The film musical? A proposal for a genre definition

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The passage of the musical from the theatre to the cinema saw a transformation in its language; it entered a no man's land (Iser 2000) between what was 'no longer' theatrical and 'not yet' cinematographic. Musicals on the silver screen are generally referred to as 'film musicals' (Altman 1989; Altman 2004), to differentiate them from those staged in the theatre. However this definition is problematic because it can suggest that the musical component, which is an integral part of the art form, is subordinate in the narrative project. In this essay I argue that there was a change in the attitude to the music in the film musical over the years 1943 – 1964, a period in which the conventional Broadway musical underwent a radical transformation. In the late 1940s new productions tailed off significantly and producers focused on mounting revivals of the hits of the 1930s and early 1940s. At the same time the Broadway production system changed radically and the onus moved from Broadway to the Hollywood film industry (La Polla – Monteleone 2002; La Polla 2004).

Rather than taking a rigidly classificatory approach or arriving at a definition of a genre – the musical – whose salient character has been its ongoing transformism, this essay hopes to contribute to a clearer vision of the film musical, based on the role music played in the passage from theatrical to cinematographic language.

One Touch of Venus and *My Fair Lady*[1] are two significant works in the history of the musical because they span the chosen period and represent the interchange that took place between Broadway and Hollywood. Kurt Weill's musical can be seen as a prototype: in the 1940s it was one of the first examples of the transformation from theatre to cinema, carried out under the composer's supervision. While *My Fair Lady* stands as a 'classic' musical because by the mid-1950s the golden age of the musical was coming to an end, with the first experiments that were to characterise the 1960s and 1970s (*Hair*, *Cabaret*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*).

One Touch of Venus

Kurt Weill composed *One Touch of Venus* in 1943, with Ogden Nash and Sid J. Perelman collaborating on the libretto. Following its outstanding box office success, in 1948 Weill supervised the film version made in the Hollywood studios. In formal terms it has many of the hallmarks of the golden age of the musical. Weill maintained the alternation of scenes between spoken dialogue and catchy tunes; structured the characters as antagonists all rotating around the main protagonist; included dance numbers with great scenographic impact and the customary moments of irony (n. 27. *Catch Hatch*); and also drew on the tradition of American music in featuring a barbershop number (n. 19. *The Trouble With Women*).

The significance of *One Touch of Venus* for our enquiry into the change in attitude to music in the film musical transpires with the passage of the musical from theatre to cinema. No changes were made to the story; it was the music which underwent significant modifications. In fact Universal set out to make a film 'based on' the hit musical *One Touch of Venus* with the complete involvement of the composer. The outcome was a film that was every bit as successful; but how was the passage from stage to screen achieved?

Most of the musical numbers that featured in the stage version of *One Touch of Venus* were not used in the film version: only two were retained, *Speak Low* and *That's Him*, and one new song was introduced *(Don't Look Now, but) My Heart is Showing*, composed by the arranger Ann Ronell. This new song and the music in the film in general do not feature particularly original orchestral writing. As in the stage musical, the protagonists are characterised by means of musical motives, but while in the theatrical version the motives were restricted to the individual numbers, in the film they become elements which recur and hence characterise the various scenes. Two of the elements in the stage musical are enhanced in the film: Venus's disorientation and her nature as an outsider, the goddess of love,

[1] Kurt Weill's *One Touch of Venus* debuted in Broadway in 1943; its filmic transposition directed by W. Seiter dates back to 1948 (Universal). *My Fair Lady*, by A. J. Lerner e F. Loewe, debuted in Broadway in 1956 and become a Warner film in 1964.

residing on Olympus, come to earth as a woman like any other and totally inept in managing personal relationships.

We shall now analyse the audiovisual sequence of the metamorphosis of the statue of Venus (Table 1). This is a key moment in the plot of *One Touch of Venus*, as it is in the short story on which the musical was based (Anstey, 1898). The sequence is particularly indicative because it reveals some of the differences in the musical component in the film musical which we referred to at the beginning.

