

C'ERA UNA VOLTA IL WEST: An Opera to do with Death?

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- Sooner or later, everyone who writes about Leone calls him 'operatic.' (Cumbow 1987, 213)
- [Leone's] masterpiece may be described as an opera in which the arias are not sung but stared. (Jameson 1973, 11)
- [M]any critics described the film as an operatic masterpiece. (Parkinson 2005, 903–4)
- [A]n operatic tale of mystery, revenge, and struggle for power (Burlingame 2000, 127)
- [Leone's] later films [...] were operatic meditations on the western and the gangster film respectively (Cook (ed.) 2005, Q12)
- The intent is operatic, but the effect is soporific. (Time Magazine, 1969)

Many commentators, even in brief reviews, use the term 'operatic' or 'opera' in describing *C'ERA UNA VOLTA IL WEST* (*ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST*, I/USA 1968), but few explain their use of the word. While this is not the place to consider the larger debate of 'film as opera'¹, the fact that the music was written and recorded before the shooting of the film, used to guide actors and technicians, and to help in the editing process, might allow us to treat *ONCE UPON A TIME* as unusual. In what ways might this film be considered operatic? Is it an essentially operatic conception? Is this *cinematic* opera?² And what would that mean? The characters do not sing, but 'cinematic opera' might generate its own techniques. One music dictionary defines opera not in terms of singing, but states that 'the essence of opera is that the mus[ic] is integral and is not incidental, as in a "musical" or a play with mus[ic]'.³ It is this integration of Ennio Morricone's music into the dramatic conception that highlights the functional difference between the music in *ONCE UPON A TIME* and the majority of films.⁴ Despite the music being an integral element of the film from the start, and not a conventionally added afterthought, Morricone is not the originator of the film's conception: he was instructed by Leone, and worked to articulate the director's ideas and vision, rather than his own. Therefore, as in opera, the function of the 'author' is spread between several people – the director, writers, composer, director of photography, set designer etc. Since all collaborators are working to specification and dictation by Leone, he appears almost as a distanced Wagner, removed one step by technical (in)ability from his *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This

¹ In music scholarship, the concept of 'film as opera' is often not favoured (see Brown 1994, p. 43), but Marcia Citron's recent *When Opera Meets Film* (2010) has successfully rehabilitated the idea, though in a very different set of directions than those proposed in the present article.

² The term is from Staig and Williams (1975, p. 117).

³ Kennedy 1996, p. 529.

⁴ It is my aim to avoid overtly daring hermeneutics, and ensure that my discussion of the film is carefully grounded in the text itself. I would therefore not seek to cast *ONCE UPON A TIME* as a Wagnerian epic, with the harmonica as a corrupting ring, consuming the character Harmonica's existence, and the three gunmen as neo-Rhinemaidens, killed as a symbol of the impending cowboy-Dämmerung of the West. It is, however, the tempting malleability of Leone's images that makes discussion of this film so dangerous (and so rewarding). My operatic analysis does not rely on the exclusivity of the identified features to opera. It is rather the commonality of phenomena between *ONCE UPON A TIME* and a typical opera construct that I seek to recognize and use.

is ‘A Film by Sergio Leone’, but it would not have been possible without the talent of Morricone (in particular) and his other collaborators. Perhaps it is ironic that it is a non-musician who conceived and produced this most operatic of cinematic conceptions. Finally achieving his ambition to have the score fully written prior to shooting⁵, Leone played the music on set (in rough-cut format). Leone said:

Throughout the shooting schedule, we listened to the recordings. Everyone acted with the music, followed its rhythm, and suffered with its ‘aggravating’ qualities.⁶

Actress Claudia Cardinale recalls that ‘every time I had to act a scene, he would put on [...] the music for my character.’⁷

Leone considered there to be too much dialogue over music and sounds in the American Western, so the score is mixed very prominently in the soundtrack.⁸ But he was not a musician, nor musically articulate. According to Morricone, ‘Sergio was almost tone deaf [...] It was a huge effort on my part to understand which theme he was referring to’.⁹ When instructed to create the score, Morricone was not given the script:

He told me the story, his take on the characters, and even what the design of the sets would look like. Then I would compose the music [...] I would play him the themes [on the piano], he would discuss them.¹⁰

The score was also used by Leone to lure actors such as Cardinale to the project. She recalled: ‘While I listened, I understood every moment of the film, shot by shot, before seeing any of it on the screen’.¹¹ The large budget allowed lavish sets with ‘authentic’ detailing, if not complete historical accuracy. As part of the film’s ‘mythic texture’, Leone’s film harbours gestures of realism but does not attempt to portray reality; instead, it creates a kind of authentic surrealism.

The Operatic Comparison

⁵ In *IL BUONO, IL BRUTTO, IL CATTIVO* (THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY, I/SPAIN/FRG 1966), source songs were performed on set. For *ONCE UPON A TIME*, short linking passages of music were created after the final cut, but no significant musical material was added.

⁶ Frayling 2000, p. 196. It was not just actors who were affected by the music. Sergio Donati, the screenwriter, recalled: ‘I saw when they shot the scene where Jill comes to the McBain farm and the corpses are laid out on the table – and they played this theme, and the grips were in tears. It was sunset [...] But the toughest grips were crying. Everybody on the set was crying except Claudia [Cardinale]’ (Frayling 2005, p. 157). Leone wanted to play music on set ‘to create the right atmosphere, focus concentration’ and ‘to help the chief camera operator find the softness necessary to make tracking shots, as if he was playing a violin’ (Frayling 2000, p. 428). In this way the motion of the camera as Jill leaves Flagstone station was created and timed perfectly to create a musical and visual crescendo (see below).

⁷ Frayling 2000, p. 278.

⁸ Frayling 2000, p. 154.

⁹ Ebd.

¹⁰ Frayling 2005, p. 96.

¹¹ Frayling 2000, p. 278.

