

## Janina Müller, *Musik im klassischen Film noir*

Würzburg, Germany. Königshausen & Neumann, 2019 [German language. 278pp. ISBN: 9783826065828. €39.80 (paperback)]. Klangfiguren: Studien zur Historischen Musikwissenschaft, Band 5.

ROGER HICKMAN

CSU Long Beach, Professor Emeritus  
[roger.hickman@csulb.edu](mailto:roger.hickman@csulb.edu)

Musicological film studies have largely focused on specific films, individual composers, and broad topics, such as silent film or national overviews. Academic studies of musical conventions associated with specific film genres have been understandably scarce. The Western is perhaps the most prominent exception. Westerns are one of the most clearly defined movie genres, being based on time and setting. Still, *Music in the Western: Notes from the Frontier*, a set of articles edited by Kathryn Kalinak, exposes a wide variety of musical approaches brought to this relatively stable genre. Other genres are not so easily defined, most notably film noir. Cinema studies offer widely divergent views of what defines film noir, whether it is a genre or a style, and what movies belong to the canon. If viewed as a genre, it is unique, as there is no one unifying factor that defines a film noir. Depending on the source, the number of noirs from the 1940s and '50s varies between nearly 250 to over 500. Obviously, there is little unity in this array of films, as they incorporate mysteries, psychological dramas, prison stories, police procedurals, horror films, comedies, musicals, and, yes, even Westerns.

Boldly stepping into this quagmire of generic analysis, Janina Müller provides a musicological foundation for the continued study of music for this elusive genre/style. She wisely limits her study to "classic noir" but, unlike other studies of noir music that focus on a limited group of well-known movies, Müller provides detailed analyses of eighteen classics that represent the wide range of "eclectic" styles. Her repertory extends from *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) to *The Touch of Evil* (1958) and includes composers

such as Miklós Rózsa, Roy Webb, Max Steiner, Franz Waxman, George Antheil, and Henry Mancini. Each film score is treated in a comprehensive manner with the inclusion of significant historical backgrounds, bibliographic support, stylistic overviews, sociological and psychological frameworks, and incisive analyses that include musical examples, excerpts from scores, and images from movies.

The Introduction and first chapter lay the foundation and provide the framework for the remainder of the book. These sections focus on two large topics: the history and definition of film noir as provided by cinema studies, and an overview of music from Hollywood's Golden Age and subsequently from film noirs. Chapter 1 begins with the recognition that film noir is an international phenomenon, not just American as defined in many cinema studies. Müller acknowledges properly that France produced the forerunners of the movement in the 1930s with films such as *Pépé le Moko* (1937) and *Le Jour se lève* (1939). Shortly after World War II, French critics were the first to identify and label the American trend for dark films in the 1940s, and Müller describes in detail subsequent American studies of the genre/style. In this overview, she includes various cinematic definitions, noting the socialistic implications and, most importantly, the "nonconformity" of film noir.

Turning to film music, Müller describes the standard view of the musical style for Hollywood's Golden Age, highlighting landmark films of Max Steiner of the '30s and '40s. She then proceeds to take on the overgeneralizations that Wagner's operas were the model for film scores and that the basic

Hollywood musical style was late Romantic or neo-Romantic. Arguing against Wagner as the principal forerunner of film music, she cites numerous other significant influences, including the music for stage melodramas and Tin Pan Alley. These arguments segue naturally into the divergent musical styles found in film noir. Müller traces academic views of music for film noir through significant writings on the topic from Robert Porfirio's landmark dissertation in 1979.

