Introduction

Let us imagine for a moment that the commercial narrative cinema had developed a bit differently: let us imagine movies having no background music. \(^1\) Raised in this hypothetical tradition, we are thoroughly accustomed to a cinematic world in which sounds (seem to) issue solely from the depicted narrative space. This cinematic world resembles the “real” world, more or less, in its conventions of depicting sonic space. Then one day, brought up in this relatively nonmusical tradition, we attend a screening of a film from another dimension—say, *Mildred Pierce*, with Max Steiner’s lush and insistent score full of dramatic, illustrative orchestral coloration. What sheer artifice this would appear to the viewer! What a pseudo-operatic fantasy world! What *excess*: every mood and action rendered hyperexplicit by a Wagnerian rush of tonality and rhythm! What curious music, as well—robbed of its properly musical structure, it modulates and changes color, chameleonlike, in moment-to-moment deference to the narrative’s images.

One hardly need emphasize that the acceptance of music in narrative cinema is purely a matter of convention. Such conventions have a long history, much of which predates the cinema itself. But does the notion of convention itself suffice to explain the operation of music in the movies? Every moviegoer, every film scholar, in ear notwithstanding, becomes aware from time to time of the ubiquity and psychological power of music in dramatic films. Such moments of lucidity tend to occur when we take note of how shamelessly emotional or copious a film score has been: what has been blaring in the background the entire time suddenly comes to the foreground of consciousness. Suddenly the story is perceived to inhabit a world strangely replete with musical sound, rhythm, signification... until, a few scenes or measures later, we drop off, become re-invested in the story again. Then the music is “working” once more, masking its own insistence and sawing away in the backfield of consciousness.

This book is for students and scholars of film who are curious about the
ways of music in films. It should prove especially illuminating for those who most successfully block out film music—not only during viewing/immersion at the cinema, but also in the process of reading—conscious, analytical investigations of the cinema’s workings. For if Marxist and Freudian theory have forever destroyed the romance of the autonomous perceiving subject, and if recent film theory has taken on among its primary missions to understand the historical, psychological, and textual positioning of the cinematic spectator, we need to start listening to the cinema’s uses of music in order to read films in a literate way.

What is music doing in the movies, and how does it do it? These questions engender others in turn. What and how does music signify in conjunction with the images and events of a story film? What can we learn from dramatic forms of the past that employed music—nineteenth-century theater and opera—and in what ways does cinema’s particular technological and historical situation give a specific thrust to this inquiry into the interrelations among media? Why do we tend not to hear music consciously in watching a story film? What business does music have in a movie in the first place? How have standard practices of composing, mixing, and editing evolved, and what alternative practices are possible/conceivable? How does music in film narration create a point of experience (note the visual chauvinism of saying “point of view”) for the spectator?

The trajectory of this book follows, more or less, the history of my own inquiry into film music. I began in a structuralist-semantic spirit to seek means of considering how music can signify in the narrative film.

It became clear that the semiological notion of codes is crucial to the study of how film music means. First of all, music has its own purely musical signification, creating tension and resolution through highly coded structure and syntax. Pure musical codes are operative in films, but only in a limited fashion, for in order to signify, they oblige the listener to listen—just as, in a restaurant, we may “hear” the din of human speech, but we cannot make sense of utterances until we listen to their vocabulary, syntax, and intonations. Some films, including Jean Mitry’s Pacific 231, Walt Disney’s Fantasia, and Jean-Marie Straub’s Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach, subordinate cinematic/narrative logic to musical logic in this way.

But surely, the vast majority of films employ music in other ways. While they might contain sequences or “production numbers” devoted to musical performances, the organizing structure of such films—even musicals and “lives of composers” films—is, precisely, a classical narrative with its own demands for pacing, development, spatiotemporal structure, and so on. Music is subordinated to the narrative’s demands.

Music signifies in films not only according to pure musical codes, but also according to cultural musical codes and cinematic musical codes. Any music bears cultural associations, and most of these associations have been further codified and exploited by the music industry. Properties of instrumentation, rhythm, melody, and harmony form a veritable language. We all know what “Indian music,” “battle music,” and romance music sound like in the movies; we know that a standard forties film will choose to introduce its seductress on the screen by means of a sultry saxophone playing a Gershwineesque melody. As for cinematic codes: music is codified by the filmic context itself, and assumes meaning by virtue of its placement in the film. Beginning and end-title music, and musical themes, are major examples of this music-film interaction. Based on the Wagnerian principles of motifs and leitmotifs, a theme in a film becomes associated with a character, a place, a situation, or an emotion. It may have a fixed and static designation, or it can evolve and contribute to the dynamic flow of the narrative by carrying its meaning into a new realm of signification.

Maurice Jaubert stated in 1936:

We do not go to the cinema to hear music. We require it to deepen and prolong in us the screen’s visual impressions. . . . It ought, like the script, the cutting, the decor and the shooting, to play its own particular part in making clear, logical, truthfully realistic that telling of a good story which is above all the function of a film. So much the better if, discreetly, it adds the gift of a poetry all its own.2

What is the “own particular part” of film music?

Approaching this question, we must start by taking narrative, the “telling of a good story,” into account. The conventional narrative film constructs a diegesis—a story world, a place of the action. Classical narratives emphasize the diegesis over the narration, efface narrational presence. Modernist forms, on the other hand, problematize the transparency of discourse, point out that it’s the narration that constructs the diegesis. Music enjoys a special status in filmic narration. It can be diegetic (musicians can play in the story, a radio can be on)—in the trade this is called source music—or nondiegetic (an orchestra plays as cowboys chase Indians on the desert). The reader might object that the human voice is just as flexible in its freedom to be diegetic or nondiegetic. But the nondiegetic voiceover is perceived as a narrative intrusion, and music is not. Furthermore, music very often crosses the boundary, even in the most conventional films. We are all familiar with soundtrack music that suddenly ceases as a character leans over and turns off a radio; or, conversely, as in a scene in North By Northwest, what seems like piped-in music in a train’s dining car becomes more and more clearly nondiegetic.3
This ease in crossing narrational borders puts music in a position to free the image from strict realism. As something not very consciously perceived, it inflects the narrative with emotive values via cultural musical codes. A music cue’s signification—eerie, pastoral, jazzy-sophisticated, romantic—must be instantly recognized as such in order to work. The prevailing dialect of film-music language has therefore been composed of the nineteenth-century late Romantic style of Wagner and Strauss. Bernard Herrmann and others may have gone beyond this style by exploring dissonance, harmonic ambiguity, even atonality, and scores using jazz, electronic music, and music of other cultures have expanded those boundaries in other directions. But the core musical lexicon has tended to remain conservatively rooted in Romantic tonality, since its purpose is quick and efficient signification to a mass audience.

But enumerating the semiological functions of film music does not help to confront an issue that keeps returning to haunt us: why is film music there in the first place, even in the most “realist” film, in virtually all films abiding by rules of verisimilitude? Few would wish to claim that “classical realist cinema” is realist in the sense of approximating objective reality (if such a thing were representable)—film serves up fantasy in the guise of verisimilitude. Classical filmic discourse (mise-en-scène, camerawork, editing, sound recording, and mixing) contributes to the portrayal of a world, the representation of a diegesis. The nondiegetic shot or sound is the exception, not the rule—except in the case of music. Therefore: why music, in the tightly consolidated “realist” world of the sound film? It gives mood, pacing, emotion, yes—but why is it permitted into the narrative’s regime at all?

For one thing, it has history on its side. Music has gone hand in hand with dramatic representation ever since the ancient Greek theater, and no doubt before, in ritual forms.

When we read a play such as the Suppliants of Aeschylus, it is as if we were seeing only the libretto of an opera to which all music, dances, and stage directions are missing. It is so clearly a lyric drama that the music itself must have been the principal means by which the poet conveyed his meaning. Euripides’ The Bacchae, on the other hand, has far greater intrinsic substance, but even here the emotional intensity of the individual scenes often rises to such a pitch that music had to take over where the words left off; just as when a person is so overcome with feeling that words fail, and he resorts to inarticulate sounds and gestures.  

Tradition has it that the departure from the prosaic toward poetry, emotion, the irrational, is served by music. Merely to cite tradition, however, is necessary but not sufficient in the case of film music. Cinema’s techno-logical specificity obliges further analysis. Why did the resources of editing, framing, and cinematography not take over all the functions that music had in previous theatrical forms? In chapters 2 and 3, I explore some of the vicissitudes in the development from nineteenth-century melodramatic theater to the “fully diegetic sound film.” This is by no means a history; for a history would entail a book in itself (Nicholas Vardac’s 1949 From Stage to Screen is precisely such a study). But a sense of the historicity of some of the technological, generic, and contextual conditions that prevailed through the arrival of the feature sound film is, I think, necessary for assessing the strength of the “continuity of conventions” argument for explaining the persistence of background music into the classical narrative film.

