

## An Overview of the Codes and Conventions of Drama Film Music

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**Abstract:** *This article is, a part of a larger chapter, which treats the analysis of also other drama soundtracks, with various plots, directing visions and kinds of typologies in order to draw a line between the conventions and codes in music. Still, it is hard, since the final result is mostly an eclecticism between program music, large types of audio layouts, applied accordingly to the script and the personal craft of the composer.*

*I identified some general approaches in drama film music, such as: the large usage of strings, or the highlight of melodic parameter, the minor keys and so on. I believe, for a composer it is essential to know the tools one needs to choose before writing music for a film. Even more, the codes found in an soundtrack are necessary because of the fact that they „talk” about the composer’s style, his trademark.*

Key-words: *film music, scoring, soundtrack, interference, composing, research*

### 1. Introduction

Research sources regarding cinematography and, implicitly, film music are numerous, varied and found mainly in countries that have a tradition in this regard. Moreover, film studios with big budgets, universities of theater and film, respectively of film music contribute enormously to the creation of an environment conducive to the discovery and support of future composers, orchestrators, arrangers, etc. If we refer to the example of the United States of America, from the very beginning there is a selection even before the entrance exams, as affordability decreases due to the enormous tuition fees. The educational process itself aims at performance, the disciple's unlimited access to education, facilitated by capable professors and practitioners, modern, reliable technology, as well as extremely clear ends: independent projects supported or not by organizations or foundations, internships in the studios, or even job offers suitable for the students' specialization.

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## 2. Objectives

The main objective on which I am currently working is to go with my research to a larger scale, to analyse more scores, to classify, to clarify aspects in which the authors did not dive in, maybe, too much. After the editing part, I intend to publish a book in which I would like to write about the codes and conventions in film music. Also, I do not want to ignore my composer activity, since no matter how difficult it can be for one to score for film, a good theoretician should be a hardworking practitioner.

## 3. General aspects of drama film music

The drama genre is perhaps the broadest cinematographic category, because it includes a wide spectrum of themes, which are based on the inner conflict of the individual with himself, or between one and other people or even with the forces of nature: conceptions of society, social differences topics, social class differences, racial/sexual/social discrimination, traditions and rites of an ethnic community/minority, violence, poverty, abandonment, mental disorders, addictions etc. As can be seen, in general, the themes (Weis, Belton, 1985) are oriented either towards society, towards the collective, or towards the individual<sup>2</sup>. Narratives can be fictitious/inspired by real events or both at the same time<sup>3</sup> and reveal the traits of human nature in moments of balance, extreme states, significant events, incidental or repetitive. Very often, however, the elements that define the drama, imitating the model of reality, are mixed precisely to provide a deep, complex image of the scenario. Moreover, the sudden appearance of new elements, the relatively violent rapidity with which significant moments follow each other or, on the contrary, the creation of the sensation of static, exactly as if nothing major is happening, are typical features of drama. In any case, accessing emotion at a deep level, manipulating it among viewers so that they can temporarily transpose themselves into the narrative, defines, perhaps the recipe for success in drama films.

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<sup>2</sup> During the censorship period in Hollywood and during communism, in Europe, in order to avoid unpleasantness, conflicts of ideologies and opinions, scenarios focused on society were avoided in favor of those that focused on the individual.

<sup>3</sup> There is, however, a greater share of one category than the other.

The enormous thematic diversity led to the classification of several subgenres<sup>4</sup>: *Epics (Historical drama)*, *Crime films*, *Courtroom dramas*, *Biopics (Biography)*, *Romantic Genres*, *Melodrama*, *Sport Drama*, *Religious Drama*, *Showbusiness Drama*.

About the specific codes and conventions used in each of these, a thorough analysis is, of course, appropriate not only within in this article, but rather in an independent work, therefore, I will summarize in series, essential features through the prism of edifying examples, which I will identify, define and abstract, with reference to various productions.

