

The sound of movies: building a storyline using notes



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The thing that makes musicals so different amongst other films is that it builds a story from works of original music. I admire the ability to write a piece of music, but I admire it even more when another composer comes in with the same piece of music and the sound comes out completely different. In a way they enhance the sound and perfect upon it. *Moulin Rouge* is an excellent example of this. It isn't about the weary and corrupt, but rather romantics, with bohemian ideals, who believe in a more glamorous life-who see the *Moulin Rouge* as a stage for their bigger and better dreams. This film features both visual sorcery and the adaption of a colorful variety of old song hits. The composer Craig Armstrong is on the orchestral end, whereas Marius Devries directs how they use the adapted music; lead many of the producers, arrangers, orchestrators, and conductors in a successful attempt to use lyrical genius and formulate a unified sound for the production (Thaxton, 2013). From this, a new genre of film is born, for it contains all elements of theater and cinema, old and new.

The film stars Nicole Kidman as Satine, the main act and head courtesan; and Ewan McGregor as Christian, a bohemian writer who is in search for love-in all the wrong places. Toulouse Lautrec played by John Leguizamo, the dwarf artist living above Christian, comes waltzing in after the narcoleptic Argentinian comes crashing through the ceiling of their shabby residence. This sparks a friendship and a soon to be collaboration in writing "Spectacular Spectacular," a show to spotlight Satine's brilliance as well as their bohemian ideals of "truth, beauty, freedom and love" (Luhmann, 2001). The show must be financed, so enters the gullible, yet villainous, and

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painfully awkward Duke of Worcester (played by Richard Roxburgh), who wants to pay for the show in return for Satine's favor and "love." The ringleader of the Moulin Rouge is Harold Zidler (Jim Broadbent), who is constantly encouraging Satine to pursue her dreams of becoming a real actress—a father figure if you will. The characters embody the physical bohemian doctrines: truth, beauty, freedom and love. For example: Toulouse is flashy and free, Christian is green and overly eager to find love; Satine but up a front with all men she encounters, but has a desire to be free of her past and to be truly loved; Zidler appears to be a serious business man, but is a gentle soul, especially with Satine; and the Duke, the antonym of the doctrines, who thinks he can buy the affections of Satine, but it is his naivety and angry jealousy that plays such a key role in the story. Another key player is Christian who makes the grave mistake of falling in love with a prostitute.

From the beginning to end, the film is jam packed with these adapted songs in a variety of ways, whether it be through singing or speech. This film is one of a kind when compared to other films within the musical genre, like Chicago or Across the Universe who are more true to a traditional musical. Trying to maintain the flow of the film I will go through the songs in chronological order, however the film often makes use of layers from multiple songs and score material at once. A conductor sets the tone of the film with animated waves of his baton that directs a live orchestra performing the films adaptations of "The Sound of Music," "Le Tango du Moulin Rouge," and "The Can Can" (Discogs, 2017). As the curtains pull back you are flown over Paris and right into the story, as the arrangement of "

Nature Boy," (Nat King Cole) performed vocally by David Bowie. Christian begins to tell the story at the front of the music as they float from one song to another in the background. The next two songs to follow have the authentic Parisian vibe as "Complainte de la Butte" is sung in French and then followed by "Children of the Revolution," Rufus Wainwright performs the vocals. Rodger and Hammerstein's "The Sound of Music" is a reoccurring piece heard throughout the film, and its most memorable use occurs next (Luhrmann, 2001).

It is in this comical scene that Christian is pulled into the world of the Bohemian revolutionaries. His impressive vocals of the first two stanzas in "The Sound of Music" wows the theatrical group, as well as the audience, and they are now inspired to take this play to the Moulin Rouge, a place from a different dimension. Christian has his first taste of absinthe in celebration of his new found friends, and the soon to be success of his play. Pieces of "The Sound of Music," and "Nature Boy" prelude to a powerful cast performance of "Children of the Revolution" (Discogs, 2017). A green fairy appears, a hallucination from the effects of wormwood in the absinthe, and sings along with the men; as she flies about, sprinkling pixie dust and trilling "the hills are alive with the sound of music," you can hear a percussion instrument (chimes) representing these movements. The most unusual medley of song adaptations is the "Zidler's Rap" piece, during which the audience is invited into the club. After a brisk intro, the audience is plunged into a remake of "Lady Marmalade," (Pattie LaBelle) sung by Christina Aguilera, Lil' Kim, Mya, and Pink (Discogs, 2017). After, it dissolves into Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," and follows with an exuberant performance of "Because We Can" by

