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Screen Music and the Question of Originality

Miguel Mera

According to the philosopher Theodore Gracyck, all music is, in some way, derivative of other music and the degree of ‘originality’ is as much a matter of aesthetic as historical judgment (2013: 61). Gracyck explained that ignorance about history can create a “false impression of novelty or its close cousins, incoherence and weirdness” (63). True enough. Equally though, as I hope to make clear in what follows, the weight of history, or rather certain historical perceptions about originality, have particularly dogged screen music. Without a re-evaluation, I suggest, we are in danger of devaluing screen music’s symbiotic relationship with sound and visuals at the expense of a false notion of intrinsic originality within musical material itself.

This idea has been used repeatedly as a stick with which to beat screen music and, indeed, a stick with which screen-music practitioners have repeatedly beat themselves. I argue that we have not engaged with the ontology of screen music until we fully understand where its originality can be found. It goes without saying that originality is highly subjective, but it is also marked by specific cultural disputes over what is thought to be musically original within different contexts. This chapter does not attempt to define *inherent* originality, which is almost certainly impossible, but aims instead to focus on perceptions of originality within contemporary screen music, revealing specific recurrent anxieties. The roots of these concerns can be traced back to ‘Romantic’ ideals of the sole musical genius, as well as wider contexts within music praxis. By focusing on several contested sites of screen music’s originality, this chapter aims to challenge perceptual frameworks that characterize the creation of ‘something from nothing’ as inherently more valuable and original than the

rearrangement of existing parts. These two poles are what Robert Macfarlane has labeled *creatio* and *inventio* (2007).

In the sections that follow (Shame, Blame, and Acclaim), several examples will illustrate the complex territories in which screen music's disputed notions of originality operate. These include the film *The Artist* (dir. Michel Hazanavicius, 2011) whose use of the love theme from *Vertigo* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) so incensed the actress Kim Novak that she wrote a scathing letter of complaint to *Variety* (2012: 9), raising questions about the morality of plundering antecedent music. A film such as *There Will Be Blood* (dir. Paul Thomas Anderson, 2007) received a less inflammatory response but was deemed ineligible for submission to the Academy Awards Original Score category because too much of the music was taken from the composer's own preexisting material. Additionally, Antonio Sánchez's score for *Birdman* (dir. Alejandro G. Iñárritu, 2014) was disqualified from the Oscars because the soundtrack featured a substantial amount of preexisting classical music. Legalistically tight interpretations of originality, especially in the last example, failed to appreciate the freshness with which musical ideas were applied in the context of these filmic narratives. Ultimately, this chapter aims to consider the ways in which the thorny concept of originality is perceived within screen music, and to reflect on the implications of this problematization for wider cultural production.

Shame

Immanuel Kant's doctrine of exemplary originality (1974: 150–151) provides a useful starting point. For Kant, originality, or “a talent for producing that for which no rule can be given,” is the primary property of genius, but “since there may also be original nonsense,” (1974: 150) its products must at the same time be exemplary models that

are also not imitative. It is unsurprising that Kant's discussion emerged in the 1790s at a point in history where notions of genius were increasingly centralized, particularly within the literary arts. There was a clear identity crisis requiring the assertion of individuality while simultaneously longing for broader humanistic purpose (Macfarlane 2007). Indeed, the dependence of the individual on the tradition from which they emerge and against which they are differentiated is what Thomas McFarland called the "originality paradox" (1974: 447–476).

Regardless of the many subtle complexities within this interplay and its subsequent unfolding, it is clear that the myth of the 'Romantic' artist shaped conceptions of compositional genius, compositional practice, and aesthetic judgment, resulting in the celebration of certain types of creativity and derision of some forms of imitation. Film composers in early Hollywood, for example, appeared to be constantly troubled by the distinction they perceived between craft (*inventio*) and art (*creatio*), and felt the desperate need to be validated as 'real' composers, not hacks. The prejudice was driven by notions of originality in concert music, compared to which film music was seen as an inferior form of commercial and derivative work (Wierzbicki 2009: 1–4; Rosar 2003). Anxieties appear to have already been enshrined from the very outset of the sound film, perhaps because émigrés were self-consciously looking back to European high art models, or Hollywood film composers felt the need to aggrandize their cultural status in relation to other art forms.

Recent scholarship primarily focusing on Hollywood's Golden Age, however, suggests the beginnings of an 'originality turn' in screen-music studies which opens up new and more subtle perspectives that are useful for this study (see for example Platte 2014). Peter Franklin has argued that classic Hollywood film music (primarily of the 1930s and 1940s) has often been perceived to lack the quality and rigor of late-

Romantic music from which it is derived. He examines film music next to early twentieth-century modernist music and provocatively argues that film music achieved something unique precisely because it was aware of its own discursive construction. A film such as *King Kong* (dir. Merian C. Cooper/Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933) is so subtle at observing “itself doing what it does that film and music together seem almost intent upon their own critique,” but truly autonomous music could “hardly manage a feat of self-indulgent performance linked simultaneously with its own implied deconstruction” (2011: 70). I am not entirely convinced by this argument, but it does begin to get at the problem of the judgment of originality within different contexts.

We might note that Franklin’s discussion seems remarkably close to Richard Dyer’s exploration of the term ‘pastiche.’ Dyer suggests that pastiche is “a kind of imitation that you are meant to know is an imitation” (2007: 1), and demonstrates how works can be critical without being parodically distant, as well as acknowledging the history of their own emotional devices and without sacrificing emotional truth. For Dyer, pastiche deforms its referent by selecting, accentuating, exaggerating or concentrating stylistic traits, and it generates discrepancy through inappropriateness, anachronism, self-reference, and stylistic inconsistency (2007: 137). Are Franklin and Dyer talking about the same thing? Both clearly describe a quality of self-reflexivity, but it is a difference of degree as well as kind that distinguishes the extent to which screen music intends to announce its self-awareness. Screen composers cannot help but be aware of historical codes and conventions but this does not always mean a conscious externalized expression of them. To paraphrase Dyer, all films know they are films, and are consequently self-aware, but most simply get on with the job of being films (2007: 118). Some, however, make self-awareness a central feature of

their concerns.

Dyer provides a broader, more celebratory understanding of pastiche than has generally been considered in the critical discourse, at least within music where it is typically used as a byword for plagiarism. Take for example Andrew Hugill's recent yet antiquated description of contemporary Hollywood film music in a guide for aspiring composers as "almost entirely pastiche, generally of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century classical orchestral music" (2012: 128), which he understands as "aping somebody else's practice" (129). This is, in essence, the same criticism that was laid against film music in the 1930s.

The various positions outlined here are not easily resolved as they represent a longstanding historical fluctuation between *creatio* and *inventio* that confirms a fundamental originality paradox. Nonetheless, after Franklin and Dyer, I want particularly to challenge some aspects of the mythic view of *creatio*, which emphasizes a kind of individual transcendental inspiration or lightning-bolt insight and contradicts everything we know about creativity in practice (Burnard 2012; Sawyer 2007). In the next sections, we will examine these ideas more fully within the collaborative contexts of filmmaking. First we will explore an example of pastiche that won an Academy Award for best Original Score. This sounds like a contradiction but is not. Then we will examine works that were deemed ineligible for the Oscars on the grounds of their lack of 'originality' but are clear examples of exemplary originality. This sounds like a contradiction and is.

