

Cinema and Popular Song: The Lost Tradition

RICK ALTMAN

Most writing on film music has concentrated on the practice in early cinema of underscoring a film segment's narrative or emotive content with light classical music in the European tradition. Historiographically, this approach to film accompaniment falls short on three separate counts: (1) It neglects the auditory practices of early cinema, thereby failing to recognize cinema's investment in a competing popular song tradition. (2) It unjustifiably limits our notion of the principles operative in musical accompaniment to those characterized by European-inspired light classical music. (3) It oversimplifies the complex dialectic between disparate musical traditions that undergirds the history of film music.

Illustrated Songs and Nickelodeon Accompaniment

Traditional accounts of silent film sound have assumed that early film exhibition borrowed its sound practices directly from the nineteenth-century theater, and thus featured accompaniment like that of the later silent period.¹ Treating nickelodeons as the first theaters specifically dedicated to films, critics typically assimilate nickelodeons and their music to later purpose-built film theaters. However, a closer look at nickelodeon programs suggests radically different conclusions.

As facade photographs readily attest, the highlight of many nickelodeon programs was the illustrated song, a live entertainment featuring a popular song illustrated by colorful lantern slides. Accompanied by the piano, the singer would typically warble two verses and two choruses, then the audience would join in while the chorus-lyrics slide was projected. First invented in the mid-1890s, illustrated song slides grew rapidly in popu-

lantern-slide images that song slide manufacturers accepted as appropriate matches for song lyrics suggests that nickelodeon accompaniment standards may have been very different from later criteria. As *Film Index* insists, "it is to be questioned whether a picture of a bird on its nest truly illustrates a line to the effect that the hero will return when the birdies nest again, but usually the slide gets a hand, the women murmur 'Ain't it sweet' and the slide maker makes some more of the same sort because he is in business to fill a demand, not to furnish an art education with each set of slides."³ Unlike later practice, which emphasizes the emotive value of musical texture, song slides and early accompaniment often stress verbal matches. A deaf man could make song slides, since only the lyrics count. In fact, a deaf man did: Edward Van Alton's partner John D. Scott had been deaf since the age of four.

A closer look at prewar sound practices suggests that early accompaniment may have been directly influenced by illustrated songs, film's audiovisual partner in the nickelodeon business. Repeatedly, we find producers recommending popular songs to accompany their films. Edison suggests the following familiar tunes to accompany *A Western Romance*: "If a Girl Like You Loved a Boy Like Me," "School Days," "I'm Going Away," "On the Rocky Road to Dublin," "Pony Boy," "Temptation Rag," "I'm a Bold Bad Man," "Wahoo," "So Long, Mary," and "Everybody Works but Father."⁴ As late as 1912 a forward-looking showman like S. L. Rothapfel (Roxy), even in an upscale theater like Chicago's Lyric, would lace his program with such old favorites as "Auld Lang Syne," "A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight," "He's a Jolly Good Fellow," "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp," "Oh You Beautiful Doll," "Annie Laurie," "Rosary," and "Good-bye."⁵ As Clyde Martin confirms in 1910, "half of the musicians in the country . . . will pick up a publisher's catalogue and get *names* of songs that correspond with the scenes portrayed [my emphasis]."⁶

To connect the music to the image, nickelodeon accompaniment depended not only on popular songs, but on their titles and lyrics. One particularly adept house pianist, affirms Martin, "kept the house in laughter with his selections in accompaniment to pictures of a flirtation. He made the Lothario say: 'There's something about you dear that appeals to me; my wife's gone to the country—won't you come over to my house? You're just my style. I like you. How'd you like to spoon with me?' The fellow's wife broke in upon the flirtation, then left him in a rage. The piano sympathized. 'Gee, I Wish I Had My Old Girl Back Again.'"⁷ Nearly a century later, we still recognize in this account the titles of no less than eight popular songs, evoked seriatim to reinforce the narrative presented by the

image. Far from simply recycling nineteenth-century melodrama music and prefiguring the accompaniment style typically applied to silent features, nickelodeons depended heavily on popular song.

The Structure of Popular Songs and "Classical" Music

For decades, scholars have neglected illustrated songs and the nickelodeon's popular song aesthetic. In order to revive that tradition, and to understand its continuing role throughout the history of cinema, we must first highlight the differences separating popular songs from the music used for late silent films and through-composed sound films. For simplicity's sake, I will adopt Royal S. Brown's use of the term "classical," in quotation marks, to designate the various types of music included in the latter category.⁸ I thus am using the term "classical" to designate not two centuries of musical tradition, but only the styles commonly employed in late silent film accompaniment and in through-composed sound cinema. The category of classical music, without the quotation marks, would include art song and opera; my "classical" category, with quotation marks, does not include those forms, since they are not regularly used in film music.

