

## Classical Music in Film

Box of Broadcasts playlist curated by Jonathan Godsall

*Box of Broadcasts (BoB) is an online archive of radio and TV broadcasts, available to subscribing educational institutions in the United Kingdom. I curated this playlist for the service in summer 2020, and have made my accompanying notes available here for those without access to BoB.*

Link to playlist: <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/teaching-and-research/bob-curated-playlists/classical-music-in-film/>

Link to 'teaching resource' page with text notes: <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/teaching-materials/teaching-resource-for-classical-music-in-film-playlist/>

This is a playlist of clips that illustrate various manners and effects of classical music's use in film. The playlist begins with nondiegetic uses of classical music, before moving to examples of characters interacting with diegetic classical music, and finally to clips from films in which classical music is the focus.

You can read about some of these examples (and others) in my book, *Reeled In: Pre-existing Music in Narrative Film* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), but below I have included brief commentary on each clip, and in most cases also suggested a specific scholarly article or chapter that discusses the example in more detail.

### **2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) – docking sequence**

This is only the second most famous use of classical music in director Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, after the use of the opening of Richard Strauss's tone poem *Also sprach Zarathustra* for the main titles (and then twice later in the film). But its audacity never fails to amaze me.

After the film's wordless opening fifteen minutes of apes in the prehistoric desert, a 'match cut' between a flying bone and an orbiting satellite instantly summarizes millenia of technological progress. There is no dialogue to help us in this next sequence, either – only a seemingly baffling combination of nineteenth-century Viennese waltz (Johann Strauss II's *The Blue Danube*) and futuristic vision of spaceflight. Yet it works – the docking of shuttle and space station becomes, like the waltz, a rotating dance of courtship.

More has been written on the music of *2001* than of any other film, but for a good overview see the chapter 'Strains of Transcendence in *2001: A Space Odyssey*' in Kate McQuiston's book *We'll Meet Again: Musical Design in the Films of Stanley Kubrick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

### ***The Shining* (1980) – ‘Hello, Danny’**

Content warning: bloody horror.

It would be possible to create a substantial playlist consisting only of uses of classical music in Stanley Kubrick’s films, but aside from the 2001 docking sequence I’ve chosen only this iconic moment from *The Shining*. The unsettling music is an edited excerpt from Krzysztof Penderecki’s 1966 composition *De Natura Sonoris No. 1*, one of several pieces by the Polish composer featured in the film.

Along with his Hungarian contemporary György Ligeti, whose music Kubrick used in *2001*, *The Shining*, and *Eyes Wide Shut*, Penderecki was brought to greater popular attention via the cinema. His music can also be heard in films including *The Exorcist*, *Children of Men*, and *Shutter Island*.

For a close analysis of this moment in *The Shining*, and discussion of other aspects of the film’s music, see Jeremy Barham, ‘Incorporating Monsters: Music as Context, Character and Constructing in Kubrick’s *The Shining*’, in Philip Hayward (ed.), *Terror Tracks: Music, Sound and Horror Cinema* (London: Equinox, 2009), pp.137–70.

### ***Raging Bull* (1980) – opening**

Director Martin Scorsese is better known for his uses of pre-existing popular music, but for a significant role in this film he chose the Intermezzo from Pietro Mascagni’s opera *Cavalleria rusticana*. The calm, melodic piece plays twice to bookend the narrative, and here at the opening – along with the ‘artistic’ black-and-white, slow-motion style of photography – creates an apparent contrast with the content of the images. The audience is thereby drawn in – the narrative and its central character, we are told, are not what we might normally expect of a ‘boxing film’.

Suggested reading: Mike Cormack, ‘The Pleasures of Ambiguity: Using Classical Music in Film’, in Phil Powrie and Robynn Stilwell (eds), *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-existing Music in Film* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp.19–30.

### ***Platoon* (1986) – Elias death scene**

Content warning: war, death.

Excerpts from Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* are heard several times in *Platoon*. The use in this clip is typical of the piece’s appearances both in this film and others (such as *The Elephant Man* (1980)), where – as Luke Howard puts it in his study of the composition’s popular reception – it tends to score ‘scenes of loss, sacrifice, and tragedy’. Remarkably, while the *Adagio* is commonly thought of today as ‘sad music’, Howard finds no evidence for this connotation in either Barber’s stated intentions or the piece’s early reception. Instead, the association with sadness has developed through uses in films and other contexts.