The characters of *ONCE UPON A TIME* are archetypes of the Western.¹² With the end of the frontier West of Western imagination that Leone's film is about, these iconic characters are at the end of their reign. Leone himself alluded to the *commedia dell'arte* tradition in his use of stock characters, and the *pupi siciliani* characters which are both historical and legendary (possibly resonating in images such as Figure 1).¹³ In the same way that *opera buffa* roles were character types known to an eighteenth-century audience, Leone's characters achieve this sense of familiarity to a film audience versed in the Western. Both Leone and *opera buffa* draw on established roles, resulting in the characters displaying an operatic undertone of theatricality.



Figure 1: Is this Cheyenne watching the puppet theatre that Frank and Harmonica are part of, walking under their 'proscenium arch'?¹⁴

Leone used the term 'fairy-tales for grown-ups' to describe his films¹⁵, and like fairy-tales or opera, the emphasis is on ritual, rhetoric and enactment, not necessarily on the plot.¹⁶ Critic Robert Cumbow proposed that

*Leone's stories are the classically-based tales of destiny, revenge, betrayal, obsession, and madness that sprang from the Attic stage [...] Leone's stories are all twice-told tales; hence the sense of fate, of a predestined outcome.*¹⁷

Opera scholar David Kimbell traces the same Greek heritage of the opera libretti of Metastasio, whose texts were set prolifically in the eighteenth century.¹⁸

The vendetta is common both on the eighteenth/nineteenth-century operatic stage and in this cinematic desert. By creating the impression that the events taking place are of far greater significance than a mere personal disagreement, it carries a sense of epic symbolism that opera creates, such as Joseph Kerman has described the elevation of a basic love story in *Tristan and Isolde* to a 'compelling higher reality of our spiritual universe'.¹⁹ *ONCE UPON A*

¹² Indeed, the entire film abounds with references to other Western films (see Frayling's identification of filmic predecessors in Frayling, 2005, 59–63).

¹³ Frayling 2005, p. 76. In the Sicilian traditional puppet theatre (*pupi siciliani*) stock characters are embellished with characteristics of specific local townspeople (Leone in Frayling 2005, p. 76).

¹⁴ Fawell 2005, p. 125.

¹⁵ Frayling 2005, p. 15.

¹⁶ The plot of *ONCE UPON A TIME* is a standard, well-worn Western story of the approach of the civilizing West in the form of the railroad, in combination with a personal vendetta narrative.

¹⁷ Cumbow 1987, p. 214.

¹⁸ Kimbell 1991, pp. 185–6.

¹⁹ Kerman 1959, p. 195.

TIME's cosmic mechanism, bringing together Frank and Harmonica for the payment of a debt through the force of destiny, is part of the 'mythic-poetic vision, based upon an intelligent combination of visuals and soundtrack'²⁰, a vision one can find in opera, especially in the works of the latter nineteenth century.²¹ Similar fatalistic mythic poeticism can be found in Verdi (*Rigoletto*), Tchaikovsky (*Eugene Onegin*) or, as observed by Gary Tomlinson, in Wagner (*Parsifal*): 'Wagnerian [poetic] myth functions by asserting a "universal humanism" that answers to the late modern subject's felt need to rediscover some generalized community of feeling'.²²

Emanuele Senici's exploration of landscape in opera examines how the depiction of an opera's setting is coloured by the subject matter and characters of the story. Senici gives the example of the mountains near Plymouth in the landscape of Bellini's *I Puritani*, reflecting the essential virgin quality of its heroine, of which the mountains were a conventional indicator.²³ This 'human geography' is equally in play in ONCE UPON A TIME. Despite the 'authentic' *couleur locale*, the landscape is an idealized reflection of the human geography of the characters. There is little to show that Harmonica and Cheyenne are cowboys, but, in the same way that Bellini employs mountains, so Leone employs Monument Valley (as iconic a Western landscape as one can get, given its role in the films of John Ford), as an icon of the story and the characters. While Leone's brutality and period detailing may echo a *verismo* school of opera, such as that of Mascagni, at the same time, Dalí-influenced landscapes, irony and the sheer unrealism of much of the action give an aura of surreality. Leone claimed that his 'fusion of reality and fantasy takes us into a different dimension – of myth, of legend'.²⁴ That dimension might entail a more than usually integrated relationship between the action and music and thus distanced from reality, rather as in opera.

The film's pacing and structure are carefully planned. Leone changed the American Western typical 'three act plus one resolution' form to one with multiple climaxes and confrontations.²⁵ This new structure was influenced in part by the nature of Italian film-watching. Christopher Wagstaff has described the typical (usually male) visitor to a *terza visione* 'third run' rural, southern cinema²⁶ who

*would not bother to find out what was showing, nor would he make any particular effort to arrive at the beginning of the film. He would talk to his friends during the showing whenever he felt like it, except during the bits of the film that grabbed his (or his friends') attention.*²⁷

This is similar to the opera-going habits of the eighteenth century, especially in Italy, where patrons would talk, visit other boxes etc., only returning to their seats for finales or favourite arias.²⁸ To attract attention, shootouts or moments of tension (guns drawn/fired or physical violence) generally occur every ten minutes in Leone films. The third quarter of ONCE UPON A TIME contains a lot of plot exposition²⁹, and no shots are fired for 29 minutes; but apart from

²⁰ Staig/Williams 1975, p. 60.

²¹ See Parker 2008 on the melodramatic vision in nineteenth-century opera.

²² Tomlinson 1999, p. 132.

²³ Senici 2005, pp. 1–2.

²⁴ Frayling 2000, p. 143.

²⁵ Frayling 2000, p. 141.

²⁶ *Terza visione* cinemas contrast with the urban, art-house 'sophisticated' northern *prima visione* cinemas. The *terza visione* cinemas were considered to cater to an unrefined public who preferred slapstick and thrills to an artistic work.

²⁷ Wagstaff 1992, p. 253.

²⁸ Rosselli 1994, p. 465.

