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A Walk Through an American Classic

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Abstract

The music of Walt Disney's classic films was written by a number of hand-picked composers who, working with Disney, ingeniously crafted the music to fit animation and bring musical inspiration to the homes of viewers leaving America and the world with a beloved legacy. Though Walt Disney was a cartoonist and not a musician, music was given a distinct, almost central, role in the creation of his cartoons. Special techniques such as Mickey-mousing or the click track were developed by composers and used to synchronize this music and animation. These processes really began with Disney and have formed the basis for all music synchronized to cartoon animation. From the very beginning with *Mickey Mouse*, to *The Silly Symphonies*, to the beloved classic Disney movies music has been an ever-present and developing center. Walt Disney, though not a composer himself, hired a number of key composers from which we have many cherished melodies. Unlike most other cartoons Disney's were focused on using music of the classical style rather than the popular style. The music from a number of classical composers was used or drawn upon as a model. Disney had a special purpose for the music in his animated films. Most of his films contained a story other than the music, but his movie *Fantasia* really seeks to find the purpose music itself has with visual interpretation. College students have done research on these ideas of simply listening to music or listening while seeing an image. All of Disney's animated films would not be the classics they are without the music that holds them together. Disney music has become recognized as its own individual art form. It has inspired America to dream and to think more deeply than realized. Walt Disney's indirect effect on music history may be considered a stretch, but there is no doubt that the music developed through Disney Bros. has left an inspiration on the hearts of Americans.

Keywords

Walt Disney, music and animation, synchronization, classic

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A Walk through an American Classic

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America's animated film industry was quite new and revolutionary in the 1920s not yet twenty years old.¹ What became even more revolutionary, however, was the addition of music and sound to animated film in 1928. Walt Disney was the main developer in this process. Looking on from the 1920s until Disney's death in 1966, music assumed a distinct, almost central, role in creating Disney's cartoons. Because of this centrality, special techniques, developed very effectively by composers, were used to synchronize this music and animation. The music of Walt Disney's classic films was written by a number of hand-picked composers who, working with Disney, ingeniously crafted the music to fit animation and bring musical inspiration to the homes of viewers, leaving America and the world with a beloved legacy.

Walter Elias Disney began his cartoon animation career around 1920. He had done much drawing before that, however. He started off with an apprenticeship at a commercial art shop at the age of seventeen.² His daughter recalls the story she was told of the first time her father drew a picture and received payment for it. When Disney was seven or eight a local doctor asked him to draw a picture of his horse. The doctor liked the picture well enough to pay him for it and thus started the informal career of Walt Disney.³ In 1921, after much work with drawing and technology, Disney began selling his one-minute cartoon reels called

¹ Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2006), 52.

² *Ibid.*, 44-45, 52, 57-61.

³ Diane Disney Miller, *The Story of Walt Disney* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1957), 17.

Laugh-O-Grams. In the next few years Walt, as he liked to be called, struggled with business in the animation world, but in 1923 with financial support from his brother Roy the Disney Bros. Studio was born.

In Walt's beginnings at the company he was only a cartoon animator among others who were testing the new field, but by 1928 he had released the very first talking picture to "marry music, sound, and image" called *Steamboat Willie*, featuring the beloved character that would become known as Mickey Mouse.⁴ Music for silent film was not a new concept, but unlike any preceding films *Steamboat Willie* "established a concrete connection between the animation and the musical score."⁵ A young animator for Disney, Wilfred Jackson, is given credit for this earliest attempt at the synchronization of animation and music. His method included developing the music until the preferred tempo for Disney's animation was reached. By figuring out that twenty-four frames of the film went by in one second Jackson could set a metronome at the desired tempo putting a beat with every specified number of frames. A metronome, in the form of white flashes on a screen, was then used to set the tempo the musicians needed to follow, and a "dope" sheet was created to indicate the relationship between the beats of music and the action on the screen.⁶

Surprisingly, for all of Walt Disney's interest in music and animation he was not a musician and was not known to have had any formal music training. However, he gave as much attention to the music of a film as to any other aspect. As recorded by David Tietyen, Walt told his animators and directors, "There's a terrific power to music...you can run these pictures and they'd be dragging and boring, but the minute you put music behind them, they have life and vitality they don't get in any other way."⁷ With this in mind, in 1928 Walt hired Carl Stalling as his first main composer after he had met him already a few years earlier. This man was responsible for creating the process that truly

⁴ Graeme Harper, Ruth Doughty, and Jochen Eisentraut, eds., *Sound and Music in Film and Visual Media: An Overview* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 603.

