



Film Music A musical interlude

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I mentioned at the start of these lectures on music and film that the topic held particular challenges for me, a person whose professional training and activity has almost all taken place within the orbit of what we used, a long time ago, in more self-confident times, to call 'serious' music, and now sometimes call 'classical' music or, when we're feeling defensive and nervous, 'elite' music. The challenges are many, and one of the most obvious is that, in my past professional existence, I've been used to taking for granted the aesthetic value of the music I study. Were I to be addressing you about Verdi or Donizetti, you would expect (and I would expect) that one of my tasks would be to act as case for the defence at the court of music history: to urge you that this is indeed 'serious' music, to be taken seriously and to be valued. But when I shift to film music, or indeed to any other musical aspect of popular culture, all such assumptions are off; and with their departure come many new challenges and uncertainties.

I was forcibly struck by all this during an exchange I had recently with an historian, a knight of the realm of great distinction. He approached me with the standard academic greeting of 'What are you working on these days?' - a line typically uttered with breezy nonchalance, but rarely without a hint of menace, an anticipation of Schadenfreude lurking beneath. When I told him that I was 'working' on film music, his riposte was immediate: 'What? nothing left to say about Mozart and Beethoven?' I muttered something I hope breezy and placatory in reply: but this was an accusation I had hardly expected from an historian. I wonder, for example, whether the eminent historian Ian Kershaw, whose magnificent biography of Adolf Hitler was completed a couple of years ago, was often admonished for devoting his energies to such an unsavoury character; whether he was regularly urged instead to write a book about Churchill or Roosevelt or, goodness knows, Mother Teresa? Of course, he wasn't and it's equally laughable to imagine Kershaw having to justify his choice on aesthetic grounds: by reminding us that, although Adolf did admittedly sometimes act less than admirably on the political stage, he was - let's not forget - a committed vegetarian, a good dancer, a famous dog-lover and - as it happens - a passionate advocate of 'classical' music. But while it's laughable to imagine a historian in this position, we who work on 'art' are, it seems, subject to different laws. We are, at least for the present, still dogged by that issue of whether there is 'value' in the objects we address.

All this is merely a preamble to my topic this lunchtime, which is a little different from the others in the series in one important respect. In all the other lectures, I have dealt with examples about which I have (doubtless sliding back comfortably into my past training) advanced pretty definite views as regards quality: while I hope that the various films I have chosen to discuss and display have offered sufficient interest from a theoretical and historical point of view, I have also (perhaps fondly) assumed that you will agree with me that they are all of undoubted quality - indeed are often exemplary of a given genre or period. But I can't assume that sense of agreement today; nor, for that matter, do I feel entirely settled about my chosen subject's aesthetic worth. This may make for a rather unusual journey, but I hope the scenery we pass will make it all worthwhile.

So: my subject is a film called *The Piano*, released in 1993, written and directed by the New Zealand filmmaker Jane Campion, someone who had previously made her reputation mostly with films of more limited distribution, over which she had been able to exercise a high degree of control. *The Piano* brought her success of a completely different kind. It won the coveted Palme d'or at the Cannes Film Festival, and then went on in 1994 to receive three Academy Awards: Campion for best screenplay, Holly Hunter for best actress, and Anna Paquin for best supporting actress. The box-office success was undoubted, but the film's critical reception gave some hint of its tendency to divide audiences. A later collection of some of

these reviews [in the Cambridge University Press book *Jane Campion's The Piano*, edited by Harriet Margolis and an excellent source of information about the film - the occasional quotations below with page numbers all comes from that source] runs the gamut. On the one hand there are gushing tributes. One begins: 'Every now and then, a movie comes along that restores faith in the visionary power of cinema. *The Piano*, a haunting tale about a mute mail-order bride caught between two men in the wilds of 19th-century New Zealand, is that kind of film' (172). On the other, though, there were vehement, passionate critiques. One distinguished critic began his review by calling the film 'an overwrought, hollowly symbolic glob of glutinous nonsense', and ended by saying that 'Every moment is upholstered with the suffocating high-mindedness that declines to connect symbols with comprehensible themes. I haven't seen a sillier film about a woman with a piano since John Huston's *The Unforgiven*.' (189-190). And so it went on, the divided views also spreading away from professional films critics into academic and other circles. This was near the high watermark of the feminist movement, and several leading figures declared the film a monument to political and other correctness. Balance, though, was restored by the new President of the United States, one William Jefferson Clinton, who said he couldn't see 'what all the fuss was about' (1).

