

Melodrama as a Compositional Resource in Early Hollywood Sound Cinema

By David Neumeyer

Of the several major turning points in cinema's roughly hundred-year history, the transition from silent to sound film holds special significance for music. To make this assertion, however, is not to claim that the others are inconsequential. The rise of a commercial cinema at the turn of the century did give theater musicians a new medium with which to experiment. (The generally accepted "birthdate" of cinema is 28 December 1895, the Lumière brothers' public showing of a film projected on a screen, apparently including piano accompaniment.¹) After World War I, a firmly established studio system enabled a flourishing composition and publication industry that supplied music for performances.² The studios sometimes provided cue sheets, but usually not music scores; and in any case theater music directors were free to plan their performances as they chose. The collapse of production and distribution monopolies and competition with television in the fifties forced studios toward larger-scale productions (best represented, perhaps, by historical films such as *Ben Hur* [1959]), which gave a relatively small number of composers unprecedented opportunities for large-scale scores—and occasionally even adequate time to write them. A second generation of directors arose in the 1960s, cinematically literate and bolder in their treatment of all aspects of film, including the sound track. Finally, the dramatically increased access to videocassette prints over the past decade has created a new market for "classic" films and for their music, which in turn has led to more attention from critics and scholars.

All the above notwithstanding, the transitional cinema of the late twenties and early thirties was the site in which studio producers, directors,

¹ Harry Geduld, *The Birth of the Talkies: From Edison to Jolson* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 28. But see also Léo Sauvage's revisionist history in his *L'affaire Lumière: enquête sur les origines du cinéma* (Paris: L'herminier, 1985).

² Some composers even specialized in writing music for this purpose, among them Otto Langey, Gaston Borch, William Lake, and Erno Rapee. Two characteristic examples are Langey's *Misterioso No. 1* and *Hurry No. 2*. Both are included in Rapee's collection *Motion Picture Moods for Pianists and Organists: A Rapid-Reference Collection of Selected Pieces Adapted to Fifty-Two Moods and Situations* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1925; rpt, New York: Arno, 1970), 165–66, 151–52, respectively. Few concert composers contributed directly to this repertoire, the only well-known example being Schoenberg's *Begleitungsmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene*, Op. 34, a set of three pieces written in 1930 for the catalogue of Heinrichshofen, the leading German publisher of music for the silent cinema.

composers, and sound technicians worked out the basic practices we now take for granted in film music. The transition years are usually taken to be 1927—when the first feature film was released with at least some synchronized sound, Warner Brothers' *The Jazz Singer*—to 1932, by which time effective postproduction mixing and re-recording technology were widely available. For music, we may expand the range slightly, from 1926—the release of Warners' *Don Juan*, a silent film with a complete recorded music track, mixed with a few sound effects—to 1935, when Max Steiner's music for John Ford's *The Informer* won the first Academy Award for Best Original Score for a Dramatic Picture.³ The year 1935 might then be taken as the inauguration of the modern era of feature film: cinematography and postproduction film editing had already matured in the 1920s, and thus by 1935 both of cinema's basic elements—image track and sound track—were functioning together in the now familiar manner.

Steiner, whose music for *The Informer* I will examine in some detail below, was one of a handful of composers who strongly influenced the development of film music during the transitional period. With Alfred Newman, Herbert Stothart, and others, Steiner came to Hollywood in 1929, the year in which studio owners realized that the sound feature film was more than a novelty—they therefore nearly emptied Broadway of its composers and arrangers in order to increase production of what had already quickly become the most popular sound-film genre, the musical. (It is no coincidence that the first sound film to win an Oscar was a musical, *Broadway Melody* [1929].) By Steiner's own account, however, musicians at first found little work available in any other genre:

[M]usic for dramatic pictures was only used when it was actually required by the script. A constant fear prevailed among producers, directors and musicians, that they would be asked: Where does the music come from? Therefore they never used music unless it could be explained by the presence of a source like an orchestra, piano player, phonograph or radio, which was specified in the script.⁴

³ This was not the first Oscar given in the "best score" category. The award was instituted in 1934 and given that year to Victor Schertzinger and Gus Kahn for a backstage musical (whose heroine was an opera singer), *One Night of Love*. Steiner did receive a nomination in 1934, for *The Lost Patrol*, and thus has the distinction of holding the first nomination as well as the first award ever given for an original dramatic score.

⁴ Max Steiner, "Scoring the Film," in Nancy Naumberg, ed., *We Make the Movies* (New York: Norton, 1937), 218; cited in Fred Steiner, "What were Musicians saying about Movie Music during the First Decade of Sound? A Symposium of selected Writings," in Clifford McCarty, ed., *Film Music I* (New York: Garland, 1989), 86. Steiner makes much the same remark in his unpublished autobiography ("Notes to You"): an edited excerpt of this work

This was the situation at RKO, where Steiner worked at the time, and would apply to other companies as well, but fear of a loss of realism in the sound track, nevertheless, is by no means adequate as a generalization for music during the transitional period.⁵ It would be more nearly accurate to say that attitudes and practices fluctuated wildly. Between 1927 and 1930, films were released in silent, part-silent, or sound versions, and often in more than one of these formats simultaneously. Silent films were sometimes released with recorded accompaniments, but in theaters that lacked the correct playback equipment these films would be screened with live performances, as in the past. These first recorded scores were essentially silent-film pastiche scores (though very often skillfully written), sometimes including a few sound effects (as in *Don Juan*). *The Jazz Singer* has a score of this sort, but the continuous background music is interrupted for Al Jolson's performances (and two famous, if brief, passages of associated dialogue). Musicals, on the other hand, like filmed stage plays, used recorded musical cues for the main title and end credits, but only source music (the actors' performances) otherwise.⁶ *Broadway Melody* is typical; Rouben Mamoulian's musical *Applause* (1929) provides good examples of what was possible creatively even within these severe constraints.⁷

Steiner's comment is appropriate for 1930—in this first Depression year, the studios were especially careful of their finances and consequently even less inclined to pay for musicians on site during production (their presence was required because the entire sound track for a scene still had to be recorded at once). The still precarious status of musicians was also not improved by the fact that audiences had already begun to tire of the steady diet of musicals. By spring 1931, however, advances in re-recording technology were sufficient to allow more economical—and more frequent—use of musicians.⁸ In that year, Paramount established a studio policy to

appears in Tony Thomas, *Film Score: The Art and Craft of Movie Music* (Burbank: Riverwood Press, 1991), 66–72. The unpublished typescript of “Notes to You” is preserved in the Max Steiner Collection, Brigham Young University.

⁵ Geduld's *The Birth of the Talkies* remains the best account of this period.

⁶ “Source music” refers to music that seems to emanate from the world of the film's narrative, such as a song performance by an actor or music played at an on-screen concert. The opposing term is “background music” (or “underscoring”), which cannot be similarly located in the narrative world. The terms for these two categories used in studio cue sheets of the thirties and forties are “visual vocal” or “visual instrumental,” and “background vocal” or “background instrumental,” respectively.

⁷ See Lucy Fischer's reading of Mamoulian's accomplishment in her “Applause: The Visual and Acoustic Landscape,” in Elisabeth Weis and John Belton, eds., *Film Sound: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 232–46.

⁸ Steiner, as well, makes this point, in “Scoring the Film,” 219; cited in Christopher Palmer, *The Composer in Hollywood* (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1990), 17–18.

underscore all of its pictures, and at RKO Steiner was asked to provide several minutes of music to accompany Sabra Cravat's speech near the end of the studio's rendition of Edna Ferber's *Cimarron*.⁹ The more dramatic changes came in 1932, when Steiner teamed up with newly hired producer David O. Selznick. Steiner's substantial original scores for *The Conquerors*, *Symphony in Six Million*, *Bird of Paradise* (all 1932), and the blockbuster fantasy *King Kong* (1933) were hugely influential and in that sense justify the claim that Steiner "develop[ed] the kind of 'classical' scoring for which Hollywood eventually became celebrated."¹⁰ This is not to say that Steiner "invented" sound-film underscoring, as if a wholly separate silent-cinema practice died with *The Jazz Singer*, then came a hiatus (roughly 1927–31), then came Steiner. Not surprisingly, Steiner himself promoted such a history, but in fact a very strong continuity obtained between the musical practices of the silent and sound cinemas.¹¹

If the uses of music in the transition years were unstable and complex, that fact only encouraged the continuation of eclectic silent-film practices. Although ably handled by experienced composer/arrangers, synchronized scores for silent films were more often than not a mishmash of quotations from nineteenth-century concert or keyboard repertoire, popular or commercial musics of varying styles, original motivic or developmental treatments, and melodramatic transition or characterization cues that had acquired the force of topical categories (such as "hurry," "misterioso," or "dramatic maestoso").¹² Steiner was adept at quoting or imitating all of these types. Not only had he worked in both the London and New York theater, but he was also very much a product of turn-of-the-century Viennese musical culture, and he knew well both its serious and its popular musical repertoires. His grandfather owned the Theater an der Wien (along with several other Viennese theaters) and was responsible for convincing Johann Strauss, Jr., to compose *Die Fledermaus*. By his own account, Steiner finished

⁹ Palmer (*The Composer in Hollywood*, 18) erroneously claims that Steiner wrote twenty-five minutes of music for this film. In fact, he composed cues only for the main and end credits and a waltz for the speech. Palmer was possibly thinking of another "capitalist western," *The Conquerors* (1932), for which Steiner did write several extended cues.

