Framing a Critical, Interdisciplinary Approach to Film: Teaching *Amadeus*

Nancy Rachel November, University of Auckland
Brenda Allen, University of Auckland

"How might I interpret the film *Amadeus* as a Mozart reception document of the 1980s?" "What does 'authenticity' mean in relation to that film's soundtrack and screenplay?" "How is Salieri characterized in the film, and why?" These are the sorts of questions one might wish that students would formulate when considering the popular music biopic (biographical film) *Amadeus* in relation to music history. The reality can be quite different. Surveys of second year Music History students at the University of Auckland in 2012-2014 show that they tend to view music history as established fact, and have great difficulty posing complex critical questions and constructing critical, evidence-based arguments. Most writers on the subject of historical literacy agree that the ability to read, write and think critically about a range of media is an especially valuable skill. These abilities not only serve students' immediate studies within historical disciplines, but also enable graduates "to negotiate and create the complex texts of the Information Age."[1] This is especially true of music history: one can draw on a broad range of sonic, visual and digital media to answer the increasingly varied questions that music historians address. But how is one to help students prepare for the interdisciplinary skills, attitudes and understandings this requires? How do we best equip students to analyze and read critically the films, YouTube clips, cartoons and diverse other source material they might want and need to study?

One useful way to address such questions is for music history teachers to bring co-teachers from other disciplines in to a given music history course: a cartoon historian, for example, or a teacher from film studies, as befits the subject matter. This allows students to learn from experts the language, kinds of questions and broader ways of thinking that the other discipline offers, which in turn helps students to decipher that discipline's key textual types. It also

1. Jeffrey D. Nokes, "Historical Literacy," *Social Studies: Newsletter of the Utah State Office of Education* (May 2011), 6.

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permits another perspective—sometimes radically different—on the content of the course. The new approaches that this disciplinary "crossing over" brings are not only useful for the teacher: they can also help students to see knowledge in general as something that is constructed and open to critique, and to think about their discipline through a new lens.[2]

With this in mind, we (teachers from music history and film studies, respectively) collaborated over three years on a unit within a second year Music course with forty students, entitled "Music, History and Ideas." The course was thirteen weeks long, and met twice weekly, for a two-hour lecture and a one-hour tutorial (the latter mostly comprised of small-group discussion). The unit was designed to help students to read *Amadeus* in ways that would help them to understand how myths and stereotypes are constructed about historical figures, and how to critique them. Thus we sought to develop a literacy skill that is highly relevant to today's undergraduates: the ability to read popular and visual media critically.

To summarize our findings: we observed that music history students are keen to use various types of texts as sources when writing essays and assignments. They would willingly discuss audio and visual aspects of *Amadeus*, for example, at some length. However, they tended naturally towards basic description of both aspects, and were often not capable of reading film *critically*—indeed sometimes not aware of the need for such reading. In this paper, we address these findings and offer guidelines on how to guide students towards richer, more thoughtful readings of music biopics in particular, and film more generally. In particular, we sought to address the following needs that we saw in the student cohorts:

1. To develop a more complex understanding of film than students currently tend to possess, especially with regard to the relationships between music and image;
2. To foster awareness of the intelligent and knowing ways in which narrative films are designed to manipulate the viewers, and thus to help students arrive at a more critical reading of any given biopic.

The understanding, skills and attitudes developed by addressing these two needs may relate directly to particular topics that students are keen to pursue in the context of music history—questions of the kind posed at the outset, for example. More broadly, by addressing these two needs, the teacher helps develop students' critical skills in the increasingly interdisciplinary and multi-media contexts in which today's students live and work.

2. On this subject see also Robert J. Nash, "Crossover Pedagogy: The Collaborative Search for Meaning," *About Campus* 14 (2009), 2-9.

Miloš Forman and Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* is a special case among music biopics, and possesses two distinctive qualities that make it an excellent teaching tool for our purposes.[3] First of all, the director and producers (by which we mean the team that craft the sounds and images of the film) have done their historical homework: each of the film's scenes is based on at least some evidence of the kind that can be read in sources like Mozart's letters and contemporary anecdotes.[4] To be sure, some of this "evidence" (for example the myth that Mozart composed works in a fluent stream, largely without corrections) has been discredited and comes from unreliable (in the sense of mythmaking) sources such as Friedrich Rochlitz's anecdotes.[5] But these aspects of mythmaking—building on the Mozart mythology of Mozart's time—make the film all the more suited to critical study by upper-level music history students.[6] Second, with regard to both the musical and visual aspects, the film is put together in a highly complex and intelligent way. It is not unreasonable to liken *Amadeus* to a Mozart opera in terms of the clever interweaving of music and narrative and the knowing ways in which the producer manipulates the audience. This complexity means that, just as for a Mozart opera, one can listen and watch on various levels: now submerged in the popular myth-making and swept along by the unfolding plot, now pulling back to laugh along with the producers at the cleverly subversive or comic moments that are created. There are many musical and biographical allusions for the knowing viewer/listener to discover.

