

The Spear of Cephalus: Observations on Film Music Analysis

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Interest in the scholarly study of film music is relatively new, despite the fact that some individuals have been associated with it, closely, for decades.¹ This interest is growing, as evinced by the present collection of articles. But if we are witness to the proliferation of film music scholarship, we should be assured that the subject holds the potential to provide answers to basic questions of analytic inquiry we must put to it. Questions such as *Does the subject merit attention? What can be gained from this research? Has it relevance to other scholarly inquiries in music?* are central to this line of thought. The purpose of this essay is to posit a number of ideas and queries which may be used to answer these questions.

It is fitting that film music scholarship addresses these hurdles and surmounts them, for if it cannot overcome the challenges they pose, scholarly interest in cinema music should be directed elsewhere. Like Cephalus in Greek mythology, who was doomed to hit whatever target he attempted, scholars must be wary else their efforts be directed toward a mirage.

¹This list includes Frederick Sternfeld, Lawrence Morton, Clifford McCarty, and Fred Steiner, among others.

My film music research spans some twelve years and has centered around three composers who were active, principally, from the late 1930s until the early 1970s—Aaron Copland, Gail Kubik, and Leith Stevens.² Their work has shaped my understanding of cinema music and is reflected in the comments which follow. Copland and Kubik considered themselves to be composers of absolute music, primarily, whereas Stevens did not. Each studied composition assiduously, was devoted to his craft, was eminently conversant with the major trends and events in the concert hall, and felt strongly that work done for the cinema should represent one's best efforts. Had my research focussed on composers less able, no doubt my conclusions about film scoring and film music might be different.

My inquiry began with the basic assumption that film scores contained material worthy of analytic inquiry. But I wondered, *How does the music function, as music, within the context of the film? Can there be a satisfactory measure of excellence in film scores? If so, what criteria can be used to determine it? To what degree does formal and tonal organization exist within the scores? How does the music relate to the extra-musical aspects of the film such as story line, screen action, dialogue, narration, etc.?* These questions intrigued me and I sought to answer as many of them as I could.

Film music, by its nature, sets itself apart from absolute music in significant ways. Most often, it is not the star of the show, but a single player among several that comprise the artistic whole. Copland addressed this as early as 1940, when he said,

In Hollywood I looked at long stretches of film before the music had been added, and I got the impression that music is like a small flame put under the screen to help warm it. It is this very function, however, which so often gives the composer a minor role. There is no sense in denying the subordinate position the composer fills. After all, film music makes sense only if it helps the film; no matter how good, distinguished, or successful, the

²Aaron Copland (b. 1900), Gail Kubik (1914-84), Leith Stevens (1909-70).

music must be secondary in importance to the story being told on the screen.³

Does Copland's acknowledgment of the ancillary role of music in the cinema preclude a scholarly investigation of film music? No. It is worthwhile to attempt to fathom the essential properties of film music, even considering its subsidiary nature within the total film entity. Music need not have undisputed, or even equal, sway to be worthy of study. It performs a separate and special function within the context of the film, just as it does in opera, music theater, and ballet. The use of music to enhance or augment other forms of artistic statement is not a new concept. Indeed, it is one of its most ancient functions.

If, then, one embarks upon a serious investigation of film music, is it possible to judge the quality or excellence of a given score? If so, against what criteria should it be measured? For without objective assessment, we run the risk of ascribing, perhaps unwittingly, attributes to film music derived more from the imagination and intellect than from the notes themselves. Copland provided information over fifty years ago that may be used inferentially to answer these questions. He wrote, ". . . I can see three important ways in which music helps a picture. The first is by intensifying the emotional impact of any given scene, the second by creating an illusion of continuity, and the third by providing a kind of neutral background music."⁴ He expanded these observations nine years later in an article for the *New York Times*.⁵ But fundamentally, neither addresses specifically the assessment of excellence or quality in a film score, so much as the role of music in the cinema.

³Aaron Copland, "Second Thoughts on Hollywood," *Modern Music* 17 (March-April 1940): 141-43.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Aaron Copland, "Tip to Moviegoers: Take Off Those Ear-muffs," *New York Times*, 6 November 1949: 28-32.