Blame

In an open letter published in *Variety* the star of *Vertigo*, Kim Novak, provocatively wrote: "I WANT TO REPORT A RAPE. I FEEL AS IF MY BODY—OR, AT

LEAST MY BODY OF WORK—HAS BEEN VIOLATED BY THE MOVIE, *THE ARTIST*.” She outlined how the use of Bernard Herrmann’s Love Theme from *Vertigo* at the end of *The Artist* was a form of cheating that used the emotions from one of the “most important love scenes in motion picture history” as if they were its own. Novak further argued it was: “MORALLY WRONG FOR THE ARTISTRY OF OUR INDUSTRY TO USE AND ABUSE FAMOUS PIECES OF WORK TO GAIN ATTENTION” (2012: 9). While the use of the term rape—which should surely only ever be used in a literal context—and the shouty block capitals were offensive and misjudged, Novak did raise challenging questions about the potentially parasitical nature of using preexisting music in film. One imagines that she was blissfully unaware of the similarity between Herrmann’s “Scene d’Amour” and its model, the “Liebestod” from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* (1859). Or indeed of the countless examples of self-borrowing in Herrmann’s work (Wrobel 2003). Novak’s comments could even be understood as an upsurge from the originality myth that long surrounded Herrmann and included, for example, direct comparisons between him and Beethoven (Rosar 2003).

Herrmann’s music has been quoted in many films, and indeed used as the model for scores in countless others, so I suspect that Novak’s primary concern stems from the fact that the uninterrupted six-and-a-half-minute cue is used unashamedly at the dramatic resolution of *The Artist*. The appropriation of Herrmann’s music is presented as a morally dubious form of theft. The director of the film, Michel Hazanavicius, and composer Ludovic Bource, could be seen to have some form in this regard as they are known in France for the *OSS 117* films (2006, 2009), spy movies that parodied James Bond. But Hazanavicius inevitably had a different perspective that emphasized homage:

The Artist was made as a love letter to cinema, and grew out of my (and all of my cast and crew's) admiration and respect for movies throughout history. It was inspired by the work of Hitchcock, Lang, Ford, Lubitsch, Murnau and Wilder. I love Bernard Herrmann and his music has been used in many different films and I'm very pleased to have it in mine. (Haznavicius 2012)

Homage is, of course, intimately tied to pastiche. A pastiche consciously takes codes and conventions and updates or comments on them. In this sense *The Artist* strikes a meaningful balance between the traditions of the past and the requirements of the present. It makes an honest recreation of the expressionist visual appearance, rhythm and technical features of 1920s cinema.¹ It makes specific plot connections to films such as *A Star Is Born* (dir. William Wellman, 1937; George Cukor, 1954), *Singin' in the Rain* (dir. Stanley Donen, 1952), *Sunset Boulevard* (dir. Billy Wilder, 1950), and *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles, 1941), among others. These films were already engaged in a reflective relationship with an earlier cinematic tradition, so I am reminded here of Dyer's comment that "pastiche is always an imitation of an imitation" (2007: 2). There are also clear references to the *Mark of Zorro* (dir. Fred Niblo, 1920) and its star Douglas Fairbanks in the parodic film-within-a-film sections. Furthermore, the fictional film where the two main characters first meet is called *A German Affair* directed by Otto Wagman, a joke at expense of émigré directors such as F.W. Murnau who were a significant influence in 1920s Hollywood. These forms of deliberate framing of work within another is what Dyer would describe as "discrepancy" (2007: 58–59) something that highlights an inconsistency in an aspect of the mode of filmic presentation that allows one to see more clearly the rest of the presentational style. In other words, it is discrepancy that defines pastiche. We will return to this idea momentarily.

There is no denying, then, that *The Artist* employs pastiche. Does this mean that it must, by default, be unoriginal? It is the nature of the pastiching that I suggest

challenges this somewhat. The film provides a unique framework to justify its acts of imitation. We would typically judge the legitimacy of the recurrence or duplication of filmic material by how successfully the appropriation has been integrated and ameliorated. *The Artist* extends this idea by performing a kind of retrospective grafting of cinematic history onto the gestural framework of an ur-genre. It is a silent film but it is also not a silent film. Indeed, it foregrounds the judicious use of sound-design and dialogue as a kind of transition-era hybrid.

