

**Music in an animated movie with almost no dialogue:**

**Analysis of the soundtrack and score of *Wall-E***

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## I. Introduction

The first time that I watched *Wall-E* I remember walking to the cinema without knowing what to expect. I had heard very good reviews about it and wanted to find out what all the fuzz was about. After a few minutes of starting, the movie had me hooked and impressed by the beauty of the music, the richness and complexity of the sound design, the detailed character animation and most importantly by the story that was unfolding in front of me. When the movie ended I was left thinking how an animated movie with so little dialogue managed to keep the whole audience on the edge of their seats for the entire 98 minutes of running time.

This paper aims to analyze the role of the music within the movie *Wall-E*, and especially to deconstruct what it is that makes the narrative move forward in a movie that, as mentioned previously, has very little dialogue.

According to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), *Wall-E*, directed by Andrew Stanton, was released on June 23, 2008 by Walt Disney Pictures and grossed a little under \$224 million at the box office.

This was the second collaboration between Andrew Stanton and composer Thomas Newman, the first one being *Finding Nemo*, another critically acclaimed animated movie about a clownfish on a quest to find his son. Stanton decided to work with Newman again because, as he mentions on the *Notes on a Score Interview* available on YouTube, he “got along with him so well on *Nemo* and because they really connect on a creative level.”

Thomas Newman, member of the Newman dynasty of film composers, is one of the sons of the critically acclaimed composer Alfred Newman, who won nine Academy

Awards for Best Film Score. This exposure to film music from an early age made Thomas Newman discover a unique sound that is easily identifiable in every one of the films he has worked in. This “Thomas Newman sound” is in part achieved through a lot of experimentation in the recording studio, where he gets together with four or five musicians and tries out different instrumentations and different layers for a specific motive or idea.

This recognizable sound is very present in *Wall-E*, where some of the sonorities cannot be easily identified and sound more like a combination of layered instruments. Ben Burtt voiced Wall-E, the main character, and he was also in charge of the Sound Design of the movie.

## **II. Plot Synopsis**

*Wall-E* is set many years in the future; the Earth has been contaminated to an extreme point, and therefore everyone has been evacuated to a spaceship called Axiom. The original plan was to evacuate all living species from the Earth temporarily while robots called Wall-E, were in charge of cleaning and preparing the Earth to be inhabitable again, however after several years of cleaning there is only one Wall-E left. Wall-E’s only friend is a cockroach, with whom he spends his days cleaning and building structures out of garbage remains. He collects whatever he finds interesting while going through the debris and he stores everything inside a garage. Wall-E’s routine is spent in the same manner everyday until one day he finds a plant, which he collects and stores inside an old shoe.

The following day, a spaceship lands on Earth and drops another robot called EVE, who attracts Wall-E immediately. After a few of days of trying to approach her, he manages to take her back to his garage where he shows her all the items he has collected, including the plant. She puts the plant inside a capsule within her body and goes into hibernation mode.

A few days later the spaceship appears back on Earth and takes EVE back onboard. Wall-E is distraught by the thought of losing her and secretly rides the ship too, which takes them back to the Axiom. Here Wall-E encounters humans for the first time, they are obese and unable to walk and therefore move around in automatic chairs.

EVE is taken to the captain, where he puts her off hibernation mode and asks her to deliver the plant, but as we soon realize, she does not have the plant anymore. The captain assumes that she has some sort of malfunction and sends both Wall-E and EVE to get repaired. In the repair section Wall-E thinks that EVE is being harmed and in an attempt to save her shoots her plasma cannon and thus accidentally releasing other robots that were being held for reparation. During the breakout, Wall-E and EVE are catalogued as rogue robots and their photos are displayed all around the Axiom for humans to be cautious in case they encounter them. EVE gets very upset about all the chaos that Wall-E generated and tries to send him back to Earth on an escape pod. Before she is able to send him back, they see a small robot called Gopher sneaking his way into one of the escape pods and sending the plant back to Earth. Wall-E quickly gets onto the escape pod trying to recover the plant, but he is sent out into space. Just when the pod is about to self-destruct Wall-E manages to take the plant with him and

escape from the pod with the help of a fire extinguisher. When EVE realizes that he saved the plant, she kisses him and flies with him enthusiastically through space.

