

What is the role of music in a critically panned film?

**Cutthroat Island: A Case Study**

Alexander Palmer

Berklee College of Music

July 11, 2014

## Introduction

---

The Hollywood film industry is one which thrives on extremes – successes, failures, triumphs and disasters. While we normally think of these in terms of films as a whole or their star actors and directors, music is not exempt from the highs and lows of modern-day filmmaking. However, scant attention has been paid to the relative strengths and weaknesses of a film and its soundtrack, particularly when one or both elements are slated. This dissertation will seek to explore the role that music plays in that oft-overlooked category: the critically panned film.

### ***Cutthroat Island*: Box Office and Critical Reception**

*Cutthroat Island* is a 1995 action/adventure film that is notorious for several reasons – primarily its poor critical and box office reception. The feature, which was directed by Renny Harlin, of *Die Hard 2* (1990), *Deep Blue Sea* (1999) and *The Legend of Hercules* (2014) fame, is often touted as the biggest box office failure of all time. Indeed, TIME magazine awards it no less than the top spot on its 2012 list of “The Top 10 Biggest Money-Losing Movies of All Time”<sup>1</sup>, claiming that after inflation adjustment, the film lost a figure just shy of \$150,000,000. Indeed, it has also been accorded this dubious honour by The Guinness Book of World Records, although the category has since been retired and it may no longer be unrivalled in this regard. In any case, it is widely considered to have single-handedly bankrupted production company Carolco, which poured an enormous quantity of money into the project as a desperate last-ditch bid to avoid collapse, and was the subject of a

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthews, C | The Top 10 Biggest Money-Losing Movies of All Time.

great deal of media attention for this reason.

Critical acclaim was likewise almost universally poor, with meta-review compilations such as Rotten Tomatoes and IMDB awarding the film marks ranging from lukewarm at best to downright scathing. There exists a wealth of reasons why this swashbuckling epic never quite hit the spot with reviewers as well as moviegoers. It is too simple to blame the film's failure on either poor acting or poor direction alone, although issues are apparent in these areas. The lead, Geena Davis, is an Academy Award winner, and several supporting actors provide decent performances. Likewise, director Renny Harlin has produced some critical successes, most notably *Die Hard 2*, albeit alongside a considerable number of critical and box office failures. The general consensus on reasons for the film's catastrophic showing list a "seriously mismatched romantic duo in [Geena] Davis and Matthew Modine"<sup>2</sup> (Variety Magazine), a failure to appeal to any particular target audience<sup>3</sup> (The New York Times), and an utter dearth of "good dialogue"<sup>4</sup> (The San Francisco Examiner). The casting was also widely panned, a rare occurrence in a film so driven by effects and action rather than emotive content. In any case, the movie is widely considered overlong, outlandish and stilted.

### **John Debney**

Despite this, the soundtrack by American composer John Debney (August 18, 1956 – ), famous for *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000), *The Princess Diaries* (2001), *Bruce Almighty* (2003), *Iron Man 2* (2010) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), for which he garnered an Academy Award nomination, was largely well-received – particularly in film

---

<sup>2</sup> McCarthy, T | Review: 'Cutthroat Island'.

<sup>3</sup> Maslin, J | Cutthroat Island (1995).

<sup>4</sup> Shulgasser, B | Yo ho, this pirate movie stinks, sinks.

music circles. Brian Orndorf describes it as “one of the finest musical scores of the 1990s”<sup>5</sup>, although this review, written to coincide with the film’s 2009 Blu-ray re-release, is unusually glowing about the film in general. Comprehensive soundtrack interest website Film Tracks effectively summarises the composer’s goals and achievements when it comes to *Cutthroat Island*.

It does exactly what Debney set out to accomplish: pay tribute to the masters of the Golden age who defined the concept of orchestral pirate music ... and modernize the concept.<sup>6</sup>

### **Score & Soundtrack**

The score to the film is best described as a swashbuckling epic, with the allusions to Korngold frequently noted and their technical prowess on par. A full orchestra is used in almost every cue, and it is often augmented with the addition of a choir. Ancestral influences can be identified in *The Sea Hawk* (Korngold, 1940), *Star Wars* (Williams, 1977) and *Hook* (Williams, 1991), and its impact is in turn evident in films such as *Independence Day* (Arnold, 1996), *The Mummy* (Goldsmith, 1999) and *The Mummy Returns* (Silvestri, 2001).

The score was recorded at AIR Studios in London, which Debney didn’t return to until his critically-acclaimed *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004<sup>7</sup>. It was one of the first major films to record at the new Lyndhurst location for the studios, which was settled on in the late 1980s after the company’s studios in Montserrat were destroyed by a hurricane in 1989 and

---

<sup>5</sup> Orndorf, B | Blu-ray Review: Cutthroat Island.

<sup>6</sup> Unknown author | Film Tracks: Cutthroat Island.

