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# Seriously Funny Music: The Use of 'Serious' Music in *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978), *Airplane!* (1980), and *The Naked Gun* (1988)

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'Is funny music funny?' poses Miguel Mera in his article of the same name (Mera 2002). The answer – after examining four main types of film music humour – was that it depends on several factors (p. 107). Humour is, after all, undeniably individualistic, rendering a holistic audience reception study of 'funny music' a challenging prospect, notwithstanding the difficulties of defining 'funny music' in the first place. This chapter seeks not to focus on so-called funny music in film, but rather the apparent opposite: 'serious' music.

What is 'serious music'? Theodor Adorno deliberated that there are two spheres of music: popular and serious, and that one is characterised by its differences from the other (Adorno and

Simpson 1941, p. 17). Adorno's key argument is that popular music is standardized across genres, whereas serious music has individual sections whose meaning is manifested through their relation to other parts of the same work. Simon Frith argues that serious music contains societally transcendental forces compared to popular music's aesthetic worthlessness and utilitarian usefulness (Frith 1987, p. 133). I find this dichotomous description of music problematic. Surely, we cannot simply define music as being *either* serious or popular? Could we not consider complex concept albums such as Pink Floyd's *The Wall* (1979) serious popular music? Contrarily, is Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, Op. 125 (1824) not popular, serious music?

Most pertinent of all to this chapter, we can ask where music is positioned in this so-called two-pronged approach to categorising the seriousness or popularity of music? Film scores do not consist solely of popular music, and for decades they were not considered serious at all. Such was the disdain shown to film music in its infancy, that Constant Lambert in the foreword to Kurt London's *Film Music* pleaded with the reader to hold the view that 'film music should not be despised' (London 1936, p. xi). The ambivalence and even antagonism towards music for film slowly gave way to an acceptance that it belonged in somewhere close to the same realm as 'classical' or art music, but there remained occasional grumbles as to its artistic merit. Adorno and Eisler famously vented in their chapter 'Prejudices and Bad Habits' (Adorno and Eisler 1947: pp. 3-19), and film composer Elmer Bernstein wallowed in pity at the direction film scoring was taking, asking 'Whatever Happened to Great Movie Music?' in a 1972 issue of *High Fidelity* magazine (Bernstein 1972: pp. 55-58). Apposite for the forthcoming discussion of 'serious' film music, we shall make the reasonable assumption that film music itself is now treated as 'serious' music in terms of its standing. The fact that John Williams has received invites to conduct the Wiener and Berliner Philharmoniker sufficiently evidences this (Audissino 2021: p. 65).

As with any artificial categorisation of film or music into generic boxes, there is no singular correct or appropriate method of scoring comedy films. Approaches to scoring comedy films have differed across the history of the medium, from the earliest silent films through to the twenty-first century. Perhaps the most straightforward approach to scoring comedy films was in the silent film era. In the age of the in-theatre pianist or organist, a lack of imagination, technology, and time resulted in forthright, simplistic accompaniments to funny films. Utilising the various volumes and albums of motion picture sounds or moods, the pianist would simply choose several 'funny' musical excerpts and match the musical mood to the visual mood, often to the extent that the visual and music would be explicitly and meticulously synchronised (a technique later retrospectively known as Mickey Mousing in the early animated sound films). Erno Rapee's *Encylopedia of Music for Pictures* (1925: pp. 153-154) contains a list of music suitable for comedy films, including curiously titled music such as '*The Pig and Whistle'* (Smith), *'Potatoe-Bug-Parade'* (Cobb), '*In Gnomeland'* (Gruenwald), and *'You'd Be Surprised'* (Berlin). Curiously, this list included a handful of funeral marches, hinting – even in the 1920s – at musical irony or soundtrack dissonance as an effective film music technique.

The Golden Age of Hollywood saw comedy films such as *Duck Soup* (1933, dir. Leo McCarey), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938, dir. Howard Hawks), and *His Girl Friday* (1940, dir. Howard Hawks) use either pre-existing or specially composed diegetic songs, little to no original instrumental score, or a combination of the two. It is noteworthy that during a time when some of the great pioneers of film scoring like Max Steiner and Erich Wolfgang Korngold were reaching the pinnacles of their careers and taking film music to hitherto unreached heights, that there was such hesitance to score comedy films with original orchestral music.

As the twentieth century reached its final quarter, comedy films had been scored by 'Mickey-Moused' slapstick music for silent films, pre-existing or original songs and sparse original scores in the Golden Age of Hollywood, and original songs and 'easy listening' scores for mid-century comedies. But where does the introduction of 'serious' music for comedy films enter the equation? Although there were examples as early as the 1960s of the application of 'serious' music to comedy, such as John Addison's Academy Award winning score to *Tom Jones* (1963), it was Elmer Bernstein's contribution to the 1978 film *National Lampoon's Animal House* that championed the technique.

### ***National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978)**

Frequently shortened to *Animal House,* this American comedy film was directed by John Landis and featured a large ensemble cast including John Belushi (as John "Bluto" Blutarsky), Tim Matheson (as Eric "Otter" Stratton), Peter Riegert (as Donald "Boon" Schoenstein), Tom Hulce (as Lawrence "Pinto" Kroger), Stephen Furst (as Kent "Flounder" Dorfman), and Bruce McGill (as Daniel "D-Day" Simpson Day). The film is set in the fictional Faber College, and centres around a trouble-making student fraternity who encounter (and actively encourage) frequent battles with the authoritative Dean Vernon Wormer (John Vernon).

