I Fear What I Hear: The Expression of Horror in Film Music

Marco Bellano

Abstract
This chapter addresses the transformations of the musical clichés related to horror films through the 20th century.[1] The discourse uses as a reference two particular musical features – dissonance and ambiguity- and studies how these are used as a basis for different musical formulas in films such as *Nosferatu*, *Psycho* and *The Fly*. In-between the study of the films, a short historical digression shows how the origins of the formulas based on dissonance and ambiguity can be put in relation with musical practices from the Baroque to the 19th century.

Key Words: Baroque, Bernard Herrmann, film music, Hans Erdmann, horror, Howard Shore, *Nosferatu*, opera, *Psycho*, *The Fly*.

*****

1. Introduction

More than two hundred years have passed since the *Symphony no. 40 KV. 550* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was named 'the horrid' because of its daring harmonies; and more than a century separates our age from a certain critic, quoted by Volker Scherliess, who explained that the *Piano Sonata Op. 53* by Ludwig Van Beethoven was nicknamed 'Horror' '[…] because of the surprising modulation at the beginning that creates a feeling of horror'.[2] That author was being deceived by a naive phonetic transcription. However, his words testify how in 1900 it was still possible to feel something frightful in a piece that today evokes only a sense of noble drama.

My chapter will describe how the expression of musical emotions can change through time by focusing on film music and by studying a specific emotion: horror. In particular, I will address two features that are an important constant of 'horror' film music, ambiguity and dissonance. These recurring features will be used as a reference to follow the evolution of 'horror' musical formulas that appear in films such as *Nosferatu* (Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, 1922), *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1984). The reason of the specific choice of ambiguity and dissonance will be explained by tracing, in between the film examples, a short historical summary intended to show how these features actually draw a path of clichés and musical standards that arrives to horror film music from the music of the Baroque age.

2. Dissonance, Ambiguity and Conventionality in *Nosferatu*

Pino Donaggio, a film music composer renowned for his scores for Brian De Palma, when asked to define how it is possible to express 'horror' in music,

answered by saying that the basic device of the various possible kinds of 'horror' music is always the same: dissonance.[3]

However, the 'familiarity' of contemporary cinema audiences with the dissonant musical styles often quoted or paraphrased in horror film music is not something that must be taken for granted. Instead, this is the result of a slow process of accustomisation, before which horror film music was dominated by a substantially different set of clichés. It is possible to understand that just by considering that the 'dissonant' styles featured in modern horror films usually take inspiration from the works of 20th century composers that reached artistic maturity and significant acknowledgement from the 1920s onwards.[4] As the conventional date of birth of cinema is December 28th 1895, and the first films with 'horror' elements started to appear just a year after, it is possible to notice how for 25-30 years the dissonant 'clichés' were not available at all to horror features. And even when they became 'available', quite a lot of time had to pass before they would be able to infiltrate mass culture, and thus cinema: as Jeremy Barham noticed, the first mainstream horror films to make a relevant use of music that was somehow inspired by 20th century Avant-gardes were released only during the early Cold War years, *Forbidden Planet* being among the most important precursors to this.[5]

One example from the silent age of cinema can help in defining this point. *Nosferatu*, an early classic of horror cinema, was among that minority of silent films that were joined with an original musical comment, specifically created to be played with them.

Nosferatu's music by Hans Erdmann has been reconstructed by Berndt Heller in 1984 and by Gillian B. Anderson in 1995.

In Heller's reconstruction,[6] excerpts from a composition by Erdmann, titled *Fantastisch-romantische Suite*, appear during the very first 'horror' scene of the film. Jonathan Hutter is a guest in Count Orlok's manor, and at midnight he witnesses the transformation of the Count into a vampire.

The music here does not reference the Avant-garde in any sense. Instead, Erdmann uses a late-Romantic musical lexicon, dominated by the sound of a particular chord: the diminished seventh. This chord is actually considered a dissonant one, within the system of tonal harmony (the musical system that has been predominant from 1600 to early 1900). It easily became a vehicle of fearsome and unpleasant sensations, precisely because of its dissonance. Moreover, this chord is also an ambiguous one, as it can resolve in four different ways, each one of them plausibly leading to a different tonal context. The use of this chord without a subsequent resolution leaves thus the music with a feeling of ambiguity. Arnold Schönberg called it a 'vagrant' chord, adding that

> It was the 'expressive' chord of that time. Wherever one wanted to express pain, excitement, anger, or some other strong feeling – there we find, almost exclusively, the diminished seventh chord.[7]

However, by the time of *Nosferatu*, as Schönberg himself reported, its expressiveness was already starting to wane: its use was becoming banal.[8]

Nosferatu's prolonged use of the diminished seventh is a clear proof of the expectations of a spectator of 1922 in terms of 'horror' film music. Unaware of the tearing dissonances that would have been at the core of the sonic terror in cinema a few decades later, Erdmann's public was educated to be terrified by an altogether 'regular' dissonance, framed within the tonal system.

