'Shirley Bernstein Can't Be Serious.[/?]': *Airplane!* and Compositional Personas

The comedy film *Airplane!* (1980), written and directed by Jim Abrahams, David Zucker and Jerry Zucker, has been well-received since its première. This parody of airplane disaster movies, most particularly *Zero Hour!* (1957) and the *Airport* series of films (1970–1979), has found continued popularity and regularly appears in the upper ranks of 'funniest film' polls.[1] Such is *Airplane!*'s fame that some of the film's jokes have entered shared pop culture, including the exchange, "Can you fly this plane and land it?"/"Surely you can't be serious?"/"I am serious, and don't call me Shirley." As encapsulated in this dialogue, the careful negotiation between serious and silly is at the core of the parody genre, and is seen to be evident in more than just the script of *Airplane!*.

Despite the film's restricted budget, the producers secured a high-profile composer. By the time he began composing for *Airplane!*, Elmer Bernstein had won an Academy Award and was among the most famous working film composers.[2] From the late-1970s to the early-1980s, Bernstein scored several comedy films that exhibit a juvenile sense of humor similar to that of *Airplane!*, such as *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978), *Meatballs* (1979), *Going Ape!* (1981), and *Stripes* (1981). While Bernstein had built his reputation on Westerns (most famously *The Magnificent Seven* [1960]), the Western genre fell out of fashion in the late-1970s and comedy films took the place of the Western in Bernstein's compositional diet.[3]

In interviews, Bernstein, described his approach to composing for *Airplane!*:

> I think if a comedy is good enough, the composer shouldn't write funny music. Write music against the comedy, and the story is funnier. I did this in *Animal House* and *Airplane!* by writing a mock serious score.[4]

> In *Airplane!*, I took [the mock serious score] a step further and made up a role for the composer – here's this young, inexperienced composer composing this score; here's somebody who's worked on minor, low-budget films all his life and, finally, this is his big chance to do a big score for a big film![5]

Bernstein here describes that he developed what might be called a 'scoring persona' for the film – a sort of filter, mask, or actor-like performative role that he adopted when composing

[1] See, for example, Helen O'Hara, Owen Williams, James White and Stephen Carty, "The 50 Funniest Comedies Ever As voted for by you!," *Empire Magazine Online*, 2008, accessed 9 August 2013, http://www.empireonline.com/features/50comedy/default.asp?film=1 and Channel 4 (anon.), "50 Greatest Comedy Films," *Channel 4/FilmFour*, n.d. [c.2007], accessed 9 August 2013, http://web.archive.org/web/20070126005841/http://www.channel4.com/film/newsfeatures/microsites/G/greatest-comedyfilms/results/5-1.html.

[2] The directors of *Airplane!* were introduced to Bernstein through John Landis. Bernstein had scored a film directed by Landis (*National Lampoon's Animal House* [1978]) while Zucker, Abrahams and Zucker had written Landis's previous film, *Kentucky Fried Movie* (1977). Dan Goldwasser, "Flying High: The Full Flight of *Airplane!*," liner notes to *Airplane!: Music from the Motion Picture LLLCD1093* (Burbank, CA.: La-La Land Records, 2009), np.

[3] Bernstein would later score the comedy Western, *Three Amigos* (1986), drawing upon his earlier musical experience with the Western genre to comic effect.

[4] Clara Alexandra Frenk, "How Bernstein finds inspiration for score," *USA Today*, 21 March 2003, accessed 29 July 2013, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/movies/movieawards/oscars/2003-03-21-bernstein_x.htm.

[5] Michael Schelle, *The Score: Interviews with Film Composers* (Los Angeles, California: Silman-James Press, 1999), Kindle edition 928–930.

for the film. *Airplane!*'s music uses a primarily symphonic musical idiom. The score is self-consciously 'film music' in that it deploys stereotypical musical gestures and clichés to refer to film traditions (of which more later). As Dan Goldwasser reports, the film's directors "were determined to fill the cast with serious dramatic actors, since the comedy would come from the absurdity of what they were saying and doing".[6] In a similar way, rather than creating a cartoon-like score filled with ubiquitous silly sound effects, Bernstein's score serves as musical satire through the persona that the composer performs.

Much of *Airplane!*'s musical humor represents a particularly elaborate version of what Miguel Mera discusses as parodic film music: "[F]or humor to arise, the implication is that the music must act as the "straight man," or comic foil to the other elements that occur in the diegesis; it must be totally credible in order to counterbalance the other humorous features".[7] Later Zucker, Abrahams, and Zucker productions deploy music as a "straight man" in precisely the fashion that Mera describes (see Ira Newborn's music for the *Naked Gun* films [1988, 1991, 1994]), but *Airplane!* is a more unusual case, because this apparently "straight man" is not "totally credible" but is instead yet another direct source of humor. In Bernstein's words, the score, through the persona he adopts, is not "serious" but "mock serious".

The purpose of this article is to investigate the notion of a 'scoring persona'. How is this persona evident in *Airplane*'s music and detectable by the viewer? Why was it used by Bernstein? Does this persona also serve some sort of pedagogical purpose? Is it possible to distinguish a persona from what might be thought of as somehow more 'genuine' scoring? How does Bernstein's imitation of an inexperienced composer differ from music that would likely be produced by a genuine neophyte? Might other films construct scoring personas, and what does this mean for our understanding of a musical narrator?

