

TUNES FOR 'TOONS

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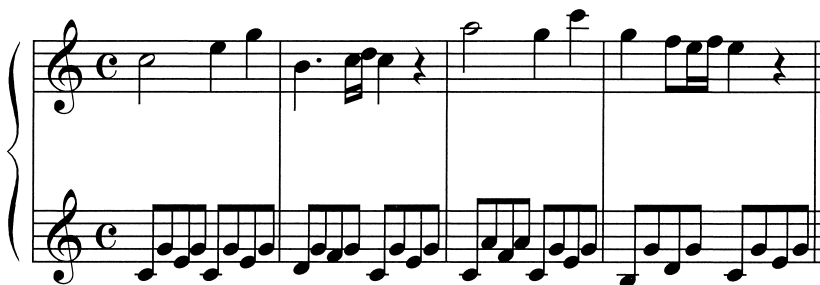
MUSIC AND THE HOLLYWOOD CARTOON

INTRODUCTION

WHY CARTOON MUSIC?

Around age five, I had my first encounter with what Germans call an *ohrwurm*, or earworm: I had a tune stuck in my head. I had no idea where or when I had heard it. With the help of a piano teacher, my mother and I finally identified the piece as Mozart's piano sonata in C major, K. 545. The tune I was stuck on was the opening melody (see music example 1). I took piano lessons for four years, and during that time I learned to play the piece. My interest in the piano faded and I moved on to other instruments, although the Mozart stayed with me as something of an *idée fixe*. In my early twenties, I got stuck on another tune during a class on Romantic music: Schubert's "Die Erlkönig," with which I felt a strange familiarity—particularly the opening melody in the piano's lower register. Not long after that class, I realized that I had learned both the Schubert and the Mozart from a cartoon, or, more accurately, from many cartoons.

Mozart's C major sonata, the so-called *facile sonata* (presumably because of its relative technical simplicity and simple melody), appears in more than a dozen Warner Bros. cartoons. The revelation that I had learned this melody from cartoons came as a shock. At the time of my epiphany, however, I did not recognize that most of the references to the tune were actually a jazz combo arrangement of the song written by the composer and bandleader Raymond Scott, titled "In an Eighteenth Century Drawing Room." This later discovery confirmed my suspicions



EXAMPLE 1 W. A. Mozart, sonata in C major for piano, K. 545.

that not only had I gleaned knowledge of classical music (Rossini, Liszt, Brahms, von Suppé, and others) from watching cartoons on Saturday mornings, but I had learned other styles of music as well. I soon realized I had a working familiarity with songs from no less than a dozen genres or traditions, among them classical, jazz, Tin Pan Alley, Hollywood film musicals, folk songs from America and around the world, Viennese opera, and nineteenth-century American parlor songs, particularly the work of Stephen Foster. This project thus began as I tried to satisfy my curiosity about how much music I had learned from cartoons; it quickly blossomed into a full-scale investigation of music's role in animated cartoons, with a special emphasis on how cartoon music could embody cultural meanings. I decided to focus initially on what is often called the Golden Age of Hollywood cartoons (those shorts produced by animation studios for theatrical release from the early 1930s to the mid-1950s), because these cartoons had given me such a broad and eclectic introduction to music; I later expanded my scope to include all forms of animation.

Having an interest in cartoon music by no means leads directly to an actual study of that music. For most of their existence, animated shorts and animation in general have typically been viewed as devoid of any intellectual import whatsoever. The close relationship between comic strips and cartoons, and the frequency—observed by the film historian Kristin Thompson—with which “animated film narratives . . . drew upon fantasy, magic and traditional stories as a motivation for stylization,” encouraged film critics in the 1920s and '30s to see animation as directed solely at children and led to “a trivialisation of the medium.”¹

Cartoons are also typically lumped together as a self-contained genre because they happen to have been created through the same process: animation. Yet even if we narrow our focus to just the output of the most prominent animation studios from the 1930s to the 1960s, we find a

tremendous variety of output: animated shorts, two-reelers, and features fulfilling the requirements of every imaginable Hollywood genre, including westerns, mysteries, dramas, musicals, and documentaries, as well as comedies of every conceivable style—romantic, slapstick, chase, black, and musical. Animation is *not* a genre; it is a technological process that creates a particular (highly idiosyncratic) means of visual representation. The question then becomes, how did animation get pigeonholed into comedy? Thompson posits that because “animation could do things live-action could not, and hence it came to be assumed that it *should* do only these things,” and because of the tradition that “all cartoons were supposed to be comic,” a new ideology subsumed cartoons, one that allowed only these seemingly “appropriate” narratives to be used.² Thompson also shows that when television became the dominant source of visual entertainment, animation producers no longer counted adults as part of their ideal demographic; as they began to concentrate exclusively on children, they targeted their humor at a far less sophisticated viewer.