A case in point is the extended scene in which Mozart (Tom Hulce) presents himself for the first time in the court of Emperor Joseph II (Jeffrey Jones), and extemporizes on a tune apparently composed by Antonio Salieri (F. Murray Abraham). The scene is bulging—even overladen—with musical, cultural, national and political references, but not all of them are easy for students to hear or spot. One subtle "insider" joke in this scene occurs when Mozart, seemingly spontaneously, develops the Salieri theme into his own "Non più andrai" from *Le nozze di Figaro*, as he recalls Salieri's tune ("from one hearing only") at the fortepiano. The reference is wonderfully ironic and pointed: "Non più andrai" is sung by Figaro at the end of Act I as he pretends to send off the

3. Miloš Forman (dir.) *Amadeus* [director's cut version] (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video c2002; original 1987); see also Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus*, on which the film is based (London: Deutsch, 1980).

4. For more on this topic, see especially Simon P. Keefe, "Beyond fact and fiction, scholarly and popular: Peter Shaffer and Miloš Forman's *Amadeus* at 25," *The Musical Times* 150/1906 (2009), 46. For a much less sympathetic view (a listing of factual "errors" in *Amadeus*), see Jane Perry Camp, "*Amadeus* and Authenticity," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 9 (1984), 117

5. See Maynard Solomon, "The Rochlitz Anecdotes: Issues of Authenticity in Early Mozart Biography," in Cliff Eisen ed., *Mozart Studies 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1–59.

6. For another angle on the use of *Amadeus* in teaching undergraduates, see Per F. Broman, "Teaching Music History in an Age of Excess" in James R. Briscoe ed., *Vitalizing Music History Teaching* (New York: Pendragon Press, 2010), 22-23.

flirtatious youth, Cherubino, to war: "You won't go any more, amorous butterfly/Fluttering around inside night and day… ." Forman and Shaffer's Mozart adds a little twiddle on the end, and laughs flippantly, so that the absorbed viewer is left to wonder at the outrageous presumption of the young composer in the presence of such august company (**Figure 1**). The knowing listener, meanwhile, marvels at the innuendo, cleverly laid down by the producer to show Mozart's character in the most frivolous light, and to further the idea that Salieri's character (perhaps aligned here with Cherubino, the novice) is not so pious and pristine as Salieri would like.[7]

Figure 1: "From one hearing only": Mozart/Hulce recalls and embellishes a theme by Salieri

This is one of many such moments in *Amadeus* that can usefully spawn student discussion of the layered nature of this and other music-related films—the manifold ways in which producers (sometimes building on historical evidence, sometime not), *construct* plots and characters. Like the work of painters and composers that we revere, films are carefully planned and considered in terms of what to include, so that intended and serendipitous elements are retained only if they contribute to the story telling. Every inclusion/exclusion, whether visual, aural, juxtaposed or kinetic, must contribute to the intended range of meanings and insights available to audiences. Of course, audience members may construct their own readings, which may differ, more or less, from those intended by filmmakers.

In this article, we provide guidance on how *Amadeus* can be used to encourage this kind of critical reading. We begin by setting up the framework for interdisciplinary understanding of film. This part involves the discussion of "crux points"—concepts that are likely to be tricky for students (and teachers

7. See also Keefe's comments on this scene, "Beyond fact and fiction," 49-50.

if they are not from film studies). Each point is illustrated with examples from *Amadeus*. We then move to a discussion of *why* these concepts are likely to be tricky for students, and some pedagogical strategies that can help.

A framework for interdisciplinary understanding of film

The director as artist

The above example nicely illustrates the idea that a film director is, in a real sense, an artist—someone who heads a team of experts to compose narrative through characters and (potentially) history.[8] Just about everything that the audiences see and hear, including all props, settings lighting and blocking, is deliberately crafted. In the above example, it is the director and the director of music who have worked to incorporate pointed variations on Mozart's themes; it is the director who has chosen the costumes from designs supplied by wardrobe, and who has dressed Salieri in black and Mozart in purple for maximum contrast; and it is the director, working with the actors, who cues Mozart to laugh absurdly and Salieri to look on with pursed lips. Most immediately, the director addresses those film viewers who are ready and willing to build on the popular image of Mozart they have obtained from other sources—popular biography, CD and book cover images, delicious chocolates ("Mozartkugeln") and so forth. But the director also addresses an audience of connoisseurs, those who will "get" what it means to compose variations on a theme and segue into "Non più andrai," and who are well aware of the multiple audio and visual clues that are being used not only to set up Mozart in diametric opposition to Salieri, but also to subtly suggest that Salieri is on Mozart's level with regard to virtue if not virtuosity.

