

## THE REMARKABLE AFFINITY OF MUSIC AND FILM

Music has such a remarkable affinity to film that the addition of the musical score was almost an inevitability. Even in the earliest films, the audience would have felt a very real vacuum of silence because the pulsing vitality provided by the moving image seemed unnatural, almost ghostly, without some form of corresponding sound. In fact, so-called silent films were almost always projected with accompanying live piano, organ, ensemble, or orchestra music. So by the time it became possible to use recorded dialogue and sound effects, music had already proved itself as a highly effective accompaniment for the emotions and rhythms built into the images.

Music has made possible an artistic blending of sight and sound, a fusing of music and movement so effective that composer Dimitri Tiomkin was moved to remark that a good film is “really just ballet with dialogue.” Muir Mathieson, in *The Technique of Film Music*, put it this way: “Music, having a form of its own, has ways of doing its appointed task in films with distinction, judged purely as music, and with subtlety, judged as a part of the whole film. It must be accepted not as a decoration or a filler of gaps in the plaster, but a part of the architecture.”<sup>1</sup>

Both film and music divide time into rather clearly defined rhythmic patterns; perhaps that provides the most important common bond. There are certain natural rhythms inherent in the physical movements of many objects on the screen. Trees swaying in the breeze, a walking man, a galloping horse, a speeding motorcycle, and a machine capping bottles on an assembly line—all establish natural rhythms that create an almost instinctive need for corresponding rhythmic sounds. Another rhythmic pattern is provided by the pace of the plot, by how quickly or slowly it unfolds. Still another is created by the pace of the dialogue and the natural rhythms of human speech. Tempo is also established by the frequency of editorial cuts and the varying duration of shots between cuts, which gives each sequence a unique rhythmic character. Although editing divides the film into a number of separate parts, the continuity and the fluid form of the medium remain, because the cuts create clear rhythmic patterns but do not break the flow of images and sound.

Because music possesses these same qualities of rhythm and fluid continuity, it can be easily adapted to the film’s basic rhythms, to its liquid contours, or shapes. This affinity between music and film has led us to accept them almost as unity, as part of the same package, as though music somehow exists magically alongside every film.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MUSICAL SCORE

Although we often accept film music without question and sometimes even without noticing it, this does not mean that its contribution to the film experience is insignificant. Music has a tremendous effect on our response, greatly enriching

and enhancing our overall reaction to almost any film. It accomplishes this in several ways: by reinforcing or strengthening the emotional content of the image, by stimulating the imagination and the kinetic sense, and by suggesting and expressing emotions that cannot be conveyed by pictorial means alone.

Because it has a direct and very significant effect on our reaction to film, the term *background music*, which is so often applied to the musical score, is a misnomer. Music actually functions as an integral or complementary element. Despite its direct effect on us, however, there is general critical agreement on one point: The role of music in film should be a subordinate one.

Two schools of thought exist on the proper degree of this subordination. The older, traditional view is that the best film music performs its various functions without making us consciously aware of its presence. In other words, if we don't notice the music, it's a good score. Therefore, the music for a good score shouldn't be *too* good, for really good music draws attention to itself and away from the film.

The modern view, by contrast, allows the music, on appropriate occasions, not only to demand our conscious attention but even to dominate the picture, as long as it remains essentially integrated with the visual, dramatic, and rhythmic elements of the film as a whole. At such moments, we may become conscious of how intrinsically beautiful the music is, though we should not be so moved that we lose sight of its appropriateness to the image on the screen.

Both modern and traditional views are therefore in agreement on one essential point: Music that calls too much attention to itself at the expense of the film as a whole is not effective. Regardless of the degree of subordination, a good score will always be a significant structural element, performing its proper functions in a perfectly integrated way, serving as a means to an end rather than an end itself. As composer Quincy Jones puts it:

For me, some of the best moments in pictures come when the music is tied in so organically with the image, is so much a part of it, that you can't imagine it any other way. The themes in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *The Third Man* seem to come out of the tapestry of the films.<sup>2</sup>

## GENERAL FUNCTIONS OF THE MUSICAL SCORE

The two most general and basic functions of the musical score are to create structural rhythms and to stimulate emotional responses, both of which greatly enhance and reinforce the effect of the image.

The musical score creates a sense of structural rhythm both in the film as a whole and in its individual shots by developing a sense of pace corresponding to the pace of the movement within each shot and to the pace of the editing. In this way, the composer articulates and underscores the basic rhythms of the film.

The film score also serves to complement and enhance the narrative and dramatic structure by stimulating emotional responses that parallel each indi-



**FIGURE 9.1** “A Sigh Is Just a Sigh” From its opening credits accompanied by Jimmy Durante’s recording of “As Time Goes By,” *Sleepless in Seattle* leans heavily on familiar ballads to intensify the romantic mood of individual sequences and the film as a whole.

vidual sequence and the film as a whole. Because even the most subtle moods are established, intensified, maintained, and changed through the effective use of film music, the musical score becomes an accurate reflection of the emotional patterns and shapes of the film as a whole (Figure 9.1). This does not mean that a film’s structured visual rhythms can be separated from its emotional patterns, for both are closely interwoven into the same fabric. Effective film music therefore usually parallels one and complements the other.

