The Western Film Scores of Elmer Bernstein

Chapter 3: What’s So Magnificent About *The Magnificent Seven*?

By the time Bernstein composed the score for *The Magnificent Seven* in 1960, he had become one of the leading young composers in Hollywood, averaging between three and four movies per year. He had written the score for one of the greatest Biblical epics of the Fifties, and had achieved some acclaim (and the first of his fourteen Academy Award nominations) for *The Man With the Golden Arm* (1955). Despite this growing reputation and his strong scores for five previous Western films and several Western television episodes, Bernstein was not the first choice as composer for *Magnificent Seven*, and, according to music critic David Wishart, had to “lobby hard” for the assignment.¹ Bernstein’s score, of course, has become recognized as one of the finest Western film scores in film history, ranked higher than any other western on the AFI list of top 25 films scores.² As Wishart says, it was this film that established “a new symphonic benchmark for western movies.”³ Filmmaker Lawrence Kasdan says simply, "Elmer Bernstein's score is the greatest Western score there ever was."⁴

¹ David Wishart, “Elmer Bernstein 1922–2994: The Man and his Music,” linter notes to *The Essential Elmer Bernstein Film Music Collection* compact disc (Silva Screen Records, 2005), 3. At least one other composer, Alex North, turned down the job (Kathryn Kalinak, “'How . . . Were We Going To Make A Picture That's Better Than This?' Crossing Borders from East to West in *Rashomon* and *The Outrage*,” in *Music in the Western: Notes from the Frontier*, ed. Kathryn Kalinak (New York: Routledge, 2012), 175.
³ Wishart, 3.
remember this score partly because the film itself has remained popular (it was one of the most frequently broadcast movies on network television), partly because the music was heard so frequently as a part of Marlboro commercials through much of the 1960s, and partly because the film and the music have been copied and parodied continually over the past half century. Still, it is hard to think of another film score that so closely approaches a film music archetype for any genre as Magnificent Seven does for westerns.

And yet, because both film and score have become so iconic, it is easy to overstate the importance of the film score in the history of Westerns. Mariana Whitmer argues convincingly that it was Jerome Moross’ score to The Big Country (1958) that really set the standard for Westerns, and certain traits of Magnificent Seven’s music are evident in Bernstein’s 1950s film scores. Bernstein also acknowledged his obvious debt to Copland in more than one interview: “You do hear him in To Kill a Mockingbird and in The Magnificent Seven. It's sort of a foursquare, a very American kind of thing.” Thus, Bernstein created an iconic Western score primarily by assembling particular features drawn from other composers and other works, composers and styles: Jerome Moross, Aaron Copland, mariachi music, and the history of film music that Bernstein knew so well. His is a kind of “magpie genius,” that consists in knowing just how to assemble pre-

existing material. Bernstein’s music also works on that fundamental level that all film
music must: it helps add intensity to the film, clarifies the intentions and roles of the
characters, helps with minor issues of pacing, and directs our sympathies and allegiances.

Some film scores can stand alone as music, work well independent of their original
context (and sometimes transcend the original film). Other scores only really work in the
context of their film, but are a key ingredient to their films’ success (if often ignored by
film critics). This last is the best measure of a film score’s quality, but *The Magnificent
Seven* is a rare example of a film score that does both.

**Kurosawa and Sturges**

*The Magnificent Seven* is a remake of Akira Kurosawa’s film *The Seven Samurai* (the
film’s title was actually translated as *The Magnificent Seven* when it was first released in
the United States in 1955; the original Japanese title is *Shichinin No Samurai*; music was
by Fumio Hayasaka). While the Japanese original was not a commercial success in the
U.S. at first, it was well respected by some of the tastemakers of Hollywood. The film is
considered one of the greatest films in Kurosawa’s oeuvre, if not in all Japanese cinema,
where Kurosawa pioneered new camera techniques and perfected his storytelling
craftsmanship.\(^8\) Kurosawa, who had found international acclaim when *Rashomon* won the
highest prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1951, was well known to have been
influenced by John Ford, and the idea of reversing the influence and remaking it as a

\(^8\) It was in this film, for example, that he hit upon the idea of using multiple cameras at
different distances and angles simultaneously, to heighten the realism and energy of the
action. See Akira Kurosawa, interview, in *Akira Kurosawa Interviews*, ed. Bert Cardullo
(Jackson: Univ. of Mississippi Press, 2008), 27.
western seems to have occurred to more than one Hollywood figure. By mid-1958 the project became attached to the actor Yul Brynner, then at the height of his career.