<sup>7</sup> Unknown author | Film Tracks: Cutthroat Island.

the lease was due to expire on their premises on Oxford Street in central London<sup>8</sup>. In retrospect, it was a major landmark in the phenomenal shift away from LA and towards Europe for recording film & TV music, which began in the mid-1990s or perhaps earlier. AIR Studios is one of the most respected beneficiaries of this trend, and at the time, *Cutthroat Island* was the biggest-budget feature to be recorded there, with almost double the budget of its closest rival at the time, *Stargate* (Arnold, 1994)<sup>9</sup>. Praise for the performers has been universal, and the choir and percussion have been particularly complimented<sup>10</sup>. Their virtuosity is rarely more evident than in the track “Escape from Mordechai’s”<sup>11</sup>, where the combination of the orchestra and the choir (which presumably were recorded separately, due to the preponderance of tracks “without choir” which feature on the 2007 soundtrack re-release) is both musically deft and achieved with technical ingenuity.

Despite breaking his record, the score also may owe a great deal to David Arnold, who was originally signed as the composer for *Cutthroat Island*, and is to this day mistakenly billed as the composer in a review by the Deseret News of Utah, an error which has gone uncorrected for over eighteen years<sup>12</sup>. The composer, whom apocryphal story holds was fired for either “creative differences”<sup>13</sup>, or “scheduling conflicts”<sup>14</sup>, although the truth is likely never to be known, has stated that his music had no effect on Debney’s final product, which the latter has corroborated. Conversely, it has also been suggested that Debney’s work had an influence on Arnold’s later scores of the mid-1990s, including his landmark *Independence*

---

<sup>8</sup> Lambert, M | Air Lyndhurst.

<sup>9</sup> This is based on analysis of the films with an IMDB listing for AIR Lyndhurst, which admittedly may not be entirely comprehensive.

Unknown author | Air Lyndhurst Studios (IMDB).

<sup>10</sup> Unknown author | Film Tracks: Cutthroat Island.

<sup>11</sup> Featured on both soundtrack releases; see appendix.

<sup>12</sup> Hicks, C | Film review: Cutthroat Island.

<sup>13</sup> Unknown contributor | David Arnold comments about “Cutthroat Island”.

<sup>14</sup> Unknown author | Film Tracks: Cutthroat Island.

*Day* (1996).<sup>15</sup>

Critical praise of the soundtrack, however, was not universal. Nevertheless, it usually requires less than labyrinthine logic to tie such criticisms back to the reviewer's low overall esteem for the film. *Variety* attacked the film's "action sequences in general", believing that "while vividly staged, [they] have a repetitiveness about them, and lack of proper dramatic ebb and flow is exacerbated by John Debney's self-consciously rousing score, which amounts to a compendium of rehashed action-adventure motifs"<sup>16</sup>. The choice of phrase "self-consciously rousing" is an illuminating one; strongly implying that Debney has made a (misguided) courageous attempt to rouse the quality of the film, conscious of the inordinate effort required. The accusation that the score amounts to no more than a "compendium" of "motifs", however, is at least slightly off the mark. James Southall's comment that "impressively, for such a long score, it isn't nearly as repetitive as you might expect"<sup>17</sup> is more considered, and more accurately captures the broader public view of this admittedly colossal soundtrack.

However, reception ranged to even more biting; *The New York Times* scathingly described the score as "so obnoxiously exultant it suggests the composer ought to walk the plank"<sup>18</sup>. Even here, however, the implicit link to its poor reception of the film overall is veiled but not indiscernible. The choice of the phrase "exultant", itself not a negative term, implies that the soundtrack was too proud in a context where it was not deserved. This paints Maslin as yet another reviewer for whom his overall opinion of the film quite clearly colours his assessment of the film's peripheral elements such as its music, a phenomenon which will

---

<sup>15</sup> Unknown author | Film Tracks: *Cutthroat Island*.

<sup>16</sup> McCarthy, T | Review: '*Cutthroat Island*'.

<sup>17</sup> Southall, J. | *Cutthroat Island*.

<sup>18</sup> Maslin, J | *Cutthroat Island* (1995).

be dissected in Part 2. The soundtrack’s largely positive reception amongst the film music community, however, suggests that the quality of the music is not wanting, rather perhaps the opposite: that it is overmuch, particularly for a feature with otherwise lacklustre production.

Nevertheless, the often-derided frequency of the statement of motifs is undeniably rather high, particularly during the film’s numerous action sequences. The main theme is transcribed below, in its incarnation on the first track from the soundtrack, “Main Title: Morgan’s Ride” (0:16 – 0:51). It constitutes the bulk of the score’s thematic material, and although several other less significant motifs are present and developed somewhat<sup>19</sup>, including a love theme and a theme for the villainous Dawg, none of these are of great importance to the development of my argument.

