

The anachronism in film music

a brief introduction on the music for “The Devils” (1971)

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The Devils

director: Ken Russell
composer: Peter Maxwell-Davies
designer: Derek Jarman

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'Historical films are often made as if the people in the past thought of themselves as part of history already, living in museums. People in every country have thought of themselves as contemporary, just as we think of ourselves as contemporary'¹

(Ken Russell)

¹ Pag. 243 Major Phillips, "Film directors of the American and British cinema"

Introduction

This sentence perfectly illustrates the starting point of this essay which is questioning the role of music in historic films and the more generic issue of film music function to be truthful or not to the specific historical time set in the film, and therefore assuming the freedom of the music to convey or ignore history. The judgment of the sources of history and the fact that the audience perceptions can be manipulated by the director's interpretation of events, are both ethical and artistic issues. A film's historical atmosphere can be established very accurately on the external layers: locations, design, costumes, lighting... etc. Music function in films is not only limited to the emotional and psychological arena and therefore can also provide extra information to the viewer, if wanted. The most accurate film in terms of visual design in relation to history fails at a very elemental level. Representation of reality is always an illusion, because the film experience is a product of artificial conventions and innovations. Anachronism in film music has to be studied on a case by case, although if we think about it, almost every music in films is 'per se' always anachronistic by principle.

Diegetic music in films (music that the characters can hear) is one of the elements which can help to create the illusion of a specific time period with more or less authenticity. On the contrary, non-diegetic music is not forced to respect or follow the rules. There has to be some reasons for the music score to transgress the time set. One of the most extravagant examples of playing with people's expectations is Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The music style contradicts the visual historical conventions (past and futuristic time set) within the science fiction genre, going beyond audience expectations in regards of the collection of pre-existent music pieces chosen by Kubrick. At one point we listen to a XIX century romantic Strauss waltz against sci-fi scenes. We are not discussing here the other elements of significance of the music but rather the historical reference of that music within the context as an example of anachronism. The music language has different levels of meanings, so the apparent contradiction between music and images can not be judged exclusively based on of its historical element and its fidelity. In *2001*, there are other subtle implications which link music and film at a deeper cognition level.

The average viewer in modern films accept more easily the use of an older music style in regard to the historical period represented in the film, rather that avant-garde music in period films for example. The reason behind is that the acceptance of new codes of communication and structures in music is a long process. The hypothesis of a modern pop sound score used in a film set in the baroque period for instance, it could lead to some surprises, confusion or even shock, unless there is a reason behind that choice.

In our collective consciousness, everyone has a perfect idea of how baroque music sounds like. One should expect music from Bach, Vivaldi or composed 'in the style of' or 'influenced by' or any kind of pastiche with no negative connotations implied to this term. On the other hand, because baroque music has been already assimilated in our culture, it is not that shocking to listen to a Bach's fugue within a thirties film, as non-diegetic music.

In 2001, the natural shock comes from the fact that we don't know what the future would look or sound like. At first instance, we would expect non-codified music and sound design within the electro-acoustic genre, not a score from a clear Romantic period with all other cultural significance values attached. It is the juxtaposition of narrative, visual elements and music that create unexpected internal meanings for the viewer. Films are made for contemporary audiences and as we know, the music which has been already accepted to be part of our common western world collective heritage has definitely clear connotations that add significance to the film (emotional, cultural, historical etc...). The question are: what culture are we talking about? How is filtered and experienced as pure music or in the context of a film through our own individual perception, background or emotional state? How is it influenced by the fashion of the moment or the imposition of the Media so it become collectively accepted? Film music is influenced by all of this at the time, but here we are going to focus exclusively in the subject of anachronism in film music that works and try to find out why by looking to one example of a film based on real 1600's historical events using contemporary atonal music.

The objective of this essay

We will proceed to discuss the issue of **anachronism** in films by discussing the music for "The Devils", directed in 1971 by Ken Russell with a score written by the concert and theatre contemporary composer Peter Maxwell-Davies.

