Hannah Lewis, *French Musical Culture and the Coming of Sound Cinema*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2019 [xiv, 245 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-063598-5. £64.00 (paperback)]. *Oxford Music/Media Series*. Music examples, photos, figures, index, filmography, and bibliography.

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Lewis's book tackles the daunting task of "forc[ing] us to reconsider our assumptions about the relationship between music and the moving image, reminding us of its malleability, . . . and providing us with opportunities to challenge our understanding of how genres, media, and artistic forms relate to one another" (p. 15). In doing so, she examines one of film music history's messiest moments through the lens of one of the messiest industries at the time. She notes, "Transitional moments are messy. They are difficult to make sense of, because artists were often struggling to make sense of their own moment even as they participated in it" (pp. 14–15). Nowhere is this truer than in the French cinema's transition to sound. The uniqueness of France in such a conversation depends on an understanding of that nation's film industry at the time. After investing heavily in infrastructure and equipment after the First World War, French studios were the best in the world. However, when sound technology arrived, those studios had little capital available to conduct the necessary industrial research and to retrofit their studios into soundstages. Consequently, German and American companies entered the vacuum, licensing their technologies to French studios at high prices.¹ Meanwhile, France's rich tradition of art criticism (including film criticism) and plentiful newspapers

recorded a rich and diverse public discourse about all aspects of film as an industry and an art. As a result, French filmmakers dealt with limited resources, yet still created a remarkable output of films that defied the aesthetic conventions of contemporary films from other major film centers.

Lewis begins by surveying the sound-film debates that unfolded in the press. She argues that this critical discourse differed fundamentally from its American counterpart: "Unlike Hollywood, whose publications on film were mainly limited to trade journals . . . and fan magazines . . . , many French publications devoted extensive space to discourse on film aesthetics . . . , giving a range of stakeholders a platform for articulating new theories of sound film" (p. 17). The selective list of French journals that Lewis identifies in the ellipses here includes seven weekly or monthly publications and one daily newspaper. This is but the tip of the iceberg, since the chapter cites primary-source articles from two dozen authors writing in sixteen journals and newspapers. Although not comprehensive, Lewis's discussion clearly establishes the vibrancy of debate and diversity of opinions about sound film in France. She draws particular attention to arguments about the merits of sound film versus silent film, the kinds of topics and genres appropriate for sound films, and the place of music in sound films.

The remaining five chapters each feature case studies. The chapter on "Surrealist Sounds: Film Music and the Avant-Garde" examines films from such surrealist artists as Luis Buñuel, Jean Cocteau, Salvador Dali, and Man Ray. After discussing the

¹ These issues are best documented in Colin Crisp's masterful *The Classical French Cinema, 1930–1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997). More recent scholarship on the industrial challenges faced by the French cinema in the 1930s is summarized in my essay "Film Music in France, 1928–1940," *The Routledge Companion to Global Film Music in the Early Sound Era*, ed. Jeremy Barham (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

influence of Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles, patrons who supported several film projects by these artists, the bulk of the chapter addresses Buñuel and Dali's *L'âge d'or* (1930, *The Golden Age*) and Cocteau's *Le sang d'un poète* (1930, *The Blood of a Poet*). The following chapter turns to *opérette filmée*, popular theatrical works transferred to the cinema with minimal change. The three representative works discussed in the chapter—*Chacun sa chance* (1930, *Everybody Has a Chance*), *Le chemin du paradis* (1930, *The Road to Paradise*), and *Il est charmant* (1932, *He Is Charming*)—provide Lewis with the opportunity to discuss the tension between the artistic and commercial goals of cinema, and the varying strategies for ensuring the international of appeal for films in which spoken language was essential. With the fourth chapter, Lewis turns to “*Théâtre filmé*, Opera, and Cinematic Poetry.” This chapter dissects a debate between Marcel Pagnol and René Clair, outspoken figures in the debates about the roles of music and dialogue in sound film. In short, they debated whether sound film was a new medium for theatrical works (Pagnol's position) or whether it extended the artistic tradition of French silent film (Clair's position). To illustrate the debate, Lewis analyzes Pagnol's *Marius* (1931) and Clair's *Le million* (1931, *The Million*).

