


CHAPTER 46

Chrissie's Death: orchestral performance and filmic narrative

 [10.56238/pacfdnsv1-046](https://doi.org/10.56238/pacfdnsv1-046)

Lisandro Nogueira

Carlos Henrique Costa

Leonel Batista Parente

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to conduct a discussion between orchestral music and its participation in film narrative. In order to understand how the orchestral performance contributes to the construction of the narrative of a film, we made a cut of the scene *Chrissie's Death*, the opening scene of the film *Jaws*, by Steven Spielberg. *Chrissie's Death* was selected as the object of analysis because it is the scene in

which the first shark attack occurs and, consequently, the first orchestral performance in the film *Jaws*. For the reading of the scene, carried out by means of analysis, we used as theoretical support the concept of Performance Intensity by Richard Schechner (2011), paired with the Functions of Music in audiovisual narrative, listed by Jiménez (1993). As a result, taking into account the Functions of Music in Audiovisual Narrative, it was possible to understand that the way the orchestra performs can assist in the construction of the narrative unity of the *Chrissie's Death* scene.

Keywords: Film, Music, Orchestra, Filmic Narrative, Performance.

1 INTRODUCTION

Music in cinema was born with cinema itself, since the invention of the cinematograph by the Lumière Brothers in Paris in 1895, it is known that the first projections of film shows were accompanied by music. According to Wierzbick (2009), the films presented by the Lumière in December 1895 were accompanied by pianist Emile Maraval.

He mentions that he also had a harmonium player at the Lumière film performances in London at the Polytechnic Institute on February 20, 1896, and that orchestras were involved in the performances that took place at the Alhambra and Empire theaters, also in London, in April 1896. Within this, the author reports that an orchestra was also playing when the Lumière performed in New York at Keith's Vaudeville House on June 28, 1896.

As can be seen, orchestras have accompanied the cinema since its inception, as well as the composer and works exclusively for films. This is because in 1908 we have the first musical production for a film commissioned to a composer; in this case, the Frenchman Camille Saint-Saens (1835-1921), and his composition for the film *L'assassinat Du duc de Guise*. Passing by Joseph Carl Breil and his work for the film *The Birth of a Nation*, of 1915, we will find in the 1930s, already in the era of sound cinema, some European composers settled in Hollywood, whose music for films will remain as a foundation until the 1950s.

The work of these composers was, above all, in symphonic style and with great influence from Romanticism. In this style, starting with the music for the film *King Kong* (1933), Hollywood began to

develop its own language of orchestral composition for films. This contributed to the consolidation of orchestral music in Hollywood cinema; and, at the same time, inaugurated what became known as the "Golden Age" of Hollywood film music, which will last until the 1950s.

For movies, John Williams' orchestral composition style is reminiscent of the "Golden Age"i , since it is in some way influenced by composers of this period. However, in this composer, there is also a great sense of originality and spirit of creative elaboration. Thus, in the cinematographic scenario of the 1970's it is precisely John Williams who will compose, in 1975, the music for Steven Spielberg's film *Jaws*, from which we extracted the scene *Chrissie's Death* to serve as the object of analysis for this article.

According to Peter Benchley's (1974, p.5) account in the book *Jaws*, the attack on Chrissie Watkins occurs while she was visiting Amity Island, a fictional island located off the coast of New England, during the 1974 summer vacation. The incident occurred on a beach south of the island, with Chrissie being victimized during the night while swimming. As Benchley describes it, the shark grabs her right leg and drags her from side to side until it pulls her under the water for good. Chrissie Watkins was the first victim of the great white shark prowling the waters of Amity Island and her remains, found the next day, include an arm, a hand, and half of her chest.

The music that accompanies the narrative of this scene is part of the original composition that John Williams produced for the film *Jaws*. To analyze the musical excerpt from *Chrissie's Death* we will rely on the functions of music in audiovisual narrative, listed by Jiménez (1993), in order to observe how the orchestral music influences the narrative of the scene. In order to observe the performance of the orchestra, performing John Williams' music, we will rely on the concept of performance intensity, by Richard Schechner (2011). Thus, considering the functions of music in audiovisual narrative and the intensity of the orchestral performance, this paper aims to understand how the participation of orchestral music in the construction of the narrative unit of the scene *Chrissie's Death*, from the movie *Jaws*.