My first hurdle will be to introduce you to the plot. Even that ostensibly simple task risks entering a minefield: what is more, one likely also to expose the teller to snipers from unexpected directions. A deep breath, then, and here goes. The time is 1850 and the protagonist is Ada (played by Holly Hunter), a woman living in Scotland who has been mute for some time, who plays the piano with great passion and who has a young daughter called Flora (played by Anna Paquin). Ada has been entered into an arranged marriage with Stewart (played by Sam Neill), a colonialist living in the wilds of New Zealand. After a brief Prologue Ada is shown to have been transported there, together with her daughter and her beloved piano. Stewart decides that the piano cannot be moved from the beach where it has been deposited, much to Ada's consternation; but Stewart's neighbour Baines (played by Harvey Keitel) agrees to buy the instrument in exchange for land, and sets it up in his own house, saying that he wants lessons from Ada. When these lessons begin, it becomes clear that he is attracted to Ada for aspects in addition to her pianistic ability; after some shocks and rejections they enter into an arrangement in which she gradually 'buys' the piano from him in exchange for increasing sexual contact. Eventually they become lovers, and are then discovered by Stewart, who takes violent revenge by chopping off the top of one of Ada's fingers with an axe. Baines and Ada leave to find a new life elsewhere, departing with the piano precariously balanced on a Maori canoe. During the journey, Ada orders that the piano be jettisoned, saying she has no further use for it. A rope attached to it becomes entangled with her foot, and she is dragged with it into the sea. At the last moment, deep underwater, she releases herself and swims to the surface. In the final scene of the film, she and Baines have set up home together, she now teaches piano for a living, and Baines has fashioned a silver tip for her mutilated finger; she is also gradually learning to speak again.

You may have noticed that, by means of verbal subterfuge and an occasional use of the passive voice, I've been trying to make this retelling ambiguous; and I've done so because many viewers found the film as a whole not at all clear about its 'message' - a circumstance that undoubtedly contributed to that startlingly mixed reception I mentioned a moment ago. To take the most basic point: the tale has evident statements to make about women's place in society, and the violence and coercion they can suffer at the hands of men; but whether Ada is, ultimately, a tragic or an heroic figure is left in some considerable doubt, as is whether many of her actions during the film (in particular her decision to become - or her acquiescence in becoming - Baines's lover) constitute moments of resistance to the forces that restrain her, or are merely further illustrations of her confinement. And, of course, a large part of this confusion arises because Ada is mute throughout the film. She expresses herself not in words, but in gestures: gestures which can be enormously powerful and laden with emotion, but which defy precise codification. Still more confusion comes by the fact that these gestures are divided into two streams. One stream comes from her extraordinarily expressive hand gestures, which are interpreted by her daughter Flora and then passed on in the simple, hyper-direct language of a young child. The other comes from her piano playing: it is made immediately obvious - for many critics much too obvious - that the piano is Ada's 'true' voice; she thus communicates to us through a medium that has, since ancient times, been regarded as an uncertain, dangerous mutable language: she communicates to us through music.

The music of the film was written by British composer Michael Nyman, and for the most part (there are significant exceptions) it consists of items played by Ada on her piano. She has no music in front of her and seems constantly to be improvising. As Nyman said:

'The role of the piano in Ada's life is not that she has an exterior repertoire that she can draw on, but that the music comes from inside... So I had to create the music as though she herself had created it. I was

composing a composer... It's as though I've been writing the music of another composer who happened to live in Scotland, then New Zealand in the mid 1850s. Someone who was obviously not a professional composer or pianist, so there had to be a modesty to it.' (46)

Following on from this, and surely a crucial decision in the entire film, was to choose as protagonist an actor who was herself a pianist, and thus to make sure that she was physically capable of playing the music Nyman wrote for her. Holly Hunter speaks not a word during the film, but emphatically and for all to see she plays the piano in *The Piano*.

