

I consider movie music as a legitimate art form like a symphony or an opera.
John Williams (Ponick 2004)

1 Introduction

The past twenty years have witnessed a remarkably increased presence of film-music selections in concert programmes, not only in film-themed shows. More and more, film music has been sharing the stage with overtures and suites from the ‘classical’ repertoire. For example, the 2019 Summer Night Concert at the Schönbrunn Castle of the Wiener Philharmoniker saw Gustavo Dudamel conducting a selection that, alongside Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, Johann Strauss Jr.’s *Jubilee Waltz*, Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*, and Dvořák’s *Symphony No. 9*, also included the suite from *Casablanca* (1942, dir. Michael Curtiz) by Max Steiner, a composer who epitomises the Hollywood music, for better or for worse. The programme strongly leaned towards American music – Bernstein’s *Overture to Candide* was also included – and hence the inclusion of Hollywood music can be explained by Hollywood cinema’s global fame as one of America’s major cultural exports. Yet, up to a few years ago, Steiner’s music used to be singled out as the example of how Hollywood’s Golden Age music – if not film music at large – was too fragmentary, formless, derivative, and image-dependent, with its ‘tendency to provide hyperexplicit moment-by-moment musical illustration’ (Gorbman 1987: 87), to be able to sustain a life beyond the films. Today, even Steiner’s film music has made it to the Wiener Philharmoniker.

If the presence of the film-music repertoire in concert programmes can be said to have exploded, the academic studies of the phenomenon are lagging behind by comparison. The probable reason is that it already took a substantially long time for academics and music critics to take film music seriously enough as a type of applied music *within* the film. Many of the first studies of film music stressed the long neglect that this type of music had to suffer, referring to film music as ‘a neglected art’, ‘unheard melodies’, ‘the invisible art’, and to the necessity of ‘settling the score’. Then, it is not surprising that accepting film music also *beyond the film* as a legitimate repertoire for concert presentations should require an extra amount of effort and time. With the increased presence of film music in concert programmes having helped supersede past prejudices, in recent years the debate has refocussed on the aesthetic legitimacy of detaching film music from its visual counterpart. Given that visuals are a fundamental formal blueprint, can film music function as stand-alone music, or does its close relation with the film require that music and images stay together for a full appreciation? One might cite the words of conductor Leonard Slatkin: ‘The question always comes up: “Do you need visuals when you are listening to film

music?” Let me ask you: “Do you need visuals when you are listening to opera?” My answer to both questions is no: if the music is good, it can stand by itself’ (Page 2003). To which, however, one might respond with the words of the film composer and concert conductor, Elmer Bernstein: ‘The music may be able to stand up very nicely outside of the film, but it’s the combination that makes a great experience – the combination of music and film’ (Karlín & Wright 2004: 472).

Academics have problematised the music/image separation. For example, Ben Winters states: ‘By advocating the separation of the musical object from its accompanying sensory stimuli, we ignore this complex interaction and risk losing an essential part of the film score’ (Winters 2007a: 116). One solution to the problem has been advanced in the form of the new modality of ‘cinematic listening’ (Long 2008: 7–8). It consists in the listeners envisioning some visual accompaniment to a music piece, be it one that is randomly evoked in the listener who is not familiar with the parent film or one that calls up in the mind the atmospheres and visuals of the well-known film. Frank Lehman, in particular, has studied ‘film music as concert music’ from this perspective:

Avid listeners of soundtracks know well how one’s frame of mind may shift upon hearing tracks from a rousing score on a personal audio device. The heightened effects and dramatic associations embedded within the average film cue have a tendency to map onto – and mythify – a cinematic listener’s subjective reality in a most pleasing fashion. ...Cinematic listening is a ‘process of simultaneous audiation and envisioning’, and ... cinematic music is anything which ‘compels the listener to engage in acts of “envisioning” some accompanying diegesis or ... series of images.’ (Lehman 2018: 11)¹

Besides the application of cinematic listening to these traditional without-the-film formats of presentations, another solution to the problem is that of presenting film music *with* the film it was created for. This phenomenon has been called ‘cine-concert’ (McCorkle Okazaki 2020) or, in a previous study of mine, ‘multimedia film’ (Audissino 2014b: 51). An orchestra plays a film score live as the film is projected, which is a way to recover the music/visual synchronisation specific to film music.