A lawyer for Yul Brynner approached the Mirisch independent production company about the *Seven Samurai* idea, and Walter Mirisch took the concept to director John Sturges. Sturges had made a name for himself as an action director, and immediately signed on to the project. A new script was created in short order and the cast put together quickly. Sturges was in a rush to get the film cast before a planned strike by the Screen Actors Guild over residuals for television rebroadcasts. (They beat the deadline by nine hours). As it happened, the cast would prove to be one of the film’s greatest strengths. As Kathryn Kalinak says, “imagine signing Steve McQueen, Charles Bronson, James Coburn, and Robert Vaughn before they became major stars. Yul Brynner already had his Oscar.” David S. Tomkins notes the peculiar appeal of Brynner as the star: “Before *The Magnificent Seven*, no one had ever seen a bald gunslinger with an indeterminate foreign accent and a vaguely Asian face. In fact, Brynner’s presence in *The Magnificent Seven* makes what might otherwise have been a rather solipsistic Western interested in reflecting on the genre’s past into something much more global.” One reason the film

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9 See *Guns for Hire: the Making of the Magnificent Seven.*
11 Lovell, 199.
12 Kalinack, 173.
was shot in Mexico was that this made the film a “foreign” production, and thus not in technical violation of the SAG strike.\footnote{Lovell, 195. It should be noted that both Sturges and Walter Mirisch were friends of labor and supportive of the strike in principle, even if they worked around it in this case.}

The plots of both *Magnificent Seven* and the original are simple in outline: a village of poor farmers is being harassed by a group of bandits that steals their food year after year. The villagers decide to fight back and hire a band of mercenaries to help them resist. After a number of setbacks, the villagers and their hired protectors triumph, but not without a high cost of bloodshed and violence. Both plots are enriched by the complexities of the relationships. Will the band of seven hold together or disintegrate, as the odds against them add up and the potential reward diminishes? Are they truly aligned with the villagers, or are they actually more like the bandits? And will the villagers overcome their distrust of the mercenaries, or betray them and return to the status quo in order to avoid further violence?

But there are as many differences as similarities between the films. Despite the clear influence of the Western on Kurosawa, these are different film genres, and bring different associations with them. *The Seven Samurai* is an example of a jidaigeki film, a historical film with certain genre expectations related to, but not identical with the Western.\footnote{Yoshimoto, 212ff.} Many critics have observed that *The Magnificent Seven* stands at the crossroads between the traditional Western of the Studio Era and the revisionist Westerns of Sergio Leone and others,\footnote{Guns for Hire.} but of course it is still a Western, with an aging hero negotiating the lines between civilization and lawlessness. *The Seven Samurai*, with an
hour more of running time, is a subtler film with more moral ambiguity and generally more depth of characterization.\textsuperscript{17} Still, those who compare \textit{Magnificent Seven} unfavorably to the Japanese original sometimes miss the point: that this is a different film genre aimed at a different audience, with different goals in mind.

\textbf{The Magnificent Seven}

The movie begins not with the establishment of the hero, as many westerns do, but with the essential conflict. The bandit leader Calvera, played by Eli Wallach, rides into the village with his band of forty thieves and demands food for the winter. He leaves, promising to return, after demonstrating his force. The villagers confer and decide to send emissaries to the U.S./Mexican border to purchase guns in order to protect themselves. In the original screenplay, the villagers hired the gunmen directly, but a Mexican censor assigned to the set insisted that this made the Mexicans look weak and must be changed. In the final version of the film, it is Yul Brynner’s character, Chris Adams, who suggests hiring men instead of guns, saying, “nowadays, men are cheaper than guns.”\textsuperscript{18}

Upon arriving in the border town, the village emissaries witness Chris and Vin (Steve McQueen’s character) protecting an Indian’s right to be buried in the town cemetery, thus establishing the moral certainty of our heroes, and approach him for help.