What does music do in the sound film? The psychic payoff it brings to the realist regime of sound film must be considerable for it to have survived, and thrived, as an integral component of even the most “realistic” movies. What is there about music itself that affects an audience? To understand background music’s functions better, and to shed momentarily any cultural snobbishness that might prevent us from considering its most basic functions—bodily functions before gastronomic arts, if you will—we might consider the social and psychological functions of music that is designed to be utilitarian: easy-listening music, Muzak. Both easy-listening and film music belong to larger contexts (dentist’s office, film narrative); neither is designed to be closely listened to. Both employ familiar musical language, both bathe the listener in affect. Easy-listening music (at least in theory) helps the consumer buy, the patient relax, the worker work; its goal is to render the individual an untroublesome social subject. Film music, participating as it does in a narrative, is more varied in its content and roles; but primary among its goals, nevertheless, is to render the individual an untroublesome viewing subject: less critical, less “awake.” This notion has several important consequences. Music may act as a “suturing” device, aiding the process of turning enunciation into fiction, lessening awareness of the technological nature of film discourse. Music gives a “for-me-ness” to the soundtrack and to the cine-narrative complex. I hear (not very consciously) this music which the characters don’t hear; I exist in this bath or gel of affect; this is my story, my fantasy, unrolling before me and for me on the screen (and out of the loudspeakers).

Music lessens defenses against the fantasy structures to which narrative provides access. It increases the spectator’s susceptibility to suggestion. The cinema has been compared to hypnosis, since both induce (at least in good subjects) a kind of trance. The trusting subject (trusting the hypnotist, the system of cinematic narrative) removes defenses to access to unconscious fantasies. The hypnotist has his/her induction methods: soothing voice, repeti-
tion, rhythm, suggestion of pleasantly enveloping imagery, and focusing the subject's attention on one thing to the exclusion of others. Narrative cinema has its own "induction methods"—including the harmonic, rhythmic, melodic suggestiveness and channeling effects of music. Film music lowers thresholds of belief. This begins to explain why it has continued to be indispensable even to "realist" narrative cinema.

The bath of affect in which music immerses the spectator is like easy-listening, or the hypnotist's voice, in that it rounds off the sharp edges, masks contradictions, and lessens spatial and temporal discontinuities with its own melodic and harmonic continuity. It lessens awareness of the frame; it relaxes the censor, drawing the spectator further into the fantasy-illusion suggested by filmic narration. When we shed a tear during a pregnant moment in a film melodrama (Mildred Pierce's little daughter quietly dying of pneumonia) instead of scoffing at its excess, music often is present, a catalyst in the suspension of judgment.

But what is it about music (especially tonal music) that has this power? What is the nature of musical pleasure? Why has it been regarded since Plato as having privileged access to the soul? Why are "depth" and "inner truth" evoked in accounting for the effect of music? Here, psychoanalytic investigations of sound and music hold particular appeal. Scholars have extended Freudian thought to theorize the auditory realm. According to the psychoanalytic scenario of psychic development, the infant is born into a sort of "sonorous envelope," and is as yet unaware of distinctions between self and other, inside-outside the body. Further, more than one writer claims that the "auditory imaginary" precedes the mirror phase: "the melodic bath (the mother's voice, her songs, the music she plays to the infant) provides [the infant] a first auditory mirror which it first uses with its cries." The imaginary longing for bodily fusion with the mother is never erased; and, these writers argue, the terms of this original illusion are defined in large part by the voice.

Thus, primary experiences of sound may account for the characteristics of depth and inwardness, and of an ineffable, preverbal attachment to music (which is the conscious organization of sounds into harmony and melody). To insist on the auditory imaginary is to suggest a basis for understanding mechanisms of pleasure and identification in music. Of course, music is a highly structured discourse of sound: but its freedom from referentiality (from language and representation) ensures it as a more desirable, less unpleasurable discourse.

Music is pleasurable, signifying but nonrepresentational discourse. Not unlike the hypnotist's discourse, it guides the spectator-audience, and increases receptivity to the narrative in its excess. Music that is noticed, which calls attention to itself, swings away from the imaginary toward the symbolic. The goal of "classical" scoring is rather to place the auditor's ears in a subject position harmonious with the spectator's eyes: to create a unified phantasmatic body of identification, a heightened for-me-ness for the regressive ego.

This brings us to the classical Hollywood cinema, which is predicated on the subject's unified body, the effacement of discourse in favor of story, and a trance-like spectatorial immersion in its world. "Classical" scoring has its own set of practices in accord with these principles. In chapter 4 I have synthesized a list of rules and principles for music composing, recording, and mixing in the classical narrative film. No one would wish to claim that Max Steiner's score for Casablanca works according to exactly the same model as Bernard Herrmann's Vertigo music or David Raksin's intriguing sounds for Abraham Polonsky's Force of Evil. My "degree zero" for the classical film score corresponds to the generalized paradigm of classical Hollywood film form of the thirties and forties—a flexible model, or rather, a range of possibilities.

The reader will note frequent references to scores by Max Steiner in chapter 4's exposition of classical scoring principles. Steiner was surely one of the most melodramatic of Hollywood's great film composers. His pseudo-Wagnerian orchestrations and harmonies draw on a well-established reservoir of emotive signification. A Steiner score explicated, underscores, imitates, emphasizes narrative actions and moods wherever possible; it wears its heart on its sleeve, contributes toward the depiction of a dramatic universe whose sole transcendental morality might be that of emotion itself. If I have called upon Steiner's music to illustrate facets of the model of classical scoring, it is because, fundamentally, the classical Hollywood film is melodrama—a drama with music.

Finally, here is a list of some things this book is not:
2. A study of representative film music composers.
3. A study of music in the following genres: the musical, the documentary, and experimental films.

The annotated bibliography includes references for readers interested in the subjects above.
CHAPTER IV
Classical Hollywood Practice: The Model of Max Steiner

Chapter I explored the ways in which music can function formally and narratively in a film. Chapters 2 and 3 examined aesthetic, historical, technological, and psychoanalytically oriented explanations for the development and functioning of nondiegetic music in dominant (Hollywood) narrative cinema. In this chapter I shall describe the actual form music takes in Hollywood films, and the principles determining it. First, however, we must situate our investigation in the context of the "classical model" of narrative cinema in general, for the codification of mainstream film has everything to do with the musical language that goes with it.

To use the term "classical cinema" means understanding this cinema as an institution, and a class of texts which this institution produces. The classical film text (which at its most specific is a Hollywood feature film of the thirties and forties) is a conjunction of several economies, a narrative discourse determined by the organization of labor and money in the cinema industry, by/in ideology, and by the mechanisms of pleasure operating on subjects in this culture. Christian Metz reminds us of these interconnected aspects of the system:

It is not enough for the studios to hand over a polished little mechanism labelled 'fiction film'; the play of elements still has to be realised ... it has to take place. And this place is inside each one of us, in an economic arrangement which history has shaped at the same time as it was shaping the film industry.¹

What are these texts produced by the classical cinematic institution? In the sense that we cannot identify the one prototypical classical film, no one textual model exists. Rather, there exists a pool of conventions, of options, whose combination and recombination constitutes an easily recognized discursive field. We know that even allowing for a wide diversity of genres and studio and authorial styles, there is something identifiable as classical Hollywood cinema, an implicit model that determines the duration of a film, the possibilities of its narrative structure, and its organization of spatiotemporal dimensions via mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing (that is, the "continuity system"), and sound recording and mixing.

André Bazin's influential essay "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" identified the classical age of the sound film as the late thirties.

By 1938 or 1939 the talking film, particularly in France and in the United States, had reached a level of classical perfection as a result, on one hand, of the maturing of different kinds of drama developed in part over the past ten years and in part inherited from the silent film, and, on the other, of the stabilization of technical progress.²

Bazin likens the state of cinematic form to the equilibrium profile of a riverbed: just as geological equilibrium results from "the requisite amount of erosion," film genres and narrating techniques reached a new stability a decade after the coming of sound. He describes 1938–1939 as a moment of "classical perfection" of the feature film, exemplified by Stagecoach, Jezebel, and Le Jour se lèce. What typifies the classical mode of narrative discourse? For Bazin, storytelling in this cinema is characterized by an editing whose purpose is analytic, dramatic, and psychological. The classical film ordinarily unfolds in several hundred shots, but these shots do not build up a narrative in the synthetic language of Soviet montage. Classical decoupage presupposes a unified scenic space. It renders this space via "establishing" (long) shots and subsequent breakdown; spatial intelligibility is safeguarded by such devices as the 180-degree rule, the eyeline match, and the shot reverse-shot pattern. Further, cutting is motivated by dramatic and/or psychological logic, accommodating to the spectator's need to see details of narrative importance.

Since Bazin, work on such films as Stagecoach (1939), Young Mr. Lincoln (1939), The Big Sleep (1946), Suspicion (1941), Mildred Pierce (1945), and The Maltese Falcon (1941) has studied features of editing and narration in the context of Hollywood's strongly consolidated "classical" system. These
interrelated "classical" features predominate in cinema as far back as the teens and into the commercial cinema of the present, as well as in commercial cinemas of many other countries.

