Knut Olav Rygnestad

Don’t say it – sing it!

Writing original songs for non-musical films

Written reflection regarding independent work
The documentation also includes the following films:

Järnridån, Lagom Svensk and Love Off Beat
Abstract

Films which are not musicals – non-musical films – sometimes include songs which are narratively motivated yet in a different way from how they are used in musicals. They may be part of the underscore or even performed by characters in the films, and add a new element to films which otherwise do not use music in this way. In this thesis I will explain how musical and non-musical films differ in their use of songs and explore various aspects of composing songs for three non-musical films made by students at the Stockholm University of the Arts.

Important results include describing how to choose lyrics for the songs and how this can add new perspectives to the scenes where the songs appear. I also explore the different challenges a composer can face during the composition process and demystify the process itself by describing how the music for each film is composed.

Key words: film music, soundtrack, song, lyrics, popular music, music composition, songwriting
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. I

Table of Contents .................................................................................................................. II

Introduction ............................................................................................................................. 1

- Background ......................................................................................................................... 1
- Musical films ......................................................................................................................... 2
- Non-musical films ............................................................................................................... 3
  - Musical moments in non-musical films ......................................................................... 3
  - Licensed film music ...................................................................................................... 4
- Purpose and aim ................................................................................................................... 5

Method ................................................................................................................................... 6

Writing songs for three non-musical films ............................................................................. 7

- Love Off Beat .................................................................................................................... 7
  - But strange am I to happiness ....................................................................................... 8
  - I write to you! Is more required? ................................................................................. 11
- Järnridån ........................................................................................................................... 12
  - Månstensögon ............................................................................................................... 12
  - Min kärlek ..................................................................................................................... 14
- Lagom Svensk ...................................................................................................................... 15
  - Välkommen solen ......................................................................................................... 15

Reflections .............................................................................................................................. 19

- Text choice ......................................................................................................................... 19
- Perspectives added by the lyrics ....................................................................................... 19
- Prominence challenge ...................................................................................................... 20
- Political challenge ............................................................................................................. 20
- Demystifying the composition process ............................................................................. 20

Reference List ....................................................................................................................... 21

- Books ................................................................................................................................. 21
- Websites ............................................................................................................................. 21
- Films ................................................................................................................................. 22
- Music recordings .............................................................................................................. 22
Introduction

At the beginning of Rocky III, Rocky is on top of the world after becoming the boxing heavyweight world champion in the previous instalment of the series. At the same time, the younger boxer Clubber Lang is rising through the ranks, with the aim of challenging his title. We see Rocky’s luxurious lifestyle, television appearances and brand deals juxtaposed with Clubber Lang’s intensive workouts, showing that the tables have been turned and that Rocky, once the underdog, is about to be challenged by a promising newcomer. What immortalises the sequence is the song Eye of the Tiger, written for the film at Stallone’s request. The lyrics reference a fight against a rival and uses the metaphor of a tiger stalking its prey, mirroring Clubber Lang’s obsessive quest to defeat Rocky. Later in the film, when Rocky has lost his title to Lang, the song is used during Rocky’s training, showing that the roles have been reversed and that Rocky now is the one figuratively stalking his prey.

The song’s use in Rocky III provides a strong musical and narrative element, like a conventional movie underscore but in song form. Songs can be an effective choice for adding depth to film scenes since they allow for poetic use of language and metaphors which may be distracting if used for dialogue.

I have long been interested in song writing, having written songs throughout my teens, and eventually studying a bachelor’s degree in the field at the London College of Creative Media. Telling stories and triggering the imagination through song is fascinating, and during my master studies at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm (KMH) and the Stockholm University of the Arts (SKH) I wanted to explore how I could integrate song writing into film scores. What effects could this have? In what situations would it work the best? And what sort of challenges does writing songs for films involve?

Background

Having songs in sound films stretches back to the earliest ones made; in fact, one of the first, The Jazz Singer, features many songs. More films with original songs soon followed; examples include In Old Arizona, the theme song of which, My Tonia, was written for the film, and Jazz Heaven, where two characters compose the song Someone together.

---

1 Rocky III. Directed by Sylvester Stallone, United Artists, Chartoff-Winkler Productions, 1982.
5 In Old Arizona. Directed by Irving Cummings, Fox Film Corporation, 1928.
It was also common to film existing musicals or write ones specifically to be filmed. Cole Porter’s *Paris* was adapted into a film back in 1929, as was *The Wizard of Oz* after the success of Walt Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. In these films the songs play a major narrative role and are performed by the actors on the screen, like they are in stage musicals.

