For Whom the Clockwork Tolls

On the opening title music of *A Clockwork Orange*

Max Thrush Hukill
Class of 2021
CINE 2252: British Film
March 12, 2021

When it comes to groundbreaking British films, one readily includes Stanley Kubrick's 1971 controversial masterpiece, *A Clockwork Orange.* Among the more memorable components of the film stands its soundtrack, composed and produced by Wendy Carlos. If Kubrick represents the archetypal perfectionist, controlling director, then Carlos represents his musical counterpart. Indeed, she is credited for taking the genres of electronic and classical music into the limelight in a single album, *Switched-On Bach* (1968), a technical masterpiece that also went platinum. One of the most nuanced scenes in this extremely complex film is its opening credits, guided by the powerful title theme composed by Carlos—a quasi-abstract Moog-synthesizer adaptation of Henry Purcell's march from *Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary II.* Combining this with the film and book, we find ourselves in a veritable labyrinth of intertextuality, with Carlos's piece setting the tone for the entire film. Yet what precisely that tone means remains ambiguous. On the one hand, the overture imbues the film with a morbid, funereal aura; at the same time, Kubrick and Carlos provide the audience with a series of perplexing incongruities, both visual and aural. The power of this scene comes from how the filmmakers link these components: the score actually reframes the appositions presented in the opening scene as a series of lethal, fatalistic conflicts. This not only adds drastically more dramatic weight to the opening scene, but succinctly sets the tone and stakes for the entire film.

Since the film opens with the funeral march playing over an empty screen, Kubrick clearly intends for Carlos's piece to set the tone for the entire film. Furthermore, Carlos actually emphasizes the funereal quality of the music beyond Purcell's composition: she holds each note for longer than Purcell's score indicates, generating a more lamenting, mournful quality.

Furthermore, she also includes percussive sounds that could represent funeral bells, which are absent from the original. Note that Carlos created this recording on a monophonic synthesizer, using a customized eight-track to multitrack the layers together. In other words, every single sound was not only painstakingly planned, but also required remarkable technical skill and execution to include (Holmes, 2003). Because of these demanding processes, each sound most likely has thematic intent. Additionally, Kubrick's meticulous attention to aesthetic detail demands our attention—he gives us half a minute alone with nothing but a blank red slide and Carlos's soundtrack. The filmmakers insist that we are alone with this lamenting piece for a substantial amount of time. The tone is indisputably funereal, and we are all but told to take note of that.

The choice of Carlos's piece as a march with a largo tempo further augments the cinematographic arguments (such as camera position, motion, and color) that Kubrick puts forth. Kubrick and Carlos take their time: this scene is *slow.* For the first 45 seconds, we have nothing but monocolor title screens, the first of which doesn't include text for 27 seconds; furthermore, while the soundtrack begins immediately, we don't hear the second note until 18 seconds in, at which point we've spent over 14 seconds suspended in sound that may not even be tonal. We get the first camera movement at the one-minute mark, an outward zoom that takes 1 minute and 16 seconds to complete, with the first words uttered 42 seconds into the zoom. Kubrick and Carlos don't give us more than one piece of new information at a time. This gives each component unexpected dramatic weight and forces us to dwell in disoriented discomfort.

This pacing arrests us in multiple phases of uncertainty. First, we're forced to listen to a soundscape before understanding that it's music; then, we're forced to stare at harsh, over-saturated colors before we see the film's visuals. The challenges continue: next, we're forced to make eye contact with Alex in an extreme close-up before we know where we are. Following that, we're forced to inspect a chaotic, plastically sexual set, which is itself revealed to us with painstaking lethargy, before we hear the first word spoken. Dwelling in this discomfort, we are actively compelled by the score and cinematography to reckon with continuous uncertainty about the trajectory of the scene (and by extension, that of the film). The filmmakers bring us into line as an audience with the rigid, militaristic structure of the march reinforcing our position, dragging us forward slowly but surely. Perhaps we can interpret this brutally slow pacing more severely: like that of time passing into death. Once again, the presence of the funeral march enables such a severe interpretation. The opening scene then imbues the film with the presence of inevitability. It raises more uncertainties about the message of the film than it resolves. We confront an inevitability that portends no specific future, but undeniably questions our societal ability to control our collective fate.

