The Role of Music

One of my favourite war movies begins conventionally enough for a film of its time. Orchestral music wells up, a rather noble theme emerges, and the credits roll. Ahead of the film's title, we read on individual 'cards' the names of the cast, including Laurence Olivier, Leslie Howard and Raymond Massey. But then convention is broken, for the last card in the sequence reads:

and the music of
Ralph Vaughan Williams
in

The film is *49th Parallel*, made by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger in 1941, when it was unusual to give the composer equal billing with the actors, making a star of the music. It is no more usual today.

Naturally, having Vaughan Williams work on your movie was something to brag about. The 69-year-old composer had never before written music for a feature film, and here he did a sterling job. But Powell and Pressburger's use of Vaughan Williams's name above the titles of *49th Parallel* was not simply a matter of boasting.

This intermittently impressive and unfailingly interesting film was in part designed, like Alfred Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), to encourage the USA to enter the war. Powell said he hoped 'to scare the pants off the Americans' and the movie, which in the United States was called *The Invaders*, ends with a fugitive Nazi U-boat commander momentarily reaching US soil at Niagara Falls. So the securing of a famous composer for the film, his name proudly proclaimed on screen in the first minute, was part of a propaganda exercise.

Now that its original purpose is behind it, the opening credit sequence of *49th Parallel* jolts its viewers in a different way. It makes 'the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams' look very much like a player, a character in the drama. And, in a way, it is. In a way, music always plays a role.

One of the most basic uses of music is to help the viewer become immersed in a film, to believe in it. This is a paradox, because a score, whether specially composed or assembled from pre-existing tracks, is one of the least plausible aspects of a movie. Even Hitchcock, a director attuned to music and not noted for his insistence on verisimilitude, dispensed with the score in *Lifeboat* (1944), because in a film set entirely in a small boat in the middle of the ocean, he couldn't see where the music would be coming from. The film's composer, Hugo Friedhofer, whose contribution to the picture ended with the two-and-a-half minutes of rather good music he had written for the opening credits, wondered aloud where Hitchcock believed the camera was coming from. And it is a fair point. Once you start worrying about the provenance of the music, nearly everything else about filmmaking invites similar scrutiny. Certainly this was the vale of tears into which the Danish filmmakers of Dogme 95 wandered when they made one of their self-imposed rules the avoidance of any sound that wasn't part of

the filming process. This of course included music.

Besides saving money, the motivation of Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg and their colleagues was partly to rid their work of falsity and manipulation and the seductive quality of the score. They were on to something, of course, even if one wouldn't necessarily want to watch their films all the time. It is precisely as a means of seduction that music has been used by filmmakers from the beginning. Even the makers of silent films understood the importance of music. It was played on the set for the actors. In the cinema, music was added live to the movie by a pianist or an organist or even an orchestra. Films have always used music to make comedy funnier, tragedy sadder, tension tenser, but most often to establish the mood, to set the scene. Music in mainstream films invites us to surrender, to lie back and think of Hollywood. Whether it is lulling or energising, creepy or humorous, film music aims to suck us in. And once sucked, we enter the film more or less on its terms. This has been the hope, at least, of film directors throughout history, especially those with an eye to commercial success.

Die Hard (John McTiernan, 1988) is a solid, mainstream example of this. Police officer John McClane (Bruce Willis) flies into Los Angeles to spend Christmas with his children and estranged wife, and within twenty minutes he is saving the world. How can we be made to believe such stuff ? How will we ever accept that after being punched and kicked a great deal, mostly in the face, after having his bare feet lacerated with broken glass, falling from significant heights and being shot in the shoulder, McClane is still going around taking out the bad guys? The answer, to a surprising degree, lies with Michael Kamen's resourceful score. The important thing is that the viewer is given no time to think, and the sheer amount of music helps here. The music provides continuity – literally, because it hardly ever stops – and it provides pace, slowing down, speeding up, and controlling the way the audience watches and understands the film.

