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Musical Catharsis and Identity in Holocaust Cinema: *Der letzte Zug* (2006)

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ABSTRACT

Holocaust representation in film has received much academic attention, with a focus on how cinematography and the narrative may assist our memorialization process. One aspect of film which has received little academic attention, however, is the issue surrounding the musical accompaniments of such films. The three countries of East, West and reunified Germany each attempted to engage with the Holocaust, including through the medium of film. They have done so in contrasting ways and to varying degrees of effectiveness. The opposing political, social and cultural environments of East and West Germany outweighed their geographical proximity. Likewise, reunified Germany developed a third, divergent approach to Holocaust engagement. This article examines a film co-produced by reunified Germany and the Czech Republic, and places the musicological study of its film score in an interdisciplinary context with film music theory, Holocaust representation in film, and German politics, history and culture. Through a textual analysis of the original and pre-existing score in *Der letzte Zug* (2006), this article examines how musical flashbacks in film offer the audience a sense of catharsis and respite from a challenging narrative, and engages with the significance of identity and religion in the music used during the flashbacks.

Auschwitz-Birkenau. 1943. A rake of cattle trucks has just arrived at the unloading platform. It seems to be snowing, but the ‘snow’ is falling ash from the crematoria. The doors of the train are wrenched open, revealing that many of those on board have already succumbed to the inhumane conditions. Most of those who survive disembark and are immediately ‘selected’. Some are put to work and head for insanitary barracks, others are marched to the gas chambers for immediate extermination. One solitary man does not disembark. He stands in the threshold of the cattle truck, his face displaying an empty smile amidst an expression of disorientation and disillusionment, and he begins to sing the ‘Ode to Joy’ from Ludwig van Beethoven’s Ninth

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Symphony. This is the destination of *Der letzte Zug*, the last train, and Jakob Noschik is about to be shot by a reluctant camp guard who hears the beauty in Beethoven but acts with the callousness of a cold-hearted murderer.

Der letzte Zug (*The Last Train*; directed by Joseph Vilsmaier and Dana Vávrová, 2006) is a German–Czech Holocaust film, with a production budget of €2.7–3.5 million. It was released on 9 November 2006, Germany’s so-called Schicksalstag, or ‘Day of Fate’, when important events such as the failed Beer Hall Putsch (1923), *Kristallnacht* (1938) and the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) occurred. Its sole award was the ‘Special Prize’ at the annual Bavarian Film Awards of 2007. Produced by Artur Brauner (1918–2019), it was the penultimate of his 500-plus film productions, and one of more than 20 in which the Holocaust is a prominent theme.

The film opens in 1943 in Berlin. The Nazis have commenced a total cleansing of the city of Jews, and several key characters are shown being herded from their homes to Berlin Grunewald station. The narrative soon moves to the station, and then on to the train to Auschwitz. From this point onwards almost the entire film is set aboard the train, often filmed claustrophobically from within the dark goods wagons. Throughout the development of the narrative, the focus is on differing characters, with flashbacks used to contextualize and personalize their pre-war lives. The film shows prisoners attempting to break out of the degrading cattle wagon, interspersed with occasional stops at stations throughout occupied Ukraine and Poland, where they are met with approaches ranging from sympathy to public executions. The film ends with contrasting outcomes for the main characters. Some of them escape at the last station before Auschwitz and hide in the woods with resistance fighters. The others arrive at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and their fate is sealed.

The score of *Der letzte Zug* functions in three predominant ways. Firstly, there is a reoccurring use of diegetic music in conjunction with character-focused flashbacks, which act as a cathartic memorialization device through foregrounding Jewish or quasi-Jewish music.¹ In a *mise-en-scène* which is often sparsely lit, containing characters who are often not immediately visible as being Jewish, the flashbacks and music offer timely reminders of the doomed passengers’ ethnic identity. Secondly, there is a heavily string-based, emotive underscore by Christian Heyne. Finally, there is a use of diegetic music in the film’s present—namely the scene described at the start of this article—where Beethoven’s ‘Ode to Joy’ is sung by one of the film’s protagonists.

This article will argue that the use of music in *Der letzte Zug* works on a cathartic level for both the characters and the audience, and affords both parties frequent, timely ‘breathing space’ in a challenging narrative. For the characters on the train, the memories invoked by the music relieve them temporarily of their merciless surroundings, whilst audiences also welcome the visual and aural distraction from the distressing claustrophobia of the train’s dark, hopeless interior. The article will also identify how the resolve and Jewish identity of the characters is reinforced through musical flashbacks that gravitate towards stylistically typical Jewish music. To suitably

¹ For the purposes of this article, diegetic music refers to any music that exists in the film world (regardless of temporal narrative context) and non-diegetic refers to additional underscore extraneous to the film world. This conforms to Gorbman’s adaptation of the terminology from literary theory. Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 20–6.

study the film's music further, the film as a production must first be placed in its complex filmic, historical and political context.

There are thousands of Holocaust films. The genres in which Holocaust narratives have been represented include 'compilation documentaries, cinema vérité exposés, docudramas, melodramas, biographies, autobiographies, experimental films, Academy Award winners, slapstick comedies, horror films, and pornography'.² These films perform a number of functions, including memorialization of victims, memorialization of the camps themselves, attempts at perpetrator representation, cathartic experiences for survivors, biographical condemnations of leading figures, coping with the genocide through laughter and, in extreme cases, forms of titillation.

