On Music and Animation

Introductory speech to Things That Go Bump in The Night, a Halloween live music to cinema performance by Camerata of St Johns Chamber Orchestra, Conservatorium Theatre, Brisbane, October 2015.

“It was terrible, but it was wonderful! And it was something new!”

- Walt Disney in Maltin (1987).

Animation was there at the start – at the beginnings of synchronized sound for cinema. Disney’s Steamboat Willie, not the first but certainly the most iconic (read ‘well marketed’) of early toon soundies, screened in 1928 – Jolson uttered his first few celluloid words in 1926. The term ‘mickey-mousing’ is still used to refer to a straight-forward approach to audio-visual synchronization.

The relationship between music and animation has and continues to be a healthy even vigorous one. Betty Boop, Mickey, Koko et al, appeared not to be able to keep still, all bouncing around in anticipation of a post-sunk musical beat. Indeed, a musical beat provided just the rhythm to structure
animated movement in sustaining an illusion of life; a story beat continues to drive narrative pacing.

Silly Symphonies, Merry Melodies, Looney Tunes … – the majors studios of cartoon animation use music for narrative and aesthetic novelty, for fun, experiment and instruction. Disney’s 1959 Toot Whistle Pluck and Boom remains the touchstone for musical fools like me in understanding how music actually works.

Figure 2

Cab Calloway and Louis Armstrong hollered and swung in Fleischer cartoons – Paramount knew that music sells animation, animation sells music: their bands book-ended animated fictions, Armstrong’s face taking chase in I’ll be Glad When You’re Dead, You Rascal You (1932), Calloway’s signature dance style providing the moves for The Old Man of the Mountain (1933).
And at the pointy end of where music meets animation, Abstract Animation notaries Oskar Fischinger, John and James Whitney, Norman McLaren and others sought a visual expression for music in their ‘colour music’s. So intense was this examination that it bore down into a frame-by-frame analysis of sonic waves in search of a graphic vocabulary to inform a hand-drawn sound – amongst the first examples of synthetic sound.

And way back in 1923, in the days before sound cinema, Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling came to animation in an attempt to put their graphic images
to time in a moving and purely visual realization of the musical concept of counterpoint. *Symphonie Diagonale* resulted.

![Figure 5](https://medium.com/screentypes-journal/on-music-and-animation-97a0e63df1f68f.srbluyclq)

So why this happy marriage? How can we account for this intense relationship between tunes and toons? Much comes down to their affinities as time-based media. Unlike Painting, Sculpture and Photography for instance, the opportunity afforded by Animation of playing out ideas *in time* provides scope for exploring musical ideas; for Music, character performance and narrative arcs are a means of drawing out the score’s emotion and drama. And that both are constructed from the blank page/screen up – frame by frame, note by note – provides the scope and necessity for practitioners to consider what goes on audio-visually at an intense analytical level. Both
animation and music are structured –constrained and liberated– by good old mathematics.

![Figure 6](image)

Jon Newsom engages in the oft-made comparisons with live action film in his ‘A Sound Idea: Music for Animated Films’ (1980). Contrary to the ‘broader, and frame-for-frame economically more relaxed, approach taken in films employing live actors’, the directors and composers for animation must engage in a ‘complex microscopic planning … for which the sight and sound elements of each frame must be accounted before filming’; audio-visual scoring is undertaken in the knowledge that content and timing must be controlled ‘in increments of one twenty-fourth of a second.’

Both music and animation are abstracted realities, and in the telling of their stories, in impressing on an audience the plausibility and need to believe in their respective images and notes in time, both benefit from the accompaniment and support of each other; the visual of a foot falling in sync with sound effect indicating the same, the accompaniment of a red circle fast approaching the fourth wall with an appropriate musical phrase –both make for a fuller experience an audience can ‘believe in’ and be impressed by. In the end, the possibility of creating story across animation and music afforded by the constructed –rather than recorded– nature of both disciplines, makes for intense, rich and resonant creative expression –so much attention to detail at the level of the frame, of the note, so much blood, sweat, tears and affection packed into moments that on their own, in ‘performance’, are too quick to apprehend, has got to amount to something, no?
The idea of performance brings us back to the event at hand. For animation, for animators, performance is largely restricted to pre-production. The life is at the front end—the painfully slow and methodical means of animation production is enough to suck the life out of anything. The magic we see at playback is a mechanical illusion, an echo or report on the creative performance that was funneled through pre-production. A live musical accompaniment at exhibition brings with it the vitality of real time performance, the possibility of things stuffing up, the joy and thrill when things go right. Fleischer’s sing-along Song Car-Tunes (1924 -27) brought patrons together in song, before songs were sung ‘in’ screen; that same electricity might happen this evening as music and animation struts its stuff.

Peter Moyes, October 2015.

Figure 1 still from Steamboat Willie, 1928, Disney Studios

Figure 2 still from Toot, Whistle, Plunk and Boom, 1959, Disney Studios

Figure 3 still from I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You, 1932, Fleischer Studios

Figure 4 Oskar Fischinger, sourced from http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/kuenstler/fischinger/biografie/

Figure 5 stills from Symphonie Diagonale, 1924, Viking Eggeling.

Figure 6 Norman McLaren, sourced from http://www.mclaren2014.com/gallery/34_norman_mclaren © National Film
Board of Canada

Figure 7 still from Blue Rhythm, 1931, Disney Studios

References:
