

A sound connection with the past: recordings of early music in screen media

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When Powrie and Stilwell's *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-existing Music in Film* was published in 2005ⁱ it marked a significant contribution to the field of film music studies. It explored the use of classical and popular musics in screen media in detail for the first time, and considered the role that pre-existent music has to play in the production of films and our own cinematic experiences. Looking back at this volume more than a decade on, it is significant that extended discussions of early music, construed broadly for this essay as music composed before about 1750, are notable only by their absence. The closest we get is Jeongwon Joe's chapter on *Amadeus*, which offers a thoughtful account of a film often maligned by the musicological community.ⁱⁱ Instead, cinematic scores are, quite understandably, situated within the context of 19th-century art music traditions.

Over the last decade, the presence of early music has been felt more strongly in popular media, a phenomenon which is now beginning to be explored across the field. For example, the work of the Representations of Early Music on Stage and Screen study group, which I co-lead, has sought to interrogate the theoretical and experiential implications of using early music in stage and screen media. The recently published volume, *Recomposing the Past: Representations of Early Music on Stage and Screen*ⁱⁱⁱ explores this issue in the greatest detail to date, and highlights the ways in which our sense of the musical past is shaped by music used in film, opera, television and videogame. In effect, the musical past is recomposed through such engagement, forming parallel musical histories across media. However, this essay does not intend to repeat the work presented in that volume. Instead, my aim here is to consider the extent to which the general viewing audience has a sensory connection to the musical past, and the ways in which recordings of pre-existent early music for specific filmic contexts are deployed.

A connection with the past?

The use of pre-existent music has a long tradition in cinema that is too vast to explore here. To summarize, though, its use might be bound up with connotations of class, the desire for directorial control, budgetary reasons, or to communicate something 'extra' to the audience.^{iv} The idea of a piece of pre-existent classical music having cultural connotations that offer an additional layer of narrative meaning to the soundscape is an interesting one, and draws attention to the location of a piece within a specific cultural context. The frequent use of pieces such as the *Dies irae* from Mozart's Requiem for murderous scenes, or Handel's *Zadok the Priest* for a coronation, are examples of this. They do not necessarily historicize the drama in a specific sense; rather, they draw upon the cultural capital that these pieces have accrued over usage in popular media, often combined with a general

historicizing influence. However, can the same argument be made about the wider cultural connotations of early music, a much more specialist area that does not have the same hold over the public consciousness?

All stage and screen media have the potential to reshape our perceptions of reality, even if just for a brief moment; that is why they are so popular. They encourage an audience to momentarily suspend disbelief at the drama being played out. Music plays an important role in stirring emotions and situating the listener within a specific context, largely via specific codes that have become ingrained in western cinematic traditions. For historical—or *historicizing*—music, the diverse and multifarious uses of the musical past can challenge traditional notions of ‘authenticity’, with the fidelity to the medium being, arguably, more important than history itself.^v For example, vocal music sung in Latin almost always accompanies a scene in a church, irrespective of whether the compositional style or harmonic language is appropriate for the time period at hand. However, to dismiss this entirely on the grounds of anachronism is overly reductive. These sounds become inextricably bound with conceptions of the musical past and therefore create something of a parallel musical history. Such a contention is, admittedly, quite provocative, and raises some challenging questions for early music recordings.

Within the broad framework of early music as defined above, distinctions between different historical periods and styles are often blurred for most popular audiences, meaning that perceptions of historical sound can become predominantly concerned with evoking perceived Otherness. However, this need not be seen in a negative light, instead offering opportunities for creative re-imaginings of the past, brought to life through period drama and sound that is sufficient to situate the viewer within a dramatic world. Thus, recordings of historical music can take on a new life and accrue a different type of cultural capital beyond a specialist audience, especially given the recent growth in engagement with early music in mainstream media.^{vi}

For film and TV, early music makes its appearance in one of two ways: either through the use of an existing recording as part of the soundtrack; or as a new recording made specifically for inclusion in the film. Both of these categories are agents in a *recomposition* of the historical past which erases another past, redefining a sensory reality of historical sound through a complex web of cultural relations. Early music, much like period costumes and film sets, therefore undertakes a significant role in the redefinition of the essence of the past depicted on screen, albeit one in which the audience often requires a much lower level of fidelity to the period to remain satisfied.

