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## The “Perfect Discords” of Billy Wilder’s Comedy Films

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Billy Wilder had a passion for jazz and he attached the utmost importance to music in his movies. He used to say: “I cannot whistle, I cannot sing, I cannot play the piano. I am totally unmusical. But I am musical as far as the song or the music for a picture is concerned. In that I am very, very finicky” (Crowe 107). Indeed, from the beginning of his career, he chose to work with some of the greatest soundtrack composers; what would his dramas and film noirs be without the collaboration of Miklós Rózsa or Franz Waxman? But Wilder was also a celebrated scriptwriter and director of comedy films in which diegetic music plays a key role. In a number of his movies, protagonists are atypical musicians or singers; in others, romantic tunes are in fact not so romantic after all; and finally, source music can be such an obsession that it turns into background music, the melodies the characters hear or hum becoming a leitmotiv and affecting the story in a practical way.

My analysis deliberately omits Wilder’s only musical, *The Emperor Waltz* (1948), as well as his most famous and certainly most analyzed comedy involving professional musicians, *Some Like It Hot* (1959), to concentrate on his other comedic movies, whether acclaimed or undervalued. Though very little has been written on that specific subject, I argue that diegetic music is fundamental at all levels in the language of Billy Wilder’s comedy films – by giving the action its tempo, introducing humor, but also from a metaphorical or lyrical point of view.

### I. Unmusical Musicians

If Wilder confessed he was no musician, many of his comedy film characters, although they sometimes sing or play an instrument for a living, do not have real talent either, which makes them quite original. In *The Fortune Cookie* (1966), Sandy (Judi West) is a failed artist who started her career on television singing commercial jingles for a linoleum company in the tune of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home.” She then leaves Cleveland for New York, and her husband for “Gus Gilroy and his Gaslighters” – but this group is no more successful than she is. As for Pamela’s ex-boyfriend Bertram in *Avanti!* (1972), he plays the guitar in a band called “The Four Apostles.” She says he “is also a terrific composer, ... writing a rock musical called *Splash* ... about the sinking of the Titanic,” which does not sound very promising either.

More interesting still, Pamela (Juliet Mills) proudly shows Wendell (Jack Lemmon) a photograph of the group (**Fig. 1**). The bass player standing on the extreme right looks a little like Frank Zappa, who was a brilliant musician. The hairstyle and general attitude of the four makes them resemble Aphrodite’s Child. Vangelis belonged to Aphrodite’s Child and he was a great composer too; Demis Roussos was another member of the band and he was not that acclaimed. Bertram, who is in the foreground, precisely bears some resemblance to Demis Roussos, which is certainly no coincidence. In addition, Bertram’s guitar has nothing to do with the beautiful hollow body electrics made by prestigious American companies like Gibson, Guild, Gretsch or Rickenbacker; instead, it rather looks like the medium-range instruments manufactured in Europe in the 50s, that were not popular across the Atlantic in the 70s at the time Bertram’s picture was taken. Finally, the position of the men’s fingers on the necks of their instruments does not correspond to any existing chord, which means that they are really static, and it could even be wondered whether they can play at all.



**Fig. 1** – “The Four Apostles” from *Avanti!*, who are seen for a couple of seconds, and never heard. Source: MGM DVD

Therefore, it seems that Wilder enjoyed making fun of musicians, and he also liked debunking myths. For instance, in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970), the detective (Robert Stephens) appears to be a rather weak man who finds it hard to solve mysteries without Dr. Watson’s help; he is a drug addict, and cannot play the violin well, although his friend writes that he is gifted. That may be why the famous ballerina (Tamara Toumanova) who asks Holmes to be the father of her child offers him a Stradivarius in exchange. In fact, in this film, the violin is relevant as an object and a metaphor: “[It] is always associated with sexuality;” it should be remembered too that “Holmes’s first love was the daughter of his violin teacher” (Gemünden 160). That explains the presence of the Stradivarius, for what would Sherlock possibly do with such a beautiful instrument?

