

# FILM'S MUSICAL MOMENTS

Edited by Ian Conrich Estella Tincknell

MUSIC & THE MOVING IMAGE SERIES

FILM'S MUSICAL MOMENTS

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### I INTRODUCTION

### Estella Tincknell and Ian Conrich

This book is about musical performance on film, about the use of music within film and it is about film musicals: a triple focus that articulates the complex relationship that exists between music and the cinematic text. The different ways in which musical performance and the diegetic or non-diegetic use of music overlap, intersect or operate in distinction, has been the focus for a range of academic debates and discussions since the mid 1990s. It was with these considerations in mind that we developed this collection of essays.

The book has its origins partly in the work we undertook as colleagues teaching an undergraduate Cultural Studies module on the film musical at Nottingham Trent University, and partly in our wider interest in the role music has played on film. These two foci directed us to explore the function and presence of musical performances in cinema. What we found was that while the film musical has always been seen as the main vehicle for cinematic musical performance, it is by no means the only place where singing, dancing, jazz bands or even on-screen orchestras are featured. Indeed, the sheer range of musical performances or what we call 'musical moments' that have appeared throughout cinema history, together with the extraordinary procession of featured stars and performers is remarkable. Here, on one level, the notion of the musical moment expands the range of examples to include not just the conventional song and dance number in musicals, but also the novelty or romantic song within comedy, musical performance in animation, or the biopic and the lip-synching musical parody in many post-classical films. On another level, as will be discussed below, the idea of a musical moment is further viewed within this collection as a

particular point of disruption, an isolated musical presence in a non-musical film which is most notable for its potential to disturb the text through its unexpectedness or at times excessiveness. This book's use of the musical moment as its organising idea represents, then, a considered attempt to recognise the breadth and diversity of music's role in cinema. It also signals a distinctively cultural approach to the subject, in which the wider social meanings and determinations referenced by musical performance may be seen as equally important, even though some of the chapters included here are relatively formalist in their consideration of the film text.

#### GENRE AND ENTERTAINMENT

Research into music in film has for many years largely been confined to the genre of the US musical and, often, to its classical phase from the 1930s to the 1950s. Writers such as Rick Altman, Jane Feuer and Richard Dyer pioneered serious analysis of the film musical as a popular genre during the 1970s and 1980s, and any consideration of musical performances on film must acknowledge their work and the critical tradition they established. In particular, Feuer's exploration of the entertainment tradition in *The Hollywood Musical* (1982) and Altman's rigorous taxonomy of the genre's characteristics and historical development in *The American Film Musical* (1987) stand out as canonical texts. None the less, the relative lateness of the emergence of such work in the context of film and cultural studies more generally is significant, as is the tendency of genre study to cast musical performance within neatly categorised boundaries.

The musical has tended to be marginalised in film studies and cinema scholarship, despite the fact that it was for several decades an important genre and that its stars frequently figure as the most familiar and iconic signifiers of the 'golden age' of Hollywood. One reason for the critical devaluation of musicals seems to be their feminised status within film culture, together with their association with the most 'excessive' aspects of popular culture more generally. The prominence of female stars, the popularity of musicals amongst female audiences and the genre's foregrounding of what are deemed specifically feminine interests and competences, such as fashion, all mark musicals in this way. As Andreas Huyssen observes, popular mass cultural forms – including popular film - have been consistently represented in political, psychological and aesthetic discourses in overwhelmingly gendered (and pejorative) terms: mass culture is feminine 'while high culture, whether traditional or modern . . . [is] the privileged realm of male activities'. The musical has, then, been doubly problematic: not only because of its unapologetic celebration of entertainment as culture but because it offers a clear space for the elaboration of feminine pleasures and directly solicits a female audience.