Recent film scholarship has recast the Bazinian description of the classical filmic system in two major ways. First, his phenomenological conceptualization of the spectator as an autonomous perceiving subject—who "wants" to see dramatically important details, and whose perceptual demands cinema satisfies—has given way to an anti-idealist stance which regards as crucial the film's ideological and psychical positioning of its viewing subject. The film positions the spectator; it does the looking and listening for the spectator. Classical editing has been reconsidered and understood in light of its particularly compelling strategies of channeling the spectator's desires, giving the "impression of reality," and encouraging imaginary identification with the film.

The second change in critical emphasis goes hand in hand with the first. If story refers to the narrative world and what happens in it, and if discourse refers to all the means of articulating the story, classical Hollywood film works toward the goal of a transparent or invisible discourse, and promoting fullest involvement in the story. For instance, cutting is a potentially disruptive characteristic of filmic discourse; Hollywood "effaces" the discontinuity that is part and parcel of cutting by means of continuity editing. Continuity editing is a kind of work that masks its own traces, a highly coded symbolic discourse permitting the spectator's fullest identification with the film, as Metz explains:

[T]he basic characteristic of this kind of discourse, and the very principle of its effectiveness as discourse, is precisely that it obliterates all traces of the enunciation, and masquerades as story. . . . a fundamental disavowal [the film "knows" and at the same time "doesn’t know" it is being观] has guided the whole of classical cinema into the paths of 'story', relentlessly erasing its discursive basis . . .

Now, as part of this discourse, background music clearly constitutes a major element of the classical narrative filmic system. It persists across most genres, from musicles to detective films, science fiction, war, and adventure films, from screwball comedies to domestic melodrama. The very fact that theoreticians of classical filmic discourse, even those who write about the soundtrack, have slighted the specific uses of music in this cinema attests to the strength of music's resistance to analysis. Nonetheless, principles similar to those articulated with respect to classical editing (and other subsystems of Hollywood narrative film) underlie the composition, mixing, and audiovisual editing of film music. Manuals and articles on sound recording and mixing, and aesthetic and practical writings on music composition and mixing, as well as the films themselves, provide access to these principles.

What follows, then, is a synthetic outline of the principles of music composition, mixing, and editing in the classical narrative film. It describes a discursive field rather than a monolithic system with inviolable rules. While I shall not argue for equilibrium profiles or ripeness, I shall emphasize the period of the late thirties into the forties, in order to contribute to an established and growing body of knowledge about the field of classical cinema. Examples shall be drawn in particular from scores by Max Steiner—not to establish his work as a paradigm, but because of his voluminous presence and influence in the classical period. That many of the films he scored have been the object of analysis by contemporary film scholars also renders him central to the study of Hollywood's film music norms.

Classical Film Music: Principles of Composition, Mixing, and Editing

I. Invisibility: the technical apparatus of nondiegetic music must not be visible.

II. "Inaudibility": Music is not meant to be heard consciously. As such it should subordinate itself to dialogue, to visuals—i.e., to the primary vehicles of the narrative.

III. Signifier of emotion: Soundtrack music may set specific moods and emphasize particular emotions suggested in the narrative (cf. #IV), but first and foremost, it is a signifier of emotion itself.

IV. Narrative cueing:
- referential/narrative: music gives referential and narrative cues, e.g., indicating point of view, supplying formal demarcations, and establishing setting and characters.
- connotative: music "interprets" and "illustrates" narrative events.

V. Continuity: music provides formal and rhythmic continuity—between shots, in transitions between scenes, by filling "gaps."

VI. Unity: via repetition and variation of musical material and instrumentation, music aids in the construction of formal and narrative unity.

VII. A given film score may violate any of the principles above, providing the violation is at the service of the other principles.

I. Invisibility

The physical apparatus of film music (orchestra, microphones, etc.), like the film's other technological apparatus, such as the camera, must under
most circumstances not be visible on the screen. In an article on film sound technology, Charles F. Altman asserts.

The assumption that all sound-collection devices must be hidden from the camera is . . .—along with the complementary notion that all image-collection noises (camera sounds, arc lamps, the director’s voice, etc.) must be hidden from the sound track—the very fouling gesture of the talkies.¹

It is revealing to examine RKO’s King Kong (1933, score by Max Steiner) with respect to the “rules” being formulated here. For Kong was one of the early 100 percent talkies to have a sustained dramatic score, and the very places in which it exhibits awkwardnesses help us recognize, in retrospect, what would soon become the smoothed-out version of classical film scoring and editing. Early in the film, when adventure filmmaker Carl Denham and a half dozen companions go ashore to investigate Skull Island, the principle of invisibility receives an interesting treatment.

A tribe of natives is staging a spectacular ritual at the foot of the enormous wall that separates the island’s human denizens from its monstrous ones. Some natives, dressed in ape gear, dance. Others are draping flower garlands onto a native virgin girl; we will learn that they are preparing her for sacrifice to appease the great ape Kong. Denham masses his companions behind some foliage and, as if plants could really hide him, stands behind a small palm; he parts some palm fronds to look. “Holy mackerel, what a show!” he exclaims. The spectacle, the excitement, the rising frenzy of the exhibition (natives) and the voyeurism (Denham & co.) build in tandem with the music.—What music? Well, indeed, music is overwhelming the soundtrack at this point. We can hear the tribal chanting and drum-beating, which we accept as diegetic—as well as the RKO studio orchestra (to be considered nondiegetic) playing a rhythmically repetitious figure in accompaniment.

Movie mogul Denham can’t stand to “lose” this spectacle. He hauls his movie camera out into the open and starts cranking. The visual apparatus is exposed, made visible. The tribal chief sees that he’s being filmed (or something like that; he has presumably never seen a movie camera). Like a huge black feathered orchestra conductor, the chief gives an imperious cutoff signal. The heretofore unconscious dancing, chanting, drumming, and nondiegetic orchestra stop abruptly.

Something—the force of convention, perhaps—made it acceptable for Denham to part the palm fronds, creating a keyhole through which to gaze (and hear) unseen (and unheard). But one cannot move one’s kino-eye out into the open without being seen, without “breaking the diegetic illusion” (to make a parallel between the film spectator and the native folk). But the case of sound technology that King Kong puts forth is even more mystifying.

Are we to believe that Denham is shooting a silent film of all this dancing, chanting, drumming? No sound recording apparatus gets caught in flagrante delicto along with the camera. If a microphone and a soundman were accompanying Denham, what would the mike pick up? Would it record the drumming, the chanting, and the RKO orchestra? We know the “obvious” answer to this question, but this scene seems to test its very obviousness in eliminating, on the diegetic level, a soundman along with Denham and his camera. It is as if sound in a film has no technological base, involves no work, is natural, and will simply “show up,” just like the spectacle Denham witnesses. Further, the classical paradigm would have us believe that no work has gone into the sound of what we witness. Sound is just there, oozing from the images we see. The principle of invisibility of the sound-collecting apparatus is inscribed more deeply into the fictional text than the corresponding visual principle of the camera’s invisibility.

Some further remarks on the principle of invisibility are in order.

a. When the musical apparatus is visible, the music is “naturalized” as diegetic.² Exceptions tend to prove the rule. Eric Rohmer’s Perceval (1978) shows us other possibilities, as medieval musicians are seen in frame accompanying the stylized actions. Perceval does not actually break the rule, as it is not by and large attempting to be a diegetic Hollywood film, but, to the contrary, is approximating conventions of medieval dramatic performance. Another exception occurs when the Godard of Prénom: Carmen (1984) intercuts segments showing a string quartet rehearsing Beethoven, with the fiction story of bank-robber Carmen and her companion. The quartet is situated problematically in the fiction via the female violinist who appears once or twice in minor scenes of the principal narrative. Otherwise, these shots of musicians have a wholly ambivalent status: are they nondiegetic (outside the “story”) or not? A third kind of example is often found in Hollywood film comedy and musicals: Mel Brooks and Woody Allen have made comic use of “diegetizing” background music by placing musicians in an unlikely mise-en-scène (e.g., Count Basie’s jazz orchestra on the western plains of Blazing Saddles).

b. Ordinarily, then, the visual representation of music making signals a totally different narrative order, that is, the diegetic, governed by conventions of verisimilitude (e.g., a dance band playing in a nightclub scene). And this, even when the visual representation is not really the source of the music we hear. When Stefan, the Louis Jourdan character in Letter from an Unknown Woman, plays the piano, Louis Jourdan is not playing the piano;
piano music has been dubbed onto the soundtrack to produce the illusion. A Hollywood music editor lays bare the artificiality of most diegetic music when he tries to describe a typical playback session on a set (where actors are filmed to synch with prerecorded "diegetic" music):

You need also to watch for sideline musicians. They are actual musicians who are used in scenes where they are supposed to be playing, but like other performers they are just doing a playback. They may actually play at the same time but such a rendition is not recorded nor used.8

II. "Inaudibility"

I have set the term in quotes because, of course, film music can always be heard. However—and somewhat analogously to the "invisibility" of continuity editing on the image track—a set of conventional practices (discursive practices and viewing/listening habits) has evolved which result in the spectator not normally hearing it or attending to it consciously. Its volume, mood, and rhythm must be subordinated to the dramatic and emotional dictates of the film narrative. Leonid Sabaneev (or perhaps his translator) expresses this principle in particularly telling language:

In general, music should understand that in the cinema it should nearly always remain in the background: it is, so to speak, a tonal figuration, the "left hand" of the melody on the screen, and it is a bad business when this left hand begins to creep into the foreground and obscure the melody.7

Bad business, precisely, for it is good business to give ticket-buyers what they have come for, namely a story, not a concert. This story is the right-hand melody, the focus of attention and desire; film music supports it with "harmony"—in fact, gives it signifying resonance.