The Director

Ken Russell become known by his biographic films based on famous classical composers' lives. He belongs to the kind of filmmakers with no formal training background but for whom the cinema is the most natural form of artistic expression. He was a frequent cinema goer since his childhood. He started his film career as an amateur with project such as *Lourdes*, 'a documentary on the famous Catholic shrine and with a score of Benjamin Britten borrowed from his ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas*'. He started his professional career working for the Monitor Arts program for the BBC. Between 1952 and 1962 he made 20 films. He created a new style of biographic films: *Elgar* (1962) *Bartok* (1966) *Debussy* (1965) *Isadora Duncan* (1966) *Delius, the song of Summer* (1968), *Richard Strauss, the dance of the seven veils* (1970) *Mahler* (1974) and *Valentino* (1977). He has been a controversial director because of its way of not giving too much importance to the historic facts and by showing the personal struggles and the obscure side behind each artist.

The anachronism in film music, a biref introduction to the music for "The Devils".

The Composer

Peter Maxwell-Davies together with Harrison Birtwistle and Alexander Goehr belongs to a generation of contemporary British composers which emerged about the mid-fifties and known collectively as the 'Manchester Group'. They were influenced by the ideas of Schoenberg, Webern and the European avant-garde, and decisively apart from traditional composers such as Vaughan Williams. His music style is basically homophonic and influenced by medieval and renaissance sources, also interested in the music of these periods because of its symbolism.

This is a common point with Ken Russell. They use a pre existent material taken from the past and then progress to change it into a personal artistic experience. Maxwell-Davies has been compared to Ingmar Bergman in relation to his relation to the humanist tradition. As Stephen Prussiln asserts: "Both of them subject Christian symbols to severe questioning or reinterpretation, these men are believers, although not in the parochial sense. They are intellectual, sophisticated and committed to the notion of 'high art'. Both skew the trappings of social reverence and refuse to 'write down' to their audiences".²

The music for *The Devils* could be regarded as a natural extension of his work, music ideology and technique. 'Maxwell-Davies before actually composing his music for the film had decided that he would base the music on the medieval plain songs -an "Ave Maria" and a "Dies Irae"³. He always has tried to apply principles of medieval music into a contemporary context.

Far from being a stereotype of film composer (he never intended to make his career in films), his experience is not just an incursion into the film business. "The Devils" is constrained in certain aesthetic and artistic values which were unfamiliar to the composer at that time. The score is carefully written to the picture as its is shown by the composer's notes regarding timing cues, dialogue or synchronization points. He did not make any concession to his music style, on the contrary it seems that Russell found the right composer in Davies. They worked together in Russell's next film "The Boyfriend" (1971). In this film Maxwell-Davies work relied on arranging and orchestrating a series of fox-trots and other musical numbers instead of original writing. Ken Russell chose also authentic seventeenth century music played by the Old Music Consort and conducted by David Munrow. This music acts as diegetic, music.

² Pag. 3 Prussiln Stephen. Tempo 2

³ Pag 247 Maxwell & Huntley The Technique of Film Music

The film

The screenplay was based on Aldous Huxley's book *The Devils of Loudun* (1942) and John Whiting's play *The Devils* performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1961. The film was produced by Warner Brothers and created a big controversy at that time due to its visual excess and inner violence. The real facts portrayed in the film happened in France during the reign of Louis XIII. The film is about the collision between the roman catholic power under the figure of Cardinal Richeleu in Paris and the Huguenot minority in the walled city of Loudun, leaded by cardinal Grandier. It was also a political issue due to the desire of stripping local dignataries. Finally Richelieu wins by destroying the walls of the city. Grandier is burnt alive at the stake accused of being possessed by the devil. The director asserts in his biography that people just read the film literally not on a deeper level.