While excerpts on YouTube are valuable for their accessibility and their related items of commentary about famous scenes, these are often edited down and are not the finished text intended by the film's creator(s). It is advisable, and in this case essential, to work with the director's cut as well. Consider, for instance, the scene of Mozart's arrival at court. In the director's cut it is clear that Salieri is reluctant to allow Emperor Joseph II to play his new march for Mozart, and the sly, knowing glances of the musicians reveal Salieri's minority status as an Italian among German-speakers. These subtle messages are all but absent from the edited version of the scene.

8. For a similarly sympathetic understanding of *Amadeus* as the work of a creative artist (under which term he considers both Shaffer and Forman), see Robert L. Marshall, "Film as Musicology: 'Amadeus,'" in *The Musical Quarterly* 81/2 (1997), 173-179. Auteur theory (a term coined by American film critic Andrew Sarris) is highly relevant here; this theory of filmmaking, in which the director is viewed as the key creative force in film, grew out of French cinematic theories of the late 1940s of Alexandre Astrucin and André Bazin.

Furthermore, as with other arts, there are messages to be read in aesthetic values of balance and slightly varied repetition, used here to build up systems of symbolism and composition within the films frames. Over time an entire rhetoric has been constructed through sets of filmic codes that have become conventions. In *Amadeus*, for example, characters are repeatedly positioned within or behind frames-within-the-frame of the film—doors, windows, theatre boxes, and even the space under a table laden with rich foods—in order to give symbolic meaning to narrative action and/or characterization. Light and shade as created by natural and candlelight is another recurring motif, exemplified in **Figures 2–5**. In Figure 2, the priest is positioned to the right of the window frame between two sources of light: daylight and the candle. Salieri, sandwiched between natural light and the slightly luminous painting in the background, by contrast, is more typically framed to the left of the frame within the frame (**Figure 3**). This contrast suggests that Salieri is indirect and somewhat shadowy in terms of personality. In Figure 4 Mozart enters, his central placement implying his callow youthfulness: he is the center of his own world and too naïve to negotiate court life, whose strictures are suggested by the guilt edges at guards that frame, but do not confine, Mozart's figure.

Figure 2: The priest framed by two natural light sources: daylight and candlelight

Figure 3: Salieri, off center and framed by natural light and the artificial light of the artwork

Figure 4: Mozart enters the court of Joseph II, framed by doors and ornate edges

Each shot, of course, is not only visual but also aural in nature. The aural components include the ambient sound of the setting, sound effects to account for the presence and/or movements of people or objects, dialogue, and frequently music, specifically designed to underpin or to contradict the more literal reading of what is happening on screen. As well as enriching a narrative, these audio-visual components can be used to comment on society in the time of the film's setting, and to help us make connections to society today. One can think in terms of three historical periods available for consideration and study in this film: that of the film's setting; that of the film's making, in this case the 1980s; and that of the viewing audience. In this article we primarily address the setting: how it is constructed in the film, and how students can step back from simple readings of the film as "retelling history" to better understand the artfully manipulative and multi-layered nature of this retelling.

Being "stitched into the narrative" and how to "unstitch"

In order to understand the concept of "director as artist," students can benefit from strategies to help them to step back from the film. First attempts to write about film are frequently limited to simple statements of "what happened," in which the student conflates the character and plot created by the actor and director, in this instance with Mozart and his life. One useful way of helping students to step back is for teachers to model the process of "longitudinal reading"—pulling out tropes and themes in the visual and auditory narrative for closer examination of the role that they play in persuading and informing the viewer/listener. This "longitudinal reading" helps them to start to see the plot as cleverly formed and manipulative.

A case in point is the portrayal of Salieri's relationship to the cross, an essential element of his transition from unquestioning but misguided faith to a consuming anger with and rejection of God. The older Salieri, who relates the events from an institution for the insane, is also deluded about his active role in Mozart's death. Salieri claims to have scuppered Mozart's career at court, to have frightened Mozart by dressing up in the costume (that of Don Giovanni) worn by Mozart's recently deceased father, and to have given Mozart a commission for a major work (the *Requiem*, K626) with an almost impossible deadline knowing that Mozart was ill. Salieri tells his story with the strongly subjective bias of recollection, showing how Mozart gradually becomes for him a manifestation of God's capriciousness. Why, Salieri asks, would a just God give seemingly limitless talent to a man who revels in excess and is not at all pious, while depriving such a man as himself who has sworn to be celibate and faithful? Salieri concludes that God is not just and it is pointless to worship Him. The subjectivity of his narrative is symbolized in many ways including a combination of frames-within-frames, light and shade, and eye lines that do

not cohere in the shots of the cross. The following scenes, which chart Salieri's changing relationship with God, provide economical and effective examples of symbolism as storytelling in this film.