Afterwards, they both manage to get back to the Captain's cabin to give him the plant, but Auto, the ship's auto pilot system confesses to being the one who took the plant from EVE earlier and refusing to let them go back to recolonize Earth. Auto throws a badly injured Wall-E, EVE and the plant through the garbage conduct, and they barely manage to escape before being sent out to space with the rest of the trash. With the assistance of the robots that they freed before they manage to get back to the Captain's Cabin. On the cabin, the captain turns Auto off and Eve puts the plant in a machine that will send the Axiom back to Earth as soon as the plant is placed within it. Once they get to Earth, EVE takes Wall-E back to the garage to repair him, but when he wakes up he doesn't recognize her and starts compacting garbage like he used to. EVE holds his hand and kisses him, rebooting him correctly and making him recognize her again. At the end the captain teaches the rest of the humans how to take care of the plant and to farm to recolonize Earth, but as we see on the final shot, outside the city plants have already started to grow.

### **III. Music Overview**

As mentioned previously, *WALL-E* is a movie that relies heavily on music to move the narrative forward because it has very little dialogue. The full running time of the movie is 98 minutes, and there is music playing during 68.

I will divide the music in three categories: the score, which refers to Newman's original music. Source music, referring to music that is coming from within the

fictional setting and so, is heard by the characters (i.e. music coming from a radio or TV inside the movie). And finally, pre-existing music that is not coming from a source within the movie, and that is used to enhance the drama. The 68 minutes of music that I previously mentioned include all of these three categories.

On the other hand, the running time of the score is just under 55 minutes. The instrumentation is a hybrid between electronic sounds and an orchestra. As we will see, the harp is the most featured instrument. It also uses additional plucked instruments that are not part of the orchestra, like processed guitars and tapped basses that were most likely overdubbed after the orchestral recording session.

#### **IV. Source and Pre-Existing Music**

In *Wall-E* there are two songs that appear recurrently both as source music and as part of the soundtrack, these are *Put on your Sunday clothes*, and *It only takes a moment*, both of which were composed by Jerry Herman for the famous Broadway musical *Hello, Dolly*.

The movie starts with *Put on your Sunday clothes* used as the music for the opening scene. It accompanies the initial shot of the Earth from space and continues through as the camera goes inside the Earth and onto the view from above of a desolate city. Interestingly, the music silences for a few seconds and reappears a bit later, but this time we hear it as source music as we see Wall-E for the first time. The way the song is mixed tells us that it is now coming from his radio.

It is in great measure through the source music used in the movie, that we get to know Wall-E and the way he feels. For example, the previously mentioned song *It*

*only takes a moment* appears for the first time on Wall-E's TV while he is organizing his recently collected items. Wall-E listens to the song and watches as the scene of *Hello, Dolly* unfolds. This is where he sees how the characters hold hands and we see him imitating that action. When this song appears later on in the movie it reflects Wall-E's feeling of love and attraction towards EVE, and it is a reminder of why Wall-E tries to hold hands with her on several occasions. Later on, the song is used to reflect EVE's feelings of love towards Wall-E.

Other tracks that appear in the movie as source music include *Don't worry be happy* by Bobby McFerrin, which plays back from an ornamental fish that is part of Wall-E's collection inside the garage, the Buy N Large jingle, (Buy N Large is the fictitious corporation that evacuated the population from Earth in star liners), which is played through different sources along the movie, and *The Blue Danube* by Johann Strauss II, which is heard coming through speakers inside the Captain's Cabin.

The pre-existing tracks that are used as part of the soundtrack to support the narrative are *La Vie en Rose*, performed by Louis Armstrong and used in the montage where Wall-E follows EVE on Earth, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* composed by Richard Strauss and used in the sequence where the Captain stands up for the first time and turns Auto off, and finally the song *Down to Earth*, composed by Peter Gabriel and Thomas Newman, which serves as the music for the End Credits.

Interestingly, *Don't Worry be Happy*, *The Blue Danube* and *Also Sprach Zarathustra* were not included in the soundtrack released by Walt Disney Records, most likely due to copyright issues. On the same note, some of the cues that appear on the movie as part of the score, are also not included the soundtrack release.



## V. Musical Themes

As we will see throughout the movie several themes and motifs are used recurrently to give cohesion to the score and to provide additional information to the spectator.

Musical motifs, also known as *leitmotifs*, were popularized by Wagner, and to this day are a fundamental part of film music, because like Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler mention in his book *Composing for Films*, “they function as trademarks, so to speak, by which persons, emotions, and symbols can instantly be identified” (Adorno and Eisler 4).