Fatboy Slim that completes the medley or rap. So using a modern day "Fatboy Slim" in replace of the original "can-can", gives the audience a similar feeling to what people of that era would have experienced (Discogs, 2017). Bright lights to convey the early years of electricity, bright costumes to highlight on iconic fashion over the years. The cinematography is intentionally chaotic with snippets colliding in yet a dynamic way-this gives an overwhelming feeling-like one you might feel if you were there having a drink of absinthe. Another form of extreme cinematography is the way Zidler is seen flying in the sky above the Moulin Rouge, and then performing outrageous acrobatics. This serves to express a confused and dramatic feeling, like you might feel actually being in the presence of the great Moulin Rouge (Luhmann, 2001).

It's a combination of very old techniques and very new techniques. The illusion that it's black and white film and then we zoom in -- that is all model work, they're old-fashioned models that are built. And then we used digital technology to put in boats and water and sky and people. We shot hundreds of little extras. There's tiny little people walking on the bridge and things to make it real. And so it's a combination of old and new. We spent all of our digital money, and we didn't have a lot of it, making things not good but BAD. Basically stopping it from looking digitally perfect, to make it look "cinematically imperfect... You can equate this with the difference between digital sound and analog. They're like CDs vs. vinyl records. Because life in digital is absolutely mathematically perfect. Unfortunately, real life is nothing like that. In fact, it's the imperfections between individual violin strings that make an orchestra warm. They're all slightly out of tune. That's why when

you get a digital sample of a violin and you put hundreds of them together, they sound nothing like the real thing. Because it's the imperfection that makes something warm. And we've done that a lot on *Moulin Rouge*. For example, when we have our camera sweeping through buildings over Paris (in the opening), we had to actually program in digitally the imperfections of bumps and shakes. At first you really do believe you might be in a bit of black and white footage, and that's because it shakes. Also, if you look at the shot it goes out of focus. We had to digitally put it out of focus (Luhmann, *The Hollywood Interview*, 2013).

After this comes the first appearance of the sparkling diamond, or Satine, who then introduces herself by singing a medley which is a reworking of the songs "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" (Jule Styne and Leo Robin) and an incorporation of one stanza from "Material Girl" (Madonna), complete with shrieks to emphasize on excitement, as well as male suitors chasing her about the room with magnificent jewels (Discogs, 2017). This is a tribute to Marilyn Monroe's scene from the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, where she sings "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" (*The Hollywood Interview*, 2013). Both David Bowie's "Diamond Dogs" and Diane Warren's "Rhythm of the Night" make brief appearances (Luhmann, 2001).

Due to a mix-up, Satine believes Christian to be the Duke, and he gets the accidental opportunity of having a private meeting in her room, where he attempts to sell the story of "Spectacular Spectacular" by saying a line from Elton John's "Your Song." In response to having trouble gaining her attention, Christian marvelously performs in his loudest singing voice "my gift is my song!" The sound echoing off the alley ways of Paris to show the