²⁹ By this point, the audience may have taken interest in the plot, or perhaps, like the *arie di sorbetto*, it provides space for eating and social activity.

that section of the film, there are never more than 16 minutes without a tension moment.³⁰ Despite this, it is not the gunshots that interest Leone, but the slow, ritualistic, tension-building climax up to the shot, with carefully paced rhythms generated by the interplay of sight, sounds, music and dialogue, and often highly-choreographed *mise-en-scène*. The dialogue in ONCE UPON A TIME invites comparison with that of opera libretti in being simple and stylized, almost aphoristic. When Harmonica confronts Cheyenne who he sees wearing clothing matching that of his attackers at the station, he says:

I saw three of these dusters a short time ago,
they were waitin' for a train.
Inside the dusters there were three men...
Inside the men there were three bullets.

The words are often 'set' in the music and movement of the film in a way similar to a libretto. When Cheyenne observes Harmonica killing Jill's would-be assassins, he speaks his line 'He not only plays, he can shoot, too' seemingly in rhythm with his musical accompaniment, timed to allow his theme and dialogue to finish simultaneously. The dialogue is introduced by music, the line serving as closure to the scene or a cadence to a dramatic event.

Cheyenne in particular is often treated to 'operatic framing', where elements of music, dialogue and cinematic *mise-en-scène* explicitly combine to generate a particular climax over all three forces (possibly imitating the unity of motion found in a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*), and exhibiting a microcosm of three key elements of operatic production. As Fawell has described, 'Cheyenne's theme will sound, the camera will pan towards him [...] and only when all three of these movements (camera, actor and music) have conjoined will he utter his line'.³¹

Like an opera, the film takes place in a small number of settings: Sweetwater, Flagstone, Morton's Train or Monument Valley, with relatively few scenes (I identified twenty-five). Time is in constant flux: there is no definite time-scale of the plot. This is part of the film's mythic texture – duration is essentially irrelevant. The plot is slowly paced, partly because reactions are always being studied by the camera's gaze. This is the same emphasis on emotional reaction rather than plot action as can be found in opera, for example in Wagner, whose 'recipe is for a drama that consists not of actions but of reactions', as Bryan Magee writes.³² This emphasis on reaction is an oft-parodied hallmark of Leone's cinematic style. The film's unusual pacing caused American distributors to make cuts, which destroyed its rhythm, prompting negative critical reactions. Leone nevertheless believed that the use of music on set created the characteristic 'rhythms' of the film, as a composer has to consider both large and small-scale pacing in his/her score. This agenda goes beyond merely synchronizing the music to particular 'hit points' with the images, it traces and constructs the entirety of a cinematic rhetorical gesture. In an analogous manner, Gary Tomlinson has

³⁰ Only three times in the film are there more than twelve minutes between gunshots. These longest points occur approximately every 30 minutes (00:00:00, 00:23:02, 01:33:04, 02:08:00 and 02:22:48) and all mark significant periods of plot development. Thus the film's pacing is carefully structured to engage with the action and plot in a manner to give the audience most pleasure, keeping their interest through action between story development sections.

³¹ Fawell 2005, p. 199. Another example of text/score interaction would be when Harmonica lists Frank's previous victims to him: at the mention of each name, the musical score becomes distorted through the use of dissonant high string cluster chords interrupting his motif, as the impact of each citation is felt on Frank's conscience. He is arrested by confusion and possibly guilt, expressed primarily through the musical overlay to Fonda's performance.

³² Magee 1988, p. 15.

illustrated Wagner’s ‘local gesture’ of tension and release, and its cumulative relation to the ‘large-scale, ebb-and-flow pacing’.³³

When quizzed about the term ‘opera’ as applied to his work, Leone interpreted the term only in its most literal sense as filmed opera.³⁴ He considered the ‘only credible way’ to create opera on film would be to dub movie actors with singers. Perhaps this is exactly what he did with the Western: ‘dubbing’ them with the score and soundtrack. When asked about the comparison with melodramas, he responded evasively:

*If this comparison arises from the importance of music in my films, then I feel flattered [...] If it is true that I have created a new-style Western, with picaresque people placed in epic situations, then it is the music of Ennio which has made them talk.*³⁵

This may support a theory that the characters ‘sing’ through Morricone’s score, since they may not express themselves in operatic singing.³⁶ Marcia Landy comments that ‘[Leone’s Westerns] fuse the operatic and film melodrama’.³⁷ As would befit such a fusion, Morricone had an importance unmatched outside ‘musical films’ through the integration of the music and film.

Analyzing Leone’s Cinematic Opera

Morricone’s score uses a very limited amount of musical material. Aside from source music and *musique concrète* (see below), of the fifty-two cues, only five use material which is not directly related to one of the seven main themes, and of these, two do not contain any significant melodic material.



Figure 2: *Jill's Theme*. Associated instrument: soprano vocalization.³⁸

³³ Tomlinson 1999, p. 108.

³⁴ Leone said, ‘I’ve been offered operas to direct, but I simply couldn’t do it [...] When I see an actor singing on a horse, and he falls out of the saddle to become his noble self again, while continuing all the while to belt out his *bel canto* at full volume – I just fall about laughing’ (Frayling 2000, p. 52).

³⁵ Frayling 2000, p. 236.

³⁶ When Morricone was asked about the use of the term ‘horse opera’ (a slightly derogatory generic term for a Western), he responded, ‘I don’t think Sergio’s films are horse operas [...] The real importance of Sergio’s films, I think, especially the later ones, is that the films might well not be Westerns [...] They are about humanity’ (Frayling 2005, 98). It would seem almost as though Morricone has most objections about the term ‘horse’ – the ‘Western’ element – rather than the term opera, which often has the focus on human experience that he describes in Leone’s films.

³⁷ Landy 1996, p. 52.

³⁸ All motif figures generated by the author, transcribed from the Region 2 DVD with reference to Morricone/Riffero 2004.