Musical jokes

Before considering the more subtle dimensions of the film's music, the most obvious place to begin examining *Airplane!* is with the explicit 'musical jokes' in the film. Some of the "specific methods of achieving humor"[8] in comedy films that Mera has identified are found in *Airplane!*. These are the most traditional types of musical humor found in the film. Mera discusses, for example, "referentialism" and "parody music",[9] both of which are evident in the opening moments of the film. From a perspective above a layer of clouds, the tail fin of an airplane glides smoothly across the screen, cutting through the clouds (Figure 1). The musical score – the first music of the film – replicates John Williams's *Jaws* (1975) theme.

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[6] Goldwasser, "Flying High," np.

[7] Miguel Mera, "Is Funny Music Funny? Contexts and Case Studies of Film Music Humor," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 14 (2002): 98.

[8] Mera, "Funny Music," 92.

[9] Mera, "Funny Music," 92.

Figure 1: The reference to *Jaws* that begins *Airplane!*

The use of music in this way, to establish a point of reference for parody, is a particularly common feature of music in comedies. The animated television series *Family Guy* (1999–), for example, uses this device frequently and the producers go to great lengths to ensure that the music is accurately replicated from the original source.[10] Though *Airplane!* does not often directly cite music from other films as 'musical jokes' like *Family Guy*,[11] the *Jaws* excerpt is representative of the role of music in *Airplane!* more generally, in that it shows the importance of music in establishing the film's tone: from the opening scene, this joke demonstrates the film's parodic nature. In the *Jaws* excerpt and in the film as a whole, music indicates the sources that are being satirized, whether in the reference to a specific pre-existing film text, or a more genre-based idea of 'disaster movie' scoring. Furthermore, the *Jaws* excerpt is not specifically comedic in any directly musical-semiotic fashion (indeed, it is quite the opposite) – it is the context and setting for the musical excerpt that produces the humorous effect,[12] just as *Airplane!*'s score favors allusive musical humor over traditional signifiers of slapstick comedy.

The other ostentatious musical jokes in *Airplane!* rely on absurdist humor, or play with the audience's assumptions of music sounding, or not sounding, in the diegetic world (what Mera terms "diegetic violation").[13] A short excerpt of Dixieland jazz is played by the airplane's crew when the air traffic controller says 'They're on instruments' and a long-legged woman walking along a bar counter in a sleazy tavern is revealed to be playing the (clichéd) sultry trombone that accompanies the scene. These are musical jokes that rely on juxtaposition and wordplay, rather than Carl Stalling-esque musical signifiers of silliness. In both the *Jaws* example, and the latter two musical jokes, the humor is similar to the use of pre-existing

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[10] To give one example amongst many, in the *Family Guy* episode "Jungle Love" (2005), the Griffin family run through a forest while being chased by native people accompanied by the cue for Indiana Jones's similar escape in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). While the seaplane at the end of the *Family Guy* sequence confirms the specific intertextual reference, it is the music that first reveals to the viewer the source being parodied.

[11] An exception is the use of this musical device during a sequence that spoofs *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), when a run-down tavern turns into a disco to the strains of 'Stayin' Alive' (Bee Gees, 1977) [0:16:30].

[12] As Mera puts it, "humor does not arise solely through specifically composed musical gestures, but […] it is dependent on the situation and context in which those gestures are heard" ("Funny Music," 96).

[13] Mera, "Funny Music," 105.

music for musical puns such as those that Jeff Smith has examined in detail.[14] Smith emphasizes "bisociation", a term borrowed from Arthur Koestler that refers to the association between two distinct frames of reference, which, in the case of puns, are comically juxtaposed. The pun "Shirley you can't be serious" exemplifies this mechanic: the two frames provided by the near-homonym of "Shirley" and "Surely" are the source of the two modes of understanding the sentence (as the punchline makes clear). In the case of the Dixieland jazz, the two contextual frames are supplied by the double meaning of the word 'instruments', and in the tavern joke, the understanding of the trombone first as assumedly 'non-diegetic' underscore, and secondly, as sounding within the diegesis.[15] The bisociation within the rest of *Airplane!*'s score operates a slightly different way, and is instead based upon the at once plausibly sincere "straight man" underscore, and simultaneously, how it sounds as implausibly over-the-top and clichéd. Put another way, the humor rests on the recognition of the score's sly duality, of which the compositional persona is the main agent.

Themes and thematic construction

Airplane!'s music enacts its scoring persona in several ways, not least through the construction and deployment of the main melodic themes of the film. The score features two main themes: a theme that is used during the opening credits and for moments of danger (Figure 2) and a 'romance' theme (Figure 3).
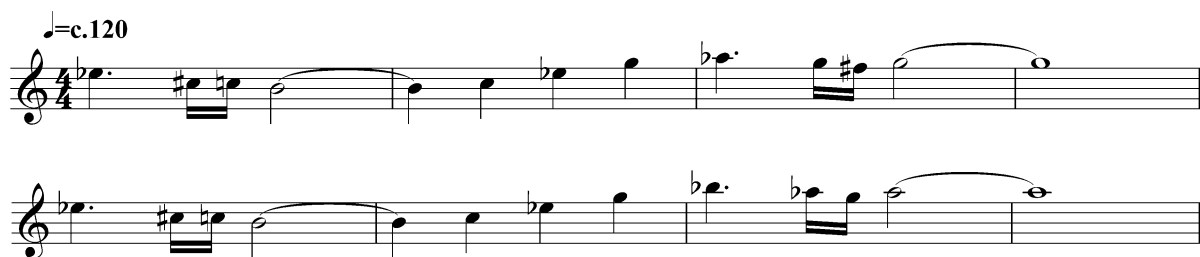
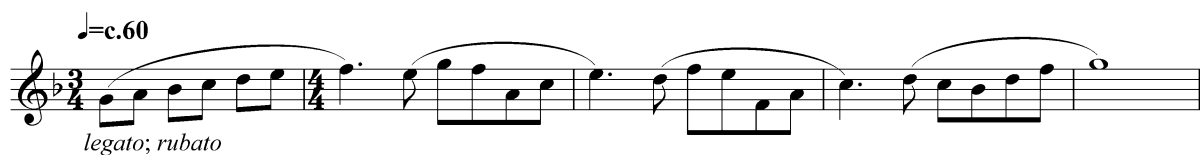Figure 2: The main theme/'danger' theme from *Airplane!*