A lengthy series of well-chosen examples shows the eclectic nature of film noir scoring, focusing on the contrasting styles of modern and popular music. Color (electronic instruments, manipulations of recordings, and unusual instrumental combinations), harmony (quartal chords and dissonances), and melodic motifs highlight the discussion of connections with contemporary music. In the process, she musically reveals how some of film noir's music is indebted to horror films. Featured composers in this section are Roy Webb, Hans Salter, and Miklós Rózsa. Particularly impressive is the linking of Rózsa's film musical style to several of his concert works with appropriate musical examples. The use of popular music in Hollywood films dates to the 1930s, including her prime example of Alfred Newman's Gershwinesque theme to *Street Scene*. Scores based on jazz appear in the 1950s, films cited as landmarks in this regard being *The Big Combo* (David Raksin, d. Joseph H. Lewis, 1955), *Sweet Smell of Success* (Elmer Bernstein, d. Alexander Mackendrick, 1957), and *Touch of Evil* (Henry Mancini, d. Orson Welles, 1958). Beyond the use of popular music in these scores, she touches on the significant topic of popular songs in film noir, often sung as musical numbers by femmes fatales.

Noting that film composers chose styles on a scene-by-scene basis, Müller focuses on two standard scene types as topics for the next two chapters: mystery and violence. For both she provides historical, sociological, and artistic backgrounds. Chapter 2 illustrates Müller's ability to describe the "big picture," provide specific examples, and focus on significant details. Three larger topics are presented: the literary background for film noir, the history of "mysteries" dating back to the eighteenth century, and a theoretical discussion of standard musical gestures in film. Citing the pulp fiction of *Black Mast* (1930s) and the works of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, Müller describes the "hard-boiled detective" with figures like Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe and how they lay the groundwork for the film noir genre. Notably, she describes their violent

and misogynist tendencies. Mysteries are traced back to several eighteenth-century novels containing mood descriptions that include dark lighting. The tradition is continued into the nineteenth century with the melodrama. Here, musical representations were created with appropriate categories such as *mysteriosos* and *hurries*. These are linked to their counterparts in silent and sound film. The discussion of common musical themes leads to the specific and detailed example of the psychological terror at the climax of *Sorry, Wrong Number* (Franz Waxman, d. Anatole Litvak, 1948). Tying this portion of the chapter together, Müller analyzes specific mystery scenes featuring Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* (Adolph Deutsch, d. John Huston, 1941) and Philip Marlowe in *Murder, My Sweet* (Roy Webb, d. Edward Dmytryk, 1944) and *The Big Sleep* (Max Steiner, d. Howard Hawks, 1946).

Chapter 3 deals with the essence of many film noirs—violence and excessive emotions. Once again, a thorough background is provided that extends to operas (*Otello*), melodramas, early films, and genres such as pornography (lust) and horror. Since the Hays Code did not forbid the showing of violence (as long as it was not in detail), many film noirs turned to brutal and sometimes shocking uses of implied violence. Strangulation scenes and their musical underpinning from *Murder, My Sweet* and *Double Indemnity* (Miklós Rózsa, d. Billy Wilder, 1944) are discussed, as well as several other brief examples. The main analytic portion of the chapter treats two topics: music accompanying scenes of overt brutality and the use of popular music in scenes of violence. Müller presents extended discussions of two films scored by Miklós Rózsa: *The Killers* (d. Robert Siodmak, 1946) and *Brute Force* (d. Jules Dassin, 1947). *The Killers* is notable for its distinctive motif, disjunct melodies, harsh harmonies, and violent syncopations. While these give way periodically to a love theme, the brutal portions dominate the score. The climactic shoot-out with the Killer's motif and a piano boogie-woogie source music is particularly striking. Many of the brutal elements are also heard in the score to *Brute Force*, but the most unsettling scene is accompanied by Wagner's *Tannhäuser* Overture used as source music that covers Captain Munsey's (Hume Cronyn) beating of a prisoner with a rubber hose. The chapter concludes with a lengthy description of Henry Mancini's music for *Touch of Evil*. Since the story takes place in a Mexican border town, American big band and rock and Mexican popular musical styles abound—a conflict of styles heard as source music in

the remarkable opening shot (in the Welles version). Among the musical moments in the overview is the use of a pianola, loud rock music that accompanies what could be interpreted as a gang rape of Vargas's wife, and the equally loud big band music for Quinn's murder (strangulation) of Grande.

