Vengeance, Betrayal and Freedom!

An analysis of the use of music
during Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*

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Braveheart is a story about the much loved Scottish hero William Wallace. The film opens with scenes of William as a young boy, and goes on to detail the death of his father before skipping forward in time to the council where the British King "Longshanks" re-instates the right of Prima Noctes. To avoid this hated tradition, a newly returned William marries a young girl named Murron in secret, but the attraction between the two is quickly discovered, and Murron is killed to provoke William to action. The bitter Scotsman begins to rally others to his side while destroying the British hold on Scotland. After a decisive battle at Stirling, William is knighted and decides to invade Britain. Upon learning that Longshanks plans to trap the Scottish from all sides, William is promised the support of Robert the Bruce, heir to the throne of Scotland. However, Robert betrays William at Falkirk, which causes William to attack both the nobles of Scotland and England's forces indiscriminately. Desperate to find some solution, a guilty Robert asks William to meet with him, and the latter agrees, despite being strongly cautioned that the meeting is a trap. As predicted, William is overpowered, taken into British custody, and subsequently tortured and killed, his head set on London Bridge. Robert the Bruce then picks up the mantle of defender of Scotland, claiming freedom with his rightful title, and fighting for the memory of the brave Sir William Wallace (Gibson).

Although parts of the film carry elements of truth in them, much of the rest of Mel Gibson's epic is riddled with historical inaccuracies that include, but are not limited to: historical dates, the behaviour and placement of certain characters, the reason certain key battles were won or lost, and the dress of the Scottish characters (Ewan). These factors mean that *Braveheart* is less of an accurate portrayal of historical events than it is fiction based off of history (although Gibson admits as much in the director's commentary as well as during the "making of" included on the DVD), and as such, the plot of Braveheart is free to take many liberties in order to fully capture Gibson's vision.

An epic film needs suitable music, and *Braveheart* delivers. The film was scored by James Horner, who is most well known for his score to Titanic, although recently, his work has cropped up again in "Avatar" and "The Amazing Spiderman" (James). His early success came from largely from the scoring he did for two of the Startrek films and he is known for mixing electronic and traditional elements in his music (Karlin 259). Horner's tendency toward Irish music served him well when he composed the score for *Braveheart,* because according to Gibson, Irish bagpipes were actually used, as the sound of the Scottish bags was not melodic enough.

Three main leitmotifs are apparent in the entire film (Hickman 408). The first is the love theme, which is the most prominent, appearing many times throughout the film. From the time that Murron is first introduced as a small child, to the hallucination of her that William has before his death – and every instance in-between – she is the constant (if mostly unseen) force driving the plot and William's crusade. It makes sense then, that the music most often heard throughout the film is that of the love theme. Titled "A Gift of a Thistle" (Braveheart) the first instance of this theme occurs around 00:11:32, during the burial of William's father.

Quiet strings, that are pitched first in the high register and quickly descend, begin the music, but fade out as a kena – a wooden flute – plays a segment from a later part of the theme. The low volume of this instrument, coupled with the fact that it is the only one playing during the moment that a young Murron runs up to William to present him with the purple thistle flower she has plucked, sets the mood for the rest of the short scene, and clearly associates the theme with the two characters. A harp begins to play gently as the flute ends its solo, serving as accompaniment to the bagpipes that state the main theme as William accepts the flower from Murron.

Even without music the scene is poignant and tender, but because of the minor qualities of the

harmony, the slow tempo and smooth lyrical melody line, the love theme inspires a feeling of deep sadness, as well as hinting at the future relationship to come (foreshadowed by thunder in the background). The use of bagpipes, harp and the wooden flute in the theme also help to set time and place because of the fact that Murron's death spurs the fight for Scotland.

Before much else is said, it must be noted that as much as the love theme represents Murron and William, it also represents the gentle side of the country of Scotland and the thistle was expressly chosen by Gibson because it represents Scotland (Gibson). “The Gift of a Thistle” tends to be paired in conjunction with shots of open fields and rivers or trees – still wild in its beauty but the depiction is different from the ruggedness or battle associated with the other main musical themes. This is markedly clear the second time that the love theme is played, during a scene where the two characters have reunited as adults. A misty woodland scene is presented on screen as the theme begins. When the bagpipes begin the melody, the image changes to a scene of the two riding up a large, green mountain, before the two talk privately. Without the love theme, the conversation that takes place between William and Murron could be taken simply as two friends reconnecting, but the inclusion of the gentle melody reinforces the fact that the two have a deep and special connection, and foreshadows William’s proposal. The music in this scene is quiet and unobtrusive, and the length of time that the characters spend onscreen together allows the theme to play almost to the end.