The score itself is not without interest. We're continually reminded that it is Christmas by the sound of bells and by the use, throughout, of little motifs from 'Winter Wonderland' and 'Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!'. The 'Ode to Joy' theme from Beethoven's ninth symphony is similarly used. This begins as the frankly odd choice of music played by a string quartet at a party, then becomes associated with the German terrorists led by Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman). At the moment the door of a vault swings open to allow Gruber's men access to $640 million, the 'Ode to Joy' comes triumphantly to the fore, choir and all. So there is humour, too, in Kamen's score. But the musical package as a whole is there to manipulate the audience, and one can hardly complain about this, because it is surely manipulation that the *Die Hard* audience is after. If you go to a film like this, you will want to be white-knuckled at the edge of your seat. And, as Hitchcock was among the first to work out, your knuckles won't be white if you're puzzling over the logic of the plot. Music helps us suspend that function of the brain.

But it would be a mistake to believe that only a composed score can manipulate its listeners. Plenty of modern films make regular and strategic use of pop music for similar effect. The romantic comedy *Sliding Doors* (Peter Howitt, 1998) has a score by David Hirschfelder, but

more prominently, and more importantly in terms of scene setting, songs on the soundtrack by Jamiroquai, Dido, Blair and other 1990s pop acts.

The film opens on Helen (Gwyneth Paltrow), a busy working girl, leaving her apartment in the morning. Simultaneously, on the soundtrack, the harmless funk of Blair is making 'the Portobello Road' seem like a cool place to be, while advising us to 'Have fun, living in the city'. Helen is late for work, but she's happy (the music tells us this), jogging up the stairs from the underground, dodging the rush-hour commuters and ringing ahead to her favourite café to order a take-away coffee, which is duly waiting for her along with a kiss from the jolly Mediterranean proprietor. In other words, it's the opening titles of a dozen TV sit-coms.

As Helen finally arrives at work, late for her meeting, the credits have finished rolling, Blair's music has faded and the film has established time (the late 1990s), place (London) and mood (cheerful, with a tinge of wistfulness). So in a matter of minutes and with just a single song the audience is primed, disbelief willingly shelved.

In the case of *Sliding Doors* this is just as well, because before long we will be asked to accept two preposterous ideas. The first concerns magic on the underground and the sliding doors of the film's title: with a whoosh of David Hirschfelder's wind chimes, our heroine becomes two people – one making the train, the other missing it – who, for the remainder of the film, will inhabit parallel realities. If you like romantic comedies and you like Gwyneth Paltrow, you will go along with the magic. Rather harder to believe is that one of these Helens, an apparently intelligent and sophisticated woman, might fall for a man who finds it endlessly amusing to recite old *Monty Python* sketches. Sometimes the burden placed on film music is simply too much for it to bear.

The ability, indeed the tendency of film music to manipulate its audience was one of the objections raised by the cultural theorist Theodor W. Adorno and the composer Hanns Eisler in their book *Composing for the Films*, first published in 1947. Both authors, but especially Adorno, were writing from the perspective that the only thing that mattered was what we sometimes call 'high art' or, to put it another way, pure art. In a telling comment referring to the most famous living concert-hall composers of their day, the writers say that they 'cannot imagine Schönberg or Stravinsky stooping to compose genre music'. By genre music, they mean tense, dissonant horror themes, chromatic but ultimately consonant love themes and fast chase music. Apart from the fact that it might be argued that both these composers did indeed 'stoop', and more than once, it is Adorno and Eisler's assumption that film music must remain pure that raises eyebrows today and probably did so even back in 1947.

Film music does not and really cannot function like other music. For a start, there is the simple fact that it always accompanies pictures, often sound effects and sometimes dialogue, so that the music is just one component in the mix, the other elements affecting the way we hear it – that's if we hear it at all. More importantly, though, there is the matter of structure.