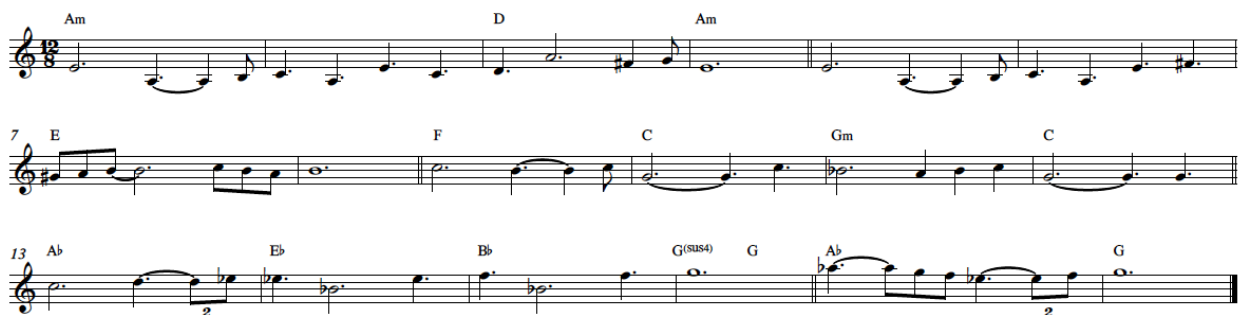


Figure 1 - Main Title: Morgan's Ride

## Essay Aims

With this background of the film and the climate of its production in mind, I will first seek to establish in what broad ways can music enhance the quality of a film. This will be effected primarily by comparing the ways in which music can amplify a film’s desirable elements, and also distract from its undesirable ones, using examples from *Cutthroat Island*

---

<sup>19</sup> For further examination, the love theme is best heard during the track “First Kiss” and Dawg’s theme in “Escape from Mordechai’s” – see the appendix for details.

and elsewhere as support. Then, I will go on address the question of whether a soundtrack can improve the overall strength of film in the case of one which is universally regarded to be of poor quality, again relating this to the strengths and weaknesses of *Cutthroat Island*, which is examined as a case study. Finally, I will conclude by addressing the question of whether it is fair to analyse a film and its soundtrack separately, using an exploration of a film's effects on the reputation of its cast and crew with *Cutthroat Island* as an example. This will culminate in the proposal of terminology and an approach which might be used to facilitate this.



## Part 1: How Does Music Improve Films?

---

Music, both diegetic and nondiegetic, is commonplace in movies produced in the modern-day film industry, both in and out of Hollywood, where a long tradition has been established, of which *Cutthroat Island* is a part. It is not the place of this essay to analyse the history of this powerful marriage between two art forms, but it is the role of this section to assess in what very broad ways music, often considered the lesser partner (if indeed it is boiled down to this dichotomy at all), can improve the film when viewed holistically. Two primary methods are addressed: music functioning as an amplifier, to take desirable content present in the dialogue, direction, cinematography or other elements of a film and expand upon it; and music functioning as distraction, to take undesirable elements from the same sources and use the music to draw attention away from them or otherwise mollify them.

### **Music as Amplifier**

It is generally considered unusual for music to actively create emotions in the course of a film which were not already present, or at least hinted at, on screen or through dialogue. Anecdotally amongst film composers, this certainly seems to be the case. In pride of place on her comprehensive list of commonly-accepted truths about film music, Hilary Schaefer attributes describes the primary function of film music as to “[add] to the emotional quality of the film”<sup>20</sup>. This list provides a valuable compendium of important principles behind film music, with an exhaustiveness that is often lacking in commentary in such a new field, and

---

<sup>20</sup> Schaefer, H | Emotion and the film scores: an empirical approach.

will be referenced throughout this section. Further to her credit, her use of language is particularly precise, and the choice of the term “add” in the above quotation supports my assertion that music as a part of film most often does not create emotion *per se* but rather that it enhances it. However, the term does not come without connotations that may be somewhat restrictive – it should be equally apparent that music is similarly capable of “subtracting” from the emotions of a film, or taking them in another direction, rather than brute addition. It is perhaps better to conceive of music as a force which can pull emotion in a certain direction on a hypothetical emotive graph of multi-dimensional space, rather than simply adding a numerical value along a one-dimensional line. However, in her defence, it must be noted that in a vast majority of cases, excluding passages where music is used in a kind of counter-intuitive sense (for though they are common, they are quite clearly distinct), music serves to take identifiable emotive content and support it in some fashion.

This capacity is one in which music routinely functions during *Cutthroat Island*. Elements like the visual effects, for example, are complemented with great bravura. The visual effects in the film, while far from flawless, are some of its strongest points. A nostalgic 2011 review of the film heaps praise on the pyrotechnics, for example, which it feels are, for a modern audience who are “so used to seeing CGI-reliant explosions ... pretty fantastic”<sup>21</sup>. However it is not the case that such effects are always complemented solely by enormous orchestral fare, as Debney has the good sense to move the music out of the way of perhaps the film’s most climactic pyrotechnical sequence at 01:54:00, where sound effects reign during the lead couple’s dramatic ocean dive off of an exploding pirate ship. When it returns, it does so with a firm but deft stroke in the form a solo violin (01:54:36). In this sequence, Debney illustrates his ability to amplify key scenes with music: both by masterful

---

<sup>21</sup> Singh, T | Looking back at Cutthroat Island.

execution of music and careful placement of silence.