Nonetheless, it is possible to argue that *Nosferatu*'s musical stereotypes played with dissonance and ambiguity, features whose presence in the logic of contemporary horror soundtracks is undeniable, even if that presence is now evoked by different musical devices.

So, a line of continuity seems to exist between the old 'horror' stereotypes and the new ones. It might be useful to shortly retrace the path of the expression of horror in music, which actually has its origins in the Baroque age.

3. Baroque Anticipations: Monteverdi's 'stile concitato'

Theoretical reflections about the relationship between certain kinds of music and the expression of feelings were prevalent since ancient Greece;[9] but it was the conspicuous literature[10] that flourished during the Baroque that brought these reflections to the modern age.

The Baroque interest around this topic was primarily due to the developments of a strong narrative and dramatic tendency in Italian music of the late 16th century: a tendency that developed through vocal compositions called *madrigali* and culminated in the birth of opera in Florence in 1600.[11]

During the Baroque, a so-called *doctrine of the affections* focused on the effect that a union between certain musical formulas and words brings to the psyche.[12]

Some of the 'affections', that is to say the formulas, by Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi can surely be considered as ancestors of future 'horror' stereotypes. Monteverdi felt that the music of his age was missing formulas to express the most extreme passions of the human soul. He acknowledged the existence of a *temperato* style (intended to express temperance), and also of a *molle* style (related to humility or supplication). In addition to that, he suggested a *concitato* style, devoted to emotions like anger and wrath.[13] In his *Ottavo libro di madrigali*), titled *Madrigali guerrieri et amorosi* (Madrigals of war and love) a clear example of this new style is the *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*, set on an excerpt of Torquato Tasso's poem *Gerusalemme Liberata*,[14] that narrates the tragic story of the Christian soldier Tancredi who fights and kills his beloved Clorinda, who was disguised as a man. The *concitato* style that describes the battle emerges from the use of fast repeated notes, conveying a sensation of anxiety and rushed movement. This formula is surely related, but not to be confused[15] with the *tremolo*, a typical effect of the bowed string instruments that would have become a staple of 'horror' music. The text of the *Combattimento* actually directly alludes to

feelings of horror, at least once, when Tancredi uncovers the face of his mortally wounded enemy, and recognizes Clorinda.[16] The moment of the revelation is underlined by a series of frenetic leaps in the vocal line that remains opened, with a sudden stop in the melodic phrase. A 'suspension' in a melodic or harmonic movement, as seen in the study of *Nosferatu*, is as well another important feature that composers will learn to associate with horror.

4. From Opera to Cinema

Between the Baroque and film music, the composers that lived during almost three centuries kept adding items to the 'library' of musical formulas related to the expression of emotions.

It is within opera that composer and musicologist Luigi Dallapiccola recognized a strong 'formulaic style', that in 19th century 'offered the Italian people a key for comprehending the dramatic situation and identifying themselves with it'.[17] As for horror in particular, Dallapiccola notices how 'every shock, every horror, every rape and abduction, every surprise, every apostrophe, every curse – and sometimes even desperate invocations – are underscored by the diminished–seventh chord'.[18]

Nosferatu's use of that chord is thus a heritage of that operatic practice. The 'recycling' of that formula was moreover openly encouraged by the silent film music practice that was prevalently based upon the use of arrangements of pre-existent music.

5. Shifting Dissonances: *Psycho*

As the history of cinema went on, some of the stereotypes of horror film music seemed to continue their evolution by following the basic guidelines set during the Baroque age. It is possible to verify this by briefly re-examining one of the most influential horror scores of all times: Bernard Herrmann's music for strings composed for Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

