Journal of Film Music 4.1 (2011) 73-75
doi:10.1558/jfm.v4i1.73
ISSN (print) 1087-7142
ISSN (online) 1758-860X

Mark Slobin, ed. *Global Soundtracks: Worlds of Film Music*

Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008 [xxiii, 387 p. ISBN 9780819568823. $34.95 (trade paper)]. Music examples, illustrations, figures, tables, notes, works cited lists, film sources lists, filmographies, videography, discography, index.

JAMES WIERZBICKI
University of Sydney
james.wierzbicki@sydney.edu

This volume in effect contains not one book but two, each of them a valuable contribution to the burgeoning literature on film music yet so different in tone, content, and—presumably—intended audience that they fairly defy comparison.

One of these is the "book" a reader might well expect from the volume's title, a collection of nine independent essays whose expert authors address film music in a variety of situations, for the most part remote from the mainstream of Western culture. Three of these (by Greg Booth, by Joseph Getter and B. Balasubrahmaniyan, and by Abdalla Uba Adamu) deal in a general, mostly historical, way with film music in India, and a fourth essay (by Sue M. C. Tuohy) takes a similar approach to music in films made in China in the 1930s. The other five essays take the form of case studies whose sharply focused light goes a long way toward illuminating bigger pictures. Sumarsam's essay on Teguh Karya's *November 1828* (1979), for example, says a great deal not just about the music in that film but also about the many political pressures that have long influenced almost every aspect of filmmaking in Indonesia; Marilyn Miller's essay similarly places the music in Joselito Rodríguez's *Angelitos negros* (1948) against the backdrop of domestic politics and, especially, race relations in post-World War II Mexico, and politics of quite a different sort—international, and prompted by the first blusterings of the Cold War—figure prominently in the essay by Eric A. Galm on the "authentic" Brazilian music appropriated by the Disney Studios for its *The Three Caballeros* (1945, directed by Norman Ferguson); one can certainly find it if one reads between the lines, but political contextualization takes a backseat to straightforward descriptions of music and musical usage in Brenda F. Berrian's study of Euzhan Palcy's *La Rue cases-nègres* (1983) and other Caribbean films, as well as to musical biography in Martin Stokes' piece on the prolific Egyptian singer-songwriter Abd al-Halim Hafiz. For the scholar of Western film music who is earnestly trying to expand his or her horizons, the quickest and richest pay-off is likely to be found in "That Bollywood Sound," an essay in which Booth not only summarizes the aesthetic essence of contemporary Indian film music but also explains, in brief, how the Bollywood sound evolved from practices that pre-date the sound film.[1] All of these essays are thoroughly researched and well written; along with a handful of articles that over the last two decades have appeared in scholarly journals devoted primarily to cinema studies and ethnomusicology, the nine essays collected here represent a scatter-shot approach to the large and still ill-defined topic of non-Western film music, but at least the topic's existence is affirmed by the simple fact of their being brought together in a single volume.

1 Booth expands on the history of Bollywood music in a monograph published in the same year as *Global Soundtracks*. See Gregory D. Booth, *Behind the Curtain: Making Music in Mumbai's Film Studios* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

© Copyright the International Film Music Society, published by Equinox Publishing Ltd 2012, Unit S3, Kelham House, 3 Lancaster Street, Sheffield, S3 8AF.

equinoxonline

This single volume, as mentioned, in effect contains not one book but two. As laudable as is the just-discussed compilation of nine unconnected essays by diverse authors, readers who are not specialists in a particular non-Western culture, or who are not historians preparing to write a *magnum opus* on film music worldwide, might find the other "book"—a neatly organized set of essays by a single author—to be far more compelling. Surprisingly, the four chapters of the elegant little monograph that wraps the larger anthology have almost nothing to do with "global soundtracks." They deal for the most part with familiar Hollywood scores, and the author's approach is often as brilliantly perceptive as it is unorthodox.

Mark Slobin is a veteran ethnomusicologist who more than thirty years ago began to establish a solid reputation primarily with exhaustive studies of music in the Jewish diaspora and, secondarily, with studies of music from tribal regions of Afghanistan. In 1993 he shocked many colleagues in the ethnomusicology business, and at the same time helped claim for musicologists territory that hitherto had been the domain only of sociologists and journalists, by publishing his slim book titled *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993). The book—an extended essay, really—considered various forms of so-called popular music not as commodities or "works of art" or expressions of individual political/emotional agendas but simply as aural representations, or icons, of the overall essence of the numerous small cultures that exist within the large sphere of Western culture.