A successful piece of music, a musical 'work' – whether it is a three-minute, three-chord pop song or an hour-long symphony by Bruckner – will have a successful structure. To put it too simply, there is a beginning, a middle and an end. But film music is nearly all middle, the

beginning and end of the structure belonging to the film itself. Structure is classical music's rationale, but the rationale for film music is the film. Take this music out of its context, then, play it in the concert hall, and an absence is felt. The big tune might remain, likewise the evocative orchestration, and together these will bring back memories, feelings and images if we know a film well, but we will still miss the structure that the film itself provides. This is not the fault of film music. It is not a fault at all. It is simply the way in which music works in this context.

Adorno and Eisler wanted music to retain its structure, advocating that filmmakers should shoot and cut their movies to fit the music. Well, it's certainly a point of view. And, of course, it's been done, at least for individual scenes within films. But it is an extremely restrictive practice that the authors propose, and it hinges on the tacit belief that music is of prime importance in the filmmaking process, not merely one element among many.

Ultimately, the problem with Adorno and Eisler's theories was that they objected so much to commercialisation and mass culture that they were only ever able to approve of what we would call 'art films'. Even Sergei Prokofiev's famous score for Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), which most people would place up at the arty end of the spectrum, came in for criticism. And yet, while some modern readers might find much of the book too far detached from the real world to be taken seriously, *Composing for the Films* is still worth reading, and many of its authors' criticisms do remain valid.

The authors railed against the clichés of film music, which they felt had a deadening effect on the genre. Clichés should always be rooted out, and Hollywood at its laziest (which is most of the time) abounds in them. Among the clichés that Adorno and Eisler identified were certain types of music. These included not only genre music, but also the obvious use of culturally specific music for certain settings. For example, *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) is set in Argentina, and tangos continually remind us of this, just as cajun music is ever present in *The Big Easy* (Jim McBride, 1986). And there are individual sonorities that fulfill the same function: an accordion alerts us to the fact that we're in France, the Westminster chimes tell us we're in London, bagpipes place us in Scotland. Music can also inform us about time. Christmas music in Christmas films is an obvious example, from *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946) and *The Holly and the Ivy* (George More O'Ferrall, 1952) to *Comfort and Joy* (Bill Forsyth, 1984) and, as already mentioned, *Die Hard*. On a grander scale, there is music to locate a film in history: either music of the period in which the film is set or music in the style of the period. Examples of the former might be the sounds of the High Renaissance that stand shoulder to shoulder with Peter Maxwell Davies's original and very violent score in Ken Russell's *The Devils* (1971), set in the early 1600s; or Handel's music, more or less contemporaneous with the story in Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*, set in the middle of the eighteenth century. For an example of pastiche, which is altogether more common, one might mention the pseudobaroquery of George Fenton's music in *Dangerous Liaisons* (Stephen Frears, 1988). In most of these cases, it is not so much the music itself that Adorno and Eisler would have considered clichéd as the use of it.

However there are also plenty of musical clichés. Once the sound of the Western was established, it was never really shrugged off. Fiddles and mouth organs, folksongs and hoedowns, the parlour tunes of Stephen Foster, revivalist hymnody and the rhythmic galloping of horses' feet: stir it all together and you have the classic Western score.

By much the same token, the later *films noirs* all tend to have jazz scores, and not just any sort of jazz: it is slow, sultry and cool, like the films themselves. Miles Davis's trumpet in Louis Malle's *Ascenseur pour l' échafaud* (1958) is a good example. But fast, loud modern jazz is used for representations of mental or physical chaos in, say, *The Naked Kiss* (Samuel Fuller, 1964) or *Repulsion* (Roman Polanski, 1965) or John Cassavetes's *Shadows* (1959).

Rather harder to explain is the quasi-archaic sound regularly concocted by composers to represent ancient civilisations. You hear this music in *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960), *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (Anthony Mann, 1964) and any number of other toga flicks. The melodic lines will be modal, the chords will move in parallel, generally in intervals of fifths and fourths, there will be brass and there will be drums. Strangely enough, it is precisely these same elements that serve to convey the idea of 'natives' or indeed 'savages' – seen or unseen, noble or not. One might compile a very long list of these, but here are four examples offering some ethnic diversity: Nigerian natives in *Sanders of the River* (Zoltán Korda, 1935), Hindu natives in *Black Narcissus* (Powell & Pressburger, 1947), native Americans in *Broken Arrow* (Delmer Daves, 1950), Indian Muslim rebels in *North West Frontier* (J. Lee Thompson, 1959): their music is almost interchangeable.