The first of these scenes occurs approximately fourteen minutes into *Amadeus*. Salieri is a child at church, his eyes on the icons not as symbols of God but as art that enriches his sense of awe and the intense sensory arousal he experiences in response to the angelic tones of the choir. Salieri prays to God: "make me famous, make me immortal through people's love for the music I write"; and in return he promises "chastity, industry and deepest humility every hour of my life." Salieri does not say that he will write for God, but for his own fame, and he does not go to a seminary to write religious music, but rather to court in order to write for an Emperor. Court is a place of excess and luxury; it is no place to demonstrate humility. His worldly pleasure is shown again and again in his interactions with art, music and cuisine. We frequently see him framed by a painting or theater box, or even sumptuous food, where he is often placed off center, or partly concealed, hinting at his wrong headedness (**Figure 5**).

Figure 5: Salieri spies on Mozart and Constanze, hiding amidst piles of sumptuous food ("worldly delights"), including a cake studded with Mozartkugeln

Just before the scene in which Salieri watches Mozart perform and extemporize on "his" theme before Joseph II, he is working to compose a piece to welcome Mozart to court. He asks God to help and there are intercut (alternate) shots of Salieri at the piano with shots of his cross. As he haltingly fashions his melody for the march to welcome Mozart, Salieri thanks God, saying "Grazie Signor," and looks at the cross (**Figure 6**). This sequence juxtaposes music's worldliness with the cross's numinosity, and shows Salieri as the grateful recipient of both. However, by a variety of subtle cues are we led to believe that

Salieri is misguided. The answering shot of the cross, as Salieri gives thanks to God, shows one candle, mirroring the idea of one God and one purpose; but it also suggests that there is one light, and one flame that God lights (**Figure 7**). The absence of flame implies that this one is not Salieri. The space to the right of Salieri's head is not within Salieri's gaze, although it is part of the audience's view. His eye line and ours do not match: we are looking from the side and are therefore distanced from him. Salieri is also set to one side, partly in and partly out of the painting that depicts a worldly court scene. This proximity to "high art" contradicts the steadfastness of his gaze towards the cross, accenting instead his relationship with the court and his obsession with fame through art. In respect to fine art, though, he remains borderline, marginalized, perhaps at the edge of greatness or perhaps equally with God and with the Devil. The cross casts no shadow, and augments his steady gaze to suggest the balance between godliness and worldliness is roughly even, at this point in the plot.

Figure 6: Salieri thanks God for the march

Figure 7: The immaculate cross that casts no shadow

When Mozart—with great fluency and fun—embellishes Salieri's carefully wrought but highly conventional theme, he belittles Salieri. The shots that follow show us Salieri's humiliation and altered relationship with God. Alone, he again confronts God. Again he says "Grazie Signor," this time with heavy sarcasm (**Figure 8**). This time the shot of the cross is even less in line with Salieri's point of view, and, as a consequence of this altered perspective, the audience's vantage point is set yet further away from him (**Figure 9**). In this way, we are led to lend increasingly less support for his actions and anger: Salieri is looking at the matter in the wrong way. The sharp shadow cast by the figure of Christ on the cross suggests that darkness is growing and that he begins to see his deity as shadowy, shady and duplicitous (**Figure 10**). From our distanced vantage point—of the angry man and his altered cross—we might now start transfer these characteristics firmly to Salieri.

Figure 8: Salieri's sarcastic "thank you" to God

Figure 9: The crucifix and its shadow

Figure 10: Detail of Salieri's cross

As Salieri prays, the shadow grows, the merciful voice of the Lord is silenced by omitting his head from the shot, and the lower camera angle with the cross appearing to rise from Salieri's head foretell a thoroughly unnatural relationship.

Later, after Salieri realizes that Mozart has slept with his favorite pupil, he prays, but to no avail because his negative thoughts and feelings grow. The shadow on the wall grows, and in our next glimpse of the cross it is lit by two candles, suggesting duplicity. Salieri tries again to make a bargain with God, saying that if God gives him one memorable piece of music, he will speak up for Mozart at court, thus righting the wrong he has already committed. But now God does not respond (i.e., there is no answering shot of the cross). As his anger with God intensifies, Salieri becomes consumed by hate and envy. Our last glimpse of his cross depicts its destruction. The light dims as Salieri finally takes the cross and burns it, a reference to the fires of hell that the audience saw earlier in the opera *Don Giovanni* (**Figure 11**).

