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Book Reviews

K.J. Donnelly, William Gibbons, and Neil Lerner (eds)
Music in Video Games: Studying Play
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review by Michiel Kamp

This volume falls right in the middle of a boom in publications on video game music. Following Karen Collins's *Game Sound* and her edited volume *From Pac-Man to Pop Music* (both 2008), there have been a number of articles and chapters appearing on the subject, both throughout the various *Oxford Handbooks* and in journals that focus on music in audiovisual media. These are joined by Kiri Miller's *Playing Along* (2012) and William Cheng's *Soundplay* (2014), which, although bundled in book form, can really be considered collections of article-length (case) studies. Add to that Peter Moormann's edited volume *Music and Game: Perspectives on a Popular Alliance* (2013) and the question becomes how this Routledge volume *Music in Video Games: Studying Play* (2014), edited by K.J. Donnelly, William Gibbons, and Neil Lerner, distinguishes itself from or relates to this rapidly growing field.

The question is perhaps unfair, as the academic study of video game music is still in its infancy and the field anything but saturated, but it is fruitful to consider the different strands and approaches that operate on this relatively new and exciting topic within musicology. And, to start with, it has to be said that this is first and foremost a musicology volume. Whereas, for instance, *From Pac-Man to Pop Music* offers a multitude of scholars from different disciplines – and even expands its topic to include game *sound* – the chapters in *Music in Video Games* almost exclusively employ methods from historical musicology and music theory. This means the book has no shortage of well-printed and clear music examples that, given the dynamic and adaptive nature of game scores, get quite inventive.

Another thing that sets this volume apart from others is the fact that it, for the most part, eschews grand theories of game music in general in favour of more focused case studies – one, or a small number, per chapter. These include what might by now be called the canonical cases of *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998),

and *Silent Hill* (1999, albeit only in passing in Rebecca Roberts' chapter), but also introduce a number of new and worthy topics of study, such as *Plants vs. Zombies*, representing the less-than-glamorous but ubiquitous non-dynamic soundtracks of low-budget mobile games; the soundtrack of *Sid Meier's Civilization IV* (2005), which features pre-existing music in a manner completely unlike other audio-visual media such as films, showing the idiosyncrasies of video games when it comes to representation; and all-but-forgotten soundtracks such as that composed for *The Dig* (1995). Together, these case studies uniquely represent the variety of video game soundtracks, whereas other collections have mostly presented the variety of *approaches* to game music.

The chapters are loosely ordered according to topics, moving from 'chip music' to analysis of dynamic soundtracks to horror games to hermeneutics. This, admittedly, is gleaned from the introduction, as there are many threads that connect chapters in the book, although none of them explicit. The book starts with 'the classics': Neil Lerner's analyses of the *Donkey Kong* and *Super Mario Bros.* soundtracks. Central to this chapter is the link between early game music and early film music, a thread of research that Lerner further explores in his contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies* (2014). There, he focuses on the very earliest video games, and his structural and semiotic analysis of *Donkey Kong* here is reminiscent of that chapter. However, particular attention is paid to the unity the soundtrack provides in an otherwise incoherent and inconsistent game world ('Why does Mario have three lives?' Lerner asks, following Jesper Juul [2005]). The tonal coherence Lerner notes is striking, and it is even more prevalent in his analysis of the later *Super Mario Bros.* soundtrack. There, too, Lerner draws connections with early cinema techniques, the game's soundtrack offering a playful combination of pastiche (combining both Latin and Tin Pan Alley influences) and unity.

Chris Tonelli's chapter on the Japanese game-inspired 'pico-pico' music scene might seem to be less directly about music in video games, but it helps us better understand one of the more prominent (sub)cultural offshoots of the subject: so-called chiptunes, or 8-bit music. There are many different names and labels for the kind of popular music that in some manner draws upon video game music, and Tonelli shows how the very specific Japanese case of pico-pico, a genre that has existed since the early 2000s, relates to these. Tonelli also highlights another aspect of pico-pico, namely the idea of imagined travel and the jet set age: lyrics that mention airports and getaways, and costumes that are reminiscent of flight attendant uniforms – albeit simplified to the point of resembling low-resolution video game avatars. All these aspects form

a space during performances where listeners conceive of themselves as avatars, a nostalgic flight into game worlds.