We may, of course, be arguing the distinction between originality and novelty. *The Artist* is clearly different in comedic register and purpose from *Silent Movie* (dir. Mel Brooks 1976), or the absurdist narrative of *Tuvalu* (dir. Veoit Helmer, 1999), or the slavish fidelity of *Dr. Plonk* (dir. Rolf de Heer, 2007). Perhaps it falls into Kant's category of original nonsense, but it is certainly not a work that can itself be imitated because its deliberate separation from contemporary practice leaves it hermetically sealed. It cannot therefore be an example of Kantian exemplary originality. Yet, *The Artist* does do something striking and fresh that challenges existing and old conventions. It is, indeed, original in the way that it *deploys* pastiche as its central driving characteristic. One of the clearest ways it achieves this retrospective rejuvenation is through the use of sound and music, in particular playing with the diegesis, silence, and listening position.

In the opening scene we see an audience watching a silent film entitled *A Russian Affair* and we hear melodramatic meta-film music. "I won't talk, I won't say a word!" exclaim the intertitles on the cinema screen. Behind this we see the central character, George, waiting to address the audience and a sign that ironically reads, "Please be silent behind the screen." Indeed, none of the characters talk and the music is shown to emanate from a pit orchestra providing 'live' accompaniment. The film within the

film is certainly 'silent' but it is not yet clear whether *The Artist* is or not. Surely a movie made in the twenty-first century will soon avail itself of the broadest sonic possibilities? However, when *The Russian Affair* ends we see but do not hear the audience burst into applause. The lead characters who are backstage, however, do hear something because they are visibly thrilled at the reaction. The sequence consciously plays with the perceived strictures of film music in both the silent era and the present day.

Just as we have become accustomed to the exclusivity of music on the soundtrack, *The Artist* engages in further double-bluff through the use of sound-design. The threat of modernity to the central character results in a surreal sequence where George can hear sound, yet despite his best efforts discovers that he is mute (both literally and metaphorically). The entrance of sound taunts him, showing how he is unable to express himself and is increasingly inadequate in a changing world. The film plays with the fluid borders of the diegesis in ways that no film of the silent era could because the grammatical constructs of sound film were not in place. These moments of discrepancy, to revisit Dyer's terminology, which are the very processes that emphasize pastiche, also demonstrate the uniqueness of approach in this film.

We return, then, to the use of the music from *Vertigo*. I suggest that this also functions as a form of discrepancy. It is boldly anachronistic and reinforces the play on film-music history that has been taking place throughout the movie. In interviews, Bource consistently identified the stylistic influence of composers writing later than the historical setting of the film, for example Erich Korngold, Franz Waxman, Max Steiner, Alfred Newman, Elmer Bernstein and, indeed, Bernard Herrmann. Bource's score is film music that performs nostalgia. It is significant that Herrmann's luscious music is heard in a sequence where we see an extreme close-up of a cop's mouth

followed in montage by several close-ups of mouths looming over the central character. In what seems like a clear playing out of Chion's symmetrical relation between the bodiless voice and the voiceless body (1999: 97–100), George as mute is contrasted with Herrmann's *acousmêtric*² music, the unseen 'voice' of film music that has floated through the movie. Astonishingly, at the end of the scene after this music has faded out we experience one-and-a-half minutes of genuine, absolute silence as the central characters find each other. This dramatic effect is one of contemplation that frames the film's music and the mode of its presentation.

To focus purely on the characteristics of the film's musical style rather than its use, I suggest, would be fruitless. The score self-consciously refers to and synthesizes cinematic musical history, including Herrmann's music. It is, consequently, not the same as 1920s silent film music, or even transition-era film music, but it feels like music that could retrospectively belong in silent film. The musical material, though charming, is not of itself original, but its use in a complex and layered pastiche framework opens new ways of thinking about the narrative relationships between music, sound and image. It is precisely in the re-arrangement of the various existing parts within carefully organized architecture that allows *The Artist* to make an original musical contribution.

Acclaim

If *The Artist* tells us something about the nature of film's fascination with its own discourse, the following focus on the judging of film music in formal award ceremonies creates further challenges for understanding originality and the sliding scales of *inventio* and *creatio*. There are many awards that could be studied—and comparison between them would be fascinating—but in the interest of space I have

chosen to focus on best known of these, the Academy Awards. According to the regulations an original score is defined as a “substantial body of music that serves as original dramatic underscoring and is written specifically for the motion picture by the submitting composer” (Academy Awards of Merit 2014: 20).

