Music Cue Archetypes in the Film Scores of Elmer Bernstein

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Section 1: Introduction

I first became interested in Elmer Bernstein when I taught the course Music in Film for the first time in 2006. As I marched through the history, I kept finding examples of great film scores written by him, scores I had long known of but never linked to the same composer. I admire the range of Bernstein's music, that the same composer could write one of the finest Biblical epic scores almost simultaneously with one of the first really fully integrated jazz scores, from the biggest post-romantic orchestral cues to the most intimate chamber music. I also admire Bernstein's range in terms of film genre. So many composers seem to get typecast, and Bernstein seemed determined to resist this. Bernstein's work for the Composer's and Lyricist's Guild, his fight to preserve old film scores, and his advocacy for the rights of film composers also impress me.

My goal here is to examine traces of silent-film cue archetypes in Bernstein's scores. This goal is complicated by the fact that Bernstein thought of himself as quite removed from the old movie-scoring practice. He considered himself a part of a new generation that had developed a more sophisticated approach to scoring than the pre-World-War II generation—and with some reason. Still, I will argue that the traces are there.

The three film cue types that I'm looking at are what J.S. Zamecnik called the "Festival March", then a broader category I call "exotica", and finally, the typical main theme for the western.

Section 2: Marches

The very first cue in the first volume of the Sam Fox Moving Picture Music collection by J.S. Zamecnik is something he called a “Festival March.” Here's my rendition:
Ex. Zamecnik's "Festival March".

Elmer Bernstein wrote a number of great marches. In fact, I can't think of another film composer with a greater record of compelling marches, used in a variety of situations. Probably his most famous is from 1963's The Great Escape:

Ex. MP3 excerpt from The Great Escape.

To my ears, there is a remote similarity to Zamecnik, but for my present purposes, this cue is not as interesting as a march heard in a different context. The Great Escape is, after all, a military movie, and you would expect to hear some sort of march—just as you do in his movies Zulu Dawn, The Great Santini, even Stripes. When you hear a march in a non-military film, I would argue that it’s serving a purpose more similar to that heard in the silent era.

Here’s a clip from the Ivan Reitman comedy Meatballs, from 1979. In this scene, our protagonists from the middle-class Camp Northstar, led by Bill Murray, are being defeated in a
basketball game by their snooty rivals from Camp Mohawk. The cue starts as a kind of stinger, and Bernstein manages to move from this march of triumph to the main song he wrote for the movie, to a quote of the Hallelujah Chorus, all within a minute or so:

**Ex.** video clip from *Meatballs*.

**Section 3: Exotica**

There are several more Bernstein marches I could play for you, but I want to move on to the next cue type. One of the most amusing set of cues in Zamecnik's collections are the pieces with names like "Hindu" or "Oriental Veil Dance," which of course sound nothing like the music from the culture they're supposedly emulating. This is part of their charm. Here is an excerpt from the Mont Alto Film Orchestra's recording of Zamecnik's "Oriental Veil Dance":

![Oriental Veil Dance](image)

**Ex.** Zamecnik's "Oriental Veil Dance".

I am grouping these cues together in a broad category called "exotica". Again, I will argue that although the music is obviously different, these are not really that removed from silent era practice.
Like any versatile film composer, Elmer Bernstein found himself writing any number of cues with an exotic character. Many of these, of course, were for movies set in exotic locales. I chose the following segment from Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* because you can hear the exotic music first diegetically on Nefretiri's barge, then in underscoring—sinuous and chromatic, associated like a lot of exotic music with the dangerous sexuality of a woman. I also chose this because it has one of the worst pieces of dialogue in any of DeMille's films. Included is my transcription of Nefretiri's chromatic leitmotif, but in a different key:

Ex. Nefretiri's theme, in a video clip from *Ten Commandments*.

