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Hannah Lewis, *French Musical Culture and the Coming of Sound Cinema*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. xii + 245 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography, filmography, index. \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780190635985.

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Think of the opening shots of René Clair's *Le Million* (1931). As the camera floats over the roofs of Paris, the bells on the church clock ring louder and louder as we move closer. Those bells become a melody, and then voices sing along with it, themselves getting louder as we approach. A man climbs out of his upstairs window to see what all the noise is about, and he and another man open a window and peer down, onto a group of people singing and dancing. Clair cuts to the dancers, but the singing continues, smoothing over the shift in perspective. The two men at the window ask what's going on, and the dancers stop and one of them says, incredulously, "*Vous ne savez pas? Ils ne savent pas!*" "You don't know? They don't know!" But the English translation is always, "You haven't heard? They haven't heard!"

That combination of the visual and the sonic, with both of them changing depth and tone as the viewer seems to move through space, is just remarkable this early in the transition to sound, and the sequence owes much to the cinema of Ernst Lubitsch, and itself will influence such disparate directors as Rouben Mamoulian and Orson Welles. Film studies, though, just like those two men on the roof in *Le Million*, has a long history of not hearing, of focusing only on visual style. There have been occasional attempts at understanding, and developing methodologies to study, the aural component of cinema, and in particular music. But the field's typical interest in music can best be summed up by the title of Claudia Gorbman's 1987 study of the topic, *Unheard Melodies*.^[1] For film scholars for a very long time, movie music was very much in the background, if heard at all. Over the last fifteen or twenty years, however, film studies has developed a significant interest in sound, and particularly music, with the latter now frequently linked to considerations of national cinema. Caryl Flinn's 2003 monograph, *The New German Cinema: Music, History, and the Matter of Style*, helped establish the field of film music studies, but since then France has emerged as the national cinema of choice in the consideration of sound, music, film style and storytelling.^[2]

Charles O'Brien's *Cinema's Conversion to Sound: Technology and Film Style in France and the U.S.* (2005) adopted a comparative model to study the period from about 1928 to 1933, and emphasized different national solutions to the industrial and aesthetic problems posed by both speech and music.^[3] At around the same time, Kelley Conway examined a single aspect of French film from the first dozen years of sound, the realist singer. Her *Chanteuse in the City: The*

Realist Singer in French Film (2004), uses the music hall and movie careers of Josephine Baker, Mistinguett, Damia, and others to examine female performance and the sound of the female voice during an era, the 1930s, that we often assume to have been dominated by such male performers as Jean Gabin and Michel Simon.[4] Most recently, Lea Jacobs's *Film Rhythm After Sound* (2015) analyzes tempo and rhythm as elements of both visual and sound style, with *Le Million* as well as Clair's *Sous les toits de Paris* (1930) emerging as early experiments in establishing new models for the use of film music during the transition to sound and also for the new relationships between the visual and the aural in cinema.[5]

Now there is a new contribution to the field. Hannah Lewis's *French Musical Culture and the Coming of Sound Cinema* directly addresses the relationship of the nation, and national film production, to issues of music and singing in the first four or five years following the adoption of recorded sound in cinema. For many years, the standard film studies historiography stressed the speed of sound, the momentary disruption caused by the new technology followed by a generally smooth transition. We know now that this was hardly the case. There were vast alterations to the movie studio landscape with the building of sound stages, various production difficulties to work out, performers to train, and, among other things, the lengthy and expensive installation of sound equipment in cinemas. Lewis poses the central questions that were circulating about all of this activity, questions that were so difficult to respond to at the time and that we are still answering in the histories of the period: What should movies sound like? How should music contribute to the movies? How will filmmakers, intellectuals, critics, and the general public react to the possibilities presented by recorded sound and music?

The chapters of *French Musical Culture* typically examine a particular genre or mode of production, with a few films emerging as examples each time, and also the challenges and possibilities that recorded music brought. After a valuable opening section that examines the debates in the French press about the coming of sound, Lewis properly devotes a chapter to avant-garde movies like Buñuel's *L'Âge d'or* (1930) and Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un poète* (1932), which rather than remaining on the margins often had a central place in French, and especially Parisian, film exhibition. Then she moves to the *opérette filmée*, musical comedies most often taken from stage musicals, and including films like *Chacun sa chance* (1930). From there, Lewis considers *théâtre filmé*, in this instance Marcel Pagnol's adaptations of his own plays, and she sets these spare, dialog-dependent films against those of René Clair, like *Le Million*, which tend to eliminate speech as much as possible in favor of singing and music. The music of the poetic realist films of the 1930s, for instance Jean Renoir's celebrated *La Chienne* (1931) and Anatol Litvak's less well-known *Cœur des lilas* (1931), featuring the chanteuse Fréhel, form the focus of the next chapter. Then, in the last section, Lewis analyzes a single film, and one not so conveniently placed in a broader school or production practice: Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* (1934), which had been reedited, re-scored, and even retitled—as *La Chalande qui passe*—to capitalize on the popularity of the song of the same name.

Except for the first chapter and the last one, which is a fascinating archaeological dig through the various reconstructions of *L'Atalante* as a visual and aural text, all of them follow the same form. First Lewis discusses the prevailing arguments about music and different modes of cinematic production, and the filmmakers' own ideas about music. Extremely early during the transition to recorded sound, for instance, Luis Buñuel, in his shooting script for *L'Âge d'or*, "specified that sound would instigate the import and conflict of the film" (p. 45), and that, rather than working with a composer on an original score for the film, he hired a full orchestra to

record “preexisting classical works” (p. 49), even though it “was widely held that a full orchestra would not record well with primitive sound technology” (p. 50). With this kind of careful excavation of the production process, Lewis fully installs both sound and music as vital to the avant-garde and surrealist projects. Usually, when we think of *L'Âge d'or*, we think of the striking images: Lya Lys kissing the toe of the sculpture, or the cow lying on the couch. Lewis, however, reminds us that the aural component of this film—and, by extension, of others like it—is just as important as the visual text.