However, in this thesis I am exploring how one might use songs in place of conventional underscores. An example of this is Aimee Mann’s contributions to the film *Magnolia*, where songs written specifically for the film are listened to by its characters, but at the same time is commenting on or otherwise accompanying the events. How is this different from songs in musicals? Since narratively driven songs are a staple of and perhaps most associated with musicals, it’s important to outline how they are used there as opposed to in narratives which aren’t musicals. We need to define what exactly differentiates a *musical film* from a *non-musical film*.

**Musical films**

If we consider a film musical to be like a stage musical, we can use the dictionary definition of a musical as a starting point: “*musical, also called musical comedy,* theatrical production that is characteristically sentimental and amusing in nature, with a simple but distinctive plot, and offering music, dancing, and dialogue”.

This definition is quite broad, omitting that musicals can be tragic and/or complex. We should therefore consider what the *role* of the music in musical is; what *purpose* it serves. Rick Altman, discussing the music’s narrative role in film musicals, describes a musical number as a “timeless interlude [which] sets up a signifying relationship between narrative flow and musical stasis.” This can be understood as a performance that halts or changes the narrative flow somehow. For instance, a character might describe how they are feeling about the events unfolding, like in the song *Let It Go* from *Frozen*, where the character Elsa reflects on how she has been concealing something about herself, on her ostracism from society, and how she is going to proceed with her life. Singing rather than saying the words gives them a certain character and significance.

Songs can also serve other functions, such as summarising events to quickly get to the next plot beat. An example of this is *Seasons of Love* from *Rent*, performed at the beginning of Act 2 to establish that a year has passed. What the songs from *Frozen* and *Rent* have in common is what we might call a *change of register*, as described by Jane Feuer:

> Musicals are built upon a foundation of dual registers with the contrast between narrative and number defining musical comedy as a form. The dichotomous manner in which the story is told – now spoken, now sung –

---

9 *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Directed by David Hand, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 1937.
is a very different mode of presentation from the single thread of the usual Hollywood movie.16

For instance, opera enthusiasts will be familiar with the moment when a character looks away from the action on the stage and out into the auditorium while singing, signifying to the audience that the singer “delivers his or her thoughts in a kind of ‘aside’”17. Musicals, in turn, often have so-called “I want” songs, where a character sings about something they want to do or achieve.18 The song reflects their internal monologue and is not part of the diegetic world, that is, “the fictional world in which the events of a narrative occur”19. Elsa is not really singing her song, accompanied by an invisible orchestra, but the performance is rather a manifestation of her character growth, only visible to the audience.

We could therefore say that, at least in general, songs in musicals involve a change in the narrative flow of the story, usually to explore the inner lives of the characters in some way, and they are often non-diegetic. How, then, are songs in non-musical films different from this?

Non-musical films

In this thesis, I consider non-musical films to mean “films which do not use elements that would define them as musical films”, as described above. However, films which are not musicals confusingly do use such elements sometimes. One such example is the film CODA20, which is not considered a musical, yet includes sung performances as part of the plot. Similarly, Sound of Metal21 is not considered to be a musical, but also has many musical performances like CODA, including using the song Cet amour me tue as a central plot point.

The reason why these films are not considered to be musicals has to do with the role that the music plays in them; the performances do not involve a change of register. Instead, they tend to be diegetic and not change the narrative register, or be underscored as with Eye of the Tiger. The songs still serve a narrative function, but non-musical films do not tell stories in an overall “dichotomous manner”22. They may however do so briefly for musical moments.

Musical moments in non-musical films

Magnolia includes a sequence where the characters, each shown sitting alone in a montage, are all singing along to the song Wise Up, having reached the so called “all is lost moment”23 in the story and reflecting on their mental state as would be typical of a musical. Is it therefore a musical? This is an example of a musical moment, a concept which Amy Herzog explores in her

---

22 Feuer. *The Hollywood Musical*, p.68
2009 book *Dreams of Difference, Songs of the Same*. She defines them as moments in films which occur “when music, typically a popular song, inverts the image-sound hierarchy to occupy a dominant position in a filmic work.”  

These moments, as Herzog explains, are common in musicals but not unique to them. For instance, in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, Audrey Hepburn’s performance of the song *Moon River* demonstrates her character’s desire to go beyond what her humble childhood provided. Saying this through song makes the statement stand out in a film which is overall quite dialogue heavy. Another effective use of a musical moment in a non-musical film is Jessie’s backstory being told through the song *When She Loved Me* in *Toy Story*.

For the purposes of this thesis, we will not be delving further into musical moments, but rather focus on songs used as underscore or as diegetic elements that do not change the film’s narrative register or invert the image-sound hierarchy. However, first we should touch upon what we might call *licensed film music*, where songs are placed into films to bring them to a wider audience and thus sell sheet music and records.