What this means will become evident in the opening scene; but before we view that, let's first have a think about what generally happens when someone plays the piano, or indeed any musical instrument, in a movie. The usual message is that, well, anyone can do it: just flap hands up and down in approximately the right direction at periodic intervals and the task is magically done. Standards have got better of late, admittedly: Russell Crowe went to some trouble to look a plausible string player in *Master and Commander*, and if he can do it, then we must assume that there's hope for us all. But in the old days, and even when it might have been thought to matter, approximation was the rule of the day. Let me show you two brief examples, both drawn from a wonderful DVD compilation of historic singers called *The Art of Singing* (NCV Arts). First, here's the great tenor Richard Tauber, pretending to be Schubert (complete with standard-issue little round glasses, and some truly alarming eyebrows which I hope are not his own) in a 1933 version of *Lilac Time*. Presumably Tauber could actually play the piano; but here, singing 'Ständchen', he just flaps, using pianistic interludes not to look down at the keyboard, but to grimace horribly at his unseen audience.

PLAY THE ART OF SINGING, Chapter 12 (START TO 27:57)

Richard Tauber, giving us an eat-your-heart-out-Liberace vision of Schubert that is - let's hope - flamboyantly less than authentic. Better still, in that he's even more impervious to the rigours of pianistic rectitude, is another great tenor, Lauritz Melchior, singing the 'Winterstürme' episode from Act 1 of Wagner's *Die Walküre*. This was in 1948, in an MGM film called *Luxury Liner*. Trying to imagine *Luxury Liner*'s plot on the evidence of what's seen in this clip is, I would guess, more fun than actually seeing the film; but perhaps someone in the audience can enlighten us as to what the relationship is between the four extraordinary people we see. The excerpt is preceded by a brief glimpse of the 'real' Melchior encouraging some very large dogs into a swimming pool (let's hope it's his own), then greeting the camera in his bathing trunks and escorting his wife with old-world formality to a nearby sofa. Those who worship Melchior as the finest Wagnerian tenor of his generation had best look away now.

PLAY THE ART OF SINGING, Chapter 18 (START TO 27:57)

Lauritz Melchior, enthusiastically demonstrating the joys of fake pianism, and also suggesting that Richard Tauber didn't have the field entirely to himself when it came to doing musical things with eyebrows.

I digress, of course, and the comparison with modern ways of movie music-making is not entirely just (as I said a moment ago, standards of verisimilitude have improved since the 1930s and 1940s); but even so the sense in which *The Piano* makes creative, cinematic capital out of the fact that Holly Hunter actually plays the piano will nevertheless be obvious if we now turn to the start of Jane Campion's movie. I'll begin as usual with the credits, that moment in which a film conventionally lays out its visual and musical stall. But here the credits are brief and understated in both senses: there is a blank visual background, and the music (synthesised strings) is at best aimed for neutrality. This understated beginning is then immediately put into context by a series of acoustic and visual shocks. First there is the striking paradox of a voiceover that announces itself as coming from a mute person, accompanied by the sudden close-up of an eye peeking through fingers, as if hiding from the camera's gaze. And then, stranger still, the sudden eruption of a very different music from that which accompanied the credits: music played by Ada; music that, as I said, is Ada. During this opening sequence, the camera has been unusually free, circling characters, or spying them from above, or tracking behind them; and notice immediately how the camera continues this encircling as Ada begins to play: enabled by the fact that Holly Hunter is actually making the sounds we hear, it can move freely around her, showing her hands and her face, exploring the manner in which her hands and face project and respond to the music, stressing what Nyman said, that 'the music comes from

inside'.

PLAY THE PIANO, Chapter 1 (START TO 3:35)

An unconventional beginning, then, which is purposefully geared to giving us the impression that Ada's music is special and different. As I said, it brutally interrupts and banishes the neutral credits music, and (as you just saw) it was itself brutally cut off as another person enters the room. (Incidentally, those of you who were around for the Psycho lecture or know that film well will surely have seen traces here of that film's obsessions: in the prying camera, and in the shower-scene-like veiled appearance of the - rather sinister - maid.)

So that's the use of music; but what of its nature? Recall Nyman's own words: 'It's as though I've been writing the music of another composer who happened to live in Scotland, then New Zealand in the mid 1850s.' As a music historian, my response to this is... hm. I'll admit that I don't actually know the works of any composer who happened to live in Scotland and was then transported to New Zealand in the middle of the nineteenth century, but I would nevertheless stake my reputation on the fact that any such composer would have found Nyman's inspirations bizarre in the extreme. The idiom sounds familiar to us, of course; but with the exception of the scale practice at the beginning its familiarity is overwhelmingly that of the 1990s: what we might - somewhat unkindly - call 'minimalism lite'. The interesting point, though, is that - resting as it does side by side with evidently painstaking attempts to create visual authenticity, a vivid sense of the 1850s - this unabashedly modern music doesn't seem to jar, even though it is supposed to come directly from an historical character.