Notwithstanding its modernity and originality, well aware of 20th century musical styles like the ones of Béla Bartók and Igor Stravinsky, Hermann's music can also be read as a clever reframing of more recent 'horror' music clichés within the path of dissonance and ambiguity discussed before. I will now deal with the notorious 'shower' scene and its 'shrieking' motif. This motif can surely be put in relation with the typical horror 'stinger': just like it often happens since Franz Waxman's music for *Bride of Frankenstein*, a scary and sudden image is put in relation with an aggressive and isolated sound event. This is the case of the apparition of 'mother' as the shower tent opens; however, arguably, it is just the first sound of the motif (an E flat) that works as a stinger, because the 'stinger' function is immediately negated by the subsequent obsessive repetition of the sound and by its inclusion in a wider orchestral pattern. The episode is thus reframed into the classical practice of the obsessive repetition of sounds, giving

new life, in a sense, to an ancient archetype of the acoustic communication of terror. In addition to that, it is possible to notice how the inherent dissonance of the whole 'shower' sequence is most importantly due to the use of intervals of major seventh (or of diminished eighth, which is acoustically equivalent). The major seventh is also featured in the cue that opens *Psycho*. There, however, the interval is contextualized and revealed as the scaffolding of a full chord, that has sometimes been called '*Psycho* chord',[19] even if it is just a regular minor-major seventh chord. So, in a way, Herrmann did not betray the 'tonal' roots of horror film music; notwithstanding his learned and appropriate references to the dissonant styles of 20th century composers, he persevered in the use of dissonances based on seventh chords, shifting though from the 'weakened' diminished seventh to the minor-major one.

6. Horror in Absence: The Silence of *The Fly*

Additional examples of transformations of old audiovisual clichés into different ways of conceiving a 'horror' film music can be found in Howard Shore's long lasting collaboration with director David Cronenberg. A film like *The Fly* seems to be particularly close to the Baroque-operatic historical line that has been followed until now, because of the overall melodramatic quality of the story that Cronenberg chose to tell.[20]

Shore often communicates or enhances Cronenberg's narration with leitmotif techniques, whose 'wagnerian-melodramatic' heritage actually permeates the whole history of film music; but it can be also pointed out how in *The Fly* Shore prefers to underline passionate bursts of emotions or building frightful tensions with intense crescendos and loud and acoustically enveloping orchestral passages, that share a lot, in terms of emotive result, with the typical musical strategies of Italian operas.

However, within this 'operatic' frame, a resettlement of former 'horror' film music clichés is at work. A scene can be used to rapidly comment upon this point: Seth Brundle, after four weeks of isolation, calls the woman he is in love with, Veronica Quaif, and begs her to come to his place.

It is when Cronenberg shows the first true 'horrific' vision of the sequence that Shore introduces an element of novelty. When the close-up of Seth's horrid and pitiful mutating face appears, Shore just lets the music end. The ensuing dialogue between Seth and Veronica is accompanied by a persisting absence of music, that sounds especially puzzling and tense because of its contrast with the 'operatic' musical richness of the rest of the film.

Shore is here apparently elaborating on the conventional concept of 'suspension' and 'ambiguity' that, as discussed before, is often linked with 'horrific' sound atmospheres. The suspended dissonance of the seventh chords, or the perceivable incompleteness of certain melodic lines, has been substituted here by a suspension of the whole musical phenomenon. However, it is necessary to

stress again how this suspension is not merely a result of the disappearance of the music, but of the contrast between this absence and the previous presence of important musical episodes.[21] This kind of subtraction of the music seems to play with and evidence a primal function of film music as a whole, that, as Royal S. Brown argued, '[acts] as a wallpaper soporific to allay fears of darkness or silence [...]'.[22]

7. Conclusion

At the end of this short itinerary through horror film music, one may wonder if, by remaining on the path traced by the use of dissonance and ambiguity, it would be possible to foresee the possible developments of horror film music in the near future – at least in the limited fields of the two basic features that have been purposely chosen for the present discussion.

The answer would be a negative one. By managing to accept more influences from daring or Avant-garde styles than any other film music 'genre', horror film music has perhaps its ultimate cliché in being the place where any kind of music can become cliché.[23]

However, the shift from a certain set of clichés to a new one would always be necessarily gradual, because of the time the audience needs to reset its musical expectations. This is why certain continuity with the past seems to be guaranteed, and this is why it has been possible to retrace this continuity starting from Monteverdi, passing through opera, and then arriving to *Nosferatu*, *Psycho* and *The Fly*. So, for the researcher that would like to proceed in the study of the evolution of the horror film music stereotypes, going beyond the mere categories of ambiguity and dissonance, the most sensate approach seems to be the one of a historian. In addition to that, this researcher should of course never forget that film music is a part of cinema as a whole, and that any film music analysis should always be an audiovisual analysis. 'I fear what I hear' said Niccolò Machiavelli in the verse that I used as an excuse for the title of this chapter; but the quotation is incomplete, as the whole line by Machiavelli actually reads: 'I fear what I hear and see'.[24]

Notes

[1] I wish to thank for the confidence in my researches on film music my Ph. D. advisor, Prof. Alberto Zotti Minici, as well as the whole Ph. D. School in Storia e Critica dei Beni Artistici, Musicali e dello Spettacolo of the University of Padova, Italy. A special thanks to Prof. Victoria Duckett of the University of Melbourne, for her constant support to my work and for having proofread this chapter.

