Dissertation Abstract

Júlia Durand

Library music (also known as 'stock' or 'production' music) is a ubiquitous yet often unquestioned presence in audiovisual media. It is specifically composed for future use in a wide variety of productions (from television programs to YouTube videos), and can be licensed from online catalogues, where tracks are categorised by mood, genre or instrumentation. A large number of composers engage in this musical practice today, and media producers increasingly turn to these catalogues to find affordable music for their projects. Although library music was at first used exclusively by professional audiovisual creators, the growth of digital technologies and video sharing platforms has widened its client base to amateur and semiprofessional videographers. Despite the growing significance of library music, it has nevertheless received little scholarly attention until recently.

Drawing library music away from the place it has typically been relegated to in both scholarly literature and popular opinion, as an innocuous and uninteresting sonic 'wallpaper', allows us to instead reframe it as an object worthy of attention -- one that can reveal much about how we understand music for media. What are library music's most defining specificities? How is it perceived and valued by its creators and users? How does its eminently functional purpose determine the sonic traits and trajectories of a library track? Which aspects of its creation and use have been transformed by its transition to digital and online media, and which have remained unchanged? Musical and audiovisual examples from European and North-American libraries active in the past twenty years, as well as qualitative interviews with library composers and audiovisual creators, are analysed from an interdisciplinary angle anchored in musicology, media industry studies, and the sociology of music and media.

Rather than focusing solely on either composers or media producers, the argument weaves together the perspectives of these different actors in order to reach a more in-depth vision of library music's production, presentation, reception and usage, as well as a broader understanding of the patterns and conventions that define it as a distinct art world. This approach also highlights the relevance of examining library music as the result of the joint action of individuals who intervene decisively in the possible meanings of a track, be it with its tagging, editing or inclusion in new audiovisual contexts.

The analysis first focuses on longstanding practices that endure to the present day in the production and use of library music. It then sheds light on new criteria that have emerged with the expansion of digital formats and online platforms. Library music's explicitly utilitarian status has always been central to its definition: the fact that it is from its inception conceived as *functional* music for media governs its composition and sonic characteristics, as well as its categorisation, promotion, modification and synchronisation with images. Since its beginnings in the first half of the twentieth century, library music has acted as a repository of musical formulas that were commonplace in film and television productions in given moments. In that respect, libraries both reflect and simultaneously reinforce stereotyped associations between music, visuals and narratives that have entered a widely shared cultural vocabulary (and that we find to this day in music generated by artificial intelligence). However, rather than condemn the stereotypes that are rife in library music as evidence of poor artistic practice, they are cast here as vital 'tools of the trade' that act as communication shortcuts between composers, library consultants, media creators and their audiences.

In addition to ascertaining old habits that endure to the present day in library music and its usage, the dissertation sheds light on new dynamics that have developed in this art world with the growth of Web 2.0. Although certain uses of library tracks in online content are aligned with long-established conventions of synchronising music to picture, others are more specific to the short-form videos of social media, evidencing new trends of combining music and images that have emerged within the affordances and limitations of digital tools and online platforms. Among these trends, we can highlight the demand for tracks that can be easily deconstructed and rearranged in editing software. We thus identify a growing understanding of library music as a raw material that is considered incomplete until its transformation and use by agents other than its composers. This peculiarity allows us to challenge a well-worn reproach often aimed at this music, namely, that it is irredeemably standardised and rote. This criticism reduces library music to a moment that it is not (and cannot be) limited to: the moment of its composition. Though it is undoubtedly characterised by familiar stereotypes, unfailingly regular tempo and predictable chord progressions, it is built on such stable formulas precisely so that it may become an *unstable* object – one that may be easily modified, cut up, lengthened, and otherwise open to unforeseen transformations beyond its composers' hands, in order to be synchronised with images.

This brings to the fore another defining aspect of this musical practice: the fact that it is media producers who will determine the future 'lives' of a track in audiovisual productions. In other words, the potential trajectories of library music are not linear and foreseeable. Rather, they are fragmented by the actions of various audiovisual creators who will come to use it, scattered across different geographical locations and time periods. For this reason, just as film music scholars would (rightly) deplore any attempt to scrutinise a film score without paying close attention to the visuals it is paired with, an examination of library music owes particular attentiveness to the imagined images it was written for. This means engaging with library music as a sonic material that is continuously transformed in multiple (and unpredictable) moments of meaning-making – especially in an online media landscape where the reuse and reinterpretation of pre-existing texts has become a key form of communication. Ultimately, the dissertation illuminates an object that has become a vital element in audiovisual messages today, even as it slips unnoticed through the gaps of our conscious attention.