### **Music as Distraction**

In a conceptually similar but functionally opposite manner, music is also often described as a way of distracting from poor dialogue, direction or visual effects. This is certainly another frequent function of film music – Schaefer notes, second on her list of functional tropes in film music, that when “used skilfully”, music can serve to “cover up otherwise weak directing and/or cinematography”<sup>22</sup>. Anecdotally, that constitutes a wisdom which seems widely agreed upon amongst professionals.

While it is impossible to say with certainty, distraction from poor visual effects certainly seems to be the goal at 00:36:33, when the music rapidly swells during a scene where Geena Davis is unconvincingly pulled off a balcony. In the heat of the action, which is underscored with screeching winds and strings, the moment passes quickly, but without the music and sound effects, which are booming loud, the effects are clearly rather flimsy.

From a slightly broader perspective, a film’s music can function as a distracter by its sheer volume. Again, while intentions are always veiled in the film industry, Debney may well have been playing towards this end in *Cutthroat Island*, which includes “over two hours”<sup>23</sup> of music. Indeed, the 2007 double CD release featured more than 146 minutes of music, which is in fact over 20 minutes longer than the running time of the film itself – for various reasons, such as that it includes various “without choir” cues, alternate versions, and a seven-minute demo that Debney pitched before being brought on board. There is barely a scene in the film without music in some form, and it is ubiquitous in action-heavy sequences

---

<sup>22</sup> Schaefer, H | Emotion and the film scores: an empirical approach.

<sup>23</sup> Unknown author | Film Tracks: Cutthroat Island.

which are typified by the cue “Carriage Chase”, which is over seven minutes long, and constitutes one of the longest and most well-executed examples of its genre in the literature.

This phenomenon seems to work somewhat against another often-held conventional wisdom that the best film music sits “operate just below the consciousness of the moviegoer”<sup>24</sup>, as Schaefer describes it. However, in the same article, she cites the findings of the respected scholar Karlin: that in the heyday of the traditional studio model, Warner Bros usually had the most successful soundtrack sales, which is attributed to the music being mixed louder during the dubbing process. From this point of view, it would certainly seem that music can, in a positive fashion, attract attention to itself – and if this phenomenon is indeed responsible for causing audiences to purchase soundtracks as Karlin claims, it seems more than possible that it would also help raise their overall estimation of the film as well.

“The Carriage Chase” seems to tiptoe back and forth across this imagined line of consciousness regularly. Underscoring a lengthy sequence in which Geena Davis’s character purchases that of Matthew Modine before an explosion-riddled horseback escape, the music comes to the fore around 00:26:00 while dialogue and sound effects take a step back. It darts behind the sound less than half a minute later, however, when a religious procession hijacks the soundscape with semi-musical Latin chanting. In this way, this lengthy cue functions as narrative glue to mask the rapid succession of shots. Its rhythmic insistence also serves to make believable one particularly unlikely sequence, in which Geena Davis leaps into an upper-story window and hurls through a series of riotous rooms to successfully dive on to a horse-drawn carriage which has been sped by Michael Modine through the colonnade below. If that summary seems convoluted, it certainly would seem more so during the course of the

---

<sup>24</sup> Schaefer, H | Emotion and the film scores: an empirical approach.

film without the gluing function of the music to hold it together. This certainly constitutes evidence that “the complexity with which Debney weaves his themes together is astounding”<sup>25</sup>, and often it is this complexity which so masterfully distracts us from the film’s weaker aspects.

### **Conclusions**

In this way, the two functions in which music functions in film, on a very broad level, have been identified and explained, and in each case, examples have been given of how these methods are employed in *Cutthroat Island*. From this analysis, it is clear that Debney’s aptitude in both ways is considerable, and we are now equipped to probe deeper into application of these ideas specifically to the film.

---

<sup>25</sup> Unknown author | Film Tracks: Cutthroat Island.

## Part 2: Can Music Improve a Dud?

---

We delve deeper into reception studies and analysis of *Cutthroat Island* in an attempt to answer the question – can music improve a poor-quality film? It seems there are two possible answers to this question. Firstly, either the music in a poor-quality film is, by extension of its being part of the film, similarly of poor quality and thus has no effect (or even a negative effect) on the film as a whole. Secondly, that music of a higher standard than the average of the film itself is capable of improving the overall quality of the film. Examination of *Cutthroat Island* will be used as an attempt to begin addressing this question.

### **A Poor Film Has, By Definition, A Poor Soundtrack**

Indian musician Mayookh Bhaumik, who has worked extensively in Tollywood, the colloquial name for the industry which produced films in the Tamil language, states in an interview with *The Times of India* that he is of the opinion that “you can't have a good score for a bad film. There is no such thing. The score is not exclusive of the movie”<sup>26</sup>. For him, it is clear that music fulfils a subservient function in the hierarchy of the elements of film, and as such its value is dictated by that of the overall film. His explanation that “film music is not supposed to stand out” ties in with tropes expounded by Schaeffer which were explored in Part 1.

There certainly seems to be further evidence for this in *Total Film*'s list of “50 Worst

---

<sup>26</sup> Singha, S | A good film can't have bad music.