Suggested reading: Luke Howard, ‘The Popular Reception of Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*’, *American Music*, 25/1 (2007), pp.50–80.

### ***Die Hard* (1988) – opening the vault**

The terrorists' plan comes to fruition when they access the Nakatomi Plaza's vault, after the FBI unwittingly unlock the final electromagnetic seal by cutting the building's power. Throughout the film, composer Michael Kamen weaves adaptations of the 'Ode to Joy' from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony into his score as the theme for the terrorists' leader, Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman). In this scene, we hear the Beethoven material's most triumphant statement. The film's nominal protagonist, John McClane (Bruce Willis), is isolated elsewhere in the building at this time, and is never accompanied by such rousing musical material. Who is really the film's hero?

Suggested reading: Robynn J. Stilwell, "'I Just Put a Drone Under Him...': Collage and Subversion in the Score of *Die Hard*", *Music & Letters*, 78/4 (1997), pp.551–80.

### ***Rat Race* (2001) – radar tower**

Edvard Grieg's 'In the Hall of the Mountain King' (from his music for *Peer Gynt*) has been used countless times in films and other cultural contexts; to my millennial generation in the UK it's probably best known as the music for the Alton Towers theme park! For the many of us who recognize the piece once it begins here in *Rat Race*, and recall its simple structure – essentially a sustained *crescendo* and *accelerando* – the fun of the scene is in watching how the action appears to follow the music. We know that the scene is going to gradually build in tension and excitement towards an inevitable climax, but what fate will have befallen the characters at the final chord?

For an exploration of this and other scenes using the same piece, see Kristi A. Brown, 'The Troll Among Us', in Phil Powrie and Robynn Stilwell (eds), *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-existing Music in Film* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp.74–87.

### ***The King's Speech* (2010) – final speech**

King George VI (Colin Firth), with the help of his speech therapist Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush), must overcome his stutter to deliver a radio broadcast to the British public at the outbreak of World War II. The opening minutes of the Allegretto from Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, here lightly adapted and newly recorded (at an especially slow tempo) for the film, illustrate the King's progression with a parallel musical journey from an uncertain, tentative beginning to a more confident finish.

Musical fit aside, the filmmakers seem to have had ideas of Beethoven's 'universality' in mind here, but some viewers have questioned the choice of music by a German composer given the scene's context.

Suggested reading: Jonathan Godsall, 'Listening to Beethoven in and through the King's Speech', *The Avid Listener*, 29 February 2016.

<https://theavidlistenerblog.com/2020/07/27/listening-to-beethoven-in-and-through-the-kings-speech/>

### ***The Lone Ranger* (2013) – runaway train finale**

The finale of the overture to Rossini's opera *William Tell* has a long association with the *Lone Ranger* franchise, beginning in 1933 with its use as the opening theme for the original radio show, and since lasting through various television, film, and video game iterations. *The Lone Ranger* is, in fact, largely responsible for the piece's now-common association with horses.

Disney couldn't leave the piece out of its big-budget 2013 *Lone Ranger* film, but how could Rossini's relatively lightweight music live up to a modern blockbuster spectacle? In this climactic runaway-train sequence, Rossini's finale emerges in an adaptation by Geoff Zanelli. The piece is expanded in terms of both length and orchestration, to match the scale of the action and the sound of the original Hans Zimmer scoring heard elsewhere in the film.

### ***Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation* (2015) – opera sequence**

Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) tries to prevent an assassination in this opera-house sequence cleverly choreographed to parts of Puccini's *Turandot*. A score held by one of the assassins pinpoints the climax of the famous aria, 'Nessun Dorma', as the moment to fire the shot – a conceit borrowed from Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934 and 1956), which builds to a cymbal crash in a concert at the Royal Albert Hall. As the tension builds, we wait to see whether Hunt can save the day. Note how the opera often seems to 'score' the action like conventional film music, despite being diegetic.

### ***Apocalypse Now* (1979) – helicopter attack**

Content warning: war, death

This is one of the most well-known of all uses of classical music in film – an appropriation that has itself been referenced and parodied in many other audiovisual contexts. As in the *Mission: Impossible* sequence, the music is diegetic but in a somewhat unrealistic way. Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries' plays from loudspeakers attached to the US helicopters, ostensibly as a 'psychological warfare' tactic, but would we really be able to hear it so loud and clear if we were present? Moreover, note how the actions of characters and editing of shots are both synchronized to the music, most notably in the build-up to the initial firing of weapons.