Figure 3: The 'romance' theme from *Airplane!*

Both of these main themes represent parodies of Hollywood musical narration. The saccharine 'romance' theme is played by upper strings as a soaring *dolce* motif. The whole phrase slurs together, and is harmonized in a sweetly dissonant way by closely-spaced pitches. This theme, very similar to Max Steiner's love theme from *Since You Went Away* (1944), is first heard when the heroine (Elaine) and the hero (Ted) are seen together for the first time in the airport's corridor [0:04:25] and it is mixed at a high volume within the film's

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[14] Jeff Smith, "Popular Songs and Comic Allusion in Contemporary Cinema," in *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music*, ed. Pamela Robertson Wojcik and Arthur Knight (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 407–430.

[15] The trombone joke could be interpreted another way. The viewer might understand the jazz to be diegetic, but emanating from elsewhere in the tavern, rather than from the woman. This explanation still relies on humour from auditory misdirection and shows the slipperiness of locating music within the diegesis.

soundtrack, to the point of nearly impinging on the audibility of the dialogue. Even though Elaine asserts that she cannot continue to be in a relationship with Ted, the music proclaims that this is the central romance of the film, and even from this early moment, the audience is assured that this romance will ultimately succeed. The dialogue is redundant here – the musical narrator unsubtly communicates that, despite the lovers' disagreement, romance will flourish. It seems that Bernstein's youthful composer cannot wait to deploy the love theme, but unlike musical material that might contribute to the characterization or portrayal of the principal players of a drama, these themes serve only as token signifiers of the romance and clichéd plot mechanics. We do not, for example, learn anything from the music about the characters of Ted or Elaine from the music, beyond the fact that they serve as the central romance of the film.

While the chromatic 'danger' theme is less musically derivative than the 'romance' theme, it is nevertheless used in a similarly prosaic way. Both themes are constructed in a cellular fashion – an opening motivic unit is repeated, either in transposition or with an altered ending. This construction, in turn, mirrors the way in which entire cues are created. Cues in *Airplane!* often rely on repeating the same theme in a transposed version, or with slightly different orchestration. This kind of direct repetition may also be seen to be a characteristic of immature composition – the composer has not yet learned methods of structuring cues, and so instead simply repeats the core thematic material.

Thematic development is in little evidence in the score – the themes are used in an iconic way and do not undergo significant transformation.[16] In the reductive thought process of Bernstein's character, quite simply, when the scene deals with the relationship between the two lead characters, the romance theme sounds, and when there is danger on-screen, the danger theme sounds. In producing such near-banal deployment of themes, the score seems to parody theme-based scoring – a staple of the classical Hollywood score that was beginning its resurgence when the film was made in 1980.

While *Airplane!* uses lines of dialogue from *Zero Hour!* and even matches shots and costumes with the earlier film, there is no comparable quotation of the musical score. *Airplane!*'s music, however, is idiomatically similar to that of *Zero Hour!*, particularly in the shared use of *tutti* orchestral 'stinger' gestures that punctuate dramatic moments. In comparison with *Airplane!*, *Zero Hour!* is very sparsely scored and the music is mixed at a far quieter volume. Even the final climactic approach and landing of the airplane is musically rather bare in *Zero Hour!*. Instead, *Airplane!* exaggerates the musical style of *Zero Hour!*, so that every possible dramatic moment is marked and the musical exclamations are very perceptually intrusive.

Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of this score is the way that it routinely violates the stylistic parameters of classical Hollywood scoring. It is the parodic aspect of the score that enables, and is accentuated through, such violation. Claudia Gorbman famously described the classical Hollywood style in terms of seven specific characteristics, the second of which is ""Inaudibility": Music is not meant to be heard consciously. As such it should subordinate

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[16] The only point in the film where any theme undergoes significant development is during a scene in which the love theme is heard as a diegetic jazz standard, to which the protagonists dance. This use of a previously-heard underscore theme as (what is implied to be) source music is often found in Hollywood melodrama, such as the sounding of the title theme of *Imitation of Life* (1959) during a party in the middle of the film [0:32:44], or when the detective investigating the titular character in *Laura* (1944) dines accompanied by a trio of restaurant musicians who play the heroine's theme [0:14:40].

itself to dialogue, to visuals – i.e., to the primary vehicles of the narrative."[17] Unlike Gorbman's ideal of a well-behaved score, and despite a musical style that obviously imitates classical film scoring practice, *Airplane!*'s music is very often heard consciously. The loud volume of the score in the film's mix, and the grandiose gestures deployed by Bernstein, draw the viewer's ear to the music. Bernstein's composer is not willing to let this 'big break' pass by without the opportunity to get the work recognized, with the hope of future employment as a composer on major films. It is this conscious audibility of the music that prompted contemporary reviewers to comment on the score. Entertainment trade magazine *Variety*, for example, described Bernstein's score as "wonderfully overdone" and *Hollywood Reporter* wrote that the "tongue-in-cheek music […] heightens the visual effects".[18] These reports also suggest that Bernstein was successful in implying an insincere scoring persona, produced through the self-consciously clichéd and 'audible' score.

