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### Unheard Possibilities: Reappraising Classical Film Music Scoring and Analysis

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# Unheard Possibilities: Reappraising Classical Film Music Scoring and Analysis. An Introduction

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- 1 This special issue of *Miranda* is comprised of a selection of articles that were presented at the SERCIA conference entitled “Music & Movies: National and Transnational Perspectives,” organized by Frank Mehring (Radboud University) and Melvyn Stokes (University College London) at Radboud University, Nijmegen, in September 2014. We would like to start by thanking the organizers for a wonderful conference and the SERCIA board for entrusting us with the challenging task of editing this issue. The task was from the start a challenge because the conference confirmed that, even today, the majority of film scholars—that is those who do not have a background in music and musicology—remain cautious, if not downright inhibited, when it comes to studying music in film. An obvious nod to Claudia Gorbman’s 1987 classic study of music in narrative film—the “unheard possibilities” evoked in the title of this introduction—evoke the willful and wary neglect of the power and potential of music to affect our apprehension of the moving image.
- 2 Film music studies has rapidly expanded since the beginning of the 21st century. It has become a thriving field, with its own academic journals (*Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* and *The Soundtrack* both founded in 2007) and a special interest group within the Society of Cinema and Media Studies (also since 2007). The field’s development has seen an expansion of the approaches adopted by film scholars and musicologists. What used to be the province of formalist and structuralist scholars now accommodates more historical and technical approaches, such as those based on archival studies of the technical characteristics of a specific studio or on the genesis of a given film score. The field has also seen emphasis steered away from music proper to a more general focus on the soundtrack (evident, for instance, in the title of one of the above-cited journals and in James Buhler’s 2019 *Theories of the Soundtrack*), and thus on sound effects, soundscapes and silence (see Helen Hanson’s 2019 *Hollywood Soundscapes* or Serge

Cardinal's 2019 *Profondeurs de l'écoute et espaces du son*). This might seem a slight paradox if one recalls Michel Chion's provocative claim, in the opening pages of his 1990 *L'Audiovision*, that "the soundtrack does not exist," meaning that, unlike the visual channel, the elements of the soundtrack are not necessarily related to each other but resonate, albeit to varying degrees, with the images (37). Increased attention to the soundtrack (or tracks) would tend to confirm his view, or at least exacerbate the paradox Chion himself underlines: that the soundtrack is a technical reality in spite of its lack of aesthetic cohesion. This turn has been further justified by the contemporary practice of "sound design," which has contributed to blurring the distinction between music and sound (see Sonnenschein 2001, Whittington 2007, Avarese 2017, Scott-James 2018); if sound design has now become the dominant model for understanding music, sound design as an ideal (I) actually goes back to the 1930s (Pisano 103).

