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# Meaning and Interpretation of Music in Cinema

David Neumeyer, with contributions by James Buhler  
Indiana University Press

Reviewed by Aakshi Magazine

*Meaning and Interpretation of Music in Cinema* is a thought provoking book that addresses critical issues that come up when it comes to the relationship between music and cinema. David Neumeyer, Professor of Music at the University of Texas at Austin, expands on his earlier works where he had argued that the sound track as a whole, as opposed to only the music track, should be the focus of study when understanding music in cinema. In this book, clearly a product of years of deep engagement with music, Neumeyer adds a new and crucial argument- that narrative sound film is vococentric.

The idea of vococentric cinema recognises the hierarchy and internal dialectics built into the sound track and argues that the position of the voice is crucial in understanding the composition of the sound track. This approach, for Neumeyer, feels best to understand film as an art form, without losing out on what music brings to it. Yet it does not focus exclusively on music at the expense of cinema. This is a sentiment reflected in an argument made by Rick Altman which Neumeyer cites in the book, saying “music *in* film, not music *for* film”. The book thus forms a part of the literature on music and cinema which bridges the gap between music theory and film studies. It does this by focussing on the voice as a place where the two meet.

The book consists of seven chapters divided into three parts. The first part has two theoretically strong chapters which elaborate on Neumeyer’s arguments. This is followed in part two by a close reading of *Casablanca*’s sound track, and in part three by an examination of films where Bach’s C Major Prelude is used both diegetically and as an underscore.

Neumeyer is persuasive in the theoretical chapters as he cuts through diverse literature. He admits that his interest is in the first two decades of the classical sound film. Even if the vococentric model might seem specific to this period and form, Neumeyer’s style of writing charts through many of the important debates when it comes to music in cinema and its links to narration. There is a sense of flexibility and open-ness in Neumeyer’s style and arguments, for instance, when he conceptualises

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music “in a very broad sense” and argues that all music used in a film, as well as while film exhibition, is film music. Neumeyer’s reading of and making linkages between different theoretic ideas is admirable. He also makes clear theoretical arguments about, for instance, the hierarchies in the soundtrack, how soundtracks are composed and not just recorded, and the opposition between spectacle and synchronised realism.

In the chapters on *Casablanca*, Neumeyer, along with James Buhler, examines *Casablanca* from the perspective of its sound track. In three chapters, this close and extensive reading of the film’s soundtrack looks at the reunion scene, two confrontation scenes between Rick and Ilsa, and what Neumeyer calls the “atypically complex sound track” in the film’s finale. These examples demonstrate how vococentrism adds to our interpretation of the film’s narrative, giving strength to the arguments made in the previous chapters. The best example as Neumeyer visualises it, is when he talks of the reunion scene. The sound track here is analysed to gain an insight into the narrative of the film which one would not have if the soundtrack was not placed under observation. Thus, by analysing the sound track, Neumeyer argues against the interpretation of *Casablanca* as an example of a film following the conventions of film noir. Whether one agrees with this interpretation of *Casablanca* or not, it is a good example which demonstrates what one has to gain by using a vococentric approach.

In the third part, the last two chapters of the book look at the history of C Major Prelude and then examine its use in films where it is used in diegetic performance and as underscore. Through its persuasive and well-illustrated style, the book makes a good argument for the importance of vococentrism when understanding music and cinema. In the beginning, Neumeyer writes that this approach leads to results that are truer to film as an art form. This desire reflects in the detailed engagement and arguments of this book.