15. Music Structuring Narrative– A Dialogue

Robert Ziegler and Ian Christie

Ian Christie: You've worked with film music from a very wide range of periods — in fact, all the way from resurrecting historical scores such as Camille Saint-Saëns's *L'Assasinat du duc de guise* (1908) and Pietro Mascagni's *Rapsodia Satanica* (1917), to conducting contemporary scores, such as those by Jonny Greenwood for the films of Paul Thomas Anderson. Along the way, you have also presented film music by many of the Hollywood greats in concerts. Obviously, the role of film music has changed considerably across the "sound period" as a whole since the early 1930s, but do you think it has also changed significantly since, for instance, the time of Bernard Herrmann — who actually wrote for Welles, Hitchcock, and Scorsese? Do modern filmmakers expect different things from composers in terms of making their films "work" as narratives?

Robert Ziegler: Technology has moved forward rapidly since Herrmann's time – everyone now has access to synchronization equipment, orchestral samples, and an infinite supply of sound designs to make a sound track. In fact, there is much more sound design (which is, in effect, organized noise) in sound tracks than there used to be – sometimes to the exclusion of conventionally composed music. There are also, for both commercial and aesthetic reasons, a great deal more pop songs, which give the audience an immediate indicator of the mood and aim of a film (see Scorsese and Tarantino, for example). However, I think the role of music in making narratives convincing hasn't really changed all that much. So much depends on how the director uses the music.

I recently conducted a live performance accompanying a screening of Scorsese's Taxi Driver (1976), which was Herrmann's last score in 1976. The most instructive moment was in the opening sequence, when the martial chords played by the brass and percussion underscore the scenes of the taxi emerging from the smoke rising from the threatening New York streets. Then, on a cut to a close-up of the driver's (De Niro's) eyes, the music switches to a warm and sensual sax solo accompanied by lush strings. In a nutshell, Herrmann and Scorsese have established the film's singular tension: one man trying to follow his heart in a city without mercy – a cliché perhaps, but one presented here with great drama and finesse.

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The widespread use of "temp tracks" is another not always welcome innovation since Herrmann's day. These are generic accompaniments added while a film is being edited, which can lead to certain tracks being wedded in the director's mind to the film being made, as well as suggesting a preexisting style for the composer to which to conform.

IC: I wonder how many viewers realize the effect of such widespread use of this practice. I came across an online video essay by Tony Zhou in which he asks a cross-section of people whether they can hum or whistle anything from a Marvel film — and none of them can (Liptak 2016). Zhou quotes the composer, Danny Elfman, on how directors become so attached to their temp music that they ask composers to do more of the same. Therefore, he argues that temp music tends to make films all sound the same and bland. RZ: Well, today directors can ask composers to write music "on spec" before the film has been made, or at least edited. Sometimes it will be used, and sometimes not. This isn't all bad, but it would have been an unthinkable luxury in Herrmann's day.

I've conducted a few new scores for Jonny Greenwood and Paul Thomas Anderson. Paul asks Jonny for a lot of musical ideas very early in the production process, sometimes before shooting has started. A great deal of music is written and remains unused, but not unlistened to, and there's a lot of groping toward a particular mood or sound that goes on until Paul feels happy with it. This happened on both There Will Be Blood (2007) and, more recently, Phantom Thread (2017). So, depending on your point of view, this could be thought of as a deeper collaboration between composer and director, or not.

These sorts of demands didn't exist in Herrmann's day (and I doubt he would have submitted to them even if they had!), but they are increasingly common now. Again, digital technology has a great deal to do with this. When you can edit and cut and fiddle with a film (especially a technically complex film), you need the music to be updated constantly. On a technically challenging film, such as the The Lord of the Rings trilogy (2001-2003), this was very much the case. As Peter Jackson continued to edit and polish the film with its extensive special effects, Howard Shore constantly had to adjust the score.

Thus, in short, the role of music in supporting and structuring narrative hasn't changed all that much. You can try to change a mood or create suspense without music, but it's much easier and more effective to use it. They make great partners as (unlike other art forms, such as painting and literature) they both exist in time.

IC: "Supporting and structuring narrative"... But, of course, narratives have changed too, with much less well-defined narrative arcs, use of "dead time" and wide variations of pace that would have been unthinkable in the 1940s

and 1950s, and even later. I want to float an idea that might once have helped us to make sense of this relationship, to see whether it makes sense to you as a practicing film musician.

Erwin Panofsky, the great art historian, wrote an essay about "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures" in the early 1930s, and one of his key ideas was that there was a "principle of co-expressibility" governing the relationship between sound and image: "the sound cannot express any more than is expressed by visible movement" (1966, 21). (Of course, we have to remember that he was writing on the cusp of the transition to the Talkies, which included adapting the conventions of continuous live accompanying music and an incorporated score — which also had to leave the dialogue audible). In a nutshell, his idea was that intensity of image — like a close-up — required dialogue to be less prominent, and vice-versa.

I'm wondering whether Panofsky's idea might also apply to the music/picture relationship. If the image is intense or busy, does music necessarily play a lesser role than when the image is quieter or less active?

