

## Book Reviews

Claudia Gorbman. *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*. London: BFI Publishing; Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Reviewed by Richard Littlefield

Music analysts who have ventured into film theory, only to be let down by anemic interpretations of film music, will find a refreshing alternative in *Unheard Melodies*. Claudia Gorbman's book is not another list of composing tips nor set of interviews with representative composers. Written by a film scholar and sensitive musician, *Unheard Melodies* is a systematic and provocative study of the power of music to shape our perception of narrative.

Part I sets out to answer two questions. "What is music doing in the movies, and how does it do it?" (p. 2). The first divides into questions about how music got into movies and what music does to us as we watch them, with "movie" considered a mix of narrative, technology, and social institution. Chapter 2 rehearses the fascinating and uneven transition from (not so) silent to sound film, and the standard explanations for why music is in the movies: pragmatic, to drown out projector noise; historical, a natural outgrowth of opera and vaudeville; aesthetic, to replace speech; psychological-anthropological.

In chapter 3 Gorbman endorses the latter argument. Psychologically speaking, music relaxes the “psychic censor” and thus weakens resistance to suggestion, as evidenced by use of music in factories to increase worker output and in stores to loosen purse strings (p. 57). And music supplies “anchorage,” interpretive assistance to combat potential ambiguity of visual cues (p. 55). An example, from *Jaws*, is the double basses’ ominous, rising half-step motive, which alerts the audience to impending danger from the killer shark, despite the on-screen image of a calm sea (p. 58). Music also anchors interpretation by establishing mood and historical setting (discussed below) and by supplying emotional depth not expressed in words, since music parallels the workings of the subconscious and substitutes for experience (p. 60). A Bette Davis film, *Now, Voyager*, furnishes an example of this substitution, wherein music takes the place of conversation during longing gazes between two lovers (p. 67). Gorbman accepts the argument that, as one of our first sensations in the “sonorous envelope” of the womb, sound endows music with an immanent capacity to instill a sense of security like that supposedly enjoyed in prenatal bliss (p. 6). This is a fascinating hypothesis, but here, in the theoretical section of the book, some reasons for accepting this argument would have been welcome.<sup>1</sup>

Anthropologically speaking—and the line between the anthropological and the psychological is a fine one—Gorbman argues that music evokes a sense of collective identity through its ancient ties to ritual, creates an “untroublesome social subject” by weakening defenses against “fantasy structures,” and thereby “sutures” the spectator’s consciousness into the narration (pp. 57-58). Some may notice that this idealized spectator, Gorbman’s “we” (“*We* forsake contemplating the abstract arrangement of sound. . . . *We* do not automatically identify a sound with its source.” pp. 11-12), is itself a (naive) fantasy structure. Other studies, where interest is in real not ideal spectators, have shown that not all members of the audience participate in the same ritual, even though they are all in

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<sup>1</sup>To pursue the issue of music’s intrinsic powers, see Gilbert Rouget, *Music and Trance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), esp. chapters 1, 5, and 7.

the same room.<sup>2</sup> So be aware that Gorbman's ideal spectator is already something of an untroublesome social subject, even before exposure to the wiles of film music. Also, film theory buffs may find it curious that there is no discussion of the "decentered subject" (the spectator as an intersection of many social determinants and never fully self-present), an issue debated in *Screen* and other film journals in the late Seventies and early Eighties, the time period in which much of *Unheard Melodies* was written.<sup>3</sup>

The rest of the book makes up for the too-brief theoretical discussions. Avoiding the overemphasis on the "composer's-eye view" which dominates many film music studies (a remnant of Fifties' *auterism*) and using the tools of semiotic narratology, Gorbman produces compelling analyses of the synergetic relation between music and image. With readings of films such as *Citizen Kane*, *Blue Angel*, *All About Eve*, *The Jazz Singer*, and *Mildred Pierce*, among many others, Gorbman answers the second question: how film music works. (The reader who grows impatient with her repeated insistence on the contributions of music to film should take it as a not-so-hidden polemic against major works of film theory that often do not even consider sound, much less music, a crucial element of film structure.)<sup>4</sup>

Music can be analyzed according to three codes, systems into which signs are organized and which determine how signs relate to each other: (1) "Pure" musical codes, the ones most familiar to music analysts, deal with musical structure alone. (2) "Cultural"

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<sup>2</sup>See for example Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986) and Stuart Hall, *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980). These studies, and others like them, have been influenced by reception theory. On this see Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup>And Gorbman does not consider the ways in which film may actually create its spectators. For a statistical study of this process see Richard Allen and Shirley Hatchett, "The Media and Social Reality Effects," *Communications* 13/1 (1986): 97-123.