Figure 11: Salieri burns the cross

This account models the process of longitudinal reading and close reading of the film. But it leaves students much more to say about the ways in which the depictions of the cross parallel Salieri's downfall, and the meanings we can make about religion and the nature of art from this film. It serves to demonstrate how repetition of visual composition is used in film to help create large-scale connections in the mind of the viewer, and in this case to help characterize Salieri as an increasingly conflicted individual. The scenes with the cross are augmented by a series of scenes in which Salieri is literally framed as a composer who is caught between high art (and his lustful desire to be an artistic genius) and God (and virtue). For example, in the shot discussed above we see Salieri at work gazing at the cross, but on the edge of a luxurious painting that addresses a worldly subject (**Figure 6**). Later, he is framed by the gilt of the opera box, again a sign of luxury and privilege (**Figure 12**). In the scene in which he is leafing through Mozart's original manuscripts, and marveling jealously over "first and only drafts of music," he is positioned partially within the frame of another painting; but also within the frame created by Mozart's music before him, which, visually and figuratively seems to start to engulf him (**Figure 3**).

When Salieri threatens to blackmail Constanze, when he is carried away to the asylum, and on many other occasions, we see him framed by doorways

or by windows. These frames within the frame of the film suggest that he is hemmed in by his love of this world and by his own limited vision. In a scene reminding us that what we see is a story within a story, a personal recollection, Salieri experiences a moment of sheer joy as he recalls the sublime effect of Mozart's music, an effect that he continues to feel (**Figure 13**). He then recalls the gap between Mozart's achievement and his own. For Salieri, Mozart is part of those limiting frameworks, and Mozart's excellence diminishes his own.

Figure 12: Salieri framed by the gilt edge of the opera box

Figure 13: Salieri experiences a moment of *jouissance* as he recalls the sublime effect of Mozart's music

The framing devices mentioned above are one such subtle way in which the film is carefully staged and a "fourth wall" is created, through which we, somewhat set apart, see the action in the world of the film. This "staging" relates to another useful line of questioning, which can help students to understand the specifically filmic nature *Amadeus*. The movie is a cinematic adaptation of a theatrical production: are there particularly *theatrical* aspects retained in the film? How do the media differ? Students can focus on a particular scene, read the play, watch a production of the chosen scene, and consider ways in which Forman has used the *particular affordances of film, music and the two combined* to create a different artwork. This is an especially useful line of questioning, since it asks students to focus on how these media are used to alter the message, creating, emphasizing and de-emphasizing certain aspects of plot and character. In quite a number of cases, students will find that theatrical aspects are retained. In several respects other than layering, for example, *Amadeus* relates to opera. Jeongwon Joe cites the use of cries that are stylized and musicalized,

woven into the sound track (Salieri's cry of 'Mozart!' near the beginning of the film; Constanza's cry, 'Wolfi, Wolfi, Wolfi', at Mozart's death bed).[9]

Getting critical about film music

Part of the process by which the film producer stitches the viewer/listener into the narrative includes the convention of using sound bridges over changes of shot and scene to create a sense of continuity and foreshadowing.[10] Auditory clues are also laid down for later payback, thus music is also used to create large-scale connections across the film. An example of the use of a sound bridge occurs at the end of the scene in which Mozart fools around with Constanze and makes her guess at words that he says backwards (unwittingly in the presence of Salieri, who hides behind a sumptuous table of food; see **Figure 5**). Towards the end of this scene, Mozart's Gran Partita, K361 (370a) is heard from outside the room and Mozart stiffens: "my music . . . they started without me!" "Mozart's music" has actually been carefully orchestrated and choreographed to carry Mozart rapidly through the door and down the hall to the court concert chamber. This transition is aided by means of a sound advance, a moment during which we hear the source of a sound before seeing its image.[11] Often this technique is used subtly, allowing the audience to "become aware" of something else that is going on in the scene that will follow, through auditory cues that do not quite mesh with what they are seeing. But here the film director wants to draw our attention to the fact that the scene we were watching *should not* have been going on—the audacity and foolery of Mozart, who is "out of sync" with courtly conventions and decorum. So in this case, attention is drawn to the sound advance: the music that he and we hear prompts a moment of recognition for Mozart, who exclaims, hastily tidies his attire and rushes down the hall. The music is dovetailed into the driving wind-up finale as Mozart arrives and takes over as conductor, the elision allowing him to appear suddenly in full control of his music and his large, attentive courtly audience. Thus the soundtrack carries the viewer/listener from one scene to the next and helps us to connect the laughing fool with the sublime genius. Many other examples show that unless there is to be a deliberate break in continuity, there will always be continuity of sound, or else a new sound will slightly precede the cut to the next shot (i.e., a sound advance).

9. Jeongwon Joe, "Reconsidering *Amadeus*: Mozart as Film Music" in *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-existing Music in Film*, ed. Phil Powrie and Robynn Jeananne Stilwell (Aldershot UK: Ashgate, 2006), 60.

10. On sound bridges, and for a discussion of film-related music terminology, see James Buhler, David Neumeyer and Rob Deemer, *Hearing the Music: Music and Sound in Film History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), especially Chapter 4.