The original score for *Animal House* was composed by established film composer Elmer Bernstein, who also wrote the score for the second case study in this chapter, *Airplane!* (1980). The score was composed in a 'self-consciously serious style' that would inspire comedy film composers in subsequent years (Stephen 2006, p. 1031). The composer described the success of the score being a result of its parodical nature of a dramatic, neo-Romantic film score (Goldwasser 2000). Bernstein explained that Landis's brief to him was to compose as if it were a serious dramatic film, and that a 'very straight underscore that would lay the flavour for all the stuff that was going on' (*This Is Your Life* 2003; *National Lampoons Animal House: Collector's Edition* 1998). He was asked not to make any reference to funny sounds or funny music at all (Millar 2002). Bernstein described this approach as trendsetting, and this so-called seriousness in the original score, combined with a frequent use of pre-existing popular music, resulted in a film that leaps from apparent sincerity to light-hearted joviality at frequent intervals, both in the music and the narrative. Bernstein was initially reluctant to score such a film, exclaiming to Landis ‘Me? You want me to do a broad comedy?’ (Simmons 2012, p. 111). This was an observation shared by Landis’s production team, with the director claiming that ‘[w]hen I suggested Elmer Bernstein for the music, they thought I was nuts’ (*National Lampoons Animal House: Collectors Edition* 1998). George Folsey Jr., an editor for the film, highlighted that the studio did not understand why a composer of ‘great [neo-]Romantic scores’ would be appointed for a goofy comedy film (*National Lampoons Animal House: Collector’s Edition* 1998). Bernstein would go on to be typecast as a comedy writer for a short period of his career; a label he was not entirely comfortable with, despite admitting that it was fun. Ten years after the release of *Animal House,* Bernstein found himself thinking, ‘Wait a minute, I’ve been there, and done that [with “serious” comedy scores]’ and attributed his popularity as a comedy score composer to the success of *Animal House* (Goldwasser 2000). Bernstein rejected the *Ghostbusters* sequel after writing the original *Ghostbusters* score, and whilst still continuing to score comedy films until the end of his career, diversified the genre of films he worked on.

Arguably the most cogent question to ask in this case study is how one distinguishes between a ‘serious’ dramatic underscore, and a parody of a ‘serious’ dramatic underscore. Will the musical nuances be perspicuous enough to be acknowledged by a lay cinema audience, and if not, is Bernstein’s score not therefore a strait-laced ‘serious’ dramatic musical accompaniment? It is noteworthy that the word ‘parody’ in reference to the score only came from the composer himself, so we can to some extent consider the degree of success in which Bernstein managed to transcend the invisible line between a ‘serious’ neo-Romantic score, and a parody of the same.

The notion that the 'serious' score was indeed written as a self-confessed parody is reinforced by the opening main title theme 'Faber College Theme', which is not so much Bernstein as it is Brahms. Taking the academic nature of the opening montage of Faber College as literally as he could, Bernstein adapts Johannes Brahms's *Academic Festival Overture Op.80* (1880). This overture had been used by Alfred Newman in *People Will Talk* (1951, dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz) which was also set in an American college, providing precedence for Bernstein's use of the piece. Furthermore, *Bedazzled* (1967, dir. Stanley Donen) uses the overture diegetically when Dudley Moore's pretentious, aloof character Stanley Moon listens to the Brahms LP on his record player. Appropriately, Brahms' overture is a sophisticated, adapted medley of student drinking songs, hence he had done Bernstein's work for him. How better to open a comedy film, with an ostensibly refined opening montage of an academic establishment, than to underscore it with a comparably refined composition that has underlying ironic humour? Suitably, the drinking song adapted by Brahms, and then taken by Bernstein, is *Wir hatten gebauet ein stattliches Haus* (*We had built a stately house*), giving subtextual meaning to the panning shots of the Faber College campus with its grandiose architecture. It fits the brief of Landis perfectly, offering a suitable aura of gravitas but also inviting musically educated audiences to indulge in a wry joke on behalf of Bernstein, and by proxy, Brahms. Although the underlying humour of drinking songs in a 'serious' composition may not be side-splittingly witty, it does offer a curious antithetical example to most of the examples found in this chapter, namely 'funny music' accompanying a 'serious' scene here, as opposed to the crux of this chapter which highlights the opposite: 'serious' music accompanying humorous scenes. Although making only minor infrequent appearances, two further pieces of pre-existing classical music are heard in the film. Eric 'Otter' Stratton is often seen and heard whistling Peter's theme from Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* (1936). More significantly, the character 'D-Day' plays Rossini's *William Tell Overture* (1829) on his throat, by tapping his fingers violently against his windpipe. As an example of 'serious' music being used for comedic effect, it appears nowhere more explicitly in this chapter than at this moment. 'D-Day' is taking a well-known and well-loved classical composition and manifesting it as an absurd party trick rendition. Whereas the Brahms overture was used with some degree of sincerity, and the Prokofiev theme was nothing more than incidental whistling, the Rossini overture was included as a quick audio-visual gag. Notwithstanding the comedic impact of this brief scene, the use of Rossini in this scene makes intertextual reference to *The Lone Ranger* (1949-57) television series, whilst also possible alluding to the highbrow cultural knowledge of the fraternity members. The scene proves that outwardly slovenly, lazy, incompetent students still had sufficient exposure to classical music to be able to caricature and parody it in the most peculiar fashion. Parenthetically, actor Bruce McHill volunteered his services as a "throat tapper" when Landis probed the cast for any unusual hidden talents that could be incorporated into the film. He can be seen performing the same William Tell party trick years later in an interview (Leighton Ginn 2015).

