

**MUSIC AND HUMAN MOBILITY
REDEFINING COMMUNITY IN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXT 2016**

Guest edited by Maria de São José Côrte-Real & Pedro Moreira

“Henri Coandă” Air Force Academy Publishing House

**LISTENING TO GOD’S LANGUAGE: STANCETAKING IN ONLINE
COMMENTS ON ENNIO MORRICONE’S MUSIC**

Raluca-Mihaela LEVONIAN*

*Department of Humanities, University of Calabria, Cosenza, Italy/ Centre for Romanian Studies, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania

***Abstract:** The study investigates the discursive strategies employed by the commenters in the evaluation of a specific musical piece, Ennio Morricone’s soundtrack for the film *The Mission* (1986). The methodology applied is based on the theoretical conception of the act of stance-taking as comprising evaluation, positioning and alignment (Du Bois 2007). The results show that similarities and differences in the evaluations lead to the emergence of threads for dialogue, which highlights the intersubjective dimension of stance-taking. The commenters engage in a process of negotiation of meanings, attempting to express the transcendental dimension of the music played. The evaluation of the music represents not only the expression of personal tastes and experiences, but it also contributes to the discursive formation of communities, based on artistic, religious or ethnic criteria.*

***Keywords:** music, film score, evaluation, alignment, community*

1. INTRODUCTION

Receiving his first Academy Award for Best Original Music Score in 2016, Ennio Morricone said: “There isn’t a great soundtrack without a great movie that inspires it”. With modesty, the composer reminded the audience that the evaluation of music scores needs to be linked to the films they were created for. Being inspired by the plot or the scenes of the film, such creations are deemed to carry on or to complete the meaning constructed by the images presented.

After its release, the relation between the soundtrack and the original film tends to be glossed over by the public. Contemporary consumption patterns reveal that the fans tend to purchase soundtrack albums based on their preference for the composer and after having watched the film; however, they “indicated a preference toward listening to the film music separate from the film after their first listening experience” (Keown, 2016:10). Besides consumption patterns, the manner in which listeners evaluate such musical pieces deserves further research. A first question regards whether they judge the soundtrack in connection with or separately from the film. Another question refers to the musical genre ascribed to the pieces forming the

soundtrack. For instance, Ferrer et al. (2012: 513) discovered that a consistent part of the respondents sampled rejected the genre-based measure as unable to explain the preferences for “a particular kind of music”. Various studies have also investigated the connection between music preferences and the listeners’ values (e.g. Gardikiotis and Baltzis 2010; Hargreaves, Miell and MacDonald 2002). However, such studies take into account musical genres or artists, tending to gloss over film scores. Hence, a further question regards whether film music enthusiasts link the music and the original film with certain values.

The present study explores the manner in which listeners evaluate a particular film score, how they motivate their evaluations and what connections emerge between their judgment of the music and the message of the film. Focusing on a corpus formed by online comments posted to a YouTube video, the analysis regards the linguistic and discursive dimension of the listeners’ evaluation.

2. THE MISSION SOUNDTRACK

The musical piece selected for this analysis belongs to the soundtrack composed by Ennio Morricone for the film *The Mission* (1986), directed by Roland Joffé. The main hero is a

Spanish Jesuit priest, Father Gabriel, played by Jeremy Irons, who travels to South America in order to convert the Indians. He is helped by the former slave hunter Rodrigo Mendoza (Robert de Niro), who converts to Christianity. Music has a particular significance in the film, as Gabriel soothes the natives and establishes a relationship with them by playing his oboe. The piece “Gabriel’s Oboe” has become famous and has been interpreted by various artists, like Yo-Yo Ma or Sarah Brightman. Not surprisingly, the soundtrack received the appreciation of film critics and public; for example, Sheila Benson remarked “the sinuous and haunting score by Ennio Morricone, a seduction all its own” (Benson, 1986). The soundtrack won a BAFTA and a Golden Globe Award, but it obtained only a nomination for the Academy Award of that year. The online comments to the videos with Ennio Morricone’s music show that a significant group of listeners still appreciate the creation and consider that *The Mission* soundtrack should have won the Academy Award. At the moment of data collection, in early March 2016, the YouTube video selected had 5,474,552 views. Moreover, there was a clear gap between the positive and the negative appreciations: the number of ‘likes’ was 23,060, while the dislikes totalized only 526.

