

The Art of Film Music

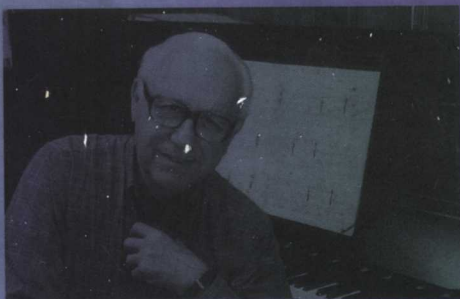
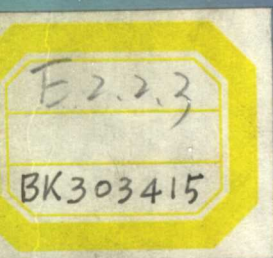
Special emphasis on

Hugo Friedhofer

Alex North

David Raksin

Leonard Rosenman



G E O R G E B U R T

THE ART *of* FILM MUSIC

George Burt

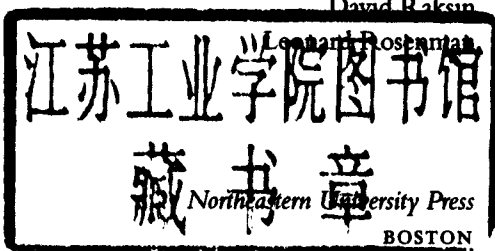
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Introductory Remarks

A short while ago, Steven Kovacs, chairman of the Film Department at San Francisco State University, invited me to give a series of lectures on film music, knowing that I had been working on a book that was intended for both composers and filmmakers. He said that while his students lacked formal training in music, he felt nevertheless that it was very important for them to have a basic understanding of how music worked in film.

I couldn't have agreed more with this sentiment. It is obvious that music plays a vital role in film, and filmmakers need to have as clear an idea as possible about what they can reasonably ask of the music. Many teachers from various parts of the country have expressed the same view. They point out that there are only a few books on the subject, and these are either on the history of film music, which is interesting and informative, or they are written for a trained musician, which is hard for them to understand. One person said, "I've read these books, or tried to, but I still don't have a feeling for what to say to a composer. I mean, I don't have a picture of what's involved or how to go about it."

Looking at the situation from another point of view, I have heard similar concerns from composers, even fully trained concert composers. Many have confessed that they would give their right arm to score a feature-length film, but even if they had the opportunity, they would have to take some kind of crash course before tackling a film score.

I honestly don't know of anything that would fully prepare a composer to score a film, but I do know that by looking at what established composers have done in specific situations, it is possible to get a feeling for what is involved. The actual mechanics of film scoring can be learned relatively fast, although there always seems to be something else to find out about.

What is not so easily learned is the cinematic language as it relates to music. All of us have grown up with the movies, and to one degree or another, all of us have been moved by certain films. We feel that we are at home with the medium. And to a large extent most of us are. But it is quite another thing to view a film print before music has been added and arrive at deep-seated convictions about where music is needed and the kind of music that would be most helpful to the film.

In this medium, it is absolutely necessary for composers and directors to communicate with each other. Yet communication between them is generally difficult. Even the most creative and highly skilled professionals on both sides regularly complain of this problem.

Why is this? Music is an intricate and specialized language, and talking about musical matters is exceedingly problematic for non-musicians. Musical terminology alone is a barrier. Further, there often is a confusion about what music can and cannot do, a confusion about the difference between literary and musical values. And there is an erroneous but widespread assumption that certain kinds of music are inevitably required in certain situations. For instance, many believe that if people are running, the music should also "run." This is a limiting if not disturbing concept.

These are just a few of the most problematic areas in film music. There are, of course, many others. What this book does is explore these areas as they occur within broad contexts: characterization, accent, pacing, and so on. No prior technical knowledge of either film or music is assumed. The music analyses vary in depth, and most will prove to be relatively clear to non-musicians. A glossary of basic musical terms is included at the back of the book. However, some aspects of the analyses will not be clear to non-musicians because advanced music-analytical terminology is employed. Technical commentary has been placed in italics and may be skipped by non-musicians without loss of continuity.