\textsuperscript{17} For a good discussion of the differences between the two films, see Joseph L. Anderson, “When the Twain Meet: Hollywood’s Remake of \textit{The Seven Samurai},” \textit{Film Quarterly}, Vol. 15, No. 3, Special Issue on Hollywood (Spring, 1962), 55–58. The Hollywood version has also generated some controversy, then and now, in its depiction of U.S./Mexican relations, with some critics going so far as reading into the film a kind of jingoistic endorsement of U.S. cold war interventionism; see Richard Slotkin, "Gunfighters and Green Berets: \textit{The Magnificent Seven} and the Myth of Counter-Insurgency," \textit{Radical History Review} 44 (1989), 65–90, among others. Available at: http://works.bepress.com/richard_slotkin/1.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Guns for Hire}.
in securing guns. Once the plan switches to hiring mercenaries, Chris begins the process of recruiting the rest of the seven. After the sardonic Vin, who becomes his right-hand man, these include: the greedy Harry (Brad Dexter), who believes to the end that the villagers are hiding a secret stash of gold; Bernardo O’Reilly (Charles Bronson), half-Mexican, half-Irish, the tough fighter with a surprising sentimental side; the laconic Britt (James Coburn), a fast draw with a knife (a character type that will be reprised in different forms in the sequels and the television series); the Southern dandy Lee (Robert Vaughn), on the run and experiencing a crisis of confidence; and the impulsive young Chico (Horst Buchholz), who turns out to be fresh off a Mexican farm himself. Each member of the Seven is given at least one establishing scene. Elmer Bernstein later commented in several interviews that this exposition part of the film was “necessarily slow” and saw it as his job to infuse this part of the film with energy, in order to keep the viewer engaged.19 “If you look at it without music, you’d be surprised how slow-moving it is,” said Bernstein. “I realized immediately there that the function of the music would be to get on top of the film, drive it along.”20

After the Seven arrive in the village, they begin training the farmers in the use of weapons. At first, the villagers hide their women from the Seven, but Chico discovers them and eventually falls in love with one of them, Petra (Rosenda Moneros).

Meanwhile, Bernardo begins to form an attachment to the children of the village. Eventually, Calvera returns with his men, and is surprised to find Chris and the others

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20 Quoted in Lovell, 208.
protecting the village. After a brief skirmish, Calvera leaves, and there is hope that our heroes might have scared him off. But Chico, sneaking into Calvera’s camp, learns that the bandits are starving and cannot survive without the village’s food. Chico brings this news back to the Seven, and they prepare to make a raid on Calvera’s camp. When they arrive there, they find the camp empty. Returning to the village, they learned that some of the frightened villagers had betrayed them to Calvera. The Seven are escorted out of town. But instead of leaving, the Seven regroup and return to the village for a final showdown. Only Chris, Vin, and Chico survive, but Calvera is killed and the village protected. In the end, Chico decides to give up his guns and stay with Petra, and Chris and Vin depart together.

**Bernstein’s Score**

After considering other composers, John Sturges suggested he and Mirisch hire Bernstein. Sturges and Bernstein had never worked together, but this would turn into one of the happiest working relationships of Bernstein’s career (they would go on to work together on five more films, including *The Great Escape* and *Hallelujah Trail*). In an interview with Cynthia Millar in 2002, Bernstein recalled:

> John loved music. I think he would have happily stripped all the dialogue out of all the movies he ever made. John had a wonderful way of working. . . . He wouldn’t let me read the script. . . . He took me into his office and told me the story. He was a great storyteller. When you walked out of that office, you knew exactly what to do. You knew what to do because of the way he told the story.

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21 Mirisch, 112; *Guns for Hire.*
John loved what he did and was very trusting. Very often he didn't even come to the recordings. That was a great and inspiring relationship.\(^{22}\)

For his part, Sturges understood the need for the director to make room for music in the film. He later recalled, “The thing is, I gave him a chance to play music. I learned that from [film director George] Stevens and from cutting pictures. When you’re doing a picture like *The Magnificent Seven*, you have to pace the music.”\(^{23}\) When Sturges heard the music for the first time, he immediately knew “that was one of the best scores ever written—just brilliant!” and was shocked that United Artists refused to release a soundtrack album.\(^{24}\)

Bernstein’s most important task was to illustrate and amplify the distinctions between the three main groups of characters: the Seven, the bandits, and the villagers. The Seven are linked to the theme of the Main Titles, a broad melody with leaping intervals, à la Copland:

![Example 3.1: Main Theme to *The Magnificent Seven*](image)

Example 3.1: Main Theme to *The Magnificent Seven*

The music for Calvera, in contrast, is carping and unstable, like the character himself. Written in minor, rather than major, in triple meter rather than duple, the theme


\(^{23}\) Lovell, 210.