The title of the video chosen for analysis is “The Mission Main Theme (Morricone Conducts Morricone)”, referring to the original film. However, it does not present a film scene, but a fragment of a concert, where the orchestra is conducted by Ennio Morricone himself. The selection of a concert recording where the composer directed the orchestra lead to a variety of comments, including references to both the music and the composer. A further reason for the choice regarded the fact that this particular video was more likely to attract comments about the music played or the soundtrack, instead of general evaluations of the film or of the protagonists’ acting skills.

The commenters describe the musical piece as belonging to the genre of ‘classical’ music, yet such categorization seems rather simplistic, especially for a film score. Following the categorization proposed by O’Keeffe (2013:96), it may be labelled as a music type “for which performer and the audience regard the composition as sacrosanct”. According to the factors identified by Gardikiotis and Baltzis (2010:149-150), the piece belongs to the category “sophisticated and complex”, encompassing those music genres which require cultivated skills and special knowledge from the listeners. The comparison to classical music appears often in the comments, indicating

that the public views the creation as a modern form of classical music or as intertwining high and popular culture.

The first research aim was to identify the terms preferred by the commenters for the evaluation of the film score. Second, the research aimed to explore how commenters position themselves and in regard to the stances expressed by other users.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A consistent corpus on research on stance taking has previously investigated the linguistic expressions of stance, thus focusing on micro-level analysis. Significant insights have been provided from studies focusing especially on English language (e.g. Biber and Finegan, 1989; Fox, 2001; Clift, 2006). However, as Hunston (2007: 28) observes, the identification of stance requires more complex operations than the mere location of specific forms. The complexity of the phenomenon of stance taking has led to recent trends, focusing on the sociocultural and the interactional dimension of stance (Englebretson, 2007: 18-19). The necessity of contextualizing the act of stance taking implies taking into account the discourse as a whole. Various frameworks advanced for the study of stance acts emphasize the subjective and the intersubjective dimension of each act. Berman (2004) identifies Orientation, Attitude and Generality as the three main dimensions of the discursive stance, with the first one concerning the relation between the sender, the text and the recipient. In their study on appraisal in English, Martin and White (2005) introduce the concept of alignment, influenced by Bakhtin’s perspective on dialogism. Such studies point out that an act of stance taking should not be studied in isolation, but as a consequence of previous acts and as potentially influencing following stances. The attention paid to the sociocultural dimension of stance is connected to the reference to a value system in which each evaluative act is grounded. By expressing the speaker’s opinion, the evaluative act also expresses “the value system of that person and their community” (Thompson & Hunston, 2001:6). The framework employed for the present analysis, which takes into account all these dimensions, is the triangular understanding of stance advanced by Du Bois (2007). The dimensions of the stance act identified by Du Bois are:

- a. the evaluation of the stance object,
- b. the positioning of the stance subject, and
- c. the alignment with other stances and stancetakers.

4. EVALUATION

The collection of the data implied a reading of all available public comments that have been posted in response to the video selected. In the first stage, only the comments in English and Italian have been selected. In a second stage, all comments which were not connected to the stance object were eliminated. The final corpus was composed of 356 comments, totalizing 6,966 words. The analysis of the terms most frequently used for evaluation showed that the users express their appreciation of the musical piece according to three dimensions: an aesthetic dimension, a psychological and a transcendental one.

