ON THE FILIPINO ROMANTIC MOVIE THEME SONG OF THE 1930S AND 1950S:

The Use of Music Genres Kundiman, Danza, and Harana in Romantic Scenes[1]

José S. Buenconsejo

Music in the soundtrack is an important element in sound film as a multimedia form. Often understated or unheard [2], it fundamentally adds subliminally (though sometimes explicitly) to the expressive layer of the represented scene, thus, deepening the intended affect or overall mood of the sound-image sequence [3]. More importantly, music in the soundtrack indexes specific feelings and attitudes that the various agencies in the film are conveying, from those projected by the characters in the diegesis, those from the various kinds of film narrators (explicit or implied), and to that of the film director in collaboration with the music scorers.

A movie theme song is a special type of music in the soundtrack.[4] Because the topic of theme song is undertheorized in the field of film music criticism, this essay offers only a preliminary interpretation of the nature of theme song, particularly in the context of Philippine movie productions from the 1930s to the 1950s. This element in the multimedia seems to parallel the function of the hook in a pop song, i.e., it brings important and poignant parts of the narrative to high relief and is what is easily remembered after the film viewing experience. In a normative sense, a movie theme song is not composed before the film is produced. Hence, it is a mere by-product of the memorable musical elements in the soundtrack that is subsequently marketed separately as sheet music or in a standalone commercial recording or part of a larger whole called original sound track (OST). A theme fundamentally functions as a "motto," i.e., an abbreviation of the soundtrack that generates the remembrance of the general effect or style that a film conveys.

A theme fundamentally functions as a "motto," i.e., an abbreviation of the soundtrack that generates the remembrance of the general effect or style that a film conveys.

Practices connected to producing films for the local market in the Philippines depart from the normative utilization of music as theme song. A number of commercially successful movies from the late 1930s to the 1950s used pre-existing music as a kind of lynchpin to spin a story that then got rendered into a film narrative (see Mutya ng Pasig below). Part of this might have to do with ensuring success since the familiarity and popularity of the already composed music material could strongly and potentially be a crowd drawer.[5]

The incorporation of pre-existing popular tunes into film was part of a larger common procedure inherited from the immediate past in the Philippine sound films of the 1930s. Its practice grew from the age of silent films in which stock music came in handy to supply the various moods projected by the moving images. Today, with the standard and value for originality and innovation, "canned music" or "appropriated score" is frowned upon. But, as a cultural practice, it stayed long in Filipino sound films of the 1930s, even beyond the 1950s, during which time the practice of composing original scores already had a firm footing.

Appropriated scores, thus, existed side by side with newly composed ones in the said period. This can be seen in the pre-World War II extant films, such as Octavio Silos's *Pakiusap* (1939) and Francisco Buencamino's *Ibong Adarna* (1941). Preexisting recorded sound –not as many though–was used as "background music" in melodramatic scenes (i.e., of Maria in the village inn). It is not known who was the first Filipino composer to write a completely new and original music score to a film because the loss of most pre-WWII titles prevents one from finding this out.

Rolling back to Philippine film history, film adaptations of existing sarswelas happened as early as 1919 in Reyes' and Tolentino's *Walang Sugat*. Sarswela-like films would later evolve in the 1930s. One of the best extant examples of which was Carlos van Tolosa's *Giliw Ko* (1939), with musical numbers supplied by composers such as Ariston Avelino and Juan Silos Jr. This fictional film is, to use the conventional generic designation, in the musical romance genre. Its story is about the thrills and allure of urban social life that was burgeoning Manila. This theme lends itself to diegetic musical scenes of radio studio orchestra, rural subjects serenading harana, and wedding celebration music. In conformity with the musical genre, there are also song numbers that highlight particular romantic scenes. Aside from the sarswela influence, some of the numbers in the said production reveal styles of American Broadway stage and Hollywood film productions. This is a corollary to the fact of the Philippines was annexed by the US empire for the most part of 20th century and was, therefore, a huge market for its film products.