RZ: That's quite a broad assertion, though a very interesting one, that intensity of image requires less accompaniment of any kind. I think in a way, it supports the view that "pure" cinema is silent cinema – a director can, if he wants, tell a whole story using only pictures.

Certainly, if the image is very busy, music can be a distraction. You can find all sorts of exceptions to that rule but, in general, music functions best when it's not commenting directly on the image. The crudest example would be "mickey mousing" the film, which refers to music that punctuates every detail of the action, as was often done for comic effect in cartoons. In fact, I believe that music is always at its best when it suggests an emotional component of the film, or plays with memory and anticipation.

I remember conducting a newly commissioned score for Hitchcock's 1927 silent film The Lodger. There were very few crucial "hit points," but if I were to miss one by a fraction of a second, it was *always* better to be early rather than late. A late "hit" immediately telegraphed a mistake to the audience, whereas an early one was accepted. This is because our senses are used to hearing something first, and then looking to see what it is, whether that's a fire engine, a woman screaming, or an explosion. The ear is our early warning system. So, in film, it's usually the soundtrack that tells us something is about to happen.

IC: I have another "case study" on which you might care to comment. Scorsese was obviously attached to the tradition of Hollywood scoring that Herrmann represented, and he had another of its last exponents, Elmer Bernstein, adapt the original Hermann score for his remake of Cape Fear in 1992. But when it

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came to his epic Gangs of New York (2002), having commissioned a score by Bernstein, he largely decided to drop this in favor of period-type pieces with a much simpler score credited to Howard Shore (Christie and Thompson 2003).³ **RZ:** I didn't know this, but it's another addition to the impressive list of composers who've had entire scores thrown out! In the end, the harsh truth is that it's always the director's film, and the composer can't really expect to write something that doesn't support the film with discretion. I remember an old arranger in LA saying that in film scoring, you should never start telling another story with the music. The audience can't take in two stories at once "unless they have two heads." Max Richter often refers to music as the amniotic fluid in which the film exists.

IC: That's an interesting metaphor: linking the process of a film's conception with its eventual public form. In his interviews about GANGS, Scorsese gave an account of the growth of his own musical taste as "a process of discovery." He described his interest in the roots of the blues, and how he had heard some traditional American folk music in a documentary by Alan Lomax, at the time he was making RAGING BULL (1980). He used to play fife and drum music repeatedly during the years when he was hoping to make GANGS OF NEW YORK, and so it must have become deeply wedded to his conception of this long-planned film — so that Bernstein would have seemed too "Hollywood," and Othar Turner and the Rising Sun Band now open and close the film! I notice that Richter also said about a recent score, for the Western Hostiles (2017), "the challenge is really how to calibrate what you're doing and not telling the audience what to think … judging how much to load up on to each moment in terms of what the music is doing" (Richter 2018).

In terms of "not trying to do too much," I was also struck by a recent review of Martin McDonagh's Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri (2017), where the reviewer commented on Carter Burwell's score being less distinctive than those he had written for the Coen brothers' films. But from my own viewing, the music in Three Billboards, while seemingly unobtrusive, performs a wide range of functions, through quotation, punctuation, and other kinds of "shaping."

RZ: I saw Three Billboards as well and know Carter Burwell's work. He is a great example of someone who is very precise and writes the minimum amount of music a scene requires – which he did very well in this film. In fact, he's also good at explaining what he does, and this is what he's said about working on Three Billboards:

Because there are so many fully-drawn [sic] characters in the story, I considered an approach used by Ennio Morricone in his Spaghetti Western

scores (which I love) — giving each character a distinctive musical signature that stays with them even as their alliances shift. But ultimately this seemed too arch, and some major characters, like Sam Rockwell's, simply don't have any scored scenes until late in the film. [...] In the end I concentrated on Mildred. There's a soulful theme for Loss, which motivates everything in the film. There's a stomp-and-clap march when she goes to War. And there's a theme for Death, which is never far away. As the story and the relationships develop, the themes intertwine until, by the last couple of reels, they're barely recognizable. (Burwell 2017)

IC: Burwell is clearly interested in how music conditions our responses, not only to fiction but also to TV news. And he's put a great discussion between himself, Joel and Ethan Coen, and a neuroscientist, Aniruddh Patel, online, which touches on the issue of temp music "nudging" scores toward conformity (Burwell et al. 2013). But Patel also shows, quite graphically, by means of neuroimaging, just how much of the brain is activated by purely instrumental music, let alone when it's part of the whole sensory input that is a film. As he shows, music plays a major part in organizing spatial awareness, emotions, anticipation and, in fact, the whole apparatus of narrative. Well worth watching!

Notes

- Robert Ziegler conducted Howard Shore's score for The Hobbit: An Unex-PECTED JOURNEY (2012).
- 2. A new score for The Lodger was commissioned by the British Film Institute from Joby Talbot in 1999, and widely performed by Robert Ziegler, conducting the Matrix Ensemble. For Talbot's reflections on the project, see http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/11838.
- 3. Bernstein had also previously collaborated with Scorsese on The Age of Innocence (1993) and Bringing Out the Dead (1999).

References and Further Reading

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