4.1. The aesthetic dimension. The comments were expected to express the judgment of the music in aesthetic terms. From this perspective, the English adjective most frequently used for evaluation was “beautiful” (18 occurrences in the corpus), followed by “great” (17 occurrences) and “wonderful” (16 occurrences). Other adjectives employed were “sublime” (10 occurrences), and “good” (8 occurrences), while the superlative “best” had 9 occurrences. For the Italian messages, the most frequent adjective was “grande” (“great”), with 16 occurrences. The noun most frequently used in both English and Italian messages was “maestro”, that referred to the composer and had 25 occurrences. The complexity of the users' evaluations varied. While some messages were formed of a single evaluative term, with a very general meaning (e.g. “Sublime”), others distinguished more objects of stance, ranging from the soundtrack to the composer, to the interpreters in the orchestra and to the original film. Evaluative terms were either employed for each of the stance objects identified (“Che meraviglia. ...splendido film, grandiosa musica” [What a wonder. ...splendid film, gorgeous music]) or for more than one object (“Meraviglioso film e musica” [Wonderful film and music]).

The selection of evaluative adjectives indicated a marked positive evaluation of the musical piece, thus confirming the high number of views. The high number of positive comments lead to a certain degree of similarity between the messages; hence, the mere labelling of the piece as “beautiful” or “good” appeared insufficient to many commenters. As a consequence, strategies of intensification were employed in a large part of the evaluative messages analyzed. The most simple form of intensification consists in the use of uppercase letters and/or punctuation: “GOOD!!”, “Wonderful!!!!”. Another form of intensifying the appreciation consists in the repetition of a

particular adjective, either without other information, or as a part in a detailed comment:

“It's beautifil [sic!], beautiful, beautiful!”;
 “Great, great, great!!!! Love Morricone's music. This one specially: The Mission is a wonderful film. About time he won the Oscar Award! Congratulations Ennio you are fantastic!”

In the latter case, the repetition forms the beginning of a more complex evaluative text, indicating the general idea expressed in the comment. The last example quoted above includes not only the evaluation of the music, but of the film and of the composer as well. From the lexical perspective, the positive evaluation is here expressed through a constellation of adjectives, referring to all the aspects of the stance object: the music, the composer and the original film.

Many evaluations are concerned with emphasizing the exceptional character of the music composed and played. The process of evaluation of the stance object is realized, in this case, in terms of hierarchization. Most frequently, the users introduced superlatives: “Best music ever composed!!!”; “il più grande di tutti grazie di esistere Ennio ☺” [the greatest of all thank you for being Ennio ☺]

The evaluation of the soundtrack was also made in terms of opposition. Such relationship was indicated by the adjective “real” which acquires a positive connotation when characterizing the music in the video. The adjective opposed Ennio Morricone's work to more recent musical pieces, whose creation and production involves technological equipment. The idea of positive evaluation contrasted with a negative judgment of contemporary music was recurrent in the comments expressed: “Why can't they compose music like this anymore????”; “Tremendous! And this 1986 best score nominee by Ennio Morricone may never be repeated. With the new technology, we are using less and less of the full orchestra's. What a shame. This is just a “tremendous” piece of music...”

4.2. The psychological dimension. Various comments show that listeners judge music as an independent agent, able to exert an influence on the audience, and attribute to the music played the occurrence of specific reactions. Instead of advancing explicit evaluations of the piece, some commenters describe their physical and emotional reactions, serving as a proof or an indicator of the pervasive force of music: “Pelle d'oca, sempre.” [goose bumps, always]; “goosebump music!”. Surprisingly, references to crying appear often in the messages posted: “when I listen the clarinetto I cry”; “I cried with this oboe!!!”

Such bodily reactions are not judged in isolation, but are perceived as indicators of an inner transformation. From this perspective, the comments indicate how music acquires a cathartic function for the audience. Besides their evaluative role, some comments appear as spontaneous confessions in front of the wide audience of Morricone's music, as they disclose personal emotions. Reactions like chills (Juslin *et al.*, 2014:613) or crying, which otherwise may be considered violent, are here mentioned with a positive connotation; they express the ability of music to set free the human soul, to alleviate suffering. Listening to music becomes a way of connecting to one's deep emotions and to avoid indifference:

“THE SOUNDTRACK OF THE FILM ‘THE MISSION’ IS SO BEAUTIFUL, THAT YOUR SOUL IS IN PAIN, FOR ALL THE AMOUNT OF EMOTIONS AWAKENING IN YOUR HEART”
(capital letters in original)

Music is viewed as a special form of language that is perceived emotionally, instinctively, not rationally. The following examples are based on a metaphor which is meant to convey the depth of the message carried by the music. Beyond the aesthetic value, Morricone's piece is appreciated for this deeper meaning perceived by the listeners: “Music that talks to the heart”; “No instrument speaks to my soul more than the oboe”.

