

## **Babylon Cinema Organ**

Country: Germany

Category: Short Form

**Title: Kinoorgel Babylon**

Company: Phoebe McIndoe and Marta Medvešek

Authors, producers, directors and sound engineers: Phoebe McIndoe and Marta Medvešek

Language: German

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## **SUMMARY**

Made in 1929 to accompany silent movies, with 913 pipes and 66 registers, it was the biggest cinema organ in Germany.

But the organ's grandeur wasn't celebrated for long. Soon after its construction, sound film took over and the Babylon's instrument became superfluous. Now, almost a century later and thanks to a dedicated team, Kino Babylon in Berlin Mitte has become a haven for lovers of silent film.

But it takes more than outdated technical equipment to experience this fading art in an authentic way. It requires quick fingers and the ability to improvise in real-time with a myriad of keys and buttons. A rare skill – and one that Babylon has found in the organist Anna Vavilkina.

## Kinoorgel Babylon



Phoebe McIndoe + Marta Medvešek

**Timothy Grossman:**

It started when I came here in 2005. Someone came and said, "This organ needs to be renovated... needs to be restored."

You would play the organ for an hour and the motor would get hot. Then you had to switch to the piano half-way through the movie.

I said, "That's a great idea, but I have no money, nothing, not a euro." And he said, "I'm retired, I'll do it for free."

*(Sound of the cinema organ. Audience laughter as the black and white images unfold on the screen.)*

**Timothy Grossman:**

The cinema organ was installed here in Babylon in 1929. Back then it was the biggest cinema organ in Germany.

**Anna Vavilkina:**

I was on vacation, and sometimes I like to look at the different organs while I'm traveling.

Imagine, you're on vacation somewhere and suddenly you find an organ that you're allowed to play!

**Timothy Grossman:**

But you can't have an organ without anyone knowing about it. So I hired an organist, full time. Anna Vavilkina.

*(Sound of the cinema organ swelling.)*

**Timothy Grossman:**

The whole of German history happened here. Weimar Republic. Fascism. GDR. This cinema has lived through everything.

**Anna Vavilkina:**

It is the only cinema organ in the whole of Germany that is still in its original place.

Because other organs - for example the cinema organ in Potsdam, or the cinema organ in Leipzig, or the organ in the Museum of Musical Instruments in Berlin - they were all originally in different spaces.

And this organ is not like a normal, classic church organ.

Here's a xylophone, for example. Church bells.

There are some other funny things... In the first manual, for example... Snare drum. You can also play it with other registers together, so with...

The triangle. We've heard that before... And castanets... And wooden drums. So, this thing... Tambourine. And so on...

**Marta Medvešek:**

What is this effect? "Tremulant"?

**Anna Vavilkina:**

Yes, well, that is... So without tremulant the organ sounds like this... With tremulant it sounds like this...

**Timothy Grossman:**

Anna Vavilkina is the best in the house. So, when you say the organ is the heart of Babylon, because it gives the cinema this unique selling point and also connects it to the silent film era...

It's not the oldest cinema in Berlin. There are older cinemas. But it's the only cinema left that has this kind of silent film equipment - the silent film organ and the silent film screen.

And of course you have to have someone to play the organ. And Ms. Vavilkina can not only do that, she can do it with virtuosity. So it's quite clear that Ms. Vavilkina is the best in Babylon.

**Anna Vavilkina:**

There are other things that you can use in silent films: gongs and thunder... Sirens...

And here, a boat whistle... And a phone. And a car horn. And a railway... What else is there... Cowbells. Storm...

And rain. And the birds...

**Marta Medvešek:**

Are there any sounds that are actually missing?

**Anna Vavilkina:**

I don't know... Perhaps a toilet flush!

**Marta Medvešek:**

A toilet flush? What do you do in this case?

**Anna Vavilkina:**

I don't know! It hasn't happened yet.

**Timothy Grossman:**

Film wasn't that advanced technically yet, so the images were silent and the sounds were produced live. That's the whole experience.

**Marta Medvešek:**

When you play here alone... it's a bit like, you have all the tones of the whole orchestra. It's so complicated, how do you do it?

**Anna Vavilkina:**

Well... it is complicated. When you sit at the cinema organ for the first time, or the second or third time... you realize that you really only have two hands and two feet. So you flap around!

*(Sound of the organ erupting to life. The organ imitates the sound of an entire orchestra. Sound of audience laughter.)*

**Anna Vavilkina:**

Sometimes I also think of these very old organists. The job was really to improvise and to be able to accompany the slapstick images with sound.

*(Repeating a question:)*

*Have I ever had the situation where I didn't know what music to play? What to play next...?*

No, I worked as an organist in the cinema for several years, so nothing can surprise me anymore.

*(Slow creeping sound of the organ. The sound follows the image of an intruder creeping onto the screen. The audience breaks into peals of laughter.)*

**Anna Vavilkina:**

I'll put it this way, I don't know which is the best organ in Berlin, but I'm sure I play the craziest.  
And I'm kind of proud of it!

**The End**