The third chapter, dealing with classic video game music, is Roger Moseley and Aya Saiki's genealogy or media archaeology of Nintendo's 'musical art of play'. The chapter is essentially a history of the musical aspects of Nintendo's hardware, and its genealogical and archeological aspects consist of a number of similarities the authors find between various toys, games, and historical musical technologies. The remoteness of these connections, drawn between forgotten Nintendo toys such as the electronic Ele-Congas from 1972 and Claude-Félix Seytre's music disks from 1842, is fascinating in its own right. Other connections between music and play in Nintendo's history are found in the rhythmical qualities of the Game & Watch games, *Super Mario Bros.* 'mickey-mousing' sound effects (glissandi for jumping, a rising fourth when picking up a coin), and Toshio Iwai's music games *Otocky* (1987) and *Electroplankton* (2005). Many of the ideas introduced here – such as the relationship between free and structured musical play (building on Roger Caillois's *Man, Play and Games* [1961]) and the various degrees of rigidity of musical instrument affordances – are further developed in much more detail in Moseley's more extensive publications (2013; 2015; 2016). However, the specific focus on Nintendo and Japanese (gaming) culture makes this a valuable contribution to the burgeoning field of ludomusicology in its own right.

Musical gameplay is also investigated by Steven Beverburg Reale, but in a completely different manner. Whereas Moseley and Saiki draw connections between Nintendo and musical technology and practices, Reale starts with *Guitar Hero* as a quintessential music game. He distills four abstract features from the game series, which then become analytical tools for a number of other cases, ranging from games that are quite 'overtly' musical, such as the *BIT.TRIP* series and *Dyad* (2012), to the very interesting case of *L.A. Noire* (2011). Reale considers both the gameplay systems and the soundtracks of these games, and more importantly, how they interact. He arrives at the intriguing schema of the 'gameworld as musical score' (p.97), supported by music examples that show both the dynamic qualities of the soundtracks in question and their close relation to the gameplay.

Elizabeth Medina-Gray's approach is similar to Reale's in the way that it employs a harmonic and structural analysis of game music 'in the field'; in other words, rather than considering the soundtrack separate from the game, she asks how all these different musical strands and stems might sound together and be heard by the player. Overall, Medina-Gray finds an aesthetic of 'smoothness' in the games she examines – *The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker* (2003) and *Skyward Sword* (2011) from the

same series – and in game music in general. In what she calls modular music, 'discrete chunks of music' have to be combined together through transitions and layering in a manner that smooths over the potential musical disjunctions that might exist between these modules: harmonies, melodies, timbres, and other parameters all have to match in modularity. That said, disjunctions are sometimes heard and become meaningful to players, as in Medina-Gray's case studies. The grating harmonies and rhythms between two musical layers in *Wind Waker* might prompt the player to wonder whether one is diegetic and the other non-diegetic, for instance, or whether they are doing something wrong. The hermeneutic process this triggers involves not just reflection but actual gameplay actions by the player as well. Medina-Gray's concepts are extraordinarily helpful for a hermeneutics of game music that starts 'in the game', and an interesting theoretical question is just how far this idea of disjunction extends beyond basic musical parameters such as harmony (in which case it takes on the guise of dissonance), and what it says about the player's game-musical literacy (cf. van Elferen, 2016).

Hermeneutics is also the method for William Gibbons's case study of *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005). In this game the most meaningful soundtrack element is actually its musical silence. In between climbing and fighting sixteen gigantic colossi (with appropriate orchestral accompaniment), the game features relatively long sequences where the player's avatar travels on horseback, with no non-diegetic soundtrack to speak of. This deliberate absence of music during stretches of gameplay that are relatively free of enemies and obstacles creates a space to reflect for the player, a unique occurrence in video games that Gibbons compares to meaningful silence in films such as *No Country for Old Men* (2009) and *Cast Away* (2000). These silences, Gibbons goes further, allow doubt to seep in about the morality of the player's actions – their killing of the colossi – and about the musical soundtrack's complicity in these actions. *Shadow of the Colossus* is often brought up in debates around the question of whether video games are art (e.g. Ebert, 2010), and Gibbons delivers a powerful argument for the centrality of music in the game considered as an aesthetic object.