Slobin's look at music in Hollywood films is not nearly as anthropologically disciplined as was his study of Western culture's popular music. Indeed, Slobin in his four chapters for *Global Soundtracks* seems to cast to the wind the idea of rigorous anthropological discipline and instead just plays, gleefully, with various items in his ethnomusicological toolbox. Here and there he hints but does not specify—because it goes without saying—that ethnomusicology and its related fields deal fundamentally with the "reality" of various social contexts; in all of these chapters he makes it perfectly clear that at least for the moment he is concerned not at all with "realities" but, rather, with "fictions" perpetrated by filmmakers and the composers in their employ. Early in his first chapter, Slobin boldly observes, emphatically in italics, that "every film is ethnographic, and every soundtrack acts like an ethnomusicologist" (pp. 3-4). One hopes that this eminently quotable phrase is not hereafter quoted out of context, for what Slobin really means is that almost every narrative film tells a make-believe story about human beings who live in one or more societal situations, and the score of almost every narrative film to a certain extent marks the boundaries of these situations, and defines their content, by means of references to pre-existing music or to musical clichés.

The opening chapter, "The Steiner Superculture," makes its points primarily with the well-known but hardly genuine "ethnic" music for Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schroedsack's *King Kong* (1933) and John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) but also—and in more subtle ways, because their settings are for the most part not exotic—with Steiner's scores for Irving Rapper's *Now, Voyager* (1942) and Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Slobin here uses the term "superculture" the way he did in the 1993 book, to mean "the dominant, mainstream musical content of a society, in effect, everything people take for granted as being 'normal' " (p. 3), and his application of the term to film music seems wholly compatible with the generally acknowledged conventions of music in the so-called "classical-style" film.[2] With that idea established, his second chapter explores "The Superculture Beyond Steiner," mostly through close looks at Leith Stevens' and Elmer Bernstein's jazz-influenced original scores for Laslo Benedek's *The Wild One* (1953) and Otto Preminger's *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), respectively, but also through considerations of the more or less authentic jazz or Appalachian source music that is rather freely used for fictional purposes in such later films as Steve Kloves' *The Fabulous Baker Boys* (1989), John Sayles' *Matewan* (1987), and Maggie Greenwald's *Songcatcher* (2000); in turn, the third chapter, "Subcultural Filmways," deals briefly with fictional musical identifiers for smaller societal groups (Jewish, African-American, Latino, Native American) that exist within the large American culture but which, both in actuality and in the minds of Hollywood producers, are nevertheless quite separate from the mainstream.

These three Hollywood-focused chapters form a group that Slobin aptly labels "American Worlds." Slobin's fourth chapter, appended at the end of the volume, is called "Comparative Vistas." Although this final chapter indeed makes reference to a great many

2 The "classical-style" film is one whose story-telling is "excessively obvious" (David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Production to 1960* (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1985), 1), a film whose various technical devices are used in tandem "to explain, and not obscure, the narrative" (Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000), 64). The musical conventions of the classical-style film have been neatly itemized in Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 73-91, as well as in Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 66-134.

© The International Film Music Society 2012.

equinoxonline

non-American films (including obscure Soviet films in which Slobin clearly has an interest), its arguments apply generally to mainstream Western film, and its key points—intriguingly—have less to do with music per se than with applications to film music of choice bits of literary theory. Slobin calls attention to the "narrative knot," in which two strands of a story are deliberately tangled for the sake of a dramatic point (p. 337). As music-related examples, he cites the familiar scene during which a relationship changes as its two parties jointly listen to a musical performance, the familiar scene during which singing by innocent children comments on present or future action, the perhaps not-so-familiar scene (but one that surely would be noticed by any ethnomusicologist who has done fieldwork) in which the introduction of phonographic technology drastically impacts life in a hitherto isolated community. He calls attention, too, to the "figure" (p. 341), a meaningful icon that recurs again and again throughout a large body of narratives; along with the just-mentioned children's chorus, Slobin mentions the musically significant "figures" of tension between classical music and popular music, of the implications of a piano in a household, of the looming presence of a canonic composer such as Beethoven. And—borrowing from theories set out by art historian Oleg Grabar—he mentions the idea of "ornament," an arguably extraneous quality that perhaps does not convey the essence of a message but which nevertheless goes a long way toward establishing the "atmosphere" within which a message might be best received.[3]

Slobin is new to film music, and thus he can easily be forgiven numerous gaffes that range from incorrect dates for *King Kong* and the Lumière brothers' exhibitions to attribution of the electronic score for Hitchcock's *The Birds* to Bernard Herrmann. It is his insights, not his information, that make his contributions to *Global Soundtracks* so worth reading. In the four free-wheeling essays that frame the book's nine dutifully ethnomusicological studies, Slobin gives today's film music scholar a great deal about which to think.

James Wierzbicki is a Senior Lecturer in musicology at the University of Sydney. He deals with film music, electronic music, and questions of modernism and the postmodern. Recently, he is the author of *Film Music: A History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009) and *Elliott Carter* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011). With Nathan Platte and Colin Roust, he co-edited the *Routledge Film Music Sourcebook* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011).

3 The French-born Grabar (1929-2011) specialized in Islamic art and architecture. His theories on ornament developed within that context and were fully articulated for the first time in *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

© The International Film Music Society 2012.

equinoxonline