**Licensed film music**

In her book *Saying It With Songs*, Katherine Spring explores the prevalence of songs in early sound films and finds that, while using songs in these films happened for various reasons both related to the narrative and not, there most certainly was a commercial component. For instance, following Ethel Water’s performance of the song *Am I Blue* in the film *On With the Show*, the song reportedly sold half a million copies of sheet music.* Eye of the Tiger* was very successful commercially, being certified 8x platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America alone, and it is questionable whether the song would have sold as many records if it had not been prominently featured in the third highest grossing film of 1982.

*Am I Blue* is an example of a licensed song being used as film music, that is, a license was given by the copyright holders to use the song in the film, but it was not originally written for the film. This aspect of songs in non-musical films goes outside the scope of this thesis, since I will be writing original songs and not consider a financial aspect. But it is mentioned here for the sake of completeness; to acknowledge that financial motivations may exist when using songs in films.

---


28 *On With the Show!* Directed by Alan Crosland, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1929.


Purpose and aim

I am interested in exploring how one can use songs as part of underscore or as diegetic elements in non-musical films. Choosing or writing the right lyrics for songs is vital, as it will draw attention to certain aspects of the story which may or may not be obvious from the other filmic elements, so I will explore how this text is chosen or written. Also, I will investigate what new perspectives the songs add to the films with their text and other musical elements.

Film music composers will face different challenges from concert music composers, as in the former case the music coexists with other important visual and aural elements, whereas in the latter it generally stands alone, or at least is significantly more important. I will therefore outline the challenges I encounter during my projects and how I solve them. By describing the composition process, I also hope to demystify how film music is made.
Method

To investigate the effects of songs in non-musical films, I composed music for three films made by master film students at SKH. I contacted the director student Alexandra Dahlström after she presented a few films she had directed prior to her studies. I was drawn to her films since she uses songs very prominently in them, not as musical performances but rather as underscore. She got me involved in two projects: Love Off Beat\textsuperscript{32}, which is a retelling of two events from the novel Eugene Onegin in a modern setting, and Järnridån\textsuperscript{33} (The Iron Curtain), which is an expansion of Love Off Beat and presents a more complete narrative. For Love Off Beat I composed the songs But strange am I to happiness and I write to you! Is more required?. The sound designer for the film was Petar Mrdjen, and no other musicians were involved. For Järnridån I wrote the songs Månstensögon (Moon Stone Eyes) and Min kärlek (My Love). The sound designer was again Petar Mrdjen, vocals were provided by Klara Tuva Wörmann and Therese Ramstedt, and Anders Kjellberg Nilsson played violin and viola.

I also worked with the director student Jamil Walli on his film Lagom Svensk\textsuperscript{34} (Swedish Enough), for which I wrote the song Välkommen solen (Welcome sun). The sound designers were Sam Soliman and Johan Escher, and some of the music was co-written with Petar Mrdjen.

\textsuperscript{32} Love Off Beat. Directed by Alexandra Dahlström, Stockholms konstnärliga högskola, 2022.
\textsuperscript{34} Lagom Svensk. Directed by Jamil Walli, Stockholms konstnärliga högskola, 2022.
Writing songs for three non-musical films

While there were some differences in the composition process for each film, which I will describe in more detail below, there are a few steps I go through for all the films:

1. Creating a scenario and/or conflict for the song. This may be taken from the film and informs all the following steps. An example would be someone telling someone else how much they mean to them or thinking about a problem.

2. Writing or finding lyrics for the song. As text is very important in song writing, I tend to do this first. Sometimes writing a melody will be a part of this process, as the structure of the text may lend itself to a certain melodic shape or rhythm. For instance, an emphatic statement might be best suited for higher notes, and stressed syllables may be placed on strong beats to be rhythmically consonant.

3. Deciding on a style for the song, including instrumentation. It can be nice to have an overarching style for the music in a film, maybe reusing the same melodic or rhythmic material several times, and the choice of instruments can contribute to this. For example, if the soundtrack is mostly jazz music, using a rhythm section and saxophones will support the choice of style.

4. Writing music that suits the lyrics and the style. Sometimes this happens during the earlier steps, but at this stage the rest is decided on and created. For instance, if I have some fragments of a melody in place, I may complete this by deciding on the harmonic structure for the song, as a tonal melody will usually have a balance of consonant and dissonant notes and use chords to create and release tension.

5. Recording the music. This step may be demanding, depending on how many musicians are needed and whether they should be recorded separately or together. I try to record everything I can in my digital audio workstation (DAW) myself first, until the music is accepted by the director. Then I can involve other musicians without fear that I will have to discard my work once it has been recorded. Some musicians have their own setups and can record themselves without me present, while others may come to a studio with me.