Since the earliest days of video game music scholarship, the horror genre has played a central role (cf. Whalen, 2004). Rebecca Roberts's chapter is essentially an overview of the ways in which soundtracks – diegetic sounds, non-diegetic music, and the uncanny spaces in between that play such an important role in horror – operate in different games of this genre. She takes as her starting point from Janet Murray the idea of a game world as a navigational environment, where audio functions to alternatively guide and confound the player. While this is an overview

that touches upon some horror games that are often overlooked, Roberts falls back on the term 'immersion' to describe the function of the audio on numerous occasions without discussing its long and controversial history in game studies (e.g., Salen & Zimmerman, 2003; Ermi & Mäyrä, 2005; Calleja, 2011). Although a thorough consideration of musical immersion might have been beyond the purview of this chapter, particularly in horror games (and films) it plays an important part.

K.J. Donnelly discusses *Plants vs. Zombies* (2009), a popular mobile game that approaches the horror genre – more specifically the zombie genre – less seriously than the games that Roberts discusses. While the game's soundtrack has qualities of Danny Elfman's gothic style, Donnelly is more interested in the meaning the soundtrack derives from its relation to arcade game music. The score's stubborn non-dynamic nature – it refuses to adapt to the action and plays continuously throughout gameplay sequences – in addition to its tango or habanera rhythms, makes it into an anempathetic, uncaring narrator. Rather than dismiss this as a necessary consequence of the game's low budget or its mobile phone platform's limited processing power, Donnelly interprets this musical indifference as reflective of the kind of indifference that the game asks of the player: indifference towards the hordes of mindless zombies encroaching on their lawn, which is potentially representative of the 'mindless' social underclasses vs. the educated 'lawns of respectable suburbia' (p.161). This final interpretive step is perhaps a bit too reminiscent of Janet Murray's oft-derided account of *Tetris* – an abstract game featuring falling blocks – as 'a perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s' (1997, p.144). Whether we agree with Donnelly's interpretation or not, the fact that a non-dynamic soundtrack can be meaningful because of that very quality is an important insight.

Whereas the soundtrack of *Plants vs. Zombies* might have been easily overlooked, *Sid Meier's Civilization IV* presents an intriguing case for any music historian. Its soundtrack consists mainly of pre-existing pieces of Western art music to accompany its different historical eras, and is rife with issues of representation. How can Mozart, for instance, signify the Renaissance? And why does the Modern era's soundtrack solely consist of works by John Adams? Karen M. Cook addresses these questions, but more generally criticises the game for perpetuating a Western canon, more particularly even a North American one. At the same time, she allows for the possibility of multiple interpretations on account of the player's ability to modify the game and change its soundtrack. While this aspect can be applied to almost any game – after all, most games have a separate 'music' volume control – it is a valid argument that points in the direction of more ethnographic research. After all, then

the question becomes to what extent do players actually modify their musical experiences, and what soundtracks do they prefer?

Jessica Kizzire addresses the issue of nostalgia in the *Final Fantasy* series. While others have gone there before, such as William Cheng (2014) in his discussion of *Final Fantasy VI* (1994), Kizzire focuses on a different instalment in the series, *FFIX*, and a different kind of nostalgia. Instead of the nostalgia for the timbres of old console sound chips that forms the basis of many modern game soundtracks (e.g. *Fez* [2012]), here nostalgia remains within the series. By the time *Final Fantasy IX* came along in 2000, the series had gone through many iterations in its thirteen-year history, which allowed its composer Nobuo Uematsu to reference his own work in past instalments. Kizzire finds another strand of nostalgia in *FFIX*, however, in the guise of an idealised Renaissance past represented by aspects of Renaissance polyphony in the soundtrack's orchestration. The idea of nostalgia here is especially complicated given the series' (and the composer's) Japanese origins. Perhaps it is interesting to think of the Renaissance aspects of the score as not just an 'idealised past' (p.191), then, but also as an idealised 'Western other'.

