Film music is a genre doubly marginalized: once by “serious” art music, and again by film itself. It is often viewed with disdain by composers of other genres for blindly catering to the demands of the public and abandoning the aesthetic of l’art pour l’art. At the same time, this music is usually taken to be something secondary to the action on screen. As Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler put it in their joint critique of film music, “birdie sings, music sings.”¹ In short, many would argue that music is subordinate to image in film.

It is exactly from this type of double marginalization that Peter Franklin seeks to rescue film music in his book Seeing through Music: Gender and Modernism in Classic Film Scores. Franklin’s focal point is film music’s often difficult task of mediating between the worlds of music and film as well as between the realms of art and consumerism. Through an exploration of ways in which music is not at all subordinate to image in film, but rather enhances it, Franklin aims to reclaim film music’s position as an equal of art music.

To frame his argument throughout the monograph, Franklin references Andreas Huyssen’s concept of “the great divide” between modernism and mass culture.² Of particular relevance is Huyssen’s notion that “mass culture is somehow associated with

woman while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men.” Following Huyssen, Franklin asserts that film music, belonging squarely to the realm of mass culture, is feminized and therefore traditionally prevented from joining the ranks of “serious” modernist art. Franklin then uses this notion to discuss ways in which film music is either marginalized by this divide or finds ways to mediate between the two sides. This leads him to conclude that not only is film music characterized by this oft-gendered “great divide,” but it can also tell us a great deal about musical genres on both sides of this dichotomy. This methodology allows Franklin to create a dialogue between film music and other musical genres instead of isolating film scores from other types of music as is often done.

Rather than focusing on film scores as primary sources, the book is framed as a series of responses to prior writings about film music. Franklin discusses a number of Hollywood movie scores, mostly from the 1930s and 40s, and in each example he engages the secondary literature to such a degree that his focus becomes other scholars’s work and not the film itself. Aside from Huyssen’s work, there is little scholarship that combines an analysis of the concepts of modernism and gender, so Franklin builds on two types of sources for his own work. First, in his discussions of modernism, he primarily cites early film critiques such as Adorno and Eisler’s *Composing for the Films*. Second, in his discussion of gender in film, he relies on more recent feminist readings such as those by Claudia Gorbman, Caryl Flinn, and Kathryn Kalinak.

Franklin begins his search for a dialogue by tracing the way in which the opposition between modernism and mass culture in film interacts with that same opposition in music, particularly that of the late Romantic concert and turn-of-the-century opera. His first chapter focuses on the former of the two genres. Contrary to Heather Laing’s reading of Romanticism as siding with patriarchal ideology, Franklin nimbly places it on the “mass culture,” and therefore feminized, side of “the great divide.” Franklin’s disagreement with Laing’s argument stems from his nuanced analysis of the term “Romanticism” and the multitude of ways in which it is...

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understood. This nuanced analysis then becomes the basis for a discussion of the ways in which Romanticism and late-Romanticism in particular crossed “the great divide” and thereby influenced the development of music.

In his opening chapter, Franklin invokes Adorno and Eisler’s seminal volume, but quickly abandons the text in favour of Adorno’s perhaps even more important essay “On the Fetishism in Music and the Regression of Listening.” Franklin uses the essay to clarify notions of “masculine” logic evoked in discussions of musical analysis (particularly of Schenkerian analysis) as a polar opposite to the emotionality of late Romanticism. He then cleverly uses Adorno’s work to discuss different modes of listening in the 1945 film, Brief Encounter.

Despite the importance of the Adorno essay, one cannot help but feel slightly cheated by Franklin’s quick dismissal of Composing for the Films. Not only is this perhaps the best-known text on film music, but it also addresses a number of issues pertinent to Franklin’s book, from the subordination of music to image to the debasement of late-Romantic opera. A discussion of passages addressing these two topics could have successfully bridged the first two chapters and made Franklin’s argument more continuous and therefore more engaging. In fact, a passage that would have been most useful to Franklin lies but a few pages after the lines he quotes. Adorno and Eisler discuss the invisibility of music by stating that it “is supposed to be inconspicuous in the same sense as are selections from La Bohème played in a restaurant.” This statement resonates both with film’s connection to mass culture (by referencing a widely known opera) and its relegation to a background role. Considering Franklin’s concern with both these subjects, engaging more thoroughly with Eisler and Adorno’s work would have strengthened his argument.

Indeed, the relegation of turn-of-the-century opera to the background and its reduction to “schlock” seemingly fit only for restaurant performances is the topic of Franklin’s second chapter. Although the connection between film and opera is usually associated with Wagner, pace Adorno, Franklin argues that film music owes more to operas such as to Puccini’s emotionally charged but critically disparaged Tosca. He argues that despite opera’s traditional position on the “high art” side of “the great divide,” works like Tosca display a shift in aesthetic from high art to mass culture. This, along with the prevalence of opera composers in Hollywood during the silent film era, connects film music to opera more strongly than the Wagnerian leitmotif ever could.


Franklin’s third chapter discusses the way “good” and “bad” music—labels traditionally attached to music of the classical period and to late romantic music, respectively—feature in movies to delineate the weakness and ingenuity of “good” women and the passion and destructive potential of “bad” women. Franklin focuses on three scores: that for King Kong (1933), by Max Steiner, and two scores by Franz Waxman—Bride of Frankenstein (1935) and Rebecca (1940). In each of these scores, Franklin picks out ways in which composers signify the threat that both “good,” pure women (King Kong’s Ann Darrow) and “bad” femme fatales (the title characters of Bride of Frankenstein and Rebecca) pose to masculine power. Although Franklin discusses the three films in chronological order, the complexity of the King Kong example is much greater than that of the other two and it would have been best saved for final treatment, drawing in ideas built up through the other two examples.

