

THE USE OF MUSIC IN POPULAR FILM: EAST AND WEST

Music in Film - A Functional Semiotic

Even before the advent of sound in film late in the 1920s, music has been inextricably connected with film performance. Whether used as a backdrop for film action, or as the principal focus for a cinematic scene, moviegoers have come to expect that film and music go together to the extent that the absence of music is considered a distinct stylistic choice on the part of a film director.

Despite the close association of music with film, its use in cinematic tradition is not the same everywhere. In fact, the use of musical elements in different film traditions is one of the clearest ways of distinguishing these traditions from each other. This is hardly surprising. Although film is an almost universal artistic form today, it embodies at base a particular medium of expression - and this medium serves as a conduit for the distinct aesthetic sensibilities of the society for which the film is produced.

In a real sense, the musical dimension of film is one of the principal semiotic levels on which the film-maker communicates with his audience. Just as the study line, imagery and cultural assumptions embodied in the film must be comprehensible to the audience, so must the use of music.

Studying the use of music in film is thus partially an exercise in studying the semiotic structure of the artistic traditions of the society in which the film is produced. As the overall place of music vis-a-vis the other performing and plastic arts in society is comprehended, the function of music as part of cinema will become clear.

Differences between India and the Western nations in the use of music

in popular film are quite marked, just as the overall structure of popular film in the two traditions exhibit marked differences. Although these differences can be explained partially by the particular historical development of the separate film industries, they also relate directly to the semiotic function of music in the two cultural traditions.

Film Music in the West

In Western tradition, the arts have been thought of as separate entities since before the Renaissance. However integrated dance, music or drama might be in a single instance of performance, the three were conceived as separate, and their co-occurrence was thought of as a combination of separate artistic forms. Even in types of performance which combined the arts—opera as a combination of drama and music, and ballet as a combination of music and dance, for example—one of the modes was always thought of as being predominant. In the public

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mind music dominated drama in opera, and dance dominated music in ballet.

Thus music in Western tradition existed as a separate and separable entity within the overall spectrum of artistic form—when it co-occurred with other forms, it was a separate 'track' for expression, in competition with the art form with which it was combined; it could achieve 'equal weight' with the other arts only with great difficulty.

Music in silent film played the

most subordinate of roles. Several difficulties faced early entrepreneurs who tried to provide attractive entertainment for the public in showing a film. First of all, early film projectors were often placed in the same room as the spectators—there were no projection booths until some time later. The projectors were very noisy, and disturbed the movie patrons. The audience, too, was often restive and noises from shifting chairs, coughing, eating food, etc. were distracting enough. Finally, the very silence of the motion picture itself was perhaps the most distracting element of all. In an aural world, silent pictures unaccompanied by any sound whatsoever had an eerie quality to them - especially when the scenes depicted action and violence. Thus music was first introduced as a solution to these problems. The early results were somewhat crude. As Irwin Bazelon notes:

Music was introduced to cover up the silence and effectively combat audience disturbance. The early film-makers had no desire to allow external annoyances to compete for attention with the visual product: music was their panacea for encouraging audience empathy. In their anxiety to bring about this rapport and lessen their fear of silence, they often selected material bordering on the ridiculous: note, for example, the countless silent films accompanied by marches, anthems, patriotic tunes, operatic melodies, and whole segments of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century symphonic repertoire, inserted without dramatic motivation to fill any and all situations. They were not meant to be listened to as music by the audience, but only to breathe musically across the

1. Irwin Bazelon, *Knowing the Score: Notes on Film Music* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1975), pp. 13-14.

screen as an aid and comfort to the muted picture, softly rocking the cradle in the darkness of the theatre through quiet interludes, violent action, or intimate moments.¹

The earliest and easiest way of providing this background music was by employing the talents of a single pianist—a one-man orchestra—who attempted to match the moods shown on the screen with his piano. He often served as a kind of one-man juke-box with a repertoire of dozens of snippets of sheet music at his command, either printed, or played from memory. Music that could be recognized from other contexts came to be regarded as somewhat unsatisfactory for film accompaniment, as it intruded too much on the action itself—it had ‘too much character’, if anything. In time, film companies began to issue suggestions for accompaniments for their films, and often provided cue-sheets and music scores.