⁵ Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert, eds., *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 226.

⁶ David Tietyen, *The Musical World of Walt Disney* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Publishing Corporation, 1990), 13-14.

⁷ Ibid.

synchronized music and animation. He developed what was called the “tick system” later to be called “mickey-mousing.” By processing frames from the film a steady beat could be determined and it was projected into the ear of each orchestra member from a telephone receiver.

Though Stalling only worked with Disney for about two years he made a great impact on the refining of processes used to bring animation and music together. When Disney and Stalling came upon a conflict about adding or taking away music to better fit the animation Disney proposed a compromise: Stalling would write music to the Mickey Mouse pictures to fit as best as possible, but Stalling would also write his own musical ideas and Disney would fit animation to them. This brought about the production of a series called *The Silly Symphonies*. This series “represents the most important era of Disney film and music development.”⁸ The music became the more important part; in a way the animation served the music. Stalling’s idea behind the *Silly Symphonies* was to take inanimate figures and bring them to life through dancing and moving with music and rhythms. The *Skeleton Dance*, produced in 1929, was the first of these productions. Other features included flowers, trees, and eventually animals. Stalling’s score for this first film was original, but it was based on “The March of the Dwarfs” from Edvard Grieg’s *Lyric Suite*. Much of the music used in the early Disney years was music in the public domain, because it could be acquired freely. Stalling recalled in an interview that oftentimes Disney wanted to use a certain song, but, not wanting to pay royalties, Disney would have Stalling write a piece similar to it but original. Stalling said he would “sometimes use a musical number as a pattern, suggesting a certain style or mood.”⁹ In 1930, Stalling left the studio but later returned as a free-lancer for Disney. With his departure a new band of composers was brought in, creating for Disney’s films the beloved musical melodies people still cherish today such as “Heigh-Ho,” “When You Wish upon a Star,” and many others.

As the newly-named Walt Disney Studio continued to progress in the animated film industry a number of composers came and went, each making their mark in the Disney world. In 1931 and 1932 Frank Churchill and Leigh Harline joined the Disney team as key composers

⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁹ Judith Tick and Paul Beaudoin, eds., *Music in the USA: a Documentary Companion* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008), 423.

of the 1930s, helping Disney reach the level of “pop/classical fusion” he desired. Ross Care says it best: “Together they created what would become the signature Disney sound: music that is primarily melodic, inventively orchestrated, and essentially simple (sometimes deceptively so) and accessible, yet always with that indefinable X-factor that was another characteristic of Disney’s work as a whole: popular appeal.”¹⁰ Disney found Churchill in Hollywood studios as a talented yet not formally trained pianist. He found Harline working with radio as a trained musician, a graduate from the University of Utah. Both of these men had very unique creative abilities that allowed them to create valuable compositions for Disney that were so for very different reasons. Jon Newsom said, “If Churchill’s greatest strength was as a composer of melodies, Leigh Harline’s was as Disney’s ‘Symphonist,’ silly or otherwise.”¹¹

As Disney took on these new composers he also assumed a new challenge in animated film. After all of the progress he had made with the *Silly Symphonies* and other short cartoons, which were called “shorts,” he hoped to create the first feature-length cartoon. His plans were met with discouraging comments and his ideas were given the name “Disney’s Folly.” Producing a successful feature-length animated film with music requires precise synchronization of sound and image whereas the production of a live-action film with music does not. With this in mind Disney had to approach the music of a full-length animated film differently than that of the shorts he had previously created. No longer could only one composer write the melodies and the background score. An arranger and orchestrator were now needed to work with the other musicians and animators. The first film that would be born through this process was the operetta-like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Frank Churchill was responsible for most of the melodic material in *Snow White* with some orchestral help from Harline and Paul Smith. He had a plethora of melodies within his mind waiting to be written that helped make the film successful, giving us songs like “Some Day My Prince Will Come” and “Whistle While You Work.” Evidence of Churchill’s uncanny ability to produce melodies is also seen in his songbook *The Children’s Music Box*.

¹⁰ Daniel Goldmark and Yuval Taylor, eds., *The Cartoon Music Book* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago Review Press, 2002), 24.

¹¹ Tietjen, *Musical World*, 37.