11. Buhler, Neumeyer and Deemer, *Hearing Music*, 93.

Amadeus has been sharply criticized for the way it fragments Mozart's music—the way the sound track bulges and bleeds with so many musical examples.[12] But this is to misunderstand the use of music in this film, and in film more generally. On the one hand, this very fecundity of musical fragments is used in service of the film's myth-making stance on Mozart's compositional genius. Consider the scene with in which Constanze visits Salieri, bringing a portfolio of original manuscripts and asking for help in finding a court position for her husband. As Salieri leafs through unblemished original Mozart manuscripts we hear a rapid succession of works in various genres. (The film's representation of Mozart's compositional fecundity is not in question here, but rather its representation of Mozart as a composer who rarely sketched or drafted music.) Elsewhere the fragmentary nature of the sound track serves a larger, unifying function, linking apparently disjunctive events and once again figuring Mozart's compositional genius. Joe cites the example of Mozart's composition of "Contessa perdono" in this connection.[13] The excerpt from the Finale of the *Marriage of Figaro*, in which the Count pleas for forgiveness from his wife, is heard in snatches, as Mozart works on its composition and then breaks off as he is interrupted. Across a sequence of events, we see and hear how the genius is able to snap in and out of compositional thought, even after great distraction. This music is also used in a later scene, involving another Salieri "sneak peek" into Mozart's music. He also seems to be trying to peek into Mozart's mind—an association we have been primed to make by the earlier scenes that associate this aria with Mozart's compositional process.

Students need to understand these conventions before they can become critical of them and see how they are used to communicate. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Music History students we encountered tended to take for granted that they knew what music is and does in film. But did they know how writing for film differs from writing for a concert? Did they know the difference between a sound track and a symphony? We found that often the answer was "no, not really": when students spoke about the music in *Amadeus*, they tended to conflate music that was excerpted, edited and sometimes re-orchestrated for the film in the eighties with that which was composed by Mozart in the late eighteenth century.

Every available device in a narrative film is used in service of story or subtext; the latter is a level of socio-political comment that exists below the dominant reading of the film, which itself exists at the surface. It is vital for students to understand how the music itself can be manipulated to enrich the story or subtext so that it is no longer considered to be "what Mozart wrote" but rather

12. Joseph Horowitz, "Mozart as Midcult: Mass Snob Appeal," *The Musical Quarterly* 76/1 (1992), 7; discussed in Joe, "Reconsidering *Amadeus*," 58.

13. Joe, "Reconsidering *Amadeus*," 63-64.

what the film director wants to convey. Thus understood, film music is part of the intensely constructed language of film narrative. To be sure, understanding the relationship between image and music in film is a complex task, but we can select specific elements that are not complex in themselves that we can teach the student to understand in order to introduce them to, or further their knowledge of, the ways sound and image work together to enrich story.

One might start by considering how music is used to reinforce visual cues and to further characterization. In the moment of sublime and deep appreciation of Mozart's genius described above, Salieri "hears" and narrates (voiceover accompanied by non-diegetic music) the opening of the Adagio (movement 3) from Mozart's "Gran Partita" (this is the film's leitmotif for Mozart as musical genius). Here, music reinforces the positive side of Salieri's character: he, like Mozart, is a composer of excellent auditory recall; he has apparently deeply internalized this music—so much so that it speaks with and almost for him (**Figure 14**). He recognizes music genius when he hears it, and is capable of responding with the awe of deep understanding.

Figure 14: 'Until … a clarinet…' Salieri narrating the opening of the Adagio (movement 3) from Mozart's "Gran Partita" K361 (370a)

This same scene provides an excellent opportunity to discuss with students the differences is between the "voice" of a character, as portrayed via the music, and that conveyed by their spoken text. The "voice" of Salieri becomes that of Mozart for a moment—the moment in which Mozart's music speaks for him. This merger might lead the listener/viewer to ask: "can Salieri do anything but parrot others?"; "how original is he?" Shaffer and Forman guide the audience towards the conclusion that he cannot help but parrot, and is not original. In other scenes this lack of originality in Salieri's "voice"/character is played and

replayed. On hearing Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, K384, Joseph II is supposed to have commented that there were "too many notes." In *Amadeus*, this anecdote is further embellished, to include Salieri: Joseph II asks Salieri's opinion of the work, and he is only able to parrot that of court composer Guiseppe Bonno. Not only is Salieri being juxtaposed to Mozart (conventional, simple composer vs. breakaway complex genius), but "Italian simplicity" (simple-mindedness?) is being opposed to the supposed intellectual complexity of Germans (and German literature/theatre).

In the sample assignment sequence given below, we ask students to read the *New Grove Dictionary* article on Salieri as background to taking a de-bunking stance towards the film's myths. One can of course take a more directed approach to this task, for example getting students to research Salieri's *dramma tragicomico* in five acts, *Axur, re d'Ormus*, which is the only work by him to figure in the film's sound track. When they do so, they will find out that the film is incorrect in its dating of the opera's first performance to 1786-7, rather than 1788. Moreover, they will discover that the opera was one of the most popular in Vienna in its day, composed by one of its most renowned opera composers. Salieri was hardly the image of mediocrity that *Amadeus* portrays. This type of research can lead students to see more clearly how history has been tweaked in service of the film's larger narrative.