Another cliché that Adorno and Eisler singled out was the pervasive use of the *leitmotif*. This concept is most often associated with the nineteenth-century music-dramas of Richard Wagner and especially with his operatic cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Individual themes represent individual characters, and so, at its most blatant and least interesting, the *leitmotif* will announce the entrance of a character rather in the manner of a personal fanfare. It often functions like this in Hollywood. Wagner applied his themes more subtly. For example, a *leitmotif* in the orchestra might suggest a character who is not present on stage, letting the audience know (if they're listening hard) that the one singing on stage is thinking of the one whose music we are hearing. Moreover, Wagner used his *leitmotifs* to stand for all manner of abstract concepts and emotions, in all manner of combinations. Claude Debussy, by no means an out-and-out critic of Wagner's works, nevertheless found little subtlety in *The Ring*, objecting to what he heard as a passing parade of musical signposts. For much the same reason, Adorno and Eisler objected strongly to the overuse of the *leitmotif* in film. And this was long before John Williams attempted to out-Wagner Wagner in *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977).

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As a general rule, clichés begin as fashions, and so to understand how some of the more virulent musical habits arose in the movies, it is worth, briefly, looking at where film music came from.

There was a time when virtually all film composers also wrote for the concert hall. Film music grew out of the classical tradition and, especially in Hollywood, most of the great names in early film music were born in Europe, particularly in the old Austro-Hungarian empire. During the 1930s – the first decade of talking pictures – hundreds of exiled Jewish intellectuals and artists arrived in the United States, among them Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Franz Waxman and Miklós Rózsa. These composers brought with them late-Romantic and expressionist styles that were European to the core.

As a child, Korngold had gone, on the recommendation of the late-Romantic composer Gustav Mahler, for lessons with Mahler's friend Alexander Zemlinsky. Another pupil of Zemlinsky's, later his brother-in-law, was the expressionist composer Arnold Schoenberg. As a young man in Vienna, Korngold had written concert music and operas, including *Die tote Stadt* and *Das Wunder der Heliane*, which were admired by two of the greatest opera composers of all time, Richard Strauss and Puccini. After he settled in Hollywood, Korngold applied his operatic skills to the swashbuckling films of Michael Curtiz. *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939) and *The Sea Hawk* (1940) all sound like operas without the singing. And of course this is how and why those *leitmotifs* got into films.

Franz Waxman composed *Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935), *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940) and *Sunset Blvd* (Billy Wilder, 1950). Rózsa, whose Hollywood career began a little later, was responsible for *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), *Spellbound* (Hitchcock, 1945) and *The Lost Weekend* (Wilder, 1945). Max Steiner, who had been in America since 1914, composed the scores for *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper, 1933), *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942). And we should add the name of another Jewish exile, the Ukrainian Dimitri Tiomkin. His film credits include Frank Capra movies such as *Lost Horizon* (1937), *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *It's a Wonderful Life*, four middle-period Hitchcock films, and a great many Westerns.

These composers and their imitators dominated Hollywood filmmaking in the middle of the twentieth century. All but Korngold continued into the 1960s (in Rózsa's case, the 1980s). Steiner and Waxman took their music into television, where the former worked on *Hawaiian Eye* and *77 Sunset Strip*, the latter on *Peyton Place* (Waxman had done the score for the 1957 Mark Robson film so it seemed natural to sign him up for the TV series, too). In particular, these composers established the norm – soon to be another cliché – that any film involving big ideas or big ambitions required an orchestra behind it. Even after film music had developed new tendencies with pop songs under the titles, or jazzy scores from American composers such as Elmer Bernstein, Tiomkin and Rózsa continued to be in demand for epics. Tiomkin composed *55 Days at Peking* (Nicholas Ray, 1963) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*; Rózsa's best-known film score is *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959).