We immediately encounter the issue that ‘original’ does not necessarily mean the same as ‘originality’. Original, in this context, seems to refer to something created personally by an individual (and it does typically mean an individual), not that music is original in the sense of being innovative, or of providing new ways of interacting with moving images. Why not simply call it Best Film Music, then, given that ‘best’ is used for almost all the other Awards categories? There are historical reasons for this, which reflect efforts to distinguish processes of creation and adaptation, highlight hierarchical differences between underscoring movies and ‘overscoring’ musicals, and prioritize certain roles within the scoring process.

Fig. X.1 outlines the changing titles of Academy Award music scoring categories from the date of the first award in 1934 until 1999, after which the categorization has remained unchanged until the present day.³ The table reveals the accommodation of a variety of compositional practices as well as a series of anxieties about originality. From 1934–1937 it was the head of the music department, rather than the specific composer or (more usually) composers, who received the award. This may have influenced a split into two categories in 1938: Music (Original Score) and Music (Scoring). Many of the nominees in 1938’s Scoring category are comedies, musicals, or reviews, suggesting a distinction between processes of arrangement/music direction or the creation of new material. Curiously, Franz Waxman’s score for *The Young in Heart* (dir. Richard Wallace, 1938) was nominated in both categories.

In the 1940s and 1950s we see two parallel categories that reflect the perceived

difference between musicals and dramatic (eventually including comedy) pictures. In 1954 Muir Mathieson was credited and nominated for the comedy *Genevieve* (dir. Henry Cornelius, 1953), but this decision was revised by the Academy in 1986 because it was felt that the “political climate of the times” unduly recognized Mathieson’s work as “arranger and orchestra conductor” rather than the “proper” composer Larry Adler. One wonders, following the rationale for this reparation, why all the winning studio heads nominated up until 1938 were not also reconsidered.

In 1962 the bizarre category “substantially original” was added and was contrasted with “adaptation or treatment,” which would presumably have included work that was substantially unoriginal. In 1972 Nino Rota’s score for *The Godfather* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola) was announced as one of the five official Original Score nominees. It was subsequently revealed that the melody of the Love Theme had previously been composed by Rota for the film *Fortunella* (dir. Eduardo de Filippo, 1958). The Music Branch was re-balloted and *The Godfather* was replaced by another nomination. Astonishingly, two years later *The Godfather Part II* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) won the Oscar even though it featured the same Love Theme that had made the 1972 score ineligible.

The Original Song Score category was abandoned in 1985 leaving only a single Original Score category, which was promptly won by Alan Menken for the Disney musicals *The Little Mermaid* (dir. Ron Clements/John Musker, 1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (dir. Gary Trousdale/Kirk Wise, 1991), and *Aladdin* (dir. Ron Clements/John Musker, 1992). Perhaps out of frustration at Menken’s dominance or the obliteration of underscoring at the hands of the Musical, the category was bifurcated again in 1995 when Menken won the newly formed Original Musical or Comedy Score for *Pocahontas* (dir. Mike Gabriel/Eric Goldberg, 1995). My point here is not to make

value judgments about music that has been nominated for or won these awards, but rather to show how the conflicted idea of originality has reflected changing socio-historical perceptions, flowed through naming conventions, and has attempted to deal with the evolution of materials and approaches to music in films.