The book cites many films. In fact, only on rare occasions is an issue explored without reference to a specific film segment. In my judgment, the validity of a statement about artistic matters depends to a large extent on the choice of example within a given analytical context. When confronted with a question about film music, experienced film composers invariably say: "It depends on the situation."

It will be noted that a great deal of space is devoted to a description of the dramatic situations involved. This is necessary in light of the premise of the book: In filmmaking, the drama is the primary concern; music performs a complementary role. Thus, continual reference to plot is indispensable to any discussion of how music functions in film.

Most of the films in the book are from the 1940s through the 1970s;

several are taken from the 1930s and the 1980s. Most if not all the examples are generally regarded as "classic" films, which are screened regularly (especially on television) and are easily available at video stores. I have made this choice principally because the shelf life of new or rarely shown films is impossible to predict, and many disappear after only a short time. Thus, further study of them would be difficult. It is possible that a few readers may find it a bother to acquaint themselves with "older" movies. I would urge them to do so; it will be worth the trouble. These are, after all, great films.

I regret that actual musical scores of Korngold, Steiner, Waxman, and Newman are not included in the book. And there are some thirty or forty other composers also not included who have made significant contributions to the film music world—particularly Rozsa, Tiomkin, Webb, and Kaper from the early period; Copland and Herrmann from the middle period; certainly Goldsmith, Williams, and Morricone of today and, recently, Bruce Broughton and James Horner, to mention but a few. Inclusion of these composers alone would go a long way toward satisfying any expectation as regards historical perspective. However, this is not a book on the history of film music. I feel strongly that although styles change, the challenges discussed in the book emerge out of the medium itself, not as they would in one decade or another or, certainly, with any particular composer.

In short, unique structural, dramaturgical, and perceptual possibilities readily emerge when music is combined with film. In this study, an effort has been made to uncover and examine many of these possibilities so as to arrive at a better understanding of how, when, and on what basis the two media interrelate.

Finally, it would be impossible for me to find the words to express my depth of gratitude to David Raksin, Alex North, and Leonard Rosenman. This book never could have been written without their help and friendship over many years. Thanks are also due to John Addison and Ernest Gold for their generous and invaluable contributions and to Hugo Friedhofer's daughter, Karyl Gilland-Tonge, for making her father's manuscripts available to me. I am indebted to Professor Arthur Gottschalk for his work on the manuscript in its early stages, and to Gunther Schuller for his help and support in bringing this manuscript to publication; to my colleagues, Professors Richard Lavenda and Ellsworth Milburn, Sam Jones, and Paul Cooper for their sustained help and encouragement; and to Tse-Ying Koh and Sally Baker-Carr for their invaluable editorial assistance. Of course, my deepest heartfelt gratitude goes to Sharon and my two sons, Eric and Wylie, for their patience, love, and understanding.

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The Art of Film Music



The Story's the Thing

At the 1986 Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awards ceremonies, Alex North was honored with a Lifetime Achievement award. He was the first (and so far the only) composer to receive this award. In his acceptance speech, North said he attempts to meet the “demands and needs of the story conflict and of the interrelationship of the characters involved and, hopefully, to add a personal comment.” North was drawing on both his profound talent and insight as a film composer and forty-plus years of experience composing the music for some of the most challenging and significant films of the last few decades. A more succinct definition of the composer’s point of view would be hard to come by.

When writing a film score, composers become musical dramatists; their thoughts are on the story and how it is told, as Alex North’s comment makes clear. The most distinguished composers possess a genuine theatrical talent and imagination as well as the ability to translate their thoughts into musical sound and gesture. Some have an undeniable instinct that enables them to find the right kind of melodic line, orchestral texture, and musical style to bring out what they intuitively recognize as an essential aspect of a drama. This is a gift. While it takes a great deal of effort, concentration, study, and experience to develop this gift, having it is indispensable to composing for film.