The scene of the metamorphosis is structured according to two main themes. In the film version the theme of the ring has two facets: on one hand the love potion, giving access to a supernatural world where other laws obtain (the law of absolute *Love* and *Beauty*), and on the other the theme of the kiss as a sensual representation of love itself. The theme of the love potion is in fact an innovation of the film. It recalls the classical literary *topos* which was so popular in music theatre. In this context the potion serves two purposes: it creates a link between the New York of Eddie and Venus's Olympus and, by clouding the character's perception of reality, opens the way to love based on the sentiments which breaks out of the confines of the bourgeois stereotype. Our analysis focuses on the complexity of the elements and the typology of the transposition at work. The main element in the film, with respect to the musical, is the emergence of an original relationship between music and image.

We can observe that the musical choices match the images: the progress of the action is accompanied by silences, which mark the beginning and end of separate formal micro-sections. The silences correspond to the crucial actions in the plot development: in the first Eddie savours the champagne, in the second he kisses the statue, in the third he sees Venus become human. There are two typologies of musical texture: in one the orchestration is based on the woodwind and a temporal organization which highlights the characters' movements and indeed gestures one by one, denoting a clownish character and commenting on Eddie's actions; the other features the main theme of *Speak Low* used almost as a *Leitmotiv*. This is played and developed by the strings, giving rise to a continuous, legato texture. Thus the two typologies display a different relationship between text and music: the first comments on the action, the second introduces another semantic plane which extends over a broader time span and with greater profundity. Here we can identify the motive of love as an absolute: as the statue reveals itself, Eddie instantly falls in love, to the notes of *Speak Low*.

One important aspect is the representation of the supernatural and thus of the statue's metamorphosis; this follows on from Eddie's kiss. The supernatural is represented in music by the use of electronic generation which, reprising the motive of *Speak Low*, provides the link between the real world of Eddie and the divine sphere of Venus. This is true in both the

TIME	ACTION	MUSIC	ORCHESTRA
6' 46"	E. & S. speaking.□ S. exits	Silence	
7' 23"	E. notices beaker, drinks	'Buffa' style, pizzicati, as commentary: follows the gestures one by one giving a clownish rendering. Use of fast swing motives.	Primarily woodwind and percussion
7' 44"	E. expresses satisfaction	Silence	
7' 46"	Puts down beaker	Return to slow swing motive	Woodwind
7' 53"	Sees statue and goes up to it, exclaims at its beauty	Motive of *Speak Low*	Strings□(+ harp)
8' 08"	Mounts stairs to approach the statue	Theme of *Tristan und Isolde*	Strings
8' 11"	Kisses the statue	Cut to silence	
8' 14"	E. turns and starts work again	Noise of thunder + *Speak Low* motive	
8' 22"	Venus caresses E.'s head; E. tells her to stay still	Silence (apart from E. humming *Speak Low* motive)	Electrophone (Theremin)
8' 32"	E. realises the statue is alive	Variation of *Speak Low* motive	Strings

Table 1. Analysis of the metamorphosis scene, from *One Touch of Venus* (1948).

first appearance of Venus (8' 14") to the notes of *Speak Low*, probably performed on the theremin, and in the second (20' 08"), in Eddie's bedroom. Here the goddess appears unexpectedly, seen in a mirror and accompanied by a long held electronic sound: the timbre is non-harmonic, static, treated with an echo effect. The presence of electronic music only in these two passages highlights the transition between the two worlds.

This use of electronic music characterises the film as an example of intersemiotic translation since it makes it possible to synchronise the electronic production with the images and because these sounds cannot be produced in a live performance. In fact the specific qualities of the electronic medium are used to achieve a new rendering of something which, with the resources available in the theatre, did not permit a sufficiently realistic representation of the action in question. The divine is also rendered by means of the symbolic element of thunder and lightning, just as, after meeting Eddie, Venus calls on heaven and Jupiter to grant her extra time on earth in order to take leave of her beloved.

This innovatory technique is accompanied by a tried and trusted modality of the language of music: allusion. When Eddie is standing on the ladder and is going up to the statue prior to the kiss, we hear a fragment of

Tristan und Isolde, specifically the fragment based on a progression that precedes the *dénouement* in the finale of the opera (Act III, scene III, *Mild und leise wie er lächelt*, Isolde). However fleeting (8' 08" - 8' 11"), this allusion to Wagner's opera reinforces the significance of the love potion and of love that is both absolute and confusing to perception.

