

## A Concise History of Western Music for Film-makers

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### **Abstract**

The use of music in films has become almost ubiquitous in both drama and documentary. Music is used regularly in cinema, broadcasting and more recently, in interactive media. Yet audiences often criticise makers for its overuse, especially in actuality television. The problem is not merely concerned with the volume and placement of music, but of the internal nature and structure of the musical material itself. This article contextualises the history of western music in a way which may be able to help inform film makers and broadcasters about how music might be used more advantageously to accompany moving pictures.

**Keywords:** Music, drama, documentary, Classical period, Wagner, Film, audiences, broadcasters

### **Introduction**

Music has been and continues to be used by all cultures in an extraordinary variety of ways, from accompaniment to religious ritual, to an object of worship in its own right; from a tool of social cohesion to a series of emotional signifiers for audiences of moving pictures. During the last century, recordings and broadcasts have served as souvenirs of musical performances as well as a medium of delivering anaesthetic through earphones. It is difficult to overstate the ubiquity of music at the centre of our species' history, and this centrality transcends cultural divisions (although cultural codes do modify some aspects of the musical gestural language).

In his ground-breaking book, *The Singing Neanderthals* (2005), Steven Mithen suggests that music predates language, and that the emotional codes embodied within it may have formed the scaffolding onto which human language was constructed. So central is music to our sense of the emotional fabric of the world that its use as an accompaniment for moving images

developed relatively quickly (if haphazardly) and after 1927 became embedded in the images they partnered so effectively, that the sound of Strauss' *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1896) evokes an interstellar ethos in a large proportion of adults in the same way as a potential burst of shrieking violins can emanate from behind even the most innocuous shower curtain.

However, as discussed more fully in a previous number of this journal (Bates & Deutsch, 2008), the misuse of music when accompanying moving images (especially factual programmes) can cause dissonance in the cognitive processes of viewers, making it harder for them to read the "content" of the film through a wash of sometimes conflicting aural signals. The confusion in the mind of the viewer is not merely caused by injudicious mixing of music, effects and voice tracks, although such inexpert mixing is sadly too common; nor does it follow simply from the capricious placement of the music against particular images, although such placement can also be careless and arbitrary; it is often caused by the internal grammar of the music itself. The essence of musical gesture is fundamentally related to the audience for whom the music is intended; a study of the history of music from the point of view of the audience is a useful way for film makers to understand how music can benefit or subvert their films.<sup>1</sup>

For the purposes of this article, the music referred to falls into the broad category of Western Music, both vernacular and (for want of a better term) Classical. Notions of the separation of these two categories are relatively recent; the distinction was not much in use before the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and not really part of our cultural consciousness until the 19<sup>th</sup>. For our purposes, the distinction need be blurred further if not made so porous so as to be irrelevant.

It was Mark Twain, I think, who said "all generalisations are false, including this one". It must be confessed that this article posits a generalised model of understanding which ignores much writing in the area of musicology and music history. Yet I hope that this skewed perspective might offer insights through which those areas of study might better be understood.

### **The Three Periods of Western Music**

Throughout most of our history, music has been used primarily as an accompaniment to, or enhancement of, another activity. Its close affinity to movement created an inevitable

relationship with dance. The first period of music can be said to be from its beginnings until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the public concert was developed. A key feature of this first period is that people listened to music while something else was going on.

From the beginnings of *Homo sapiens*' social organisation, vocalised 'musical' gestures were used to influence the emotional response of others (Mithen, 2005). Darwin saw the root of musical activity as the imitation of animal cries (although Mithen might suggest that no imitation was intended, as the sounds may have served the same function in early humans as it had done in other primates). There are also arguments to suggest that music based upon vocalisations was different in function from that which was based on drumming activities, the latter being related to our species' penchant for dance. This model is reinforced by recent studies which show that rhythm excites activity in the cerebellum, earliest" area of the brain to be developed (Levitin 2006; 174).

There is evidence, albeit sketchy, that music in antiquity was used as an enhancement of the ceremonial, both religious and secular, and that its practice was regarded as much a science as an art, related to poetry, astronomy, drama and mathematics. Rousseau in the 1750s (in Ulrich and Pisk, 1963, p 6) defined music as "an elevated form of speech" (as assertion which Mithen inverts), and its reliance on words during its early period seems probable. This was especially true during the Hellenistic period, but was mirrored in many other cultures. Music defined the ceremonies of the society, marked the passing of the seasons, and put listeners into the state of mind through which they might experience the divine. It is therefore hardly surprising that texts on Western music history have traditionally begun their narrative with the musical practice of the Catholic church, given its centrality to the culture of its time (and the fortunate development of musical notation which was nurtured within that particular ecclesiastical environment).

