

King Kong: Reflections of Feminism Through Film Music

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A giant ape discovered on a mysterious island falls in love with a beautiful woman, is trapped and brought to New York City, escapes to steal back his love, and then is hunted and falls to his death from atop a skyscraper.

Who would have thought that such a story would become a timeless classic that has been realized by filmmakers and musicians alike? And yet in 1933, 1976, 2005, and most recently in 2017, the story of “King Kong,” the “eighth wonder of the world,” has inspired major motion pictures that have earned production companies over six hundred million dollars in revenue. It is a story that can even be credited in helping to save the United States from economic crisis.

Hollywood in the 1930’s and 40’s can be credited as one of the tools of survival of the U.S. during the Great Depression. Of Hollywood and movies in general, Hortense Powdermaker said that they are the ultimate distraction, that they “increase certain emotional needs which can only be satisfied by more movies.” While the U.S. suffered large scale unemployment and hunger, distraction may have been just the remedy. King Kong may not have been able to save himself, but he saved thousands from despair as he appeared on the big screen.

The imaginative story was conceived by Merian C. Cooper and Edgar Wallace, two adventurous filmmakers who spent a lot of time in exotic locations like Africa. At the time, in the early 20th century, jungle movies were a huge success. Apes were a rare sight in zoos and therefore seeing them in the movies was a fascination to many movie-goers. Playing into this public craving, Cooper and Wallace developed an idea for a giant ape that is discovered on a mysterious jungle island.

Such a mystical concept has been the catalyst for creativity in all of its many mediums - from set design, to writing, to robotics even. The music scores for each of the three films (1933, 1976, and 2005) have been colossal undertakings - bigger than the enormous ape that

they portray. Their respective composers, Max Steiner, John Barry, and James Newton Howard each approached this world-famous story in very different ways. But what proves to be the most interesting is how each score encapsulates the treatment and views of women in the time period in which each is composed. In exploring these connections, I hope to offer insight into how film scores can be accurate representations of the social conditions which exist during their composition, especially in feminism.

## FEMINISM IN FILM MUSIC

Film music seems to have been doomed from the start with issues of sexism. Nearly all of the early notable film score composers, such as Max Steiner, Eric Korngold, and even Sergei Prokofiev, were seen as being “seduced or ensnared” by Hollywood from war-torn Europe.<sup>1</sup> These men all fled the danger that threatened their well-being and artistic liberties, especially those who were Jewish. As they transitioned from careers as concert music composers in an enormous romantic writing style to film score composers, many criticized this as being a “step down,” or a lesser art form. Therefore, peculiarly enough, many considered such a transition to be “feminine.”

Two German authors, Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler, co-wrote a book entitled *Composing for Films* which added its disapproval of those composers who chose to move to Southern California to work in Hollywood. They wrote a small nursery rhyme to help illustrate their feelings:

“Ich weiss ein schönes Spiel,  
 Ich mal’ mir einen Bart,  
 Und halt mir einen Facher vor,

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<sup>1</sup>Franklin, Peter. *Seeing Through Music: Gender and Modernism in Classic Hollywood*. Oxford University Press. New York: 2011.

Dass niemand ihn gewahrt.”

Translated into English it reads: “I know a lovely game, / I paint myself a beard, / Then hide behind a fan, / So nobody shall notice it.”<sup>2</sup>

Essentially Eisler and Adorno are saying that these men - Steiner, Korngold, Franz Waxman - were lying to themselves; that they were no longer “men,” but subservient, secondhand “women” that now bowed down to film. Such a comparison between film music composition and women is sexist and chauvinistic. Whether or not the early composers themselves saw things this way, many others did. And this new career path sprouted from such soil.

But since the 1930’s, when women and film scoring were both considered subservient and weak, have things changed much? According to Nan Schwartz, an incredibly successful and sought-after composer and arranger in Hollywood today, things have changed, but not much. Schwartz says that it is still “a boy’s network” and that overall it’s “all about the money.”<sup>3</sup> For this reason, production companies are nervous to take chances in their decision making - especially in hiring women composers, which Schwartz admits is not something that is “normal” yet in the film scoring industry.

Nan Schwartz, however, has been breaking the “norms” now her whole life. She has worked in the Los Angeles area as a composer, arranger, and orchestrator since her early twenties, gaining herself a Grammy Award for her arrangement of “Here’s That Rainy Day” which was performed by Natalie Cole, as well as earning numerous Emmy nominations for her work on the TV series “In the Heat of the Night.” Schwartz has worked as an orchestrator for many of the “A-listers,” as they have often been referred to - the big names that production companies *will* take their chances on. Therefore, she has had a true insider’s look

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Nan Schwartz, personal communication, February 16, 2017.

at how much of a “boy’s network” the film scoring world remains to be. Her recommendations for action? To inspire more women to take up the career in the first place, and then to trust them.

In a special “Women and Conducting” group interview and panel held at Berklee Valencia on February 16, 2017, Schwartz gave an interesting example. She had us imagine that our television set was broken and so we called for a repairman and a half hour a 9 year-old boy shows up on our doorstep to fix it. We probably would feel a little unsure about his ability to perform the job because we are not accustomed to seeing a 9 year-old boy do that job. In the same way, women need to be trusted as composers in Hollywood, even though we aren’t used to seeing many of them yet fulfilling that position.

Andrew Kinney, an active orchestrator in Hollywood also comments on feminism in the Hollywood music industry. From his perspective he sees that there are “more and more women [who] are pursuing the career in the first place.” He says that when he studied film scoring at the University of Southern California from 1993 to 1994, there was “exactly one woman in a class of 12 composers, and that was a pretty typical ratio during that era.” But now days he suspects “that the numbers are now a lot closer to equal at USC or Berklee.”<sup>4</sup> To Kinney, we are going to inevitably see more and more women composers because more of them are considering this career field in the first place.<sup>5</sup> Hopefully this is because we as an industry and society are normalizing the option - we are learning to trust that 9 year old boy who has come to fix our television set.