Apart from writing using pen and paper, with the help of a piano, I also use the notation software Sibelius to write scores of the music and the DAW Logic Pro to produce. I will record the music at the studios at KMH and SKH. For the sake of simplicity, I will cover Alexandra’s films together first, since they are thematically linked, and look at Jamil’s last.

Love Off Beat

My first opportunity to try out song writing for a non-musical film happened in early 2022, when the film students at SKH did an exercise where they created short films consisting of one interior and one exterior shot. Alexandra had long wanted to create a modern film version of the Russian novel Eugene Onegin and decided that this would be a good occasion to do a trial run, which became a roughly six-minute film called Love Off Beat. The two scenes were based on the
point when the main character Onegin rejects the advances of a romantic interest, Tatyana, followed by a later time when he tries to reconcile with her but she, having moved on with her life, rejects him in kind. Since the original novel is written as a collection of poems, I thought it might be interesting to use its text as a basis for the soundtrack.

I am not the first person to have set Pushkin’s text to music; other composers have had the same thought, perhaps most famously Tchaikovsky, who wrote an opera based on the novel which premiered in 1879. The original Russian text is written entirely in iambic tetrameter, a common meter used for poetry. Iambic means that the stanzas consist of iambics, that is, metrical feet which sound like ‘ta-TAM’, and tetrameter means that there are four such feet in each stanza. This type of poetic meter is common in music, since a lot of music is written in 4/4 and iambic tetrameter creates four strong beats, mapping easily onto a 4/4-time signature. Many hymns are written in iambic tetrameter, like *I Know That My Redeemer Lives* and *Veni, Emmanuel*.

Since the project had a very quick turnaround, I had about two weeks to write the music in March 2022, which was achievable given that the film didn’t turn out to be very long. The script was written entirely in English and neither of the two characters are named explicitly, so my idea was to strengthen the connection to the original novel by using the text from the corresponding events in the book.

**But strange am I to happiness**

The film opens with a dream-like wedding sequence using traditional Russian Orthodox iconography (see fig. 1), and Alexandra wanted Russian choir music as underscore. I therefore decided to set the following poem, taken from the part of the novel where Onegin rejects Tatyana:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Но я не создан для блаженства;</td>
<td>But strange am I to happiness;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ему чужда душа моя;</td>
<td>’Tis foreign to my cast of thought;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Напрасны ваши совершенства:</td>
<td>Me your perfections would not bless;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Их вовсе недостоин я.</td>
<td>I am not worthy them in aught;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Поверьте (совесть в том порукой),</td>
<td>And honestly ’tis my belief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Супружество нам будет мукой.</td>
<td>Our union would produce but grief.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Я, сколько ни любил бы вас,</td>
<td>Though now my love might be intense,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Привыкнув, разлюблю тотчас;</td>
<td>Habit would bring indifference;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Начните плакать: ваши слезы</td>
<td>I see you weep. Those tears of yours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Не тронут сердца моего,</td>
<td>Tend not my heart to mitigate,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>А будит лишь бесить его.</td>
<td>But merely to exasperate;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Судите ж вы, какие розы</td>
<td>Judge then what roses would be ours,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Нам заготовит Гименей Ж.</td>
<td>What pleasures Hymen would prepare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>И, может быть, на много дней.<strong>^36^</strong></td>
<td>For us, may be for many a year.<strong>^37^</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

My reasoning behind choosing this text was two-fold: a literal and a more symbolic. The literal is that it is taken from Onegin’s rejection letter to Tatyana, which mirrors what the Onegin parallel in the scene is doing. This aspect is probably only apparent to Russian speaking viewers who know the text intimately. The more symbolic reason is that the text, being about rejection, contrasts with the intimate and romantic scene. It also foreshadows that the relationship is doomed. I deliberately wrote the music in a major key to avoid making the scene appear to be sad. Thus, to a viewer who does not understand the language, the Russian connection is established through the singing, but the scene may still be interpreted as a happy moment.

The text already had a good framework for how the musical phrases could go, given that it was written in iambic tetrameter and therefore had a consistent structure. Since I was recording all parts myself, I wrote the music to work for my own voice, with some allowance at the bottom so I could use an octaver plugin to achieve a low bass part. The tenors are paired against the basses; the latter tend to start the phrases and the former come in later, creating rhythmic interest.