Filipino's propensity for musical numbers in locally-produced, "sarswela-inspired" films is a blueprint of the bourgeois taste for sentimental themes in movies that emerged immediately after WWII.[6] This middle class sensibility cannot be separated from the material conditions that fueled the imperative to produce and consume glossy, glamorous, spectacular, and sensual images. The need to sell an entertainment commodity in the market meant "cosmeticizing" social reality so that they will have a "come on" effect on the audiences and consumers. Obviously, the theme of romantic love provides an easy formula to guarantee returns in the box office. Yet, the theme of romantic love in itself is not sufficient to explain why certain romances would resonate better among individual Filipino film spectators. This sufficient condition brings us to the issue that the romances must have been understood as embedded within singularly Filipino contexts and that they embody certain social values that touched the personal lives of the audiences. Music in Filipino films from the 1930s to the 1950s supported the lucid expression and indication of identities and subjectivities felt and sensed by the idealized characters on the fictional screen. These sonic expressions stand in as, to use Charles Peirce's vocabulary (as explained neatly by Turino),[7] "indexical icons" (i.e., "indexical" being a part of the characters' gestures in particular life-worlds or habitus and "icon" being a replica or copy of the characters' gestures as a real referent).

Take the case of the contrast in characters between the urbanite landlord son Antonio and the barrio folks Jose and Guia in *Giliw Ko*. In one scene, the landed man sings an American Tin Pan Alley song in the KZRM music studio of Manila where Antonio is the music director of a big jazz band. He teaches this to Guia, the barrio lass who, in a cliché love triangle, is admired by the tenant's son, Jose. Guia is to have her debut in KZRM radio program. At the last minute during that debut , Guia, filled with jealousy upon witnessing the unfaithfulness of Antonio, refuses to sing the American song and instead sang an "awit sa aming nayon" (song of our place). The song, titled "Tunay na Tunay" ("Genuinely True") was composed by Juan Silos Jr. and is sung is in the *danza filipina* style. The beginning stanza of this song is tinged with a dark sound reminiscent of another

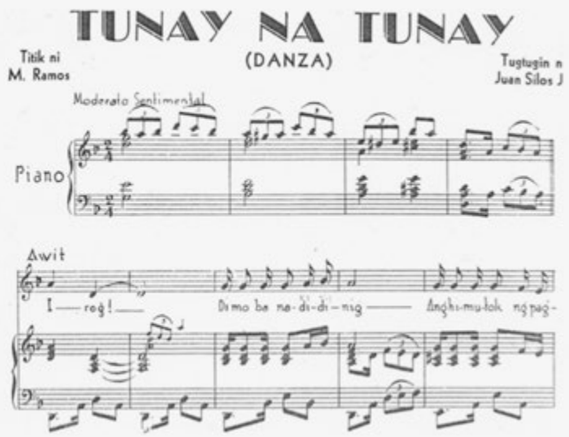

Figure 1. An excerpt from the theme song of *Giliw Ko* showing features of the danza such as triplets in melody, duple meter, and dotted rhythm in the bass line. Courtesy of the UP College of Music Library.

popular genre called *kundiman*. It is spiced up a bit with the graceful *tresillos* (triplets or rhythm of three against two) in the accompaniment. Together with the dotted rhythm in duple meter played by the bass part, the *tresillos* becomes the *danza*'s most distinguishing feature, with the *kundiman* as the contrast. It is in moderate triple time with simple conjunct melodic directions.

Historically, both *kundiman* and *danza* were popular Hispanic musical types that Filipino inhabitants and *creollos* in the course of colonial domination had assimilated, especially between the late 18th and 19th centuries. *Cundiman*, as it was spelled then, was originally a song with dance. In the 19th century, it underwent stylistic transformation in its lyrics, from jocose to serious. The lyrics of the "Cundiman de 1800" is about mosquitos. In the 1846 "Geronella Notation" (preserved in *Biblioreca Nacional de Espana*), the song was danced and had a coquettish and lighthearted estribillo called *Hele Hele Cundangan*. In 1886, piano teacher and repairer Diego Perez included it in his long medley of 19 popular tunes and dances called "Recuerdos de Filipinas." This was exhibited in the 1887 Madrid-Philippine exposition.[8] By the 1890s, the *cundiman* acquired deeper associations, i.e., with love for local culture and native social identity, so did other local popular genres, such as the *balitao* and *cumintang*.