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Kinney, personal communication, February 4, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## ANN &amp; KONG

Surprisingly enough, when observing the development of feminism in film music over the decades, the relationship between a woman and a giant ape seems to reveal a lot. Ann Darrow, the main female role in both the 1933 and 2005 versions of *King Kong*, and Dwan, the main female role in the 1976 film who parallels Ann Darrow's part, each interact with Kong in ways that coincide with the state of feminism in their respective years. The distance between man and woman shifts from being very much separated and at opposite ends of a spectrum to basically becoming one.

In analysing each film, I decided to select the first moment when Kong and Ann are alone. This way we can see both characters in a more established relationship and away from the outside influence of other figures and circumstances. In the 1933 movie, the giant ape and our damsel in distress are musically kept very much far apart - both in register and in style. In the scene where Ann is rescued by Kong from a Tyrannosaurus Rex, we finally get to witness the two alone and see how they interact with each other ([see "Supporting Materials" Video 1](#)). The way this is represented musically is fascinating (See Figure 1). Max Steiner is seemingly scoring dialogue between the two.

Figure 1, Max Steiner

Andante

Ann: (oboe)

*mp*

Kong: (strings and brass)

*mf* *f*

Kong: (low brass, ww's)

*mf* *f*

7

Ann: (strings)

*mf* *f* *mp*

*mp* *mf* *f* *mp*

*mp* *mf* *f* *mp*

As in most cases in this score, Kong is portrayed in fat descending “stomps” in low brass, strings and woodwinds. He speaks first in three fat chords that rather split in contrary motion. This is effective as Kong in this part is stooping down towards Ann. We get the sense of how she would perceive his looming face. Next Ann “speaks.” But her musical voice is much different - a delicate and lovely oboe solo supported on a bed of soft strings. This reflects the 1933 Ann quite accurately as she is helpless and fearful almost constantly.

Kong speaks once more, again in the fat, lower register of the orchestra. And then as expected, Ann’s musical answer is sweet and romantic, in a sweeping upward string passage. It is peculiar that Max Steiner scored these two characters as if they were standing opposite one another. Even their thematic material rarely overlaps. But as it turns out, it is an accurate representation of how women were treated in the 1930’s in western civilization.

In the early 20th century in the United States of America, traditional roles of masculinity and femininity were already established after centuries of development. For



example, men were expected to be bread winners and women were expected to be caregivers and homemakers.<sup>6</sup> But the 1930s presented a new challenge that would disable any attempt at equalization between sexes - (a challenge that actually kept the motion picture business alive and gave King Kong a prosperous opening). The Great Depression was sort of an “all hands on deck” for the American household. As jobs and food were scarce, there sadly wasn’t time for women to challenge the social expectations that were placed on them. Susan Ware said, “Forced to take on even more important roles in their homes and families, women played often unrecognizable roles in helping the country through the Great Depression. Hard times worked to reinforce traditional gender roles, not subvert them.”<sup>7</sup> Traditional roles of masculinity and femininity were nailed down in order to survive - not because they are optimal for human prosperity, but because early 20th century Americans *thought* so and were perhaps under too much stress to try anything new.

Max Steiner, in the way he separates high and low registers, and sinister and sweet musical moods between Ann and Kong is (perhaps) unknowingly projecting the social situation of the day onto the score for King Kong. Their respective motifs do not develop during the film. Kong “remains the destructive, relentless monster, she the helpless damsel” from beginning to end.<sup>8</sup>

43 years later, John Barry’s approach to this one-on-one moment between Ann (or in this case “Dwan”) and Kong is treated completely different, initially noted in the amount of music. John Barry writes very little music for this scene, but what he does write reflects the treatment of women in the 1970’s.

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<sup>6</sup> Ware, Susan. “Women and the Great Depression.” The Journal of the Gilder Lehrman Institute. New York: 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Allen, David. <http://davidallencomposer.com/blog/king-kong-max-steiner-james-newton-howard-comparison>.

Dwan's attitude is to be noted in this analysis primarily because of Barry's choice in where to bring in the music, especially since there is so little. Unlike the Ann from 1933, Dwan fights back to a certain extent. She shouts at Kong to put her down and defends herself angrily until at 1:01:11 when she breaks down into tears of fear and frustration (see ["Supporting Materials" Video 2](#)). That is when Barry places the cue, a melancholy and mysterious cue orchestrated into simply strings, oboe, and piano (See Figure 2).

Figure 2, John Barry

Moderato High strings, oboe:  
 mp  
 Strings (celli, violas):  
 pp  
 Piano:  
 mp

The music seems to be designed to make us pity Dwan in her interesting predicament. It is interesting how she is initially passionately self-defensive, but then in an instant becomes submissive. The way Jessica Lange, the actress who played Dwan, was directed to portray her character, the way the character was written, and the way John Barry scored her, are reflections of a peculiar movement that was taking place in world: "Second-wave Feminism."

"Second-wave Feminism," as referred to by both historians and some feminists, was a movement during the 1960's and 70's across the globe to help women achieve equality in the workplace, home, and in relationships. The years leading up to the production of the 1976 *King Kong* were full of thriving activism for women's rights - the National Organization for Women, a feminist organization that formed in the United States, was busy at work doing everything they could to "lobby Congress for for pro-equality laws and assist women seeking legal aid as they battled workplace discrimination in the courts."<sup>9</sup> But it wasn't an easy battle.

<sup>9</sup> Carabillo, Toni, Judith Meuli, and June Bundy Csida. "Part II [Timeline]." *Feminist Chronicles: 1953-1993*. Feminist Majority Foundation. 2009.

