

ARTICLE

Introduction: From Nineteenth-Century Stage Melodrama to Twenty-First-Century Film Scoring

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In the early 1990s I met a number of theatre historians at a Gilbert & Sullivan conference in New York. I was a newly minted Ph.D., and was hungry to meet established scholars inside or outside of my field. My new acquaintances that spring included David Mayer, Professor of Drama at the University of Manchester in England, who with Matthew Scott edited *Four Bars of 'Agit': Incidental Music for Victorian and Edwardian Melodrama* for Samuel French in 1983.¹ I remember sitting with David in a coffee shop after the conference was over and sharing with him—in what must have been the earnest true-believer style of an enthusiastic young scholar—my ideas about the importance of music in the theatre of late nineteenth-century America, and the ubiquity of the theatre in the lives of everyday Americans during that period. I had recently completed my first book (an examination of the work of journeymen musicians in Washington, D. C. during the last quarter of the nineteenth century), and in the process had learned a great deal about both of those issues.² The conversation that I had with David was a fortuitous one, for it resulted in an invitation to write a short introductory essay called “The Music of Toga Drama” for an anthology he was assembling for publication. This work (eventually called *Playing out the Empire*) is a collection of scripts of a particular type of late-century drama that came to be known (somewhat derisively) as “toga plays”; it includes scripts of five

plays (including *Claudian*, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, Wilson Barrett's *The Sign of the Cross*, *Ben-Hur* by William Young, and Marshall Moore's *The Charioteers*) and two silent films (D. W. Griffith's *The Barbarian Ingomar* and the first cinematic version of the epic *Ben Hur*, with music by Edgar Stillman Kelley).³ In the essay that I contributed, I discussed the important role of music in both the staged dramas and the early films that were included in the book; this was my first foray into the field of film music scholarship. I mention this experience, and the essay, primarily because it illustrates an important underlying context and background for my engagement with music used in the cinema, that is, a background in nineteenth-century studies. It is also a wonderful example of the dual themes of “From Nineteenth-Century Stage Melodrama to Twenty-First-Century Film Scoring,” a musicological symposium held at California State University, Long Beach, April 12-14, 2012, which was an examination of the connections between nineteenth-century stage drama and film music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Sponsored jointly by the CSULB College of the Arts and the Society for American Music, the symposium invited scholars from two different sub-areas of musicology (music for the theatre and music for the cinema) to come together to converse with and learn from each other. One of the basic intents was to familiarize film music scholars

¹ London: Samuel French/Theatre Museum V & A, 1983

² *Music for Hire: The Work of Journeymen Musicians in Washington, DC, 1875-1900* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1992).

³ David Mayer, *Playing Out the Empire: Ben-Hur and Other Toga Plays and Films, 1883-1908: A Critical Anthology, with additional essay by Katherine K. Preston* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1994).

with research by specialists in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theatre music; this is work, in fact, that should always function as the deep background for studies in music for the cinema. The symposium was organized roughly chronologically, so that the information shared by stage-music scholars towards the beginning of the conference could resonate with and inform the contributions from film music scholars later in the program. I was asked to introduce the symposium, and to focus on some aspects of that deep background in order to provide a context for what was heard over the course of the two-day event.

My area of scholarship is not film music, although for many years I have taught a course on the history of music and film. In real life, I am a scholar of nineteenth-century American musical culture. I have long been fascinated by the richness and vibrancy of American musical history, and believe deeply that we Americans should know about our own cultural history, especially that of the nineteenth century. As a result of this interest, I have spent my professional career studying and writing (some would say proselytizing) about the important role of music in the day-to-day lives of middle-class nineteenth-century Americans. I like to think that the musical culture that I study is that of people who were similar to me—Americans who were neither the aristocratic wannabees nor the poor or working classes. They were regular and ordinary Americans—in essence the same type of people who make up much of the audience for contemporary mass-market cinema today. I have endeavored to understand what music meant to these people—what they listened to and why. My research almost always, as if inevitably, has circled back to the theatre. In fact, one of the important ideas that came out of the symposium was an understanding that theatre was a vital part of American popular culture in the nineteenth century, just as the movies are an important part of popular culture in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

One way to illustrate the deep importance of the theatre in nineteenth-century American life is to describe briefly the nature of some of my own scholarship over the last several decades—especially the early work that defined the trajectory of my scholarly career. It is interesting to me that although I have always been fascinated by the history of American music, I certainly did not foresee when I was a young scholar that I would eventually spend much of my career studying musical theatre in nineteenth-century America. How I arrived at this point, however, is illustrative.