- 3 This special issue devoted to music in US-American cinema sets out to renew the attention to film music proper. The broadening of the spectrum of the field of film sound and music studies has perhaps not diminished our interest in music in American cinema, but has no doubt toppled it from its privileged position—yet another welcome trend. The reappraisal proposed in this issue is twofold: it involves, on the one hand, a reappraisal of the classic works on film music in Hollywood cinema, and, on the other, a consideration of how new modes of attention to film music and sound affect our approach to scoring and film music analysis. This special issue thus hopes to assess the extent to which the ideas put forth in the signature works on music in Hollywood movies—Claudia Gorbman's 1987 *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, Karthyn Kalinak's 1992 *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* and Michel Chion's 1995 *La Musique au cinéma* (which mainly prolongs Gorbman's own analyses)—remain relevant today, in the light notably of more recent work on music in American cinema—Anahid Kassabian's *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Film Music* (2001), the collected volume *The Hollywood Film Music Reader* (2010), Matthew Bribitzer-Stull's *Understanding the Leitmotif: From Wagner to Hollywood Film Music* (2015), Michael D. Dwyer's *Back to the Fifties: Nostalgia, Hollywood Film, and Popular Music of the Seventies and Eighties* (2015). There is a general sense in the articles that follow, moreover, that the field of music studies has broadened its horizons geographically, historically, methodologically and theoretically.
- 4 The eight articles that compose this issue propose a historical journey—from the advent of sound cinema (the Marx brothers), to the classical era (Ford, Steiner, Hitchcock, Huston), to the contemporary era (Carter Burwell and the Coen brothers); from Hollywood to independent cinema (Hooper) or that uncertain in-between space that is off-Hollywood (Burwell and the Coen brothers); and finally from the creation of an "original" score (Steiner, Hermann, Huston, Burwell, Hooper and Wayne Bell) to the contemporary practices of compilation scoring (Burwell, Hooper and Bell) and scoring music for silent films (the work of composers Christopher Caliendo, Robert Israel and John Lanchbery). The issue's structure thus reflects the creative and analytical gesture of looking back, from our vantage point in 2021, on classical film music conventions and, more precisely, on the texts that attempted to formulate and circumscribe them and thus laid the foundations of classical and contemporary practices of film music scoring and analysis. The reappraisal announced in the subtitle is, therefore, historical, analytical, creative and implicitly metacritical, and aims to put forth possibilities that may have been overlooked in the founding texts on Hollywood film music.

- 5 The following case studies illustrate the wide variety of relationships that exist between movies and music. They investigate the musicality of an actor such as Harpo Marx's persona (Ventura); the work of a seminal Hollywood composer like Max Steiner (Paquet-Deyris); the utilization of music by a director like John Huston (Ness); the ongoing collaboration between a director and a composer like Burwell and the Coen brothers (Assouly); and the texture and functions of music in specific films such as *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958) (Gelly) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) (Chambost). These approaches and their methodologies provide a neat sense of where film music studies stands today, while the two pieces on contemporary silent film composers provide us with a picture of current practices of scoring silent films (Costa de Beauregard, Israel).
- 6 Marie Ventura's passion for Harpo Marx leads her to conduct a study that blends biographical, technical and symbolical elements, an approach that has been adopted to tackle more obvious material such as the male stars of the Hollywood musical, Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly (Decker 2011; Genné 2018). Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris draws on the key works on Max Steiner (Thomas 1996; Wegele 2014) in order to identify the composer's formula, an approach which resonates with what the research Emilio Audissino has recently carried out on one of Steiner's musical descendants, John Williams (2017). Robert Ness's article attempts to map the forms and uses of music in the films of John Huston, exploring issues similar to those raised by Kalinak in her 2007 book on music in the Westerns of John Ford, and Christine Lee Gengaro in the films of Stanley Kubrick. Julie Assouly's interest in the Burwell-Coen trio echoes similar work on similar composer-director collaborations, including Hermann-Hitchcock (Rawle and Donnelly 2016) or case studies on Burton-Elfman (Carayol 2018) and Lynch-Badalamenti (Kalinak 1995; Norelli 2009). Christophe Gelly and Christophe Chambost offer in-depth analyses of the music in two films, *Vertigo* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, that are exemplary and singular to various degrees. Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard observes the intentions of contemporary composers scoring *The Iron Horse* (Ford, 1924) before the film's original score (written by none other than Ernö Rapée) was unearthed in 2012, paying particular attention to the implications of their choices. The issue ends, quite naturally, with composer Robert Israel's insights into his own practice as a composer through his account of scoring the MGM production *The Cossacks* (George W. Hill and Clarence Brown, 1928), testifying to the significance of research for a composer, but also of the drive to formalize one's practices, as in the books of Ernö Rapée (1925) or more recently Ennio Morricone (2013).
- 7 What follows is an attempt to foreground the main points of convergence between the eight case studies that follow, to emphasize how they resonate with recent studies of film music and the soundtrack, and ultimately to regroup the findings the issue articulates as a whole. Methodologically speaking, each article pays attention to how the film score was created, and more or less explicitly raises the question as to who exactly is the *auteur* of the score. Film music may establish to a director's and/or composer's style. This is obviously the case when a director scores his own soundtrack, as in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Chambost), or the films of Chaplin and Clint Eastwood. But it is also the case with collaborations. Burwell's music also contributes to the Coen "touch" (Assouly), an elusive notion that the non-verbal quality of music may, in effect, reinforce; Carter Burwell is sometimes described as the "third" Coen brother in recognition of the shared authorship of the film. This leads to the paradoxical view

