

Yared and Minghella's Use of Leitmotif in the Film: *THE TALENTED MR. RIPLEY*

Abstract

This article examines the musical context of the filmic narration of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), focusing on how a certain motif is used in relation to the main characters in specific scenes. The unique partnership between Gabriel Yared, the composer, and Anthony Minghella, the film director, is also considered.

Body Text

Gabriel Yared is a music composer who has been working for more than thirty years on films. Many of these were in collaboration with the late film director Anthony Minghella, whose work is respected worldwide and has won awards for its remarkable craftsmanship and high aesthetic standards. Yared's scores have also received numerous awards, including the Academy Award for music composition for Minghella's film *The English Patient* in 1997. *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999) was the collaboration between Yared and Minghella that followed the Academy Award. With regard to their collaboration, it is worth noting that they worked together during the entire film-making and post-production process, that is, from the script writing to the final recording, editing, and mixing of the film.¹

The soundtrack of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999) consists of both pre-existing and originally composed music, and the selection of the pre-existing songs, especially the jazz pieces, reflects the atmosphere of the period in which the story takes place. As Minghella suggested, jazz music is very “particular to this period” and can serve in an excellent way to convey the 50s atmosphere in Italy.² The selection of the pre-existing jazz songs was made very carefully by both Minghella and Yared, in order to represent the feeling of that period and at the same time serve the plot of the narrative.³

A very interesting observation about Yared's scores is the way in which non-diegetic scores are used to express different concepts and especially to reveal the essence of the characters or a situation from the director's viewpoint, which may be different from what the spectators actually see on screen. In this film, music is often there to

imply Ripley's secret nature. According to Laing, this creates an obvious difference between the diegetic and non-diegetic music.⁴ In many cases non-diegetic music takes the viewer into Ripley's emotional state, implying his disguise, and then at the next moment diegetic music returns the viewer to the cheerful reality around Ripley. In other words, as Laing points out, "the non-diegetic score reveals subjectivities that are entirely at odds with outward appearances."⁵

The title song, "Lullaby for Cain," was written by Minghella and composed by Yared. The song's chromatic melody (Appendix, Figure 1.) and harmonic energy both characterize the atmosphere of the film and reflect Ripley's fragile and tragic personality. As Yared said, "the song expresses the whole thematic and the spirit of the film musically,"⁶ also adding that the form of the music is very "unsettling", due to the use of syncopation. This musical shift of the beat is used to represent Ripley's awkward, childish instability. In addition, the song is used in the opening credits to evoke an eerie feeling of mystery. The song's theme is used in multiple ways throughout the film. The melodic themes are long and have a strong lyrical element, and a slow tempo that adds a wistful tone. The themes are also tightly constructed and appear in different forms to express specific emotional qualities of a character or a situation.⁷

It is worth noting that this powerful theme appears in the film to characterize Ripley's complex, sentimental personality. A short melody, actually a short thematic cell, accompanies Ripley's thoughts every time that he has to confront his secret madness and his deeper instincts. This melody consists of a five-note, descending figure that seems to be extracted from the "Lullaby for Cain"⁸ (Appendix, Figure 2). This time, it is orchestrated differently, featuring celesta and glockenspiel that add a sense of eerie dreaming. This thematic cell in this particular version comes to represent a "music box" that draws Ripley back to his childhood and, thus, emphasizes a childish element of his mysterious and awkward personality, as Yared pointed out in a personal communication with the author.⁹

Ripley's enigmatic nature and the secrets that he keeps during the film initially reflect on his clandestine mission to Italy, then on his veiled desire for Dickie and later on Dickie's murder. In these different situations there are powerful moments when

Ripley finds himself confronting his hidden instincts and his instability. This theme comes at such moments to introduce us to the mysterious and unstable aspects of Ripley's split personality, such as when Ripley sits with Dickie at Dickie's house for the first time, he starts imitating Dickie's father's voice. After a few seconds, and as Ripley continues talking, the theme appears to indicate that there is something underlying the way that he talks.