The simplest and oldest method of adding music to film is simply selecting a piece of familiar music (classical, pop, folk, jazz, blues, rock, and so on) that fits the rhythmic, emotional, or dramatic demands of the sequence at hand. An excellent example of the use of familiar music was the choice of the *William Tell* Overture for the old “Lone Ranger” radio show. The classical overture not only provided a perfect rhythmic counterpart to the galloping hoofbeats and served as a stimulus to the visual imagination, but also gave the program a seriousness of tone that it would not have possessed otherwise. In similar manner, Stanley Kubrick employed such diverse types of music as *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *The Blue Danube Waltz*, and “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” to very effective ends in *2001* and *Dr. Strangelove*.

A perfect match of song with dramatic situation—such as Steven Spielberg’s choice of “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” for the romantic dance in the firefighters’ Quonset hut in *Always* (selected in part because composer Irving Berlin had

denied the director's request to use his first choice, the popular song "Always")—can do much to create a magic moment on film. Many directors, however, prefer to use music specially created and designed for the film—music composed either after the film and its accompanying sound-effects track are completed or while the film is being made—so that composer and director can work together in the same creative atmosphere. Many films, of course, use a combination of familiar and original music.

Film music especially composed for a film can be divided into two types.

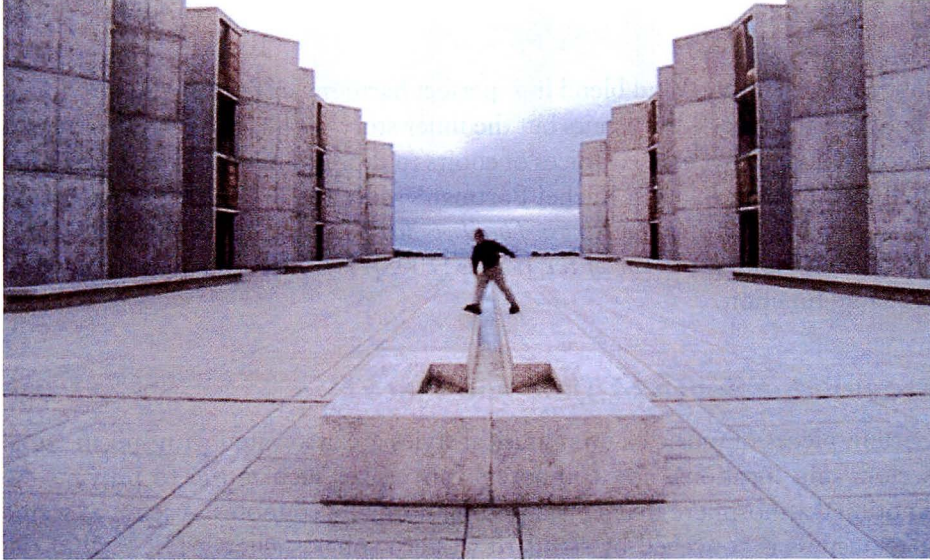
1. **Mickey Mousing.** So named because it grew out of animation techniques, **Mickey Mousing** is the exact, calculated dovetailing of music and action. The rhythm of the music precisely matches the natural rhythms of the objects moving on the screen. This synchronization requires a meticulous analysis of the filmed sequence by the composer. Although some sense of emotional tone, mood, or atmosphere can be included in Mickey Mouse scoring, the primary emphasis is on the kinetic (the sense of movement and action) and rhythmic elements of the sequences in which the music is used.
2. **Generalized Score.** A **generalized score** (also known as an *implicit score*) makes no attempt to precisely match music and movement; instead the emphasis is on capturing the overall emotional atmosphere or mood of a sequence or of the film as a whole. Often, this is achieved through recurring rhythmic and emotive variations of a few main motifs or themes. Although basic rhythms in such scores are varied to suggest the rhythmic structure of individual action sequences, their primary function is to convey an emotion that parallels the story.

## SPECIAL FUNCTIONS OF THE MUSICAL SCORE

In the modern film, music is used to perform many varied and complex functions, some of which are rather specialized. Although it is impossible to list or describe all these functions, some of the most basic ones are worthy of our attention.

### Heightening the Dramatic Effect of Dialogue

Music is often employed as a kind of emotional punctuation for the dialogue, expressing the feeling underlying what is said. Generally, the musical accompaniment of dialogue must be extremely subtle and unobtrusive, stealing in and out so quietly that we respond to its effects without conscious awareness of its presence. In Neil Jordan's fascinating *The Butcher Boy*, the opposite is too often true. The film, a darkly comic domestic horror story, utilizes Irish accents so thick that subtitles sometimes seem warranted. Elliott Rosenthal's score for it, though aptly indigenous, is frequently performed so loudly that the listener can barely hear the dialogue, much less understand it easily.



**FIGURE 9.2 Music to Tell an Inner Story** The superb documentary *My Architect* allows an illegitimate son, filmmaker Nathaniel Kahn, a professional space in which to discover and re-create his long-dead father, internationally celebrated architect Louis I. Kahn. While making all the necessary, obvious, and deliberate investigations expected of any good historian, Nathaniel Kahn at one point seems to have taken a little personal break from his labors with some recreational rollerblading. However, he filmed the scene, and then he shrewdly used it in his movie: here, around the concourse “canal” at the artist-father’s majestic Salk Institute campus overlooking the Pacific, the artist-son literally skates upon the face of one of his dad’s greatest works. As he moves, with spontaneous, restorative energy, the soundtrack plays Neil Young’s “Long May You Run.”