One of the principal reasons a Lietmotif is included in a film is so that certain key plot points might be associated with the music and recalled later in certain high or low points of the film (Predergast 232). During the scene William has with Murron whilst “The Gift of a Thistle” is playing, the film introduces a visual element that is tied to the plot and to the love theme; that is, a piece of cloth with a thistle – the same one Murron gifted to William when they were young – carefully preserved in it.

The theme is heard again when Murron responds favorably to William's proposal (00:35:24), and the cloth emerges during the secret wedding with the sewn images of trailing thistle plants sprawling around the edge. After her death Murron appears once more to William in a dream, where a fragment of the love theme is heard (01:44:59), and the cloth makes a third significant reappearance at the end during and after William's beheading, when he sees the image of Murron. Here the cloth stands in for the theme as it falls to ground from William's lifeless hand, signifying the end of their love. The theme is also heard during the funeral of Murron.

Besides these instances, there are two very important places the love theme is re-used and transformed, and another scene where the cloth makes its last appearance, two of these three aspects being further discussed in detail in a later section. The instance in focus at this present time however takes place during Wallace's affair with the future queen.

Now it must be noted that Wallace had an earlier meeting with the English princess in which the love theme was played after Isabelle tells William that she knows about his woman (1:49:44). The love theme is still associated with Murron at this point, because William goes on to speak of her, but when he utters the line “I don't know why I tell you now, except I see her strength in you,” (01:50:23) this bit of dialogue coincides with the part in the melody where the harmony is major, and sweet, and implies that there could be a chance for, if not love, genuine attraction between Isabelle and William, thus partly associating the love theme with the knight and the princess (Hickman 408). Therefore, by the time the love theme is reused during William and Isabelle's affair, the melody seems to fit naturally, without feeling like a betrayal of Murron's memory.

However although bagpipes and flutes are briefly heard when the theme begins to play for William and Isabelle, they sound simultaneously with strings, signifying the fact that while William may be Scottish, Isabelle is not at all, and eventually the strings take over and continue to play a variation of the original love theme heard during William's courtship of Murron. Although the theme starts off quietly at the beginning of the scene, it quickly crescendos and because of the variation has much more of a major slant to it, especially during the images where the princess visibly recalls her time spent with William. The love theme is important in this utilisation of it, because it is setting up its later usage where fragments of the leitmotif are heard during an extremely understated underscoring of a series of scenes during which Isabelle first visits Wallace in prison, and directly afterward torments Longshanks by revealing that she is pregnant with William's child.

There are other lietmotifs besides the love theme however, and Braveheart makes good use of them. The “Outlaw” theme is the first theme introduced in the film, appearing around 1:08 after the titlecard and in conjunction with some stunning footage of the mountains of Scotland. The theme starts on the tonic scale degree of the piece, before rising in a series of leaps to reach a third above the octave and then descending in a similar manner. These major intervals give the melody a triumphant and brave feel and because the melody is played by bagpipes, immediately associates the piece with Scotland, particularly the more rugged and wide side of the country. The “Outlaw” theme is later heard as a source music during the midnight funeral of William's father, and is named as such when William's uncle tells a young William that the mourning Scotsmen are playing “outlawed tunes on outlawed pipes” (14:23)(Hickman 408). This is one of the only scenes in which bagpipes are specifically shown on film, but their inclusion cleverly works the theme into a setting appropriate for source music (Burt 71). The association of the melody with Scotland is very important, because the tune is used again (01:25:52) during the scenes at Stirling when the British army begins to march on the Scottish army. Drums and strings play as the horses advance, but as soon as the scene cuts to show the waiting Scottish army, the “Outlaw” theme begins to play. The interweaving of the “Outlaw” theme with a tense ostinato in the strings and the percussion does an admirable job of representing the impending armies of the British and the Scots as the two draw ever closer.

The third principal theme, as highlighted by Hickman's text, is the “Braveheart” theme, which is heard most prominently in four places. The first is during the oft-quoted speech that William gives to the Scottish army when they are in danger of losing heart (01:16:48)(Hickman 409) and again directly after the battle, reflecting the fact that the Scots prevailed; the third is just before William cries out, “Freedom!” and the last is right at the end of the film, when Robert the Bruce rides out to meet the armies of the English, and realizes that he cannot betray the memory of one who fought until his dying breath for Scotland. The last use of this leitmotif is of particular interest because of the musical techniques that are utilized. The melody begins with flute doubled an octave lower by a horn, and is quickly joined by percussion and strings (02:47:43). This signifies that even though William is dead, his crusade has been passed on to Robert the Bruce (Hickman 409). Shortly afterward, William's friend hurls his sword into the air, whereupon the “Outlaw” theme and the “Braveheart” theme play together in counterpoint (02:49:17). The “Braveheart” theme is pitched lower and the melody has been transferred entirely to the string section, which prevents the bagpipes playing the “Outlaw” theme from being drowned out.