¹⁰ William Darby and Jack Du Bois, *American Film Music: Major Composers, Techniques, Trends, 1915–1990* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1990), 14. Steiner's association with Selznick continued through *Gone With the Wind* (1939).

¹¹ Nevertheless, the claim that sound-film musical practices were somehow fundamentally different continues to be repeated in books and articles on the subject, most recently in Richard Taruskin's essay "The Golden Age of Kitsch," *New Republic* (21 March 1994): 32. To Steiner's self-promotion, see his "Scoring the Film," 220 and *passim*.

¹² With allowances for different levels of skill, the same variety characterizes the mostly improvised scores of theater organists and the mostly pastiche scores of small-town theater pianists.

the conservatory course at age fifteen, studied conducting and composition with family friend Gustav Mahler, then composed an operetta (produced by one of his grandfather's rivals) as well as a symphonic suite that was performed by the Vienna Philharmonic.¹³ Extensive experience in the theater helped Steiner in arranging, composing, and directing filmed musicals, an important part of RKO's output throughout the 1930s. He was, for example, musical director for the Astaire-Rogers musicals through *Follow the Fleet* (1936), although the exact nature and extent of his contributions are still not entirely clear (other than as conductor, the usual task of a studio's musical director).

In films other than musicals, Steiner, like Alfred Newman at Fox and Herbert Stothart at MGM, used theatrical entrance/exit cues for transitions between scenes and, occasionally, more extended, musically complete forms that set the mood of a scene but were not closely synchronized with action. When Steiner came to underscoring dialogue more closely, in the tightly synchronized fashion for which he is well known, he drew partly on Wagner and partly on the traditions of Viennese melodrama. It is the latter on which I will focus here: the technique of melodrama (speech accompanied by music) as a compositional source for underscoring dialogue.¹⁴ The idea is not to try to prove that Steiner drew directly on the early German melodrama of Benda, Beethoven, or Schubert, which is unlikely.¹⁵ Instead, I will argue that one can reasonably claim a closer connection than might at first seem possible between the musical and expressive techniques of that earlier tradition and the "late" Romantic operettas of Victor Herbert, Sigmund Romberg, and Rudolf Friml. Beginning with a brief discussion of eighteenth-century melodrama and some

¹³ From the transcription of an interview with Steiner, in Bernard Rosenberg and Harry Silverstein, *The Real Tinsel* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 388. The best of several brief accounts of Steiner's life and career is Palmer, *The Composer in Hollywood*, 15–45.

¹⁴ Strictly speaking, Al Jolson uses melodrama when he speaks verses of several songs in *The Jazz Singer*, but this is a very specialized application closely constrained within a musical performance—it is also a Jolson trademark. In similar fashion, we can discount rhymed dialogue in some early musicals, such as *Melody Cruise* (1932).

¹⁵ The position I take here does not contradict the arguments made by Anne Dhu Shapiro in her "Action Music in American Pantomime and Melodrama, 1730–1913," *American Music* 2, no. 4 (1984): 49–72. She convincingly traces a path from eighteenth-century pantomime, one of the progenitors of the melodrama, to musical accompaniment in the early silent film. However, the post-World War I studio system strongly (and quickly) encouraged musical practices that were more complex and sophisticated (especially in the studio-owned theaters of large cities). It would be a mistake to assume an unbroken line of continuity in all respects between music of the early silent era (roughly 1900–15) and of the last years (1927–30). Steiner, in any case, came to Hollywood not from the movie house but from a well-established career in the musical theater of Vienna, London, and New York.

theoretical questions for the combination of speech and music in a theatrical work, I proceed to commentary on a series of examples from *Fidelio*, Romberg's *Maytime* (1917), Friml's *The Three Musketeers* (1928), and Steiner's music for *The Informer*. The final section situates the melodramatic musical cue within music's narrative functions in sound film. My object overall, then, is to suggest that the historical traditions of the genre were significantly embedded in what became, through Steiner's influence, a ubiquitous practice in American film music.

* * *

Melodrama as a theatrical genre, as a musical genre, and as a compositional technique are closely related, and all originated at roughly the same time, in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Jean-Jacques Rousseau invented the melodrama, his *Pygmalion* (1762?; produced in Lyon, 1770) being its first monument.¹⁶ Rousseau regarded French as inferior to Italian for the recitative and conceived of melodrama as a substitute, with its novel emotional expressivity combining spoken soliloquy, pantomime, and orchestral accompaniment.¹⁷ From this mixture, but especially from the addition of dialogue to the traditional pantomime, the now familiar stage melodrama emerged before the end of the century.¹⁸

Music scholars in the present century have paid more attention to German composers' settings of Rousseau's *Pygmalion*, as well as their subsequent melodramas to other texts and, ultimately, the introduction of melodramatic scenes into the opera during the first half of the nineteenth century. It was in the German melodrama that a compositional link between melodrama and the *recitativo accompagnato* was established, a feature that was essential to the tradition from which Steiner eventually drew.¹⁹ In

¹⁶ Rousseau actually called *Pygmalion* not "mélodrame" but "scène lyrique," and he apparently composed little of the music for its first production—that honor goes to Horace Coignet. See Jan van der Veen, *Le Mélodrame musical de Rousseau au Romantisme: ses aspects historiques et stylistiques* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955), 2, 5–13. Music for the influential productions of *Pygmalion* in Weimar and Vienna in 1772 was composed by Anton Schweitzer and Franz Aspelmayr, respectively (van der Veen, *Le Mélodrame*, 48). For details of the Weimar performance, see Edgar Istel, *Die Entstehung des deutschen Melodramas* (Berlin and Leipzig: Schuster & Loeffler, 1906), 4–5.

¹⁷ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 14. Van der Veen discusses the question of Rousseau's intentions at length in *Le Mélodrame musical*, 13–24.

¹⁸ Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 87. Van der Veen discusses the pantomime as a source for *Pygmalion* in *Le Mélodrame musical*, 25.

¹⁹ According to Thomas Bauman, the reason melodrama flourished in Germanophone countries was that economic conditions forced theatrical companies to produce both drama and opera, and, although the major actors "could not be expected to sing, [they found that]

the Lyon production of *Pygmalion*, the alternating passages of music and text were relatively long; but typically in the German melodrama individual sentences or even phrases were punctuated by brief musical commentary, one of the traditional features of the accompanied recitative (see example 1, from Georg Benda's *Ariadne auf Naxos* [1775]).²⁰ In most instances, Benda, Reichardt, Mozart, and others who composed melodramas in the 1770s and 1780s restricted themselves to this technique rather than using the full resources of the accompanied recitative. Benda's *Ariadne*, for example, contains only four places where music and speech are simultaneous, and all are very brief except the last, the dramatic conclusion in which Ariadne throws herself from a cliff to the accompaniment of an *agitato misterioso* played pianissimo, in D minor, with repeated sixteenth notes in the violins and a disjointed melody in the violas and cellos.²¹

Example 1. Georg Benda, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, ii.

The musical score consists of three systems. The first system is a piano accompaniment in D minor, marked *f* and *p*. The lyrics are "Schrecklich beugt sich der Felsen, droht einzustürzen!". The second system is marked "Un poco largo" and features a complex piano accompaniment with repeated sixteenth notes in the right hand and a disjointed melody in the left hand. The lyrics are "Der Löwe brüllt". The third system continues the piano accompaniment with lyrics "Ach, Theseus! Theseus, komm! ich bin erwacht!".

the most powerful and sublime dramatic device of opera, the obligato recitative, could adapt itself with ease to the tools of the spoken trade, speech and gesture, and specifically to their touchstone, the dramatic monologue." See Thomas Bauman, ed., *Georg Anton Benda: Ariadne auf Naxos; Johann Friedrich Reichardt: Ino*, German Opera 1770–1800, vol. 4 (facsimile edition, New York: Garland, 1985), 3. A good summary of the relation between melodrama and eighteenth-century language mimesis theories is Giorgio Pestelli, *The Age of Mozart and Beethoven*, trans. Eric Cross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 59–64.

²⁰ Bauman gives details of the origin and influence of Benda's work in his introduction to *Ariadne auf Naxos*, 3–4.

²¹ Bauman, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, 114–15. The other three places are on pages 34, 63, and 85. Mozart's two melodramas for the unfinished Singspiel *Zaide* (1779) are similar to this example; on the other hand, his setting of Act III, iv, of *Thamos, König in Aegypten* (from the same year) uses simultaneous music and text throughout.