## Telling an Inner Story

Music often moves beyond a merely subordinate or complementary role to assume a primary storytelling function, enabling the director to express things that cannot be expressed through verbal or pictorial means (Figure 9.2). This is especially true when a character’s state of mind undergoes extreme and rapid changes that neither words nor action can adequately express.

A good example of the use of music to tell an inner story occurs in *On the Beach*. An American submarine captain (Gregory Peck) takes an Australian woman (Ava Gardner) to a mountain resort for a final fling at trout fishing before the lethal radioactive clouds reach Australia. The American, whose family was killed in the nuclear war, has failed to adapt to the reality of the situation and continues to think and talk of his family as though they were alive, making it impossible for him to accept the love of the Australian. The two are in their room in the lodge, listening to the dissonant, off-key voices of the drunken fishermen downstairs singing “Waltzing Matilda.” In an underplayed dramatic scene, Peck finally realizes the futility of his ties with the past and accepts Gardner’s love. As they embrace, the loud and drunken voices become soft,

sober, and melodious and blend into perfect harmony, reflecting not any actual change in the voices downstairs but the inner story of the change in Peck's state of mind. The use of massed voices of choirs to express an inner mystical or spiritual transformation (as in Rachel Portman's score for *Beloved*, Howard Shore's music for *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, or John Williams's sound-effects heightening in *War of the Worlds* [2005]) is a more obvious example of the same function.

## Providing a Sense of Time and Place

Certain pieces of music or even musical styles are associated with specific time periods and locations, and composers can utilize such music to provide the emotional atmosphere that a given setting normally connotes. A sense of scenic spaciousness is conveyed by standard western songs such as "The Call of the Faraway Hills" from *Shane*. Completely different qualities, such as the hustle and bustle of people having a good time and a merry, communal feeling, are conveyed by "town" or "saloon" music. Therefore, when the locale in a western changes from the range to the town or saloon, the visual transition is often preceded slightly by a switch to standard saloon music (player piano accompanied by shouting, laughter, general crowd noises, and an occasional gunshot or two). The music not only tells us that a change of scene is coming but also prepares us mentally for the visual scene before it appears, thereby serving a transitional function.

Music associated with different countries or even different ethnic groups can be used in a similar way. Certain instruments are associated with definite settings or groups of people: the zither, the mandolin, the banjo, the Spanish guitar, and the Hawaiian guitar all have fairly concrete geographical connotations, and these connotations can be varied or even changed completely by the style in which the instruments are played.

The time period of the film is also made realistic through appropriate music and instrumentation, as illustrated by the use of the quaint, old sound of a harpsichord for a period piece and otherworldly or futuristic electronic music for a science fiction film.

When the time frame of a story is within most viewers' memories, recent American films have loaded the soundtrack with popular recordings from the era, thus evoking a strong "remembered flavor" of the time. Such music underscores the past-tense quality of the story for the viewer and, by triggering built-in associations, intensifies and personalizes the viewer's involvement with the story itself.

Nostalgic music is used effectively in such films as *Good Night, and Good Luck*, *Pleasantville*, *The Last Days of Disco*, *Forrest Gump*, *The Big Chill*, *Coming Home*, *The Last Picture Show*, and *American Graffiti*, which is literally built around such music. In many cases this music is heard coming from some on-screen source such as a radio or record player, but it usually is used as part of



**FIGURE 9.3 A Serious Good Night of Nostalgia** Director George Clooney's politics-and-broadcasting drama *Good Night, and Good Luck* spins a tale of hubris and greed in black-and-white. But the movie's somber tone is balanced somewhat by a surprising and very pleasurable use of music. While the powerful adversaries Senator Joe McCarthy and TV newsman Edward R. Murrow are grimly vying, metaphorically, for center stage, the audience is invited periodically, quite literally, into a CBS sound studio where Dianne Reeves is singing pop and jazz classics of the 1950s period.

the off-screen musical score as well (Figure 9.3). Such film scores are called “compilation” works.

## Foreshadowing Events or Building Dramatic Tension

When a surprising change of mood or an unexpected action is about to occur on the screen, we are almost always prepared for that change by the musical score. By preparing us emotionally for a shocking turn of events, the score does not soften the effect of the shock but actually intensifies it by signaling its approach. In its own way, the music says, “Watch carefully now. Something shocking or unexpected is going to happen,” and we respond to the musical signal by becoming more attentive. Even the fact that we know what is going to happen does not relieve the tension thus created, for suspense is as much a matter of when as of what. Music used in this way does not coincide exactly with what is happening on the screen but precedes it, introducing a feeling of tension while the images on the screen retain their calm.

