-contained, one-act operettas. In some of these, the dialogue was entirely sung: e.g., *The Pied Piper* (1933), which presented the studio's early experiment with animation of the human form and a charming Harline vocal/instrumental score, and the less successful *Goddess of Spring* (1934), a near-operatic opus which anticipates the use of music in *Snow White* and is another, more 'realistic' experiment in human animation. In others, a basic theme song was woven into an orchestral, often ballet-like score, with dialogue spoken rhythmically (much in the manner of an operatic recitative) and/or written as rhymed, metered verse. The very popular *Three Little Pigs* (1933) and *The Grasshopper and the Ants* and *The Big Bad Wolf* of 1934 illustrate these techniques.

A somewhat less cohesive alternative to both these plot-oriented formats involved using the cartoon short as a basis for several musical 'spots', each allotted its own individual musical turn. This form of Silly drew its inspiration both from vaudeville and (more importantly) ballet; as regards the latter, these Sillys were quite similar to the *divertissement* (or set of character dances) in the classical Russian ballet, in which plot comes to a standstill to make way for a series of colourful, set-piece dances. Certainly the ballet is yet another art which initially influenced Disney's style of animation; his animators, many of whom were accomplished musicians, also served as excellent choreographers. Kurt Weill, who dubbed the animated cartoon 'another important steppingstone toward a truly musical film,' said of Disney's work: 'Here is music that is actually written first, [with] the characters "animated" to the rhythm and accent of [that] music. The cartoon is the "ballet" among the different forms of movie entertainment, and some of the scores written for Disney's pictures are fine examples of popular ballet music.'

Countless Disney shorts throughout the 1930s could be cited as proof of this, from *Skeleton Dance* onwards, for in his films' affinity to the dance and ballet Disney discovered an essential facet of his art, one which, once acknowledged, demanded only refinement. In both the Mickeys and the Sillys of the late 1920s and early 1930s, characters would burst into rhythmic movement at the drop of a hat, often accompanied by their hats and any other inanimate objects, which the animators' imaginations cared to have join the dance.

As prolific as was the output of Disney shorts during the 1930s, there was remarkably little repetition in their format and execution. Two of the best, *Music Land* (1935) and *The Old Mill* (1937), stand alone for the brilliance of their execution, related to the other shorts in the series only by virtue of the seamless integration of the musical and the visual which characterised all the best work in the series, and to each other only because of the sensitive contributions made by director Wilfred Jackson and composer Leigh Harline.

Of all the Sillys, it is *The Old Mill* which is most anticipatory of *Fantasia*, in that it is entirely structured in conjunction with Harline's orchestral/choral score which, in its pantheistic lyricism, evokes Delius. As such, the short is a wordless, nearly plotless aural/visual tone poem, a sustained piece of cinematic Impressionism which records the changing aspects of a single environment – the interior and surroundings of an abandoned windmill – during the course of a calm evening, stormy night and placid dawn. Besides the sheer musicality of the film's pacing and editing – the storm sequence being a veritable textbook lesson on the use of beautifully scored montage techniques – *The Old Mill* is noteworthy for its introduction of the three-dimensional effects of the multiplane camera (not to mention some of the most elegant and intricate 'flat' camerawork seen in a Disney film up to that time) and virtuoso special effects.

In little more than a decade, Disney and his staff brought the animated musical film to a level of creative and technical brilliance which remains a touchstone by which other endeavours in the field may be measured. Though the films' success owes as much to the talents of his musical collaborators as to those of his graphic and story artists, Disney achieved his goal of total synthesis in such a way as to make distinctions between the various contributions of his staff practically meaningless.

Ross Care, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1976-77