Again, students can be reminded of the three historical periods available for consideration and study in this film: that of the film's setting; that of the film's making; and that of the viewing audience. Of particular interest here is the artful *construction* of the first of these periods, and the ways in which the viewing audience can critique this, not to dismiss the movie as "inauthentic," but to obtain critical distance from its myths and to better understand and appreciate it as art.

Perceptions and pedagogies

In discussing the above example with students, we are trying to promote a paradigm shift. On first watching the film, students can even consider the film music to be "wrong," especially if they know Mozart's music well and can perceive some of the ways it is changed. We are aiming to help students to move from aural perceptions of music and visual perceptions of film to a more holistic mode of audience reception where the aural and visual are equally important and perceived as inseparable in terms of understanding both forms of information. This is arguably a "threshold concept" in film literacy—and in understanding film's role in music history. Rey Land defines threshold concepts as "concepts that bind a subject together, being fundamental to the ways of thinking and practicing within that discipline." These concepts differ from a given subject's

conceptual building blocks (or "core concepts"), owing to their transformative nature: threshold concepts can irrevocably change one's view of a subject in ways that core concepts do not. They are, however, likely to be difficult for a student to understand, owing to the radical shifts or leaps in thinking that they require one to take; so they are also considered potentially "troublesome."[14]

In the literature on threshold concepts, two learning strategies are frequently mentioned: first, educators recommend using group work, so that students create knowledge collaboratively and "divide and conquer" difficult tasks. One can design group work so that students meet and exceed what social constructivists term the "zone of proximal development," the gap between that which they have already learned, unassisted, and that which they can achieve when provided with educational support.[15] This space, or zone, enables new levels of criticality, not least because it lies outside a student's accustomed intellectual comfort zone.[16] It can be reached through students' dialogue and conversation (with each other, with the lecturers, with the material), and through problem-based tasks that allow them to practice being a researcher. Researchers have shown that these student-driven, dialogic approaches can be far more effective than having students work alone through materials geared towards knowledge acquisition.[17] This is because in order to attain high-level modes of thinking (as is the case with threshold concepts) students often need to change their views of knowledge—from something static and non-contestable, to something to which they can contribute, on which they can reflect, and in which they are a part.

Conclusion

Combining study of a significant scene from *Amadeus* with study of a longitudinal highly significant visual motif—in this case Mozart's entry to court and

14. Rey Land, Glynis Cousin, Erik Meyer and Peter Davies, "Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (3): implications for course design and evaluation" in: C. Rust ed., *Improving Student Learning—Diversity and Inclusivity*, Proceedings of the 12th Improving Student Learning Conference (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, 2005), 53-54. Available at: http://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/ISL04-pp53-64-Land-et-al.pdf.

15. Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

16. Rob Wass, Tony Harland and Alison Mercer, "Scaffolding Critical Thinking in the Zone of Proximal Development," *Higher Education Research & Development*, 30/3 (2011), 317-328.

17. This is a stance frequently taken in the recent literature on constructivist approaches to teaching and learning and e-learning. See for example David H. Jonassen, Jane Howland, Joi Moore and Rose M. Marra, *Learning to Solve Problems with Technology: A Constructivist Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Columbus, OH: Merrill/Prentice-Hall, 2002); Gerry Stahl, Timothy Koschmann and Dan Suthers, *Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning: An Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

the cross respectively—engaged students in the active work of thinking, speculating, discussing and learning independently. At the end of the unit, many students exhibited changed attitudes, suggesting that they had firmly grasped the intended threshold concept and in future they would be unlikely to read film and film music in isolation from each other or in the naïve way described earlier.

While getting drawn in to the film's intended narrative and range of meanings remains available and pleasurable, these students learned that such participation alone is relatively passive, impoverished and not the only possible audience position to adopt. Practice in searching out the more subtle clues of character and layered subtexts also helps students develop character judgment in their lives, and they come to respect the complexity of the film that they may now compare to the construction of an opera. Thus they no longer think the film music is "wrong" when it deviates from the original, but that it may even be, in the case of *Amadeus*, what Mozart might have done had he lived in our time. A side effect may be a deeper awareness of the complexity of the film industry and its many specialist roles, which may be useful in thinking about future careers.

Sample module: an interdisciplinary reading of *Amadeus*

In the first week you will start by viewing a short clip from the movie *Amadeus*, which depicts an encounter between Mozart and Salieri that is supposed to have taken place at the court of Joseph II.