During one year while I was still a graduate student, I had the good fortune to be awarded a fellowship in the Division of Musical History of the Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C. For the duration of one particularly fortuitous semester, I spent a significant amount of time *not* sitting in a classroom, but rather working with two senior scholars (William Brooks, a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Smithsonian, and Cynthia Adams Hoover, a curator in the Division of Musical History) on three different and unrelated projects.⁴ It turned out that all of them were connected at least in some way with the theatre.

The goal of the first project was to provide background information to curators at the museum who were designing a major exhibit on George Washington in honor of the sesquicentennial of his birth. The project eventually shifted its focus to an examination of the theatre as entertainment during Washington's life. In the process of working on this project with Bill Brooks, I learned about the close musical and theatrical connections between the United Kingdom and the American Colonies (and the early Republic) during the eighteenth century. More important, however, was the emergence of a new understanding (for me) about important aspects of American musical and theatrical history—in essence, the two ideas I have already introduced: the importance of the theatre to Americans of different social and economic classes and the vital role of music on the popular stage.

The second project involved the reconstruction of an extraordinarily popular mid-nineteenth-century theatrical burlesque by the actor and playwright John Brougham (1810-1880). *Po-ca-hon-tas; or, the Gentle Savage* (1855) was a send-up of both Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* and of the popular American mythology surrounding the Noble Savage; the musical numbers—assembled ballad-opera style by James Maeder (1809-1876)—consisted of new texts set to familiar popular tunes, only a handful of which were identified in the printed libretto. The scavenger-hunt techniques that we used to identify a vast majority of the tunes (again, I was working with Brooks) suggested clearly that the emotional baggage associated with each borrowed song (and its original lyrics) was consciously used by Maeder

⁴ Cynthia Adams Hoover is a highly respected expert on organology and on musical theatre, especially of the eighteenth century. Since 1988 she has focused much of her attention on a documentary editing project, *The Diary of William Steinway, 1861-1896*, for which she is Co-Editor-in-Chief. William Brooks, a theorist, composer, performer, and musicologist, is Professor of Music at York University in the United Kingdom.

and Brougham to make their points. I also learned from this work that there was an extraordinarily close connection between nineteenth-century songs that were performed in the theatre, sung in taverns and in homes, and used on the stage for purposes of burlesque. These two projects demonstrated to me, very early in my scholarly career, that the theatre and theatre music were an important part of the tangled web of contemporary American popular culture.⁵

At the same time that I was working on these two projects, I was also in the middle of a scholarly endeavor of my own (under the supervision of Cynthia Hoover): the exploration of work by journeymen musicians in Washington D. C. during the last quarter of the nineteenth century (I mentioned this earlier). This research, which was based on a gig book kept by a Washington musician during the 1880s and 1890s, was also an eye-opening experience for me. As a master's degree student in musicology in the early 1980s, my coursework had been exclusively about European art music compositions and composers. If performers were mentioned at all, they were the big guns—Franz Liszt, Niccolò Paganini, and such luminaries. Furthermore, the idea of reception theory was very new to musicology, and the concept of examining the makeup of audiences was almost completely off the disciplinary radar screen. So my chance to focus on the repertory of regular journeymen musicians, the reception of that music by normal Americans, and the importance of music in the lives of these people opened up an entire world to me—and fed my continued fascination with the place of music in the everyday lives of nineteenth-century Americans. That this approach was relatively unknown in musicology of the time suggests how radically different the field is today. It turned out that the musician who created my gig-book source relied for much of his income on working in Washington theatres. This also meant that music was a major component of most theatrical productions mounted in the city during the 1880s and 1890s. That research resulted in two major theatre music-related insights for me. First was the understanding of how important the theatre was during this time (the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s)—both to ordinary journeymen musicians and to normal, regular Americans (for whom attendance at a theatrical performance was an absolutely unexceptional activity). Second—and more important—was the awareness that music from the stage (mostly from operas and operettas) permeated the soundscape of late-century Americans: they danced