Edison Films issued suggestions for music that could be used with certain scenes, even by a solo pianist. Two important collections were the Sam Fox Moving Picture Music Volumes by J. S. Zamecnik (1913) and the Kinobibliothek by Giuseppe Becci (1919). The former included “Indian Music”, “Oriental Music”, and “Spanish or Mexican Scenes”; there were also periodical publications of music for “Paris Fashions”, “Aeroplane or Regatta Races”, “European Army Manoeuvres”, and “Newsreels”. The most popular material was extracted from sections of these volumes and labeled “Burglar or Sneaky Music”, and the famous “Hurry Sequences.”²

Some of the largest theatres engaged whole orchestras with spe-

cially trained conductors who read the cue-sheets and led the orchestra through the entire film. The conductor of the theatre orchestra was of course the only musician who could actually see the film. As a consequence, when sound films were introduced, these early conductors were able to find new careers in writing and conducting film scores—the essential skills had already been developed in the orchestra pit of the silent films.

Music in the Sound Film

The Sound era was heralded by *Don Juan* in August 1926. It had a musical accompaniment provided by the ‘Vitaphone Symphony Orchestra’, some sound effects, but no talk. The first ‘talkie’ appeared the next year, and by 1928, the silent film was obsolete. It was not possible to have a music track perfectly synchronized with the picture. Yet, the conventions of the use of music in silent films lived on. Just as with the silent film, the music was designed to be subordinate to the action on screen. It was deemed important that the audience should not notice the film score—the role of music was primarily to enhance the visual material on the screen, and as before, to shut out the distractions of the theatrical viewing situation.

Then, in the 1930s, a miraculous discovery was made: music in a film score could do more than serve as a mere placebo for the audience—it could actually help to repair faults on the film itself.

...it was discovered that, acting in a catalytic way, music could alter a viewer's perception of the dramatic links between words and images; that it could stimulate feelings and reactions. With this unconscious revelation arose the

theory that if the film-makers were unable to fulfill the dramatic requisites of their films—because of oversights, errors in cinematic judgment, or simple lack of talent—the composer could apply his witchcraft technique to soothe the sick film's ailments, and in some cases completely cure it.³

The result was a series of sweeping symphonic scores which served chiefly to emphasize the already overblown emotional content of the film action.

Musical styles have changed considerably since this period. Dmitir Tiomkin's score for the classic film *Lost Horizon* drew high praise from the film's director, Frank Capra, who, upon hearing the score for the first time in orchestral rehearsal wrote:

I left with stars in my eyes. And after sitting for over three hours in that packed projection room, I still had stars in my eyes. Tiomkin's music not only captured the mood, but it darned near captured the film.⁴

Much later, when Bazelon showed the same film to his class in ‘Music for Motion Pictures’, he reports that the students booed and hissed the music—and the film. “Incredibly schmaltzy to the point of dripping honey, Tiomkin's music was about as refreshing as stale ginger ale”, was a typical comment.⁵

The fact that these film scores seem so dated today is not wholly explained by ephemeral tastes for music. For a score to achieve a desired unobtrusiveness, it had to be stylistically ‘unmarked’ for the audience. In other words, the music had to blend perfectly not only with the actions of the film, but also with audience anticipations. If the music was too ‘odd’ or

2. Mark Evans, *Soundtrack: The Music of the Movies* (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1975), p. 8.

3. Bazelon, *Knowing the Score*, p. 22.

4. Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), pp. 217-18, cited in Bazelon, *Knowing the Score*, p. 25.

5. Bazelon, *Knowing the Score*, p. 26.

'jarring' it would lose its function within the film entirely.⁶

The film scores of bygone days are thus heavily 'marked' for today's audiences. The passage of years has had its effect on the nature of the score. The 'big-band' era of the '40s, 'pop' music of the '50s, and 'rock' music of the '60s and '70s have all contributed their style to the music of films of the period. They are able to enhance the screen images because their sound is part of the acoustic environment for society in general, and this helps connect the artificial world of the film with the real world of the film's viewers.

