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When Walt Disney approached Igor Stravinsky to include The Rite of Spring in the animated film Fantasia, Disney said, “Think of the numbers of people who will now be able to hear your music.” Stravinsky replied by stating, “Well, the numbers of people who consume music… are of no interest to me. The mass adds nothing to art” (155). Other art music composers have had similarly disparaging views of cinema and its audience, which may have contributed to a lack of film music scholarship. It has only been in the last thirty years that musicologists and film scholars have begun to explore opera and its relationship to the visual media it accompanies. Jeongwon Joe’s Opera as Soundtrack adds to this growing collection of works, particularly the way artists use opera in critical moments in film and what that might mean for the viewer. Joe’s work provides insight to a field that is continuing to gain momentum. In her introduction to When Opera Meets Film, Marcia Citron states that the study of the relationship between opera and cinema began with the publication of Jeremy Tambling’s work, Opera, Ideology and Film (1987).² In his

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² Marcia Citron, When Opera Meets Film (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1.
own text, Tambling focuses on the political implications of opera’s use in film.\textsuperscript{2} Since then, Citron believes that three works have added to the disciplinary foundation. The first, Citron’s own \textit{Opera on Screen}, provides a “preliminary framework” for analyzing screen versions of opera. The second, \textit{Between Opera and Cinema}, is a collection of essays compiled by Jeongwon Joe and Rose Theresa that explores opera’s role in mainstream film as well as screen adaptations of opera. Finally, the third, \textit{Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera} by Michal Grover, examines the “spectral implications” of the disembodied operatic voice in visual media. Citron sees \textit{When Opera Meets Film} as part of a “second generation” of opera and film studies, one that has continued to grow since with the publication of Jeongwon Joe’s \textit{Opera as Soundtrack}.\textsuperscript{3}

Published in 2013, three years after Citron’s second monograph on the subject, \textit{Opera as Soundtrack} serves as an unofficial sequel to Citron’s work. While Citron’s book explores how opera can reveal something “fundamental” about a film and vice versa, \textit{Opera as Soundtrack} instead explores how operatic excerpts, rather than excerpts from the symphonic or jazz repertoire, appear at critical moments in film, more so than any other genre of music. While this proves to be true, Marcia Citron states that opera has “become a common gambit of mainstream film.”\textsuperscript{4} If this is the case, how does the “gambit” continue to resonate with filmmakers and viewers? Even films that do not use pre-existing opera excerpts often use operatic-style singing during dramatic moments, such as Peter Jackson’s \textit{The Lord of the Rings} trilogy. In the article “The Ring and the Rings” Alex Ross states, “when the hobbits escape Mt. Doom, Renée Fleming sings, in Elvish.”\textsuperscript{5} The most dramatic and climactic moment in the whole trilogy uses the voice of an opera star singing in an indistinguishable language, much like how pre-existing opera music is used in soundtracks. What is it about the operatic voice that inspires filmmakers?

Joe explores this question in six chapters, taking examples from films released after 1979. The 1960s in film inspired an onslaught of rock and pop music soundtracks, however, by the end of the 1970s classical and classical-style

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\bibitem{2} Jeremy Tambling, \textit{Opera, Ideology and Film} (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 9-10.

\bibitem{3} Marcia Citron, \textit{When Opera Meets Film} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1.

\bibitem{4} Marcia Citron, “The Operatics of Detachment: Tosca in the James Bond Film Quantum of Solace,” \textit{19th Century Music} 34, no. 3 (2011): 316.


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music had begun to reappear in cinema. In each chapter Joe explores a different facet of opera as soundtrack, referencing several film examples from a diverse range of genres, from Luc Besson’s *The Fifth Element* to David Cronenberg’s *M. Butterfly*. Her main areas of concern are the qualities of the operatic voice, the use of opera excerpts in character death scenes, how opera contributes to film’s “castration anxiety,” and the use of opera in association with minority groups, particularly women. In her final chapter, Joe explores the tensions between classical music, a live, high-art form, and mass-produced and heavily edited films.

Joe takes a refreshingly diverse and flexible approach to the study of the relationship between opera excerpts and film soundtracks. She states “imposing and insisting on a certain methodology as the definitive one has a danger of becoming intellectual totalitarianism” (178). Joe’s varied viewpoints stress that it is important to have differing opinions and theoretical approaches in academic work. To illustrate her position, each chapter in *Opera as Soundtrack* presents a different perspective and examines each opinion as an option for how one could look at this phenomenon. For example, in the first chapter Joe looks at the concept of opera as “geno-song,” a term that refers to the voice as “pure sound” instead of a voice singing words that are meant to be understood (35). Joe considers this idea from a variety of angles, including examining the concept of the “maternal voice” (the idea that the first sound a child hears in the womb is the mother’s) and how that is related to the fact that women’s singing voices are most commonly used in soundtracks. The involvement of women’s voices in film is addressed again in various chapters, especially highlighted in the fifth chapter, “Film Divas.”