The final chapter in this volume traces the spectre of Richard Wagner in video game music. The most obvious candidates are, of course, applications of Wagnerian leitmotivs, and the author Tim Summers finds a number of examples of this that go beyond the 'birdie sings, music sings' signposting in film music that Adorno and Eisler warned against (2005, p.12). The most interesting case Summers presents, however, is that of *The Dig* (1993). For the basis of the soundtrack for this game, composer Michael Z. Land used chord snippets drawn from Wagner scores which are then extended and built upon with synthesiser tones. The result is something quite haunting, especially given the science-fiction setting of the game. What's more, Summers finds Schopenhauerian undertones in Land's discussions of the score.

The quality of these chapters is high across the board, but there are a number of studies that stand out as particularly important contributions to the field. For instance, Roger Moseley and Aya Saiki's work on Nintendo has a wealth of information that comes from their translations of interviews with its composers and designers, such as Shigeru Miyamoto and Koji Kondo. Donnelly's chapter also deserves mention, again, for its choice of case study. In game studies, lower-budget mobile games have been a focus of study, as by Jesper Juul in *A Casual Revolution* (2010), and given the fact that these kinds of game nowadays occupy the largest share of the market,[1] and that they are likely to be the most omnipresent in people's daily lives, their soundtracks might also be the most frequently heard (although particularly in the case of these games something might

[1] Newszoo reports that in 2016, over half of the revenues in the global games market will be generated by smartphone, tablet, handheld, and casual webgames. Available from: https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/global-games-market-reaches-99-6-billion-2016-mobile-generating-37/ (Accessed: 13 September 2016).

be said about that old problem in game music studies: 'but you can just turn the music off, right?'). *Plants vs. Zombies* and its theme occupy the musical memory (whether consciously or not) of many and its particularities might seep into the soundtracks of tomorrow. For that reason alone, these kinds of games deserve scholarly attention. And this particularly is the strength of *Music in Video Games*: to bring into the scholarly limelight a number of game soundtracks that help expand the scope of game music studies and of studies of music and the moving image in general.

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Michael Slowik
After the Silents: Hollywood Film Music in the Early Sound Era, 1926–1934
New York: Columbia University Press, 2014: 400pp.
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review by Alexis Bennett

King Kong (1933) features prominently, and right from the outset, in Michael Slowik's *After the Silents: Hollywood Film Music in the Early Sound Era, 1926–1934.* And with good reason: Steiner's score has been consistently hailed by other scholars as immensely influential on countless other musical responses to films made in the US industry in the classic period and far beyond. But the aim of his book is to interrogate some of the assumptions that we might make about those critical years between the first successful attempts at sound film in 1926–1927 and the moment – roughly coinciding with the release of *King Kong* – when the turmoil seemed to settle into something resembling an industry which finally knew a little about what its products would look and sound like in the years and decades to come.

Slowik's key argument is that Max Steiner's *King Kong* was not quite the original instruction manual of classic scoring that it is often hailed as being; or, at the very least, much important groundwork had been achieved in the language of the classic Hollywood score before *King Kong* was composed that has hitherto not been given the scholarly attention that it deserves. The author is a former student of Rick Altman at Iowa, and, following Altman, Slowik bridges the gap between late silent practices and early sound scores by tracing a line of development that effectively shows *King Kong* as being drawn not only from European art music but, crucially, via silent film and early sound experiments.