In studying the dramas, I noticed that there was a strong tendency in Hollywood to "dress up" the subjects in an artistic color, exploiting the dramatic moments in a slightly softer form that allows greater accessibility to the viewer and to facilitate the understanding of the cinematic content. Although not devoid of violence or shocking events, symbols and characters, they focus on the individual and diminishes the high degree of violence slightly by enhancing the artistic element. In short, in general, it was aimed that through drama, comedy and thriller, the film would become a blockbuster. In Asia, on the other hand, directors were more focused on producing films as forms of cultural-artistic manifestation, to be made with patience and quality, outlining the plan of reality as faithfully as possible, spending a lot of time in the pre-production stage. At the same time, the subjects were addressed to larger masses of individuals, in films with war themes, historical events or in those with social themes.

#### **4. The eclecticism in Ran` film music.**

*Ran* (1985), directed by Akira Kurosawa, is one of the reference productions for the drama genre. Working for about ten years<sup>5</sup> in the pre-production stage, the director prepares everything in the smallest details, even painting the storyboard sketches of the important frames, putting special emphasis on chromatic, dynamic, on capturing beautiful landscapes, highlighting the intimate, mysterious relationship of man with nature. At the same time, it uses the symbol of sunrise and sunset to communicate, on a

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<sup>4</sup> I opted for notating them in English, because, in Romanian, for some of them, word-for-word translation is almost not possible, and a contextual one requires the use of several words. Also, most of the classifications were made by American film critics, which implies from the beginning, a series of names specific to the English language.

<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, a series of events happened in his personal and professional life: other films under his direction were released, he lost his wife, taking only a day off to mourn her, etc. He was an extremely deep, dedicated director who did not let compromise enter his work.

subtle level, data about the course of action. For example, before the start of the war between the brothers, in which a considerable number of people lost their lives, the sky at sunset was a bloody color with purple iridescence.

The symbolism is strongly aspected, starting from the title - *Ran*, which, in Japanese is translated as rebellion, madness, chaos, being portrayed with the help of several dimensions: social, philosophical, psychological, chromatic and dynamic. The social one reveals social aspects of samurai life, norms and customs, as well as typologies and types of mentalities, while the psychological and philosophical<sup>6</sup> aspects continue to outline the principles of the mentalities of that period, conclusive for the creation of a credible reality regarding the time and space of the action.

Rhythm is another characteristic dimension of Kurosawa's films; each character has its own dynamic, its own rhythm, which suggests a certain type of personality, alternated with the movement of objects and/or elements in nature (the breeze that makes the curtain flutter, the swaying of tree branches, etc.).

Chromatics plays an overwhelming role in understanding the message conveyed; the director assigns meanings to the colors, giving the scenes complex meanings: white, yellow-light, hope, while red-bright, purple-death, chaos, the end. Although the director shows a predilection for landscapes, pale, pastel shades predominate, while contrasts appear only at key moments.



Fig. 1. "Dream"- sketch from the storyboard made by the director Akira Kurosawa, for the film "Ran"

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<sup>6</sup> About the philosophy behind the film, Kurosawa states that: "What I was trying to get at in *Ran* and this was there from the script stage, was that the gods or God or whoever it is observing human events is feeling sadness about how human beings destroy each other and powerless to affect human behavior."

The script is based on Shakespeare's tragedy, *King Lear*<sup>7</sup>, but the action is set in the medieval period, in the Asian space<sup>8</sup>, and has as its subject the desire of Emperor Ichimonji Hidetora to leave the kingdom and wealth as an inheritance to his three sons: Taro, Jiro and Saburo. The main themes are: inheritance, the theme of the family, the antithesis between the traditional society with well-rooted traditions (Dennison, Hwee 2021, 156-157) and the modern one, the impotence of the gods in the face of the choice of people. At the same time, Kurosawa addresses "key" feelings in the action, such as: revenge, anger, greed, pride.

The soundtrack has, however, undergone numerous serious modifications and changes. If at first Kurosawa wanted the music to be written in the tategoe manner - a style of strident vocal performance without instruments, he later proposed to the composer Tōru Takemitsu to write a score in the true sense of the word, similar to Mahler's compositional language. It was, however, significantly influenced by the Japanese karmic concept of interpreting *ma* as a surplus of energy surrounding an abundant void. He said: "My music is like a garden and I am the gardener. Listening to my music can be compared to walking through a garden and experiencing the changes in light, pattern and texture." (Craig 2021)