Both the lietmotifs and underscoring (whether it be diagetic or not) of *Braveheart* utilize many of the different functions of film music as defined by Aaron Copeland's list (Predergast 213). Though referred to in passing during many of the scenes already discussed, and those yet to come, at this point it is prudent to take a step back and consider specifically a few key places where some of the functions are most visible in *Braveheart.* The first function on the list is continuity, where music is often used to

tie montages together (Predergast 221). A montage is a series of different scenes connected by a single piece of music, generally with no spoken dialogue, and a wonderful example of this occurs toward the end of the film, starting around 2:26:50 after William rides away from Isabelle. The love theme is playing at this point, and the strings have just crescendoed to a triumphant peak. From there, the scenes flash between those of William on horseback, Robert the Bruce with his leprous father, the feeble Longshanks, and Isabelle walking in the palace. This montage is very short, but the music connects a series of otherwise disjunct scenes in a dramatic and memorable way.

The second function on the list is psychological refinement, wherein the music enhances what is happening onscreen (Predergast 216). Sometimes the type of music being played can be contrary to the action, and a brilliant example of this is found at the end, where the Braveheart theme plays triumphantly despite the fact that William is in agonizing pain.

The third function, using music as background music is very much present, but it is generally coupled in *Braveheart* with either function four or function five. That is, the underscoring is used either to set time and place, or as dramatic buildup. Both of these uses help to set the mood of particular scenes. This is illustrated by the "Outlaw "theme, in which the sound of bagpipes are used to represent Scotland from the very beginning. That means that slightly later on when bagpipes are heard in an upbeat fast tempo in a major key accompanying the images of dancing village people that it is clear that the scene is set in Scotland – in a poorer part of Scotland no less, since the pipes have been outlawed, and would not therefore be associated with the nobles in such a manner (Hickman 408). It also serves as a contrast to the previous wedding scene, which was English, royal, and took place in a church accompanied by chant.

Dramatic underscoring tends to be used mostly during battle scenes, or scenes related to the conflict between the British and the Scots, as in scenes such as the ones that depict the Scots crossing a river (00:57:39), flanking the British (01:02:56), and the British burning the homes of defenseless Scottish peasants (01:02:01), as well as a lone William Wallace running about the wilds of Scotland (02:17:06). All of these aspects come together in *Braveheart* to create a memorable score, but in particular, there were three scenes that really caught my attention.

The first scene that really stood out to me musically begins directly after the British soldier who kills Murron says: "Now, let this scrapper come to me."(00:46:00) A flute trill accompanied by a single resounding drumbeat signals the start of the music. Immediately a high wire (a sustained pitch) begins in the upper strings. The entire scene lasts until about 00:52:32, which means that it is roughly six and a half minutes long. Although the music changes character during the violent skirmish in the middle of the scene, the music plays without stopping from the first time marker to the second and ends the same way that it started – with a wire (which is played both by lower and upper strings when it returns) and the flute trill that ends in a drum beat. The fact that the piece starts and ends in almost the same manner helps to unify the music even through its different phases.

The wire at the beginning is punctuated by drums, and continues to play even as other instruments such as cello and flute fade in and out to create dissonance and musical tension. Even though percussion accompanies this piece, the wire suspends any sense of pulse, making it hard to determine when the next beat will appear. The musical tension creates physical and emotional tension, and this is what gripped me when I first viewed this scene. Being unable to predict what was going to happen next musically made me tense, and gave me the feeling that something awful was about to happen. Around 00:47:12, quiet soprano voices are introduced to the piece, and as vocal lines are often associated with death in film, their inclusion causes the music to becomes even more foreboding than

before. When William starts to raise his hands above his head in a (seeming) gesture of surrender, (00:47:55) the percussion begins to sound two beats in a row, and because the tempo is very slow at this point, the drums carry with them an air of finality. Having never seen the film before, I thought that William had given up, which further added to the dread I was feeling, and the music led me through a range of different emotions that began with sorrow, followed by anger and pity before I finally settled into hopelessness. Gibson explains in his commentary that he consciously made the decision for the scene to be drawn out, and the music matches the pacing by employing the less popular non-lyrical approach (Burt 117) to maintain tension (Hickman 408).