Today, there are still very few modern Hollywood blockbusters that lack a lush orchestral score, and the big-name film composers remain broadly in the tradition established by the likes of Steiner and Rózsa. John Williams, obviously, owes a marked debt to Wagner. He also draws

on later European composers – Igor Stravinsky for the motor rhythms in *Jaws*, Prokofiev for those bold, unexpected modulations in *E.T.* (Spielberg, 1982). If it all sounds American to our ears, it is possibly because we have begun to associate this style of music with Hollywood (Adorno would have been appalled). Williams's great skill, and it should not be underestimated, is to give Hollywood what it wants, which is more of the same, but to do so with class and skill and subtle originality. Like his illustrious European-born predecessors, Williams has the ability to transform himself from project to project, while continuing to draw on musical styles and gestures from the broad tradition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century classical music.

New fashions will always come along, in film music as in all else, and in time they will turn to clichés. Since Thomas Newman began bringing his distinctive sounds to film music in the mid-1980s, and particularly since his score for *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999) and theme music for the HBO series *Six Feet Under* (2001–05), other composers for film and television appear to have been drawn to his instrumentation – marimba, tabla, synthesised 'junk' percussion, oboe – as well as his modal melodic writing and use of high, floating piano chords. It is hard to believe that Williams's score for *Catch Me If You Can* (Steven Spielberg, 2002) or Hans Zimmer's music for *Frost/Nixon* (Ron Howard, 2008) would have sounded quite as they do without the example of Thomas Newman. It should be added, however, that film composers as famous and busy as Williams and Zimmer (and probably Newman, too) can only manage their busyness by employing a team of assistants to orchestrate, elaborate and expand their musical ideas, so it might have been a minion and not the Great Men themselves who fell under Newman's spell.

Clichés in film music – and in other areas of film – are not, of course, immutable. One hardly needs to be a card-carrying postmodernist to recognise that it is possible to turn a cliché on its head and even revivify it so that it seems, for a moment, to be a brand new idea. Lawrence Kasdan's *Silverado* (1985) did just this for the Western; Bruce Broughton's score is not only in the tradition of the cowboy scores of yore, but is rather bigger and better than many of them. Similarly *Far from Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002) deals in the clichés of the domestic melodramas that Douglas Sirk once used to direct. The film is set in 1950s Hartford, Connecticut, where it's always autumn and red leaves fall elegantly from suburban trees, while behind respectable middle-class walls, respectable middle-class women wrestle with their husbands' homosexuality and their own growing attraction to the black gardener. An eighty-year-old Elmer Bernstein wrote the score for this one, recapturing the same kind of depiction of small-town life that he had created for films such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan, 1962).

Casino Royale (Martin Campbell, 2006) is a film notable for taking the worn-out and increasingly laughable James Bond franchise and bringing to it good writing, good directing and good acting (Daniel Craig). Forty-four years after *Dr No* (Terence Young, 1962), and at least two decades after all but the most dyed-in-the-wool Bond fans had ceased caring about the films, the obvious approach would have been to go for laughs (since the audience was already laughing) and play up the self-parody. After all, the 1967 film called *Casino Royale*

(Val Guest et al.), very loosely based on Ian Fleming's book of the same name, had been an early Bond spoof. The clear alternative to making a comedy was to put the beached whale of a franchise out of its misery and stop making the films altogether. It surely can't have crossed many people's minds that James Bond might be made to seem exciting again. But, alongside the elevation of creative standards, Bond was revived by addressing the clichés that had accrued over the years and subverting them one by one.

Part of this was a matter of role reversal. It is Bond, and not the 'Bond girl', who gets naked, just as it's Bond, not the girl, who says – and seems to mean – the words 'I love you'. It is also Bond who walks out of the waves in his swimmers, mirroring the shot of Ursula Andress in a bikini emerging from a shimmering sea as Honey Ryder in *Dr No*. Moreover, when a bartender asks the secret agent whether he would like his martini shaken or stirred, the new Bond replies testily, 'Do I look like I give a damn?'