Copland's younger colleague, Gail Kubik, provided further insight into the creation of successful film scores through several articles and papers he wrote that dealt with functional music. These appeared contemporaneously with the comments made by Copland. In 1943, Kubik participated in the *Writers' Congress* sponsored by the Hollywood Writers' Mobilization and the University of California. In his remarks, he said, "The real problem . . . which confronts the composer . . . is this: can he discover the form which the film itself takes, and assuming that he has the instinctive dramatic talent which enables him to perceive this form, can he then translate his reactions to the film's structure into terms which are both musically satisfactory and convincing and yet which also supplement the dramatic impact of the film itself?"⁶ And in a later interview with musicologist Frederick Sternfeld, Kubik added,

(a) Never write down to your public. (A movie score is as serious a work as a symphony.) (b) Don't be afraid of using a contemporary idiom. (Music of 1950 need not, and, indeed, should not sound like Tchaikovsky. The Russian himself never aped a predecessor already in his grave for over half a century.) (c) Serious and modern as the score should be, don't forget that its first requirement is to be functional. (A movie score is not written for a few smart people, it is written for the mass audience of today and is bound to fail unless it contributes to the film's success with that audience.)⁷

These comments by Copland and Kubik are insightful and valuable, yet they fall short of establishing objective parameters of

⁶Kubik's presentation was entitled *Music in the Documentary Film*. Other participants in that particular session, which was called *Music and the War*, were Sol Kaplan, Adolph Deutsch, David Raksin, Hanns Eisler, Lou Cooper, Darius Milhaud, and William Grant Still.

⁷Frederick Sternfeld, "Kubik's *McBoing* Score: With Excerpts of Score," *Film Music Notes* 10 (November-December 1950): 8-16.

sufficient specificity against which one might assess quality. However, Kubik's first comment above, regarding the form implicit in a given film, and the corresponding musical form it engenders, is of particular interest. For there can be no doubt that the screen images and the story line influence, profoundly, the shape and unfolding of the music. Copland recognized this, saying, ". . . Composing film music is not itself 'easier' than writing concert music except that the form, length, and general tone are set in advance, so the composer does not have to make those initial decisions. . . ." ⁸ For the film music scholar, a composer's reactions to the formal limitations and impositions of specific films becomes a critical matter in assessing the quality of the corresponding film scores.

The question then arises, are the external limits that a film brings with it different, fundamentally, than the self-imposed parameters chosen for absolute music? For example, commissions extended to composers frequently bear limitations regarding form, length, and general tone. ⁹ The answer is less definite here; valid points exist on both sides of the question. This results partly from semantics—how strictly one interprets the term *fundamentally*—and the degree to which a given composer might place limits on a work. However, Copland spoke to the point insightfully when he said, ". . . Essentially there is nothing about the movie medium to rule out any composer with a dramatic imagination. But the man who insists on complete self-expression had better stay home and write symphonies. He will never be happy in Hollywood." ¹⁰

Notwithstanding this comment, which I feel to be accurate, my research has shown that specific types of formal organization exist at both foreground and background levels in the film scores I have studied. To be sure, they are linked to filmic form but transcend it, at times, in wonderful ways. Scores which, to me, are most effective

⁸Quoted in Aaron Copland and Vivian Perlis, *Copland: 1900 Through 1942*, (New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1984), 290.

⁹A setting of the *Ordinary* of the Mass is such an example.

¹⁰Copland, "Tip to Moviegoers": 28-32.

possess what Nadia Boulanger called *la grande ligne*, or *the long line* of logical inevitability in music. This quality can be present in a score regardless of its particular external shape or form. It arises as a result of the accumulation of specific, related musical occurrences; but, one's recognition of its presence is often quintessentially subjective. Its value lies in direct proportion to its ability to impart a sense of cohesiveness to the musical flow, the realization of which by the listener need not be apparent at the conscious level. It is a basic ingredient in most music, including film music, where its relative importance is even greater, perhaps, than in absolute music. It touches upon some of the broader and more provocative aspects of what music is and is not, how one perceives the passage of time within a musical context, the role of musical dynamism or its absence, ways that structural form and tonal organization function in music, what the concept of *development* in music is, and what the various roles and functions of musical rhythm are at various levels of a composition.

