

Jon Burlingame. *Sound and Vision: 60 Years of Motion Picture Soundtracks*

New York: Billboard Books, 2000 [xi, 244 p. ISBN: 0823084272. \$18.95]

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In his introduction to *Sound and Vision: 60 Years of Motion Picture Soundtracks*, Jon Burlingame states that his aim is to produce “a general, all-around guide to the world of movie soundtracks.” He promises to provide a history of the commercial use of movie music and a guide to “classic and best-selling” soundtracks and their composers. Burlingame is eminently qualified for this task. A lecturer in the Scoring for Motion Pictures and Television program at the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California, he is a well-known journalist specializing in music for motion pictures and television. His first book, *TV’s Biggest Hits: The Story of Television Themes from Dragnet to Friends*, traced the history of American television scoring. *Sound and Vision* likewise focuses primarily on the activities of American film composers.

The book is organized into three parts: a history of the commercial use of music in film; a dictionary of film composers; and a section dealing with movie musicals and song compilation scores. The layout is clear and enhanced by black-and-white

photos of composers and album covers. Written in a conversational style that is engaging, if not always elegant, *Sound and Vision* provides a good list of “must-have” soundtracks, “must-know” composers, and “must-see” movies.

Burlingame’s history of film music draws on earlier histories of film music and the diverse histories of the technology of recorded sound, the recording industry, and the popular music industry. In Burlingame’s account, the paths of recording and popular music industries are inextricably linked. Yet, in this whirlwind summary of 32 pages, Burlingame’s preference for older dramatic scores over today’s song scores emerges in his claim that from the 1990s, as music became an important part of the promotional package of a film, less attention was paid to its function in the film (28). In particular, he criticizes the “song score” for what he sees as the overt “corporate impact” on the selection of songs. He states, for example, that while “[c]ontemporary music – whether pop, rock, soul, country, or rap – can and sometimes does make a legitimate and telling contribution to a film; what’s different between then and now is

the degree of thought that is applied toward the inclusion of a song.” (13). While one might suggest that Burlingame’s criticism of the song score overstates the quality of many films that employ such scores, we also know that even in the earliest days of film, music was seen to have a serendipitously functional effect on the image.¹ Rather than lamenting the music-industry-driven nature of the song score, it is perhaps time to focus on what these scores are doing, besides making money. Readers might also remember that older scores were not free of marketing considerations either.

Much of this essay seems to be based on Burlingame’s own experience and knowledge of the field, if we are to judge from the bibliography. Thus, it is disappointing that he stops short of placing his discussion in an illuminating historical, theoretical, or analytical context. His main claim is that the

¹Claudia Gorbman writes: “We may then ask: isn’t any music usually sufficient to accompany a segment of film? In fact the answer is yes. Whatever music is applied to a film segment will do something, will have an effect.” Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 15.

market shaped the industry, but without framing the discussion in this way, the reader is essentially left with a list of hit songs and albums from the movies. Furthermore, it is at times unclear where his information is coming from. He quotes from publications which are not cited in the bibliography and, at times, it appears that he conducted interviews himself. This lack of citation is a problem that recurs throughout the book.

The main part of this book, a dictionary of well-known film composers, is in many ways similar to the "Composers" segment of Didier C. Deutsch's *MusicHound Soundtracks: The Essential Album Guide to Film, Television and Stage Music*.² Burlingame, however, focuses more upon the figure of the composer, as opposed to his or her works. While the biographies in *Sound and Vision* are basic, they do coincide with Burlingame's assertion that film music is the "classical" concert-music of today. Citing Peter Gelb, the president of Sony Classical, Burlingame suggests that "the failure of most new concert-hall works in the commercial marketplace has led executives to seek out fresh voices." These new voices, which are "accessible" and "melodic," are most prevalent in Hollywood (32). Burlingame suggests that some "purists" would reject the categorization of film music as "classical" but does not tell us why. Whether we agree or disagree that film music is today's art music, the claim does lend artistic merit to (or at least balances) the economically motivated selection of the recordings.

Burlingame states that among

the basic criteria for choosing the recordings, "[a]ll of the records chosen had to be legitimate, licensed commercial recordings available for sale to the public in the United States." (x). Thus, like *MusicHound*, *Sound and Vision* is ultimately a buyer's guide. Each entry provides a CD or LP label and number after each disc title. Most major composers are included, although a "handful of composers [who] never achieved prominence in the film-music world" (including Richard M. Sherman and Robert B. Sherman and Alan Menken) come as one entry under "Disney," and interesting composers such as Richard Robbins and Angelo Badalamenti are left out.

The third section, which focuses on soundtracks of musicals and song compilation scores, is organized by film. The criteria for the selections in this segment seem based primarily upon the commercial success of the film or soundtrack, and each entry enumerates the best known, or best selling, songs from the score.