The period of the dominance of the church can be said to have lasted about 1000 years, and during the period musical genres were remarkably similar. Church music was heard by congregants solely as part of a religious service. For much of the period of the early church, and certainly before the Reformation, this music was intended to be simple, non-metric and ethereal; thus allowing the religious spirit to inhabit the unconscious mind of the listener. The fact that such music (for example, Gregorian Chant) was rhythmically irregular was

probably in order to separate it from the corporeal and venal daily lives of the people. Elaboration, counterpoint, or translation into a language other than Latin were regarded to be a diminution the mystical effectiveness of such music and was not encouraged. The structure of this music was thus dependant on the structure of the words, and no purely musical forms (beyond embellishment of some of the syllables) were generated until much later. Over the centuries, some elaboration was tolerated, with the church sometimes borrowing from secular forms, however, until the Renaissance, western church music was essentially text-based and in Latin.

Outside of the church, much music certainly existed, and was performed with great vitality. The forms these musics took was based on both church melodies and dance structures. Secular music was almost entirely based on corporeal structures, with regular meters, symmetrical phrases, and memorable melodies. However, as with sacred music, almost all gestures were primarily vocal, with any instruments simply doubling the vocal line, or sometimes replicating it.

The period before 1500 saw the primacy of the church uncontested. Secular music during the Medieval period, when not domestic (people singing at home), was performed by amateur and professional musicians, typified by the *jongleur*, who, as the name suggests, was a general entertainer, a juggler, story teller, singer, dancer; in fact, what we would now call a busker - performing for coppers and travelling around the countryside. These entertainers carried news, offered the latest song (often based upon a church chant, with Roman text replaced by bawdy lyrics and with a strong meter, perhaps to encourage dancing or other such non sacred merriment<sup>2</sup>). Other musicians during this period were employed to offer fanfares for the arrival of princes, the opening of civic ceremonies, or to accompany a wedding or funeral procession. Throughout this entire first period most musicians were therefore the servants of the church, or the community, or the court. An interesting example: in the late middle ages *Stadtpeifer* were employed in Germany to sit in a tower and play a shawm to warn the town of approaching danger. The raucous sound of the shawm was used as it was the loudest available instrument (trumpets being reserved for aristocratic purposes<sup>3</sup>).

The musical forms of this period, beyond the short ceremonial blast, were text-based if sacred, and text and/or dance based if secular. The tunes were memorable, the rhythms

predictable, often vivacious, and the sung lyrics were often the conduit of a narrative sometimes involving many verses.

What we now call the Renaissance saw the centre of gravity shift from the church to the court (this had been happening gradually for some time) and with it developed a flourishing of musical expression. New styles of secular music began to proliferate for singers, and for the first time, instrumental music began to be composed which broke from the imitation of vocal gestures. The gravitational shift from the church to the court meant that the *jongleurs*, troubadours and other minstrels were now invited into the palace. The music thus gradually eschewed the common vulgarities of Medieval secularity and focussed on more aristocratic, more noble sentiments: princely devotion, selfless love and chivalry. Musicians were employed to be generalised servants as well, often also acting as footmen, barbers (and in many other roles) as well as being responsible for the entertainment of the family who employed them. Music was also seen as being part of the educational refinements of the aristocracy (as well as the emerging middle-classes) and these secular musicians were employed as teachers of music as well as performers.

The church also began to change its musical focus, adopting some of the more elaborate counterpoint evident in the madrigal and other part-songs then in vogue. Polyphonic complexity began to gain a foothold throughout this period, as did the repertoire of the pipe organ which exploited this style. Keyboard instruments generally begin to gain ascendancy, especially in domestic environments, and music is composed to entertain and enlighten the growing numbers of amateurs who played these instruments for their own pleasure or the entertainment of their families and associates.

Although musical forms were still reliant on either the poetic ballad, church forms or dance structures, the internal logic and the rhetorical content of the music accelerated that development which culminated in the monumental works of the High Baroque, 250 years later.

If we take a snapshot of musical activity at the height of the Baroque, we see, in addition to ecclesiastical music (which reflected the schism between Catholicism and Protestantism in the way music was composed, but not in its intended effect, unchanged, as creating the appropriate mood for religious devotion), a multitude of musical activities blossoming,

especially for the growing urban populations of Europe. None was more important to the Baroque sensibility (or to our understanding of film music) than was opera.