Year	Scoring Category
1934	Music (Scoring)
1938	Music (Original Score) Music (Scoring)
1941	Music (Music Score of a Dramatic Picture)
1942	Music (Music Score of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture)
1957	Music (Scoring)
1958	Music (Music Score of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture) Music (Scoring of a Musical Picture)
1962	Music (Music Score—Substantially Original)
1966	Music (Original Music Score)
1968	Music (Original Score—For a Motion Picture [Not a Musical]) Music (Score of a Musical Picture—Original or Adaptation)
1970	Music (Original Score)
1971	Music (Original Dramatic Score)
1973	Music (Scoring: Original Song Score and Adaptation—or—Scoring: Adaptation)
1975	Music (Original Score)
1976	Music (Original Song Score and Its Adaptation or Adaptation Score)
1978	Music (Adaptation Score)
1979	Music (Original Song Score and its Adaptation or Adaptation Score)
1980	Music (Original Song Score and its Adaptation or Adaptation Score)
1982	Music (Original Song Score or Adaptation Score)
1983	Music (Original Song Score)
1984	Music (Original Song Score)
1985	Music (Original Song Score)
1995	Music (Original Dramatic Score) Music (Original Musical or Comedy Score)
1999	Music (Original Score)

Figure X.1. Etymology of Academy Awards ‘Original’ Music Scoring Categorization (1934–1999). X axis = Years, y axis = Music (Scoring) Category. Shading reflects years where award category was not offered.

The category Music (Original Score), settled upon from 1999 onwards, includes a broad range of works and approaches. Recently contested examples, however, show how legality rather than quality is used to justify judgments about eligibility and yet, behind the supposedly impartial rationale, unacknowledged value judgments lurk furtively in the shadows.

There Will Be Blood, for example, was disqualified from the Oscars because the score included selections from works by Arvo Pärt and Johannes Brahms, as well as Jonny Greenwood's own preexisting music from his concert pieces, *Popcorn* *Superhet Receiver* (2005) and *Smear* (2004). The relevant section from the Academy Awards regulations (Rule 15, Section II-E) states:

Scores diluted by the use of tracked themes or other preexisting music, diminished in impact by the predominant use of songs, or assembled from the music of more than one composer shall not be eligible. (2014, 20)

How would one determine when a score has been diluted or diminished in impact by pre-existing material without making a value judgment? In the case of *There Will Be Blood* there was more preexisting than newly-composed score, which made the decision relatively straightforward. However, this ignores the extraordinary impact of the music, including the reappropriated material from Greenwood's earlier concert pieces, which is astonishing in its audiovisual visceral quality. Furthermore, the music for one of the most powerful scenes is based upon an existing Greenwood track "Convergence" (composed for the film *Body Song*) but features extensive new material. I have argued elsewhere (Mera, forthcoming) about the hapticity of this music, which generates a unique connection between landscape and character, and drives the audience's engagement with the film in a powerful embodied experience. In a legalistically narrow definition, it cannot be denied that the music is not 'original', but the way it is adapted, updated, and used within the film is breathtakingly fresh and prototypical. Interviews with numerous composers and filmmakers attest to the importance of the score, which they have considered a primary recent example of exemplary originality.

Reflecting on the score's disqualification, the director Paul Thomas Anderson suggested that it reflected the threat of an 'outsider' to tradition: "They just couldn't

stand the idea of a guy in a rock band with moppy hair being that good” (Kermode 2014). The Music Branch would, no doubt, argue that it is not their job to make value judgments on the quality of music within a film, but rather to apply the eligibility regulations and ensure fairness. This would be a reasonable defense if there appeared to be any degree of consistency in application, and if opinion did not seem to impact negatively on numerous cases where directors and composers made clear attempts to develop detailed and deep collaborative relationships that extend existing practice. If self-borrowing is problematic then several other film composers should also have found themselves in trouble in the past.⁴