In cases where pre-existent recordings are used as part of a soundtrack, directors and music supervisors are able to select at will, finding a recording that they deem to be suitable for inclusion. For early music, this raises some important questions, especially where performance practices significantly change the sound and presentation of the music in question. The motives behind the recordings ultimately selected are not necessarily guided by current scholarship and discussion on historically informed performance, with those making these choices being most likely interested in

factors other than current trends. The widespread use of *a cappella* vocal music for church scenes, and thin and ‘buzzy’ instrumental music for secular scenes is almost a filmic outplaying of the so-called ‘*a cappella* heresy’ debate.^{vii} Indeed we might venture to say that in all but a few cases, such consideration is highly unlikely in mainstream media productions. Instead other factors such as sound quality, overall mood, tempo, instrumentation, along with more practical issues such as availability and affordability of usage rights are likely to rank high on the list of directorial priorities.

Although the vast majority of early music used in films comes from pre-existent, commercially available recordings, this is not always the case. Indeed, there are many fabulously lavish examples which promote the apparent authenticity of the soundtrack as a key facet in the illusory recreation, or *recomposition*, of the distant past. Whilst some of these have received prior attention, here I would like to explore some commonalities and differences to better understand the implications of such approaches through the recordings themselves.

Soundtracks and authenticities

Take Jacques Rivette’s two-part cinematic epic retelling the life of Joan of Arc, *Jeanne la pucelle* (1994), built upon painstaking historical consideration and accompanied by a lavish soundtrack of period music directed by Jordi Savall.^{viii} The soundtrack, recorded specifically for the film rather than compiled from existing recordings, features mostly mid 15th-century music, principally that by Guillaume Du Fay, along with new arrangements by Savall of contemporaneous anonymous works; it was released as a soundtrack CD shortly after the film premiere.^{ix} Savall’s leadership brought a high-profile performer of early music onto the creative team, forging artistic links with contemporary performance practices that are not usually seen in film soundtracks. This completed the circle for Rivette’s ambitious films which closely follow historical accounts and avoid overzealous artistic reinterpretation of recorded accounts of Joan’s life. The dramatic success of this approach across the two films is mixed, but this case raises an interesting prospect for understanding the musical considerations of a painstakingly documentary account of an historical life.

The use of music that is roughly contemporaneous with Joan of Arc (1412–31) certainly serves to imbue a degree of historical accuracy upon the film. The soundtrack recordings themselves are not dissimilar from those we might expect to find on standalone recordings of this music, but there are some important points of difference, as a consideration of the Sanctus from Du Fay’s *Missa L’homme armé* demonstrates. The soundtrack includes three excerpts from Du Fay’s Mass to accompany the coronation of Charles VII in Reims: a section from the Sanctus, and two Osannas. It is one of the most musically successful moments in the film, with Du Fay’s work seemingly entirely at home in the dramatic context of a royal coronation, undoubtedly one of the film’s narrative peaks. The lavish set and vivid costumes all signify royal grandeur, and the viewer is left in no doubt that this is a key moment in the drama.

In terms of the musical forces themselves, as is common in many recordings by continental European ensembles, vocalists are accompanied by a number of instruments, playing one or more of the vocal lines. The tempo for Savall's recording is relatively brisk, emphasized by a repeating drum pattern in the second half of the excerpt. The driving rhythm certainly accentuates the music's ceremonial quality, entirely appropriate in terms of the dramatic context at this point. Throughout, brass instruments are featured prominently, at times overpowering the vocal lines, and bells accent key harmonic changes in the later stages of the recording. A low bass line is emphasized, establishing a rich texture that reaches an emphatic climax, topped off with a drum roll to draw the excerpt to a close.

The contrast between this approach and those seen in recordings by the Oxford Camerata – *Guillaume Dufay: Missa l'homme armé; Supremum est mortalibus bonum* (Naxos 8.553087, issued 1995, 59') – and Giuseppe Maletto and Cantica Symphonia's *Guillaume Dufay: The Masses for 1453* (Glossa GCD P31907, issued 2014, 80')^x is marked. Taking the first of these, the most immediately apparent difference is that the Oxford Camerata presents this work entirely *a cappella*, in the tradition of many English early music ensembles, altogether changing the mood of the piece. A much slower tempo is struck for most of the movement, leading to the Sanctus lasting some 10 minutes, and allowing the intricate counterpoint to emerge clearly. Melodic intricacies come to the fore in the generally slower tempo, all handled with the relative restraint typical of the English cathedral choir tradition. Cantica Symphonia projects something of a balance between the vocal purity of the Oxford Camerata and the lavish Savall recording. Light string instrumentation supports most of the recording, with subdued slide trumpet and sackbut appearing periodically throughout the movement to great effect. The tempo is similar to that of the Savall recording, but a different mood is struck altogether thanks to a smaller ensemble. Here, the liner notes acknowledge the debate surrounding the use of instruments in vocal polyphony, concluding that the chosen approach allows 'the modern listener to be able to savour fully the richness and the *varietas* of Dufay's polyphony'.^{xi}