Opera had its modern roots in Italy circa 1600. The first *public* opera performance (as opposed to performances at court) took place at the Teatro San Cassiano in Venice in 1637. For the first time an audience paid to see music performed, albeit in support of a drama. Music in support of theatrical performances had been common throughout the medieval and Renaissance periods, but in this new genre, music for the first time shared the foreground with the dramatic action. The form of opera from this point (and until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) involved a duality, whereby the plot was advanced through either speech or heightened speech (recitative) accompanied by instruments; songs (or in the Italian, *arias*) evoked the emotional context of the plot and the feelings of the singer. Thus, even in the case of opera, the music's function is unchanged; it provides accompaniment for another activity, the development of a dramatic scenario.<sup>4</sup>

In London, music composed in a style appropriate for the court was also available in the street, as it were, with Handel and other eminent composers of the day offering entertainment at various pleasure gardens and other *al fresco* environments. The forms of such music relied principally on the dance, with symmetric regular rhythms and phrases offering the comfort of the familiar (however complex any elaboration). In fact, it can reasonably be asserted that for most of the history of Western Music, at least until the late 18th century, familiarity and predictability were generally more highly valued than innovation and experimentation. This is because the tastes of the patrons, whether clerical or aristocratic, tended towards conservatism, and the notion of the composer as secular prophet, (or as we might refer in the filmic world, *auteur*) was not given serious thought.

Things began to change in the 1720s, slowly at first, but with ever increasing momentum, reaching an apogee at around 1920. For two hundred years the function and structure of music took on a shape which dominated most thinking, at least in the academies, and brought about the schism between “art” music and “vernacular” music, a schism which has yet to be bridged. (It should be noted that a global differentiation between types of Western music as classical and popular (as we understand these terms today) did not really exist before the late 18th century, and was not a common notion until well into the 19th.)

The credit for the first regular series of public commercial concerts is often given to the London violinist John Banister, who launched them after being dismissed as leader of the King's band for remarking, in the King's hearing, that he thought English violinists better than French. The concerts were held in his own house in Whitefriars in 1672 and advertised in the London Gazette, thus drawing on the same coffee-house audience which formed the core of the emergent public sphere, and the readership of the early newspapers. The ensemble at these meetings was the same as the consort favoured by amateurs; some of the players also sang and much of the music was vocal. When Banister died at the end of the decade, the mantle fell on a music-loving coal merchant: Thomas Britton, known as 'the musical small-coal man', had started a similar weekly music meeting in a room above his shop in 1678, where Banister's son was one of the players. Initially Britton's meetings were free, but after Banister's death he began to charge a yearly subscription; cash, however, was not yet exchanged at the door. (Chanan, 2001: xx)

During the first half of the 18th century, the practice of concerts for which an audience paid to enter became more widespread, especially among the burgeoning middle classes who regarded the accomplishment of music, either as an amateur performer or at least as a member of a knowledgeable audience, as an appropriate accoutrement to social standing. By the middle of the century, a group of composers and performers in Mannheim produced music which seemed radically different from what had preceded it. Shorn of most Baroque ornament, this new style focussed on dramatic effects, with great contrasts in dynamics and fervent crescendos being two of the more obvious stocks in trade employed.

At the same time, the composer was beginning to make the shift from pleasing a single patron to earning a living pleasing a volatile public. One of the most eminent composers of this period embodies these two worlds - of the court and the concert hall. For much of his career, Josef Haydn (1732-1809) was in the employ of the Esterházy family who maintained him and a stable of musicians to perform his music at their whim. Near the end of his life he made a good living giving concerts in metropolitan Europe (and receiving his pension from the less musically receptive, new Prince Esterházy). He also was able to earn money from the publication of his music, which enhanced his fame, and consequently, his box office. Haydn's music, still based on familiar styles and forms, included novel innovations (not always previously encouraged by his princely patrons) and rather dramatic gestures (for its time) inspired by his contact with the Mannheimers. The problem he faced was how to keep

a stationary and attentive audience involved, to make them care what happens next. Throughout his career, the form and content of music began subtly, then more radically to change, accelerating the shift from the predictable to the arresting (he was, after all, the composer of the *Surprise* symphony). Haydn's long life spanned three musical epochs, from Baroque through the Classical to the Romantic. Bach's *Coffee Cantata* (BWV 211) was composed in the year of his birth, Beethoven's *Emperor Concerto* (Piano Concerto No 5 in Eb, op 73) in the year of his death. His influence was arguably more extensive than was that of his younger friend, Mozart, who was born when Haydn was 24 and died when Haydn still had 18 years to live.

Mozart was probably the first genuine free-lance composer. His death in relative penury owed more to his financial profligacy than his lack of commissions. He was extremely famous in his lifetime. Part of this fame was built on his reputation as a performer as well as composer.

Mozart, who for the last passionately active ten years of his life had no real employer except the public, was quite clear about the necessity to surprise and delight those who listened to him... Amongst the multitude of precise calculations which went into the composition of his works was, his letters suggest, an accurate estimation of the taste of its recipient and its intended audience. (Raynor, 1972, p8)

A seasoned trouper from childhood, Mozart's musical persona was designed to charm and entertain, first an aristocratic elite, later a growing public audience. Novelty, charm, the ability to improvise as well as the demonstration of dazzling instrumental technique served him well throughout his career. The musical forms inherited from the Baroque were transformed in Mannheim, modified and accelerated by Haydn and brought to a wider public by Mozart. It should be noted that these famous names (Bach, Haydn, Mozart) were the most eminent representatives of a far wider group of musicians, many of whom were influential in their day. Shaffer's (b 1926) play *Amadeus* (1979) (and more widely seen, Milos Forman's (b. 1932) 1984 film of the same name) highlights the career of Antonio Salieri (1750-1825), who in his day was one of the most popular and influential composers in Europe.



