

MUSIC IN FILM: REPRESENTING THE LEADING ACTORS

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Music as a means of communication, and a mode of representation, elicits many questions, the most intriguing of these being: Does music actually represent anything but itself? According to Schopenhauer, music never represents objects but rather the 'secret history' of the 'intellectually enlightened' human will (Young 1992:22).¹ Nietzsche asserts that "music in its absolute sovereignty does not need the image and concepts but merely endures them as accompaniments... language can never adequately render the cosmic symbolism of music" (Young 1992:38).² But if music is merely an organized form of sounds and truly only represents itself, how is it that we are moved by the music that we hear? On the other hand, if music represents something other than itself, how does it do this? This paper will consider such questions in relation to film music, drawing on examples from various films and also my own compositions for film, examining the leading role of music in film and its ability to create effect through 'representation'.

All music is coded and decoded by the listener as an aural symbol and directed to the senses to elicit a specific emotion. Music is emotionally meaningful not as the subjective effect of emotionally charged composition, or as the cause of emotional states in the listener, but 'in and of itself.' Music can be considered visually representational due to the symbols of musical notation, but for film viewers, this sort of representation is not available. Hence, the representation carried out by music and the emotion it arouses in film is more of an instinctive and subconscious type, one does not exactly have to know the language to be affected by it. Even if one does not readily 'feel' the emotion, it can be argued that the particular emotion in question is 'understood' as present in the music. Any effect created by music alone also depends on the types of associations the listener forms, related to past experiences, social and political background, and hence his or her ideas of what the music represents.

Music in film is often representative of some character (the use of the *leitmotif*)³, time, place or emotion. In films where the music is taken into serious consideration as a major part of the overall work, it is used where the visual information is not sufficient to express the necessary feeling, or when the emotion cannot be put into words or action. It is in such cases where the music represents that particular emotion at that moment.

In a recent work on music, meaning, and emotion, Laird Addis contemplates on philosophy of mind, aesthetics, and semantic theory to distinguish between (i) natural representation (ii) quasi-natural representation and (iii) conventional representation, supporting the idea that music is a "quasi-natural form of representation of emotion" (Carr 2004:227). The author mentions

¹ Young cites Schopenhauer from his work *The World as Will and Representation* published in 1819. The quotations here are from Volume I, p. 259.

² The words of Nietzsche are quoted from his work *The Birth of Tragedy From the Spirit of Music*, p. 6, translated by W. Kaufmann and published by Vintage Press in New York in 1966. This volume also contains Nietzsche's *The Case of Wagner*.

³ A *leitmotif* is a German musical term, meaning 'leading motif' or 'guiding motif,' which refers to a recurring musical theme associated with a particular person, place or idea. The term is generally associated with the operas of Richard Wagner, but he was not the originator of the idea.

five principal vehicles of representation: awarenesses (the only form of natural representation), words and sentences (conventional representation–language), art objects, dreams (quasi-natural representation), and behaviors. He goes on and asserts that aside from dreams, music is the most interesting form of quasi-natural representation (Addis 1999:36). According to Carr (2004) this account of Addis seems to support the familiar conviction that the sadness we feel in a piece of music is not just conventional but an ‘inherent’ feature of the music itself. This suggests that music is, like consciousness, intrinsically expressive of emotion. Hence, no differences in convention or culture can make sad music happy.

Now then, what is the relationship between consciousness and representation? Consciousness implies intentionality, and if one intentionally tries to elicit emotional response, then some form of representation is being used, whether natural or not. Music can be said to be representational in the sense of the visual symbols of musical notation, but for film viewers, this sort of representation is not available, and since it is yet another language, the viewer would have to know the codes to ‘understand’ it. Hence, the representation carried out by music and the emotion it arouses in film is more of an instinctive and subconscious type, one does not exactly have to know the language to be affected by it. Even if one does not readily ‘feel’ the emotion (which could have to do with the mood state or the attention of the viewer, or how interested she or he is in the film), it can be argued that the particular emotion in question is ‘understood’ as present in the music.