Foreshadowing or tension-building music deliberately plays on our nerves in a variety of ways: by gradually increasing in volume or pitch, switching from

a major to a minor key, or introducing percussion instruments and dissonance. The introduction of dissonance into a musical score that has been harmonious to that point automatically creates a sense of nervousness and anxiety. Dissonance in such a situation expresses disorder, chaos, and a breakdown of the normal patterned order of harmony, causing us to become nervous and insecure, exactly the state of mind desired for effective foreshadowing or the building of dramatic tension. For example, the famous breakfast montage from *Citizen Kane*, showing the increasing alienation between Emily and Charles Foster Kane over a period of years, begins with a gentle lilting waltz and ends with a dissonant and harsh variation of the same waltz theme.

## Adding Levels of Meaning to the Visual Image

Sometimes music makes us see the visual scene in a fresh, unusual way by combining with the image to create additional levels of meaning. Take, for example, the opening scene in *Dr. Strangelove*, which shows a B-52 bomber refueling in flight. Extremely delicate maneuvering is required to place the refueling boom correctly, trailing like a giant winged hose from the tail of the tanker plane into the fuel-tank opening in the nose of the giant B-52 bomber, which is flying slightly behind and below the tanker. The music accompanying this sequence is the familiar love song “Try a Little Tenderness,” played on romantic violins. If we are alert enough to recognize the song and think of its title, the music not only seems very appropriate to the delicate maneuvering required for the refueling operation but could also lead us to see the whole thing as a gentle love scene, a tender sexual coupling of two giant birds. Because this is the opening sequence of the film, the music also helps to establish the satiric tone that runs throughout the film as a whole.

Highly ironic levels of meaning can be achieved by using music that suggests a mood exactly opposite to the mood normally suggested by what is occurring on the screen. This technique is illustrated at the conclusion of *Dr. Strangelove*, in which the sticky-sweet voice of Vera Lynn singing “We’ll Meet Again Some Sunny Day” accompanies the image of a nuclear holocaust as it destroys the world.

## Characterization Through Music

Music can play a role in characterization. Mickey Mouse scoring may be used to emphasize a peculiar or rhythmic pattern set up by a certain character’s physical movement. The score for *Of Human Bondage* (1934), for example, utilizes a “disabled” theme, which rhythmically parallels the main character’s limp, thus reinforcing that aspect of his character. Some actors and actresses, such as John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe, and Al Pacino, have distinctive walks that exhibit definite rhythmic patterns and can therefore be reinforced musically.





**FIGURE 9.4 Exquisite Peter-and-the-Wolfing** In Rob Marshall's film version of the popular novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*, composer John Williams created an elegant correspondence between key characters and the musical instruments and themes that symbolize them on screen. Thus, a cello melody played by Yo-Yo Ma represents the central female character (Zhang Ziyi), and a different one performed on violin by Itzhak Perlman identifies the main male figure (Ken Watanabe).

Instrumentation can also be used to aid in characterization in an effect that might be called **Peter-and-the-Wolfing**, scoring in which certain musical instruments and types of music represent and signal the presence of certain characters (Figure 9.4). Many films of the 1930s and 1940s used this technique, causing the audience to associate the villain with sinister-sounding music in a minor key, the heroine with soft, ethereal violins, and the hero with strong, “honest” music. Although such heavy-handed treatment is not common today, **leitmotifs** (the repetition of a single musical theme or phrase to announce the reappearance of a certain character) were staples of silent-film scores and are still employed to some extent.

Sometimes a character is complex enough to require multiple themes, as composer Jerry Goldsmith discovered while scoring *Patton*:

[I]t was a challenge to keep the audience aware of the complexity of Patton's personality. We were dealing with three different facets of Patton's imagination. He was a warrior, a man who believed in reincarnation, and a man with stern religious beliefs. [Director] Frank [Schaffner] and I felt it was important for the music to help delineate which facet of his personality was predominant in the various

scenes. . . . At the beginning of the picture I set up the reincarnation theme with the trumpet fanfare, the very first notes of music you hear. When he relived the battle of Carthagenia in his mind you heard these trumpets again, heralding this facet of his personality. The second and most obvious piece of music was the military march, and when he was commanding, this was the predominant theme—the warrior theme. The third was a chorale, which was used in counterpoint to underline his religious character, his discipline, and his determination. When he was the whole man, commanding his troops in victory, the idea was to combine all these musical elements, because he was all of these facets together.<sup>3</sup>

In *Citizen Kane*, composer Bernard Herrmann used two separate leitmotifs for Charles Foster Kane. One, “a vigorous piece of ragtime, sometimes transformed into a hornpipe polka,” was used to symbolize the mature Kane’s power. The other, “a featherlight and harmonic” theme, symbolized the simpler days of Kane’s youth and the more positive aspects of his personality.<sup>4</sup>

A good composer may also use the musical score to add qualities to an actor or actress that that person does not normally have. In the filming of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, for example, Dimitri Tiomkin felt that Mala Powers did not really look French enough for the part of Roxanne. Therefore he Frenchified her by using French-style thematic music whenever she appeared on the screen, thus building up associations in the viewer’s mind to achieve the desired effect.