What dominates compositional form from this period is a reliance on a three-part structure, known as A-B-A, analogous to a journey with a starting place, divergence and return. It evolved from Baroque 2 part forms in which the first part stated material in the tonic key and moved to the dominant, and the second part reversed that process. The migration of the symphony, concerto and other genres from the drawing room to the public arena was dependent upon the reliance on this tripartite structure, through which audiences seemed to be able to follow these musical journeys with some notion of their location on the path. The tripartite structure saw its apotheosis in what is called Sonata Form, dominant in the majority of larger works from 1750 to 1900.

Dance forms, which had been the mainstay of Baroque secular music, were at first incorporated into the larger works these symphonies, sonatas and concertos became, but evolved into pieces which could not reasonably be used for actual dancing; more a reference point to an earlier age. (Interesting here is the *minuet*, reworked by Beethoven until it becomes a *scherzo*, whose only connection to the earlier dance style is its three-four meter.)

As the Classical period of Haydn evolved into the Romantic period of Beethoven and later into the late Romantic age of Mahler, these forms of abstract music grew in length and intensity. An early Beethoven Symphony would have employed 30 musicians and lasted about 25 minutes. A century later, a Mahler Symphony would employ over 100 musicians and last nearly four times as long<sup>5</sup>. Music of this period began to resemble dramatic structures, similar those familiar to audiences of the theatre and from the many novels which proliferated during the Romantic age. The metaphor of the narrative found its way into abstract music (as described above), as well as into “programme music”, which, although begun in the Renaissance, flourished during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Such music was designed to elicit a story in the mind of the listener, the plot of which was made available to the audience through “programme notes” which they might purchase as part of the concert programme.

It was not only the tripartite structure that maintained the audience’s interest; other musical devices were imported from earlier times and put to dramatic use. In particular, the development of harmonic structures which elongated the interval between dissonance and resolution enabled a composer to manipulate the expectations of his listeners. This music also borrowed various rhetorical devices, melodic hooks and memorable melodic patterns,

which through variation, afforded the listener signposts within the content of the music. We recognise a new section of a piece if the main theme is repeated, with or without variation.<sup>6</sup> Most Christian denominations imported these dramatic forms into sacred music as well (although the path had been prepared by Baroque and Classical composers, especially Bach and Mozart).

Not only was music changing at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, but the entire structure of Western society was being altered as well. These parallel changes were not coincidental but inter-related. The age of the disruption of the social order, exemplified by the revolutions in America and France, put great pressure on the hitherto accepted hierarchy of the monarch and church. The age of the citizen replaced that of the subject, the king was usurped by the Parliament, the aristocracy by a growing middle-class, and the priest by the poet-philosopher-artist. It is in this context that the life and career of Beethoven can be appreciated. He (and his successors) had replaced the authority of the monarch and church with the holy aristocracy of art. He can be seen as a font of universal wisdom and his works are the conduit of all that might be of meaning to Everyman. This notion of the artist persists to our day, especially within concert music. The composer stands at the top, the performer, his dutiful and humble servant, practising tirelessly in order to interpret faithfully that which has been handed down (and partial to fervent squabbles with other priests in this church about the correct interpretation of the scripture) through notation, which can only be interpreted by those specially trained to read it. Music conservatories are designed to perpetuate this practice, and to eliminate heresy. Academic departments scour the texts for new insights towards meaning and composers' intentions. They are sometimes given air-time on Radio 3.

The music produced by these composer-deities therefore has embedded within it not only narrative, but the stamp of the *auteur*, a recognisable (to the initiated) imprint which persists to our time. To achieve success today, parallel with the essential recording contract, is to have a clear and demonstrable *voice*, a series of characteristics which can be discerned by audiences. Of course, back in the classical period, a composer whose music was said to be similar to that of Haydn might have reacted with pleasure.

Particular mention here needs to be made of Richard Wagner (1813-83) whose life, like Haydn's, encompassed a huge shift in musical practice and aesthetics. He was born while

Beethoven and Schubert were still alive (he was in his teens when both died) and did not himself die until after the birth of Stravinsky and Webern<sup>7</sup>. Most important to our particular over-view is Wagner's influence on film composition.

