

Kathryn Kalinak. *How the West Was Sung: Music in the Westerns of John Ford*

Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2007. [x, 256 p. ISBN: 9780520252349. \$24.95 (trade paper)] Music examples, illustrations, bibliography, index.

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“**F**or John Ford, there was no need for dialogue. The music says it all.” This pithy quote by actor James Stewart, who collaborated with Ford on several films, encapsulates the thesis of Kathryn Kalinak’s new book. According to Kalinak, Ford was unique among directors of the studio system in his consistent use of American folk song and hymnody as both source music and scoring. In order to fill a void in the literature about Ford, Kalinak asserts that she offers here a systematic analysis of the music—scores and songs—in the director’s westerns. She seeks to determine ways in which the film score in general and the songs themselves function and unfold “narratively, thematically, structurally, and ideologically” (p. 3). For Kalinak, Ford’s films “engage with the relationship between history and myth, the definitions of nation and nationality, and matters of class, ethnicity, race, and gender,” and the judicious use of songs constitutes an important element in articulating these issues (p. 2). She explains in her Introduction that “one can chart the ideological terrain of a Ford western through its songs,” and that the music constitutes “a powerful system of meaning circulating through the western, one Ford recognized and, to an amazing degree controlled” (p. 2).

To demonstrate how Ford employs this system of meaning, Kalinak traces the role of music from Ford’s silent films, such as *The Iron Horse* (1924) and *3 Bad Men* (1926), to his last western, the elegiac *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), with its pungent score by Alex North. Among the other films she examines are *Stagecoach* (1939), scored by a team of Paramount Studios staff composers John Leipold, Leo Shuken, Gerard Carbonara, W. Franke Harling, and Richard Hageman; two films scored (mostly) by Cyril Mockridge, *My*

Darling Clementine (1942) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962); *3 Godfathers* and *Fort Apache* (both released in 1948), *Wagon Master* (1950), and *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* (1949), all with music by Richard Hageman, who became the “in-house” composer of Ford’s production company Argosy Pictures; and of course Ford’s most famous western *The Searchers* (1956), with music by Max Steiner.¹ While most of the content of these chapters is devoted to the way song and scoring function to articulate “matters of class, ethnicity, race, and gender,” Kalinak shares the fruits of her research in various archives (such as the Warner Bros. Archive at the University of Southern California and Special Collections at Brigham Young University) by describing the production history for each score, with occasional quotes from Ford’s correspondence, which reveal that he was indeed deeply involved in the selection of period music for his films.

A recurrent theme in Kalinak’s analysis is Ford’s preoccupation with community on the frontier. She is interested in how this issue is reflected in his choice of songs to represent social and ethnic boundaries. For example, in her discussion of *My Darling Clementine* she draws attention to the use of music to delineate who does and does not belong to the frontier community, as represented by the town of Tombstone:

Tombstone is defined by a confluence of law, race, ethnicity, and a value system dominated by a Protestant work ethic. Its residents include the lawman Wyatt Earp, the future schoolteacher Clementine Carter, and various law-abiding white inhabitants . . . The music of this community . . . consists of folk tunes, such as “The Cuckoo Waltz”; period songs, such as “My Darling Clementine” . . . and hymnody: “Shall We Gather at the River?” in simple orchestrations. (p. 80)

Excluded from this community are

¹ In his silent films, Ford used the lyrics of specific songs as intertitles to suggest what was being sung onscreen.

those defined as Other by their racial or ethnic difference [and] . . . those who fail to adopt the Protestant value system: law breakers, the idle, and the drunk . . . Their music emanates from saloons and consists of minstrel tunes and Spanish Californian folk songs, often played on a honky-tonk piano, a signifier of the cheap and tawdry (pp. 80–81).

A similar use of the associations of songs through their lyrics is evident in *Stagecoach*, in which Stephen Foster's "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair," a ballad associated with the antebellum South, accompanies the two Southern passengers on the stagecoach. The prostitute Dallas is linked with the saloon songs "She's More to be Pitied than Censured" and "Up in a Balloon," while her nemeses, the bigoted ladies of Tonto who drive her out of town, are characterized by the Protestant hymn "Shall We Gather at the River," presented as a parodic march.

These examples illustrate Kalinak's basic analytical approach, which is to link the genre, cultural associations, and lyrics of particular American vernacular songs to the various aspects of cultural identity and community building that she sees as central concerns of Ford's work. Because she views the use of song as an important aspect of Ford's creative expression, it is essential to her argument to establish that the particular selection of songs in each film represents Ford's personal choice. She emphasizes that, in contrast to other directors who relied on the composer or music supervisor to take care of the music, Ford was very particular in selecting the songs he used in his films. Since the music for his films "largely consist of songs," Kalinak asks whether Ford therefore "deserves a special status in the Pantheon of directors" (p. 11).