Following on immediately from the opening titles, the music in the film transcends from non-diegetic to diegetic as two of our ungainly protagonists enter the prestigious Omega Theta Pi's start-of-term house party, longing to be accepted as its newest members. Reinforcing the perceptible sophistication of the party, a pianist is seen and heard performing light music as a highbrow accompaniment to the revelry. Although insignificant or worthy of comment as standalone music, being little more than an underpinning of elitism and superiority at this point, it provides a foundation for the contrast in mood found later in the score. Refined piano music giving way to popular music and jazz signifies and complements chaos and rebellion. This disparity is soon apparent, and as 'Flounder' and 'Pinto' are rejected by Omega and find themselves in the degrading surroundings of the much-maligned Delta house, the music turns to diegetic rhythm and blues (*Louie Louie*, 1955, by Richard Berry).

Perhaps the finest example that engages with the 'serious film score parody *or* serious film score' conundrum is the leitmotivic music composed for the character of Dean Wormer. As Wormer plots in his office the potential expulsion of Delta from the college, an ominous vertiginous ostinato enters the score in low strings. Although released prior to either of these films, there is a striking resemblance to the villain motifs composed by John Williams for Emperor Palpatine in the *Star Wars* trilogies, Williams again for Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* (Chris Columbs, Alfonso Cuarón, Mike Newell, David Yates, 2001-11) franchise, and Howard Shore for Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings* (Peter Jackson, 2001-03) and *The Hobbit* (Peter Jackson, 2012-14) trilogies. This reinforces the argument that this motif for Dean Wormer is legitimately serious in its style and represents him through the use of strait-laced music as an undisputed villain. The music is not funny, but it is bookended by comedy. Analogously, this enables the music to function as a serious filling in a comedy sandwich, where each ingredient would not be satisfying if presented independently, but together form a well-rounded product that works. An example of this is when Wormer visits the Delta house. We see his shadow and hear his footsteps before he physically appears on screen, and as he marches ominously into the Delta house common room, his portentous presence is accompanied by his sinister leitmotif. After a serious discussion with the students (interspersed with interjections of very brief comedic dialogue), Wormer leaves. As he exits, a musical cue is heard not dissimilar to the overused and overwhelmingly familiar "dun-dun-dunnnn" three-note dramatic motif. One of the gathered students then immediately smiles, claiming, 'Well that was pleasant – nice of him to stop by, don't ya think?' The musical cadence – a parody of more seriously dramatic moments that use the same stinger – and light-hearted, sarcastic dialogue immediately defuse the tension and the film returns to its fundamental *raison d'être*: a comedy. This scene did not utilise serious music for comedic effect in the present, but serious music was used as a prelude and postlude to humour and provided contrast so that when the comedy returned, it was felt more keenly after a moment of tangible hostility.

### ***Airplane! (1980)***

*Airplane!* is a comedy film written and directed by David Zucker, Jerry Zucker, and Jim Abrahams. It stars Robert Hays and Julie Hagerty and features well-known (at the time) serious dramatic actors such as Leslie Nielsen and Lloyd Bridges in major comedic roles. It is widely considered a very funny film, appearing in second position in two prominent ‘funniest film of all time’ polls (Rolling Stone 2014; Kryza et. al, 2021), and earning a score of 97% on film critic website Rotten Tomatoes (2021). The latter describes the film as ‘unabashedly juvenile and silly’ and praises the still-quotable lines almost half a century after its initial release (Rotten Tomatoes, 2021). The film parodies the disaster film genre, and the plot is particularly inspired by *Zero Hour!* (1957, dir. Hall Bartlett). It also takes inspiration for several characters from *Airport 1975* (1974, dir. Jame Smight). As Paramount Pictures owned the rights for *Zero Hour!,* the screenplay was parodied almost verbatim in *Airplane!,* and the protagonist’s name of Ted Stryker in *Zero Hour!* became Ted Striker in *Airplane!*. A side-by-side comparison video by YouTube creator Mason Wood (2015) exemplifies the explicitness of the scene and dialogue duplication between the two films.

Music is utilised in a variety of ways in *Airplane!* At times, the score is dramatic and seemingly conformist to the prevailing Hollywood style, at other times musical jokes are introduced as a fleeting, unsophisticated gag, and most pertinently for this chapter, ‘serious’ music scores comedic scenes to enhance the humorous impact. It would be remiss of me not to partake in a brief overview of the musical ‘jokes’, as they epitomise the sense and style of humour that permeates the film.