Almost all Filipino composers from that said decade composed in the *cundiman* style. "Jocelynang Baliuag," a patriotic *cundiman* penned perhaps by the former Spanish regimental band leader Lucino Buenaventura, sort of became a revolutionary song associated with the Malolos Philippine government.[9] Moreover, in 1897, Julio Nakpil inserted a section clearly dedicated to the memory of Jose Rizal in his piece "Pahimakas." This was a solemn *cundiman* in 4/4 time. This act clearly showed what the word "*cundiman*" has become a symbol of local collective self by the end of the 19th century. Hence, it gained gravitas in feeling, which continued to be attached to the genre even until now.

In contrast, *danza* (or *habanera*) did not assume a serious connotation. *Danza* came from the international genre *contradanza*. Although English in origin, it evolved into the Spanish *habanera* in the 19th century and this subsequently gained international popularity, reaching the Philippines by the time of the opening of the Suez Canal in the 1870s. Those who had access to a cosmopolitan education in urban areas such as Manila, Cebu, and Iloilo were the first to assimilate the idiom, together with the ever popular and global 19th century genre *valse* (waltz), into their habitus. From around the late 1870s to the early 1880s, original compositions, such as "Flor de Manila" and "1878" by Eusebio Alins, and "Sampaguita" which is attributed to Dolores Paterno, were already in the salons by the piano-owning bourgeoisie in the city. This was followed later by Julio Nakpil's "Recuerdos de Capiz."

Some of the second generation Filipino composers from the 1920s were from the University of the Philippines (UP) Conservatory of Music. This list included Francisco Santiago, Nicanor Abelardo, and violinist and pedagogue Bonifacio Abdon. A notable non-UP composer is Francisco Buencamino Sr., who composed pieces in both genres.

Abelardo's "Bituing Marikit" is a *danza*, even if it is a love song similar to the *cundiman*. It became the theme song of the 1937 hit movie with the same title by Sampaguita Pictures. The movie essentially relied on the popularity of already well-known songs (see handbill of the screening below) that had certainly been circulated as sheet music before the film was released. Other such examples included Miguel Velarde's, "Dahil Sa'Yo", Manuel Velez' "Sa Kabukiran," and folk songs like, "Ay Kalisud" and "Aking Bituin" (later known as a *harana* song, "O Ilaw"). I argue that it was

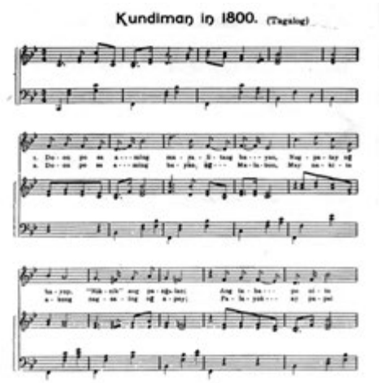

Figure 2. Kundiman of 1800, a folksong with jocose lyrics. Courtesy of Emilia Reysio-Cruz.

Figure 3. *Cundiman* as dance-song idiom in 1846. Courtesy of the Gervacio Gironella Album.

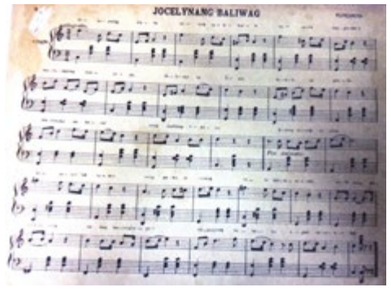

Figure 4. "Jocelynang Baliuag" is a revolutionary kundiman ca. late 1890s. Courtesy of the UP College of Music Library.

precisely in the constant utilization of *danza* music in the film medium that the romantic sentiments became more wedded to it as a genre. But unlike the *cundiman*, *danza* was associated with gay gentility and refined mannerisms that the emerging polite civil society in Manila was cultivating. It lacked the tendency for gravitas that was the constructed identity of the *kundiman*. Take the case of Constancio de Guzman's *Bayan Ko* and Abdon's kundiman or "Kundiman ni Abdon". These were patriotic songs in line with the convention of resistance and patriotism that stemmed from the late 1890s revolutionary movement. No film producers from the 1930s and the 1950s, thus, utilized the said two pieces. This was perhaps due to two reasons: they did not have the glossy, chic, and glamorous element suitable for a film product and because these were overtly anti-American.