The first cue of the original score enters a little bit before a long shot of the inhabited city. The first thing we hear is a sustained pad, and soon after a harp and strings come in as we see the title of the movie appear on screen.

This first cue, which is based around harp arpeggios in F minor, reflects the bleakness and desolation of the current state of the Earth within the movie; set on the year 2805, where the Earth is empty and covered in garbage. I will refer to this as the Desolation motif.

This is an excerpt of this motif:

This first cue fades out and transitions onto the Buy N Large jingle, which appears as source music coming from the street speakers.

This same previous cue comes in again as we see a long shot of the city, full of Buy N Large billboards advertising everything from sportswear to food items. As we come to realize, this corporation is the responsible of the amount of trash that made the Earth inhabitable and this is accentuated by the music. Newman makes orchestration choices to follow the action. From an intimate combination of harp and another stringed instrument when we see Wall-E up close, to a bigger sound that uses the harp and the mid range of the string section as Wall-E moves. Then, there is an interesting use of contrast as Wall-E encounters an identical looking robot lying broken in a pile of trash. Here, Newman changes the orchestration completely utilizing only the brass section, mimicking Wall-E's confusion. When the scene changes and we see a long shot of the city, the music adapts and the orchestration gets bigger, employing the full range of the string section, plus the Desolation motif that was introduced earlier by the harp.

This cue, (titled *2815 A.D.* on the album release) keeps on adapting as the action depicted on screen changes. As soon as we see the ads of the Axiom star liners and a voice over is introduced, the music slowly becomes less busy to avoid interfering with what he is saying. The Desolation motif stops and is replaced by sustained strings and woodwinds. When the voice over stops, the harp fills in reintroducing the motif.

As we will see, this motif is used a couple of times throughout the movie to create a psychological mood of despair and hopelessness. First, when we see the

current state of the Earth and later on in the movie, when Wall-E fails to put EVE out of hibernation mode. This motif appears in the key of F minor both times.

As we see Wall-E's garage for the first time the music becomes more playful and child-like with the introduction of a celesta playing a beautiful melody accompanied by strings filling out the harmony.

This is the second motif, which I will refer to as the Garage Motif:

The image shows two staves of musical notation for the Garage Motif in F minor, 3/4 time. The first staff contains measures 1 through 7. Above the notes are chord symbols:  $D^{\flat}$ ,  $D^{\flat+}$ ,  $D^{\flat}$ ,  $E^{\flat}7(sus4)/B^{\flat}$ ,  $G^{\flat}$ ,  $A^{\flat}$ ,  $B^{\flat}m$ ,  $A^{\flat}$ , and  $G^{\flat}6$ . Below the notes are Roman numerals: I, I+, I, II, IV, V, vi, V, IV. The second staff starts at measure 8. Above the notes are chord symbols:  $D^{\flat}$ ,  $E^{\flat}7(sus4)/B^{\flat}$ ,  $G^{\flat}$ ,  $A^{\flat}$ ,  $B^{\flat}m$ ,  $A^{\flat}$ , and  $G$ . Below the notes are Roman numerals: I, IV, V, vi, V, #IV.

As I mentioned, this one has a playful quality, but at the same time manages to provide a sense of wonder as we see Wall-E's house and collection for the first time. Later on in the movie, Newman introduces this motif again, but this time his orchestration choices accentuate this sense of wonder and amazement even more to reflect the greatness of space and the way Wall-E experiences watching everything from up there. This time, a solo flute plays the melody while a celesta and high strings provide the harmony. Then the orchestration gets bigger and the melody goes to unison violins, while the rest of the string section provides the harmony, as well as countermelodies. When we see Wall-E travelling close to the sun the motif reaches its

highest point and the brass section joins in playing harmony. The transitions between the different intensities of the cue are emphasized with harp glissandi.

This motif, like the Desolation motif, also appears in the same key both times, Db major. However, the second time it is presented it is developed further and in the climax modulates one semitone down to C major.

The next theme that I will mention is Wall-E's theme. It appears when we see the main character leaving his garage in the morning, ready to perform his daily tasks. It is a playful theme performed on the higher register of the bassoon and accompanied by pizzicato strings, whistles and different sorts of hand percussion. It is in the key of Bb major.

The main melody is the following:



The theme continues in this playful staccato fashion throughout the sequence, until the moment where we see a long shot of Wall-E building structures out of the debris. It is until this point that legato strings are introduced for the first time to this theme.

