

## **Cultural Representation in Western Film Music**

How Does Western Film Music Represent and Misrepresent Different Cultures?

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### **Abstract**

Our perception of any cultural artifact is affected by the media we consume. So when we are watching a movie and we hear pentatonic scales and plucky strings as we see sweeping shots of the East Asian country side, we may make dangerous assumptions. Film composers utilize music to create subconscious attachments and queues to events on the screen. A variety of techniques are used: from leitmotifs, themes, instrumentation and other (sometimes theoretically elaborated) techniques. These tools help drive the narrative, impact the audience, and create memorable experience. As film music becomes further insinuated into the consciousness of society, cognitive shortcuts and liberties are taken. A composer can make an audience think about a certain region of the world in the span of a few notes, utilizing musical stereotypes and cutting down on precious time in the composing process. If decisions that inform the creation of film music ignore the social-political implications of those decisions, misleading stereotypes take root and persist in cultural consensus. This research proposal will examine how western film music (both scores and soundtracks) effectively *and ineffectively* represents different cultures. Additionally, the proposal highlights what exactly makes these assumptions dangerous through deconstructing the concepts of “ethnic” and “exotic” music.

## Proposal

I have studied classical and popular music for the better part of 13+ years. Growing up in a Korean-American household, where many of my siblings also studied music, has made the field of study all but unfamiliar. But the first time I was in a music class and heard the oriental riff, “The Asian Song” and was met with points and laughs, with friends all saying “Haha, did you get it?” I was uncomfortable. In the years that followed, and without fail, the same thing was bound to happen eventually in every single music class, band room, or jam session. Even in higher music education I’m still told that “this pentatonic scale creates an exotic sound.” I can’t even recall the first time I was told that black keys on the piano make Asian music. Or that the harmonic minor scale was the sound of the Middle East and Egypt. Somehow these ideas were planted in my mind, along with countless other music students.

On December 28th, 1895, the Lumiere brothers presented a series of shorts at the Grand Cafe in Paris. This was supposedly the first time a pianist provided live accompaniment for a film.<sup>1</sup> In the 1930’s, synchronous recorded audio was introduced, opening a whole new world of musical possibility with the first film composers and orchestral recordings. Prior to film, live theater utilized music to represent characters, emotions, and narrative. Film continued that train of thought and expanded on the versatility of music. Through the latter half of the 20th century and now two decades into the 21st, film music has developed into its own artform.

Film music is commonly understated in its abilities and narrative influence. Composers put endless thought into themes and motifs that come and go as the audience watches characters on the screen. The evolution and integration of these musical ideas as the narrative progresses, creates a subconscious emotional reaction that many movie goers would label simply as “good music.” The same music is used to give life to environments, both fictional and non-fictional. Themes are created to represent certain places and peoples. It is at this point that the dangers of film music and its use in representation come into play. What themes and instruments represent a Korean dynasty in the 1300’s? What themes and instruments represent Bulgaria in the 1600’s?

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<sup>1</sup> Royal S. Brown, *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2009)

Composers in western film media constantly ask these questions and make these choices, but usually in the context of what is easier for a western audience to understand. This has the effect of “westernizing” many aspects of music from other parts of the world. What, then, are some of the ways in which western film music represents and misrepresents different cultures?

Modern western music is fundamentally based around a twelve equi-interval series of notes labeled by corresponding letter names. These notes are used to create melodies and harmonic progressions that reference (in some cases by rejection) the same theoretical system. This system is what most western ears are accustomed to. When we deviate from that standard, we often feel a sense of what many would label as “exotic.” The distinguished ethnomusicologist and exponent of Arabic classical music A.J. Racy writes, “The snake-charmer theme, meanwhile, accords with a Western predilection for the exotic. Its connotations of alienness and familiarity resonate with exoticism’s focus on the other and the self, or more accurately, on envisioning the other in terms of the self”.<sup>2</sup> The snake-charmer theme is a musical motif commonly used to represent areas of the Middle-East and South Asia.