Indeed, the author goes as far as to assert that this book actually sets the record straight in a way that breaks new ground:

> The historical record thus depicts the early sound era as featuring only a few primitive stabs at sound film music, followed by an absence of music until Steiner's innovative scores. By casting a wider net over the early sound era, this study reveals a far different story and suggests several surprising conclusions.
>
> (p.266)

The 'wider net' that Slowik refers to is his methodological approach, which prioritises the lesser-known works of the early sound era in the

United States rather than the established canon of 'great' or popular films. He is keen to emphasise that he has watched more than 200 relatively obscure (or 'ordinary') films from the period. As he mentions in his conclusion,

> studies of film style often restrict their focus to films of high artistic merit, thus implying that those films represent the whole of film production from a particular period. Such selective scholarship tends to distort the true situation, since 'exceptional' films often constitute a tiny, unrepresentative fraction of a period's output. As more early sound films are discovered, preserved, and made available for viewing, perhaps scholars will attain an even greater sense of the diverse musical approaches taken in the early sound era.
>
> (p.268)

While Slowik is undoubtedly correct in this observation that film history is – to misuse and misquote a cliché – written by the winners, through the most well-known and critically praised films, this reviewer is uneasy with Slowik's aim of representing the 'true situation'. Slowik has just as many biasing factors at work behind his writing as the best historians. Indeed, an obvious drawback – or rather, a necessary limitation – in the book is that Slowik's project is focused on Hollywood. By drawing the boundary lines of a study at the borders of the greater Los Angeles area, one has to ignore the developments in other world cinemas and their scoring practices. This is not a problem; it's a book about Hollywood music, and it doesn't claim otherwise. But in boldly asserting that the book 'aims for comprehensiveness' (p.6), Slowik is perhaps putting himself in a position of omniscience that no historian can reasonably expect of him or herself.

However, the book is very thoroughly researched, and nowhere else can be found a more penetrating and lingering look at those critical years. Furthermore, he does successfully argue that the familiar refrain that flags *The Jazz Singer* as the breakthrough, and *King Kong* as the first great classical score, is tired and in need of revision.

Chapter 1 is a look at the influences on early sound scores that came from other forms, including melodrama, radio and phonography, opera, the stage musical, and – crucially – the varied silent film practices of the 1920s. Here, Slowik negotiates the complex process by which the industry began to establish the ways of using music alongside image and narrative that were to feed into the sound era. The chapter's title, 'A Wide Array of Choices', highlights the broad range of reference points from which cinema took its musical cues in the following decade.

He follows this with a chapter largely concerned with synchronised

pictures (with mechanically locked-in scores but no dialogue), part-talkies (some dialogue alternating with music), and 100% talkies. He makes a particular study of *Don Juan* (1926), a film that was 'the first of what would be hundreds of films produced with a synchronised score that drew heavily on silent film accompaniment practices' (p.42). In fact, Slowik sees the work on pictures such as Don Juan as barely different from much of the silent era:

> Drawing on silent film music practices gave early sound film practitioners a ready-made model of film accompaniment with a proven ability to define characters, clarify narrative development, smooth over filmic transitions, guide interpretation, and channel emotion. But early sound cinema's heavy indebtedness to silent film music also suggests that sound film practitioners did not initially see themselves as doing anything substantially different from the silent era.
>
> (p.42)

Motivic treatment is a key discussion point here, and the chapter discusses how character themes are used in *Don Juan*. Case studies are also drawn here from *The Singing Fool* (1928) and *Weary River* (1929). The discussion of the role of 're-recording' (the early sound technique of layering and adding post-production sound to on-set sound) in *The Singing Fool* is illuminating, and Slowik cleverly uses this to discredit a claim by Max Steiner himself that the technique was unheard of in the late 1920s. The author is right to identify re-recording as a central issue of contention in the study of this period. He asserts that the received wisdom on the subject, that the vast majority of scores had to be recorded simultaneously with live dialogue and singing on set, is not borne out by the evidence. This has great repercussions for the discussion of the development classical scoring, since it implies that non-diegetic narrative scoring of sound pictures in post-production was much more widespread in the late 1920s than previously thought.