The live in-presence performative element of the orchestra playing the musical score, added to the pre-recorded dialogue/sound and image tracks, engenders ‘a sense of connection that watching the same movie at home on a streaming service cannot. Live music is a crucial ingredient in creating a communal atmosphere’ (McCorkle Okazaki 2020: 7). Another advantage of multimedia film is that the music is highlighted, not only because the live

¹ ‘Audiation’ is the mental hearing and processing of sound: Gordon 1985.

performance of the orchestra inevitably brings closer attention to the musical element but also because such live performances often showcase a more detailed rendition of the music itself. This aspect is stressed by Keith Lockhart, one of the most active conductors of multimedia films and the current leader of the Boston Pops Orchestra: ‘In the tracks on the old movies the orchestra is so muddy and it is so hard to hear it. When you look at the score of *The Wizard of Oz*, for instance, the orchestration is ingenious, but you could never tell that from listening to the low-res sound of the old soundtrack’ (Audissino & Lehman 2018: 403). Finally – and perhaps the principal reason for their success – multimedia films are very profitable for orchestras and allow them to lure into the concert halls segments of audience that would have never attended a ‘normal’ concert: in Jon Burlingame’s formulation, ‘After years of looking down their collective noses at film music as unworthy of performance alongside, say, Beethoven or Wagner, orchestras from the Chicago Symphony to the New York Philharmonic are jumping on the bandwagon, playing classic film scores “live to picture” in growing numbers’ (Burlingame 2015). Today, we see a skyrocketing increment of the number for these events: ‘As of July of 2019, at least ninety films have been concertized for live performance, with the greatest number yet (eighteen) premiering in 2017’ (McCorkle Okazaki 2020: 9).

In this study I argue that a pivotal and highly influential agent of change for the legitimisation of ‘film music as concert music’ (Lehman 2018), as well as for the development of today’s multimedia films, was John Williams’s tenure as the conductor of the Boston Pops Orchestra. Archival research into the history of Williams’s Pops years reveals the seminal impact that his appointment to the position and his policies and experimentations throughout his tenure had on the wider acceptance of film music as concert-programme material. I have published some of my findings in previous essays (Audissino 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2016). Here, I reinterpret and expand on my past archival work because the Williams/Boston Pops importance for the acceptance of film music as concert music has not, in my opinion, been stressed enough. For example, as regards the aforementioned phenomenon of live-accompanied films, McCorkle Okazaki’s essay offers a thorough examination, but, oddly enough, her survey completely neglects to mention the Williams/Boston Pops case as an antecedent.

Before delving into how the Boston Pops Orchestra was an essential stepping stone in the concert legitimisation of the film-music repertoire, it is necessary to provide a general background of the life of film music beyond the films, along with a mention of the prejudices that have long accompanied this type of applied music and, as a consequence, have considerably contributed to the prevention of its concert presentation until recently. Some might be already familiar with the

condensed survey I am about to offer, as well as with the sketch of the principal aesthetic/philosophical reasons behind the bias against film music. Nevertheless, I am convinced that providing a general backdrop for the less specialised reader is a necessary preliminary step to fully appreciate the groundbreaking nature of the John Williams/Boston Pops collaboration. An aesthetic prejudice influenced by the Romantic aesthetics has still been circulating, more or less overtly and more or less consciously, in most of the criticisms against the film-music repertoire. Even if its centrality and influence have arguably abated during the twentieth century, I am convinced that its shadow has still been exerting a sizeable role in the shaping of mindsets and axiology.