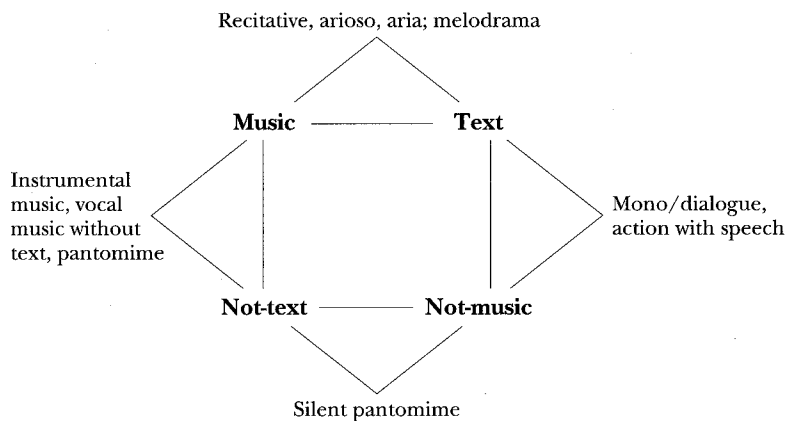
Perhaps as Rousseau intended, the melodramatic technique bluntly exposes the question of the semiotic relations between text and music in a theatrical work. Considered as two sets of binary oppositions—text/music, presence/absence—these relations resolve to four possible combinations: (1) Text and music used together give the several categories of recitative, aria, arioso, and melodrama. (2) Text but no music is, of course, dialogue or monologue. (3) Music but no text may be pantomime (if accompanied), nontexted vocal music, or instrumental music such as an overture or entr'acte. (4) Neither text nor music may refer to “pure” action (physical movement or interaction of characters), silent pantomime, or even stage and costume design.

We may map out these several possibilities as combinations of terms in a semiotic square or “square of logical oppositions” (see the central part of figure 1).²² If we set “music” and “text” as opposing terms, then we have also established their logical contradictories, “not-music” and “not-text.” Depending on how we define the essential qualities of the music/text opposition, we might decide that music represents sound, where text—although also sound—first of all represents narration (the plot or story being told), in which case “not-music” is sound effects and “not-text” is action. I have not constrained the definitions in that way, preferring to take “not-music” and “not-text” as collections of all those things in a stage production which are not music, in the one case, or not text, in the other. This leaves the opposition “not-music” and “not-text” only very loosely defined, but that is acceptable for my purpose, which is simply to locate the four general ways to combine text and music as combinations of the square’s four terms (these combinations are represented by the points of the diamond shape in figure 1).

The combined term music/text (at the top of the diamond) proposes a continuum running from recitative through arioso to aria. At the one extreme, music and text are very closely combined and the latter is strongly lyrical. In most arias, a small quantity of text is frequently repeated, and thus text mostly abandons its continuity for the sake of the melodic line and the logic of musical form. The structural similarity of the operatic aria or cavatina to song performances in the sound film or film musical is obvious, as is the fact that the realistic sound cinema would have little

²² The medieval “square of logical oppositions” has been revived in the present century by the semiotician A. J. Greimas. An influential early paper that explains the construct with particular clarity is Greimas and F. Rastier, “The Interaction of Semiotic Constraints,” *Yale French Studies* 41 (1968): 86–105. My specific use of it here, with the combined terms, is indebted to Fredric Jameson; see, for example, his *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 256, 277.

Figure 1. Scheme for text and music in a theatrical work.



place for the arioso or recitative, which would require actors to sing their dialogue.

The technique of melodrama is another matter, however: its passage from accompanied recitative to cinematic underscoring is surprisingly direct. In the preceding example 1, for instance, two characteristic features of underscoring are already present: a concentrated mixture of topical expression and word painting, and a complexity of musical means (or, to put it negatively, lack of a typical musical continuity). The topic “active danger” or “fearful agitation” is expressed clearly.²³ In mm. 1–2, sharp dynamic contrasts, syncopated treble notes with an active bass figure, unstable chords, and the clichéd dotted-note “cadence” of the recitative all point to this topic and at the same time depict the rolling and heaving of the mountainside in advance of Ariadne’s outburst about an impending avalanche. By the end of the example, similar musical means imitate the low-pitched roar of a lion. Musical continuity is maintained not in the usual fashion, through stereotypical melodic phrasing, motivic concentration, or the logic of harmonic progression and tonal design, but through repetition of the pattern of musical gesture/text/reactive gesture.²⁴

²³ This topic may readily be taken as a subcategory of Leonard Ratner’s stylistic topic “Storm and Stress.” See his *Classical Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer, 1980), 21.

²⁴ I have to assume that it is the latter to which Edward Branscombe refers when he claims that, in the early German melodrama, musical continuity is maintained “despite the gaps.” See Branscombe, “Melodrama,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980), 12: 216.

Accompanied recitative and melodrama are conveniently juxtaposed in the early minutes of Act II of Beethoven's *Fidelio*. The act opens with Florestan, a Spanish nobleman unjustly imprisoned (apparently for political reasons), reflecting on his situation and then seeing a vision of his wife Leonora as a rescuing angel. An extensive symphonic introduction (as if a prelude to Act II) prefaces Florestan's number, which consists of a brief accompanied recitative and a large two-part aria.

The pairing recitative-aria was, of course, well established by the beginning of the eighteenth century as the foundation of operatic design—the prose (and musically formulaic) recitative furthered the action and set the stage for the poetic and lyrical aria, which gave more opportunity for rich musical expression and, just as important, display of the singer's skills. By tradition the accompanied recitative, richer in timbral and expressive means than the *secco* recitative, is a signal that a major aria is to follow (certainly true of Florestan's aria). Beethoven avoids *secco* recitative altogether in *Fidelio*; instead, he employs the spoken dialogue of the *Singspiel*. The musical characteristics of the accompanied recitative can vary widely, from little more than an orchestrated *secco* recitative to something approaching an *arioso* with more extended purely instrumental phrases. Text painting is very common. This recitative uses gestures in the voice that are consistent with *secco* recitative, such as the opening exclamation, a long-held high note followed by a breath-expelling, falling gesture in a clichéd melodic pattern (see example 2). The subsequent orchestral phrase is taken from the instrumental prelude, a work whose very slow tempo, minor key, exaggerated dynamic contrasts, repetitious chords, and timpani tuned at the tritone(!) would certainly allow it to qualify as a "misterioso infernale" in the topical categories of silent-film music a hundred years later.

As Florestan's aria closes, he lies down and falls asleep. The jailer Rocco then enters with his assistant, who is Leonora disguised as a man. Their task is to dig a grave in which Florestan will be buried after he is executed by the prison governor Pizzaro. Beethoven labels this passage "melodrama," and it clearly substitutes for an accompanied recitative, as Rocco and Leonora follow it with an aria-like duet, a rather nervous piece that somehow still manages to be lugubrious and during which they do the actual work of the grave digging. A full page of dialogue (with no music) then leads to an aria-like trio for Rocco, Leonora, and the awakened Florestan.

By the time Beethoven composed *Fidelio*, the German melodrama was nearing the end of its popularity, though among the Viennese it remained a favored genre for nearly two more decades.²⁵ The situation of the grave-

²⁵ Istel, *Entstehung*, 97; Branscombe, "Melodrama," 117.

Example 2. Beethoven, *Fidelio*, Act II, i, accompanied recitative to Florestan's aria, opening.

Gott! — welch' Dun - kel hier! O

grau-en-vol - le Still - le! Oed' ist es um mich her;

nichts, nichts le - bet aus-ser mich.

digging scene—mysterious, even grotesque, with only two actor-singers involved—is perfectly suited to melodrama, and Beethoven follows closely the practices of his predecessors in the genre.²⁶ Until m. 6, music and dialogue alternate (the first half of the number is reproduced in example

²⁶ This passage is the only instance of melodrama in *Fidelio*. By contrast, two earlier settings of the Leonora story, by Pierre Gaveaux (1798) and Fernando Pär (1804), were conceived more as melodrama than as opera. See Edward J. Dent, introduction to Beethoven, *Fidelio or Wedded Love* [vocal score] (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1948), [iii].


3). Leonora and Rocco walk down the stairs into the dungeon; “walking” or “stepping,” “descending,” and “low” are simultaneously represented in the music (mm. 1–2), which ends with a “shivering” figure anticipating Leonora’s remark about the cold. Measures 3–4 follow up on the gesture of the opening with a telescoped version of the stepping-down figure, itself transposed a whole-step lower (F–E \flat , at the end C \sharp –B). The three quickly struck chords in m. 5 are the cadence gesture of the *secco* recitative—here they close the “descent of the stairs” portion of the scene and bring (temporarily) clarifying tonal closure on D minor/major as well. The alteration of the D-major chord of m. 5 to D minor in m. 6 obviously reflects comments that Florestan might be dead. Measures 8–9 confirm that he is in fact only sleeping—the melody is taken from the preceding aria, mm. 34–35 of the *poco allegro*, one of the more distinctive gestures in which he names his “angel Leonora.” The slower tempo and the pedal-point bass F reinforce the affect before Rocco says “Nein, nein, er schläft.” The *allegro* of mm. 10–11 is a slightly more elaborate cadence gesture, this time separating comment about the prisoner from the final section of the melodrama, or preparations for the grave digging.