Musical narration and synchronization

Both the neophytic and humorously unsubtle dimensions of Bernstein's score are evident in the synchronization of music with the film, which creates the "overdone" (as *Variety* put it) and "heard" properties of the musical narration. Bernstein discussed 'background music' in a 1999 interview:

> [Q:] Do you find that there are times when the need for hustle-bustle background music gets in the way of your need for emotional underscore?
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> [Bernstein:] First of all, your mindset as a composer of a film has to be to do what's best for the film. Sometimes what's best for the film is to be out there emotionally, and sometimes what's best for the film is to be subtle, to be quiet, to kill time in an interesting way. I think that, certainly as far as the craft is concerned, the ability to do that kind of thing is part of the job. It isn't as much fun as doing something emotional or something splashy, like *The Magnificent Seven*, but there are things that you have to do simply because the film needs them.
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> [Q:] Have you found there to be times when you're trying to be emotional but the director may say, "Elmer, back off a little. Let the actors do the emotion."?
>
> [EB:] Only all the time![19]
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> […]
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> [EB:] In recent years, I'm a little bit less devoted to the necessity of starting with, so to speak, a particular theme. […] I'm more willing now to approach a film in terms of its atmosphere rather than what the big theme should be.[20]

Bernstein here discusses how he has become less concerned with emphatic thematic statements as he has matured as a composer. Rather than themes obviously synchronized with on-screen action, he is instead more willing to consider that "unheard" music that is not bound as tightly to the image is more appropriate for certain situations in films. *Airplane!*'s implied composer has no such maturity. While the music does not use a cartoon musical

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[17] Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: BFI, 1987), 73.
[18] Quoted in Goldwasser, "Flying High," np.
[19] Schelle, *Keeping Score*, 758–766.
[20] Schelle, *Keeping Score,* 973–976.

idiom of the kind that involves cymbal crashes with slapstick, pizzicati that accompany a character blinking, or other zany sound effects, *Airplane!*'s score is very closely synchronized with the on-screen action. Any opportunity for a dramatic stinger is taken – the music reacts to dialogue with fragmentary interjections (sometimes sounding cues consisting of only two *tutti* chords as a response to a character's comment [e.g. 0:45:20]). Aside from the frequency and immediacy of the musical response to dramatic developments, the score lacks any sense of mediation – all of these moments, however significant or insignificant, are given an impassioned reaction by the score. One character simply expressing impatience with another's tardiness [0:46:40] is given the same kind of musical exclamation as the hero being told that he is the passengers' 'only hope' [0:47:50]. The lack of subtlety by the alarmist musical narrator is part of what provides the film with a melodramatically 'over the top' style.

The knee-jerk musical reactions to *Airplane!*'s dialogue evince a basic understanding of the relationship between the music and the other components of the film by the inexperienced composer – the score serves as a closely-charted response to the dialogue and on-screen events. This simplistic logic is also obvious in the mickey-mousing way that the music mirrors in pitch the altitudinal direction of the airplane: when the pilots struggle to control the aircraft and the 'plane begins to dive, the score sounds repeated short shrill descending figures, until the pilots regain control of the airplane, and the descent (musical and otherwise) is halted [e.g. 0:48:06]. Apart from this kind of close reaction to the dialogue and action, Bernstein's fictional composer also appears to have been influenced by another image-music framework – a temp track.

Temp tracks and pre-existing music

Airplane!'s score includes citations of pre-existing music that sound non-diegetically. In addition to the *Jaws* theme, an instrumental version of the *Notre Dame Victory March* by Michael J. Shea and John F. Shea is heard to accompany both the doctor's motivational speech to the hero [0:59:20] and the end credits. This piece of music is well-known to American audiences from its use in sporting events including, but not limited to, those involving the Notre Dame University football team. In *Airplane!*, the *March* is used as part of a parody of a pep talk delivered by a team coach in the film *Knute Rockne All American* (1940), which is accompanied by this piece of music. Even if the musical citation is not recognized, as is likely to be the case for non-American viewers, the music still serves as a comedic reference to the clichéd half-time encouragement speech ubiquitous in sports films.

The doctor's speech is underscored appropriately by the *March* as part of the direct parody of a particular scene (or type of scene), but it is curious that it should be reprised for the end credits, when there is no such specific intertextual reference. An even more ostentatious citation is found in the sounding of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, heard in the closing moments of the film before these end credits begin [1:08:10]. The Tchaikovsky does not seem to be deployed to refer to a pre-existing scene from another film or a real-life event. While the first sounding of the *March* may be written off as a simple indicator of a point of parody, the second use of the *March* and the *1812* seem to work in a more complex way, beyond borrowing music from a specific point of satire. Perhaps the use of the *1812* and the *Victory March* are another part of the compositional persona that Bernstein adopts.