Figure 2 shows the most obviously ‘operatic’ element of the film – the wordless female voice suggesting Jill’s determined essence. Frequently described as ‘*bel canto*’³⁹, this soaring line, especially during the ending sequence, provides a metaphysical aura around the proceedings and a sense of grand, epic sweep associated with this style of singing, particularly when accompanying extended crane shots: ‘soaring’ in both melody and visual effect. At this point, the theme transcends Jill and is appropriated by the whole country as she gives birth as earth-mother to the nation (similar to Wagner’s Erda in this way). Morricone uses the motif to imbue the landscape with humanity (and to imbue humanity with the landscape, as the two are conceptually conjoined through the theme’s use). The theme is associated with introspection, because it is frequently used when Jill becomes reflective, or is at her most vulnerable, such as during her love scene with Frank. In such moments, the music seems to express her thoughts and feelings as in a soliloquy. Claudia Cardinale has credited this motif as being the major directorial authority on the film: ‘it gave you the energy and the poising and everything, and it was so easy to act, to become the character’.⁴⁰

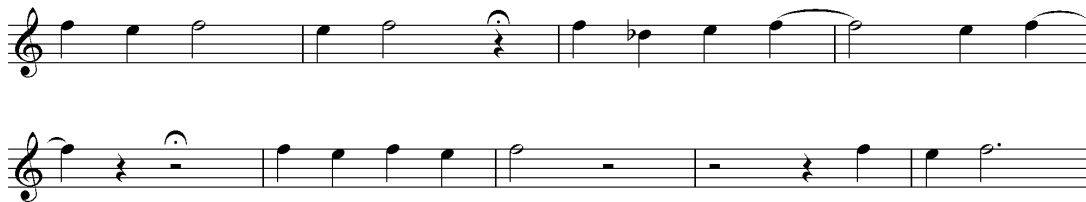


Figure 3: *Harmonica's Theme*. Associated instrument: harmonica.

Morricone describes Harmonica’s motif: ‘I incorporated a little series of interior sounds, part of a tonal language [...] I used just three notes of the instrument [...] as a physical force like a heartbeat’.⁴¹ In this sense, the score gives Harmonica life. The identity provided by the score tells us more of his character, style and purpose than a normal name. The very *sound* of the harmonica signifies pain and describes the debt of vengeance to be paid; and it often speaks for Harmonica, indicating his presence. As Cheyenne says: ‘When he oughtta talk, he plays.’

The initial three-note motif was created from a series of improvised combinations of Morricone’s selected notes by Franco De Gemini, instructed to imbue them with emotions of sadness and fear. The harmonica that was played had a chromatic lever, half-applied to facilitate minor second chords.⁴² Its sound pre-empts the flashbacks at each of the three times they happen, and illustrates the pivotal nature of these moments for the plot, together with the importance of the harmonica itself. The very sound of the hanging becomes the theme: in creating Harmonica’s motif, De Gemini recalls, ‘Leone put his hands round my neck and started to strangle me so that we could understand what was needed!’⁴³

The harmonica is used as a gateway from the reality of the film (and from the diegetic music) to the nondiegetic score. Sometimes it is seen to be played, other times not, or often, the sound is of ambiguous origin, thus smoothly transferring the diegetic music into the underscore, in the process unifying the filmic conception into a musical whole. In his death scene, the sound accompanying the harmonica in Frank’s mouth could be diegetic or not, but by this stage, the music from the underscore and the diegetic music are so integrated on a real and metaphysical level, the question becomes irrelevant to the audience – almost like a ‘trumpeter’ on stage in an opera miming to a performer in the orchestra. This scene sees the

³⁹ Brown 1994, p. 229.

⁴⁰ Frayling 2005, p. 119.

⁴¹ Frayling 2000, p. 284.

⁴² Horace 2005, pp. 54–5.

⁴³ Ebd.

music making the absurd and surreal seem obvious and of utmost believability, like suspended disbelief during opera. The music is at the core of the narrative connection between the past and the present.

After Cheyenne threatens Harmonica (‘Watch those false notes’), the latter replies by musically warning Cheyenne by a glissando on the harmonica to a dissonant chord. Cheyenne reacts, understanding the significance of the musical gesture. Leone weaves his fabric so that the audience also understands the significance and reacts with Cheyenne.

The first time we hear the harmonica, it is internal to the scene [diegetic]; when we hear it subsequently, it is no longer internal but it has retained all the dramatic strength, the irony and the tragedy it originally attracted from its internal setting...The sound was a symbol in the viewer’s memory and also a dramatic representation of the story of the entire film.⁴⁴

It is in these processes of the symbolic, narrative and emotive that the conception of the harmonica becomes operatic, in the same way that the music of an opera performs these same three functions. Turning once again to Wagner as an example, his motifs in *Tristan* tell the story, evoke emotional response from the audience and symbolize particular plot elements in a metaphysical way.

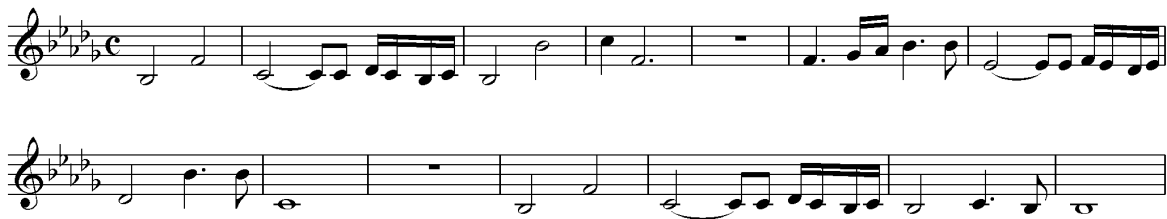


Figure 4: *Frank's Theme*. Associated instrument: electric guitar, trumpet.

Frank's character is described in the abrasive sonority of the distorted guitar, before his face is seen, as he approaches Timmy McBain. This theme (Figure 4) becomes a funereal, dignified and grand *deguello* in the final shootout.⁴⁵ The motif embodies the Morricone/Leone preference of setting violent sequences with very melodic, often highly ornamented, lyrical material which may also be found in eighteenth-century operatic technique.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Morricone in Frayling 2005, p. 96.