\(^{24}\) Lovell, 209–10. In 1966, United Artists did release a soundtrack album for the first sequel. The original soundtrack was finally released on CD in 1998.
is also centered on the fifth of the tonic triad, the least stable member of the chord. The constant grace notes add to the sense of instability, as does—especially—the descending minor third at the end of the first phrase. This creates a sharp dissonance, a triad with a raised third against the implied minor third of the harmony. This descending third acts as a kind of demented, inverted form of the opening ascending third of our heroes’ theme:

Example 3.2: Calvera’s theme.

As Kevin Hughes observes, in Calvera’s theme, "Elmer ingeniously uses intervals and melodic lines vaguely reminiscent of flamenco music—only arced up in a menacing way." Later on, the theme evolves into an assertive falling gesture—once again with that inverted m3 at the start of the second and fourth measures:

Example 3.3: Calvera’s theme, part 2.

The villagers, by contrast, have gentle music in parallel thirds, reminiscent of Mariachi music, stepwise, simple and repetitive, played by flutes over a strumming guitar (first heard when the village emissaries arrive in the border town to seek guns, DVD time 9:34):

While the main themes for the heroes and villains are reused in each of the sequels even as the actors and characters change, we hear several different melodies representing the villagers, both in *Magnificent Seven* and beyond. This theme returns, but is sometimes in duple meter rather than triple, and often is replaced by another, similar, mariachiesque tune. Here is an example of one variant of this tune (DVD time 1:05:25):

Example 3.5: Village pastoral variant.

And here is the villagers’ theme from *Return of the Magnificent Seven*:

Example 3.6: Village pastoral from *Return of the Magnificent Seven*.

In this category can be placed three more themes using similar orchestral color. The first of these is played on a solo Spanish guitar, associated with the village’s women, with Petra in particular, and then with the budding romance between Petra and Chico:
Example 3.7: Petra’s theme.

The second is a quasi-Flamenco theme, first heard when Chico mock-fights a bull, right before he meets Petra for the first time. Bernstein’s music—labeled “Toro” in the original cue sheet—is brilliantly comic in this scene. Bernstein found uses for it in each of the sequels:

Example 3.8: Quasi-flamenco music.

The third is a solo trumpet, heard in lighter moments, such as the following example from *The Return of the Magnificent Seven*:

Example 3.9: Mexican trumpet melody from *Return of the Magnificent Seven*.

In general, Bernstein’s writing for the villagers is one of the most charming aspects of this score, tapping into the growing popularity of Mexican music in the 1950s and 1960s. But it is the distinctiveness of these three theme categories—the Seven, the bandits, and the villagers—that is one of the key ingredients to the film’s success. One of the points of the film is the tension inherent in the ambiguity of this triangulation. The Seven are in opposition to the bandits, but most have questionable histories (and in more
than one case, are operating outside the law). Calvera and his crew are the obvious villains, and yet Calvera sees himself as virtuous, a paternal figure to the villagers—and yet simultaneously identifies with Chris and the rest of the Seven. Eli Wallach plays the role of Calvera with such relish, he is at times almost appealing (unlike, for example, Bart Bogardus in *The Tin Star*). “Wallach's Calvera [is] one of the genre's most ambiguous villains,” says James Lovell. “Instead of a one-note sadist, the bandit chief is an oddly sympathetic rogue, a seriocomic paterfamilias who craves the company of his peers.”

Not all the villagers support the hiring of the Seven; they hide their women from them; and toward the end of the film, some actually betray the Seven and choose to restore their vassalage. In these themes, we can see traces of the other group’s music, but for the most part Bernstein chooses to use musical means to heighten the distinction between these groups, rather than accentuate this ambiguity.

**The Main Titles**

The famous theme that we associate with the Seven is not presented right at the start of the film. Bernstein leads us into it, and by doing so provides himself with more musical material to work with later in the film (and in the sequels). Delaying the arrival of the famous theme also heightens our anticipation of it, especially on subsequent hearings. In all, we can divide the main theme into five distinct segments, followed by a relaxed version of the theme and the a related theme later in the film that I call the “Secondary Main Theme”

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26 Lovell, 215.
The first of these segments is a series of five chords, marcato—an exclamatory wake-up call in the key of E-Flat Major—moving at the fast clip of about 180 B.P.M.

Like the similar E-Flat Major chords at the start of Beethoven’s *Eroica* Symphony, these triads seem to operate outside the main musical discourse of the score:

Example 3.10: The opening two measures of *The Magnificent Seven*.