Here are some practices dictated by the principle of inaudibility.

a. Musical form is generally determined by or subordinated to narrative form. The duration of a music cue is determined by the duration of a visually represented action or a sequence. Thus Sabaneev gives much practical advice about how to compose flexible and neutral music that may be stretched or trimmed, in the likely case that the studio should lengthen or shorten scenes in the final cut. "One might call it elastic or extensible music." He encourages composers to build pauses and sustained notes into the music, for one can draw them out further if the sequence is lengthened with added shots. The composer should write in short musical phrases, also for ease of cutting. Sequential progressions are convenient and therefore encouraged. And "it will be well for the composer to have small pieces of neutral music ready for any emergency—sustained notes on various instruments, rolls on the drum or the cymbal, string pizzicati, chords of a recitativo type."8

King Kong’s score is largely constructed in this way, especially the central section where Denham, Jack Driscoll, and other crew members, themselves pursued by the island’s fancifully created monsters, are attempting to find Ann and rescue her from Kong’s clutches. Sequential progressions—each restatement of a motive beginning a step or a third higher than the last—build tension incessantly and relentlessly, and at the same time surely proved adaptable in fitting with the final cutting of the images. Steiner here anticipates Sabaneev’s prescription for elastic, extensible film music, and this predilection for sequential repetition is a hallmark of his style throughout his career.

b. Subordination to the voice. "It should always be remembered, as a first principle of the aesthetics of music in the cinema, that logic requires music to give way to dialogue.9 Sabaneev means narrative logic. Dialogue, or any narratively significant sounds for that matter, must receive first priority in the soundtrack mix, as composer Ernest Gold learned:

What fiendish tortures await the composer at [dubbing] sessions! That tender cello solo, his favourite part of the entire score, lies completely obliterated by a siren which the director decided was necessary at that exact spot in order properly to motivate the reaction on the hero’s face! Or that splendid orchestral climax . . . held down to a soft pp because of a line of narration that had to be added at the last moment in order to clarify an important story point.10

Pursuing the notion that music must not drown out speech, Sabaneev, already out-of-date by Hollywood standards, recommends in 1934 the total cessation of music while there is dialogue on the soundtrack, to rule out any aural "competition" and to ensure the dialogue’s clarity. In the United States, the practice of lowering the volume of music behind dialogue, rather than eliminating it, was already de rigueur. A machine nicknamed the "up-and-downer," developed as early as 1934, had as its purpose to regulate music automatically. When dialogue signals entered the soundtrack, the up-and-downer reduced the music signal.11 In an article about the up-and-downer, soundman Edward Kellogg gives a psychological rationale for the music-dimming practice it automated, claiming that it approximated the perceptual activity of attention:

The system employed here attempts practically to imitate by changes of relative intensity the psychological effect of switching attention from one sound to another. In actual life we can usually take advantage of differences of direction in order to concentrate attention upon a particular sound. The result
of concentrating upon one sound is, of course, not to make the sound louder; but with our directive sense to help, we can largely forget the other sounds, which accomplishes the same purpose as making them actually fainter. Since, in the present case (i.e., a film soundtrack with more than one type of sound), all the sound comes from one direction, and our directive sense cannot be brought into play, the suppression of the sounds in which the listener is less interested is accomplished by making them fainter.\textsuperscript{12}

The thirties also saw the development of guidelines for composing and orchestrating music to be placed behind dialogue. Musicians and soundmen felt that woodwinds create unnecessary conflict with human voices, and they stated a preference for strings. They concurred on questions of range, too: even in the seventies Laurence Rosenthal advised “keeping the orchestra well away from the pitch-range of the speaker—low instruments against high voices, and vice versa.”\textsuperscript{13} although other composers note that combining voice and orchestra in the same register can sometimes be a creative move, if a sort of indistinguishable tone color is desirable.

c. For editing, certain points are “better” than others at which music may stop or start, for “music has its inertia: it forms a certain background in the subconsciousness of the listening spectator, and its sudden cessation gives rise to a feeling of aesthetic perplexity.”\textsuperscript{14} Typically, within a scene, music enters or exits on actions (an actor’s movement, the closing of a door) or on sound events (a doorbell, a telephone ring). It may also begin or end by sneaking in or out under dialogue, or at the moment of a decisive rhythmic or emotional change in a scene. It goes relatively unnoticed in these cases because the spectator’s attention focuses on the action, the sound, or the very narrative change the music is helping to dramatize. Finally, starting the music cue is considered more difficult than ending it; an entrance seems to be more conspicuous than an exit. Thus music almost never enters simultaneously with the entrance of a voice on the soundtrack, since it would drown out the words.

d. The music’s mood must be “appropriate to the scene.” Classical composers avoid writing music that might distract the viewer from his/her sceneic involvement in the story; the point is rather to provide a musical parallel to the action to reinforce the mood or tempo. A fast horse chase needs fast “Ride of the Valkyries” music; a death scene needs slow, somber music. Counterexamples—music inappropriate to the mood or pace—are usually comedic or self-reflexively modernist. In Godard’s Bande à part (1964), a film abounding with Hollywood genre expectations gone wrong, brass instruments pleasantly execute a waltz as two would-be robbers tensely attempt to break into a house via a ladder to the upper floor.

Incidentally, this is one reason why the nineteenth-century Romantic or-

III. Emotion

Music appears in classical cinema as a signifier of emotion. Sabaneev describes the image-track, dialogue, and sound effects as “the purely photographic” objective elements of film, to which music brings a necessary emotional, irrational, romantic, or intuitive dimension. Music is seen as augmenting the external representation, the objectivity of the image-track, with its inner truth. We know that composers add enthralling music to a chase scene to heighten its excitement, and a string orchestra inflects each vow of devotion in a romantic try to move spectators more deeply, and so on. Above and beyond such specific emotional connotations, though, music itself signifies emotion, depth, the opposite of logic.

Music and representation of the irrational. Following King Kong’s opening titles, music leaves the soundtrack altogether for a while. The film presents entrepreneur Denham and his “moving picture ship” making preparations to set sail. Denham makes a last trip into town, meets impoverished Ann Darrow, and hires her on for the mysterious and exciting adventure. The ship leaves; it crosses the ocean. On board, Denham administers to Ann her screen test/scream test, in apt foreshadowing of her rendezvous with Kong. All this expository material, from the opening shots to the ship’s arrival at Skull Island, transpires with no background music.

Music finally appears with a fade-in to a shot of the ship approaching mist-enshrouded Skull Island. A harp in the low register plunks a tonally vague, repetitious motif, over sustained chords of a string orchestra. The music initiates us into the fantasy world, the world where giant apes are conceivable, the underside of the world of reason. It helps to hypnotize the spectator, bring down defenses that could be erected against this realm of monsters, tribesmen, jungles, violence. This association of music and the irrational predominates throughout the genres of horror, science fiction, and fantasy, as a catalyst in the textual process of slipping in and out of the discourse of realism. Max Steiner avers: “Some pictures require a lot of music and some of them are so realistic that music would only hurt and interfere.”\textsuperscript{15} Thus, background music aligns with the paradigm of the right-hand column:
Music and representation of Woman. A film of the forties is airing on television. Even though you're in the next room, you are likely to find that a certain kind of music will cue you in correctly to the presence of Woman on screen. It is as if the emotional excess of this presence must find its outlet in the euphony of a string orchestra. I refer here to Woman as romantic Good Object, and not to old women, or humorous or chatty women, or femmes fatales (who possess their own musical conventions—jazz, brass, woodwinds . . . )." Sabaneiev states categorically that films "with love episodes, would find it difficult to dispense with music."