⁴⁵ The *deguello* is an ornamented Mexican trumpet bugle call, and holds significance both to the American historical West and Leone's history. *El deguello* was reportedly sounded by the Mexican army musicians at the 1836 siege of The Alamo, a signal of the intent to show no mercy to the enemy. 'Always its notes have meant wanton destruction of property and death without mercy, and for this reason it is often designated as "the fire and death call."' In fact, the very word *deguello* in the Spanish language signifies the act of beheading or throat cutting – utter destruction and ruin. Throughout its history this old call has always been the relentless signal of no quarter, no mercy to the foe.' (Williams, 1934, p. 181) Morricone had previously used a trumpet *deguello* in *A FISTFUL OF DOLLARS* and its sequels.

⁴⁶ Frayling claims that 'the chords of this music are based on Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. The Commendatore, the rider, the statue' (Frayling 2003, commentary track). Frayling appears to be referring to Act II, Scene XV, where the statue famously calls 'Don Giovanni, a cenar teco'. The string accompaniment is similar to that accompanying Frank's motif in its repeated chords and stepwise progression, and the melodies in both excerpts share a rising fourth interval. Though Morricone is known to quote classical works in his scores, it seems nevertheless difficult to validate Frayling's statement, and it would be unwise to put too much weight on such a comment.



Figure 5: *Cheyenne's Theme*. Associated instruments: detuned piano, whistle, banjo.

For the bandit Cheyenne, Morricone produced a stereotypical theme (Figure 5) ‘built around the type of clip-clop accompaniment that has evoked “westernity” on countless Hollywood music tracks’.⁴⁷ Cheyenne’s jaunty, spiky but non-threatening theme defines his character through the music as much as it is defined through his dialogue or actions. Cheyenne’s death is indicated to the audience (and Harmonica) by the extended pause between the last two notes of the theme. The theme has pauses integrated into it, from 01:03:21 onwards, which may be a manifestation of the character’s approaching destiny.⁴⁸ The whistling is part of the evocation of solitude Morricone establishes in creating the landscape through the music.⁴⁹



Figure 6: *America/Future/Jill's America Theme*. Associated instruments: celesta, violin, harpsichord.

The slow, stately theme for both Jill and America’s future (Figure 6) is reverential. The use of the celesta with its music-box childhood associations may signify a loss of innocence or the coming of age of America, and is heard with Jill’s theme as she forges a new era. Jill’s ‘art-music’ instrumentation (soprano, harpsichord, strings, horns) apparently sets her apart from the other characters, whose timbres are more closely related to the diegetic content; it prefigures her transcendental role as midwife to a new America. Yet simultaneously, taken with the main Jill theme, the solo voice is a direct link to the (her) human body and breath

⁴⁷ Brown 1994, p. 230.

⁴⁸ The pause’s introduction coincides with the sealing of his fate when his relationship with Jill evolves. This pause is also exploited when, during one of Cheyenne’s speeches to Jill, the music is timed such that it gives the impression of silencing itself for him to deliver his punch-line (‘make believe it’s nothing’), before continuing.

⁴⁹ Morricone in Frayling 2000, p. 155.

(like Cheyenne’s whistling or Harmonica’s harmonica playing).⁵⁰ Do Jill’s twin themes thus enable Jill’s move from time and location-bound character to mythic legend?



Figure 7A: *Morton’s Ostinato*

Figure 7B: *Morton’s Theme*

Associated instruments: piano (ostinato), harp and glockenspiel (theme).

A falling theme (Figure 7A) embodies Morton’s dream to see the ocean through its Debussian orchestration, and the ‘wave’ of the ostinato pattern (Figure 7B) rippling beneath it (tremolo, *sul ponticello* strings with upper woodwinds). The ‘theme’ is a pentatonic scale created from the omission of the second and sixth degrees of the minor scale. The resonant, metallic timbres that play the scale, together with the dotted rhythms, evoke nautical associations. Perhaps this descending scale also embodies his physical and mental degradation that is integral to the character (Morton’s very name involves death). In a world where characters are partially defined by their motifs, it is curious that one of the main villains in the plot should have such a luxurious and beautiful theme. Morton’s thematic material is the last of the main themes to be introduced: unlike the other characters, the motif does not accompany his first appearance. It is only heard when his power is stolen by Frank, over halfway through the film. At this point, the newly impotent Morton, his desire to see the ocean finally thwarted, becomes a tragic figure, and thus has a suitable theme bestowed upon him.

The score is formed from these identifying themes, constructing a narrative voice of its own. Morton aside, no character ever appears, or is implied in the plot, without the accompaniment of their motif. Morton does not receive a motif on initial appearance, and this may reflect the character’s impotence, illness and dishonesty. The motifs are developed little, but are repeated and combined to form short ‘cues’. Cumbow reads this as ‘tapping [...] the Italian operatic tradition’ in the ‘repetition of melodic set-pieces [...] [rather than] the commingling of themes’⁵¹; that is to say, Verdian rather than Wagnerian. They are used as signifiers, for example, in the metaphysical connection of Frank and Harmonica (in the second cue of the film, the yet-to-be-introduced Frank’s theme is heard).

The film frequently shows characters in a reflective state; the inner monologue of the soliloquy is provided by the music. When Jill stares in the mirror, it is the music (both emotionally and referentially playing Frank’s theme) that provides the meaning and emphasis of this action. The themes not only represent the characters, but also embody the core emotions associated with the characters and the story. Cheyenne’s theme is used for humorous moments; Frank’s for moments of violence and evil; Harmonica’s for mystery and apprehension; Jill’s for tender, lyrical moments and Jill’s America theme for grandiose, expansive emotion.

Morricone’s score emphasizes the significance of timbre. Thus the abrasive guitar of Frank and the dissonant timbre of Harmonica’s instrument describe their characters. When Cheyenne is perceived as a threat, his theme is performed on the harsher timbre of the banjo than when he is known to be friendly, when it is whistled or heard on a detuned piano. This emphasis on sonority is taken to the extreme in the opening sequence (see below). In the same sense, Morricone is creating the characters: all of the main characters are portrayed to the

⁵⁰ Jill’s America theme, however, with clock-chime-like intonation, may still link Jill to the immediacy of the diegesis (especially upon first hearing while she is looking at the station clock and her pocket watch when McBain is not there to meet her from Sweetwater station).