This is not to say that music in American and other Western countries is always designed to be disattended. Music often plays a prominent role in film as well as a passive role. The principal active roles for music are in the 'theme song' and in the highly specialized form of the film Musical.

It was not until the 1940s that specific songs began to be associated with films as 'theme songs' and promoted as such. The identification of a musical theme with a particular film was an excellent commercial device, for it allowed a quick aural identification for the film. It also allowed the film-makers to develop an additional source of revenue as the 'theme' was promoted and sold apart from the film. Some film themes actually became more famous than the films they were associated with.

Movie 'themes' could serve the score in other ways. Played underneath the action of the film, they served as a kind of leitmotiv for the film itself. Whenever one of the main themes of the film's story line needed to be emphasized, the theme song could be pulled in under the dialogue--played fast, slow, in major or minor mode, it was the one musical element that was always in place, always correct.

The Film Musical is a topic

that is so vast that one cannot do it justice in a short essay such as this. It is necessary to provide a short treatment of it, however, since it is the Film Musical that is most often used as the point of comparison between Indian films and films of Western cultures. The Film Musical is clearly identifiable as a separate genre and has a long but erratic history. Early sound films were often little more than loose plots against which musical and dance numbers were played. From the mushy Busby Berkeley musicals, which were designed to distract viewers from the Depression in the '30s, to *My Fair Lady*, lies a long trail of inventiveness with the genre. But although the Musical eventually developed a great deal of sophistication, it never came to totally dominate the motion picture industry. Particularly as cinema strove to achieve greater realism, the conventions of the Musical--its stylized acting and the 'interruptions' of songs--came to be regarded as something that belonged more properly to Broadway than to the screen. The Musical literally reverses the role of music and drama in American film. In the Musical, music plays the paramount role, and acting and plot become secondary. It is perhaps for this reason alone that the Film Musical has never been universally accepted in the West, and is only rarely seen among contemporary films.

In summary, music has always had a function within Western films as a separable element. Its primary function is in the underscore of the film, only occasionally rising to prominence in the form of a theme song, or as the featured element of the film in the rarely seen Musical. In no sense, however, is music treated with equal prominence to the other elements of the film.

..Music in Indian Film

In Indian film, in contrast to the Western film, music plays a role equal to other cinematic elements. From the first sound feature film *Alam Ara*, down to the present, music, song and dance have always been inseparable elements of the Indian film.

Even before sound films were introduced to India, early accounts show that silent films were often accompanied by 'variety acts' which included music:

It was finally with D. G. Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* released on 3 May 1913 at the Coronation that the Indian feature film came into being in its fullest sense....And appeal it did to all kinds of spectators seeing the big success it proved. The whole was a one and a half hour show, including Miss Irene Delmar (duet and dance). The McClements (comical sketch), Alexandroff (foot juggler) and Tip-top comics.⁷

It was the coming of sound that really launched the Indian film industry in a big way, and it was largely the fact that with sound, music could be included directly in the films, that made all the difference.

Writing from a Western perspective, Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy attribute the importance of music in Indian film to the structure of Indian traditional performance altogether.⁸ The closest analogy for Western observers is, of course, the Film Musical, but it would be a mistake to consider Indian film, with song and dance as integral elements, to be in any way the Indian equivalent of the Western Musical:

Alam Ara included about a dozen songs. Another early Hindi film is said to have had about forty songs. An early Tamil film is said to have had over sixty songs. All the sound films

6. This perhaps explains why films have been so conservative in using serial (12-tone) and electronic music as part of the underscore. The public would have found this kind of music entirely too jarring at the time it was first in vogue on the concert stage.

7. Firoze Rangoonwalla, *75 Years of Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Indian Book Company, 1975), p. 30.

8. Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

produced in India in these early years had a profusion of songs. Most also had dances. Advertisements described some of these films as "all-talking, all-singing, all-dancing" features. The Indian sound film, unlike the sound films of any other land, had from its first moment seized *exclusively* on music-drama forms. In doing so, the film had tapped a powerful current, one that had given it extraordinary new impetus. It was a current that went back some two thousand years.⁹

Traditional performance in India has of course effected an integration of music, song and dance from ancient times. Classical Sanskrit theatre made no separation between these arts—all were required for a perfect enactment of the performance themes whether they be sacred or secular in nature.

