Textbooks for Film Music History: An Overview

Blake Howe

Imagine that your dean has asked your department to boost enrollment by offering more courses on popular music topics, and, despite your many obligations next semester, your department has drafted you to teach Film Music History. You sigh, but you attempt to summon your fortitude. You teach music for a living, and you like movies—how hard can it be?

Before assembling your syllabus, it will be necessary to define the parameters of those three seemingly innocent words: *film*, *music*, and *history*:

Film. Although *film* is often used synonymously with *movie* (i.e., something shown at your local multiplex), film studies is a much more expansive discipline, encompassing a variety of audiovisual media: documentaries, advocacy and propaganda films, shorts, cartoons, television shows, commercials, concert films, music videos, even video games. How focused, or how broad, will your own definition be? Will you concentrate on films produced by Hollywood studios, or will your approach be more eclectic?

Music. Most histories of classical music use music notation as their principal source material, while most histories of popular music examine recorded performances. Histories of film music present these and other options. Yes, a film's music often begins with a composer's (or with the composers') score. But it must later receive its realization through a recorded performance, and it exists in its final form only when interwoven into the film's soundtrack. There, it competes with other sounds like dialogue, effects, and source (diegetic) music, which, when taken together, might be every bit as musical as the "music" itself. Which of these three musics will constitute your principal text: the score (usually buried in the archives of a studio, guarded by copyright lawyers, and inaccessible to casual researchers), the recorded performance (the music itself, shorn of its sonic context), or the soundtrack (all film sounds—most far beyond the composer's control)? Or will your principal text be the entire audiovisual film, a medium that (some argue) inseparably fuses sound to moving image?

History. Free from the canon that burdens most histories of music, and free from the utilitarianism that biases music history courses toward repertoire that

students will perform in their recitals and concerts, film music histories zig-zag through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in a highly idiosyncratic manner. Their repertoire fluctuates; few works (perhaps only *The Jazz Singer*) occupy a permanent position in the canon. The historical narrative that links these films might concern methods of creation (filmmakers and their technologies) or matters of style (the works and their receptions). Or a film music history might be constructed to intersect with other historical narratives, like those concerning the history of film, the history of popular culture, and the history of twentieth-century music.

Film music histories, then, have many stories to tell. What kind of story will you teach? If your fortitude has been diminished by these complexities and variables, please summon it again. You do not need to reinvent the wheel. The good news is that there are several great textbooks available for your needs, each defining "film," "music," and "history" according to different combinations of the above parameters. This review will survey some of the best options.

In many respects the friendliest textbook on film music for the novice, non-specialist instructor is Roger Hickman's *Reel Music*: *Exploring 100 Years of Film Music* (New York: Norton, 2006). Mirroring the format of J. Peter Burkholder's *A History of Western Music* (also published by Norton), Hickman's text presents its information hierarchically: there are seven units, five chapters per unit, several headings per chapter, and multiple subheadings per heading. Call-out boxes for biographies, music examples, and special topics ("Composer Profile," "Significant Films," "Close-Up") keep the prose streamlined and focused. At the ends of chapters, lists of important names and key terms indicate to students what information they should probably commit to memory before the next exam. A negative consequence of this streamlining is the rather dreary first unit, which, like many music appreciation textbooks, greets students with terms, terms, terms, and their definitions, definitions, definitions. Many such terms are intuitive and unnecessary ("a *character* is simply someone in a story"), while others (open cadence, tritone) are far too complex for the half-sentence definitions they are allotted. A better approach, and one that users of this book should probably use, would treat the opening unit as a displaced appendix and build students' film and music vocabularies over the course of the semester as the need for such language arises. On the other hand, some of the most helpful features of *Reel Music* are its extensive "Viewer Guides," which offer detailed summaries of film clips and their music cues, including transcriptions of important themes and motives. Indeed, the chronicling of motives—their assignment to fixed characters or themes, their thematic transformation according to the circumstances of plot—is Hickman's chief analytical tool, one used effectively if bluntly. Students should be encouraged to question the names that Hickman gives some of his motives; their identities are seldom

so narrowly fixed. With references to DVD chapters and timings, these Viewer Guides suggest the most logical viewing assignments for your course; the repertoire, for better or worse, has mostly been chosen for you.