Despite existing scholarly work on the scores of *Schindler's List* (directed by Steven Spielberg, 1993) and *Nuit et Brouillard* (*Night and Fog*; directed by Alain Resnais, 1956) as predominant examples, there remains a significant academic gap in the study of Holocaust film scores.³ Claudia Bullerjahn claims that no authentic soundtrack to the Holocaust exists in film.⁴ In other words, one cannot simply define film music as 'Holocaust film music'.

The challenges surrounding a newly reunified Germany and its reaction to the Holocaust differed from the preceding East and West German situations, but were no less difficult to overcome. As the twentieth century edged towards its conclusion, the German attitude towards the Holocaust saw a new approach, or rather a new consideration: how should the Holocaust be memorialized? The age of questioning whether it should be memorialized was over, and the focus in the new Germany centred on confronting the past and representing it in some form. Central to this age of memorialization, and a good case study of the complicated Holocaust debate in contemporary Germany, was the decision to build a Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, an almost two-decade process that was riddled with controversy, difficulty and sometimes apathy. There was also a concern regarding the role of the memorial in the post-reunification period, with a fear that it would be used as a closing door on the twentieth century and enable Germans to move into the twenty-first century without the burden of the past on their consciences. The trepidation resulted from believing a 'finished monument would ... finish memory itself'.⁵

Even in the extremely early stages of both the memorial planning process and the reunified country itself, Wolfgang Benz suggested that the 'majority of Germans perceive the victims of the Holocaust only as being dead, a reflection of the subconscious

² Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 3.

³ See Elias Berner, "Remember Me, But Forget My Fate"—The Use of Music in *Schindler's List* and *In Darkness*, *Holocaust Studies* 27/2 (2021), 156–70; Yosefa Loshitzky (ed.), *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Jean-Louis Pautrot, 'Music and Memory in Film and Fiction: Listening to *Nuit et brouillard* (1955), *Lacombe Lucien* (1973) and *La ronde de nuit* (1969)', *Dalhousie French Studies* 55 (Summer 2001), 168–82; Albrecht Dümling, 'Eisler's Music for Resnais' "Night and Fog" (1955): A Musical Counterpoint to the Cinematic Portrayal of Terror', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 18/4 (1998), 575–84.

⁴ Claudia Bullerjahn, 'Der Soundtrack des Holocaust: Musik im Dienste einer Erinnerungskultur', in Paul Gerhard and Ralph Schock (eds.), *Soundtrack des Jahrhunderts: Geräusche, Töne, Stimmen 1899 bis heute* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2013), 541.

⁵ James Young, 'Germany's Holocaust Memorial Problem—and Mine', *The Public Historian* 24/4 (2002), 70.

desire to put an end to the National Socialist past tied to the need to cope with it'.⁶ After years of struggling with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) and the identity crisis of what it meant to be German (*Deutschsein*), some German citizens would wish to utilize this memorial as the concluding aspect of explicit Holocaust memorialization, as a form of final catharsis. It could be argued, however, that it was never the intention to use the memorial as an endpoint to Holocaust memorialization, as such a move would be regarded as unethical and problematic. Benz articulated concerns by regarding an open-ended memorialization process: '[b]ecause of pressure and guilt and suffering which outlasts all suppression, "preservation" is understood as an accusation, and "remembering" as a declaration of forced self-accusation'.⁷

The fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification of Germany in 1989/90 gave rise to a 'complex and contradictory culture of remembrance, retrospection, and nostalgia', and brought into question what it means to be German, the meaning of Germanness and how it applies to ethnicity and culture.⁸ The reunification also coincided with an 'unexpected revival of popular cinema' and a 'promotion of consumerism, materialism and fun'.⁹ The film industry had been in economic decline since the early 1980s, and so the new arrangements between public and private funding promoted the chance for a commercially viable German cinema.¹⁰ The 1990s saw a radical break from the 1960s and 1970s, and hedonism, fun, pleasure and entertainment saw a rise, as did 'unabashedly materialist and consumerist individualism' and a star-driven cinema preoccupied with glamour, fame, beauty and celebrities.¹¹ At the same time, the state began to withdraw funding for film production, giving way to private interests, with the funding it still gave being prioritized for economic expediency over artistic quality.¹² The 1990s culture of narcissism and hedonism also saw a renewed interest in nostalgia and retrospection, with the Third Reich and Cold War being dealt with more frequently.¹³ The nostalgic movements of Ostalgie and Westalgie saw generations of young directors born in East Germany sharing memories of socialism through viewing East Germany as *Heimat* (home or homeland), while the nostalgia for the 'prosperous, comfortable, and self-contained' West Germany of the Cold War era formed the crux of Westalgie.¹⁴ The filmic contributions to both movements 'thrived on widespread frustration with the consequences of unification', which included perceived threats such as neo-liberalism, globalization and multiculturalism, and these retrospective looks at East and West Germany were often dramatic, sentimental, comical or ironic.¹⁵

⁶ Wolfgang Benz, 'Auschwitz and the Germans: The Remembrance of the Genocide', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 8/1 (1994), 96.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁸ Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002), 190.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 191–2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 195–6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹² *Ibid.*, 192–3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 208.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 209–10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 208–11.

Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate, and arguably the most prominent advocate of Holocaust education and a lifelong human rights activist, expressed trepidation about the growing trend to incorporate melodramatic elements into Holocaust cinema post-Wall.¹⁶ He states that certain productions ‘dazzled’ with their authenticity, while others ‘shock’ with vulgarity.¹⁷ Wiesel continues that he prefers documentative restraint to tear-jerking excess, suggesting that directing a massacre such as Babi Yar in the ‘romantic adventure’ style of narrative mainstream cinema ‘smells of blasphemy’.¹⁸

Georg Seeßlen used the examples of *Schindler’s List* and *La vita è bella* (*Life is Beautiful*; directed by Roberto Benigni, 1997) to offer a similar viewpoint, but also added balance to the debate by claiming that a melodramatic, populist approach was more favourable than a cinematic silence. Seeßlen suggested that while it may be considered ‘terrible’ that popular culture was representing the Holocaust, it would have been ‘just as terrible if they had kept quiet about it’.¹⁹ Indeed, taking the Holocaust to a broader audience through the medium of cinema was the next logical step in memorializing the event, and even educating new audiences about it. As Seeßlen suggested, had the Holocaust been ignored by the multi-million-dollar film industry, there would have been more cause for concern. Despite issue being taken with certain narratives, the broadening of the Holocaust’s representation and impact upon global audiences can only be seen in a positive light.

The process of Holocaust normalization had begun as early as the release of the television miniseries *Holocaust* in 1978, with the process of ‘distanciation [giving] way to entertainment. Veracity gave way to scriptwriting, emplotment to fiction, intellectual engagement gave way to emotional experience, films sought to produce empathy, not knowledge’.²⁰ *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*; directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006), a film set in East Germany focusing on the role of the Stasi, uses melodramatic techniques and music to heighten the sense of drama. A similar sense of melodrama is evident in the musical aesthetic of *Der letzte Zug*, with the melodrama encouraging a wider commercial success, and meeting the needs of gratification of a popular, modern cinema-going audience.

The changing paradigm of German representations of the Third Reich is closely linked to the fact that those who witnessed it are passing away, and the Holocaust will soon pass out of living memory. Because of this, German cinema is created by those who are part of the event ‘through collective processes of forgetting and remembering’, and films have narratives which are ‘redefined from the perspective of post-memory’.²¹ The fascination with National Socialism has given rise to constant battles between aesthetically, commercially driven dramatic representations and film’s

¹⁶ Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xii.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Georg Seeßlen, ‘Jakob und seine Brüder: Neue Spielfilm-Bilder von Faschismus und Holocaust’, *Die Zeit* 46/1999 (11 November 1999), https://www.zeit.de/1999/46/Jakob_und_seine_Brueder/komplettansicht.

²⁰ Randall Halle, *German Film after Germany: Toward a Transnational Aesthetic* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 78.

²¹ Hake, *German National Cinema*, 211.

moral role to sensitively memorialize and accurately historicize the Holocaust. The changing engagement with the Holocaust, a growing focus on German–Jewish relations and an interest in the ‘ordinary German’ bystander are all tendencies seen in post-1989 Third Reich films.²² Most importantly, we have arrived, or almost arrived, at an age where the Nazi past can be approached without guilt, but rather ‘explored, experienced and enjoyed’ from a more objective standpoint, where history is seen as a ‘consumable’ by cinema-goers.²³

Der letzte Zug opens with a blank screen and is accompanied by a simple diatonic score by Heyne, to which the sound of a steam engine is added. The puffing of steam and a poignant-sounding string passage during the opening few seconds offer a subtle yet simultaneously explicit foundation on which the audience can build their expectations, namely that this film is based on a train, in accordance with the film’s title, and is solemn in character. These two sounds are later revealed to form a strong relationship, and the sight, or sound, of the train on screen is often accompanied by the string ensemble. Indeed, the train itself can be said to later develop as an audio-visual leitmotif which is present throughout the film.

The first example of the sight–sound relationship between the train motif and the train itself occurs when the Jews are waiting on the platform at Berlin Grunewald station, and the engine is seen entering the station with a rake of cattle wagons behind it (see [Figure 1](#)). Interestingly, the string movement here is not in a static minor tonality, and the music that accompanies the train arriving has a bittersweet positivity in its harmony. Several interrupted cadences see an upbeat major chord taking the place of the expected minor, which offers harmonic interest and enables a temporary tonal ambiguity. It must be noted that the music never ventures into the territory of



Figure 1. The Train Arriving at Berlin Grunewald Station. *Der letzte Zug* (film), directed by Joseph Vilsmaier and Dana Vávrová. Central Film Company Film (CCC), Diamant Film, 2006.

²² *Ibid.*, 212.

²³ *Ibid.*, 213.

joyousness or jubilation, however, and there is an underlying sadness which is helped by the choice of homophonic, hymn-like string textures. The hint of a major tonality, signifying hope, suggests the presence of a more emotionally engaging, conventional musical score in accordance with the film's more transnational, commercialized aesthetic.