In another film yet another myth is smashed, this time with the consent of the person involved. *Kiss Me, Stupid* (1964) opens on Dean Martin singing “S Wonderful” at the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas, the way he could have done it in real life during a performance of the Rat Pack. In fact, an actual record of his *Italian Love Songs* is used as a prop in one of the scenes (**Fig. 2**). It is clear that the singer and actor, whose character name Dino in the movie is actually the star’s birth name, indulges in self-mockery by playing “a caricatured version of his own image” (Simsolo 85). Later on indeed, we understand that the ageing playboy is a bit old-fashioned to young and attractive Zelda (Felicia Farr), who used to be one of his greatest fans.



**Fig. 2** – Early in the plot of *Kiss Me, Stupid*, Zelda has not yet found out what kind of man Dino really is. Source: scan of an original production photograph.

The film's totally fictitious characters are in no way forgotten by Billy Wilder, who was well known for his wit: the director said of Cliff Osmond, one of his favorite supporting actors, that he had “the musical ear of van Gogh” (Wilder and Karasek 314). Interestingly, in *Kiss Me, Stupid*, Cliff Osmond plays the part of an obscure lyricist who thinks he can become famous with songs like “Pretzels in the Moonlight.” His friend Orville (Ray Walston), who writes the music, is also convinced that they are geniuses; that is why he casually sings “I’m a Poached Egg” while following Dino to the toilets. Orville is silly enough to be convinced that it is a clever way to attract the crooner’s attention; but of course, the effect is quite the opposite and Dino only feels like running away.

Orville is in fact obsessed by music. He is a piano teacher who gives his lessons in his home, in the middle of his living room, and who wears a sweater with Beethoven’s prominent portrait on it; he also has a Bach sweater and a Brahms sweater in his wardrobe. His foolishness and the inanity of his ditties are there to prove that everything can be bought since the two friends will eventually become famous when Dino sings one of their songs on television... after having slept with Orville’s wife.

Orville is an eccentric musician and a grotesque character, which is not the case for Ariane (Audrey Hepburn), the heroine of *Love in the Afternoon* (1957). That said, she does have something in common with him: the pianist of *Kiss Me, Stupid* is a very jealous and paranoid man, always spying on his wife, and thus, he cannot concentrate on what his pupils are playing; in the same way, Ariane finds it hard to focus on her music, simply because she is in love. The girl is a cello student – not at the Sheboygan Conservatory of *Some Like It Hot*, but at the Paris Conservatory which is a “good school” too. Unlike Josephine (Tony Curtis) and Daphne (Jack Lemmon), Ariane did not get “time off for good behavior,” so she spends her

days carrying her instrument, practicing at her father's home or rehearsing with the other students in an orchestra.



**Fig. 3** – Ariane's love for music is quite forgotten from the moment she meets Flannagan (*Love in the Afternoon*). Source: scan of an original production photograph.

Ariane is not an amateur and cannot really be called an “unmusical” musician; rather, she is an “unusual” one. The only occasion on which she plays incorrect notes is when she places some articles about Frank Flannagan's private life on her stand and reads them with passion instead of the sheet music (**Fig. 3**). The originality of the girl also lies in the fact that she is not telling Flannagan (Gary Cooper) the truth about her age, her life and her sexual experience, and so she has to hide her cello when visiting the playboy at the Ritz. This is not easy since its case is almost bigger than she is. However, the case proves quite useful: Ariane hides her face behind it so as not to be recognized by one of her father's clients (John McGiver) (**Fig. 4**), and she also hides objects inside; in particular, an ermine coat she has borrowed and will wear in Flannagan's suite to impress him. So, the function of the cello case is altered and allows a well-behaved young girl to turn into a kind of femme fatale.





**Fig. 4** – The cello case is successively a hindrance and an ally for Ariane in *Love in the Afternoon*. Source: scan of an original production photograph.

Wilder's choice of *Tristan and Isolde* by Wagner for the opera house sequence of this romantic comedy is significant. Charlotte Chandler remarks: "Appropriately, that opera is about a casual relationship that grows into undying love, and is set in Ireland, Flannagan's ancestral home" (194). Once again, Ariane's behavior at the opera is not expected from a music student. She attends the performance with Michel (Van Doude), her friend from the Conservatory. While the boy is carried away by the music and cannot help "conducting" the orchestra from the balcony, thus annoying his neighbors with his many gestures, Ariane is not that absorbed, especially when she sees Flannagan in the audience below. From then on, her main preoccupation is to watch him, and she keeps using Michel's theater binoculars, to the latter's great displeasure (**Fig. 5**).