The generic distinction between the lightly sentimental danza and the graver sentimental *cundiman* is further demonstrated in the utilization of Nicanor Abelardo's kundiman but with touches of *kumintang* gestures, "Mutya ng Pasig." Composed in the 1920s, this became the theme song of the same movie in 1949 or 1950. Nicanor Abelardo was known for his astutely poetic treatment of the subject of the *kundiman*, which is the legendary water nymph (*diwata*) of Pasig River. The music matched the supernatural theme of the later movie. It is as if the song itself was intentionally made for that movie. In the absence of concrete evidence, one cannot assume that the story crafted by Richard Abelardo, the writer and director of the film *Mutya ng Pasig*, was in the mind of the composer and Richard's cousin, Nicanor. This showed that the reverse process in the 1948 production happened: theme song first before the movie.

The depth of sentiment in the *harana* scene of the 1941 movie *Pakiusap* was, in my interpretation, what prompted the choice of Francisco Santiago's "Pakiusap" over the *danza*. While one would argue that a *danza* would have been a better choice for that scene, the gravity of the act of *pakiusap* (pleading) by the male suitor (even if his social status was way above the barrio maiden) was what warranted the more serious idiom. In this presentation, the *kundiman* love song is not only diegetic to the scene. It also serves as a motto or a musical abbreviation for the entire feel of the movie and its theme, which is the despair of love across social or status group divisions. The same depth of drama and desperation was what made Lamberto Avellana choose Santiago's *kundiman* "Anak Dalita" as the theme of the movie, which depicts the struggles and social pain of the poor slum dwellers in Intramuros. Life after destruction due to wars is an ironic metaphor of neglect that the Philippine government had failed to do in that time of reconstruction.

In contrast to the profound sentiments of the *kundiman*, a theme of mere romantic love is suited to a genre like *danza*, with its graceful and laid-back dotted rhythm in the bass. This is shown in the Mars Ravelos's *Maalaala Mo Kaya*, which had Constancio de Guzman's *danza* of the same title as its theme. In the dialogues of the said movie, the characters refer to *kundiman* as a song or voice of the inner self (*loob*). But the story about the separated but later reunited lovers does not really need a music that is dark and tragic because everything ended well in the movie. A *danza*, though termed "*kundiman*" is, therefore, more suited with the task.

The romantic love song style with *danza* features would continue to be utilized beyond the *harana* scenes in movies like *Maala-*

ala Mo Kaya. Constant iteration of romantic pictures of the 1950s would further lead to the creation of a new music genre labelled as *harana*, which was always *danza* in style. Examples of these are "Dungawin Mo Hirang" by Santiago S. Suarez and "Awit Ko'y Dinggin" by T. Maiquez.

From the examples of the theme songs in selected 1930s and 1950s Filipino movies, this article discussed how two music genres were utilized as mottos or external sound icons that encapsulated the diegeses of the movies' fictional worlds. As mottos, they served as a mnemonic to the film viewing experience and, hence, a device for easy recall of the moving images in a summarized form. I had argued that cultural associations fundamentally operate to link the effect of the musical genres to the moving visual experience.

Historically received from the past, the two genres in question were the *kundiman* and the *danza*. They were once easily distinguished from each other in terms of their formal characteristics and features of which were ostensibly emergent to the specific performance contexts of the past. Late 19th century *kundiman* was associated with local selfhood. Thus, it was clearly marked off from the *danza* which was genteel and politically neutral. As a musical symbol, the *kundiman* saw its use in projecting patriotic sentiments, while the charming *danza* remained associated with middle class domestic subjectivity and frivolity. The danza "Buhat" by Miguel Velarde, for example, was the dance music in a scene in 1939 film *Tunay na Ina*. The received kundiman from the late 19th century would have been anachronistic for such leisurely pursuit. The *danza*'s association with lighter sentiment, thus, suited articulating romantic love sentiments more as it had lesser gravitas in effect compared to a lofty and even "sublime" kundiman. The case of sound tracking the harana scene in the movie *Pakiusap* is an illustration. To reiterate, the scene depicts the difficulty and pain of loving across social division. Thus, the *kundiman* fits logically to that scene, even if the event is romantic.