You will then examine the scene in some more detail, so that you get an idea of how stereotypes are constructed in film (in this case a musical biopic). This part of the assignment involves writing two 100-word answers to the questions posed.

In the second week, you will work in teams of four to present (as a short "documentary") a cultural myth based on another scene from *Amadeus*, which you have not studied before.

Part One/Week 1: Understanding cultural myths

This week you will start to examine cultural myths associated with Mozart, working individually. Week two involves group work and you will need to choose a group of four people with whom to work.

STEP 1 First watch the following clip taken from the movie *Amadeus*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ciFTP_KRy4 [Mozart embellishes a Salieri theme in front of Joseph II].

STEP 2 Read the section on *Amadeus* in the following Wikipedia article, paying special attention to the second on "factual accuracy"; then read the *New Grove Dictionary* article on "Antonio Salieri"

The musicologist David Cairns has criticized the portrayal of Mozart in *Amadeus*, especially Shaffer's alleged portrait of Mozart as "two contradictory beings, sublime artist and fool" (*Mozart and His Operas* [University of California Press, 2006], 14).

1) To what extent is Mozart portrayed as "two contradictory beings" in this scene? In your answer, consider how his character contrasts to that of Salieri.

2) Now consider the portrayal of Salieri. How is he characterized in the scene and (from your brief background reading) to what extend is this portrayal of Salieri one-sided, biased, or falsifying?

In answering these two questions, carefully consider how the various layers of film (visual, musical, verbal) work together to convey the characters.

Part Two/Week 2: Applying the Concept

Overview: your group's task is to choose a short (ca. two-minute) film clip from *Amadeus*, present the clip, and provide with a short (two-minute) myth-debunking commentary. There are four steps to this process:

1) In your groups, your first task is to *choose a short clip from Amadeus, which differs from the one studied in class*. Assign the following roles to the four people in your group (Note: if you have less than four in your group, the first or second two roles can be taken by one person, and the roles can also be shared—just be sure that they are all covered):

- Historical researcher: events, setting
- Historical researcher: myth-debunking
- Presenter(s): careful description of the scene
- Presenter(s): myth-debunking commentary

Some suggestions for scenes, and some useful resources for analyzing them, are found under 'Resources' (below).

2) In your group discuss how film is used to develop myths about Mozart (and one other main character in the scene, where relevant), and/or factual information about his life (or their lives).

3) With your group members, write and rehearse a commentary to describe the scene and consider the myth making that is involved (or not). Consider any 'ulterior motives' that the key mythmakers might have had, for example making biography appealing/understandable to a modern audience. Once again,

carefully consider how the various layers of film (visual, musical, verbal) work together to convey the character(s) and actions in the chosen scene.

4) Finally you and your group will present your chosen film clip, plus myth-debunking commentary. Your group's presentation could involve a single person, or all four group members (a single reporter, or perhaps a panel of "experts," each with various pieces of evidence to contribute).

Resources for basic film terms

Like any area of study, film studies has its own set of technical terms. Many are also industry terms. Use the glossaries to clarify terms you meet in readings and lectures. Begin with the following: shot, take, cut, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, diegetic sound, sync sound.

BFI Film Language Glossary: https://www.scribd.com/document/45825840/Bfi-Glossary-of-Film-Language-Terms

Visual literacy: Reading film requires visual literacy, but most people don't really understand what that is in respect to reading movies. The Yale Film Studies Film Analysis Web Site at the following address contains a great deal of useful material: http://filmanalysis.yctl.org/

On music terms in connection with film, see:

Buhler, James, David Neumeyer and Rob Deemer. *Hearing the Music: Music and Sound in Film History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, especially Chapter 4.

Selected resources for *Amadeus*

On mythmaking and "authenticity":

Joe, Jeongwon. "Reconsidering *Amadeus*: Mozart as Film Music." In *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-existing Music in Film*. Ed. Phil Powrie and Robynn Jeananne Stilwell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 57-73.

Solomon, Maynard. "The Rochlitz Anecdotes: Issues of Authenticity in Early Mozart Biography." In Cliff Eisen ed., *Mozart Studies 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1-59.

Stafford, William. *The Mozart Myths: A Critical Reassessment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.

Preferred versions for the film and the play:

Forman Miloš (dir.). *Amadeus* [director's cut version]. Burbank, CA : Warner Home Video c2002; original 1987

Shaffer, Peter. *Amadeus*. London: Deutsch, 1980

Some suggested scenes to study

When Salieri first meets him, Mozart is crawling around on his hands and knees, engaging in profane talk with his future bride Constanze Weber: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeOE4BQPHxk.

Emperor Joseph II is supposed to have remarked to Mozart that his opera had 'too many notes...': https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_UsmvtyxEI.

Salieri meets Constanze to view Mozart's manuscripts: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJZiVP-swFU.

Supposed connections between *Don Giovanni*, and Mozart's father: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0Iv28yYMCc.