**Fig. 5** – An explicit subjective shot from *Love in the Afternoon*. Source: Carlotta DVD of the film.

Incidentally, Frank Flannagan is not captivated by the beauty of the music either – as a matter of fact, he will later tell Ariane that he was planning to take his new conquest to the Folies Bergère and that the opera tickets were bought by mistake. If the “Friends of Italian Opera” in *Some Like It Hot* are actually uncultured mobsters, Flannagan is no music lover himself; the playboy is rather restless, looking at the audience around him although he is sitting in the first row, right in front of the orchestra pit. Likewise, Ariane does not pay much attention to the music or to what is happening on the stage, but for different reasons. This point is quite interesting, being reminiscent of a film by Ernst Lubitsch, Wilder’s master. In the opera house sequence of *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), Monescu (Herbert Marshall), the elegant thief, spends his time looking closely at a rich widow’s jewels through his binoculars (**Fig. 6**). Much of the scene is shot in subjective camera and not one reverse shot is used to show us the performers. Similarly, in Wilder’s movie, most shots are of the audience and we barely see the members of the orchestra.



**Fig. 6** – Lubitsch has always been Wilder’s “mentor”: a subjective shot showing what catches Monescu’s attention in the opera house sequence of *Trouble in Paradise*. Source: Criterion Collection DVD of the film.

Whether in *Trouble in Paradise* or *Love in the Afternoon*, an opera is a pretext for the meeting of a man and a woman, and source music serves as a clever and explicit backdrop for Monescu’s intentions and Ariane’s feelings. And yet, Lubitsch’s musical choices for his love or seduction scenes were not always as classical, and in that, he also influenced Wilder tremendously.

## II. Romantic Interludes?

Gypsy bands and music can be considered as Lubitsch’s trademark since they are central in many of his films, having a lot to do with love stories. Interestingly, in *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), there is hardly any source or background music and the only melodies come from the cigarette boxes that play “Otchi Tchernye” (“Dark Eyes”) when opened. Their recurrent presence becomes a running gag whose topper is the scene in which the dishonest clerk (Joseph Schildkraut) is pushed into a pile of those music boxes that all start playing in an ear-piercing cacophony. “Otchi Tchernye” is a traditional Russian song with a Gypsy tune; in this film, it is also performed by the orchestra at the café when Klara (Margaret Sullavan) has her failed rendezvous with her mystery correspondent. The choice of such a tune is not surprising in a movie whose action takes place in Budapest. And yet, Lubitsch was so fond of Gypsy bands that he introduced them in some of his other stories even though they were not set in Eastern Europe. *Angel* (1937) is one notable example. The introduction of a Gypsy band happens in a Wilder film too.

In *Love in the Afternoon*, a quartet of Gypsies consisting of two violins, one accordion and one hammered dulcimer, is inseparable from Frank Flannagan (**Fig. 7**). Like the champagne, the quartet is one of the playboy’s usual seductive tricks and it seems that he would never be able to be so successful with women without those musicians: they “[set] the mood for [his] seductions” (Chandler 194) and “[follow him] everywhere, providing a romantic



soundtrack for all his pursuits” (Crowe 345). The musicians’ presence, however, is certainly more humorous than truly glamorous – as is the case, to some extent, with the disheveled violinist playing behind a door in *The Prince and the Showgirl* (Laurence Olivier), released on the same year.



**Fig. 7** – Flannagan’s peculiar definition of intimacy in *Love in the Afternoon*. Source: scans of original production photographs.

Indeed, in *Love in the Afternoon*, nothing is left to chance and timing is perfect: the Gypsies always arrive as scheduled, slipping away at the end of the evening without forgetting to place a “Do Not Disturb” sign at the door. In one of the scenes, they rush to Flannagan’s suite on a non-diegetic “martial drum rhythm” (Chandler 194), which is meaningful. Every night, the pieces they are asked to play are the same, in the same order: they start with the staccato-paced “Hot Paprika,” then perform some Liszt, Lehár and one or two czárdás. As the evening goes by, the rhythm of the music slows down: at five to ten exactly, “Fascination” is played and, invariably, Flannagan and one of his many conquests dance cheek to cheek while the first violin gets closer to them. At the end of “Fascination,” the couple is left alone – at last – since it seems there is nothing more the Gypsies can do. At one point, the four musicians go as far as following Ariane and Frank in a rowboat on the river. What is so romantic about that?