that music is at once an essential ingredient to build up a director's status as an *auteur* (it proves that the director controls elements that are outside his/her personal qualifications), but it simultaneously confirms that the film *auteur* is largely a fabrication (since the work was created by two artists, with one being clearly in charge of the film music). John Huston represents an interesting counter-example because he did not attach himself to any one composer but picked different ones depending on the film (Ness). An analysis of the music in his films thus makes it even more difficult to pinpoint his style; not only did he work with varied topics and genres, but the types of music and scoring methods utilized also varied from one film to another. In Huston's case at least, music's dramatic function exceeds style. The link between music and creative authority predates sound cinema and existed in the 1920s (Costa de Beauregard). In *The Iron Horse*, music is inscribed within the images through the inclusion of diegetic songs such as "Drill Ye Tarriers" and, more covertly, through the rhythm of the editing, as if Ford wanted to have a say in a yet-to-be written soundtrack. However, the music was also an essential ingredient in the making of the film, with Rapée's original score played on set to prime and inspire actors.

- 8 For nearly all the authors in this issue, genetics become enmeshed with aesthetics, and it proves to be difficult to study them separately. For example, the sound of Harpo Marx's harp is profoundly linked to the performer's life story and to how he chose this instrument to give him a distinctive voice (Ventura); a study that would separate the aesthetics of Harpo's music from his persona would make little sense. Studying the genetics of film music is thus indispensable to the study of the score itself. The link between the creation of the film and that of the score also demands attention to that Bartleby moment when composers would rather *not* underscore, as in films such as *The Asphalt Jungle* (Huston, 1950) and *No Country for Old Men* (the Coen brothers, 2007) (Ness, Assouly).
- 9 By and large, the eight articles tend to confirm the central tenets formulated by Gorbman and Chion, and by composers like Ernö Rapée before them. Hollywood film music offers a characteristic mix of 19<sup>th</sup>-century classical music (notably Wagner) with folk music, whose themes can be integrated within a symphonic orchestration (Paquet-Deyris, Ness, Assouly, Costa de Beauregard). Classical film music relies on motifs and themes—the main theme, the romance theme (Paquet-Deyris, Ness, Assouly, Gelly)—that sometimes verge on clichés, particularly when evoking ethnicity and race, e.g., the Indian music of Hollywood Westerns (Costa de Beauregard); conversely, the use of specific instruments (the yodel, the banjo, the bandura) also serve to evoke regional or nationality identity with a degree of parody (Assouly) or verisimilitude (Israel). Film music fulfills a variety of functions that are, in effect, combined. It can help structure the narrative and provide or even complexify narrative content, enhancing the dramatic potential of a given scene (Paquet-Deyris, Ness, Assouly, Gelly, Costa de Beauregard). It can take on a symbolic function, evoking a nation's ideology (Costa de Beauregard) or identity, as the famous musical duel of *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1941) demonstrates (Paquet-Deyris). Reprising Chion's famous empathetic/anempathetic binary, several articles show how film music plays an essential role in the production of emotion, whether enhancing the dominant emotion of the scene—horror in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Chambost)—or on the contrary, introducing an emotional gap between what we see and what we hear (Assouly, Gelly). Film music can also endow a given scene with a sense of irony, notably in the use of counterpoints (Ness, Assouly, Gelly). It can also serve to express a character's inner life, whether that of a mute such

as Harpo Marx (Ventura), a beast like King Kong (Paquet-Deyris), an obsessive voyeur like Scottie in *Vertigo* (Gelly) or a troubled writer like Barton Fink (Assouly). The case studies in this special issue thus tend to confirm the validity of the critical tools provided by Gorbman, Kalinak and Chion, even if these tools need to be used with a degree of flexibility. In so doing, the articles of this volume seem to make a case for the classical quality of classical Hollywood film music.