A number of features of this melodrama are common to cinematic underscoring as well. Word painting, or musical imitation of action (steps, shivering), works in the same way as in the Benda excerpt of example 1—in film music, this is referred to as “mickey-mousing.” Major/minor contrasts create the simplest category of affective oppositions: good/bad, happy/sad, light/dark, tranquil/endangered, etc., as appropriate to the situation at hand. The use of musical articulations to clarify or reinforce narrative articulations is standard practice in film scoring, as are leitmotif-like thematic references—indeed, mm. 8–9 are relatively subtle because the music “names” neither Léonora nor Florestan but instead refers simultaneously to his dream-vision, to their relationship, and to their common hope for his freedom. This kind of thematic reference, established within the composition itself, Claudia Gorbman calls a “cinematic musical code” when it occurs in film—we might rename it “operatic musical code” for the case of mm. 8–9. This designation contrasts with a “cultural music code,” or culturally accepted gestures attached to some reference.²⁷ For example, in mm. 8–9 the slow tempo, major key, and static harmony are all subcodes of a cultural musical code for “sleeping” or “dreaming.”

²⁷ Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 2–3. The term *cultural code* is borrowed from Christian Metz, though Gorbman uses it in a slightly different sense. See Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 112.

Example 3. Beethoven, *Fidelio*, Act II, melodrama to Leonora-Rocco duet, opening.


Poco sostenuto



Leonora: Wie kalt ist es in diesem unterirdischen Gewölbe!

Rocco: Das ist natürlich, es ist ja tief.

Allegro



Leonora: (Sieht unruhig nach allen Seiten umher) Ich glaubte schon, wir würden den Eingang gar nicht finden.


Rocco: Da ist er.

Leonora: Er scheint ganz ohne Bewegung.

Rocco: Vielleicht ist er tod.


Leonora: Ihr meint es?

Poco adagio




Rocco: Nein, nein, er schläft.

Allegro



Rocco: Das müssen wir benutzen, und gleich ans Werk gehen, wir haben keine Zeit zu verlieren.

Leonora: (beiseite) Es ist unmöglich, seine Züge zu unterscheiden.



* * *

The *Fidelio* melodrama thus sets up many of the conditions necessary for cinematic underscoring a century later. But the route followed to reach the latter did not primarily run through opera. After about 1830, most operatic composers stopped using the melodrama, and it passed almost entirely into the popular theater. Although the earliest subjects had been classical (as in *Pygmalion*, *Ariadne*, and *Medea*), their mode of presentation was dramatic and emotional, favoring scenes of tension, anxiety, or mystery and generally including action, not just reflective, “passive” monologue or dialogue. This emphasis on tense, active scenes with an element of the mysterious led directly and quickly to the familiar characteristics of the stage melodrama: a polarized moral universe, focus on action rather than character development, and plots with sensational or

suspenseful elements and unlikely triumphs. In this genre, as Gorbman describes it, music was used “to mark entrances of characters, to provide interludes, and to give emotional coloring to dramatic climaxes and to scenes with rapid physical action.”²⁸ Furthermore, in its later history “the melodrama aspired to pictorial illusion down to the minutest detail. For [producers of these works], dialogue was not important (and thus dialogue’s absence in the [silent] cinema may not have felt as abnormal to audiences as numerous present-day critics have insisted).”²⁹ The early cinema, then, is a continuation of theatrical and musical practices that have their roots at least as far back as the last quarter of the eighteenth century.³⁰

Though it eventually lost its (admittedly always precarious) place in the opera, melodrama thrived in the popular theater and its musical traditions remained alive, even if in debased forms.³¹ In the Act I finale of his first major score, the musical *Maytime*, Romberg stays much closer to the roots of melodrama than was typical of his post-Wagnerian contemporaries. Romberg opens the scene (see example 4) with the sharp, short articulating gestures of recitative—as in mm. 2, 5, and 10 of Beethoven’s melodrama. These gestures are played simultaneously with parallel gestures of the actors: “What’s this?” and the surprise of the stinger chord³² (a sforzando diminished chord), as Claude finds his fiancée, Otilie, in the arms of the workman, Dick; then “How dare you?,” with a quick, menacing figure in the bass (marked by a crescendo to the attack of the last note). When the Colonel (Otilie’s father) enters and asks questions parallel to

²⁸ Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 34.

²⁹ Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 34. Emphasis omitted. As this quote suggests, concert composers’ renewed interest in melodrama in the early twentieth century probably had less to do with the cinema than with a deliberate revival and adaptation of the eighteenth-century model.

³⁰ Peter Brooks also makes this point (*The Melodramatic Imagination*, 48). Only a stubborn insistence on ignoring the nineteenth-century popular theater could justify Donald J. Grout’s assertion that “the chief historical importance of the melodrama lay in the effective use made of the style by later composers for special scenes in opera” (Grout, with Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of the Opera*, 3d ed. [Columbia University Press, 1988], 308), or Taruskin’s claim that Steiner’s underscoring techniques “enabled the mutation of opera into cinema” (“The Golden Age of Kitsch,” 32). An excellent summary of the political conditions underlying the development of melodrama may be found in Christine Gledhill, “The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation,” in idem, ed., *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 14–22.

³¹ See, for instance, David Mayer and Matthew Scott, *Four Bars of “Agit”: Incidental Music for Victorian and Edwardian Melodrama* (London: Samuel French, 1983).

³² A “stinger” is a sharply attacked, but not necessarily loud, chord or short gesture used to draw the viewer’s attention to a specific event. Though commonly used now, the term is of uncertain origin—in his sketches, for example, Steiner does not use it, referring instead to “hitting” the action.

Claude's, the series of stingers ceases and Romberg introduces a waltz melody, played suitably *agitato* to maintain the undercurrent of tension and confrontation (example 5). This melody seems new,³³ but we later realize that it is a stand-in for "Sweetheart," the musical's lead song, which Otilie and Dick have just sung in the previous number and which here is hinted at in gradually more obvious ways until it is stated directly—though still *agitato* and with the running eighth-note accompaniment of example 5—under the Colonel's angry dismissal of Dick from his presence and employment (see example 6). Carrying out this process of unfolding recognition even further, the act concludes with a full thirty-two-measure statement of "Sweetheart" in the orchestra, over a proper waltz bass. That the melody of example 5 is indeed a stand-in for "Sweetheart" is confirmed by the lead-in to this final statement of the song: a repetition of the first eight measures of the scene (the lead-in to the *agitato*), as the Colonel comments ("What impudence!") to the crowd assembled to celebrate Otilie's engagement to Claude.³⁴

Example 4. Romberg, *Maytime*, Act I finale, opening.

Claude: What's this? How dare you? Dick: What business is it of yours? Claude: My affianced bride
in the arms

Moderato assai

(Cl.) of a low apprentice! Otilie: I'm nothing of the kind,
I'll never marry you! I love Dick!

³³ This statement is based on the piano/vocal score published by G. Schirmer in 1917. It is, of course, entirely possible that some numbers from the original (or subsequent) productions, especially orchestral incidental music, were deleted from this edition.

³⁴ For readers who may be inclined to check my arguments by watching the MGM musical *Maytime* (1937), a warning is in order. This remarkably successful Jeanette MacDonald/Nelson Eddy vehicle bears very little resemblance to the stage musical, either in the story or the music. All that survived was this song (Roger Dooley, *From Scarface to Scarlett* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984], 471). Indeed, Herbert Stothart's adaptation for MGM is memorable primarily for its quotes from nineteenth-century operas and for an operatic scene based on Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony!

Example 5. Romberg, *Maytime*, Act I finale, mm. 9–11.

Colonel: What's this? What's all this? Claude: This fellow, this dependent— Dick: Yes in my
she was in his arms!

Allegro moderato ma agitato

(D): arms, where I intend to keep her!

[He puts his arms about Otilie defiantly.]

Example 6. Romberg, *Maytime*, Act I finale, "Leave my presence."

Colonel: Leave my presence! How dare you take that tone with me! You are discharged! Take your things
and leave at once!

Meno mosso

Otilie: No! No! Father!

Dick: You can send me away, Sir, but I'll come back;
and when I do, it will be to claim her!

Colonel: Begone!
Out of my
sight!

Thus, although the music at a low level is often mimetic, following and reinforcing the stage action, it is also endowed with considerable narrative or referential power. Basing the score on "Sweetheart" gave additional incentive for the audience to continue to focus on the romantic relationship of Otilie and Dick rather than on the awkward social situation, class

differences, or the Colonel's outrage. That the "stand-in" melody and the first clear statement of "Sweetheart" are set under the Colonel's dialogue also leaves open the possibility that his public attitude and his personal feelings may be at odds. And finally, the thirty-two-measure statement of "Sweetheart" is obviously ironic—Otilie's engagement party continues with this gentle waltz as its background, and the act ends (as it ought) with the plot unresolved.

Nevertheless, the opening stinger (in example 4) demonstrates the degree to which functional categories can merge or be confused. Is this diminished chord mickey-mousing Claude's first exclamation? Is it mimicking the actor's physical gesture of surprise, or "stopping short"? Is it point of view—that is, an externalization for the audience of Claude's subjectivity, the shock he feels upon entering the scene? Or is it mainly a formal device, a marker telling the audience to pay attention because some significant turn in the plot is about to occur? To some degree or another, the answer to all of these questions seems to be "Yes." For both theatrical and early sound-film composers, this ambiguity was at once a problem and an opportunity: a problem because it impeded the realization of a transparently mimetic underscoring style, an opportunity because it freed the composer from an excessively narrow range of obligations to the image track and thereby enabled the development of a rich underscoring that could be truly narrative.