But once again, I would argue we see more evidence of the silent-era approach in the exotic cues that occur in a non-exotic setting—and once again, we can find some of best examples of this in the many comedies Bernstein scored. The next two clips are from the 1968 Peter Sellers comedy *I Love You, Alice B. Toklas*. This first one is the very opening of the film. It's interesting that already by 1968, the sitar is associated with hippies and general weirdness. (This is only months after Sgt. Pepper's was released, and just a couple of years after the sitar made its way into the collective consciousness with "Norwegian Wood" and subsequent British Invasion songs). I like how Bernstein affects our understanding of this conversation through musical commentary:

Ex. video clip from *I Love You, Alice B. Toklas*.

In this movie, Peter Sellers plays Irving Fine, the ultimate square, who gets seduced into hippiedom because he was given a groovy van as a rental car by his repair shop, to his chagrin—and via the allure of a free-spirited hippie chick. In the next scene, Sellers has just rescued her from what he perceived to be a dangerous situation, and has offered to let her sleep in his living room. Even though he has been engaged for years to a respectable woman, he is visibly tempted by his houseguest. I'm interested in the way Bernstein juxtaposes the hippie music, represented by the sitar, with Peter Sellers' more conventional music, first strings, then a nervous piano and conga tune, with more connections with jazz but also some atonality. This is also interesting to me because just a decade and a half earlier, jazz represented youth and danger in the film scores Bernstein helped pioneer. The meaning of jazz as signifier of cultural status had already shifted by this time. At the beginning of this clip, Sellers has just taken a deep breath from his asthma inhaler, and is confused by the sounds of inhalation coming from the other room:
Section 4: Western "Open Country" Cues

Even though Bernstein was admirable for his resistance to being typecast, he did go through periods where he seemed to be the go-to composer for certain film genres. The John Landis comedies of the late-70s and early 80s is one such period; the run of smaller independent and foreign films at the end of his career was another. And if we look at his total output, it's clear that he wrote more Westerns than any other genre—around twenty films, depending on how you count them. This is second only to Dmitri Tiomkin among first-rank film composers. Interestingly, Bernstein said in interviews that he found Westerns difficult to score. He said, "The western is a highly formulated kind of thing in which the characters and situations are most familiar. . . . The similarities in these kinds of films do not lend themselves readily to original musical interpretation."

Western scores call for some similar musical treatment as exotic cues and marches: the music plays an important role in establishing the setting, and like marches, there's also inevitably an element of triumph. Bernstein excelled at scoring westerns, particularly the broad, post-romantic heroic theme music. The most famous of these is the main theme for The Magnificent Seven, from 1960. These themes are often heard as the main titles, but not always; subsequently, they might occur as part of a travel montage, heard against sweeping VistaVision long shots of the western landscape. Here's an excerpt from this movie, from the end of the film’s exposition. Bernstein labeled this cue "The Journey":

Ex. video clip from The Magnificent Seven.

The question, then, is how this compares with the music heard in Westerns in the silent era. This was one of the surprises, for me. The generic western cue that Zamecnik wrote, for example, is miles away from The Magnificent Seven:
Ex. Zamecnik’s “Cowboy” theme.

Also probably heard in these films was a cue like this next one, for the inevitable appearance of the Native American menace:
To be fair, I doubt these were heard as main titles music, but I still thought I'd better look into this further. I've known for several years about a valuable collection of manuscripts held at the Chicago Public Library, the Balaban and Katz Theater Orchestra Collection, materials donated from one of the great silent movie houses in Chicago. What’s interesting about this collection is that it contains not only several different generic cue sheets from the likes of Zamecnik and Erno Rapee, but also those original scores written directly for films, as became increasingly common in the later silent era. I've enjoyed looking at these in the past, because they provide a valuable insight into the actual practice. I've seen cue sheets written for films, for example, with extra staves taped in, suggesting that the practicing musicians discovered over time that a particular scene needed some extra yardage.

In this collection I found not a single score that was written for a particular silent western. We know that westerns were one of the most popular of genres in the silent era, but apparently, the generic cues—or some variety of improvised music—were considered adequate for a majority of these films. I did manage to dig up some further generic cues from different
printed collections, such as the *Sam Fox Cinema Impressions*. This one is called "Wild and Woolly":

**WILD AND WOOLLY**

(Characteristic Western Allegro & R.T.)