This is immediately followed by a repeated staccato E-Flat in the strings, leading to the second part of the main theme, a wandering figure that foreshadows some of the strong ascending intervals of the main melody. The E-Flat pedal point is maintained throughout, adding tension and anticipation:

Example 3.11: Second section of the main theme of *The Magnificent Seven*.

This bit, lightly syncopated, leads directly to the third segment, more intense and emphatic, with our first taste of the mixed meter that is such a trademark of Bernstein’s film scores, here and elsewhere:

Example 3.12: Third section of the main theme of *The Magnificent Seven*.

Another trademark of Bernstein’s heard here is the major seventh chord, sometimes with an added ninth. This chord is heard even more prominently in the next segment of
the theme, the famous series of chords that form the rhythmic backbone to the main theme, outlining the I-IV-V chords in E-Flat Major, sharply syncopated:

Example 3.13: Fourth section of the main theme of *The Magnificent Seven*.

Bernstein said on more than one occasion that he thought it was this rhythm that mattered, not so much the melody that followed. “The rhythmic underpinning—that was the important thing. I got that early on. I remember being very thrilled when I got that. I thought, this is really exciting, you know? The tune itself I thought was much less interesting than the rhythmic input, and I think that’s what people really remember.”

When the main melody finally comes in, it is in juxtaposition to this ostinato:

Example 3.14: Ostinato combined with the main theme of *The Magnificent Seven*.

This is the first of three key ingredients that make this theme so effective, the combination of these two rhythms: the faster rhythm underneath, with the slower, longer-held notes on top. This creates a rhythmic counterpoint that perfectly symbolizes the classic visual *topos* of the Western: the long shot of the heroes on their horses in the

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27 Elmer Bernstein, interviewed in *Guns for Hire*.
lower part of the frame with the open Western landscape surrounding them, a musical expression of the two components of scale. This combination of the two beat levels, or tactuses, can be taken to symbolize the two levels of meaning in the plot. The heroes are saving the village, but their work takes on larger meaning—the restoration of law and order, a return to the older ways when gunmen wielded more authority, and the potential for personal redemption for each of the Seven. This idea of the two simultaneous meters was not original to Bernstein—we hear examples of it as far back as *Stagecoach* (1939, music by Gerard Carbonara)—but it is the first time it is combined with the other key ingredients.

The second of these ingredients is the use of the subtonic, or bVII, first heard in the seventh measure of the main theme:

Example 3.15: The main theme, with the bVII indicated.

Again, this idea was not original with Bernstein. Modal inflection had long been associated with Western scores, perhaps as a residue from the silent era when music directors used or emulated cowboy songs when accompanying films. The specific use of the bVII has been heard so frequently, it has become almost a Western film-score cliché (probably due to the popularity of *The Magnificent Seven*). As associated with the Western, it probably originated with Jerome Moross in the theme song to the TV show
Wagon Train (1957), where the move from $b$VII to V is heard fleetingly at the end of a phrase; but more prominently in The Big Country (1958).\textsuperscript{28}

The third ingredient is the strong use of melodic intervals, already mentioned, typically positioned at the start of the measure, all thirds and fifths:

Example 3.16: The main theme with prominent intervals highlighted.

Once again, this kind of melodic writing did not originate with Bernstein. Neil Lerner makes explicit the connection between Copland’s ballets and several film scores including The Magnificent Seven, and the intervallic content of the melodies is clearly a key component of Copland’s Americana.\textsuperscript{29} And yet no composer before Bernstein had combined this kind of melodic writing with the rhythmic and harmonic language in this particular way.

Bernstein was well aware of the power of these intervals, and used them to great effect later in the movie and in the sequels. In the middle section of the movie (DVD time 1:06:38), as the danger of Calvera’s return looms, Chris and Vin ride to the home of the Old Man to convince him to move to the village, behind the walls. We hear staccato eighth notes in the lower brass as they ride up, then a distilled version of the main theme,

\textsuperscript{28} For an entertaining discussion of the mixolydian mode in popular culture, see Philip Tagg’s website, tagg.org.

\textsuperscript{29} Lerner, 499.
just the first two intervals, as though their grim determination would not allow for a fuller expression of the Seven’s theme:

Example 3.17: Main theme intervals used for tension.

Later in the film (DVD time 1:42:36), as the Seven are discovering Calvera’s abandoned camp, Bernstein uses this device again, but now three of these intervals are stacked up instead of two. The long notes are held over one another, but now the intervals are changed into perfect fourths and tritones—which, in combination with the C-Sharp pedal point, creates a chord that leaves the listener uneasy, telegraphing the trouble the Seven are in:

Example 3.18: Another example of the main theme intervals used for tension.