The second major section of the book discusses ways in which film music comments on other genres. The first chapter of this section focuses on the relations between the narrative nature of film scores and the ability of absolute, symphonic music to be interpreted in a programmatic fashion. Franklin discusses the way in which epic films such as Anthony Adverse (1936) create a narrative experience not unlike that of attending the symphony: the music is not used to signify anything specific and yet it is narrative. Curiously, in this chapter Franklin speaks little of the gendering of “the great divide” so strongly present in other portions of the book. Although he touches upon issues of modernism, this temporary setting aside of one of the book’s main ideas is puzzling, especially because it comes with no warning, disclaimer, or explanation.

Franklin then moves on, in the fifth chapter, to specifically discuss diegetic music and the way female characters engage with and are usually undone by it. Here, Franklin rejects Carolyn Abbate’s notion that women undone by narrative are redeemed in the music they perform or experience. Rather, he adopts a reading of music as male aggressor and supports that reading by examining the use of Wagner’s Liebestod, from Tristan and Isolde, to drive Joan Crawford’s character to suicide in the film Humoresque (1946).

After having discussed at length the various ways in which mass culture music, be it opera or symphonic music of the Romantic period, is used in films, Franklin finally turns to film scores that incorporate modernist touches. Among other examples, he discusses the use of avant-garde-styled music in Hermann’s score to Psycho (1960) as a delineation of male insanity. The juxtaposition between Hermann’s modernist score and the genre of film music is paralleled in the closing shot of Norman Bates’ face superimposed with that of his mother. Franklin’s argument that these parallel

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juxtapositions exemplify the gendered relations in film music provides a strong conclusion to the idea of film music’s straddling of “the great divide.”

Throughout his book, Franklin interacts with a great deal of literature, framing his text as a series of responses to prior writings about film music. His strategy is at its most compelling when Franklin extends prior scholarship on specific scores. Particularly effective is the introduction, where Franklin engages with Heather Laing’s understanding (or, according to Franklin, misunderstanding) of the function of Tchaikovsky’s “Pathétique” in the film *Now, Voyager* (1942) as a masculine, high-art burden on Bette Davis’ character rather than as an equally feminized sympathizer.10

Similarly intriguing is his examination of Max Steiner’s score to *King Kong* (1933) that draws into question Claudia Gorbman’s notion that the music is cut around scene shifts representing the masculine and the feminine.11 Franklin determines the breaks are caesurae in the score and not directorial choices for cuts in a continuous score. Therefore, the music is not cut around the film; instead, the two work in symbiosis. It is a simple point, but one that both helps Franklin’s argument about the film itself and his overall point in this chapter: the speed at which movies were produced in the 1930s and 1940s allowed music to be more organically expressive; there was no time to dwell on the music one was composing.

However exciting Franklin’s constant engagement with the scholarly literature, it nevertheless creates a “fly-by” character to the book periodically. Every chapter engages a number of different scholars that, combined with over fifteen case studies of film scores, simply overwhelms the short text. This leads to two main issues: (1) a cursory treatment of some of the sources and (2) a quick abandonment of exciting points made by Franklin.

The cursory treatment of Eisler and Adorno’s volume leads to a slight problem of interpretation. The only passage discussed by Franklin is a nursery rhyme: “I know a lovely game,/I paint myself a beard,/ Then hide behind a fan,/ So nobody shall notice it.”12 Franklin interprets the rhyme as speaking of film music as feminized and therefore marginalized and oppressed. The rhyme does indeed speak about traditional markers of gender—beards and fans—and as such a gendered reading is not out of place. However, Franklin seems to ignore that Adorno and Eisler are not talking about the issues of “frivolous” (and therefore feminized) film music; they are talking about cases in which film directors would like music to be an unobtrusive background. In such instances, Adorno and Eisler suggest that extra-musical sounds be used. Although

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12 Adorno and Eisler, *Composing for the Films*, 5.

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Adorno and Eisler do take up the idea of the opposition between “serious” music and film music, the discussion in the passage quoted by Franklin is about the use of non-diegetic music in film, and not about its gendered nature.

The breadth of Franklin’s study also causes him to occasionally bypass important and interesting points in his own work. In an example from Brief Encounter (1945), Franklin suggests that the character’s inner monologue over Rachmaninov’s Second Piano Concerto demonstrates a kind of listening contrary to the structural listening sought by Adorno, among other modernists. Franklin argues that, to audiences, this type of listening “significantly facilitate[s] an inner emotional discourse in which was reconstructed the Romantic practice of art as an escape into the dream of passion.” (36) Franklin discusses this type of feminized listening in a later chapter, borrowing from Heather Laing’s notion of the female listener, but the spirit of the first chapter is never recaptured. He instead abandons it for a discussion of how women’s listening of diegetic music affects the actions on the screen.

In sum, the overall quality of this book, along with the exciting points suggested by the author, outweigh the problems. The vast array of topics addressed make this book more valuable as an expression of Franklin’s theory of early Hollywood film music than as an exploration of any one particular topic. The overall argument is convincing and well laid-out, and this book will be invaluable to scholars as a starting point for the many topics left to be explored in the domain of film music.

For Further Reading:


Gorbman, Claudia. Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music. London, Bloomington,


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