Book Review


This well-researched text was a delightful discovery within an area of the religion-and-film field that is still severely under-explored today, despite being a profitable and popular genre most famously championed by Cecil B. DeMille—the master of the American biblical epic. Although there are many film music books, and Hollywood composer biographies, textbooks devoted to fusing musicology with biblical film studies are comparatively rare. As such, this major contribution to the field is a welcome associate of such scholarly works as *Retellings: The Bible in Literature, Music, Art and Film* (J. Cheryl Exum, 2007), *Teaching the Bible through Popular Culture and the Arts* (Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray, 2007), and *The Bible in Music: A Dictionary of Songs, Works, and More* (Siobhán Dowling Long and John F.A. Sawyer, 2015).

Structure-wise, the text consists of title pages, production details, dedication, contents, acknowledgments, a note to readers, an Introduction (pp. 1-18), and nine dedicated chapters, namely: ‘A Biblical Story for the Post-World War II Generation? Victor Young’s Music for DeMille’s *Samson and Delilah*’ (pp. 19-45), ‘Turning Away from “Concocted Spectacle”: Alfred Newman’s Score for *David and Bathsheba*’ (pp. 46-73), ‘Spectacle and Authenticity in Miklós Rózsa’s *Quo Vadis* Score’ (pp. 74-95), ‘Novel and Film, Music and Miracle: Alfred Newman’s Score to *The Robe*’ (pp. 96-113), ‘Spirit and Empire: Elmer Bernstein’s Score to *The Ten Commandments*’ (pp. 114-41), ‘The Law of Genre and the Music for *Ben-Hur*’ (pp. 142-64), ‘King of Kings and the Problem of Repetition’ (pp. 165-89), ‘Suoni Nuovi, Suoni Antichi: The Soundscapes of *Barabbas*’ (pp. 190-209), and ‘Universality, Transcendence, and Collapse: Music and *The Greatest Story Ever Told*’ (pp. 210-30), followed by an epilogue, comprehensive notes, detailed bibliography, scholar-friendly index, and biographical note.

Content-wise, the ‘biblical films’ claim is technically misleading because *Barabbas, Ben-Hur, The Robe, and Quo Vadis* are not Bible films per se (i.e., Old Testament or New Testament cinematic adaptations) but as Meyer partially acknowledges, they are ‘Roman/Christian epics’ (pp. 26, 87, 169). This cinematic sub-genre briefly references biblical characters, objects and events usually enmeshed within novels, i.e., fictionalised flights of fancy only tangentially linked to Holy Writ. For example, Jesus’ scarlet/gorgeous/purple robe is only mentioned in passing within Scripture (Matt 27:28, 31; Luke 23:11; John 19:2, 5 KJV), and without any elaborate backstories such as had preoccupied the intricate plot of *The Robe*.

Meyer’s central claim is that musical soundscapes can emotionally and intellectually enhance, contradict, or complicate the filmic narrative, often functioning like additional characters. This effect resulted from the composer’s personal style, the director’s instructions-cum-limitations, the aesthetic, ideological, and cultural tensions of the genre, the influence of past musical styles, aural experimentation with widescreen cinema, and stereophonic sound production, plus its reception and reflection of the American state of...
mind. Using self-transcribed musical excerpts to prove his assertion that ‘there is by no means a unitary biblical epic musical style’ (p. 2), Meyer eschewed the complete analysis of entire film scores and instead focused upon the similarities and differences of his nine filmic exemplars (spanning 1949–1965) that showcased five major composers (Elmer Bernstein, Mario Nascimbene, Alfred Newman, Miklós Rózsa, and Victor Young). Therein he highlighted Bernstein’s submission to DeMille’s auteur vision, Nascimbene’s experimentation with electronic tape recording, Newman’s focus upon moral and emotional complexity and his wandering away from traditional film music, and Rózsa’s quest for historical authenticity then adoption of a Wagnerian leitmotivic approach, whereas Young preferred conventional musical artistry.

Production-wise, the book is of good quality printing and binding with eleven figures and fifty-eight score excerpts. Regrettably, the cover picture from David and Bathsheba looks washed-out and the musical score printed on top is more distracting than illuminating. What is sorely missing is a List of Figures (of film stills, conductor’s scores, and sheet music covers), a List of Examples (of the discussed musical scores), and a basic glossary given the deployment of such technical terms and foreign phrases as: ‘Mixolydian’ (p. x), ‘ostinato’ (p. 51), ‘fons et origo’ (p. 57), ‘feuilletons’ (p. 74), ‘hymnody’ (p. 76), ‘lubido dominandi’ (p. 84), ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ (p. 92), ‘chromaticism’ (p. 104), ‘voix acousmatique’ (p. 173), ‘sforzando’ (p. 220), and so on. Acoustic samples via enclosed CD or website to demonstrate Meyer’s points musically (and jog readers’ aural memories) would have been very welcome.


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