And sometimes, the intervals are heard in complete isolation, just one ascending m3, or one perfect fifth (DVD time 25:44).

When this happens, Bernstein is telegraphing to us that there is a fundamental threat to the integrity of the Seven. When the group is all together, riding to meet its destiny, we hear the theme intact. When trouble brews, the theme is atomized. Hearing these cells,
even subconsciously, we long to hear the full rendition of the theme, and by holding back, Bernstein fuels the drama of the movie.

In one short example, Chris and Vin are returning to their hotel on the night before their departure (DVD time 39:42). Chico, desperate to join the Seven, has just made a drunken spectacle of himself, but Britt, the fifth member, has just joined. As the two enter their hotel room, the innkeeper warns them that someone is waiting in their room. This would turn out to be Lee, the sixth member of the Seven, but they don’t know this walking in. The lighting is dark, the mood serious, and Bernstein highlights this by once again giving us a fragment of the theme, just the rising minor third played by the clarinet, doubled by marimba, followed by a chromatic, atonal, out-of synch melody played by the flute and violins:

Example 3.19: Even more fragmentation of the main theme.

There are two other related themes associated with the Seven. The first is a relaxed variant on the main melody, usually heard immediately after the main theme, accompanied by guitar strumming:
Example 3.20: Main theme, relaxed variant.

This melody is clearly closely related to the main theme, with front-loaded intervals, similar harmony (including the $bVII$), and similar syncopation. It is more relaxed, however, and Bernstein uses it to ease the listener down from the excitement of the main theme. It is never heard by itself, in this film or any of the sequels; when it is heard, it is always immediately following the main theme or one of its variants.

The second is a kind of B section to the main melody, first heard when Chris and Vin score their victory over small-town prejudice, about twelve minutes into the film:

Example 3.21: Secondary main theme.

This theme also first appears in Eb Major, has some invigorating syncopation, a couple of similarly accented melodic intervals, and a prominent $bVII$ in the fourth measure.

Bernstein would make good use of this theme in the sequels.

**Bernstein’s Musical Treatment**

All in all, this is a strong collection of themes, an example of Bernstein’s gift for memorable melodies. Still, in the hands of a lesser composer, these themes would be simply affixed to certain characters. What makes Bernstein successful is how circumspect he is with their use. We only hear a full rendition of the main theme four times in
Magnificent Seven, and other themes are likewise presented tastefully. Bernstein was also a master at writing non-thematic music. One very effective example occurs at the start of the third act of the film, when the signal has been received that Calvera and his gang are returning (at about DVD time 1:10). Starting with a highly-charged, faster, more percussive version of Calvera’s theme, Bernstein’s music gradually evolves into something entirely rhythmic, using both orchestral and non-western instruments, providing a heart-pounding, visceral reaction to the coming violence.

But Bernstein also embeds fragments of previous themes in later cues. One example of this occurs midway through the film, right after the “Toro” theme is heard (Example 8 above). Chico realizes he’s being spied upon, and intense chase music begins (DVD 1:00:38):

Example 3.22: Chico’s pursuit.

As the chase music continues, it becomes clear that Chico is chasing a young woman (who turns out to be Petra). Since this is an “inversion” of the overarching situation, Bernstein transforms this pursuit theme into an inversion of the third segment of the main theme. When Chico is about to catch her, Bernstein hits three quarter notes and flips the melody around the right way, and reprises segment three of the main titles (in the last two measures of the example below), signaling a minor success of one of the Seven:

Example 3.23: Chico’s pursuit, later on.
This same cue is recycled in *Return of the Magnificent Seven*, where it works even better than in the original. Here, the theme occurs right at the end of the second act, as the Seven and the villagers are working together to build walls around the village in preparation for the gun battle (starting at DVD time 58:49). The music at first emphasizes the unpleasantness of their task, working through a heavy thunderstorm. Gradually, their mood lightens and they begin to feel more unified as a group, just as the music turns major and the third segment of the main theme emerges. This scene also provides an example of one of Bernstein’s few missteps, however: the scene was longer than the original Chico-Petra scene, and Bernstein seems to have awkwardly cut and pasted the last half of the cue onto the end.