In response to an interviewer's question about his opinion of temp tracks,[21] Elmer Bernstein passionately responded,

> I think that people who make temp-tracks should be *shot!* I think that the temp-track is a vile and disgusting habit, which absolutely robs the composer of originality. I refuse to listen to temp scores, unless the film has been temped with music of mine. Otherwise, I won't even listen to the temp score, because with temp scores, once you hear it you cannot ignore it. And you then are robbed of your own originality, your own voice, so to speak. I think that the answer is that temp scores should be discouraged.[22]

In the same interview, Bernstein comments about a problematic lack of "trust" between composers and directors, which leads to directors and producers creating very prescriptive instructions and models for the composers. Both the *1812* and the *Victory March* are well-known pieces of music and have become famous examples of a 'military pomp' topic. These two pieces fit the profile of excerpts selected for a temp track. Here, perhaps our fictional composer has succumbed to the temp track, and/or a director's preconceived idea of a particular musical model for the sequence. (Perhaps the most famous example of a composer being shackled to a temp track is Alex North's experience of working on Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968].) It seems reasonable to assume that a youthful composer just given a 'big break' would be less likely to challenge inflexible instruction and more eager to supply the desired musical result than a well-established composer. A composer at the beginning of their career would be unlikely to find a film temped with their own music, and perhaps would be less able to resist the model provided by the temp track (as Bernstein reports, even an experienced composer "cannot ignore it").

The use of the *1812* in particular is comedic, since, as a direct quotation of a famous piece of music integrated into the fabric of the underscore, it is likely to be heard as a cliché (unlike, for example, Bernstein's "pastiches of Elgar, Brahms, and Mendelssohn" in *Trading Places* [1983]).[23] Perhaps it is deployed as a parody of the uninspired use of pre-existing music in film soundtracks, or as a satire of imitative scoring – scores that are apparently based upon art music models, without explicitly acknowledging their influence (whether or not they are, in turn, based upon temp tracks). Such examples include

➢ John Williams's near-citation of the introduction from 'Le Sacrifice' from Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* during the Tatooine cues in *Star Wars* (1977) (such as 'The Dune Sea of Tatooine' cue);
➢ Hans Zimmer's near-citation of 'Mars' from Holst's *The Planets* in 'The Battle' cue in *Gladiator* (2000);
➢ Craig Safan's near-citation of the 'swan call' theme from the final movement of Sibelius's Fifth Symphony in the 'Into the Starscape' cue of *The Last Starfighter* (1984);
➢ Cliff Eidelman's near-citation of the opening of Stravinsky's *Firebird* at the start of the first cue of *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991).

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[21] As Ronald Sadoff describes, "The 'temp track', a temporary mock-up of a film's soundtrack, is assembled from pre-existing music prior to the real, commissioned score being composed." Sadoff argues that "the temp track informs compositional practices and the final score" (165), a situation implied by Bernstein's score. Ronald H. Sadoff, "The Role of the Music Editor and the 'Temp Track' as Blueprint for the Score, Source Music, and Scource Music of Films," *Popular Music* 25, no. 2 (2006): 165.

[22] Paul Andrew MacLean, "Elmer Bernstein," *Film Score Monthly* 36/37 (1993): 14, emphasis original.

[23] See, on *Trading Places*, Ben Winters, "The Sound of Satire; or, Trading Places with Mozart," in *Sounding Funny: Sound and Comedy Cinema*, ed. Mark Evans and Philip Hayward (Sheffield: Equinox, Forthcoming).

In their book *On the Track*, Fred Karlin and Rayburn Wright even go so far as to list eleven "art music composers" alongside the films that have used their works as, what Karlin and Wright diplomatically term, "role models".[24] While it would be false to claim that only immature film composers rely on such classical models extensively, this moment in *Airplane!* serves as a parody of film scores that adapt material from pre-existing art music, or mirror temp tracks too closely.[25] The use of the *1812* (and to a lesser extent, the *Notre Dame Victory March* during the end credits) seem to deploy knowing cliché to establish the score's insincerity, but, while these citations could potentially be understood as not self-aware, another moment in the score reveals very explicitly that the music is deliberately deficient in certain respects.

Asserting insincerity

One of the most unusual and notable sections of *Airplane!*'s score occurs near the end of the film, when the hero and heroine share a romantic kiss while the camera circles them [1:07:25]. This clichéd moment is underscored, or rather, overscored, by the score's 'romance theme', accompanied by a choir singing vowels. The choir alternate between "ooh" and "aah" on each pitch of the theme, resulting in an awkwardly prosaic "aah-ooh-aah-ooh-aah" vocal part. As the theme repeats, it modulates to a higher key and the vocal parts ascend in pitch, until the choir can no longer accurately perform the notes, and are heard to be screaming in their attempts to reach the higher pitches. This joke not only satires the trope of a wordless choir singing the film's love theme in the final scenes of a film (as in, for example, *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and many a Disney animated film), but is seen to be insincere in two ways. It challenges the belief that first, even an inexperienced composer would not realize the absurdity of an "aah-ooh-aah" lyric, but further, and secondly, that in the course of a motion picture production, the out-of-range vocal parts would be rectified during the scoring sessions. Unlike other aspects of the score, the music in this scene is not plausibly the work of a composer writing in a 'sincere' way – these are ostentatiously deliberate deficiencies in the score.

This example betrays *Airplane!*'s score as the product of an impersonation of an immature composer, rather than the work of a true beginner. For the viewer knowledgeable about film music composers, Bernstein's prominent credit at the start of the film would have already made this fact patently obvious, and that the film is understood as a comedy suggests that the score is more likely to be heard as insincere, rather than genuinely defective. Perhaps it is significant that this 'screeching choir' scene occurs in the closing moments of the film, when all pretense at verisimilitude is finally jettisoned in favor of the fully absurd as the inflatable autopilot flies the crashed plane away from the airport and up into a sky filled with fireworks.