For better, because students will love these selections: the finale of *The Bride of Frankenstein*, the beginning of *Touch of Evil*, the "This is no cave . . ." sequence of *The Empire Strikes Back*—these are all crowd-pleasers, instantly accessible. For worse, because Hickman's textbook treats both film and music according to the narrowest of parameters. In *Reel Music*, a film is a movie, and a movie is usually produced by a Hollywood studio. (A symptom of this bias is Hickman's running tally of film scores that received Oscars or Oscar nominations, as if the Academy of Motion Pictures has ever been anything but a ridiculous judge of such things.) There are some exceptions—a heading for "International Films" (with subheadings for "France," "Soviet Union," etc.) appears every other chapter or so; and the final Viewing Guide covers John Corigliano's score for the multilingual (and Canadian) film *The Red Violin*—although these examples are usually sidelined in a manner that reinforces the dominance of a Hollywood mainstream. Further, *Reel Music* focuses on "real" music: composers (not sound editors, not directors, not sociocultural forces) are the main protagonists of Hickman's history, and their compositions (not the technologies that produce and realize them, not the soundtracks that contain them) are the main subjects for scrutiny. *Reel Music* is safe, easy to use, and probably your best bet for a non-major general education course. Its repertoire, its cast of characters, and its approach to score analysis will be familiar to you. Its focus on Hollywood film gives students tools to hear better, and hopefully interpret better, films and film traditions with which they are probably already familiar. These are simultaneously advantages and disadvantages.[1]

Mervyn Cooke's *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) lacks the familiar amenities of modern textbook design: no floating text boxes, no bolded keywords, few images (and no music examples), no bullet points, no supplementary pedagogical resources. Its prose, infrequently divided by headings and subheadings, cannot be skimmed or easily summarized. There are no "Viewing Guides," listing cues and motives and such; in fact, no single film receives sustained consideration beyond a paragraph or two. But

1. A similar approach may be found in Larry M. Timm, *The Soul of Cinema: An Appreciation of Film Music* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003). The book's excellent second chapter introduces the film music industry and its many professions (e.g., music supervisors, contractors, copyists, etc.). However, with *Gladiator* (2000) as its most recent film, the textbook needs an update. Laurence E. MacDonald, *The Invisible Art of Film Music: A Comprehensive History*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013) is, as the title promises, comprehensive—but only in its coverage of Hollywood sound film (there is almost nothing on silent film or foreign film); the extremely rigid organization by year (1950, then 1951, then 1952 . . .) makes the book unviable as a textbook but valuable as a reference chronology.

this is a wonderful and important book, and its comprehensive, encyclopedic scope makes it a valuable resource especially for upper-level courses beyond the general education curriculum. Unlike Hickman's text, which focuses on Hollywood movies, Cooke's *History of Film Music* considers film from a variety of formats and genres: not just movies, but documentaries, advocacy and propaganda films, filmed operas, cartoons, and television. Its worldview is similarly broad, with separate chapters on film music in the United Kingdom and France, plus a "Global Highlights" chapter that covers the Soviet Union, India, Italy, and Japan.[2] Max Steiner makes an appearance, of course, but so does Tōru Takemitsu. *Casablanca* is considered, yes, but so is *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. The extent of coverage is extraordinary and a little overwhelming; a single-spaced, two-column index of film titles runs seventeen pages. But this, too, is simultaneously an advantage and disadvantage: *A History of Film Music* exposes students to more works and composers than any other comparable book on the market, but it does so at the expense of detailed, word- and labor-intensive analyses and close readings. Your class meetings will need to be the venue for this difficult work, as Cooke's text does not model it.

A History of Film Music is actually a collection of many histories: Chapters 1–3, 5, and 10–12 follow the familiar arc of film music history, set mostly in the United States, moving through the increasingly standard periodizations of silent film, early sound film, Hollywood's "Golden Age," the stylistic bifurcation of "classical" and "popular" soundtracks, and contemporary practices. But Chapters 6, 8, and 9 each have miniature arcs of their own, covering the film histories of the United Kingdom (from Ralph Vaughan Williams to George Fenton), France (from Arthur Honegger to Zbigniew Preisner), and other countries. Chapter 4, on opera and musicals, also has its own timeline, as does Chapter 7, on television music. Although Cooke's segmentation precludes some important intersections (e.g., the use of classical music in cartoons appears in Chapter 7, but not in Chapter 11, "Classical Music in Cinema"), it also sharpens his focus and permits him space to raise complex questions and offer controversial opinions about film sound ontology, musical meaning, and national style, all topics perfect for classroom debate. For example, in his discussion of the leitmotif, Cooke quotes extensively from Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler's difficult but important text *Composing for Films* (1947), then critiques it, and does so strongly: "[Their] misapprehensions are tainted by an elitist dogma which views functional film music as a poor cousin to art music" (82). Agree? Disagree? Discuss.