The Act I finale of Friml's *The Three Musketeers* is also a melodrama, though considerably longer and more involved, both musically and dramatically, than its counterpart in *Maytime*. The one respect in which Friml's methods obviously differ here is that the actors' parts are sometimes sung (in the traditional recitative manner), sometimes spoken, the motivation for employing one or the other and for shifting between them not always being clear. Like Romberg, Friml aims for as much traditional musical continuity as he can manage, given the libretto, and he makes liberal use of melodies sung earlier in Act I. On the other hand, where Romberg's melodrama uses a developmental treatment, gradually introducing fragments of (or references to) his theme until it appears in a clear form, Friml resorts mostly to quotation.

The scene opens with an eight-measure quotation of "My Dreams," sung by the Queen earlier in the act, as she reflects on her love for Buckingham. Friml's use of this melody here and later in the play reflects a practice already established in the cinema: the melody confuses the connotation of the romantic relationship of a man and woman with the function of the signature theme for the woman herself. The Queen sings recitative against mm. 4–8 of the quotation, then a tense diminished-seventh-chord tremolo interrupts as the King says, "This letter, Madam, is

yours." Musical continuity is sharply attenuated during a tense interchange between the King and Queen, but "My Dreams" is quoted again (this time for twelve measures) as the Queen's lady-in-waiting, Constance, reads the letter aloud. The letter turns out not to be incriminating—rather than speaking of love, the Queen warns Buckingham against Cardinal Richelieu—but the musical accompaniment obviously contradicts. D'Artagnan, the leader of the Musketeers, enters. He sings a short phrase of an old recitative formula (answered by the King in speech), then another short phrase in the more melodic "arioso" manner (answered again by the King), and finally continues with speech as his signature theme is played in the orchestra (this marchlike theme was played at D'Artagnan's first entrance earlier in the act). After seven measures, the sharp articulations of recitative interrupt as the King and Richelieu talk. The Cardinal then elaborates on his suggestion of a ball, against which play fourteen measures of a chromatic waltz not heard previously; four measures interrupt, and the King speaks against eight further measures of the waltz. The Queen nearly faints (as she knows that the ball is part of a plot by the Cardinal against her), and she, the King, and the Cardinal exit, all this over ten measures of "My Dreams."

Left alone, D'Artagnan and Constance sing recitative (thirty-one measures) expressing mutual love.³⁵ She also talks him into going to see Buckingham in England. A short scuffle between D'Artagnan and the Cardinal's agent, Rochefort, is followed by a brief quote of D'Artagnan's signature; several further measures of recitative between Constance and D'Artagnan follow, and the act closes with the "Musketeers' March," as D'Artagnan and his companions head off on their errand.

The melodrama as Romberg and Friml use it consists of the free deployment of two kinds of musical passages: the first closely resembles the recitative, the other emphasizes traditional musical continuity and is essentially a performance invoked by the appearance of a character or by dialogue. These remain the basic constituents in Max Steiner's use of the technique as well. The motivation for, and placement of, the melodrama is another matter. In *Fidelio*, the melodrama substitutes for accompanied recitative in the latter's traditional place before an aria (the duet) and in its traditional function of furthering action or facilitating extended dialogue. In Romberg's and Friml's "musical plays" (the term used in pub-

³⁵ Quotations may be involved here as well, though nothing is used which appears elsewhere in the published score. It is possible that the themes come from incidental music not included in the score, but I have so far been unable to confirm this conjecture.

lished editions), however, the melodrama is a specialized device: because there are extensive patches of dialogue with no music at all, the melodrama is not simply a substitute for an expected recitative but a truly “melodramatic” device used to draw attention to, and heighten the emotional and dramatic effect of, a particular scene—in the case of *Maytime* and *The Three Musketeers*, the finales of early acts.³⁶ In this sense also, the melodrama is not simply mimetic but takes on the role of a partly independent narrator; that is, its function is not merely to turn the volume of the drama up, so to speak, by copying mood and action in its own sphere, but to draw the viewer/listener’s attention to certain features, to mark them as important and to make connections between them. The great problem for the film composer was to find a compromise that permitted this functional role for the melodrama within the framework of the large-scale scores favored by studios and producers between roughly 1932 and 1940.

* * *

Steiner’s score for *The Informer* was the second he composed for director John Ford, the first also being a Victor McLaglen vehicle, *The Lost Patrol* (1934). Both films, whose general mood is an often disconcerting mixture of tension and sentimentality, received extensive musical accompaniment. The story of *The Informer* takes place just after World War I and centers on the destitute Gypo Nolan, who betrays his closest friend, Frankie McPhillip, to the British for the twenty pounds that will buy tickets to America for Gypo and his girlfriend Katie. But Gypo is not a very cagey plotter; he quickly squanders a good part of the money, makes a poorly argued accusation against another person, and eventually is forced to confess.

The film’s particular achievement, appropriately recognized in its four Academy Awards, is the close coordination of acting, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and music to emphasize Gypo’s changing emotional states. Steiner misses few opportunities for music’s participation in such processes, and, somewhat paradoxically, his score is well matched with the film’s lead actor’s manner, for music is often needed to clarify medium shots and close-ups. As Kathryn Kalinak notes, “It’s often hard—with

³⁶ Although I believe this statement does reflect the role of melodrama in many musicals, I do not want to leave the misimpression of a monolithic practice. In *Desert Song* (1927), Romberg uses (unlabeled) melodrama in a way similar to the two musicals cited, but outside act finales and partly in pantomime. His *Student Prince* (1929) approaches opera in the small amount of unaccompanied dialogue; melodrama, though extensively employed, tends to regress into the transitional and introductory role of brief recitatives.

McLaglen's acting—to tell what Gypo is supposed to be experiencing."³⁷ Steiner was obviously proud of his ability to mirror rapid changes and specific gestures. In his unpublished autobiography, he says:

I write my music to split seconds. I have written music for 1/3 of a second or 8 frames; 1/4 of a second or 6 frames or 1/2 second which is 12 frames. I drive this to a very fine point and that's the reason you note in any of my pictures, all these cues hit right on the nail.

To effect this precision in recording sessions, Steiner used a click track, a series of holes punched in a film print; the conductor would time his beat to the flashes of light. (Alternatively, the clicks were placed in the optical sound track, and the orchestra used earphones, the result being very much like a metronome.) To those who might criticize this device as too constraining, or even unmusical, Steiner replies:

The difficulty that arises for a man not used to composing this way, obviously, is to make his compositions sound natural and at the same time write against these clicks. . . . It took me some time before I learned to do it, but I finally licked it. I used it most effectively for the first time in *GONE WITH THE WIND*. Of course, I do not always use it. There are some sequences which just don't lend themselves to this kind of writing or composing. But I would say 70% of the pictures for which I compose and which you have heard and liked . . . even way back to *THE INFORMER*, sound absolutely natural and I don't think people would be able to identify which sequences were written with the aid of a click track and which were not.³⁸

The Informer is filled with instances of underscoring not far removed from the accompanied recitative or the melodrama of *Romberg* and *Friml*. By way of orientation to the film, the plot and the use of music in the first thirty minutes are summarized in table 1.

The part of cue 1, Foreword in which Katie attempts to solicit offers a characteristic example of Steiner's practice. This section, running from 1:29 to 3:42 of the cue, opens with a pantomime of suggestion between Katie and a well-dressed, middle-aged man. After a few uncertain chords,

³⁷ Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 117; emphasis omitted.

³⁸ Steiner, "Notes to You" (unpublished MS), 197, 199.

Table 1
 Summary of *The Informer* (dir., John Ford;
 music, Max Steiner), opening thirty minutes.³⁹

Section	Duration	Plot
*Main Title + cue 1,Foreword	9:23 ⁴⁰	Main Title Gypo finds and tears down the wanted poster. A young man sings on the street (with unison violin accompaniment). Katie is about to prostitute herself, but Gypo intervenes and they argue. Frankie McPhillip sneaks through the streets to his mother's house. After a grand pause, continuation of same.
dialogue	3:22	Conversation between Gypo and Frankie at the Dunboy House.
*cue 2,1	1:43	Gypo decides to betray Frankie and goes to the constabulary office.
dialogue/action	4:13	Frankie is killed by British soldiers in his mother's house.
*cue 3,1	5:12	Gypo leaves the police station, encounters and briefly threatens a blind man, goes to a saloon.
dialogue/action	0:38	Katie arrives and they talk.
*cue 3,2	0:46	Katie and Gypo emerge from the saloon, encoun- ter the blind man, and Gypo leaves.
song "Minstrel Boy"	1:24	At the wake; source music sung by the same young man who earlier did "The Rose of Tralee."
dialogue/action	1:49	At the wake.

the musical continuity is fairly strong, as Katie's theme is heard for the first time. The continuity breaks down as a stinger is synchronized with the man's striking a match against a lamppost. Held tones, then a harp/celesta glissando, follow as he blows cigar smoke in her face. Gypo approaches and we hear crescendi on held chords and faster chord changes in a lower register as he picks up the man and throws him onto the street (this last timed to a sharp, descending stinger gesture). Katie's monologue

³⁹ The labels marked with asterisks in the left column follow Steiner's sketches, which are preserved in the Max Steiner Collection, Brigham Young University.