There was a lot of backlash, especially from President Nixon who was a stern right-wing conservative. Many attempts to generate equal rights in the workplace or to allow women the right to choose abortion were denied by him and his cabinet for “personal and religious beliefs.”<sup>10</sup> What could have been a triumphant leap for women everywhere in the 60’s and 70’s turned out to be a series of small and painful steps forward - though in the end important and successful, it still was met with much opposition.

As we watch Dwan interact with Kong, therefore, we not only see how she lashes out at him, shouting for her freedom and then collapsing into tears of despair, but we also hear how the music reflects the events of “Second-wave Feminism.” The violas are suspending the entire cue on a drone while the violins and oboe weave a melancholy melody (see Figure 2) - neither lurching forward in her rage, nor regressing into her despair. It rather hangs us there, expressing pity for her and wanting her to be okay. John Barry, perhaps unknowingly, was not only scoring the relationship between a giant ape and his female captive, but also the status and presence of feminism of the day.

So as we have watched feminism in the western world evolve from traditional gender roles in the 1930’s to Second-wave Feminism in the 70’s, Peter Jackson’s 2005 film takes us to the next step in development and James Newton Howard’s score opens the window for us. Howard, rather than highlighting the horror or despair of Ann, or the romantic infatuation that Kong has while Dwan conflictingly shouts and then cowers, underlines a subtle tenderness and mutual respect between “beauty” and “beast.” The music is mysterious and delicate, but it does something that the other scores do not: it evolves with the characters. In Peter Jackson’s film, characters are more dynamic, more complicated. Things are not black in white (literally and figuratively). While Merian Cooper kept things quite type-casted and

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<sup>10</sup> Carabillo, Toni, Judith Meuli, and June Bundy Csida. "Part II [Timeline]." *Feminist Chronicles: 1953-1993*. Feminist Majority Foundation. 2009.

predictable, John Guillermin's '76 film less so, and Jackson even more allows for characters, especially women, to be less understood and more complicated.

James Newton Howard's score follows this same idea, taking character motifs of King Kong and of Ann and develops them as we the two develop over time. For example, Kong's motif (see Figure 4) is first presented plainly and clearly without any variation. But as the film continues, Howard adds harmony and contrary motion to it - it develops just as Kong's character develops.

Figure 4, James Newton Howard

The image shows a musical score for the 'Kong' motif in 3/4 time. It is divided into two parts: the original motif and a developed version. The original motif is played by low brass and strings, starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The developed version is played by high strings, woodwinds, and brass, starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic and ending with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic. The bass line is played by low strings, woodwinds, and brass, starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The score is written in 3/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat).

Peter Jackson, the director, expresses how important relationship development was in the creation of his version of the story: "Kong's a gorilla who has lived his entire life on this island. Suddenly, when Ann Darrow comes into his life, whom he is expecting to kill and doesn't, he starts to become curious and the relationship develops, from Kong's point of view, to a point where he wants to protect her. And it's a dangerous relationship for anybody else."<sup>11</sup>

As far as Ann goes, Howard wrote no motif to attach to her character. I find this fascinating and refreshing. He does not pretend to understand or know her at all. She is unique, mysterious, and complicated, like all men and women on this planet. And interestingly enough, his allowance of Ann's integral mystery reflects a major development of feminism in the late 90's and early 2000's.

<sup>11</sup> Applebaum, Stephen. "Peter Jackson: King Kong." BBC Entertainment. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/12/09/peter\\_jackson\\_king\\_kong\\_2005\\_interview.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/12/09/peter_jackson_king_kong_2005_interview.shtml).

Basically a celebration of the broad spectrum of different shapes, sizes, and colors of women, what some label as “Third-wave Feminism” was a breakdown of “universal womanhood,” including body, gender, heteronormativity, and sexuality.<sup>12</sup> It was an effort to say that women are not a single uniform entity, but rather a complex and diverse one in which every single personage thinks and sees the world differently. Issues about equality for those who are different from the “norm” such as transsexualism ignited as hot topics under the feminism umbrella, inspiring important conversation and eventually U.S. congressional action with the “Gender Recognition Act” in 2004 which fought for the rights of transsexual persons.<sup>13</sup>

James Newton Howard’s 2005 score reflects this. As aforementioned, the music that often underscores Ann Darrow’s presence is simple and mysterious, and the fact that he composed no motif for her while he did for Kong, shows that it wasn’t even a priority to encapsulate her essence musically.

Interestingly enough, this is even further emphasized in a certain part of the film in which director Peter Jackson blatantly places Ann Darrow next to another anonymous female character to show us how different they are. Nearing the end of the story we see Kong chained up in a theater on Broadway in New York City. An actress who is supposed to be portraying Ann screams and wails in front of him as a sacrifice from the native tribesman, tied at the wrists so as to not escape. It is at this point in the movie in which we realize that the real Ann turned down the opportunity to perform each night as the “helpless sacrifice.” The juxtaposition of scenes, and the way the film is edited to show us both women, one right after the other, is almost a display of how women were portrayed in the 1930’s and in the 2000’s.

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<sup>12</sup> Rampton, Martha. “Four Waves of Feminism.” <https://www.pacificu.edu/about-us/news-events/four-waves-feminism>.

<sup>13</sup> Sandland, Ralph. “Feminism and the Gender Recognition Act 2004.” <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10691-005-1456-3>.

## THE COMPOSERS

### *Max Steiner*

Max Steiner came from a musically prodigious childhood in Eastern Europe, where at the age of 15 he composed and conducted his first operetta. Music industry development in the United States soon began drawing him west - first to Broadway in New York City where he was offered plenty of work as a conductor, composer, and arranger, and then later to Hollywood, where the film industry was blossoming. This was at a time when the classical music world still bled seamlessly into the film music world.