There are a few points which invite a stronger dynamic, for instance “Начнете плакать: ваши слезы / Не тронут сердца моего,” (I see you weep. Those tears of yours / Tend not my heart to mitigate.), given the more chastising nature of the text. I normally achieve these stronger points in my choral music by writing parts in a higher range, where they tend to naturally ring out stronger. I also keep the music monophonic here, so the diction is as clear as possible (see fig. 2).

To create an ensemble sound, I used a vocal transformer plugin to change the formants of two of three recorded parts in each section. This minimises the phasing one might get when a few similar sounding instruments play the same line but are not completely in tune with each other.

Alexandra had originally requested pop music for a later scene, but I instead suggested using the choral piece recurring throughout the film to indicate points where it goes into a dream realm. Since the wedding symbolism also recurs in these scenes, I thought it would create a consistent theme. She seemed to like this idea and went as far as to remove a later monologue at the end to just leave space for the choral music. While the Russian text certainly creates a barrier of entry for viewers who want to understand exactly why it is there, I believe the music still manages to create a mood which is appropriate for the scene.
Figure 2: Detail from But strange am I to happiness
I write to you! Is more required?

For the scene set in a nightclub (see fig. 3), I decided to write a club track using Pushkin’s text. Since the scene is dialogue heavy, I knew that the song text most likely couldn’t be in focus. The characters are in a corridor by the club’s bathrooms and the music comes from the adjacent room. But to strengthen the scene’s connection to its roots, I went with the Russian text regardless.

**Original**

Я к вам пишу — чего же боле?
Что я могу ещё сказать?
Теперь, я знаю, в вашей воле
Меня презреньем наказать.
Но вы, к моей несчастной доле
Хоть каплю жалости храня,
Вы не оставите меня.
Сначала я молчать хотела;
Поверьте: моего стыда
Вы не узнали б никогда,
Когда б надежду я имела
Хоть редко, хоть в неделю раз
В деревне нашей видеть вас,
Чтоб только слышать ваши речи,
Вам слово молвить, и потом
Всё думать, думать об одном
И день и ночь до новой встречи. 38

**English translation**

I write to you! Is more required?
Can lower depths beyond remain?
’Tis in your power now, if desired,
To crush me with a just disdain.
But if my lot unfortunate
You in the least commiserate
You will not all abandon me.
At first, I clung to secrecy:
Believe me, of my present shame
You never would have heard the name,
If the fond hope I could have fanned
At times, if only once a week,
To see you by our fireside stand,
To listen to the words you speak,
Address to you one single phrase
And then to meditate for days
Of one thing till again we meet. 39

38 Pushkin. Evgenii Onegin / Евгений Онегин. p. 98
39 Pushkin (Spalding). Eugene Onegin. p. 87
The text is from Tatyana’s letter to Onegin, and I chose it because the scene reflects that of the poem: the Tatyana parallel in the film is expressing her interest in the Onegin parallel. Again, I wanted to draw a connection to the original text. Though the music has been mixed in such a way that the words are obscured, I wonder if a Russian speaking viewer could spot the connection.

While I first composed the music using a piano, I only did this to decide on what the melody and chords should be, and all other elements were created using a DAW. I used a drum machine and synths to create various four-bar-elements which could be combined, including some arpeggiated bell patterns, brass stabs, and pads. The bass part had a compressor side chained to the bass drum, which plays four beats in a bar, as is typically done in electronic dance music.

One interesting thing I did with the sound designer was to introduce gradual distortion of the music once the rejection takes place, subtly indicating a change in tone and adding discomfort. The idea was that the music, being a diegetic element in the scene, takes on features of non-diegetic underscore by responding to an emotional change while remaining diegetic.

I thought the music worked well for the scene, though it should be noted that the sound designer, wanting to challenge himself, mixed the music very loud compared to the dialogue. I personally think this was unnecessary, although I can appreciate that he wanted to create an authentic club sound environment. Alexandra, while she was happy with my work, also said that she would have liked to spend some more time with me choosing which texts to use, as there may have been excerpts which would have worked better narratively with the scenes. We would get a chance to focus more on text choice in Järnridån.

Järnridån

Alexandra’s expanded version of Love Off Beat, eventually titled Järnridån (The Iron Curtain), was developed during the autumn of 2022. During the script writing I started developing some ideas for the soundtrack, and Alexandra’s initial requests included classical Russian theatre and film music, but also some contemporary and older Eastern European pop music, like the works of Alla Pugacheva. I wrote a song in the vein of old Russian hits, inspired by the script but this time writing Swedish lyrics myself, aiming to have them translated into Russian later.