⁵ William Brooks, "Pocahontas, Her Life and Times," *American Music* (Winter 1984), 19-48.

to theatre music, heard it in concerts, in parades, at mountain resorts, on riverboat steamers, at picnics, athletic contests, commencements, bicycle races, and everywhere else. These two ideas—that the theatre (and its music) occupied a seminal place in the lives of most middle-class nineteenth-century Americans and that music from the stage was ubiquitous in the American soundscape of the period—have informed my scholarship ever since.

Since that time I have continued in my quest to understand music in the lives of nineteenth-century Americans; almost invariably I find myself dealing with one or another aspect of nineteenth-century theatrical entertainment.⁶ I mention all of this to reinforce a basic idea: that scholars of nineteenth-century American musical culture understand in an intrinsic way that the theatre (and, by extrapolation, theatrical music) was of central importance to Americans of the late nineteenth century. Again, the parallels with middle-class consumption of movies should be obvious. This understanding, I believe, has much bearing on the intellectual genesis of this symposium, and should function as important background to the research presented at the symposium and in the proceedings.

The importance of music in stage productions—and the nature of the techniques used by theatre music composers—is the other major concept that everyone participating in the symposium internalized. Theatre historian Julian Mates has demonstrated convincingly that a large percentage of works performed on the American stage before 1800 had a significant musical component.⁷ This certainly did not change for the majority of the nineteenth century. And as we heard during the symposium, the composers or adaptors of theatre music during this time used particular tried-and-true techniques to create music that worked (in conjunction with

⁶ Some of my theatre-related publications since the early 1990s include *Opera on the Road: Traveling Opera Companies in the United States, 1825-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993; PB 2001); *David Braham: The Mulligan Guard Ball, and Reilly and the 400* (Nineteenth-Century American Musical Theatre, 10; New York: Garland Publishers, 1994); "Nineteenth-Century Musical Theatre," in *Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, ed. Paul Laird and William Everett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, republished 2007), 3-28; "Between the Cracks: The Performance of English-Language Opera in Late 19th-Century America," and "American Musical Life of the Late Nineteenth Century" (Introductory Essay), *American Music*, 23, no. 3 (Fall 2003), 349-74; 255-59; "To the Opera House? The Trials and Tribulations of Operatic Production in Nineteenth Century America," and "Notes from (the Road to) the Stage," *The Opera Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2007), 39-65 and 103-19; and "A Rarefied Art? Opera and Operatic Arias as Popular Entertainment in Late-Century Washington City," in *MUSIC, AMERICAN MADE: Essays in Honor of John Graziano*, ed. John Koegel (Sterling Heights, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2011), 3-46.

⁷ Julian Mates, *America's Musical Stage: Two Hundred Years of Musical Theatre* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985) and *The American Musical Stage before 1800* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1962).

actions on the stage) to convey particular emotions, foreshadow impending developments, underscore affective scenes (melodrama), and smooth over transitions. One important point worth remembering is that many of the musicians who were employed in late nineteenth-century theatre orchestras, as well as the composers and musical directors who wrote and arranged the music, were the same musicians who were hired to supply music for the early cinema. Not surprisingly, they used for film the same techniques that they had found effective for the theatre, some of which had been evolving for almost two centuries. The lineage of film music, then, should be clear—it grew directly out of music for the stage. This may be surprising to some scholars of music for the cinema, especially to those individuals who study composers active in the late twentieth century. But this is an important context about which all scholars of film music should be aware.