Wagner called his operas "music dramas". He composed the texts as well as the music, and involved himself in almost every aspect of their staging. Unlike the works of his exact contemporary, Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), whose operas took the traditional form of heightened speech interspersing coherent self contained songs ("arias"), Wagner's later operas are meant to flow continuously, the music a mosaic of motifs, harmonies, melodies and gestures. The orchestra's role changes in his works, from the traditional function of accompanying the singer (who is normally the focus of the action) to taking on a life of its own, a running commentary on what is happening on the stage - elaborating, warning, summing up, and sometimes taking over entirely. Many believed that Wagner concentrated all of his interest on the orchestra, giving the vocal parts a secondary role (Seroff, 1956: 94).

The orchestral textures and "leitmotifs" which identified characters and helped the audience recall previous situations within the extended (and convoluted) narrative were adopted wholesale by the first generation of film composers. These men, Max Steiner (1888 -1971), Erich Korngold (1897-1957), Franz Waxman (1906-67), and others, were classically trained European musicians who from childhood had been steeped in the Wagnerian aesthetic and technique, and found little difficulty incorporating Wagnerism into the movies. Wagner's style of orchestral writing and his extended harmonic language, not to mention the leitmotifs, suited these films admirably. Many sound films, especially those produced between 1935 and 1950 could be said to resemble Wagner operas, but without the singing. The music serves to re-enforce what the characters on screen are feeling, and to tell the audience what to feel about what they are seeing. This type of music was ideally suited for films in which the audience was expected to know exactly how to feel about what they were seeing.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918), who had in his youth been a devoted Wagnerite, but as apostate described Wagner's music as "a beautiful sunset mistaken for a dawn" (Seroff, 1956: 128), was extremely influential on what would later become key 20<sup>th</sup> century musical developments. His music reflects a greater sense of emotional ambivalence than does that of many of his predecessors, especially Wagner, and more pertinently for this survey, his music

focusses more on the sonorities of the instruments used than on the rhetorical (didactic) content of the music as notes. Of course, it was of more than passing interest to Wagner as well which instruments were playing his music, but the invention of the “Wagner tuba”, the use of anvils within the percussion section, and other such devices, might be construed more as theatrical effects rather than musically essential in their own right.

Debussy and many of the ‘sonorists’ who followed him, developed a gestural musical language which later proved particularly useful for film composers (although only really exploited filmically after the introduction of jazz based scores after the 2nd World War<sup>8</sup>), in that the music seemed to be of languid trajectory, and felt malleable harmonically and rhythmically - qualities which fit more seamlessly into the less didactic films of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the century. The exploitation of sonorities in this type of music also influenced the development of *musique concrète* and electronic music after 1945. Debussy’s death in 1918 is at the beginning of the Third period of Western Music, which continues to today.

### **The Third Period**

As a result of the invention of the Gramophone (phonograph) in 1877 and later the wireless (radio) in 1896, music could be listened to without the presence of the performer (still less the composer)<sup>9</sup>. More importantly, it was again possible to listen to music while something else was going on. However, in contrast the first period, the concert based lessons of passive listening have been well absorbed by modern audiences. Very few are inclined to dance about while listening to their iPods in the underground.<sup>10</sup>

Michael Chanan (1995) reflects at length upon the influence of recording on the production and consumption of music generally. These two inventions changed fundamentally the way people heard music. Prior to the 20th century, the only way one might hear music was live, either by playing it oneself or hearing someone else play or sing it. This revolution ushered in the age of music as a commodity as opposed to an experience.

Musical form changed as a result of these technological and social developments. For example, we today take for granted that a piece of “popular” music lasts about 3 minutes. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, vernacular music (almost always vocal, or an instrumental version of a vocal piece) could be of a variety of durations, mostly determined by the content (especially

if a song told a narrative of several stanzas). However, the restrictions imposed by technology were quickly integrated into vernacular forms. For example, one side of a 10" 78 rpm record lasts about 3 minutes. A song much shorter would prompt angry complaints from short-changed record buyers. Of course, a piece longer than 3 minutes would fall off the end of the disc (or would require segmenting into sections, as did most classical recordings, notwithstanding the larger format – 5 minutes per side - of the discs onto which they were recorded).

Simultaneous with the birth of the new audio technologies and the artistic upheaval they would bring about was the musical development now called Modernism.

(Schoenberg: ) All I know is that ... (*the listener*) exists, and in so far as he isn't indispensable for acoustic reasons (since music doesn't sound well in an empty hall), he's only a nuisance. (Rayner 1972, p. 9)<sup>11</sup>

The belief that composers had the moral obligation to compose music not for an audience, but on their own terms was a convenient artistic rationalization which has persisted to today, when audiences for Classical music concerts are dwindling. Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century both the content and carbon dating of concert music changed fundamentally. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most music heard in concert halls was new, less than 10 years old, and often played by the composer of the work. There are few, if any, cited instances of Beethoven playing the work of any other composer at his concerts; similarly Mozart, Chopin, Schumann and other early Romantics. By the end of the century, this had changed significantly, perhaps due to the impact of Mendelssohn's influence on the creation of a canon of masterworks.

