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MUSICAL POSTCARDS OF OUR TIME A Personal Look at the Importance of Original Pop Songs Written for Mainstream Films

When I started composing for film, I was immediately drawn to one particular area of film music: the use of original songs specifically written for this media. The task of writing a song that needs to convey a specific mood, emotionally connect the audience to the story, and at the same time correspond with the film's cultural and social context, is not an easy one. In this essay, I shall explore the role of original songs in the cinematic experience, with particular reference to mainstream cinema. Popular songs have become an important element of mainstream film and I would argue that they are significant documents, musical postcards of our culture and times, reflecting the needs and desires of the audience. I will try to prove this point by both analysing the song "Carousel" which I composed for the feature length documentary "The most important boy in the world",¹ and approaching the subject from different angles.

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¹ Full length documentary directed by Tea Lukač and produced by Belgrade Faculty of Dramatic Arts and Public Film in Serbia, 2015.

When we think of popular music today, we mostly think of music created for mass consumption and distributed by the mass media² – a form of entertainment, easily digested by mass audiences. Richard Middleton argues that “popular music can only be properly viewed within the context of the whole musical field...and this field, together with its internal relationships, is never still – it is always in movement”.³ Popular music has developed and changed through time, under the influence of technology, and has come a long way. From songs for the bourgeois market which were described as “popular songs” in the first half of the nineteenth century, through music hall products in Britain and the songs of Tin Pan Alley in New York,⁴ to the globally and commercially exploited twenty-first century pop hits of artists like Beyoncé, popular music has become a massive force and a way of life, constituting our culture.

Mainstream films are produced for wide audiences, bearing in mind the popular taste of the masses, and distributed by different media. They are not primarily created with the intention to educate, but to entertain us. The most widely distributed films of today are Hollywood films, which is why we consider them to be today’s mainstream cinema. Fourie defines mainstream cinema as “films produced by the big studios; the so-called big box-office movies and thus popular films; and films produced against the background of capitalist considerations and thus with the emphasis on commercial success”.⁵ It was inevitable that popular music and mainstream cinema would one day combine their powers and produce a “new” area of film music, which would benefit not only the film industry but music industry, as well. In reality, there was a lot of resistance towards the inclusion of popular songs in films, and according to Mervyn Cooke, “the tension between the use of popular music and classically influenced scoring began as far back as the silent film”,⁶ and culminated in the mid-1960’s. Bernard Herrmann, the legendary film composer, best known for his collaboration with Orson Wells and Alfred Hitchcock, stood out as the main speaker against the inclusion of popular music in film soundtracks, which in turn “reinforced

² Middleton, Richard. 1990. *Studying popular music*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 4. According to Middleton, Frans Birrer (1985:104) provides a summary of main definitions of popular music. The one described in this essay is Technologico-economic definition of popular music.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ Fourie, Pieter Jacobus. 2001. *Media Studies: Content, audiences and production*. Lansdowne: Juta Education, 225.

⁶ Cooke, Mervyn. 2008. *A history of film music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 396.

his reputation as a composer-auteur”.⁷ Before popular music entered Hollywood cinema, it was used in national cinemas around the world, both as diegetic and non diegetic music.⁸ The real breakthrough came in the sixties, when a popular song became an almost obligatory element of the background score, and continued until today. The audience was becoming younger and more restless, influenced by a new music drug called rock & roll, that in return, was crucially connected to yet another “new” medium – television. The old traditional methods of film scoring were looked upon as outdated and out of place in products which were catering for a completely new generation of viewers.⁹ The Hollywood film industry was under a lot of pressure to come up with something different. One of the first and most important films to use rock & roll was the youth oriented controversial MGM movie “Blackboard Jungle” (1955) which featured Bill Haley and The Comets’ hit “Rock Around the Clock” in its credits, and announced the beginning of a new and extremely influential communion of popular music and films.¹⁰

