

MUNHEARD MELODIES

NARRATIVE FILM MUSIC

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Chapter IV

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to *take place*. And this place is inside each one of us, in an economic arrangement which history has shaped at the same time as it was shaping the film industry.¹

What are these texts produced by the classical cinematic institution? In the sense that we cannot identify *the one* prototypical classical film, no one textual model exists. Rather, there exists a pool of conventions, of options, whose combination and recombination constitutes an easily recognized discursive field. We know that even allowing for a wide diversity of genres and studio and authorial styles, there is something identifiable as classical Hollywood cinema, an implicit model that determines the duration of a film, the possibilities of its narrative structure, and its organization of spatiotemporal dimensions via *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing (that is, the “continuity system”), and sound recording and mixing.

André Bazin’s influential essay “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema” identified the classical age of the sound film as the late thirties.

By 1938 or 1939 the talking film, particularly in France and in the United States, had reached a level of classical perfection as a result, on one hand, of the maturing of different kinds of drama developed in part over the past ten years and in part inherited from the silent film, and, on the other, of the stabilization of technical progress.²

Bazin likens the state of cinematic form to the equilibrium profile of a riverbed: just as geological equilibrium results from “the requisite amount of erosion,” film genres and narrating techniques reached a new stability a decade after the coming of sound. He describes 1938–1939 as a moment of “classical perfection” of the feature film, exemplified by *Stagecoach*, *Jezebel*, and *Le Jour se lève*. What typifies the classical mode of narrative discourse? For Bazin, storytelling in this cinema is characterized by an editing whose purpose is *analytic*, *dramatic*, and *psychological*. The classical film ordinarily unfolds in several hundred shots, but these shots do not build up a narrative in the synthetic language of Soviet montage. Classical *decoupage* presupposes a unified scenic space. It renders this space via “establishing” (long) shots and subsequent breakdown; spatial intelligibility is safeguarded by such devices as the 180-degree rule, the eyeline match, and the shot reverse-shot pattern. Further, cutting is motivated by dramatic and/or psychological logic, accommodating to the spectator’s need to see details of narrative importance.

Since Bazin, work on such films as *Stagecoach* (1939), *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), *The Big Sleep* (1946), *Suspicion* (1941), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), and *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) has studied features of editing and narration in the context of Hollywood’s strongly consolidated “classical” system. These

CHAPTER IV

Classical Hollywood Practice: The Model of Max Steiner

Chapter 1 explored the ways in which music can function formally and narratively in a film. Chapters 2 and 3 examined aesthetic, historical, technological, and psychoanalytically oriented explanations for the development and functioning of nondiegetic music in dominant (Hollywood) narrative cinema. In this chapter I shall describe the actual form music takes in Hollywood films, and the principles determining it. First, however, we must situate our investigation in the context of the “classical model” of narrative cinema in general, for the codification of mainstream film has everything to do with the musical language that goes with it.

To use the term “classical cinema” means understanding this cinema as an institution, and a class of texts which this institution produces. The classical film text (which at its most specific is a Hollywood feature film of the thirties and forties) is a conjuncture of several economies, a narrative discourse determined by the organization of labor and money in the cinema industry, by/in ideology, and by the mechanisms of pleasure operating on subjects in this culture. Christian Metz reminds us of these interconnected aspects of the system:

It is not enough for the studios to hand over a polished little mechanism labelled ‘fiction film’; the play of elements still has to be realised . . . it has

interrelated “classical” features predominate in cinema as far back as the teens and into the commercial cinema of the present, as well as in commercial cinemas of many other countries.

Recent film scholarship has recast the Bazinian description of the classical filmic system in two major ways. First, his phenomenological conceptualization of the spectator as an autonomous perceiving subject—who “wants” to see dramatically important details, and whose perceptual demands cinema satisfies—has given way to an anti-idealist stance which regards as crucial the film’s ideological and psychical positioning of its viewing subject. The film positions the spectator; it does the looking and listening for the spectator. Classical editing has been reconsidered and understood in light of its particularly compelling strategies of channeling the spectator’s desires, giving the “impression of reality,” and encouraging imaginary identification with the film.

The second change in critical emphasis goes hand in hand with the first. If story refers to the narrative world and what happens in it, and if discourse refers to all the means of articulating the story, classical Hollywood film works toward the goal of a transparent or invisible discourse, and promoting fullest involvement in the story. For instance, cutting is a potentially disruptive characteristic of filmic discourse; Hollywood “effaces” the discontinuity that is part and parcel of cutting by means of continuity editing. Continuity editing is a kind of work that masks its own traces, a highly coded symbolic discourse permitting the spectator’s fullest identification with the film, as Metz explains:

[T]he basic characteristic of this kind of discourse, and the very principle of its effectiveness as discourse, is precisely that it obliterates all traces of the enunciation, and masquerades as story. . . . a fundamental disavowal [the film “knows” and at the same time “doesn’t know” it is being watched] has guided the whole of classical cinema into the paths of ‘story’, relentlessly erasing its discursive basis . . .³

Now, as part of this discourse, background music clearly constitutes a major element of the classical narrative filmic system. It persists across most genres, from musicals to detective films, science fiction, war, and adventure films, from screwball comedies to domestic melodrama. The very fact that theoreticians of classical filmic discourse, even those who write about the soundtrack, have slighted the specific uses of music in this cinema attests to the strength of music’s resistance to analysis. Nonetheless, principles similar to those articulated with respect to classical editing (and other sub-systems of Hollywood narrative film) underlie the composition, mixing, and

audiovisual editing of film music. Manuals and articles on sound recording and mixing, and aesthetic and practical writings on music composition and mixing, as well as the films themselves, provide access to these principles.

What follows, then, is a synthetic outline of the principles of music composition, mixing, and editing in the classical narrative film. It describes a discursive field rather than a monolithic system with inviolable rules. While I shall not argue for equilibrium profiles or ripeness, I shall emphasize the period of the late thirties into the forties, in order to contribute to an established and growing body of knowledge about the field of classical cinema. Examples shall be drawn in particular from scores by Max Steiner—not to establish his work as a paradigm, but because of his voluminous presence and influence in the classical period. That many of the films he scored have been the object of analysis by contemporary film scholars also renders him central to the study of Hollywood’s film music norms.

Classical Film Music: Principles of Composition, Mixing, and Editing

I. *Invisibility*: the technical apparatus of nondiegetic music must not be visible.

II. *“Inaudibility”*: Music is not meant to be heard consciously. As such it should subordinate itself to dialogue, to visuals—i. e., to the primary vehicles of the narrative.

III. *Signifier of emotion*: Soundtrack music may set specific moods and emphasize particular emotions suggested in the narrative (cf. #IV), but first and foremost, it is a signifier of emotion itself.

IV. *Narrative cueing*:

—*referential/narrative*: music gives referential and narrative cues, e. g., indicating point of view, supplying formal demarcations, and establishing setting and characters.

—*connotative*: music “interprets” and “illustrates” narrative events.

V. *Continuity*: music provides formal and rhythmic continuity—between shots, in transitions between scenes, by filling “gaps.”

VI. *Unity*: via repetition and variation of musical material and instrumentation, music aids in the construction of formal and narrative unity.

VII. A given film score may violate any of the principles above, providing the violation is at the service of the other principles.

I. *Invisibility*

The physical apparatus of film music (orchestra, microphones, etc.), like the film’s other technological apparatus, such as the camera, must under

most circumstances not be visible on the screen. In an article on film sound technology, Charles F. Altman asserts,

The assumption that all sound-collection devices must be hidden from the camera is . . . —along with the complementary notion that all image-collection noises (camera sounds, arc lamps, the director's voice, etc.) must be hidden from the sound track—the very founding gesture of the talkies.⁴

It is revealing to examine RKO's *King Kong* (1933, score by Max Steiner) with respect to the "rules" being formulated here. For *Kong* was one of the early 100 percent talkies to have a sustained dramatic score, and the very places in which it exhibits awkwardnesses help us recognize, in retrospect, what would soon become the smoothed-out version of classical film scoring and editing. Early in the film, when adventure filmmaker Carl Denham and a half dozen companions go ashore to investigate Skull Island, the principle of invisibility receives an interesting treatment.