Månstensögon

As Pushkin’s novel follows a specific stanza structure throughout, I thought it would be interesting to use this structure for the song. As mentioned earlier, the lines are written in iambic tetrameter, and the so-called Onegin stanza goes as follows: a-B-a-B-c-c-D-D-e-F-F-e-G-G-G. Lower-case letters indicate feminine rhymes; rhymes ending on an unstressed syllable, and upper-case letters indicate masculine rhymes; rhymes ending on a stressed syllable. I decided that trying to stick closely to the masculine/feminine rhymes would be a waste of time, since the text would later be translated, so I only used the syllable structure and a similar, albeit basic, rhyme scheme:

---

I wrote the lyrics as a summary of Onegin’s character; a person only concerned with outward appearance who enjoys creating intrigue. My intention was to write conventional underscore based on the song, using the melody and/or chord progression, and have the song during the credits as a ‘summary’ of the film. I did a basic recording of the song plus a handful of other tracks using strings, piano and celesta: illustrating how it could form the basis for the soundtrack.

While Alexandra enjoyed the tracks, and thought the song sounded very much like an old Russian hit, she worried that having a very Russian-sounding song in the film might give off the impression that the film was glorifying Russia. This felt a bit uncomfortable, given the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. I had not originally considered this aspect, but, since this is a very sensitive topic, we decided that a different approach would be better. Another concern she had was that the film was becoming too serious, and that it needed something to release tension. This led to the creation of a different song which I would base the rest of the soundtrack on.
Min kärlek

As some references for music that would make the film sillier and more playful, Alexandra played me some recent Eastern European pop songs based on ‘80s American pop music, such as the works of Rusya and Olga Vosconyan. She wanted a song for a dance sequence, where the main character is remembering his childhood (see fig. 4) and requested that the music should have an optimism reminiscent of when the Berlin Wall fell, leading to Eastern Europe opening to Western influences. I wrote lyrics about lovers fleeing oppression to search for a better tomorrow:

Original

Åh, alla tittar på oss
Och dömer oss för det vi valt
Men jag skulle gjort
Det samma igen för dig
Min kärlek är större än havet
Och ingen kan stoppa oss nu
Vi flyr från nattens sorger och böner
Och följer solen mot en hoppfull dag

English translation

Oh, everyone’s looking
And judging us for our choices
But I would do
The same again for you
My love is greater than the ocean
And no one can stop us now
We flee from the night’s sorrows and prayers
And follow the sun towards a hopeful day

Figure 5: Melody of Min kärlek
The melody is in a minor key (see fig. 5), accompanied by basic drum machines, synthesizers and the famous ‘orchestra hit’ sample ubiquitous in ‘80s and ‘90s pop music. It consists of a verse, a chorus and an instrumental break. The main character is dancing in a carefree way before being interrupted by a bigoted neighbour knocking at the front door and shouting at him. My idea was that the optimism of the song would represent the main character’s wish for a better life for himself, while still having an element of sadness through the minor key and sorrowful words.

There is also symbolism achieved through diegesis. In the scene, the song is played on a radio before the boy starts dancing, sounding tinny like from poor speakers. Once the song reaches the chorus, the song plays in high fidelity and no longer sounds like a cheap radio, blurring the line between diegetic and non-diegetic. While the song is certainly still playing in the room, having it in hi-fi reflects the boy’s mental state; it becomes the focus of not only the boy but also the audience, putting the lyrics front and centre and connecting them to his dance. Being interrupted by the neighbour is a violent return to reality, as the song is immediately played on tinny speakers once more. The hi-fi quality of the music while the boy is dancing presents his dreams and ambitions, but the situation he really lives in shows afterwards through the poorer-quality audio.

To help the song shine, Alexandra put me in touch with the pop singer Klara Tuva Wörmann from the duo Klara & Jag, who I recorded at KMH. I had originally envisioned that the song would return in Russian during the credits, but I instead opted for an English translation to avoid tying the music too closely to Russia. The credits version is just the chorus, accompanied by a string quartet, celesta, and oboe, allowing the minor melody to melancholically sum up the film like I had envisioned with Månstensögon.

**Lagom Svensk**

Director Jamil Walli contacted me in March 2022, looking for a composer for Lagom Svensk, which deals with national identity and the prejudice that people of colour living in Sweden often face. Most of the music I wrote for the film was conventional underscore, but for one sequence, where characters are saying horrible and racist things to each other and eventually fight (see fig. 6), I decided to write Välkommen, solen (Welcome, Sun), an upbeat, positive ‘50s pop song.

**Välkommen solen**

I took a bit of a gamble in writing this song for the film, since the director’s reference tracks had been the funk track Abu Ali and the sonata La Follia; very different types of music from where I ended up. The scene is set in a café, and I wanted some diegetic music playing in the background. At the same time, the action happens in a dream-like manner where the characters’ prejudices are uttered outright rather than concealed. I therefore thought it would be interesting to write some music that would contrast with the things happening, and slot in sung vocal lines between the cast’s spoken lines.