Ex. from "Wild and Woolly".

And this next one, for scenes involving a "Dashing Cowboy." This was composed by "Morris Aborn," actually a pseudonym of Maurice Baron, a major composer of silent film scores:
Ex. "Dashing Cowboy".

Here, I have a copy of the drum part. I was amused to find the sound effects listed for the musicians, like "horse hooves" and "whip".

Here is a novelty song extolling "Harriet", who is handy with a lariat:
Ex. "Harriet".

Finally, "Round Up":

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Ex. "Round Up".
So, how did we get from "Wild and Woolly" to Bernstein in just a generation? After all, Magnificent Seven is closer, chronologically, to the end of the silent era than we are to Magnificent Seven. I don't think there's a single answer, but I think we can make some tentative observations about the emergence of this cue archetype.

Section 5: Traits of the Bernstein Western Theme

First of all, what music ingredients are we talking about? Bernstein was asked in several interviews about the genesis of the Magnificent Seven theme, and he emphasized that the rhythm was primary. In one interview, he says, "The rhythmic underpinning—that was the important thing. I got that early on. . . . I thought, this is really exciting, you know? The tune itself . . . was much less interesting than the rhythmic input, and I think that's what people really remember."

I think Bernstein's too modest about the tune, though: it's certainly memorable. This melody has that common trait of western main themes, the wide leaps, which can be traced back to Copland and before (more on Copland in a moment). Here is my transcription of this great theme:

Ex. Magnificent Seven main titles.

Here's another Bernstein theme, where you can hear several similarities to the theme for Magnificent Seven, such as the wide melodic intervals:

Ex. from 1965's Sons of Katie Elder.
This intervallic quality is only one ingredient of these melodies. It's partly the combination of this sweeping, broad melody over the supercharged, galloping rhythmic ostinato underneath, which we hear in several of Bernstein's western themes—the melody carried by the upper strings, rhythmically augmented. Meanwhile, some of the rhythmic energy of the ostinato seems to infect the melody as well, so that we have a fair amount of syncopation, especially at the start of the phrases. Usually, this syncopation takes the form of tied eighth-note figures. The rhythmic energy is prevalent in many of Bernstein's western themes:

Ex. from *Hallelujah Trail* (1965) (Main Theme Part A).

Ex. from *Hallelujah Trail* (1965) (Main Theme Part B).

*Magnificent Seven* doesn't have these eighth-note rhythms, but you do see more rhythmic action at the start of the phrases, in general, than later on. And this trait holds over to many of his western themes.

There's also one interesting harmonic maneuver in the *Magnificent Seven* theme, the striking move to the ♭VII in the seventh measure. I call attention to it because we do hear harmonic moves of similar nature in other Bernstein western scores, a kind of modal borrowing.

**Section 6: Evolution of the Western Main Theme**

Where did this musical language come from? The first thing to note is that *Magnificent Seven* wasn't Bernstein's first western--depending on whether you count the incidental music for the TV show *Gunsmoke*, it was his fifth—and we hear Bernstein developing this language over time.

In one of these, the main theme to *Drango* (1957), you hear a quasi-pentatonic quality, vaguely Native-American, and some of that rhythmic energy, but he hasn't quite achieved the power and memorability of *Magnificent Seven*:
Ex. from Drango.

Here is the main theme from a western that Bernstein was particularly proud of, the Henry Fonda film *the Tin Star* from 1957:

Ex. from *The Tin Star*.

I like the striking harmonic motion (V/V) and the mixed meter toward the end. The 5/4 time continues on into the first scene, evolving into a "trouble motive" involving a falling minor third, something you also hear in *Magnificent Seven*.