One finds an early—and curious—illustration of this principle in King Kong. The ship is anchored off Skull Island; it is evening. Alongside the ship's railing, Jack declares his love to Ann, while Denham and the skipper converse on the ship's bridge. Crosscutting between the two locales occurs as follows:

\[\text{[JACK, to Ann, concerned about her participation in the dangerous adventures on the island:] } \text{"I'm scared for you... I'm sort of scared of you, too. [Melodic background music, in strings and harp, through this monologue, which cuts once to a CU of Ann, then back to Jack.] Ann, uh... I... uh... uh... Say, I guess I love you."}\n
\[\text{[SKIPPER, in 2-shot with Denham on bridge:] } \text{"Mr. Driscoll: are you on deck?" [No music during this shot.]}\n
\[\text{[JACK, embracing Ann:] } \text{"Yes, sir!" [Music plays.]}\n
\[\text{[SKIPPER:] } \text{"Then please come up on the bridge." [No music.]}\n
Jack and Ann engage in romance; close-ups highlight them against the dark night sky. Denham and the skipper seem to be engaging in a discourse of work; medium-long shots show them in an evenly lit interior. The score reinforces the contrast: violins play sweetly behind the romantic duo's shots, while no music plays with the shots on the bridge. This auditory alternation, strictly aligned with the visual cutting, proves quite disconcerting. The score distinctly 'ends up violating the “inaudibility” and “continuity” principles in its intended mission to accompany/illustrate the presence of Woman. (Abrupt stops and starts of music become rare after 1934. For a sequence like this, the composer would henceforth choose either a sustained musical cue throughout—its volume subdued as the men on the bridge are seen—or the less likely solution of eliminating music altogether.) The set of oppositions in this case can be drawn as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logic</th>
<th>The Irrational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everyday Reality</td>
<td>Dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Loss of Control</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Music and epic feeling. Music, especially lushly scored late Romantic music, can trigger a response of "epic feeling." In tandem with the visual film narrative, it elevates the individuality of the represented characters to universal significance, makes them bigger than life, suggests transcendence, destiny. This phenomenon seems to point back to anthropological analyses of the ritual functions of rhythm and song in human groups. The sense of common destiny which fans at a football game might have as, "of one voice," they sing the national anthem or chant a slogan in support of the home team has something to do with the emotions inspired by group identity-inducing rituals in more primitive (or, as Eisler and Adorno put it, precapitalist) groups.

In dominant cinema, this capacity of music to refer to commonality, destiny, and the like, is exploited for producing emotion and pleasure. The appropriate music will elevate the story of a man to the story of Man. When Mildred Pierce is stunned by a cruel argument with her ungrateful daughter, the reaction shot of her (a close-up in which she looks offscreen, suffering), backed by a loud and tragic rendition of the first three notes of her theme, becomes a statement not only of the condition of Mildred, but of the condition of Woman as Mother. At the film's end, as Mildred is reunited with her husband and walking from the police station into the sunset, a full orchestra, with chimes and dominated by the brasses, restates her theme in a major key. Not only has the couple been reunited, but, in the words of Pan Cook, the patriarchal system (which the plot had threatened to dismantle) has been reconstructed, and "under the aegis of the Law . . . ambiguity is resolved and the shadows dispersed by the light of the new day." I would suggest, again, that music has played a considerable role in the process.

John Ford's historical films provide numerous examples of a related strategy, using music to give a fictional scene mythical significance. The editors of Cahiers du cinéma demonstrated how dialogue, cinematography, mise-en-scène, narrative, and the audience's retrospective "knowledge of history" mythify the protagonist's smallest actions in Young Mr. Lincoln. Music contributes significantly to this. The final scene, for example, has Lincoln alone, "going on a piece—maybe to the top of that hill." The camera's low angle, the painterly grandeur of the landscape—and the Battle Hymn
of the Republic on the soundtrack—transform Lincoln’s little walk (his constitutional?) to a prefiguration of his destiny as Civil War president. (While virtually any Romantic orchestral music might help here in transforming the everyday to the mythic, the additional reference of the Battle Hymn serves to pinpoint the character’s destiny.)

Thus a third large category of “emotion” signified by classical film music can be charted in the following way, with music contributing to the values on the right.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Particular</th>
<th>The Universal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Prosaic</td>
<td>The Poetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Present</td>
<td>Mythic Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Literal</td>
<td>The Symbolic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IV. Narrative cueing

We may divide the semiotic duties of music in classical film into two categories: (1) it refers the spectator to demarcations and levels of the narration; (2) it illustrates, emphasizes, underlines, and points, via what we shall call connotative cueing. Let us first consider some cases of the first type.

1a. Beginnings and endings. Music normally accompanies opening and end titles of a feature film. As background for opening titles, it defines the genre (Mildred Pierce’s title music signals a melodrama); and it sets a general mood (for Mildred Pierce, sweeping emotionally, tragic perhaps, as it plays over images of waves washing up on shore). Further, it often states one or more themes to be heard later accompanying the story; the distinctness of the melody can cue even the nonmusical listener into this promissory function, setting up expectations of the narrative events to follow. Finally, opening-title music signals that the story is about to begin, bids us to settle into our seats, stop chatting with fellow moviegoers, and drift into its daydream. Conventionally for melodramas, adventure films, and comedies, composers wrote opening music “full of joy and gladness.” (Dimitri Tiomkin reveals that some studios actually forbade the use of minor keys for opening titles, “their reasoning being that ‘minor’ meant sad and ‘major’ denoted happiness.”)[20]

Ending music tends to strike up in the final scene and continues (or modulates) behind the end credits. Musical recapitulation and closure reinforces the film’s narrative and formal closure. Often, it consists of an orchestral swelling with tonal resolution, sometimes involving a final statement of the score’s main theme. At any rate, it typically provides a “rising crescendo,” “loud and definite.”[21]
Steiner’s score for Of Human Bondage (1933) provides some striking examples of early point-of-view music in film. The educated, upper-class, club-footed protagonist Philip Carey (played by Leslie Howard) develops a romantic obsession for the prosaic, uninterested cockney waitress Mildred (Bette Davis). He takes her to dine at a restaurant, where an offscreen piano, violin, and cello trio plays a waltz. Philip’s line, “I love that music; it makes me think of you,” consolidates this as the Philip-thinking-about-Mildred theme. The nondiegetic rendering of this waltz will henceforth signify a romantic complicity with Philip’s love/obsession for Mildred. This is not simply the Mildred theme. Significantly, it does not nondiegetically accompany scenes where Mildred actually is present: the cold reality of her emotional disinterest in Philip thus becomes clear, at some level, for the spectator.

Sometimes this musical theme turns into an index of strongly subjective point-of-view. As Philip takes a medical school examination, he absentmindedly looks at a skeleton at the head of the classroom. A dissolve turns the skeleton into the shapely form of Mildred, and as it does, the scene’s background music, a possibly diegetic calliope (outside the window?) playing the Mildred waltz, gives way to the waltz now played by a cello and string orchestra and recorded with an inordinate amount of reverberation. (This reverber contrasts markedly with the “dead” sound of the diegetic rendition in the restaurant.) One of Philip’s classmates notices his distracted reverie, and as he coughs to bring Philip back to the business of exam-writing, the calliope tune returns to the auditory background. Earlier in the film he dreams of Mildred: they dance, he without his clubfoot, and they talk gaily, she without her nasal working-class accent. During this wish-fulfillment dream a string orchestra plays the familiar theme with a high degree of reverber.

2. Connotative cueing. Narrative film music “anchors” the image in meaning. It expresses moods and connotations which, in conjunction with the images and other sounds, aid in interpreting narrative events and indicating moral/class/ethnic values of characters. Further, attributes of melody, instrumentation, and rhythm imitate or illustrate physical events on the screen. Classical cinema, predicated as it is on telling a story with the greatest possible transparency, overdetermines these connotative values. Soundtrack music reinforces what is (usually) already signified by dialogue, gestures, lighting, color, tempo of figure movement and editing, and so forth.

Caged, a 1950 “realistic” prison melodrama, begins as a police van brings young and innocent Marie Allen (Eleanor Parker) to the women’s prison to which she has been unjustly sentenced. As they are herded toward the door, another prisoner tells her to “grab your last look at freesoil, kid.” Marie turns around, and a last lingering shot follows of the “normal” world outside the prison gate: a city street, a building, a church spire, a few automobiles. At the film’s end, a hardened Marie, headed for a criminal life, emerges from the prison door and takes her first look at “freesoil” in over a year. Over the same shot—traffic, church—we now hear jazzy, sultry music on trumpet and saxophone. The whole meaning of the “normal” outside world has changed for her, and Steiner’s score conveys this efficiently via musical conventions.

2a. Music has tremendous power to influence mood. The commutation experiment undertaken in chapter 1 with a small segment of Jules and Jim establishes—albeit in a simplistic way comparable to Kuleshov’s short editing experiments—that different music will cue the viewer to different interpretations of an image or scene. The associations that (Hollywood’s, Tin Pan Alley’s) conventions attach to particular musical instruments, rhythms, melody types, and harmony, form a veritable lexicon of musical connotation which the studio music department exploits.