Absolute music should be devoid of any program or story, and should communicate deeper ideals, emotions and thoughts, enhanced through an understanding of the composer and his life experiences during the time of the composition. But consider the symphonies of Beethoven, the idea of the ‘Hero’ in the third symphony, the *Eroica*, the stories behind his piano sonatas and so forth. In fact Wagner, in an essay he wrote in 1841, says that the *Eroica* is not just a representation of heroism, but an act of heroism in itself (Cook 2007:35).⁴ When we consider the music of the Romantic period, especially the works of Liszt and Strauss (particularly the symphonic poems), Chopin (his *Ballades*), Robert Schumann (take into consideration his work for solo piano *Carnaval* for example) and Wagner’s music dramas, it is difficult to say that they are absolute music and do not represent anything but themselves. The message of the music and the effects that it sets out to create reach the audience much more successfully when the ideas and events that the music represents is made available to the audience beforehand. Any effect created by music alone also depends on the types of associations the listener forms, depending on past experiences, memories, social and political background and such. People from different cultural backgrounds are known to react to music differently, depending on the semiotics contained within and the meaning they attach to each musical sign. Aristotle is said to have asserted that “hearing alone among the objects of sense... affects the emotional temperament of the hearer” (Kalinak 1992:22). Having said this about absolute music, let us now consider the function of music in film and what it represents, whether absolute, descriptive, or programmatic.

⁴ The citation is from Cook’s article “Representing Beethoven” in *Beyond the Soundtrack*, edited by Goldmark et al.

A lot of the literature on the topic deals with the functions of film music and the reasons for its existence. This is considered with the simple question: Why use music in film? According to Konuralp (2004), there are three main reasons: The first is to create an effect, and to keep the tempo of the film. This has more to do with the psychology of music. The second reason is to define a character or a message. Here the use of the *leitmotif* comes into the picture (see endnote 3), where the same musical theme or excerpt is used to accompany or suggest the presence of a certain character, the same one each time. The third reason is to add a 'popular' element. This is necessary for the film to sell and thus seems to carry more of an economic implication. I believe that music in film also has the role of telling part of the story even before it is seen; it is almost as if the music provides a preview of what we are going to see, before the film shows it to us.

The literature also contains many arguments as to what is considered 'good' film music. Since film and music are two separate texts and contain their own aesthetic values, another intriguing element is how these two texts can be put together to represent the same message. They can be said to function similar to counterpoint found in classical music, where more than one voice sound together in harmony; we can hear the independent lines, and yet they are also heard together as a whole, much like the visual and sound aspects of film being perceived together, rather than as separate entities. It is possible to speak of an audio-visual counterpoint in the montage of the film. Sir Arthur Bliss, who composed one of the very first important scores for British feature film (*Things to Come*, 1935) gives his opinion on film music problems with the following statement:

"... pure musical sound will always have a wide importance on the films. It is powerfully expressive. It can bring nostalgia to a landscape, drama to any hour of day or night; it can express undercurrents of human emotion, when the actors involved show little of it outwardly. It can suggest what is going to happen, it can recall what has happened; most important of all, perhaps, it can make what has turned dead and dull in a picture come alive and exciting. And yet, music must not obstinately intrude, as at any time it can. Someone said that the best film music is that which is not consciously heard at all. There is a truth in the paradox. The music should do its work so smoothly and perfectly that it is only when you see the same picture run through in the studio without it, that you realize its irreplaceable importance" (Prendergast 1977:209-210).

Music is a text, so let us take a look at what this implies for meaning in film. Barthes defines textuality as a process carried out at five different levels simultaneously. These different levels are said to intersect at multiple points, and Barthes likens this to a braid. He mentions that "each thread, each code, is a voice; these braided -or braiding- voices form the writing" (Silverman 1983:241). Music is exactly one of these codes in the text of the film. So, it is right to say that there are multiple codes, but are there multiple texts also? It seems almost certain that there are, and this 'braiding' of texts creates a mesh, in which music plays one of the most prominent roles.

Considering music from the point of 'readerly' versus 'writerly' texts, we can say that music is most always a writerly text, as each time it is interpreted, by performers or listeners, it creates many meanings, depending on the attributes of each player or listener at that particular time. If these meanings are somewhat close to the intended meaning of the composer, then

the music can be said to have reached its goal in conveying a certain state of emotional being, and hence deemed successful in representing the intended emotion or message. Music in film also acts as a writerly text, as any type of music can 'mean' slightly different things for different people, so it will be read and reread together with the other texts in the film, mainly the visuals, culminating in the final message. The music can be said to successfully play its role in the film when all of these 're-readings' are combined and point towards the messages that the film is trying to convey. Now let us look more closely at music in film in order to ascertain what it is meant to represent in that realm.