**Fig. 8:** The tireless Gypsy musicians of *Love in the Afternoon*. Source: scan of an original production photograph.

A funny fact is that the Gypsies even follow the businessman (who is alone, for a change) to the Turkish bath (**Fig. 8**). The musicians have kept their suits and their bow ties on, which must be very uncomfortable – they are sweating streams – but which shows that they are real professionals and would do anything to please Flannagan. And yet, such a setting is not plausible at all; indeed, the musicians would never take their instruments to a hammam for the excessive heat and humidity would ruin them. Besides, in just a few minutes, the strings – violins and hammered dulcimer – would be out of tune and it would be impossible to tune them again for several days. As to the accordion, its bellows would fill with water vapor and it would soon be unplayable. Towards the end of the scene, the first violinist suddenly stops playing, empties his instrument of water, and then goes on performing with passion; but in reality, a fiddle full of water no longer produces any sound.

Thus, technically, the Gypsies would never be able to play the whole of “Fascination” in such extreme conditions. Wilder must have known it, especially as the members of the band were in fact actual Hungarian musicians (Crowe 147); but the director certainly did not mean to be credible since *Love in the Afternoon* is first and foremost a comedy. Beyond its witty and even farcical aspect, the scene is interesting because it proves that contrary to Flannagan, who always uses the same tricks to impress women, the Gypsies can adapt to all kinds of situations. Incidentally, during one of Ariane and Frank’s dates at the Ritz, the musicians suddenly realize that what they are playing, “C’est Si Bon,” is too lively, so they immediately switch to “Fascination.”

The Gypsies are surely less predictable than their employer, but most importantly, they can be associated with the chorus in classical Greek plays; witnessing the action and

commenting on it. They pay great attention to the lovers' behavior, which means that they are once again being rather intrusive, and that the couple's intimacy is almost non-existent. In the last shot of the film, the musicians stay on the platform while Ariane and Frank's train is drawing away. They play "Fascination," this time as a farewell song: "Since the quartet was associated with Frank's seductions, they have been left behind for good" (Phillips 194). Flannagan indeed does not have to pretend anymore and he proves to the girl that he is really in love with her. For the first time in his life, he behaves in a sincere and romantic way, and thus, he no longer needs the Gypsies' help.



**Fig. 9** – In the same way as the playboy of *Love in the Afternoon*, David would not manage to seduce so many women without the help of a group of musicians in *Sabrina*. Source: Paramount DVD of the film and scan of an original production photograph.

Another small musical ensemble, although not a Gypsy one, is an essential ingredient for David's successes with women in *Sabrina* (1954) (**Fig. 9**). Each time they give a party, the rich Larrabees have a sextet playing and their younger son David (William Holden), after a few dances with a beautiful girl, always uses the same technique: he asks her to go to the deserted indoor tennis court and meets her there with a bottle of champagne after having told the combo to play "Isn't It Romantic?" When the chauffeur's daughter, Sabrina (Audrey Hepburn), sees her dream come true and attends the party, she dances amorously with David and they are so fond of each other that they go on dancing even after the music stops. But that is where romanticism ends. Actually, Linus, the elder brother (Humphrey Bogart), places the family business above all else and wants David to marry the daughter of a rich industrialist. As David is ready to slip away with the champagne, Linus, fully aware that David has glasses in the back pockets of his trousers, asks him to sit down.

Instead of David, Sabrina is met by Linus who drinks with her, dances with her, and even kisses her. In the meantime, a cross-cutting allows us to see David, who is having the glass fragments removed from his bottom and is complaining – not because it is *physically* painful, but because he can also hear the orchestra play the song. However, Linus and Sabrina's dance is not that romantic either: indeed, Linus does all this for the Larrabee company, and tries to deal with the girl and buy her off. Over the following days, he goes on entertaining her while his brother is recovering, with the aim of getting David out of her mind. "Music might help," and he brings a portable phonograph as they go sailing so that Sabrina can play several records; she discovers, on that occasion, that Linus is in fact more sentimental than she thought. The "cold businessman," as he calls himself, was not planning to seduce her at all, and yet, that is what happens eventually: quite unexpectedly, they fall in love and leave for Paris. This unlikely love affair thus begins in a strange way with a tune programmed by a playboy, and on which he will never have looked so ridiculous.