Within the funereal atmosphere that the filmmakers establish, Kubrick and Carlos present us with contradictory, paradoxical ideas from every side. As we've come to expect from these artists, this is anything but a coincidence. The soundtrack systematically reframes each incongruity as contributing to the sense of lethality of the film, posing each one as a matter of life and death. Why, then, do we find ourselves positioned as mourners—without any clear information about who or what we're mourning? And from what deadly conflicts do these losses arise?

To begin, the piece itself presents a fundamental contradiction, occupying the uncanny valley between familiar and alien. Carlos is credited for bringing both electronic and classical music to the international stage, largely by heralding the shift in electronic music from atonality and dissonance to consonance and melody (Adams, 1999). Using the Moog synthesizer to emulate each instrument of the orchestra individually, Carlos performed classical pieces through a futuristic lens (which itself is often linked to *A Clockwork Orange's* dystopian setting). While her fame preceded her by the time of the film's release, no one had heard Purcell's march done using her approach. Moreover, even those familiar with Carlos's work had no reason to expect either the addition of the abstract sounds that permeate the piece, or the occasional collapse of the tonal melody. Thus, even within the already atypical framework of electronic classical music, this piece, replete with all its avant-garde accoutrements, is *particularly* unexpected. Positioning this idea with the cultural connotations of Purcell's original, we find yet more discomfort. Purcell's melody is quintessentially British: it carries the weight of the English monarchy behind it, which in turn has marked and guided British cultural identity for centuries. Thus, the distortion of a cultural classic such as this would simultaneously alienate and reassure the audience. The piece begins in a terrifying, surreal soundscape, transitions to a famous melody—even if played in a novel way—and ends with a dying crash.

Indeed, these percussive noises in particular bring an unsettling, morbid quality to Carlos's rendition. When her piece arrives at the famous melody, we hear unidentifiable percussion noises articulating the ends of phrases, where in the original march there is silence. Baroque music typically uses silence to articulate between phrasing, meaning the music briefly pauses between subsequent musical ideas (much like punctuation in language). Purcell's piece

does that methodically, and Carlos does that frequently here as well. However, unlike Purcell's version, Carlos occasionally, unpredictably, inserts an abstract sound, typically percussive and loud, where silence should be. The sound then registers as disruptive, even violent, to the listener. Indeed, in the fatalistic context of the piece, the inter-phrase silences evoke the fading of life in the approach toward death. The percussive additions then represent violent death itself, a central motif in the film.

Beyond the piece itself, Carlos's soundtrack bleeds into the visuals, bending them—and their inherent contradictions—to its will. Before the first shot, we see three title cards: one in bright primary red, followed by one in bright primary blue, and then back to the same red. These colors, opposites of each other on the visible spectrum, set the visual stage for glaring contrast. Simultaneously, we hear deeply distorted percussive sounds, followed by an uncomfortable, undulating noise steadily gaining in pitch. These sounds swell until eventually, they play the very famous first phrase of Purcell's piece—steeping the phrase in the dramatic weight generated by the uncertain and intense build-up. For the first 45 seconds, we hear contradictory abstract and electronic sounds, alongside the famous British melody, all the while alternating between saturated red and blue title cards. Without the soundtrack, these title cards simply stand in garish opposition to one another: red versus blue. The tone of the music capitalizes on this opposition but suggests to the viewer what the difference actually means via its funereal connotation: life versus death. Kubrick and Carlos give us nothing to focus on except conflict, visual and aural, for the majority of the first minute. This begins a trend that persists throughout the film.