There is a clear functional distinction between the music used to underscore and the songs; the only two songs that feature, *Speak Low* and *(Don't Look Now, but) My Heart is Showing*, take on a marked significance with respect to the episode being narrated because the construction of the meaning and transmission of the message are entrusted to the music rather than to the camera shots. Weill distinguishes the underscoring from the two songs by structural means: the songs are based on a symmetrical thematic structure with a clear, straightforward development; the underscoring serves as transition and is organized as a continuous progression of modules devoid of any symmetrical structuring.

My Fair Lady

In the case of *My Fair Lady* the passage from stage to screen was less complex: here the transformation can best be described as by analogy or indeed correspondence, because the theatrical framework, consisting in overture, intermission, entr'acte and exit music, was maintained, although it was matched to the requisites of the new framework. The narrative pace of the original was preserved, but made all the more impelling in the film version.

The opening credits appear during the overture as far as 3' 14", and the opening scene remains faithful to the beginning of the stage musical. Lerner kept the same staging practically unaltered, just as Loewe introduced a minimum of new music; it was primarily a matter of making cuts and moving around some of the musical numbers. In the Broadway version these alternated with instrumental pieces that accompanied the scene changes: Doolittle's song (n. 4. *With a Little bit of Luck*) came between scenes 2 and 3 and led into Higgins's song (n. 5. *I'm a Ordinary Man*), followed by a further scene change (scenes 3 and 4), number 5a, while the reprise of n. 4 launched scene 4 and prepared, in yet another scene change, N. 6a, Eliza's second song (n. 7. *Just You Wait*). In the Hollywood version the scenes come in the following order: scene 1 (nn. 1 – 3), scene 3 (n. 5), scenes 2 & 4 (nn. 4, 6), scene 5 (n. 7); in the film the scene changes, n. 4a and 5a, were rearranged by Loewe and joined together. This made the individual numbers less apparent and emphasised the contrast between Higgins and Alfred P. Doolittle. Above all it made the narrative pace more uniform. Eliza's desire to improve herself is presented in n. 3 as the aspiration to lead a more comfortable life, and her thoughts emerge above all as she hears the bell tolling, with Higgins expressing his considerations on her

future as a shop assistant or even as a duchess (23' 23" – 24' 22"). The scene change is clear-cut, switching to Higgins's studio, where Eliza appears to ask for lessons. In the long dialogue leading into n. 5 (*I'm a Ordinary Man*), Lerner and Loewe introduce a refinement which could not have worked on stage because of the speed of the dialogues. As Higgins seeks to convince Eliza using the lure of chocolate (33' 25"), Lerner inserts an anticipation of the motive of n. 5. This is only apparently out of place, for if this number is seen as the declaration of a dedicated researcher, a modern Pygmalion who wants nothing to do with women, at this moment the artist-creator cannot allow his 'creature' to absent herself, indeed he has to convince her to stay. Further on another citation fulfils the same function of reminiscence: as Eliza (36' 00") is having a bath we hear the motive of *Wouldn't It Be Loverly?*, creating a hidden web of pervasive motivic echoes that persists throughout the film. In fact in the film the constellation of meanings takes on a special importance with the bath glimpsed through clouds of steam together with Eliza's cries: she is unaccustomed to such habits, and this presentation alludes to the different social stations and provides a critique of the system that derives directly from Shaw's original drama.

The second significant change comes between the end of the first act and the beginning of the second and once again renders the narrative more fluid. In the film the end of the first act (1h 35' 41") coincides with Eliza leaving the house, accompanied by Higgins and Pickering, to go to the embassy ball; n. 14, *Eliza's Entrance*, plays an important role because a dialogue between Pickering and Higgins makes us aware of Higgins's creative anxiety with respect to Eliza, who promptly makes her entrance. Then come the intermission and entr'acte (1h 37' 29" – 1h 37' 48"). In the film the second act opens with the embassy ball (nn. 15, 16, 17), the test that Eliza has to pass; the chief obstacle for her is Higgins's first pupil, Karphaty, who has mastered phonetics and is a skilful debunker of impostors. Eliza's winning ways arouse widespread curiosity and Karphaty is charged with finding out who this elegant guest is and where she comes from. There follows a hasty investigation, favoured by Higgins, until Karphaty dances with Eliza and immediately goes and reports what he has discovered. This element takes on greater importance in the film, whereas in the stage version it is conveyed entirely by a musical narration: the three numbers are instrumental and in the libretto there is no dialogue nor relevant stage directions. This sequence (1h 48' 00") was created by Lerner *ex novo* for the film and takes up a lot of room. In fact there is a parallel between the gyrations of Eliza waltzing with the prince and the murmurings of the guests concerning the origins of this delicious 'creature'; with each evolution of the dancers her 'fame' spreads until it reaches the ears of Higgins, who bursts out in a hearty laugh which is decidedly out of place.