Movie Soundtracks”<sup>27</sup>. The film which takes out the top spot is the infamous and universally-panned film *The Room* (2003), which was memorably described by *Entertainment Weekly* as “the *Citizen Kane* of bad movies”<sup>28</sup>. Indeed, it has achieved cult status primarily due to its thin plot, unwieldy dialogue and terrible cinematography, similar criticisms to those levelled at *Cutthroat Island*. Total Film are certainly not off the mark on their unforgiving assessment of the music, however they only address the songs which appear in the film, which although plentiful (and in many cases, produced specifically for the film), are very different from the soundtrack’s traditionally-scored elements. While objectively, both of these elements of the soundtrack to *The Room* are far from high quality, this film no doubt clinched its top spot partly because of its notorious critical and cult reception. Indeed, it would seem that, for the list’s author, Josh Winning, music certainly is constrained by the film, or at least there is a high correlation between the two – of the remaining films on his “top” 5, the meta-review site Rotten Tomatoes gives scores of, from highest to lowest: 53%, 45%, 27% and 11%, all of which are considered “rotten”, and the lowest of which (for the 1997 film *Batman & Robin*) is among the lowest possible scores on the site. In this light, *The Room*’s 33% seems rather mediocre, but on closer inspection, almost every positive review on the site cites basking in its ineptitude as the primary vehicle for enjoying the film. This recurring phenomenon of correlation between a poor quality film and a poor quality soundtrack may have a range of explanations, not all necessarily involving causation. However it seems clear that at least in some cases, a film of poor quality can, for this reason, stymie the effectiveness of its soundtrack.

---

<sup>27</sup> Winning, J | 50 Worst Movie Soundtracks.

<sup>28</sup> Collis, C | The Crazy Cult of ‘The Room’.

## Soundtrack as a Diamond in the Rough

When it comes to *Cutthroat Island*, comments with regards to the soundtrack that are truly enlightening, and which treat the soundtrack with some degree of critical independence, are infrequent at best. However, oblique references to the score are sometimes made which attempt to handle the soundtrack independently from the feature, and this is usually done with praise for Debney's creation. Even in a lambasting review from The San Francisco Examiner, where critical examination of the score is entirely absent, reviewer Barbara Shulgasser at least finds time to liken it to the soundtrack of *Star Wars*<sup>29</sup> (1977), which is presumably complimentary, although she provides no comment as to what the wider implications of this statement are. The soundtrack's only mention in a similar, if not slightly more kind, review from Peter Canavese is a description as "a robust Korngold-esque score by John Debney"<sup>30</sup>. Although no other attention is given to the score in either review, it is significant that it is mentioned in both cases; while value judgement is ostensibly absent, comparison to such classics can only be interpreted as an endorsement. Both reviews are rather harsh to the film as a whole, but their attitudes to the soundtrack have a definite conciliatory ring.

This "diamond in the rough" mentality when it comes to soundtracks is not without precedent. Many films over the years have been lauded for their soundtracks despite poor critical reception, although what impact this has on the quality of the respective elements remains unclear, although it is a point which I will attempt to address in the conclusion of this dissertation. *Tron: Legacy* (2010) is often cited as a film fitting this description, although to what extent this is attributable to the widespread appeal of composer duo Daft Punk is unclear. *I Am Sam* (2003) is another similar candidate, although again complicated by the use

---

<sup>29</sup> Shulgasser, B | Yo ho, this pirate movie stinks, sinks.

<sup>30</sup> Canavese, P | Grouch Reviews: *Cutthroat Island* (1995).



of entirely Beatles covers for its soundtrack. In fact, the film went so far as to earn a Grammy Award nomination (for Best Compilation Soundtrack for Visual Media, a category which is fairly unique to the Grammys), despite the film's negative reception.

Bill Scheggia argues that this phenomenon is absolutely real, and that a strong soundtrack has the capacity to improve a film, as evidenced by his list of “6 Bad Movies Redeemed by Great Original Scores”<sup>31</sup>. While *Cutthroat Island* does not feature among them, it is interesting and enlightening to note that every entry could be considered an action or adventure film, and most are also firm cult favourites in film music circles. Particularly notable is *Hook*, which is not far from *Cutthroat Island* in either its subject matter or its score. Despite strong arguments for the shortcomings of the films in question, and the strengths of their respective scores, his takes on the two facets are largely separate. His formula for assessment of the films consists largely of a summary of critical views of the film, and then praise for the soundtrack from a musical perspective, with little comment on how the music impacts the film, positively or otherwise. Despite the fact that this renders the topic of real improvement obliquely addressed at best, it certainly provides evidence for the “diamond in the rough” phenomenon.

## **Conclusion**

Again, two broad streams of thought have been examined when it comes to the impact music can have upon an objectively bad film. The first is that the soundtrack is inherently bound to the overall quality of the film, and is unable to contain value in and of itself for this reason. Many have expounded this view since the early days of film, and it is widely held as a trope of film music; however, there is also much merit to the idea that a soundtrack can

---

<sup>31</sup> Scheggia, B | 6 Bad Movies Redeemed by Great Original Scores.

possess independent value, either as a kind of redeeming influence upon the film as explained by Scheggia, simply as a standalone art form, or both. This is the approach which I have dubbed the “diamond in the rough” mentality. Synthesis of these two ideas and an exploration of how the merits of both can be explored and reconciled, is carried out in the conclusion.