Even before 1925, film-music lexicons (e.g., Giuseppe Becce’s 1919 Kinobibliothek), which aided in compiling cue sheets for individual films, enjoyed popularity and profit; indeed, they became instrumental to the efficient functioning of the musical staff of movie houses. Musical “meaning” was codified and institutionalized well before the coming of sound. In turn, these meanings were inherited from a long European tradition whose most recent forebears included theatrical, operatic, and popular music of the latter nineteenth century. Erno Rapée compiled the definitive lexicon of film-musical connotation in 1924, the Motion Picture Moods for Pianists and Organists: A Rapid Reference Collection of Selected Pieces Adaptable to Fifty-Two Moods and Situations. The fifty-two subjects ranged from Aeroplane, Band, Battle, Birds, Calls, and Chase, through National, Neutral, Orgies, and Oriental, to Sea-Storm, Sinister, Wedding, and Western. The accompanist needing to supply “Sadness” during a film projection could select from among ten pieces, which included the first movement of Beethoven’s Sonata no.2 (Op.27), Chopin Preludes 4 or 29 (Op. 28), Grieg’s “Elegie” (Op. 47), and Gaston Borch’s “Andante Patetico e Doloroso.” The three selections available for wedding scenes were Mendelssohn’s wedding march, Wagner’s wedding march from Lohengrin, and “O Promise Me.”

Classical film music scores that deviate from the standard stylistic repertoire—scores using jazz or electronic music, for example—end up participating in signification just as fully as scores written in the familiar Hollywood-Wagnerian idiom. The expression and connotation in Miklos Rozsa’s electronic music in Spellbound (1945) might be a bit more difficult to characterize in words, but any moviegoer will tell you how eerie or spooky it sounds.
This is precisely as it should be, since the electronic music cues accompany dream sequences, events in the film that bring the murky unconscious into play. Likewise, jazz during the studio era often conveyed connotations such as sophistication, urban culture, nightlife, decadence. In general, any musical language, other than the major nineteenth-century one, itself carried connotations simply by virtue of being unusual. Even music that attempts to subvert the principles of classical scoring will connote something when played with narrative images; and the reading position of spectators in the thirties and forties was so thoroughly defined by the classical norm that the rare music composed with subversive intentions was most probably perceived as conforming, by and large, to the established canon.

Without trying to cover the entire range of standard connotation, which also includes conventions of range, of tempo, and of rhythm, let us at least consider two categories.

**Conventions of orchestration.** Film music calls upon traditional connotative associations evoked by instrumental colors. Eric Sarnette, in his book *Music for the Microphone*, gives examples.

When the picture of an irate man appears, brass trumpets are heard; chubby-faced bassoons, when a fat man is seen coming along; oboes, when a quiet valley with cattle is shown on the screen; plaintive violins to accompany a picture of a pair of lovers, more like a sentimental postcard than anything else.

Eisler and Adorno identify many other conventions of instrumentation in their delightfully grumpy first chapter, which zeroes in on Hollywood's "Prejudices and Bad Habits." They assert that "mountain peaks invariably invoke string tremolos punctuated by a signal-like horn motif." In another context, "The tremolo on the bridge of the violin, which thirty years ago was intended even in serious music to produce a feeling of uncanny suspense and to express an unreal atmosphere, today has become common currency."

**Melodic conventions.** Certain melodic types characterize Westerns: either based on Western ballads, or the typical calls of hooties in the case of cavalry films, or "Western frontier" melodies in major keys with skips of perfect fourths and fifths, connoting the grandeur of the frontier landscape. Other melodic types illustrate another kind of "nature," the kind with birds, serene lakes, and virgin forests; these often present a stylization of bird calls or the major-key pastoral pleasantness of the first measures of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony.

Some Hollywood composers also made frequent use of stock music, musical clichés instantly recognizable by filmgoers and directly inherited from the lexicons. In *Of Human Bondage*, for example, a montage conveys Philip's confusion in London as his rival marries Mildred. When during the montage a single shot of the wedding is seen, the ongoing background score is briefly punctuated by a few seconds of Mendelssohn's wedding march—after which the music returns to its normal nondescript lushness. Eisler and Adorno again:

... the scene of a moonlight night is accompanied by the first movement of the *Moonlight Sonata*. ... For thunderstorms, the overture to *William Tell* is used; for weddings, the march from *Lohengrin* or Mendelssohn's wedding march. These practices—incidentally, they are on the wane and are retained only in cheap pictures—correspond to the popularity of trademarked pieces in classical music, such as Beethoven's E-flat Concerto, which has attained an almost fatal popularity under the apocryphal title *The Emperor*, or Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*. ...

Sound film composers also quickly developed musical phrases, some extremely brief, to illustrate actions on the screen. For example, *King Kong* contains a scene in which Kong shakes several men off a large log, like so many ants, and sends them down a ravine to their death. From a niche in a wall of rock, hero Jack Driscoll manages to prick Kong's finger a couple of times with his knife. Kong's reaction, as he looks a bit sadly at his tiny wound, is accompanied by a pathetic-sounding violin glissando downward.

2b. **Illustration.** To a greater extent than other major Hollywood composers, Max Steiner synchronized musical effects closely with events on the screen. As one writer puts it, Steiner is legendary for a film-musical style intent on "catching everything." A Steiner score accompanying an eventful sequence can sound like a hodgepodge of mixed thematic material, rapidly changing dynamics and orchestral texture, and rapid modulations, in its tendency to provide hyperexplicit, moment-by-moment musical illustration.

Witness this description of a brief but busy sequence from *The Adventures of Don Juan* (1948):

While reminiscing with one of his past amours, Don Juan discovers to his horror that he has no real idea where and when he became acquainted with the lady. She is furious when she realizes this, but then determines to win his affections all over again. At this point her father and fiancé enter and confront the couple. Don Juan flees. The scene dissolves as he ponders his predicament, concluding, "Woman, thy name is trouble."

Steiner's accompaniment for this scene consists of a series of rapid-fire quotations of all the motifs identified with the various characters. The young woman's outburst of temper is accompanied by a woodwind glissando. When she exclaims, "This time you won't forget me," Steiner quotes the roguish,
sautering melody that serves as the Don Juan love theme. As the philanderer tries to disengage himself from her embrace, she calls to her father, "I'm trying to get away from him, but he's so strong." When Don Juan identifies himself, the composer quickly quotes the Don Juan hero motif. The girl pouts, "Stop being so Spanish!" Immediately, we hear a tambourine, castanets, and Castilian rhythms. Don Juan's rapid departure is accompanied by a typical Spanish march. The principal theme is stated as a lyrical melody when he contemplates his fate, and resolves in the stirring hero motif again. Hardly any of these themes lasts more than a few seconds; the entire scene is only 3 1/2 minutes long."

To achieve to-the-second synchronization of score and film, Steiner adopted the click-track technique early in the thirties. This was developed for the animated cartoon: even before 1930, Disney's Silly Symphonies used the device for exact timing of music with images. The click-track consists of holes which the studio's music editor punches into the soundtrack at the edge of the film for the purpose of matching metronomic tempo to that of the projected film. As it is projected during a music dubbing session, the conductor and recording musicians hear these clicks through their headphones, and they record their music to its beat. The music editor can create a rhythmically regular click-track, or one to match rhythmically irregular actions on the screen (such as a character's uneven steps), should the composer wish to match the music exactly with the visuals.

So while illustration to the minutest detail was a hallmark of Steiner's style in particular, our overall model of classical-era film music also must include the general tendency toward musical illustration. Two frequently used dramatical techniques of illustration are mickey-mousing and the stinger.

Mickey-mousing. Music making actions on the screen explicit—"imitating" their direction or rhythm—is called mickey-mousing (after musical practices used in the early Disney sound cartoons). Click-tracks made this effective as early as Of Human Bondage (the "clubfooted" limpning theme of Philip Carey) and King Kong (the tribal chief walking over to parlay with Denham). Music mickey-mouses the gait of Gypo Nolan in The Informer. Near the beginning of Casablanca, as an Allied resistance fighter is shot, the score imitates his fall to the ground. Near the opening of The Big Sleep, a harp glissando helps to mickey-mouse the feigned collapse of spoiled Carmen Sternwood into the arms of Philip Marlowe.

The stinger. A musical sforzando used to illustrate sudden dramatic tension is called a stinger. A couple of examples from Mildred Pierce—a melodrama virtually built upon stinging revelations to its suffering protagonist, and therefore replete with Steinerian stingers—will suffice. As newly successful restaurateur Mildred embraces playboy Monte Beragon after hours, Monte's theme appropriately plays in the background. Mildred's estranged husband Bert walks in on the scene, the sound of his closing the door, a cut to the startled couple, and a stinger in the score coincide. Second, toward the end of the film, Mildred runs downstairs in Monte's beach house, and into a close-up showing her stunned revelation: as the orchestra does a glissando to a stinger chord, we cut to a medium close-up profile of her daughter Veda in an embrace with Monte.