Before the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was unusual for a composer's works to outlive the author by more than a few years. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a very small fraction of music played was less than 50 years old. The simple reason, especially for orchestral promoters, was that an unfamiliar name or a modern work could be counted upon to reduce the size of the audience appreciably. It needs also to be stressed that new works in unfamiliar styles required more rehearsal time than did the "war horses" of the established repertoires. Without a subsidy, few orchestral organisations could afford the lengthy rehearsal time and

diminished audiences new works would entail. A more recent strategy adopted by many composers, especially for orchestral works, is to write music of singular simplicity for the performers. Thus possibly the emergence of the style known as *minimalism*, in which the musicians need only to be able to count the number times they play a rather undemanding figure.

The impact of recordings and radio broadcasting on the musical world in which we live is almost impossible to overstate. With the record and the radio, the democratisation of music began. In an age when social mobility was unusual, education was a pre-requisite for any attempt to break out of a lower class existence. In an age before the current fetishisation of ignorance, one of the ways through which people could “better themselves” was through the acquisition of learning and culture, available through the wireless, and later the television.<sup>12</sup>

More importantly perhaps, was the general dissemination of vernacular music to the public at large, through such recordings and broadcasting. It is true to say that in Britain at least, there had been a tradition of large popular audiences for choral and brass band concerts throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and although such music was made available on record, the popular concert tradition remained intact for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, those types of music excepted, vernacular music reached wider “democratised” audiences from the point when radio and recordings became readily available.

Through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more and more people received music primarily in its recorded form. Today, one suspects that live music makes up so small a percentage of the amount of music we consume as to be almost insignificant culturally (however spectacular as rock concerts and however expensive, at the public purse, as classical extravaganzas). In both concert and vernacular music, the recording has become the end product, rather than the souvenir of performance it was until quite recently. It is fair to say that an unrecorded musician or composer does not really exist.<sup>13</sup>

The use of shared music as social glue, such as the sing-songs beloved by the generation which experienced the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, has all but disappeared, replaced by music which is available as a commodity, at any time in any location, through the convergent replacement of radio and gramophone, the digital music player.

The technology of these players does not limit the duration of the music on it, but in the main, most music listened today on iPods, pop-music, has kept the familiar duration limit of about 3 minutes. However, the form and style of this music has diverged from vernacular music of the past.

It was the case until relatively recently that a pop song had an ABA structure (as did most classical music of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, as mentioned above), usually in either 3/4 or 4/4 time, in 4 or eight bar phrases, but with some variation occasionally evident (certainly in the music of the Beatles or the Rolling Stones). There would be a contrasting middle section which would segue into a reprise of the chorus. There were a variety of tempi available, some fast, some slow. There was also some variation on dynamic levels within a song. Before the mid sixties it was also possible to hear pop-music with no vocals attached.

Today, it is safe to say, most chart music is in the same 4 bar structure, 4/4 time. The vast majority of such music includes drums and centres on the vocal track. The equalisation and compression of the tracks makes it difficult to hear any variation in loudness as well as in tempo. Most pieces use the same pitch patterns, based upon the few notes which is in the best part of a particular singer's range. The tempo is fairly uniform in most pieces, the majority being between 100 -120 beats per minute, and to the uninitiated, it's quite hard to tell the pieces apart. There is no middle section and no journey for the listener to take. The music remains where it begins, repeating its 4 bar phrases, and after about 3 minutes, ends.

This leads one to the supposition that the combination of regular rhythms, familiar material, commonplace lyrics as well as the lack of any musical development within a piece, acts as an anaesthetic, especially if heard through earphones. What passes for musical activity is an enveloping comfort zone of familiarity, cutting the listener off from the world beyond his/her ears, and crucially, suppressing any instinct to react critically to the world around them.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, this world also allows for an infinity of genres, audiences of which make up the "long tail" now commonly exploited by internet marketing. We can hear through retrieval software (such a iTunes<sup>®</sup> or Spotify<sup>®</sup>) most anything we wish, from Gesualdo to Getz to Girls Aloud. And all such recordings are available to be used for films.