The moment of the screeching singers is significant because it ensures, beyond doubt, that the viewer understands that the score is knowingly flawed and secures the two frames of interpretation for the aforementioned mechanism of humor by bisociation. Up until this point, the musical humor, beyond very explicit musical jokes of the type described at the beginning

[24] Fred Karlin and Rayburn Wright, *On the Track: A Guide to Contemporary Film Scoring* 2nd Edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 25.
[25] Referring again to Alex North's unused score for *2001*, North's opening 'Main Title' cue, clearly reveals a composer attempting to closely copy a temp track of pre-existing music. The spectre of *Also sprach Zarathustra*, from Kubrick's temp track, haunts North's 'Main Title' in an obvious way. If North's cue had been used, the point of reference would have been clear to viewers familiar with the Strauss.

of this article, has been rather more subtle. The audience members might not recognize the satirical dimension to the score, and understand the music's banalities and simplicities just as the composer's style. The screeching singers, through ostentatiously showing the score's self-consciousness, makes entirely sure that the viewer/listener is aware of the score's satire. This not only emphasizes the score as a source of humor, but it also helps to make clear that the awkward aspects of Bernstein's music are not to be taken as a genuine representation of his abilities – he is not composing 'as himself'. The assertion of the musical persona is doubly necessary when Bernstein produces music that may be seen to be somehow inappropriate or culturally insensitive, if it were taken as sincere expression.

In one of *Airplane!*'s many flashback sequences, the hero visits "an isolated tribe". Just as the costumes and setting are caricatures of African tribal life, so the music is cliché nondescript 'ethnic' music. It seems that Bernstein's immature composer commits the crime of which many famous composers are guilty. While it is unclear if the "Molumbo" tribe that is mentioned in the film has any relation to the area of Mozambique by the same name, a musical stereotype of African music is nevertheless heard. This clearly primitivist music uses nondescript shakers, cowbells (possibly an agogô) and drums in triplet vs. duplet cross-rhythms with a drum struck with rute sticks. This percussion ensemble is accompanied by low brass instruments in unison that play simple phrases in a minor mode of limited tessitura.

In contrast to the ubiquitous caricaturing that non-Western music receives in film scores (a history that stretches back at least as far as *King Kong* [1933]), Bernstein was very proud that, when he used non-Western music as part of the composed underscore for *Hawaii* (1966), he "actually went over to Hawaii on several occasions and spoke to historians and listened to local folk musicians. […] We did a lot of research on *Hawaii*."[26] The 'tribal' section of *Airplane!*'s score not only functions as part of the scoring persona that Bernstein has created, but satires the stereotypes and preconceptions of non-Western cultures in films and film scores. The ridiculous nature of both film and score provides Bernstein with a safe space in which to create a satire of this kind. In the scenes set in the tribal village, Bernstein commits a common musical crime (albeit in a particularly exaggerated version), and one that he had previously gone to great lengths to avoid. He avoids any danger of his music (or even himself) being considered as genuinely ignorant or perpetuating stereotypes on two counts. First, the tone of the whole film that is resistant to any sense of 'truthful' or 'genuine' expression on the part of the producers of the film. When the film's world is so ludicrous that it involves inflatable auto-pilots, swordfights on an airplane, and a moment when a character's nose increases in length as they tell a lie, it seems unlikely that Bernstein's 'tribal music' cue would be taken as seeking to be any kind of genuine or accurate representation of such music. Secondly, the same argument can be applied to the film's score – as noted above, no viewer would sincerely believe that Bernstein's out-of-range writing for the choir in the final scenes of the film was a genuine mistake, or that the underscore represents his true technical ability. The ostentatious assertion of the insincere scoring persona is essential to enabling such jokes to be made safely – Shirley Bernstein can't be serious.

Reception, pedagogy and audiences

The comments made by reviewers in *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* (quoted above) suggest that Bernstein was successful in establishing the satirical dimension of his score. While I used Bernstein's description of his intentions as a way into my reading, the reception

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[26] Schelle, *Keeping Score*, 938–940.

of the film's music as "tongue-in-cheek" seems to imply that such evidence is not necessary for viewers to appreciate the score as a knowing satire of film music. This understanding of the score necessarily involves a critical perspective on the film's music – the viewer/listener identifies the ways in which the score is considered to be (comically) unrefined, simplistic, clichéd, inappropriate, and so on. It also relies on recognizing the 'insincere' dimension of this poor scoring. Particularly for film composers and practitioners who watch *Airplane!*, Bernstein's satirical score may even serve a pedagogical function. In caricaturing certain aspects of film scoring practice, Bernstein highlights them in a parodically critical way. For instance, the too-close relationship between music and action that Bernstein criticized in interview (quoted above) is not described, but demonstrated as vulgar in *Airplane!*. Bernstein uses *Airplane!* to implore composers to avoid thematic cliché (through identifying these same clichés), ignore the temp track, attempt thematic development, eschew simplistic score/action relationships, abstain from stereotypical depictions of music in other cultures, and so on. Using the persona of a composer who is guilty of all of the film scoring crimes Bernstein detests, he creates a score that highlights these problems, so that they may be avoided by real-world scoring novices.