What emerges from the brief comparison of these three recordings, even in general terms, is that Savall's approach appears to have been influenced by the dramatic function that it is intended to serve. The prominence of brass instruments, the liberal use of percussion, and additional low string bass parts all contribute to a sense of grandeur that is entirely appropriate for a coronation scene, but probably less so through an historical performance lens. Though maintaining a perceived sense of historical fidelity, Savall's approach here points towards the influence of the dramatic context he is working with. In effect, well-established cinematic musical tropes, as perpetuated by mainstream media, mesh with approaches to historical performance designed to enhance the perceived historical accuracy of a filmic world. The tensions apparent here offer a fascinating site for a recomposition of the past in which Du Fay's Mass becomes ceremonial coronation music. The musical past is reimagined for a new purpose, yet all under the banner of historical authenticity.

A new partnership for early music in mainstream contexts

Louis XIV and the mystique of the palace of Versailles have been the subject of many an historical drama, some sticking closer to the facts than others. The most recent reimagination of this palace of luxury and opulence, with an enticing mixture of extra-marital affairs, aristocratic scheming, poison and murder, is the Canal+ Franco-Canadian series *Versailles*, created by Simon Mirren and David Wolstencroft (2015–). Though some of the plot is heavily embellished, bordering on fictional, it is grounded in historical accounts of the activities of the court. Thus, this series occupies a different territory from the rather more specialist *Jeanne la pucelle*. Building on the success of the first season, which features rather less period music, the second series includes specially commissioned recordings of works by Marin Marais, best-known as a court musician to Louis XIV. Marais's works, though known widely in the field, were brought to a new audience through Savall's work on the soundtrack (Valois v 4640, *issued* 1991, 74') to Alain Corneau's 1991 film *Tous les matins du monde*. This recording, according to one reviewer writing shortly after the release of the film, led to a 'new generation of viol players recording the music of Sainte-Colombe and Marin Marais'.^{xii} Whilst the full validity of this claim is questionable, the significance that Savall's recording had is undeniable.

Throughout *Versailles*, period music is provided by Fuoco E Cenere, led by Jay Bernfeld, whose recordings will be widely known among readers of this journal. All period music provided by Fuoco E Cenere was recorded especially for the series. Indeed, something of a partnership has developed between this ensemble and the television series, with the musicians being featured both in the soundtrack and on screen, an interesting proposition for a high-budget mainstream television series that does not make pretence at historical fidelity. Indeed, when period music can be heard in court scenes, the audience is treated to a glimpse of Fuoco E Cenere, clad in period costume, bringing this into the diegesis. Although period music features in a number of episodes across the two seasons, especially in court entertainment scenes, the second season sees its most frequent and dramatically prominent use as more than a musical backdrop. The majority of the soundtrack consists mostly of ambient soundscapes, produced principally through synthesized drones, marking out any period music by its contrast against this atmospheric sound design.^{xiii} The long-form nature of this television series changes the type of musical partnership at work here, with the musical drama unfolding over years rather than a few short hours.

In the fourth episode of the second season, entitled 'Miasma', Marais's music features prominently in the narrative depiction of Louis's struggle to come to terms with the death of his gardener. This character has acted almost as a down-to-earth father figure to Louis, and it is clear that their relationship extended beyond master and subject. His death is shocking to all concerned, and casts a further shadow over the murderous rumour-ridden palace, to which the audience is granted the inside track.

After an overwhelmingly resonant synthesised drone that accompanies the discovery of the gardener's murdered body in the woods, the film cuts to a scene with Louis sitting in his private

chambers with a single musician. The room is dimly lit and silent save for the crackling fire in the background. Louis is, for once, away from his servants, his mistress and wife, and the ever-faithful Bontemps, the King's valet. Following an extended silence, Louis moodily instructs the musician with 'Again', and after a somewhat concerned look, the violist (Jay Bernfeld) begins to play the first 'Gravement' section of *Le Labyrinthe* from Marais's fourth book of *Pièces de viole* (1717), arranged for solo viola da gamba. Bernfeld performs the solo passage with great freedom and extraordinary passion, as though we experience the anguish Louis feels at the loss. The opening four-note chord, spelling out a D minor triad, is drawn out in a quite deliberate fashion, emphasizing a weightiness in the sound. Louis, leaning forward on his chair with a glass of wine on his side table, is gripped by this musical performance, with the grating dissonances completing the picture of his distress. The performance, which begins with a glimpse of Bernfeld bowing the first notes, offers a rare imagining of an intimate musical setting, with a single musician playing at the command of a royal patron.