Perhaps more relevant for understanding the structure of music in contemporary Indian film is an understanding of the nature and use of music in the contemporary folk theatre. From east to west, north to south, all major folk theatrical forms in India involve the total integration of music with other performance elements in a manner that is totally different from Western performance traditions.

Moreover, music as an element of performance is far less separate in India than in the West in terms of its place within the overall structure of sound expression in all areas of the culture. In Indian traditional performance vocal expression takes many forms, which can be exhibited on a continuum:

speech-dialogue-poetic recitation-
intoned speech-song

For Indian spectators the psychological distance between speech and song is considerably narrower than for Western spectators. The artificial 'break' which is felt in the West when

an actor bursts into song is thus less apparent to the Indian viewer.

The Indian spectator, used to viewing traditional folk forms with tightly integrated music and dance, was undoubtedly delighted to see essentially the same form preserved on the cinema screen.

"In India the drama, much in the manner of the drama of ancient Greece, had originally developed from dances performed at religious festivals. As these added elements of narrative and dialogue, they became a kind of folk drama. The *jatra*, a form of folk drama long popular in Bengal and surrounding areas, apparently stems from this ancient period. *Jatra* means festival, but in Bengali the word also came to be applied to plays performed at festivals. Songs were always a central feature of the *jatra*...

"There is no doubt that the *jatra*, crude and naive as they may have been, had a powerful hold over large audiences. Some *jatra-wallis* were idolized...

"Corresponding to the *jatra* of Bengal and adjoining areas, other forms of musical folk drama persisted through the centuries in other parts of India. There were the *ojapali* of Assam, the *jashn* of Kashmir, the *kathakali* of Kerala, the *leela* of Orissa, the *swang* of Punjab. When a new Indian theatre began to develop in the nineteenth century, these folk-drama forms exerted an immediate influence: a vast tradition of song and dance was available to the new theatre. When the sound film appeared, this same reservoir pressed strongly upon it.

"Thus the Indian sound film of 1931 was not only the heir of the silent film; it also inherited something more powerful and broad-based. Into the new medium came a river of music, that had flowed through unbroken millennia of dramatic tradition."¹⁰

Music in Indian film did

more than just enhance cinematic productions and respond to popular tastes. It became a cultural force on its own, escaped its celluloid boundaries, and was unleashed to completely alter the face of the Indian musical scene. It served as the principal impetus for rapid musical change as well. Western influences were most easily introduced into Indian music through the medium of film. Film was modern—an importation from the West. Therefore the music used in film could cut loose from the bounds of both folk and classical tradition.

Some commentators tended to look on this new music as a 'hybrid' abomination. For a period between 1952-1957, All India Radio greatly reduced the air time given to film music, while trying to effect a revival of classical music. Dr. B. V. Keskar, the Minister of Information and Broadcasting during this period, was widely praised for his support of the classical tradition, but eventually the government could not ignore the fact that the vast majority of listeners had 'tuned out'. They had been lured away, during All India Radio's 'classical' period, by Radio Ceylon, which regularly blanketed the subcontinent with 'hits' from the latest Hindi films.

Many observers tried to explain the preference of the mass population for film music over classical music by analyzing film music as a genuine continuation of folk tradition. Naushad Ali, a leading composer for films, contrasted film music to classical music, pointing out that the masses could have no deep appreciation for classical forms that belonged more to the exclusive environments of the courts of Maharajas and Nawabs. He saw film music, with its vitality and lively development, as the genuine successor to the rural folk musical traditions: the true folk-music of modern India.¹¹

Naushad is probably not correct in saying that film music is 'a genuine continuation of folk tradition', if he

10. Barnouw and Krisnaswamy, *Indian Film*, pp. 67-8; for their information on these and other folk drama forms they acknowledge *Indian Drama* (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1959), 36, 75, 79, 95, 97.