Director Jonathan Demme (*The Silence of the Lambs, Philadelphia*) has said that, in choosing music for his films, he tries “to talk about what kind of music the characters might be hearing in their daily life. It’s just more true, more subtle, and more fun, too.” Like most directors, he prefers to make the choice of a film’s composer as early as possible in the process and observes that “editors love to find a piece of music that works with a scene before the scene is cut.”<sup>5</sup> For the scoring of *The Truman Show*, Peter Weir (*The Year of Living Dangerously, Witness*) ultimately selected German-Australian composer Burkhard Dallwitz, but Weir also decided even earlier, through experimenting with a “temp” track, that certain existing pieces by Philip Glass would be included. Weir writes,

When making a film, I play music constantly during “dailies”—the nightly screenings of the previous day’s shooting. I test all kinds of music against the image, searching for the elusive “sound” of the picture.

In the case of *The Truman Show*, since it is the story of a live television program, I was also determining the music that the show’s creator, Christof [Ed Harris], would have chosen.

The tracks that seemed to be drawing the most out of the images for me (and presumably Christof) were those of Philip Glass. . . . Complementing these tracks is a score by Burkhard Dallwitz . . . and from the moment he played back his first cue, I knew Christof would have been as delighted with the result as I was.

The use of music in this film is as unusual as the concept of the movie itself. Sometimes the music is Christof’s choice, sometimes it’s mine!<sup>6</sup>



**FIGURE 9.5 Composing Character** Among the actors who not only performed but wrote songs *in character* for *Nashville* was Ronee Blakley.

Already-published music by Philip Glass was used so extensively by director Stephen Daldry as a temp score when he was editing his 2002 film *The Hours* that he finally just decided to convince Glass himself to compose the movie's music.

One of the great mavericks of modern cinema, Robert Altman (*M\*A\*S\*H*, *Vincent & Theo*, *The Player*, *Short Cuts*), is celebrated for his willingness to work improvisationally with actors. In *Nashville*, his 1975 epic vision of America, this director carried over his playfulness into the creation of the film's musical score. Altman asked several of the actors playing the film's twenty-four central figures (including Karen Black, Ronee Blakley, and Keith Carradine, who won an Oscar for his song "I'm Easy") to compose, *in character*, songs for performance during the narrative's unfolding (Figure 9.5). Although this film-music experiment had an origin very different from that of the 1972 musical film *Cabaret* and the 2002 musical *Chicago*, the three works are similar in their strategy: In each case, all songs are somehow restricted to being performed on a "stage." By the early 1970s, the tradition of the great American movie musicals—in which fictional characters suddenly burst into song in reel life—had died. By most accounts, the tradition's apex had been reached, ironically, in *Singin' in the Rain*, the 1952 comic requiem for the silent-film era.

## Triggering Conditioned Responses

The composer takes advantage of the fact that viewers have been conditioned to associate some musical stereotypes or musical codes with particular situations.

Such codes can be used with great economy and effectiveness. In old Western movies, the sudden introduction of a steady tom-tom beat accompanied by a high, wailing, wind instrument ranging through a simple four- or five-tone scale effectively signals the presence of Indians even before they appear. The “cavalry to the rescue” bugle call is equally familiar. Such musical codes cannot be treated in a highly creative way, for to do so would cause them to lose some of their effectiveness as code devices. Composers do, however, try to make them seem as fresh and original as possible.

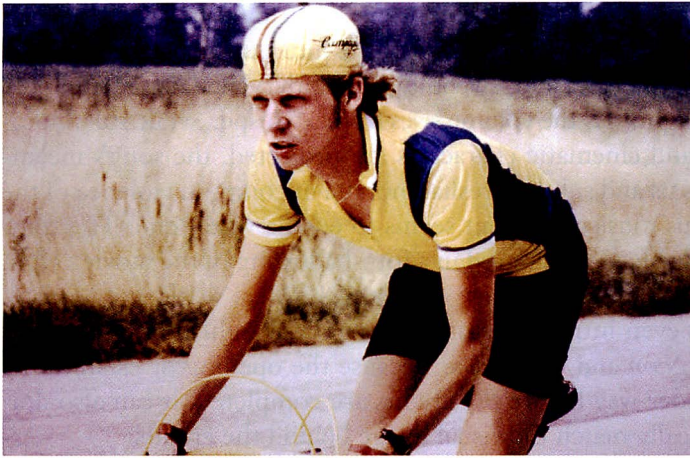
Even stereotyped musical codes can create unusual reactions when they are used ironically. In *Little Big Man*, for example, a lively fife and drum “good guys victorious” score accompanies scenes of General Custer’s troops as they brutally massacre an Indian tribe. The ironic effect catches us in a tug-of-war between the music and the image. So compelling is the rhythm of the heroic music that we can scarcely resist tapping our toes and swelling with heroic pride while our visual sensibilities are appalled by the unheroic action taking place on the screen.

## Traveling Music

Film music is at its best when used to characterize rapid movement. Such music, sometimes called **traveling music**, is often employed almost as a formula or a shorthand code to give the impression of various means of transportation (Figure 9.6). The formulas are varied to fit the unique quality of the movement being portrayed. Thus, stagecoach music is different from horse-and-buggy music, and both differ essentially from lone-rider music. The old steam engine requires a different type of railroad music than the diesel locomotive. On rare occasions, traveling music performs a wide variety of functions, as is illustrated by the use of Flatt and Scruggs’s “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” to accompany the famous chase scenes in *Bonnie and Clyde*. The strong, almost frantic sounds of the fast-fingered five-string banjo create a desperate yet happy rhythm that captures precisely the derring-do and spirit of the Barrow gang, the slapstick comedy, desperation, and blind excitement of the chases themselves, and the nostalgic, good-old-days flavor of the film as a whole.