## Conclusions

### Can Music and Cinema Be Fairly Analysed Separately?

---

Music and cinema have a complex relationship, with no single analogy quite doing it justice – ‘two sides of the same coin,’ a ‘marriage of art forms,’ and a ‘symbiosis’ each only explain facets of a larger picture. For this reason, analysis of the two is rarely carried out entirely separately, with film critics regularly weighing in on soundtracks and music critics commenting on the films for which soundtracks are produced. However, in some cases, a good film with a bad soundtrack, or a bad film with a good soundtrack is spoken of. Are these labels fair? Is the fate of a soundtrack tied up in its parent film? Below are outlined a brief exploration of this phenomenon and ways in which it can be dealt with.

#### Effect on Reputations

*Cutthroat Island* certainly seems to have affected the reputations of the cast and crew in widely varying ways. Statements to the effect of “Debney seems to be among the few crew members unscathed by the film's poisonous touch”<sup>32</sup>, that take for granted the dire effect which the film’s reception had on the careers of many who were involved in it, are rife. The careers of the actors involved, particularly Geena Davis, suffered considerably, and perhaps this effect is the root of the “poisonous touch” often discussed. Director Renny Harlin, who was Davis’ husband at the time, is something of an enigma, and the enormous failure that was *Cutthroat Island* never seemed to prevent further high-budget forays, going on to direct films

---

<sup>32</sup> Unknown author | Film Tracks: *Cutthroat Island*.

including *Deep Blue Sea* (1999, \$60m), *Driven* (2001, \$72m), *Exorcist: The Beginning* (2004, \$80m) and *The Legend of Hercules* (2014, \$70m), though none with quite so high a budget as *Cutthroat Island*'s \$98m. Even so, the reason for which he consistently found work during this period is unclear, given that critical reception of these films was consistently poor. In fact, none of the above films, save for *Deep Blue Sea*, managed to even make a profit at the box office. The careers of other stars, and perhaps crew members, took an even sharper downwards dive. Despite never achieving true A-list composer status within Hollywood, Debney successfully managed to sidestep most of the repercussions in this sense. In this way, the music department seems to have been perceived as quite separate from the rest of the cast and crew, suggesting that independent assessment of the two is possible and commonplace in the industry.

### **Separating a Marriage**

After examination of *Cutthroat Island* and the film world at large, it is clear that the strength of a film and its soundtrack are not always related, although they very often are, for reasons that are evident in the close relationship of the two art forms. The high prevalence of informed opinions which state that the quality of a film is a cap which music cannot surpass suggests that this trope has some merit. However, it can be rather restrictive to thorough analysis of the merits and reception of a film, and the wealth of counter-examples we have seen demonstrate that not all soundtracks are slave to the film for which they were penned, with genre perhaps playing a large role in determining the functional independence of the two aspects. Action/adventure films, which have a strong lineage within Hollywood and a closely-associated practice of music-making are perhaps least susceptible to this problem, due to their ability to successfully gauge key archetypal concepts of the genre and effectively

bring them to life in a way which is time-honoured, relatable and musically powerful.

### **Two Views: Quality and Effectiveness**

It is my opinion that it is this sense in which the music of *Cutthroat Island* can be fairly deemed to have great merit, despite being a component part of a film whose quality (or lack thereof) is largely unquestioned. In this way, we arrive at the conclusion that music and film can, to a degree, be analysed independently. Using *Cutthroat Island* as an example, I believe that this is most successfully carried out, and the relative merits of each area most effectively explored, in a way which does not seek to tie their fates in a wholly inextricably fashion to one another. Instead, I advocate recognition and analysis of two distinct but related assessments of a film and its soundtrack: the *quality* of both, where independent conclusions can be drawn, and their *effectiveness* in each case, where the two art forms are innately bound.

### **What are the Implications of these Differing Views?**

This is also the place for a brief summary of the additional consequences of films where the two elements do have divergent levels of *quality*, regardless of the *quality* in each case, with the case of *Cutthroat Island* providing examples.

This disparity certainly seems to give rise to a large amount of critical attention, which I believe is fundamental to shaping the perception that a film and its soundtrack can, at least on some level, have different levels of both *quality* and *effectiveness*. The Hollywood industry is one which has always been subject to intense scrutiny, but failure and flops have often particularly captivated the public imagination. As the range and quantity of opinions presented in the public domain has increased rapidly with the advent of social media, this

opens debate to an array of stances which can appreciate this dichotomy and illuminate audiences because of it.

In addition, music from an otherwise “bad film” retains the powerful capacity to provide us with great concert material or music with standalone value. “Setting Sail” is perhaps the cue where the allusions to Korngold are most obvious<sup>33</sup>, but the allusion goes back much further, with the resemblance to Vaughan Williams’ *A Sea Symphony* perhaps even stronger. It certainly has sufficient musical value to constitute a standalone musical piece, with strong ties to the programmatic late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century repertoire which the genre owes so much.