⁴⁰ These are rough timings taken from a videocassette print: *The Informer* (N.p.: Turner Home Entertainment, 1993).

ensues, the first part of it continuing the preceding music; the most notable part of this passage is a solo violin's imitation of her first exclamation, "Gypo!", with very nearly the same pitch intonation (D⁵-A⁴). As she continues speaking, her theme plays in the background, a citation that draws a clear parallel between the earlier pantomime and her attempts now to explain her actions to Gypo. The clearer thread of musical continuity produced by the thematic statement breaks down again when she comments bitterly on the poster advertising "£10 to America. Information within." We hear fragments of "Yankee Doodle Dandy" in the celesta (and vibraphone?), then a sharp "inverse stinger" as Gypo grabs and upbraids her after she says "20 Pounds." During the ensuing grand pause they argue excitedly, and Katie, badly upset, leaves.

The opening of cue 3,1, about fifteen minutes later in the film, works in a similar manner. The scene is the immediate aftermath of Frankie's death. The phone rings in the police station with the news that Frankie has been killed trying to escape; Gypo is given his bounty money and told to leave through the back door. With this the cue begins, giving the four-note MONEY motive for the first time (example 7, m. 1).⁴¹ The sergeant tells Gypo contemptuously that he had better count it to make sure it's all there. Gypo at first hesitates to take the money but finally grabs the bills as he rises to leave—to the accompaniment of an "inverse stinger," or silence at the point a sforzando chord would be expected (m. 4). After a pause, Steiner "hits" the door slamming with another stinger (m. 5), and we hear MONEY once more as Gypo surreptitiously counts the bills. The blind man's theme (also heard for the first time) follows a brief pause (m. 7), and musical continuity would seem to improve, except that a sforzando in the accompaniment—with a short fermata—is timed to Gypo's grabbing the man by the throat. The two subsequent measures slow down, and two measures later still is another fermata, all this happening as Gypo slowly comes to realize that the man is blind. Later in the cue, the blind man's theme is replaced by those for Katie and Gypo (the latter was first heard in the main titles). Motives from these themes are mixed with held chords or MONEY, all this for the saloon scene, in which Gypo first reveals that he has acquired money and tries nervously to come up with an explanation for it when challenged by Katie.

Cue 3,2 accompanies a brief scene acting essentially as a postscript to the long sequence that began with Katie's solicitation. A detailed description of this scene will illuminate Steiner's method of close synchroniza-

⁴¹ The opening minute of this cue (mm. 1-13) is reproduced in short score in Prendergast, *Film Music*, 44.

Example 7. Max Steiner, music for *The Informer*, cue 3,1, opening.

And[an]te Misterioso

tion. The opening shot lasts twenty-two seconds; it frames a medium long shot⁴² of Katie and Gypo coming out of the saloon door (the camera is placed down the sidewalk to their right as they emerge). The camera moves back as they walk along the sidewalk; near the end of the shot, the blind man walks into the frame from the front (only his back is visible, in silhouette). Just before the blind man appears (and seven seconds from the end), Gypo lifts Katie rather roughly up onto a cart and cue 3,2 enters with the blind man's theme played by the English horn, set against slowly "walking" lower parts in the strings (example 8, mm. 1–2).

A shot/reverse-shot pair comes next: a medium close-up of Gypo (from the front) and the blind man (from the back), then the reverse, at the end of which the blind man walks out of the frame, leaving Gypo (who turns to look past the camera at a close angle). The pair lasts nineteen seconds, the reverse dominating (at sixteen seconds). During the reverse, the blind man's theme continues, interrupted only by MONEY as Gypo gives him a one-pound note (mm. 3–6). The fourth shot of the scene is a medium shot of Katie and Gypo and lasts fifteen seconds as she remonstrates with him mildly over the pound note; behind this, the blind man's theme continues (mm. 7–9). We hear an inverse stinger as Gypo hits his fist (m. 10); in the following seconds of silence he says he's forgotten something. The final shot lasts only five seconds, a long shot of Katie and Gypo with the blind man walking away (then stopping) in the background.

⁴² A "medium long shot" frames an individual or group from below the knees. It was so common in classical Hollywood films that post-World War II French critics dubbed it the *plan américain*, or "American shot."

Example 8. Steiner, music for *The Informer*, cue 3,2.

Molto Mod[er]ato
[Blind man's theme]

Blind man stops by Gypo.
Gypo gives money. Blind man walks again.

shot 1

shots 2, 3

["Money" motive]

Gypo hits fist.

shot 4

sfz

shot 5

Gypo walks toward the camera, and a dissolve brings us to the first shot of the next scene: Gypo walks from the background toward the camera as he approaches the McPhillips' house, where a wake for Frankie is in progress. In the music we hear the head motive of GYPO (m. 11) and then a final chord that resolves ("dissolves") with the camera into a young man singing "The Minstrel Boy" off camera.

* * *

Having established a technique of closely synchronized melodramatic underscoring of the sort just described in the cues from *The Informer*, Steiner continued to favor the device throughout his career. Given a choice, he would rather write such a cue than leave the scene without music or supply a cue with more obvious musical continuity, such as a dance, song, or march-based number. As a case in point, when Steiner was asked to compose the music for *Gone With the Wind* on an impossibly tight schedule, he kept the (many) melodramatic cues for himself and asked friends and colleagues to compose others that would be needed for the film, such as agitatos, hurries, transitional montage cues, and even the main titles.⁴³ He

⁴³ For example, Hugo Friedhofer composed the connected main title and Foreword cues, and Adolph Deutsch wrote "The Burning of Atlanta." I am indebted to Thomas DeMary for corroborating information about the music for *Gone With the Wind* based on documents in the David O. Selznick Collection, University of Texas, Austin.

clearly connected his own compositional identity with this mode of writing, and he would argue in its favor if necessary:

The two different schools [of film composition] are . . . the difference between “Mickey Mouse” and “over-all” scoring. The “Mickey Mouse” scoring (my way of scoring) is a method which I consider the best for the screen, as it fits a picture like a glove. In other words, if I were to underline a love scene in a parlor and we were to cut away to a boat on the water, I would try and write my music so that the love theme would modulate into some kind of water music or what have you, as naturally the love theme would have nothing to do with the boat as the locale would be changed and probably would indicate time elapse. The “over-all” school does not believe in this and would keep right on playing regardless what happens—or maybe they consider it too much trouble to write so intricately.⁴⁴

In many ways, Steiner’s methods represent an advance over those of the silent-film era—he did solve basic technical and rhetorical problems of the music/dialogue relationship—but in some respects the success of the melodramatic technique was also a problem. Within the context of a score that “fits a picture like a glove,” it became more difficult to establish a niche for music as a significantly independent component of film narration, with the ability to “comment” through cues stylistically (and tonally) more coherent (in a traditionally musical sense) rather than to mimic the screen action continuously, relying on motivic references and dynamic/registral gestures such as the stinger chord to articulate and organize a chain of musical fragments. By the mid 1940s, moreover, studio preferences had shifted toward the deep-focus cinematography and hyperrealism of *film noir*, and heavy scoring for feature films was no longer favored. The resulting large patches of “silence” altered demands on composers.⁴⁵ The subtler artistic problems involved in balancing musical continuity, synchronization with dialogue, and higher level of stylistic coherence with the larger gaps and smaller total number of cues were solved most effectively by composers other than Steiner, especially Waxman, Herrmann, and Rozsa.

⁴⁴ Steiner, interoffice memo to Carlyle Jones, Warner Bros. Pictures, 11 March 1940.

⁴⁵ The history of the melodrama technique in cinema holds one small curiosity. In a later John Ford film, *My Darling Clementine* (1946), one Granville Thorndyke, an actor fallen on hard (and alcoholically hazy) times, finds himself in a western saloon and renders Hamlet’s soliloquy “To be or not to be” as a Victorian melodrama, to the accompaniment of the saloon’s pianist.

To situate the melodramatic cue as one compositional device among several in the sound cinema, we need to consider more closely the role of the sound track. In an early essay concerned with the problem of identifying the characteristics of objects in cinema, the influential film semiologist Christian Metz turns to what he calls "aural objects."⁴⁶ He first asks, "How is it possible that we are capable of recognizing and isolating the sound of 'lapping' [water] on the soundtrack. . . .?" He posits that this sound must be an "autonomous aural object" and comes up with a short list of its properties. But these properties are not sufficient to describe "lapping" as a perception in the film context, and it emerges that a sound, although an object, is incompletely identified as a percept unless its source is included. Thus, aural objects are complex and problematic on (at least) three counts: (1) By cultural convention, the visual is privileged to such an extent that it is difficult even to accept that a sound might belong to the class *object*. (2) Perhaps for this reason, naming an aural object requires both the sound and its source, but the *source* is primary, "the sound itself a 'characteristic.'" (3) "Spatial anchoring of [sound] is much more vague and uncertain than that of visual events,"⁴⁷ a trait increased by the physical separation of the film screen and loudspeakers. The device of "off-screen sound"—for example, persons talking in a hallway outside the room shown in the frame—obviously takes advantage both of spatial ambiguity and of the tendency to treat sound as an aural qualifier of some physical/visual object.