- 10 While the authors also reprise long-standing oppositions between music and sound (or silence) on the one hand, and between diegetic and nondiegetic music on the other, they often end up questioning the boundaries between these categories. In *Blood Simple* (the Coen brothers, 1984), the same song is used alternately as diegetic or nondiegetic music (Assouly). With a music score that combines concrete music and a compilation of country songs, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* radically defies the boundaries between music and noise, a confusion that also renders unclear their nondiegetic and/or diegetic origin (Chambost). And yet such uncertainties were already present in the classical scores composed by Hermann for *Vertigo*, where the expression of Scottie's subjectivity by the nondiegetic music is such that the protagonist seems to be transported by it (Gelly), or even by Steiner, in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (Huston, 1948)—for instance when the source of the music is mentioned in the dialogue but not visible on screen (Ness). The distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic becomes particularly tricky when considering a silent film like *The Iron Horse*, whose songs “performed” in the diegesis are, perhaps, not diegetic to the same degree as in a sound film (Costa de Beauregard). Ultimately, the authors follow Chion's contention that the elements of the soundtrack are predominantly tied to the images, but nonetheless insist on the soundtrack as a sonic space that can be the recipient of a vast array of sounds (Paquet-Deyris, Gelly, Chambost).
- 11 While it is common to study the role of silence in music, especially in avant-garde and concrete music, for film scholars at least, silence is perhaps even harder to grapple with than sound and music. And yet silence in film can be a parameter of music as well as a powerful expressive device to “sculpt sounds” (Solomos 132, our translation).<sup>1</sup> Several of the analyses in this volume (Ness, Assouly, Chambost) demonstrate that the creation of silence is as important as the creation of music. The Coen brothers' and Burwell and the Coen brothers' intent “not to over underscore” (Assouly) brings to mind the precepts of Pierre Boulez, Iannis Xenakis (Solomos 127-36) or John Cage (Soulez 55). In *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, silence heightens the noisy and loud quality of the film's predominantly atonal soundtrack and, in so doing, creates a feeling of void (Chambost); silence is thus music in its own right and fulfills its classical function of inspiring emotion. Hence, notions that were attached to niche and elite music have seeped into more popular art forms, thereby paving the way for new practices and offering, from a theoretical, historical and analytical standpoint, a more complex and global view of silence and/or the lack of scoring in US-American cinema. Indeed, the history of film music's role in film has left little room for critical analyses of the lack of score and the presence of silence. If there were restrictions for underscoring in early talkies, namely recommendations to only use music when it could be associated with a diegetic source (Graham McCann in Adorno and Eisler VII), music would often blare from any radio or phonograph that was in the shot. We commonly associate classical scores with the continuous superimposition of different themes. Yet even in a film like *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1941), silence crops up when Steiner's music stops “suspended in mid-phrase” (Paquet-Deyris). Such examples tend to qualify Gorbman's

main thesis that classical film music should go “unheard.” This special issue aims to celebrate the power of silence in film music, opening on a mute character/actor, Harpo Marx, who eventually finds his voice through music (Ventura), and ending with an article on silent cinema (Costa de Beauregard, Israel).