[2] V. Scherliess, 'Beethoven Klaviersonaten – Versuche einer Annäherung', *Beethoven – Klaviersonaten*, R. Evidon (ed), *Complete Beethoven Edition*, Vol. 5, Deutsche Grammophone, 1997, p. 70.

[3] This information come from an unpublished interview I had with Donaggio on June 8, 2007 in Venice, Italy.
[4] What is crucial for the impact on the public is however the dissonance itself, and not the style. So, the works of 20th century composers such as Arnold Schönberg, Anton Webern, Béla Bartók and Sergej Prokofiev, notwithstanding the substantial differences between their musical languages, can equally be sources of inspiration for horror film music –even within a single film. This is something that is perfectly legitimate: as Italian musicologist Roberto Calabretto explains, '[Film music] is [...] a universe where it is possible to collect the most disparate genres, making it possible to rework and redefine the very forms that went through the history of music itself for a long time' R. Calabretto, *Lo schermo sonoro: La musica per film*, Marsilio, Venezia, 2010, p. 11. English translation by the author of the present chapter.
[5] J. Barham, 'Incorporating Monsters: Music as Context, Character and Construction in Kubrick's The Shining', *Terror Tracks: Music, Sound and Horror Cinema*, P. Hayward (ed), Equinox, London, 2009, p. 138.
[6] I am referring to the recorded and synchronized version of the music that is available in the *Nosferatu* DVD published by Divisa Red S. A. U., enclosed with L. Berriatúa, *Nosferatu: Un film Erótico-Ocultista-Espiritista-Metafísico*, Divisa Ediciones, Valladolid, 2009.
[7] A. Schönberg, *Theory of Harmony*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1983, p. 238.
[8] Schönberg, op. cit., p. 238.
[9] The main reference is the Theory of Ethos, as it is found in Aristotle's *Politics* and in Plato's *Laws* and *Republic*, where music is considered the sovereign art 'because rhythm and harmony possess to the utmost degree the power to penetrate the soul and move it strongly [...]'. Plato, *La Repubblica*, Italian trans. G. Lozza, Mondadori, Milano, 2000, p. 229. English translation of the quotation by the author of this chapter.
[10] How to express the passions with specific musical tropes is shown in Burmeister's *Musica poetica* (1606), Nucius' *Musicae poeticae praeceptiones* (1613), Johannes Crüger's *Praecepta musicae practicae figuralis* (1625), Wolfgang Schoenleder's *Architectonice musices universalis* (1631), Marin Mersenne's *Harmonie universelle* (1636), Athanasius Kircher's *Musurgia universalis* (1650), and in Autumnus Herbst's *Arte prattica e poetica* (1653).
[11] The first opera is conventionally believed to be *Euridice*, with verse by Ottavio Rinuccini and music by Jacopo Peri. It was staged on the 6th October, 1600, during the grand wedding between Maria de' Medici and Henry IV of France, at the Palazzo Pitti in Florence.
[12] See G. Haydon, 'On the Problem of Expression in Baroque Music', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1950, pp. 113-119. However,

as Manfred Bukofzer noticed, that was by no means a 'scientific' interest, based on a study of the reactions of the audience to a certain musical stimulus. M.F. Bukofzer, *La musica barocca*, Italian trans. by O.P. Bertini, Rusconi, Milano, 1982, p. 4.

[13] J.A. Westrup, 'Monteverdi and the Orchestra', *Music & Letters*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 1940, p. 244; also F. Dorsi and G. Rausa, *Storia dell'Opera Italiana*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano, 2000, pp. 33-34.

[14] Canto XII, 52-62, 64-68.

[15] As Hans Ferdinand Redlich did: 'This new effect of rapidly repeated notes, which he dignifies as the symbol of passion is, however, nothing more than the string *tremolo* so well known to us today as to be hackneyed'. H.F. Redlich, *Claudio Monteverdi*, Oxford University Press, London, 1952, p. 107.

[16] 'La vide e la conobbe: e restò senza/e voce e moto. Ahi vista! ahi conoscenza!' Tasso, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, XII, 67.

[17] L. Dallapiccola, 'Words and Music in 19th-Century Italian Opera', *Selected Writings – Volume One*, R. Shackelford (ed and trans), Toccata Press, London, 1987, p. 143.