11. 'Indian Talkie, 1931-1956', p. 204, see also pp. 196-204 for an excellent discussion of this important topic.

means that there is a direct inspirational link between the two. True, there are 'hit' songs based on recognizable folk tunes and *dhuns*. But a great many are also modeled on simplified classical *raga* structures. And increasingly, film music has shown an amazing eclecticism in borrowing or adapting from other non-Indian musical traditions as well. Indian film music appears to show no real preference for its sources.

If we must look for its parentage, a more likely source is the urban Parsi Theatre—*Company Nauak*—of the late nineteenth century. Culminating as a countrywide operatic tradition by 1900, it is the Parsi Theatre that appears to have invented all the recipes for popular appeal which are now associated with Bombay's film industry. The institution of the Music Director, and his important place in film credits, derive from Parsi Theatre, and in many other respects there appears to have taken place a remarkable wholesale transfer of the forms and conventions of musical drama directly from Parsi Theatre to the screen.

It is useful to remember that the Indian film did not have to find its form by an erratic process of trial and discovery and adaptation. Parsi Theatre was a direct progenitor, and the relationship between cinema and rural folk performance traditions is more in the nature of an extended family tree.

What film music does share with certain forms of communal folk-music is a set of 'strategies' designed to allow a melodic line to be remembered and reproduced without too much effort by an unskilled audience. In this precise sense, it can be opposed to classical music and certain other folk forms, particularly those associated with highly skilled professional castes of bards and *mirasis*. The opposition is between an 'easy', repetitive, musical structure, one that is simple enough to be whistled with some degree of fidelity by a *chapassi* bicycling to office—and an esoteric 'difficult', tradition that is intended primarily for passive listening.¹²

In trying to realize its potential as a new mass media, the Indian cinema sought popularity on a countrywide scale that no local, regional form could have attained. The cinema was not interested in challenging the conventions of folk theatre on any level, and it co-opted its most consistent feature—the use of music and dance as elements of dramatic narrative.

So dominant was music and dance in the Indian film that it became commercially disadvantageous to complete a film without utilizing the characteristic formula: six songs, three dances. Indeed, no separate musical 'genre' can be said to have developed in Indian film, because music was a constant factor in all productions.

Nothing could demonstrate this more clearly than the stark contrast offered by the modern Bengali film, starting with Satyajit Ray's remarkable *Pather Panchali*, which, of course, had no singing and dancing. This stark formal contrast with the mainstream of Indian film was at first a shock. Later, however, the absence of music as an equal performance element within the film came to be almost a criterion of *avant-garde* cinema. Indeed, even such observers of Indian cinematic art as Firoze Rangoonwalla can hardly contain their disappointment at seeing potentially excellent 'serious' subjects treated within the traditional music-dance framework:

"Guru Dutt tried to follow the triumph of *Pyasa* with a still more gloomy film *Kaagar ke Phool* on the frustrations of a film director and the utter instability of everything pertaining to the film world. It was the first Indian film to be made in Cinemascope (black and white) and was shot very lovingly. But the subject and the treatment made it a dismal failure. The extraneous elements of comedy, songs, etc., hardly suited it and were to affect its stature for posterity."¹³

Film Music: Comparative Dimensions

Comparing the use of music in film in India and the West we see that as a communicational and semiotic device, music has been used in very different ways in the two traditions.

Music in Western film began as an element separate from the film itself, and was employed in a supportive role from the start. Music had a very concrete function as a support mechanism for film action, and was designed to exert an instrumental effect on moviegoers. In this regard, the *unconsciously* perceived effects of music were of primary value in film.

Because so much of music used in films in the West was not designed to be heard directly, but rather only perceived in a manner subordinate to the film action, it was unusually sensitive to changes in musical styles external to the film industry. This created a curious role for film music: active in its effects on viewers, it could only fulfil its functions when it was bland and predictable enough to be disattended.

When music departed from this role in film in the Musical, this use was so specialized that it quickly concretized into an identifiable genre within the film industry. Likewise, 'theme songs' for films were placed in a 'marked' position within the film, and constituted a special use of music.