Metz does not discuss music (in fact, he rarely mentions it in any of his writings), but it is not difficult to read the aural object in terms of categories established more recently by Gorbman. The uncertain status of sound as an object and sound's spatial ambiguity, first, made possible the acceptance of background music in the "realistic" sound film (the point about which producers and directors dithered in the transition years) and, second, enabled what Gorbman calls its "inaudibility," or its subordination, to the image track and to narrative.⁴⁸ All that was required to establish "inaudibility" was a cultural convention allowing music-as-sound to be detached from its physical/visual source, a convention long available in silent-film performance practice, where the physical source—a live performer—was very obviously external to the "film itself." Indeed, the "proper" musical-aural object was established relatively late in cinema history in the many musicals produced in the earliest years of sound film: music-as-performance specifies that we know the physical source of the sound and appre-

⁴⁶ Christian Metz, "Aural Objects" (1975), in Weis and Belton, *Film Sound*, 154–61.

⁴⁷ Metz, "Aural Objects," 156, 158.

⁴⁸ Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 73.

ciate that sound as a qualifier (the performance being a special attribute of that source). Music-as-performance also corresponds exactly to characteristics Metz delineates for the other sound-track components, effects and dialogue.

Nevertheless, the variety of sources and practices in silent-film music clearly permitted a more complex practice in sound-film composition than music-as-performance suggests. For example, after 1932 it was hardly unknown for musicals to have underscoring, despite the considerable percentage of time already taken up with performances and despite the fact that musicals were basically romantic comedies, which by convention used relatively little background music. Similarly, "catching" screen action in silent-film performances, like mickey-mousing in sound films, depends on a fluid (and usually rather rapid) movement from background to "physically anchored" music and back again—or from music in its formal or expressive functions to music used as a substitute for sound effects. This is because in most circumstances such musical "illustrations" (Gorbman's term) are embedded in a continuing background-music cue. Sometimes the situation can be understood in terms of a binary pair: music-nearly-as-speech (music serving as "assistant" to the filmic narrator), opposed to music-as-sound-effects (music as mere sound that can be traced to a physical source). In the opening scene of *The Lost Patrol*, a transition from the main titles fades out, and shortly thereafter we hear a sound-effects rifle shot; the soldier on-screen falls from his horse; just as he hits the ground, a stinger breaks in and then the underscoring continues with a quieter, funeral-march-like passage. The stinger is one of those which can be heard in many of Steiner's scores for action films: not a single sforzando chord, but a series of three or four chords in lower brass and percussion, especially timpani. (The stinger for Gypo's throwing the "John" into the street is also of this type.) Really more sound effect than musical event, the stinger is not integrated motivically with the succeeding music. On the other hand, a stinger chord sustained for several seconds can gradually lose its character as sound effect, as in the famous scene from *Casablanca* (1943) where Rick and Ilsa encounter one another again: the mildly dissonant, vibrato-laden chord that signals Rick's shock is held for almost fifteen seconds under a slow-paced statement of "As Time Goes By." Similarly, in the opening scene of *Rebecca* (1940), the underscoring at first is mostly hidden under loud sound-effects ocean waves and seems to provide mostly an upper-register "edge" to the effect with its trills and thirty-second-note figures.

Similar instances on a broader scale may be found in many chase or disaster scenes, where underscoring may be present primarily to add more noise (and a certain more organized rhythmic content) to dominating

sound effects such as trains or fighter planes.⁴⁹ When the musical processes are taken over at their core by an "illustration," the construct of opposing terms seems to collapse, as in cue 3,1 from *The Informer*, when Gypo counts out money and the motive MONEY that "illustrates" the action, through repetition and variation, comprises the principal thematic content of the cue.

Finally, the tendency to "name" a sound with its source greatly facilitates the use of musical motives or themes to connote, in particular, individuals and, in turn, the treatment and development of those motives or themes in characteristically musical ways in order to promote what Gorbman calls a film's "formal and narrative unity."⁵⁰ The conventional device of a lyrical theme for the principal female character was so strong that it was possible to introduce the theme *before* we see the character, as in *Laura* (1944), or even to use the theme to *substitute* for a character we never see, as in *Rebecca*. In both these instances, the film title plus the theme sounding with it during the main title sequence is a sufficient naming device. In the typical two-part main-title cue for a dramatic film, the heroine's theme (or love theme) was the melodic component of the second part, despite the lack of a visual cue (the theme usually appeared during one of the subordinate, multiple-name credit titles). Audiences were quite accustomed to this practice by the late 1930s, so much so that Victor Young could blithely introduce the second theme of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony, opening movement, as the theme for Jane Russell's character in the sex western *The Outlaw* (1941), only to have the melody reappear not long after as she is raped by Billy the Kid.

The notion of aural objects helps to some extent to situate music within film sound and music's functions within film narrative. Music can act like a sound effect or provide emotional "enhancement"—both instances of melodramatic excess—and it can function as a rough substitute for voice-over narration. But music also has properties that are distinct from the other components of the sound track. The traditional industry distinction between source music and background music has been enfolded by the terms "diegetic" and "non-diegetic," adapted from semiotics to film music

⁴⁹ For example, in his sketches for *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), Steiner adds a marginal note to orchestrator Hugo Friedhofer: "Train effect should match the one in part one. This mixes with the actual Railclicks and isn't heard at all at first but gradually gets louder and louder!" And, for an effect in *Dive Bomber* (1941), he remarks, "as if the 'propeller' were singing the melody."

⁵⁰ Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 73, 89–91.

by Gorbman.⁵¹ In her usage, these terms refer primarily to spatial anchoring, that is, to apparent physical location (or the lack of it) in the diegesis or story world of the film. Although the opposition source/background is convenient for criticism, it is important to remember that the reasons for establishing that dichotomy had little or nothing to do with narrative functions and everything to do with the business practices of film production: first, source music had to be precisely synchronized with the image track (and, in the earliest days of sound film, recorded live during shooting sessions); second, "visual" performances raised contractual questions (the performers might need to be paid additional monies; copyright owners usually charged more for visual uses); third, the composer of the background music was often not the composer or arranger of the source music.

Gorbman gives special attention to music's apparently unique capacity to pass back and forth, or hover uncertainly, between the diegetic and the nondiegetic: "the only element of filmic discourse that appears extensively in nondiegetic as well as diegetic contexts, and often freely crosses the boundary line in between, is music."⁵² She takes the "flexibility that music enjoys with respect to the film's diegesis" as the motivation for her own complex reading of music's "many different kinds of functions . . . : temporal, spatial, dramatic, structural, denotative, connotative—both in the diachronic flow of a film and at various interpretive levels simultaneously."⁵³ Thus, background music that mickey-mouses a screen action is very nearly a sound effect which is heard unproblematically as diegetic. On the other hand, radio music heard earlier in a film as background music (at the same volume and in the same performance) is at best uncertainly anchored in its supposed physical source. And, of course, it is quite possible to dub in and synchronize both categories as if they were a single performance, as in the wake scene which immediately follows cue 3,2 in *The Informer*: a young man sings "The Minstrel Boy" and we see him standing in the doorway of a house as he sings, but he is accompanied by an angelic (at least, disembodied) and wordless chorus of women's voices.

⁵¹ Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 3.

⁵² Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 22. For more extended discussion of theoretical and ideological issues clustered about diegetic/nondiegetic and synchronized/not-synchronized, see the review of Kalinak's *Settling the Score* and Caryl Flinn's *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) by James Buhler and myself in *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 47, no. 2 (1994): 364–85.

⁵³ Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 22.

Music's narrative functions in film are affected fundamentally by such ambiguity. At a basic level, if we take denotation in film to mean what Metz says it is—the “how” of story/plot presentation—and connotation, the “spin” that is given these “neutral” facts of the narrative (and accepting the notion that some level of neutrality is possible in narrative presentation), we can say immediately that it is questionable if music is very often purely denotative in film.⁵⁴ In the same way that editing undermines the realism of the camera shot (as in a shot/reverse-shot pair or a series of fairly rapid cuts from a long shot to a close-up), sound editing compromises the realism of music performed on-screen (especially in the smoothing or flattening of dynamic levels). An extreme (but still not atypical) example of this is one of the early song performances in *Broadway Melody*: the scene opens with a long shot from the middle of a theater audience, then cuts to the stage next to the singer, yet the volume level does not change. The continuum in table 2 tries to capture, if somewhat crudely, the variety and uncertainty of music's positioning with respect to narrative.

Table 2
Film music's positioning with respect to narrative.

