

Music, Drama, and How One Ring Cycle is Like Another

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We are sitting in the movie theater and watching Peter Jackson's *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and the Council of Elrond sequence has just commenced. Elrond summons Frodo to present the ring. Horn and strings beat out a few ominous chords as the hobbit takes some apprehensive steps forward, and an eerie sound is played as the ring is laid on a plinth. Boromir examines it, and the strings play the seductive temptation theme of the one ring to indicate the power it has over him. Later on in the scene, Frodo announces to the council that he shall be the one to take the ring, and the heroic strains of the Fellowship theme are heard, first sounded by the horn before being elaborated on by full orchestra. The fellowship theme is briefly broken by melodies reminiscent of the Shire when Sam, Merry, and Pippin burst into the scene to insist on their joining Frodo on his journey, but then the heroic strains of the fellowship theme return to complement the first shot of the newly formed company.

What we have just experienced in the theatre is an excellent example of the crucial part that music plays in film by helping to set moods and subtly communicate or emphasize points that would be unaesthetic or impossible to parlay through dialogue or visuals alone. Howard Shore's scoring for *The Lord of the Rings* films (hereafter referred to as '*Rings*'), in addition to being beautiful in its own right, is a brilliant piece of programme music, music that exists to communicate an idea or tell a story. Music used in alignment with various other aesthetic categories such as visuals and acting to create a unified artistic experience is very much a

hallmark of film as an artistic medium. Because of its ability to so beautifully synthesize art forms, film can be thought of as a modern heir to the Wagnerian concept of Gesamtkunstwerk, or total art, and Shore's scoring for *Rings* is a paradigmatic illustration of the contribution that music makes toward film as total art.

In order to understand Shore's contribution to *Rings* as a piece of total art, we need to understand the philosophy behind using music to represent something. Pieces created following this practice are called programme music, a genre most thoroughly explored by the romantic composers of the 19th century. Programme music is, very broadly, "Music of a narrative or descriptive kind" (Scruton), and it can best be understood insofar as it exists in dichotomy with absolute music. While there is some argument as to what are the exact definitions of programme and absolute music, we can name some paradigm examples: the tone poems of Liszt, Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, and Wagner's operas are all classic examples of programme music, music which seeks to represent some idea or narrative. Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, Haydn and Mozart's symphonies, and Brahms' concertos would all fall under the purview of absolute music, music that exists and is organized purely in accordance with musical ideas and conventions (Scruton).

The idea of programme music was codified by composer Franz Liszt and earns its name from his using a description in a program given to the audience members telling them how they should interpret the music they are about to hear. Though some later writers would go on to define programme music as including all music that is in any way related to some nonmusical object, Liszt's original usage of the term was meant to describe music which derived its internal logic from an outward source. Scruton elucidates, "Further, to follow Liszt's conception, programme music is music that seeks to be understood in terms of its programme; it derives its

movement and its logic from the subject it attempts to describe” (Scruton). A piece of music which merely imitates the sound of a birdcall would not be considered programmatic in this sense, but if the piece were divided into movements which represent the birds’ seasonal migration patterns, it would.

Film music is by its nature programmatic. Mervyn Cooke categorizes film music as “music contained within the action (known variously as diegetic, source, on-screen, intrinsic or realistic music), and background music amplifying the mood of the scene and/or explicating dramatic developments and aspects of character (termed extra-diegetic or extrinsic music, or underscoring)” (Cooke). Diegetic film music in particular embodies Liszt’s original idea to an almost ridiculous extreme: The various pulses and swells of music which accompany the action in a film would be incoherent if the logic of the film itself did not serve to organize the sound for listeners. We could actually interpret the film as a whole as a piece of programme music, the non-musical elements serving as the program which helps the audience to understand the logic of the composition.