[18] Dallapiccola, op. cit. pp. 139-140.

[19] S.Murphy, 'An Audiovisual Foreshadowing in Psycho', *Terror Tracks: Horror, Cinema and Sound*, P. Hayward (ed), London, Equinox, 2008, p. 50.

[20] As film critic Gianni Canova argued, '*The Fly* has the structure and the emotive temperature of a melodrama. In this sense, the film ultimately makes explicit the melodramatic vein that emerges and stays in Cronenberg's cinema since its inception'. G. Canova, *David Cronenberg*, Il Castoro, Milano, 2005, p. 70. English translation of the quotation by the author of the present chapter.

[21] This audiovisual strategy was probably conceived on the basis of a comparable use of silence that is relevantly featured in the film scores by Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu. Shore openly spoke of Takemitsu's influence on his scores for Cronenberg (see P. Brophy, *Cinesonic: The World of Sound in Film*, Australian Film, Television and Radio School, Sydney, 1999, p. 2). As Kyoko Koizumi explains, Takemitsu explored a creative use of silence in horror films like *Kwaidan* (Masaki Kobayashi, 1964) by referring to the Zen Buddhist concept of *ma*, that 'is not simply the replacement of sound by silence – it has a positive sense of lingering sound' (K. Koizumi, 'Creative Soundtrack Expression. Toru Takemitsu's Score for *Kwaidan*', *Terror Tracks. Music, Sound and Horror Cinema*, P. Hayward (ed), London, Equinox, 2009, p. 80). Inherent to *ma* is the concept of relationship between music and silence, as the word means 'between two sounds'.

[22] R.S. Brown, *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994, p. 32.

[23] See Bahram, op. cit. pp. 137-138 and p. 157.

[24] 'E paura ho di ciò ch'i'odo e guardo', *Io spero, e lo sperar cresce il tormento*, verse 8.

Bibliography

Barham, J., 'Incorporating Monsters: Music as Context, Character and Construction in Kubrick's The Shining'. *Terror Tracks: Music, Sound and Horror Cinema*. Hayward, P. (ed), Equinox, London, 2009.

Berriatúa, L., *Nosferatu: Un film Erótico-Ocultista-Espiritista-Metafísico*. Divisa Ediciones, Valladolid, 2009.

Brophy, P., *Cinesonic: The World of Sound in Film*. Australian Film, Television and Radio School, Sydney, 1999.

Brown, R.S., *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994.

Bukofzer, M.F., *La musica barocca*. trans. Bertini, O.P., Rusconi, Milano, 1982.

Calabretto, R., *Lo schermo sonoro. La musica per film*. Marsilio, Venezia, 2010.

Canova, G., *David Cronenberg*. Il Castoro, Milano, 2005.

Dallapiccola, L., 'Words and Music in 19th-Century Italian Opera'. *Selected Writings – Volume One*. Shackelford, R. (ed and trans), Toccata Press, London, 1987.

Dorsi, F. and Rausa, G., *Storia dell'Opera Italiana*. Bruno Mondadori, Milano, 2000.

Haydon, G., 'On the Problem of Expression in Baroque Music'. *Journal of the American Musicological Society*. Vol. 3, No. 2, 1950, pp. 113-119.

Koizumi, K., 'Creative Soundtrack Expression: Toru Takemitsu's Score for *Kwaidan*'. *Terror Tracks: Music, Sound and Horror Cinema.* Hayward, P. (ed), London, Equinox, 2009.

Monteverdi, C., *Lettere, Dediche e Prefazioni*, De Paoli (ed), D., De Santis, Roma, 1973.

Murphy, S., 'An Audiovisual Foreshadowing in Psycho'. *Terror Tracks: Horror, Cinema and Sound.* Hayward, P. (ed), London, Equinox, 2008.

Plato, *La Repubblica*. Italian trans. G Lozza, Mondadori, Milano, 2000.

Redlich, H. F., *Claudio Monteverdi*. Oxford University Press, London, 1952.

Scherliess, V., 'Beethoven Klaviersonaten – Versuche einer Annäherung'. *Complete Beethoven Edition*. Vol. 5, Deutsche Grammophone, 1997, pp. 64-99.

Schönberg, A., *Theory of Harmony*. University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1983.

Westrup, J.A., 'Monteverdi and the Orchestra'. *Music & Letters*. Vol. 21, No. 3, 1940, pp. 230-245.

Marco Bellano is a PhD candidate in cinema at the University of Padova, Italy; at the same time, he is also completing his studies of Composition at the Conservatory of Vicenza, where he already graduated in Piano. His research interests include music for silent films and music for animated films.