The remaining two chapters mark a rhetorical shift. Whereas the previous three chapters explored the dominant trends immediately after sound cinema arrived in France in 1930, these chapters examine the ramifications of those debates, featuring artists and films that sought to resolve the aesthetic tensions between surrealist films, *opérette filmée*, *théâtre filmé*, and Clair's sound films. Chapter 5 traces the development of poetic realism through the treatment of music in realist films from the transition years. Lewis focuses primarily on Jean Renoir, one of the filmmakers who helped create and define poetic realism. After broadly addressing issues of music, verisimilitude, and realism, she analyzes Renoir's use of music in *La chienne* (1931, *The Bitch*) and *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932, *Boudu Saved from Drowning*). Chapter 6 reprints Lewis's 2015 JAMS article on the two versions of Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* (1934, *Atalante*).²

Through the book, Lewis navigates between archival research, broad surveys of music and film criticism, and analyses of films. The films she

chooses to highlight are consistently well chosen. While I might quibble with her choice to represent only one realist aesthetic (poetic realism, but not social realism) and with one or two film choices (For example, why *Le million* instead of Clair's *Sous les toits de Paris*?), these are issues of personal preference and do not detract from the larger purpose of her book. All of the films that Lewis discusses in detail figure prominently in the scholarship on 1930s French cinema. All are also readily available on DVD and/or Blu-ray, though not necessarily on zone 1 discs nor on discs with English subtitles.

Her film analyses are not simply focused on the music, but provide several different paths into the films and their scores. For example, in discussing *Le sang d'un poète* (pp. 59–68), she discusses issues of synchronization, Cocteau's approach to “accidental” synchronization, and the ways in which the music provides structure for the film. The section on *Le million* (pp. 112–25) examines issues of theatricality on screen, operetta-style uses of music, and operatic uses of music. The section on *La chienne* (pp. 143–50) draws much from the film's extremely limited score, addressing diegetic music and cinematic artifice, music as a token of bourgeois culture, and Renoir's diegetic use of a realist singer.

In recounting the debates over synchronized sound in the French cinema, Lewis treats her sources fairly. In the 1930s, these debates were acrimonious and occasionally included *ad hominem* attacks. At stake for the filmmakers and critics was the very identity of French cinema—an art form that they understood through nationalistic eyes as having been born in France and elevated by the French industry from crass commercialism to Art with a capital A. In the Pagnol–Clair debates, then, each saw the other as debasing and devaluing the artistic importance of cinema. The same is true for other filmmakers and critics engaging in the same debates. While their arguments were based on *a priori* rejections of their opponents' claims, Lewis maintains a neutral position. By presenting the streams of surrealist film, *opérette filmée*, *théâtre filmé*, and realism on their own terms, she provides a rich and full understanding of music in early French sound cinema.

In sum, this book is a must-read for any scholar working on French film music, classic French cinema, or early sound films. While its reliance on music examples will steer this toward a more musicological audience, it is written in a style that is accessible to scholars working in other areas of film studies. It builds on the existing scholarship by providing a

2 Hannah Lewis, “‘The Music Has Something to Say’: The Musical Revisions of *L'Atalante* (1934),” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 68, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 559–603. The only significant change is the excision of several pages of contextual information about the French film industry during the transition to sound (562–65 in the article); in the book, this would have been redundant as Chapters 2 through 4 cover much the same ground in far more detail.

new lens into the transition years in France, bridging the gap between film musicologists and other film historians.³ Perhaps most notably, Lewis gives more value to *opérette filmée* and *théâtre filmé* than prior scholars, bringing more subtle nuances to the contexts in which René Clair, Jean Renoir, and Jean Vigo made their most celebrated films.

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³ Lewis's work is both indebted to and moves beyond the scholarship in Crisp, *The Classical French Cinema*; Crisp, *Genre, Myth, and Convention in the French Cinema, 1929–1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Charles O'Brien, *Cinema's Conversion to Sound: Technology and Film Style in France and the U.S.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Kelley Conway, *Chanteuse in the City: The Realist Singer in French Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and Colin Roust, "Say It with Georges Auric: Film Music and the *esprit nouveau*," *Twentieth-Century Music* 6, no. 2 (2011): 133–53.