Nothing could stop the invasion of popular songs that were featured in films, both those already published and well known, and those specifically written for the media, whether country, rock, disco or funk. According to Kathryn Kalinak, “popular music became a defining characteristic of film music in the second half of the twentieth century”.¹¹ Hollywood saw an opportunity to advance its profits, and cross promote its products with record labels, which were slowly being acquired by the film studios, and vice versa.¹² Title or theme songs appeared as “the least creative application of popular music common in the 1960’s soundtracks”¹³ and grew into a massive tool of promotion and sales both for films, and music products associated with films. These songs sometimes became as important as the films they were in, taking on different roles, which Simon Frith addresses in his essay “Mood music”. He states that a theme song can take on the role of a summary; it reprises the melody we’ve been hearing throughout

⁷ Idem. Cooke points out that Herrmann’s snobbish beliefs about the importance of conventional scoring were scrutinized and challenged.

⁸ Kalinak, Kathryn. 2010. *Film Music: A very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 84. Kalinak points out that national cinemas of Egypt, China, India, the Soviet Union and others had used popular music, long before it entered Hollywood mainstream cinema.

⁹ Cooke, Mervyn. *A history of film music*. Op. cit., 396.

¹⁰ Ibid., 398.

¹¹ Kalinak, Kathryn. *Film Music*. Op.cit., 84.

¹² Ibid., 85.

¹³ Cooke, Mervyn. *A history of film music*. Op. cit., 405.

the movie, and captures the mood of an ending.¹⁴ But most importantly, when a theme song appears in the end credits, it represents a gentle but firm reminder that we, the audience, need to embrace reality again.

There are a number of examples of popular songs in films that were partly or mainly responsible for that film's worldwide success; there are even examples in which the songs themselves became more popular than the films. "The Bodyguard",¹⁵ "Titanic"¹⁶ or "Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves",¹⁷ all highly successful films, would not be what they are today without their theme songs, which glue us to the atmosphere and characters.

The James Bond movies produced some of the most well known theme songs in mainstream cinema, changing the audience's experience and expectations of films and their title songs. These were "allied to imaginative main-title graphics"¹⁸ and performed by pop stars like Tina Turner¹⁹ and Madonna,²⁰ creating a new platform for the series promotion and marketing.

But how does popular music in film affect our understanding of the image before us? Anahid Kassabian argues that "popular music depends on a web of memory, emotion and identification",²¹ and addressing one of the most important features of popular music, she states that "songs choreograph good and bad times, serving as cues for memories of specific times of your life".²² Popular music communicates with us on an emotional level and through identification. When we hear an original pop song in a movie for the first time, it will search through our memory to extract the exact experience linked to the music style, genre, story and mood that apply to the song. Film music depends on those expe-

¹⁴ Frith, Simon. 1984. "Mood music: An inquiry into narrative film music", *Screen*, Vol. 25/3, 83–84.

¹⁵ Film directed by Mick Jackson, USA, 1992. Theme song "I will always love you" written by Dolly Parton, and performed by Whitney Houston.

¹⁶ Directed by James Cameron, USA, 1997. Theme song "My heart will go on" written by James Horner and Will Jennings, and performed by Celine Dion.

¹⁷ Directed by Kevin Reynolds, USA, 1991. Theme song "(Everything I do) I do it for you" written by Bryan Adams, Michael Kamen and Robert John "Mutt".

¹⁸ Cooke, Mervyn. *A history of film music*. Op. cit., 406.

¹⁹ Tina Turner performed the title song in the Bond film "Golden Eye", directed by Martin Campbell in 1995. The song was written by Bono and The Edge.

²⁰ Madonna performed the title song in "Die another day", directed by Lee Tamahori in 2002. Title song was written by Madonna and Mirwais Ahmadzai.

²¹ Kassabian, Anahid. 2001. *Hearing Films: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music*. New York: Routledge, 79.