Music’s Vital Role

Most of us can recall instances in which film music tipped the balance, bringing out or amplifying the spirit of the drama. Music has the power to

open the frame of reference to a story and to reveal its inner life in a way that could not have been as fully articulated in any other way. In an instant, music can deepen the effect of a scene or bring an aspect of the story into sharper focus. It can have a telling effect on how the characters in the story come across—on how we perceive what they are feeling or thinking—and it can reveal or expand upon subjective aspects and values associated with places and ideas intrinsic to the drama. Further, music being a temporal art, an art that takes place in time (as does film), it can have an enormous impact on the pacing of events, moving things along when needed, dwelling on something that requires attention, accenting this or that instant or event to help bring out the various connections and divergent points of view. In the world of opera, these inherent capabilities of music have been well known for hundreds of years; in film, they are just as fundamental.

Significantly, it is difficult to recall a single feature-length dramatic film—old, new, long, short, traditional, or avant-garde—that does not employ music to dramatic advantage to some extent. Epic films (for example, *Spartacus*, *Cleopatra*, *Empire of the Sun*) generally require more music than usual, especially when they contain a preponderance of scenes with broad scope such as landscapes, ceremonies, troop movements, and riots or protests of some sort. In such instances, particularly where dialogue and plot development have been suspended momentarily, music is often needed to maintain a sense of dramatic connection. The same tends to be true of “adventure” films (e.g., *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Star Trek*), in which dialogue gives way to action requiring musical emphasis. Thus, it is the nature of the story and how it is presented on the screen that is a determining factor with respect to the amount of music that is needed. It is telling that while the duration of most feature-length films is between 90 and 120 minutes, up to 30 or 40 minutes of dramatic music is required on average—roughly one-third of the film. This is quite a bit.

Once a story begins, we are principally drawn to what we see on the screen, not what we hear in the music. We have an instinctive inclination toward the human experience, and when we see a person on film we automatically become interested in him or her and in the overall unfolding of the story. The more engaging the drama, the truer this becomes.

Generally, music makes its first appearance during the main (opening) titles, where it is in a position to make substantial comment with lasting effect. Jerry Goldsmith’s stirring and penetrative main titles music for *Patton* (1970) (discussed in Chapter 2) is an excellent example. In this instance Goldsmith manages to tell us a great deal about the major character from

the outset—his sense of religious conviction and personal commitment to the military—which prepares us for what is to come. The human aspect is, of course, the *sine qua non* of any story. Filmmakers count on music to help bring this out.

Should Film Music Be Heard?

In concert music the weight of the experience is carried by the music alone. Film music has a much more particularized function, always within a dramatic context. As music in a film is placed here, and then there, but certainly not everywhere, the overall shape or form of a film score becomes a constituent aspect of the film. Certainly, when musical statements are separated by several minutes it is not possible to think in terms of a large-scale musical structure, as we would with concert music or, for that matter, a Mozart opera. Leonard Rosenman points out that “the form is that of the film. What we are dealing with, then, is basically a literary form, not a musical form. Certainly, the music can contribute a great deal in support of an overall shape, but this shape originates with the film itself, not the music.” Rosenman adds, “In this sense, it is crucial that a filmmaker has a sense of the larger form, not just a sense of detail.”¹

If the music draws away or diverts from the dramatic shape, line, or impulse, it doesn't fit the film. If it understates the case, it will be a disappointment. And if it overstates a particular situation along the way, it will cause a problem of balance or a distortion of the dramatic line. On the other hand, if the music connects with the film in terms of dramatic shape and meaning, bringing out various aspects in a corroborative manner without overdoing it, the music then begins to fit the film. How this is done in each situation is the basic question—the most important question of all for the film music composer.