Howard Shore’s score for the film helps to illustrate many conventions of programme music, and its style and content were both very much derived from Tolkien. As Shore himself states in an interview he did for www.lordoftherings.net, “I just kept that Tolkien book [*The Lord of the Rings*] on my desk. If you have that book on your desk, you know it could take a few years to compose all the music for that book” (Shore). Through the use of appropriate instrumentation and musical themes, Shore creates a vocabulary with which he can tell the story of *The Lord of the Rings*, and once this vocabulary is established, the score’s musical evolution is dictated by the logic of the film in the style of Liszt’s programme music.

Shore establishes the basic musical vocabulary across the three films through the use of appropriate instrumentation and musical convention to build leitmotifs, melodies that are associated with a certain place, person, or idea, a concept thoroughly explored in the operas of Richard Wagner. The use of folk instruments such as the tin whistle and fiddle are used to introduce the rustic melodies of the Shire which will later come to serve as leitmotifs for the hobbits. When Éowyn's theme is introduced, it utilizes chords which do not contain a third interval, meaning they cannot be distinguished as major or minor, similar to how the character masquerades between sexes. And naturally, Tolkien languages are used during choral settings to help establish regional feelings (Adams Annotated score for *Fellowship*, Adams Annotated Score for *Towers*).

Once these themes are established, their musical evolution is dictated by the action on screen. For example, the Fellowship theme goes through a number of variations throughout the films. The melody is first introduced when Sam and Frodo initially leave the shire by a solo horn with little musical accompaniment. The theme is introduced again in its full glory when the fellowship proper is established in Rivendell and we begin to hear decaying variations of it after Gandalf's fall. The warlike and industrial sounds of the Isengard theme and the theme for the Ents wax and wane against each other depending on the action in the movie (Adams).

Now that we more fully understand programme music, it is time we explored the concept of total art, and for that we will need to examine the life and work of composer Richard Wagner. Wagner was born to a time of great social, political, and cultural change and he was very much a part of it. Wagner's life is punctuated by debt, political exile, and strife in his personal relations. His music, almost exclusively opera, is steeped in nationalist thought. He could count mad King Ludwig II of Bavaria and the philosopher Frederique Nietzsche as personal associates, and his

operas, ideologies, and anti-Semitism would be very influential on the Nazi party to follow him (Millington).

On a purely musical level, Wagner introduced many novel ideas that would be massively influential on music in the following years as composers either affirmed or dissented against Wagnerian conventions. Wagner's increased use of chromatism, dissonant harmony, and key ambiguity forms one of the final stages in the breakdown of traditional tonality in western art music before its collapse in the 20th century. Additionally, he further expanded the size and force of the orchestra in order to get the characteristic big sound he wanted for his operas (Millington).

Wagner wrote mostly opera, and as such, he had many new ideas concerning the combination of music and drama. As mentioned earlier, he is known for his innovation with leitmotifs and he is very much a precursor to film composers in the way he would use certain musical ideas to represent dramatic ideas and the way he would have the musical evolution of the piece mirror the dramatic evolution of the story. He also changed the form of opera from its traditional structure to thorough-composed, meaning he changed it from a broken collection of arias and recitatives into one flowing and continuous whole, also a direct precursor of film music.

Gesamtkunstwerk, or total art, was one of the ideals that Wagner sought to embody in his opera. It entails the unification of disparate artistic elements into one grand whole, for this union, as Wagner thought, was their natural state. In one of his long essays, *The Artwork of the Future*, Wagner said about the arts:

“By their nature they are inseparable without disbanding the stately minuet of Art; for in this dance, which is the very cadence of Art itself; they are so wondrous closely interlaced with one another, of fairest love and inclination, so mutually bound up

in each other's life, of body and of spirit: that each of the three partners, unlinked from the united chain and bereft thus of her own life and motion, can only carry on an artificially inbreathed and borrowed life;—not giving forth her sacred ordinances, as in their trinity, but now receiving despotic rules for mechanical movement.” (Wagner 28)

Film is able to realize this marriage of the arts to an extent that not even Wagner’s grandiose imagination could have imagined. Wagner believed that in order for a thing to be total art, it needed to synthesize all the great art forms together, it needed to be produced by a community of artists, and it needed to arise in response to a desire by the people of a society. Film satisfies these three conditions beautifully. Film can seamlessly blend the acting and playwright traditions of the theater, the designs of the visual arts, and the sound of the symphony into one beautiful whole; its sheer dimension requires that a veritable community of artists and artisans contribute to it; and it tends to very closely reflect trends in society.