- 12 As previously mentioned, music may exploit ethnic and national clichés, but the link between music and politics goes further than this and is tackled in many articles. We learn that, at a time when the US was about to recognize the political legitimacy of the USSR, Harpo Marx was chosen to travel and perform there because it was believed local audiences could relate to him “musically” and “viscerally.” His muteness and talent would allow for a universal musical communion (Ventura). A similar ideological agenda drove the makers of *The Iron Horse* ten years before, since their ambition was to invent an anthem that would bind communities and glorify global US nationalism (Costa de Beauregard). Recent scores of 1920s Hollywood productions have aimed, by contrast, to enhance cultural differences by looking for accurate ethnic songs or sounds, thus revising conceptions of Manifest Destiny and the American way of life (Costa de Beauregard, Israel). Comparing different scores for a same silent film provides a rare opportunity to fathom the power of music and to complicate political meanings. Music also plays a major role in integrating narrative film in history. *Casablanca* provides a well-known example of a film in which the layering of musical themes brings to the fore the complexities of French politics during World War II (Paquet-Deyris); the inclusion of *La Marseillaise* in the opening and closing scenes frames what is essentially a very classical *film noir* in considerations of French patriotism and the country’s path towards liberation from German occupation.
- 13 Because it is non-verbal, music seems to reinforce the 1920s notion of cinema as a universal language (Hansen 148-49) able to speak across class differences and the opposition between high and low culture that had formed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Levine 233). It can become an instrument of capitalist propaganda, as in Adorno and Eisler’s readings, while, conversely, an atonal score such as that of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* could be associated with anti-capitalism (Adorno and Eisler 46). In any case, the 1974 film demonstrates that atonal sounds are not the exclusive domain of the highbrow and avant-garde films such as Arnold Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) or Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck* (first performed in 1925), but can be blended with country music and directed at horror aficionados whose ears are not necessarily trained to forget everything about rhythm, harmony, and melody.
- 14 Finally, the most important question raised by this issue may be: how classical can film music get? And what exactly do we mean by “classical” in the first place? Studying film music complicates our understanding of the word “classical.” In musicology, classical refers to a certain period and form of music in Western culture. In film studies, classical refers to a particular style, period and industry: 1920s-1950s Hollywood and its imitators. The classical style studied by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson is largely determined by its visuals, which are meant to facilitate the spectator’s comprehension of the narrative. Yet in this classical film style, from the start, the role of film music was—and still is—less prescriptive. Julie Assouly notes the “challenges” to filmic conventions in the Coen brothers’ films; Richard Ness points out music’s “autonomy” and “eclecticism” in the work of John Huston; Christophe Gelly dwells on music as the “experimental drive” in *Vertigo*.

- 15 Of course, there may very well be historical reasons for the differing status of film images on the one hand, and film music (and sound) on the other. In early cinema, music had no consubstantial relation to the moving pictures; it was meant to cover the obtrusive noise of the projectors and/or to pacify spectators unaccustomed to sitting down for a silent show (Kalinak, 2010 23). Moreover sound and integrated scores appeared nearly thirty years after the first moving pictures had been screened. Audiences had gotten used to film and did not question the origin of the images. But this was not the case for film music; there was a concern that spectators would question its source, even well into the forties. For example, Hitchcock had renounced scoring *Lifeboat* (1944) because it was impossible to imagine a plausible diegetic source for the music in the middle of the North Atlantic; the unhappy composer, Hugo Friedhofer, complained about the discrepancy in the perception of music and images in film: “Ask Mr. Hitchcock to explain where the camera came from, I will tell him where the music comes from” (McCann in Adorno and Eisler VII). In the 1940s, the guideline that all music must have a diegetic origin quickly disappeared, giving filmmakers free rein to choose composers who designed the score as they pleased.
- 16 And even the Steiner formula according to which “[e]very character should have a theme” (Kalinak, 1992, 13) is questionable when applied to a plot-driven film. Robert Israel remarks, when discussing his attempt to compose a score for the 1928 film *The Cossacks*, that, in practice, there are contradictions between the use of leitmotifs and the consistency of drama: why should the soundtrack be forced to announce the arrival of a character when he or she is perfectly identified in the images; using the character’s theme runs the risk of contradicting the emotions at the heart of a given scene. Together, the articles in this issue suggest that the leitmotif formula has been used, by composers and by film analysts, with a certain laxity. John Huston, for example, rejects themes attached to characters and favors more abstract themes that are further linked to the drama (Ness); in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), the fuzzy chords employed in the falcon theme are both redolent of the object’s mysterious shimmer and the confusion that it creates in the diegetic world; by contrast, *The Misfits* (1961) resorts to a monothematic score and does not provide a reassuring and “expected recapitulation” of its main theme in the end. With *Vertigo*, Hermann-Hitchcock used leitmotifs in order to explore untrodden territory; characterized by an “openness of chords” (Gelly), the score does not stay in one tonality, instead reaching a form that is alien to classical cinema: atonal music. Contrary to any codified practice, the music of *Vertigo* seems to follow uniquely expressive purposes linked to memory and character’s subjectivity leading to an “unexpected music structure.” Similarly, the atonal music score of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* ends up being even more radically experimental than its visual style (Chambost).
- 17 The in-depth analyses proposed in this special issue underline that the main tenets of classical scoring, and the analytical tools that have been developed to study it, remain relevant to the study of classical film music, at least to some extent. Yet “classical” film music—its themes and structures, its tonality, texture and orchestration, its relation to other sounds, silence and, of course, the images—allows for more creative freedom than is generally acknowledged. Perhaps the term “classical” should be understood as referring more to a period than an alleged style since it neglects the constant experimentation that has characterized film music from the beginning.

