

REVIEWS

James Buhler, David Neumeyer, and Rob Deemer. *Hearing the Movies: Music and Sound in Film History*

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. [xxiv, 470 p. ISBN 0195327793. \$54.95(trade paper)] Music examples, figures, illustrations, glossary, endnotes, index.

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The appropriateness of reviewing *Hearing the Movies: Music and Sound in Film History* in a musicology journal is questionable. Authors James Buhler, David Neumeyer, and Rob Deemer are not historians, but two theorists and a composer. They make no pretense of writing a survey of film music: “We do not aim to promote a particular historical narrative that valorizes certain repertoires” (p. xv). Holding to this perspective, music is consistently approached in a theoretical manner; passages appropriate to discussion are examined in detail, but the music is rarely placed in the context of the film score as a whole, within a composer’s course of development, or in a broad historical overview. Moreover, music is not even the primary subject of the book: “we focus on music in the context of the film sound track and on the sound track in the context of a history of film technology” (p. xv). Indeed, the last portion of the book presents a technological history of the sound track, not (as suggested on the back cover) a history of film music.

Still there are three compelling reasons to call attention to this new addition to literature on film music in this forum. (1) The authors are highly respected. Neumeyer has contributed an article to the first issue of this journal, and he and Buhler are

among the editors for the informative collection of essays, *Music and Cinema* (Wesleyan University Press, 2000). Lending a practical point of view, Deemer has scored over 30 films and documentaries. (2) The perspectives offered on the music for specific scenes are generally incisive and, as intended, suggest ways in which other such passages can be viewed. (3) A musicological approach to film music cannot ignore technological developments. This book can serve as a valuable tool for understanding the technology behind sound in film.

Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer have crafted *Hearing the Movies* as a textbook. Conforming to the needs of a college course, the book has 15 chapters divided into three relatively equal parts, facilitating its use in a 15-week semester with two midterms and a final exam. Although the examples are drawn from the broad range of film history, there is an obvious effort to incorporate recent films that would be relevant to college-age students. The ease of reading is enhanced by numerous well-chosen images and detailed charts analyzing specific scenes. Particularly useful for classroom instruction are the practical exercises located at the end of several chapters and the insertion of chapters dealing with how to write about music and sound.

The three sections of the book are markedly different in their approach and subject. Part 1 functions as an introduction to cinematic narrative, sound, and music. Specific terms relating to these topics appear in bold type, alerting the reader to their significance and to definitions that can be found in the glossary. The first chapter describes the relationships between the image and sound tracks and between the three areas of sound—speech, sound effects, and music. The second chapter, entitled “The Musicality of the Sound Track,” defines terms that are used to describe the elements of music and proposes that this terminology should be applied to dialogue and sound effects. Whether or not sound engineers adopt this suggestion, the linking of musical concepts with non-musical sound provides an intriguing way of introducing the elements of music, and it underlines the concepts that dialogue and sound effects are subject to organization and that there is indeed a craft in sound engineering. Continuing with a theoretical approach, Chapter 3 describes the various roles and sometimes subtle differences between diegetic (source) and non-diegetic (score) music, and Chapter 4 explores the relationship of sound and time in film.

Part 2 deals more specifically with music. For those interested in the relationship of music and film, this is the most rewarding portion of the book. The well-organized section begins with an overview and then examines the variety of musical functions in film extending from its most independent uses (credits, performance segments, and montages) to its more supportive roles (leitmotifs, dialogue, and action). Examples range from the silent-film era to the twenty-first century; international films are thankfully included as well. Without delving too far into any one film, this provides an excellent theoretical summary of film music organized by function. Of course, there are inevitable points that a musicologist could choose to argue. From the perspective of a historian, it would have been preferable to have an analysis of a silent film with its original music, rather than one with newly created music by Martin Marks. We should also add a reminder that Wagner did not invent the term “leitmotiv.” While a minor point, this common misconception has led to heated debates about the appropriateness of the term in discussions of film music.

The third part of the text opens with two chapters detailing the use of music and sound effects in the silent-film era and in the transition to sound film. The organization and thoroughness make these chapters a good read for historians of film music. Particularly

enlightening are the discussions of the importance of sound effects during this time, a topic that is often overlooked in historical writings and in the recreations of films with the original music.

With such strong opening chapters for Part 3 and with the framework to study the development of film music, sound, and narrative established in the first two parts of the book, the remainder of Part 3 is musically disappointing. Following a chapter on the Classical studio era, succeeding chapters are devoted to major technological developments—stereo, Dolby, and digital sound. These chapters focus primarily on technological developments, changes in movie theaters, and phases in film production, and music receives increasingly less attention. The number of analyses of specific scenes drops off considerably when compared to earlier portions of the text. With the authors’ evident analytic skills and insights, lengthier and more specific discussions of how technological developments impacted composers and their music would have been most welcome. The lack of such consideration implies that recent developments in sound technology have had little practical impact on the composer’s creative process.

The title of the text *Hearing the Movies* suggests a focus on an observer’s perception of film, much as a similar title would for music appreciation. Yet the text goes well beyond the realm of hearing. Many of the discussions deal with subjects that cannot be heard and are of interest primarily to those studying filmmaking. This brings us to the question of the target group for this text. The discussions are clearly intended for non-music majors. Musical terms are systematically and carefully defined, but the same care is not taken with concepts of cinema and sound. For these areas, terms are often described briefly or with a general statement to consult the glossary. A fundamental concept such as “optical track,” for example, is explained in a parenthetical phrase, but the term does not appear in the glossary or index. This would suggest an expectation that students would already be comfortable with such terminology. Discussions also seem to imply pre-knowledge or at least interest in the production of film. The dance scene from *Glory* receives an extended analysis in Chapter 3. Among the many details are precise descriptions of the cinematic shots—close-ups, establishing shots—that are of interest to film students, but do not contribute to our understanding of how one hears the film.

The Preface suggests that *Hearing the Movies* is suitable for a class on “film music and film sound,”

by which one must infer that the student interest would lean towards the latter. Such a class would be invaluable for film majors and future sound engineers. The authors add: “The book may also serve effectively as a substantial supplementary or reference text in introductory film courses, courses on sound design and aesthetics, courses on film music composition, courses on twentieth-century and contemporary music, courses on music and media, or even seminar courses on specific repertoires” (p. xvi). One cannot argue with this assessment. Even the subject furthest from that of the text—classes on twentieth-century music—can benefit from an understanding of sound technology. The composition and recording of all types of music, not just film music, are impacted by these developments. While the book stands on the outer edge of musicology, it presents many important

concepts that are related to the field and is a recommended supplement for those who wish to read and understand more about film music.

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