What is particularly interesting about this recording is its extraordinary resonance, far exceeding that which we might expect on a commercially available recording. We feel as though we are inside Louis's mind and trapped with his anguished thoughts, with this piece operating across diegetic, non-diegetic and, importantly, metadiegetic boundaries.^{xiv} The overwhelming resonance of the sound, markedly louder than the rest of the soundtrack, draws us into the drama on screen and signals concern for Louis's wellbeing. The music is dramatically appropriate and, played at a slow tempo in a resonant acoustic (certainly not that of Louis's chamber), enhances this poignant narrative moment.

However, considering the audio on its own reveals some stark differences from other commercially available recordings of this well-known piece by Marais, albeit rearranged in a solo form. Firstly, the closely-miked recording of the viola da gamba creates an immediacy of sound that better fits the electro-acoustic mixture of a film soundtrack than an historical performance presented in concert conditions, or released on a specialist CD. Dramatically, the sound is almost deafeningly resonant and reverberant, as though the listener's head is inside the instrument. Secondly, the exuberant performance of the anguish-laden dissonant chords, and the prominent angularity of the virtuosic melody, gives this performance a heightened sense of dramatic poignancy.

Christophe Coin's recording—*Marin Marais: Suite d'un goût étranger* (Decca 458 144-2, issued 1998, 77')—offers a neat comparison to Bernfeld's impassioned performance in *Versailles*. Coin's playing, supported sensitively by a small ensemble, is much more restrained in its approach to the tortured dissonances of the passage played by Bernfeld. The group does not appear to have been recorded with close microphones, instead giving a much more natural resonance to the ensemble, with the acoustic helping to retain a sense of clarity in all of the playing, even in intricate and florid passages. Coin approaches the sequential chords with much lighter bowing, giving a greater sense of poise and restraint, a stark contrast to the weighty bowing heard in Bernfeld's performance. The

tempo is approximately equivalent to Bernfeld's performance, though maintaining a greater sense of regularity.

Demonstrating a different approach to this piece, and recorded in a much larger space, is the 1994 recording *Marin Marais: Suite d'un goût étranger* by Markku Luolajan-Mikkola and the Continuo Group of Battalia (Alba Records ABCD 107, *issued* 1994, 71'). The use of such a resonant acoustic is particularly effective during the extended pauses on each of the dissonant chords in the opening part of this piece. Indeed there is some variety in tempo across this section of the performance, with some of the sequential passages being played rather more slowly than others. Prominent bass lines help to create a brooding sound here, but the descending melodic lines on the viola de gamba feel somewhat rushed, and are further obscured by some exaggeratedly spread chords from the continuo players. That said, this recording has a distinctive voice that avoids straying into self-indulgent playing, and presents a different take on this piece.

This, however, is not to criticise either approach, but rather to point towards the influence of the filmic context upon Bernfeld's. The presentation of the first 'Gravement' section of *Le Labyrinthe* as a viola da gamba solo for this specific scene of the television series raises interesting questions about the narrative function of music in this context and its broader significance beyond the soundtrack itself. Though historical, and arguably historicizing, the motivating factor behind this performance is dramatic appropriateness, something that is achieved in way not possible if a pre-existent recording were to be used. Its bespoke nature supports its metadiegetic status.

Of particular interest in this case is that we hear the same piece of music played only a few minutes later, albeit non-diegetically in this instance. The same performance fades into the soundtrack mix as Louis stares down into the freshly dug grave for his murdered gardener. This time, *Le Labyrinthe* is not so prominent in the mix, but again accompanies Louis's emotional anguish at the death of a character approaching a father figure to him. Close comparison of these two renditions, which both stop abruptly after around 30 seconds when Louis is shaken out of his grief-stricken state, highlights that these are the same recording. We might see this repeat as a musical memory of the immediate anguish Louis feels during a difficult period of poisoning and treachery at court. This passage becomes, in effect, the musical expression of his grief, furthering the metadiegetic musical commentary outlined above.

