

“Once”, New style of musical movie from the breakthrough in music

In the year 2007, an independent Irish production, “*Once*”, had shocked the movie industry. Winning the Academic award for Original Song, and resulting \$20,710,513 in revenue from worldwide box office, with only \$150,000 in budget. While this movie “*Once*” directed by John Carney had received tremendous commercial success, it had also created a new style of musical movies. In the follow paper, we will discuss how the music element of the movie made it a very different kind of musical movie, also on its discussion of the shift in musical taste.

The movie backgrounds

The story is about the mysterious relationship between the two main character, known as the The Guy and The Girl. The characters met at a night when the guy (played by Glen Hansard) was busking with his own music. As both characters have musical background, the girl (played by Markéta Irglová), soon understood the feeling and know there are story behinds the guy’s own music. Eventually encouraged and assisted him to produce his very own demo in hopes for him to get back with his girlfriend. Although the plot of the movie is rather simple, most of the movie reviews praised the movie as one of its kind, some even titling it as “one of the best romantic comedies in a generation” (Gleiberman, 2007; Orr, 2007). Tracy (2007) explained that music is one of the few major elements that makes the movie “Carneyque”.

Strives to be realistic

In fact, John Carney, the director of the movie mentioned from an interview that he pays special attention on the music element. As he is aware of the unrealism of the existing musical movies like “a star is born”, he had aims to create a naturalistic musical (Clash, 2008). He further explained his intention on another interview with national public radio that the unrealistic musical movie may be fun for him, but not the YouTube generation. So, he wanted to create a movie where the audience are not aware of that fact that its musical while they are watching, but only realising after the movie is finish (Literature Resource Center, 2007). Carney also mentioned that one of the aims of the music is to discuss how the musician are able to communicate through music (Clash, 2008). Another evidence of Carney paying special focus on the music is that he had casted two professional musician to be the main character rather than a professional actor.

Through plot reasoning

The unrealism of the musical movie that Carney mentioned, is due to the attempt of adopting the musical form into movie. As Monaco (2000) explained that movie very closely mimic the reality, and it is a product between realism and expression. While songs and dance often breach out of sudden in musical, which is not something you would see in normal day, this attempt tends to result as an ungainly product. There are three things that Carney did in the movie “*Once*” that makes the musical element smoother and more natural. The first thing he did is to provide a reason every time a character performs a song. For instance, the first two songs were sung because the guy was busking, or the award-winning song “falling slowly” was sung because the girls want to know more of the guy’s work. This solves one of the major problems of the unrealism, as it is common to see buskers singing on the street, or we heard people

playing piano at a music store. These reasons the plot provides, justify the existence of the music and the performance of it.

Breaking free from musical tradition

The second thing Carney did, is the original composition of music. As musical theatre derived from the comic opera, there are still many traits of opera tradition that was used in the composition of musical theatre. For example, many musical today like *“Singing in the rain”*, *“Mamma Mia”*, and *“Chicago”*, just to name a few, preserved the idea of an overture. An instrumental piece, often played by the orchestra before the show starts, an opera tradition intended to accompany the king’s entry back in the 17th Century, and now uses to let the late audience to be seated (Burkholder, Grout and Palisca, 2014). These overture pieces are often written separately from the opera, and sometime be played on a different opera piece, since the purpose of it, is solely functional, and irrelevant to the opera itself. In some cases, the piece will be played once again before the beginning of act II, or in other cases there will be a new piece called entr’acte (understandably the overture of act II). Since movie a recorded media, there is no need of an overture. However, some musical movie still tries to include these pieces within the movie, taking *“Mamma Mia”* in 2008 as an example, it played a mix of the entr’acte and the overture together at the beginning, which provides no extra content, but being played purely because it was part of the original musical.

Other than the overture/entr’acte, there are many elements of a musical composition that is as functional, which is not applicable for movies. For example, the repetition of musical motif and structure, and the use of recitative is essential to a musical, but its counterproductive if used in a movie. In musical setting, the repetition of musical motif is often used to hold the

coherence of the musical, and its attached to the character, which helps audience from far to identify the character. Take *Master of the house* and *Beggar at the feast* from “*Les Mierable*” as example, both pieces use the same instrumentation and structure, which is to help identify Madame Thénardier as she enters the stage. The use of music to distinguish character may be a good idea, but unlike musical, movie have a relatively short duration, the repetition of music might actually cause boredom. As for recitative, which is a monologue as music provide a soundscape at the back (i.e. *Who am I* from “*Les Miserable*”), is used for character to narrate the story for compensating the lack of visual element of acting. On the other hand, as movie is a visual and acting dominant media, there is better method to narrate and progress the movie than a recitative in musical. Hence, the music used in “*Once*” could have the focus on building emotional tensions alongside with the visual assistance, the title scene would be a really good illustration of this. As the scene starts calmly with music introduction, the long shot get tense as the music reaches its peak in the chorus, and fall back as the music starts to fade.

Free from structure to match audience’s taste

The use of original composition in “*Once*” made the music free from all these functional elements which would not help the movie as it did in musical. Also, this music is written in a pop song manner, every song is more detached from one another. In comparison to the rigid structure in musical, where the movement sequence (different song within a piece, i.e. Allegro con brio in C minor and Andante con moto in Ab Major from Beethoven’s symphony no.5) had been carefully designed, and the first movement would affect the composition for the following movements, such as the keys used. This make the movie more down to earth, easily understandable and matches the taste of the general public. Given the Youtube generation tend to listen to shorter songs than classical piece that might last up to an hour. Furthermore, the

lack of pre-existed music allows Carney to choose the instrumentation of its music. Unlike the usual musical, Carney get rid of the grand feeling from orchestral or big band setting. Having most of the music played with guitar accompaniment or pop band setting, which is more familiar to the ear, hence more naturalistic. The reaction of the guy when the girls plays *Song without words Op.19 No.1* by Felix Mendelssohn, could actually be a represent of today's generation's lack of music awareness. The guy being the reflection of the audience, not recognizing well-known classical piece, because they pay little attention to "Song without words" (instrumental music) and the guy actually said at the title scene that people only like to hear popular songs that they are familiar with, an enforcement with the above representation. Mara (2010) also agrees on reading, as she points out one of the other scenes, when the girl brought the guy to a Czech gathering, suggested that the contemporary music will replace the traditional ones.

Conclusion

In conclusion, John Carney made a new style of musical movie by paying extra attention to the balance between realism and expression. Unlike the adopting existing musical into a movie, the use of completely original materials free "*once*" from many musical traditions and structural function. Hence, Carney are able to direct the music composed to matches the taste of the general public, and to adjust the music's function tailor to match the emotion of the visuals. Also, Carney provides reasoning for every performance in the movie, which helps in the naturalistic feeling he aims to create. With these focuses and musical technique used, John Carney is able to produce a musical that is one of its kind. There are also other discussions Carney rise with in the movie, such as the development of urban Ireland (Mara, 2010) and on the topic of immigration (Gallagher, 2012), that make "*Once*" becoming an influential art work.

However, given this essay have its focus on the musical element of the movie. With the very limitation words remaining, it is not proper to discuss how Carney uses representation of the characters and the set used express his political perspective on these matters. Reader could look at the suggested article above for these discussions, which was elaborate extensively.

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