4.3. The religious dimension. Many comments point out a relation between music and a superior level; according to such perspective, the music is particular because it renders perceptible something which normally lies outside the human possibilities to experiment (the perception of other worlds). The music composed is considered to function as a signifier, standing for the presence of God. In both English and Italian comments, evaluations include terms which make reference to “heaven” (17 occurrences) and “God” (17 occurrences). To the same semantic field belong adjectives like “celestial” (5 occurrences), “divine” (2 occurrences), and “sacred” (one occurrence). The appreciation of the piece was motivated through its association with divine harmony and peace: “this is exactly something that you gonna hear, when you are in heaven”; “una musica così ha di certo una ispirazione Divina è come un affresco di Giotto” [such music surely has a divine inspiration it's like a painting by Giotto].

The particularity of such evaluations lies in the fact that the soundtrack does not constitute religious music, approved by the Church or used for religious service, literally speaking. The

religious association may be due to the message of the film, but it seems also that it is made spontaneously by the listeners – commenters; in other words, they consider it as transcendental, even if it is separated from the original film.

5. POSITIONING

According to Du Bois (2007:143), positioning represents “the act of situating a social actor with respect to responsibility for stance and for invoking sociocultural value”. The positioning of the speaker is usually realized through personal pronouns or through affective verbs, such as “like” (Du Bois, 2007: 152). Both personal pronouns and affective verbs are frequent in online comments, which, similar to real-life conversations, aim to express subjectivity. At the most general level, each comment may be considered to express an attempt of self-positioning within the general discussion frame. In the case of comments to music videos, the explicit manifestation of subjectivity dimension allows the commenter to develop a sense of involvement. The commenters are no longer passive consumers of music, but they construct and present their personal image through their interventions.

The most common form of positioning regards the commenters' self-presentation as music lovers. In this case, the speakers' positioning is unavoidably connected to the judgment of the stance object. The musical piece discussed is viewed as a contemporary form of classical music, and, by manifesting their appreciation, the speakers position themselves as educated members of the public, able to understand a complex musical genre: “I just love music, could listen to this again and again.” Moreover, the comparisons made by some users indicate – intentionally or not – their vast musical culture: “This is the best oboe solo on “Gabriel's Oboe” or “Nella Fantasia” that I have ever heard. I get chills when I hear it.”

A further form of positioning involves a perceived difference between the live experience of music and the mediated experience. The following comments show that some commenters attempt to overcome the status of consumers of online music videos, highlighting their experiences as ‘true’ music lovers or their aspirations to become such: “I wish I could see this live. It is one of my big dreams ☺”; “Maestro Morricone The pride of Italy! I will be in Prague the 15th Jan at his concert. ..Immenso”

A group of commenters positioned themselves through the attempt to construct a community, in connection to the composer's Italian identity. Many users highlighted their Italian identity as an

attempt to establish an alignment with the composer that overcomes the mere appraisal of his music: "io gliel'ho do per questa musica l'Oscar complimenti ,è un onore per me essere una italiana" [I give him the Oscar for this music, compliments, it is an honour for me to be an Italian].

6. ALIGNMENT

In general, the discussion between the posters of YouTube comments is carried on at two levels. Besides the main thread, which includes the comments having the content of the video as a stance object, secondary topics of discussion emerge. In the latter case, a particular comment serves as a leading stance, to which other users reply. The replies are marked as such and the addresser is indicated at the beginning of each message, a trait serving to distinguish them from the main discussion. The latter case represents a form of expressing online alignment, defined by Du Bois (2007:144) as "the act of calibrating the relationship between two stances, and by implication between two stancetakers". For YouTube commenters, the intersubjective dimension is optional, as they can choose whether to take into account previous stances or not.