Whilst we must be cautious to compare this recording with those that are commercially available, the impassioned performance tailor-made for cinematic spectacle offers something quite different from more conventional recordings. If we were talking about a piece of western European art music of the 19th-century tradition, especially one that is very much alive in the public consciousness, then this could be approached from the perspective of this musical pantheon. However, most of the viewing public are unlikely to recognize this piece of music, will not have formed prior associations with this specific piece, and will therefore be less able to locate it within a detailed conception of the sound of the past. Instead, it connotes generic 'earliness' in its otherness, both in its sound and—from

the brief glimpse of Louis's court musician—appearance too, meaning its function is different from, say, Strauss's *Blue Danube Waltz* in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). It is, therefore, an active agent in establishing a new, parallel, musical history, fusing historical performance practices with western cinematic codes. Its historicizing power, though entirely present, is not its only function. Such instances are richly intertextual and referential, possessing vast power to reshape musical narratives and recompose the past. Recordings may, therefore, live on beyond the screen media itself.

Concluding thoughts

So where does this leave us? Is it sensible to draw upon the same underlying theoretical principles to explain the musical encounter taking place here as if it were a piece of pre-existent western European art music from a much later time? I would caution against doing so uncritically. From the examples discussed in brief terms above, we have seen the different ways in which bespoke recordings of early music are used in the process of recreating the past, with all of these engaging in a *recomposition* of sorts. In these two examples, we have seen how soundtracks consisting of excerpts or short movements from existing works can be used to recreate a musical world that befits the historical or narrative ambitions of a director. The absence of newly composed music presents significant challenges, and can lead to new arrangements being made, or artistic decisions being taken for purely pragmatic reasons. The sheen of supposed historical authenticity that is brought through such an undertaking is, in itself, partly responsible for erasing a different musical past.

The example from *Versailles* discussed here demonstrates an emerging partnership where early music performed on period instruments by experts in the field co-exists with synthesisers and modern sound design. The performance of period music, certainly in the case examined here, opens up a metadiegetic dialogue between the musical past as seen and heard, and that which is preserved in documents and historical narratives. In a sense, this creates a parallel musical history, where an ultra-modern soundtrack is imbued with a sense of historical authenticity through the presence of recognized early music, with this history unfolding over series and years, rather than minutes and hours. It is on these terms that we might move forward in considering such approaches to the musical past, moving beyond reductive discussions of anachronism and perceived historical authenticity and towards a celebration of the rich musical universes created in such media.

ⁱ See Phil Powrie and Robynn Stilwell (eds.), *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-existing Music in Film* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2005).

ⁱⁱ Jeongwon Joe, 'Reconsidering *Amadeus*: Mozart as Film Music', in *Changing Tunes*, pp.57–73.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Cook, Alexander Kolassa, Adam Whittaker (eds.), *Recomposing the Past: Representations of Early Music on Stage and Screen*, (Routledge, 2018).

^{iv} Mike Cormack, 'The Pleasures of Ambiguity: Using Classical Music in Film', in *Changing Tunes*, p. 19.

^v James Cook, Alexander Kolassa, Adam Whittaker, 'Introduction', *Recomposing the Past*, p.7.

^{vi} See James Cook, Alexander Kolassa, Adam Whittaker, 'Music in fantasy pasts: neomedievalism and *Game of Thrones*', *Recomposing the Past*, pp.229–50.

^{vii} Adam Whittaker, 'Musical divisions of the sacred and the secular in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*', *Recomposing the Past*, pp.90-91.

^{viii} Alex Robinson, 'The Middles Ages Restored or Re-imagined? Music in Jacques Rivette's Film *Jeanne la pucelle* (1994)', paper presented at Representations of Early Music on Stage and Screen 3 (University of Sheffield, June 2018).

^{ix} Jordi Savall (1994), *Bande original du film Jeanne la pucelle* (Auvidis Travelling, κ1006, issued 1994, 61').

^x See John Milsom's review of this disc in *Early Music*, 45, no.3 (2017), p.486.

^{xi} Giuseppe Maletto and Guido Magnano, 'Notes on the performance', CD liner notes to *Guillaume Dufay: The Masses for 1453*, Glossa GCD P31907, issued 2014, 80', p.10.

^{xii} 'Marais Pièces de violes', *Gramophone Magazine*, <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/marais-pi%C3%A8ces-de-violes> (accessed 16 May 2018).

^{xiii} Interestingly, the opening title music is taken from the 2011 album *Hurry up, we're dreaming* from French electronic outfit M83 (Naïve NV824311, issued 2011, 74'), demonstrating the range of musical styles used in this series.

^{xiv} On this see Ben Winters, 'The Non-Diegetic Fallacy: Film, Music, and Narrative Space', *Music & Letters*, 91 (2010), pp. 224–44.