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Peter Franklin

Seeing Through Music: Gender and Modernism in Classic Hollywood Film Scores Oxford University Press, 2011, 191 pp., ISBN: 978-0-19-538345-4

review by Miguel Mera

Given the explosion in film musicology in recent years it does not seem unreasonable to ask why we need another book on gender and classic Hollywood film scoring. Caryl Flinn's *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia and Hollywood Film Music* (1992) and Heather Laing's *The Gendered Score: music and gender in 1940s melodrama and the woman's film* (2007) are just two of the essential works in this field, both offering detailed insights. We might also point to several other important texts including Anahid Kassabian's *Hearing Film: tracking identifications in Hollywood film music* (2001) and Kathryn Kalinak's *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood film* (1992), which also examined gender, albeit in the context of broader identity issues found within the Hollywood film scoring tradition. The fact that the majority of the case studies in Peter Franklin's *Seeing Through Music* have already been heavily covered in the literature, including, for example, *Casablanca* (1943) and *Psycho* (1960), could suggest the characteristic navel-gazing of a discipline in crisis. Indeed, knowing that this book contains a critique of Adorno and Eisler, a focus on Max Steiner and a close examination of *King Kong* (1933), we might be excused for thinking that film music studies has not moved on since Claudia Gorbman examined these very same topics in her seminal work *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* in 1987. What, if anything, is there left to say about this material?

Well, as it turns out, quite a lot. Peter Franklin's gossamer-like title provides a clue to his project, because this is not really a book about film music at all, but rather about the place of film music within twentieth century musical canons. Franklin argues that classic Hollywood film music (primarily of the 1930s and 1940s) has often been perceived to lack the quality and rigour of late-Romantic music from which it is derived. The perception of supposedly irrational, regressive and emotional music both has a

history that is longer than film and is indissolubly tied to discourses highlighting gender differences that Franklin believes were promoted by the developing project of twentieth century modernism. Franklin, therefore, invites us to see through various historiographical dialogues in order to ‘glimpse an alternative history of music and musical ideas in the twentieth century’ (18). This is a bold claim and one that is not always entirely convincing, but the journey is consistently fascinating nonetheless.

The book is divided into two sections, both dealing in different ways with the relationships between ‘high-culture’ music and music in popular cinema. Part 1 reconsiders the relationships between film music, late-Romantic concert music and popular early twentieth-century opera. If Part 1 seeks to discredit the historical vilification of film music, then Part 2 further emphasises film music’s valuable connection to the above-mentioned ‘high-culture’ forms. Although Part 1 is more heavily theoretical than Part 2, numerous case-studies are employed throughout. This use of concrete examples usefully animates the writing, which is particularly engaging and direct, but at times it becomes challenging to disentangle the line of the argument. Perhaps more could have been done to distinguish the roles and perspectives of the two parts

In the introduction, Franklin invokes Andreas Huyssen’s *After The Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (1986). Huyssen argued that postmodernism itself could not be regarded as a radical break with the past, as its political and artistic strategies were beholden to other trends within the culture of modernity, particularly the historical avant garde. Franklin uncovers the problems inherent in relying on the ‘powerfully institutionalized’ discourse of the Great Divide arguing that the intersections between ‘feminist film and cultural studies, “new musicology” and opera criticism, and the history discourses of Modernism are nowhere more provocatively revealed than in the study of movie music during the 1930s and ’40s’ (15). Franklin is at pains to examine and evaluate ways in which mass culture became associated with women whereas ‘authentic’ culture became associated with men, and he highlights ways in which film music has been subjected to a process of discursive othering.

The Marxist critiques of Hanns Eisler and Theodor Adorno are used in Chapter 1 to unpick the nature of this discursive othering. Franklin examines Adorno and Eisler’s