When the train departs Berlin, building up steam at the beginning of its tragic journey, the aforementioned string leitmotif is heard in full for the first time, and becomes one of the most prominent musical themes in the film, despite only appearing three times in its entirety (see [Example 1](#)). The musical characteristics are relatively standard. The strings accompany the stepwise melody diatonically, and the harmonic progressions are conventional. The only unexpected (interrupted) progression is in between the penultimate and final chord in [Example 1](#), where an F major chord moves to G flat major rather than the expected tonic of B flat minor, resulting in the return of the bittersweet aesthetic which was applied to the opening string moments in the film. The third and final occurrence of the theme in its full form is in a musical medley during the closing credits. There are other partial occurrences of the theme throughout the film, however, with one of these offering a large degree of melodramaticism. As one of the prisoners attempts to hack the cage away from the window of the train, a montage sequence plays out, with the camera offering the audience close-ups of several key characters, including older people and babies, for a heightened effect.

The first example of a character-focused musical flashback outlines the method for the subsequent occurrences. A young girl begins to dance silently on the train. The visual then fades to a ballet lesson before the war, where the girl is accompanied by Tchaikovsky's 'Waltz of the Flowers' from *The Nutcracker* (1892) on a diegetic gramophone. This offers the first moment of light-heartedness in a dark narrative, with the up-tempo waltz offering the audience some audial relief from the claustrophobic surroundings of the train. As the scene returns to the interior of the train, the music fades and the girl stands silently with her eyes clasped closed, continuing the flashback meta-diegetically, shutting out the audience and returning us to the distressing present of the repetitive sounds of the train, while she remains in the musical

The image shows a musical score for 'The Train Leitmotif'. It consists of two systems of music. The first system starts with a tempo marking of ♩ = 100. The music is written for strings, with a 'str.' label in the bass clef. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody in the treble clef is a stepwise line: D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4. The bass clef accompaniment consists of block chords: F4-A4-C5, F4-A4-C5, F4-A4-C5, F4-A4-C5, F4-A4-C5, F4-A4-C5, F4-A4-C5, F4-A4-C5. The second system starts with a measure number of 5. The melody continues: D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4. The bass clef accompaniment continues with block chords: F4-A4-C5, F4-A4-C5, F4-A4-C5, F4-A4-C5, F4-A4-C5, F4-A4-C5, F4-A4-C5, F4-A4-C5.

Example 1. The Train Leitmotif.

past.²⁴ This transition from present to past memory and back is handled effectively, as flashbacks readily become a clichéd device in film if not utilized appropriately.

The second musical flashback occurs as Jakob Noschik, played by Hans-Jürgen Silbermann, sings with his wife accompanying him on the piano. An earlier flashback sees him trying to persuade his wife to emigrate to the United States during the pre-war years, when it had become apparent that it would no longer be safe for Jews in Germany. Noschik says firmly ‘You must go to America’, to which his wife replies ‘They already have enough pianists. They do not need me’. The husband becomes more agitated and insists: ‘You are emigrating to America. Do you understand?’ When his wife refuses again, Noschik despairs and exclaims: ‘Our relationship is at an end. Go away. I don’t want to see you again. I’m getting a divorce. I’m getting a divorce from you!’ The two are shown to reconcile their differences, and the second flashback involving the couple demonstrates them performing the Yiddish song *Di Grine Kuzine* together (see [Figure 2](#)). The song was written in 1921 and the translated title, ‘The Greenhorn Cousin’, refers to a cousin newly arrived to the United States, and the promise and excitement of a new life.²⁵

The lyrics in [Example 2](#), translated into English, read:

She didn’t walk, she leaped
She didn’t talk, she sang
Happy, joyful was her face
Such was my cousin

Happy, joyful was her face
Such was my cousin



Figure 2. The Noschiks Performing *Di Grine Kuzine*. *Der letzte Zug* (film), directed by Joseph Vilsmaier and Dana Vávrová. Central Film Company Film (CCC), Diamant Film, 2006

²⁴ Meta-diegetic music is that which is internalized or imagined. It belongs in the diegesis (or film world), but only in the mind of a specific character.

²⁵ Robert Rothstein, ‘The Girl He Left Behind: Women in East European Songs of Emigration (1)’, *Folklorica* 5/1 (2000), 26.

♩ = 130

Nisht ge-gang-en iz zi nor gehprung-en Nisht ge-ret hot zi_nur gezung-en

5 Leb-e-dik un frey-lekh ye-de mi - ne Ot a-za ge-ven iz mayn ku - zi - ne

9 Leb-e-dik un frey-lekh ye-de mi - ne Ot a-za ge-ven iz mayn ku - zi - ne

Example 2. *Di Grine Kuzine* [transcription by the author].