A tribe of natives is staging a spectacular ritual at the foot of the enormous wall that separates the island's human denizens from its monstrous ones. Some natives, dressed in ape gear, dance. Others are draping flower garlands onto a native virgin girl; we will learn that they are preparing her for sacrifice to appease the great ape Kong. Denham masses his companions behind some foliage and, as if plants could really hide him, stands behind a small palm; he parts some palm fronds to look. "Holy mackerel, what a show!" he exclaims. The spectacle, the excitement, the rising frenzy of the exhibition (natives) and the voyeurism (Denham & co.) build in tandem with the music. —What music? Well, indeed, music is overwhelming the soundtrack at this point. We can hear the tribal chanting and drum-beating, which we accept as diegetic—as well as the RKO studio orchestra (to be considered nondiegetic) playing a rhythmically repetitious figure in accompaniment.

Movie mogul Denham can't stand to "lose" this spectacle. He hauls his movie camera out into the open and starts cranking. The visual apparatus is exposed, made visible. The tribal chief sees that he's being filmed (or something like that; he has presumably never seen a movie camera). Like a huge black feathered orchestra conductor, the chief gives an imperious cutoff signal. The heretofore unselfconscious dancing, chanting, drumming, and nondiegetic orchestra stop abruptly.

Something—the force of convention, perhaps—made it acceptable for Denham to part the palm fronds, creating a keyhole through which to gaze (and hear) unseen (and unheard). But one cannot move one's kino-eye out into the open without being seen, without "breaking the diegetic illusion"

(to make a parallel between the film spectator and the native folk). But the case of sound technology that *King Kong* puts forth is even more mystifying.

Are we to believe that Denham is shooting a *silent* film of all this dancing, chanting, drumming? No sound recording apparatus gets caught *in flagrante delicto* along with the camera. If a microphone and a soundman were accompanying Denham, what would the mike pick up? Would it record the drumming, the chanting, and the RKO orchestra? We know the "obvious" answer to this question, but this scene seems to test its very obviousness in eliminating, on the diegetic level, a soundman along with Denham and his camera. It is as if sound in a film has no technological base, involves no work, is natural, and will simply "show up," just like the spectacle Denham witnesses. Further, the classical paradigm would have us believe that no work has gone into the sound of what *we* witness. Sound is just there, oozing from the images we see. The principle of *invisibility of the sound-collecting apparatus* is inscribed more deeply into the fictional text than the corresponding visual principle of the camera's invisibility.

Some further remarks on the principle of invisibility are in order.

a. When the musical apparatus is visible, the music is "naturalized" as diegetic.⁵ Exceptions tend to prove the rule. Eric Rohmer's *Perceval* (1978) shows us other possibilities, as medieval musicians are seen in frame accompanying the stylized actions. *Perceval* does not actually break the rule, as it is not by and large attempting to be a diegetic Hollywood film, but, to the contrary, is approximating conventions of medieval dramatic performance. Another exception occurs when the Godard of *Prénom: Carmen* (1984) intercuts segments showing a string quartet rehearsing Beethoven, with the fiction story of bank-robber Carmen and her companion. The quartet is situated problematically in the fiction via the female violinist who appears once or twice in minor scenes of the principal narrative. Otherwise, these shots of musicians have a wholly ambivalent status: are they nondiegetic (outside the "story") or not? A third kind of example is often found in Hollywood film comedy and musicals: Mel Brooks and Woody Allen have made comic use of "diegetizing" background music by placing musicians in an unlikely *mise-en-scène* (e.g., Count Basie's jazz orchestra on the western plains of *Blazing Saddles*).

b. Ordinarily, then, the visual representation of music making signals a totally different narrative order, that is, the diegetic, governed by conventions of verisimilitude (e.g., a dance band playing in a nightclub scene). And this, even when the visual representation is not really the source of the music we hear. When Stefan, the Louis Jourdan character in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, plays the piano, Louis Jourdan is not playing the piano;

piano music has been dubbed onto the soundtrack to produce the illusion. A Hollywood music editor lays bare the artificiality of most diegetic music when he tries to describe a typical playback session on a set (where actors are filmed to synch with prerecorded “diegetic” music):

You need also to watch for sideline musicians. They are actual musicians who are used in scenes where they are supposed to be playing, but like other performers they are just doing a playback. They may actually play at the same time but such a rendition is not recorded nor used.⁶

II. “Inaudibility”

I have set the term in quotes because, of course, film music can always be heard. However—and somewhat analogously to the “invisibility” of continuity editing on the image track—a set of conventional practices (discursive practices and viewing/listening habits) has evolved which result in the spectator not normally hearing it or attending to it consciously. Its volume, mood, and rhythm must be subordinated to the dramatic and emotional dictates of the film narrative. Leonid Sabaneev (or perhaps his translator) expresses this principle in particularly telling language:

In general, music should understand that in the cinema it should nearly always remain in the background: it is, so to speak, a tonal figuration, the “left hand” of the melody on the screen, and it is a bad business when this left hand begins to creep into the foreground and obscure the melody.⁷

Bad business, precisely, for it is good business to give ticket-buyers what they have come for, namely a story, not a concert. This story is the right-hand melody, the focus of attention and desire; film music supports it with “harmony”—in fact, gives it signifying resonance.

Here are some practices dictated by the principle of inaudibility.

a. Musical form is generally determined by or subordinated to narrative form. The duration of a music cue is determined by the duration of a visually represented action or a sequence. Thus Sabaneev gives much practical advice about how to compose flexible and neutral music that may be stretched or trimmed, in the likely case that the studio should lengthen or shorten scenes in the final cut. “One might call it elastic or extensile music.” He encourages composers to build pauses and sustained notes into the music, for one can draw them out further if the sequence is lengthened with added shots. The composer should write in short musical phrases, also for ease of cutting. Sequential progressions are convenient and therefore encouraged. And “it will be well for the composer to have small pieces of neutral music ready

for any emergency—sustained notes on various instruments, rolls on the drum or the cymbals, string pizzicati, chords of a recitativo type.”⁸

King Kong’s score is largely constructed in this way, especially the central section where Denham, Jack Driscoll, and other crew members, themselves pursued by the island’s fancifully created monsters, are attempting to find Ann and rescue her from Kong’s clutches. Sequential progressions—each restatement of a motive beginning a step or a third higher than the last—build tension incessantly and relentlessly, and at the same time surely proved adaptable in fitting with the final cutting of the images. Steiner here anticipates Sabaneev’s prescription for elastic, extensile film music, and this predilection for sequential repetition is a hallmark of his style throughout his career.

b. *Subordination to the voice*. “It should always be remembered, as a first principle of the aesthetics of music in the cinema, that logic requires music to give way to dialogue.”⁹ Sabaneev means narrative logic. Dialogue, or any narratively significant sounds for that matter, must receive first priority in the soundtrack mix, as composer Ernest Gold learned:

What fiendish tortures await the composer at [dubbing] sessions! That tender cello solo, his favourite part of the entire score, lies completely obliterated by a siren which the director decided was necessary at that exact spot in order properly to motivate the reaction on the hero’s face! Or that splendid orchestral climax . . . held down to a soft *pp* because of a line of narration that had to be added at the last moment in order to clarify an important story point.¹⁰

