Diegetic Withdrawal and Other Worlds: Film Music Strategies before *King Kong*, 1927–1933

by Michael Slowik

Abstract: This article addresses the neglected area of pre- *King Kong* sound film scores. Though *King Kong* is often said to “begin” sound film music, many of its prominent techniques—including the drift of music from diegetic to nondiegetic terrain and the connection between music and otherworldly environments—had their roots in prior sound films.

The notion that Max Steiner’s score for *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper, March 1933) brought film music to the sound film for good and paved the way for the Golden Age of film music (roughly 1935 to 1950) has remained in place for several decades and has become a widely assumed historical fact.¹ This article argues for a major shift in our understanding of the history of early sound film music. Rather than claiming that *King Kong*’s sound music strategies sprang virtually full-blown from the head of Steiner, I submit that the music was in many ways deeply indebted to sound film music strategies developed in prior films. Examining neglected pre-*King Kong* scores and analyzing available soundtracks reveals that *King Kong*’s blurring of diegetic and nondiegetic distinctions and its connection between music and fantasy were already common film music techniques before the film’s release.

¹ Throughout this article, the year and month given for each film refers to its premiere, not its general release date. For a few of many examples of this argument about *King Kong*’s score, see Christopher Palmer, *The Composer in Hollywood* (London: Marion Boyars, 1990), 19; Laurence E. MacDonald, *The Invisible Art of Film Music: A Comprehensive History* (New York: Ardsley House, 1998), 25, 31; Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 88.

In five decades of film music scholarship, few films have received more commentary and admiration than Steiner’s score for *King Kong.* Though scholars have addressed numerous aspects of *King Kong*’s score, two techniques have received perhaps the most attention. First, scholars have commented extensively on Steiner’s decision to forgo music in the film’s early scenes and then blur the boundaries between diegetic and nondiegetic music during the first few musical cues. When filmmaker Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong) roams the streets of New York City to select his leading lady Ann Darrow (Fay Wray), and when Denham and his crew sail for unknown waters, no music plays on the soundtrack. Yet when Denham and company approach the mysterious, mist-shrouded Skull Island, we hear the film’s first musical cue—a slow, hypnotic harp arpeggio accompanied softly by strings and woodwinds. This cue soon merges with drums, which dialogue reveals is coming from the island. Then, as Denham and his crew come ashore and approach the islanders’ ceremony, they hear chanting accompanied by music performed by brass, strings, and woodwinds. The music that accompanies the islanders’ dance is not precisely diegetic, because it features instrumentation plainly not visible in the image or likely in that setting. Yet it is not exactly nondiegetic either, because it retains clear connections to the dancing and drumming. Musicologist Robynn Stilwell describes this as a “fantastical gap” between diegetic and nondiegetic boundaries. Reflecting on her use of the term, Stilwell writes, “The phrase ‘fantastical gap’ seemed particularly apt for this liminal space because it captured both its magic and its danger, the sense of unreality that always obtains as we leap from one solid edge toward another at some unknown distance and some uncertain stability—and sometimes we’re in the air before we know we’ve left the ground.”

Scholars have devoted even more attention to connections between *King Kong*’s score and the fantastical elements of its plot. For instance, film music historians James Buhler, David Neumeyer, and Rob Deemer contrast the opening New York City scenes, which feature no music and thus constitute a “rationally organized sound space,” with the island and its inexplicable assortment of creatures. For these authors, the island’s primacy of sound effects and nondiegetic music fosters the sense of a “primitive, pre-rational (because pre-linguistic),” and enchanted space. Though music is anchored

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3 In addition to Stilwell’s discussion, the diegetic and nondiegetic categorization of *King Kong*’s score during these early scenes is addressed in Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 75; Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer, *Hearing the Movies, 77*; and Royal S. Brown, *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 41. Regarding the music accompanying the islanders’ dance, Brown writes, “Even the most naïve listener, if he or she thought about it, would realize that neither the cinematic images—the only instruments we see are drums—nor the ethnic context allows us to interpret the music as diegetic.” Yet the fact that he feels obliged to justify this interpretation suggests a measure of diegetic and nondiegetic ambiguity. Buhler and Stilwell also address the categorization of *King Kong*’s music in James Buhler, Anahid Kassabian, David Neumeyer, and Robynn Stilwell, “Roundtable on Film Music,” *Velvet Light Trap* 51 (Spring 2003): 73–91.


5 Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer, *Hearing the Movies*, 331.
once more to the diegesis back in the New York City theater, the authors point out that
when Kong breaks free of his shackles, nondiegetic music again reigns supreme. Musical
ally as well as narratively, New York City reverts to a pre-rational state. Throughout
King Kong, then, the presence of nondiegetic music helps evoke a world of fantasy and
irrationality. Other film music scholars have advanced similar claims for the function
of the film’s music.