The song strongly symbolizes and classifies the characters as Jewish through its musical characteristics. The lyrics provide a deeply ironic counterpoint to the film's narrative, and therefore the song also has a very melodramatic function, in keeping with many of the historical films of the normalization period. The first principal characteristic which identifies the song as Jewish is the Yiddish language in which it is sung. The interwar period is regarded as 'the golden age of Yiddish culture', placing the flashback showing Noschik happily singing to an appreciative audience in Yiddish in a pre-war German context.²⁶

The musical characteristics are also inherently Jewish. In a 1932 journal article, A.Z. Idelsohn claims that 'eighty-eight per cent [of Jewish songs] have the minor scale or at least minor character'.²⁷ The key of E flat minor for *Di Grine Kuzine*, presumably chosen to fit the vocal range of the actor performing the song, adheres to this majority characteristic. Idelsohn also claims that a large majority of Jewish folk songs contained '[m]elodies in a minor with a major seventh, or with major or minor sevenths alternating'.²⁸ This is exemplified in [Example 2](#), which contains both D flat and D natural in the key of E flat minor.

While the aforementioned characteristics identify the music as Jewish, we must ask how the music in turn functions as film music. Film music which uses very identifiable characteristics of either a geographical region or culture has a rather dichotomous existence. On one hand, it could be perceived as being a suitable and efficient signifier to the audience of the narrative to which it is attached. Hence, in this example, the music sounds 'Jewish', so we know to associate the juxtaposed characters in the visual with Judaism. However, the other face of such music can be seen as negatively stereotypical. Racial stereotyping through music has complex ethical considerations, and these subtle stereotypical characteristics comply with the Nazi view of the Jews. The music may seem overtly stereotypical to contemporary audiences,

²⁶ Anna Lipphardt, 'Yiddish After the Holocaust. A Case Study', *Europa Ethnica* 68/3-4 (2011), 81.

²⁷ Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, 'Musical Characteristics of East-European Jewish Folk-Song', *Musical Quarterly* 18/4 (1932), 636.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 636.

but its role in defining the Jew as ‘Other’ may benefit the narrative and audience perception of the fictional character. By seeing the Jewish characters singing an overtly Jewish song to a Jewish audience in a Jewish language, the filmmakers are either celebrating and exemplifying Jewish culture, or classifying and ring-fencing the Jew as ‘Other’ or something exotic or alien to the norm. However, the former is more likely, as a Jew performing Jewish music in film gives the narrative verisimilitude. One of film music’s many functions is also to be explicit—sometimes.

An instrumental arrangement of *Di Grine Kuzine* is heard prominently at three other moments in the film, one of which precedes the scene where Noschik sings the song diegetically. On all but one occasion it underscores a different character, or set of characters, on the train. In the first instance, the melody is heard in a piano rendition resembling the melancholic style of certain Chopin works, as the following prayer is read to a young girl: ‘Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad’ (Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One). This forms an affecting juxtaposition of the prayer, used here in a time of despair, against the piano melody of *Di Grine Kuzine*, a song of hope and the future. This Jewish affirmation of faith is also significant and poignant at this moment in the film, as it is used in the Jewish faith in a variety of contexts, including on one’s death bed. It also foreshadows the more jovial rendition of the song as performed in the flashback, and forms a contrast with this. In the next scene in which the melody is heard, it is in a slower tempo and scored for celesta, with a string ensemble adding simple homophonic harmonies. The scene, displaying traits of a montage with the camera focusing on various different characters as the music accompanies the soft cuts, finally focuses on a young couple, who discuss the importance of bravery and kiss. The instrumentation and visuals combine to create a small moment of romance, which appears incongruous to the characters’ surroundings and situation. The final occasion on which *Di Grine Kuzine* is heard prominently is during the final scene of the film and is discussed below. It is, however, heard in variations on several other occasions during the film.

The musical stereotyping of the Jews through the utilization of Yiddish songs, whether positively or negatively, is evident again in a flashback involving two different characters in the cattle wagon. This time, the flashback involves a Jewish wedding and a diegetic performance of one of the most famous and well-known Jewish wedding songs: *Khosn kale mazl tov* (see Figure 3). There are various spellings of the title of this song, due to transliteration issues from Hebrew script to Latin. Other variations of the first word include Khosen, Chosen, Chusen, Chosn and Chassen, which translates as ‘groom’ in the full title of ‘Groom, Bride, Good luck’, or less literally ‘Congratulations, Bride and Groom’. The song is often heard in films depicting Jewish weddings alongside the popular *Hava Nagila*, and in the western world of popular culture is one of the strongest audial symbolizers of Jewishness. Daniel Goldmark discusses it in detail regarding its use in cartoon music and engages with the song under a subtitle of ‘Generic Music and Musical Stereotypes’, which emphasizes its overt Jewish connotations to western ears.²⁹ Its origins lie in the 1909

²⁹ Daniel Goldmark, *Tunes for ‘Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2005), 32.