Chapter 4 deals with a common musical technique perhaps most notably employed in *Casablanca*: the use of a source music melody that becomes a critical recollection theme for characters in the drama. Müller begins the chapter with a discussion of the celebrated B film, *Detour* (Leo Erdody, d. Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945). As in *Casablanca*, a flashback reveals a song that represents a romantic relationship. Haunted by the melody, pianist Al Roberts (Tom Neal) decides to follow his lover (a singer) to Los Angeles, but twisting events lead to tragic results. The chapter then focuses on three extended analyses of noirs with divergent recollection themes. *Out of the Past* (Webb, d. Jacques Tourneur, 1947), a title that describes the primary haunting theme as well, centers on the song "The First Time I Saw You," which indeed is heard as café source music when Jeff (Robert Mitchum) first meets Kathie (Jane Greer). Mitchum again plays the sap in *Angel Face* (Dimitri Tiomkin, d. Otto Preminger, 1953), where the recollection theme is "Nostalgia," a work played on the piano by the femme fatale Dianne (Jean Simmons). In both movies Mitchum dies with the femmes fatales. Schumann's "Chopin," from *Carnaval*, is integral to the film *Possessed* (Waxman, d. Curtis Bernhardt, 1947). David (Van Heflin) plays it for his lover Louise (Joan Crawford), saying that it is her theme. After he dumps her, it becomes a symbol of her obsession for David. In all these examples, extensive analyses of orchestration, melody, and harmony provide insights into these noted noir scores.

A different approach can be seen in Chapter 5, which is devoted to just two films that have a common underlying theme: an unflattering look at Hollywood through the stories of two screenwriters. *In a Lonely Place* (George Antheil, d. Nicholas Ray, 1950) tells of Dix Steele (Humphrey Bogart), an embittered, sarcastic, and volatile screenwriter with writer's block. He begins a relationship with neighbor Laurel which energizes his writing. Müller notes that much of this film seems like a slapstick comedy, but darkness intrudes when a young hat-check girl is murdered, having last been seen with Dix. He is eventually exonerated but his relationship is destroyed, largely

due to his temper. George Antheil supports the story with music which critic Lawrence Morton described as suffering from "malnutrition."

In *Sunset Blvd.* (Waxman, d. Billy Wilder, 1950), Müller details the musical transformation from comic to deadly serious. In this film, writer Joe Gillis (William Holden) has not been successful in the industry. Escaping from creditors he enters the mansion of Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson), an aging former silent film star. Norma, in a disillusioned state, wants to make a comeback in movies as the sexy biblical Salome. Joe feeds this fantasy and becomes her lover. Unlike *In a Lonely Place*, this film ends in tragedy as Norma ultimately shoots Joe. Waxman composed a deservedly celebrated score (an Oscar winner). As Müller details, the music of Richard Strauss's opera *Salome* is a significant influence on Waxman's music.

The only thing lacking in this study is an index. With its diversity of topics and score analyses of specific films divided among several chapters, an index would have been a valuable aid for someone wanting to read about one of her many topics. Overall, the book offers much more than a study of film noir. While focusing on the music for this genre/style, Müller provides an overview of film music—where it came from, its multiple styles, and how it developed through mid-century. In its entirety, this book is a significant accomplishment. For those young musicologists that want to study the music of film noir, brush up on your German. This book is essential.

**Roger Hickman** teaches musicology, undergraduate music history, and humanities courses and is a specialist in film music, music of the Classical era, and performance practices. He has numerous publications to his credit, including several articles for *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. He has written two books, *Miklós Rózsa's Ben-Hur* and a textbook entitled *Reel Music: Exploring 100 Years of Film Music*. As a performer, he has conducted a festival performance of Carmina Burana in the Sydney Opera House and conducted orchestral concerts in China, Taiwan, Vienna, Prague, Budapest, Rome, and at Carnegie Hall. Active in the community, he was selected by the *Los Angeles Times* as the Arts Volunteer of the Year in 1999.