We find the same reframing on the opposite end of the complexity spectrum, as we see sexually exaggerated mannequins that dispense drugged milk. The mannequins and milk pose profound, abstruse contradictions that receive their fatalistic importance from the music. The role of sexuality and sexual violence in *A Clockwork Orange* is immensely complex, and the visual composition doesn't simplify anything: the droogs are indulging in the drugged milk; the mannequins have hypersexualized body posture, unnatural hair coloration, plastic bodies, and soulless eyes; and the droogs' costuming accentuates their sexual predation (all topics for another day). In brief, milk connotes maternity, which is both reinforced and deeply polluted by the hypersexualized, breastfeeding mannequins. Further along these lines, milk occupies a very special place in Anglo-Saxon cultural heritage, having served as a dietary staple for the masses for centuries, and often connoting purity, which again ties into the maternity theme. Thus, the pollution of milk with psychoactive drugs, particularly those designed to enable "ultraviolence," conjures images of corruption of the most sinister and thorough kind.

The severity of this juxtaposition prompts us to see Carlos's adaptation of Purcell's march as another form of pollution—from pure, royal, and classical to muddied, evil, and electronic. But the ramifications of linking the aural and visual pollution extend beyond the first scene: the job of the soundtrack is not to resolve the conflicts of sexuality and pollution raised as the film begins. Rather, Carlos's piece simply reminds us to attend to these conflicts. For the entirety of the film, we will associate the opening visuals, and their underlying themes, with the funeral march, subconsciously imbuing them with life-or-death importance.

But Carlos's theme actually modifies more than just the visuals of the scene: it augments and reframes the role of the human voice, as well. In his monologue, Alex not only makes up

words, but inverts the structure of his sentences: “There was me, that is Alex, and my three droogs, that is.” In much the same way that Carlos alienates the listener by using newly constructed sounds, Alex uses language and grammar that the listener can barely follow. Yet, at the same time, we more or less get the point (we understand who they are, where they are, why they’re there, and who’s in charge). Similarly, we recognize Carlos’s theme for what it is, a semi-abstract synthesizer variant of Purcell’s funeral march. Rather than completely estrange the audience, both the dialogue and music situate us in the uncanny valley. This uncanniness slightly, but not completely, negotiates the visual incompatibilities. In other words, while we’re not quite sure what to make of the visuals, the soundtrack compels us to hear Alex’s words as an elegy—a powerful application of the human voice that simultaneously grounds us in the universal human concern with death, and estranges us from Alex’s cavalier enthusiasm surrounding violence.

On this elegy, note that the guiding structure of Alex’s narration is fairly typical—even simple—like a child talking about his day. Yet the content of his narration disturbs the audience, and his casual tone genuinely terrifies us. Here the soundtrack counterbalances that casual, playful tone with grim severity—another glaring incongruity. The grimness of the piece’s aural content acknowledges the deathly horror of the narrative content in a way that the narrative does not. The piece essentially signals Alex’s unreliable, sociopathic narration to us well in advance of his words, words that unfortunately guide us for the rest of the film. To that end, Carlos's piece also highlights Alex’s line “a bit of the ol’ ultraviolence” with a crescendo from an unidentifiable percussion instrument (which fades into eerie string imitations of tenuous tonality). Again, “a bit of the ol’” summons that casual tone that crashes head-on with

"ultraviolence," a crash that becomes literal with Carlos's percussion. The filmmakers are careful not to break the balance of what Alex is discussing: while he argues for a playful, casual understanding of his words and actions through dialogue, the music encourages us to view these ideas as ghastly, dangerous, and morbid.

Despite the undeniable significance that Beethoven and his music play in the film, Kubrick and Carlos choose Purcell's funeral march for the most important track in the film. This is particularly puzzling considering that Beethoven wrote two funeral marches in the same exact key of C minor (Symphony No. 5, Movement 3 and Symphony No. 3, Movement 2). Purcell's march connotes the social and moral leadership of the monarchy, which conflicts with Alex's anti-social tendencies. But perhaps we can take things a step further. Purcell wrote in the Baroque era, where key signatures carried very specific emotional connotations, to the point where it was believed that the key of the piece would cause those emotions in the listeners (Headrick, 2010). In Baroque convention, the key of C minor implied melancholy; it is an appropriately respectful tone for the death of a monarch (Stickland, 2009). However, for Beethoven, C minor represented a more powerful, heroically struggling, even revolutionary tone. In particular, scholars frequently connect Beethoven's *Eroica* funeral march (in the same key) to the French Revolution (Burke, 2004), a compelling rebellion against the Old World monarchy that could arguably suit Alex's anti-establishment persona. So why the Purcell piece instead?

