

THE MORRICONE PARADOX: A FILM MUSIC GENIUS WHO MISSED WRITING SYMPHONIES

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Abstract

This short essay reviews a specific aspect of Ennio Morricone's work as a film music composer. The review is of personal character and analyses the expectation of the composer as a projection of the social conditions he lived in. The review invites controversial discussions and may show some ideas of the way how purposeful research can turn into culturally contributing subjectivity.

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With Ennio Morricone, who died on July 6th, 2020, one of the artists who wrote the sound track to my life sadly disappeared. Of course, he made it to a ripe old age and no one can be expected to live forever. I have to be happy he could be active for so long. In my younger years, before turning to musicology, I was for some time active in the popular music business, precisely when Morricone was beginning to work with film director Sergio Leone. I do remember how arrangers and composers active at the time quickly realized he was an emerging force to be reckoned with.

I am familiar with much of his music, and observed over the years how the spectrum of his expressive means so impressively developed. Yet Morricone remains for me somewhat of a mystery. He managed to be quite original although, in looking carefully at his music, we find in it rather simple chord progressions. It is also easy to perceive (as he admitted in countless interviews) how much influence the easy-listening orchestras so popular from the 1950s through the 1980s exerted on him: Mantovani, Ray Conniff, Percy Faith, etc. One good example of that is quite apparent in his tasteful rendition of *Amapola*, an arrangement reminiscent of Mantovani and, at the same time, so very much Morricone.¹ We can see in this scoring a miracle few composers are capable of: to be totally rooted in the styles of their own time, and be original and personal nonetheless.

I am reminded in this connection of Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, which is original only in terms of its quality; otherwise there is nothing in the score that in any way goes beyond the standard compositional techniques of the time. In fact, composers like Morricone, Nino Rota is another example, could show their personal touch, even when using trite clichés. To achieve that is, I believe, more difficult than seeking originality by disrupting the rules of the game and inventing new ones out of scratch, like so many 20th century avantgarde composers wanted to

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkdDIV1M10c>, last retrieved 8 November, 2020.

do. To put it differently, the importance of knowing how to ingeniously elaborate common place materials cannot be overstated. Listeners recognize the familiar input, and easily gauge how creative is the transformation process.

To me, another intriguing aspect of Morricone's expressive palette is that, although he was for so long active in popular music, he hardly ever used jazz idioms.² Several other contemporary Italian film composers, even those a few years older than he was, on the contrary, frequently did: Armando Trovajoli (1917-2014), Mario Nascimbene (1913-2002), Piero Piccioni (1921-2004), and even Nino Rota (1911-1979); the latter much more of a conservatory "animal" than Morricone was (meaning, alien to jazz by education). Some amount of jazz idioms and, more generally, African-American, are hard to avoid today. In consistently avoiding any jazz tinge Morricone appears fundamentally impermeable to anything that could not be naturally connected to his habitual musical practice. His palette was rich, and yet he was no eclectic composer.

One more aspect I also find intriguing in Morricone is his divided self. Not many people today may remember to what extent, as a young man, he was a strong supporter of the avantgardes of his time. He had also been a student of Goffredo Petrassi (1904-2003), a moderate modernist, for whom music was a religious practice only concerned with the production of "works of art" significant in and of themselves, meant to be appreciated by posterity (an attitude which coincided with most avantgarde poetics). In other words, Petrassi was a true carrier of the "classical music" ideology as it developed in the very late romantic season, and into the early 20th century. He certainly never intended to raise songwriters and film composers.

Unsurprisingly then, Morricone wrote in his younger days a fair amount of concert music. Most people familiar with that part of his output, seem to agree that Morricone was very special indeed in arranging popular songs, and composing for the movies; and considerably less so in other genres. And yet Morricone had profoundly absorbed the late Romantic ideology of art, one which was based, as we know, on the most absolute scorn and contempt for all forms of art contaminated by commercial concerns. It is not surprising then, that Morricone would have liked to be recognized also as a composer of "serious music". In several of his interviews it clearly comes through how much he felt the stigma of being classified as popular composer. Admittedly, at the outset he got into arranging popular songs (for singers as famous in Italy as Mina and Gino Paoli), as well as deliciously frivolous songs (for Edoardo Gubellini), simply because he needed to make a living, which is so hard to do with concert music. One can do so, by working as a conservatory professor, something which is not for everyone.

All of that explains, in my view, why the late Morricone started giving public concerts in "classical format". There he conducted his film music, alas, arranged into symphonic suites, so trying to make it "classical". His idea was (one still cultivated in conservatories) that the best "functional music" is the one you can still appreciate when its function gets ignored or forgotten. That is a spectacular fallacy in my view; it is a fallacy to willingly ignore and, in a way, disrespect the intentions behind the music and the talent it requires to make music that is effectively functional. Only musicians of the first rank are capable of producing, exactly, what is needed under the most diverse circumstances – any time, all the time.

All such symphonic concerts directed by Morricone, easily available in the web, do not portray him at his best. His music, I think, is really great, really is superb, exactly as it was written for the motion pictures. His lovely tunes lose much of their charm when overblown into a pompous symphonic format. I prefer not to forget how great Morricone was in concocting sonic textures that owed nothing at all to the late Romantic symphonic tradition. It gives me considerable

² He has attempted only once some counterparts that are reminiscent of the era of Joplin and Gershwin in his music for Tornatore's *The Legend of 1900* (*La Leggenda Del Pianista Sull'Oceano*).

discomfort to look at him conducting gigantic orchestras, standing on the podium, dressed up with tuxedo and bow tie, with baton in his hands.

I suppose it is not rare for composers to be living contradictions, and to be unable to sense where their real strength really lies. Morricone was a great, great composer, no question about it. I find it therefore just too bad that he was not as happy as he could have been with what he achieved. I wish he had been able to forget how this idea that music deserving highbrow status is only to be found in “classical” domain – an idea which is by now quite overdue for retirement.