As Churchill and other supporting composers worked, Disney sought his objective. He wanted the music in *Snow White* to “offer exposition, develop characters and situations, or advance the plot rather than be musical interludes randomly inserted in the film.”¹² Disney wanted his animated musical to stand out among the patterns of the day and to start a “new pattern” of weaving the music “into the story so somebody doesn’t just burst into song.”¹³ Disney succeeds in this as *Snow White* is seen and heard singing while working just as anyone might do. With every action centering on a musical beat Disney continued to make sure that every bit of music or lyric matched the action on the screen. Each dwarf had his own musical theme and when all the dwarves were together a new theme entered in containing seven notes. Though the idea of *Snow White* was considered a folly it met with great success at its premier in 1937 and paved the way for future feature-length animated films.

Within the next five years Walt Disney created and produced four more feature-length animated films that abundantly developed and advanced the technology used to incorporate music with animated film. These included *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia*, *Dumbo*, and *Bambi*. *Pinocchio* was musically unique in its scoring, most of it attributed to Leigh Harline. Other composers, however, also contributed to the scoring and orchestration, working together on parts that best suited their particular talents, to create a comprehensive score. It was also different from the *Snow White* score in its richer and more luxurious musical sound. The now characteristic Disney theme song “When You Wish upon a Star” was written by Harline with lyrics by Ned Washington. The music in *Pinocchio* helped to create the mood of the film. Leitmotifs were used for specific characters like Jiminy Cricket and heard in varying forms every time that character appeared on screen.

Dumbo, though not particularly well-known, had the clear essence of a bright and boisterous musical. Its songs were team-composed by Frank Churchill, Ned Washington, and Oliver Wallace; at times specific voices were brought in to represent certain characters such as the song sung by crows in the film calling for the distinct sound of Jim Crow and the Hall Johnson Choir.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 37.

Disney's *Bambi* introduced an entirely different role for music in animated film. Disney wanted music to replace much of the dialogue from the original story and to enhance the action and storyline in the way the dialogue normally would. He wanted the music to be great, not in the sense of a large orchestra, but in the sense of intense showmanship. Frank Churchill was the initial composer for *Bambi*, but with his death in 1942 his work was finished by Ed Plumb and other supporting composers. With Plumb's talent in mind Disney had them develop the music into an intensely rich orchestration and score. Ross Care says, "In the Disney *modus operandi* a distinctively collective effort toward excellence superseded the work of any single contributor."¹⁴ Because Disney demanded excellence of the music in his films artists worked together in collaboration to reach the best result with no one person receiving all the credit. Disney wanted the classical music of *Bambi*, more than with any other film, to appeal to a broad audience. He wanted the general audience, not just the music critics, to understand and appreciate the music.

Attention to minute detail of the synchronization of animation and music is exemplified in the song "Little April Shower" as drops of rain and other elements of nature are given specific musical sound effects. Staccato notes on the clarinet, the tap of a triangle, and the clang of a Chinese cymbal portray drops of rain on leaves while rapid sixteenth notes on the violin portray scurrying animals trying to avoid the storm.

Every aspect of the music adds to the action of the story. "Galop of the Stags," though a very simple quarter-note sequence, intensifies the bounding of the male deer through the clearing. A theme based on "twitterpation," the Disney term for the awakening of love, is introduced, developed, and varied each time the characters of Flower, Thumper, and Bambi fall into "twitterpation," presenting a sort of theme and variations, variations ranging from waltz to march to jazz style. Musical themes and expressions are threaded throughout the film successfully intensifying meaning, feelings, and actions of the animals.

During the same time that Disney was working on the previous four films he was also generating another film unlike any of his others. *Fantasia 1940* worked with and visualized music more than any other

¹⁴ Ross B. Care, "Threads of Melody: The Evolution of a Major Film Score - Walt Disney's *Bambi*," *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 40, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 89.

aspect in the film, and, in fact, music was in charge. Disney said, “We are picturing music. This music is not serving as background to the picture.”¹⁵ The music for *Fantasia* was chosen from pre-existing music, unlike the originally composed music for his other films. Originally *Fantasia* started as a short called *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* with the same role of visualizing music on a screen, but because of the growing cost and Disney’s growing fascination with the idea of using concert music in film he decided to expand to a feature-length film. This idea for a film representing music first came from the fellow abstract animator Oskar Fischinger. He made the suggestion to conductor Leopold Stokowski, who later passed on the idea to Disney. Fischinger was hired by Disney to work on the ideas for animation, but his work was not what Disney desired. Though Fischinger’s position was soon terminated he clearly inspired the idea for a film like *Fantasia*.

