

**Lecture 8: music and film**

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## The role of film music

In this lecture we apply a number of the tools we have developed in previous lectures to sound and music in film. Shortly we look at the representation of character in film and at the way introduction themes can help to communicate ideas and attitudes about the topic of the film.

To begin with we list a number of things that film music can do. We can in the first place listen to some movies and consider what music is used for in each case.

1. *Unobtrusiveness*: It should not be something of which the audience is conscious. It should unobtrusively contribute to the film experience, to form part of the action and plot. Manvell and Huntley (1957: 7–9) note that in some ways it is an odd thing that audiences are able to accept film music. For example, a person is told of something bad and we hear an aggressive orchestral gesture. Yet we don't consider if the characters can hear this sound. In *High Anxiety* (1978), Mel Brooks parodies this by looking around when he hears loud music on being told bad news. Shortly afterwards we see a bus filled with an orchestra (Mera, 2002).

2. *Action*: Sometimes music can follow action very closely, as in cartoons where each footstep is represented by a note on a horn, or bassoon depending on the qualities of the character. Or it can be used less closely to suggest speed or moments of confusion.

3. *Emotion*: It should signify emotion. It should provide atmosphere and mood and provide insight into the inner worlds of the actors, indicating fear, anticipation, joy, etc. Even weak dialogue can be made to sound powerful and emotive with the right music or sounds.

4. *Setting*: It can create a sense of time and place evoking geographical locations and moments in history. Of course for the most part these will draw on clichés along with the language of 19th-century romantic music. But these will be used to create a sense of authenticity, such as a Celtic landscape, an African landscape, etc. This will be an interpretation of what that place stands for, rather than representing the place naturalistically. Normally these will emphasise particular motifs of these times and places: are they peaceful, mysterious or lively, etc.? Frith (1984: 84) puts it:

The 'reality' of film musical setting actually refers to historical and geographical myths (themselves constructed, in part, by previous musics in previous films set in these places and

times). Thus the music for Zorba the Greek became so powerfully connotative of 'Greece' that Greek restaurants (even in Greece itself) have to use the music to convince customers of their 'Greekness' .

5. *Continuity*: Music should play a part in film continuity. This can be through coherence with the use of musical themes for characters, places and kinds of events. Or it can be by suggestion that action is about to commence or to be resolved. Music can simply be background filler. Movie scenes without any music can often seem excessively naturalistic or even dramatic. Period drama may not use music. At the end of *Taxi Driver* (1976) there is no music during the violent scene.

We can also ask the question as to whether the music we hear is produced by persons, objects or processes in the film world or comes from without.

#### *Diegetic and non-diegetic music*

Diegetic music and sound is produced in the world represented in a film. So we might see and/or hear a band playing or hear a radio. Both of these might be off-screen but will be perceived by the audience as part of the represented film world.

Non-diegetic music has been added to the film afterwards and is not part of the represented film world. So we may see a couple kissing and hear an orchestral score.

However, this difference is not always so clear. An actor may sing and then be accompanied by an orchestra that is off-screen and dubbed in. We might see a small number of musicians playing and yet hear a massive orchestra and a choir of accompanying voices.

#### **Character in movies**

We can also look in more detail at the characters in music. Music can represent both types of character and also their relationship to others and to the wider society.

McClary's (1991) work on the representation of character in the music of certain classical composers helps us to focus on some salient features. She believes there is a long tradition of representing men and women, for example, in European music such as Beethoven's *Unfinished Symphony* where we are encouraged to identify with the feminine which is then tragically quashed. In Tchaikovsky's *Fourth Symphony* she says that the opening, played by the whole orchestra is military forceful and invincible (p. 71). The masculine theme is then played by horn and strings going down in small steps expressing fear and yearning. He is

indecisive. The feminine part is then sultry and seductive, slinky and irrational. Later the masculine theme reappears yet trapped inside the feminine theme. The man escapes but only to be then quashed by the opening militaristic theme. McClary, noting Tchaikovsky's struggle with his homosexuality, explains that where the whole orchestra plays together at the start represents oppressive society. The second masculine theme represents the anguish of the protagonist and the third feminine theme a manipulative antagonist.

