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**IMPRESSIONS**

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# Ennio Morricone – The Keys to a Monumental Work for the Cinema

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translated from French by D.T.

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On the occasion of the French release on July 6, 2022, of the documentary dedicated to the Maestro by Giuseppe Tornatore, we propose to give here some keys to understanding the work of Ennio Morricone. From his childhood to his planetary consecration, passing through the essential spaghetti westerns of Sergio Leone, the music of Ennio Morricone remains a musical continent to explore.

The opulent Tornatore documentary opens with a small thing that says a lot. To the great Spinozian question "What can the body do?" Morricone was responding by getting up at four in the morning to do his daily gymnastics. An exercise in physical and intellectual salubrity without which it is impossible to last validly over time, when you are so long riveted to your desk to compose. An activity that he began at 11 years old and which will end at his death, at the venerable age of 91, without any real interruption. Admittedly, the Tornatore

documentary is not without pitfalls. Not everything could be said or even heard despite the archival work. A musical archipelago of such magnitude required choices. Immediately, what seems regrettable is the final quarter of an hour, against a backdrop of international congratulations. The who's who couldn't legitimately miss the occasion, with John Williams and Hans Zimmer, but the tribute is a little too obvious. Regardless, fans of this pop icon, as well as the curious, will relish. As for us, fans of the maestro for

many years, we take advantage of this tribute to present here some keys to understanding his musical work. On the other hand, we will ignore the biographical data, which everyone can easily find.

### Key #1: An Effective Melodist

The Maestro's melodies are easily identifiable, as is his inimitable style. They can be remembered by the general public and express a considerable range of emotions and situations. Thus **Le clan des Siciliens** by Henri Verneuil (1969) in which opposite destinies intersect. The melody is the result of a quite unexpected association by Morricone. The latter offers the director two themes that will soon become one, doomed to a resounding success. This is what the director attested on the set of "Rules of Three"<sup>28</sup>, at the microphone of Jacques Chancel in 1997.

In addition, Morricone excels in recuperating melodies from the classical field and anchored in general culture. In 1973 in **Il mio nome è Nessuno**, the wild bunch is thus accompanied by an arrangement on Wagner's famous theme *The ride of the Valkyries*. A pastiche theme full of irony in which the great Wagnerian orchestra is replaced by an ocarina, a piano and an indefinable instrument. It is true that the pastiche is a genre that Morricone knows very well, having handled it since he was 6/7 years old... This film is also an opportunity to highlight one of the master's innumerable signatures: the harmonic descents. In the opening credits<sup>29</sup>, the theme is shaped by the ocarina, while the voices develop their own

theme on the treble. The bass never stops descending lower and lower.

Morricone's influences are numerous: from Monteverdi to Boulez via Stravinsky. He claims the sounds of Weber's *Freischütz* as a possible explanation for his western music.

### Key #2: Music Easily Recognized thanks to the Use of Unexpected Orchestrations

Morricone's orchestrations are an indisputable trademark. The Maestro does not like large standard orchestras which sometimes sound a bit "fanfare". On the other hand, daily life is much more disparate. The result is sometimes a little rococo, in the sense of a proliferation of instruments that turns a little excessively. Not excess in the sense of a nauseous overflow but excess in the sense of pushing voices and instruments to where we are not used to hearing them, to where they are not used to go. But the result is obviously effective and constitutes a pinnacle of film music. This is what can be heard, for example, in **Vamos a matar compañeros** (1970)<sup>30</sup>. Who can use voices pushed in this way until deformation without anybody saying "*What is that?*".

The use of noises also appears fundamental in the work of the Maestro. Any noise interests him and he uses them as a musical element in their own right. It is a revolution in orchestration; revolution that we find even in the songs with the use of a typewriter to represent work in the factory. Thus in 1961 in the song *Io lavoro* sung by Gianni Meccia<sup>31</sup>. But it is also the accelerating heartbeat and the cries of a dying woman in **L'uccello dalle piume di**

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.radiofrance.fr/francemusique/podcasts/les-tresors-de-france-musique/regle-de-trois-avec-le-cineaste-henri-verneuil-une-archive-de-1997-r-1798504> from 10:30.