Film music criticism has long understood the implied narrator created by a film score,[27] but *Airplane!* not only highlights the implied narrator of the score but also how this narrator is understood as a person(a), and one that collapses, or at least *can* collapse, into this identity. An apt starting point to discuss other examples of such scoring personas is the sequel to *Airplane!*, *Airplane II: The Sequel* (1982). *Airplane II* was produced without the involvement of the writers and directors of the first film. The sequel reprises the plot and many jokes from the first film in the context of an interplanetary 'airplane' flight. While several actors from *Airplane!* reprise their roles, Bernstein did not score the sequel. Instead, composer Richard Hazard worked on the film and, together with some "additional music" (as the film's credits describe it) of his own, adapted Bernstein's music from the first film for use in the second. Hazard thus constructs a sort of second-degree persona – he imitates Bernstein's compositional persona. The sequel film uses Bernstein's themes, and repeats his processes: cues are again mainly created from repeated soundings of the same undeveloped themes, and the music has a similarly close and exclamatory relationship with the drama. Hazard even seems to extend Bernstein's processes in some respects. For example, Hazard uses more direct repetition within the same cue than Bernstein does in *Airplane!*: the airport is introduced with two cues [0:01:42 to 0:05:31 and 0:06:16 to 0:07:01] that entirely comprise of eleven undeveloped soundings of the main 'danger theme' from *Airplane!*. Hazard attempts to score the film 'as' Bernstein, and perpetuate the scoring persona that Bernstein developed for the first film.

The situation here is arguably more complicated than *Airplane!*, because of the two levels of compositional persona. While Bernstein's persona is deliberately (and ultimately ostentatiously) inauthentic, Hazard's first degree of scoring persona is sincere – this is not a parody of Bernstein's scoring, but is instead a sincere imitation of Bernstein, even if the style being sincerely copied is one that is a parody of an immature composer. This two level persona in Hazard's score may be part of the reason that the sequel's score is less humorous (at least, for this viewer): the parody by second degree is less successful than the first film at establishing two precise frames of bisociation/interpretation (i.e. the 'bad score' and 'knowingly bad score') because of the interference of the specter of the first film's score, which is not itself the subject of parody, but imitation. Hazard's score is not 'bad' enough for

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[27] See Guido Heldt, *Music and Levels of Narration in Film: Steps Across the Border* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2013).

successful comedic satire, because it has been charged with imitating Bernstein's score 'well'.

Authorship in the score

Hazard's task of imitating another composer in *Airplane II* was not a unique one. For the second *Harry Potter* film, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (2002), composer William Ross worked to create the score using John Williams's music from the previous films and several new themes written for the film by Williams. While "Music by John Williams" is shown as a credit at the end of the film, it is followed by "Music Adapted and Conducted by William Ross". The intention seems clearly to create a 'John Williams' score, even though the famous composer's schedule did not allow him to write the score in the more traditional fashion.

A similar situation is found in video games based upon films. While most video games will include at least some music from the film score, it is usually the case that additional music will be required for the game. The composer(s) for the game will be challenged to write new music in the style of the film soundtrack, emulating the film composer's scoring style, much in the same way that Hazard wrote for *Airplane II* like Bernstein scored *Airplane!*, and Ross wrote a 'John Williams' score for *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. In the games, the consistency of musical style is part of the way that the game asserts that it is part of the same fictional universe as the film. For games, a composer, or many composers, often aim(s) to score the media in the style of another; Graeme Norgate and Grant Kirkhope, for example, scored the game of *GoldenEye 007* (1997) in a similar style to Éric Serra's score for the film *GoldenEye* (1995).

Perhaps these examples, however, force us to confront the issue of authorship in film scores more generally: while a single composer's name may appear as the 'music by' credit, often multiple composers will contribute to a film's score. In the classical Hollywood studio system, several composers would write for a film,[28] and this practice continued into the 1970s.[29] The most famous recent manifestation of the multi-author score is the Media Ventures/Remote Control Productions scoring studio led by Hans Zimmer (and formerly Jay Rifikin). In the Remote Control model of film scoring, several composers work together to score a film, under the ostensible guidance of Zimmer, who often receives the "music by" credit, as on, for example, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (2006).[30] For the listener, the compositional input of the contributing composers are indistinguishable from the single persona created by the score as it sounds in the film. In a television series that includes multiple composers on the writing staff, as was the case for *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994), composers must write in a complementary fashion, lest the scoring persona change radically from episode to episode. Composer Ron Jones, for example, ultimately stopped writing for *The Next Generation* because, in part, his music was heard as too contrasting in style with the other composers on the series, and the producers were unsatisfied

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[28] See Ben Winters, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold's The Adventures of Robin Hood: A Film Score Guide* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2007), 8–15.

[29] To cite just one example, Alexander Courage and Fred Steiner contributed to *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* [1979], for which Jerry Goldsmith received the "music by" credit.

[30] The credits for *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* include 'additional music by' credits for Lorne Balfe, Tom Gire, Nick Glennie-Smith, Henry Jackman, Trevor Morris, John Sponsler, and Geoff Zanelli. See Dan Goldwasser, "Breaking the Rules with Hans Zimmer," *Soundtrack.net* 2006, accessed 28 October 2013, http://www.soundtrack.net/content/article/?id=205.

with the degree to which his music conformed to the 'house style'.[31] In the cases of these games, films, and television where more than one composer contributes to the soundtrack, the aim is to create a score that, if not entirely homogenous, stands as a whole and implies a singular musical persona. Perhaps it is now time to reconsider the notion of a compositional persona.