## Providing Important Transitions

Music functions in an important way by providing transitions or bridges between scenes—marking the passage of time, signaling a change of locale, foreshadowing a shift in mood or pace, or transporting us backward in time into a flashback. *Citizen Kane* director Orson Welles and composer Bernard Herrmann both had experience in radio, where musical bridges were virtually mandatory. In *Citizen Welles*, Welles’s biographer Frank Brady describes the effect of this experience on the use of music in *Citizen Kane*:



**FIGURE 9.6 Traveling Music** In *Breaking Away*, an excerpt from *The Barber of Seville*, a stirring opera by the Italian composer Rossini, provides traveling music for Dave (Dennis Christopher) as he prepares for the big race, and it reinforces the character's obsession with things Italian as well as underscoring the heroic effort involved in his training.

The most frequent use of music in radio is to provide the transition from scene to scene or situation to situation. Even a single note becomes important in telling the ear that the scene is shifting. In film, the eye usually supplies the transition as the scene is cut or dissolves into the next. Welles and Herrmann both believed that an opportunity to include transitional music, whether it be symbolic or illustrative, to weave parts of the film together or to set it in context, should not be overlooked.

As Welles worked on the script, and as he began to direct specific scenes, he could hear in his mind the suggestion of the music that should be inserted, just as he could hear the additional dialogue or the sound effects that would eventually be added. He sensed where a scene would be more effectively transferred with a musical bridge and where music would conflict with the dialogue. Pencilled notations began to fill his script indicating where music was needed. For instance, as Thompson reads Thatcher's diary and his eye travels over the parchment with old-fashioned handwriting, "I first encountered Mr. Kane in 1871 . . .," Welles asked Herrmann for a fully melodic transition that would evoke all at once the frivolity and innocence of childhood in the snowbound winter of the Victorian era, and Herrmann responded with a piece of lyrical music that used delicate flutes leading to a blizzard of strings and harps that perfectly captured the guiltlessness and simplicity of a former age. The "snow picture" sequence as it grew to be called, became one of the most charmingly innovative transitions to a flashback ever seen or heard on film.<sup>7</sup>

## Setting an Initial Tone

The music that accompanies the main titles of a film usually serves at least two functions. First, it often articulates rhythmically the title information itself, making it somehow more interesting than it is. If the music consciously captures our attention anywhere in the film, it is during the showing of the titles

and credits. Second, music is especially important here, for at this initial stage it usually establishes the general mood or tone of the film. At the opening of *Bonnie and Clyde*, we start to hear a soft, sweet, lyrical Rudy Vallee pop song of the early 1930s, “Deep Night.” As the volume rises from a whisper, while still photographs of both real and cinematic characters are projected, the song’s melancholy at once soothes us and subtly foreshadows the uncommon violence of the film that follows. This musical element seems to echo a visual one: The tranquil white titles slowly bleed to dark red in a foreshadowing of the movie’s later, surprising carnage.

Title music may even introduce story elements through the use of lyrics, as was done in *High Noon* and *Cat Ballou*. Because the opening or establishing scene is generally under way before the credits are completed, it can also dramatically or rhythmically match the visual image behind the credits.

## Musical Sounds as Part of the Score

Certain sound effects or noises from nature can be used in subtle ways for their own sake, to create atmosphere in the same way that music does. Crashing waves, rippling streams, bird calls, and moaning winds all possess clear musical qualities, as do many manmade sounds, such as foghorns, auto horns, industrial noises of various kinds, steam whistles, clanging doors, chains, squealing auto brakes, and engine noises. Such sounds can be built up and artistically mixed into an exciting rhythmical sequence that, because of its naturalness, may be even more effective than music in conveying a mood.

## Music as Interior Monologue

In the modern film, songs with lyrics that have no clear or direct relationship to the scenes they accompany are increasingly used as part of the soundtrack. In many cases, such songs are used to reveal the private moods, emotions, or thoughts of a central character. This was the case with the lyrics of “The Sounds of Silence” in *The Graduate* and “Everybody’s Talkin’ at Me” in *Midnight Cowboy*. Such lyrics function on a more or less independent level as a highly subjective and poetic means of communication, capable of expanding the meaning and emotional content of the scenes they accompany.

## Music as a Base for Choreographed Action

Usually the director composes, photographs, and edits the images first and adds music later, after the visual elements are already assembled. In some films, however, music is used to provide a clear rhythmic framework for the action, which essentially becomes a highly stylized dance performed to the music (Figure 9.7).

Director John Badham remembers his use of the technique in *Saturday Night Fever*:



**FIGURE 9.7 Choreographed Action Music** In *Shrek*, the title character (shown with his comic-irritant buddy, the talking Donkey) conspires to keep his domain private. At one point in the animated film, Shrek rhythmically battles a menacing army to the tune of “Bad Reputation.”