perception of the noble and masculine music of high German culture forced into the ‘subservient and demeaningly “feminine”’ (25) methods used in the popular movies. That this kind of marginalising attitude attempted to degrade film music is hardly a new insight, but Franklin helpfully shows how it was a gendered sociological shortcut that contrasted with more subtle and detailed analyses of high or modernist culture. As such Franklin argues for a closer musicological reading of film music that places reception at its core. Here he explores a scene from David Lean’s *Brief Encounter* (1945) examining it through the lens of Adorno’s concept of ‘regressive listening’. Adorno was concerned about the role of the culture industries in devaluing genuine art and constructing an automaton populace unable to interrogate political or social issues. For Adorno, regressive listening was a form of control that reduced people to silence. Franklin examines a scene between husband and wife, Fred and Laura Jesson. Laura has been on an emotional rollercoaster, triggered by the ending of her extramarital affair, which contrasts sharply with her normal humdrum suburban life. Now back at home, the married couple listen in silence to a radio broadcast of Rachmaninov’s second piano concerto. Franklin argues that it is only on the surface that the characters’ silence supports Adorno’s theory. There is much ‘slippage between the administered message and the way it is received’ (34). Indeed, the film’s supposed concluding affirmation of the integrity of the nuclear family is challenged by the Rachmaninov which for Laura represents an escape from feminine domesticity and evokes late-Romantic music’s culturally constructed ability to bypass the mechanisms of social control.

Opera is the focus of Chapter 2. One might have expected a good deal more interrogation of the discourse surrounding the notion of the Wagnerian leitmotif here, but it is the legacy of verismo opera that is Franklin’s real starting point. He argues that classical Hollywood cinema borrowed heavily from European operatic culture and contends that works such as Puccini’s *Tosca* (1900) are analogous to a ‘prototypical mass-entertainment movie in all but medium’ (43). This comparative argument is simultaneously explored through notions of the male gaze and the idea that ‘high culture’ was administered in the same way as mass media was perceived to be by its detractors. Franklin develops these ideas by showing how popular opera passed the baton onto the four- or five-reel feature film, with Max Reinhardt’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1935)

as his central example. Mendelssohn's music was re-arranged by Erich Wolfgang Korngold for the film with 'all the skill and experience of a practitioner of post-Wagnerian "symphonic" opera' (57). We begin to get towards some of the musicological detail that Franklin contends is vital to a full understanding of the interrelationships between media, yet it is rather brief and the reader is left wanting more.

In Chapter 3, Franklin's examination of gender issues focuses on female subjectivity in three 'golden age' films: *King Kong* (1933), *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), and *Rebecca* (1940). The discussion once again places film music next to early twentieth-century modernism, but Franklin provocatively argues that film music achieved something unique because it was aware of its own discursive construction. Consequently, a film such as *King Kong* is so subtle at observing 'itself doing what it does that film and music together seem almost intent upon their own critique'. Truly autonomous music, on the other hand, could 'hardly manage a feat of self-indulgent performance linked simultaneously with its own implied deconstruction' (70). Franklin avoids the term postmodernism here, perhaps wisely, although the idea of self-aware film music seems to point exactly in this direction. It does not help that 'modernism' is used as rather a blanket term throughout. If, as Franklin suggests, we need to be more vigilant about the highly constructed nature of the Great Divide, then further refinement of definitions given the multiplicity of aesthetic directions of new music in the early part of the twentieth century would help nuance the argument. Which or whose modernism(s) are we talking about? Surely not all films of the 1930s and 1940s were quite so self-aware as the cited examples suggest? What is clear is that the case-studies in this chapter all provide useful insights that encourage us to attend to these classic movies with fresh eyes and ears. Particularly striking and effective is the re-reading of *King Kong* that skilfully expands and develops Claudia Gorbman's analysis in *Unheard Melodies*.

Part 2 continues where Part 1 left off. Chapter 4 examines the debt Hollywood film scores owe to symphonic works and suggests a broader musical perspective on the prehistory of cinema. Through analyses of Anthony Adverse (1936) *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and *King's Row* (1942) Franklin argues that film music retrospectively reveals the 'contingent character of the nineteenth-century symphonic experience as a visualized narrative, as something that had always given the lie to the regulating aesthetic ideology

of the “purely” musical’ (114). It is a nice idea, but feels a little forced, more so than the relationship between opera and cinema argued in Chapter 2. Of course, the connection is made to critiques of ‘programme’ music, the symphonic poem and late-Romantic symphonies, and inevitably Adorno returns to the fray. By finding further flaws in Adorno’s ‘symphonic bestiary’ (104), Franklin has been steadily moving towards the idea that the implicit ‘manners of late romantic music’ (115, my italics) became explicit in entertainment cinema. Defining manners is, of course, notoriously elusive, but again Franklin points to the socially constructed nature of the discourse that connects late-Romantic music and film music.