Ironically, just a few years later the Academy Music Branch permitted the nomination of Greenwood’s score for *The Master* (dir. Paul Thomas Anderson, 2012), which had a similar balance between preexisting and especially composed music as *There Will Be Blood* yet was considered less ‘diluted’. The use of “Scene d’Amour” in *The Artist* in 2011 was also debated and it was decided that Bource’s score was eligible because elsewhere there were eighty minutes of original music in the film. *The King’s Speech* (dir. Tom Hooper, 2010), which draws heavily on Beethoven, and *Saving Mr Banks* (dir. John Lee Hancock, 2013), which featured extensive material from Richard and Robert Sherman’s songs from *Mary Poppins* (dir. Robert Stevenson, 1964), were also considered eligible. Yet, Clint Mansell’s score for *Black Swan* (dir. Darren Arronofsky, 2010)—which skilfully and creatively assimilates material from Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*—and Carter Burwell’s score for *True Grit* (dir. Joel Coen/Ethan Coen, 2010), which uses nineteenth-century hymnody as its basis—were disqualified because both scores were deemed too dependent on preexisting material. *Enchanted* (dir. Kevin Lima, 2007) was excluded because of its predominant use of songs—which is ironic given that the film parodies Disney

musicals, and that no less than three of these same songs were nominated in the Original Song category.⁵ However, George Fenton was nominated for *Dangerous Liaisons* (dir. Stephen Frears, 1988) despite the extensive use of material from Vivaldi and Handel, and the score for *Babel* (dir. Alejandro Iñárritu, 2006) won the Oscar despite its preexisting cues from Hitoshi Sakimoto and the composer's own preexisting tracks from *The Insider* (dir. Michael Mann, 1999). We can find no consistent or coherent approach here.

The notion of a score being diminished in impact by preexisting material was also used to justify the disqualification of the score for *Birdman*. This seems one of the more contentious of recent decisions, because there was no ambiguity about the eligibility of the score in relation to any of the other defining regulations, as was the case, for example, with *There Will Be Blood*:

- The work must be created specifically for the eligible feature-length motion picture
- The work must be the result of a creative interaction between the filmmaker(s) and the composer(s) and/or songwriter(s) who have been engaged to work directly on the motion picture.
- The work must be recorded for use in the motion picture **prior** to any other usage, including public performance or exploitation through any media whatsoever.
(Academy Awards of Merit 2014: 20)

Birdman features a solo drum score that generates pace and rhythmic punctuation in a film that has been made to look as if it has been shot in one continuous, fluid take. The composer Antonio Sánchez, who plays the drums in Pat Metheny's band, employs an extraordinarily subtle range of sounds that exploit the full timbral range of the drum kit. The partially improvised score is sometimes reminiscent of the fluttering of bird wings, but also generates a 'cool' New York vibe. Iñárritu requested a messier, dirtier quality resulting in the use of vintage kits and recordings made on the streets as well as in studios. Furthermore, the composer himself is seen playing the drums at several points in the narrative world of the film so it is hard to tell from where the

score emanates. The vibrancy of the creative process jumps out from the sounding score.

But the soundtrack also features preexisting music, including works by Mahler, Tchaikovsky, Ravel and Rachmaninov. These cues are primarily used to accompany the play-within-the-film as ‘incidental’ music, but also seem to issue from the mind of central character, Riggan, particularly when he is conflicted about his past life as a fictional superhero. Indeed, there appears to be a deliberate demarcation between the preexisting music and the drum score in order to help define the layers of fantasy in which the film rejoices. In one striking scene, a looped extract from Rachmaninov’s Second Symphony is heard while Riggan reimagines himself as Birdman and flies above the city.

The chair of the Academy’s music branch executive committee, Charles Fox, wrote to Sánchez on 11 December 2014 explaining that the score had been disqualified because of the “non-original (mostly classical) music cues that are featured very prominently in numerous pivotal moments in the film” (Feinberg 2014). The argument here is not driven by relative amounts of music because Sanchez’s drum score lasts thirty minutes compared to seventeen minutes of preexisting music.

On December 17, Iñárritu, Sánchez, and Danielle Diego, executive vice principal of Fox Music, protested at what they perceived to be an injustice and asked the committee to reconsider their decision. Iñárritu outlined his detailed collaborative process with the composer and stated: “The drums are the score and any other music throughout the whole film is coming from the context of the film.” He also explained that pieces such as the Rachmaninov are “clearly music in his [Riggan’s] head... I love those classical music pieces but, honestly, each of those pieces could have been any other piece and the film would have worked more or less the same” (Feinberg

2014). The Music Branch upheld their decision stating that they were applying a rule that had been followed many times before, and believed that the “tracked classical music was also used as scoring, and equally contributes to the effectiveness of the film and that both the drum score and the tracked score together create the musical identity of the film” (Feinberg 2014).