Bernstein is also concerned with the cohesion of the score. Much of this is carried out through instrumentation, but he also extracts cells from the themes and reuses them in different contexts (one such example is the use of the main theme melodic intervals, illustrated in Examples 16–18 above). Some of this is subtle, and probably occurs beneath the awareness of the average moviegoer, but it is observable. For example, the pastoral guitar line associated with Chico and Petra’s blossoming love is built around an arpeggio followed by a more rapid descending scalar figure, outlining a fourth:

![Example 3.24: Scalar figures in Petra’s theme.](image)

Bernstein effectively extracts this scalar figure and turns it into a theme used for unsettling situations, usually with one or more of the Seven is waiting:
Example: 3.25: Waiting theme.

This is first heard after Chico passes out in the bar (DVD time 39:09), actually before the tune is associated with Petra, so it’s possible to hear the relationship going the other way. In either case, there is a connection between these two melodic ideas that helps to weave the fabric of the film score together.

Reception and Sequels

United Artists released *The Magnificent Seven* in the fall of 1960. Critical reaction was mixed. “In their relentless search for the off-beat western, the moviemakers are going farther and farther off-trail,” Philip Scheuer of the *Los Angeles Times* declared. “The latest exhibit is *The Magnificent Seven*, which is likely to frighten, thrill and perplex most moviegoers, not necessarily in that order.”30 Howard Thompson of the *New York Times* dismissed the film as “a pallid, pretentious and overlong reflection of the Japanese original,” and Bernstein’s score as “the loudest prairie blast since [Tiomkin’s music for] *Giant.*”31 The film received a lackluster ad campaign from United Artists and was only released in second-string theaters, fading from view quickly. But then the movie was released internationally and began to take off, especially in France. According to James Lovell, “To reviewers-turned-filmmakers Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, who had already championed the Westerns of Mann and Aldrich, the film represented the

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apotheosis of the Western as morality play.” When it reached Japan, it became the most popular foreign film of 1961. Eventually it would earn between five and six times internationally what it had made in its initial domestic release and become a major moneymaker for United Artists and the Mirisch Company. In the United States, it became a sleeper hit, slowly increasing its popularity through word-of-mouth. The only academy award nomination for the film went to Bernstein.

As the movie’s popularity grew, and as the music became a part of popular culture via the Marlboro commercials (starting in 1963), discussions began about a sequel. Mirisch hoped to reconstruct as much of the original cast and crew as the original, starting with John Sturges (who had recently achieved another triumph with Mirisch in The Great Escape, another male-bonding film featuring Steve McQueen and Charles Bronson, as well as effective music by Bernstein). Sturges was intrigued by the idea and even concocted a wild plot scheme whereby the deaths of four of the seven would be revealed to have been an elaborate hoax, so that they could all be reunited. Sturges eventually pulled out, however, replaced by Burt Kennedy as director. Except for Yul Brynner, none of the original cast returned. Other actors substituted for Vin and Chico.

Return of the Magnificent Seven, released in 1966, was shot in Spain to save money, as were many other Westerns of this era. In this film, the same Mexican village is under siege, but this time all the men have been kidnapped and sent off to a work camp. Thus, the issue of the virtue of the village women is played even more strongly here than in other

32 Lovell, 213.
33 Mirisch, 113.
34 Walter Mirisch recalls being in Yul Brynner’s agent’s office to discuss the sequel when the news of Kennedy’s assassination broke.
35 Lovell, 216.
first one, underlined by the fact that one of the new members of the Seven, Colbee, is
established as consummate womanizer. At the start of the film, Petra—now Chico’s wife,
and also played by a different actor—and their adopted son seek out Chris’ help to rescue
the kidnapped men, and he once again assembles the rest of his crew one by one. Once
again, the villain (named Lorca) is defeated by the Seven’s bravery, of course, but also
their use of more advanced technology and explosives.

The music for the sequel was closely modeled on the first, as the audience probably
expected it to be—so much so that when Bernstein was nominated for the Academy
Award this time, it was for best adapted score, rather than original. The film is shorter by
a half hour, but there are slightly more than half as many individual cues. Most of the
themes are reprised, but there are some differences. The main theme, for example, is only
heard in its entirety at the very beginning and very end of the film. There is a new
pastoral theme for the village (see Example 6 above), and a new tension theme, also
based on a falling scalar figure, but more desperate in character (heard at DVD time
6:35):

Example 3.26: New tension theme in *The Return of the Magnificent Seven*.