Glimpses of the final flourishes of the book are also present as Carolyn Abbate’s *Unsung Voices* (1991) and the problem of narrativity is introduced into the argument. Abbate defined a dialectic in opera between music’s desire to convey narrative information and its corporeal resistance to such signification; what opera divas recover in vocal performance they lose in their dramatic ‘undoing’. Franklin problematises these ideas in order to set up his final chapters and further challenge the notion that film music redundantly describes or reacts to what we see on the screen.

In Chapter 5, following Abbate, Franklin examines what he describes as ‘extramusical women’ who ‘reflect music’s very soul at the same time as they are undone by it’ (118), but in reality he examines both men and women embroiled in a series of love triangles. Franklin’s rereading of *Casablanca*, for example, focuses on how the song ‘As Time Goes By’ and its symphonic manifestations are employed not only as a symbol of Rick and Ilsa’s nostalgic romance but also as a marker of Ilsa as femme-fatale. According to Franklin, the narrative back-and-forth conducted through the use of ‘As Time Goes By’ points to an emasculated Rick becoming a ‘triumphant’ feminised man, and an initially agential Ilsa becoming subsumed by music and a victim of the plot. In a way, Franklin argues, both characters are ‘undone’ by the symphonic score.

The sixth and final chapter highlights aspects of masculinity in relation to modernist music. The book shifts focus here. Instead of highlighting the connections between film music and ‘high culture’ music, Franklin shows how Hollywood music confronted this culture and explicitly critiqued the ideals of modernism. Franklin examines Hitchcock’s *Spellbound* (1945) and argues that it begins with the conventional

idea that Hollywood women dream ‘Hollywood romance’ but ends with the notion that ‘Hollywood men dream modernism’ (144). Franklin also examines *Psycho* and contrasts what he sees as the masculine modernist music of the main titles with the feminine first cue. He argues that the recurrence of these musical cues creates links between the schizophrenic identity of Norman ‘the voyeuristic camera, and us, the audience’ (161). For Franklin, *Psycho* sits across the Great Divide and performs a kind of analysis of modernism ‘as a function of a range of socio-psychological anxieties, among which gender instability is significant’ (163). Ultimately, Franklin argues that the films covered in this book deserve to be studied by anyone concerned with the historical and cultural development of music in the twentieth century.

This is an important piece of scholarship which is bound to provoke further detailed discussion. Its greatest strength is in the original, engaging, and even virtuosic re-readings of many classic film texts. Film music scholars will find themselves able to revisit several of these well-known movies from new perspectives. It might have been more structurally focused, more precise in its terminological boundaries, and there could have been more detailed musicological analysis to support some of its claims. But overall, through exquisite prose, *Seeing Through Music* presents an enticing and provocative argument about the importance of film music to the wider aesthetic appreciation of music in the twentieth century, and it shines a light on the reception of both.

And yet, there is an odd little niggle in all of this. Early on in the book Franklin expresses his admiration for Michael Long’s *Beautiful Monsters: Imagining the Classic in Musical Media* (2008) whose study is ‘in many ways a close relative of this one, but writing (as I do) from the Old World, and what I suspect he would consider an example of the “old academy”, I must insist that mine adopts a different conceptual approach’ (17). For Franklin, Long writes about the history of the problems of labeling ‘art’ or ‘popular’ music from a liberated standpoint that allows him to dissolve those categories. Franklin, however, has been ‘sufficiently marked and conditioned’ (17) by the terms to find them full of meaning. Evidently, the same is true for the reviewers on the book’s dust jacket. For the two eminent musicologists, Susan McClary and Lawrence Kramer, the book means that ‘guilty pleasures [are] exonerated!’ and that the reader can trade

‘guilty pleasure in old movies and their music for guilt-free insight’. But for many of Franklin’s readers there have never been any guilty pleasures here, there are simply pleasures and scholarly depths and delights to be explored. *Seeing Through Music*, therefore, also tells us something useful about the state of film music scholarship and the academy. For some it will be an audacious call to arms and for others it will be an indicator of just how far film musicology has advanced in recent years.

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