<sup>4</sup>Christian Metz's authoritative tome (*The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* [Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1975-82]) contains nary a word about film music.

musical codes, reminiscent of Boris Asafiev's intonations, elicit and refer to enculturated reactions. In one example, a scene from *King Kong* (1933), music signifies the male/female cultural opposition, through use of melodramatic orchestration to portray Woman as romantic Good Object. Lush strings accompany the sweet nothings spoken by Jack, the first mate-hero, to the heroine, Ann. When "objective" conversation between Jack and the skipper repeatedly interrupts the love scene, the strings fall silent at each interruption, signifying no-nonsense-male-talk (p. 80). Gorbman demonstrates her mastery of Structuralist technique in her derivation of this and other binary oppositions operative in the film (p. 81). (3) "Cinematic" musical codes specify relationships in which the music is codified by the film context, as when themes are associated with characters, places, and emotions in order to establish semiotic "anchorage." Chapter 1 explains and illustrates these three codes and their functions relative to the traditional classification of film music into diegetic and non-diegetic.<sup>5</sup> Diegetic music emanates from a source within the narrative (a radio, a band playing). Non-diegetic or "background" music is on the soundtrack but has no visible source. Besides reinforcing visual associations through leitmotifs and themes, music draws attention away from technological artifice and thus provides formal continuity. For example, in slow motion episodes and in flashbacks/flashforwards, music bridges the resulting temporal gaps which threaten the illusion of unity of time. And music normally accompanies changes of location which require "cuts," abrupt shifts of camera focus, produced by edits, which threaten the illusion of unity of place. For example, diegetic music such as a dance hall orchestra may be heard faintly as the camera centers on actors outside the hall, then get louder after they enter the hall, as if we are hearing through the actors' ears, cushioning the visual shock of relocation (p. 25). To demonstrate the codes, diegetic/non-diegetic music, and that music is not a poor cousin to narrative but

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<sup>5</sup>Diegesis is "the narratively implied world of the actions and the characters" (p. 21). This term is Plato's, taken up again recently by literary theorists, and it links Gorbman's work to the broader field of narrative studies, a subject of inquiry in various interpretive disciplines, from literary criticism to music analysis to the practice of law.

that the two exist in a dialectical relationship, Gorbman applies the “commutation test,” borrowed from phonology. Instead of phonemes, musical variants are compared with the original score in order to measure the soundtrack’s influence on meaning and mood (pp. 16-19), a procedure music theorists will recognize from norm-deviation analysis of art music.

One could ask for a more exact definition of codes as methodological categories. The “pure” musical code, for instance, is not so pure on close inspection, since analysis of music solely in terms of internal structure relies on a cultural code operative in the interpretation of Western art music and perpetuated by notions of artistic autonomy and disinterested observation.<sup>6</sup> And “cultural” musical codes often shade into “cinematic” codes, since it is from the movies and not excursions down the Ole Chisholm Trail that most spectators learn to interpret tom-tom music as a sign of Indians lurking nearby. The interesting question then becomes, How do these codes get there to begin with? Are they properties of the film? If not, how are these codes imposed by the film industry and by the spectators themselves? To answer these questions a film music rhetoric—in its classical sense as modes of persuasion—is needed along with or in place of the Structuralist method used here.