Max Steiner was the first Hollywood composer tasked to compose music for the King Kong story, which proved to be a difficult endeavor since the studio executives of the film weren't convinced that they ought to pay for an original score (this is also understandable considering the economic situation of the United States in the 1930's). But both Merian C. Cooper, who was working as a producer, and Max Steiner felt more earnestly that the movie gave itself to a large orchestral sound and that it was a marvelous opportunity to compose. Cooper promised to fit the bill if Steiner would "score it to the best of [his] ability." That is precisely what Steiner did - and then handed Cooper a bill for 50,000 dollars. The immigrant composer worked under a lot of pressure. He confided that the producers "thought that the gorilla looked unreal and that the animation was rather primitive."<sup>14</sup> They were obviously worried about the believability of the picture and decided that the music was the last opportunity to save a possible failure.

Steiner's score was, for its day, a huge undertaking. Whereas usually the standard setup for movie music recording was a 10-piece orchestra and one single microphone, Steiner composed for an ensemble of 46 musicians. "It was made for music," Steiner said. "It was the

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<sup>14</sup> Allen, David. <http://davidallencomposer.com/blog/king-kong-max-steiner-james-newton-howard-comparison>.

kind of film that allowed you to do anything and everything, from weird chords and dissonances to pretty melodies. When the picture was completed, the studio bosses were very skeptical about it and doubtful that the public would take to it.”

The music that Max Steiner composed for RKO’s *King Kong* laid down foundational stones upon which we have built our modern-day film scoring techniques. In three fat, darkly orchestrated, descending chords, he presented the massive character of “Kong” and proved to the producers how much music can enrich film. In reality, it was the first time that orchestral music had been presented so officially hand-in-hand with cinema. He was a pioneer in the potential of original music. He wisely stated that “the music of *King Kong*...demonstrates, for the first time in the ‘talkies,’ that music has the power to add a dimension of reality to a basically unrealistic situation...”<sup>15</sup>

In the end, the movie was a soaring success, grossing over \$20,000,000 from a budget of \$670,000. Much of that success is owed to the musical genius of Max Steiner.

### *John Barry*

The second composer to undertake the musical responsibility for the story of “Kong” is the British composer John Barry. John Barry was born in York in the United Kingdom, into a home already invested in the film world. His Irish father worked as a projectionist and owned a small chain of movie theaters in the area. Barry was thus exposed to the cinema at an early age.

His musical journey began with simple composition and organ lessons at St. Peter’s School in York. From there he played trumpet during the years he served in the British military, began playing and arranging in jazz orchestras, and finally formed his own band, the John Barry Seven, which put out a few successful records. More and more people grew

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<sup>15</sup> Allen, David. <http://davidallencomposer.com/blog/king-kong-max-steiner-james-newton-howard-comparison>.

interested in his abilities to compose and arrange, commissioning work from Barry - one of these clientele, the BBC. Music for television and film became the obvious next “rung” on the ladder and soon Barry was working full time in the industry. Until being hired to compose for the film *King Kong*, his greatest contribution to the movie world was probably his iconic James Bond music, which forever changed the film scoring world for the action genre, especially in the James Bond franchise. Like Max Steiner, job opportunities in the west coast United States beckoned him. When he finally did visit Los Angeles, he was offered so much work that he decided to just take up residency in Beverly Hills after having lived in a hotel for a few weeks.

When John Barry was hired to score the 1976 version of *King Kong*, he may have felt like Johannes Brahms felt after Beethoven’s death - like an enormous shadow loomed over him. (Brahms apparently was terrified to write his first symphony for fear that he would be compared to Beethoven and never find success). After Max Steiner’s groundbreaking score to the 1933 film, John Barry was chosen to follow up - but he did so very wisely. Rather than making any reference at all to Steiner’s work, Barry took off in a completely different direction, adding elements such as organ to make this score something completely new.

Barry at the time was extremely popular for his music in the new British sensation “James Bond.” But showing great versatility as a composer, he approached this new project from a completely different angle. Rather than fixating on the savagery and grandeur that *King Kong*’s character exudes, Barry chose to focus on the subtle romantic qualities that Kong has towards the film’s heroine. The score, therefore, is lush and rich in harmonies, rather than angular and jagged like that of Steiner’s. Of this, Barry said that he never went back to revisit the work of Steiner. “I only remember the original *King Kong* from my earlier viewings. Every film has its own life, its own specifics, its own period of time, so that was never a problem. What I did was a reaction to what was on the screen.”



The 1976 version of *King Kong* was also a colossal success, grossing \$52,600,000 out of a \$24,000,000 budget. The music that John Barry wrote is still remembered by countless fans as some of the most beautiful and memorable music ever written for film.

*James Newton Howard*

Similarly to John Barry, James Newton Howard's musical path led through a colorful history of popular music - specifically pop and rock. As a young touring keyboardist, his manager found him a chance to audition for Elton John, and before he knew it, he was flying to Europe to begin touring with the legendary British pop star. By the mid-80's Howard was involved more and more with the arranging and production of various projects other than Elton John's music.<sup>16</sup> It wasn't long before he accepted offers to score small films, and from then on he has been a major contributor to the Hollywood film industry.

James Newton Howard's score for *King Kong* was a massive undertaking - between the three scores, his was the largest in scale (written for a 100 piece orchestra, choir, various ethnic solo instruments, electronics, with eight orchestrators and four conductors working under him).<sup>17</sup> In five weeks, close to three hours of music was composed. Max Steiner had eight weeks to compose 75 minutes of music. Apparently, Howard "composed for 18 hours a day with orchestrators and copyists working overnight, recording the next day and video-conferencing with [Peter] Jackson to review each cue less than 24 hours after it had been conceived."<sup>18</sup> But only with a team of experienced musicians could such a feat be pulled off.

More than the other two scores, this one was truly a group effort, and it is fascinating to see into the process. Peter Myles, a working orchestrator in the film industry, shared his experience working as part of this team under James Newton Howard: "I came on to the

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<sup>16</sup> "James Newton Howard – Elton John Story". Yamaha All Access on youtube.com. Retrieved 2014-01-28.