Pursuing the notion that music must not drown out speech, Sabaneev, already out-of-date by Hollywood standards, recommends in 1934 the total cessation of music while there is dialogue on the soundtrack, to rule out any aural “competition” and to ensure the dialogue’s clarity. In the United States, the practice of lowering the volume of music behind dialogue, rather than eliminating it, was already *de rigueur*. A machine nicknamed the “up-and-downer,” developed as early as 1934, had as its purpose to regulate music automatically. When dialogue signals entered the soundtrack, the up-and-downer reduced the music signal.¹¹ In an article about the up-and-downer, soundman Edward Kellogg gives a psychological rationale for the music-dimming practice it automated, claiming that it approximated the perceptual activity of attention:

The system employed here attempts practically to imitate by changes of relative intensity the psychological effect of switching attention from one sound to another. In actual life we can usually take advantage of differences of direction in order to concentrate attention upon a particular sound. The result

of concentrating upon one sound is, of course, not to make the sound louder; but with our directive sense to help, we can largely forget the other sounds, which accomplishes the same purpose as making them actually fainter. Since, in the present case [i.e., a film soundtrack with more than one type of sound], all the sound comes from one direction, and our directive sense cannot be brought into play, the suppression of the sounds in which the listener is less interested is accomplished by making them fainter.¹²

The thirties also saw the development of guidelines for composing and orchestrating music to be placed behind dialogue. Musicians and soundmen felt that woodwinds create unnecessary conflict with human voices, and they stated a preference for strings. They concurred on questions of range, too: even in the seventies Laurence Rosenthal advised “keeping the orchestra well away from the pitch-range of the speaker—low instruments against high voices, and vice versa,”¹³ although other composers note that combining voice and orchestra in the same register can sometimes be a creative move, if a sort of indistinguishable tone color is desirable.

c. For editing, certain points are “better” than others at which music may stop or start, for “music has its inertia: it forms a certain background in the subconsciousness of the listening spectator, and its sudden cessation gives rise to a feeling of aesthetic perplexity.”¹⁴ Typically, within a scene, music enters or exits on actions (an actor’s movement, the closing of a door) or on sound events (a doorbell, a telephone ring). It may also begin or end by sneaking in or out under dialogue, or at the moment of a decisive rhythmic or emotional change in a scene. It goes relatively unnoticed in these cases because the spectator’s attention focuses on the action, the sound, or the very narrative change the music is helping to dramatize. Finally, starting the music cue is considered more difficult than ending it; an entrance seems to be more conspicuous than an exit. Thus music almost never enters simultaneously with the entrance of a voice on the soundtrack, since it would drown out the words.

d. The music’s mood must be “appropriate to the scene.” Classical composers avoid writing music that might distract the viewer from his/her oneiric state of involvement in the story; the point is rather to provide a musical parallel to the action to reinforce the mood or tempo. A fast horse chase needs fast “Ride of the Valkyries” music; a death scene needs slow, somber music. Counterexamples—music inappropriate to the mood or pace—are usually comedic or self-reflexively modernist. In Godard’s *Bande à part* (1964), a film abounding with Hollywood genre expectations gone wrong, brass instruments pleasantly execute a waltz as two would-be robbers tensely attempt to break into a house via a ladder to the upper floor.

Incidentally, this is one reason why the nineteenth-century Romantic or-

chestral idiom of Wagner and Strauss predominated for so long in classical cinema. It was (and is) tonal and familiar, with easily understood connotative values.¹⁵ The gradual introduction of jazz and popular music to scores in the fifties and sixties provides further evidence of the stylistic conservatism of background music. A musical idiom must be thoroughly familiar, its connotations virtually reflexive knowledge, for it to serve “correctly,” invisibly, in classical filmic discourse.

III. Emotion

Music appears in classical cinema as a signifier of emotion. Sabaneev describes the image-track, dialogue, and sound effects as “the purely photographic,” objective elements of film, to which music brings a necessary emotional, irrational, romantic, or intuitive dimension. Music is seen as augmenting the external representation, the objectivity of the image-track, with its inner truth. We know that composers add enthralling music to a chase scene to heighten its excitement, and a string orchestra inflects each vow of devotion in a romantic tryst to move spectators more deeply, and so on. Above and beyond such specific emotional connotations, though, music itself signifies emotion, depth, the obverse of logic.

Music and representation of the irrational. Following *King Kong*’s opening titles, music leaves the soundtrack altogether for a while. The film presents entrepreneur Denham and his “moving picture ship” making preparations to set sail. Denham makes a last trip into town, meets impoverished Ann Darrow, and hires her on for the mysterious and exciting adventure. The ship leaves; it crosses the ocean. On board, Denham administers to Ann her screen test/scream test, in apt foreshadowing of her rendezvous with Kong. All this expository material, from the opening shots to the ship’s arrival at Skull Island, transpires with no background music.

Music finally appears with a fade-in to a shot of the ship approaching mist-enshrouded Skull Island. A harp in the low register plunks a tonally vague, repetitious motif, over sustained chords of a string orchestra. The music initiates us into the fantasy world, the world where giant apes are conceivable, the underside of the world of reason. It helps to hypnotize the spectator, bring down defenses that could be erected against this realm of monsters, tribesmen, jungles, violence. This association of music and the irrational predominates throughout the genres of horror, science fiction, and fantasy, as a catalyst in the textual process of slipping in and out of the discourse of realism. Max Steiner avers: “Some pictures require a lot of music and some of them *are so realistic that music would only hurt and interfere.*”¹⁶ Thus, background music aligns with the paradigm of the right-hand column:

Logic	The Irrational
Everyday Reality	Dream
Control	Loss of Control

Music and representation of Woman. A film of the forties is airing on television. Even though you're in the next room, you are likely to find that a certain kind of music will cue you in correctly to the presence of Woman on screen. It is as if the emotional excess of this presence must find its outlet in the euphony of a string orchestra. I refer here to Woman as romantic Good Object, and not to old women, or humorous or chatty women, or femmes fatales (who possess their own musical conventions—jazz, brass, woodwinds . . .).¹⁷ Sabaneev states categorically that films “with love episodes, would find it difficult to dispense with music.”¹⁸

One finds an early—and curious—illustration of this principle in *King Kong*. The ship is anchored off Skull Island; it is evening. Alongside the ship's railing, Jack declares his love to Ann, while Denham and the skipper converse on the ship's bridge. Crosscutting between the two locales occurs as follows:

[JACK, to Ann, concerned about her participation in the dangerous adventures on the island:] “I'm scared for you. . . . I'm sort of scared of you, too. [Melodic background music, in strings and harp, through this monologue, which cuts once to a CU of Ann, then back to Jack.] Ann, uh . . . I . . . uh . . . uh . . . Say, I guess I love you.”

[SKIPPER, in 2-shot with Denham on bridge:] “Mr. Driscoll: are you on deck?” [No music during this shot.]

[JACK, embracing Ann:] “Yes, *sir!*” [Music plays.]

[SKIPPER:] “Then please come up on the bridge.” [No music.]

Jack and Ann engage in romance; close-ups highlight them against the dark night sky. Denham and the skipper seem to be engaging in a discourse of work; medium-long shots show them in an evenly lit interior. The score reinforces the contrast: violins play sweetly behind the romantic duo's shots, while no music plays with the shots on the bridge. This auditory alternation, strictly aligned with the visual cutting, proves quite disconcerting. The score distinctly ends up violating the “inaudibility” and “continuity” principles in its intended mission to accompany/illustrate the presence of Woman. (Abrupt stops and starts of music become rare after 1934. For a sequence like this, the composer would henceforth choose either a sustained musical cue throughout—its volume subdued as the men on the bridge are seen—or the less likely solution of eliminating music altogether.) The set of oppositions in this case can be drawn as follows:

Man	Woman
Objectivity	Subjectivity
Work	Leisure
Reason	Emotion
Realism	Romantic Fantasy

Music and epic feeling. Music, especially lushly scored late Romantic music, can trigger a response of “epic feeling.” In tandem with the visual film narrative, it elevates the individuality of the represented characters to universal significance, makes them bigger than life, suggests transcendence, destiny. This phenomenon seems to point back to anthropological analyses of the ritual functions of rhythm and song in human groups. The sense of common destiny which fans at a football game might have as, “of one voice,” they sing the national anthem or chant a slogan in support of the home team has something to do with the emotions inspired by group identity-inducing rituals in more primitive (or, as Eisler and Adorno put it, precapitalistic) groups.