Fortunately, this trend has shifted in the last decade. A wealth of new animated television series have reinvigorated the public’s interest in animation, in no small part thanks to the remarkable success and longevity of *The Simpsons*. *Ren & Stimpy*, *Animaniacs*, *King of the Hill*, *Powerpuff Girls*, *Dexter’s Laboratory*, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Futurama*, *Fairly OddParents*, and numerous other shows have brought back the idea that animation appeals to people of all ages. The growing popularity of anime in the United States has also helped animation’s credibility. True, a great many cartoons still pander to children, feature poor writing, and function as little more than animated toy commercials. But there are just as many stimulating shows appearing each year. As a result, animation studies has grown into a formidable discourse.

Soon after beginning my research I became frustrated by the lack of critical work on cartoon music, which convinced me that others found it insignificant. Until very recently, neither film studies nor musicology afforded film music any credence as an important topic; and film historians, as already noted, seldom gave more than a cursory glance toward animation, particularly Hollywood cartoons. I should not have been surprised that so little research had been done on the intersection of two already marginalized areas. This picture has changed considerably, however: film music criticism has burgeoned with the acceptance in the academy of general media studies, and critical investigations of animation have also expanded (although not to the same extent as those of film music).³ But no matter who considers the topic, the resulting criticism

never seems to exceed the bounds of the author's discipline. The film studies-based writings take little account of any actual music, and the few musicological essays seldom offer more than simple biographies enlivened by some musical examples. Neither approach considers much of the history of the animation industry or examines its production methods.

A telltale sign that cartoon music is seen as a poor relation to film music is the application of film music terminology to cartoons. Such dichotomies as source/underscore, diegetic/nondiegetic, and iconic/isomorphic can be very useful in discussions of the music in live-action films. They all in some way gauge the degree to which music stays within the traditional bounds of the narrative. That is, the audience usually knows whether or not the music is coming from within the story or diegesis (thus, nondiegetic music is perceptible not to the characters on screen but only to the audience). Occasionally these terms can be helpful for analyzing particular situations in cartoons, but they fail to take into account that music is far more integral to the construction of cartoons than of live-action films because the two forms are created in completely different ways. I therefore find such terms of limited utility.

Surviving evidence regarding music in films made before synchronized sound was developed indicates that cartoons received much less attention than features. Cue sheets and specially created scores—today of great interest to film music scholars—were created for cartoons only under the most extraordinary circumstances, and we thus have few substantial clues about how cartoons might have been accompanied. In his 1920s handbook, *How to Play the Cinema Organ*, George Tootell includes “‘Cartoon’ comedies, such as those of the famous Felix, though in these more opportunity is offered for the exercise of the musician’s wit. The organist is recommended to extemporise accompaniments to cartoon comedies, which are always short and concise, and offer scope for witty extemporisation; it is not too much to say that a skillfully accompanied cartoon can often be the most popular item in the programme.”⁴ Tootell focuses on cartoons as occasions to display wit and perhaps skill, rather than discussing how music in them might be used to establish mood or define character. Edith Lang and George West’s accompaniment guide of the same era offers similar advice, although it devotes an entire chapter to music for live-action comedies and animated cartoons.⁵ The connection between cartoons and comedies is borne out in Erno Rapée’s *Encyclopedia of Music for Pictures* (1925), which contains lists of appropriate songs for use in hundreds of situations. The sole entry relating specifi-

cally to cartoons is “Aesop’s Fables,” which contains a cross-reference to the more general category of “Comedy Pictures.”⁶

Two years before Rapée’s book was published, the earliest indication of an original musical arrangement for a cartoon appeared. On 2 June 1923, the periodical *Motion Picture News* printed

JAZZ AND “AESOP’S FILM FABLES” GOOD MIXERS

Jazz music goes well with “Aesop’s Film Fables.” That’s the conclusion reached after a number of tests, and consequently hereafter Pathé, the distributor of these subjects, will furnish musical effect sheets to each distributor booking one of these cartoons, declares a statement from the Pathé home-office. At the New York Capitol this week “Spooks” was presented with a musical jazz accompaniment, and at the Strand “The Mouse Catcher” was similarly presented.⁷