Silence can also "sting." Mildred pays a visit to her daughter Veda, having learned of her desire to marry the rich young bachelor Ted Forrester. She asks whether family friend Wally knows that Veda wants to marry Ted. A big close-up frames Veda as she says, "... want to get married? We are married." The film cuts at that moment to a close-up of Mildred's stunned reaction; also at that moment the background music ends on a quick crescendo to a high, dissonant chord. The stinger in this case is the silence that abruptly follows.

V. Formal and rhythmic continuity

"At its most general functional level, film music serves as a kind of cohesive, filling in empty spaces in the action or the dialogue."30 Virtually everyone who has written about standard film music agrees that music "fills the tonal spaces and annihilates the silences without attracting special attention to itself" (Sabaneev). Anti-Hollywood composers (e.g., Maurice Jaubert, Hanns Eisler) harp on this feature of classical film scores: the studio brings the composer in to "plug up the holes" in the soundtrack. Perhaps they are right: that the impetus behind using music this way arises from a fear of silence or of visual stagnation, a fear that equates such absence with death. In soundmen's and musicians' discourse, music gives the soundtrack "life," "warmth," "color." Hollywood's narratives tend to be based on action, not reflection.31 The classical film brings music into its service in particular ways we will now enumerate.

Music smooths discontinuities of editing within scenes and sequences. The discontinuity of a cheat cut or a temporal ellipse will be slightly less jarring or noticeable because of music, this flexible and pleasurable auditory substance (this "cohesive") in the background. As an auditory continuity it seems to mitigate visual, spatial, or temporal discontinuity. Montage sequences—calendar pages flipping, newspaper headlines spanning a period of time, citizen Kane and his wife growing apart at the breakfast table over the years—are almost invariably accompanied by music.

Music also bridges gaps between scenes or segments; the classical film uses it for transitions. Typically, music might begin shortly before the end
of scene A and continue over into scene B. Or perhaps, scene A’s music will modulate into a new key as scene B begins. The beginning of The Big Sleep demonstrates how music functions as spatiotemporal connective tissue. Marlowe leaves the Sternwood mansion after having met Carmen, Colonel Sternwood, and Vivian in three successive conversations. Music strikes up as the butler escorts him to the door. The film cuts to a shot of a plaque that reads “Hollywood Public Library,” then to a close-up of the documents Marlowe is taking notes on; then to longer shots reestablishing that Marlowe is doing research in the library. Steiner’s transition music has no particularly musical form of its own, since it must obey the rhythm of the editing and the rapid change of locations it is illustrating and connoting. It modulates frequently, but it is still one uncut piece of music, a continuous substance that compensates for the spatiotemporal discontinuities—necessary for narrative coherence, efficiently getting Marlowe from one place to another.

In the King Kong sequence that crosscuts between Ann and Jack’s romantic dialogue on one hand and Denham and the skipper’s “work talk” on the other, the presence of music signifies emotion. But it doesn’t “work” there, precisely, because it violates the need for auditory continuity in which music is usually caught up. Strictly aligning music (or its absence) with the crosscut scenes only emphasizes a discontinuity which runs counter to classical soundtrack construction.

VI. Unity

Classical cinema, predicated as it is on formal and narrative unity, deploys music to reinforce this unity. We have already seen that opening and closing music encloses the film within a musical envelope, announcing genre, mood, and setting, and then providing musical recapitulation and closure to reinforce narrative closure.

Tonal relationships in the score are also managed so as to contribute to a sense of the film’s unity. Sabaneev gives a typical rule of thumb: if music has been absent for more than fifteen seconds, the composer is free to start a new music cue in a different and even unrelated key, since the spectator/auditor will have sufficiently forgotten the previous cue’s tonality. But if the gap has lasted less than the requisite time, the new cue must start in the same key (or a closely related one).

The major unifying force in Hollywood scoring is the use of musical themes, although it is by no means accurate to claim that all classical scores rely on themes. Max Steiner’s film-composing method, however, relied on thematic structuring. After watching the rough cut, he devised the principal character and idea motifs, and then elaborated the score from there. The thematic score provides a built-in unity of statement and variation, as well as a semiotic subsystem. The repetition, interaction, and variation of musical themes throughout a film contributes much to the clarity of its dramaturgy and to the clarity of its formal structures.

VII. Breaking the rules

The principles of Hollywood scoring I have enumerated should not be considered as hard-and-fast rules. Enjoying a special status between conscious and unconscious perception, sometimes between diegetic, nondiegetic, and metadiegetic fictional levels, and between formal and narrative rhythms, music as a nonrepresentational “cohesive” mediates among many types of textual contradictions and itself participates in them. Thus, for instance, in its illustrative function (IV), mickey-mousing music often becomes noticeable, violating the principle of inaudibility (II). This is to say that certain conditions (the specificity of the text itself, the composer’s personal style, the studio’s practices of orchestrating, mixing, and editing, historical factors) may require one principle to take precedence over another.

Steiner’s Score for Mildred Pierce

Let us examine the “classical” principles as they operate in Mildred Pierce. Having provided numerous examples of principles I through V, I will now emphasize the “unity” principle by exploring the film’s use of musical themes in the context of its narrative. I will also suggest ways in which Steiner’s compositional style, above and beyond its adequacy to the classical Hollywood model, is paradigmatic for melodrama in particular.

By the time he composed the score for Mildred Pierce, Max Steiner was a veteran of film music, at the height of a career that would include more than three hundred film scores over a period of thirty-five years. Head of the music department at RKO from 1930 to 1936, and a chief composer at Warner Brothers thereafter, Steiner’s influence on the procedures and style of film composing during the studio years was enormous. Whether avidly pro- or anti-Steiner, film music’s critics have characterized Steiner’s work along fairly consistent lines. Some refer to his music as “pure schmaltz,” all agree on his “heavy-handed emphasis on large-scale symphonic composition;” his “sweeping melodic lyricism” is “nostalgic, emotional, and sentimental.” The tendency of a Steiner score to accompany as much of the film as possible led Henri Colpi to assert—a bit unreasonably—that this
TO ALL LAYERS OF EIGHT SHEETS!

Effective Monday morning, October First,  
I can be found at the Studio during the hours:  
9:00am to 12:30pm; and from 1:00pm to 6:00pm,  
every day except Sundays and Holidays. However,  
I WILL NOT be found, any longer, during the  
hours from 6:00pm to 9:00am next morning, as  
in the past.

Should this not be satisfactory to anyone,  
I shall be only too happy to cancel my contract.

Furthermore, I just received an offer  
from the President of the Hay Company, Eighth  
at Broadway, Los Angeles, California, who wants  
to obtain my services, on a long term contract,  
as a "RED-T cYER'' and that looks awfully good  
to me.

Max Steiner

A 1934 memo from the much-in-demand Max Steiner to his colleagues in the 
RKO Music Department. Courtesy of RKO Pictures, Inc.

composer was “no doubt frightened by silence.” Mark Evans views Steiner’s  
tendency to state and restate themes, and insert illustrative music at the  
slightest narrative provocation, as a compulsion to “catch everything,” as we  
have seen.

At Warners, Steiner put to frequent use his lush symphonic style and his  
predilection for minute coordination of music with narration. Among his  
scores for melodramatic pictures of those years were Jezebel, Dark Victory,  
Gone with the Wind, All This and Heaven Too, The Letter, The Great Lie,  
Casablanca, In This Our Life, Since You Went Away, and New, Voyager. In  
light of recent reevaluation of women’s pictures and the melodramatic in  
film, it seems fitting and necessary to investigate what this most prolific  
composer brought to the genre. How is the function of music for melodrama  
erved out in specifically cinematic terms?

Very few readers could spontaneously recall the musical motif assigned  
to Mildred Pierce’s protagonist—which is repeated fifty to a hundred times—  
although many who have seen the film can accurately quote lines of dialogue  
or describe shot compositions. Only in actively deciding to listen for the  
music will we realize how structured and repetitive it is, and how central  
to our emotional reception of the narrated events.

The score of Mildred Pierce has five major themes. These we may identify  
easily by examining what musical lines are associated with what characters  
or events. The main theme (A) belongs to Mildred.

One comes gradually to associate Mildred with this music. First, as waves  
wash over the film’s opening credits, the piece is heard. Then, when in the  
fifth diegetic shot a man falls to the floor, his dying word, “Mildred,” is  
followed by a rendition, in minor, of A. Three shots later, a woman—soon  
to be identified as Mildred—walks on a pier, as on the soundtrack the first  
three notes of melody A are repeated and varied in accompaniment to Joan  
Crawford’s mysterious half-hearted attempt to commit suicide. The theme  
is next heard in its entirety—still in minor—when Mildred pulls up to her  
mansion at night, before a pair of detectives take her to police headquarters.  
Not until well into her flashback narration of her separation from husband  
Bert and the beginning of her restaurant career do we hear the melody in  
its full major-key statement. Bert has left; alone, late at night, Mildred  
reviews her finances as her voiceover says, “It didn’t take me long to figure  
out that I was dead broke.” Thus the first major statement of A is reserved
for the protagonist at a point when a quick exposition has removed her husband—economic and emotional support—and put her at the beginning of her road of work, sacrifice, and suffering. Mildred’s theme will henceforth occur on a multitude of occasions, always associated with the character Mildred.