The musical jokes utilised in *Airplane!* are always diegetic in nature. There are three moments where music is used most obviously in this way. The first of these is where Lisa Davis, a young girl on board *en route* to a heart transplant operation, is sung to by a saccharine sweet stewardess wielding an acoustic guitar. As the folk song becomes more energetic, so too does the stewardess, and she inadvertently knocks Lisa's life support drips out with a careless flailing guitar. As the upbeat song continues, Lisa's face contorts comedically as she seemingly fights for her life. Admittedly, the comedy in this sequence does not translate well from screen to the written word. This is one of the many sequences parodied in *Airplane!* having originally appeared in *Airport 1975*.

The second musical joke in *Airplane!* involves a simple musical instrument prop. As Ted Striker enters one of his numerous reminiscent analepses, he is seen sat in a gritty club 'in Drambuie off the Barbary Coast', which he described as 'a rough place – the seediest dive on the wharf'. As he absentmindedly tinkers with his whisky glass at the bar, a pair of hosiery-laced legs in stiletto heels struts in front of him to the sound of seductive jazz. The camera pans up the woman's body to reveal that who the audience assumed to be a showgirl or stripper dancing, is in fact playing the trombone jazz melody that they initially may have presumed to be either emitting from an off-screen big band or belonging in the non-diegetic underscore.

The final musical joke lasts for just a matter of seconds but is arguably the most effective. As the air traffic control team at the airport become growingly concerned as to the whereabouts of the missing plane, Steve McCroskey (Lloyd Bridges) exclaims that they could be 'miles off course by now.' To this, Rex Kramer (Robert Stack) responds, 'that's impossible; they're on instruments.' There is then an immediate cut to the cockpit of the plane, where the protagonists including Leslie Nielsen's Dr Rumack, Ted Striker, and cabin crew are seen performing Dixieland music (badly mimicked for additional slapstick comedy) on clarinet, double bass, saxophone, and trumpet. After three seconds, there is a return cut back to the control tower. The remarkable nature of this sequence is how much hilarity is caused in just three seconds. It epitomises the strength of musical comedy in cinema, as the music does all the talking, and it enables the filmmakers to insert another gag into their production without wasting barely any screen time.

[FIGURE 1 HERE] – The instruments scene from *Airplane!* (1980)

The noteworthy thing about the music used in each of these joke sequences is that the music itself is not funny. An upbeat quasi-spiritual song, a sensuous trombone solo, and a buoyant jazz ensemble evoking the heyday of Dixieland are all perfectly sincere pieces of music. The crucial element is context, as is the case in each of the case studies within this chapter. An interesting experiment involves watching each of these sequences with the sound muted. The outcome of this experiment is a collection of three scenes that simply aren't funny in their newly silent guises. Suddenly, the ill girl evokes sympathy rather than invoking a *schadenfreude* inspired chuckle; the nightclub sequence takes on a surrealist rather than humorous vibe when the female trombonist appears.

A fourth musical joke is present in *Airplane!,* this time non-diegetic, and it is in fact the first sight and sound audiences see and hear when viewing the film. This use of music sits somewhere between the aforementioned diegetic musical humour, and 'serious' original underscore found elsewhere in the film. The reason for this is that it is pre-existing 'serious' film music that is used in a humorously visual context to create mirth from the outset of the film. John Williams had composed the famous two-note motif for Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) five years prior to the release of *Airplane!*, and it is this musical cue that is heard first of all in this film. After the production company logo fades to black, the audience finds themselves perched above cloud level at night, in an ostensibly mysterious, eerie panorama to open a comedy film. This mystery is abruptly cut short by an absurd parody of *Jaws,* whereby the vertical stabiliser on the tail of an aeroplane appears through the clouds mimicking a shark fin, accompanied by Williams's *Jaws* motif. The plane predatorily stalks around the screen in shark-like fashion, before disappearing under the clouds. A jump scare then sees the plane emerge from the clouds and fly up and over the camera, resulting in a segueing from Williams's music to the main theme to *Airplane!*. The *Jaws* theme has cemented its place in the film music canon and collective consciousness of film fans on a global scale, so as well as this intertextual musical joke hitting the jovial jackpot with audiences at the time of release, it has irrefutably also lasted the test of time and is as relatable today as it ever has been. As with the three diegetic examples though, the music is not funny. Indeed, according to Tim Summers, the opposite is true (2015, p. 3). The *Jaws* theme was a 'serious' piece of music for a serious film, and it is the context in *Airplane!* that provides the humour; namely the explicit satirising of a well-known and well-loved recent film, at the time of *Airplane!*'s release. The prior knowledge of *Jaws* to the audience is important, although not crucial, in being able to enjoy the ludicrous opening sequence, which still provides humour with or without recognising the Spielbergian or Williamsian influences.

For the sake of this chapter, there are two original cues that exemplify the notion of serious music for comedic effect in film: the main theme, and the 'Romance theme'. These have been well analysed by Summers (2015) who describes their impact through a lens of insincerity. Summers describes the 'ostentatiously deliberate deficiencies' in the score as clear signifiers of the composer writing in an insincere fashion (Summers 2015: p. 83).