#### **Codes used for drama genre:**

- chordophones: often using a compact writing, i.e. without encompassing a considerable scope, Takemitsu proposes that the music for chordophones is a whole, unitary body, as a single identity. Going further, this seems to be the voice of the tragic, the dramatic, the suffering that lies behind the struggle for power and possession. The timbre of the chordophones is more than defining for the drama;
- high-pitched violins, in octaves (Davis 1991): sad, melancholic, depressing sound, often used in dramatic scenes or foreshadowing drama;
- diminished intervals: if they usually describe a feeling of anguish, of unhappiness, this time, moreover, they announce the passing of a tragic event, deeply unpleasant, with an unfortunate outcome;
- the rapid alternation between the ascending and descending meaning: chaos, unnatural;

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<sup>7</sup> The director is not at the first "attempt" to be inspired by Shakespeare's creation. "The Body of Blood" is also inspired by Shakespeare's creation.

<sup>8</sup> The fact that the film's script is based on a British text, but the action takes place in Japan, proves that the director had in mind the universal character of behavioral typologies, of social problems, turning it into one of the classic productions of the cinematographic collection.

- the abundance of percussion instruments: their use is justified in the present analysis by the war drama subcategory, in which the film falls. However, there are also the color ones, which depict the spirit and wisdom of the samurai, as well as the religiosity of the Lady Sue character;
- repeated rhythmic formulas: in my opinion, they can easily be classified as a thriller, because they basically announce, through repetition, the imminence of a danger, a disaster. Any repetition has the minimal role of dynamic growth and tension. As in a nightmare, Emperor Ichimonji realizes the ominous turn that his desire to share the power of the three sons takes, being caught in a kind of hypnotic consternation;
- second overlays<sup>9</sup>: together with sound pedals, create textural sounds, describing large masses of people and complicated contexts;
- minor chords with a minor seventh: the emperor's sadness, helplessness and resignation in the face of his sons' blinding desire to each have the entire kingdom for themselves;
- the alternation I-IV-I: successfully used in so many productions already analyzed, as well as here, it denotes a tragic situation, with no escape, which has an essential role in the evolution and psychological shaping of the characters. Unfolding on the same harmonic basis, they also refer to the impotence of the divinity to intervene in people's choices;
- sequences of minor chords (Adorno, Eisler 1947): arranged at intervals of ascending second or descending third, refer to the drama of the general context, the extremely high degree of violence and danger and the transformation of the two sons - Taro and Jiro - into two tyrants hungry for power;
- piccolo flute: its timbre will always stand out and have the effect of cutting the sonority of the orchestral apparatus. In the soundtrack to be analyzed, his interventions can be detected in many of the important scenes, transmitting to the audience at a subliminal level, the presence of a danger, through his shrill timbre;
- tremolo, clusters and the abundance of chromaticism: the mystery, the suspense, the state of expectation. Although the film has a slightly static pace, there is a constant tension, played not only by the music, but also by the changing colors of the sunset.

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<sup>9</sup> Kurosawa's films have always impressed with the enormous number of extras used, bringing a significant dose of realism and grandeur to the war scenes.

Ran is an impressive film, a classic of cinematic productions, and also an example of what followed in the Asian space, in the way Kurosawa perceives the approach of all parameters: complex typologies that reflect Asian thought, a large number of extras, symbolism rich as well as impressive settings.

## 5. Accomplishments

One of the best results I have at the present moment is that I teach film music at *George Enescu* National University of Arts in Iași, as an optional discipline. When I teach, I try to offer the students the best quality in matter of informations, based on interference of genre in film music and based on composition technical skills. As a consequence, I get an interactive lesson, in which I use many methods, trying to make it as diverse as possible. Also, I can materialize some parts of my research, by providing good content, tips and useful tricks, following the final result, which is creating a solid film music young composer's generation.

## 6. Conclusions

Drama film music can be defined by several aspects. For example, the heavy use of chordophones in broad articulations, wide breathing, in themes with a sad, dramatic profile, such as in the productions of *Talented Mr. Ripley*, *Jane Eyre*. But even the whispered singing in the film *Ran*, or the dissonances and sounds produced by the synthesizers in *A few good men* are no less dramatic. Everything depends enormously on the scenario, on the character typologies, on the instruments chosen by the composer and on his own code, which, after all, ensures the originality of the sound content.

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