Chion, a prominent French scholar on music and film, assigns the term *acousmetre* (a French neologism made from '*etre acousmatique*' or acousmatic being) to any voice without a face, a kind of "talking and acting shadow" (Chion 1999:21). Any voice that is heard on a radio, a telephone, or unseen due to any other circumstance presents itself as an *acousmetre* in film. Music, it can be argued, is also an *acousmetre* in this sense, as it also represents a character, the emotions or inner thoughts of that character, and becomes the voice of the narration, but cannot be seen. In other words, music actually tells us something, presenting it not in the form of words, but in an alternate form of communication. Hence, music in film is the 'invisible actor' or its closest representative. It is undoubtedly another character in the film, an invisible but perceivable (consciously or unconsciously) 'subject' which coexists with the others, sometimes reinforcing what they 'say' but other times saying its own words and speaking on their behalf. This idea of music being another actor in a film, or a re-presentation of an actor in the film, is actually a demonstration of how music has the power to become a 'subject'. In fact, music can be a subject in more ways than one; both as subject in terms of a person or character, and/or subject in terms of the main idea of the film, as in films on composers and their music such as *Amadeus* (Mozart), *The Immortal Beloved* (Beethoven), and such. Music itself is an actor, and anyone who performs a piece of music has to be one as well. The performer must 'act' like the composer, must feel what the composer felt at the time of writing the music, to become the messenger of the composer, hence his/her representative, in order to relay his/her messages through the emotional content of the music.

Just as the presence of music in film represents some location, time, character, emotion or state of mind, its 'absence' also represents something: that there is a lack, a void, or an absence, creating tension and expectation, hence performing a narrative function. Similarly, the use of incomplete music suggests that there exists an 'incompleteness' in the events or persons.

Why are we so moved by the music if it truly only represents itself? Music moves both temporally and emotionally. If it is only an organized form of sound, why does it affect the listener? Is it an example of 'sentience', covering the intuitive sense, cognition, consciousness, and the subconscious (Dyer 2007:249). Since music is a product of human intellect and emotion, it must be written with the same intuitive sense that other humans, namely the listeners, have; that is the reason why it has the same effect on the listener, and is able to elicit the same emotions as those which created it in the first place. Since emotions cannot be always expressed in words (they are almost always much more complicated and complex), there is the need for music in film, to re-place the words or action, and hence re-present the actors.

My Music for *Kanatsız Uçmak* (Flying Without Wings)⁵

This short film, produced and directed by senior students of the Department of Radio Television and Film at Eastern Mediterranean University, North Cyprus (in partial fulfillment for their Bachelor's degree) is about two children of differing backgrounds (stressed in the film with the use of a darker boy and a blond boy) happily playing marbles together (representing home or the exposition of the plot) in an unidentified country. Their game is interrupted by the onset of a war resulting in separation for some time (conflict and remembrances, nostalgia; constituting the development section). The war comes to an end, which also constitutes the end of the conflict, resulting in a return to home (the Recapitulation), but a home that is much different from the initial one (again nostalgia and sorrow). For now, a barbed wire fence has been erected between the two boys, and yet they continue to play by shooting their marbles through the fence. When asked to write original music for the film, I chose two instruments, the piano and cello, to represent the two characters, and wrote three pieces of music, all related tonally and somewhat thematically, to go with four major scenes in the film. Since the film contained no dialogue at all, it was the function of the music to 'say' what words might have been uttered by the characters and to represent their emotions, as well as to create a general atmosphere of pain, sorrow, and later hope. My idea was to place music at major points of change in the boys' lives and also in their emotive and expressive states. In so doing, the music represented the actors, each instrument speaking for one particular boy.

In the first scene, the children are playing together, the general atmosphere is serene and calm but there is a feeling that unfortunate things are about to happen. The music is thus calm as well, with the piano and cello conversing in the key of E minor, after a somewhat intriguing introductory section played by the piano (the blond boy). The music contains a touch of sorrow and worry, and is meant to be stagnant while at the same time creating a sense of disturbing expectation. The cello (the dark boy) has a sighing musical motif (he seems to be the more introspective, emotional and perceptive of the two) and slowly meanders through a wide register, both low and high notes being sounded, reflecting the colorful imagination and world of the two children. Shortly afterwards, the war begins and people are scurrying about to enter their homes for safety. The boys' game is thus interrupted and they are forced to separate, the scene ending on the cello's high E, holding a single note (holding on to dear life) supported by the piano's bed of E minor harmony.