The main theme to *Airplane!* is one that evokes drama, danger, and commitment. It is first heard immediately after the opening *Jaws* sequence. The main theme begins with a gloomy fanfare, with rising arpeggios following a triplet movement in brass. The main melody that follows is a chromatic, undulating melody in two four-bar phrases. The opening two bars are identical, with the second iteration of the four-bar phrase finishing a tone higher.

Harmonically and tonally, the opening six bars are accompanied by a I-V-I 'oompah' bass ostinato in C minor, moving to F minor for the penultimate and final bars.

This music is undoubtedly serious in nature – it is foreboding, mysterious, and unsettling. However, even in the opening credit sequence, the directors include several visual and audial jokes to immediately set the tone of the film. There is now the now almost infamous argument between the two PA announcers over who can park in the white and red zones outside the airport, with their increasingly frustrated argument never truly drawing attention to itself but giving the audience something to grasp on to and chuckle at in the opening sequences. In terms of visual comedy, there are a couple of subversion-of-expectation gags including a security X-Ray area which shows a human ribcage followed by a passenger unloading a plethora of unusual metallic items into the tray on request. None of these moments are hilarious, but they set the audience expectation. Already in this opening two minutes, we have serious, strait-laced orchestral music, visual gags, and a diegetic sound-based joke in the form of the PA announcements. There are three aspects of the film for audiences to concentrate on, and it is likely that the music sits at the bottom of the pile. Despite the jokes present in this scene, the music keeps the film grounded to some extent (no pun intended). In some ways, contradicting Summers's approach of viewing the score through the lens of insincerity, I would argue that this is one of the moments in the film where the score is keeping the film sincere. After the outrageous *Jaws* opening, maybe this was a moment for scaling back the absurdity?

The second orchestral theme in the film – the Romance theme for Ted and Elaine – oozes with insincerity. As Summers suggests, this theme mimics some of the great romance themes of the Golden Age of Hollywood, and is introduced early in the film, just moments after the opening sequence. This theme was heavily inspired – arguably outright borrowed – from an earlier Bernstein composition for the little-known *Hollywood & The Stars* documentary on Al

Jolson, *The Immortal Jolson* (1963, dirs. Julian Ludwig and Irwin Rosten). The point can therefore be made that Bernstein was indeed parodying a serious score; his own! The theme continues throughout the film, and scores some of the more conventional, non-comedic scenes in the film. The amorous narrative threads involving Ted and Elaine are often used to distract from the bizarre slapstick narrative on the plane, but the joke-saturated film was never likely to stay sincere for a prolonged period. A seemingly typical Hollywood romance scene accompanied by the romance theme scene seems to be unfolding halfway through the film – in the form of a flashback - but it would hardly be a scene in *Airplane!* without a visual gag. In this sequence, Ted and Elaine share a passionate moment in the surf of a beach, reminiscent of a famous beach scene in *From Here to Eternity* (1953, dir. Fred Zinnemann). The difference in *Airplane!* is that our enamoured couple become covered in flotsam and jetsam as the water aggressively pounds them. As seaweed becomes entangled around their bodies, this tender moment transforms into something significantly less romantic. At this point, the music retains its seriousness and sincerity, and it is another example of outlandish visuals being accompanied by Bernstein's strait-laced romantic score. The theme is unforgivingly trite thanks to its swelling strings and hackneyed melody and harmony, but it fulfils its function as a serviceable film score. This remains true upon each return of the theme, right up until the concluding moments of the film, where something intriguing occurs; Bernstein writes funny music. This is the only time in the film he attempts to do so.

As the plane lands, and the passengers and makeshift crew disembark, Ted and Elaine share an overstated romantic moment on the airport tarmac. The camera circles around dramatically as they kiss and embrace, with the stricken aircraft visible in the background of the darkly lit *mise en scène*. Here, the Romance theme returns, but on this occasion, Bernstein mocks the Romance scores of old by introducing strident wordless choral lines, adding superfluous melodramatic excess to the already imposing score. As the camera continues to sweep around the couple, and the romance of the scene intensifies to excruciating levels, Bernstein's rising arpeggios for the female singers reach such a lofty pitch that they cannot sustain it, and they begin to scream in "pain" as they strain, before falling off the note altogether. Of course, this was all manufactured, but it is arguably the only example in *Animal* House or *Airplane!* where Bernstein attempts to be unequivocally funny through *only* the music. It transcends the line between parody and intentionally humorous music, and for some, it may be felt that it rather cheapens the impact of Bernstein's hitherto 'seriously' funny score. It also goes against Bernstein's own thoughts that "[i]f you score funny scenes seriously they are much funnier, so long as they are funny to begin with" (Millar 2002).

### ***The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad!* (1988)**

Usually shortened to *The Naked Gun*, this film is an American crime comedy directed by David Zucker, starring Leslie Nielsen (Lieutenant Frank Drebin), Priscilla Presley (Jane Spencer), Ricardo Montalbán (Vincent Ludwig), George Kennedy (Captain Ed Hocken), and OJ Simpson (Detective Nordberg). The film is described as 'a parody of 1950's hard-boiled, TV cop shows. The plot doesn't much matter as it is only there as a laundry line to hang jokes on. It could be described as deadpan broad comedy which necessitates a dead pan/faux serious treatment from the score' (Newborn and Sadoff 2010, p. 8).