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volume and strength his tenor timbre. Alessandro Safina provides a glorious tenor voice, along with a child choir singing backup vocals, as Christian serenades Satine (Discogs, 2017). Satine sings an urgent version of "Your Song" in the following scene, to the actual Duke she mistook Christian for moments earlier. Her soprano voice, light and feminine, performs with simple elegance. Heard in this scene is a combination of Marius Devries' composition of "Meet Me in the Red Room" and a stanza from "Children of the Revolution" (IMDb, 2017). The can-can now takes a new sound tactic at this point of the movie with a hyperactive, but still an amusing medley called "The Pitch" (Wikipedia, 2017). Cleaver in the way it touches on the Shakespearean style of putting a play inside of another play, because it seems to also be a use of foreshadowing, in that most characters die tragically in his plays, just as Satine will die in this one. "Spectacular Spectacular/ The Pitch" has an upbeat and fast tempo and combines "The Can-Can," "The Sound of Music," and "Your Song," and is the only song not adapted to the film, because it features original lyrics, and incorporates the vocals of all major characters in this very wildly hilarious performance (Discogs, 2017). The scoring of this piece contains a piano performance, along with big percussion at the parts that move incredibly fast in tempo, along with sitar and chimes to inspire the sound of Indian music. As Zidler is throwing the bait to the Duke for "The Pitch" or "Spectacular Spectacular," swirling from one side of him to the other, all this to emphasize the Duke's confusion about what's going on and to sprinkle on more humor (Luhmann, 2001).

The next memorable song is the "Elephant Love Medley" which highlights a scene of the courtesan and writer playing a light and innocent game of cat and mouse, while also speaking and singing lyrics. Kidman's (Satine's) first half of the performance of the song "One Day I'll Fly Away" (Will Jennings) is accompanied by strings and woodwinds only, then by the end a full-bodied orchestra is heard (Discogs, 2017). As he hears the courtesan longing for a better life, he builds momentum in his approach to the "Elephant Love Medley" by reciting lyrics before it erupts to a full blown song. The structure is developed with Christian slowly winning over Satine with his "poetry," to the point she can no longer resist but to join in. The lyric meanings even change to fit the mold of this song, like "Pride" for example, originally about Martin Luther King Jr. and his movements for equal rights, but now is being used as a coaxing method to make Satine feel inspired to do something "In The Name of Love." Then, after he has charmed her with "All You Need is Love", she starts to sing her replies. The "Elephant Love Medley" is by far the highlight of the film, as the two main characters fall in love. The structure of the "Elephant Love Medley" methodically takes one or two lyrical lines from a variety of adapted songs and melts them together seamlessly. The songs reference: The Beatles (writers John Lennon and Paul McCartney) "All You Need is Love," Kiss (writers Paul Stanley, Desmond Child, and Vini Poncia) "I Was Made for Lovin' You," Phil Collin's "One More Night," U2's "Pride (In the Name of Love)," Thelma Houston (Kenneth Gamble, Leon Huff and Cary Gilbert) "Don't Leave Me This Way," Paul McCartney's "Silly Love Songs," Joe Cocker (writers Jack Nitzsche, Buffy Sainte-Marie, and Will Jennings) "Up Where We Belong," David Bowie and Brian Eno's "Heroes," Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You," and then Elton John's "Your Song"

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(Discogs, 2017). The "Elephant Love Medley" is completed by the tenor vocals of Jamie Allen and a percussive accompaniment. Many of the themes within this medley along with Armstrong's other scores begin to play a much larger role as the gravity of the film's tragedy unfolds, along with "Satine is Dying" (Wikipedia, 2017). It is during this time that the film employs its love song for Christian and Satine, "Come What May" is a grand ballad emotionally performed between the secret lovers (Luhrmann, 2001).

The next song is Madonna's "Like a Virgin," which shows perhaps the true depth of silliness in this film. As the clueless Duke gets more tangled in the dealings of the Moulin Rouge's new theater and first show "Spectacular Spectacular"-while also ironically contributing to Satine's demise-he begins to become deathly jealous and suspicious of the relationship between Satine and Christian. When Satine fails to show to dinner, the outlandish character of Zidler (using lyrics from the song) reassures the Duke about Satine's intentions by explaining that she was attending confession because she was starting to feel "like a virgin... shiny and new" (Discogs, 2017). The following performance of "Like a Virgin" (Billy Steinberg and Tom Kelly) is ridiculously funny in every way, with terrible-but sidesplitting none the less-vocals by the nasally voice of the Duke. The vulgar lyrics for this song are juxtaposed against whimsical dance moves and acting, which only adds to the comedic tone of the scene and film. This adapted song is a departure from the original 80s sound with a return to a big band orchestral style of accompaniment providing that 1900s feel. After this last comedy routine, the film now dives very deeply and permanently into its foreseeable grave end (Luhrmann, 2001).