2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

To talk about the functions of music in audiovisual narrative we seek support from Jesús García Jiménez (1993), in his work *Narrativa audiovisual*. Jiménez (p. 269), from a dramatic conception, classifies ten functions of music regarding its insertion in the audiovisual context. 1) Referential function: when the music refers to a specific place, for example, a saraband refers to Spain. 2) Focusing function: when it concerns the perceptual point of view, that is, position, opening angle and depth of field. 3) Pragmatic function: halfway between the referential function and the focusing function, music refers first to the time and conditions of production. 4) Formative function: when the music creates an atmosphere to express not the way the characters perceive the space, but the way the spectator perceives the characters in that space. 5) Expressive emotive function: when music holds the spectator's attention and impels him/her to live and share with emotion the characters' actions. 6) Environmental function: when the music leads to the dramatic and aesthetic perception of the space, contributing to the decoration and setting the mood of a situation. 7)

Magical function: music creates a kind of mandala or limited space where other exceptional forces operate. 8) Delimiter Function: when music marks structural parts of the narrative. 9) Identifying function: music identifies geographical spaces in different parts of the world, examples are folk songs. 10) Lubricating function: the music functions as a lubricant for the fractures originated in the game of the scale of planes, restoring the continuity of the narrative discourse.

Concerning Performance Intensity, this concept was formulated by Richard Schechner (2011) in *Points of Contact* between anthropological and theatrical thought. Although the points of contact listed by Schechner are between the anthropological and the theatrical realm, one can deduce that this dialogue also extends into the realm of the performing arts in general, including music and film. Thus, in understanding Performance Intensity, Schechner mentions that a great performance modulates in intervals of sound and silence, there being an increasing and decreasing density of temporal, special, emotional, and synesthetic events. According to the author, although perceived as simple, these elements are aligned in a seemingly inevitable and complicated pattern. As for the patterns of intensities, these can lead to an ecstatic trance for both performers and spectators.

Still on the intensity conception of performance Schechner reveals that there are low intensity patterns and high intensity patterns. Low intensity is trophotropic: the heartbeat slows down, as does the blood pressure; the pupils are constricted, the EEG is synchronized. There is a tendency toward trance and drowsiness. High intensity is ergotropic: the heartbeat increases, as does the blood pressure; the pupils dilate, the EEG is desynchronized, and there is a high level of arousal and wakefulness. With great acuity and a strong sense of perception, Richard Schechner concludes that to understand performance intensity is to discover how a performance constructs monotony or how it attracts participants (2011, p.219).

3 METHODOLOGY

Given the nature of the phenomenon to be studied in this research, the qualitative research approach was adopted, since this type of approach works with the universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values, and attitudes. With a view to generating new knowledge in the field of film music, useful for the advancement of further investigations, the nature of the research fits as basic in nature. As for the objective, it is an exploratory research since the intention in this article was to obtain more familiarity about the relationships involving orchestral music and Hollywood cinema. Regarding the procedure, the article made use of bibliographical research, surveying theoretical references already analyzed and published in written and electronic media such as books, scientific articles, dissertations, theses, and Web pages. It was also performed an analysis of the music used in the scene *Chrissie's Death*, from the movie *Jaws*, in order to observe how the performance of the orchestra and its compositional apparatus could contribute to the construction of the narrative unit of the scene.

4 DISCUSSION

In the sense of causing some kind of sensation in the viewer, the music written for *Jaws* was as unique as the images Steven Spielberg envisioned. Its intensity, and the visceral power contained within it, helped make the film a global phenomenon to the extent that Spielberg compared it to Bernard Herrmann's equally frightening music for Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, produced in 1960.

In *The Jaws Log*, Carl Gottlieb (2010, p. 200) relates that in the discussions between John Williams and Steven Spielberg about the music for *Jaws*, they both listened every day in Spielberg's office to music from past films. In addition, they also listened to recordings by Stravinsky and Vaughan Williams looking for analogies between the work of these composers and what they thought the themes for *Jaws* should be.

Bearing in mind what has been said above regarding John Williams' observations about the music of erudite composers of the past; some authors, taking the idea of pastiche as a point of observation, claim that *Jaws*' music reverberates excerpts from composers such as Maurice Ravel, in *La valse*; Antonin Dvořák's, in *Symphony of the New World*, and in Igor Stravinsky's "*The Rite of Spring*."

In spite of the above considerations, because of its effectiveness in the dramatic action, many authors, on the other hand, claim that the music in *Jaws* has become one of the most recognizable in the history of film music. Aligned with the camera shots from the shark's perspective, it is by itself sufficient to evoke the shark's attacks, even when the spectator does not see it on the screen, as can be observed in the scene of the first victim, the girl Chrissie.

Williams' idea proves to have great compositional and performative potential in the context of the drama-suspense film. The leitmotif, the recurring musical motif that typifies the shark, is an ostinato built on the Mi-Fá notes that John Williams, in support of dramatic needs, skillfully delays or accelerates during the development of the film's narrative. The semitone interval, used to construct the shark leitmotif, carries with it a sense of built-in tension, so that its constant repetition, in the audience and filmed action relationship, establishes immediate emotional associations with terror (KARLIN & WRIGH, 2004, p.176).