---

42 Antonio Vivaldi, composer. ‘Sonata No. 12 in D minor ”La Follia”, RV 63’. Giuseppe Sala. 1703.
My inspiration was ‘50s popular music and not strictly Swedish, but rather Norwegian; the music of Jens Book-Jenssen and Nora Brockstedt are good examples. I wanted it to be as sweet as possible, using a common pop band setup of the era with singer, strings, guitar, accordion, bass, and drums. The idea was to allude to a time when people would be comfortable with and vocal about their prejudices. The initial text I wrote went as follows:

**Original**
Mitt Sverige är så skönt  
I sommarens värma  
Jag är så glad  
För att ni kom.  
Välkomna hit!  
Kom in, kom in  
Här finns plats för stora och små,  
Plats för stora och små  
Och grannarna dansar en vals  
Vi skrattar och ler  
I ljuset från solen  
Och blommorna doftar så gott,  
och blommorna doftar så gott.  
Himlen är blå  
Min käraste vän

**English translation**
My Sweden is so lovely  
In the warmth of summer  
I’m so happy  
That you came.  
Welcome!  
Come in, come in  
There’s space for big and small,  
Space for big and small  
And the neighbours are waltzing  
We laugh and smile  
In the Sun’s light  
And the flowers smell so good,  
and the flowers smell so good.  
The sky is blue  
My dearest friend

Figure 6: Scene from Lagom Svensk
The song is a waltz, inspired by the Norwegian songs *Sønnavindsvalsen* and *Når kastanjene blomstrer*. Since the timing was important, given that it was accenting on-screen actions, I mapped out the important events on a timeline in my DAW, and then adjusted the tempo carefully until they all were on strong beats. I could then decide where the sung parts would go based on where the characters were talking and adjust the form accordingly. Using a combination of short instrumental sections and not adhering to having each section always have the same number of bars, it was not difficult to give the song a suitable form.

As there was not really any budget for the music, I produced everything using synthesised instruments in my DAW. Logic Pro has a very good drum machine which humanises drum patterns and adds fills, and I wrote string accompaniment in counterpoint against the sung melody, as would have been common at the time. Since the music was to be mixed as though played on a radio, it did not need to sound exactly like a real band, just enough to convince using sound design.

Jamil enjoyed how the music provided a rhetorical element against the spoken dialogue but felt like there was no need to emphasise the “Swedishness” in the lyrics and rather keep them

---

more general and about the summer. After a few rewrites, I finally ended up changing the first few lines (see fig. 7):

Original                      English translation
Välkommen, solen             Welcome, Sun,
Välkommen, sommar             Welcome, summer,
Jag är så glad                I’m so happy
För att ni kom                That you came!
Nu har vi lov                  Now we’re on holiday.
Vad skönt att se              How wonderful to look
Ut mot havets gnistrande kust   Towards the scintillating shore
Där vågorna smeker en strand      Where the waves caress a beach,
Och fåglarna sjunger i kör          And the birds sing in harmony.

As mentioned earlier, I slotted the sung lines between the spoken ones, leading to some funny combinations in context:

Välkommen, solen             Welcome, Sun
Välkommen, sommar             Welcome, summer
“Om det är någon som ska åka    “If anyone should go
hem, så är det du, ditt svin”     home, it’s you, you bastard”
Jag är så glad                I’m so happy
“Äckliga invandrare, åk hem du,   “Dirty immigrant, you go home
till ditt äckliga land”             to your dirty country”
För att ni kom                That you came

An added benefit of having sung lines was that the scene had some spots of awkward silence which could be filled by the music. In the final sound mix the effect is subtle, though the music does move in tandem with the action and even has crescendos leading up to a plate being broken and a woman screaming while acting out a racist stereotype. What really struck me was how the music helped the humour come across; without music the scene is uncomfortable to watch, since the characters are being mean, but the music makes their actions come across as silly, which was the director’s intention.
Reflections

Text choice

The most important factor I encountered when it came to writing songs for these three non-musical films was what lyrics I ended up using. For all the projects this was the most consistent concern the directors had. I was expecting that I might have to make big changes to the music itself when I delivered the songs, but to my surprise the main feedback I got was centred on the text. In the case of Love Off Beat, which text was used for the music ended up not being exactly right, and for Lagom Svensk it took a few rewrites to find the right tone. Interestingly, while I did not have to rewrite the text to Min kärlek, it did come into existence due to Månstensögon not being used for unrelated, albeit language based, reasons.