Given the importance of the role and function of music in film, it is important to ask to what extent film music is consciously heard generally, or, to put it another way, to what extent it should be heard. David Raksin, one of the most distinguished and experienced film composers, holds the view that “the purpose of film music is not to be noticed for itself. Its great usefulness is the way in which it performs its role without an intervening conscious act of perception. It is most telling when the music registers upon us in a quiet way, where we don't know it's actually happening.”² Though music enters the plot, so to speak, and takes certain unique technical, aesthetic, and dramatic values into full account, it rarely assumes a command-

ing position that we are aware of for any length of time. However, this is not to say that the music is not heard or that it is not meant to be heard. Take the music away and we immediately sense its absence, particularly if the music tells us something that needs to be said. As we shall see, there are various situations where film music becomes more noticeable than at other times and where, on occasion, it carries the weight of dramatic development.

The Contrapuntal Aspect

Many writers allude to the contrapuntal relationship between music and film. When music and film are combined, they interact contrapuntally. Interaction is the key aspect: Music has an impact on film, and film on music. Whether or not we are conscious of this, it is through interaction that the full force of their combined effect comes into play.

In music, the word *counterpoint* is applied to situations involving two or more lines, where each line has a sense of independence or integrity of its own. When combined, they make a statement that is larger than each of the component parts. In our case, there is no question that because of the fundamental difference between the two media—one is visual, the other aural—each is inevitably perceived as having an independence of its own. When placed together to achieve a common goal, a great deal more is expressed than would be possible by means of either medium alone. Indeed, one will heighten the effect of the other.

In music, counterpoint evokes the transfer of attention from one voice to another as an enrichment of the total experience. In string quartets, for instance, primary material passes from the first violin to the viola or the cello and back. This happens in film as well, though to a limited extent. There are occasions when the score takes on a more noticeable role, if only for a short period of time—even a few seconds. This can occur at the beginnings and endings of scenes or at climactic points where dialogue and action come to a momentary pause. Still, this momentary transfer of attention in no way mitigates our preoccupation with what is on the screen. Under the best of circumstances, it substantiates what is on the screen by filling in where dramatic extension is required.

Musical counterpoint traditionally involves the technique of “contrary motion” (two lines moving in opposite directions) as a viable means of achieving linear independence and enlarging upon an overall musical gesture. In a curious manner, this principle emerges in film and music, particu-

larly with regard to the emotional shape of a scene. Imagine a character in a film gradually losing control of a situation and becoming infuriated. In musical terms, we might associate this rise in intensity with the high point of the melodic line. However, a musical gesture or line in the score could just as well be taken in the "opposite" direction, ending on a low pitch as the person screams. The dramatic implication here, underscored by the music, is that the person or the situation has somehow bottomed out, that the crux of the matter has come into full view, or that a point of no return has been reached. This technique has been used quite often and with effective results, as in *Secret Honor* (1984), at the very end of the picture.

"Supra Reality"

On a broad level, there is music that more or less goes with what appears on the screen (battle music for a battle), and music that establishes a different kind of reality than what is apparent, what Rosenman calls a "supra reality." For instance, pictures of people running in frantic pursuit of something need not be accompanied by music that also "runs." If the dramatic intent of the scene is to amplify an underlying sense of fulfillment or release, it may be better served by a broadly based, lyrical kind of music. The *raison d'être* of this approach is significant. The music interacts with the intrinsic meaning of the sequence, as distinct from a surface-level meaning; it is addressed to what is implicit within the drama, not to what is explicit (such as the visual action), that is, to what you cannot see but need to think about. You will be particularly aware of the music in such instances, because it tells you something that will make an appreciable difference in your perception of the overall event.

This approach is particularly useful in more dramatically involved situations. These ordinarily consist of several layers of thought, where you have something to work with in terms of multiple meanings. For instance, consider the film *Mission* (1986). The story takes place at a time when the natives in Peru were forced to defend themselves against the onslaught of the conquering Spaniards. For the battle, the score recalls a hymn tune that, from the beginning of the film, is associated with the religious spirit embedded in Peruvian culture. Music that ordinarily would be associated with a fierce battle is put aside in favor of a more astute comment.

Film composers are naturally sensitive to the necessity of writing music that will somehow take notice of an important yet understated or implicit aspect of a scene. It should be noted, however, that music by its very nature is expressive of subjective values. It invariably evokes or suggests something