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A History of Unobtrusive Music? Aesthetic Debates about Film in Context

Every so often the popular press will introduce its readers to the aesthetics of film music by referring to an apparently unchallenged truism, which suggests that good film music goes unnoticed. Similarly, historians of film style often point to this attitude amongst classic-era critics, or identify in scoring techniques what Jeff Smith called ‘implicit aesthetic guidelines’ of unobtrusiveness, as evidence of the transparency offered by Hollywood narrative. Yet, how widespread was this view amongst contemporary critics? And what other perspectives were in evidence?

Using contemporary newspaper and journal criticism by (among others) Bruno David Ussher, Bosley Crowther, and Paul Bowles, I nuance this aesthetic debate, examining various perspectives that speak out in favour of music’s foregrounding in film, in addition to those that advocate its complete subordination to a non-distracting background—from where it may admittedly be granted a certain arcane power. Moreover, I suggest that questions about the noticeability of music in film are part of a much larger and historically far older debate about the role of music in drama. I suggest that many of these same perspectives can be found in the discourses surrounding opera and melodrama; and argue that, far from being confined to film, the question of music’s obtrusiveness in dramatic genres is part of a more fundamental aesthetic conundrum.