In both the second and third sections, the entries may be used as a guide for purchasing soundtracks, but these sections may also be used simply as a guide to movies for viewing and listening. The descriptions are more anecdotal than informative, usually describing the story of the film rather than the details of the music, and it is seldom made clear why the music is so noteworthy. Although the composers' identifiable style characteristics are mentioned at times, the writing tends in general to be vague and descriptive, as in the biographical entry on Bacharach, which describes him as a composer whose "trademark style was lively, bouncy, and melodic . . . often with offbeat or quirky orchestration." (39).

Leonard Maltin, a colleague of Burlingame at USC, states in the foreword that *Sound and Vision* is ideal for "anyone who's just getting hooked on soundtracks" to "navigate those muddy waters" of recordings, reissues, and re-recordings (9). Indeed, *Sound and Vision* seems at times to be directed towards the novice fan, specifically in terms of level and tone. Yet, in terms of content, the intended audience is unclear. Take the entry for Franz Waxman's *Prince Valiant*, for example, which states:

One of Waxman's most celebrated scores, this music for the 1954 adaptation of the long-running comic strip is as richly detailed and ornate as Hal Foster's famous artwork and stories. Robert Wagner, James Mason, and Janet Leigh starred in the movie, but Waxman's score was the real star, with its grand fanfares, thrilling chase sequences, heartbreaking love theme, and hints of early English music (184).

Somehow, it seems odd that an audience to whom music is described as "richly detailed," "ornate," and "the real star" could also call to mind early English music. Elsewhere, Burlingame describes James Bernard's "Vampire Rhapsody" as "Lisztian-flavored." (44).

The book is rounded off with a highly selective bibliography. Although it contains several standard film music texts, such as Royal S. Brown's *Overtones and Undertones* and Jeff Smith's *The Sounds of Commerce*, it mainly consists of coffee-table books on the industry, composers, and movies, and the curious inclusion of Stanley Sadie's *Norton/Grove Concise Encyclopedia of Music*.

These details aside, the most significant omission in *Sound and*

²Didier C. Deutsch, *MusicHound Soundtracks: The Essential Album Guide to Film, Television and Stage Music* (Detroit: Visible Ink, 2000).

Vision is Burlingame's critical opinion of these scores. Coming from the perspective of the history of production and consumption, Burlingame could potentially offer some keen observations on the industry and popular taste, if not the scores themselves. To be fair, Burlingame states that his objective was to "create . . . a handy and noncritical guide to classic and best selling soundtracks." Whether or not it is possible to be truly "noncritical," it is clearly not the purpose of this book to judge whether the music actually performs a worthwhile function in a film. On the other hand, I would find the guide more helpful if it contained the critical opinion of an author of Burlingame's expertise.

The lack of a critical voice and, indeed, most of the problems in this volume may arise from the seemingly contradictory aims of Burlingame and *Billboard* Books. Burlingame often seems on the verge of suggesting that there were reasons critics disparaged a particular film score, but quickly points out that the sales figures—often as calculated in *Billboard*— suggest that the score was in fact, a suc-

cess. For example, of James Horner's score for *Titanic*, Burlingame writes:

Composers grouched about Horner's savvy commercial sense, and critics complained that it wasn't very original, but consumers bought the disc at an estimated half-million copies a week. The movie, it should be noted, went on to become the most successful film of all time (31).

Of course, publishing is also an industry and we all know that scholarly monographs sell far less well than trade items do. But books like *Sound and Vision* that attempt to bridge the scholarly/trade gap call attention to the tension between being too simple and having too much jargon. *Sound and Vision* exemplifies the problems of writing about film music because it treats the music for the most part without reference to the narrative and iconic aspects of the film. These problems are due partly to the fact that film music has a clear commercial viability apart from the film itself and partly to the present lack of convention amidst

our wealth of theoretical language and historical contexts for film music. Also problematic is our preconceived notion about the wide divergence between the commercial fan base and academia.

As we know from Smith's exemplary study, *The Sounds of Commerce*, the commercial success of film music changed the way soundtracks are made.³ But I'm not sure that Burlingame's historical overview sheds new light on the context or the ramifications of hit songs in the cinema. And thus, when Burlingame states that in collecting soundtracks, "[t]he shocking proliferation of overseas bootleg discs – illegal, unauthorized 'soundtracks' sold by the thousands to cater to the whims of fanatic film-score collectors – should be discouraged at every turn," (xi), one can't help thinking it is because the industry loses money and not simply because of the legitimacy of the recordings.

Although not a cornerstone of a film music buff's library, *Sound and Vision* would be a welcome addition as a supplement to existing collectors' guides.

³Jeff Smith, *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

References

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