This kind of neo-auteurist perception of the director as musical mastermind seems to be in the air these days (Jack Sullivan's recent book *Hitchcock's Music*, which I reviewed in a previous issue, makes a related argument).² Kalinak defines her own analytical perspective as a compromise between the extremes of auteurism, with its exclusive emphasis on the director's role in shaping the meaning of a film, and the poststructuralist perspective, which views directors as mere "products of psychic and cultural forces that leave them little or no control over meaning" (p. 11). While her sympathies clearly tend toward auteurism, she acknowledges that the work of individual artists is shaped to a significant extent by dominant cultural and ideological factors. What is neglected in this conceptual framework

is the role played by the composer, and it is in this area that the book is at its weakest.

Kalinak points out that both auteurist and poststructuralist critics have been fixated on the visual aspects of film while ignoring the central role of music in shaping meaning and perception. This is an important point, but Kalinak's near-exclusive focus on Ford's musical choices causes her to go only part of the way toward redressing the imbalance. The careful identification and history of the various traditional songs in Ford's films is certainly useful as a source of reference, and the interpretation of their symbolic meaning within the narrative is often intriguing. But in regard to the original music composed for Ford westerns, *How the West Was Sung* is considerably less perceptive. Information about the composers, and discussion of their stylistic characteristics, is brief and superficial, if not entirely lacking (all we learn about Mockridge, for example, is that he was a staff composer at 20th Century Fox). Original musical passages that do not refer to traditional tunes are often ignored or dismissed as stereotypical. Kalinak repeatedly resorts to the epithet "conventional" to describe anything that does not fit into her conception of "Fordian" musical design—that is, "authentic," "lean," "simple" arrangements of folk music or protestant hymnody, as opposed to the "lush," "sweet," "sentimental," "wall-to-wall" original cues contributed by the various composers who collaborated with Ford. By pitting the individual musical "vision" of Ford against the generic, "conventional" practice of his composers, Kalinak runs in a well-worn groove of condescension toward the tradition of Hollywood scoring that dates back via Irwin Bazelon to Adorno/Eisler, Hans Keller, and others who have lumped together the majority of music written during the studio era into a single syrupy, undifferentiated musical mush. "Hollywood music" has often been a convenient foil that serves to highlight the virtues of whatever superior aesthetic is being espoused, be it modernism, British film music, or the artificial "authenticity" of Ford's compendium of hymns and folk songs. In a book so keenly attuned to the exclusion of the "Other" within traditional hierarchies of dominance, it is ironic that the contributions of Mockridge, David Buttolph, and Steiner, among others, are for the most part perceived only as cluttering up the director's pristine "musical design."

Kalinak's treatment of composers is in accordance with Ford's own conception of scoring, which was essentially negative. He remarked that "generally I hate music in pictures—a little bit now and then, at the end or the start. . . . I don't like to see a man alone

² Tom Schneller, review of *Hitchcock's Music* by Jack Sullivan, *Journal of Film Music* 2: 87–93.

in the desert, dying of thirst, with the Philadelphia Orchestra behind him.”³ This notion of film music brings to mind Hitchcock’s objection to using music in *Lifeboat* (1943) on the grounds that “the entire action of the film takes place in a lifeboat on the open ocean,” so “where would the music come from?” To which David Raksin gave the only sensible reply: “Ask Mr. Hitchcock to explain where the camera came from, and I’ll tell him where the music comes from.”⁴ Kalinak cites Ford’s remark (p. 121), but her sympathy with his aesthetic aims preclude her from pointing out its patent naivité. This is hardly surprising, given the auteurist slant of her argument as a whole.