Another brilliant medley in the film is that of " El Tango de Roxanne" which has the Argentinian singing of betrayal and performing an argentine tango with Nini, one of the prostitutes, and main dancer in the scene. The scene contains splits, so it simultaneously jumps to dark and disturbing scenes of Satine and the Duke, and then once again back to the tango; creating a metaphor. At its core is a beautiful and elegant dance scene with wonderful character vocals by Jacek Koman (narcoleptic Argentinian). A brilliant combination of the adapted vocals and song from Sting's " Roxanne," and Marianito Mores' " Le Tango du Moulin Rouge," and a polyphonic textural sound produced using " Come What May" (Discogs, 2017). This medley sounds like an original piece of musical, due to the largest departure from the original sound. " Roxanne" originally has a simple and distinct beat, with curt lyrics, and in this song the vocals are elongated and paired now with a full orchestra. This compliments the split screen scene of an almost heart breaking rape scene, while also touching on a beautiful and emotional dance scene. The tango medley contains wild sounding instrumentals: from the violin solos, as well as the accompaniment of what sounds like a demented piano, and chaotic string section. Opposite to the instruments and the Argentinian is Christian's singing " Come What May." As the scene intensifies between the Duke and Satine, the tango becomes more aggressive because of the symbology it holds. The length of the shots become shorter and shorter, jumping back and forth to assimilate anger. This creates a great tension in unison with the fierce instrumentals, which continues to raise until fortissimo in volume and it finishes with shots of everyone yelling. Then Chocolate (a Moulin Rouge dancer/entertainer) renders the Duke

unconscious, while Nini falls to the ground, and the music come to a
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screeching halt. This all encompasses Christian's strong emotions, and the cries of terror from Satine and the Argentinean gravelly baritone voice highlight the points as well. The instrumental use of "Le Tango du Moulin Rouge" as a counterpart with the song "Roxanne" is another beautiful example of the elevated level this movie and its writer exhibit; the sound is such departure and that makes me love it (Luhrmann, 2011).

An operatic performance by Zilder shows another dimension to the film and how it really does touch on all forms of music, while also setting a melancholier tone. He accompanies Kidman with compassion in a short repeat of "One Day I'll Fly Away" at the end of "Fool to Believe," in an adaptation of Queen's (writers: Freddie Mercury, Brian May, Roger Taylor, and John Deacon) "The Show Must Go On" (IMDb, 2017). This is a cruel and dramatic piece of the "show going on" as a metaphor for Satine giving her all as well as Christian going on after her passing; the music only reaffirms the death looming over the courtesan, and the stage crews prepare the fateful transition from burlesque club to sophisticated theater. An aggressive sound within the bass region eventually builds to a pulsing beating, while maintaining reminiscent melodies typically found in rock 'n' roll. As Satine carries out her plan, the scoring explores darker melodies on strings and woodwinds, while also implementing parts of "Your Song" (IMDb, 2017). The upcoming show allows for one last major embellishment from the entertainers before Satine's death, which is sure to suck the last remaining light from this production making the audience feel every kind of emotion (Luhrmann, 2001).

The last medley "Hindi Sad Diamonds," opens with a smaller, original theme called "The Hindi," (by Steve Sharples) performed by Toulouse and combines "Chamma Chamma," (Sameer) then runs into an alternative version of "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" (Discogs, 2017). All forming an overwhelming blast to the eardrums, using Indian style developments while simultaneously incorporating heavy rock instrumentals, with sharp, soprano performances by Alka Yagnik and Nicole Kidman as Satine emerges from the stage floor calling out in high pitches and drawing closer to her fate of death. A confrontation breaks out between Satine and Christian at the end of the show, a painful silence moves over the performers and audience. Zidler attempts to hide this by performing an off the cusp "Wedding Vow" vocal that is brief but touching, whispering encouraging words to Satine, which gives her the bravery she needs to sing a forbidden performance of "Come What May." After interrupting the show, Christian walks away in silence only to be stopped by the faint and gentle voice of Satine singing "Come What May" with little to no accompaniment. As she rises up, she belts out "and forgive everything" and the orchestra surges along with her strength, her illness cuts her back down, and in response the orchestra quiets again. To her shock, she hears Christian calling back to her now. The energy the couple gains from the duet establishes a foundation for the final performance of the movie. The reprises of "Come What May" and "Children of the Revolution" in this last medley and contains a significant amount of forte (IMDb, 2017). Toulouse opens the finale with a triumphant statement from "Children of the Revolution," and then is joined by the entire cast. From that dramatic point, it launches in a comedic eruption of disarray as the Duke's henchmen attempts to kill Christian-a revolver flies all about the