The sound effects used during this scene interact successfully with the music to further heighten the emotional effect of the music, in particular the part wherein one soldier steps forward to to take hold of the horse's reins. The little huffs from the horse, and the clinking of the soldier's chain mail gauntlets are set above the music in the sound mix (00:48:39), and emphasize the message the music (and the visuals) are sending. These sound effects continue as the music begins to crescendo, signaling that after four or so minutes of pure anticipation that something is about to happen. The re-entrance of a flute into the music is juxtaposed with the image of William pulling out a concealed weapon, (00:49:10) which both confirms the fact that the action is about to begin, and removes the fear that William has given up. The music changes character at this point, as the bagpipes start to play, and a drum ostinato repeats steadily in the background, increasing the tempo. Even with these changes, the music still rides underneath the dialogue and the sound effects in the mix, and the harmony is minor.

That the music has a sorrowful feel to it despite the fact that the Scots are obviously overwhelming the British serves several purposes. First, the viewer is reminded that William is only fighting the British to avenge his wife, and her death is still fresh in his mind – he fights out of anger and pain, and not for any other noble cause. Secondly, the still tense atmosphere of the music holds the attention of the audience because the outcome of the fight is not clear, especially when the archers are summoned – at which point the music crescendos again, and brass instruments are briefly heard. A sliver of micky-mousing is employed when the music ends, as the drumbeat coincides with William kicking his enemy down the stairs. As noted previously, the scene ends in nearly the same way as it starts, and this symmetry in the music is then paralleled by the action onscreen, as Murron's throat was slit before the music started, and the magistrate's throat is slit after the music ends (00:53:49). The mirroring of both the music and plot ties the lengthy scene together flawlessly and left me feeling vindicated as the feeling of intense unease began to fade. Although this scene did not use any of the leitmotifs identified above, the next two scenes that caught my attention do, and it is to the first of these that we now turn.

The second scene that really gripped me was the one in which Robert the Bruce's betrayal of William Wallace came to light. The underscoring made up of mostly strings is beautiful and powerful in of itself, and made me want to cry, but what really impressed me was the insertion of the love theme at around 02:09:17, right after Robert the Bruce yells “go!” to the Irishman on horseback.

The music for this scene begins when William flips Robert onto his back. Technically between the last scene and this one, the music barely breaks, but both the music and the action on-screen begin to change character at this point, so it is appropriate to start this scene here. The use of music as dramatic buildup for the beginning of the scene is particularly important because as of yet, William does not know that the masked knight is Robert, and to the unobservant viewer, Robert's identity is not obvious, so as the music rises in intensity and pitch through a series of ascending thirds, the viewer knows that something is going to happen. To someone who has been paying attention, the music cues the audience that William is about to discover what has already been deduced – that the man in the

mask is Robert the Bruce.

The unmasking of Robert (02:07:39) is timed perfectly with the transference of pitches from the low strings to the high strings as the upper strings almost freeze (meaning they sustain the pitch they have arrived at) for a little bit before continuing to ascend in thirds and then descending. Pausing on the high note illustrates the use of music to pinpoint surprise (Burt 83). The camera cuts back and forth between William's and Robert's faces during this sequence, as William backs away and Robert begins to recover himself, but there is a moment when the realization of what has happened overcomes William's original shock, and it is at this moment that the music begins to take on a more lyrical quality. The upper strings still carry the main melody, but the lower strings support them and the horns enter playing their own melody in counterpoint. As Robert the Bruce later points out to his father when he says: "[William] fights for something I never had, and I took it from him when I betrayed him, and I *saw* it in his face in the battlefield," (02:13:48), Gibson does an excellent job of portraying a heartbroken, devastated and shocked William Wallace. The look in his eyes is not easily forgotten, but the music, with its choice of orchestration, drawn out melodies and setting in a minor key draws even more attention to William's reaction.

The first phrase that is presented musically is repeated, and crescendos on the second repetition, the strings going on to hit a high note as the approaching soldiers draw ever closer, almost signaling that this could be the end for the Scotsman. The tempo begins to increase around 02:09:04, as the Irishman rides in on horseback to retrieve William. The melody is also dropped, the strings playing a very slow ostinato as the music prepares to enter a new section, one that will highlight the exact moment that Robert transitions from thinking 'what have I done!?' to realising exactly what consequences his actions have brought about. The insertion of the love theme at this point in the film might seem a little strange at first, because so far the tune has been used to signify the romantic relationship William had with Murron, and the audience is not given to believe that anything similar had *ever* existed between William and Robert.