The second scene opens in total quiet, while the mother of the dark boy lights an oil lamp to bring some light into the dark room. It seems the war has been going on for some time. The dark boy is alone on his bed, seems bored and sad, missing his friend and their game. He seems to be in a state of nostalgia reminiscing about his playmate, and begins to create shadows on the wall by using his hands in front of the low light of the lamp (their time together was a shadow or a dream?), the shadows are mostly of a bird flying free, spreading its wings across the

⁵ The colour film was completed in January 2010 and lasts 7 minutes and 43 seconds. It was directed by Engin Örsel, produced by Uluç Yemen Aslan, while the screenplay is by Mehpare Taş & Engin Örsel, original music and music editing by Aslı Giray, the editing by Erman Sağırılı, and the effect supervisor was Seyit Özcan Giden. Professional actors were not used, there were three lead actors in addition to extras, the dark boy being played by Eray Vudali, the blond boy by Joshua Lamalawson and the mother by Filiz Başorgun.

wall. The music is a remnant of the opening scene, I decided to use the same music to remind the viewer of the initial scene. The music acts here to reflect the reminiscences of the boy about the joyful playtimes he had with his blond friend. Thus both the cello and the piano are present, although the blond boy is not physically there, his memory is. The boy is then coaxed by his mother to eat something, and he leaves his bird shadows to sit at the table. The music continues as he plays with his food and has no appetite or intention of eating. The reminiscences continue until he goes to bed and closes his eyes.

In the third scene, we find the boy waking up, while his mother continues to sleep beside him. He goes to the window to look outside, there is a sense that the war has ended and all is quiet. The camera shifts to the reverse shot and the window is shown from the outside of the house. The music begins with a forte *e* minor arpeggio with a suspended 6th, exactly when the boy's face is seen looking out from the house. The state outside is one of destruction, there is nobody in sight except for a stray cat crossing the yard. There are feathers, dust and debris floating in the air, which is grey and foggy. The solo cello begins its soliloquy with music that is very rhetorical as the boy expresses his feeling of loneliness, solitude, missing his playmate, with a crying out of rising emotions (the cello reaches its highest notes through an extended crescendo) that he has kept locked in for some time. There is only a touch of piano (creating the harmony with a few suspended chords) to represent the missing friend. The music reaches its climax and the cello and piano come to a pause on their notes, just as the two boys meet for the first time since the onset of the war. However, things have changed. They are now separated by a barbed wire fence and can only see each other through this obstacle. After a moment of hesitation, the dark boy runs inside while the blond one waits quietly in expectation and hope.

The final scene begins with the final piece of music, which has not been sounded until now. The music is all together new. It includes both cello and piano in a more joyful atmosphere (but still in the key of *E* minor), with the swaying rhythm of 6/8, creating a sense that there is renewed energy and restored life, reflecting the joy of re-unification. The music has a clear melody, which moves, towards a specific goal, with clear joint cadences of the cello and piano. The harmony moves through a number of keys, both major and minor, to reflect the multitude of emotions that are present. The dark boys return with the marbles and shows them to the blond boy. They both smile, smiles that carry a lot more meaning than happiness. Although there is a certain amount of joy, there is something that has changed. The joy is tainted with sorrow, containing hope and nostalgia, a sense of longing for the past and yet hoping for better things in the future. The film ends as the dark boy places the marbles on the ground, sends a meaningful glance at his friend, and the blond boy shoots at the colorful marbles with the one in his hand, across the wire fence. There is a continuation of life (which at this time means the game of marbles for the two boys) in spite of everything, even a war. The same piece of music continues through the credits.

Music is a process of tension caused through conflict (the same as most plots in novels and cinema) and its movement towards a resolution, which may or may not always come. Similar to sonata form, it is about being home (the Exposition), leaving home and the experiences one has (the Development), then returning home (the Recapitulation). This return usually does not result in the exact configuration as it was before, and the home we find is never the same. A change has

occurred leading to a kind of nostalgia (a word originating from Greek, to mean ‘return of sorrow’) expressed through the music. One does not have to experience the sorrow in reality to feel it in the music, although it is a fact that in order to feel it in a film, one genuinely goes through the motions of the emotion at that particular moment, sometimes keeping them for some time even after the film comes to an end. Are these emotions due to ‘learned’ conventions, experience, cultural characteristics, or are they instinctive and hence inherent in everyone, waiting to be revealed by the appropriate music? In other words, does the music become our emotions, or do we become the music? According to Langer (1942), “music is a tonal analogue of emotive life” (Dyer 2007:249). So it seems fair to say that music in film represents the emotions of the actors and hence constitutes their re-presentation.

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