An anomaly to the rest of the book is the third chapter, “Opera in Woody Allen’s *Match Point*,“ which examines in detail the use of opera excerpts in a single film as opposed to several. While at first appearing to be an odd choice, in my opinion, Joe’s reasons for using the film as the central case study become clearer as one reads on. Her exploration of the concept of the “maternal voice” in the first chapter is important to an understanding of how different the *Match Point* soundtrack is. While most, if not all, of the examples Joe explores in other chapters feature the female voice, in *Match Point*, the soundtrack is exclusively male and all recordings used feature tenor Enrico Caruso. The only soundtrack moment to not include Caruso’s voice is the “murder scene,” which Joe examines in great detail.

In *Match Point*, the underscoring of the murder sequence exists purely in a non-diegetic way, contrary to other films that feature an extended “murder scene” such as *The Godfather Part III* (1990) and *La Cérémonie* (1995) (85). The...
opera used in this scene from *Match Point* is Verdi’s *Otello*, an odd choice, given the differences in plot structure. In my opinion, Joe places undue emphasis on this example. Joe makes some connections between the two texts, such as how Nola, the protagonist Chris’ mistress, is “sacrificed” because of his greed and need to climb the social ladder; Desdemona is “sacrificed” by Otello’s jealousy (70). But the connection is not as explicit as it could be, and Joe even states that the parallels between the two narratives are “moderate” (70). Writings on other film “murder scenes,” such as *The Godfather Part III* and *La Cérémonie*, emphasize the importance of the parallels between the opera’s themes and plot and those of the film. In *Match Point* the connections are not as strong. While Nola is portrayed as a seductress, Desdemona is a virtuous and attentive wife. Finding similarities between the two characters, therefore, becomes nearly impossible. There are many elements of *Match Point*’s murder scene that make it unique to other films yet the discrepancies described make it difficult to ascribe as large a significance to the scene as Joe intends. The chapter does, however, open the possibility for new discussions concerning how opera contributes to a soundtrack.

While *Opera as Soundtrack* provides excellent examples of “opera visits” in film and their signification, there are several instances where Joe’s research digresses from her main topic: the exploration of opera in critical moments in film. In her fifth chapter, “Film Divas,” Joe compares the portrayal of female instrumentalists in film to their “diva” counterparts. She uses five film examples: *Deception* (1946), *Autumn Sonata* (1978), *A Heart in Winter* (1992), *I’ve Always Loved You* (1946), and *The Competition* (1980). While it is important to understand the opposite of the singing diva character, it may have been excessive to include so many detailed examples. Joe’s main point through these descriptions is that female instrumentalists in film are portrayed as less “serious” than their male counterparts and often are only shown performing in private settings as opposed to public concerts like their diva counterparts. Each example provided presents the same argument with slight variations and focuses on the heroine’s relationship to the male characters. While Joe’s inclusion of these non-operatic heroines enables her to highlight opera as a special case in film, the focus of *Opera as Soundtrack* is, evidently, opera, and including so many non-opera examples is unnecessary to illustrate her comparison.

The sixth and final chapter also digresses from opera to focus on the tension between film music and the art music community as a whole. The placement of the chapter is odd in and of itself, because here Joe provides

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6 Marcia Citron, *When Opera Meets Film*, 58-96 and 136-172.
alternate views of the use of source music (pre-existing pieces) in film. She includes many counter-views to her own, including that of Leonid Sabaneev, who believes that film scoring should “nearly always remain in the background.”\(^7\) Incorporating classical music excerpts can be distracting in some cases, especially highlighted in the use of the “Blue Danube Waltz” in 2001: A Space Odyssey. Indeed, some musicologists and film critics have argued that the piece was so familiar it distracted from the action onscreen (173). In bringing these counter arguments to light Joe completes important work, however, it seems odd that she would choose to include these views at the end of the book instead of at the beginning. Placing them at the beginning could show the reader how she would disprove these notions and concepts throughout her text.

Furthermore, in this final chapter Joe discusses the tension between art music and film in general and does not even mention opera. It would seem more logical to make the reader aware of this tension in detail earlier on in her text so that the reader could spend the rest of the book learning how Joe’s research contradicts these beliefs.

Joe’s Opera as Soundtrack provides an interesting narrative while using various methodologies to explore the relationship between opera and film. While each chapter is connected in this cohesive narrative, each section is also self-contained. Joe cross-references material throughout the book, so that anyone can understand an isolated concept, regardless of whether they have read the whole text. For example, in the sixth chapter, “The ‘Great Divide’ Between Modernism and Postmodernism,” Joe refers to a scene in the film Farinelli in which the titular character sings an aria from Handel’s Rinaldo and briefly redescribes it for the reader, despite having previously addressed the scene in the first chapter. This process aids those readers who intend to read the whole book, as it helps reaffirm what concepts are important and how they return.

Jeongwon Joe’s work in Opera as Soundtrack is overall an interesting exploration of an area of film and musicological studies that has yet to be fully developed. The digressions from her main topic, such as her descriptions of instrumentalist heroines, and questionable selection of certain film examples, such as the chapter devoted to Match Point, signify the breadth of the topic and the possible need to cover these subtopics in a separate publication. Nevertheless, Joe’s work opens up discussion concerning our understanding of critical moments in film and the opera soundtrack that accompanies them. It

leaves the reader wondering how film and opera studies will progress over the next few years and how this “second generation,” as Marcia Citron calls it, will continue to develop.

**For Further Reading**