However, if as theorized previously, the love theme represents not only Murron, but the country of Scotland herself, than by betraying William Wallace, Robert the Earl of Bruce – as a contender to the throne of Scotland – has betrayed his country, the country he is supposed to live and die for. This idea is further emphasized in two ways. Firstly, the crescendoing music focuses the viewer's attention on Robert as the camera pans to a shot of him standing by himself in an open field – a lonely figure in the gentle beauty of Scotland, and secondly the strings drop in intensity and the tempo slows a little as Robert picks up the thistle embroidered cloth that William had unknowingly abandoned. The melody also drops into a lower register to direct attention to the tune and sweeten its sound. The scene cuts before the anticipated ending of the melody, opting rather to have the tonic note be sustained and then fade out. The inclusion of the love theme is extremely powerful, and adds a entire new layer to the meaning behind the scene, acting as the musical cue to the emotional high point of the scene (Burt 59). The additional visual reminder of the cloth sets up its further use at the end of the film, where the cloth is seen tucked into the left bracer of Robert the Bruce.

The last scene that really stood out to me was the execution scene. This is probably the one scene in the film that would have have been vastly different if the choice of music had been different. There are actually two musical parts to the entire scene, the second one using principally a wordless choir (Hickman 408) and strings during William's death hallucination of Murron, but it is the first part that employs the "Braveheart" theme and so that is the section that will be focused on. According to history, (so says Gibson) William Wallace was drawn and quartered – a British method of capital punishment for treason that included disemboweling and emasculating the victim before the actual

beheading. With this awful torture in mind, the musical expectation for this scene might be harmonies that are harsh and jarring, or a melody at least set in a minor key.

However Horner begins the music for this scene with a soft major melody in the strings and flute, creating an atmosphere that might be appropriate for a romantic stroll. Starting the music at this point allows Horner to avoid ungraciously dropping the "Braveheart" theme in right after a cut, and allows him to tie the theme to the dramatic action happening on screen (Burt 81). The music begins to crescendo as the people in the crowd implore to William to say "mercy." Most notedly, at 02:43:46 a peasant woman cries out "mercy" and the "Braveheart" theme begins. Having appeared twice already in conjunction with both battle and victory, meaning that the theme is therefore associated with William as a triumphant character, the use of the theme here seems to adhere to the type of psychological refinement that is contrary to a scene (Prendergast 216). William is in agonizing pain, yet his theme of victory is being played. He will certainly die, yet the music is hopeful, and almost exultant. The use of horns to play the main melody accents the heroic nature of William's struggle, and not only foreshadows his last indomitable cry of "Freedom!" but also the use of the theme to signify the passing of the gauntlets to Robert the Bruce (Hickman 409). At the point in the music where William does cry out (but not the word his captors desire), the music has been steadily building, by repeating a three note variation of the opening phrase of the theme over and over in the horns, and by the rise in pitch and volume of the upper string section.

After William's last word, the melody picks up again in the strings, adding bagpipes which most likely stand for Scotland, and gives the sense that not all is lost. Although the music was breathtaking and the use of it both ingenious and magnificent, I laughed hysterically when William cried out, because although the music tries very hard to prepare the viewer for this supposedly epic part, the fact that William still somehow had the strength to talk at all after the brutal medieval torture he had just endured struck me as unrealistic instead of inspiring and I could not take the scene seriously after that. (Gibson again admits as much in his commentary, but says that he deliberately scarified realism for the sake of dramatic action.)

All in all, *Braveheart* takes advantage of stunning cinematography paired with tightly woven storytelling and the gratuitous, but not overwhelming use of music to craft an unforgettable tale. The three principal leitmotifs are as important to the story as the plot, in some cases telling the story without dialogue, or adding additional layers where an verbal explanation would hinder the flow. Time and place is always established by music, and clearly distinguishes the British from the Scottish. The many other skirmishes in the film as well as scenes that further the plot, or introduce characters who have a role to play later on are all accompanied by music, and apart from the notable example of the battle at Stirling that – similar to Alexander Nebsky – employs only sound effects during the hack–and–slash mayhem, (perhaps to add a layer of realism to the scene (Burt 213)) most of the scenes without much dialogue are set to music, although the music tends to be understated during those parts.

I found that while I did not much enjoy the film itself, (mostly because of Gibson and his ever apparent ego) the use of the music was brilliant, and I was very impressed by not only the structural use of it, but by the fact that I was able to feel a whole range of passionate emotions toward a film that I had only a passing interest in. Without the music, and James Horner's score especially, *Braveheart* would not be as commanding and compelling as it is, no matter how well directed, filmed or acted it was. I feel that the power of film music is very much highlighted by *Braveheart*, and even though some of the music is quite understated, it is never used too sparingly, or too much, and the end effect is flawless.

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