Also, too often in the art world, we focus our critical attention towards those bodies of work that represent either entirely effective or ineffective examples of their respective genre, or at least examples which are painted that way. However, through analysis of those works which have a more divergent range of strengths and weaknesses, we come to learn a great deal about the nature of these respective elements in a way which might otherwise be impossible.

One conclusion which can be drawn from the ill-fated production history of *Cutthroat Island* is that music is a more foolproof art than filmmaking as a whole, largely because of the nature of the industry. Music, certainly within the Hollywood tradition, is seen as an element of a film which must be produced to stated specifications at the explicit direction of others, and often the result is little room for artistic freedom in the face of a well-established hierarchy of more powerful figures in the artistic process – chiefly, the director

---

<sup>33</sup> Unknown author | Film Tracks: Cutthroat Island.

and the producer. However, this results in a film's composer having a far weaker susceptibility to vanity, folly and delusion. Whereas *Cutthroat Island* has been described as "the last of the 80's trend of coke-snorting, top-heavy, extravagant filmmaking endeavors; a film so assured of its appeal, it willingly careens out of control as much as it can just to say that it could"<sup>34</sup>, no criticism of the kind has ever been levelled at its soundtrack, nor would this ever seem likely given the prevailing industry climate of the period. Whereas "Harlin approaches this film like his own private theme park stunt show"<sup>35</sup>, Debney was not only fulfilling a role subservient to Harlin, but also to the producers, the production company, and in some ways, to the temp track, the editor, and the ghost of David Arnold's involvement in this film. It is little wonder that he was able to build upon the firm traditions of action/adventure scores which have been discussed, and use the combination of working within a tightly structured managerial hierarchy and strong financial power due to the film's high budget, to produce a soundtrack of high quality. Two art forms which can be analysed separately, indeed.

---

<sup>34</sup> Orndorf, B | Blu-ray Review: *Cutthroat Island*.

<sup>35</sup> Orndorf, B | Blu-ray Review: *Cutthroat Island*.

## Conclusion

In a sense that is truly meaningful, without being divorced from its context, we can now conclude that:

It'd be a shame to forget about the scores along with the movies.

Perhaps it's best to let the music speak for itself; sit back, play the soundtracks, close your eyes, and let your imagination do the rest.<sup>36</sup>

Let us thus view the *quality* and the *effectiveness* of a film and its soundtrack separately, and appreciate the *quality* of a soundtrack like *Cutthroat Island*, irrespective of its *effectiveness*.

---

<sup>36</sup> Scheggia, B | 6 Bad Movies Redeemed by Great Original Scores.



## Appendix

### Soundtrack Track Listing

#### 1995 Release

Number	Title	Duration
1	"Main Title : Morgan's Ride"	4:38
2	"Carriage Chase"	7:20
3	"The Language of Romance"	2:39
4	"Setting Sail"	1:03
5	"To the Bottom of the Sea"	2:43
6	"Morgan Takes the Ship"	4:30
7	"The Funeral"	1:30
8	"The Rescue"	3:41
9	"Discovery of the Treasure"	2:19
10	"The Big Jump"	2:38
11	"The Storm Begins"	2:33
12	"Morgan Captured/Sword Fight"	5:23
13	"Shaw Steals the Map"	3:30
14	"Escape from Mordechai's"	2:09
15	"Charting the Course"	2:19
16	"First Kiss"	1:54
17	"The Battle"	6:29
18	"Dawg's Demise / The Triumph"	3:31
19	"It's Only Gold / End Credits"	9:42

## 2007 Release

### Disc One

Number	Title	Duration
1	"Main Title : Morgan's Ride"	4:38
2	"The Rescue / Morgan Saves Harry"	3:41
3	"Purcell Snatcher" (composed by Brad Dechter)	2:58
4	"Shaw is Caught"	1:15
5	"The Funeral"	1:29
6	"Morgan in Command"	2:51
7	"The Language of Romance"	2:40
8	"A Lady Scorned"	1:38
9	"Carriage Chase"	7:21
10	"Ainlee Plots / To Spittelfield"	3:46
11	"Uncle Mordechai"	2:02
12	"Morgan Captured/Sword Fight"	5:23
13	"Escape from Mordechai's"	2:09
14	"Setting Sail"	1:03
15	"Charting the Course"	2:19
16	"First Kiss / Love Scene / Dawg's Plan"	3:12
17	"Shaw Discovers the Location"	2:04
18	"Betrayal"	2:46
19	"The Storm Begins"	2:33
20	"To the Bottom of the Sea"	2:43
21	"The Island"	3:41
22	"Shaw Steals the Map"	3:30
23	"Discovery of the Cave"	4:39
24	"Discovery of the Treasure"	2:19