Conclusions: personas and implied authors

We may conceptualize two related, but distinct definitions of a compositional persona. The first, as in the case of Hazard, Bernstein and Ross, is a composer's attempt to adopt a particular persona when writing for the moving image. This persona, and its adoption, may be earnest (as in Ross's *Potter* score and games of films), or involve a persona that is comedic and shown to be inauthentic (as in Bernstein's *Airplane!*). The second distinct definition comes not from the composer's intentional actions, but from the viewer's understanding of the film. This compositional persona is rather the persona which the film viewer perceives from the score – the persona which is constructed and implied by the musical soundings in the film. This persona may, or may not, be understood as 'authentic'. While it may be argued that this latter perspective has little to distinguish it from a musical narrator, it refocuses attention not on the reported information, but instead on the attributes, attitudes and processes of this implied narrator. It asks us to consider how the persona of the composer is implied by the performative action of the musical score, and in turn, how this implied author is understood by audiences.

The persona created by a score may be distinctly problematic. The score for *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), by Joseph Carl Breil has been famously criticized for its racism, most particularly with respect to the so-called "motif of barbarism"[32] whose primitivist signifiers were associated with the people of color in the film. In this situation, and particularly for a modern audience, the musical persona created by the score is racist, just as is the case with scores that stereotype other musical cultures (such as Henry Mancini's music for Mr. Yamamoto in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* [1961]). This kind of criticism can obviously be extended to misogyny, ableism, homophobia, transphobia and other instances of discrimination.

While *Airplane!* is an important filmic text, its significance begins, not ends, with the wide dissemination of the film. This film has lessons to teach the viewer about film scoring, both in the particular practices that Bernstein seems to teach composers to avoid, and how it reveals that film scores construct personas, and, furthermore, that these personas are, or at least can be, consciously interpreted by audiences.

The case of *Airplane!* shows the complex performance of personas that can occur in film scores: while the young composer is a persona created and performed by Bernstein, the screeching choir at the end of the film makes obvious that this is an inauthentic persona. *Airplane!* not only prompts the viewer to engage in critical consideration through the comic exaggeration of film scoring clichés and what Bernstein sees as common deficiencies in film

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[31] See Lukas Kendall, "Ron Jones: Fighting for the Music of the Final Frontier," *Film Score Monthly* 1, no. 25 (1992): 16–18.

[32] Jane Gains and Neil Lerner, "The Orchestration of Affect: The Motif of Barbarism in Breil's *The Birth of a Nation* Score," in *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, ed. Richard Abel and Rick Altman (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press), 252–268.

scores, but it also shows the distinction between the scoring persona created by the film, and the real person of the composer.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

Airplane! makes clear, through Bernstein's processes and the film's reception, that personas can be created through film scoring. We have seen some of the ways in which this persona can be forged and articulated in just one example. Furthermore, this film suggests that audiences are able to understand film music as implying such a persona, and viewers may interpret scores in terms of personalities. These personas can be used to serve satirical, comedic and educational ends, as *Airplane!* demonstrates, but the 'uses' of the persona identified in this article are only a small number of the possible implications and effects of these personas. The personas as understood by audiences may or may not be personas intentionally or consciously deployed by a composer. *Airplane!* succeeds in its aim of implying an inauthentic persona, but such success is not automatically assured; the composer's intention to create a persona (if there even is such direct intention) may not be communicated to the audience, resulting in a different persona that is 'read' by the viewers.

The challenge that thus faces analysts is to consider the work of other personas, particularly with respect to the continuity and contrast of personas over film series and multi-media franchises,[33] and in the cases of problematic scores and films (including the extent to which the score personas are complicit, apathetic, or rebellious to the problematic aspects of the film's narration beyond the music).[34] Ben Winters, for example, claims in that Bernstein's *Trading Places* score, the film's use of *The Marriage of Figaro* "offers us a way to sidestep some of the contradictions and tensions that the film's treatment of social inequality suggests" by drawing upon the tradition of comic opera.[35] Thus in *Trading Places*, we may say that Bernstein's persona has a 'political' (in the loosest sense) agenda, which is distinct from, and challenges, the problematic racial politics of the film's narrative. The compositional agency, his persona in the film, much like in *Airplane!* has something distinct to say and do.

We must further understand the process by which personas are created. Composers and producers work to create music in texts. The texts imply personas for the viewer (even if a unified persona is the product of several composers' work). These personas, taken together in accumulated understanding by a viewer over the course of a composer's career, collage-like, build the image of the composer themselves. The critical perspective of a 'musical persona' asks the critic and audience to put the 'person' into the film score (that is a narra*tor*, not just narra*tion*). Aside from those watching the film, the notion of a 'musical persona' is important for composers, who should perhaps be urged to consider carefully what personas they create through their composition, especially when these personas are not as obviously distinct from the real person of the composer as is the case in *Airplane!*. It is essential to recognize the implied human agency that audiences can infer from the music, what people/personas composers create, and consider what film music performatively 'does', particularly when these personas, unlike *Airplane!*'s, may indeed be thought of as Surely Serious.

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[33] I have in mind analysis that traces analysis over multiple media and texts, such as I have previously attempted in a limited way in my own work: See Tim Summers, "*Star Trek* and the Musical Depiction of the Alien Other," *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 7, no. 1 (2013), 19–52.

[34] Here, I have focussed on 'non-diegetic underscore', but the notion of a musical persona need not be limited to such music. Musical agency within a film may easily include sourced and 'diegetic' music.

[35] Winters, "Sound of Satire".

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All musical figures are audio transcriptions by the author.