It is quite a modern subject because 'although the events took place over four hundred years ago, corruption and mass brainwashing by the church, the state and commerce is still with us, as is the insatiable craving for sex and violence by the general public. The film itself was universally condemned as sacrilegious by the irreligious, was a disaster in America where Warners got out the scissors and circumsised twelve minutes⁴ 'We know from history that the State usually survives while the individual loses out in these cases; but I wanted to examine what lasting impact the individual still has, even when he loses'⁵

The modernity behind the historical film

The modernity of "The Devils" is underlined by its flamboyant visual design with the authorship of Derek Jarman together with atonal modern classical music by Peter Maxwell-Davies. The music is clearly not a period film. It is anachronistic because Russell has taken the historical facts and then changed the external level, in order to achieve more immediacy to the real issues which are political and religious. This is one of the reasons why such a dissonant and modern score is suitable for this film. The set design is very important. They look quite modern and definitely non realistic. The convent, the church, the tower and all the buildings are white brick coloured. It is the kind of set and light design we would expect to see in a sci-fi film. The scene with Richelieu and Laubanderdemont is set in a non naturalistic place. It looks like a modern prison rather than a religious building. Another aspect of anachronism are the figures of the King as caricatures, but the most bizarre character is Father Barre who looks like a pop star or hippie, rather than an exorcist. Another element to be added to the list is the fact that the film, at points, was printed with blue shades.

⁴ pag 193 Russell, Ken "An autobiography"

⁵ Pag. 251 Phillips

Regarding the use of the strange appearance of the sadic doctors with gask maks is one of the many anachronistic elements as part of Russell's aesthetic vision.

Music description

Making an exhaustive analysis based only the listening would be not enough for this complex score. Here we shall discuss some interesting points about the function of the music. The first thing to notice is the almost absence of silence. The sonic space seems to be always quite saturated due to the amount of information for the ear and the volume level to add chaos between dialogue, music and sound effects. The exuberance is really achieved to the extremes in consonance with the film.

This give us the overall impression of a claustrophobic space not only in reference to the acoustic sense. The exceptions are most of Sister Jeanne's dreams. They are driven exclusively by Davies's music with almost no dialogue at all. The composer expresses in these terms his conception of the relationship between music and sound effects as expressive devices: 'If you are going to do something as unnatural as having music against a scene, I think naturalistic sound effects do not make it more natural. Music is a convention of the art form. In normal life when you something there is no music. If one is going to use film music, it is a stylisation and I think the sound effects should be perhaps be stylised.'⁶

Maxwell-Davies uses a small orchestra but then through some electro-acoustic transformations of the nature of the music, instruments sounds become difficult to be identified. He uses violin, vila, cello, double bass, trumpet, trombone, two saxophones, flute, piccolo, three clarinets, organ, celesta and three percussion players.

There is an interesting phenomenon happening to the music within the context of the film. Unlike most traditional film music, Davies score seems to be a continuous piece. There are music cues but, they are long and difficult to be perceived as individual pieces. Sometimes the music works not as non diegetic substract. The music when gentle and soft, disappears without the audience noticing it, but when violent, has a defined impact. There is a common element in the score, at a cognitive and emotional level throughout the whole film. The music although elaborate and modern, has quite instinctively primitive impact. This melts perfectly with the state of collective hysteria and sex depravation showed in the film.

After the opening masquerade "The birth of Venus" played by the king Louis XIII, we perceive the State and the Church as corrupt forces of power. The camera distorts the face of the king who represent the dyonisiac element, the real devil.

⁶ Pag. 251 Manwell & Huntley

The title music is a series of dissonant chords together with the disturbing effect of a glissando over the strings of a piano with a metal object, or probably an autoharp.

There is an interesting moment when the *Dies Irae* played by the procession is combined simultaneously with Davies music on purpose. The music represents the darkness and the sexual repression of Sister Jeanne (brilliantly played by Vanessa Redgrave). It is an effect of tremolo played sul ponticello. It fits the scene despite the number of sound elements involved in it. The position of the camera, from the point of view of Sister Jeanne makes us to perceived it as distorted. To give a sense of non-reality in the dream sequence, Davies uses 'strange' sounds like the flexatone when Sister Jeanne dries with her hair Grandier's feet. When her physical deformity is discovered, the music changes into a sort of chaotic series of glissandos rising gradually in register.