2 Film Music and Aesthetic Prejudice

Primarily, the reasons behind the prejudice against film music can be found in the aesthetics of the nineteenth century, in which an axiological classification gained currency that assigned different degrees of musical value and aesthetic weight to ‘programme music’ or ‘applied music’, on the one hand, and to *Absolute Musik*, on the other.² Applied music was based on some extramusical programme and created to serve some practical/functional purpose, as an accompaniment to some extramusical event or music based and shaped on some extrinsic structure – dance, theatre, a lyrical text, singing, and so on. *Absolute Musik* was composed independently from extramusical restrictions or references: ‘Thereafter there is no longer a *single* concept of music, as previous generations knew it, but *two*, about whose rank and historical priority one soon begins to quarrel’ (Dahlhaus 1991: 7–8). The two typologies would extend, under different formulations and names, into the twentieth century – the dichotomy between *Gebrauchsmusik* (‘music for use’, written for some extramusical usage) and *Vortragsmusik* (‘music for listening’, written for the sole or primary scope of being listened to) in the 1920s *mittel-Europe* (Hinton 2001), or the more recent and still lingering distinction between ‘art music’ and ‘popular music’ or ‘experimental music’ and ‘commercial music’, for example. Behind the nineteenth-century term *Absolute Musik* was the philosophical paradigm of Idealism: ‘Music was considered to be an expression of the “essence” of things, as opposed to the language of concepts that cleaved to mere “appearances”’ (Dahlhaus 1991: 10). Just as absolute philosophy was ‘a philosophy of the “absolute,” interpreted or denounced as severed from its roots in earthly and human matters, and thus “absolute”’ (21), and also *ab soluta* in the Latin sense (‘freed from’), so the highest expression of music was the one that was similarly ‘freed from’ the mundane: a direct expression of the Being and the Absolute. For Wackenroder – one of the founders of the German Romanticism –

² I further discussed the Romantic prejudice against film music in Audissino 2014a.

absolute music was ‘in itself already religion’ (75). The consideration of musical fruition as akin to a sacred experience produced a change in the contexts and attitudes of the listening situation: music could not be any more merely a pleasant background for conversations and games of cards, as it often had been up to the eighteenth century; music should be experienced in a solemn state of quasi-religious contemplation (80). These aesthetic positions, naturally, exerted some authority on compositional practice. In his treatise *The Beautiful in Music*, Eduard Hanslick intimated that only music without a text, a function, a programme was true music: ‘The composer must not allow his hands to be tied by anything alien to his material, since he . . . aims at giving an objective existence to his (musical) ideal, and at casting it into a pure form’ (Hanslick 1891: 100–1). For Hanslick, ‘tonally moving forms are the sole content and object of music’ (quoted in Dahlhaus 1991: 109). Besides this formalism – the centrality of pure musical form – organicism was another hallmark of nineteenth-century music (Meyer 1996: 190). In a piece of music, each element had to be justified by its own intrinsic, ‘natural’ organic development, like a tree naturally developing from a seed, growing spontaneously and inevitably, independent of external conditions and impositions (193).

From this Romantic perspective, film music is certainly not ‘ab soluta’: its very existence is predicated on the previous existence of a film. If for Hanslick, ‘Every melody or theme has its own laws of construction and development which to the true musical genius are sacred and inviolable, and which he dare not infringe in deference to the words’ (Hanslick 1891: 63–4), film composers are then sacrilegious in how they ‘violate and infringe’ the laws of construction and development of music to bend them to the cinematic demands. For the Romantic aesthetics, film music possesses no organicism either: its elements are not motivated by intrinsic musical necessities but by the extrinsic demands of the film. True, examples exist of film music that can fulfil the film’s demands while at the same time developing into a stand-alone musical organism – instances can be found in the film music of many of the major film composers, and the organicistic compositional approach of John Williams has been called ‘teleological genesis’ (Schneller 2014). Yet, on the other hand, the often fragmentary nature of film scores (one perfunctory ten-second cue, then one unrelated twenty-three-second cue, another few seconds of music to accompany an isolated action, and so on) or the very technique of ‘Mickey-Mousing’ (music that closely mirrors the visual actions and hence whose development is externally driven in a rigid and highly prescribed way) all tend to look like the opposite of the unbridled organicistic flow envisioned by the Romantics. Moreover, to the Romantic eye, film music is formulaic and inclined to linguistic borrowing from other musical works. The Romantic aesthetic found clichés and conventionality hardly acceptable. In the words of Chevalier Louis de