Although Orville, the pianist of *Kiss Me, Stupid*, is ridiculous too – and nearly all the time – he manages to be romantic once thanks to a long piece of music he composes for his



wife and performs for Polly, the prostitute (Kim Novak), who is sitting by his side on the bench (**Fig. 10**). This scene is the exact inversion of a sequence in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) where Richard (Tom Ewell) is trying to seduce his gorgeous neighbor (Marilyn Monroe) by playing the piano. Interestingly, *That Uncertain Feeling* by Lubitsch (1941) is also the story – not of a man – but of a woman (Merle Oberon) who, after six years of marriage, wonders if she is still in love with her husband (Melvyn Douglas), and who is seduced by the talent of a classical pianist (Burgess Meredith). His arpeggios seem to be tickling her and the more he plays, the less she can resist. At one point, she even asks him to stop because of the effect his music has on her.



**Fig. 10** – One of the only romantic scenes in *Kiss Me, Stupid*. Source: MGM DVD of the film.

In *The Seven Year Itch*, Richard is convinced that the second piano concerto by Rachmaninoff is some kind of universal seduction weapon, and he can even see himself performing it while his neighbor is so shaken that she can only fall into his arms. He thus plays the record of that concerto when she comes to his apartment. Unfortunately, there is a huge gap between his imagination and reality. Indeed, the girl is not that sophisticated and prefers Eddie Fisher to “good old Rachmaninoff.” Richard Armstrong writes that “Wilder revels in the vulgarity of a character who dunks potato chips in champagne and recognizes classical music because it lacks a vocal” (Armstrong 74). The other funny aspect is that Richard is in fact unable to play the piano; all he can perform is “Chopsticks”; –nothing is simpler than that, and besides, the girl can play it too. So, they start playing together and, since that type of music makes her “goose-pimply,” Richard stops and tries to kiss her. He only succeeds in making a fool of himself, and they both fall from the bench, which makes one more failed romantic interlude (**Fig. 11**).



**Fig. 11** – The gulf between Richard’s fantasies and reality in *The Seven Year Itch*. Source: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox DVD of the film and Cinémathèque française website.

If the girl played by Marilyn Monroe is insensitive to what many would consider romantic music, a number of Billy Wilder characters, on the contrary, are rather obsessed by specific songs – whether sentimental or not – to the point that a particular tune becomes pervasive: it is a kind of Ariadne’s thread that precipitates the action and works as a structural plot device.

### III. “Instrumental” Music

The most obvious example of a Wilder comedy film in which music affects the whole story and gives it its rhythm is, of course, *Some Like It Hot*. However, other movies and songs, although they are sometimes not numerous, do have a concrete role to play in the script. In *Buddy Buddy* (1981) for instance, while preparing his suicide, Victor Clooney (Jack Lemmon) plays the cassette on his transistor radio of a rather romantic song whose choice is not coincidental: its title is “Cecilia,” and Victor wants to kill himself because he has been left by his wife, “Celia.” Interestingly, the communicating hotel room is not soundproof, so contracted-killer Trabucco (Walter Matthau) can also hear the music while preparing his rifle to shoot a witness down. The contrast between this soppy tune and the situation is striking. Exactly when the music stops, Clooney hangs himself. The timing is perfect: the end of the song symbolically corresponds to the definitive end of a relationship and to the end of the man’s life, but Victor fails because the water pipe of the bathroom is not strong enough to support the weight of his body.

Such a scene cannot be compared to the many scenes in *Some Like It Hot* where Wilder, directing Jack Lemmon, uses music in a very clever way – we can think of Osgood (Joe E. Brown) and Daphne dancing tango, or of Jerry/Daphne shaking his/her maracas “so that comic dialogue [is] not swallowed up by the audience’s reaction” (Arens 49). Indeed, Wilder’s last film *Buddy Buddy*, was definitely not his best and he was not happy with it. And yet, the suicide scene shows that source music was rarely absent from his stories. Incidentally, this farcical mood is reinforced by the recurrent presence of the Mexican chambermaid (Bette Raya) who is never surprised at anything and keeps singing “Cucurrucú Paloma” no matter what happens.