Recognizing the ways in which nondiegetic music gradually enters the soundtrack
and conveys the film’s fantastical elements certainly enriches one’s understanding of
King Kong’s score. But where did these strategies come from? What preexisting practices
encouraged Steiner to use these methods? King Kong’s reputation as the originator of
sound film music has prevented a full investigation of these questions. The narrative
of its monumental importance in the history of film music rose in the 1970s, when
book-length studies on the Golden Age of film music began to regularly appear. The
authors of these books, influenced by methodologies of musicology and literature—
which privileged individual authors and outstanding works—focused on the Golden
Age and its plethora of original music credited to a single composer to suggest that
film music was worthy of study and appreciation. Today, these studies remain valu-
able efforts to validate film music as a legitimate area of study. Yet with their attention
directed primarily toward the Golden Age, these studies often summarized the early
sound era in a few brief strokes. They also relied on the problematic recollections
of Steiner, who claimed that the early sound era’s preference for diegetic music and
technological restrictions resulted in virtually no nondiegetic music until his own scores
paved the way for the future of film music. In these 1970s studies, King Kong’s score
was probably singled out because it remained a well-known film, thus constituting a
readily accessible candidate for the “birth” of sound film music. Despite the release

6 Though the authors state that music emerges from the pit orchestra, no instruments are visible. The theater music
is probably best considered plausibly diegetic.
7 Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer, Hearing the Movies, 331.
8 For instance, Christopher Palmer, Mervyn Cooke, Kathryn Kalinak, and Claudia Gorbman have all focused on
music’s role in the audience’s suspension of disbelief in King Kong. See Palmer, Composer in Hollywood, 28; Cooke,
History of Film Music, 88; Gorbman, Unheard Melodies, 79; Kalinak, Settling the Score: Music and the Classical
9 Tony Thomas, Music for the Movies (South Brunswick, NJ: A. S. Barnes, 1973); Evans, Soundtrack (1975); Roy
Prendergast, Film Music: A Neglected Art (New York: Norton, 1977); Tony Thomas, Film Score: The View from the
10 The exception is Prendergast’s Film Music, which devotes a small chapter to music in the early sound film.
11 For the most frequently cited Steiner article on the early sound era, see Max Steiner, “Scoring the Film,” in We Make
quotations include Prendergast, Film Music, 23; Thomas, Music for the Movies, 146; and Thomas, Film Score,
66–68.
12 Nathan Platte similarly argues that King Kong’s status as a pop-culture icon may have helped preserve the score in
“Investigating the Emergence of the Hollywood Symphonic Score” (conference paper presented at the meeting of
the American Musicological Society Midwest Chapter, spring 2011).
of many valuable studies in the ensuing decades, the claim that nondiegetic music was generally avoided before *King Kong* remains largely unchanged.13

This article aims to reorient this history of film music in two respects. First, I suggest that early sound film music deserves more attention than it has been given to date. Though some early sound films indeed avoided nondiegetic music, the period on the whole contained many important early film music experiments that deserve attention. Second, in tracing music strategies before *King Kong*, I submit that a new account of the early sound era is in order. Though *King Kong* is traditionally said to begin an era of film music history, I contend that *King Kong* was in important ways a culmination of certain tendencies that emerged in prior early sound films. These tendencies not only illuminate previously unknown early sound film strategies but also reveal much about the broader cultural functions of early sound cinema. Ultimately, my aim is not to discredit the work of prior film music scholars but to reformulate our understanding of the early sound era.

A few caveats are in order. The evidence submitted here is part of a book-length project that examines the history of early sound film music. To obtain a filmography, I read through every entry in the *American Film Institute Catalog* from 1926 to 1934 and noted each film that contained any sort of music credit. The findings here stem from a viewing of 240 films from the period. Though space forces me to restrict my number of examples, where possible I name additional films that adhere to the film music strategies laid out here and indicate the prevalence of certain techniques. Space also forces me to set aside the specific problem of the early sound musical, which contained innovative early film scores.

**Diegetic Withdrawal.** When Steiner chose to begin his score with diegetically ambiguous music, he was responding not only to a film narrative that gradually brings the viewer into a world of magic and danger but also to an already-established film music tactic that I call diegetic withdrawal. Diegetic withdrawal refers to a situation in which a film initially features music with an explicit or likely source in the image before drifting toward music that is either ambiguous or downright nondiegetic in the later sections. This drift from diegetic to nondiegetic terrain is usually quite difficult for the spectator to detect, thus resulting in music that seemingly emerges organically from the diegesis rather than from an external, nondiegetic narrational force.

The filmic history of diegetic withdrawal dates back to *Lights of New York* (Bryan Fox, July 1928), which Warner Bros. heavily advertised as the first “all-talking” film. Though the film was a tremendous box-office success, today it serves mainly as a poster child for the static camera and stunted dialogue of the earliest sound films. To date, film music scholars have not attended to *Lights of New York*, perhaps assuming that nondiegetic music would not have played a role in an early and awkward sound

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13 Claims for the virtual absence of music in the early sound era appear in four generally excellent film music books: Garfman, *Unheard Melodies*, 42; Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, 66–69; Brown, *Overtones and Undertones*, 56–57; and Cooke, *A History of Film Music*, 85. To date, James Wierzbicki’s *Film Music: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2009) remains the primary exception to this tendency. However, while Wierzbicki draws on a wide array of valuable primary articles from the period, the study’s absence of close analysis causes the actual music practices of the early sound era to remain undefined.