It is common in the 21st century to conflate the traditional Filipino music genres. This article had hinted that it was the film medium of the 1930s and 1950s, with its impulse to market sentiment and love, that muddled the musical associations. As a genre in the late 19th century, the *danza* primarily circulated as a tool for pleasure in the salas among the rich in the form of sheet music for the piano. On the other hand, mid-19th century *cundiman* was a popular song-dance genre which was used as entertainment with its jocular lyrics. By the Philippine revolution against Spain (1896-1898), the *kundiman* had gained gravitas as it was used as a patriotic symbol of incommensurable love of self for the Other which, in this case, was the country. This sublimity was not accorded to the *danza* that became more and more attached to the notion of the middle class' feeble sentiment and romance. As musical forms, the *danza* and *kundiman* were once quite distinct but they became interchangeable by the 1950s because motion pictures incorporated these two genres into *harana* scenes.

In short, this paper explored the role of motion pictures in shaping the transformation of Filipino musical expressions. It analyzed a number of movie theme songs, such as danzas like "Bituing Marikit" and "Maalaala Mo Kaya" and kundiman like "Pakiusap" and "Anak Dalita." To understand such transformations, there was a need to orient music genres as communicatively meaningful within particular historical contextualization of enunciations and as interactive with various media, particularly film. In tandem, these became vehicles for shaping expressive Filipino popular cultures.

Figure 5. Handbill of the film *Bituing Marikit* in 1937. The film is lost. From IMDB.

José S. Buenconsejo is Professor of Musicology at the University of the Philippines College of Music. He has researched extensively on indigenous ritual and cultural history. He has also done documentary film projects, one of which, *Seven Dances of Life,* was nominated for Best Documentary Film in the 2018 Gawad Urian.

1 This article is made possible by the Ateneo-UP Salikha grant.

2 Claudia Gorbman, "Classical Hollywood Practice" in *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London Bloomington: BFI Pub. Indiana University Press, 1987), 73-79.

3 Peter Kivy, "Music in the Movies" in *Music, Language, and Cognition: And Other Essays in the Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press Oxford University Press, 2007), 62-87.

4 Following Chion's "The Three Borders," the film's soundtrack can be categorized according to where it is heard in relation to the moving images: (1) sounds and ambient noises (including music) that are within the frame of the represented scenes (**onscreen**) and are called diegetic, (2) sounds heard clearly outside of the image-frame called **nondiegetic** or extradiegetic (i.e., what is explicitly external to the image), and (3) sounds that are sort of "in and out" of the frame, hovering around the screen (**offscreen**), not quite in the diegesis and not quite far from it. See Michel Chion, Film, a Sound Art, English ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 247-261.

5 The same thrust is manifested in the Filipino teleseryes of the recent decades, such as "Maalala Mo Kaya," "Pangako Sa'Yo," etc.

6 There were other genres of course such as films on historical subjects, epics, and so on.

7 Thomas Turino, "Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music." *Ethnomusicology: Journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology* (1999), 221-55.

8 José S. Buenconsejo (ed.), *Philippine Modernities: Music, Performing Arts, and Language, 1880 to 1941*. (Diliman, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2017), 17-58.

9 Ian Christopher B. Alfonso, *Muling Pagbasa sa Jocelynang Baliwag: Paglutas sa Problemang Historical ng Tinaguriang "Kundiman ng Himagsikan."* (Los Baños: Philippine High School for the Arts, 2017), xx-xxi.

EKONOMIYA NG MGA BULAKLAK:

Ang Paghanga sa *Bituing Walang Ningning*

Christian Jil R. Benitez