[I]n the opening we took a tape recorder out with us in the street—we already had a demo made by the Bee Gees of “Staying Alive,” which was their initial version. But they had promised us they’d always stick to the same tempo in any future versions they did. The tempo was really all I had to have. But I had the rest of the song, too. Every time we shot a shot, that music would be playing, so all the movie that is on screen is in exact tempo to that. . . . [John Travolta’s] paint can is swinging in the right tempo with the music. Of course, Travolta’s feet are going right on the beat. And that makes a big difference for unifying and getting a synergistic action between the sound and the music.<sup>8</sup>

A similar technique is used when the music originates from some on-screen source, such as a radio or a CD player, and the actor coordinates the rhythms of his movements to it. In *Hopscotch*, Walter Matthau, playing a former CIA agent writing his memoirs, comically structures his typing and related tasks to match the rhythms of a Mozart symphony on the record player.

In *Punchline*, Sally Field and her two daughters redefine the phrase “fast food” as they frantically clean house and throw together a formal dinner for



**FIGURE 9.8 Music First—and Later** One scene in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* actually “creates” the music that accompanies some of the later action in the film. Here, three prison escapees (Tim Blake Nelson, George Clooney, and John Turturro) become the Soggy Bottom Boys when they record “A Man of Constant Sorrow” in a makeshift country studio.

husband John Goodman and two Catholic priests he is bringing home on short notice. The frantic action is choreographed to the accompaniment of “The Sabre Dance” on the stereo. With the meal finally ready, the house cleaned, the table set, and the guests seated, they sit down to begin a quiet dinner soothed by *Pachelbel’s Canon* until one of the daughters breaks the mood by telling a shockingly filthy joke.

An extreme example of this technique of “music first” is heard in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Figure 9.8). This Coen Brothers film uses “roots” music throughout to help provide a narrative framework, and these sounds combine with Roger Deakins’s arresting images to create an indelible movie experience. Some parts of the film, such as the “O Death” segment, are intricately choreographed to the music. In other sections, the dynamic rhythms of the action and the editing are somewhat more subtly designed to complement or contrast with the words and music of melodic songs. Such “traditional” tunes as “You Are My Sunshine,” “I’ll Fly Away,” and “Keep on the Sunny Side” appear from a soundtrack album that was already available and immensely popular well before the film itself was released.

Action that has no essential rhythmic qualities can be edited to music to create an effect very similar to that of choreographed action. The Little League baseball action in *The Bad News Bears* was apparently edited to match the heroic rhythms of orchestral music from the opera *Carmen*, creating the impression of a comic/heroic dance.



## Covering Possible Weaknesses in the Film

A nonstorytelling function of the musical score is to disguise or cover up weaknesses in acting and dialogue. When such defects are evident, the director or composer can use heavy musical backing to make weak acting or banal dialogue appear more dramatically significant than it otherwise would. Television soap operas traditionally used organ music for this purpose with great frequency (and little sense of shame). Modern action films are frequently criticized for their disregard of narrative credibility, but, as producer Jerry Bruckheimer (*Con Air*; *Armageddon*) observes, a film can divert the audience's attention from such weaknesses. "Sound," he says, "carries you through moments when the action doesn't. Take away the sound and it's dead."<sup>9</sup> Director Martin Scorsese, in characterizing the score that Elmer Bernstein wrote for *The Age of Innocence*, sees greater complexity in the process generally:

Film music's kind of a slippery thing. It can take hold of your ear when the rest of the movie eludes your imagination, or just doesn't have the strength to challenge it. It can overwhelm you in a great wash of sound, so dramatic inadequacies don't seem quite so treacherous. It can add punch where the story or the filmmaking craft have abandoned the drama. Or—and this is best—it can give the film another dimension, a separate signature.<sup>10</sup>

And Bernstein's delicate score assists director Todd Haynes in reaching that other dimension in *Far From Heaven*.

The examples just described represent only the most common and obvious uses of music in the modern film. The point to keep in mind is that we must be aware of the various emotions and levels of meaning that music communicates (Figure 9.9).

## SYNTHESIZER SCORING

A fairly recent trend is the use of electronic synthesizers for instrumentation on film scores. A synthesizer is essentially a musical computer played on a piano-like keyboard and equipped with various knobs and buttons that permit all sorts of variation in pitch, tone, and decay. It can imitate the sounds of a large variety of other instruments while still retaining its own distinct quality. Because of its tremendous flexibility, it is the fastest, most efficient way to score a film. A two-person team—one playing the keyboard, the other controlling the sound qualities—can create a full sound comparable to that provided by a complete orchestra.