For me, tracing the threads of *la grande ligne* in film scores has been rewarding and enlightening. I have discovered the presence of a *Grundgestalt* in several of the scores I have studied. And in the case of Copland and Kubik, I have seen the same fundamental aspects present in their film scores as in their absolute music. This strikes me as important in that it shows that the links between the two seemingly disparate types of music are quite strong. Based upon this, I have come to believe that the line of demarcation between film music and absolute music can be much more narrow than has been believed previously. Therefore it seems that a means of assessing quality in cinema music, if it first fulfills its basic mission of supporting the film, can be found by determining the degree to which the score exhibits internal unity, coherence, logic, and organization, i.e., *la grande ligne*—the same criteria that are applied to determine quality in other types of music. This is not to say, however, that a score which is formally well-conceived according to some pre-existing reference will necessarily be good film music. For indeed, such unrealistic and irrational notions have, for years, made

the concert hall composers suspect by Hollywood insiders. That suspicion has not been entirely unjustified, for some of the so-called *academic* composers and theorists have failed completely in understanding that functional music *is* different than absolute music. Historically, if Hollywood movie composers have been anything, they have been versatile, quick, and practical—commendable qualities. It is understandable that their patience with those who are dogmatic, slow, or impractical would wear thin quickly. Yet the very traits that commend the Hollywood adepts have too often taken the place of originality and quality in their music. Indeed, composers with too distinctive a style have always run the risk of not being hired, having departed too far, as it were, from the accepted norms of Hollywood practice.¹¹ One would suppose that this issue might have been resolved decades ago since it was addressed in the 1930s and 1940s by Antheil, Copland, and others. But unfortunately, it persists today and is having a deleterious effect on film music and film music scholarship. There can be no question that Hollywood has exerted a stifling effect upon itself; a more open-minded approach is needed. To be sure, there are those who would argue that film music is not *music* at all. In a sense, this is true. One could make a similar analogy today, comparing the puerile rhymes and music of rap songs to more substantive artistic works—even in the world of popular music—that contain greater interest and complexity. Both types of music in this analogy may involve similar resources—the human voice and musical instruments, for example; both may be functional in nature; both may be recorded to disk and marketed similarly, but their intrinsic worth is vastly different. This despite the fact that public opinion may reward the mediocre and ignore the sublime. Considering the tremendous amount of bad film music that has been

¹¹Gail Kubik is a good example of such a composer. Although his documentary film scores received excellent critical reviews and praise from other film composers in and out of Hollywood, his feature film work in that city had a different reception. Most of his score for William Wyler's *The Desperate Hours* was thrown out, not because it didn't fit well with the film but because it was considered to be too modern and dissonant for its day.

written in this century, one would be hard pressed to argue too strenuously with assertions that some film music is not *music*.

Let us now examine a film that, by consensus, does contain superior music—the 1950 UPA cartoon *Gerald McBoing-Boing*. It won an *Oscar* in 1951 for best animated film and has a first-rate score by the Pulitzer prize-winning composer, Gail Kubik. But what qualities does this score possess that make it *good* film music. Does the score itself offer anything to support a contention that the music has inherent quality and worth? To answer this, the questions enumerated in the fourth paragraph above can be useful.

The music functions quite like glue which holds the film together. It accomplishes this, in part, by its coherent and logical unfolding—creating Boulanger's *la grande ligne*—while still reflecting admirably the situational and dramatic necessities of the film. The music has humor, which fits the nature of this cartoon, and is insouciant, witty, and sophisticated. It was highly original for its day in its harmonic idiom, rhythmic audacity, and basic approach; in short, it met the demands of the film's story line and visual images superbly and continues to delight, even today. While potentially this music could have had almost any conceivable formal and tonal organization, from tightly knit to amorphous, it is interesting to note the choices Kubik made in this regard. The examples shown below reflect the actual music in the film and the manner in which Kubik came to terms with what he perceived to be the form implicit in the film itself.¹²

¹²The sub-sections are delineated on the basis of thematic content.