Consider the first visual. The note upon which the second phrase of the funeral march resolves plays at the exact moment we cut to a close-up of Alex. There can be no mistaking it—this song plays for him; we are to focus on him; this film is about him. Yet this song amounts to

an elegy for a beloved monarch at the height of British imperial power. So why is it playing for this smirking man, who looks just as evil here as he turns out to be? On the one hand, Alex stands as the ultimate antithesis to the authority of not just of the British state, but of modern, civilized culture (in Alex's words, "sophisto" culture). At the same time, he is interested in power and authority. He enacts violence upon his droogs, both physically and emotionally, attempting to perfect his dominance and power. In a way, Alex sees himself as waging a one-man revolution against society where he alone can be the all-powerful hero—a perfect opportunity for Beethoven's C minor, with its connotation of heroic rebellion.

But it's not Beethoven's song. As listeners, are we compelled to hear the theme music with the connotations of C minor that Purcell intended, or are we tempted to transpose the meaning of the key onto Beethoven's register? Regardless, the piece is clearly elegiac. We are therefore justified in dwelling on the perhaps cheeky question of for *whom* the bell tolls? Is it the death of the monarchy, loyal to Purcell's interpretation (who wrote it for Queen Mary II)? This dystopian film certainly represents the decay, and literal death, of traditional British culture and morality. Alex's actions rage against those norms, and his evil smirk suggests that he's actively mocking the collapse of the older order. He hopes to usher in a sicklier era of cankerous anti-morality, actualized through ultraviolence.

Or perhaps the funeral is for Alex. Fundamentally, one can classify *A Clockwork Orange* as a very dark comedy, and at the heart of comedy lies irony, often tragic. The fundamental irony could be that Alex believes he's mocking the death of society but is inadvertently mocking the death of his own soul. This is a loss he brings upon himself by his actions through the rest of the film. Or perhaps the elegy is for *both* society and Alex. After all, Kubrick and Carlos structure

the opening, and the film as a whole, based on the forced coexistence of deeply incompatible entities. Maybe the elegy itself is a paradox, inherently self-defeating and self-contradicting.

The film raises these immensely complex questions in the first two minutes and sixteen seconds through the use of its title music. It is the duty of the rest of the film to answer or complicate these questions. The job of the title music stops at positioning the themes of the film and periodically reminding us to revisit them when the overture returns throughout the film. Kubrick and Carlos employ the funeral march from *A Clockwork Orange* to establish the battlefield of the film: each of the myriad incompatibilities represents distinct sides of the conflict. The haunting drone of the march incites them to mortal combat, and warns us of the war to come.

References:

1. Adams, Doug. “Making the world safe for synths: Three albums by Wendy Carlos: *A Clockwork Orange*”. *Film Score Monthly*, vol. 4, no. 3 (1999). Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.
2. Aikin, Jim. “Musicmakers: Wendy Carlos”. *Keyboard*, vol. 25, no. 4 (1999). Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.
3. Burke, Richard. “Revolutionary and Operatic Models for the Funeral March of the *Eroica* Symphony.” *The Beethoven Journal,* vol. 19, no. 1 (2004): Accessed 15 Mar. 2021.
4. Gennet, Robbie. “Key Tracks.” *Keyboard*, p. 14 (2005). Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.
5. Headrick, Paul. “The doctrine of affections.” *Telegraph-Journal,* (2010). Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.
6. Holmes, Thom. “Chapter 8: Robert Moog, Wendy Carlos, and the Birth of the Commercial Synthesizer” in *Electronic & Experimental Music*, p. 151–74, (2003). Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.
7. Jackson, Blair. *Wendy Carlos’ “March from ‘A Clockwork Orange’”. Mix,* vol. 26, no. 5 (2002). Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.
8. Stickland, Peter. “Henry Purcell.” *Musical Opinion*. Melton Mowbray, United Kingdom: Musical Opinion Limited (2009). Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.