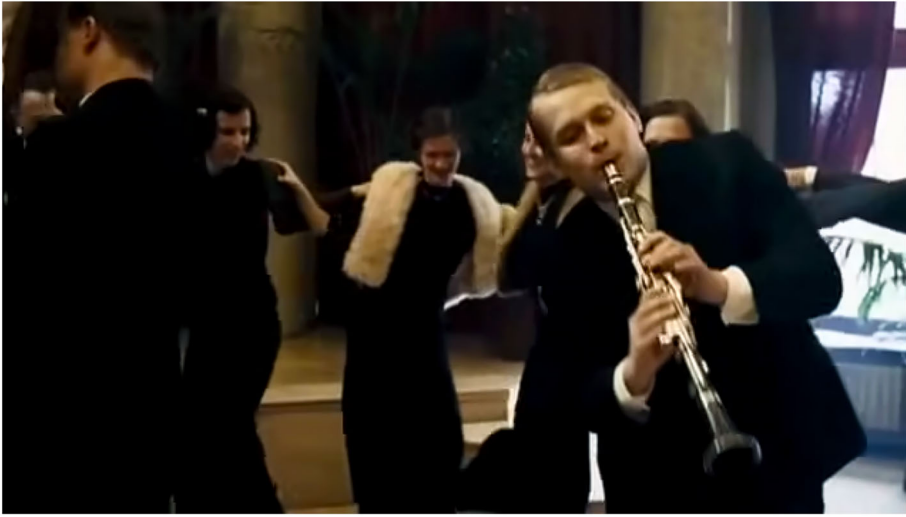


Figure 3. The Wedding Band Performing *Khosn kale mazl tov*. *Der letzte Zug* (film), directed by Joseph Vilsmaier and Dana Vávrová. Central Film Company Film (CCC), Diamant Film, 2006.

Yiddish opera *Blimele* with music by Sigmund Mogulesko, and according to klezmer scholar Henry Sapoznik (quoted by Goldmark) it was soon identifiable as the ‘clearly identified Jewish tune’ due to its highly memorable and recognizable melody.³⁰ Just as *Di Grine Kuzine* offers symbolism, the use of *Khosn kale mazl tov* encourages almost instantaneous reminders of the characters’ Jewish heritage, given that the song, as highlighted earlier by Sapoznik, is immediately recognizable as being Jewish. The audience does not necessarily need such a reminder, given that this is a film based upon the Holocaust, but the music signposts audiences through the film, and offers them a memory of pre-war happiness, and more importantly pre-Nazism freedom for Jews to express their culture. The appearance of the wedding band, including a klezmer clarinetist, adds to the authenticity of the music but also foregrounds it as a visual, as well as audial, symbol of Jewishness. The frequent cuts back to the present of the train are made more poignant and emotionally jarring by the use of music to celebrate the characters’ culture prior to their persecution and deportation.

As with the other flashbacks, the music and happiness fades, and the camera refocuses on the present-day forlorn faces in the cattle truck, while the sounds of the train moving ever deeper into Poland become the primary audial focus once again. This repeated audio-visual motif, and leitmotif in terms of the music, acts as a scene transition or element of a montage, and also reinforces the geographical and temporal contexts of the narrative.

Two further uses of musical flashbacks, reinforcing their role as a significant structural narrative device, both involve children for heightened affect. The first incorporates the singing of a German *Kinderlied* (children’s song) entitled *Kommt ein Vogel geflogen* (A bird comes a-flying). It is sung in the flashback diegesis by a young girl

³⁰ Ibid.

to her unborn sibling as she rests her head on her pregnant mother's stomach. The lyrics of the first verse are as follows:

Kommt ein Vogel geflogen, setzt sich nieder auf mein' Fuß
 Hat ein' Zettel im Schnabel, von der Mutter ein' Gruß
 [A bird comes a-flying, it settles on my foot,
 It has a note in its beak, a greeting from my mother.]

As the scene transitions back to the train, it is the voice of the mother who continues the song in the present diegesis while comforting both the little girl and the young baby, suggesting that the flashback was set less than a year before the deportation began. This flashback once again highlights the importance of music not only as a characterization technique, but also as a structural device to split the film into 'chapters' on the train. Each subsection ends with a flashback that informs the audience of the characters' lives before the deportation, and then returns to the train to advance the narrative figuratively, and the train literally. These musical chapter transitions offer the audience regular respite from the confines of the train, as well as offering important backstory to the doomed protagonists.

The final example of a flashback, with a focus on music, occurs just prior to the train arriving at Auschwitz. The same young girl from the *Kommt ein Vogel geflogen* sequence reads aloud an inscription on the side of the wagon, written by an unnamed prisoner at an earlier time in the narrative: 'Ein traum so schrecklich. Mein Volk gab es nicht mehr. Was ich träumte wird wahr' (A dream so terrible. My people no longer existed. My dream is coming true). The girl appears solemn, and then asks her grandmother what she is playing. A camera pan reveals that the grandmother is 'performing' the piano on her legs, and she replies that she is performing *Der Dornröschen-walzer*, or the waltz from Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* (1890). She invites the young girl to join in, and together they close their eyes and subjectively hear the waltz as they play. This scene, and the other train-flashback sequences which precede it, offer prominent examples of how complex the use of music can become in film. The waltz in this example begins as solely subjective. That is, the audience is not aware of it. It is in the grandmother's mind, and until the music is heard a few seconds later, we do not know of the nature of this internal performance. The music is meta-diegetic from the beginning of this scene, but the audience cannot initially hear it. The characters can 'hear' it in their own minds, and the audience can eventually hear it too, but the other on-screen characters cannot. It remains internalized. As the scene transitions to a flashback, the music becomes non-diegetic as an accompaniment to the flashback. The complexity of the role of music is augmented here by the fact that the return to the present suggests that the visual flashback was of another character, as the camera focuses on a man's face in deep thought, and not the grandmother or child. It is therefore unclear at which stage the music transitions from meta-diegetic to non-diegetic underscore, if at all, or whether the source of the meta-diegetic music simply transfers from one character to another. The use of a waltz again draws similarities to the *Waltz of the Flowers* from earlier in the film, as it utilizes a lively time signature and tempo to offer an aura of incongruence to the scene.