Example 1. Themes of Sub-sections.

a)

Example 1a consists of two staves of music. The top staff is in treble clef with a 2/4 time signature. It begins with a series of chords marked with a forte 'f' dynamic and includes accents and slurs. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a 3/4 time signature, featuring a melodic line with slurs and dynamic markings.

b)

Example 1b is a single staff of music in treble clef with a 2/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line with slurs and a forte 'f' dynamic marking.

c)

Example 1c consists of two staves of music. The top staff is in treble clef with a 3/4 time signature, featuring a melodic line with slurs and dynamic markings. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature, featuring a melodic line with slurs and dynamic markings.

d)

Example 1d consists of two staves of music. The top staff is in treble clef with a 2/4 time signature, featuring a melodic line with slurs and dynamic markings. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a 2/4 time signature, featuring a melodic line with slurs and dynamic markings.

e)

Example 1e consists of two staves of music. The top staff is in treble clef with a 2/4 time signature, featuring a melodic line with slurs and dynamic markings. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a 2/4 time signature, featuring a melodic line with slurs and dynamic markings.

f)

Example 1f consists of two staves of music. The top staff is in treble clef with a 2/4 time signature, featuring a melodic line with slurs and dynamic markings. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a 2/4 time signature, featuring a melodic line with slurs and dynamic markings.

Example 1. (cont'd.)

g)



h)



i)



j)



k)

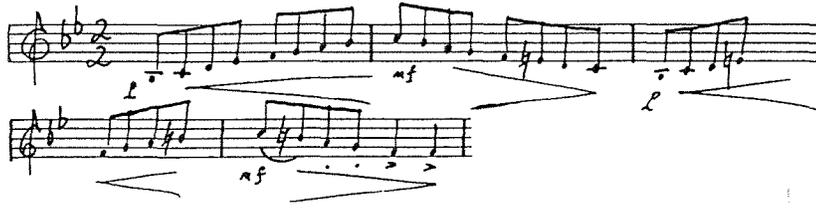


l)



Example 1. (cont'd.)

m)



Example 2. Formal Organization of *Gerald McBoing-Boing*.

Measure numbers:	1-38	* 39-125	* 126-151	*
Sections:	A	* B	* A	*
Sub-sections:	a-b-c-d-b	* e-f-e/a-f/a-e/a-d-g-d-b-g-d-g-d	* a-g-b	*
Tonal center:	C	* G	* C	*

.....*

Measure numbers:	152-275	* 276-303	* 300-311	*
Sections:	C	* A	* Coda	*
Sub-sections:	h-i-h-i-j-k-l-m	* a-b	* b	*
Tonal center:	E	* C	* C	*

.....*

A-B-A-C-A-Coda= 5-part form plus coda *

projected in the principal theme of such a film. This too, as but a tiny aspect of Kubik's conception, fits into the larger panoply of logical organization and coherence which the score possesses.

A look at the film music of another composer, Aaron Copland, is particularly illuminating. In his score to the acclaimed documentary film *The City*, one finds music of distinction and excellence. Stravinsky praised the score, as did Paul Bowles, Henry Cowell, and others, including its makers Willard Van Dyke and Ralph Steiner.¹³ Steiner said,

When I heard for [the] first time the music (recorded) with the film I saw that the shots were held together more by the music than by film cement. I was bowled over not only by what Aaron had done but also by what Willard and I had done—it was an unbelievable amount more exciting. . . . *The City*, a documentary, was composed of hundreds of various shots. It could have been jumpy and lacked flow. Aaron tied all the misc. [sic] shots together and made the climaxes climactic.¹⁴

Van Dyke added, "We all thought the score was exactly right, there were no requests for him to change anything. . . . Although I had film scores by Marc Blitzstein, Wm. Schumann [sic], Morton Gould, Mel Powell, and others less famous, I have always liked the score Aaron did the best."¹⁵ A critical look at this music shows an array

¹³The Stravinsky quote is reported in Copland and Perlis, *Copland: 1900 Through 1942*, 74; Bowles's comments are contained in "On the Film Front," *Modern Music* 17 (October-November 1939): 62; Cowell's words are part of his "The League's Evening of Films," *Modern Music* 18 (March-April 1941): 176. Van Dyke praised Copland's work in letters to this author of 8 and 21 July 1983; Steiner's comments are found in letters to the author dated 19 July and 2 August 1983.