Another suicide attempt involves music, this time on a far less humorous note. In *The Apartment* (1960), Fran Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine) and Jeff Sheldrake (Fred MacMurray), her married lover, always meet in the same Chinese restaurant where the pianist plays “their” tune, “Jealous Lover.” When Fran gives Jeff a record of that song for Christmas and receives a hundred dollars in return, she understands that she does not matter. Alone in someone else’s flat on Christmas Eve, she plays the record Jeff left there, and intentionally takes too many sleeping pills. The deeply melancholic “Jealous Lover” is also the theme song of the film and can be heard on the opening credits and also in the final sequence, when Fran, understanding that Baxter (Jack Lemmon) is in love with her, runs to his apartment. The tune is thus both diegetic and non-diegetic, and it gives the movie its sweet-and-sour taste.

In *Avanti!* too, melancholy and tenderness mix, and Neapolitan music has a lot to do with it. Wendell and Pamela have come to Ischia to bury his father and her mother, who were lovers, and they choose to reenact one of their nights at the hotel as “a tribute to them.” The orchestra plays Willie and Kate’s favorite tune and then comes closer to their table to perform a song called “Caterina,” in homage to Pamela’s mother. The young woman is so touched that, at dawn, she is still there, the musicians playing while she is singing and drinking champagne with them, which of course is reminiscent of the Cuban band in *Some Like It Hot*. Pamela is humming “Senza Fine” (“Never Ending”) and non-diegetic music progressively takes over. That tune is of particular importance: it is heard all through the film, whether as source or background music, and constitutes its theme song, used for the opening and closing credits. At the very end of the movie, Wendell thus leaves Pamela on “Senza Fine,” which tends to suggest

that they will meet again, probably as their parents always did. This motif is instrumental in giving the film its delicate nuances and lyrical aspect.

According to a witness of the car crash, Willie and Kate even died in music: they were found in each other's arms, with the radio playing "Hello, Dolly" – which is not Italian but is nonetheless romantic. At the funeral, there is music again since the orchestra of the hotel has come to the cemetery to perform Willie and Kate's favorite tune for the last time (**Fig. 12**). Billy Wilder explained: "I bought six Italian songs that will be the themes throughout the film. They will act as the base of the score. But the music mustn't be invasive, as much as a certain number of songs naturally belong to the film (the orchestra, the funeral, etc.)" (Ciment 76). This makes *Avanti!* a perfect example of harmony between diegetic and non-diegetic music.



**Fig. 12** – In *Avanti!*, the Neapolitan musicians adapt as easily as the Gypsies in *Love in the Afternoon*. Source: MGM DVD of the film.

The fact that source music sometimes becomes background music is, of course, not unique to Billy Wilder's films; a typical case is *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) when the British prisoners arrive at the camp whistling "Colonel Bogey March," and an accompaniment is then added and faded up. But Wilder's originality lies in the fact that, in at least two of his movies, he does the opposite, and characters whistle on a non-diegetic music they are not supposed to hear: it is the case of Captain Pringle (John Lund) in *A Foreign Affair* (1948) when he goes up to Erika's (Marlene Dietrich) apartment – or what is left of it – and of the main character of *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* when he leaves his brother's (Christopher Lee) club. Oddly enough, it seems that Wilder never mentioned that specificity in his interviews and preferred to talk about the – more traditional – use of diegetic tunes in a film's soundtrack.

In particular, Wilder was proud of *Kiss Me, Stupid* where the pieces played at the piano "[become] the score of the movie" (Crowe 156). Gene D. Phillips indeed remarks that "[Previn] adroitly integrated into his score themes from the songs that Ira Gershwin had provided" (273). This feature is essential since it highlights the importance of music for the characters as well as Orville's obsession with classical piano composers, and also with his own stupid songs. The same kind of process is at work in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*: when the irritated detective puts his fiddle away after having played one or two incorrect notes, an identical tune can be heard, but this time as orchestral music: "Of central importance for the film [is] the score by Miklós Rózsa, which built on a violin concerto written in 1953 for the virtuoso Jascha Heifetz that Wilder liked very much. Using a violin concerto [is] ... an obvious choice for the



violin amateur Holmes, and throughout the film, diegetic and non-diegetic violin music is used as a structuring device” (Gemünden 160).