In another scene, Ripley has just settled into Dickie's house and overhears Marge and Dickie talking about him on the terrace below the window of Dickie's room. Dickie explains to Marge that he likes Ripley because he makes him laugh and asks her whether she also likes him. Then, we see Ripley opening Dickie's jewel-case looking inside it. As he does so, he repeats Marge's and Dickie's words, imitating them while looking in the mirror. The thematic cell (Appendix, Figure 2) is heard at the exact moment when the shot changes from Dickie and Marge to Ripley in the room, indicating that there is something mysterious about Ripley's actions. Interestingly, the music here not only underscores Ripley's dangerous nature, but also makes Ripley's act of looking in Dickie's jewel case seem forbidden and suspicious. This is a perfect example of how music can communicate emotion and thus affect the narrative comprehension of the visual presentation.¹⁰

Another interesting recurrence of this cell in the same glockenspiel-celesta version takes place during the "train to San Remo" scene. Dickie and Ripley are travelling to San Remo sitting next to each other, while Dickie had previously decided and declared that this would be their last trip. Dickie is asleep and Ripley stares at him, expressing an obvious desire. Then he carefully lowers his face on to Dickie's lapel and takes a deep breath, full of passion for Dickie. When the guard passes in the corridor, Ripley suddenly twists his neck and returns to his normal position. Then he continues looking ecstatically at Dickie and consequently at their own reflection in the window. Dickie wakes up and asks him why he did "that thing with his neck," also characterizing him as "spooky." Ripley puts on his glasses and tries to give an answer, pretending that nothing unusual has happened.

Dickie's scent, in other words, at the same moment that Ripley seems to give in to his lust. Once again the theme appears to symbolize Ripley's masked homosexuality, his

secret love for Dickie, and also his childish behavior, as he acts without caring about the consequences. The music continues while Dickie asks him why he did it, adding to the dangerous element of Ripley's behavior that Dickie apparently seems to overlook. The music does not stop until Ripley puts on his glasses, trying to resume his normal behavior. Here, one can realize the property of music not only to characterize an emotional state, but also to indicate a shift in the character's emotion (Burt, 1994).¹¹ The remarkable thing about this occurrence of the theme is its alignment with Ripley's emotional state. In other words, in such cases we can see how the musical score "shapes and thus dramatizes the emotional curve of the scene in ways that are consistent with the narrative line."¹²

These two examples are representative of the way in which music operates in relation to the film direction. The placement of the music is something that depends not only on the composer but also on the director of the film. Yared and Minghella were used to spending a lot of time on the placement of music on specific scenes, trying several different timings in order to find the one that conveyed the intended emotional meaning.¹³ Yared himself claims that his collaboration with Minghella helped him to develop his compositional style by focusing "on the detail of the action without losing anything of the quality of his music."¹⁴ Of course, this shows that, unlike some other directors, Anthony Minghella considered the role of the music in his film as inseparable from the emotional texture and the emotional comprehension that he attempted to deliver through the filming process.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mr Yared for kindly agreeing to an interview about his work in this film. The article originated as an essay for my Master of Research in Screen Music at the University of Surrey, UK.

Endnotes

¹ Gabriel Yared, interviewed by the author, March 20, 2006.

² Anthony Minghella, "Inside The Talented Mr. Ripley", *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, directed by Anthony Minghella (1999; Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2000), DVD.

³ Gabriel Yared.

⁴ Heather Laing, *Gabriel Yared's The English Patient* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 41

⁵ Heather Laing, *Gabriel Yared's The English Patient*, 19.

⁶ John Wilson, Gabriel Yared and Antony Minghella, *Front Row*, BBC- Radio 4, December 30, 2005, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/frontrow> (accessed 17 March 2006).

⁷ Heather Laing, Gabriel Yared's, *The English Patient*, 30.

⁸ Heather Laing, *The English Patient*, 45.

⁹ Gabriel Yared.

¹⁰ Annabel Cohen, “Music as a Source of Emotion in Film,” *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research*, ed. Patrick Juslin and John Sloboda (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 249-272.

¹¹ George Burt, *The Art of Film Music* (Lebanon, NH: Northeastern University Press, 1994), 59.

¹² George Burt, *The Art of Film Music*, 59.

¹³ Gabriel Yared.

¹⁴ Gabriel Yared.

Appendix

1. Figure 1. *Lullaby for Cain* (opening bars of melody)



Gabriel Yared *The Piano Collection*, ed. Ann Barkway, arr. by Derek Jones, (London, UK: Wise Publications, 2007), 58.

2. Figure 2. Thematic cell extracted from the song “Lullaby for Cain”



Gabriel Yared *The Piano Collection*, ed. Ann Barkway, arr. by Derek Jones, (London, UK: Wise Publications, 2007), 58.