Clearly some cartoons, like most early feature films, were distributed to theaters with “special scores.” Though none of these has survived, other tangible examples of early cartoon music exist: for example, *PianOrgan Film Books of Incidental Music, Extracted from the World Famous “Berg” and “Cinema” Incidental Series*, comprising seven volumes in the 1920s, included five pieces under the heading “Animated Cartoonix.” In 1926 the Cleveland-based music publisher Sam Fox printed *Loose Leaf Collection of Ring-Hager Novelties for Orchestra*. The second of ten pieces in the collection, “Funny Faces,” bears the subtitle “A Comedy Sketch (For Animated Cartoons, Eccentric and Acrobatic Dancing, Etc.).” These same pieces were included in Sam Fox’s classified catalogue three years later; a four-volume collection of music from the same company in 1931 bore the title *Incidental Music for News Reels, Cartoons, Pictorial Reviews, Scenics, Travelogues, etc.* and contained works by Edward Kilenyi, L. E. DeFrancesco, J. S. Zamecnik, Harry Read, and several others.⁸ Cartoons in this period certainly were accompanied by music, but the form was not yet taken seriously. Indeed, the perception of cartoons solely as comedies limited their scores’ potential before it even had a chance to develop.

Most books and manuals from the 1930s on film music make some mention of animated cartoons, still grouped with comedies and other short subjects. Walt Disney’s cartoons are most frequently used to exemplify “good” scores, no doubt in part because the association of the Disney name with animation had become so ubiquitous. This international fame explains why, for instance, in *Film Music* (1936) Kurt London discusses only Disney’s music in the section “Sound Cartoon Films” before

moving on to European animation directors.⁹ During this era the music in Disney's cartoons also gave rise to a term: "mickey-mousing," the exact synchronization of music and action. It was supposedly coined by David O. Selznick, who was derisively likening a Max Steiner score to the music of a Mickey Mouse cartoon. The phrase implies not only that the music in question is simplistic, or "mickey mouse," but also that it is telegraphing to the audience too much information: that is, the music is calling attention to itself as it describes what is happening on screen.¹⁰ I'll address the usefulness of this term more fully in chapter 2.

As the animation industry reached a productive peak in the 1940s and '50s, coverage of cartoon music somewhat increased in various literary or professional journals, particularly *Film Music Notes*. Because *Film Music Notes* always tried to provide biographical as well as professional information on composers working in Hollywood in the 1940s, biographies of cartoon composers appeared sporadically. Once again, the predominance of the Disney studio in Hollywood ensured that their composers were the most frequently featured, with the sole exception of Scott Bradley. Darrell Calker, James Dietrich, Joe de Nat, Dave and Lou Fleischer, Eddie Kilfeather, Frank Marsales, Winston Sharples, Sammy Timberberg, Arthur Turkisher, Clarence Wheeler, Eugene Poddany, Philip Scheib, Hoyt Curtin, David Raksin, Gail Kubik, Eugene Rodemich, Bernard Brown, Carl Stalling, Milt Franklyn, William Lava, and others writing music for cartoons received little or no attention.¹¹

By the time critical examination of cartoon music began appearing in the late 1970s, the Hollywood studios producing theatrical shorts had all closed or ceased producing shorts. Roy Prendergast spends an entire chapter of *Film Music: A Neglected Art* (1977), "Music in the Cartoon and Experimental Animated Film," looking back at what was already a bygone era. He mainly explores Scott Bradley's music (relying in part on Bradley's numerous *Film Music Notes* articles) and the sound-on-film experiments of John Whitney and Norman McLaren. Just three years later, Jon Newsom provided an in-depth examination of the history of cartoon music in the *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*.¹² His discussion centers largely on Disney, MGM (Bradley again), and the music for the UPA shorts of the 1950s. The subjects chosen by both Prendergast and Newsom reflected the information available. For instance, because practically nothing on the Warner Bros. composer Carl Stalling existed then (or now), he is barely mentioned at all; his influence on the rest of the industry had yet to be widely acknowledged. Since that time, a handful of other articles on cartoon music have appeared, treating top-

ics that range from the application of Sergei Eisenstein's theories of sound to Disney cartoons to how the technological limitations of early sound affected the cartoons' music in the early 1930s.¹³

In many ways the responsibilities of cartoon music resemble those taken on by traditional film scores: establishing the setting, drawing the audience into the story, providing the viewer with additional information about a scene, telling the viewer how to feel at any given moment, and vitalizing the "lifeless" pictures of the film. This last point is particularly important for animated drawings, whose figures—unlike those in live-action films—were never alive to begin with. The medium of animation requires that music for cartoons be conceived and constructed differently than traditional feature film music. We can best see these differences by examining two issues: who helped to establish the paradigmatic sound of Hollywood cartoons, and how music was used to enhance and intensify cartoons as a whole.