Part of an explanation for this lack of jarring comes in a slightly later scene. Ada and her daughter Flora have now set up home with Stewart, but her beloved piano is still there on the beach where she landed. She persuades Baines to take her back there, which leads to an elaborate seaside scene in which she repeatedly plays what turns out to be 'her' theme. There are many points to note here, perhaps in particular the peculiar intensity and density of expression formed by circles: by the constantly circling camera movements, which are echoed (or inspired) by the constant circling of Baines as he listens to Ada, or by Flora's circling dance, or, later, by the circling figures in the sand that are the scene's final shot. All this is accompanied by the constant circling figures that make up Nyman's music, the way the theme revolves about itself, and is also encircled by the subsidiary musical figures that swirl around it. This, surely, is one of the reasons the music seems to fit so neatly into the film: that camera and music dance to the same rhythms. You'll also see how the music now flits in and out of coming directly from Ada and her playing: we hear it as 'background' as she approaches the beach, and it fades into 'background' - with orchestral additions - as the scene comes to an end. By these methods, Ada's music (and thus, arguably, her point-of-view), saturates the film.

I'll start the scene a little earlier, as Ada and Flora meet Baines and ask him to take them back to the piano. Partly this will give you a longer look at Ada's other gestural language, that created in hand movements and then translated by Flora; but it will also make clear that there is another kind of music in the film - music that emanates from the intensely exotic New Zealand ambience, which is packed with what seem to be the most musical birds on the planet, one of them even seeming to have mastered the opening notes of J.S. Bach's Toccata and Fugue in d minor.

PLAY THE PIANO, Chapter 3 (START TO 25:37)

Where to go next in charting a course through The Piano is complicated, as it needs perforce to explore the central problem of its plot, that of the sexual relationship that springs up between Ada and Baines. There are some fairly steamy sex scenes, or - at least - some fairly explicit ones; but I'm reluctant to show them because that would inevitably mean disseminating them, and I'm unsure about whether their evident good intentions are realised cinematically. What I will show, though, is the lead-in to the scene in which they are discovered by husband Stewart. Ada appears at Baines's house and, as usual, is silent but intensely, mystifyingly gestural. Baines makes attempts to interpret, fails and orders her away. She makes one further gestural move, the most violent of all, by attacking him with her fists; and then they kiss. This scene is, as so often, accompanied by the mysterious, musical din of the outside, with that Bach-imitating bird in full

voice; but then, at the moment of the kiss, or rather seeming to make it happen, something entirely new appears musically.

PLAY THE PIANO, Chapter 7 (START TO 1:13:09)

I don't know how you all will have reacted to that, but my guess would be in quite a variety of ways. The 'dialogue' between Baines and Ada is, I think, remarkably skilful in keeping alive and resonant the ambiguity of the situation: the manner in which Ada is both silent - and thus in some sense deprived of power and agency - and at the same time extraordinarily powerful in her control of the gestural space of the film. But the moment of the kiss bothers me, and it bothers me mostly because of the music that accompanies it (or, perhaps better, actually enables it). The climactic kiss is, of course, a stock in trade of Hollywood, and very often used as a substitute for the (generally unrepresentable) sexual act. We all know the sequence: first there's the kiss, and then - as if by magic - the couple is seen waking up together the next morning. And an almost invariable accompaniment to the Hollywood kiss is musical intensity of some kind. Music is used to draw us in, emotionally stimulate us, and - most importantly - by these means avoid us having any feeling of voyeurism, any sense that we are looking at something that, in real life, we would instinctively turn away from in embarrassment. And it's precisely for these reasons that I'm worried about that rather syrupy synthesised music that turns on to stimulate and accompany Ada's and Baines's kiss. It seems to be there to make us uncritical, to take away the ambiguity that has thus far informed the scene. And if we take away the scene's ambiguity, then the action becomes fatally ordinary - just another passionate kiss, one of the countless thousands that Hollywood has rained down on us in its nearly hundred-year history.