*Figure 1. The Snake Charmer theme*



Although the theme itself is written in the relatively common natural minor, the structure of the melody and harmony evokes a sense of “different”. In the third measure of Figure 1, the melody leaps in a motion uncharacteristic of most traditional western music. The underlying implied harmony also deviates from the western standard. Rather than developing around a progression utilizing the “common-practice” logic of tonal harmony, the melody mainly remains with the same chord beneath; the minor one. This is more similar to drones and non-triadic

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<sup>2</sup> A.J. Racy, “Domesticating Otherness: The Snakecharmer in American Popular Culture,” *Ethnomusicology* 60, no. 2 (2016): p. 197, <https://doi.org/10.5406/ethnomusicology.60.2.0197>.

harmonies used in many traditional sounds outside of the western sphere. When a composer can utilize such a simple motif to separate the other from the self - to create a sense of the exotic - the door to misrepresentation and shortcuts opens. The composing process falls into “codified scoring practices based on the economic variation of recognizable themes according to dramatic context.”<sup>3</sup> By using what stereotypically can be understood as other and or representative of a certain location/culture, composers had the opportunity to communicate more easily to a western audience. These themes and musical motifs - when given semantic value to represent a person, place, or thing – become a kind of musical shorthand known as “leitmotifs”

Richard Wagner was a 19th century German composer popular for his operatic work. In his compositions, Wagner used leitmotifs to represent different characters and ideas within the opera narrative. Although Wagner pioneered an extensive and systematized use of this technique, “the semiotics of Wagner’s leitmotivic process is not really new; it relies – as did earlier associative music – upon a tendency already important to musical literacy: topical association (e.g., scoring for trumpets to signify honor, strength, integrity, or battle)”<sup>4</sup> Many composers previously used different instrumentations and musical techniques to establish a connection to different non-musical ideas. And this process was continuously used in theater and eventually film.

*Figure 2. The Oriental Riff*



The oriental riff (shown above) has long been associated with East Asia or the more common blanket label, China. The theme itself has no clear exact creation, however ideas similar to it have been seen in all matters of theatrical media. This theme was constructed using the

<sup>3</sup> Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Bribitzer-Stull, *Understanding the Leitmotif: From Wagner to Hollywood Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

pentatonic scale, a scale commonly associated with East-Asia. This association was exploited to abbreviate the need for musical context. The by-now conditioned western audience listens and instantly understands the cognitive connection to the other. Composers used this theme to indiscriminately represent and separate “China” from the western norm. Now, after being a tool within the public ear for nearly a century, the connection persists, devoid of its original imperialistic and orientalist motives.

Examples of these subconscious connections and thematic shortcuts can be seen in more modern filmic applications. Disney’s animated film *Mulan* from 1998 showcases a fictional narrative from China during the Han Dynasty. The musical choices however, were both misrepresented and westernized to appeal to the primary audience. Composer Earle Hagen quoted the composer of the score, Jerry Goldsmith as saying, “One-time dramatic scoring serves composers as a common tactic for signaling or reinforcing ‘exotic’ geographic locations: If we see a picture shot in China, we immediately have the fourths and gongs going”.<sup>5</sup> Goldsmith is essentially laying out the effectiveness of orientalism within the film music environment. These ideas, however, extend beyond just that of the score.

The film begins with the opening number “Honor to Us All”. The number serves as an introduction to the character of Mulan, her surroundings, and the expectations being held to her, built around a recurring melody.

*Figure 3. Honor to Us All Theme*<sup>6</sup>

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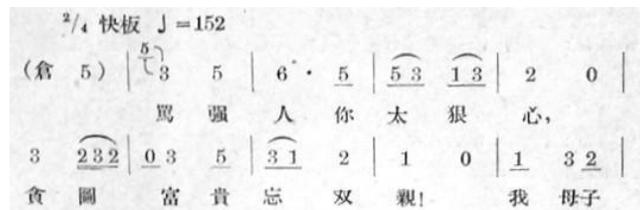
<sup>5</sup> Robin, “The Sound of Stereotypes: The Impact of Film Scores on Stereotypes and Bias,” *The City Voice*, February 20, 2021, <https://thecityvoice.org/2021/02/18/the-sound-of-stereotypes-the-impact-of-film-scores-on-stereotypes-and-bias/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Mulan* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1998).