The score and soundtrack to the film consists of original compositions by Ira Newborn alongside pre-existing popular music. Newborn's original score calls heavily upon music from the crime drama genre, pastiching, imitating, and parodying well-worn musical tropes as the film progresses. The music can be divided up into distinct categories: anxious dramatic music for tense situations or heroic quasi-fanfare cues for action sequences, seductive jazz music for the relationship between Frank and Jane, incidental big band cues for scene transitions and credits, diegetic music to establish and reinforce special and temporal contexts, and non-diegetic pop music which accompanies montages.

Arguably, the opening of the film does not conform to any of these categories. As we see the Paramount Pictures logo appear on screen, it is a solo mizmar (a double reed instrument in Arabic music) that provides the musical accompaniment, ascending and descending a distinctively Arabic musical scale. A Muslim call to prayer joins the mizmar as the film's opening location is revealed as Beirut, Lebanon. In a twenty-first century society that is rightly more sensitive to negative stereotypes and cliché, particularly surrounding religion, ethnicity, and nationality, this opening sequence saturated with overt stereotypes has the potential to cause umbrage amongst current audiences, but in the 1980s would have been perceived as 'harmless' insinuation. Indeed, Newborn himself refers to his music in the wider context of the sounds of 'stereotypical movie-land' (Newborn et. al 2008: p. 37). The composer was asked, in conversation with fellow film composer Ron Sadoff, whether the opening sequence could be considered musical cliché. Newborn responded that 'a cliché is really doing the predictable in a predictable way in a predictable context without thought or imagination. If you use a certified cliché in the right place, like comedy, it can be useful' (Newborn et. al 2008, p. 37). Newborn also admitted that he was composing at the lowest common denominator; the 'movie-land' Hollywood expectation of what Middle Eastern music *should* sound like. He claims that he tried to make it sound authentic, but that it 'wasn't supposed to be a joke'. The use of authentic instruments was an antidote to cliché; an attempt at sincerity that is not necessarily evident in the shallowness and uncomplexity of the music itself. Although the instruments and aesthetic were authentic, Newborn later admitted that the musical mode utilised was more Persian (utilising quarter tones, for example) than Lebanese, not that a lay Hollywood audience would necessarily tell the difference (Newborn et. al 2008, pp. 37-38). The music here is undoubtedly serious, despite the negative connotations linked to cultural stereotyping. The use of the Islamic call to prayer as threatening, serious sound and/or music has an uncomfortable but undeniable presence in films that involve the religion, both in the pre- and post-9/11 years – *United 93* (2006, dir. Paul Greengrass), for example, is a 9/11 film that opens with no musical score, but the diegetic sound of Muslim prayer as a signifier of ominous and foreboding threat. The opening sequence does not remain 'serious' (yet musically cliched) for long. As the leaders and politicians of Arab and North African states (plus Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union) plot a terrorist attack on the USA, a face-shrouded waiter enters the room with refreshments. Suddenly, the waiter places a boiling hot cafetiere on the bare hand of Iranian leader Ruhollah Khomeini (Charles Gerard) and reveals himself to be Frank Drebin. Here, the music transitions immediately into the hero musical theme of the film as Drebin comedically beats up the entire delegation of leaders in a scene akin to the slapstick comedy prevalent in early silent comedies.

Following on from this sequence, the opening titles roll, and *The Naked Gun* gives us the first audial glimpse into the big band score that permeates the film. Here, a drivers-eye-view of a police car (albeit from the roof) takes us erratically along a boulevard at night in the rain, harking perhaps to detective or film noir visual tropes. This title sequence was reprised from the television series *Police Squad!* (1982) (the series that inspired the *Naked Gun* films), which in turn was a verbatim remake of the title sequence from the drama series *M Squad* (1957-60) (Audissino 2022: pp. 187-89). The absurdity levels are ramped up significantly as the car drives down a pavement, into a mansion, through a womens' changing room, and onto a rollercoaster track. Again, the music here is 'serious' in any other context, but the surreal preposterousness of the visual ensures that even the opening credit sequence to the film encourages a hearty chuckle from audiences. Is the music funny in its own right? No, but the visual is, and the music elevates the comedy to another level with its foot-tappable big band beat and upbeat, ostentatious melody. The opening sequence is also indubitably a parody of American detective or police shows of the mid to late twentieth century, most notably *M Squad* (1957-60), whose Count Basie main theme is almost exactly imitated by Ira Newborn. Newborn and the director had a back-and-forth argument about the main theme, mainly due to the composer's concerns around a potential lawsuit for plagiarism. Newborn recalls his discussions with the production team on *The Naked Gun:*

> Don't you understand? Plagiarism. Plagiarism. You could get sued. If it sounds like you were copying someone else's music and it's much too close, and of course you are not qualified to decide whether it's much too close. I am, and maybe there's some people even more qualified than I am like lawyers and professional musicologists, so it's not a good idea. Take my word for it. This is close enough. It's great. (Newborn and Sadoff 2010, p. 9).