This stylized realism seems to affirm the actions of the attackers, but James MacDowell interprets that affirmation as ironic. For one, the emphatic congruence between music and action is perhaps knowingly excessive. Also significant here, though, are the historical associations of the piece and its composer: with Nazism, for instance, and also more specifically developed through an earlier use in Joseph Carl Breil's score for the notorious film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). There, the 'Ride' accompanies director D. W. Griffith's approving depiction of a Ku Klux Klan horseback charge against a black militia. In *Apocalypse Now*, the US Army are therefore painted as racist aggressors.

Suggested reading: James MacDowell, *Irony in Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp.155–213.

### ***Red Dragon* (2002) – opening**

Hannibal Lecter's (Anthony Hopkins) intellect and sophistication is clearly illustrated at the very beginning of this film by his distaste (or is that taste?) for his local orchestra's flautist, who he watches in a performance of the Scherzo from Felix Mendelssohn's music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (which, incidentally, was Kubrick's initial choice for the *2001* docking sequence).

In Hollywood film there is a long association between villains and classical music (conceived as European, intellectual, and therefore Other), though Lecter's penchant – more often for J.S. Bach, whose F minor Prelude from the second book of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* is playing in the subsequent dinner-party scene in this clip – originates in the books by Thomas Harris. More broadly, though, this clip gives an example of how film characters' specific interactions with classical music can inform us about their personalities.

Suggested reading: Carlo Cenciarelli, 'Dr Lecter's Taste for *Goldberg*, or: The Horror of Bach in the Hannibal Franchise', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 137/1 (2012), pp.107–134.

### ***Shine* (1996) – competition performance**

Films about classical music performance commonly focus on its physical and/or mental demands. *Shine* depicts real pianist David Helfgott's struggles with mental illness, which are dramatized in this competition performance of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3.

'No-one's ever been mad enough to attempt the Rach 3', warns his professor in a previous scene – 'You have to tame the piano, David, or it'll get away from you! It's a monster!' Helfgott's breakdown during the performance is depicted largely aurally, as the film's sound design takes us into his detached 'inner world'.

On this and other film depictions of the challenges of concert performance, see the third chapter of Ben Winters's book, *Music, Performance, and the Realities of Film: Shared Concert Experiences in Screen Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

### ***Amadeus* (1984) – deathbed scene**

As well as having their music used in various cinematic contexts, classical composers have often been the subjects of films themselves. Based on Peter Shaffer's 1979 play of the same name, *Amadeus* was a critical and commercial success. Its central plotline – composer Antonio Salieri plots the demise of his more talented rival, Mozart – is nonsense, historically speaking, but the music is beautifully presented, nowhere more so than in this climactic scene.

Mozart is attempting to complete his Requiem whilst gravely ill, and Salieri assists him by transcribing Mozart's verbal dictation. We hear the result take shape in their shared imagination through some fine music editing. At times we cut away to see Mozart's wife and child on their journey home to see him, and here the music takes on a conventional accompanimental role.

This dual use of the composer's music, as both subject of the narrative and means of presenting that narrative, is common in composer biopics.

Suggested reading: Robert L. Marshall, 'Film as Musicology: *Amadeus*', *Musical Quarterly*, 81/2 (1997), pp.173–79.

### ***Fantasia* (1940) – opening and first segment**

According to its souvenir roadshow programme, Disney's *Fantasia* aimed to bring 'a wider understanding of good music to the general public'. The film, arranged as if a concert, offers visualizations of eight pieces from the classical canon. Most famously, Mickey Mouse plays the title character of Paul Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, in an animation based on the story of the original Goethe poem (Dukas's inspiration).

The first piece – J.S. Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, arranged for orchestra by the programme's conductor, Leopold Stokowski – is illustrated in a way more appropriate to its seemingly absolute nature. In his introduction, the presenter Deems Taylor promises 'a picture of the various abstract images that might pass through your mind if you sat in a concert hall listening to this music'. These begin, in the Toccata, with a focus on the conductor and musicians (in silhouette and coloured spotlights), acting to teach the viewer about the orchestra and its different elements, before more impressionistic illustrations of the musical material take over for the Fugue.

Suggested reading: Mark Clague, 'Playing in 'Toon: Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) and the Imagineering of Classical Music', *American Music*, 22/1 (2004), pp.91–109.