It would never occur to a scholar of nineteenth-century American music to question the existence of a clear connection between the music written and performed for nineteenth-century staged melodrama (among other styles of drama) and the music written and performed for the “silent” cinema and, later, for early sound films. Scholars who have a research background similar to mine see this connection as clear and incontrovertible. But this conviction is evidently not shared by all scholars. To return to that post-conference conversation that I had with David Mayer over 20 years ago, I remember being astonished when he spoke (as a theatre historian) of his frustration with film scholars of his acquaintance who—he said—wanted to treat the cinema as if it were an entirely new and unique art form, and who were willing to recognize few connections to the conventions of late-century stage drama. Evidently (David pointed out), the practices of stage drama from this late-century period—the lighting, costumes, scenery, demeanor, gestures, overblown expressions—were considered old-fashioned, stilted, and overly emotional, in contrast with the newly evolving conventions of the cinema. Film offered a new direction for artistic expression, and scholars in the growing field of film studies, so David explained, were eager to make a clean break with the past and create a new scholarly discipline. Since the time of that conversation, Mayer has devoted an entire book (*Stagestruck Filmmaker: D. W. Griffith and the American Theatre*) to documenting the appropriation of theatrical practices in the films of one cinema pioneer.⁸

⁸ *Studies in Theatre History & Culture* series, University of Iowa Press, 2009.

To a music historian, however—especially to a scholar who has studied the musical practices of the nineteenth-century stage—the idea that music in the cinema did not grow out of theatrical tradition flies in the face of what we know about this music. Americans of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s attended live theatrical performances with the same kind of nonchalance that modern Americans head over to their local cinema multiplex—so they were much more than casually acquainted with the music that accompanied the drama. Furthermore, as already mentioned, Americans of this period were absolutely surrounded by music from the stage. So why would performers and composers for the early cinema even consider starting over with some new style of musical accompaniment when the old style of theatrical music would work just fine? This would have been throwing out the baby with the bath water. In fact, as seen over the course of the symposium (and reflected in these proceedings), the evidence is abundantly clear that many of the conventions associated with stage music of the nineteenth century (and even earlier, as several presenters suggest) significantly influenced not only the so-called “photoplay music” that accompanied early “silent” films, but also the scores for films made well into the twentieth (and even the early twenty-first) centuries. The more we know about the earlier practices, the better we will understand the music of the cinema. And, appropriately enough, that is where the proceedings begin.

It is certainly appropriate to acknowledge that over the last twenty years much has changed in cinema studies and film music scholarship (as well as in musicology, as I pointed out earlier). When I wrote my essay for David Mayer’s book in the early 1990s, the body of scholarship on film music was sparse. There were some studies, but the vast majority of film-music books that I can now pull off my shelf have been published since then, most of them in the later 1990s and 2000s. The topic is now something of a cottage industry within the discipline of musicology, with film music journals, societies, and regular symposia and conferences being held in both the United States and in Europe. Those of us who teach film music have an embarrassment of riches to choose from for our classroom texts; there are also biographies of film composers, books devoted to music of particular genres, and anthologies of essays on specific scores and films. All of this scholarship is evidence of a great deal of work that has been undertaken in the area of music for the cinema. Even so, there is still plenty of work to be done. The scholarly focus of the symposium represents one of those areas.

Indeed, the scholarship being accomplished in both film music and in nineteenth-century theatre music is encouraging. In the latter area, new evidence is constantly being unearthed and explored, new books are being written, and new sources made available to scholars. Musicologist Michael Pisani read a riveting paper in July 2012 at a conference on nineteenth-century music about Giuseppe Operti's score for an 1870s production of Edwin Booth's *Julius Caesar*. Operti's music for this play included stand-alone instrumental works, segments of melodramatic underscoring, and short mood-setting pieces. Pisani's discovery of the music for this production (and similar work by other scholars) helps us to understand much more clearly the function of music in stage dramas of the 1870s.⁹ Other sources are also surfacing regularly and being made available to scholars. For example, prior to the symposium, Bill Rosar learned from Tobias Plebuch in Berlin of an anthology of short pieces for stage melodrama (published in New York in 1878) that employs the term "cues" for the short little melodramatic pieces—instead of the traditional term "melos," which scholars have tended to use for such musical snippets.¹⁰ It is perhaps no coincidence that "cues" is the term long used for the pieces that make up a film score. And at the British Library a huge cache of theatre music—including the entire orchestra library of the Grecian Theatre in London—is being digitized and should be available online soon. The discovery and increased availability of primary documents like these—and there are probably many more examples out there waiting to be unearthed—contribute in no small degree to our understanding of the function of music in stage drama during the late-century period. The more we know about the latter, the better we will understand the music of the early cinema (whether composed works like Edgar Stillman Kelley's score to *Ben Hur*, or cobbled-together collections of evocative photoplay music from such collections as Erno Rapée's 1925 compendium *Encyclopedia of Music for Pictures*) and of film music in general, even into the twenty-first century.¹¹