In addition, the tendency of musicals to be identified with an idea of 'pure' entertainment, unsullied by profundity or by a wider social relevance is linked to Hollywood's own (disingenuous) representation of itself. This, too, has contributed to a problematic status. 'Entertainment' is a conceptual category that continues to defy attempts at definition while simultaneously troubling cultural critiques from elitists and democrats alike. On the one hand, it tends to be seen as self-explanatory or transparent and therefore 'trivial', on the other it is clearly sufficiently important to have warranted the full force of Marxist criticism in the form of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's denunciatory essay about the dishonesty of the 'culture industry', 'Entertainment as Mass Deception'.<sup>2</sup> The film musical's status as the primary locus of Hollywood versions of entertainment thus marks it also as the site of anxieties about what entertainment is supposed to be. For this reason, one of the most important contributions to the study of film and popular culture made by critical work on the musical has been the recognition of the centrality of pleasure to culture – and its value.

The framework of the traditional genre study, although essential to the establishment of critical discourse around a film canon, has not always addressed the ways in which pleasure is experienced by audiences, and does not allow fully for the exploration of the relationship between film and the wider context of popular culture. The emergence of 'big band' musicals in the 1930s, for example, or the brief flowering of the 'beach party' film in the 1960s, clearly owed their development to cultural forces outside as well as within the film industry. Yet work on musicals and on music in film had been, until the mid 1990s, split between genre analyses, cultural studies and a version of musicology, which has intensified any tendencies to exclude discussion of material deemed to lie outside the specific focus of a particular discipline while also leaving important issues unaddressed. For example, the work of writers such as Caryl Flinn and Claudia Gorbman, while offering a systematised and philosophically complex framework for understanding the musical score has neglected styles of musical performance associated with 'popular' rather than 'high' culture, such as the ballads and show songs characteristic of musicals.3

This has meant that the relationship between the film score and diegetically performed musical numbers has, until recently, remained relatively unexplored. As Kay Dickinson observes, too often the scholarly emphasis has been on the 'formal distinctions between music and the moving image – their physical and spatial properties, their wildly divergent modes of reception', as though film musicals and music on film are a curious anomaly. Similarly, auteurist studies of particular directors working within the Hollywood system and specialising in musicals, such as Vincente Minnelli or Stanley Donen, while offering detailed discussion of directorial style and interests, have often struggled to take account of the wider cultural, economic and technological influences that helped to shape musical performances and their reception by audiences. As Steven Cohan

points out in his analysis of *Singin'* in the Rain (1952), attempts to ascribe authorship of the film in a simple sense either to Stanley Donen or to Gene Kelly consistently come up against the problem that such an account is not enough: not only does it fail to address the specifically collaborative character of the film's production under the Freed Unit at MGM, it cannot successfully situate the film's place in the history of postwar Hollywood.<sup>5</sup>

Such relatively purist approaches are also potentially problematic in the context of the long-standing and close relationship between the contemporary music and film industries. Indeed, Hollywood's control of significant parts of the music industry and its cross-promotion of particular film songs or theme tunes in the form of sheet music goes back to the 1930s at least. By 1942, as Jeff Smith points out, 'a Peatman survey showed that Hollywood and Broadway together accounted for more than 80 percent of the most-performed songs'.6 While the majority of these clearly originated in musicals a significant number were also featured in non-musical films, especially as the opening or title number, a factor that became increasingly common in the 1950s and 1960s, according to Smith.<sup>7</sup> By the 1980s, the close relationship between the two industries and their increasingly globalised structures was being deliberately exploited through the use of film soundtracks tied to performers under contract to media conglomerates and the use of music stars in feature films that foregrounded musical performance (such as Whitney Houston in *The Bodyguard* (1992)). 'Selling' a film and selling a particular piece of music has always been closely related, it seems, but the complex economic and cultural factors involved are only now being considered extensively.

Since the late 1990s, critical work on music in film has capitalised on the increasingly interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach to cinema to address these relationships. John Mundy's study, *Popular Music on Screen* (1999), Jeff Smith's *The Sounds of Commerce* (1998), Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell's edited collection, *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond* (2000), Pamela Robertson Wojcik and Arthur Knight's edited collection *Soundtrack Available* (2001), K.J. Donnelly's *Film Music: Critical Approaches* (2001), Ian Inglis's *Popular Music and Film* (2003), and Kay Dickinson's *Movie Music: The Film Reader* (2003) are exemplary of the ways in which work in this area has extended both the definition of the 'object of study' to include popular music and performers and the critical frameworks being used to explore the material.<sup>8</sup> All of these studies, in their different ways, have contributed to the increasingly interdisciplinary emphasis of scholarship on music and musical films.<sup>9</sup>