As the train arrives at Auschwitz, it becomes clear that Noschik is losing his mind. His wife had died in the previous scene, and only a short while before the train arrived at its final destination in narrative temporal terms. After everyone else has

departed the train to be sent to the camp barracks or the gas chambers, Noschik stands in the open door of the wagon, wearing no shoes or trousers but insisting on his dinner jacket, and begins to sing the ‘Ode to Joy’ from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, with the famous text by Friedrich Schiller (see Figure 4 and Example 3).

The solo performance is underscored by a non-diegetic string drone on octave B flats, the relative minor of D flat major, the chosen key for this rendition. The drone offers an unsettling aura of danger, incongruously complementing the transcendental performance with the tragic reality of the character’s impending fate. As Noschik concludes the verse with the line beginning ‘Alle Menschen werden Brüder’ (All men shall become brothers), the SS guard who previously shouted at him to depart the wagon claps and exclaims ‘That is Herr Schiller! Very good—carry on!’. The verse in question makes



Figure 4. Noschik Sings Beethoven. *Der letzte Zug* (film), directed by Joseph Vilsmaier and Dana Vávrová. Central Film Company Film (CCC), Diamant Film, 2006.

Strings

Noschik

Freu-de, schö-ne Göt-ter fun-ken Toch-ter aus E - ly - si-um

5

Wir be - tre - ten feu - er - trun - ken Himm - li - sche, dein Hei - lig - thum

The image shows a musical score for a piano accompaniment. The top system is labeled 'Strings' and shows a drone on octave B flats in the treble clef. The bottom system is labeled 'Noschik' and shows the vocal line in the bass clef. The lyrics are written below the notes. The score is in 4/4 time and the key signature has three flats (B-flat major/D-flat minor).

Example 3. Noschik Sings Beethoven [transcription of ‘Ode to Joy’, arr. Matt Lawson].

mention of the ‘daughter from Elysium’, with Elysium being the ancient Greek embodiment of an afterlife. As Noschik looks out from his imaginary stage into Auschwitz, he does not really see what is in front of him. With a glazed expression, and looking up to the heavens, he muses with wonder that ‘this must be Elysium!’. This reinforces the use of music here as a tragically ironic accompaniment to the visual. The swirling snow—like ashes blowing in the wind—adds a poignant touch to what will be Noschik’s last performance as a singer. Another irony in evoking Elysium is that the route from the unloading ramps and trains to the gas chambers was referred to as the ‘street to heaven’ (Himmelstrasse) at certain camps, such as Sobibor and Treblinka.³¹

After Noschik sings another short extract from the ‘Ode to Joy’, the SS guard, with shaking hands and some apprehension, possibly suggesting regret at shooting a performer of Beethoven’s music, shoots Noschik, and he joins his wife as one of the many bodies in the recently arrived wagon. The final few lines of singing are accompanied by a subtle but highly expressive harp and piano duet, with the latter performing descending minor thirds in a high register to add to the tenderness of the scene. The use of the delicate harp sound, along with the unobtrusive piano, contrasts deeply with Beethoven’s original, expansive orchestration for a combined symphony orchestra and four-part choral ensemble, as well as solo vocalists. This utilization of the ‘Ode to Joy’, an element of pre-existing German high culture, and specifically one of the most famous examples of German classical music, contrasts with the Jewish music heard in the previous examples. For a brief moment it connects Noschik and the SS guard at the camp, as they both temporarily embrace Beethoven’s music and Schiller’s words and are moved by them. The juxtaposition of Schiller’s words with the narrative becomes melancholically ironic as the SS guard and Noschik share this musical moment. This might be interpreted as a fleeting moment of empathy towards a fellow German music-lover from the SS guard, with the love of Beethoven humanizing the ‘Otherness’ of the Jew who he must play a part in exterminating. However, at this juncture, it must be acknowledged that Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was a work which—despite having a significant presence in Nazi musical life (including a famous 1942 rendition to Nazi High Command, conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler)—had lyrics that caused contradiction with their ideology (such as Beethoven positing that all people will become brothers). Likewise, the work has had a complex relationship with the Holocaust since 1945, with controversy surrounding its live performance at Mauthausen concentration camp at a commemoration event in 2000.³² This use of irony in the music is a predominant feature of *Der letzte Zug*’s score and is a highly affective technique employed by the composer. Irony can be comedic, but in the case of this film it is often melodramatically tragic. This proves to be the case in this scene, as the rendition of Beethoven by Noschik is cut tragically short by a gunshot, and the reality of Auschwitz hits the audience suddenly as we are also taken out of this momentary musical transcendence.

The Ninth Symphony is also a highly symbolic piece of work to use in film, and functions on several levels. Roger Hillman expresses his views on the use of the work

³¹ Yitzhak Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps, Revised and Expanded Edition: Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 39.

