

Ernest Newman contended that “the desire to write programme music is rooted in humanity from the very beginning.”³³ In other words, films were not the first to subordinate music to external narrative. Film composer Elmer Bernstein: “the concept of using music as an adjunct to what is basically a mixed medium is ancient. . . . Music in its inception was really adjunctive. . . . Its emergence as pure entertainment was relatively late in history.”³⁴ If film music was suspect for its supportive functions, then it was in good company.

Roy Prendergast says that appeals to program precedents are not mere self-justification; Wagner, Puccini, Verdi, and Strauss faced and solved the exact same kind of dramatic problems the film composers had. Prendergast makes a point of quoting “distinguished music historian” Donald Jay Grout. “For Wagner, [too] the function of music was to serve the ends of dramatic expression.”³⁵

Are these self-justifications, or valid connections? Both perhaps, but the real similarities should not be ignored. Parallels between program music and the conventions of classical film scoring are especially evident in Liszt’s career and compositional practice. For a period he collaborated with orchestrators to help him with his scores.³⁶ With some resemblance to the later film practice of writing variations to familiar external airs (including classical ones), we find Liszt denying Mephistopheles his own theme in the third movement of his *Faust* symphony. Instead he simply parodies the first movement’s Faust theme.³⁷ Also in regard to apparent appropriations of outside material, Liszt also freely, and sometimes modestly, composed on themes by other composers.³⁸ Finally, his technique of “transformation of themes” uncannily prefigures the conventions of Hollywood scoring, as well as providing an alternative to Eislerian claims that serious music needs space and time to properly develop musical material.³⁹

One may not like these connections, but they are not as strained or artificial as they have been made out to be. For example, in their film music primer Lang and West cite grand opera as an ideal model for appropriate film accompaniment.⁴⁰ At the time cultured film-haters may well have bristled at the presumption.