Conclusions

This use of songs points to a first difference between the two musicals regarding the musical component. Both *One Touch of Venus* and *My Fair Lady* originated as stage musicals, but diverged in the transposition to the screen. *My Fair Lady* is a transposition/adaptation (Hutcheon 2006; Cartmell-Whelehan 1999) effected by the authors of the Broadway musical, while *One Touch of Venus* is an example of intersemiotic translation (Dusi 2003; Rutelli 2004) of the original. In *My Fair Lady* the dramatic structure, comprising the evolution of the plot, rhythm, articulation and pauses of the text, is reproduced in the new screen version, whereas in *One Touch of Venus* the music is used in quite a different way with respect to the original, constituting in effect a new entity.

It is perhaps appropriate to call on new terms to define the different approaches: *My Fair Lady* could be defined as a film musical, and *One Touch of Venus* as a musical film. However, since there is a consolidated literature that uses the existing terminology, a change could give rise to misunderstandings. It is better to focus on the use of the music; the musical film relies on a musical formal conception, with the music going beyond the function of commentary; the film musical maintains the sequence of closed numbers, using transitions such as overture, entr'acte and exit music, and the plot development in three stages, exposition – vicissitudes – catastrophe (happy end) (Miceli 2009), all typical of the stage musical.

The film version of *One Touch of Venus* is an intersemiotic translation, that of *My Fair Lady* an adaptation; I adopt a similar classification with regard to the theatrical origins of both works. What determines the use of one or the other term is the function of the original music: in the first case the music has been used as a binding agent in the passage from the theatrical to the cinematographic language; and in the second, the stage musical has been taken over just as it is and adapted to the cinematographic language.

In the case of *My Fair Lady* it was possible to make an adaptation, since the work belongs in a well established tradition of film musicals (Leitch 2007, Naremore 2000), with a 'classic' dramaturgic and formal organization. In fact Lerner and Loewe chose to base their work directly on Shaw's *Pygmalion*, without diverging significantly from the literary antecedent. A different procedure was adopted for *One Touch of Venus*, in part because this was one of the first musicals to transfer from Broadway to Hollywood. In both musicals we find the appropriation of the source-text, but the outcomes are different. In intersemiotic translation the music plays a different role with respect to an adaptation; in *One Touch of Venus* the music fulfils an important role in the evolution of the narrative. *My Fair Lady* does not exploit the characteristics of the new medium (cinema): the processes of exploitation of the music are very similar to those deployed in the stage

version. *One Touch of Venus* can actually be situated at the interface (Iser 2000) of two art forms: the respective languages are characterised by cohesion, rather than one prevailing over the other. Each has its own specific nature to contribute: neither the musical nor the theatrical dimension is predominant. This fosters an innovation of the musical forms, with the introduction of electronic music, and the organization of the musical time corresponds to the audiovisual editing.

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Film details

Seiter William, *One Touch of Venus*, (USA 1948, 81')

SCRIPT: H. Kurnitz, F. Tashlin – PHOTOGRAPHY: F. Planer – SCENOGRAPHY: B. Herzbrun, E. H. Nicholson – EDITING: O. Ludwig – SPECIAL EFFECTS: D. S. Horsley – MUSIC: A. Ronell, K. Weill – CAST: A. Gardner, R. Walker, D. Haymes, E. Arden, O. San Juan – PRODUCTION: Universal.

Cukor George, *My Fair Lady* (USA 1964, 166')

SUBJECT: *Pygmalion* (G. B. Shaw) and *My Fair Lady* (A. J. Lerner, F. Loewe, produced by H. Levin) – SCRIPT: A. J. Lerner – PRODUCTION: C. Beaton – MUSIC: F. Loewe – MUSICAL SUPERVISION: A. Previn – RESTORATION: R. H. Harris, J. C. Katz – CAST: A. Hepburn, R. Harrison, S. Holloway, W. Hyde-White, G. Cooper, J. Brett – PRODUCTION: J. L. Warner.