#### Musical Performance Beyond the Musical

It would be a mistake, therefore, to assume that the musical genre constitutes the only discursive space in which musical performance has been foregrounded in

film. In an earlier analysis of the Marx Brothers' films, one of us explored the way in which a specific version of musical moments involving singing, dancing and the virtuoso playing of particular instruments became a common feature of many early Hollywood comedies, which drew directly from the vaudeville tradition as well as making conspicuous use of the new sound technologies in their inclusion of novelty songs or even operatic-style performances. Such 'moments' punctuate *Monkey Business* (1931) and *Duck Soup* (1933) and are a more erratic feature of the later Marx Brothers comedies. However, the performance of song and dance routines in these films does not simply disrupt the narrative flow, it represents an eruption of anarchy and disorder that condenses the film's own refusal of convention. Music in this context is thus both a momentarily disruptive force *and* integral to the overall coherence of the text: it helps to articulate the underlying values or ideas in a new way.

This sense of a double articulation is what underpins our understanding of the development of the 'musical moment' in films which are very far from the vaude-ville aesthetic. Indeed, it is possible to go further and identify similar 'moments' in more unusual sources, including film noir, melodrama and the thriller. Lauren Bacall's husky rendition of 'Her Tears Flowed like Wine' in Howard Hawks's The Big Sleep (1946) and Doris Day's performance of 'Que Sera Sera' in Alfred Hitchcock's The Man Who Knew Too Much (1956) are two examples of unlikely musical interludes that underpin a film's wider themes. Such moments condense textual meaning by offering thematic concerns within a specific musical articulation: The Man Who Knew Too Much is, after all, a film whose plot hinges on destiny, while Bacall's song is an opportunity for her character's mischievous sexiness to be displayed more fully. In both cases, the musical moment represents a temporary crossing of genre boundaries and expectations.

One-off performances of a key song can also be found in later films such as *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), where Audrey Hepburn's wistful version of 'Moon River' is an iconic moment, and *Blow-Up* (1966), which, in a gesture that would become characteristic of many films set in 'Swinging London' during the 1960s, features a cameo by The Yardbirds. Nobody would mistake such films for musicals, but their use of staged musical performance to underline meanings about character and plot are not wholly unlike the function of song or dance in the classical version of the genre. Furthermore, such moments are integrated into the narrative. However, in more recent films dating from the 1980s and 1990s, such as *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) the impact of the 'music video aesthetic' identified by Mundy, has meant that musical moments (and the music soundtrack) not only break narrative continuity, they are also frequently self-consciously non-realist in style, using montage editing and an aesthetic that defies continuity to produce textual disruption.<sup>11</sup>

This deliberately anti-integrational use of music has become an interesting feature of post-classical cinema, where it incorporates an avant-garde device

(the breaking of conventions and the manipulation of form) in order to ultimately broaden rather than restrict the possible audiences for the film. The musical moment in these films seeks to secure audience engagement, not only with the film itself but also with the particular recordings featured in these brief eruptions of aural and visual spectacle; this in turn may be used as a form of cross-promotion in which the music and the film are culturally synthesised. The 'meaning' of *Titanic* (1997), for example, was not confined to the film itself, but was also articulated by the circulation of Cèline Dion's unforgettable 'My Heart Will Go On', the film's love theme which quickly entered into popular culture. What this suggests is that the foregrounded presence of musical numbers in non-musical films has become a way of articulating emotions, desires, even fears that exceed narrative motivation.

As we have emphasised, this is not a book about the Hollywood musical in its classical period, nor is it generically specific. If anything, as editors we have avoided looking for contributions that make such a focus their primary concern. That is because we wanted to make critical space for exploring the sheer richness and diversity of musical performance and style in film as well as recognising the importance of different national traditions and approaches to the genre. For this reason, the chapters range across the topic, while being marked by a shared emphasis on history, context and cultural impact. Rather than approaching the musical as an isolated genre or considering the development of different styles of film music and star performances as decontextualised phenomena, this book brings together a range of contributions that are careful to situate films within specific historical and cultural contexts, whether these are of the former West Germany in the postwar period, Australia in the 1970s or Britain during the 1930s.