<sup>17</sup> Allen, David. <http://davidallencomposer.com/blog/king-kong-max-steiner-james-newton-howard-comparison>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

film...to work with JNH in LA while Jim and David went to New Zealand to work with Peter and Fran. Aside from attending the scoring sessions (doing some comping etc.), and doing anything else JNH needed, my main job was to take the music from the original Max Steiner *King Kong* score, and track it for the Theater Scene in the remake. So...the challenge was to find cues that would work with the dancing and conducting...the right mood/tempos/key relationships etc. JNH would listen to and give notes/approvals as we went forward and then Blake Neely arranged what had put together for the scene.”<sup>19</sup>

All of this group effort, long hours, and nonstop work was not necessary only because of the restrained timeline, but also because more than ever before, the music was vitally important to this new version of the Kong story - a version that Peter Jackson considered a “complex story of people doing what they need to do to survive, and Kong behaving in a way that is perfectly natural and normal.”<sup>20</sup> And often times, the only way to help audiences feel the meaning behind complex situations is through music. Music, therefore, played a huge role in the 2005 film.

Jackson wanted to make the film as realistic as possible. To do so he left a lot of silent scenes between Ann and Kong, for instance from 1:53:00 to 1:56:30 (three and a half minutes) Ann says one word, “Beautiful,” and she says it twice. But the *entire* sequence is scored by James Newton Howard. Music is telling the story that the dialogue can’t ([see “Supporting Materials” Video 3](#) and Figure 8). The music here is, in a word, sensitive, and allows room for the audience to pick up subtle characteristics of the relationship between “beauty” and “beast.”

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Myles, personal communication, February 6, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Applebaum, Stephen. “Peter Jackson: King Kong.” BBC Entertainment.  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/12/09/peter\\_jackson\\_king\\_kong\\_2005\\_inter\\_view.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/12/09/peter_jackson_king_kong_2005_inter_view.shtml).

Figure 8, James Newton Howard

The musical score for Figure 8 is written for Piano and Cello. The tempo is marked 'Largo'. The piano part begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and later shifts to mezzo-piano (*mp*). The cello part starts with pianissimo (*pp*) dynamics and later shifts to piano (*p*) and mezzo-piano (*mp*). The score is in 2/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#).

“We didn’t want to have Ann talking to a gorilla because we wanted to make this as realistic as we possibly could. It’s actually something that Jessica Lange did in 1976. She couldn’t keep her mouth shut. She was continuously talking to Kong in that movie and I thought it was one of the weaker parts of the film. So it was a deliberate decision.”<sup>21</sup>

James Newton Howard reacted well to the pressure and produced one of the most colossal scores he had written to that day. It continues to be one of his most popular as well.

#### MAX STEINER’S SCORE: A MORE TRANSPARENT EXPOSURE

Comparing three different musical scores written for three different movies, by three different men, and in three completely different decades may seem like a pointless endeavor. What could be similar about them at all? Apart from the story that they are each telling, perhaps the only thing similar about them is the title of the movie for which they were composed: *King Kong*.

So, in an effort to extract useful discussion, I want to examine solely Max Steiner’s 1933 score for a moment and how it treats women and feminism in general. Being one of the first orchestral scores to have been composed for film, and certainly being the biggest recording endeavor of its day, Steiner’s work is more transparent and honest in the essence of

<sup>21</sup> Applebaum, Stephen. “Peter Jackson: King Kong.” BBC Entertainment.  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/12/09/peter\\_jackson\\_king\\_kong\\_2005\\_interview.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/12/09/peter_jackson_king_kong_2005_interview.shtml).

its treatment of women because giving women a more respectful and equal representation in the film probably wasn't a consideration in the score's creation. The other two scores, composed in 1976 and 2005, were surely exposed to more social pressures and expectations to please a growing feminist movement (and unpopularity would result in a loss of revenue). Therefore, I focus on Steiner's music.

Other than a grand a bombastic overture in the opening titles, Steiner wrote no music for the film until the crew and Ann reach the fog of Skull Island, Kong's mysterious tropical home, over twenty minutes into the movie. But from that moment on, the score illuminates an important characteristic of sexist behavior back in the early 1900's. Claudia Gorbman, the author of a groundbreaking book *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* summarizes it as basically the conception that women are the "romantic Good Object."<sup>22</sup> She observed that "The Irrational, Dream, and Loss of Control" were implicitly feminine and therefore in need of musical underscoring. On the other hand, "Logic, Everyday Reality, and Control" were implicitly masculine and in no need of music.<sup>23</sup> Considering this, analyzing Steiner's choices within the movie have a peculiar light.

Take for example the first moment that music is even introduced into the story. Beforehand we see very "everyday reality" events such as movie business and production, hiring Ann, setting sail and working. These things are all considered (by Gorbman's analysis) to be ordinary and in control, and thus has no music underscoring it. But as soon as the ship hits fog, an unexpected element and something in which the crew has no control, music leaks in - and quite effectively.

This adherence to the "feminine" and "masculine" by Max Steiner becomes even more evident as the story progresses. In one scene in particular, it is almost laughably

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<sup>22</sup> Franklin, Peter. *Seeing Through Music: Gender and Modernism in Classic Hollywood*. Oxford University Press. New York: 2011.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

obvious (see [“Supporting Materials” Video 4](#)). Jack, the story’s “macho man” and Ann end up alone on deck together. Jack starts to nervously confess his love for her and how he feels protective and constantly worried for her safety. Ann is flattered, and all the while swooning strings are playing a gorgeous melody to support Jack’s temporary abandonment of the masculine. The scene climaxes to a romantic kiss which is interrupted when the captain calls out to Jack asking if he is on deck. When the picture cuts to the captain (who is working away in the “Logic, Everyday Reality, and Control”), the music ceases entirely. “Yes, sir!” Jack responds, and the gorgeous melodies return. The picture cuts back to the captain who calls for Jack to come up to the bridge. The music ceases. Cut back to Ann and Jack, Ann urging Jack to “go on.” The music is back! And like a traffic light, the score stops, goes, stops, and then goes.