A striking characteristic of the comments analyzed consisted in the general alignment regarding the stance object. With two exceptions, all the commenters appreciated the music or manifested interest in the concert and/or the film. While the general agreement on the aesthetic value of the work was expected, a surprising finding regarded the alignment of personal stances. The commenters revealing their personal reactions while listening to Morricone's music sustained each other and aligned to previous stances by disclosing their own emotional reactions:

(User 1, 1 month ago): Questa musica è soprannaturale; quando è partito l'oboe, ho letteralmente pianto, spontaneamente e senza sapere il perché. Ti tocca l'anima e la sconvolge. [This music is supernatural; when the oboe began, I have cried literally, spontaneously and without knowing why. It touches your heart and affects it]

(User 2, 1 month ago): +User 1 Magia vera :) [True magic]

(User 3, 1 month ago): Sì...è successo anche a me. ..magica... [Yes... it happened to me too. .. magic...]

(User 4, 3 weeks ago): Sì... Veramente una bellissima canzone. Grande Ennio..." [Yes... Truly a very beautiful song. Great Ennio...]

In the example above, one comment triggers more discursive attempts of alignment with the

first speaker, even if the topic is particularly delicate. Three of the four commenters are identified through male first names; however, they all show an understanding of the emotional involvement. Instead of manifesting disalignment; instead, they agree and sustain the first evaluation, by the repetition of the affirmation "sì" and of the terms "magia" and "magica". The repetitions serve to mark the alignment with the first stance, but also to enforce the feeling of community represented by the public of the musical piece.

The general impression given by the comments is one of a general alignment, even if the references to prior stances are not explicitly mentioned in all the interventions. One message is particularly interesting for the understanding of the collaborative construction of the stance in the sampled texts. The commenter expresses his agreement to all previous stances, at the same time highlighting the singularity of such intersubjective relation:

"Non sono riuscito a smettere di leggere le recensioni, e ascoltando l'enorme composizione non posso che essere d'accordo con tutti. Non mi è mai capitato di 'condividere' sentimenti contrastanti con una marea di altri consensi. Grazie Maestro per questo immenso dono." [I couldn't stop reading the reviews and listening to the enormous composition I can only agree with everybody. It has never happened to me before, to 'share' contrasting feelings with a stream of other agreements. Thank you Maestro for this immense gift.]

In this comment, the author's evaluation and the self-positioning are embedded in his generalizing alignment to all previous stances, a characteristic used by the commenter in order to demonstrate the pacifying force of the music.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the lexical terms employed in the evaluation of Ennio Morricone's piece shows a marked positive judgment from almost all the YouTube commenters. Furthermore, the listeners attempt to overcome the mere labelling of the musical piece as 'good' or 'beautiful' by employing various intensifying devices, ranging from superlatives to discursive relations of opposition. Besides the evaluations that take into account the aesthetic dimension of the music, two other ideas emerge from the corpus. The soundtrack is viewed as able to trigger emotional reactions and to impress the listeners, leading even to physical reactions. Further, the musical piece is considered to be able to render accessible the transcendental sphere, allowing the listeners to

connect with the divinity. While all the three evaluative ideas are connected with the original message of the film *The Mission*, it is obvious that the soundtrack has also gained an autonomous life, being considered a contemporary masterpiece of the classical music genre.

Such judgment of the piece needs to be linked to the commenters' manner of self-positioning and their alignment. Although the comments are posted by isolated individuals, the thread of discussion gives the impression that various communities are constructed. Besides the community represented by enthusiasts of classical music, other communities emerge, based on the criterion of national belonging or on the religious criterion. The spontaneous discursive construction of fans' communities proves, by itself, that the soundtrack of the film has truly been well chosen and composed. The main message of the film is that music is an universal language, able to create bonds in spite of beliefs, ethnic, linguistic or political differences. Thirty years after the release of the film, this message is still materialized by the enthusiasts who listen to the soundtrack and express their appreciation for it.

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