Critics panned the movie for being too derivative of the original (just as the original
was panned in comparison to *Seven Samurai*). Walter Mirisch remembers that it was not
all that successful in the United States, “but like its predecessor, it was exceedingly well
received abroad, and the combined worldwide gross of the picture produced a tidy profit.\textsuperscript{36}

Three years later, the idea for a second sequel came up. It was a troubled time in the movie industry, and studios—including United Artists—were facing record-breaking losses. “In an unpredictable market, we sought further safety in presold material,” admits Walter Mirisch. “There was undoubtedly some magic in the \textit{Magnificent Seven} franchise, and we continued to mine it again and again.”\textsuperscript{37} Yul Brynner was no longer available to play Chris, and so veteran actor George Kennedy was brought in to play the role. The movie was shot in Spain, like its predecessor, but was directed by Paul Wendkos.

Bernstein’s music again is mostly adapted from his earlier scores, but once again features some strong new themes. There is more diegetic music in this film, although sometimes the source of the music is not actually revealed on screen (such as when we hear some guitar noodling in an outdoor camp scene, DVD time 54:30). And although we hear the Village Pastoral theme from the first two films (see Example 4 above), there is again a new theme representing the victims (DVD time 47:00):

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{music_score.png}
\caption{Example of music score.}
\end{figure}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Mirisch, 238.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Mirisch, 283.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Example 3.27: Pastoral theme in *Guns of the Magnificent Seven*.

Bernstein no longer received Academy Award nominations for this or the last film in the franchise, and the critics once again panned the movie. “It’s the same old iron-jawed, cowboy seven, with new actors and all the magnificence of a dead burro,” wrote Howard Thompson. “Let’s face it. By now, the ‘Seven’ have had it and so have we all.”

Still, the movie turned a profit, partly because it was shot on a tight budget.

Clearly, the Seven hadn’t had it, because they returned again in 1972, in *The Magnificent Seven Ride!* Walter Mirisch admits, “It’s not a picture of which I am proud, but it was again profitable, mainly because it was produced so inexpensively . . . It was a purely commercial venture.” Bernstein recycles most of his themes, but with some variation. In the middle of the film, for example, we hear the main theme with a new ostinato:

Example 3.28: Variant on main theme in *The Magnificent Seven Ride!*

And there are variants on Calvera’s theme, as well as yet another pastoral tune (heard at DVD time 1:17), played by flutes in parallel thirds over a strumming guitar:

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39 Mirisch, 284.
40 Mirisch, 315.
Example 3.29: Village pastoral tune in The Magnificent Seven Ride!

Aftermath

The impact of The Magnificent Seven and its music is impossible to measure. In addition to the sequels and the short-run television series on CBS (titled The Magnificent Seven, utilizing Bernstein’s main theme but adapted by other composers, 1998–2000), several subsequent films have been either virtual remakes or highly derivative of the concept. A science-fiction movie from 1980, Battle Beyond the Stars (music by James Horner) is essentially a pastiche of Magnificent Seven, with Robert Vaughn reprising his role in this new context. The second feature film released by Pixar, A Bug’s Life (1998, music by Randy Newman), was at least influenced by either the Kurosawa or the Sturges film, or both (“less a Magnificent Seven, more a Bugnificent Eight,” wrote one reviewer at the time).41 The Magnificent Seven, in fact, is frequently cited in reviews for action/adventure films, from The Right Stuff to The Avengers, whether or not the connection is intentional or explicit. As we shall see, Elmer Bernstein participated in a parody of the film in the mid-1980s, The Three Amigos! There has been talk recently of a new remake of The

*Magnificent Seven* with Tom Cruise, as well as a different remake of the original Kurosawa film.\(^{42}\)

The main theme of *The Magnificent Seven* has become iconic, not only through its repetition in the sequels, TV series, and TV commercials, but also in Disneyland theme park rides, in pop songs (the ostinato of the main theme appears in the intro to Arthur Conley’s 1967 song “Sweet Soul Music,” while Mick Jones’s band Big Audio Dynamite made a complete cover of the main theme in the mid-1980s), and in other movies and TV shows.\(^{43}\) This usage, as well as the frequent imitation in Western scores over the past half-century, suggests that Bernstein’s combination of ingredients has worked. Looking back at the end of his career, Bernstein said, “I loved writing the score for *The Magnificent Seven*. I loved the whole western thing. I loved all that energy and I’d stored up so many ideas about western music.”\(^{44}\)


\(^{43}\) For details, see the encyclopedic website [http://www.absoluteastronomy.com](http://www.absoluteastronomy.com), last accessed July 19, 2012.

\(^{44}\) Bernstein, interview with Cynthia Millar.