In dominant cinema, this capacity of music to refer to commonality, destiny, and the like, is exploited for producing emotion and pleasure. The appropriate music will elevate the story of a man to the story of Man. When Mildred Pierce is stunned by a cruel argument with her ungrateful daughter, the reaction shot of her (a close-up in which she looks offscreen, suffering), backed by a loud and tragic rendition of the first three notes of her theme, becomes a statement not only of the condition of Mildred, but of the condition of Woman as Mother. At the film's end, as Mildred is reunited with her husband and walking from the police station into the sunrise, a full orchestra, with chimes and dominated by the brasses, restates her theme in a major key. Not only has the couple been reunited, but, in the words of Pam Cook, the patriarchal system (which the plot had threatened to dismantle) has been reconstructed, and “under the aegis of the Law . . . ambiguity is resolved and the shadows dispersed by the light of the new day.”¹⁹ I would suggest, again, that music has played a considerable role in the process.

John Ford's historical films provide numerous examples of a related strategy, using music to give a fictional scene mythical significance. The editors of *Cahiers du cinéma* demonstrated how dialogue, cinematography, mise-en-scène, narrative, and the audience's retrospective “knowledge of history” mythify the protagonist's smallest actions in *Young Mr. Lincoln*. Music contributes significantly to this. The final scene, for example, has Lincoln alone, “going on a piece—maybe to the top of that hill.” The camera's low angle, the painterly grandeur of the landscape—and the Battle Hymn

of the Republic on the soundtrack—transform Lincoln’s little walk (his constitutional?) to a prefigurement of his destiny as Civil War president. (While virtually any Romantic orchestral music might help here in transforming the everyday to the mythic, the additional reference of the Battle Hymn serves to pinpoint the character’s destiny.)

Thus a third large category of “emotion” signified by classical film music can be charted in the following way, with music contributing to the values on the right.

The Particular	The Universal
The Prosaic	The Poetic
The Present	Mythic Time
The Literal	The Symbolic

IV. Narrative cueing

We may divide the semiotic duties of music in classical film into two categories: (1) it refers the spectator to demarcations and levels of the narration; (2) it illustrates, emphasizes, underlines, and points, via what we shall call connotative cueing. Let us first consider some cases of the first type.

1a. *Beginnings and endings.* Music normally accompanies opening and end titles of a feature film. As background for opening titles, it defines the genre (*Mildred Pierce*’s title music signals a melodrama); and it sets a general mood (for *Mildred Pierce*, sweepingly emotional, tragic perhaps, as it plays over images of waves washing up on shore). Further, it often states one or more themes to be heard later accompanying the story; the distinctness of the melody can cue even the nonmusical listener into this promissory function, setting up expectations of the narrative events to follow. Finally, opening-title music signals that the story is about to begin, bids us to settle into our seats, stop chatting with fellow moviegoers, and drift into its daydream. Conventionally for melodramas, adventure films, and comedies, composers wrote opening music “full of joy and gladness.” (Dimitri Tiomkin reveals that some studios actually forbade the use of minor keys for opening titles, “their reasoning being that ‘minor’ meant sad and ‘major’ denoted happiness.”)²⁰

Ending music tends to strike up in the final scene and continues (or modulates) behind the end credits. Musical recapitulation and closure reinforces the film’s narrative and formal closure. Often, it consists of an orchestral swelling with tonal resolution, sometimes involving a final statement of the score’s main theme. At any rate, it typically provides a “rising crescendo,” “loud and definite.”²¹

1b. *Time, place, and stock characterization.* Music, via the well-established conventions, contributes to the narrative’s geographical and temporal setting, at the beginning of a film or during a scene within it. The first diegetic shots of *Casablanca* are accompanied by a vaguely Middle-Eastern cue (a clarinet plays a minor-key melody with much ornamentation), to supply the impression of the exotic streets and markets of Casablanca, as if to situate *us* in *it* (when really it’s the other way around), to create the sense of a world, even though no one in that world is (diegetically) playing the music.

Strongly codified Hollywood harmonies, melodic patterns, rhythms, and habits of orchestration are employed as a matter of course in classical cinema for establishing setting. A 4/4 allegretto drumbeat (or pizzicato in bass viols), the first beat emphatically accented, with a simple minor-modal tune played by high woodwinds or strings, signifies “Indian territory.” A rumba rhythm and major melody played by either trumpet or instruments in the marimba family signifies Latin America. Xylophones and woodblocks, playing simple minor melodies in 4/4, evoke Japan or China. If one hears Strauss-like waltzes in the strings, it must be turn-of-the-century Vienna. Accordions are associated with Rome and Paris; harps often introduce us to medieval, Renaissance, or heavenly settings. The hustle and bustle of the big city, especially New York, is signified by rhythmic support of a jazzy or slightly discordant major theme played by brass instruments or strings, interrupted now and then by a brass automobile-horn imitation. Character types, too, have typical musical signifiers. The girl next door is graced with a sentimental tune in a major key; the seductress is often accompanied by a cocktail-lounge jazz clarinet or saxophone. Max Steiner gives virtually the same rhythmic, open-fifths theme to the Seminoles in *Key Largo* as he does to Apaches and Cheyennes out west. Woodwinds or xylophones often introduce comic characters in a major key with occasional “wrong”-sounding notes. The code and its constituent signs are well known to American filmgoers. Quincy Jones fantasizes the impossible (except in a comedy): “I’ve always wanted to see a juxtaposition of a Victorian setting with modern soul music. It would really crack me up to find, in the middle of scene out of Dickens, James Brown screaming away as the town crier.”²²

1c. *Point of view.* The classical film may deploy music to create or emphasize a particular character’s subjectivity. Several devices cue the spectator: the association of the music with the sight of the character in a shot, a thematic association repeated and solidified during the course of the narrative, orchestration of music that was previously sung by or to the character, and the marked addition of reverberation for suggesting strongly subjective experiences.

Steiner's score for *Of Human Bondage* (1933) provides some striking examples of early point-of-view music in film. The educated, upper-class, club-footed protagonist Philip Carey (played by Leslie Howard) develops a romantic obsession for the prosaic, uninterested cockney waitress Mildred (Bette Davis). He takes her to dine at a restaurant, where an offscreen piano, violin, and cello trio plays a waltz. Philip's line, "I love that music: it makes me think of you," consolidates this as the Philip-thinking-about-Mildred theme. The nondiegetic rendering of this waltz will henceforth signify a romantic complicity with Philip's love/obsession for Mildred. This is not simply the Mildred theme. Significantly, it does *not* nondiegetically accompany scenes where Mildred actually is present: the cold reality of her emotional disinterest in Philip thus becomes clear, at some level, for the spectator.

Sometimes this musical theme turns into an index of strongly subjective point-of-view. As Philip takes a medical school examination, he absent-mindedly looks at a skeleton at the head of the classroom. A dissolve turns the skeleton into the shapely form of Mildred, and as it does, the scene's background music, a possibly diegetic calliope (outside the window?) playing the Mildred waltz, gives way to the waltz now played by a cello and string orchestra and recorded with an inordinate amount of reverberation. (This reverb contrasts markedly with the "dead" sound of the diegetic rendition in the restaurant.) One of Philip's classmates notices his distracted reverie, and as he coughs to bring Philip back to the business of exam-writing, the calliope tune returns to the auditory background. Earlier in the film he dreams of Mildred: they dance, he without his clubfoot, and they talk gaily, she without her nasal working-class accent. During this wish-fulfillment dream a string orchestra plays the familiar theme with a high degree of reverb.