9 Michael Pisani, "Fiddling while Rome Burns: Music for *Julius Caesar* in New York, 1875," paper presented at Second Biennial North American Conference on Nineteenth-Century Music, University of Richmond, Richmond, Virginia, 8 July 2011.

10 Email communication from William Rosar, 23 March 2012. H. Wannemacher, Jr., *Collection of Melo-Dramatic Music, Containing 20 Numbers or Dramatic Cues, such as Hurrys, Combats, Tremolos, Mysterious Music &c., &c.* (New York: A. M. Schacht & Co., 1878).

11 Erno Rapée, *Encyclopedia of Music for Pictures* (New York: Belwin, 1925); see also his *Motion Picture Moods for Pianists and Organists: A Rapid-Reference Collection of Selected Pieces, Adapted to Fifty-Two Moods and Situations* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1924; reprinted by Arno Press, 1970).

Scholars who participated in the symposium revealed many newly discovered sources. These contributions are important, for musicologists who are well versed in the musical-theatrical practices of earlier centuries bring to the conversation a wealth of information and insight. Furthermore, what we heard from film-music scholars in the course of the symposium reinforced the idea that film composers are both part of a shared compositional tradition and that some of the techniques they use have been around since the eighteenth century. This wealth of insight-sharing will help us all to understand better the correlations between music for the stage and music for the cinema. At the time of the symposium I was eager to hear what my colleagues had to contribute, and I hope you share that enthusiasm as you prepare to read these essays. Before I suggest that we "get on with the show," however, I would like to add a coda to this essay.

I end this introduction with a few words about one of the contributors to the symposium. Anne Dhu McLucas, a multi-talented scholar and a former president of the Society for American Music (a co-sponsor of the symposium), described in her paper the use of "melos" on the American theatrical stage from 1720 to the early twentieth century. To a certain extent, this paper represented a scholarly full-circle for her. Anne had wide-ranging and eclectic interests, but her first major article (in 1984) was on "action music" in American melodrama and pantomimes during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries.¹² I first met her when she was engaged with this research, which eventually resulted in an important edition of the 1883 melodrama *The Count of Monte Cristo*.¹³ At the time I was involved with the Smithsonian Institution projects described earlier in this introduction, and her passionate enthusiasm and genuine *joie de vivre* contributed in no small way to my own nascent interest in nineteenth-century American musical theatre. It was Anne Dhu, in fact, who introduced me to David Mayer. There is no question that McLucas' pioneering work in the field of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American musical theatre was seminal to the discipline of musicology (and, especially, Americanist musicology), for during the 1980s and early 1990s only a handful of scholars were interested in the field. It is also somehow quite appropriate that she returned to this decades-old

12 Anne Dhu Shapiro, "Action Music in American Pantomime and Melodrama, 1730-1913," *American Music* 2, no. 4 (1984), 49-72.

13 Anne Dhu McLucas, ed., *Later Melodrama in America: Monte Cristo (ca. 1883)* (Nineteenth-Century American Musical Theatre, 4; New York: Garland Publishers, 1994).

scholarly interest and used it in a forward-looking manner in the context of the symposium.

Anne Dhu McLucas died in September 2012, the victim of homicide. Her tragic death devastated her many friends, colleagues, and students, and

shocked the world of American musicology. It is both immeasurably sad and somehow fitting that her final publication appears in this volume, which is dedicated, with deep affection and profound sorrow, to the memory of this brilliant and gentle scholar.

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