²² *Idem*.

periences and manipulates our emotions and reactions, and “positions the audience to receive the narrative in the way intended by the filmmakers”.²³ We organize and evoke our memories with the help of music, and our previous experiences dictate and influence our perception of events today. One of the main reasons why a pop song works in film is identification. A romantic pop song, a well rooted music convention, used under a love scene, will accentuate the feelings of the characters. But, most importantly, it will “prompt the audience to identify with and share that emotion”.²⁴ Popular music bathes in its own conventions, history and identity and quickly establishes meaning when used in film.

Claudia Gorbman introduces different musical codes and argues that the “semiological notion of codes is crucial to the study of what film music means”.²⁵ These semiotic codes help audiences understand certain aspects of the film better, and allow film music to work its magic. Pure musical codes draw attention to the music itself, and cultural musical codes rely on the fact that every type of music brings with it a defined cultural context. Cinematic musical codes use different styles of music to transcend and convey different types of emotion, or in Gorbman’s words “music assumes meaning by virtue of its placement in the film”.²⁶ Popular songs especially written for film bring all of these meanings to the table and communicate with the listener more directly than instrumental scoring. Their effect is immediate, as they become “the star of the show”, drawing the complete attention of the listener to themselves. In this way, “they establish meaning more quickly and effectively”,²⁷ as they instantly convey the message. Kalinak also reminds us that one of the major differences between a song and instrumental score is the fact that songs use lyrics to communicate its message to the listener.²⁸ I find lyrics a practical and economical tool and a secure way of tapping into the listener’s emotional world and addressing an issue. They convey not only direct messages, but hidden ones as well, suggesting something unspoken - emotions the characters are feeling but not voicing. In my opinion, a song becomes an important addition to the script, making sure the audience gets the right message. Simon Frith refers to “emotional reality” and argues that “music is as essential to the perceived ‘truth’ of a film as everything

²³ Kalinak, Kathryn. *Film Music*. Op. cit., 19.

²⁴ Kalinak, Kathryn. *Film Music*. Op. cit., 20.

²⁵ Gorbman, Claudia. 1987. *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*. London: The British Film Institute, 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁷ Kalinak, Kathryn. *Film Music*. Op. cit., 87.

²⁸ *Idem.*

else”²⁹ and this can be applied to songs in films as well as instrumental scoring. Both melody and harmony, and the lyrics of a song placed in a film, directly influence the way we perceive a scene, character, or an event. The song brings its own meaning and history which arise from our joint experiences of music but, merged with the visuals, builds a new perspective.

The most successful songs in Hollywood cinema, according to Billboard magazine’s³⁰ “Top 10 movie songs of all time”,³¹ are some of the most loved pop songs in the history of popular music. Interestingly, the majority of songs on this list were written specifically for films, bearing in mind the requirements posed by the genre, story, characters, and the overall mood of the film. A good example would be the Billboard Hot 100 number one single, “Eye of the tiger”, written by Frankie Sullivan & Jim Peterik, and performed by the American rock band “Survivor”. This song was written for “Rocky 3” in 1982, at a direct request from Sylvester Stallone, who was looking for a rock anthem with a “street sound” to it, which would appeal to younger audiences.³² The songwriters recorded it using dead string guitar riffs, big sounding drums, and keyboards, all important and effective elements of rock music in the 1980’s. This song clearly portrays the decade in which it was produced, not only through the overall sound of the production, but also in the style of instrumental playing and vocal phrasing, the type of voice used for the lead, and the big sound of the drums and their prominent position in the mix.

Songs mirror the cultural context in which they are produced, and paint a picture of the time of their creation, but constitute that context as well. Not only do we notice the difference in production, technical equipment used, the style of composing, arranging, and mixing, but also these music style characteristics mirror our own cultural requirements. Sergio Miceli addresses the importance of film music in the context of the twentieth century, saying that “film music is an expressive form that has the capacity more than any other to speak to human beings about the twentieth century”.³³ Film and popular music both have the ca-

²⁹ Frith, Simon. “Mood music: An inquiry into narrative film music”. *Op.cit.*, 83–84.