Spatially anchored, denotative	Unclear relations	Not spatially anchored, connotative
“Pure” performance; realistic or edited sound levels	Denotative underscoring; or “significant” performance	Connotative underscoring

The synchronized “pure” performance with realistic sound levels (at the far left) is the best possible representative of a spatially anchored denotation—the sound is patched to both sound track and image as well as is feasible in the medium. This type of performance must seem “natural”—it must minimize intrusive questions in the viewer/listener's mind about appropriateness to narrative (Why is so much time being given over to a performance? Why are we watching a performance now? or Why is this character performing?), and it must avoid inviting too much interpretation (that is, guesses to alternative connotations). Such performances are relatively rare and are perhaps most easily achieved in musical revues, where, in the manner of vaudeville, the narrative is essentially about a

⁵⁴ Metz discusses denotation in cinema in *Film Language*, 108–46; see especially 143–45.

series of performances. The “road shows” of Bing Crosby and Bob Hope are good examples: the plot is little more than a thread on which the important elements—the jokes, gags, and songs—are strung. An example of something approaching a “pure” performance in dramatic films occurs near the beginning of *Mildred Pierce* (1945). The scene is a pierside tavern at night; at first we look (with Mildred) into the interior from outside and hear music at a low dynamic level (a young woman singing “You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby,” backed by a small stage band). When Wally, the tavern owner and Mildred’s business acquaintance, invites her inside for a drink, the sound level shifts up abruptly without a break in the performance. We do not see the performers at first, but the sound level is convincing when a shift of camera angle brings them into view on a small stage at the back of the tavern. The music is thus securely anchored in diegetic space, and the reason for its presence is untroublesome (we would expect an evening performance in a popular musical style in a tavern with a stage)—it is thus purely denotative. Or, at least, that’s the case for a hypothetical unbiased viewer/listener who had not read James Cain’s novel. The person who did know the novel might well catch the allusion to Mildred’s daughter Veda, also a singer and a young woman for whose character and personality this light romantic song would be bitterly inappropriate.

The scheme above, of course, is not entirely satisfactory as it stands: the number of categories is too small, and it falsely suggests that denotation and connotation are to be understood as opposing terms in the same sense as spatially/not spatially anchored. The pertinent relations may be interpreted more fruitfully as combinations of terms in a semiotic square (see the central part of figure 2, p. 92). I have set “physically real” and “musically real” as the opposing terms. The “physically real” is source music, securely anchored in space. Its logical contradictory is “disembodied,” nondiegetic, music as voice-over, or (in part) noumenal music, in Carolyn Abbate’s sense.⁵⁵ The “musically real” is a performance, diegetic or not, which emphasizes traditional norms of musical continuity. Source music, of course, usually does this, too, but musical continuity is not a necessary property of the “physically real.” Consider, for example, the orchestra tuning in Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940): musical instruments are being played and we can see some of the performers on-screen, but the normal progression of phrase and harmony is completely lacking. Other examples include a radio turned off midphrase or brief passages from

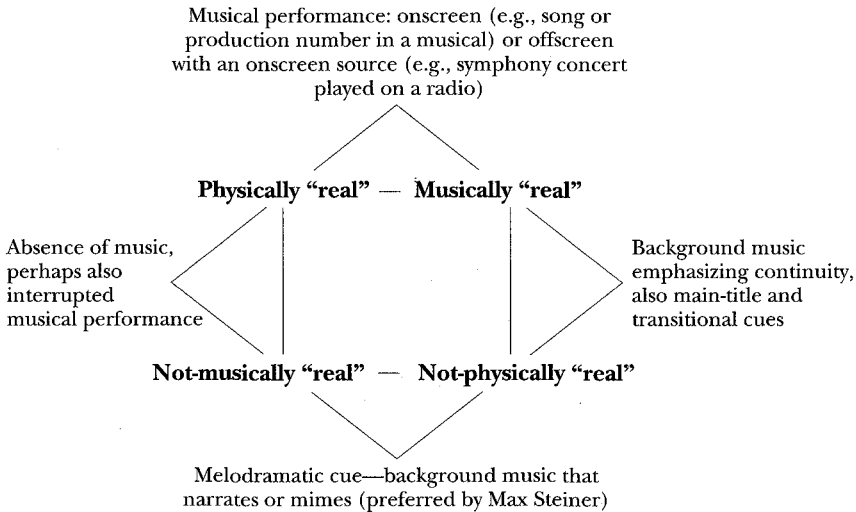
⁵⁵ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 119.

songs as sung or hummed by actors. Finally, then, the logical contradictory of the “musically real” is music whose continuity is distorted or interrupted by plot events.

Somewhat more useful for the present purpose is the synthesis or combination of adjacent terms from this square, as shown by points of the diamond shape in figure 2. A “pure” musical performance, then, is both physically and musically “real,” securely placed in the apparent physical space of the film’s diegesis and phenomenal (in Abbate’s sense), in that it draws attention to itself as a (live) performance. Melodrama finds its place in the synthesis of the logical contraries. Neither musically nor physically “real,” the melodramatic cue is tied to narrative rather than to apparent physical space and generally does not draw attention to itself as a performance, but rather to its own “comments” as a narrator. Thus, melodramatic underscoring in the cinema accomplishes with great ease what Abbate says music does only rarely and with difficulty in opera: that is, narrate.⁵⁶

Along with that power comes complicity with the patriarchal grounding of classical Hollywood cinema: underscoring that “fits a picture like a glove” manages viewers’ response in a way that might not be so intense as

Figure 2. Scheme for “spatial anchoring” and music in cinema.



⁵⁶ Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 48. In taking the position that melodramatic music cues are powerful narrators, I disagree with Gorbman, who emphasizes the subordination of music to the image track.

an on-screen performance by one of the actors but is far more precise, pervasive, and manipulative.⁵⁷ The musical naming of MONEY, the stinger to focus viewers' attention, the dissonance and fragmented texture adding a level of tension not apparent in the actors' bodies or voices, the contrast between the fragmented music and the melodic clarity and consistent texture of the blind man's theme—all these rival acting and editing as narrative controls in the opening seconds of cue 3,1 of *The Informer*. Unlike his fellow Viennese emigré and Warner Bros. staff colleague Erich Korngold, Steiner preferred a cinema music that is melodramatic, not operatic;⁵⁸ that is, the “excess” of means that is the most characteristic trait of the stage melodrama was turned back around to become a tool of unification, of “economy,” as music routinely took over the role of something approximating voice-over narration.

Melodrama was emphatically not the only source for music in the early sound film. Nor was the technique universally admired or emulated: Virgil Thomson, who did compose for films, had no use for it and said so: “To put continuous music under the speech (‘melodrama’ is the technical term for this combination), is just as unsuitable to the naturalistic style [of sound film] as operatic recitativo.”⁵⁹ On-screen performances, background music in schemata peculiar to film (such as the main-title cue or music for montage sequences), or background music emphasizing musical continuity over synchronization all derive from models that are unrelated to melodrama and its historical source in accompanied recitative. In general, the practice that emerged from the dramatic films of the transition years was a complex mixture of elements that derived from melodrama, German and Italian opera, operetta, symphony, popular musical theater, and the swing band. Among trends in film composition during the 1930s, two things in particular stand out: a gradual de-emphasis of the silent-film practice of pastiche (which could promote small-scale but not large-scale musical continuity); and the merger of Steiner's melodramatic technique with Korngold's operatic style, an amalgamation that became the model for Hollywood thereafter, a model whose legacy can be readily heard in scores for films released today.

⁵⁷ The literature on the patriarchal system of classical Hollywood is large and more ideologically varied than one might expect. Among recent publications, see essays in Gledhill, ed., *Home is Where the Heart Is*, and essays in part I of Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch, eds., *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). Gorbman (*Unheard Melodies, passim*) and Flinn (*Strains of Utopia, passim*) both touch on the matter as it involves music.

⁵⁸ On the relationship between Korngold's operas and his film scores, see van der Lek, *Diegetic Music in Opera and Film*, 12–25 and *passim*.

⁵⁹ Virgil Thomson, “How to Write a Piece,” in *A Virgil Thomson Reader* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 153.

ABSTRACT

The transitional cinema of the late twenties and early thirties was the site where studio producers, directors, composers, and sound technicians worked out the basic practices we now take for granted in film music. Max Steiner at RKO, Alfred Newman at Fox, Herbert Stothart at MGM, and others used theatrical entrance/exit cues for transitions between scenes and, occasionally, more extended, musically complete forms that set the mood of a scene but were not closely synchronized with action. When Steiner came to underscoring dialogue in the tightly synchronized fashion for which he is well known, he drew partly on Wagner and partly on the traditions of Viennese melodrama. The focus of the article is the technique of melodrama (speech accompanied by music) as a compositional source for underscoring dialogue. Steiner exploited the musical and expressive techniques of the early German melodrama as they survived in the "late" Romantic operettas of Victor Herbert, Sigmund Romberg, and Rudolf Friml. Discussion of eighteenth-century melodrama and some theoretical questions for the combination of speech and music in a theatrical work is followed by a series of examples illustrating the article's main points: the grave-digging scene from *Fidelio*, the Act 1 finales from Romberg's *Maytime* (1917) and Friml's *The Three Musketeers* (1928), and two cues from Steiner's music for *The Informer* (1935). The final section situates the melodramatic musical cue within music's narrative functions in sound film.