There could be, there should be, much more to show of Jane Campion's film, but I have time only to pause through the ending, which probably sparked the greatest controversy. Or rather, the two endings, placed next to each other. Just to recall: Ada and Baines are on their way to a new life, with the piano precariously balanced on a Maori canoe. Ada orders her instrument to be thrown into the sea, and perhaps seems to commit suicide by attaching herself to it. But at the last moment she chooses life. And then, in a kind of epilogue, the voice-over that started the entire film returns, and a kind of rebirth is sketched: a rebirth not without its ironies but sealed again with a music-assisted kiss before returning almost nostalgically to the possibilities of that earlier, tragic ending. Last of all, we revert to that oddly neutral, synthesised music to play out the credits. Just as the camera circled endlessly, so - it seems - has the film: back to its first moments.

PLAY THE PIANO, Chapter 11 (1:46:00-1:51:30)

I hope I've illustrated enough of this film to suggest its difficulty, or at least some of the reasons why it became so controversial. There's no doubt that it attempts to deal boldly with issues that general-release films tend to avoid, in particular that basic issue about the role of women in popular cinema. In a famous essay of the 1970s (it was called 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'), feminist film critic Laura Mulvey arrived at what many then thought a devastating exposé of this role. According to her analysis 'The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man' was basic to the entire edifice of what she called 'illusionistic narrative film'. She continued:

Far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself. Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire.

Although some of the absolutes of Mulvey's approach, in particular the bleakness of her attitude to popular culture, may now seem dated, there is little doubt that it laid out some of the theoretical ground on which filmmakers such as Jane Campion could try to build a new kind of cinema. Indeed, *The Piano* might be seen as an extremely bold attempt to interrogate and perhaps even break down the dominant codes Mulvey's analysis exposed. Ada is in one sense a classic female victim. The plot sees her as the repeated object of barter and exchange between men, and her muteness ensures that she cannot speak back, or even fully articulate her pain and sense of outrage at the wrongs committed against her. On the other hand,

though, Campion's cinematic techniques are consistently placed at Ada's disposal, assuring that her presence and her various gestural languages are by far the most powerful in the film. As we have seen, the camera is in many ways at Ada's service: to invert Mulvey's term, it cuts the film to the measure of the heroine's desire.

What is more, the other principal element of the film's expressive world, its music, is among the most obvious of those gestural languages, and Ada's music saturates much of the score. Again, though, there is ambiguity at the heart of this. After all, the piano in the nineteenth century was a classic accoutrement of the Victorian ideal of the Angel of the Hearth: a decorous way to demonstrate female accomplishment while keeping the female body modestly concealed by the instrument's bulk and also by neatly tying the performer to the domestic sphere in which the instrument was anchored. It's no accident that when the New Woman movement began to make itself heard in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the piano became a reviled symbol of female captivity, just as the bicycle and the tennis racket became symbols of freedom. Getting women away from their pianos was a first step along the road to liberation. Something of this seems to be hinted at in that penultimate scene, in which Ada's final liberation is when she untangles herself from her beloved instrument: an instrument that, if she allows it to, will ensure her complete and lasting silence.

But we are reminded again and again in this film that the piano is Ada's 'voice', and we are periodically encouraged to assume that her creation of music in some way liberates her, allowing her an element of lyrical expression that makes her daughter dance, confuses her husband, hopelessly captivates her lover and causes the camera to encircle her in beauty and light. What is more, this piano music extends out to become the affective background of the film, drawing us in another way into a celebration of Ada's special world. The fact that this 'liberation' is steeply coded as 'modern' in terms of musical style may, for some, undermine or even overturn such interpretations; but for many (probably for most) it did not do so: in fact it allowed them a level of affective identification that would probably have been impossible to achieve had a more purist attitude to musical authenticity been attempted.

And so? What are we to make of *The Piano*? A hymn to the visionary power of cinema or a symbolic glob of glutinous nonsense? In the face of such exaggerated positions, and particularly at a distance of some fifteen years, it might be tempting to follow the middle path, the one espoused by that expert (of sorts), William J. Clinton, and merely profess wonder at such passions aroused. But I'm reluctant to leave it there; I want, somewhat in spite of myself, to urge the film's cause. At the least, Jane Campion encourages us to think, and think quite hard, about what pleasures (musical pleasures among them) we take from narrative cinema.

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