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Dr. Haramaki

MUSC 201: Film Music Seminar

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## Graduate Written Examination MUSC 201

“A study into the diegetic, meta-diegetic, and non-diegetic elements in *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*”

1) *Please analyze and discuss the interaction of the diegetic and non-diegetic elements in the score for the 2018 film *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, discussing how composer Carter Burwell musically constructs character, place, situation, time, and narrative through pitch, rhythm, and timbre. Please use musical examples for illustrations and support, as well as any pertinent information from television music literature.*

*Answer:*

“*The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*” was directed by the Coen Brothers, with an orchestral score composed by Carter Burwell, and musical direction by T-Bone Burnett. Burwell clarified to me regarding specific music in an email correspondence we had on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020 that “the songs in the first tale [*The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*], were part of the script. Some are old songs that were repurposed for the movie, and the last one was always going to be written by Dave Rawlings and Gillian Welch, although we didn’t know exactly what they would write until it was done.”<sup>1</sup> This movie is comprised of six varying tales, with different characters, themes, and music that are not always connected as the audience would first come to think.

The importance of defining the use of “diegetic, meta-diegetic, non-diegetic” music in this movie is paramount to understanding how the composer and musical team came together in this modern

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, Burwell, email to Jason Keiser, May 4th, 2020.

western tale. In "Narrative Film" by Claudia Gorbman, she defines diegetic as "music that (apparently) issues from a source within the narrative."<sup>2</sup> Meta-diegetic music is perhaps that music is being issued from a source within the story, but some of the characters may be aware of it, and others who are not at all. Gorbman's statement on non-diegetic music is clearly stated when she describes "forty-piece orchestra that plays is nowhere to be seen, or inferred, in the filmic space."<sup>3</sup>

The six tales in the movie include "The Ballad of Buster Scruggs", "Near Algodones", "Meal Ticket", "All Gold Canyon", "The Gal Who Got Rattled", and "The Mortal Remains". Musical examples transcribed via Finale will be included below in figures 1-6 from the tales "The Ballad of Buster Scruggs", "Meal Ticket", "All Gold Canyon", "The Girl Who Got Rattled", and "The Mortal Remains". There is not enough non-diegetic elements in tale two "Near Algodones" to show its importance compared to the other musical elements in the tales mentioned. The tales mentioned will show to the reader the most important musical leitmotifs and themes from the film. A few of these excerpts including "The Wingless Thrush", and "Hello, Mr. Pocket" set the scenes for those specific tales. The use of the non-diegetic orchestrated music in these tales is extremely important in keeping the viewer and listener engaged and following the storyline.

As Burwell mentions above, the music in the first tale "The Ballad of Buster Scruggs" is a part of the script and features the most diegetic music elements in the whole film. The following tales have more non-diegetic elements that bring the viewer into each story, from one tale to the next. The absence of music can be important especially to specific scenes and Gorbman points out "Natural sounds or sound effects, however, tend to remain diegetic (unless they accompany also

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<sup>2</sup> Claudia Gorbman. "Narrative Film Music, Yale French Studies, No. 60, Cinema/Sound (1980), 197."

<sup>3</sup> Gorbman. "Narrative Film Music, 197."



use of orchestration as the main melodic line from figure 2 is re-orchestrated to piano and English horn in the latter part of the piece adds a wonderful musical dimension overall. The contour of the melody can be heard till its resolution on the root C as well as the harmony line in Figure 3, the beautiful clarinet counter melody transcribed in concert pitch. Perhaps the title the “Wingless Thrush” melody title is alluding to our arm and legless character in this tale and is his own leitmotif.

Meal Ticket Tale 3, Figure 2 & 3 “The Wingless Thrush”, main melody & clarinet countermelody

Figure 2 & Figure 3

## The Wingless Thrush

Composed by Carter Burwell "The Ballad of Buster Scruggs"  
Transcribed by Jason Keiser

The musical score for 'The Wingless Thrush' is presented in three staves of music. The first staff (measures 1-8) features a main melody in 3/4 time, starting with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and a dotted quarter note C5. The second staff (measures 9-12) continues the melody with quarter notes D5, E5, F5, and G5. The third staff (measures 13-14) shows a single quarter note G5, which is the root of the piece, followed by a double bar line.

