

GENIUS FILM STUDIES

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In the world of classical music compositions are sometimes disregarded for sounding like “film music”, the connotations being that the music is simplistic and lacking in depth. Although much of film music does not have the layers of complexity inherent in works of the great classical geniuses, to dismiss this genre is to dismiss the work of countless remarkable composers. Without a doubt, creating music that evokes emotion in tandem with the requirements of motion picture requires a high level of skill, discipline and ingenuity.

Firstly, the score must be exciting and inventive. These are factors one would associate with genius in the world of classical music because, as most would agree, genius lies in innovation. The “How to Train Your Dragon” score (John Powell) is an example of colourful orchestration and creative manipulation of thematic material contouring to the nuances of onscreen emotion. His control of thematic material is present even in the opening cue (“This is Berk”¹), as the theme evolves seamlessly from a lyrical melody on reed instruments into a heavily percussive brass passage to accompany a battle scene all within the same minute.

Additionally, Powell plays with leitmotifs that act as an aural guide referencing characters, relationships and ideas. For example, the stepwise leitmotif introduced in the cue “Downed Dragon”² (3:55-4:12) symbolises the protagonists’ bond and in this cue it is strongly stated by bagpipe with chromatic variation to convey the animosity between the protagonists through dissonance and the harsh timbre of the bagpipe. However, in the cue “Forbidden Friendship”³ the motif is softened by the timbre of the xylophone and acts as an ostinato. In a minimalist style more instruments are added after every cell-like rotation, conveying the tentative development of the protagonists’ trust. Furthermore, Powell does this without falling into the trap of abusing the leitmotif – a trope common in early Hollywood scoring that composer Aaron Copland criticized as trite and clichéd⁴, heavily over-used to announce the arrival of the dashing hero or the sinister villain with formulaic repetition. Powell’s unique genius is evident in the way he orchestrates leitmotifs that relate to moments in the film, bonds between characters and setting, rather than rigidly defining a single character, which allows him to translate the most frivolous melody into an emotional core of the film.

Secondly, does the score do its job as a score? Arguably, the best film scores outline the film’s narrative so seamlessly that the average cinema-goer does not notice its existence. Composer Neil Brand goes as far as to say that “the most grievous sin of all” for a film score is “that of drawing attention to itself”.⁵ The purpose of film music is to support the image without stealing the limelight and without this careful relevance genius cannot truly exist. However, this becomes unfair because the extent of what can be composed is limited closely by the film itself, which makes judging film scores as standalone music very difficult. For example, animated films are fast-paced and imaginative in order to appeal to children and are generally more visually stimulating than live-action rom-com films, therefore the composer has the freedom to be indulgently theatrical and innovative. The parameters of explosive drama in independent films (and therefore explosive music) are narrow, and it is impractical to have a swelling symphony cue over a scene where people are talking over breakfast because the score “must hold the audience inside the movie”⁶.

¹ “How to Train Your Dragon Soundtrack: 1. This is Berk”

² “How to Train Your Dragon Soundtrack: 3. Downed Dragon”

³ “How to Train Your Dragon Soundtrack: 8. Forbidden Friendship”

⁴ POLLACK, Howard - “Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man”

⁵ BRAND, Neil - “The Secret Art of the Film Soundtrack”, The Guardian

⁶ PODLUCKI, Martin - “Interview with silent film accompanist Neil Brand”, Royal Albert Hall

Hans Zimmer, one of the most prolific film composers of our time, is recognised to have created the sound world for these epic, explosive films. In particular, Christopher Nolan's 2010 film "Inception" could be considered the launching point of Zimmer's career in this genre. In fact, his influence on 21st century film music was so broad that "The Hans Zimmer Braaam" became an affectionate nickname in popular culture for his iconic use of French horn, bassoon, trombone, tuba and timpani playing the same note repeatedly together⁷. This powerful yet minimalist motif became so common in modern action films, particularly trailers, that it has subconsciously become "a type of cinematic shorthand for "action blockbuster"⁸ to film audiences. The score for "Inception", predominantly the cue "Time"⁹ is composed in a minimalist style – the same chord progression is repeated throughout while developing from solo piano to a huge symphonic work. Zimmer captures the weight of the film through the enormous orchestration, but the roots of the score remain clean and restrained. Despite the fact that "Time" has accumulated over 32 million views on YouTube, in the context of the film the audience becomes entirely consumed by the film's narrative as the simplicity of the score does not disturb the image, while being almost completely responsible for the emotional drive in the scene.