Disney first met Leopold Stokowski rather coincidentally at a restaurant in Hollywood. The two men struck up a conversation and from there grew many ideas for *Fantasia*. They decided to work together to choose what music would be used in this “visualized concert” of a film. Both men met a number of times to listen to many different pieces. Ultimately, they chose pieces that contained the highest quality of expressivity. Stokowski himself went on to conduct the Philadelphia Orchestra for the music in *Fantasia*. His example of conducting, seen in the film as a silhouette when animation is not being shown, helped the general audience better understand the role of the conductor. This does not appear to have been a central goal of Disney’s, however. Among the pieces used for *Fantasia* were Bach’s “Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor,” Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker Suite*, Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony*, and a number of others. Disney wanted *Fantasia* to present music in the best way possible, “yet, he knew that current film sound systems were inadequate to properly convey the majesty of the music.”¹⁶ Disney, therefore, had engineers develop a new sound system called “Fantasound.” “Fantasound” used multiple recordings to create the most balanced final recording from the orchestra and used multiple speakers placed throughout the auditorium to give the audience the most engaging experience. This was the earliest development of the more advanced systems we have today. At *Fantasia*’s release in 1942 it

¹⁵ Tietjen, *Musical World*, 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

was not a great success, but in later years it was found to be more valuable.

Disney's approach to visualizing the music through animation with colors and live action served to give the audience a greater experience of the music. Disney was not an expert on the idea of color music, a concept somewhere between synesthesia and physical resemblance. He did not use this as the basis in animating the music for *Fantasia* as Clark Farmer says, "the keying of colors with instruments is not consistent," but Disney succeeded in making a new way for the music to be understood.¹⁷ To prove the effectiveness of this, an exploratory study was done on the effect visual components have on a non-music major's comprehension of music. Students were given a test and divided into groups by those who would see the visual of *Fantasia* and those who would hear the music only. The study found that students who listened and watched scored higher on the test, though not substantially higher. The visual narrative section, the *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, as opposed to the abstract visual representation, was the most significantly helpful section, because it helped students better understand the programmatic quality of the music. It was found, though, that in the comment section of the test students who heard the music only referred more to the specific elements of the music while those who had the visual referred to the images on the screen. This study concludes that teachers of music should consider including visuals while teaching music but also consider how it may detract from the music itself.¹⁸ The fact that Disney's *Fantasia* would spur such a stimulating study is proof of the vision he was trying to fulfill.

Deems Taylor was another crucial figure in *Fantasia's* development. As a musicologist and composer, he also helped choose the pieces used in *Fantasia*. He came alongside Stokowski, the conductor, and became the narrator of the film. For each new section and, therefore, new piece of music, Taylor introduces and explains what the audience will be seeing and hearing in relation to program, pictorial, and abstract music. Disney uses very distinct and reflective imagery to interpret the music

¹⁷ Jay Beck and Tony Grajeda, eds., *Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 196.

¹⁸ John M. Geringer, Jane W. Cassidy, and James L. Byo, "Effects of Music with Video on Responses of Non-Music Majors: An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 44, no. 3 (September 1, 1996): 249, *RILM Abstracts of Music Literature*, EBSCOhost.

being played. At one point Taylor introduces the “soundtrack.” It is invited to make instrument sounds and we see the flowing sound of a harp, the more rigid sound of a violin, the larger sound of a trumpet, and the shaking sound of a cymbal. These are all represented by different colors, shapes, and spaces. Disney seeks to ensure that the audience understands the imagery and is able to have a more enriching experience through it.

Fantasia was re-released a number of times but most significantly in 1969 and 1980. A scene in the original film from Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony* portrayed a dark-skinned centaur shining the hooves of a light-skinned centaur. With the civil rights movement so prominent this particularly racist scene was cut in 1969, unfortunately leaving the scene and the music with a large skip. Later in 1980 work was done on this scene to allow it back into the film without having any racist connotations. This was done by cutting the image only to reveal that the centaur’s hooves were being shined, not by whom.

Fantasia had many advanced technological and psychological ideas, but Disney’s largest goal, holding a similar view to Stokowski’s, was to bring the inspiration of classical music as entertainment into the general audience’s reach. Stokowski said, “That is why great music associated with motion pictures is so important, because motion pictures reach millions all over our country and all over the world.”¹⁹

During the years of World War II Disney continued experimenting with film techniques, but he had no major successes until the release of *Cinderella* in 1950. Finding himself once again at the forefront of animated film, Disney introduced some “musical firsts” with this film.²⁰ He hired pop songwriters rather than musicians from his studio to compose the music. The songs in the film were also published by Disney’s own music publishing company whereas, before, other music publishers were used. Disney was drawn to the “Tin Pan Alley” songwriting team of Mack David, Jerry Livingston, and Al Hoffman because of their hit song “Chi-Baba Chi-Baba.” Perry Como’s recording of this song was becoming famous and Disney was very

¹⁹ Mark Clague, "Playing in 'Toon: Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) and the Imagineering of Classical Music," *American Music: A Quarterly Journal Devoted To All Aspects Of American Music And Music In America* 22, no. 1 (March 1, 2004): 92, *RILM Abstracts of Music Literature*, EBSCOhost.