In the sense described by Karlin & Wrigh, we believe that the natural tension caused by the Mi-Fá notes gains a more dramatic contour when orchestrated in the bass region, as John Williams indicated to his orchestrator, Herb Spencer. The picture below shows this orchestration in the low register of the orchestra using harp, cellos, double basses, bassoons, contrabassoon and piano, used along with the percussion section.

Figure 1: first 5 bars of the main theme from Jaws.

Jaws M-101 *Jaws* Titles John Williams
Orchestrated by Herb Spencer

Source: KARLIN, Fred; WRIGH, Rayburn. *On the Track: a guide to contemporary film scoring*. p.177.

Since the shark is invisible to the audience, only appearing at the end of the film, the leitmotif above represents his impending attacks, leading the viewer to associate the musical theme with the shark. That is, the shark leitmotif, which is exploited toward a climax of tension, is the shark itself that the viewer does not see, but knows that it attacks and devours its victims. Furthermore, the instrumentation and orchestration noted above represent the relentless force of the shark, evoking, as John Williams himself said, a sense of oppression in the viewer (FRIEDMAN, 2008, p.174).

However, the music in *Jaws*, written to support and reinforce the expressive demands of the narration, will only be effective and precise in fulfilling the functions of stage music through the orchestral performance. If the music was conceived and written for an orchestra, then the orchestra will be in charge of echoing the sonority idealized by the composer. In fact, among contemporary film composers, John Williams is probably the most traditional when it comes to the use of orchestral power in film music (DARBY & BOIS, 1990, p.521).

The orchestra projects the timbre built in the composer's mind to the ear of the spectator who, by hearing his "voice", also narrating the events on the screen in front of him, will be able to identify and have a better understanding of the story being told. It is in this sense that, taking into account the functions of music in audiovisual narrative, from now on we will analyze the orchestra's performance in the scene *Chrissie's Death*, from Steven Spielberg's film *Jaws*.

The scene opens with a group of young people on the beach, presumably at an outdoor party on Amity Island. In this environment, after an exchange of glances and a brief dialogue between Chrissie Watkins (Susan Backlinie) and Tom (Tom Cassidy), an inebriated young man, Chrissie starts a run towards the sea. In the water, she suddenly feels something pulling her right leg. Subsequently, Chrissie is dragged from side to side before being pulled permanently to the bottom of the sea and never seen again. In this opening scene of the film *Jaws* Steven Spielberg decided beforehand not to show the shark to the audience,

letting them imagine what was happening under the water, so that they would think that something was attacking Chrissie. In this sense, the music appears descriptively, revealing the invisible shark through its theme, written for cellos, double basses, bassoons and contrabassoon.

Seen from the bottom of the sea, from the shark's perspective, Chrissie appears on the screen floating peacefully in the water. At this point, we hear the first intervention of the orchestra, which, while performing, echoes the sound of a harp, sustained by a pedal provided by cellos and double basses. According to Litwin (2012), the harp is the instrument that, in films, evokes aquatic sounds. In this framing of the scene, it merges with the sound of the celesta, an instrument that, as Adler (1989) states, when it bends the strings of the harp provides a silvery sound.

From the point where Chrissie appears in the image below, until the next shot, when she appears swimming near a buoy, the sound ambience generated by the harp, celesta, cellos, bass and violins, these subtly as background, creates an atmosphere of expectation, seeming to announce to the spectator the imminent danger. What in fact occurs in the next shot. Here, the music acts within the formant function, described by Jiménez, creating an atmosphere to express not the way Chrissie perceives the space, but the way the spectator perceives her in that space, revealing the action before the iconic speech does.

Figure 2: Chrissie's view of the shark's perspective. Formant function.



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dg-HIHMhthY>

Following this, we can observe the sound prolongation performed by the harp and celesta that begins with Chrissie's smile, shaking her hair. Here the music can be perceived performing a lubricating function, providing rhythmic continuity in the transition to the next shot, when it again returns to the forming function, revealing that the shark is approaching the victim's legs. This revelation is made through musical elements extracted from the shark's leitmotif, played by cellos and double basses and accentuated by the bass drum.