But the biggest clichés are saved for the end, and this alone helps to freshen them up. Wicked Mr White (Jesper Christensen) answers his phone and a voice says, 'We need to talk.' He replies, 'Who is this?' Simultaneously, he is shot in the leg. Now '007' saunters onto the scene to supply the answer and the film's last line: 'The name's Bond. James Bond.' And, with that, Monty Norman's famous theme erupts over the closing credits. Suddenly this tired old bit of music sounds as thrilling as the first time we heard it, a musical cliché triumphantly reborn.

It was against such a backdrop of musical trends and clichés that the composer Bernard Herrmann shone so brightly. There was no lack of professionalism about Herrmann – he got the job done – but there was also very little of the chameleon. His scores jump out at you, in almost any context, as being the work of Bernard Herrmann. He had such a strong musical idiolect that one can usually spot his music within seconds. He used instruments distinctively and combined them distinctively. Yet more striking, whether one understood the technicalities or not, was his use of harmony, which typically blurred major and minor chords. You can hear these chords in films from *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) to *Taxi Driver*, while in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) Herrmann's music delivers a real-time analytical exposition of the technique as he spells out his chords, note by note, rolling back and forth in contrary motion across the arpeggios. It's as though he is saying, 'See? This is how I do it.'

Herrmann's music is vital to *Vertigo*. This might be one of Hitchcock's greatest films, but it is also one of his least typical. The majority of the director's work is either light comedy masquerading as high suspense, or vice versa. *Vertigo* is neither. It is a profoundly sad picture, a study in hopeless obsession, and the music elevates what is essentially a tawdry narrative to the level of grand, romantic tragedy. Music can do that to a film. In *Notes on a Scandal* (Richard Eyre, 2006), the story of a jealous middle-aged London school teacher reaches surprising heights of passion, thanks not only to the music of Philip Glass (a composer who owes a thing or two to Herrmann), but also and specifically to the high volume of much of that music. There are moments in the film when the score literally overwhelms the drama, drowning it out and, in the process, making the ordinary mythic.

Like Herrmann, Glass is a very distinctive musical voice and hard to miss. Glass has

resisted aligning himself with any one director, but Herrmann will forever be associated with Hitchcock, in spite of scoring only eight of his fifty-odd films, seven if you don't count *The Birds*, which had no score but for electronic bird noises, supervised by Herrmann. Composers with strong musical idiolects can help create a house style for a director, if the partnership lasts long enough. Besides Herrmann with Hitchcock, one thinks of Nino Rota and Federico Fellini, Georges Delerue and François Truffaut, Michael Nyman and Peter Greenaway. And when it is a matter of choosing music from existing sources, a filmmaker's musical preferences can achieve something similar.

It is hard for a seasoned moviegoer to hear Bach's solo cello suites and not think of the later films of Ingmar Bergman. The director's use of music may be minimal, but it is always striking, and the sound of Bach – it was usually a *sarabande*, a slow dance in triple time – sticks in the mind. By the same token, New Orleans jazz or the Benny Goodman orchestra or the tunes of George Gershwin will bring to mind Woody Allen, though it is only the films set in and around New York City that actually feature vintage jazz, and only the comedies, from his first feature, *Take the Money and Run* (1969), to *Whatever Works* (2009). Allen's serious films tend to employ serious music – Varèse's *Ecuatorial* for the dream sequences in *Another Woman* (1988) and Schubert's G-minor string quartet for the murder story in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) – while films set beyond the Triborough area often use lighter classical music: Mendelssohn in *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982), Italian opera and popular classics in the London films *Match Point* (2005) and *Scoop* (2006) and, for that matter, a specially composed Philip Glass score in *Cassandra's Dream* (2007). There are also genre films, such as *Shadows and Fog* (1991), a comedy in the form of a German expressionist film that is full of the music of Kurt Weill. *Husbands and Wives* (1992) has no music at all except for Bubber Miley's sublime version of 'What Is This Thing Called Love?' over the opening and closing titles. So the vintage jazz association is intermittent. But often a filmmaker who uses strong music well imprints things on our memories that are not strictly accurate. We associate Hitchcock with Herrmann from just eight films, and Woody Allen with jazz from not many more.

