

# Zampano's song



A simple girl raises the instrument to her lips. Her eyes are filled with wonder, her face with laughable, caricature delight. In an instant, the trumpet is snatched away, and a strongman harshly reproaches her for the presumptuous act—" Do only what I tell you to!" A simple girl is presented with a trombone; she is encouraged by the Fool to give it a blow, and she excitedly marches around with her Chaplin-esque, penguin walk as she learns a tune. At night, the simple girl finds the Fool by following the sound of his haunting motif on violin. With a few reiterations, the tune is soon indelibly associated with him. Scenes later, the simple girl performs the haunting tune of the Fool for a nun—his signature melody that she has made her own. Upon finishing, her face briefly clouds over with nostalgic longing. A scene later, it is the simple girl who will be indelibly haunted by this very tune, as she witnesses the climactic death of the Fool. A final scene with the simple girl—she has been irreparably, psychologically damaged, is deserted by a similarly tormented Zampano, left asleep with money, clothing, and most notably, the beloved trumpet that she was once so forcefully denied. It is years later when every one of these scenes comes flooding back in the instant a familiar tune is hummed—the film's final employment of this musical memory. An emotionally numbed Zampano strolls listlessly through the streets, cheerlessly downing his carnival ice cream cone in two bites. A woman's lilting voice drifts through the carnival mélange, echoing the long-forgotten tune of the Fool (and Gelsomina as well). A pause, then a complete halt; some semblance of concern flashes across his roughened features. " Where did you learn that song?" the gruff Zampano manages. " A girl who was here a long time ago.... she always played it on the trumpet and it stuck in my head," she shrugs. Hesitantly, he asks, " Where is she now?" Her

reply: “ She’s dead, poor thing.” It is in this late scene that Fellini most powerfully demonstrates the effect of a musical motif on the audience’s collective unconscious. Upon hearing the tune sung by the woman’s voice, one is intensely aware of the association that was hitherto unarticulated—the ability of a tune to capture and connect the experience of simple Gelsomina and all the characters around her throughout the entirety of the film. This one scene musically embodies the overwhelming loss in the film, and simultaneously recalls every other scene in which the tune was played. As the woman elaborates on Gelsomina’s fate since Zampano’s desertion, the camera closes in on his face. The previously lifeless Zampano now looks troubled; his eyebrows furrowed together, his face an unmistakable expression of constrained pain. His eyes are increasingly downcast as the woman absentmindedly continues while hanging her laundry, reciting mercilessly, unaware of its intimate relevance. “ Poor thing was sick with a fever. We took her into our home. But she wouldn’t say anything. All she did was cry. She wouldn’t eat. When she got a little better she sat out in the sun. She would thank us and play the trumpet. Then, one morning, she just didn’t wake up.” Zampano is noticeably struck by the unforgiving tale. He backs away from the fence, shakes his head distractedly in response to the woman’s question (would he like to meet the mayor and identify the unknown girl?), turns dazedly around in a circle before remembering to give a halfhearted wave goodbye to the woman, and slowly walks off. Music is trance inducing. The precise placement of the Fool’s song at various points throughout the film creates an intense and almost magical emotionality, a musical placement of seeds to be later harvested in this penultimate scene—to heartbreaking effect. Interestingly, the subsequent and final scene is titled

“ Zampano's Song,” suggesting the impact of the Fool's and Gelsomina's motif most specifically on Zampano's emotional growth. Indeed, by the end, it is only Zampano with the song, alone on the beach with only his memories of the two deceased. The tune is introduced in its purest melodic form—a lone violin played from a distance by the Fool, an easygoing, almost angelic soul, and later echoed on trumpet by Gelsomina, an equally simplistic conception of great inner beauty. This single treble clef melody, stripped of accompaniment and embellishment, is juxtaposed uneasily with the rest of the soundtrack both thematically and in form. The *La Strada* soundtrack largely consists of more whimsical or festive compositions, which, at their cleanest, are delivered by several solo instruments together, though more often are elaborated upon by harmoniously dense orchestral arrangements. Even the mournful dirge played during the religious celebration is still a musical procession of grand scale (albeit funereal) proportions.

Contrastingly, the humble tune of the Fool is intensely focused and poignant, evoking the simplicity of a life of routine, the rootless solitude of a vagabond life on the road. Like a straightforward fable with strong themes, this unadorned tune of inordinate depth makes a suitable prelude later to the woman's story of Gelsomina's final years. She hums the loaded melody before recounting a conceptually relevant tale that painfully highlights Gelsomina's utter desolation, loss of family, and consequently, loss of identity. This particular anonymity darkens her last days with palpable loneliness and anguish. Giulietta Masina so strikingly portrays Gelsomina in her last scenes on-screen that the woman later recounting Gelsomina's off-screen fate can paint an effectively vivid picture with just a few simple sentences. Drawing upon Masina's memorable character portraits, the

audience easily imagines the silent Gelsomina at end of her life, damaged beyond repair, moaning like an injured puppy, going quietly, helplessly insane. La Strada utilizes instruments as extensions of its characters' souls. Fellini particularly emphasizes the class of wind instruments for Gelsomina, a class known for its distinctive similarity in sound to the human voice, able to emote an array of emotions—plaintive, lonesome, excited, abrasive, and so forth. Second only to the voice itself (which is the instrument of choice for the song's final diegetic recurrence), it is often said that some horns come closer than any string, keyboard, or percussion instrument to mimicking the natural, most innate expressions of humanity. When Gelsomina plays the trumpet at the convent, time comes to a brief rest, and the song seems to emerge from a memory somewhere deep within her. Zampano's emotional breakdown in the final scene is largely in silence, with only the slight sound of waves breaking in the background, heightening the sense of despairing isolation and anomie of his character. One imagines his low moans as a direct response to the sighing melody that first called for his remorse. As the camera pans out, the orchestra swells conclusively in the closing number with the same salient leitmotiv that now fully links all three main characters. Zampano lies broken and weeping on the darkening beach, left with only his memories and a song.