Figure 3: Chrissie smiling. Lubricating function



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dg-HIHMhthY>

Figure 4: the shark approaches Chrissie's legs. Formant Function



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dg-HIHMhthY>

In the next shot, Chrissie is abruptly pulled down! This pull is synchronized with a chord from the brass section, the imposing sound of the orchestra, which appears to announce the overwhelming force of the shark. This chord is prolonged by a cluster in the violins; which, like a resonance of "Trembling for the Victims of Hiroshima," a piece that Krzysztof Penderecki composed to describe the agony of the victims of the atomic bomb, announces the beginning of Chrissie's agony. In the sequence, Chrissie is carried back and forth by the shark while the horns in glissandi, backed by the trombones, tuba and bombo play heavily, typifying the force of the sea beast.

At the same time, a strong dissonance sounds in the strings section, played in an agitated manner, tinting Chrissie's agonizing wavering.

Meanwhile, the xylophone, an instrument used by Camille Saint-Saëns to represent a skeleton, in "Dance of the Maccabre," is played with such fury that the piercing sound it echoes seems to represent the fangs of the shark penetrating the victim's flesh. Here, the music seems to fulfill rhythmic and delimiting functions, since, enhancing the movement of the visual rhythm, it marks structural parts of the narrative while illustrating the jolt suffered by Chrissie and describing her movements from side to side.

Figure 5: Chrissie being pulled down and dragged by the shark. Rhythmic and delimiting functions



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dg-HIHMhthY>

A moment of relief! Almost free of the beast's attacks, the victim clings to the buoy; however, a descending and sinister melodic passage, played by the clarone and harp, in the bass register, already announces his death! Again the creature attacks! This time the horn, stretching the sinister melody of the clarone, and tinged by the dissonance of the trumpet and violins, seems to say that the victim will not resist one more offensive of the shark. Indeed! Chrissie is definitely taken to the bottom of the ocean. She disappears and the orchestra with her, leaving only the clanging of the buoy's bell and the sound of the water.

Here, given the situation experienced by the victim and the sonic ambiance provided by the orchestra, we do not find in Jimenez a specific function for music. However, we take the liberty of marking the music in this shot as a dramatic function, since it intensifies the dramaticity of the scene by projecting Chrissie's impending death. In addition, the way the instruments are performed in this shot contributes in reinforcing the dramatic density of the victim's final moments.

Figure 6: Chrissie is led to her death. Dramatic Function



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dg-HIHMhthY>

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Considering the functions of music in audiovisual narrative, which, as seen, through them one can better understand the participation of music in filmic narrative; we believe that the orchestra's performance was of real importance for the fulfillment of these functions. According to Richard Schechner's observation, regarding the intensity of the performance, one can say that this large organic instrument, called the orchestra, performing in the Chrissie's Death scene, produces a performance of high intensity. This is in light of the fact that at many moments there is a high level of excitement from the viewers who have seen this scene over the years. When Chrissie is pulled down and then returned to the surface we can hear her gasping for breath, her cries of terror, her despair. In this, the intensity of our emotions is heightened, since we are also experiencing Chrissie's agony as spectators. We are internally affected by the scene and the sound that emanates from it.

This emotional alteration that the scene generates in the viewer in large part is caused by the intensity of the orchestral performance, narrating Chrissie's misfortune. We see the orchestra eventually produce violent and distressing sounds in order to intensify the viewer's sensations and the dramaticity of the scene in the victim's sad plight. The functions of the music could be fulfilled through the orchestral performance, which, with its instrumentation and timbric coloration, brought consistency to the narrative of Chrissie's Death. With the orchestral performance, narrative events are illustrated and anticipated on the viewer's screen, and the idea of rhythmic continuity, through the use of ostinati and the prolongation of the sound of some instruments, between camera shots and in shot transitions, strengthens the unity of the narrative. Without Williams' music, and, consequently, without the orchestra's performance, which begins with harp arpeggios and ends with trumpet and violin dissonances, the audience would certainly have a different perception of Chrissie's Death scene.

REFERENCES

- ADLER, Samuel. Study of Orchestration. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989. BENCHLEY, Peter. Jaws. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1974
- DARBY, William; BOIS, Jack du. American film music: major composers, techniques, trends, 1915-1990. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc.
- FRIEDMAN, Laster D. Citizen Spielberg. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2008. GOTTLIEBE, Carl. The Jaws Log. Sydney: ReadHowYouWant, 2010.
- JIMÉNEZ, Jesús García. Narrativa audiovisual. 3. ed. Madrid: Cátedra, 1993.
- KARLIN, Fred; WRIGH, Rayburn. On the Track: a guide to contemporary film scoring. 2. ed. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004.
- LITWIN, Mario. Le film et sa musique: création-montage. Paris: Romillat, 1992. SCHECHNER, Richard. Points of contact between anthropological and theatrical thought. Cadernos de campo, São Paulo, n. 20, p. 213-236, 2011.
- WIERJZBICKI, James. Film Music: A History. New York: Routledge, 2009.