Film music critics typically stress the Wagnerian tendency of "classical" film music to employ repeated leitmotifs and themes in connection with specific characters or situations.⁹ While not denying the importance of this technique, I will here concentrate instead on more basic aspects of "classical" music. For the purposes of a comparison with popular song, it is essential to recognize the fundamental muteness, indeterminacy, inconspicuousness, and expansibility of "classical" music, along with the effects that these characteristics have on listeners.

muteness. Though "classical" pieces sometimes have titles, they achieve audiovisual matching by generalized parallelism between the emotive connotations of particular musical textures and the content of specific image sequences, rather than through verbal content.

indeterminacy. Whereas the title and lyrics of a popular song usually overdetermine meaning, the signification of "classical" music is far more dependent on the images and situations to which it is linked.

inconspicuousness. By this term I do not mean simply that "classical" music is "unheard," as Claudia Gorbman says of narrative film music. Gorbman's point relates to the way "classical" music is deployed in the cinema, whereas I am referring to a fundamental dif-

ference in saliency between wordless music and popular songs. Language is processed differently from instrumental music (even when only a reminiscence of that language remains, as with an instrumental version of a popular song); "classical" music is thus by its very nature inconspicuous, even before being inconspicuously applied to Hollywood films.

expansibility. In terms of its difference from popular song, "classical" music's expansibility looms large. Variable phrase length and delayed closure contribute heavily to this feature. "Classical" music's expansion methods include development by variation, modulation, minor or modal treatment, and change of instrumentation, register, or volume. To delay closure, "classical" music employs deceptive cadences, where a v-vi harmonic structure extends the piece rather than closing it off through the expected v-i "authentic" cadence. The multilayered nature of "classical" music offers multiple opportunities for extension, any separate layer potentially justifying continuation, even when the others have reached closure.

quiet listening and mental involvement. Though "classical" music depends on the same drive toward tonic resolution as does popular song, its lack of repetitive and predictable closure diffuses rather than unifies audience reaction. Because it operates on multiple levels, "classical" music rarely offers a separable hummable melody, and never provides singable lyrics, thus encouraging quiet and attentive listening rather than active participation. As such, "classical" music involves audiences mentally more than bodily, inviting them to internalize rather than externalize their reactions. The convention of silent listening to concert music, established well prior to "classical" music's debut in film exhibition, provides strong cultural reinforcement for this tendency.¹⁰

In contrast, popular song depends on language, and is predictable, singable, rememberable, and physically involving in ways that "classical" music usually is not.

linguistic dependence. The musical aspects of popular songs may suggest emotive or narrative connotations just as "classical" music does, but musical modes of meaning-making are typically overwhelmed by popular song's tendency toward direct linguistic communication. Titles and lyrics so dominate public evaluation of a popular song's emotive or narrative content that a song rarely signifies separately from its linguistic content.

predictability. Built out of standard four- or eight-bar units, popular songs at regular intervals reach rhythmic closure, reinforced by linguistic structures, such as the placement of rhyming lyrics at the end of phrases. Based on regular melodic repetition, popular songs establish and satisfy audience expectations of return to familiar melodic material. Because they systematically employ standard iv-v-i harmonic progressions, popular songs also establish and satisfy audience expectations of predictable harmonic closure. Not only do popular songs privilege repetition and regularity, but they align linguistic and musical systems to take advantage of multiple simultaneous closure cues.

singability. Popular songs are hummable because they imply reducibility to their melody, which is restricted to an accessible frequency range. They are singable because they have easily pronounced lyrics arranged in convenient and readily understandable breath groups reproducing common speech patterns. Careful matching of music and lyrics further reinforces popular song's singable nature.

rememberability. Composed of short, standardized, repeated components, popular songs are easy to remember, both musically and linguistically. Through repetition of verse and refrain, the song is easily taught to even the most unmusical audiences. This return to familiar material generates anticipation of further repetition that popular songs amply satisfy.

active physical involvement. Predictable, singable, rememberable, apparently reducible to melody and lyrics, and often based on familiar dance rhythms, popular songs typically inspire toe-tapping, whistling, humming, singing along, and other types of active participation.

Of course "classical" music at times borrows elements from popular song. When a studio arranger like MGM's Roger Edens needed bridging music, he would often create it by applying the principles of "classical" music to melody material derived from one of the film's songs. In other words, neither the principles of "classical" music nor popular song strategies should be seen as insulated from each other. By and large, however, the tendencies presented here are strong and clearly differentiated.