¹⁴Letter to the author of 19 July 1983.

¹⁵Letter to the author dated 8 July 1983.

of sophisticated compositional devices and procedures that link its constituent parts together to form a well-unified whole. These include the presence of a *Grundgestalt*, important motivic and thematic recurrences, a consistent and definite musical style, and a definite plan of long-range structural and tonal organization wherein the prolongation of a tonic triad on *C* can be seen spanning the entire work.¹⁶ The film can be divided into four major parts based upon the story line and visual images. These individual entities also exhibit internal unity of motivic and thematic material as well as tonal organization. Example 5 is a reduction of the tonal organization of the first major division of the film, spanning 291 measures within a framework of two sections and seven sub-sections. The background prolongation is of the fundamental harmonic progression, *I-V-I*.

Space prohibits a more detailed discussion of this music here. Suffice it to say that the excellence of Copland's score, like Kubik's mentioned above, arises from a sophisticated set of relationships that links individual portions of the music to one another and to the film itself. The logic and coherence of the score is not accidental but is an organic aspect of its conception, skillfully executed by a master craftsman.

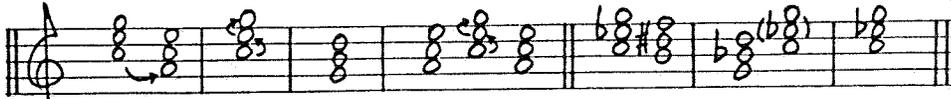
An examination of Copland's first two Hollywood scores—*Of Mice and Men* and *Our Town*—reveals similar qualities of compositional congruity.¹⁷ This is significant, for the demands of the Hollywood feature films were different in some ways than those of *The City*, a documentary, or Kubik's cartoon score discussed above, *Gerald McBoing-Boing*. Yet, fundamentally, the problem was much the same—providing suitable music to help the film come alive.

¹⁶For a detailed examination of this music see the author's *Style, Structure, and Tonal Organization in the Early Film Scores of Aaron Copland* (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1986).

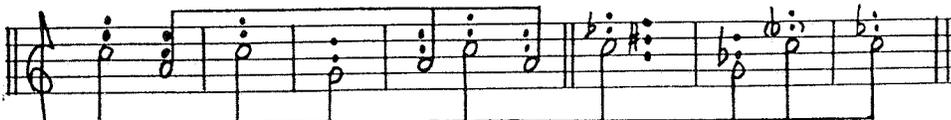
¹⁷*Of Mice and Men* was written in 1939 while *Our Town* was done in 1940. These film scores are discussed in depth in the author's dissertation *Style, Structure, and Tonal Organization in the Early Film Scores of Aaron Copland*.

Example 5. Reduction of Tonal Organization in First Division.

Section: 1 2



Sub-section: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7





My research has shown that film scores written by these talented composers have many features in common with their absolute music. In many cases, these aspects are not immediately recognizable to the viewer/listener but exist nonetheless. This should not be taken to suggest that the best film scores are those that most resemble music for the concert hall—not at all. It does suggest that quality music of any genre has levels of coherence and sophistication at more than one level. A key to understanding cinema music more fully may be found in looking for these relationships and linking them to the demands imposed by the films themselves.

While the determination of excellence in film music will always contain a large measure of subjectivity, more study of an objective nature is needed to understand this body of music that is largely unexplored to date. The information we glean will help us to understand the whole area of film music better and will enable us to view the worth of individual film scores more intelligently and

from a better perspective. Lest we become jaded in our endeavors, we would do well to remember the words of awe and wonderment about film music spoken by Copland forty-one years ago: “For when all is said and done the art of combining moving pictures with musical tones is still a mysterious art.”¹⁸

¹⁸Copland, “Tip to Moviegoers”: 32.