This slant causes Kalinak to overstate the originality of Ford’s musical preferences. She distinguishes the model of classical Hollywood music, which seeks to tap into “powerful musical signifiers encoding specific cultural meanings” while remaining “unobtrusive, even inaudible” from the “Fordian” model as exemplified by *Stagecoach*, in which the copious use of familiar folk songs and hymns tends to draw the viewer’s attention to the music and provides “reassuring signs of the authenticity of the images” (p. 77). Since the use of widely recognizable songs increases “the threshold of audibility,” “Hollywood . . . used songs sparingly and carefully in the nondiegetic film score” (p. 62). But is the “Fordian” model really that distinctive? In 1939, the same year that *Stagecoach* was released, Steiner composed *Gone With the Wind*, one of the archetypal scores of classical Hollywood music, which quoted, among other traditional tunes, “Dixie,” “Bonnie Blue Flag,” “Maryland, My Maryland,” “Marching Through Georgia,” “My Old Kentucky Home,” “Old Folks at Home,” and “Camptown Races.” Steiner’s 1942 score for *Casablanca* is based on a mélange of familiar melodies, most prominently the “Marseillaise” and “Deutschland über Alles.” A similarly prominent use of traditional tunes marks Bernard Herrmann’s 1941 score for *All that Money Can Buy* (“Springfield Mountain,” “Pop Goes the Weasel,” “Devil’s Dream”). While the prominent use of particular period tunes is an obvious and important feature of Ford’s films, a broader and more extensive discussion of the practice would have certainly revealed it as a more common practice in Hollywood music than Kalinak makes it sound.

In her introduction Kalinak claims that her inquiry “has spread out in a number of critical directions, including cultural studies, feminist theory, masculinity

³ See Kathryn Kalinak, “The Sound of Many Voices: Music in John Ford Westerns” in Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, eds., *John Ford Made Westerns: Filming the Legend in the Sound Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 171.

⁴ Cited in Graham McCann’s introduction to Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler, *Composing for the Films* (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), vii.

studies, African American studies, ethnic studies, and discourses of authorship” (p. 4). This interdisciplinary breadth is not matched by a corresponding depth of musical exegesis. In a scholarly work dedicated to film music, one yearns for some substantial analysis of the music itself. But despite Kalinak’s claimed perusal of holograph scores by Hageman, George Duning, North, and Steiner, there are no music examples other than a few uncommented reproductions of sketches. It is surprising that she took the trouble to consult scores when the level of musical discussion never rises above descriptions such as “a harp glissando mimics the flight of birds” or “falling cadences . . . accompany the tragic story of Martin Pawley’s origins” (p. 170).

In fact, discussion of music is strangely absent from the book. Since Kalinak focuses on the cultural connotations of songs, which are often derived from their original context (folk song, church hymn), and, most importantly, their lyrics, she deals almost exclusively on the level of literary meaning or historical association. Kalinak’s analysis of the famous dance scene from *My Darling Clementine* (which, like the corresponding dance scene from Ford’s earlier film *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), is accompanied by “The Cuckoo Waltz”) exemplifies this analytical approach:

The lyrics to “The Cuckoo Waltz,” although we don’t hear them here, revolve around a story of loss and a cuckoo’s call, evoked in the melody, brings another dimension to the sequence. A cuckoo is a bird who deposits its eggs in other bird’s nests to be hatched and raised. Cuckoos are born outsiders, always different from those around them. Thus the use of the song suggests that both Abe [Lincoln] and Wyatt [Earp] are out of place . . . (p. 86).

For Kalinak, the sole purpose of the tune is to serve as a vehicle for the symbolic significance carried by the words of the songs, whether they are sung or not. The actual music of a given song is significant only insofar as it serves to trigger the appropriate verbal association. Perhaps this privileging of the literary over the musical explains why Kalinak gives such short shrift to the original passages scored by Ford’s composers: these work in musical terms and cannot be as readily reduced to a tidy symbolic concept. On the rare occasion when actual musical devices or gestures, such as tremoli, brass stingers, or harmony in fourths are mentioned at all, they occur in Kalinak’s generic and generally disapproving descriptions of the various stereotypes employed by film composers.

Kalinak’s emphasis on lyrics, genre, and attendant cultural associations is a valid approach to analyzing the meaning of music in film (especially in scores

that refer so extensively to traditional songs); but it seems an incomplete one (and often somewhat superficial). It may reflect the way Ford conceived of musical meaning in his films, and a consideration of the lyrics and cultural connotations of songs he chose obviously contributes to an understanding of the music. But ultimately the way music operates in film—the way it shapes the psychological response of the viewer through orchestration and harmonic inflection, the way it articulates characterization in musical terms independent of verbal associations, the way it echoes or contradicts the rhythm of the editing and camera movement, the way its motivic design relates to the specific structure of a scene and the dramatic premise of a film as a whole, has so many more dimensions than the literary connotations that may be attached through song lyrics to a particular set of pitches. These dimensions cannot be fully accessed without resorting to the specific vocabulary and concepts of musical analysis. Any serious analysis of film music will have to deal in depth and detail with actual notes, just as any discussion of a mathematical concept will not be content with prose descriptions, but will involve formulas or diagrams. It is an odd (if widespread) assumption in film studies that one can talk about the music while ignoring the score.

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