When they are used in association with images, "classical" music and popular song reveal yet another important difference. Because it has an obvious coherence, with each line clearly connected to the overall structure and a universally expected musical cadence and linguistic conclusion,


popular song never allows listeners of the song's individual parts to escape from the whole. As such, the popular song always remains a coherent block that appears to be authored separately from whatever images it accompanies, whereas "classical" music's meandering capacity often conceals overall structure, implying that the music is generated not by some global vision, but by the image at hand. "Classical" music thus more easily convinces us that it is authored not by a composer, but by the image. In this sense, the popular song aurally recalls the discursive nature of an early cinema of attractions, while "classical" music fits especially well into the impersonal narration of classic Hollywood cinema.

Popular Song and the History of Film Music

Film music scholarship has concentrated almost exclusively on "classical" music. Yet the influence of the nickelodeon's song-oriented accompaniment practices is visible throughout the history of film music. From the theme song craze of the mid-twenties to the compilation soundtracks of the last two decades, popular song has continued to share cinema sound space with "classical" music. Several genres depend wholly or primarily on the song mode. These include early sync sound camera and disc recordings; 1930s animation series based on popular songs available through recently acquired music publishers; Soundies and other pre-TV attempts to provide an audiovisual version of popular songs; and music videos spawned by MTV and its imitators.

More complex, and in the long run more interesting, are the many feature film attempts to take advantage of popular song's ability to perform certain operations better than "classical" music. Two of these in particular stand out. While "classical" music is particularly able to provide routine commentary and to evoke generalized emotional reactions, popular song is often capable of serving a more specific narrational purpose. Thus John Ford regularly used folk songs to establish a specific mood in his westerns, historical films often employ period songs to signify specific historical moments, and film noir regularly interrupts loveless male-dominated narratives with nightclub songs offering an oasis of romance or female power. From *High Noon* to *Miller's Crossing*, nondiegetic popular song lyrics provide a unique opportunity to editorialize and to focus audience attention. Theme songs used over initial credits constitute a particularly common example of this strategy.

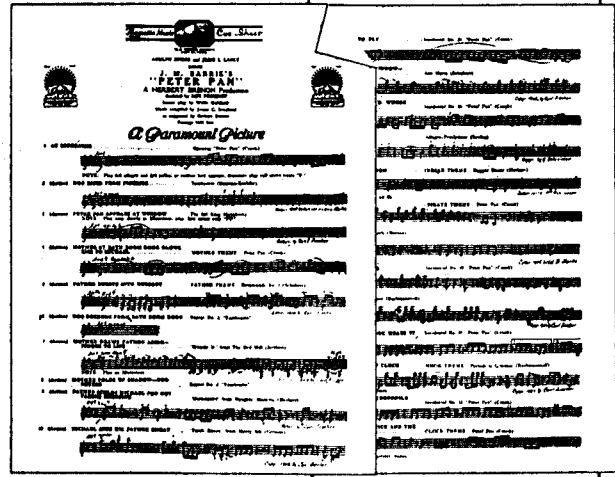
A second capacity not fully shared by "classical" music is popular song's separate marketability. By virtue of its reproducibility by a piano and ama-



M. J. MINTZ
Originator and Patentee of the
THEMATIC MUSIC CUE SHEET
for Motion Picture Presentation

Available at

Famous Players-Lasky
First National
Metro-Goldwyn
Fox Film
Universal
United Artists
Pathe
Associated Exhibitors
Vitagraph
Producers Distributing
Warner Brothers
F. B. O. of America
Preferred Pictures
Chadwick Pictures
Principal Pictures
Chronicles of America
Arrow Film
C. B. C. Film Sales
Lee-Bradford
Banner Productions
Burr Pictures
Lumas Film
Ray-Art
Jans Pictures



CAMEO MUSIC SERVICE CORP.
SOLE MANAGERS OF THE
THEMATIC MUSIC CUE SHEET
112-118 WEST 44TH ST. NEW YORK

4 1925 *Film Daily* ad for Cameo Music's "Thematic Music Cue Sheet" service, featuring a typical example mixing popular songs drawn from Victor Herbert operettas with classical favorites by Schubert and Rachmaninoff. [Author's collection]

Unforgettable melodies
bring back the past you
want to remember... re-
vealing the heart of a girl
love couldn't crush... no
matter how it tricked her!