This scene works perfectly, but not as much as the following music cue when the black death bodies are burnt in the streets. The music starts with a big presence of percussion instruments. Everything in Loudon seems an open show, a party and so the music does. The tension is always high, so there is no time to relax the viewer. The music seems to be pulled down at the dubbing rather as opposed to the original music ending. The same occurs in the following scene when Father Grandier try to console the poor woman tortured by the doctors. There is a weird effect of sound perspective in the dialogue when the cries of the woman are pulling down suddenly before she dies.

The scene of the private wedding ceremony between Grandier and Madeleine du Brou's in counterpoint by editing to the masturbation and sadomasochistic scene of Sister Jeanne, is moving by the dramatic contrast between the two blocks. The music expresses tenderness, and contains subtle elements of instability in it. It is all about frustrated love and the music achieves this goal.

An unexpected music scene -because the change of style to a music parody of a Hollywood love scene- takes place when finally Sister Jeanne is announced that Grandier is visiting the convent to confess her, but when she runs outside to the encounter, she finds is not Grandier, but the austere Father Mignon. Another cross-style occurrence was planned to the scene when Sister Jeanne meets Madeleine at the gate of the nunnery. Maxwell-Davies says of these scenes:

'I had talked to Ken Russell and decided it would perhaps be lovely to have a dance under the scene, but not just a seventieth century dance. Why not do something completely crazy and do it in 1920's style! We though of some send-up music for the scene that follows where Mignon arrives. We recorded it. It turned out beautifully. It was splendid and characterized the scene very well.

When it came in context it stuck out like a sore thumb, so the music had to go. In the final edited film the music does in fact start a good few bars later than we intended it to'.⁷

There are moments of black humour like the scene of Louis XIII shooting men dressed like birds. His line said: "bye bye blackbird" and it is underscored with thirties music making a reference to a song of the same title. The scene is not just comic, but it has another level of interpretations. The climax of the film is the last sequence, the burning of Father Grandier at the stake. 'At one point during the music for this scene, he stipulated that one of the percussion players should scrape his fingernails against a blackboard. I put a microphone right up to it so it goes on to the sound track together with the instrumental music. One does not hear the scraping as such unless one really listens for it. I think the effect is there and think in a much more subtle way that is how the music works'⁸ With the last credits, the music comes to a plain and quite atmosphere after near two hours of over climax. The music lines become longer and, like the opening, small cells without thematic material brings the calm after the intense storm.

Conclusion

The music for "The Devils" is not based on the development of thematic melodic material. The range of register and dynamics is big and over the top, so the density in the music is used as an expressive device. There is something primitive in the whole score, matching the pathos of the film, through music with Dionysiac connotations. At first, the music score could have been labeled or perceived as anachronistic or against the film historical time set. The issue of anachronism is not perceived in the same way as in *2001*. "*The Devils*" at all levels is already anachronistic on its own rights and open to a more ambiguous music approach in relation to any reference to history, period or style. In *The Devils*, the events are real but they are presented unconventionally to contemporary audiences. The use of atonal contemporary classical music with suffocated intensity and controlled chaos helps to engage the viewer emotionally with individual characters and the citizens of Loudun as if they were witness of the events portrayed in the film. This is the magic of this contradictory film which makes us believe and feel the story using a combined set of artificial anachronistic resources among them the music, following the vision of a director and his creative team.

⁷ Pag252 Manwell & Huntley

⁸ Pag. 252 Manwell & Huntley

Note

Unfortunately, under the time constraints to finish this work and without the opportunity of discussing it directly with both Director and Composer, this work is uncompleted, a mere attempt to introduce readers to the subject of anachronism in music through a very powerful example. The second exciting related subject that comes out of it is a further research on the relationship between concert contemporary composers and filmmakers in history.

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