⁵¹ Cumbow 1987, p. 204.

audience through the music more than any other element, thus putting the ‘commentating’ musical voice at the level of an omnipotent observer, as in Wagner’s scores.

Morricone sets up a timbral association when a bell is heard before the deaths of Timmy McBain, Harmonica’s Brother, Frank (upon assuming the position of the duel), the three gunmen, one of Frank’s men in Sweetwater and Morton,⁵² fading into the sound of the rails being laid, which, on a larger scale, is the death-knell of the West. Such musical symbolism is perfectly suited to an operatic landscape.

The intervallic melodic contours of the themes are well-defined. Jill has the stereotypically ‘feminine’ rising-sixth gesture, while Frank’s power and grand stoicism is demonstrated with angular octaves, fifths and fourths (while downplaying the third degree of the scale), and Cheyenne and Harmonica have melodies that aimlessly wander around a single pitch. Indeed, Cheyenne’s meandering quasi-improvisatory whistling reflects the character’s own casualness and lack of direction.

Pursuing this analysis to a close reading, let us consider in detail specific musical-dramatic moments. Through close reading we can begin to understand the detailed mechanics of the music-image interaction in *ONCE UPON A TIME*. Each of these scenes has been selected for its prominent use of music, aesthetic weightiness and narrative importance.

Three Scenes

The Opening Sequence

One of the most striking sequences in *ONCE UPON A TIME* is the opening, where the ‘score’ is made from amplified sound effects.⁵³ This *musique concrète* approach was especially apt because the Italian film-making process at this time was completely post-synchronized, without any sound recorded on set, requiring the soundtrack to be entirely created in the studio. Such a process brings into question what exactly we consider to be the score of the film. The ‘music’ of these sounds evolves from their rhythmic assembly, and Morricone and Leone force us to listen closely to the *sounds*, similar to the emphasis on timbre in the presentation of the characters’ themes. With the first ‘traditional’ music heard being the harmonica motif, which this opening overture introduces, the line between music and sound effect is indefinable, so integrated is music into this world that Leone conjures up – it is part of the very fabric of the film. Because of the opening sequence, by the time the harmonica arrives, the audience has been conditioned to listen carefully to the sound world of the film.

Perhaps the opening is devoid of themes because none of the elements they represent have yet set foot on the stage and, unlike in some overtures, cannot be pre-empted. Are the titles a conjuring sequence, and equivalent of the opening of the storybook in early Disney movies such as *SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS* (USA 1937)? Is this the extinguishing of the specific past and the creation of the iconic, mythic, the indefinite, as though chanting the phrase ‘Once upon a time...’? The sequence is carefully structured, with careful control of time and space, in the crescendo and diminuendo of sounds and certain ‘episodes’ that occur in the sequence. Each character has an associated sound: Mulock’s knuckles cracking, Elam’s fly and Strode’s water dripping. Some are even varied: the fly in and out of the gun, the water

⁵² Morton’s death at a puddle rather than the sea is filled with the poetic irony opera specialises in. Perhaps the bell-like glockenspiel which plays his theme has the timbre of the death bell within it, just as Morton has the death of tuberculosis within him. Bells are also used in the starting and stopping of the train, which is killing ‘the West’.

⁵³ The inspiration for this stems from an experimental music performance which Morricone attended, consisting of a squeaking ladder (Morricone in Frayling 2005, p. 96–7).

on Strode's hat or head.⁵⁴ The windmill remains unchanged (if not constantly present) and continues squeaking even after the shootout. The sonic episodes build to a climax of the train's screeching appearance and a brief recapitulation of the sound elements before the final burst of sound as the train pulls up to the station.⁵⁵

This opening sequence has its antithesis at the opposite end of the film – the train's approach to Sweetwater, where sound effects are muted and the music carries the viewer through the death of the mythic West and outward to a historical viewpoint. From the audio extremes of either end of the film, a halfway point is found in the sequence where Frank is being stalked by his own men. This cue, 'Transgression', as the soundtrack album calls it, uses traditional instruments (mostly percussion), but in a method more similar to the use of sound effects in the opening, with emphasis on the sonorities and timbre of the instruments, eliminating any regular pulse or rhythm. If this is a 'cinematic opera', then the 'score' consists of the music, the sound effects and the dialogue, all in one unified soundtrack.

The Final Duel

The final duel is the climax of the film, musically and dramatically. Inevitable from the outset, Frank and Harmonica are drawn together, to this event, into this circle. This event concludes the main plot of the vendetta of Harmonica: Frank pays for the death of Harmonica's older brother. The scene invites parallels with the operatic death scene, complete with extended dying throes. Leone relinquishes dramatic and narrative handling to Morricone to heighten emotions and tension, music becoming the focus of the film. The characters seem to move to the soundtrack – they are controlled by it. The score is now telling the story, which dominates the soundtrack; sound effects are mixed to a minimal level. Other ostensibly artificial references to conventional theatre are made here: approaching the gunfight, Frank and Harmonica walk under a wooden proscenium arch (see Figure 1) in order to enter this theatre where the drama of both their lives will be exposed and resolved. Only one will walk back out of the theatre and they are both aware of this fact. By preparing the shootout through moments of little action, with the music foregrounded, it is almost as though, rather than putting the death aria *after* the killing blow, Leone puts it *before*. Indeed, he makes a whole film out of it, since everything has led to this culminatory point. But let us consider Jameson's claim that the 'arias are [...] stared' closely. Might the structure of the Leone-Morricone gunfight even be comparable to that of the Rossinian *solita forma* number? By comparing the sequence with number section descriptions by Marco Beghelli, I hope to draw similarities and parallels between the two forms.



⁵⁴ Fawell 2005, p. 194.