2. *Connotative cueing.* Narrative film music "anchors" the image in meaning. It expresses moods and connotations which, in conjunction with the images and other sounds, aid in interpreting narrative events and indicating moral/class/ethnic values of characters. Further, attributes of melody, instrumentation, and rhythm imitate or illustrate physical events on the screen. Classical cinema, predicated as it is on telling a story with the greatest possible transparency, overdetermines these connotative values. Soundtrack music reinforces what is (usually) already signified by dialogue, gestures, lighting, color, tempo of figure movement and editing, and so forth.

Caged, a 1950 "realistic" prison melodrama, begins as a police van brings young and innocent Marie Allen (Eleanor Parker) to the women's prison to which she has been unjustly sentenced. As they are herded toward the door, another prisoner tells her to "grab your last look at freeside, kid." Marie

turns around, and a last lingering shot follows of the "normal" world outside the prison gate: a city street, a building, a church spire, a few automobiles. At the film's end, a hardened Marie, headed for a criminal life, emerges from the prison door and takes her first look at "freeside" in over a year. Over the same shot—traffic, church—we now hear jazzy, sultry music on trumpet and saxophone. The whole meaning of the "normal" outside world has changed for her, and Steiner's score conveys this efficiently via musical conventions.

2a. Music has tremendous power to influence mood. The commutation experiment undertaken in chapter 1 with a small segment of *Jules and Jim* establishes—albeit in a simplistic way comparable to Kuleshov's short editing experiments—that different music will cue the viewer to different interpretations of an image or scene. The associations that (Hollywood's, Tin Pan Alley's) conventions attach to particular musical instruments, rhythms, melody types, and harmony, form a veritable lexicon of musical connotation which the studio music department exploits.

Even before 1925, film-music lexicons (e.g., Giuseppe Becce's 1919 *Kinobibliothek*), which aided in compiling cue sheets for individual films, enjoyed popularity and profit; indeed, they became instrumental to the efficient functioning of the musical staff of movie houses. Musical "meaning" was codified and institutionalized well before the coming of sound. In turn, these meanings were inherited from a long European tradition whose most recent forebears included theatrical, operatic, and popular music of the latter nineteenth century. Erno Rapee compiled the definitive lexicon of film-musical connotation in 1924, the *Motion Picture Moods for Pianists and Organists: A Rapid Reference Collection of Selected Pieces Adapted to Fifty-Two Moods and Situations*. The fifty-two subjects ranged from Aeroplane, Band, Battle, Birds, Calls, and Chase, through National, Neutral, Orgies, and Oriental, to Sea-Storm, Sinister, Wedding, and Western. The accompanist needing to supply "Sadness" during a film projection could select from among ten pieces, which included the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata no. 2 (Op. 27), Chopin Preludes 4 or 20 (Op. 28), Grieg's "Elegie" (Op. 47), and Gaston Borch's "Andante Patetico e Doloroso." The three selections available for wedding scenes were Mendelssohn's wedding march, Wagner's wedding march from *Lohengrin*, and "O Promise Me."

Classical film music scores that deviate from the standard stylistic repertoire—scores using jazz or electronic music, for example—end up participating in signification just as fully as scores written in the familiar Hollywood-Wagnerian idiom. The expression and connotation in Miklos Rozsa's electronic music in *Spellbound* (1945) might be a bit more difficult to characterize in words, but any moviegoer will tell you how eerie or spooky it sounds.

This is precisely as it should be, since the electronic music cues accompany dream sequences, events in the film that bring the murky unconscious into play.²³ Likewise, jazz during the studio era often conveyed connotations such as sophistication, urban culture, nightlife, decadence.²⁴ In general, any musical language, other than the major nineteenth-century one, itself carried connotations simply by virtue of being unusual. Even music that attempts to subvert the principles of classical scoring will connote *something* when played with narrative images; and the reading position of spectators in the thirties and forties was so thoroughly defined by the classical norm that the rare music composed with subversive intentions was most probably perceived as conforming, by and large, to the established canon.²⁵

Without trying to cover the entire range of standard connotation, which also includes conventions of range, of tempo, and of rhythm, let us at least consider two categories.

Conventions of orchestration. Film music calls upon traditional connotative associations evoked by instrumental colors. Eric Sarnette, in his book *Music for the Microphone*, gives examples.

When the picture of an irate man appears, brass trumpets are heard; chubby-faced bassoons, when a fat man is seen coming along; oboes, when a quiet valley with cattle is shown on the screen; plaintive violins to accompany a picture of a pair of lovers, more like a sentimental postcard than anything else. . . .²⁶

Eisler and Adorno identify many other conventions of instrumentation in their delightfully grumpy first chapter, which zeroes in on Hollywood's "Prejudices and Bad Habits." They assert that "mountain peaks invariably invoke string tremolos punctuated by a signal-like horn motif." In another context, "The tremolo on the bridge of the violin, which thirty years ago was intended even in serious music to produce a feeling of uncanny suspense and to express an unreal atmosphere, today has become common currency."²⁷

Melodic conventions. Certain melodic types characterize Westerns: either based on Western ballads, or the typical calls of bugles in the case of cavalry films, or "Western frontier" melodies in major keys with skips of perfect fourths and fifths, connoting the grandeur of the frontier landscape. Other melodic types illustrate another kind of "nature," the kind with birds, serene lakes, and virgin forests; these often present a stylization of bird calls or the major-key pastoral pleasantness of the first measures of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony.

Some Hollywood composers also made frequent use of stock music, musical clichés instantly recognizable by filmgoers and directly inherited from

the lexicons. In *Of Human Bondage*, for example, a montage conveys Philip's confusion in London as his rival marries Mildred. When during the montage a single shot of the wedding is seen, the ongoing background score is briefly punctuated by a few seconds of Mendelssohn's wedding march—after which the music returns to its normal nondescript lushness. Eisler and Adorno again:

. . . the scene of a moonlight night is accompanied by the first movement of the *Moonlight Sonata*. . . . For thunderstorms, the overture to *William Tell* is used; for weddings, the march from *Lohengrin* or Mendelssohn's wedding march. These practices—incidentally, they are on the wane and are retained only in cheap pictures—correspond to the popularity of trademarked pieces in classical music, such as Beethoven's E-flat Concerto, which has attained an almost fatal popularity under the apocryphal title *The Emperor*, or Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*. . . .²⁸

Sound film composers also quickly developed musical phrases, some extremely brief, to illustrate actions on the screen. For example, *King Kong* contains a scene in which Kong shakes several men off a large log, like so many ants, and sends them down a ravine to their death. From a niche in a wall of rock, hero Jack Driscoll manages to prick Kong's finger a couple of times with his knife. Kong's reaction, as he looks a bit sadly at his tiny wound, is accompanied by a pathetic-sounding violin glissando downward.

2b. *Illustration.* To a greater extent than other major Hollywood composers, Max Steiner synchronized musical effects closely with events on the screen. As one writer puts it, Steiner is legendary for a film-musical style intent on "catching everything." A Steiner score accompanying an eventful sequence can sound like a hodgepodge of mixed thematic material, rapidly changing dynamics and orchestral texture, and rapid modulations, in its tendency to provide hyperexplicit, moment-by-moment musical illustration.