According to Gorbman’s analysis of this scene, Steiner had to have scored these pauses, or “Luftpausen,” as he may have called them (‘pauses for air’ that were common in the Viennese Waltzes) because they have deliberate cadences at their ends.<sup>24</sup> This means, then, that according to Steiner’s best judgement and intuition, the “feminine” needed music, and the “masculine” did not. It was how he thought, and surely most of society as well. Truly in this case a film score has offered a window into the social conditions of a certain time period by how it represents men and women.

## KONG - A PERCEPTION OF THE CHAUVINIST MAN

While it is definitely worthwhile to observe the changes of Ann/Dwan’s behavior over the years as we see the development of feminism in the western world, it is just as eye-opening and important to witness the changes that take place in Kong’s character as well. If

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<sup>24</sup> Franklin, Peter. *Seeing Through Music: Gender and Modernism in Classic Hollywood*. Oxford University Press. New York: 2011.

early film and film music reflected sexism towards women, then it must be probable that men too were marginalized and generalized. As Peter Franklin puts it in his book *Seeing Through Music: Gender and Modernism in Classic Hollywood Film Scores*, both film and film music were a means to “emphasize and reinforce one set of values rather than another” and to “present models for human relations.”<sup>25</sup>

In the 1976 setting of *King Kong*, there is an interesting scene in which Dwan, the lead female character who is captive of Kong, is trapped in the giant ape’s grip. In her rage that he won’t release her, she calls him a “Goddamn chauvinist pig ape.” The word “chauvinist” literally refers to excessive pride or nationalism, and it the word has French origins. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the terms “chauvinist pig” and “male chauvinism” reached popularity in 1969 and were used in conjunction with sexism from men towards women.

In basic analysis, it could be argued that Kong in this situation is a representative of the “chauvinist male” who, because of his size or self-proclaimed superiority, feels like he is in control of Dwan and can therefore do with her what he wants - and he does. As the film continues (at about 1:18:00), Kong, instead of eating her like we might expect a giant beast to do, he rather attempts to remove his prisoner’s clothing, caressing her face and body. John Barry’s score here has a feeling of sweetness and tenderness - gentle high woodwinds and strings with a lovely cello line - which is misleading because the sexual fascination in the scene is completely one way (see Figure 5).

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<sup>25</sup> Franklin, Peter. *Seeing Through Music: Gender and Modernism in Classic Hollywood*. Oxford University Press. New York: 2011.

Figure 5, John Barry

Largo, romantically

High strings:

Cellos: *mp*

Flute: *mp*

enter Basses:

*mf*

5

Dwan shows no mutual interest. On the contrary, she is terrified. (I have to admit that upon watching this scene myself for the first time, I was uncomfortable.) Peter Jackson lightheartedly described it as “kind of a weird 70s sexual innuendo.”<sup>26</sup> Observing his “film predecessor” he said that “they camped up the sexuality of it, which we didn’t want to do.”

So while the 2005 Kong does not attempt to garner a sexual relationship with his captive, Ann, he does still administer chauvinistic qualities, reflecting such portrayal of men in classic Hollywood (it is important to note that though Peter Jackson’s film *King Kong* was produced and released in the early 2000’s, it is still a story set in the early 1930’s, meaning that examples of chauvinism in men may be written on purpose to give time-period authenticity). The scene specifically in which this is best demonstrated can be considered a parallel to the same scene used above as an example from the 1976 film.

At 1:29:00 Ann is being held captive by Kong ([see “Supporting Materials” Video 5](#)). In order to distract him she resorts to performing old tricks and dance routines that she had

<sup>26</sup> Applebaum, Stephen. “Peter Jackson: King Kong.” BBC Entertainment.  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/12/09/peter\\_jackson\\_king\\_kong\\_2005\\_interview.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/12/09/peter_jackson_king_kong_2005_interview.shtml).

used all too often in her previous work as a Vaudeville performer in New York City. It becomes clear quite quickly that his favorite part of the whole situation is when she pretends to fall down. So, he starts to push her down over and over again. She plays along with it for a while, but it starts to exhaust and even injure her. Finally she snaps and yells, “No! I said, no! That’s all there is. There isn’t anymore.” (James Newton Howard’s music sounds as if stunned itself at her fierce self defense). At this point Kong explodes into a rage, punching boulders, uprooting trees, hurling rocks. It’s as almost as if he can’t stand being told ‘no.’ If Kong did not have excessive pride, if he did not exhibit “chauvinism,” he would not have reacted that way.

Merian C. Cooper’s movie seems to portray a more “beastly” and “monstrous” creature. Yet still the 1933 King Kong displays chauvinistic qualities. At 1:08:30 Kong is holding an unconscious Ann Darrow in his massive hand ([see “Supporting Materials” Video 6](#)). Taking advantage of her helplessness, he begins to remove her clothing to reveal her body. Steiner’s music underscores his curiosity with strings and harp, and then as he tears a large piece of her dress away we hear a trio of saxophones, which melodramatically tend to represent sexual or romantic situations. As Ann eventually regains consciousness, she squirms to try and free herself from Kong’s grasp, illustrating what Peter Jackson described as “a case of an unwilling kidnap victim” who “never felt comfortable being with Kong, was always terrified of him, always screaming.”<sup>27</sup>

Max Steiner’s writing was segregated as well for Kong. Never is his associated music in a higher register or sweet or romantic in style. It is always bombastic, fat sounding, or low in register. Even in the example above of Kong holding Ann as he removes her clothes and fondles her, his movement is scored with bassoons, the lowest standard reed family

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<sup>27</sup> Applebaum, Stephen. “Peter Jackson: King Kong.” BBC Entertainment. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/12/09/peter\\_jackson\\_king\\_kong\\_2005\\_interview.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/12/09/peter_jackson_king_kong_2005_interview.shtml).



instrument. This is juxtaposed to the high strings and harp that surround Ann Darrow (see Figure 6).