Interestingly enough, this music, used to introduce the main character (the track is called Wall-E on the album), only appears once more throughout the whole movie. The music is up-tempo, energetic, and playful (like the character) and is

entirely performed by acoustic instruments, which, in my opinion, is a reflection of his rudimentary and unsophisticated features as a robot.

When EVE accidentally hurts Wall-E and damages his right eye, the theme appears again, but in a very transformed and almost unrecognizable way. It is now presented in 6/4, instead of 4/4, the melody is played by harp instead of bassoon, and the playful pizzicato strings have been replaced with more “serious” legato strings. Still, the original key signature (Bb major) has been maintained for cohesion.

Again, this perfectly reflects what is happening on-screen. The essence of the character has been altered, things have turned more serious and therefore the theme has been altered accordingly.

As mentioned before, Wall-E’s theme mainly serves as a brief introduction to the character, but in terms of character development, the music that best defines him is the two songs from *Hello, Dolly*, which are the ones that accompany him throughout his adventure both on Earth and on space.

Besides *It only takes a moment*, which as discussed earlier is the love song that inspires both Wall-E and EVE to hold hands and kiss, there is another theme that is part of the score composed by Newman, and it is called *All that love’s about*. This theme however, is not coming from a source within the movie and therefore is directed to the viewers and to influence them on a psychological level, enhancing the feelings of romance depicted on-screen.

Here is a transcription of this theme:

## All That Love's About

Thomas Newman

$\text{♩} = 75$

Flute

delay

delay

Harp

$\text{♩} = 75$

Vln I

Vln II



6

Harp

Vln I

Vln II

Vla

Cellos

2

10

Vln I

Vln II

Vla

Cellos

DBass

This love theme appears when Wall-E sees EVE for the first time, and makes it clear that he feels very attracted towards her. It is in the key of B major.

The theme, as others I have mentioned, makes use of the harp as the primary element that we hear, it also uses a flute with delay, and afterwards high strings are introduced.

The next time this theme appears, is when EVE is watching the recordings of how Wall-E took care of her when she was in hibernation mode, and is when we realize that EVE also has feelings of love towards him. The theme is presented in a very similar fashion and in the same tonality, but this time it is shorter to fit the image. The instrumentation is also a bit different; the flute has been removed and some sort of pulsating synth bass has been added.

The third time the love theme appears is after Wall-E and EVE are almost disposed into space with all the trash. She realizes that Wall-E, badly damaged, managed to keep the plant safe and give it back to her. The love theme comes in once

again, in its original version, but stops before the main melody played by strings appears.

Just like Wall-E's theme, mentioned earlier, manages to punctuate his character traits and features, there is a theme that does the exact same thing for EVE. It is, unsurprisingly, called EVE in the album and is first heard when we see her flying and displaying her high-tech capacities.

This is an excerpt of the main melody of this theme:

The image shows a musical transcription of the EVE theme melody. It consists of two staves of music in 3/4 time, key of D-flat major. The melody is characterized by a pulsating eighth-note pattern with a raised 4th degree (G natural). Chord symbols (Db) are placed above the notes. A measure rest with the Roman numeral 'I' is shown below the first staff.

Once again, the melody is presented by harp, with the harmony being provided by the same instrument. Unlike Wall-E's theme, this one relies a lot on electronic elements, like a pulsating synth bass playing a pedal note on Db, and another synth bass playing arpeggiated patterns underlining the harmony. As we can see on the transcription above, this motif heavily emphasizes the raised 4<sup>th</sup> degree (G natural), thus giving the music an ethereal and dreamlike quality. EVE is a highly sophisticated and technologically advanced robot and this theme effectively conveys that.

Later on, when EVE kisses Wall-E for the first time, this theme is used again in the same key and with the same instrumentation. As we see Wall-E and EVE flying through space, the dreaminess and elegance of the music complements their moves.



Meanwhile, we hear the voice of the computer defining the term “dancing” for the Captain as we see the two robots doing exactly what the computer described.

Later on, when Wall-E is showing EVE his collection, another motif is introduced. This one is called Bubble Wrap and also features the harp as the predominant instrument.