⁵⁵ It would be tempting to try and construe this sequence as canonic, but the construction is not as exact as to support such a hypothesis. However, the sound effects are introduced one at a time and often interleaved, especially against the near-constant creaking of the windmill.

Figure 8: "Just a man." – *Sprechstimme* pronouncements before the duel



Figure 10: Harmonica and Frank's vortex

Figure 9: Composition of vertical lines: Frank arrives at the only place he can – he slots into position⁵⁶



Figure 11: '... the camera looks into the eye of a character. The theme then singles out what he is thinking at that moment' – Morricone⁵⁷



Figure 12: Theatrical macabre unrealism: the execution of Harmonica's brother. The figures are arranged in point symmetry, in a manner reminiscent of renaissance religious art



Figure 13: The return to the present



Figure 14: The shared flashback recognition



Figure 15: Poetic justice

tempo d'attacco: Dramatically kinetic, in real time; communication between characters is active [...] rhetorical import, with grandiloquence⁵⁸

The opening of the duel sequence could be read as a two-part section, the first being when Frank and Harmonica meet. Their conversation in statements certainly has the grandiloquence and rhetoric Beghelli mentions (Figure 8). After a short interlude with Cheyenne and Jill, the two men walk up to their positions for the shootout – they walk in time with the score, as though in a ballet, and Frank drops his jacket when the choir begins to sing (he seems to wait for the choir before dropping it). The combination of Frank and Harmonica's themes create dynamism and cultivates an atmosphere of both tension and unhurried grandiose rhetoric, which builds to a climax of silence when Frank and Harmonica are in position and ready for

⁵⁶ Fawell 2005, p. 124.

⁵⁷ Horace 2005, p. 56.

⁵⁸ Beghelli 2004, p. 95–6.

the shootout (Figure 9 – the positioning is accentuated by the compositional landscape of the shots). The use of choir and *andante* tempo melodies generate religious overtones, almost inviting a processional analogy. The music scores both the mounting suspense and the huge metaphysical importance of this ritual toward the space-time confrontation of flashbacks that will occur. The camera motion follows the pace of the score, and the balletic associations, including the synchronization of the movement of the men in time with the music, become overpowering, dictated by the music. The camera describes an arc around Harmonica, like that around Frank before he shot Timmy. This ‘visual rhyme’ emphasizes the power of Harmonica, as does the entry of both men from the same side of the frame, which is marked by the guitar entries.⁵⁹ By moving the camera relatively quickly, but at a distance from the subject, Bronson (or Fonda) is stationary in the frame, while the background moves behind him, locking him in place (Figure 10). It seems as though the whole world is spinning around these two men, two centres of gravity for both each other and the desert world (not only space, but time, as well). Combined with the music, cinematic effects such as this vortex achieve a unified sense of motion/staticity and chronology/timelessness by the concordances of tempo, punctuation and harmonic/melodic rhythm.

*cantabile: The director [...] spotlights the character; he comes to the footlights, removing himself from the reality surrounding him. This is the moment of introspection [...] we are in the realm of the unrealistic [...] In [...] cinema, this brief act of passionate contemplation would be expressed in [...] a silent look; in opera, the introspective moment develops into a full musical passage which lyricises the fleeting moment. If a clock were onstage, its hands would have to slow down*⁶⁰

Instead of the character coming toward the audience, we go inside him, in the zoom into Bronson’s eyes, to the flashback which begins with the solo harmonica sound on the soundtrack after the silence. We enter the timelessness of flashback and reflection. The sense of time that was in the first section has evaporated. This time of operatic reflection reveals the inner soliloquy of the character. True to Beghelli’s description, unlike other films, this *does* lyricise the moment. The flashback is accompanied by solo harmonica to begin, and is from Bronson’s point of view. The second crescendo of the sequence has begun. We are reminded of the introspection by the second zoom, closer than before, heightening the tension (Figure 11). Frank’s guitar theme enters when the harmonica is placed into Harmonica (Jr.)’s mouth (just as it did before the death of Timmy McBain, and at the arrangement of the men at their duel positions). It is at this moment that Frank’s destiny is sealed, the ‘character’ of Harmonica is forged with his identity, and the events of the film are precipitated. The use of the guitar to mark this moment may strike one as Wagnerian in its articulation of fate and the way it ascribes huge importance to a small movement by a sonically explosive musical signpost. The situation of Harmonica and his brother is revealed through a pull-back shot, showing the brother hanging from an unrealistic arch before the icon of Monument Valley (Figure 12). Harmonica falls to the desert floor, thus hanging his brother. As he crumples, the harmonica is released from his mouth. Just as with Timmy, a bell chimes upon the death of Harmonica’s brother. Once again, the music performs a combination of Frank and Harmonica’s themes as heard at the killing of Timmy and the duel approach. As before, the music articulates the timelessness and profundity of this introspection and key narrative moment. Harmonica falls in time with the music, and it is only when the music is ready, when the cue ends, when the ritual is complete, that Harmonica may shoot Frank.

⁵⁹ Fawell 2005, p. 186.

⁶⁰ Beghelli 2004, p. 96.

*tempo di mezzo: dramatically kinetic, in real time; communication among characters resumes [...] The lights come back on, real time resumes, as does communication*⁶¹

With the sound of a gunshot (the first sound effect in some time), we are very suddenly pulled back into real time, and the present (Figure 13). To break the tension, we see Cheyenne and Jill's reaction to the sound of the gunshot. Frank is seen trying to holster the gun, as if to try and turn back time. Poetic justice has been served.

stretta: 'dramatically static, outside time: the action is already completed; strictly musical logic.', 'All that needed to be said has already been said [...] impressive conclusion, outside dramatic time'⁶²

We witness the drawn-out staggering of Frank, and the shared flashback as Harmonica falling to the ground is replayed (Figure 14), 'outside dramatic time' in a recapitulatory function, in answer to the question – 'Who are you?' Harmonica removes his instrument, and places it into Frank's mouth. It is heard, playing a series of 'death rattles' (Figure 15). He falls back onto the ground, echoing Harmonica in the flashback, with the harmonica falling out of his mouth. The sound of him hitting the floor is the punctuation to finish the 'aria', leaving only the sound of the rail gangs chiming on the railroad construction. Frank at last understands completely who Bronson is, his reasons and his motivation. Perhaps he understands he never could have won the duel. It is unrealistic to suppose that Frank only now identifies Bronson, but this implausibility is more than permitted for the sake of theatrical and operatic dramatic spectacle, just as the 'suspension of disbelief' in the opera house. The debt has been paid. Harmonica has lost his instrument – he no longer has an identity or purpose. He is now the 'Bronson' character stereotype, just like the character relinquishes to the singer during the stretto.