Chapter 3 covers the subject of 're-recording' again in confronting the phenomenon of the 'reduction' in the amount of music that featured in many scores in the period from 1929 to 1931. The ghost of Steiner returns, as Slowik cites what he calls the 'Max Steiner Explanation' for the thinning-out of musical material in many pictures. This consists of two explanations: a) 're-recording' was unknown in these years, so that if non-diegetic music was required then the orchestra had to be on set, a situation that brought with it great expense and planning, and b) a new realist attitude arose in the early sound era that required a diegetic explanation for music. Slowik debunks the 'Max Steiner Explanation' by pointing out that these two reasons contradict one another:

> The first component of his explanation suggests that filmmakers would have wanted nondiegetic music if the hassles of an on-set orchestra were not so great, while the second component indicates that filmmakers would not have wanted nondiegetic music because it would have created audience confusion.
>
> (p.106)

He further refutes Steiner by re-asserting that re-recording was used extensively not only because the technology was there, and could be applied to competing studios that used different formats, whether sound-on-disc or sound-on-film. Slowik mentions several films that contains sequences of continuous, uninterrupted music under film that was clearly edited repeatedly between scenes or shots, and some films that used music alongside location footage.

This chapter also interrogates what Slowik calls 'diegetic withdrawal' (p.112), which

> refers to a situation in which a film begins with clearly marked diegetic music, only to drift toward music that is either ambiguous or downright nondiegetic in the later sections of the film. [...] The 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 emanating from an external, nondiegetic narrational force.
>
> (p.113)

Again, Slowik backs up his thoughts with evidence from the films themselves, and how the interplay of diegetic to non-diegetic has functionality within the development of plot and character, in this case *The Wild Party* (1929), *Alibi* (1929) and *Party Girl* (1930).

The book does not shy away from the discussion of songs and other forms of popular music, with a look at theme songs in Chapter 3 and the whole of Chapter 4 devoted to the Hollywood musical between 1929 and 1932. He calls this an 'interlude', but in fact it feels just as thoroughly researched as the rest of the book, and could easily lose the slightly apologetic subtitle.

Having looked at the 'reduction' of film music in Chapter 3, Slowik uses Chapter 5 to explore a renewed enthusiasm for lengthy scores and unashamedly non-diegetic material, but this is placed within a broader theme of 'Music and Other Worlds', which he divides into scores that describe an exotic or unusual setting and also scores which 'reflect internal dreams, fantasies, or altered emotional states' (p.181). Slowik's purpose here is to try to find out how filmmakers began to justify the use of extensive non-diegetic scores again, and how this was closely linked

to 'wish fulfilment and the depiction of the unusual' (p.227). He also identifies the paradox that was the return to more conventional scoring that was more akin to silent practices in order to reach the style of the Golden Age. This chapter is a useful and intriguing addition to the work previously undertaken by Caryl Flinn and others on the roots of the classic period.

Returning to *King Kong* for the final chapter, Slowik again asks why that score is consistently held as a 'landmark'. He laments the fact that 'film scholars have sought to capture the early sound era in a few quick strokes before moving to a topic of greater interest', causing *King Kong* to be lazily hailed as the first of its kind, and contributing to 'the myth that *King Kong* revolutionized film music' (p.263). *King Kong*'s apparent influence on later works is placed under the microscope, as Slowik compares it with forty-three films from 1933–1934, supposedly released afterwards. He finds no overwhelming change in attitude in scoring techniques, and instead observes the same trends as were evident in 1931–1933. While Slowik's argument is interesting, I am not convinced that analysing a film score from January 1934 (*Four Frightened People*) and finding no overt influence from *King Kong* tells us a great deal. If *King Kong* was released in March 1933, the intervening time period of nine months hardly gives much scope for a score to sink in. One only has to look at how slowly so-called 'cult films' gain traction, and how some universally adored films have often been met with indifference at their first release, to realise that the 'importance' of a work is rarely immediately apparent.

The book is by no means overtly critical of *King Kong* in itself, but instead takes aim at a culture of film music scholarship that has turned a blind eye to those key years after the advent of sound and before the first great celebrated works of the classic period, or Golden Age. In this respect Slowik takes *King Kong* as an effective springboard for a much more interesting discussion of how the great Hollywood composers stood not only on the shoulders of late-Romantic giants but learned their craft from a complex network of prior practices. Despite my reservations in respect to the author's claims to 'comprehensiveness' and the presenting of the 'true situation' (see above), the book is nevertheless deeply researched, lucidly composed, and thoughtfully presented.