## Clarinet Counter melody "The Wingless Thrush" 2:08-2:20

Concert Score

Composed by Carter Burwell  
Transcribed by Jason Keiser

The clarinet counter melody is shown in a single staff of music in 3/4 time. It begins with a quarter note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. The melody concludes with a quarter note G5, which is the root of the piece, followed by a double bar line.

Figure 4 is from the tale “All Gold Canyon”, which features brief diegetic music of the actor singing this melody from the Figure 4 below. Its use of triple meter, and chromatic half-step descending elements creates a lasting effect in this beautiful melody entitled “Hello, Mr. Pocket”. The piece is heard after first being sung as all non-diegetic music throughout this story and lends itself to the picturesque and beautiful landscape captured on film. The use of dynamics from the orchestra is quite effective and lends a hand to the beauty of this melody in C major.

All Gold Canyon Figure 4 “Hello, Mr. Pocket” melody

Hello, Mr. Pocket Leitmotif

Concert Score  
Adagietto

Composed by Carter Burwell  
Transcribed by Jason Keiser

The musical score for "Hello, Mr. Pocket Leitmotif" is presented in three staves. The first staff contains the main melody in 3/4 time, starting on G4 and moving chromatically down to C4, then up to G4. The dynamics are marked *mf* and *cresc.*. The second staff shows a sustained chord on G4. The third staff shows a melodic line starting on G4, moving up to C5, then down to G4, with dynamics marked *ff*.

The next tale with non-diegetic musical elements is “The Girl Who Got Rattled”, in which people are traveling on the Oregon Trail. Almost all the music in this tale is non-diegetic, and mostly based off this melodic excerpt in figure 5 below. Burwell’s use of major harmony throughout the score is shown and creates a Copeland sort of feel to the score.

The Girl Who Got Rattled Figure 5 “The Oregon Trail” melody

## The Oregon Trail Leitmotif

Composed by Carter Burwell  
Transcribed by Jason Keiser



The last of the figures is from the last tale “The Mortal Remains”. The melody transcribed below can be heard first as non-diegetic music in the intro book scene of the film. It is also heard by one of the actors when the melody is sung unaccompanied in this last tale, and Burwell makes use of this traditional melody from “The Unfortunate Lad” to bookend the beginning and ending of the film. The melody is placed and orchestrated into different parts of the orchestra in the latter half of the last tale. The repeated use of triple meter time signature is paramount through this score. In this melody specifically, the use of this meter lends a hand into the more traditional and Celtic stylings heard in so many old works.

The Mortal Remains Figure 6 “The Unfortunate Lad” melody

## The Unfortunate Lad Leitmotif

Concert Score

Trad. composed & arranged by Carter Burwell  
Transcribed by Jason Keiser

Moderato



As discussed in the above musical examples, analysis, and research the use of diegetic and non-diegetic music is paramount to binding the musical score together with the film “The Ballad of Buster Scruggs”. Composer Carter Burwell’s use of mostly non-diegetic musical material that runs congruent with each story gives the viewer another lens into energy, feeling, and story

captured by both the picture and music. The most important musical aspects are the non-diegetic elements as discussed above and they bind the film and alternating stories together.

## Bibliography

***Primary Source Material******Musical examples:***

Carter Burwell, *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, Milan Records, released November 9, 2018

***Transcriptions:***

Burwell, Carter (2018). *Cool Water, The Wingless Thrush, Hello, Mr. Pocket, The Oregon Trail, The Unfortunate Lad, "The Ballad of Buster Scruggs"*, Milan Records. Transcriptions by Jason Keiser.

***Secondary Resources******Online Publications:***

Gorbman, Claudia. 1987. *Unheard melodies: narrative film music*.

***Books:***

Holoman, D. Kern. *Writing about Music: a Style Sheet*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2014.