Reading from McClary, Van Leeuwen (1999) lists therefore a number of associations in music that have been used to represent men and women:

#### Men

- Dotted rhythms
- Ascending melodies
- Disjunctive articulation (staccato)
- Wide pitch range
- Loud brass and percussion instruments

In other words, assertive, precise, forceful, thrusting, outward looking.

#### Women

- Soft connected articulation
- Descending melodies
- Narrow pitch range
- Suspension (delayed or lengthened notes for emotional effect)
- Softer instruments such as woodwind and strings.

In other words, gentle, delicate, seductive, emotionally contained, modest, inward looking.

In sonatas, McClary (1991) notes, we often find that the two melodies and sounds become intertwined as characters become involved. A third theme may be introduced to represent society as a whole or a third force that influences the main characters.

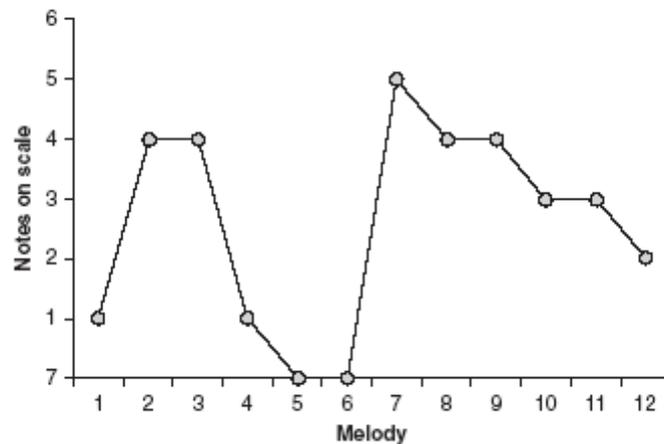
Within this basic framework, McClary explains, many different stories can be told:

Many of Beethoven's symphonies exhibit considerable anxiety with respect to feminine moments and respond to them with extraordinary violence. Other pieces, such as many by Mozart and Schubert, tend to invest their second themes with extraordinary sympathy, and

this leads one to regret the inevitable return to the tonic and the original materials. (1991: 69)

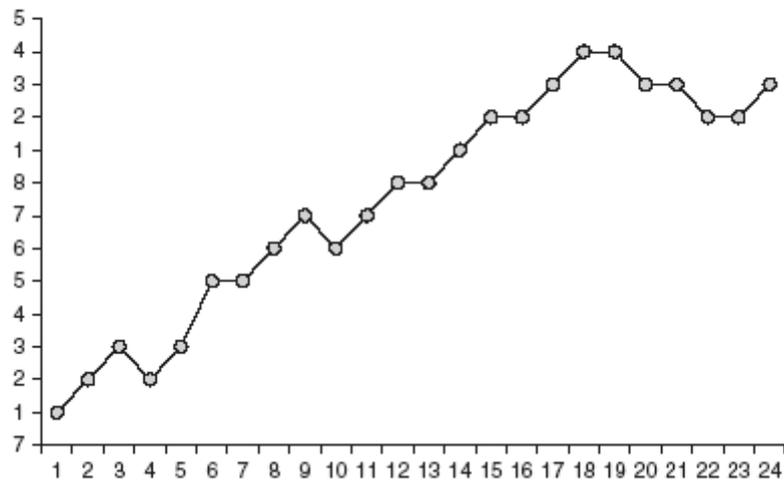
We can draw on McClary's observations alongside those we have made as regards pitch, melody and sound quality earlier in the course.

Example 1: Mr Collins from *Pride and Prejudice*.



**Mr Collins** The melody is played using cellos to create both high and low notes. We find the use of major 3<sup>rd</sup> notes and minor 7<sup>th</sup> notes. Mera (2002) noted that extremes of tonal range are often associated with comedy characters. He observes also that instruments played at the limit of their range also tend to suggest comedy, as this adds awkwardness to the sound. In this motif we find cellos played in this manner. Of course lower pitched notes themselves can suggest weight and lack of agility. Also some of the notes are played using dotted rhythms. In other words, the notes are short and emphasised rather than drawn out. McClary (1991) has suggested that such notes are associated with masculinity. But in the case of Mr Collins's motif these notes played at deeper pitches suggest something lacking agility. And rather than staccato the notes bounce 'slightly', suggesting something playful or silly. We also find the motif played on strings rather than brass. This suggests a lack of masculine confidence. In the melody itself we can see that there is an initial falling away of energy followed by a peak which then gradually descends to end on the 'unfinished'