Witness this description of a brief but busy sequence from *The Adventures of Don Juan* (1948):

While reminiscing with one of his past amours, Don Juan discovers to his horror that he has no real idea where and when he became acquainted with the lady. She is furious when she realizes this, but then determines to win his affections all over again. At this point her father and fiancé enter and confront the couple. Don Juan flees. The scene dissolves as he ponders his predicament, concluding, "Woman, thy name is trouble."

Steiner's accompaniment for this scene consists of a series of rapid-fire quotations of all the motifs identified with the various characters. The young woman's outburst of temper is accompanied by a woodwind glissando. When she exclaims, "This time you won't forget me," Steiner quotes the roguish,

sauntering melody that serves as the Don Juan love theme. As the philanderer tries to disengage himself from her embrace, she calls to her father, "I'm trying to get away from him, but he's so strong." When Don Juan identifies himself, the composer quickly quotes the Don Juan hero motif. The girl pouts, "Stop being so Spanish!" Immediately, we hear a tambourine, castanets, and Castilian rhythms. Don Juan's rapid departure is accompanied by a typical Spanish march. The principal theme is stated as a lyrical melody when he contemplates his fate, and resolves in the stirring hero motif again. Hardly any of these themes lasts more than a few seconds; the entire scene is only 3 1/2 minutes long.²⁹

To achieve to-the-second synchronization of score and film, Steiner adopted the click-track technique early in the thirties. This was developed for the animated cartoon: even before 1930, Disney's Silly Symphonies used the device for exact timing of music with images. The click-track consists of holes which the studio's music editor punches into the soundtrack at the edge of the film for the purpose of matching metronomic tempo to that of the projected film. As it is projected during a music dubbing session, the conductor and recording musicians hear these clicks through their headphones, and they record their music to its beat. The music editor can create a rhythmically regular click-track, or one to match rhythmically irregular actions on the screen (such as a character's uneven steps), should the composer wish to match the music exactly with the visuals.

So while illustration to the minutest detail was a hallmark of Steiner's style in particular, our overall model of classical-era film music also must include the general tendency toward musical illustration. Two frequently used dramaturgical techniques of illustration are mickey-mousing and the stinger.

Mickey-mousing. Music making actions on the screen explicit—"imitating" their direction or rhythm—is called mickey-mousing (after musical practices used in the early Disney sound cartoons). Click-tracks made this effective as early as *Of Human Bondage* (the "clubfooted" limping theme of Philip Carey) and *King Kong* (the tribal chief walking over to parlay with Denham). Music mickey-mouses the gait of Gypo Nolan in *The Informer*. Near the beginning of *Casablanca*, as an Allied resistance fighter is shot, the score imitates his fall to the ground. Near the opening of *The Big Sleep*, a harp glissando helps to mickey-mouse the feigned collapse of spoiled Carmen Sternwood into the arms of Philip Marlowe.

The stinger. A musical *sforzando* used to illustrate sudden dramatic tension is called a stinger. A couple of examples from *Mildred Pierce*—a melodrama virtually built upon stinging revelations to its suffering protagonist, and therefore replete with Steinerian stingers—will suffice. As newly successful restaurateur Mildred embraces playboy Monte Beragon after hours,

Monte's theme appropriately plays in the background. Mildred's estranged husband Bert walks in on the scene; the sound of his closing the door, a cut to the startled couple, and a stinger in the score all coincide. Second, toward the end of the film, Mildred runs downstairs in Monte's beach house, and into a close-up showing her stunned revelation: as the orchestra does a glissando to a stinger chord, we cut to a medium close-up profile of her daughter Veda in an embrace with Monte.

Silence can also "sting." Mildred pays a visit to her daughter Veda, having learned of her desire to marry the rich young bachelor Ted Forrester. She asks whether family friend Wally knows that Veda wants to marry Ted. A big close-up frames Veda as she says, ". . . *want* to get married? *We are* married." The film cuts at that moment to a close-up of Mildred's stunned reaction; also at that moment the background music ends on a quick crescendo to a high, dissonant chord. The stinger in this case is the silence that abruptly follows.

V. *Formal and rhythmic continuity*

"At its most general functional level, film music serves as a kind of cohesive, filling in empty spaces in the action or the dialogue."³⁰ Virtually everyone who has written about standard film music agrees that music "fills the tonal spaces and annihilates the silences without attracting special attention to itself" (Sabaneev). Anti-Hollywood composers (e.g., Maurice Jaubert, Hanns Eisler) harp on this feature of classical film scores: the studio brings the composer in to "plug up the holes" in the soundtrack. Perhaps they are right: that the impulse behind using music this way arises from a fear of silence or of visual stasis, a fear that equates such absence with death. In soundmen's and musicians' discourse, music gives the soundtrack "life," "warmth," "color." Hollywood's narratives tend to be based on action, not reflection.³¹ The classical film brings music into its service in particular ways we will now enumerate.

Music smooths discontinuities of editing within scenes and sequences. The discontinuity of a cheat cut or a temporal ellipse will be slightly less jarring or noticeable because of music, this flexible and pleasurable auditory substance (this "cohesive") in the background. As an auditory continuity it seems to mitigate visual, spatial, or temporal discontinuity. Montage sequences—calendar pages flipping, newspaper headlines spanning a period of time, citizen Kane and his wife growing apart at the breakfast table over the years—are almost invariably accompanied by music.

Music also bridges gaps between scenes or segments; the classical film uses it for transitions. Typically, music might begin shortly before the end

of scene *A* and continue over into scene *B*. Or perhaps, scene *A*'s music will modulate into a new key as scene *B* begins. The beginning of *The Big Sleep* demonstrates how music functions as spatiotemporal connective tissue. Marlowe leaves the Sternwood mansion after having met Carmen, Colonel Sternwood, and Vivian in three successive conversations. Music strikes up as the butler escorts him to the door. The film cuts to a shot of a plaque that reads "Hollywood Public Library," then to a close-up of the documents Marlowe is taking notes on; then to longer shots reestablishing that Marlowe is doing research in the library. Steiner's transition music has no particularly musical form of its own, since it must obey the rhythm of the editing and the rapid change of locations it is illustrating and connoting. It modulates frequently, but it is still one uncut piece of music, a continuous substance that compensates for the spatiotemporal discontinuities—necessary for narrative coherence, efficiently getting Marlowe from one place to another.

In the *King Kong* sequence that crosscuts between Ann and Jack's romantic dialogue on one hand and Denham and the skipper's "work talk" on the other, the presence of music signifies emotion. But it doesn't "work" there, precisely, because it violates the need for auditory continuity in which music is usually caught up. Strictly aligning music (or its absence) with the crosscut scenes only emphasizes a discontinuity which runs counter to classical soundtrack construction.

VI. Unity

Classical cinema, predicated as it is on formal and narrative unity, deploys music to reinforce this unity. We have already seen that opening and closing music encloses the film within a musical envelope, announcing genre, mood, and setting, and then providing musical recapitulation and closure to reinforce narrative closure.

Tonal relationships in the score are also managed so as to contribute to a sense of the film's unity. Sabaneev gives a typical rule of thumb: if music has been absent for more than fifteen seconds, the composer is free to start a new music cue in a different and even unrelated key, since the spectator/auditor will have sufficiently forgotten the previous cue's tonality. But if the gap has lasted less than the requisite time, the new cue must start in the same key (or a closely related one).

The major unifying force in Hollywood scoring is the use of musical themes, although it is by no means accurate to claim that all classical scores rely on themes. Max Steiner's film-composing method, however, relied on thematic structuring. After watching the rough cut, he devised the principal character and idea motifs, and then elaborated the score from there. The

thematic score provides a built-in unity of statement and variation, as well as a semiotic subsystem. The repetition, interaction, and variation of musical themes throughout a film contributes much to the clarity of its dramaturgy and to the clarity of its formal structures.