With the *opérette filmée*, Lewis takes something of a disparaged genre and shows how it fit within a significant critical discussion of how best “to allow for experimentation with the camera and with music’s role in shaping film rhythm,” such that “music could, instead of being a hindrance to camera movement, become a structuring device in and of itself” (p. 77). As much about Pagnol’s films themselves, the chapter on *théâtre filmé* is a discussion of the debate between Pagnol and his friend René Clair about the status of music in cinema—the former adopting a spare, “realist” aesthetic, the latter more in favor of playfulness and fantasy—often played out in the myriad French film journals of the time as well as in daily newspapers.

Here and throughout the book, Lewis goes right to the primary materials of cinema: *Paris-Midi*, *Pour Vous*, *Ciné-Miroir*, *Mon Ciné*, *Cinémagazine*, *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous*, *Ciné-Journal*, *Comoedia*, *Echo*, and many, many others. The research, mostly conducted at the Bibliothèque nationale, is thorough and scrupulous. This might be the first English-language book about French cinema that makes such full use of these materials, materials that tell us so much about how people thought about cinema at the time, and that provides vital information about film production and exhibition.

In fact, Lewis’s research complicates the very notion of national film production. Her emphasis not just on the films themselves, but rather on how they were made and by whom, makes “Frenchness” not quite so obvious or self-explanatory. During the first years of sound, the French film industry lagged behind other countries in developing the necessary technology, and so many “French” films were produced by the American studio, Paramount, in its facility just outside Paris, while others, including some of the most celebrated, like *Sous les toits de Paris*, were made by the German company Tobis. In examining the discussions about sound, from filmmakers, critics, and others, Lewis also provides us with surprises that make us rethink the importance of some movies from the period. *The Broadway Melody* (1929), for instance, directed by Harry Beaumont at MGM in Hollywood, has come down to us as a Best Picture Oscar winner that now seems more like an interesting but clunky novelty saved mostly by an astonishing lead performance by Bessie Love. From Lewis, though, we learn that *The Broadway Melody* struck filmmakers, and particularly Pagnol and Clair, as a significant artistic advance, with the latter claiming that the film was “neither theatre nor cinema, but something altogether new” (p. 103). This is an important historiographic revision. We have appreciated for a long time the influence on French filmmakers of early sound films by Lubitsch, Sternberg, and other members of the directorial pantheon. We have not, however, given enough importance to Beaumont’s seemingly forgettable homage to Tin Pan Alley.

Lewis is a musicologist, and she brings a musicologist’s ear to the historical arguments. They are nuanced and complicated, and the evidence is wonderful. The discussion of films, however, remains mostly in a descriptive register. Lewis effectively tells us what we see and hear in scenes from *La Chienne* or *Le Chemin du paradis* (1930) or *La Quatorze Juillet* (1932). In the

latter film, for instance, at a celebration on the night before Bastille Day, Anna and Jean “dance to the music of a neighborhood band. Then a bartender walks over to the stage with a tray full of drinks. The musicians repeatedly stop their music to grab drinks, much to the consternation of the conductor. We see Anna and Jean’s frustration each time the music stops, as it disrupts their dancing and threatens to ruin their night. This scene establishes music’s unreliability early in the film” (p. 136). This sort of descriptive analysis is helpful, but it suggests that, perhaps, film studies has not yet developed a method for aural analysis similar to the textual models developed in the 1970s by Thierry Kuntzell, Raymond Bellour, Laura Mulvey, or Christian Metz. There might not yet be anything approaching, for sound, the careful methods of shot by shot analyses of the first two. Nor do we yet have an “aural pleasure and narrative cinema” to match Mulvey’s consideration of “visual pleasure.” There is also no *grande syntagmatique*, in the manner of Metz.[6] Lea Jacobs, in *Film Rhythm After Sound*, has begun just such a project, but it has not yet been fully absorbed or utilized by other film scholars. Or, perhaps, there is still a tension between musicology and film studies, a productive one in terms of the superb histories of debate and industrial development that Lewis so often provides, and one that is less useful when it comes to analyzing the film text.

French Musical Culture and the Coming of Sound Cinema is a significant book, particularly because of those histories. Lewis effectively troubles much of the received wisdom of the early sound period, and in doing so teaches us how we might ask important questions about film historiography generally, and where we might find the evidence to answer them. At the end of *Le Million*, there is a return to the beginning and the men at the window and the assembled men and women in the hall. They dance frenetically, the film speeded up while the accompanying music speeds up to keep pace. They all exit as the music slows, and only the central couple of the film, Béatrice and Michel, remain. They kiss, almost in silence but not quite. Hannah Lewis helps us understand how René Clair, and those of us in the audience, got to that point, and how the combination of music and image, space and tone, guide us in making sense of what we see and hear, and also what that might have meant, in the very early 1930s, about the promise and potential of sound films.

NOTES

[1] Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987)

[2] Caryl Flinn, *The New German Cinema: Music, History, and the Matter of Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[3] Charles O’Brien, *Cinema’s Conversion to Sound: Technology and Film Style in France and the U.S.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

[4] Kelley Conway, *The Chanteuse in the City: The Realist Singer in French Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[5] Lea Jacobs, *Film Rhythm After Sound: Technology, Music, and Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

[6] Thierry Kuntzel, "The Film-Work, 2," *Camera Obscura* 2(1980): 6-70; Raymond Bellour, "The Obvious and the Coded," *Screen*, 15, 4(1974), 7-17; Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, 3(1975), 6-18; Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

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