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## NOTES

1. Original text: “Chez Boulez ou Xenakis, le silence apparaît comme un puissant outil pour façonner, sculpter la sonorité” (Solomos 132).

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## ABSTRACTS

Comprised of eight articles that focus on mainstream and even independent cinema from the silent era to the 21st century, this issue explores the creative possibilities of music in US-American cinema and aims to contribute to a renewal of methodological perspectives. In a day and age when film music and sound studies are increasingly paying attention to the history, technique and technology of sound film and sound design, the articles refocus attention on music itself in order to assess the continued relevance of the analytical tools developed in the classical studies of film music, in particular those developed by the Michel Chion-Claudia Gorbman-Karthyn Kalinak trio. The articles demonstrate the continued applicability of their tools, notably when it comes to analyzing a score’s structure or the relationship between music and image. But taken as a whole, they also single out areas that require more critical attention, including the praxis of creating film music itself and its central role in the filmmaking process, as well as the central role of silence in a film music score. The authors also emphasize that music is steeped in ideology and that its non-verbal quality endows it with political power. As a whole, the issue suggests that music in US-American cinema remains constantly open to invention and experimentation; classical Hollywood music refers more to a period than to an actual style or set of conventions.

À travers huit études de cas allant du cinéma muet au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, majoritairement *mainstream* mais incluant des films indépendants, ce numéro explore les possibilités créatives de la musique dans le cinéma états-unien et vise à renouveler les perspectives méthodologiques. À l’heure des études sur le bruit sa texture ou sur le *sound design*, les auteur.e.s reviennent sur la musique elle-même et réévaluent la pertinence des outils proposés dans les études classiques menées par le trio Michel Chion-Claudia Gorbman-Kathryn Kalinak. Les articles montrent la pertinence de ces outils, notamment quand il s’agit d’analyser les structures de composition ou la relation musique/image. Mais au fil des contributions émergent de nouvelles aires d’études qui s’avèrent indispensables, comme celle de la genèse de la musique et de son poids dans la création du film ou encore le rôle du silence dans la partition musicale. Les auteur.e.s pointent aussi la connexion essentielle entre musique et politique, notamment de par sa puissance non-verbale. Le numéro dans son ensemble suggère que la musique dans le cinéma états-unien reste constamment ouverte à l’invention et à l’expérimentation, comme si le classicisme hollywoodien, pour la musique, désignait plus une époque que des règles ou même un style.

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**Mots-clés:** musique de cinéma, bande son, cinéma américain, Hollywood, analyse de films, composition, classicisme

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