Figure 6, Max Steiner

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for Saxophones, with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It begins with a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) marked *p*, followed by a half note (C5) marked *mf*. The middle and bottom staves are for strings, with a treble and bass clef respectively. The middle staff begins with a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) marked *p*, followed by a half note (C5) marked *mf*. The bottom staff begins with a half note (G3) marked *mf*, followed by a triplet of eighth notes (A3, B3, C4) marked *f*, and ends with a half note (D4) marked *mp*. The score is in 3/4 time and features dynamic markings (*p*, *mf*, *f*, *mp*) and triplets.

#### DIRECTORS: STEERING THE BOAT

It is important to remember that all of film music is created with a specific purpose and with given direction. To analyze these three scores of *King Kong* and say that they reveal the inner thoughts and devices of the composers alone would be misguided. The directors of the movies are initially the ones who have the vision and the end goal, who then in turn share that vision with composers to try and help them to understand and write music that pushes their picture in the direction they want. So while composers may be the one's rowing the boat, directors are steering. We therefore ought to investigate what the director of each film asked for from the music to better see the connection between the score and its treatment of characters, specifically females.

Merian C. Cooper, the director and a producer for the 1933 *King Kong* at first seems to have had all the artistic liberty in the world. After all, creating such a story had been a dream of his since he was a little boy. As a child Merian decided that he wanted to be an explorer after being inspired by the book *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa*

by Paul Du Chaillu.<sup>28</sup> But as in most motion picture productions, there are a lot more factors involved than just artistic vision and fulfilling dreams.

In the early 1930's RKO Pictures was hurt just as much as any other company by the Great Depression, an economic crisis that ravaged the United States. Therefore it needed to produce movies that would be sure to make a profit. That is why, apparently, they jumped on the idea of *King Kong* as soon as they heard about it. To them, "Gorillas plus sexy women in peril equals enormous profits."<sup>29</sup> So if gorillas and sexy women were what the people funding the project wanted, that is what Cooper had to deliver, and in turn, if that was to be highlighted in the story, then Steiner would need to emphasize it in the music (which he did). And Cooper considered himself a producer that truly cared about the music of a film. In his own words he says that there wasn't any other producer in Hollywood that would give even 10% what he gives to the music of a movie, and that he argued and struggled a lot with his hired composer Max Steiner as they fine-tuned the score for *King Kong*.<sup>30</sup> A director who didn't care about the influence that music would have in a motion picture would not give so much time and effort to its creation.

John Guillermin, director of the 1976 *King Kong*, worked under a much less strenuous budgetary situation. Neither the Dino De Laurentiis Corporation (the production company) nor Paramount Pictures (distributor) were under any dire financial strains, so while making back a profit was as much of a goal as ever, Guillermin wasn't directing the film in order to

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<sup>28</sup> Vaz, Mark Cotta (August 2005). *Living dangerously The adventures of Merian C. Cooper, creator of King Kong*. Villard. ISBN 978-1-4000-6276-8.

<sup>29</sup> Erish, Andrew. "Movies; REEL HISTORY; Illegitimate dad of 'Kong'; One of the Depression's highest-grossing films was an outrageous fabrication, a scandalous and suggestive gorilla epic that set box office records across the country." *Los Angeles Times*.  
<http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/latimes/doc/422079810.html?FMT=ABS&FMTS=ABS:FT&type=current&date=Jan%2008,%202006&author=Andrew%20Erish&pub=Los%20Angeles%20Times&edition=&startpage=E.6&desc=Movies>.

<sup>30</sup> Rudy Behlmer (ed.). *Memo from David O. Selznick*. New York: The Modern Library, 2000. Pág. 130.

save anyone's skin. We do, however, see that the importance of "sexy women in peril" was just as important in this version as in its predecessor in the casting processes of the film.

The main female lead character was filled by Jessica Lange, who was up and coming at the time. But the part was only given to her eventually. Meryl Streep said that she was interested in the role and was even considered for it, but wasn't pretty enough by Dino De Laurentiis's standards. Barbra Streisand, one of the most popular and sought-after actresses of the day, was also in the running, but she turned it down. It is clear that talent alone was not Guillermin and De Laurentii's main concern (though in my opinion all three women are incredibly talented), but rather a pretty face.

#### THE ACTRESSES - SHARING THEIR OWN STORY

Both Ann and Dwan have been treated very differently as the decades have come and passed. The Ann in 1933 was considered a "nuisance" (15:17) and a "bother" (17:36) that couldn't seem to be capable of anything except biting her fist and screaming so that some gallant gentleman would come save her. Her associated musical underscore was always hopelessly swoony and romantic. Dwan, who followed in 1976, was an over-emotional, flirt with a pretty face that aggressively fights back, but never seems to follow through in her convictions. The underscore that accompanies her is also romantic and tender. And in 2005, Ann's character returns, but as a more independent, self-respecting, complicated individual. She doesn't seem to have any music specific to her, but rather exists in a cloud of beautiful underscoring that encapsulates general mood and tone.

But behind the facades of both Ann's and Dwan, actual women live and breath within this world of developing feminist ideals. Fay Wray ("Ann Darrow" 1933), Jessica Lange ("Dwan" 1976), and Naomi Watts ("Ann Darrow" 2005), each share their own experiences as they portrayed their respective heroine as well as how they themselves were treated on set.