This melody employs the technique that Goldsmith outlined - the characteristic fourths - as well as other westernized adaptations of Chinese music. It is interesting to compare this with the more traditional music found in Peking or Beijing Opera. The musical structure and sound is vastly different from what is seen in *Mulan*. The notation itself uses some aspects of western theory but looks completely unrecognizable by someone trained predominately in western music.

Figure 4. Scanned Excerpt from *Qin Xianglian*<sup>7</sup>



The adaptation and essentially exploitation of the “sound” of East-Asia and in this case China specifically leaves the door open for dangerous implications of Imperialism and Orientalism. In this instance, the music of the area meant to be represented is being conformed to a western idea of normativity and is used as a spice or flavoring to add on top of a westernized story, rather than proper representation.

Disney’s *Frozen*<sup>8</sup> and *Frozen 2*<sup>9</sup> both use Yoik, a traditional form of music from the Sami peoples of Sapmi in Northern Europe to create a “different” sound in their soundtracks. Through the production of the first movie, Disney made no effort to properly represent and or contact the Sami people about the proper use of their music. During the production of *Frozen 2*, Disney worked with the Sami government to help alleviate the issues of the first film. However, the

<sup>7</sup> He Fei, *Qin Xianglian* 秦香蓮 *Ping Ju* (Beijing, 1955).

<sup>8</sup> *Frozen* (Walt Disney Pictures, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> *Frozen 2* (Walt Disney Pictures, 2019).

production still remained somewhat controlling as to how the sounds were used in the narrative. Yoik music was, much like the Chinese themes in *Mulan*, used to evoke stereotypical responses rather than represent a distinct music culture.

James Cameron's *Avatar*<sup>10</sup>, introduces an interesting discussion on this topic of musical representation. Vast amounts of time and money were put into developing both a language and fully realized alien culture for the Na'vi people in this fictional universe. Ethnomusicologist Dr. Wanda Bryant was brought in to help develop the musical language. Using a mix of many different sounds from around the world, the Na'vi music was created to be unfamiliar and alien, much like the narrative aliens themselves. By combining aspects of many different cultural sounds, the end product was meant to be unrecognizable as from any singular region on Earth. However, when director James Cameron was introduced to the non-western musical ideas, he feared that they would resemble certain cultures too much. He instead shut them down in favor of more familiar western tropes. The musical ideas were morphed back to traditional western orchestration and composition, with the developed culture being used again as a spice or flavoring to make it somewhat exotic. In an instance where the film was actively trying to avoid sounding like any particular culture, the constant presence of these musical connections persists.

Several aspects of the music were also considered too foreign and somewhat distracting. In her essay on the project, Dr. Bryant writes that "initial responses to the track indicated that the unusual fluctuating microtonality sounded 'wrong' and 'out of tune'."<sup>11</sup> The production went as far as to rewrite lyrics with fictional cultural significance to be gibberish that merely sounded better with the music. In this particular instance, the line between creative liberty and proper representation (albeit fictional) becomes blurry. Where does the development of the story take precedent over the work being done in the ethnomusicological perspective?

However, there are some ways these ideas can be avoided altogether. In film, there lies a difference between the soundtrack and the score. While a score consists of traditionally

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<sup>10</sup> *Avatar* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Wanda Bryant, "Creating the Music of the Na'Vi in James Cameron's *Avatar*: An Ethnomusicologist's Role," *Ethnomusicology Review* 17 (2012).

orchestral pieces underlying scenes and moments, a soundtrack consists of songs written with lyrics. These can be either original or licensed music from different artists. In the recent Marvel Studios movie, *Shang Chi and The Legend of The Ten Rings*<sup>12</sup>, the soundtrack is highlighted more than the score itself. And while the score has hints of instrumentation and motifs used to convey the East Asian/American background, the soundtrack has a more modern structure. The soundtrack creators, however, consist of many Asian American/Asian artists. The songs themselves were written by the people who they're meant to represent. This film uses the soundtrack in a way to represent beyond just the use of melodies, harmonies, instrumentation etc. The representation comes from the voice of the people themselves, being given a platform to showcase their own cultural significance.