Gorbman’s method does not acknowledge the Deconstructive or any other agenda lined up against interpretive enterprises that posit a unified system as their analysis object. On the other hand, it could be argued that the film music studied here was not composed under the factious constraints of Postmodernism. Via “The Model of Max Steiner,” the classical Hollywood film established in the Thirties and Forties supplies the conventions or grammatical “rules” for Gorbman’s analyses (chapter 4). Film music should be (1) invisible (we don’t see the soundtrack orchestra); (2) “inaudible” (whence comes the title of the book) and strictly subordinate to the narrative; (3) emotive (tritones for Suspense, etc.); (4) used for narrative cuing (character themes, physical gestures, etc.); (5) a

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<sup>6</sup>Simon Frith goes on to connect “pure” musical codes to modes of production and consumption in bourgeois societies, in “Hearing Secret Harmonies,” *High Theory/Low Culture*, ed. by Colin MacCabe (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 53-70.

means of formal continuity (discussed above); (6) a means of creating formal unity (more on this later); and (7) allowed to break any of these rules when necessary, the obligatory artistic license (p. 73). Gorbman amplifies each of these rules. Rule 4 (narrative cuing) suggests for example that music operates denotatively through codified harmony-orchestration to establish time (“modal” music for the sixteenth century, use of period instruments and songs), place (marimbas for Latin America, the pseudo-Saharan clarinet melody in *Casablanca*), character (wailing sax for the Temptress, wah-wah mute for the Clown), beginnings (title music to signal genre: melodrama, comedy, adventure, etc.), endings (crescendos to reinforce closure, continuation of music into closing credits). Connotatively, music imitates physical gestures (“Mickey Mousing”) and with sforzandi underlines poignant moments (“stingers”). Music also signifies particular emotions, as in the (over)use of Beethoven’s Opus 27 for Sadness, and the early years of film saw publications like *Motion Picture Moods* (1928), a compendium of themes for affects such as Neutral, Sinister, Chase, Sea Storm. Gorbman illustrates all these rules and more in a virtuosic reading of *Mildred Pierce* (1945), with score by Steiner (pp. 91-98).

Chapter 5 outlines Eisler’s and Adorno’s critique and rejection of all the rules listed above. Gorbman defends her acceptance of those rules as analytic norms by pointing out that analysis must begin somewhere and that the audience pays for the identification such conventions provide. The audience doesn’t want to be puzzled or have its consciousness raised (p. 109): a pragmatic defense against scions of Modernism, one that wisely refuses to do battle on their turf.

My only quarrel is with the circularity involved in trying always to find a unified relationship between the narrative and the music (Rule 6). Once you’ve decided in advance that a movie is a complete textual system “predicated on the subject’s [spectator’s] unified body” (p. 7) and that “music aids in the construction of formal and narrative unity” (p. 73), how can you *not* discover the unity you’ve already decided is there? Gorbman can hardly bear the blame for this rugged little fly in the Structuralist ointment. Still, a rage for unity seems out of place when interpreting a medium that is the product of multiple authors and usually not conceived as an

aesthetic object.<sup>7</sup> Though one of the most successful approaches to analysis of popular art has been to produce such complex accounts of the “low” that is transformed into “high,” the fact that movies are designed first and foremost to make money and created under the almost total control of producers and directors who do not hesitate to substitute their own creative two-cents worth for that of the composer—all this makes it hard to buy any total-artwork fetishism that might ignore the real poetics of moviemaking and film music composing. Hands-on experience has taught me that, in the case of music for film-radio-television, the powers that be are less interested, if at all, in the “intrinsic” beauty of their product than in its capacity to generate faithful listeners and watchers and, therefore, *buyers*. Gorbman rarely acknowledges that there may be economic concerns afoot in the poetics of motion pictures (pp. 162-63).

The last three chapters do not pursue the totalizing agenda of Rule 6 and instead concentrate on specific aspects of music-film interaction. An analysis of *Zéro de conduite* (1933) explores methodological problems, the main one being how to “quote” a film. There are two standard ways: (1) Present the dialogue with a verbal description of the music. (2) Present score samples along with still shots. Gorbman opts for the latter format and provides themes beneath still shots. The resourceful analyst will no doubt find ways to elaborate thematic sketches and ways to incorporate aspects of timbre, tempo, and texture into the still shot format.<sup>8</sup> This should lay the groundwork for more sophisticated descriptions of musical structure than a “thump in G major” and an “onomatopoetic flourish” rendered by an “elephantine trombone” (p. 129).