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-tXc2PaqE> from 1:25

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVRCbCe8HEE>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jfwj7JJaeu8>

**crystallo** in 1971<sup>32</sup>; everyday noises that play their own part in the films. Or the imitation of a braying mule in **Two Mules for Sister Sarah** in 1970<sup>33</sup>. But among the unexpected elements, the general public will particularly remember the whistler, symbol of this filthy cowboy so well portrayed by Clint Eastwood and supposed to counterpoint to his forerunner, portrayed by the always clean cut, John Wayne. The whistler is Alessandro Alessandroni (and not Curro Savoy, a confusion that makes Italian aficionados howl...), a childhood friend of Morricone who will bring him on **Per un pugno di dollari**. Indeed you hear him in many spaghetti westerns. Alessandroni is also known for having lent his voice to a theme with a great future, whether in **Benny Hill** or in the **Muppet Show: Mana Mana** composed by Piero Umiliani. Another unexpected manner that we hear in **C'era una volta il West**: tightening the throat of the harmonica player in order to radically modify the sound.

### **Key #3: An Avant-Garde, Experimentalist, Unclassifiable Composer**

From 1965, Morricone composed and played the trumpet in the avant-garde group Nuova Consonanza, which is by the way still active. *“Nuova Consonanza is a non-profit musical cultural association, which aims to spread knowledge of Italian and foreign contemporary music, with particular reference to the enhancement of new music. Nuova Consonanza aims to produce and distribute contemporary music in order to ensure its relevant presence in the world of music and culture, offering opportunities for encounters between generations of composers. It aims to increase the visibility*

*of the musical and performative repertoire of the present through musical and multimedia events, debates, conferences, publications and recordings, didactic seminars, workshops for schools, conferences.”*<sup>34</sup> Morricone joined this group in 1966, at the age of 38. *“The music we made was improvised from targeted exercises: we did months and months of improvisation on very specific parameters, we recorded ourselves, in the evening we listened to each other again and again. We criticized each other. It was very careful”*, explains Ennio Morricone in an interview<sup>35</sup>. What he cannot do in the cinema can be expressed here through unceasing improvisation. Their first record was released in 1964, under the title "Gruppo Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza". This musical experience should in no way be considered secondary, on the contrary it constitutes the heart of one of the master's two major musical paths: musica assoluta (absolute music) and musica applicata (applied music). The first one is resolutely atonal, dissonant music, based on improvisation, experimentation, serialism<sup>36</sup>. The second is intended for the cinema, a music that the Maestro says is constrained by the image and reserved for an audience of average culture. The experiments with the trumpet made by Morricone in this group – and many other elements too – can be found in particular in the music of **Danger Diabolik** in 1968<sup>37</sup>.

### **Key #4: The Fusion of Musical Genres**

But one of the most important keys to Morricone's work lies in his ability to merge

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9XiS6l-868>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNbLE5Eznu0>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.nuovaconsonanza.it/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqvAhBJ99wA>

<sup>36</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZGTaBI7U\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZGTaBI7U_Y)

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUHRraHZN5Q>

the two musical styles mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Let's take two examples: **Peur sur la ville** in 1975<sup>38</sup> and **The Untouchables** (more particularly *Machine Gun Lullaby*<sup>39</sup>) in 1987. In the first example, we can hear an ostinato in the bass, a hauntingly repeated motif. The high-pitched whistled theme is applied music. It is that of the nocturnal thug (or the commissioner portrayed by Bébel, with unorthodox methods to say the least). The middle part is very dissonant and belongs to absolute music. The superimposition of these two themes in two such different registers which ultimately become one, symbolizes the struggle between Belmondo (a sort of French-style Harry Callahan) and Minos, the one-eyed serial killer. All for an excellent B-movie characteristic of a Sunday night from a now bygone era. In the second example, we can hear two distinct themes: the nursery rhyme (the buggy on the stairs) and the dissonant/atonal ornaments (absolute music) symbolizing the danger that the killers of Al Capone will cause to the baby.

In each example, the union of the two musical motifs provides dramatic tension. In the same scene, we see two antagonistic worlds coexist: childhood and banditry. In a previous article<sup>40</sup>, I mentioned the theme of utopia specific to this type of musical superposition. Taking disparate or even opposing musical elements and making them a coherent whole to musicalize existences, for better or for worse, evolve in the same plane of existence: this is the Morriconian musical utopia. It results in the emergence of dissonance in the melodic.