³⁰ American music magazine, regarded as one of the oldest trade magazines in the world, first published on November 1st, 1894. Specializing in the music industry, it contains internationally recognized record charts, which track the sales and air play of popular songs and albums across several categories on a weekly basis.

³¹ http://www.billboard.com/articles/list/5922814/top-50-movie-songs-of-all-time?list_page=4, published on February 27th, 2014, 4:45 PM EST

³² <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=3938>, published in 2015.

³³ Morricone, Ennio and Miceli, Sergio. 2013. *Composing for the cinema*. Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press Inc, 2.

capacity to influence and constitute cultural and social developments of our time, but can also serve as documents of those developments.

When I was asked to write the music score for a feature documentary called “The most important boy in the world”, directed by a young and talented female Serbian director, Tea Lukač, I needed to compose a score that could communicate with young audiences all around the world. This is a film which deals with new generations of young people who are searching for identity, love, and a sense of purpose by idolising pop stars, in this case one of the most popular and controversial contemporary male singers, Justin Bieber. As well as exploring their emotional and personal views on life and society, this film is a document of the times we live in. The director pointed out to me, whilst explaining her perception of today’s youth emotional and social interaction, “that teenagers often take the number of likes and followers on Facebook as a proof of love”. The film demonstrates that popular culture and messages sent by the media profoundly influence and condition the lives of teenagers in the twenty first century.

After long and fruitful discussions on the style of music that would suit the mood of the film, Tea and I came to the conclusion that this film needed a characteristic acoustic sound that could reflect the emotional aspect of the story. The fact that today’s teenager is familiar with the built in sounds of computers and social media (Facebook, Twitter) and accustomed to hearing them daily, led us to the idea of incorporating these sounds into the score. The film also needed a pop song, that would be featured in the final montage sequence of the film, that brings to an end an emotional journey we have taken with some of the female fans featured in the film: teenage girls who feel alienated from their society, uncertain of who they really are. They find sanctuary in the personality of Justin Bieber, a young music superstar whose message “Believe” is their lifebelt and motto. Lause argues that “popular heroes turn our attention away from what we are, toward what we would like to become” and “popular icons often serve to grant us new identities and powers we otherwise lack”.³⁴ He addresses these issues in explaining how popular culture allows us the environment to act out what usually isn’t allowed by our society, and argues that popular culture is escapist. Popular music and film could be regarded as escapist as they allow the viewer to enter a new world, one detached from reality. Popular idolatry is not new, it has been a trait of popular culture of the twentieth and twenty first century.

The song I was writing had to deal with social and emotional issues of twenty first century teenagers, but be able to communicate with mass audiences as well, as it would be used for promoting the film through different media. In my

³⁴ Nachbar, Jack and Lause, Kevin. 1992. *Popular culture – an introductory text*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 45–46.

experience, the most effective and irresistible songs are those that include every single listener in the story, by dealing with situations and emotions everyone has experienced at one point in their lives. This song needed to be written in a contemporary pop style, but performed as a live version, with acoustic guitar and vocals, so it would sound intimate and not overpower the montage sequence and its meditative, nostalgic atmosphere, but still communicate with young people who listen to Western pop music. I researched the structure and form of Justin Bieber's best known songs, the chord progressions and the melodies, as well as the lyrics and what made them so powerful and mesmerizing to his listeners. I needed to analyze what his sound was made of, and then implement those specifics into the song I was writing, so that his audience, also the target consumer group of the film, could recognize the song as something familiar, reminiscent of Bieber's music style and expression. Live performance in today's pop music allows the fans to be as intimate with their idol as possible, as this kind of performance exposes the performer and makes him most vulnerable. It is also the highest form of emotional expression in today's pop music, stripped of over produced backing tracks and artificially pitch corrected vocals. This offers fans the opportunity to identify with the humanity and imperfections of their idol, traits that are more prominent in live performance.