Adorno and Eisler complained about films in which music was used simply to reinforce what was on the screen, but right from the beginning there have been examples of the opposite tendency with music used ironically. Cheerful or pretty music in tense situations is something of a favourite. Hitchcock did this memorably in *Strangers on a Train* (1951), associating the murder with the sound of a fairground organ playing 'And the Band Played On', and horror films have made much use of children's songs, musical boxes and other innocent musical sounds. Progressive rock band Goblin's jangly theme at the start of *Suspiria* (Dario Argento, 1977) shares the same instrumental timbres and the same mode – actually the very same notes – as the beginning of Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells* heard in *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973).

Badlands (Terrence Malick, 1973) might not be a horror film, but its two antiheroes, Kit (Martin Sheen) and Holly (Sissy Spacek), commit plenty of murders. The film is set in the American Midwest in 1959, and the recurrent music is from Carl Orff's *Schulwerk*. In the

1930s, Orff composed his rather basic pieces as learning tools for children to play on tuned percussion (xylophones and the like), and they are still used in some classrooms today. In point of fact, Orff had originally written the music in the hope of selling his whole teaching system to the Hitler Youth, but they never bought it. One probably shouldn't make too much of that connection in the context of Malick's film. Kit and Holly are not Nazis, but they are certainly youthful – Holly is just fifteen – and the music reminds us of this with every appearance, its simple innocence at odds with the killing on screen. Similarly, the chic foxtrot that opens Pier Paolo Pasolini's notorious *Salò* (1975) stands in ironic contrast to the shocking scenes of human degradation that follow.

Music has many possible roles in films. It can even be itself. And when music is seen as well as heard, it really becomes a player. As the US soldier Bob Johnson (real-life Sergeant John Sweet) reaches the organ loft of Canterbury Cathedral and sits down at the console in Powell and Pressburger's mystical wartime film *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), he not only fills the historic building with music, but also the whole of the final reel. The sense of attainment, achievement, relief and finally optimism is palpable. In contrast, Charles Aznavour's luckless piano player in *Tirez sur le pianiste* (François Truffaut, 1960) does more than get into trouble through his playing, he allows it to becomes a metaphor for his frustrations and his boredom. We watch him sitting expressionless in the café, tapping out Georges Delerue's infuriatingly catchy little tune.

In Jane Campion's *The Piano*, the instrument is something noble, almost alive. Ada (Holly Hunter) doesn't just express herself through the piano, she lives and breathes through it and will do anything to keep contact with it. In Scott Hicks's *Shine* (1996), the piano comes to symbolise a dangerous dream ('No one's ever been mad enough to attempt the Rakh 3!'), the agent of mental destruction for David Helfgott (Geoffrey Rush) as well as the path to some sort of redemption. *The Soloist* (Joe Wright, 2009) blends all these themes.

The Italian wedding music at the start of *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) demonstrates better than words the continuing links of the American Mafia families to their Sicilian homeland and its traditions. All the guests know the tunes. But by *The Godfather: Part II* (Coppola, 1974), at a similar outdoor party a continent away at Lake Tahoe, Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) is at pains to present himself as a model American citizen. The musical corollary of this is that the band no longer has any idea how to play a tarantella. When an old man tries to teach them the rhythm, he is mocked.

There's a similar example of history passing and musical traditions fading in *The Scent of Green Papaya* (Tran Anh Hung, 1993), as the film jumps from 1951 to 1961. In a scene in the early part of the movie, the father (Ngoc Trung Tran) is playing a *đàn nguyet* – the two-string 'moon lute' – with apparent skill. In a later scene, his son is holding the instrument, turning it over in his hands as though wondering how it might work. Finally, he gives it a bit of a polish.