### Key #5: The Importance of Mixing

Morricone writes the score directly on paper, in order to verify the harmonic verticality. In his office, computers have no place; the old manners applies here... But his film scores were not composed to be performed in concert. These are pieces resolutely at the service of the film. So much so that on the set of Sergio Leone's films, the music is played while the actors act in front of the camera. Performing them in concert frequently requires re-orchestration. For the cinema, the different instruments are recorded separately before being mixed. A frequent practice which is not the prerogative of the Maestro but which responds, here in particular, to a logic of feasibility. Roland Joffé's **The Mission** (1986) is a film that brings the composer back to his Catholic faith. We hear a profusion of soundscapes: the singing of the Guarani, classical music evoking the nobility of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (harpsichord), religious music from the Counter-Reformation<sup>41</sup>. All elements gathered in the final track of the film: **On Earth as it is in Heaven** (where we find again the harmonic descents mentioned in the first part). One wonders what Morricone will have written more magnificently than that... But then why is this track never performed in concert? We usually hear the main theme repeated on the oboe but that's all. Simply because it is an impossible track to perform live. Only a mixing desk can make it audible. Indeed, how could an oboe (and harpsichord) get along so distinctly with, behind it, the full London Philharmonic with choir, ethnic choir, classical and ethnic percussion? It is therefore necessary to resort to mixing to

<sup>38</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YX\\_ZfgjgrL4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YX_ZfgjgrL4)

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyOmDdij33U>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyOmDdij33U>

<sup>41</sup> Read here my article about this movie:

<https://www.cinezik.org/infos/affinfo.php?titre0=20161124133348>

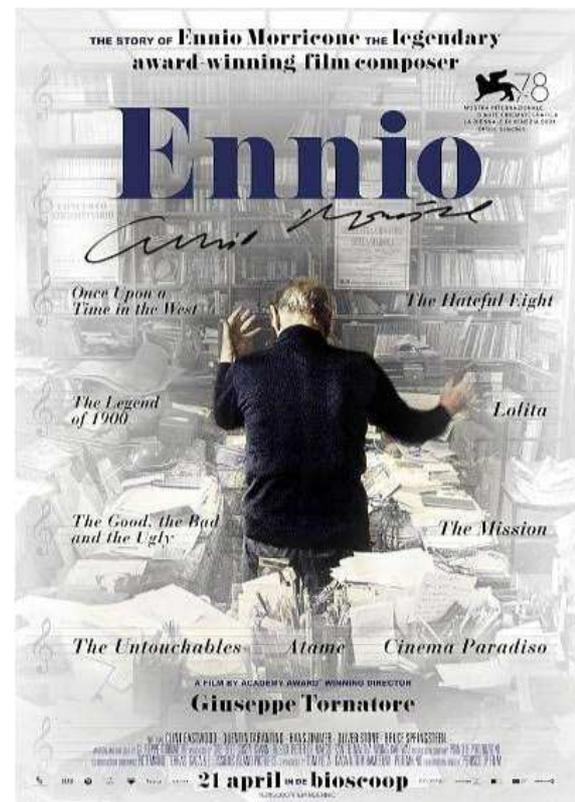
artificially rebalance the voices. Or proceed to a re-orchestration of the orchestral accompaniment so that the performance becomes possible.

### Key #6: Music that Knows When to be Silent

In nowadays cinema, in particular in Hollywood, a two-hour film ought to demand music for at least an hour and a half... The relevance of the whole does not necessarily gain from this, unless you want to find a way to hide scriptwriting weaknesses... Morricone, for one, knows how not to compose. This can be heard in Tornatore's **The Best Offer** (2013). The music is so discreet that it willingly goes unnoticed, as in the sequence where Geoffrey Rush delivers his verdict on a canvas which is in reality only a copy of Veliente. It is when the expert lays down his implacable verdict that the music stops. From this point, the music becomes useless, considering that the word of the expert is the only music necessary.

Morricone has been able to craft over the decades an inimitable musical style, allowing him to differentiate himself from the competition. There would be other keys to address. His ability to constantly question himself in order to avoid routine, considering that a new language is always possible. Recognition will come late, after a failed Oscar for **The Mission** in favour of another film that everyone has forgotten. A missed occurrence recognized as such since... Among the keys, it is also necessary to point out his wife, Maria Travia. By the Maestro's own admission, without her, Morricone would never have existed. Such an amount of work inevitably assumes someone else is taking care of the house and

the four children (not to mention whatever we don't know...). It would also be necessary to approach his work capacities which pushed him to agree to work on several films per year, sometimes at the cost of a few distractions. **Red Sonja** (1985) is an undeniable musical success, but for a film duly listed on the Nanarland website! A theme taken up for the credits of the show **Franck Ferrand Raconte**<sup>42</sup>. What remains to be discovered from Mr Ennio Morricone? After the Tornatore documentary, pretty much everything since we continue to dwell on spaghetti westerns...



<sup>42</sup> <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/franck-ferrand-raconte/id1434297164>