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Orlene Denice McMahon, *Listening to the French New Wave: The Film Music and Composers of Postwar French Art Cinema*. Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2014. xiv + 295 pp. Figures, filmography, bibliography, and index. \$72.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-0343-1750-4.

Review by Kim Harrison, Independent Scholar.

*Listening to the French New Wave* is the sixteenth volume in Peter Lang's "New Studies in European Cinema" series edited by Wendy Everett and Axel Goodbody, and is Orlene Denice McMahon's first book based on her doctoral thesis of the same name. Although, as the author herself asserts, the French New Wave has been studied and written about extensively, from a wide range of angles and perspectives, over the past fifty years, there still remain some gaps in the scholarship, and the study of music is indeed one of the most striking. In the prologue, McMahon provides the reader with an extensive and useful list of those works that do focus on New Wave film music, mainly chapters within books and articles, concluding that her own volume is the first book-length study specifically devoted to the music and composers of the French New Wave.

The author's primary aim, then, is clear: "to offer a detailed study of the music and composers of the French New Wave, arguing for the need to rehear and thus musically reassess this important period in film history" (p. 7). By taking an ethnographic, as well as cultural-historical approach, McMahon connects this need for reassessment to the categorisation of New Wave films by contemporary scholars—especially film scholars—and the continually vexing question of the extent to which the French New Wave revolutionised the practices and aesthetics of French film music.

In 1962, the influential American-born film critic Richard Roud drew a distinction between those films directed by the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics-turned-directors (Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, and so on) and the "Left Bank" group (Varda, Marker and Resnais). Although over the past five decades this distinction has become somewhat blurred as different approaches to the New Wave have necessitated updated categorisations, it remains largely upheld by (francophone) film scholars. McMahon argues that the distinction is indeed useful, especially in the context of film music, and therefore structures her book accordingly: the three chapters that make up part one focus on the *Cahiers* directors, while part two devotes a chapter each to the film music of the Left Bank group, Agnès Varda (chapter four), Chris Marker (chapter five) and Alain Resnais (chapter six). A prologue, serving as introduction, and the concluding epilogue round out the volume.

The book's structure thereby serves to convincingly redress the historical imbalance of the *Cahiers* directors over the Left Bank group while also promoting the argument that film music scholars, especially in Anglophone studies, need to move away from the "mythic, catch-all term 'French New Wave' and work from the same definitions [as film scholars]" (p. 132).

While part one is devoted to the *Cahiers* directors, its three chapters also contain a fair amount of historical and cultural contextualization. Chapter one, for example, outlines the contemporaneous yet separate developments of music and cinema in postwar Paris. Given that this is the first book-length study on the music of French New Wave films, a certain amount of introductory material is necessary

and, indeed, welcomed. The book is, of course, interdisciplinary in nature, and such contextualisation serves to ensure it appeals to a wider audience, providing sufficient background information for film scholars and music scholars alike to understand the analyses that follow. Furthermore, what McMahon does particularly well is to position her historical overview of postwar French cinema *in relation to* music, drawing parallels between the rejection on the part of critics and the *Cahiers* directors of “tradition de qualité” cinema and, for example, Boulez’s “Propositions” (1948), “in which the composer voices a complete rejection of tradition, declaring that ‘the phenomenon of heritage is no longer important for me [...] only new categories of thought’—a phrase that could just as easily have been uttered by Truffaut” (p. 31).

Chapter one also contains biographies of four of “the most emblematic” of the new generation of film composers: Antoine Duhamel, Georges Delerue, Pierre Jansen, and Michel Legrand (p. 37). McMahon argues that because of *la politique des auteurs*, so embraced by the *Cahiers* directors, these composers and their works have often gone unheard in cinema studies.

Chapters two and three take as their starting point the contentious question of whether the collaborations between this new generation of composers and filmmakers did, in fact, “revolutionise the aesthetics and practices of French film music” (p. 61). Mervyn Cooke has suggested that “the French New Wave did more to revolutionise the techniques and aesthetic perspectives of film music...than any other movement in the history of cinema” [1] while Michel Chion remains sceptical: “It is not certain whether the phenomenon of the French New Wave...was accompanied by a revolution in the area of music.” [2] In order to address the question, McMahon provides five case studies (Truffaut, Chabrol, Rohmer, Godard, Rivette) that address not only the function of music in the films but also the value placed on it by the filmmakers. Her analyses reveal that although these collaborations did act as a catalyst for a shifting perspective on the role of film music, with it becoming an element considered as early as the screenwriting stage, true collaboration between director and composer was not fully embraced.

Of the five case studies, the author pleasingly devotes the most space to the films of the least well-known and studied of the *Cahiers* directors, Jacques Rivette, noting that “in terms of the Cooke-Chion dialectic, Cooke makes no mention of Rivette’s film music in his overview of the New Wave and Chion only mentions Rivette in passing in *La musique au cinéma*” (p. 91). It was Rivette, however, who engaged the most with contemporary music and who, through his films and *Cahiers* writings, demonstrated the immense value he placed on film music. With the exception of Rivette, the author clearly agrees with Chion’s assertion that there was not a “global change” in the use of film music, and that “although [the *Cahiers*] directors worked with a new generation of composers who themselves issued from a contemporaneous art undergoing significant parallel changes to that of cinema, the impact of these New Wave collaborations on film music practices was, in the end, far from revolutionary” (p. 116).

If the *Cahiers* directors, then, failed to provoke any real change in terms of film music aesthetics in McMahon’s estimation, would the Left Bank group fare any better? Part two of *Listening to the French New Wave* assesses the music in the early films of Agnès Varda, Chris Marker, and Alain Resnais, skilfully analysing how this group of filmmakers differs from the *Cahier* directors in terms of their approach to both the function of music and the creative possibilities of collaboration. In voicing her support for the *Cahiers*/Left Bank distinction, McMahon reminds us that the Left Bank group began their careers, not in journalism like their *Cahiers* counterparts, but in short and documentary filmmaking and, more importantly, “what binds the Left Bank filmmakers together on a more conceptual, aesthetic level...is their emphasis on collective creation, which includes the importance they attribute to the role, choice, and integration of music into their films” (p. 143).

It is, in fact, this rebuke of the individualist ethic of *la politique des auteurs* in favour of a collaborative approach to creation that ultimately results in a true “audiovisual revolution”: “each one [of the Left

Bank directors] has effected a revolutionising of the relationship between the audio and visual through engagement with the figures and aesthetics of contemporary musical culture” (p. 269). Although very different in many ways in their approach to filmmaking and their cinematic output, all three directors use “music as an agent; as a force engaged in ongoing negotiations with the image, narrative, and—for Marker and Resnais in particular—with the cultural-historical context of the film. It is arguably this engagement with the discursive dimension of film music that sets them apart from the majority of their *Cahiers* contemporaries” (p. 272).

Through a combination of analytical case studies and cultural-historical overview, McMahon succeeds in presenting the reader with an original study of the French New Wave seen from the perspective of film music. Interdisciplinary volumes can be tricky beasts, and the author has done a good job here of balancing the needs of her various readers, providing enough contextualisation to make the book accessible to musicologists, French film scholars and those with an interest in French culture of the period alike. For film scholars and students, this volume can add a layer of nuanced sophistication to any reading of New Wave cinema: McMahon’s analysis of the music, and to a much lesser extent the sound, reminds us how important these creative elements are, not only within the narrative context of any one particular film, but also to the understanding of the enduring impact of the French New Wave in cinematic and cultural history.

## NOTES

[1] Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 319.

[2] Michel Chion, *La musique au cinéma* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), p. 145 [English translation by McMahon].

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