Jaucourt, ‘The man of genius is cramped by rules and laws of taste. He breaks them so that he can fly upwards to the sublime . . . He is constantly thwarted in his desire to express the passions that excite him, by grammar and conventions’ (Meyer 1996: 172). The film composer, then, is seen as a mere artisan rather than an artist: ‘The nonutilitarian pleasure of art confirms the distinction between art and craft (which almost by definition has a purpose), and it also confirms, as it were, the childlike innocence of the creative artist, for, eschewing the worldly temptations of patronage, fame, and fortune, the artist plays the game of art for its own sake’ (189). It is no coincidence that the well-remunerated practical purpose of film composition has been one of the strongest arguments employed in the critics’ circles to denigrate a priori the artistic validity of film music and the venal motivations of its composers. Film music apparently complies with none of the Romantic criteria for aesthetically worthy music, and though the single criterion can be contested – for example, film music can indeed have an organicistic development, as previously pointed out – it is the general labelling attitude of the Romantic aesthetics that has caused long-term effects. The assessment is not made on the individual piece of music and its merit, but there is a pre-judgement (prejudice) based on whether a type of music belongs to one category or another – applied/absolute – and the music is liable to be labelled and judged without even being actually listened to.

The Romantic aspect of nonutilitarian art versus commodified crafts was somewhat reprised by the Frankfurt School in its critical theory of the ‘Culture Industry’, whose products are instrumental to anaesthetise the conscience of the consumers by entertaining them, thus maintaining the ideological status quo of the ruling class. The Hollywood ‘Dream Factory’ was deemed to be one of the most insidious branches of such Culture Industry, and hence its film music was considered the worst form of commodified music. Hollywood Cinema and its music were vehemently criticised along these lines by Theodor W. Adorno and Hanns Eisler in their 1947 book *Composing for the Films*: ‘The motion picture cannot be understood in isolation, as a specific form of art; it is understandable only as the most characteristic medium of contemporary cultural industry’ (Adorno & Eisler 2007: xxxv). Within, Romantic-ideology residues are evident, for example, in the usage of ‘form and content’ and ‘inspiration’: ‘The rule of big business has fettered the freedom of artistic creation, which is the prerequisite for a fruitful interaction between form and content’ (42). As to film music, they state: ‘All music in the motion picture is under the sign of utility, rather than lyric expressiveness. Aside from the fact that lyric-poetic inspiration cannot be expected of the composer for the cinema, this kind of inspiration would contradict the embellishing and subordinate function that industrial practice

still enforces on the composer' (4). According to this view, film music is the product of a mercenary inclination and cannot be taken seriously as art: 'The truth is that no serious composer writes for the motion pictures for any other reason than money' (37). This 'for-money's-not-for-art's-sake' argument has been systematically adopted to denigrate film music and its practitioners. For example, Stravinsky famously quipped: 'The only function of film music is to make its composer earn good money' (quoted in Calabretto 2010: 48).

These Romantic prejudices have found a remarkable diffusion in particular in those countries in which philosophical Idealism was strongly established. One such country is Italy, where the influence of Benedetto Croce's aesthetics has been central, and Italy is an interesting example of how the aforementioned a priori labelling has hindered the legitimisation of film music. From the viewpoint of Croce's Idealism, film music is not the artistic result of a free 'aesthetic intuition' but the product of hired craftsmanship, and as such, it belongs more to the 'economic dimension' of the Spirit rather than to the 'aesthetic dimension' (Croce 2005). It is no surprise that the Italian art-music composer Ildebrando Pizzetti, after agreeing to compose the score for the silent-film epic *Cabiria* (1914, dir. Giovanni Pastrone), felt awfully guilty: 'A cowardly action . . . , pages and pages of meaningless music, more or less unpleasant noise, music of which I would be the first to laugh at, that would make me sick if it were composed by someone else, music beneath myself' (Miceli 1982: 78). In more recent times, at the end of the 1970s, another art-music composer, Goffredo Petrassi, rehashed the old 'for-money's-not-art's-sake' argument when he dismissed his sporadic involvement with film music as 'out of sheer economic necessity, without the slightest illusion of producing something aesthetically worthy' (Miceli 2009: 341). In addition, the academically trained composer – and Petrassi's pupil – Ennio Morricone also showed an ambivalent attitude towards his work in cinema: 'I did not approach film music by vocation: I thought I would be one of the many composers who *earn little money* [emphasis mine] but write what they want. . . I regret not doing in my life what I would have liked' (Miceli 1982: 309–10, 321) – note again the money-versus-art argument implied in Morricone's statement. Crocian restraints can be found even in some of Italy's pioneers of the study of film music. Ermanno Comuzio, on the one hand, was amongst the first to defend the dignity of film music as an object of study: 'Sometimes [musicologists] do discuss the topic, but always from a position of aristocratic disdain. . . They consider film music as a mercenary practice of little noble nature' (Comuzio 1980: 9). Having said so, when it comes to the concert presentation of film music, Comuzio takes a more conservative stance:

the practice is questionable, since these works for their very nature should not be separated from the related films. ... While every other type of music (a symphony, a song, an opera) can be found both on paper and in live concerts and theatre performances or recorded on discs, film music exists only when it is played through the loudspeakers of a film theatre while the film is projected. (Comuzio 1980: 41, 117)

In 1999, Sergio Miceli, on the occasion of a radio broadcast of a BBC Proms film-music programme, commented on this largely documented Italian disdain for film-music concerts:

Considering the influence that Croce's aesthetics has had on musicology – an idea of pure music, untouched and untouchable – it is clear that applied music [tends to be seen as a minor production]. This also happens with film music, which – I always repeat it a bit polemically – is not the only type of applied music. However, it is the one that gives more trouble because there is some sort of basic misunderstanding, a basic refusal. ... Film music concerts are very frequent abroad. Only here there is this negative perception of the phenomenon. (Miceli 1999)³

For example, until late in his career, Morricone was reluctant to perform film music in concert, and in 1979 he stated: 'Very often film music is really banal, it should not be performed. I'd be offended myself. I was invited all over the world to perform my music in concerts, and I have always declined because I perfectly knew that they wanted me to present my easiest pieces' (Miceli 1982: 313). The first noteworthy attempts at the inclusion of film-music pieces in concert programmes took place in Italy only in the 1980s (Corbella 2016), ten years later than in the United Kingdom, for example, where the 'FilmHarmonic' concerts were established in 1970.

The Italian context, for its radicalisation of the Idealist aesthetics, functions as a clear illustration of the concrete effects that this Romantic conception of music had on the delay of the concert presence of film music. If for the Romantic-influenced, Wackenroderian aesthetics music is akin to religion and listening to a concert is like attending some solemn rite, it is clear that such 'non-religious' music as film music – the least absolute of all – cannot find a place in the concert halls, the temples devoted to the contemplation of *Absolute Musik*. In the United Kingdom, to name a different context, film composition has been more accepted within the art-music circles as one of the musical outputs of the 'English Musical Renaissance' (Mazey 2020: 2), and film-music concerts found an increasingly steady place in concert halls, for example, with the already mentioned 'FilmHarmonic' series at the Royal Albert Hall. Yet, the Romantic aesthetic

³ Rai Radio 3 interview of Sergio Miceli, 15 August 1999 (my translation).

resurfaced against the music hailing from Hollywood, in which ‘specialists’ were mostly employed. The British composer Anthony Hopkins vehemently attacked the legitimacy of Hollywood composers with a wording that betrays the Romantic ‘money-versus-art’ discrimination: ‘Who are these people, whose names never seem to appear on any concert programmes? What else have they written; what pages have they placed upon the altar of Art rather than on the lap of Mammon?’ (Wierzbicki, Platte, & Roust 2012: 141). As to the American ‘Pragmatist’ context, it is, oddly enough, closer to Italy, not so much because of an influence from Idealism but presumably for a combined influence of the Critical Theory of the Culture Industry (and specifically, Adorno and Eisler’s book) and for the widely reported vituperative opinions that art composers who had tried their hand at cinema expressed, in frustration, against film scoring. Hollywood’s strict industrial routines left less leeway and freedom to art composers than the more ‘light-weight’ British film industry, by comparison. Some of the harshest prejudices against film music in the USA were ignited and propagated by a trio of art musicians dissatisfied with their film experiences, George Antheil, Oscar Levant, and Virgil Thomson (Wierzbicki 2009: 2), but also Aaron Copland, Igor Stravinsky, and Arnold Schönberg contributed to variable degree to the disparaging of Hollywood’s music (Cooke 2010: 257–360). Speaking of the American context, Jack Sullivan offers this summary:

The classical intelligentsia once openly ridiculed film composing, using it as an instant metaphor for anything shallow or sentimental and scoffing at concert composers who wrote for the movies on the side. . . . Current critics tend to be more accepting of the field, but they practice a curious doublethink, one that is often unconscious. ‘Sounds like movie music’ is still a common way to dismiss a new concert work, even among reviewers ostensibly friendly to the genre. (Sullivan 2007)

If the presence of film music beyond the screens has long been ignored or deprecated in critic and academic circles – and its legitimacy (mostly) accepted only in recent times – film music as a stand-alone entity has long been consumed and enjoyed by the layperson.

3 Film Music: from the Screens to the Concert Stages

Frank Lehman thus summarises the stand-alone existence of film music:

The list of extra-filmic musical traces is extensive and includes artefacts (sheet music, soundtrack albums), activities (performances, covers, remixes), venues (concert halls, recitals, theme parks) and discursive communities (Internet forums, enthusiast magazines, scholarship). . . . It is safe to say, in 2018, that more people have become familiar with the themes from *Chariots*

of Fire, The Magnificent Seven or Psycho through various extra-filmic media than have seen the movies they originate from. (Lehman 2018: 7)

Considering the entirety of film history, the main manifestations of the external life of film music can be grouped into three types: piano reductions for home performance, disc records, and adaptations for concert performance. The third incarnation – concert presentation – has been the tardiest to appear and get established, perhaps precisely because of the ‘sacred’ image of the concert halls as the temples reserved to *Absolute Musik* that the Romantic aesthetics had consolidated. Film-music records sold on the market as a commodity are not a ‘sacrilegious’ crossover: film music *is* commercial *Gebrauchsmusik*, so it is normal that it should be sold for a profit. Film-music pieces performed in concert, on the other hand, constitute a much less acceptable trespass into the realm of *Vortragsmusik*. The fact that stand-alone incarnations of film music have long existed as sheet music or records and only much later, and timidly, have started to appear on concert stages seems to suggest a different point: the crux of the matter does not lie so much in the supposedly intrinsic incapacity of film music to stand on its own as in the ‘cultural-guardian’ attitude instigated by the Romantic aesthetic. Film music broke the borders of the screen very soon in its history, having a life beyond the films it was composed for; what took longer was to erode the entry barriers that guarded the concert halls from ‘ill-reputed’ types of music.

Chronologically, piano reductions were the first form of adaptation and extra-filmic life. At the end of the nineteenth century, almost simultaneously with the birth and spread of the cinema, a veritable ‘piano craze’ was spreading throughout the USA (Altman 2004: 51). The vast diffusion of pianos caused the rapid and massive development of music publishing, the main output being popular songs, the so-called Tin Pan Alley music, largely sold in the form of sheet music, ‘one of the nation’s fastest-growing commodities . . . propelling popular tunes to a level of cultural importance that would rarely be equaled’ (Altman 2004: 51). The expanding music market seized the opportunity to associate with cinema in order to promote new songs by exploiting its popularity, for example, in the form of ‘illustrated song’, a sort of primitive karaoke that was a fixture of the 1910s nickelodeons and was directly supported by music publishers (Altman 2004: 182–90). When illustrated songs went out of fad, the music publishing industry took advantage of the new trend of original/custom-compiled film scores by using them to exploit tie-in products. One of the earliest American examples of an originally composed/compiled film score, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915, dir. David W. Griffith), is also one of the earliest examples of this commercial exploitation. The film’s love theme composed by Joseph Carl