### Disc Two

Number	Title	Duration
1	"The Wedding Waltz"	2:43
2	"Caught"	1:37
3	"The Rope"	2:17
4	"Morgan and Shaw Jump the Cliff / The Big Jump"	2:38
5	"Shaw Captured"	2:32
6	"Morgan Takes the Ship"	4:30
7	"The Hangman's Noose"	3:56
8	"The Battle/To Dawg's Ship / Morgan Battles Dawg / Dawg's Demise / The Triumph"	17:52
9	"It's Only Gold/End Credits"	9:33
10	"Main Title / Morgan's Ride (Without Choir)"	4:48
11	"Carriage Chase (Alternate Version)"	7:21
12	"First Kiss (Album Edit)"	1:54
13	"Dawg's Demise / The Triumph (Without Choir)"	3:31
14	"Morgan's Ride & The Rescue (Original Synth Demo)"	7:25

## Bibliography & List of References

- Matthews, C. (March 20, 2012) The Top 10 Biggest Money-Losing Movies of All Time. *TIME*. Retrieved from <http://businesstimecom/2012/03/21/the-top-ten-biggest-money-losing-movies-of-all-time/slide/cutthroat-island/> [May 29, 2014]
- McCarthy, T. (December 31, 1995) Review: 'Cutthroat Island'. *Variety*. Retrieved from <http://varietycom/1995/film/reviews/cutthroat-island-1200444773/> [June 12, 2014]
- Maslin, J. (December 22, 1995) Cutthroat Island (1995). *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimescom/movie/review?res=9403E4DF1539F931A15751C1A963958260> [June 12, 2014]
- Shulgasser, B. (December 22, 1995) Yo ho, this pirate movie stinks, sinks. *The San Francisco Examiner*. Retrieved from <http://www.sfgatecom/news/article/Yo-ho-this-pirate-movie-stinks-sinks-3115016php> [May 29, 2014]
- Orndorf, B. (August 5, 2009) Blu-ray Review: Cutthroat Island. *Brian Orndorf*. Retrieved from <http://www.brianorndorfcom/2009/08/bluray-review-cutthroat-islandhtml> [June 12, 2014]
- Canavese, P. (August, 2009) Groucho Reviews: Cutthroat Island (1995). *Groucho Reviews*. Retrieved from <http://grouchoreviewscom/reviews/3538> [June 12, 2014]
- Hicks, C. (December 31, 1995) Film review: Cutthroat Island. *Deseret News*. Retrieved from <http://www.deseretnewscom/article/700000396/Cutthroat-Islandhtml> [June 12, 2014]
- Various unknown contributors. (December 1995) David Arnold comments about Cutthroat Island. Retrieved from <https://groupsgooglecom/forum/#!topic/recmusicmovies/neN1cvb7CDU> [June 12, 2014]
- Unknown author. (December 31, 1998) Film Tracks: Cutthroat Island. *Film Tracks*. Retrieved from [http://www.filmtrackscom/titles/cutthroat\\_islandhtml](http://www.filmtrackscom/titles/cutthroat_islandhtml) [June 12, 2014]
- Singh, T. (April 7, 2011) Looking back at Cutthroat Island. *Den of Geek*. Retrieved from <http://www.denofgeekcom/movies/17303/looking-back-at-cutthroat-island> [June 24, 2014]
- Schaefer, H. (Date unknown) Emotion and the film scores: an empirical approach. *Film Music*. Retrieved from <http://www.filmmusicde/article1htm> [June 24, 2014]
- Scheggia, B. (June 27, 2013) 6 Bad Movies Redeemed by Great Original Scores. *The Artifice*. Retrieved from <http://the-artificecom/6-bad-movies-redeemed-by-great-original-scores/> [June 24, 2014]
- Karlin, F. (1994) *Listening to Movies: The Film Lover's Guide to Film Music*. New York: Schirmer Books

Collis, C. (December 12, 2008) The Crazy Cult of ‘The Room’. *Entertainment Weekly*. Retrieved from <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20246031,00.html> [June 30, 2014]

Singha, S. (2014) A Good Film Can’t Have Bad Music. *The Times of India*. Retrieved from <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/bengali/music/A-good-film-cant-have-bad-music/articleshow/35381316.cms> [May 29, 2014]

Winning, J. (June 19, 2012) 50 Worst Movie Soundtracks. *Total Film*. Retrieved from <http://www.totalfilm.com/features/50-worst-movie-soundtracks/the-room-2003> [June 30, 2014]

Lambert, M. (January 13, 2009) Air Lyndhurst. *Electronic Musician*. Retrieved from <http://www.musician.com/gear/1332/air-lyndhurst/40716> [July 8, 2014]

Unknown author. (Date unknown) Air Lyndhurst. *IMDB*. Retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com/company/co0137663/> [July 8, 2014]

Southall, J. (2005) Cutthroat Island. *Movie Wave*. Retrieved from [http://www.movie-wave.net/titles/cutthroat\\_island.html](http://www.movie-wave.net/titles/cutthroat_island.html) [July 8, 2014]

### Note

*All time codes in reference to Cutthroat Island are taken from the August 11, 2009 BluRay release of the film.*

*Listing retrieved from: <http://www.blu-ray.com/movies/Cutthroat-Island-Blu-ray/5426/>*