Whereas Hickman's primary musical concern is the motive, Cooke's primary concerns are style and topic. He notes that modernist music has been

2. Kim Kalinak's *Film Music: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) also offers a global perspective of film, albeit within a "very short" page limit.

used to connote "the Angst-ridden atmosphere of such genres as film noir, intense psychological drama and the horror film" (194), popular music has been used to connote age and ethnicity (401), jazz has been used to connote "urban decay" (104), classical music has been used to connote "master criminals of non-US descent" (439), and so on. These associations change, and these changes are made within a sociocultural context. Cooke's music analysis is unsophisticated (few harmonies are analyzed, no motives transcribed), but the cultural analysis—supported with ample citations to the recent scholarship of Arved Ashby, Marcia Citron, Kevin Donnelly, Claudia Gorbman, Jeff Smith, and many others—is provocative and compelling.

While Cooke's definition of film is broad and his construction of history admirably eclectic, his treatment of music is quite restrictive. For Cooke, composers, guided by the artistic preferences of a director, produce their own film music. Although there are nods to film technology and the studio system, they are not active agents of historical change within Cooke's narrative. Notably, his chapter on the history of silent film—a period with few notable composers and many technologies—is quite slim and may need to be supplemented with other sources. Rick Altman's *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), a comprehensive, accessible, and beautifully illustrated resource, will fill (perhaps overfill!) this lacuna. So will James Wierzbicki's *Film Music: A History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), which offers a rich technological study of the many ways in which film music has been created, performed, recorded, and distributed. Wierzbicki's history begins much earlier than those of his competitors, with a long, slow, circuitous, and refreshingly non-teleological route to the arrival of synchronized sound. The Nickelodeon receives its own chapter, cue sheets are reprinted and examined, the Roxy Theater is visited, and the Cinephone, Kinetophone, Vitaphone, and Movietone are all described in detail. Over halfway through the book (p. 133 out of 239), Wierzbicki enters Hollywood's "Golden Age." From there, he continues to emphasize the role that sound technologies have had in determining film music styles and aesthetics. For example, while Cooke's discussion of *Star Wars* focuses on the musical elements of John Williams's famous score, Wierzbicki instead focuses on the film's influential use of Dolby Stereo and the concurrent composition of "action-filled orchestral scores that could accompany Dolby-powered crashes and explosions" (210). The introduction of Dolby technology is significant enough to be one of the factors justifying Wierzbicki's periodization of this historical moment, splitting film music history into a "new wave" period (1958–1978) and a period of "eclecticism" (1978–2001). Cooke, by contrast, mentions Dolby only twice in a single paragraph. The two authors thus operate quite differently, but their oppositional approaches might produce a fruitful synthesis if you choose to use their texts in tandem. Doing so would also address their inverse

deficiencies in coverage: Cooke devotes little space to silent film but plenty of space to recent trends; Wierzbicki offers an exhaustive coverage of silent film but hurries through films from the previous three decades.

Finally, you should consider James Buhler and David Neumeyer's *Hearing the Movies: Music and Sound in Film History*, 2nd ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). This second edition is an impressive and accomplished revision, unifying and synthesizing what, in the first edition, seemed to be a disparate collection of lesson plans. As the most recently published textbook, it offers up-to-date coverage of new releases, many of them major blockbusters: *Batman Begins*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *Casino Royale*, and *The Bourne Ultimatum* all make significant appearances in the final chapters. Elsewhere in the text, clips from *Sleepless in Seattle*, *De-Lovely*, and *There's Something About Mary* (!) stand alongside masterpieces like *Casablanca*, *Rashômon*, and *Trois Couleurs: Bleu* to exemplify key terminology and concepts. A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down? Perhaps. This is an admirably eclectic book, one whose definition of film is restricted to movies (almost exclusively Hollywood ones) but whose taste is catholic enough to encompass the highbrow, the lowbrow, and everything in between. Although not all the films that they mention qualify as "high art," Buhler and Neumeyer attempt to demonstrate that high artistry is still required to make them.