Equally importantly, alternative traditions in music on film, such as the Danish singing films of the 1930s, which feature their own musical moments, and the explicitly politically motivated development of socialist musicals in the former East Germany, are explored here not as imitative versions of Hollywood models but as significant in their own right. The impact of such films, and their complex relationship both to specific national cultures and to popular culture more generally, has been an important aspect of research since the 1990s. The dominance of Hollywood cinema has not only helped to marginalise other versions of the film musical produced in Europe during the classical period and rarely screened beyond specific national boundaries, it has also tended to limit access to knowledge about such films.

#### THE CONTEMPORARY MUSICAL FILM

Although the classical film musical appears to be in long-term decline as a Hollywood genre (notwithstanding occasional successes such as *Evita* in 1996

and Chicago in 2003, and attempts to repeat their success with other theatricallyderived films such as *Phantom of the Opera*, 2004, and *The Producers*, 2006), this does not mean that musical performance or even alternative versions of musical stories are themselves unpopular. The increasingly global impact of the Hindi film industry, for example, has led to Bollywood styles of song and dance appearing in Western-produced films such as Moulin Rouge (2001), and the non-musicals East is East (1999) and The Guru (2002). The phenomenal growth of the soundtrack as a separately marketed element of such apparently 'nonmusical' films as Batman (1989), Pulp Fiction (1994) and Trainspotting (1995) is also significant. These developments, together with the recent recasting of diegetic musical performance in various ways on film in texts such as Zero Patience (1993), Muriel's Wedding (1994) and Everyone Says I Love You (1996), suggest that music remains central to the pleasures and the meanings that popular cinema offers. In fact, in contrast to the 'unheard melodies' of the orchestral score that Claudia Gorbman identifies as subtly shaping and underpinning the affective experience of the classical film, new sound technologies ensure that the contemporary post-classical film soundtrack contributes powerfully to the immediate aural texture of a film as well as its wider cultural impact. 12

Furthermore, as John Mundy has pointed out, the impact of new technologies in the production of sound, together with the emergence of multiple music television channels has helped develop the music video aesthetic in which the marriage between screen images and sound performance is a feature of a whole range of media forms. For Mundy

what is significant about the Hollywood musical, music on television, pop musicals and music video . . . is that they employ specific representational strategies which in part draw upon music and musical performance, and that they make specific appeal to an audience precisely because of the way in which music and singing are privileged.<sup>13</sup>

The 'Hollywood musical' may have declined in terms of production, then, but the basis for its appeal has not. The recent revival in the late 1990s of *The Sound of Music* (1965) as a kitsch cult experience – however ironically it is received and recast – indicates not only that there is nostalgia for the genre but that musicals are robust enough to withstand parody. Moreover, the continuing presence of the musical biopic, from Barbra Streisand as Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl* – produced in one of the last great years of the Hollywood musical in 1968 – through to Joaquin Phoenix as Johnny Cash in *Walk the Line* (2005) points to the continuing centrality of diegetic performance, or the idea of such performance, as well as the figure of the musical star to popular cinema.

Music's affect – its impact upon the senses and the non-cognitive parts of the mind – has become increasingly a focus for the understanding of music's place

within culture. As Marshall and Stilwell observe, one of the curiosities about the way in which film musicals have tended to be analysed academically is the relative lack of consideration of the music itself. A Shaping the form and style of performance as well as the 'content' – that is, the song or dance number – music is central to a text's meaning, and also to its emotional impact. This book appears, then, in the wake of shifts and changes in music's function in film and in critical work on the musical tradition. We bring together a collection of critical explorations, all of which consider music on film in relation to specific social and cultural contexts, with the wide range of musical styles and traditions examined here presented as symptomatic of music's importance to cinema.