Thus, Wilder’s choices were, of course, based on his own tastes, and it is not surprising to find that he drew part of his inspiration from his favorite director when it comes to the intermingling of source and background music. In *Angel* by Lubitsch, the romantic evening of Maria (Marlene Dietrich) and Anthony (Melvyn Douglas) starts in a restaurant where a Gypsy band plays for them. They then kiss in a private dining room to non-diegetic music, which reproduces that of the Gypsies. Later on, Maria performs that tune on the piano of her English manor with her husband Frederick (Herbert Marshall) by her side; Frederick is far from imagining what this particular piece of music means to his wife and in fact, it is as if she were openly cheating him by playing the piano. Likewise, when the husband calls the lover, his butler tells him. but Anthony, who is precisely playing that tune on the piano, will never get the phone. Lubitsch does not show the husband’s reaction and he chooses to end the scene with a fade to black preceded by a close-up on the lifted telephone handset, accompanied by the off-screen melody.

In this Lubitsch movie, music is central in suggesting Maria and Anthony’s thoughts and emotions. In the same way, some of Wilder’s characters cannot resist the power of a particular tune, and its haunting presence acts as a kind of musical voice-over. When Sabrina comes back to Long Island, she sings “La Vie en Rose”, which she heard an accordionist play in a street of Paris. The lyrics of the song and the way she sings it are a sign that she will no longer live by proxy. This tune is also decisive in making Linus fall in love with her and is regularly heard as background music too, especially in the last scene of the film. In *Love in the Afternoon*, the same Audrey Hepburn cannot get “Fascination” out of her head. Just after having met Flannagan for the first time, she comes back home; very slow non-diegetic music takes the place of her humming, and dreamy Ariane has a “silent dance in the hallway with her cello” (Crowe 146), which is a visual, musical and poetic way of showing whom she is still thinking of.

The young girl is thus completely “fascinated” by Flannagan and by the tune which becomes an essential component of the movie’s score: in the last shot, “the strains of ‘Fascination’ swell sublimely to a peak as Waxman marshals the full orchestra for the film’s finale” (Phillips 195). Interestingly, “Fascination” was “one of Wilder’s favorite songs from his student days in Vienna” (Phillips 191). It is worth noticing that towards the end of *Love in the Afternoon*, Flannagan the playboy happens to realize that he is in love, most likely for the first time in his life, as Gypsy music fills his suite: he is listening to a recording left by Ariane of her phony list of lovers over and over again while his private quartet is playing “Hot Paprika” in a loop. The repetitive pattern of the passage gives it great rhythm, all the more so as Frank and the musicians “pass the liquor cart back and forth, from room to room” (Crowe 345) in a kind of ballet; finally, the music stops since the Gypsies end the night as drunk as Frank is. Once again, Billy Wilder proves what he can do with a tune and no dialogue at all; Cameron Crowe notes that “most writers would have simply put [the leading man] at a bar, talking to a bartender. They are not Wilder” (146; 345).

A tempo similar to that of “Hot Paprika” can be found in *One, Two, Three* (1961). The film has a very different aim since ideologies of all kinds – not love affairs – pervade it, and Wilder satirizes Communists as well as Capitalists. Incidentally, MacNamara (James Cagney), a Coca-Cola executive, explains how he “got loused up by Benny Goodman” (though indirectly) because the artist did not show up for a concert, which led to his own “[exile] to South America.” Thus, MacNamara wants to take his revenge, and he uses music to his own advantage. By manipulating stupid people, he intends to get what he regards as a well-deserved promotion. When he arrives at an East Berlin hotel to meet three Russian businessmen, Peripetchikoff (Leon Askin), Mishkin (Peter Capell), and Borodenko (Ralf Wolter), the general

atmosphere is that of a tea dance: the orchestra, formed of seven elderly people, is playing “Yes! We Have No Bananas,” which the conductor (Frederick Hollander) is singing, rather solemnly, in German. First, his way of performing cannot compare with Audrey Hepburn’s lively version of that same song in *Sabrina*; second, Benny Goodman and his Orchestra happened to record it. The director’s sense of humor is also obvious in the presence of “a young man steering an older woman around the dance floor”, “an implicit reference to the Hotel Eden, where Wilder squirmed elderly matrons around the ballroom in 1929” (Phillips 251).