More than any other film music history textbook, *Hearing the Movies* conceives of music in the broadest possible terms—not just as a composer's score, but also as the entire soundtrack to which that score belongs. "Once we recognize the extent to which the sound track presents filmmakers with choices," Buhler and Neumeyer write, "we will realize that the soundtrack is crafted, that is, designed in a more or less conscious way. We might even think of the sound track as 'composed,' much like a piece of music" (35). Throughout their text, Buhler and Neumeyer expose the ways in which filmmakers use sound to manipulate viewers, to cover up film's two-dimensional artificiality and "render" (Michel Chion's term) its fictions more expressively, more viscerally. Chapter 2, "The Musicality of the Sound Track," develops a vocabulary for exploring these concepts by gradually introducing musical terms (tempo, rhythm, volume, timbre, pitch) and then applying them to film sound. For example, Luke Skywalker might be said to speak at a faster "tempo" and higher "pitch" than Darth Vader; passages of overlapping dialogue might be described as "polyphonic"; and background or ambient sound effects (rain pattering, traffic humming) might be considered a kind of "accompaniment." Buhler and Neumeyer are particularly interested in the interaction of elements within the soundtrack and the ontological and narratological ambiguities that sometimes arise. For example, the film *Atonement* opens with non-diegetic sound effects (the clicks of typewriter spelling out the title of the film); those clicks become

diegetic as we see their source onscreen (an over-the-shoulder shot of a woman typing); and those clicks continue as their source moves offscreen, eventually becoming a percussive instrument within the non-diegetic underscore. Chapter 3, "Music, Sound, Space, and Time," uses this example and many others to explore the porous boundaries between what is onscreen and offscreen, what is acousmatic and visualized, what is diegetic and non-diegetic, what is music and noise. Buried here are seeds for many fruitful classroom debates, student presentations, and writing assignments.[3]

Like Wierzbicki, Buhler and Neumeyer offer a technological history of film music, albeit one that covers the entire soundtrack rather than just the music on it. Their interests also extend to sociology and economics. For example, in the chapter on the "post-classical era" (1950–1975), topics include a ruling from the Supreme Court of the United States prohibiting studio ownership of movie theaters, the postwar expansion of suburban neighborhoods away from lavish central-city theaters, and industry competition from the rise of television; these trends and others are framed as the impetuses for the standardization of widescreen and stereo formats (Cinerama, Cinemascope, Todd-AO), the practice of recording on magnetic tape, and the rise of both on-location sound recording and automated dialogue replacement (ADR); and all these technologies are framed as the impetuses for the popularity of "big event" pictures (e.g., *Cleopatra*), the composition of epic scores performed by increasingly large orchestras, and creative uses of sonic space (especially the "illusion of depth"). Social and economic forces determine changes in technology, and changes in technology determine changes in style.

While Hickman's primary musical concern is the leitmotif, and Cooke's primary musical concern is style and topic, Buhler and Neumeyer's primary musical concerns are genre and function. After each discussion of sound technology (like the one described above), the authors pivot to the changing styles of music within various film forms: opening credits, title sequences, and end credits; the action scene, the love scene, the song and dance scene, and the montage. (The "music video" sequence—e.g., "Danger Zone" in *Top Gun*—also makes an appearance.) Buhler and Neumeyer convey this material primarily through analytical vignettes that consider the expressive interaction of image, sound, dialogue, and music; these are generously illustrated by film stills, score transcriptions, and the occasional shot-by-shot table (similar to but more detailed than Hickman's "Viewing Guides"). The textbook's greatest strength is here, in these close readings that model clear, concise, persuasive analysis.

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3. Michel Chion's "tricircle" offers a helpful way to visually map some of these concepts. See "Three Borders," in *Film: A Sound Art*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 247–61.