Tran's film has a very interesting score, part traditional Vietnamese, part Western contemporary, by Tôn-Thât Tiêt – the film was shot in France, and many of the credited musicians on the soundtrack are from the Paris-based contemporary-music specialists

Ensemble Intercontemporain. It also features a composer, Khuyen (Vuong Hòa Hôi), as one of the main characters in the second part of the film, and it manages to show his occupation with some fidelity. He improvises, he scribbles (we see a sheet full of musical ideas), he rejects. The conventional Hollywood representation of the composer has inspiration striking, followed by a quick sprint to the piano and then the music pouring, fully imagined, out of the composer's fingers. In the same way, on-screen songwriting teams generally manage to come up with both words and music in little more than the time it takes to sing the finished song.

It is not just Hollywood that makes a poor fist of conveying the act of creating music. Even such celebrated European films as *Death in Venice* (Luchino Visconti, 1971) and *Three Colours: Blue* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1993) don't really get it right. For one thing, we seldom see any work going on. Visconti gives Dirk Bogarde a little pair of glasses to make him look like Mahler (whose music we are listening to) and, in the process, turns Thomas Mann's Aschenbach from a writer into a composer, but apart from a few shots of a piano, there's little to connect him to his trade. Kieslowski at least tries to show us Julie (Juliette Binoche) composing. We see musical notation and hear a synthesised orchestra playing extracts, but somehow it is all too slick and easy. *Amadeus* (Milos Forman, 1984) does it better. At least one senses the work, the effort. We see and hear musical ideas being had, jettisoned, revised and re-orchestrated. If only the modern instruments on the soundtrack matched the eighteenth-century instruments on the screen!

But Hollywood has got the composer right at least once and, what's more, in a solidly mainstream film. As its title predicts, *The Glenn Miller Story* (Anthony Mann, 1954) shows us the main biographical events in the doomed bandleader's life, but, much more impressively, it also allows us to eavesdrop on the process of composition and, in particular, orchestration. In terms of the film's plot, the 'Glenn Miller sound' has been something of a Holy Grail. Anthony Mann shows its creation. Obviously it helps if the audience knows what it is listening for because they will recognise 'the sound' as it emerges.

To start with, there is no distinctive sound at all: the Glenn Miller Orchestra might be any big band. As the film progresses, the instruments proliferate into choirs and the harmonies get closer, but it is only when Joe, the trumpet player, splits a lip in rehearsal and Miller (James Stewart) is forced to rewrite his charts overnight that 'the sound' finally arrives.

'Clarinet lead. And I can harmonise it real tight, all in the same octave,' Miller says to no one in particular, reaching for the manuscript paper and rushing from the room.

Next, we see him seated at a table, writing the walking bass line of 'Moonlight Serenade', and as he does this we hear the line with simple piano chords. Then muted trombones add a syncopated accompaniment, then muted trumpets, and finally unison saxophones join in, playing the last line of the chorus.

As Miller works, the camera pulls back as though to make room for this expanding sonority. At last, that clarinet lead emerges, swathed in close-harmony saxophones, and the picture dissolves to the rehearsal room, beginning tight on the bell of the clarinet. Slowly the camera pulls back, once again, to show us the whole band with Miller conducting. There's a close-up

of Miller, listening, looking pensive, looking pleased, before dissolving into another image of him, still conducting, but now in a tuxedo. The band is in a dance hall, scores of young men and women are dancing to ‘Moonlight Serenade’ and Miller’s wife, Helen (June Allyson), is seated at a table looking on. She reaches round to the back of her neck where, we may assume, the hairs are on end.

When the band’s trumpets and trombones stand up and the crowd bursts into spontaneous applause, Si Schribman (George Tobias), Miller’s backer, turns to Helen excitedly.

‘It looks like he’s got it, maybe,’ says Si. ‘Listen to those kids!’

‘But there’s no maybe about it, Mr Schribman,’ Helen replies, firmly. ‘That’s it. That’s the sound.’

Throughout these changing scenes the music hasn’t stopped, it has grown. It has gone from a simple bass line to the full Glenn Miller Orchestra sound. It has played a role. Indeed, it has played the principal role.