### **Musical forms and film music**

It follows fairly directly from an understanding of the history of music's social function how the structure of music can have an impact on a score's efficacy in film. The use of pre-composed music, especially if the decision to use it comes in post-production, can undermine the trajectory of the images. This is particularly true of music composed during the "concert" era, when form, harmony and rhetorical material was designed musically to articulate an architecture which would generate interest in the audience, and make listeners care what happens next. Combined with narrative film, music from this period may offer the viewer competing trajectories. For example, the use of Wagner's *Siegfried's Tod*, from *Götterdämmerung* (1874) in John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981) makes sense in terms of period referentialism (the period represented by the film and that of the opera are both what might be called the *mythic medieval*). However, Boorman's fading of the music at the climax of a long musical gesture causes a dysfunction between the two trajectories, to the discomfort of at least some of the audience. Specially composed scores can also detract from a film if composed with a concert sensibility, by being too insistent rhetorically, rhythmically and/or harmonically.<sup>15</sup>

### **Three models of Film Music**

The trajectory of this article now leads us to reconsider music in relation to sound film<sup>16</sup>, to provide a slightly different way of understanding its function. To persist in generalisation, one can suggest three models of music's use with narrative moving images. These models are not mutually exclusive, but films tend to use one model predominantly.

The first model is based on **opera**. The bulk of the mainstream Hollywood output offers operatic music. As with the earlier models by Monteverdi, Gluck, Mozart, Bizet, Berg, Britten and others, this music signals what the characters are feeling, and what the audience should feel about what is being presented to them. Of course, in the main, film characters do not sing, so the orchestral music is employed either as Wagnerian overture, Debussian underscore or Verdian *entr'actes*. One need only listen to a few bars of Erich Korngold's score to *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Curtiz, 1938) or John Williams' score to *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) to observe the operatic conventions in full sail. More subtle versions of this type of music are based on Wagnerian principles (especially the *leitmotif* and harmonic architecture), but the musical material is stripped down to basic elements, especially under



dialogue. We are left with a large orchestra playing music which refers to the artistic shell of opera, but is by necessity denuded of many of the more interesting operatic (and rhetorical) musical conventions; counterpoint, melodic invention, rhythmic variation, as these can interfere with the reading of the dialogue.

The second model might be called **convergent**. Music of this type, happily more common now, is less distinguishable as a separate entity within the soundtrack of a film. The notion of a “score” begins to dissipate. Convergent music blends with the sound design of a film and is often made of the same material. It is more common in those films where the audience is less well informed about what the characters are meant to be feeling, and are less often encouraged to read the film with a particular emotional filter in place. Such music (and its total absence, in films such as *Caché* (Haneke, 2005)) offers us a more ambivalent emotional template with which to understand the film.

An interesting comparison can be made between two films of similar tone (and similar cast). The first is *No Country for Old Men* (Coens, 2007) which has very little music (13 minutes in total, much of it in the closing credits) and the second is *In the Valley of Elah* (Haggis, 2008), which has a score by Mark Isham. Both films feature Tommy Lee Jones looking wonderfully sad and concerned. The Coens’ film invites us to our own reading of what we are seeing. Much is left unexplained, the ending is unresolved. Carter Burwell’s music melds with Skip Lievsay’s sound design in such a way as to be almost indistinguishable from the ambient sounds of the West Texas location.<sup>17</sup> It offers us a reinforcement of the loneliness of the location, and signals an emotional vacuum in keeping with the unremitting blankness of the landscape. In contrast, Mark Isham’s sensitive score reinforces the sadness of the film and the despair of the principal character (although one might argue that the film does that admirably without music). The decision to reinforce the dominant emotion through such operatic music might have had more to do with producer induced insecurity than narrative production values.

Other successful convergences can be found in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, David Lynch and several animators, including the Brothers Quay.

The musical material of convergent music relies less on Wagner than on Debussy, whose timbral subtleties, ambivalent harmonies and vector-less rhythms are very useful if a

composer and sound designer with to speak the same language. Further, such musical techniques marry well with what has become known as *musique concrète*, where non instrumental sounds are incorporated into a musical texture. This development can be seen in many horror and sci-fi examples. One notable early example of electronic music creating a convergence between the musical and sound design areas is the score produced for *Forbidden Planet* (Wilcox, 1956). The “electronic tonalities”<sup>18</sup> produced by Bebe and Louis Barron fused music and FX into a single soundtrack, predating later developments by about 40 years.

One must hope that the convergent will gain favour among producers at the expense of the operatic, at least in films designed for adults.

The third type of music can be called **referential**. Theodor Adorno, Hanns Eisler, as well as several Soviet and French “New Wave” filmmakers posited the wish that the sound track offer a dialectic with the images, that it be readable as a separate strand of discourse. One can see such attempts in some of the films of Alain Resnais and Jean Luc Goddard, to name but two. This approach has not been adopted by most film makers, perhaps because of the way music which does not support the film, either operatically or convergently, distracts from the narrative, and as a result, causes the audience to become aware of the act of making the film itself at the expense of involvement with characters or story-telling (apologies for this enormous simplification, which I intend to redress in a later article).

