

Live at UQ Concert Series presents

Sketch Ensemble:
Nosferatu

1:00pm • 14 September 2023 • Nickson Room



Sketch

Sketch was formed in 2021, and has a focus on creating new works by its members. Since forming the ensemble has given many premieres of music composed by its members, along with new arrangements of Japanese animation and game music, innovative work with Marike van Dijk involving dynamic, animated music notation, and music focused on responses to and interpretations of specific natural environments. Sketch is directed by Robert Davidson, using insights from his 25 years as artistic director of the award-winning ensemble Topology.

Members:

Brianna Butters, flute and piccolo

Caleb Hodgkinson, trumpet

Max Fitzgerald, trombone

Abigail Lui, violin

Ashlyn Keiler, violin

Sophia Mackson, viola

Emily Winter, cello

Alexandra Mison, piano

Leon Eyears, piano

Erik Griswold, conductor and melodica

Program Notes

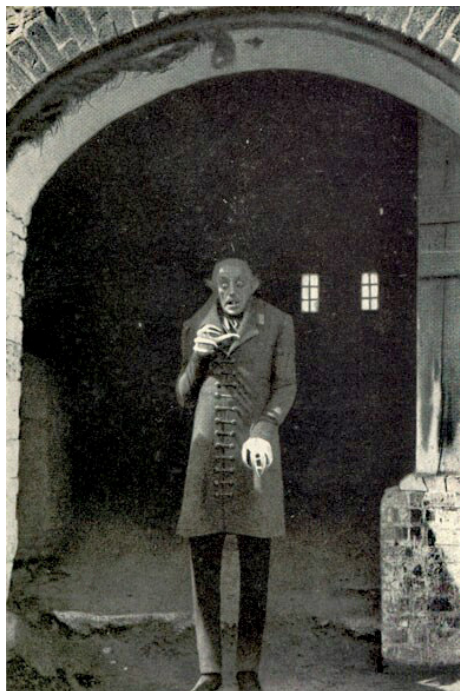
By Anne Levitsky

Welcome to today's screening of J.W. Murnau's 1922 film *Nosferatu*, with an original score composed and performed live by the members of UQ's Sketch Ensemble! Murnau's film was premiered during the "silent film era" (mid-1890s to late 1920s), labeled thus because films made during this period were not accompanied by any audible dialogue. However, "silent film" is something of a misnomer, as these films were almost always accompanied by some kind of live sound, whether that was a pianist, organist, or small musical ensemble (like you'll hear during today's screening).

The plot of *Nosferatu* is an unauthorized adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*, written in 1897. To give a brief synopsis, *Nosferatu* tells the story of Thomas Hutter, employed by estate agent Herr Knock. Hutter is sent to Transylvania by Knock to visit a new client, Count Orlok, who plans to buy a house in Hutter and Knock's (fictional) hometown of Wisborg, Germany. While staying in Orlok's castle, Hutter begins to suspect that Orlok is a vampire, and eventually finds Orlok resting in a coffin in the crypt. Orlok travels in a coffin to Wisborg via ship, where many people die following his arrival. Orlok is eventually defeated by Ellen, Hutter's wife, who decides to sacrifice herself to kill him.

Murnau did change a few details to avoid copyright infringement (for example, *Dracula* is now named Count Orlok,

and sunlight now kills him rather than just weakening him), but despite these changes Stoker's estate sued and a court ruled that all copies of the film must be destroyed. However, a few copies survived, and *Nosferatu* is regarded today as a masterpiece of German Expressionist horror film. Expressionism was a larger European artistic movement during the first part of the 20th century where artists emphasized subjectivity and rejected realism, aiming to present inner emotion through radical distortion.



Cinematographically, this manifests as sets that contain crooked buildings and jagged shapes (particularly the way Orlok's shadow is reflected and exaggerated onto walls), extreme makeup and costuming (especially in the case of Count Orlok), and hyper-expressive performances from the actors, all of which combine to instill in us as the audience the intense emotions the characters are feeling.

The score you will hear today joins part of a long tradition of writing new music for *Nosferatu*. The score for the film's premiere in Berlin was composed by Hans Erdmann, but most of the music was subsequently lost. As such, many composers have written new scores for the film, including James Bernard, best known for composing the music for films produced by British horror studio Hammer Film Productions. Sketch Ensemble's score borrows a few ideas from German composers, including Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss, and places them in a new musical context. As they mention in their note, Sketch has created a short musical motif, or leitmotif, for each main character. Wagner is well-known for pioneering this technique in his operas (you may know the famous Valkyrie leitmotif from his opera *Die Walküre*), and it will help you keep track of the characters as they interact with each other during the film.

Another feature of today's score is the use of sounds often associated with horror films, including string tremolos (where the player moves their bow back and forth rapidly across the string to create a trembling effect) and instrument mutes, to change the sound an instrument (often a brass instrument like a trumpet or trombone) makes. Brass mutes also play a role in the music of Strauss, where he sometimes uses them to portray extreme psychological states. These cinematic horror sounds function as another element of Expressionism, adding to our ability to understand the characters' inner states throughout the film—while creeping us out at the same time.



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