Synthesizers have played a part in film scores for some time, at least since *A Clockwork Orange* in 1971, but they have become much more prevalent since *Midnight Express* (1978), which has a complete "synth" score by Giorgio Moroder. Films with synthesizer scores include *Sorcerer*; *Thief*; *American Gigolo*; *Foxes*; *Blade Runner*; *Cat People*; and *Beverly Hills Cop*. The great versatility of



**FIGURE 9.9 “Anachronistic” Film Music** Strong emotions and multiple levels of meaning are supplemented in *A Knight’s Tale*, very loosely based on a Chaucer fable from the Middle Ages, through the use of modern rock music. In scenes such as this one (featuring Heath Ledger and Paul Bettany), Queen’s “We Will Rock You” and David Bowie’s “Golden Years” add both tension and ballast to the narrative.

synth scoring was most evident in *Chariots of Fire* (1981), a period piece that seemed an unlikely choice for an electronic score. *Chariots* composer Vangelis’s challenge was to compose a “score which was contemporary, but still compatible with the time of the film.” He met the challenge successfully by mixing synthesizer and a grand piano.<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes it is difficult to know whether to classify electronic scores as music or sound effects. In *Cat People* (1982), for example, the synthesizer often functions as an almost subliminal animal presence behind the image, creating the effect of “listening in on the vital processes of other organisms—of other places, other worlds.”<sup>12</sup> Horror movies have been less subtle in their overuse of the tension-building, nervous-pulse sounds, which are repeated over and over without musical development.

Electronic scores are still relatively rare in major films because most top composers still prefer to use an orchestra. Even in the case of *The X-Files*, a 1998 film version of the popular television program, the composer, Mark Snow, chose to “enlarge” with orchestral adaptations his celebrated synthesizer themes from the series. Some writers of film music (James Newton Howard in *King Kong* [2005], for example) utilize “synthesized mock-ups” to share ideas with directors and prepare for later full orchestrations.



**FIGURE 9.10 Movies With No Music Score** Many cinephiles have long complained about the superabundant and intrusive musical cues in films made by American studios (recent case in point: check out the myriad, forceful grumblings of reviewers about James Horner’s score for the 2006 version of *All the King’s Men*). In Europe, however, the expectations of both filmmakers and audiences seem, generally, to be very different. There, less music is considered more appropriate. And in some films, such as Michael Haneke’s *Cache*’ (starring Daniel Auteuil and Juliette Binoche, above), provide no music at all; dialogue, ambient sounds, and silence alone must even carry the weight of building and sustaining suspense.

## BALANCING THE SCORE

Generally speaking, economy is a great virtue in film music, both in duration and in instrumentation. The musical score should do no more than is necessary to perform its proper function clearly and simply. However, because of some irresistible temptations to dress up scenes with music whether they need it or not, the normal dramatic film usually ends up with too much music rather than not enough. The Hollywood tendency seems to be toward large orchestras, even though smaller combinations can be more interesting and colorful or even more powerful in their effect on the film as a whole. Typically, European films tend to use less music than do American works—or, in some cases, none at all (Figure 9.10).

The proper amount of music depends on the nature of the picture itself. Some films require a lot of music. Others are so realistic that music would interfere with the desired effect. In many cases, the most dramatically effective musical score is that which is used most sparingly. For *All the President’s Men*, in 1976, composer David Shire had to be convinced by the director, Alan J. Pakula, that his film needed *any* music written for it. As Shire puts it, “This was

a case where a director had a better grasp of what music could do for a film than a composer. That doesn't happen very often." Two years earlier, near the beginning of his career, Shire had shown a similar disinclination for overwriting when he composed the haunting solo piano score for Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*. About that experience, Shire says:

One of the things that makes scoring films so much fun is the opportunity to constantly write for orchestras of all sizes and shapes, and to write only as much music as a film really needs. The most economical score is often the best one, just as the simplest solution is often the most effective. But it always depends on the picture. If next week I get one that calls for ninety minutes of orchestral scoring, then that's what I'll give it, but *The Conversation* required very little. In that film, about a surveillance expert whose obsessive nature gets him involved with a case that causes him to lose his mind, I used a synthesizer to modulate the texture of the piano cues to give a weird, unsettling effect to underscore the man's dilemma. It's opportunities like this that make film scoring a fascinating business.<sup>13</sup>

Oscar-winning composer Randy Newman, who wrote the scores for *Ragtime*, *The Natural*, and the *Toy Story* films, is critical of Woody Allen's *Manhattan* score, which he feels is too big for the film. Although he does not object to the full-orchestra treatment during panoramic scenes of the Manhattan skyline, Newman claims that the music often overwhelms the characters and the action with "great genius music by Gershwin and Wagner—and little Woody Allen and other little guys talking on the phone at the same time. It dwarfed them."<sup>14</sup>

The director Sidney Lumet (*Twelve Angry Men*, *The Pawnbroker*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Network*, *Find Me Guilty*) has observed, "When I haven't been able to find a musical concept that adds to the movie, I haven't used a score. Studios hate the idea of a picture without music. It scares them." Besides, he notes, "talking about music is like talking about colors: the same color can mean different things to different people."<sup>15</sup> Usually, though, an attempt at creating film music is definitely worth the resulting colorful dialogue.

Finally, in *Knowing the Score: Film Composers Talk About the Art, Craft, Blood, Sweat, and Tears of Writing for Cinema*, David Morgan has observed:

Cinema has offered some of the most vibrant and sophisticated music available to mass audiences, yet film music remains an underappreciated art form. . . . Good film music can rise above its material and live on outside of the film, long after the drama for which it was written has been forgotten. And it is a testament to . . . composers . . . that Hollywood has given them opportunities to write their music and have it performed in a wide variety of styles and genres that would be almost impossible to match on stage or in the concert halls.<sup>16</sup>