MacNamara promises to “give” the three Russians his gorgeous blonde secretary, Ingeborg (Lilo Pulver), if they can get Otto Piffel (Horst Buchholz) out of jail. So, one of the Soviets becomes quite enthusiastic and asks for “more rock’n’roll.” The funny response of the musicians, who suddenly seem to be waking up, is the “Sabre Dance” by Khachaturian, which already opened the film and hinted at its tone and speed. The piece certainly has a fast pace, but has absolutely nothing to do with rock’n’roll. In fact, this scene is more than just a joke since Wilder simply hated rock music (Crowe 167-168; 215). As Ingeborg is dancing on the table (**Fig. 13**), Borodenko bangs on it with his shoe in rhythm – another allusion, this time a political one, to Khrushchev who is said to have pounded his shoe in protest on his desk at the United Nations. Because the walls of the room are trembling, a big picture of Khrushchev precisely falls out of its frame and reveals a portrait of Stalin that had been left underneath. The three Communists are going to be corrupted in the same way as the three Comrades (Sig Ruman, Felix Bressart and Alexander Granach) in Lubitsch’s *Ninotchka* (1939) when they visit Paris, stay in a luxury hotel and have three girls and an orchestra come to their suite – which is not surprising since Wilder co-wrote the screenplays of all his films and also that of *Ninotchka*.



**Fig. 13:** Music is an essential ingredient to fool the Russian characters in *One, Two, Three*. Source: pinterest.fr.

Earlier on in *One, Two, Three*, we discover, in MacNamara’s office, “a cuckoo clock featur[ing] a flag-waving miniature figure of Uncle Sam while playing ‘Yankee Doodle’ every hour on the hour” (Phillips 250). The striking clock is a running gag and makes one of the

Russians furious at what he calls “cheap propaganda”, but above all, this “subversive” tune will be the driving factor behind Piffel’s arrest by East German authorities. Indeed, the young Communist, totally unaware of the real nature of the clock, accepts it as a wedding present from the unscrupulous MacNamara. This is just the beginning of Piffel’s nightmare since the Stasi interrogates him using an American novelty song as an instrument of torture. Psychological torture turns into physical one: the young man is exhausted and shouts he wants to sleep. “Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polkadot Bikini” becomes even more unbearable when the LP is played at an EP speed, and Piffel eventually confesses that he is an American spy although he is not. And yet, beyond its absurdity in the choice of the song and in the exaggerated effects it produces, the scene in fact is not that funny; ironically, since the film was released, the US Army itself has been accused of employing musical torture on certain occasions.

In any case, it seems that Wilder had never gone so far in using music for practical reasons, and in expressing his distaste for rock and pop at the same time. Thus, it is not surprising to see “Itsy Bitsy (...)” associated with such suffering, while in some of the director’s other movies, the recurrence of tunes like “Fascination” or “La Vie en Rose” will also make a character “surrender,” but in a much more positive and pleasant way.

## Conclusion

To the question: “What should a score do for a film?” Billy Wilder used to answer: “It should be invisible, of course. Sometimes not” (Crowe 214). This remark could appear to be self-contradictory; and yet, it perfectly summarizes the director’s own vision of the role of music in a movie. With the exception of *Irma la Douce* (1963), originally a stage musical adapted into a film with hardly any songs left (Arens 51), Wilder’s works generally include relevant diegetic tunes. In particular, most of his comedy films seem to be immersed in a constant flow of music that becomes an integral part of the story, influencing the characters’ decisions or expressing their intimate thoughts: just like the editing, source music turns to be “invisible” and nonetheless vital in giving the film its distinctive tone and color, and making the audiences like it and remember it.

Jazzman Matty Malneck, “who served as musical adviser on [*Love in the Afternoon*], said Wilder ... knew how to integrate a song into the action, so that it heightened a moment” (Phillips 191). And indeed, the director was certainly more musical than many of his awkward characters: thanks to his intuition, inner sense of rhythm and dexterity at playing with a tune, he was able to articulate the different movements of a film. If Wilder mainly used his favorite style of music, he also enjoyed introducing what he considered stupid songs as grotesque counterpoints. Born in Austria-Hungary from Jewish parents, he spent many years in Vienna and lived in Berlin and Paris too before immigrating to Hollywood. This rich cultural background probably accounts for such eclecticism in the choice of source music, Wilder’s comedy films being clearly a universal language able to cross national, cultural, and ethnic boundaries.

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