Example 2: Catherine de Bourgh *Pride and Prejudice*

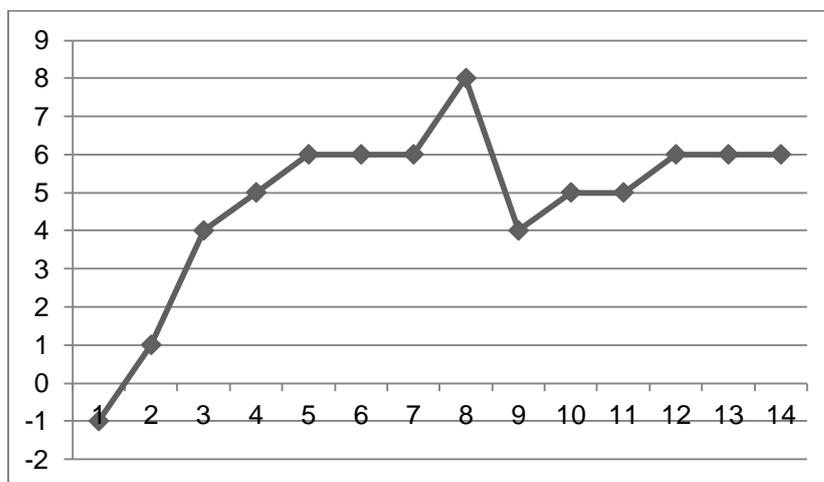


Lady Catherine de Bourgh is very different character. She is a rich, widowed member of the gentry who is unpleasant, yet powerful, and is filled with the sense of her own importance. In the melody we find lots of minor notes in the 3rds and the 6ths that are also flattened. This motif is very expansive in terms of pitch moving from the 1st note to the 4th in the next octave. This therefore takes place over 12 notes. What is crucial about this particular melody is that it ascends in short bursts or statements. There is an association, as we saw when we looked at phrasing, of shorter abrupt statements with assertiveness or formality, as in the fashion of newsreaders. While this motif is incredibly expressive and expansive it is also therefore very formal, making its progress in short steps. The extended increase in pitch gives the impression of excessive expression and even pompousness. The motif also uses painful minor notes. We would expect this combination from a character who announces her presence proudly and sternly. There is also, importantly, high tension in the way the strings are played with tight vibrato.

### **Film and television theme music**

Finally we take a quick look at the way theme music can communicate discourses, ideas and attitudes. Here we look at the example of the music for the TV series *Band of Brothers*. This is a series that represents true events in WW2 where Easy Company of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne played an important role in the invasion of France and Germany. Formerly war films have used nationalistic and militaristic styles of music with horns, dotted rhythms and ascending melodies and drums. Other more recent films have represented war through more tragic

themes to suggest loss, regret and uncertainty. In the case of Band of Brothers we find no happy 3<sup>rd</sup> notes nor sad minor notes. We find rather the use of the 6<sup>th</sup> which brings a sense of warmth. The tune takes place over a large pitch range, and is highly emotionally exuberant. It also uses large ascending sections and emotional outpourings. Significant here is the use of the 4<sup>th</sup> note. When the tune begins we hear the fourth note under the melody which brings a sense of building. We also find the 4<sup>th</sup> used extensively in the melody itself. This is therefore about moving forwards. This is not a negative representation of war. It is also a highly grounded one since we use the 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> notes extensively. We do find the occasional use of the 7<sup>th</sup> note which communicates a sense of melancholy.



Important in this theme is the use of a choir to sing the melody. There is a connotation of the sacred in this case. And there is sense of unity and shared purpose as there is unison in the voices. This music aligns closely with the meanings and stories found within the series itself which is about the way the men become close, behave heroically and suffer through death and sacrifice. Notably the later series by the same producers *The Pacific* was very different where war became squalid, desperate and humiliating. There is also more sympathy for the ordinary Japanese soldier and the broader waste of life. In societies at different times there are different possible discourses for understanding and thinking about war: war as the activity of greedy politicians, war as humiliating and oppressive occupation. In some societies such as the UK and the US the dominant discourse of war is of 'our boys' abroad helping remove oppressors. The theme tune to Band of Brothers can be seen to be part of communicating such a discourse.