Another of the score’s major themes belongs to Bert.

\[ B \]

The association between this motif \((B)\) and its character is established rapidly. In the sequence where Bert is introduced, leaving his real estate office, his theme plays through. After the argument that culminates in their decision to separate, Bert’s theme plays slowly, in minor, by a plaintive oboe, as a few last hesitating words pass between him and Mildred. Later repetitions of \(B\) are heard as Bert comes to grant Mildred a divorce, as he comes to visit her after her marriage to Monte, and as Mildred thanks him for reuniting her with her prodigal daughter Veda.

A third theme \((C)\) belongs to both daughters, Veda and Kay—a rather curious designation, since each daughter is not only strongly differentiated, but is virtually the opposite of the other in terms of values in the mother-daughter constellation that the film assigns to them. In melodramatic terms, Kay is the good daughter and Veda the evil one. How, then, can the score use one theme for the two of them?

\[ C \]

The earlier part of the story concentrates not so much on Veda’s evil traits as on the breakup of Mildred’s marriage, and the development of her career, all necessitated by her “putting the children first.” Mildred bakes pies and cakes for neighborhood customers so that both Veda and Kay may have expensive music and dance lessons. The daughters function as a unit, the vessel into which Mildred’s sacrifice and hard work are poured. Only later—precisely, the night of Kay’s death—is Monte Beragon introduced into the constellation of sexuality which will culminate in the Mildred/Veda/Monte Oedipal triangle; this sexual dimension really brings Veda’s evil and competitive attributes into narrative play. Thus, the very night when the Oedipal (strictly speaking, Electra) plot is initiated by the introduction of Monte as

Mildred’s lover, Kay is dying; after her death, the daughters’ musical theme will only be needed for Veda anyway.

A fourth theme \((D)\) is a jaunty melody associated with Mildred’s restaurant business and with the growth of her social and financial status.

\[ D \]

It is first heard early in Mildred’s waitress career. When Mildred starts her own restaurant, this melody regularly accompanies the narration of the growth of the business. Finally, we also hear \(D\) in connection with a newspaper article about Mildred’s impending marriage to Monte. In contrast to the sinister behind-the-scenes conditions of the marriage, the shot of the newspaper’s wedding announcement, especially with \(D\) playing on the soundtrack, creates an ironically pleasant nuance. It shows the public face of this union as opposed to what we know to be its seedy motives of mutual exploitation.

A final major theme \((E)\) refers to the romance between Monte and Mildred.

\[ E \]

This is the only theme which the film presents both diegetically and non-diegetically. When Monte first seduces Mildred at his beach house, he has put on a record of mood music \((E)\). “Monte... the record,” says an offscreen Mildred weakly, as the sight and sound of the scratching phonograph needle acts as a metonymical figure of the seduction. Tune \(E\) is heard several more times in the film, non-diegetically, always referring to the romance between the two.

The lion’s share of Mildred Pierce’s score consists of statements or variations of these five themes. The melodies are treated in conventional ways to fit each narrative context in which they appear. Variations in tonality, register, harmonic accompaniment, time signature, rhythm, and instrumentation alter their sound and mood. The first few treatments of Kay and Veda’s theme will amply illustrate the expressive range Steiner derives from such variation.

The first statement of \(C\) coincides with the film’s first shot of Veda and Kay. Especially following the film’s noir opening and then the oppressively claustrophobic look of the scene of Mildred’s quarrel with Bert, the even
exterior lighting and compositional simplicity of the initial shot of the girls strikes the viewer as virtually from another world, another film, simpler and cheerier. Likewise, the soundtrack bursts in with violins introducing theme C in 4/4, forte, allegro, in A-flat major. As they talk on their way home, Kay, the younger, unsensitively turns, dances, and skips as she goes; accordingly the tempo of the music shifts to 3/4 to accentuate—to mickey-mouse—her dancing.

A few scenes later, Veda tries on the new dress that had given rise to the argument and separation of her parents. At the moment when Veda says "I wouldn't be seen dead in this," a reaction shot shows a stunned Mildred in the hall having overhead. Now theme C plays in a minor key, in a lower register, and much more slowly—conventional ways of inflecting a melody with darker or sadder connotations.

Elsewhere: Bert meets Mildred outside the house in the rain, on the night of her tryst with Monte. Bert gravely tells Mildred that Kay has pneumonia. As she says "Oh, no," we hear bass viol, unaccompanied, state theme C slowly in minor. After Kay has died at Mrs. Biederhoe's, a viola plays C with much vibrato, connoting mournful sadness and nostalgia. Steiner is certain, however, to have Mildred share the stage with Kay even as Kay dies—milking the spectator for mother's grief by presenting Mildred's theme A at the moment the doctor says he couldn't save the child. A close-up of Mildred grieving over the little body, accompanied by A, thus shifts the focus of sympathy to the protagonist. Only several shots later does the score return properly to mourn the dead, sounding Kay's theme as the doctor says that he brought her into the world.

Once Kay is out of the picture, the theme belongs to Veda. Now a successful restaurateur with a socialite daughter, Mildred gives Veda a car for her birthday; theme C plays rhythmically and jauntily. When Veda goes for a first drive, it continues to play, though more amorphously and with no rhythmic accentuation, as Monte and Mildred discuss their differences over Veda. The music serves at least a double function here, as it does throughout the score. The theme itself designates that Veda is the subject of narrative focus; it directs attention to this character. The musical treatment of the theme, especially in contrast to the bouncy rendition seconds before, expressively underscores the scene's narrative conflict, Mildred telling Monte to stay away from Veda. I. A. Richards might say that these two functions of themes in classical Hollywood scores are the referential (C denotes or directs attention to Veda) and the emotive (a particular musical treatment of C yields a certain range of expressive connotations); my overall category of narrative cueing includes both these functions.

The score continues to use C whenever Veda appears. When as prodigal daughter she returns to Mildred, who now lives in a mansion and is married to Monte, a richly and warmly orchestrated version of Veda's theme plays through the scene. By means of a final example, I wish to point out the increasing harmonic "distortion" the theme undergoes toward the film's end. Mildred discovers Veda in an embrace with Monte; a fragment of C plays repeatedly, each repetition a step up from the last. The tension evoked by this ascending stepwise repetition, and by the progressively closer shots of Veda's face in alternation with reaction shots of a shocked, disbelieving Mildred, has a double culmination: musically in a dreadful silence, and in Veda's line: "... and there's nothing you can do about it."

The cursory examination of this theme and its elaborations shows that the relation between the theme and its referent is extremely clearly articulated—often to the point of redundancy—and that little but the standard late-nineteenth-century conventions of tempo, instrumentation, and tonality are employed to give the theme its emotive values at given points along the narration. Steiner was not interested in subtlety. In his own words:

The danger is that music can be so bad, or so good, that it distracts and takes away from the action. And beware of embellishments; it's hard enough to understand a melody behind dialogue, let alone complicated orchestrations. If it gets too decorative, it loses its emotional appeal. I've always tried to subordinate myself to the picture. A lot of composers make the mistake of thinking that the film is a platform for showing how clever they are. This is not the place for it."

Thus Steiner clearly bore in mind the difference between the referential function of a musical theme, "understanding a melody," and the theme's emotive function: "if it gets too decorative, it loses its emotional appeal." It almost goes without saying that both functions of themes in the film score are "subordinated... to the picture," to the narrative discourse.

Steiner's music often sacrifices its musical coherence to effects gained in coordinating with diegetic action. The forlornness and fragmentary nature of musical statements in his scores are perhaps the most easily recognizable mark of his style. More mickey-mousing occurs, for instance, early in the film when Mildred attempts to frame Wally by locking him in the beach house with Monte's body. The musical score rhythmically apes Wally's increasingly harried steps as he walks from door to door searching for an exit. I see Steiner's fondness for such rhythmic redundancy as being closely linked with the "melodramatic spirit"—a desire to externalize and explicate all inflections of action, from emotional values in a scene to the very rhythms of physical movement.
On several levels, then, the musical score exhibits a pronounced tendency toward hyperexplication. Steiner's intrusively lush dramatic music has an interesting effect—an effect common to all "realist" Hollywood cinema but which is especially prominent here. The music is an element of discourse that magnifies, heightens, intensifies the emotional values suggested by the story. Just as melodrama displays a tendency to use the close-up on the female star's face—and just as the close-ups in Mildred Pierce have caused critics to comment on the revelation of every twitch and wide-eyed stare in Crawford's small inventory of expressions—Steiner's music has a similar effect. The close-up of Crawford, bigger than life, parallels this musical score, which also renders bigger than life James M. Cain's tawdry story. Like melodrama in general, Mildred Pierce "allows us the pleasures of self-pity and the experience of wholeness brought by the identification with 'monopathic' emotion." The background score has a key function of guiding the spectator-auditor unambiguously into this particularly compelling identification.