VII. Breaking the rules

The principles of Hollywood scoring I have enumerated should not be considered as hard-and-fast rules. Enjoying a special status between conscious and unconscious perception, sometimes between diegetic, nondiegetic, and metadiegetic fictional levels, and between formal and narrative rhythms, music as a nonrepresentational "cohesive" mediates among many types of textual contradictions and itself participates in them. Thus, for instance, in its illustrative function (IV), mickey-mousing music often becomes noticeable, violating the principle of inaudibility (II). This is to say that certain conditions (the specificity of the text itself, the composer's personal style, the studio's practices of orchestrating, mixing, and editing, historical factors) may require one principle to take precedence over another.

Steiner's Score for *Mildred Pierce*

Let us examine the "classical" principles as they operate in *Mildred Pierce*. Having provided numerous examples of principles I through V, I will now emphasize the "unity" principle by exploring the film's use of musical themes in the context of its narrative. I will also suggest ways in which Steiner's compositional style, above and beyond its adequacy to the classical Hollywood model, is paradigmatic for melodrama in particular.

By the time he composed the score for *Mildred Pierce*, Max Steiner was a veteran of film music, at the height of a career that would include more than three hundred film scores over a period of thirty-five years. Head of the music department at RKO from 1930 to 1936, and a chief composer at Warner Brothers thereafter, Steiner's influence on the procedures and style of film composing during the studio years was enormous. Whether avidly pro- or anti-Steiner, film music's critics have characterized Steiner's work along fairly consistent lines. Some refer to his music as "pure schmaltz";³² all agree on his "heavy-handed emphasis on large-scale symphonic composition;" his "sweeping melodic lyricism" is "nostalgic, emotional, and sentimental."³³ The tendency of a Steiner score to accompany as much of the film as possible led Henri Colpi to assert—a bit unreasonably—that this

Form E-3—20M—K-I-J Co. 6-33

R K O STUDIOS, IN
Inter-Department Communication

Messrs: KAHANE
BERMAN WHITE
O'HERON ABBOTT

To..... NOLAN WILKINSON..... Date..... September 29, 1934.....

From..... MAX STEINER..... Subject..... OFFICE HOURS.....

TO ALL LOVERS OF NIGHT SHIPYS!

Effective Monday morning, October First, I can be found at the Studio during the hours: 9:00am to 12:30pm; and from 1:30pm to 6:00pm, every day except Sundays and Holidays. However, I WILL NOT be found, any longer, during the hours from 6:00pm to 9:00am next morning, as in the past.

Should this not be satisfactory to anyone, I shall be only too happy to cancel my contract.

Furthermore, I just received an offer from the President of the May Company, Eighth at Broadway, Los Angeles, California, who wants to obtain my services, on a long term contract, as a "BED-TRYER" and that looks awfully good to me.

MS/h

Max Steiner



A 1934 memo from the much-in-demand Max Steiner to his colleagues in the RKO Music Department. *Courtesy of RKO Pictures, Inc.*

composer was “no doubt frightened by silence.”³⁴ Mark Evans views Steiner’s tendency to state and restate themes, and insert illustrative music at the slightest narrative provocation, as a compulsion to “catch everything,” as we have seen.

At Warners, Steiner put to frequent use his lush symphonic style and his predilection for minute coordination of music with narration. Among his scores for melodramatic pictures of those years were *Jezebel*, *Dark Victory*, *Gone with the Wind*, *All This and Heaven Too*, *The Letter*, *The Great Lie*, *Casablanca*, *In This Our Life*, *Since You Went Away*, and *Now, Voyager*. In light of recent reevaluation of women’s pictures and the melodramatic in film, it seems fitting and necessary to investigate what this most prolific composer brought to the genre. How is the function of music for melodrama served out in specifically cinematic terms?

Very few readers could spontaneously recall the musical motif assigned to *Mildred Pierce*’s protagonist—which is repeated fifty to a hundred times—although many who have seen the film can accurately quote lines of dialogue or describe shot compositions. Only in actively deciding to listen for the music will we realize how structured and repetitive it is, and how central to our emotional reception of the narrated events.

The score of *Mildred Pierce* has five major themes. These we may identify easily by examining what musical lines are associated with what characters or events. The main theme (A) belongs to Mildred.



One comes gradually to associate Mildred with this music. First, as waves wash over the film’s opening credits, the piece is heard. Then, when in the fifth diegetic shot a man falls to the floor, his dying word, “Mildred,” is followed by a rendition, in minor, of A. Three shots later, a woman—soon to be identified as Mildred—walks onto a pier, as on the soundtrack the first three notes of melody A are repeated and varied in accompaniment to Joan Crawford’s mysterious half-hearted attempt to commit suicide.³⁵ The theme is next heard in its entirety—still in minor—when Mildred pulls up to her mansion at night, before a pair of detectives take her to police headquarters. Not until well into her flashback narration of her separation from husband Bert and the beginning of her restaurant career do we hear the melody in its full major-key statement. Bert has left; alone, late at night, Mildred reviews her finances as her voiceover says, “It didn’t take me long to figure out that I was dead broke.” Thus the first major statement of A is reserved

for the protagonist at a point when a quick exposition has removed her husband—economic and emotional support—and put her at the beginning of her road of work, sacrifice, and suffering. Mildred's theme will henceforth occur on a multitude of occasions, always associated with the character Mildred.

Another of the score's major themes belongs to Bert.



The association between this motif (*B*) and its character is established rapidly. In the sequence where Bert is introduced, leaving his real estate office, his theme plays through. After the argument that culminates in their decision to separate, Bert's theme plays slowly, in minor, by a plaintive oboe, as a few last hesitating words pass between him and Mildred. Later repetitions of *B* are heard as Bert comes to grant Mildred a divorce, as he comes to visit her after her marriage to Monte, and as Mildred thanks him for reuniting her with her prodigal daughter Veda.

A third theme (*C*) belongs to both daughters, Veda and Kay—a rather curious designation, since each daughter is not only strongly differentiated, but is virtually the opposite of the other in terms of values in the mother-daughter constellation that the film assigns to them. In melodramatic terms, Kay is the good daughter and Veda the evil one. How, then, can the score use one theme for the two of them?



The earlier part of the story concentrates not so much on Veda's evil traits as on the breakup of Mildred's marriage, and the development of her career, all necessitated by her "putting the children first." Mildred bakes pies and cakes for neighborhood customers so that both Veda and Kay may have expensive music and dance lessons. The daughters function as a unit, the vessel into which Mildred's sacrifice and hard work are poured. Only later—precisely, the night of Kay's death—is Monte Beragon introduced into the constellation of sexuality which will culminate in the Mildred/Veda/Monte Oedipal triangle; this sexual dimension really brings Veda's evil and competitive attributes into narrative play. Thus, the very night when the Oedipal (strictly speaking, Electra) plot is initiated by the introduction of Monte as

Mildred's lover, Kay is dying; after her death, the daughters' musical theme will only be needed for Veda anyway.

A fourth theme (*D*) is a jaunty melody associated with Mildred's restaurant business and with the growth of her social and financial status.



It is first heard early in Mildred's waitress career. When Mildred starts her own restaurant, this melody regularly accompanies the narration of the growth of the business. Finally, we also hear *D* in connection with a newspaper article about Mildred's impending marriage to Monte. In contrast to the sinister behind-the-scenes conditions of the marriage, the shot of the newspaper's wedding announcement, especially with *D* playing on the soundtrack, creates an ironically pleasant nuance. It shows the public face of this union as opposed to what we know to be its seedy motives of mutual exploitation.

A final major theme (*E*) refers to the romance between Monte and Mildred.



