

## ***Touch of Evil: An Analysis of Henri Mancini's Score***

**Virginia Kilbertus**

If one thing is for certain upon viewing Orson Welle's *Touch of Evil* (1958), it is that the accompanying score by Henry Mancini is just as disconcerting as the disturbing and confusing narrative and setting. The music on its own would have shocked audiences of 1958 for its use of the newly emerging styles of Jazz (cool, Afro-Cuban, and Latin big band) and rock and roll, which are in direct contrast to the lush Romantic Hollywood scores that had been the norm well into the 50's. Mancini even goes a step further to incorporate the genres of exotica easy listening, mariachi, bluegrass, and cabaret/turn-of-the-century parlor music as well. The use of any one of these genres would have been surprising enough, but their juxtaposition in *Touch of Evil* adds a deeper level of meaning to what Jill Leeper terms the "hybrid" theme of the film, in her article "Crossing Musical Borders: The Soundtrack for *Touch of Evil*," such that the narrative and the music are intrinsically linked.

What is so innovative and yet so subtle about the score, however, is that it simultaneously adheres to and goes against the standard Hollywood practice of leitmotif scoring. It does so not by using motifs to identify character, as was the norm, but by presenting a different genre of music for each character, therefore providing overt cultural cues. The score thus serves as an aid to the viewer, helping them to orient themselves within the culturally mixed population of the fictional setting of Los Robles. Simultaneously, though, Mancini reflects the dislocated nature of the film, which comes across primarily through the purposefully mismatched casting (for example, of Charlton Heston as a Mexican,) by using music which at

times seems at odds with the nature of the drama transpiring on screen. This can be seen as stemming more from the Soviet-era style of discontinuity editing.

One instance in which this becomes overtly apparent is in the scenes involving Suzy and the gangster Grandi boys, leading ultimately to the climactic rape scene. When Suzy first meets Grandi's son towards the beginning of the film and gets lured to Grandi himself with a note, lively rumba-rhythm conga music plays in the background despite the ominous implication of the scene. In Suzy's hotel room in Los Robles, we subsequently hear an easy listening pop song, which, although it reflects her cultural character type of the white American woman, seems to have no sense of the danger she facing. Then, in her American motel room we hear bluegrass music, which again fits with the night-caretaker character, but contradicts the mounting tension in the narrative. Finally, when the gangsters break into her room, the rock music that has come to be their associative cultural cue becomes obnoxiously loud, drowning out the scene completely and therefore calling immediate attention to itself. Here, although the music does feature strong chords and harsher sounds, the general tone of rock is not an ominous one, but rather an upbeat one. The music therefore again purposefully confuses and unsettles the viewer's emotional response, which is perhaps even more effective than the expected sinister music would be, as it adds another level of wrongness to the scene. Again breaking away from the standard Hollywood tradition, Mancini and Welles heighten the stress of the rape scene by abruptly crosscutting away from Suzy's hotel room to Tana speaking on the phone with Peter, the music switching to her accompanying player-piano waltz theme and Peter's silence, accordingly. Another instance in which this same technique is used is in the later scene where Quinlan murders Grandi and again, Quinlan's associative Jazz music with its underlying conga drums (reflecting its Afro-Cuban influence) completely overtakes the scene. Once more, the

percussive drums and prominent brass section make the music somewhat appropriate to the nature of the action on screen, but the overall upbeat dance rhythm is at definite odds with it. Immediately following this scene, when Suzy wakes up, the sight of Grandi's dead face above her is cued by a trilling trumpet, followed low blasting brass instruments which are brought to the forefront of the ongoing Jazz music. When Suzy runs out to the balcony, however, the ominous tone fades smoothly out of the music and we realize that the Jazz has been emanating from the nightclubs lining the streets below. Here, the fact that the music switches to a lighter and jauntier tone just as Suzy cries out for help once again plays with our emotions. This confusion is mirrored in the miscomprehending street people below, who do not register that her screams are a cry for help.

This raises perhaps one of the other most important aspects of Mancini's score for *Touch of Evil*: that nearly all of the music is cued diegetically, its source almost always being explicitly stated in the dialogue of the film. For example, the ticking clock/timer sound in the opening music is cued by a woman in a car saying "I've got thick ticking in my ear," and the smooth Jazz (featuring prominent vibes) is understood to emanate from the strip club and to infiltrate the street. The music playing in Suzy's hotel room is also shown to be coming out of speakers, and Tana's theme is that of a waltz that plays on her player piano. The only instances where these diegetic musical cues are broken are in the very beginning of the film and towards the end of the film, beginning when Vargas is informed that his wife is being convicted of murder and lasting to the final scene on the bridge. At the beginning of the film, the music can be understood to be somewhat diegetic, as the music is composed partly from the ticking of the timer on the bomb shown in the very first shot, and the rest could be coming from a nightclub in town. The music persists at a consistently high level, however, even though the drama follows

characters throughout town, therefore weakening its diegetic link and confusing the viewer on yet another level. At the end of the film, a low brass Jazz tune, which does not seem to emanate from a known source, accompanies Vargas as he runs to Suzy in prison. Mancini subtly includes an underlying piano in this music, however, which creates a smooth transition to the next scene in Tana's home where her player piano plays first not her usual theme but another jauntier piece, and then finally her waltz again, blurring the boundaries of diegetic cues once more.

It is clear that Orson Welle's *Touch of Evil* provided Henry Mancini with the perfect canvas with which to explore new methods of film scoring with new musical genres. His use of various musical styles demonstrates how important information regarding setting and characters can be conveyed using engrained cultural cues, even when the narrative, casting, or mis-en-scène lacks this information. Mancini also masterfully demonstrates how, contrary to classical Hollywood scoring, employing music which contradicts the nature of the drama transpiring in a scene can affect the viewer's emotions just as much, if not more so, than if it were to reflect the appropriate mood or to strictly follow the narrative direction. Together, both Welles' direction and Mancini's score provide a turning point in the history of film making and scoring.