The latest installment in the Scarecrow Film Score Guides series, by Erik Heine, examines James Newton Howard’s music for the 2002 science-fiction thriller Signs. This volume seeks to contextualize Signs as a unique work among Howard’s œuvre while at the same time contributing to the broader study of film music. Heine is a professor of music theory at Oklahoma City University with a number of film-music-related publications, and is the resident musicologist for Film Score Monthly.

The first two chapters of the book are concerned with the composer, his beginnings, influences, career journey, and scoring techniques. Readers who have previously plumbed the depths of the internet to learn about a favorite composer will now rejoice that this information has all been compiled within a single volume. However, they will also be frustrated, if amused, by Heine’s findings. Despite having stated in the introduction that one of the primary objectives of the book is to define Howard’s composition style as a means of placing Signs within the context of the rest of the composer’s work, the author repeatedly refers to Howard’s style as undefinable. A number of scores preceding Signs are touched on as significant milestones in Howard’s stylistic evolution, as is his working relationship over the years with director M. Night Shyamalan, yet the “style” in question remains elusive.

The next two chapters cover the historical and critical context of Signs, both from the perspective of film history and film music history, and it is here that the book’s shortcomings begin to surface. It spends an inordinate amount of time providing said context, essentially amounting to a broad survey of the development of science fiction and science-fiction music, with a particular emphasis on invasion films. This information has been well documented elsewhere, and we would have been better served by a summary. To give the author his due, it is clear that Heine has gone to some pains to research and include all of this information, even if it keeps readers from getting to the heart of the guide: the musical analysis. The material about the film’s reception and Shyamalan’s Hollywood status throughout this section was also gratuitous, although it reveals perhaps the book’s most valuable contribution by drawing attention to the often-overlooked subject of music in film as approached by mainstream critics. Heine’s insights into the perspective of critics in general are entertaining and well founded.

The last two chapters discuss the realization of the score and a formal analysis of its content. One might applaud the meticulous level of detail, but this does not alleviate the reader’s exhaustion from the indecipherable jargon and monotonous prose. The book examines the technical aspects of the score’s development, or in the case of the orchestration breakdowns, the division of labor. The focus of the analysis is constantly split between theory and

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application, with an entire index of terminology provided for the layman to decipher. Loose ties between Howard’s music and that of Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky are regularly mentioned, with no discussion of a concrete musical tradition to connect them; and discussion of the emotional impact of the music—either for its congruity with the film or for its affective influence—is sterile. Moreover, the use of set theory in place of conventional (or Schenkerian) analysis is, since the score is primarily tonal, an unconvincing approach, especially with the author resorting to conventional analysis at various points. Using intervals in place of pitch relations would have provided greater transparency, and would have given the much-discussed three-note motif (given the acronym “TNM” in the book) a more robust basis for examination. Ironically, it is this same motivic device that gives the score as a whole a minimalist design, an association that is raised only in the concluding pages of the last chapter.

To the book’s credit, there are illuminating parallels drawn between various cues, both musical and narrative. And, although writers should be cautious about the aesthetic principles they choose to impose on a piece of art, the application of Durchbruch to describe a transformational moment in the climax of “The Hand of Fate, Part I” is entirely appropriate. In addition, the notated music examples, from Signs and other scores, are of much interest, being rare and otherwise difficult to obtain.

There are numerous instances in the Kindle edition where the terminology used is not universal, even among musicians. Meter changes are rendered as accented vowels in bold (á, é, ô, and ú), flats are spelled out with a letter from the international phonetic alphabet known as a “voiceless postalveolar fricative” as opposed to the traditional flat symbol (D♭ instead of D♭), and tempo markings use the infinity sign in place of a note value (example: ∞ = 60). This intriguing nomenclature is visible across multiple viewing platforms, including Kindle Paperwhite, iPhone, and Windows. It is unclear at this time as to whether the use of these characters was intentional or a publishing error, though the latter seems to be the more feasible explanation.

It is additionally surprising how many grammatical errors were evidently overlooked in the editing, although overall the series editor Kate Daubney has performed creditable service with the Film Score Guides.

The purpose of the Film Score Guides series is to select case studies and analyze them for their broader application in the scholarly study of film music. Its authors have had the freedom to choose their scores, and approach each book as they wish within the generous confines of the series format. For this reason the series has been highly successful, presenting a wide variety of scores, perspectives, and methods of study. What is more, the series tends to focus on exceptions to the norm, looking at scores that stand out when matched against their historical peers. Like Haydn’s symphonies or Mozart’s operas, the scores have been chosen by the authors expressly because they serve to define their respective film genres. Taken together, the now seventeen volumes make for a formidable and valuable corpus for the study of film music, so it is disappointing to report that the series has been discontinued.²

Though few would argue against Howard’s score for Signs being a worthy choice for a case study, Heine’s interpretation does little to illuminate its value. It is a book about how the score came to be, rather than a book about what the score is. What should be an interdisciplinary study is devoted instead to moving from one contextual aspect to the next without building on what has been said or relating it directly to the score. The impact of the score and its influence on later films is not discussed, hardly any attention is given to the recording sessions, and the text is often repetitive. The analysis seems distant from either the film or the music, with the most colorful interpretations expressed through the words of others. Fortunately, a quick listen to the score will remind readers why they got the book in the first place.

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² Confirmed in email correspondence with Kate Daubney, February 15, 2020.