

*MUSIC, PERFORMANCE, AND THE REALITIES OF FILM:  
SHARED CONCERT EXPERIENCES IN SCREEN FICTION*

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Film and reality share a long history. Cinema was initially conceived and introduced as a medium of capturing and showing actual world's reality, which is primarily placed and experienced outside film. Thus, concerning the analysis of cinema, most film theorists have been examining movies according to the opposing conceptions of cinematic and extra-cinematic reality. On the other hand, film and music share a long history too. As most film music scholars agree, there have never been purely "silent films", in the sense that even in the first years of cinema, before the "talking pictures", every movie screening almost always featured live music performance in combination with the visual apparatus. But this is only one side of the coin, because film as an audiovisual means of representation not only reflects or replicates the actual world but it also generates new spheres of reality.

In his outstanding study *Bruits: Essai sur l' économie politique de la musique*,<sup>1</sup> French economist and writer Jacques Attali symbolically refers to music's primeval (and prophetic) relation with the real world. According to him, there are four stages of the cultural history of music: the "sacrifice", the "representation", the "repetition" and the "composing". On the contrary, considering that moving pictures is a construction of the western modernity, cinema did not linearly follow the above steps but, in fact, has blended together all these levels of communication, thus creating impressions of pseudo-multimodal experiences based upon the fusion of visual and optical senses. Film as a contemporary technological art operates, transforms and intermixes several types of realities: the ritualistic lived performance, the theatrical drama and the staged show via both the recorded mimesis and the systematic reproduction of the audiovisual culture. And, vice-versa, this changing set of realities has altered the nature of actually-lived human reception and perception all through the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

This so often discussed – but not thoroughly examined – relation between film, music and reality is the subject matter of Ben Winters' book *Music, Performance, and the Realities of Film: Shared Concert Experiences in Screen Fiction*, which is the ninth tome of the "Routledge Research in Music" series. The book is an extended study of various filmic representations of western art music performances and their cinematic experience by the audience. Winters focuses on a specific dimension of western art music, the practice of performance, comparatively experienced either as live music performance or as inscribed music performance through film. This is quite interesting in view of the fact that concert has become a widespread performative process since the classical period of western art music and the main area for interaction between classical music and the public; furthermore, it has also been criticized for becoming a listening and viewing experience that lacks contextuality, follows the eclectic cultural needs of the elite, stays beyond the everyday and exists in separation from the real world and the social life. Challenging these preconceptions all the way through his book, Winters does not only try to make a distinction between filmic and everyday reality. He also intends to provide interconnections of both cinematic and actual-world situations that are shared by the audience and, at the same time, put to the question their intersubjective experiences.

Most of us can bring to mind the (widely portrayed and almost predictable) image of a cartoon conductor tapping his baton on the music stand to interrupt the sound of the symphonic orchestra tuning up and prepare the beginning of the first piece of a concert. Without any doubt, this symbolic gesture in addition to its audible sign have become an audiovisual mark – a "cue", in the terminology of film (music) practice – that, as Winters points out (p. 2), "is ingrained in Hollywood's portrayal of the orchestral concert but absent from the real world of professional performance". How many of us have ever thought that this could be just a false stereotypical conception, a cliché, constantly reproduced to serve the narrative of a specific filmic reality? And this is only one scene among countless that might be cited from personal experience. The book reflexively articulates as many as possible of these instances to highlight the mutual encounter between real viewers and onscreen cinema spectators.

*Music, Performance, and the Realities of Film* is neither about music documentaries (since it deals only with fiction films) nor about musicals and operatic film performances, themes that have been studied separately (since Winters prefers not to cite other music genres and concentrates on instrumental art music, thus identifying with the particular

style of classical Hollywood film scores). The author combines major theoretical, methodological and epistemological questions that appraise the substance of music in accordance to the overall filmic ontology, giving his own interpretations juxtaposed with other scholars' earlier references. The book relies heavily on a comprehensive inspection of a vast number of scenes from movies, which formulate a vivid and strongly argued essay. It is worthy of note that, except the detailed description of concert instances in mainstream narrative cinema, quite a lot of these examples illustrate animation films as well as movies that thematize western classical music.

The first part of the book ("The Real versus the Reel") consists of two discrete chapters that involve the main axes of Winters' focal point: scenes from movies during which "real" musicians (such as conductors, performers and composers) appear and filmic representations where actors play the role of "reel" musicians, according to narrative construction. Then, the second part ("Film and Life: The Mirror of Film") follows. This is a more musicological section, anchored in Carolyn Abbate's concepts of "drastic" and "gnostic" musicology<sup>2</sup> as well as Christopher Small's term "musicking",<sup>3</sup> hence concentrating not only on the hermeneutic aspect of music but mainly on its performative and embodied qualities. This part of the book extensively presents the visualization of the focal performance agents: the musicians and the members of the audience. It also looks upon the narrative models that seem to be common between the classical Hollywood fiction cinema and the concert hall repertoire. The last part of the book ("Film's Musical Identity") contains two chapters, which further address an ontological approach towards the musical subsistence of the film, i.e. how music performances can affect the "film's body" – in terms of Vivian Sobchack's existential and semiotic phenomenology.<sup>4</sup> Winters shows no hesitation in making some critical suggestions on Claudia Gorbman's well-worn theoretical paradigm of "diegetic versus non-diegetic" film music<sup>5</sup> and stressing the difficulties that often arise from such a bipolar methodology. Instead, he pursues an intermediate channel, a liminal pathway, which underlines and embodies music's magical power within cinematic discourse.

Ben Winters, currently appointed as a Lecturer in Music at The Open University, UK and author of *Erich Wolfgang Korngold's The Adventures of Robin Hood: A Film Score Guide*,<sup>6</sup> is also a regular performer of western art music, both a conductor and a violinist; for that reason, he certainly has plenty of personal experience regarding the orchestral practices in concerts as well as the scientific study of western art music history, philosophy and

aesthetics. In conclusion, his book offers an insightful approach to contemporary film music studies by examining the correlations between music and image, fiction and reality, cinema and everyday life, as been perceived by the spectators of onscreen classical concert performances. It is, therefore, an essential addition to the academic literature of the recently established field of film musicology.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Attali, *Bruits: Essai sur l' économie politique de la musique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Abbate, "Music: Drastic or Gnostic?", *Critical Inquiry* 30/3 (2004): 505-36.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Ben Winters, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold's The Adventures of Robin Hood: A Film Score Guide* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007).