Newborn's concerns were justified, as Paramount Pictures told him to 'forget it' when he presented his imitation of the *M Squad* theme, resulting in him having to roll it back a few versions into a more generic 'big band blues à la Count Basie' sound (Newborn and Sadoff 2010, p. 9). The similarities are still undeniable though, and for those who listen to both in quick succession, the almost-plagiarism is hidden in plain sight. *Hawaii Five-O* (1968-80), *Kojak* (1973-78), *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-79), and *Quincy, M.E* (1976-83) are other examples representative of this genre of television programme, and contained upbeat, jazzy scores bordering on sleaze, with *Starsky and Hutch* also containing erratic, high-octane driving as part of the opening visuals. Whilst clearly showing their age, they provided a tangible musical style and sound that Ira Newborn could latch on to for the purposes of parody, creating a more bombastic, exaggerated imitation of the main title themes, and one closely resembling *M Squad* most of all. Of course, there was an intermediary television series linking the classic police shows of the 1960s and 70s and *The Naked Gun* in the shape of *Police Squad!* (1982), the precursor to *The Naked Gun* trilogy. *Police Squad!* ran with the same main theme music, but in a much-shortened guise and with less absurdist visuals, instead opting to show Drebin and Hocken in 'serious' (albeit chaotic) shootout situations. Thus, the *Police Squad!* opening titles were less funny than those in the feature length *Naked Gun* films, highlighting the importance of the films' farcical visuals working in conjunction with the 'serious' music to create humour. Such was the strength of the parody of *M Squad* in *Police Squad!* that a YouTube content creator has juxtaposed two episodes from each series, and the resulting video is identical sets, dialogue, and situations (Tommy Westphall's Snowglobe, 2019). The only differences are added humorous dialogue, albeit in a typically Nielsenian deadpan fashion. In *M Squad,* the detective stands over a new widow in sympathetic silence; in *Police Squad!,* Nielsen's Drebin states coldly "we would have come sooner, but your husband wasn't dead then".

The jazz sound reoccurs throughout the film in the form of what I will label 'driving music'. These sequences, which see Drebin driving to the scene of investigation, Police Squad HQ, or his home, always come with an accompanying visual gag, usually depicting Drebin as a terrible driver. In chronological filmic order, they are: (1) Drebin and Hocken arriving at a hospital to see Nordberg from the airport, where it is revealed there are several baggage trollies attached to the back of his car; (2) Drebin and Hocken arriving at the docks where they crash the car into the sea wall, knocking a fisherman into the harbour; (3) Drebin screeching to a halt outside Ludwig's office, smashing into the back of a van sending it careering down the street; (4) Drebin arriving back at Police Squad HQ, crashing into some bins, setting off the airbag in his car, which then sends the car autonomously down the street as Drebin shoots at the ‘runaway car’ asking “did anyone see the driver?”. Only the first of these driving sequences is unaccompanied musically. The other three all have jazz ‘driving music’ playing along to Drebin’s misadventures behind the wheel. The music does not have inherent comedic value, but the simple visual gags along with the detective noir score provide uncomplicated humour for the audience, even in what are effectively transitional scenes with expository off-screen narration from Drebin.

Elsewhere in the *Naked Gun* trilogy, and indeed the original *Police Squad!* series, the driving sequences (accompanied by the same smooth ‘driving music’) often parody the substandard back projection superimpositions of classical Hollywood cinema reverse point-of-view driving scenes. An example of such a scene lampooned in *The Naked Gun* is the drunk driving sequence from *North by Northwest* (1959, dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1959) which has an obviously superimposed image behind Cary Grant’s car as he drives along dark country roads whilst intoxicated. Whereas in *North by Northwest,* the comparatively poor production quality can be acknowledged as a sign of the technology of the time, in *The Naked Gun,* Drebin’s narration explaining that he had to visit a part of town known as Little Italy is accompanied by background images of the Colosseum in Rome, with his in-car passengers looking astounded by their surroundings, sharing the joke with the audience.

A noteworthy recurrence during the film is the build-up and release of tension utilising ‘serious’ music and visuals for a short period, followed by slapstick humour or comedic visual joke or dialogue. The opening sequence post-opening credits exemplifies this, where Detective Nordberg sneaks around LA Harbour and onto the antagonists’ moored up boat, accompanied by dissonant string drone chords and sinister arpeggios. The tension in the music builds to a deafening climax and cuts out as Nordberg attempts to kick down the door of the boat to make a dramatic entrance. Instead, humour is introduced by Nordberg’s foot going through the door and him getting it stuck, followed by him comically injuring himself with a combination of a window, a cake, wet paint, and what appears to be a bear trap. To the soundtrack of more ‘serious’ orchestral underscore, he falls in the water, seemingly killed. Yet again, the music is as far from funny as it is possible to be, yet the release of tension through the introduction of slapstick acting brings the film back from becoming too dark, returning to the realm of absurdist comedy. A musical analogy is that the film employs the tension and release mechanism found in suspensions; the release always occurs just as the tension is becoming unwieldy, or at least inappropriately prolonged for a comedy.