³² James Schmidt, “‘Not These Sounds’: Beethoven at Mauthausen”, *Philosophy and Literature* 29/1 (2005), 146.

in German film particularly, claiming it functions both as ‘cited artwork and political symbol’.³³ He develops this viewpoint by stating that there are three simultaneous functions of the piece in German cinema: ‘(a) as a dramatically secondary artwork within the primary artwork that is the particular film; (b) within a culture ranking music aesthetically higher than film; and (c) as a symbol of different historical stages of German politics’.³⁴ It might be argued that while notions (a) and (c) are applicable to the Noschik singing scene in *Der letzte Zug*, notion (b) is problematic, as early twenty-first-century Germany, unlike at points earlier in its history, does not necessarily position music above other art forms in terms of aesthetic quality or value.

As the film concludes, we see a young girl who had escaped with a handful of others when the train stopped in a station en route to Auschwitz. As she recites a Jewish prayer and looks to the sky, composer Christian Heyne underscores her tender voice with a piano instrumental of *Di Grine Kuzine*. Working on two levels, this identifies her as a displaced Jew through its context as a disillusionment song, but may also function as a memorial to Noschik, who was seen performing it earlier in the film. This scene also conforms to a common feature of transnational cinema based upon the Holocaust: one of hope. Seeßlen reinforces this by claiming that ‘[a] common theme of the new Holocaust films is the hope of illusion and the illusion of hope. People will, one way or another, be saved, preserving a little dream’.³⁵ The song continues to be subtly prominent throughout the closing credits, where at first we hear a seemingly mournful string elegy which is later joined by the piano melody of *Di Grine Kuzine*. This arrangement of *Di Grine Kuzine*, the final time we hear it as an audience, then bridges into a concluding refrain of the train leitmotif to close the film.

Der letzte Zug included a repetitive audio-visual motif which acted as structural music, by reinforcing a strong symbolic image of the train at regular key moments in the narrative. In reunified Germany, normalization and transnationalism may have encouraged a melodramatic score, and atmospheric ‘mood’ music was ubiquitous. The use of frequent pre-war analepses creates a mournful nostalgia not only for the on-screen characters, but, through empathy, for the audience too. They also offer viewers relief from the dark, claustrophobic interior of the train, an audio-visual respite, before being suddenly plunged back into the ‘present’ of the journey. Musical intervals provide the audience with ‘breathing space’, and remove them from the unrelenting trauma of the oppressive narrative. This remedial use of music both functioned as a respite from the horrors of the visual but also acted as a tragically ironic counterpoint to the on-screen narrative. The use of analepses in *Der letzte Zug* enabled the director and composer to build characterization through the choice of musical accompaniments. The different families had various musical themes which followed them through the narrative, and the Yiddish song *Di Grine Kuzine* was utilized as a universal theme for their suffering, being used to represent several characters at different moments in the film.

³³ Roger Hillman, *Unsettling Scores: German Film, Music, and Ideology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 49.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁵ Seeßlen, ‘Jakob und seine Brüder’, https://www.zeit.de/1999/46/Jakob_und_seine_Brueder/komplettansicht.

Regarding characterization, the Jewish element of the score manifested itself through analepses showing Jakob Noschik performing *Di Grine Kuzine*, depicting Jewishness to the point of overemphasis and providing explicit context. Certainly, the scene involving this particular Yiddish song featured a Jewish character with several stereotypical characteristics in terms of appearance and musical repertoire. Of course, the filmmakers would not have set out consciously to offer explicitly, stereotypically negative scenes to their audiences, and there is definitely a clear distinction between using stereotype or cliché in post-war films, and the far more serious use of anti-Semitism in some National Socialist films. However, applying such loaded musical underscores to a stereotypically Jewish scene may lead to the same assumptions and associations in the audience that existed during World War II, albeit of far less severe nature. Alternatively, a more likely argument is that the filmmakers are using accepted musical conventions to accurately depict a Jewish character, and that is simply a case of assisting the audience in understanding the on-screen character. Finally, the film evoked realism through the large amount of time spent in the dark, claustrophobic train wagons. The lack of music underscoring in this distressing location emphasized the melodramatic misery, groaning and sound of the train travelling towards death. The analepses, along with the music, were the only moments where the realism was temporarily broken in favour of emotive cinematic music.

This article opens various possible avenues of further investigation. Firstly, the examination of flashbacks from a specifically musical perspective has room for further enquiry, particularly when they interact with memory, culture, religion and identity. Secondly, the use of music in Holocaust films is still a comparatively untouched field of film musicology. There is much to be said about how music assists in the memorialization process and the relationship with trauma. The trichotomous relationship between on-screen trauma for characters, survivor trauma for those experiencing the cinematic representations and audience trauma for those unconnected with the historical event but witnessing it as an audio-visual construct is something the author is keen to explore further. Finally, this article might prompt further thought into music's potential for manipulation in film, whereby audiences are afforded a false sense of security or safety by the musical flashbacks, when the reality of the filmic presence in this case study was the interior of a train headed for Auschwitz. Music's role in film has been extensively studied from a plethora of perspectives, but as a cathartic shield from the severity of the filmic present and 'reality' there is more work that could be done.

Notes on contributor

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