²⁰ Tietjen, *Musical World*, 89.

interested in the character style of the song. It is likely that Disney was searching for a song to fit his fairy-godmother scene and he saw great potential in these men based on “Chi-Baba Chi-Baba.” After writing “Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo” and finding great success, this three-some went on to create the other characteristic and precious Disney song, “A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes.” In other songs, like “So This Is Love,” a duet arrangement complements the animation of the dancing Prince and Cinderella, and the musical features of “Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo” help establish the bubbly character of the fairy-godmother. An effective technique is used in “Oh Sing Sweet Nightingale.” The end of the song carries the phrase through and then successively drops a word until the last word is the first word of the phrase: “Oh sing sweet nightingale, Oh sing sweet, Oh sing, Oh!” The music in the remainder of the film beautifully establishes the characters and the mood just as Disney desired.

In the next nine years Disney produced *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, *Lady and the Tramp*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. *Sleeping Beauty* was unique because it took pre-existing music and adapted it to the film. George Bruns, a more recent addition to the Disney staff, adapted Tchaikovsky’s *Sleeping Beauty* ballet for Disney’s film. Unlike *Fantasia*, the music was changed a bit in order to better fit the animation and Bruns also added to the score with his best Tchaikovsky imitation. *Sleeping Beauty* was nearly the last full-length animated feature Disney would see released, but his work in entertainment was yet to be finished.

In 1960, Disney took a huge musical step in hiring the brothers Richard and Robert Sherman as studio musicians. This was the first time Disney had a team of songwriters on his staff as part of the personal studio. The Sherman brothers would go on to write a plethora of songs for Disney’s films, the animated features including *The Sword in the Stone*, *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, and, his last to work on, *The Jungle Book*. The Sherman Brothers had a personal favorite of one of their songs: “The Most Wonderful Thing about Tiggers.”

While Disney was living he developed one other film that was particularly outstanding, but it was not purely animation. Disney and his workers perfected the process of integrating live-action with animation in *Mary Poppins*. It was a very difficult technological advancement that required real humans and animation to be combined in one frame, unlike the simpler pure animation, but Disney was always

looking to try a new, fascinating idea. *Mary Poppins* was a “total synthesis of all that was Disney—animation, music, special effects, outstanding art, and superb casting and acting.”²¹ This was a full-fledged musical for which the Broadway and television arranger Irwin Kostal was brought in to conduct. From this film we have the beloved songs “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious,” “Chim Chim Cher-ee,” and “Let’s Go Fly a Kite.” One of Disney’s personal favorites, that he often had the Sherman brothers play for him, was “Feed the Birds,” which conveyed such kindness and compassion. Another very special song was “A Spoonful of Sugar.” The melody line of this song was used as a leitmotif whenever the character of Mary Poppins was about to take center stage. *Mary Poppins* was an immense success at its release in 1964. It was among the last films on which Disney would work personally before he died in December of 1966.

Since Disney’s death Walt Disney Studios has continued trying to create films with the same musical vision as its founder. Walt Disney was the first to show how music could be used as an essential element in a film. It was through his studio that much of our modern-day technology on music and film began to be developed. Through his fusion of classical and popular music he was able to reach a broad audience with beautiful music. His composers and lyricists always wrote songs that purposefully advanced the plot. Though Disney was not a musician, he had a keen sense of what the music included in his films should be and how a song could make or break a film. Even in his development of Disneyland he emphasized the importance of music, whether playing in the streets or on the rides to bring the experience to life. In all of his entertainment work Disney demanded excellence. No one person ever received all the credit because the team of animators and musicians worked together to ensure a spectacular outcome. Walt Disney merged classical music with popular film to broaden the horizons of entertainment. The melodies and orchestrations produced were of utmost quality. David Tietyen wrote in 1990, “His songs reached our innermost selves with messages of love, hope, and human compassion—messages that will live for years to come.”²² Walt Disney believed in his vision to inspire his audience to dream and think deeply through music. Though he is not currently listed in the canon of music history, musicologists need to take a closer look at the importance of Disney’s work with animation and music in comparison to today’s

²¹ Ibid., 133.

²² Ibid., 149.

music in film and the inspiration that music from his studio has left on the hearts of the world.

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