IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Igor Stravinsky on Film Music (1948)

Igor Stravinsky’s music first appeared in a feature film in the 1940 Walt Disney classic animation *Fantasia*. Parts of The Rite of Spring, conducted by Leopold Stokowski, were used there to accompany a sequence showing the struggles of prehistoric animals, with dinosaur gyrations cued to Stravinsky’s complex rhythms.

Stravinsky was not pleased with the outcome. Although he had been paid $5,000 for the use of his music (a tidy sum at the time), he resented the changes that had been made in his score, and he found in Disney’s animation only an “imbecility.”

Still, it seemed inevitable that Stravinsky would forget his squabbles with Disney and embrace the new medium of film music when he moved permanently to Hollywood in 1941. After all, there was a widespread enthusiasm among classical composers of the day for the art of cinematic music, and Hollywood producers were ready to pay large sums to enlist the services of prestigious names from the world of classical music. Stravinsky’s friends—including Georges Auric and Sergei Prokofiev—had written important film scores, as did leading American composers such as Aaron Copland.

But despite a few incomplete negotiations and abortive plans for film music, Stravinsky could never convince himself that the genre had value as music. He explained his skepticism in an article appearing in 1948 in the New York journal *Musical Digest*:

What is the function of music in moving pictures? What, you ask, are the particular problems involved in music for the screen? I can answer both questions briefly. And I must answer them bluntly. There are no musical problems in the film. And there is only one real function of film music—namely, to feed the composer! In all frankness I find it impossible to talk to film people about music because we have no common meeting ground; their primitive and childish concept of music is not my concept. They have the mistaken notion that music, in “helping” and “explaining” the cinematic shadow-play, could be regarded under artistic considerations. It cannot be.

... The current cinematic concept of music is foreign to me; I express myself in a different way. What common language can one have with the films? They have recourse to music for reasons of sentiment. They use it like remembrances, like odors, like perfumes which evoke remembrances. As for myself, I need music for hygienic purposes, for the health of my soul. Without music in its best sense there is chaos. For my part, music is a force which gives reason to things, a force which creates organization, which attunes things. Music probably attended the creation of the universe.