This is the only theme which the film presents both diegetically and non-diegetically. When Monte first seduces Mildred at his beach house, he has put on a record of mood music (*E*). "Monte . . . the record," says an offscreen Mildred weakly, as the sight and sound of the scratching phonograph needle acts as a metonymical figure of the seduction. Tune *E* is heard several more times in the film, nondiegetically, always referring to the romance between the two.

The lion's share of *Mildred Pierce's* score consists of statements or variations of these five themes. The melodies are treated in conventional ways to fit each narrative context in which they appear. Variations in tonality, register, harmonic accompaniment, time signature, rhythm, and instrumentation alter their sound and mood. The first few treatments of Kay and Veda's theme will amply illustrate the expressive range Steiner derives from such variation.

The first statement of *C* coincides with the film's first shot of Veda and Kay. Especially following the film's *noir* opening and then the oppressively claustrophobic look of the scene of Mildred's quarrel with Bert, the even

exterior lighting and compositional simplicity of the initial shot of the girls strikes the viewer as virtually from another world, another film, simpler and cheerier. Likewise, the soundtrack bursts in with violins introducing theme *C* in $\frac{3}{4}$, forte, allegro, in A-flat major. As they talk on their way home, Kay, the younger, unselfconsciously turns, dances, and skips as she goes; accordingly the tempo of the music shifts to $\frac{3}{4}$ to accentuate—to mickey-mouse—her dancing.

A few scenes later, Veda tries on the new dress that had given rise to the argument and separation of her parents. At the moment when Veda says “I wouldn’t be seen dead in this,” a reaction shot shows a stunned Mildred in the hall having overheard. Now theme *C* plays in a minor key, in a lower register, and much more slowly—conventional ways of inflecting a melody with darker or sadder connotations.

Elsewhere: Bert meets Mildred outside the house in the rain, on the night of her tryst with Monte. Bert gravely tells Mildred that Kay has pneumonia. As she says “Oh, no,” we hear bass viols, unaccompanied, state theme *C* slowly in minor. After Kay has died at Mrs. Biederhof’s, a viola plays *C* with much vibrato, connoting mournful sadness and nostalgia. Steiner is certain, however, to have Mildred share the stage with Kay even as Kay dies—milking the spectator for mother’s grief by presenting Mildred’s theme *A* at the moment the doctor says he couldn’t save the child. A close-up of Mildred grieving over the little body, accompanied by *A*, thus shifts the focus of sympathy to the protagonist. Only several shots later does the score return properly to mourn the dead, sounding Kay’s theme as the doctor says that he brought her into the world.

Once Kay is out of the picture, the theme belongs to Veda. Now a successful restaurateur with a socialite daughter, Mildred gives Veda a car for her birthday; theme *C* plays rhythmically and jauntily. When Veda goes for a first drive, it continues to play, though more amorphously and with no rhythmic accentuation, as Monte and Mildred discuss their differences over Veda. The music serves at least a double function here, as it does throughout the score. The theme itself designates that Veda is the subject of narrative focus; it directs attention to this character. The musical *treatment* of the theme, especially in contrast to the bouncy rendition seconds before, expressively underscores the scene’s narrative conflict, Mildred telling Monte to stay away from Veda. I. A. Richards might say that these two functions of themes in classical Hollywood scores are the referential (*C* denotes or directs attention to Veda) and the emotive (a particular musical treatment of *C* yields a certain range of expressive connotations); my overall category of narrative cueing includes both these functions.

The score continues to use *C* whenever Veda appears. When as prodigal

daughter she returns to Mildred, who now lives in a mansion and is married to Monte, a richly and warmly orchestrated version of Veda’s theme plays through the scene. By means of a final example, I wish to point out the increasing harmonic “distortion” the theme undergoes toward the film’s end. Mildred discovers Veda in an embrace with Monte; a fragment of *C* plays repeatedly, each repetition a step up from the last. The tension evoked by this ascending stepwise repetition, and by the progressively closer shots of Veda’s face in alternation with reaction shots of a shocked, disbelieving Mildred, has a double culmination: musically in a dreadful silence, and in Veda’s line: “. . . and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

The cursory examination of this theme and its elaborations shows that the relation between the theme and its referent is extremely clearly articulated—often to the point of redundancy—and that little but the standard late-nineteenth-century conventions of tempo, instrumentation, and tonality are employed to give the theme its emotive values at given points along the narration. Steiner was not interested in subtlety. In his own words:

The danger is that music can be so bad, or so good, that it distracts and takes away from the action. And beware of embellishments; it’s hard enough to understand a melody behind dialogue, let alone complicated orchestrations. If it gets too decorative, it loses its emotional appeal. I’ve always tried to subordinate myself to the picture. A lot of composers make the mistake of thinking that the film is a platform for showing how clever they are. This is not the place for it.³⁶

Thus Steiner clearly bore in mind the difference between the referential function of a musical theme, “understanding a melody,” and the theme’s emotive function: “if it gets too decorative, it loses its emotional appeal.” It almost goes without saying that both functions of themes in the film score are “subordinated . . . to the picture,” to the narrative discourse.

Steiner’s music often sacrifices its musical coherence to effects gained in coordinating with diegetic action. The formlessness and fragmentary nature of musical statements in his scores are perhaps the most easily recognizable mark of his style. More mickey-mousing occurs, for instance, early in the film when Mildred attempts to frame Wally by locking him in the beach house with Monte’s body. The musical score rhythmically apes Wally’s increasingly harried steps as he walks from door to door searching for an exit. I see Steiner’s fondness for such rhythmic redundancy as being closely linked with the “melodramatic spirit”—a desire to externalize and explicate all inflections of action, from emotional values in a scene to the very rhythms of physical movement.

On several levels, then, the musical score exhibits a pronounced tendency toward hyperexplication. Steiner's intrusively lush dramatic music has an interesting effect—an effect common to all “realist” Hollywood cinema but which is especially prominent here. The music is an element of discourse that magnifies, heightens, intensifies the emotional values suggested by the story. Just as melodrama displays a tendency to use the close-up on the female star's face—and just as the close-ups in *Mildred Pierce* have caused critics to comment on the revelation of every twitch and wide-eyed stare in Crawford's small inventory of expressions—Steiner's music has a similar effect. The close-up of Crawford, bigger than life, parallels this musical score, which also renders bigger than life James M. Cain's tawdry story. Like melodrama in general, *Mildred Pierce* “allows us the pleasures of self-pity and the experience of wholeness brought by the identification with ‘monopathic’ emotion.”³⁷ The background score has a key function of guiding the spectator-auditor unambiguously into this particularly compelling identification.

CHAPTER V

Eisler/Adorno's Critique

Critics and musicians have opined on various aspects of the implicit “classical” film music model since it emerged in the thirties. By and large, personal taste has prevailed as the dominant criterion for evaluating film scores and scoring practices.¹ No one has attempted a rigorous, consistent, global critique of the classical model other than Hanns Eisler and Theodor Adorno, whose landmark *Composing for the Films* (1947) is grounded in the Frankfurt School's neo-Marxist theoretical debates on culture and society. Eisler and Adorno's analysis of dominant film music in the framework of the “culture industry,” and their proposals for an oppositional practice, stand out so strikingly against the general background of impressionistic film music criticism that any subsequent responsible work on music in film must take stock of their book.² Though certainly the authors' proposals for alternatives to the classical model deserve serious critical attention, here I shall only present their critique of the classical model itself.

Composing for the Films represents a collaboration between a composer (Eisler) and a social philosopher and music critic (Adorno).³ The two authors had much in common. Both studied music in the Vienna school of composition (Eisler with Arnold Schoenberg, Adorno with Alban Berg); the passionate antifascism of both during the tumultuous prewar years in Weimar Germany found a theoretical basis in Marxism; and both wrote and taught in Europe and, during the war, in the United States. Their thinking differed in this major respect: Eisler, closer to Brecht, believed in the possibility of