Frayling states: 'It is the flamboyance and the *rhetoric* of Leone's treatment... that support his argument that he was 'translating' into Italian'.⁶³ Perhaps equally, he was translating opera into 'Ford-ian'.

Jill's Departure into Flagstone

A particularly musically striking sequence is Jill's arrival and decision to seek her missing husband. The moment is significant because it is in taking this action that she becomes involved with the plot. With no-one to greet her at the station, Jill looks at the station clock, which prompts the beginning of Jill's America theme (the allusion to a chime is particularly obvious here with the harpsichord and vibraphone timbres).⁶⁴ After this statement, Jill's theme is sung by vocalizing soprano. At the moment this theme begins, Jill stops deliberating and decisively begins to walk to the station exit. (En)powered by the theme and mood change, she takes her fate into her own hands. Having tracked Jill into the station office, the camera

⁶¹ Beghelli 2005, pp. 95–96.

⁶² Beghelli 2004, pp. 95–97.

⁶³ Frayling 2000, pp. 129–30.

⁶⁴ The chime-effect may also hold intertextual value in alluding to the pocket-watch chimes that chronologically structure the duel in the Leone/Morricone film *FOR A FEW DOLLARS MORE* (1965). Jill compares her pocket-watch to the station clock to ascertain that the clock has stopped, and realizes that McBain has not come to pick her up, at which point she decides to take matters into her own hands and venture out into the landscape of the film on her own.

settles on a window through which to view Jill's conversation with the stationmaster. It is static until the next musical phrase. Jill exits the office, and, timed with the beginning of a horn and oboe-led transitional sequence based on the opening interval of Jill's theme and matching a broad orchestral crescendo, the camera rises, staying close to the side of the station. As the roof gives way to a view of the town, the grandiose orchestral gesture becomes an accompaniment to the soaring soprano line of a fragment of the America theme, now at the highest extreme of the soprano register, before a stately, confident string-based reprise of Jill's theme, which is heard as Jill is seen in the town of Flagstone. The cut from the crane above Flagstone to street-level images is again timed with the beginning of the thematic statement.

Clearly here, the music determines the rhythm of the film (the timing of the shots, the movement of the camera, the dramatic timing), a variety of emotional content (Jill's change of heart, the overwhelming broadness and spectacular reveal of the town) and perhaps even what is shown on screen (Jill is seen with the 'Jill' theme, while timepieces and broad landscapes are seen with the Future/America theme). The film here imitates opera's precise synchronization of action/gesture and music; it is the film which is moving to the music, not vice versa, and is dependent on the music for the shot to work. The unity of movement is striking: the crane rises, the pitch of the music rises, the musical texture broadens, Jill moves out and up through the composition and the landscape extends out before our eyes. As in other introspective moments of lyricism in the film, sound effects and dialogue are muted, giving the impression of the music arising from some interior world – here possibly that of Jill, given the boldness and determination of her actions, together with fear and confusion.

This sequence demonstrates the use of the music to provide an expression for the characters, though at other times, it seems very much distanced from the characters' interior worlds, often identifying danger well ahead of a character's knowledge, e.g. when Frank's theme is heard while Jill is introspective and the same theme indicates Timmy's mortal danger, and even anticipates the murder itself.⁶⁵ At other times it is used as a direct signifier – the use of Cheyenne's theme indicates to the audience the identity of the bounty Harmonica is collecting before Cheyenne's face is seen. Such is the strength of his musical identity, the audience are consciously aware of this musical message, and it is used for comic effect.

Windows through the Silver Screen

At the outset of this analysis, I used the historical production circumstances and method of *ONCE UPON A TIME* as a means of legitimizing the premise of 'film as opera'. This analytical strategy has revealed a way of understanding the film text as a whole, and has recognized and sought to appreciate the fundamental role that Morricone's music performs within it.

However, the film's viewer who did not have access to this production information would find nothing in the film text to specifically indicate that the actors are receiving the same sonic information that they are. Indeed, if Leone's suspension of disbelief is successful, the audience would be too immersed in the film to consider such technicalities, just as an opera audience does not consider the fact that the singers are hearing the same orchestra and sound as the spectators.

This hermeneutic gambit, therefore, is non-exclusive: other films which do not have unusual production practices may also be ripe for an operatic comparison. Even if the integration of music and image is forged only during post-production, the degree to which the

⁶⁵ In addition, the McBains are given a notable sonic warning before the impending massacre, as the cicadas fall silent. The characters take hints from the soundtrack.

music pervades the film need not be constrained by such chronological inconveniences, especially with modern editing technology: the impression for the viewer could be the same. It may be an indication of the extent to which ‘film as opera’ might be profitable as a hermeneutic trope that the viewer does not find ONCE UPON A TIME particularly strange: the fact that the music is playing on both sides of the screen, so to speak, does not seem to be perceived as categorically unusual, even if viewers recognize the importance of Morricone’s music in the film. Thus the film repertoire to which such an approach could be applied is extensive; the analysis in this article does not rely on production details, but could be applied to many films, either as a similar ‘film as opera’ or broader ‘film as composition’. Such a fusion of film studies and musicology may allow a greater dialogue between the two trends of scholarship, to produce fruitful results.⁶⁶

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⁶⁶ I am grateful to Peter Franklin, Enrique Sacau and Guido Heldt for their extensive comments, advice and support concerning this research.

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