So we can see that Bernstein was gradually developing his western theme characteristics. We can also see some of these traits in other westerns leading up to Bernstein's great scores of the sixties. The first influence to note is, of course, Aaron Copland. Bernstein met Copland when he was a child, and always acknowledged Copland's influence in interviews. When asked about where he got the idea for the orchestral color of his western themes, for example, Bernstein said, "To be perfectly honest about it, a lot of it came from Aaron Copland. I always credit him with having invented American music." And in another interview, he said, "You do hear [Copland] in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and in *The Magnificent Seven*. It's sort of a foursquare, a very American kind of thing." He also credited Copland with inspiring some of his rhythmic ideas.

Musicologist Neil Lerner talks about Copland's influence on film music in general in his *Musical Quarterly* article "Copland's Music of Wide Open Spaces: Surveying the Pastoral Trope in Hollywood." He notes in particular Copland's use of successive melodic perfect fourths,
observing that "Copland's music has become closely associated with these images of wide open spaces and, by extension, the limitless possibilities of the so-called American Dream."

But it wasn't just Copland. Other film composers were groping toward this sound. There are some 8000 westerns in Hollywood history, and I don't pretend to have watched even 1%, but a handful of significant films leading up to Bernstein's breakthrough might include *Stagecoach* (1939), *Shane* (1952), *High Noon* (1952), and *The Big Country* (1958). John Ford's *Stagecoach* was a popular movie in that great movie year of 1939, significant for the careers of both John Ford and John Wayne. The score, in typical Hollywood fashion in the Golden Age, was put together by several composers, led by Gerard Carbonara. The main theme is an arrangement of an old cowboy tune known alternately as "Oh Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie," and “The Trail to Mexico.” In this tune you can hear that combination of front-loaded rhythm followed by sustained notes. Unlike most of Bernstein's westerns, however, this tune has a quasi-pentatonic quality, and has no modal borrowing that I can hear:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Ex. from 1939's } \textit{Stagecoach}. \\
\text{Interestingly, later on in the main titles, we do hear that arranging trick we encounter in Bernstein's music, with the fast ostinato rhythm followed by an augmented version of the melody in the violins. And something like this occurs later in the film as well. You even hear the melodic fifths in the background.} \\
\text{Ex. MP3 of } \textit{Stagecoach}, \text{ part 2.} \\
\text{Victor Young's score for } \textit{Shane}, \text{ from 1952, on the other hand, seems to me more pastoral than the Bernstein westerns—although you do hear a quasi-pentatonic quality, and that same front-loaded rhythm followed by long notes:}
\end{align*}
\]
Ex. from *Shane*.

But in Jerome Moross’ score to *The Big Country*, from 1958, you can hear more Bernstein elements. What I notice, in particular, is the rhythmic energy of the theme, in syncopated eighth notes, and that striking i-VII in the fourth measure; you also hear it in the B section of the theme:

Ex. from 1958’s *The Big Country* (A section of main theme).

Ex. from 1958’s *The Big Country* (B section of main theme).

You can also hear some of these elements in the western scores that followed *The Magnificent Seven*, such as Alfred Newman's *How the West Was Won* from 1962—lots of wide intervals, intense rhythmic energy, and that i-VII again. While this is certainly a great theme, it's hard not to hear Bernstein's influence on the older composer:
Ex. from 1962's *How the West Was Won*.

Section 7: Conclusion

It seems to me that some of the elements of the archetypal "open country" theme were coalescing in the 1950s before Bernstein started in on these, but we also have to acknowledge what he innovated. I want to quote from the scholar David Wishart, who in the liner notes to the *Elmer Bernstein* CD collection, says that *The Magnificent Seven* immediately established "a new symphonic benchmark for western movies. This was scoring altogether more rhythmically dynamic and demanding than Hollywood had witnessed before in a western setting." In a way, Bernstein established a new cue archetype with these scores.

I do wonder, though, if we wouldn't think of this as the pinnacle of western music if it weren't for the fact that *Magnificent Seven* was repeated so much in Marlboro commercials, in subsequent sequels, imitated in parodies of westerns—and because just a few years later, Ennio Morricone would redefine the western sound so dramatically, as though film composers could go no further in the Bernstein direction.

Ex. MP3 of *the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966).