Since both directors also wrote the script for their respective films, it is perhaps natural that they would want to make sure that the text used in the music works with the rest of the text in the film. If we think back to Eye of the Tiger, the song is presenting one of the main tensions of the film; Clubber Lang figuratively stalking his prey at the beginning of the film and Rocky in turn doing so at the end. The same can be said of Moon River; the text summarises a central character element in a compact and artful way. The text needs to be right, or the songs lose their purpose.

Therefore, it is important to get the lyrics for the songs right and be prepared to spend additional time on them. For my next projects I will probably run the lyrics by the director as early as possible, to make sure that they are happy with them. Also, and this is only speculation on my end, I suspect that giving feedback concerning text is probably easier for most directors than giving feedback concerning music, as they will likely be used to working with language but may not be used to musical terminology. It would be interesting to interview some directors regarding their approach to and feelings concerning working with film music, to help find out how to make this work as well as possible for both them and the composers.

Perspectives added by the lyrics

For the two films based on Eugene Onegin, I found that using the original text was an interesting way to tie the material to its source, going as far as using the original Russian in the case of Love Off Beat. The general plot of the novel and films is found with some variation in other stories and the plots of the films are not exactly like the novel, so using the text provides a very clear connection to this specific story.

I added foreshadowing to Love Off Beat with But strange am I to happiness; a perspective otherwise not present in the film. The café scene in Lagom Svensk became more humorous, which was not as clear when there was no music. The music added to the character building in Järnridån, creating a positive moment in an otherwise tough life and a brutal return to reality once it is over.

I think the best way to add more perspectives to the narratives through the music comes from understanding what information the scene gives the viewer and how it does so in the overall narrative, as there will be perspectives one could add which maybe are not relevant to the story. I will try to discuss this with directors as early as possible for future films, since they have the best overall view of the film and will know what is suitable.
Prominence challenge

Since a lot of my music played concurrently with dialogue, the question of how prominent it should be in the sound mix was important to consider. I had not thought about this for Love Off Beat but took it to heart for the following films. Thinking back to Magnolia, how much space each of Aimee Mann’s songs takes up in the sound mix varies from song to song, from being diegetic background music to being a full musical moment.

I have come to realise that there is no single answer to how prominent the songs should be, since many changes happen to the audio during the post-production phase. In fact, the early cuts a composer receives may not be representative of what the sound mix ends up becoming. For example, in Love Off Beat the director removed a monologue to make room for But strange am I to happiness, which I had not expected. But in Järnridän there was a monologue missing from the cut I received, and a viola solo I had written for the underscore had to be reduced significantly in volume to make space for the voice. Things can therefore go in very different directions.

I think it may be best to be cautious when considering where to use songs, unless the director has planned for this, since overlapping voices can make it hard to distinguish what each is expressing. I can here briefly mention that there is another song in Järnridän used as diegetic music in an afterparty scene, but, since I knew that there was going to be much dialogue in the scene, I requested that it be mixed so the words cannot be heard. As composers we can save ourselves some headaches by pre-emptively assuming that sung lines will not be allowed on top of dialogue unless they are indistinct, as was done with I write to you! Is more required?.

Political challenge

An unexpected challenge I faced was the political implication of using Russian text in Järnridän. While I am not sure whether a viewer would take support for Russia from the film, this was a concern the director had, and it is an unnecessary risk to take given that the film was not really about the politics of the war, but rather used it as a narrative device.

I think it can be difficult to plan for these kinds of challenges, as they may happen suddenly and make it necessary to change plans very quickly. However, it is good for a composer to pre-emptively consider these kinds of perspectives, as they can even be used actively to add new ideas to film. Clear communication with the director and producer, and awareness of various aspects of a creative project and their wider societal implications are the best ways to avoid problems coming up late in the process.

Demystifying the composition process

Through reading about the process behind composing songs for these three films, the reader will attain a deeper understanding of how film music is made. Some steps will be similar for each film, but others will differ based on the film in question. It has also been valuable for me as a composer to reflect about my work once it is finished, as it can be challenging to do this while in the middle of the process. One may have to run straight from one project to the next without a chance to think about how the previous went.
Reference List

Books


Websites


**Films**


*In Old Arizona*. Director I. Cummings, Fox Film Corporation, 1928.

*Jazz Heaven*. Director M. Brown, RKO Pictures, 1929.


*On With the Show!* Director A. Crosland, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1929.

*Paris*. Director C. Badger, First National Pictures, 1929.


*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Director D. Hand, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 1937.

*Sound of Metal*. Director D. Marder, Caviar, Ward Four, Flat 7 Productions, 2019.


**Music recordings**