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room-the audience completely oblivious-and the show continues on. The whole cast eventually echoes "Come What May," while Christian and Satine sing their respective themes- "One Day I'll Fly Away" and "Your Song"- creating a final robust performance, which allows the audience to hear the layering of voices creating a polyphonic texture over a heightened harmony from the orchestra (Luhrmann, 2001). The "Ascension" is the gripping sounds of a string section and a choir accompaniment, which then directly melts into both an instrumental and vocal reappearance of "Nature Boy" now sung by Christian/McGregor, and the film begins to circle back to the beginning once again, coming to a conclusion (Wikipedia, 2017). The ending song entitled "Bolero," offers simplified rhythm and tempo with a sad and airy voice of Christian accompanied by a violin, and then the orchestra coming in to offer some meat to the bones of this delicate piece. It grows rapidly and becomes dark, a sort of menacing carnival sound to it (Luhrmann, 2001).

Armstrong and Elliot's underscoring is something to be commended. To weave adaptations from all genres into an organized and singular unit of sound and tones, is wearisome to say the least. You not only want music that fits into the story, but to also represents the time and place. Much of the original orchestral material is blended with the adaptations of "Your Song," "Nature Boy," and "One Day I'll Fly Away" (Discogs, 2017). Small portions of "Gaité Parisienne," "Orpheus in the Underworld," (Jacques Offenbach) "The Lonely Goatherd," (Rodgers & Hammerstein) "Golden Bowls," (Richard Karma Moffett) and "Tanguera" (Marianito Mores) are adapted in and throughout (IMDb, 2017). Among the beautiful works, the score during Satine's death uses a gripping angelic choir, and over this is Christian's sobs;

this captures the agony and frustration of the writer as his world turns from bliss to grief-finally getting the girl and in the same moment lose her. The words, or lyrics, are placed so meticulously that it carries the story line along effortlessly. (Luhrmann, 2001).

Moulin Rouge is a tragedy within a 19th century style opera, with hints of Hollywood glamour from the 50s. Nothing can be defined exactly by an era within this movie, because of the implementation of so many genres over several decades. The actors embody their character. The movie is colorful with its sounds and dynamic motions, hints of operatic vocals and story lines, and an undying energy; it's like being trapped on an elevator with a circus. The use of songs that many are acquainted with makes the appreciation and enjoyment of the movie greater; helps the audience to better identify with the characters, rather than an arrangement of all new songs that only cater to a specific audience. I would go as bold as to say Moulin Rouge changed how musicals were done, so much so that Chicago continued that pursuit with its reinvention of the musical. A modern day audience doesn't care much for stories disturbed by songs, but rather prefer songs disturbed by stories. Both movies are jam-packed with alluring songs and burlesque style dance scenes, with the bare minimum of speaking. By frankly making it more fast paced, and not lingering over the stories too much; this makes it both similar and different compared to Moulin Rouge. In contrast to those two musicals, Across the Universe takes a focus on historical events and contains only music composed by the Beatles, using 33 of their songs (Holden, 2007). Although they both build stories from the lyrics, Across the Universe it does it in a straight forward way; not much variation to the original sound, which is

fine to the purist, but I think most want more. *Moulin Rouge* creates something entirely new that allows for a song to emerge refreshed or reborn (Luhmann, 2001).

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