Introduction: Screened Music, Trans-contextualisation and Ethnomusicological Approaches
Miguel Mera & Anna Morcom

This paper proposes the use of the term ‘screened music’ as a means of encompassing a broad range of methodological approaches that emphasise agency, process and context, moving beyond the extant focus on Western musical traditions associated with film music analysis. It argues that perspectives from ethnomusicology offer new possibilities for understanding screened musics in their numerous forms. In particular, focus on practitioner perspectives and self-reflexive ethnography can provide insights into industrial and political processes as well as issues relating to ethics and responsibility. The notion of agency as embedded in processes of de-/re- and trans-contextualisation offers new ways to explore the use of ‘exotic’ or hegemonic musics, as well as the emergence and development of style. This paper also considers issues of representation, including problematic stereotyping of the ‘primitive other’, national identity, code formation and viral re-signification.

Keywords: Screened Music; De-/Re-/Trans-contextualisation; Representation; Ethnographic Filmmaking; (Self-reflexive) Ethnography; Viral re-signification; Film music

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Introduction

In a 1976 article ‘Ethnomusicology and Visual Communication’, Steven Feld explores ‘film work in ethnomusicology’, adding the footnote:

By ‘film work in ethnomusicology’ I will limit the discussion to the uses of the film medium for ethnomusicological research and presentation. For the present then I am placing aside the other important relation between ethnomusicology and film, namely the cultural/musical study of sound tracks, film scores, and television sound. There are obviously several interesting dimensions to this latter area; one need only think about the ways music has been used in exotic movies, adventure films, and travelogues to realize the wealth of data here. Studying the sound symbolism of films of the *Mondo Cane* genre seems as worthy an ethnomusical topic as any. (Feld 1976, 317, footnote 4) 

Silent film (accompanied by live music) and sound film had arrived in large parts of the world by the early 1900s and 1930s respectively, and television by the 1960s. However, in 1976, the study of film music and television (music video and video games did not exist then) was something ethnomusicology was only beginning to regard as important. This reflected certain well-known biases of ethnomusicology towards ‘high’ art or ‘pure’ folk traditions. It also reflected the fact that mediated music and especially music on screen was still a relatively small part of the total sum of the world’s music making, especially outside of the economically wealthy ‘first’ world where urbanisation was then far less extensive than it is now. However, with the present levels of electronic mediation, mass communication and virtual spaces worldwide, as well as the widespread accessibility of filming and making films on home computers and exhibiting clips or posting them on the internet, music that is not just mediated, but on screen or screened has become a global norm, an ordinary fact of life. This is the case even in parts of the world that are relatively unindustrialised, rural and remote. The world has changed, and the agendas of ethnomusicology have also changed; it is comforting to see that Feld’s then forward-looking comment now seems dated.

While the study of film, popular music and media has become well established, the study of music in its myriad and burgeoning screened manifestations remains largely focused on particular areas. Not surprisingly, given the chronology of the emergence of screened music, the vast majority of scholarship has been on film music, Hollywood’s ‘Golden Age’ in particular and a canon of both mainstream North American films and film scores more generally (Darby and Dubois 1990; Palmer 1990; Flinn 1992; Kalinak 1992; Kassabian 2000). Music video is a much less researched area than film music, with major publications including Kaplan (1987), Frith, Goodwin and Grossberg (1993), and Vernallis (2004). Work on television music is even rarer (despite the fact that it emerged before music video) including, for example, Cook on television commercials (1998, 3–23) and Donnelly (2008). Research on video game music and music in virtual environments is also scant, with recent publications by Collins (2008a,b), Hoffert (2007) and Sexton (2007) beginning
to map out new territories. These fields are also supported by the launch of the journals *Music, Sound and the Moving Image* (2007), *Music and the Moving Image* and *The Soundtrack* (both 2008).

The study of film music beyond Hollywood and North America is gathering momentum, with a number of book-length publications including some by ethnomusicologists (Arnold 1991; Coyle 1998; Hillman 2005; Mera and Burnand 2006; Morcom 2007; Booth 2008; Slobin 2008). Work on music video beyond the field of Western popular music is also beginning to emerge in the form of television-oriented studies (Sutton 2003, 2006; Sung 2006), or those pertaining to VCD production (Morcom 2008), ‘micro-media’, globalisation and meaning (Harris 2005) or new/old media and the internet (Pease 2006).

This volume and Slobin (2008) are the first collections of essays that focus specifically on screened music from a global perspective, with this special issue incorporating not just film music, but also other forms of screened music. This volume aims principally to broaden the field of study of music on screen through decentring the focus on Western musical practices and on certain methodological traditions closely associated with film music analysis. In particular, it aims to introduce a number of ethnomusicological perspectives as central to the study of screened musics.

We argue that global perspectives are fundamental to the very nature of screened music, whichever part of the world it is from. As mediated, and hence trans-contextual, and as actively or purposely de- and re-contextualised, screened music is inherently multi-contextual and cross-cultural. This is the case particularly due to the myriad ways that music and visuals (and their constituent sections/shots and so on) situate and re-situate each other in both the screened music text and a given live playback situation. Ethnomusicology as the study of music in context hence offers extensive scope to enrich the study of screened music. Close attention to context and issues of representation promise to develop our understanding of code formation in screened music, including the use of ‘other’ musics, processes of (national or other) self-representation, and the complexities of reception, including the re-screening and re-signification that new media in particular offer. Furthermore, self-reflexive ethnography by participant-observers or practitioner-scholars offers new perspectives for understanding processes of production and ethics. This is the case with both ethnographic and commercial filmmaking. In general, ethnography is also a vital and still very much underused tool in analysing processes of production and industry, essential for salient textual interpretations of music and moving image as well as broader questions of style. We have chosen the term ‘screened music’ as opposed to ‘screen music’, ‘music on screen’ or even ‘music and the moving image’ as the title for this special issue in order to emphasise these approaches and perspectives, to draw attention to issues of agency, of process, active or contrived representation or re-representation, and of mediation and media-isation. We also hope that this term will allow broader and more multi-disciplinary approaches to emerge.