The lyrics of a song in a film can sometimes clearly convey the main message and mood of the film. One example in mainstream cinema would be the opening montage sequence of "The way we were". Marvin Hamlisch's Oscar winning song, sang by Barbra Streisand, serves as an introduction, and guides us into the story. The lyrics, written by Alan and Marilyn Bergman not only reveal the story's ending, right at the very beginning, but prepare us for an emotional roller-coaster.

I based the lyrics of the song "Carousel" on different emotional states of the main character and other Bieber fans represented in the film, and positioned the most important message as the opening line of the chorus: "...if we've got each other, we've got everything...". It directly addresses the relationship of a fan and their idol, but more importantly, the experience of feeling lost and lonely in today's world. I used the lyrics to explicitly convey the story of the film, using the emotional states of the protagonists as guiding posts. Since the song "Carousel" appears at the very end of the documentary, it serves as a final reminder of the views and emotions expressed by the main characters, a compressed and direct confirmation of the real message that we want the audience to embrace. I needed to address the listener directly, so I used first person pronouns to relate my message. This again reflects the strong bond between the fans and the superstar. Most of the lyrics in "Carousel" address and accentuate loneliness, social inadequacy, and emotional struggles young people go through in search of ac-

ceptance, approval, and their own identity. The audience gets the chance to identify with these issues and feelings, which glues them even more to the story.

My analysis of Bieber's vocal expression helped me understand that, in order to get his fans' attention, the lead vocal needed to be used as a damper pedal, suppressing strong emotional eruptions, allowing small fluctuations in dynamics and as little vibrato as possible. His style of singing "draws on black musical techniques of emotional expression",³⁵ so the phrasing of the melody in "Carousel" needed to meet that criteria as well. With all of these elements in place, the song could directly transmit the intended message, reflect its target audience's emotional, social and cultural circumstances, and correspond to their needs, while serving the film's needs as well.³⁶

Allowing popular music to claim its rightful space in film today is enabling a better documentation of our times and culture. Obviously, the consumer has changed over time, developed with technology and science, in search of immediate gratification of their emotional and physical needs. Mainstream cinema and popular music provide a direct window into the consumer's world, and they are created to satisfy the audience's needs by dealing with issues that the public is interested in, at that particular time. Every time has its own preoccupation with an issue, whether it be political, social, emotional or cultural, and both popular music and cinema document these issues, explore them, reproduce them through their own elements and become an invaluable certificate of times gone by.

Translated by the author

³⁵ Frith, Simon. "Mood music: An inquiry into narrative film music". *Op. cit.*, 79. Frith addresses hit songs which use main stylistic elements of black music.

³⁶ The song "Carousel" can be heard here: <https://soundcloud.com/aleksandrakovac/carousel/s-owtkK>

APPENDIX

“Carousel”

Music and lyrics written by Aleksandra Kovac

ALEKSANDRA KOVAC

CAROUSEL

ALEKSANDRA KOVAC

ANDANTE

4

Bm7 Gmaj7 A Bm7 Gmaj7

8

A Bm7 Gmaj7 A Bm7 Gmaj7

12

A Bm7 Gmaj7 A F#m7 Bm7 Gmaj7

16

A F#m7 Bm7 Gmaj7 A F#m7 Bm7 Gmaj7

20

A F#m7

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Look at us fighting, we're all here searching for love,
The world is waiting, I'll take my chances and run,
But if I've got you, I won't be scared,
There's nothing that I wouldn't do,
To keep you safe, right by my side,
Cause' I'll be here until the end.

If we've got each other, we've got everything,
No one can break us, never fall again,
When your body's weak, I will be your strength,
We'll shine through the night like a carousel.
I know you're hurting, all alone in this world,
Just keep on smiling, and let your story be heard,
But I see your light, it shines so bright,
Don't you know you're beautiful,
Forget the pain, and take my hand,
Cause I'll be here until the end.

If we've got each other, we've got everything,
No one can break us, never fall again,
When your body's weak, I will be your strength,
We'll shine through the night like a carousel.

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