The stars of
"Alexander's Ragtime Band"
TYRONE POWER
ALICE FAYE
and
AL JOLSON
singing his famous negro songs
in
**ROSE OF
WASHINGTON
SQUARE**
with
WILLIAM FRAWLEY
Joyce Compton
HOBART CAVANAUGH
Directed by Gregory Black
Assistant Producer and Screen Play by
Frankly Johnson
A SOA Century-Fox Picture
Darryl F. Zanuck is Chairman of Production
STARTS TODAY!
MADISON

Here are
some... like with
scores of melodies:
Mama - Tom Tom
Touche Goodbye
My Man - Avlon
The Always Chasing
Rainbow in Sun
April Showers - The
Cure of an Aching
Heart - Call Her
Mine I Love - I'm
Just Wild About
It - Do - Rose of
Washington Square
and
some of the
songs of 1939
Gladys & Revel
New Hit "I Never
Saw Heaven Cold"
"Rock"

5 As Twentieth Century Fox's most precious commodities, stars and song titles share top billing on this 1939 poster for *Rose of Washington Square*. [Author's collection]

teur singers, popular song for decades carried on an intense symbiotic relationship with the sheet music industry. Short, inexpensive, and easily distributed, popular songs also made ideal auditory commodities when recorded on cylinders, discs, or tape. Since the American cinema is a for-profit industry, films regularly renew attempts to take advantage of the commercial opportunities associated with popular song. Even before sound, orchestra leaders understood the benefits of this strategy, privileging certain music cues and building them into potentially lucrative theme songs. By the fifties, the film and recording industries were so tightly intertwined that theme songs were often released as singles in advance of the film's opening. With the triumph of albums and the development of compact discs, the single theme gave way to the compilation soundtrack built entirely out of popular songs.

"TRAILER TO WAR NURSE"

1. Open's with 1st. slide while Playing Introduction and half Chorus of Madelon - (Open Curtain on last 8 Bars of Madelon -

2. Last bar of Modulation to Rose of No Man's Land - buss for slide, while singer, sing using P. A. system. - (The Chorus of No Man's Land has four slides.

3. When Chorus is over buss for slide of Mother Nurse, while singer recites, Orchestra continue playing chorus PP - until talking trailer goes on.

4. For last two frames of talking trailer, buss the booth to have it silent so that the singer can pick up last half chorus of Rose of No Man's Land. Build up the last two Bars and close curtain.

PLEASE REHEARSE THIS VERY CAREFUL, SO EVERYTHING BLEND'S TOGETHER.

H. L. SPITALNY.

6 Extraordinary internal document in which Balaban and Katz musical director H. L. Spitalny explains to local conductors how to combine song slide techniques with a talking trailer in order to feature *War Nurse's* theme song. [Chicago Public Library]

One of the film music problems most requiring attention involves the interaction between "classical" music and popular song in films that include both. Is a song melody thematized and turned into a leitmotif? Is part of a song expanded, developed, and used according to "classical" principles? In short, is the popular song made to change colors and participate in the work of the "classical" soundtrack? Or are lyrics and a title imposed on "classical" material? Is a "classical" theme so often repeated in conjunction with a particular structure and cadence that it emulates a popular song? In short, is the film's "classical" accompaniment forced into accomplishing popular song goals?

When we consider these questions historically, we recognize the important role played by the sound component of early exhibition practices. Nickelodeons established many expectations and techniques that would ultimately either be overtly adopted by Hollywood or repressed and carried covertly within dominant filmmaking practice. In order to understand

Hollywood sound more fully, we must begin to address the dialectic that simultaneously relates and separates "classical" music and popular song. We must also recognize the extent to which this relationship serves as a vehicle for essential oppositions between spectacle and narrative, between *discours* and *histoire*, between static dual-focus forms and dynamic single-focus modes, between bodily reaction and mental processing, between film as participatory mode and as spectator form, between European inspiration and American pragmatism. None of these important dichotomies can be properly understood independently of the ongoing and complex relationship between "classical" music and popular song.

Notes

- 1 For a critique of this position, and for several other points of particular relevance to the subject of this article, see Rick Altman, "The Silence of the Silents," *Musical Quarterly* 80.2 (1997): 648-718.
- 2 Charles K. Harris, "Song Slide the Little Father of Photodrama," *Moving Picture World*, 10 March 1917, 1520.
- 3 "Unique Effects in Song Slides," *Film Index*, 6 May 1911, 12.
- 4 *Kinetogram*, 15 March 1910, 11.
- 5 Reported by Clarence E. Sinn in "Music for the Picture," *Moving Picture World*, 9 July 1912, 49.
- 6 "Playing the Pictures," *Film Index*, 19 November 1910, 27.
- 7 Clyde Martin, "Playing the Pictures," *Film Index*, 22 April 1911, 13.
- 8 Royal S. Brown, *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 38-39.
- 9 See for example Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 26ff.
- 10 For European audiences' turn toward silence in the early nineteenth century, see James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). For the silencing of American audiences in the latter half of the nineteenth century, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), esp. 179 ff; and John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1990), 215 ff.