Tunes for 'Toons thus presents a set of case studies rather than an all-encompassing history of cartoon music. And my key questions lead me to focus on two broad ideas: genre and compositional style. I discuss the methods of Carl Stalling and Scott Bradley, in my opinion the two most influential composers of music for theatrical cartoons, at the one studio where each had the most historical significance. For Bradley, that studio is necessarily MGM; for Stalling, a choice is possible. While some, with reason, might select Disney, arguing that his work there in 1928 and 1929 defined the entire field for years to come, I concentrate on Warner Bros., where he came into his own as a composer and where he wrote close to one new score every week for more than twenty years.

Carl Stalling's extraordinary influence on cartoon music as a whole suggests a host of possible avenues to explore, including his relation to mickey-mousing; the original music he wrote for each score that succeeds in mickey-mousing the action with its unexpected and unique melodic lines and instrumental choices; his collaboration with his arranger (and eventual successor), Milt Franklyn; and the role played by his experiences with Disney and Iwerks in preparing him for Warner Bros. Here I take up the most pressing topic, particularly in the eyes of his critics: Stalling's employment of popular songs in his scores. I thus examine why their use was so frequent if not pervasive, how those songs became a musical language through which Stalling could tell stories, and how his particular style colors our understanding of the Warner Bros. cartoons.

Scott Bradley, whose approach was diametrically opposed to Stalling's, provides the ideal foil. Bradley's formal training in composition and his

love for contemporary classical or concert hall music explain why he avoided popular songs in his scores and why he constantly sought to raise the public's awareness of the quality of music in animated cartoons. He pays careful attention in his music to the action of each cartoon. I discuss the modernist techniques Bradley used both to elevate his scores aesthetically and to give them a unique musical "signature"—a compositional style distinct from that of any other studio composer for cartoons, most of all Stalling (who once said that his idea of a modernist composing style was the use of augmented intervals).¹⁴

The comparison of jazz and swing music with classical music and opera is not only natural, it has been made repeatedly in films and cartoons themselves. I therefore examine how the various studios made use of such culturally charged music in the cartoon narrative, gauging the success of composers at either integrating stylistic elements of these forms or completely appropriating them into their scores. To be sure, the most significant portion of existing scholarship on music and cartoons is devoted to the role of jazz and swing, but it has typically focused on representations of black jazz musicians. Equally important in these cartoons is what the very different approaches to jazz tell us about the public's view of the genre and its creators when these shorts were produced. Moreover, the look of jazz does not tell the whole story: the songs chosen, the personalities represented, and the specific styles appropriated in each short show how pervasive an element of popular culture jazz had become. Numerous forms of it—swing, bop, Dixieland, vocalese, boogie woogie, big band, and even free jazz—surfaced in cartoon scores or stories during the Hollywood studio era.

The natural complement to a study of jazz is a study of classical music. If we are to believe the oppositions set up in cartoons and films of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, these two genres are cultural and aesthetic antagonists, constantly jockeying for social preeminence. The increasingly high-brow aura surrounding classical music and its practitioners provided cartoon directors with an endless supply of jokes at the expense of concert hall culture. After looking at *many* of these cartoons, we see that certain topics (the appearance and actions of the conductor, the attitudes of singers, and so on) and specific pieces (Rossini's *William Tell* overture and Liszt's Second Hungarian Rhapsody, for instance) seem perpetually ripe for ridicule. What makes the comparison of classical music and jazz so rewarding is that they actually have a great deal in common, especially in how they were used. Popular culture, expressed in animation, took the most recognizable bits of both as fodder for social commentary.

Tunes for 'Toons is far from objective or definitive: I have a very specific and relatively narrow agenda in mind. I focus on Carl Stalling and Scott Bradley because I believe that they helped establish the public's notion of what cartoon scores should sound like. Both men had well-defined ideas about what they wanted their music to convey, yet this desire for self-expression constantly pitted them against the Hollywood production system. Their chief obstacle was their limited opportunities (if any) to create a dialogue between the music and the visual components of the film. Stalling overcame this hurdle by using popular music to comment on the scores, while Bradley wrote music so specific to the animation that the cartoons often seemed to become animated ballets. Stalling and Bradley provide the most compelling case studies for this book, in part because of their musical influences and opposed approaches to scoring. My discussion of classical music and jazz also reflects my interest in these genres, and my particular fondness for cartoons that are scored exclusively within them. Any apparent neglect of other studios—Disney, Lantz, UPA, and Fleischer, among others—by no means implies that I think them unworthy of discussion. I know that I am only scratching the surface of what remains to be investigated, and I hope that the reader will take away from this book a sense of the endless possibilities for future research. No matter which cartoons we choose to look at, the significance of the music in those cartoons has changed—not only because audiences have changed but also because animation and our culture more generally have evolved and been transformed over the past fifty years. The music in the cartoons still provides meaning, but we must repeatedly rediscover what that meaning is.