#### ORGANISATION

We have divided the book into four sections. Part One - 'Music, Film, Culture' - is historical in focus, and concerned with the complex cultural, social and economic relationships between music and cinema. It begins with 'Jazz, Ideology and the Animated Cartoon', Barry Keith Grant's contribution, which explores the emergence of the jazz cartoon of the 1930s and 1940s. Although jazz has had a significant presence in the movies from the arrival of sound onwards (during 'the jazz age' itself in the late 1920s) its ideological connotations have been a source of struggle and considerable tensions, especially around race. For Grant, Hollywood's casting of 'sweet' - that is mainstream jazz as primarily a white musical form in feature films such as The King of Jazz (1930) is problematically paralleled by the use of 'hot' jazz in animations such as Jungle Jive (1944), in which racist stereotypes of black men as sexually predatory 'zip coons' preying on white women prevail. Rather than dismissing such films as ephemeral because of their status as programme fillers, Grant reminds us that they were often the site of an aggressively asserted insistence on black primitivism in which jazz is the primary signifier.

A development of jazz was the emergence of the big band sound, which was largely consumed by white audiences. The big band musical's brief success between the mid 1930s and late 1940s, a moment when bandleaders became household names, is considered by James Chapman in his contribution 'A Short History of the Big Band Musical'. Unusually, British cinema pioneered a trend with a Henry Hall film called *Music Hath Charms* (1935). As Chapman shows, however, the British and US versions of the big band film tended to be very different in terms of the strategies adopted for incorporating musical performance, with the British films relying on a revue-style format and the US films drawing more extensively on the conventions of existing genres such as the backstage musical. But by the early 1950s the big band musical was already seen as dated, with new styles of musical performance emerging such as rock 'n' roll and the pop ballad.

Rock 'n' roll itself rapidly diversified into a range of musical styles of which the Twist was one of many brief crazes. In 'Television, the Pop Industry and the Hollywood Musical', John Mundy examines the rise of the twist-dance and the role played by American Bandstand host, Dick Clark, in the career of 'Twister in chief' Chubby Checker. For Mundy, Clark's power to promote Checker and the Twist represents a fascinating example of cross-promotion between the increasingly dominant popular music industry, television and Hollywood. The postwar encounter between film and music was not confined to US cinema. In national cinemas beyond Hollywood, cultural identity has been articulated with equal importance through representations of musical performance. The final chapter in Part One, Ulrike Sieglohr's 'The Operatic in New German Cinema', is an analysis of the way in which opera has been used in three German films: Werner Schroeter's Eike Katappa (1969), Alexander Kluge's Die Macht der Gefühle (The Power of Emotion, 1983) and Hans Jürgen Syberberg's Hitler, Ein Film aus Deutschland (Our Hitler, 1977). Sieglohr considers Schroeter's mobilisation of an emotionally-charged and performancedriven style which radically reworks German operatic traditions, and examines Syberberg's use of Wagnerian opera to articulate the complex and contradictory meanings attached to West German identity in the pre-unification period. A particular concern is Schroeter's repeated return to the opera singer Maria Callas, a subject of many of his films, who offers an important reminder of the way in which star images are intertextual.

Part Two – 'Stars, Performance and Reception' – explores those meanings circulating around particular stars, including those produced intertextually and 'unofficially', through fan cultures. The first chapter here, Andrew Spicer's 'Jack Buchanan and British Musical Comedy of the 1930s', considers the relationship between performance and star persona in the films of Jack Buchanan, one of the most successful British male stars of the period. Focusing on the way in which the crossing of social barriers in order to romance a heroine from a different class was a regular trope in the British films of the 1930s, Spicer argues that such stories offered audiences fantasies of success and social esteem without overtly challenging the status quo. The debonair, upper-class 'manabout-town' was an important figure in British popular culture during the interwar period but, surprisingly, continued to appear well into the postwar years up to the early 1960s, despite the emergence of youth culture in the 1950s. Moreover, Buchanan's star persona was remarkably consistent throughout his career and was strikingly close to his presence as an actor.

These concerns are developed by Bruce Babington in 'Star Personae and Authenticity in the Country Music Biopic', the second contribution to this section. Focusing on a range of Country music films, from theatrically released productions such as *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980), to the wave of made-fortelevision biopics that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, Babington explores

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