Notwithstanding the reluctance of most directors to adopt the dialectic approach to sound and music, one version of this function can be seen when music is used to refer to ideas which lie outside the world of the film. As outlined in an earlier issue of this journal (Deutsch, 2008), such musical referentialism has been much employed by many directors, notably Stanley Kubrick and Martin Scorsese, who encode much meaning into the music track, by mixing music with strong references (both of the classical and vernacular) into their films. This technique can be employed in either style of film music (operatic or convergent), and is often used when music is placed on the membrane wall between the diegetic and non-diegetic. Music written before the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (or offered in pastiche), if used in film, tends to function in this referential way. For example, the inclusion of a Medieval *virelai*, a Baroque *gavotte*, or a ante-bellum minstrel song into a film would be a powerful reference of time and

perhaps place; however the regular rhythms, the symmetrical phrases and repetitive melodies might not necessarily be suitable for general use as underscore.

There are, of course notable film composers and directors whose work does not fit neatly into the categories presented above. For example, the music of Bernard Herrmann, especially during his collaboration with Alfred Hitchcock, seems to skirt between the operatic and convergent. His unique style of orchestrating anxiety may be based in opera, but so well integrates with the fabric of these films that a convergence can be said to occur. Similarly, it could be said that with the work of Alain Resnais, and especially in his collaboration with Hans-Werner Henze, a genuine dialectic beyond referentialism has been accomplished (such as would have been appreciated by Eisler, Adorno, etc al). Whether audiences for these films would have engaged in this dialectic or employed the “cocktail party effect” to tune out the music is a matter for speculation.

## **Conclusions**

This discourse has at its core the intention to encourage film-makers to re-evaluate the use of music in their films. If one were to offer a series of summative implications from this history, they might be as follows, at least for narrative films:

- if it is possible not to use music, don't use it. This is especially true in actuality film;
- if music is required, try to integrate it into the fabric of the sound design; i.e., use it convergently;
- such music would therefore focus on the timbral at the expense of the rhetorical;
- if operatic music is required, make space for it. If possible cut the film to the music, not the other way round;
- encourage the early involvement of the composer and sound designer into the production process; even at script stage if possible.

It is important to remind ourselves, we film makers, composers, sound designers, and listeners, of how potent music can be as a social construct, as an accompaniment of our daily

lives and a signifier of emotional communication. Being mindful of its power, and respectful of its potency, might help all of us to decommodify this precious yet abundant resource.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Chanan's excellent *Musica Practica* (Verso, 1994) is an extremely important example of this sort of history.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps similar to the recent importation of the subtle timbres and rhythms of Indian Classical music into the hyper-simplified Bollywood gestures beloved of the emerging film-goers and iPod owners.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps because the villagers would need clearly to be able to discriminate between the warning sound of an escaped herd of cattle and the arrival of the local Duke.

<sup>4</sup> Oratorio, basically an unstaged opera on (usually) Biblical themes began at around this time as well.

<sup>5</sup> Or even longer under Leonard Bernstein's conducting.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see my article, "Putting Music in its Place" in *The Soundtrack*, Vol. 1 No 1, 2008: 5-13

<sup>7</sup> and H.H. Zweck. See "The Pioneers" in *The Soundtrack 1.1*, 2008

<sup>8</sup> The harmonic language of jazz owes much to Debussy.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, it took some time for these inventions to have an impact on mass behaviour, but both inventions were well established in Western Society by the 1930s.

<sup>10</sup> The Coen Brothers exploit this notion comically, having Brad Pitt gesticulate manically while listening to his personal music player in *Burn After Reading*, (2008)

<sup>11</sup> Schoenberg in a letter to Alexander von Zemlinsky, 23, Feb, 1918

<sup>12</sup> Interesting and depressing is how the popular press has learned to equate education with some sort of effiteness; and those possessing it not being part of the society as a whole. This may have produced a world in which in Britain at least, more people vote for Big Brother than for general elections, and that what used to be on BBC2 is now relegated to BBC4.

<sup>13</sup> The new self-publishing formats such as YouTube is confronting this issue head on, by allowing everyone to be recorded and filmed if they so wish.

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps a cynic might say that the combination of the celebration of ignorance with the anaesthetic of pop music allows a ruling oligarchy to maintain control, despite any vestige of democratic forms.

<sup>15</sup> In "Putting Music in its Place" (*Soundtrack 1.1*) I make some reference to Leonard Bernstein's score for *On the Waterfront* as an example of this conflict between the competing narrative of film and music.

<sup>16</sup> Music's relation to silent film is beyond the scope of this article, and is admirably and comprehensively discussed in Rick Altman's seminal work, *Silent Film Sound* (2005).

<sup>17</sup> Burwell and Lievsay's collaboration can be traced through all of the Coen's films. Another spectacular and memorable example of this fusion can be found in *Barton Fink* (1991).

<sup>18</sup> Hollywood's Musicians' Union would have blacked a film in which anything called "music" was not provided by a large group of orchestral players. MGM's solution was to avoid the word music entirely; this was sufficient to lift the threatened ban.