In contrast, music in Indian film was, from the very beginning, designed to appeal directly to public tastes. It was placed in the film to be heard. In this role, it occupied a position equal or superior to all other elements of the film.

Unlike the underscores of films in the West, which passively responded to current musical tastes imposed from without, Indian film music was one of the most active elements in *shaping* public musical tastes. For the West, symphonic music—indeed, music written in a classical style, however pale—was the bread and butter of film scoring for years. Thus a sharp distinc-

12. I am greatly indebted to Mr. Pradip Krishna for information contained in this section.

13. Rangoonwalla, *Indian Cinema*, p. 130.

tion between the classical music tradition and 'music in films' never occurred. In India, film music provided a direct challenge to the classical traditions, and was even actively opposed by cultural reformers.

In the end, however, perhaps the simplest way of epitomizing the differences that have developed in the utilization of music in India and the West is the simple observation that in the West there really is no such thing as 'film music' as a distinct category of music. In India, of course, 'film music' is read-

ily recognizable as such. Popular songs are always identified (even on radio announcements) with the films in which they occurred. The songs appear to have no identity independent of the films, and it may well be that the appreciation of a song has a lot to do with the viewer's recall of the context in which it was sung on the screen. Film music is a conspicuous if not predominant feature of India's popular culture and whether one has a taste for it or not, it has become concretized as one of the most durable features of Indian cul-

tural life.

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Independent Documentary in India: A Preliminary Report

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In 1985, the distinguished American visual anthropologist Robert Gardner released *Forest of Bliss*, a feature-length documentary on India's holy city Varanasi (Benares), garnering critical acclaim and several festival prizes. To me however, the film was simply one more *Mondo Came India*, an ethnographic variant of the recent glut of Indian imagery in the Western media marketplace. Our reliance on colonized images of India such as these in the past has greatly hampered our knowledge of, and our solidarity with, this vital and changing society. The continuing imbalance in the exchange of information, culture and media between first world and third is now being challenged in part by a new generation of independent documentarists in India. This network of committed artists, by no means a unified movement, have emerged over the last decade and are worth getting to know.

Many Indianists may already be familiar with the work of Mira Nair and Anand Patwardhan, but these two Bombaywallahs are only the best known of a national network of young independent artists bearing audio-visual witness to—and intervening in—a whole spectrum of socio-political dynamics.

Politically, the independent documentarists have acquired a kind of oppositional status. Culturally, the ensemble of their work constitutes a kind of "third" cinema, or "counter-cinema", a dissonant counterpoint to both the Bombay/Madras feature industry, and to the state-promoted "art" fiction cinema lavishly peddled abroad through the "Festival of India" apparatus, which markets culture as tourist bait and political clout.

The independents, born for the most part since Independence, are frequently engaged in battles with the censors in the courts, when they are not raising a ruckus at the national film festival and the national film awards (where they ordinarily run off with a good share of the prizes, thanks to the relative objectivity of the jury system).

The production and distribution infrastructure for 16mm independent filmmaking is chronically underdeveloped, and state support at home and promotion abroad are virtually nonexistent. Nevertheless, the independent documentary scene is active in the major regional film culture centers and is slowly building a constituency both at home and abroad. In some cases the filmmakers have strong ties to the Indian diaspora,

ties originating during the Emergency (1975-77), when the exile network was an important locus of dissidence. At home, many practitioners have had to re-invent grass-roots financing and distribution, the latter for the most part being carried out through existing networks of community and political groups, unions, government and non-government agencies, and film clubs. Occasionally there are breakthroughs onto the airwaves, particularly for prize-winning films, but the mainstream channels of dissemination are by and large not available, whether the state-controlled television or the traditional documentary niche in the commercial theatres. Financing is thus always tenuous: though occasionally foreign television sales make the difference between breaking even or not for some of the group, others stand on principle for a strictly domestic constituency.

Thematically speaking, the discourse of class and caste exploitation, as might be expected, is high on the list of priorities. Feminism also has an important profile, with the "third" cinema unsurprisingly offering a more significant concentration of women filmmakers than the other two strata, speaking out not only on gender politics but on the whole