Here is an excerpt of this motif:

The image shows a musical score for the 'Bubble Wrap' motif. It consists of two staves: Flute (top) and Harp (bottom). The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 6/8. The Flute part is mostly rests with a few notes in the first two measures. The Harp part features a complex, rhythmic melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The melody is characterized by a raised 4th degree (E natural) in the Lydian mode. The score ends with a double bar line.

This is an ambiguous theme that goes from Bb major to Bb minor, and just like EVE’s theme, uses the raised 4<sup>th</sup> degree of the Lydian mode, which in this case is the E natural.

This theme is the one that repeats more times throughout the entire movie, even if it is for very short periods at a time and to me, it reflects something like mischievousness and innocence; we hear it either in scenes where we see two characters being playful and having fun, or in scenes when one of the two characters is acting in an innocent manner without realizing that things are more serious than they appear. As I mentioned before, the first time we hear this theme is when EVE is playing with Wall-E’s items at his garage. She is just trying to have fun with Wall-E, but her uncontrolled strength and skills end up inadvertently damaging him or his stuff.



Axiom. The same happens with Newman’s choice of instrumentation for this motif; so far most of the music has been based around harp and orchestral instruments, with a few electronic elements. On this theme, the most prominent and featured instrument is one that we hadn’t heard so far, thus mimicking the idea of a foreign element.

The last theme I am going to discuss is called *Repair Ward*, and it is used in a similar context as the previous one, to accompany Wall-E on his search for EVE through the Axiom. However, this one has a more “sneaky” and less serious mood as *Foreign Contaminant*, it even has a comic feel to it and could be described as light espionage music.

As most sneaky music, this theme, which happens to be the only one that has a swing feel in the whole soundtrack, prominently uses pizzicato strings and staccato woodwinds to convey that feeling of someone tiptoeing.

This is an excerpt of the theme:

## Repair Ward

Thomas Newman

Swing

Flute 1

Flute 2

Flute 3

Piano

Cello

D Bass

pizz.

pizz.

8<sup>th</sup>

As we can see in these four bars, for this theme Newman also makes use of a 2-bar ostinato that repeats and adds new elements as the music evolves. As we have seen in many examples, this technique of repeating a pattern and building on top of it is something very common in Newman's music.

As the composer himself mentioned in the interview *Notes on a score*, "a lot of my music tends to be patterned and repeating, so oftentimes I'll get together with a percussionist or a guitarist who can take these patterns and add to them, and therefore make them more sonically interesting". Regarding the benefits of using this technique, Newman said, "If you have repeating phrases, oftentimes it allows the ear then to hear colors in a way that widens your perception of sound and music and how it comes at you". This is especially true in a movie like *Wall-E*, where the dialogue is very sparse. The composer needs to create pieces of music that make it easier for the viewer to get entrapped in the narrative through repetition, which is exactly what Newman does so effectively in *Wall-E*.

## **VI. Music Functions**

Before analyzing what the purpose of the music in *Wall-E* is, I will summarize the three general categories of dramatic functions that music can have within a movie, as explained by composer Dan Wilkins in his online course *Film Scoring 101*. The three categories are: physical, psychological and technical functions.

The physical functions are those in which the music evokes a physical setting or location, creates a physical atmosphere (time of day, climate), evokes a time period, culture or nationality, or underlines the action on-screen.

The psychological functions of the music include creating a mood (suspense, drama, etc.), rounding off the film, suggesting unspoken thoughts of a character, revealing unseen implications of a situation, revealing psychological makeup of a character, underlining the expected reaction of an audience, deceiving an audience as to what actually happened, making a philosophical point (also known as “playing against the drama”) or setting up an audience for a subsequent surprise.

Finally, the technical functions are used to build continuity from scene to scene or to build overall continuity.

The musical motifs that appear recurrently in Wall-E, mainly fall into the psychological function category. It is by the repetition of these themes that we become more acquainted with the characters and their feelings.

As I mentioned earlier, there are short some cues that appear in the movie that are not part of the album release. These primarily fall into the physical functions category since it is music that Thomas Newman uses to underline the action on-screen.

## **VII. Conclusion**

As we have seen throughout this paper, it is in great measure because of Thomas Newman’s use of music and motifs that the narrative in Wall-E develops so flawlessly and effortlessly despite the sparse use of dialogue. This movie serves as an example of the importance of music in film and the way that music helps to connect the audience with the characters. Like film director Sidney Lumet claimed on his book

*Making Movies*, “almost every picture is improved by a good musical score” (Lumet 149), and *Wall-E* certainly exemplifies this statement.

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