Nowhere else is this transference of the total art ideal from 19th century opera to 20th and 21st century film more apparent than in Jackson’s *Rings*. Even before Jackson’s films, people were pointing out the similarities between Tolkien’s novels and Wagner’s own ring cycle, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*: Both draw inspiration from Germanic mythology, both treat their fantastical subjects with a high seriousness, and both, of course, feature a magic ring. Musically speaking, Shore employs conventions very reminiscent of a Wagnerian opera, including the characteristic big sound of the romantic orchestra, a complex web of leitmotifs, and an extended tonal vocabulary. Shore’s music is coupled with all the other artistic elements present in *Rings*, produced by a veritable community of artists as the film credits can attest, to bring Tolkien’s vision into glorious realization.

In addition to synthesizing multiple artistic mediums necessary to Wagner's vision of total art, *Rings* also satisfies the condition of answering a certain communal need. Kristin Thompson's main thesis in *The Frodo Franchise* is that the fact that Jackson's *Rings* is a franchise and makes conscious choices for the purpose of achieving popular appeal does not diminish the artistic value of the films. Far from thinking that making films with such popular appeal robbed them of artistic integrity, Thompson states, "I admired the energy they [the filmmakers] infused into the trilogy by drawing on unpretentious genre cinema" (Thompson 58). I do not think Wagner would have disagreed with her. The main idea behind *The Artwork of the Future* is that art of the day had become stale in attempting to appeal to the capricious fancies of a bourgeois upper class and that true art could only be generated in response to a deeply felt intrinsic need of the common people, hence why one of the conditions of creating total art was answering this popular need. While it is uncertain how exactly Wagner himself would have reacted to the films, Thompson's belief about both the popular and artistic character of *Rings* is at least drawn along similar lines as Wagner's philosophy.

It can be argued that there are too many fundamental differences between Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* and the Wagnerian concept of total art for there to be a true continuity. Wagner had a very specific idea in mind when he originally proposed the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. He emphasized that the three primary arts which go into making a piece of total art are dance, music, and poetry. *The Lord of the Rings* does not contain dance; its use of music, while excellent and masterful, is not given the same integral primacy to the movie that it would be in an opera; and excluding for the occasional poem, the dialogue in *Rings* is told through prose, not poetic verse.

I would argue in response that even though Jackson's *Rings*, along with film in general, does not adhere strictly to Wagnerian convention, it is in actuality more successful at meeting the

spirit of a total synthesis of artistic media than Wagner himself was in his own endeavors. After all, for all his talk of uniting all of art into one grand whole, the irony of Wagner's legacy is that he is remembered primarily for his music. The reason why dance is not typically included in film is the same reason why the dialogue is not told in poetic verse and the music not given integral primacy: doing so would draw too much attention to these individual elements at the cost of the film as a whole, going directly against the purpose of total art. *Rings* draws upon a vast well of artistic resources, but it also has the temperance not to overly emphasize one thing to the detriment of the complete film experience.

In order to truly appreciate a massive thing like Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*, we need to understand it as a piece of total art, as a collection of multifarious elements that come together in glorious harmony that truly exceeds the sum of its parts. Howard Shore's work for *Rings* is fine in its own right, but it only truly shines when we understand it in relation to the films as a whole. Through music's power to summon emotion and forge mnemonic connection, the score makes essential contributions to the experience which, in tandem with all the other artistic crafts in the film, succeeds in drawing the moviegoer in and helping him experience Middle Earth in a way that only the magic of cinema, of total art, can achieve.

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