## Conclusion

Why does serious music work in film? The three preceding case studies all utilise music that could be considered either ‘serious’ film music, or at least a parody of serious film music, and on each occasion, it is juxtaposed against comedic visuals or dialogue. It is commonly accepted that utilising serious music is the predominant, most effective way of scoring comedy films. Bernstein believed it, Landis believed it, and Mel Brooks added weight to the argument by stating “[y]ou never do funny music for a comedy. The humour must come from the truth of the situation, the juxtaposition of serious music and bizarre behaviour” (Yacowar 1981, p. xi).

I believe there are two functions of serious music in comedy film: one related to subversion of audience expectation based on the incongruity theory of humour (a theory that can be traced back as far as 1725), and one related to the focus of attention of an audience (Berger 1997: p. 32). Audience expectation is built upon familiarity. Familiarity with a film genre, and the audio-visual juxtapositions usually found therein, creates the foundation for that expectation to be subverted to create a particular impact or effect. An example outside of the comedy genre would be *Full Metal Jacket* (1987, dir. Stanley Kubrick) where an American soldier fatally shoots a group of opposition forces. The audience may expect emotive, string-based music, and a feeling of horror or solemnity, but instead we hear "Surfin' Bird" (1963, by The Trashmen), a bouncy, farcical pop song. As the American soldier begins to smile, the audience subversion of expectation is complete; a transformation from the expected sadness and horror associated with war, represented in the initial visual, to the insincere pop song that soon follows. As highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, expectation in comedy film usually veered somewhere between 'Mickey-Mousing' musical literalism and popular song or light-hearted easy listening jazz scores. That may seem like a superficial generalisation, but it is fair to acknowledge that most comedy scores prior to the 1970s will have taken one of these approaches. The arrival of Bernstein and Landis, and the introduction of a serious orchestral score, subverted the expectations of the audience, thus creating a sound of comedy rarely – if at all – heard before. The addition of a serious score ironically adds gravitas but also adds humour, reinforcing subversion of audience expectation as a comedic tool. Subversion of audience expectation can also manifest as contrast, and Ira Newborn (Newborn and Sadoff 2002, p.5) explains that this contrast can make or break the joke, using the idea of an elephant being accompanied by a piccolo as an explicit of example of 'contrast humour', to coin a phrase.

The second function of audience attention is a little tricker to theorise without detailed psychological, empirical studies and subsequent evidence. However, the argument I will make here is that audience attention cannot be split between two humorous components of a film if those two components are visual and audial. If it were, it would render both components less funny, due to the conscious or subconscious flitting between comedic visual and sound. It can be argued that doubling up the comedy in dialogue and visual can be achieved, but the same claim can be made as made elsewhere in this chapter, that it is always context that adds humour, and not the standalone element of the film. For example, in *The Naked Gun,* a firework factory catches fire and there is a cacophony of light and sound as the building explodes in the guise of an unexpected firework display. In its own right, this is quite funny, but is made funnier by a characterizing trait of Zucker, Abrahams, and Zucker whereby comedic elements follow in linear fashion prolonging the visual punchline (in this case the explosion). Emilio Audissino coins this technique 'nonsensical accumulation' (Audissino 2022, pp. 188-89). An accident at a firework factory is a gag used in many productions, including *The Simpsons* Season 8 Episode 14 "The Itchie and Scratchy and Poochie Show" (Steven Dean Moore, 1997). In an episode of the in-episode cartoon *Itchy and Scratchy,* the two lead characters are *en route* to the fireworks factory when they are interrupted by a new, seemingly boring character called Poochie. They only reach the fireworks factory as the episode ends, meaning the audience (both diegetically in the Simpsons universe, and the real-world audience) missed out on the predicted hilarity.

[FIGURE 2 HERE] – "Nothing to see here! Please disperse!" from *The Naked Gun* (1988)

In *The Naked Gun,* Frank Drebin stands in front of the magnificent exploding spectacle, and the gag of him reassuring the spectators with a clichéd police phrase: 'Nothing to see here. Move along!'. At this point, we can come back to the notion of context being important for humour. That spoken dialogue by Drebin is not funny if you remove it from its context of the background commotion, so yet again, the audience is only provided with one objectively funny component of the film (the factory exploding) on which to expend their attention. This technique – coined 'audiovisual disjunctions' by Audissino (2022, p. 91) is another staple of Zucker, Abrahams, and ZuckerThe dialogue is the metaphorical icing on the cake. The same can be said for music. If Ira Newborn had added zany music under this sequence, the audience would then have two funny elements on which to concentrate; on one hand they would be watching and listening to the combined humorous situation of fireworks and Drebin's announcement, and on the other hand they would be contemplating the funny music. This is a dangerous approach to a comedy sequence, because as soon as the audience are exposed to funny music *and* funny visuals, they are consciously thinking about the humour. Consequently, the scene may become 'too funny' through overexposure or over-explanation, and therefore, ironically, less funny. It is a form of sensory overload, and it is reasonable to suggest that the best comedy often relies on subtlety. Whilst it cannot be argued that the firework sequence was particularly subtle, many of the scenes discussed in the preceding films were less explicit in their attempts to be humorous, and the serious or unfunny music utilised was a crucial ingredient in exercising restraint. Adapting Mera's question that opened the chapter, we can conclude by asking 'is serious music funny?'. On its own, not at all, but used in the right context, at the right moment, in the right film, it can be downright hilarious.

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