Gorbman is most impressive in the last two chapters. The analysis of *Sous les toits de Paris* (1930) concerns a film that deliberately rejects Hollywood conventions. Breaking the “inaudibility” rule, for one, music in this film prevails over dialogue, with an almost complete absence of non-musical sounds. This reversal of

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<sup>7</sup>My thanks to Professor Thomas J. Mathiesen for reminding me of this fact.

<sup>8</sup>Gorbman borrows the still shot-score set up from Roger Manvell and John Huntley, *The Technique of Film Music* (London: Focal Press, 1980; orig. pub., 1957), 140-49.

the normal “sound hierarchy” as well as the disruption of “auditory space” by masking and desynchronization of sound with visual events prompt just two of several intriguing discussions (pp. 141-50). In the final chapter *Hangover Square* (1944), a film about a homicidal and schizophrenic composer, illustrates what Nietzsche somewhere called the heartlessness of music. Rather than “empathetic” (emotionally consonant with the narrative situation) or “didactic” (commentarial), Bernard Herrmann’s score is often ironic or “anempathetic,” as when a street organ plays merrily while a murder is committed and when a concerto plays while the concert hall burns down. Paradigmatic of Hollywood conventions, *Hangover Square* exhibits repetition/variation of both music and image, and uses musical themes to connote mental states (dissonance=Crazy). Gorbman draws upon psychoanalytic theories to explain music’s ability to signify indifference and comes up with a powerful and convincing reading of the film (pp. 153-61).

So what has all this to do with *music* analysis? More than what it actually says, *Unheard Melodies* implies many directions for music study, a few of which follow: (1) As shown above, the specificity of musical codes could stand some work. Close examination of so-called pure musical codes shows that these are in fact extremely “narrowcast” codes, engaged by a limited listenership. A rigorous questioning of the pure and the other codes may provide them the definition needed if they are to remain viable analytic categories, in or out of film music.<sup>9</sup> (2) Montage, pastiche, and other editing techniques, viewed in relation to the soundtrack, could furnish a basis for comparative studies with music that also exhibits those techniques, such as works by Ives, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Copland. If music in film eliminates potential distraction by smoothing over changes of scene and by injecting temporal continuity into sequences like flashbacks and flashforwards, what happens when music mimics or plays along with cuts and time disruptions, as occurs in ballet, musicals, and especially videos? What happens to

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<sup>9</sup>For thorough discussions and applications of semiotic codes in mass media see John Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982).

listeners' apprehension of plot in the face of episodic music-narrative genres which are in opposition to the continuity of unified, beginning-complication-denouement genres? Studies of "aberrant" films like *Sous les toits* may lead to interpretations of stage works such as Brecht-Weill theater, whose intent was, among other things, to defy and overthrow purportedly unified genres. (3) Those put off by the abundant, slippery, and exotic jargon of some brands of musical semiotics will appreciate *Unheard Melodies'* clear and accessible exposition and demonstration of basic principles of signification at work in a medium where the dual nature of the sign as envisioned by Saussurian linguistics lends itself to semiotic analysis. Gorbman's approaches to music-narrative interaction at many levels suggest new and interesting directions in semiotic analysis of opera, early Baroque oratorio, and other musical-dramatic productions which have resisted interpretation other than that of pitch structure.

Readers of *Unheard Melodies* will no doubt find other implications for further study and other theoretical points to engage, and it is one mark of a "good" book to call for elaboration and critical response. They will also find superb organization: varied redundancy, with departures from and returns to analytic examples, and tight integration, with summaries that begin and end chapters.

Don't be fooled by the gaudy pop cover. *Unheard Melodies* is a thoughtful, well written, scholarly book whose bibliography alone is worth the price of admission. Any study of film music, serious or tourist, should begin right here.

*Film Music I*. Edited and with an Introduction by Clifford McCarty. New York: Garland Publishing, 1989.

Reviewed by Ronald Rodman

Joining the growing corpus of literature on film music is *Film Music 1*, a collection of articles providing a forum for important film-music issues and source materials. The articles, edited by Clifford McCarty, offer diverse perspectives on film music from the Twenties