These examples are just a few of many instances of ethnomusicology and representation within the western film world. I will carry out my research by studying several separate films and analyzing their scores and soundtracks further and in context of the social-political implications as well as production agendas. The goal is to study around 5-10 films to use as case studies of representation in film music. By diving deep into both the history, production process, and composition of several film scores; patterns, issues, and successful products can be highlighted. In the same way, by analyzing the soundtrack of specific films and the interplay between what is being shown on screen and what the audience can hear, we can understand many aspects of film music that alter the way we think about the cultures being represented.

Many films will fall short from what would be considered proper representation. Though many films may try to successfully represent different cultures, the issue is rooted in the years of history in cinema and film music. Certain sounds have become so closely tied to certain representations that it has become increasingly difficult to avoid. However, a new wave of film and film representation has allowed for more understanding and thought to be put into the way both the score and the soundtrack are developed.

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<sup>12</sup> *Shang Chi and The Legend of the Ten Rings* (Marvel Studios, 2021).

Musical representation within film that is faithful to culture is a still growing process. Cinematic storytelling has gone through many iterations over the years and a recent drive towards representation and understanding has become more prevalent. However, it is still important to understand how our subconscious can be misled into understanding what we see on the screen through the music we hear. We otherwise become prey to the dangerous assumptions that can come along with it. An audience and a production that becomes more aware of these issues can work to mitigate them in future projects and develop proper representation in future film music.

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## Budget and Timeline

By nature of this research, the majority of the time and money will be spent reading and watching movies and their corresponding scores.

| <b>Time</b> | <b>Description</b>   | <b>Estimated Cost</b>   |
|-------------|--|---|
| Week 1      | Study different films (estimated 1-2 hours a day)  | <i>LMU Undergrad Research wage \$15/hr: 10 hour week</i><br><br><i>Est. cost to access films: \$30 = \$180</i>          |
| Week 2      | Study different films (estimated 1-2 hours a day)  | <i>LMU Undergrad Research wage \$15/hr: 10 hour week</i><br><br><i>Est. cost to access films: \$30 = \$180</i>          |
| Week 3      | Study film scores. Analyze film themes and relations to other filmic compositions. (estimated 4 hours a day) | <i>LMU Undergrad Research wage \$15/hr</i><br><i>20 hour week</i><br><br><i>Avg. film score cost: \$20 x 10 = \$500</i> |
| Week 4      | Study film scores. Analyze film themes and relations to other filmic compositions. (estimated 4 hours a day) | <i>LMU Undergrad Research wage \$15/hr</i><br><i>20 hour week</i><br><br><i>= \$300</i>                                 |
| Week 5      | Analyze music/notes and synthesize research paper. (estimated 4 hours a day)                                 | <i>LMU Undergrad Research wage \$15/hr</i><br><i>20 hour week</i>   |

|        |   |  |
|--------|---|--|
|        |   | = \$300  |
| Week 6 | Analyze music/notes and synthesize research paper.<br>(estimated 4 hours a day) | <i>LMU Undergrad Research<br/>wage \$15/hr<br/>20 hour week<br/><br/>= \$300</i> |
| Week 7 | Analyze music/notes and synthesize research paper.<br>(estimated 4 hours a day) | <i>LMU Undergrad Research<br/>wage \$15/hr<br/>20 hour week<br/><br/>= \$300</i> |
| Week 8 | Analyze music/notes and synthesize research paper.<br>(estimated 4 hours a day) | <i>LMU Undergrad Research<br/>wage \$15/hr<br/>20 hour week<br/><br/>= \$300</i> |
|        |   | <b>TOTAL ESTIMATE: \$2260</b>  |