The problem here is that it is precisely this combined identity that makes this film such a fantastic instance of exemplary originality, particularly in the contrast between the improvisatory freedom of the drum score that represents Riggan’s future and the preexisting scores that represent a nostalgic past. In the final moments of the film, as Riggan finally casts aside his image as a washed up Hollywood movie star, we hear the Rachmaninov again, but this time it is merged with and eventually overtaken by Sánchez score, a potent resolution to the musical dichotomy. It is challenging not to see the exclusion of the *Birdman* score as value judgment impersonating regulation. There appears to be tacit privileging of traditional composition over more performative approaches, conventional non-diegetic scoring over more collaborative forms of narrative interaction, scale and size over content and concept, insiders over outsiders, and composers’ intentionality over auteur directors’ influence. I am unfortunately reminded of an old but somehow pertinent joke: What do you call someone who hangs around with musicians? ... a drummer.

Conclusions

Although this chapter has provided a critique of ideas about musical originality within screen music and particularly as elaborated in the Academy Awards, this focus is not entirely fair because there is general incoherence when it comes to judging and valuing originality. Originality is frequently heralded, but virtually impossible to

define because of an inherent paradox between acknowledgment of the past and differentiation from it. I have shown how this idea has historic roots that can be traced back to Romantic notions of individuality, which have shifted between poles of *creatio* and *inventio* and have left a particularly severe mark on screen composers throughout history. I have examined some specific case studies that problematize ideas of originality, showing that a focus on compositional prowess or style is often at odds with the collaborative nature of film. Anxieties about originality also run across different screen media. Video-game composers frequently describe feeling like the poor relations of film composers, and they increasingly try to emulate film music without always cherishing what is unique and specific about gameplay. It is important to recognize screen music's specific symbiotic relationship with sound and visuals rather than a false notion of intrinsic originality within musical material itself. It might also reasonably be questioned why originality is valued so highly in the first place. I am certainly not arguing that plundering and unattributed copying should be ignored, but the celebration of certain types of creativity and the disrespect for certain kinds of imitation is deeply ingrained and intensely problematic.

Perhaps a clearer awareness of these issues is the first step towards making better judgments about the role, value, location and use of music in screen media. For example, it is hard to imagine how Carter Burwell's score for *No Country for Old Men* (dir. Joel Coen/Ethan Coen, 2007) could ever win a music award given its subliminal and minimal content. Yet, simple is not the same as simplistic. The composer perfectly shapes the delicate and sparse material within the context of a bleak narrative and relates the music beautifully to the sound design. In many ways this is a daring and original approach, but by choosing to work within the specific context and parameters of the film it hides its status as music. If we are to fully

understand innovation, creativity and, yes, originality, we need to question whether we value screen music *as* screen music or whether we secretly crave a concert with pictures. Do we want originality by and of itself or original screen music?

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¹ For example it uses 1:33:1 aspect ratio and was shot at 22 frames per second aping the hand-cranked camera style of early cameras.

² Please note that in the choice of this adjective I am distinguishing between the notion of the acousmatic and relating specifically to the *acousmêtre as a character within filmic narratives*.

³ For the purposes of this discussion the Music (Song) category, which has run since 1934, has not been included, although this would make a further interesting comparison. The category was simply called Music (Song) until 1968. From 1968–1972 it was called Song–Original for the Picture, before reverting to Music (Song), and then from 1975 to the present Music (Original Song).

⁴ Korngold won the Academy Award for *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (dir. Michael Curtiz/William Keighley, 1938), yet that score reuses substantial sections of the composer's earlier symphonic overture *Sursum Corda*.

⁵ Incidentally, this also breaks another Academy rule stating that no more than two songs from any one film may appear in the Best Original Song category.