For Fay Wray, things seemed to be quite healthy and respectful. By her account, Merian Cooper was a caring and wonderful person to work with. In an interview with Rick McKay, Wray was asked about the scene in which Kong peels her dress off to try and reveal her naked body. Wray reveals that she was not even present for those scenes. “Merian Cooper never would have done that and he never would have asked me to do that.”<sup>31</sup> More of the director/producer she said, “I liked Merian Cooper well enough. He had this wonderful, boyish enthusiasm, and I was keen about his style and his friendship and what he stood for as a human being.”<sup>32</sup> Thankfully while her character was shown to be marginalized to submissive gender roles, Fay Wray herself claims to have been treated professionally and respectfully in the production of *King Kong*.

Jessica Lange, who was considered to be the “only person to play the role Fay Wray made famous,” was scouted out by Dino De Laurentiis, the film’s producer.<sup>33</sup> At the time she was a fashion model working in New York City. The eccentric producer was convinced that the film needed an unknown face to play the movie’s lead female role. The whole experience was startlingly fast for Lange, apparently, who said “the moment I was signed, things started happening. Dino was in a race with Universal at the time to see who could make King Kong first.” Even though from an outside perspective, her character seems to be treated as a helpless sexual object for an overly curious giant ape, Lange felt differently about it: “At the beginning, I feel absolute terror, of course, but then I realize that Kong has affection for me. He listens to my voice, and maybe he understands something. I feel a rapport with him, a certain empathy...he tries in his own way to be amorous and playful.”<sup>34</sup> For Jessica Lange,

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<sup>31</sup> McKay, Rick. “Rick McKay’s Night on the Town With Fay Wray!”  
<http://www.rickmckay.com/Rick%20McKay%20-%20Fay%20Wray%20Interview.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ebert, Robert. “Jessica Lange: Woman Behind the Ape.” Roger Ebert Interviews.  
<http://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/jessica-lange-woman-behind-the-ape>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

acting in King Kong was an enjoyable experience, and rather than feeling victimized or objectified, she felt understood and loved.

Naomi Watts, while she still empathized for her character, has a different perspective on Ann's treatment and on the treatment of women in general. In an interview with Brad Balfour, she interestingly states that Kong is simply "lonely." "He is desperate for connection," she said.<sup>35</sup> To her, Kong is not in love with Ann Darrow, but rather a lonely creature who needs distraction, and since both him and Ann need to survive, they help each other by distracting one another. In this sense, Ann seems to maintain a bit more intelligence and self respect. Naomi says that she owes a lot of her strong character to her mother, who is "a complete survivor. She sort of taught us, my brother and I, to do it ourselves."<sup>36</sup> And yet despite this she recognizes the need for help and to be saved once in awhile.

#### CONCLUSION: KONG: SKULL ISLAND (2017)

Twelve years after the release of Peter Jackson's King Kong epic movie, the giant ape makes yet another big screen appearance, this time with a completely different story. Directed by Jordan Vogt-Roberts, and with a new story by John Gatins, this newest portrayal of Kong seems to mirror the 1976 film in the same way that Jackson's film mirrored the original. It takes place in the 1970's just after the United States withdrew its troops from Vietnam. The mood is much more playful and less serious, though it definitely takes periodic dips into a dangerous and threatening tone.

The heroine, Mason Weaver played by Brie Larson, is a war propaganda photographer who is hired to photograph the excursion. I paid close attention to her

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<sup>35</sup> Balfour, Brad. "Naomi Watts Takes on Kong."  
<http://www.popentertainment.com/naomiwatts.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

throughout the film and anxiously awaited the scene where she and the massive King Kong would be alone. I was surprised to see that not only did Kong and Mason have little to do with each other at all (Mason is never kidnapped or even touched by Kong - in fact Mason is the one who reaches her hand out to touch Kong), but in the scene where the two are finally alone, Kong is uninterested in the woman standing below him and after a few tranquil moments, walks off. There is no underscore in this scene.

It seems that since the 1933 film, things have completely changed. The composer, Henry Jackman, did little to nothing to score their relationship. In an interview with Andrew Kinney, an orchestrator who worked for Jackman on *Kong: Skull Island*, Kinney confided in me that Jackman is “amazingly specific and complete” in his work.<sup>37</sup> There doesn’t seem to have been any interest in exploring Kong and Mason’s relationship, not in the story and not in the music. Could this mean that feminism in King Kong films is reaching a state of normalization? What was once a powerful driving plot point for the story is now hardly even mentioned.

“We’re in a different time right now, and I think we’re ready to see a different type of female hero,” said Brie Larson in an interview with Christina Radish. “I believe that just seeing women be strong and tough is not answering the question of what a female hero looks like. Women have their own set of skills that are worth exploring and seeing on screen. I feel like it’s too easy to just say, ‘We’ll just change the name of this male character to a female, but have her do all the same things that a male does.’ I don’t believe in that. I think that there’s something else. I think that there’s more to women than that.”<sup>38</sup>

Does Henry Jackman’s action-packed score reflect this timely point of view? It doesn’t seem to pay any attention to it actually. Henry Jackman’s music is dominated by

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<sup>37</sup> Andrew Kinney, personal communication, February 4, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Radish, Christina. “Brie Larson & John Goodman on ‘Kong: Skull Island’ and Building a Better Heroine.” <http://collider.com/kong-skull-island-brie-larson-john-goodman-interview/#images>.

heavy percussion, electric guitar, fat and low brass, and motor-rhythmic strings (see Music Clip 1 and Figure 7).

Figure 7, Henry Jackman

Allegro

Celli, double basses:

Bass trombones, tubas:

**fff**

So as the decades roll on, Kong climbs to the top of skyscrapers with heroine in hand and falls to his death, over and over again, each time directors and composers continuing to reinterpret this iconic story. And as they do, they encapsulate their relative time periods into their work - especially the condition and direction of feminism in the western world. Film scoring continues to bring stories into the deepest rooms of our hearts, and whether it be Max Steiner, John Barry, James Newton Howard, or Henry Jackman, we effectively feel what the characters feel as well as grasp the opportunity to see into the minds of the men and women who lived, worked, acted, and wrote in that day and age.

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