In fact, the authors do more than passively offer models of good prose: a significant portion of their textbook is devoted to explaining how to write about film. In a series of exercises distributed throughout the textbook, Buhler and Neumeyer patiently describe the differences between synopsis, analysis, criticism, and interpretation. These exercises are cumulative: the first one offers a kind of paint-by-numbers format for writing a film synopsis (with a model synopsis of *Catch Me if You Can*); the next one elaborates a checklist for the elements of a scene analysis (with a model scene analysis of *Le million*); the next one describes a "screening report" that begins with synopsis then adds analysis (with a model report on *Mildred Pierce*); and so on. The exercises become less schematic and more complex over the course of the book. By the end students are encouraged to develop original interpretations and criticism, even those that might go "against the grain" of the film (for example, reading race or class in *Casablanca*). *Hearing the Movies* includes other helpful textbook amenities: chapter summaries, a glossary, online resources, and a blog. But these writing guides are truly golden. Bravi tutti.

In a clever bit of marketing synergy, *Hearing the Movies* (published by Oxford University Press) repeatedly references source readings in Mervyn Cooke's *The Hollywood Film Music Reader* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Most of the thirty-one source readings in this helpful collection are interviews with, profiles of, or reminiscences by major Hollywood composers: Max Steiner (via the indispensible "Scoring the Film"), Franz Waxman, Aaron Copland, Miklós Rózsa, Henry Mancini, Bernard Herrmann, John Williams, and many more are represented in this manner; so are two composers of cartoon music, Carl Stalling and Scott Bradley. Like his *History*, Cooke's *Reader* offers relatively little on silent film music, with only four readings (the earliest from 1920). By contrast, Julie Hubbert's *Celluloid Symphonies: Texts and Contexts in Film Music History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2011) devotes eleven source readings to silent film, with its earliest source printed in 1909 (F. H. Richardson's "Plain Talk to Theater Managers and Operators"). Hubbert's selection of texts is admirably diverse, including not just composer interviews and reminiscences but also cue sheets, newspaper reports, and plenty of criticism. Indeed, her selection doubles as a history, with many important stylistic and technological trends (the development of synchronized sound, the fall of the studio system, the rise of jazz and rock scores) captured and exemplified by at least one reading. These connections are made explicit in Hubbert's thorough introductions to each unit, which weave a narrative thread through her collection of fifty-three readings. Hubbert's focus is Hollywood; for a more global collection of source readings, consider James Wierzbicki, Nathan Platte, and Colin Roust's *The Routledge Film Music Sourcebook* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2012). Included among its seventy-four readings are new

English translations from Russian (Dmitri Shostakovich), Italian (Gianandrea Gavazzeni), French (Darius Milhaud, Georges Auric), and Chinese (Wang Yunjie) sources. It's a pithy collection, with most readings occupying no more than two pages. As in *Celluloid Symphonies*, the diversity of the source material is impressive, with texts authored by film composers (Franz Waxman, Bernard Herrmann, Elmer Bernstein, and more usual suspects), non-film composers (John Cage), producers (David O. Selznick), critics (Virgil Thomson), and many newspaper and trade magazine reporters. Its unique contribution to the field, however, is a new translation of a set of survey results about film music from the French journal *Le film* (1919). This is a treasure trove of information, featuring strongly worded and amusingly wrongheaded opinions about the state of early film music from prominent music professionals (including Armande de Polignac, Reynaldo Hahn, Paul Vidal, Gabriel Pierné, and Vincent d'Indy). This reading achieves in microcosm what the very best collections of source readings must attempt: to document the messy world of reality from which the more pristine narration of history is drawn.

All three collections of source readings (Cooke; Hubbert; Neumeyer, Platte, and Roust) are valuable. So are the textbooks (Hickman, Cooke, Wierzbicki, Buhler and Neumeyer) that I have described. The methodologies by which they define themselves, the parameters by which they limit themselves (think *film*, *music*, *history*, and their many permutations), create opportunities while also precluding others. Choosing breadth over specificity, or specificity over breadth, simultaneously presents advantages and disadvantages. I've written variations of the previous sentence three times throughout this review, and if I sound noncommittal or nonjudgmental, it's because textbooks are merely tools. They require a teacher—you—to animate them. They must be supplemented by your guidance, by your questions, by your contagious passion for film and film music. Your students will thank you if you can do this, regardless what textbook you end up choosing. Your dean will, too.