Contrastingly, although the work of Ludovico Einaudi is composed in a minimalist style, it cannot be called genius. Einaudi's pop-classical piano pieces such as "I Giorni"¹⁰ are constructed of repetitive chord progressions similarly to Zimmer yet Einaudi's music rarely develops. For example, in the final scene of "The Intouchables", Einaudi's score¹¹ – except for a slight shift in dynamics – gives little to no indication through instrumentation or harmonic progression to the emotional weight of the onscreen narrative.

On the other hand, both "The Maze Runner"¹² (John Paesano) and "Transformers"¹³ (Steve Jablonsky) are both explosive, action films with scores that fit the onscreen action. However, their use of "generic" or "redundant"¹⁴ features including repeated staccato cello quaver patterns to create drive or the "Hans Zimmer Braaam" to create impact, create the average blockbuster blanket score. Can one title these scores genius if they are carbon-copies of hundreds of scores, even if they do objectively amplify what is happening onscreen?

Of course, in any discussion about creative genius, the question of subjectivity will arise. The rise of aesthetic relativism in the late 20th century reduced many forms of art to personal expression and abandoned rules prominent in earlier art. While some, such as Jakob Rosenberg argue that genius is "objectively traceable"¹⁵, now my personal distaste for Einaudi's music because of his lack of inventive manipulation of thematic material can now be completely disregarded as subjective. Einaudi can now be titled "the inventor of "atmospherica"¹⁶ because people find a universal standard of quality restrictive¹⁷. Nonetheless, I believe that film music can be exempted from subjectivity due to its characteristically strong sense of purpose – regardless of the virtuosity of the score, if it cannot manipulate the audience's emotions toward the specific narrative it cannot be described as genius.

I believe that good film music should be equally celebrated as genius in the way that classical music is, because film scores are subject to meticulously set-out confines in a way that even commissioned classical music is most often not – it is harder to write film music. While classical programme music can be written to narrative, it often approaches in a far more abstract way – recognised in the titles of many classical works named "Prelude No. x" or "Symphony No. 2 in x key", perhaps allowing composers to evade giving their work a distinct title, and to move more freely to convey a concept. The composer is often at his/her liberty to structure the architecture of their music as they see fit, without a temperamental director (often with limited musical knowledge) painstakingly defining not only the emotional arc of the particular scene but also their personal musical preferences.

⁷ YORK, Melissa – "Hans Zimmer on re-inventing film music, playing live and ruining the Oscars", CityAm

⁸ YORK, Melissa – "Hans Zimmer on re-inventing film music, playing live and ruining the Oscars", CityAm

⁹ "Hans Zimmer – Time (Inception)"

¹⁰ "Ludovico Einaudi: I Giorni"

¹¹ "The Intouchables Ending", YouTube

¹² "The Maze Runner Soundtrack – 01. The Maze Runner"

¹³ "Transformers: The Score – Arrival to Earth"

¹⁴ SERVICE, Tom – "When did movie music get so boring?", The Guardian

¹⁵ ROSENBERG, Jakob – "On Quality in Art: Criteria of Excellence, Past and Present"

¹⁶ SWEETING, Adam – "Ludovico Einaudi, The Inventor of "Atmospherica"", Telegraph

¹⁷ FLORCZAK, Robert – "Why is Modern Art so Bad?", PragerU

Film scores are dictated to be specific to the second which hinders the creation of interesting, naturally moving music. "The Adventures of Tintin" score¹⁸ (John Williams) – reminiscent of the works of Prokofiev and Shostakovich – outlines the film's narrative perfectly and maintains its brilliance as a stand-alone piece of work. John Williams, "the undisputed king of Hollywood blockbuster music"¹⁹ creates a score that is a striking exception, which I believe defines the genius of film music; being able to work concisely under constraints but perceive those constraints with enough fluidity and creativity to produce music that is meaningful.

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¹⁸ "The Adventures of Tintin – John Williams – 01 – The Adventures of Tintin"

¹⁹ FAHY, Patrick – "John Williams: 10 Essential Soundtracks", BFI