



The
UNIVERSITY
of VERMONT

DEPARTMENT OF GERMAN AND RUSSIAN

November 27, 2013

Professor D. Thomas Toner
Chairperson, Department of Music
Southwick 303
University of Vermont

Dear Tom:

It is with great pleasure and profound admiration that I report on Professor David Feurzeig's guest presentation on "Wagner and Film Music" for the Wednesday, November 13, 2013 meeting of the English 195/World Literature 117 course on "Wagner at 200: Achievement and Influence" that Tom Simone and I are co-teaching this semester. We as well as our students are so grateful for the careful preparation, excellent writing assignments, insightful observations, and stimulating class discussion that he orchestrated so expertly. I hope the following description gives at least a sample of the riches to which we were treated.

In preparation for his class visit, David had provided us with topics for writing, viewing, and reflection, namely: "How does music function in film? Why is there music in film? How does the use of music in film vary according to genre (drama, action, comedy, animation, documentary, movie musical, etc.)," requesting that we write brief, but specific answers to all these questions. Only then did he ask us to choose a 5-10 minute segment of a film drama (i.e. a story-telling film, not a musical, documentary, or other form), listen to the segment without sound, write notes to describe our viewing experience, and then turn on the sound again. Now he asked us to consider the following: "Aside from the presence of dialog, describe the difference in the viewing experience. Be as specific and vivid as you can, with references to particular moments where appropriate." The students, in turn, posted their reflections on our course's "Blackboard" page, some of which we were able to share with David before his class appearance, so that he would be aware both of their film interests (e.g., *Apocalypse Now*; *The Two Towers*; *There Will Be Blood*; *Django Unchained*) and also their analytical abilities. Thanks at least in part to his excellent questions, the students did great work here, and David made sure to give them ample opportunity to expand on their remarks during the course of the 3-hour class that ensued.

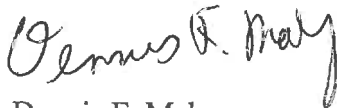
After having determined that Tom and I had made mention of, but not already shown in class *What's Opera Doc?*, your colleague made use of this Warner Brothers cartoon as a light-hearted "overture" to the major theme of his presentation: film music represents the popularization of Wagner's concept of "Gesamtkunstwerk" in a medium that was to become the 20th century's most popular medium of entertainment. Giving some background on why and how music was employed during the so-called "silent"-

film era, as well as lucid explanations of what used to be called “source” and “background” music before film theorists came up with the terms “diegetic” and “non-diegetic,” he then proceeded to illustrate the distinctions between music embedded in film narrative, music used as “underscoring,” and the absence of music in the interest of providing an aura of “realism” (as opposed to the “operatic” film scores of Erich Korngold) with the help of well-chosen clips from films such as *Eyes Wide Shut*, *The Sea Hawk*, *Lifeboat*, *Dr. Strangelove*, and *Fail Safe*.

Initially, Tom Simone and I had suggested to your colleague that he speak for 50 to 75 minutes, as we did not want to take advantage of his willingness to visit our class and were well aware that later in the evening he had the responsibility of supervising a concert in the Music Recital Hall. Both he and the students, however, were so enthusiastically engaged after the first half of our 3-hour class that we invited him to continue to share with us his observations about film music as “Affect” (using as a parodistic counterexample a clip from *The Shining* set to “family music”) and music as “Leitmotif” in movies such as *Jaws*, *Psycho*, and *M*. Had there been ‘world enough and time’ to discuss the renaissance of operatic film scores in movies such as *Star Wars*, the *Harry Potter* films, and the *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* trilogies, the direct influence of Wagner’s compositional practices and pervasive use of leitmotifs in film music would have become even more evident. But – following the model of analysis that David had provided for us – at the beginning of the succeeding Wednesday’s class we investigated the use of film music as “Affect” and “Leitmotif” in segments from Fritz Lang’s *Siegfried* and Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, which amply demonstrated the pedagogic skill of your colleague.

In reading the information on your department’s Home Page so as to be better able to introduce David Feurzeig, I had noticed yet another connection to Wagner: his “Songs of Love and Protest” received their 2006 world premiere in Dresden’s Semper Opera House, where Wagner conducted the first performances of his early operas. How fortunate we are at UVM to have in David Feurzeig a noted composer as well as an expert teacher!

Sincerely,



Dennis F. Mahoney
Wolfgang and Barbara Mieder “Green and Gold”
Professor of German and
President, International Novalis Society

cc. David Feurzeig ✓
Tom Simone
Antonio Cepeda-Benito