

### **A Midsummer Night's Theme**

In 1842, Felix Mendelssohn composed a score to accompany stage performances of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The score includes the famous Overture, the beautiful Nocturne, the lively Scherzo, and the renowned Wedding March. The purpose of Mendelssohn's music was to aurally supplement the play by bringing life to the characters' actions and emotions, setting the tone for the next scene, and driving the theme of the play. While Mendelssohn's work is highly regarded as a masterpiece, it created some problems for adaptation on the silver screen: the score was too short, and the chorus was sung in German. In their circumvention of these challenges, directors Reinhardt and Hoffman of the 1935 and 1999 film versions each incorporate Mendelssohn's music in different manners to emphasize different messages in Shakespeare's text. The two directors differ in their choices regarding instrumental timbre, vocal orchestration, placement of the Nocturne and Wedding March, and entwinement of musical and film techniques. Reinhardt's incorporation of Mendelssohn's music emphasizes his interpretation that the midsummer night's dream consists of the characters' adventures in the forest, while Hoffman depicts the dream as the couples' romantic awakening from the fairy-induced comedy of errors into an ideal world of reciprocated love.

Reinhardt's choice of instrumentation shines light on his views of what sequence of events constituted the dream. He showcases both the flute and harp, and both instruments

produce a surreal, mystical sound when played staccato. The fast, lighthearted flute plays as the fairies dance in Act II, and the triplets played create a dreamy flowing sensation. In addition, the harp's rising arpeggios provides a magical feeling as Oberon describes the love potions he plans to use. In addition to Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Reinhardt includes excerpts from Mendelssohn's *Symphony Italian* while the fairies bring Bottom luxurious goods. This symphony's brass line is noble and captivating, mocking the situational irony that the only "human" to meet a fairy is a donkey. Later, Reinhardt intertwines Bottom's song about hay into the symphony with the "he haw" falling on beats two and three in the waltz. These musical lines highlight the nonsense of the dream sequence and the complete dominance of the human mind by the fairies' power.

Hoffman's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* uses instrumental details to add background to Bottom's character and portray a different side of the forest and fairies. The English horn and pizzicato strings played in the second scene convey Bottom's hope and determination to acquire another part, but the tenor conveyed sadness of his failure at not getting the role. The music combined with the extra scene of him going to his house frustrated and defeated dramatically increases the importance of Bottom's character over Reinhardt's or Shakespeare's versions. In contrast to Reinhardt's flute and harp, Hoffman uses wind chimes in the background. When the fairies are introduced, they dance to a nonsensical music of Indian beat, percussion, and scale played by Irish instruments. The harp and the fairy's music show a mysterious woods that was fanciful and even incomprehensible, but not dreamlike.

While both directors use vocalists to accompany the music, the orchestration of the voices is completely different. Reinhardt has a full choir accompany the orchestra, which has the effect of dramatizing the dream sequence with their powerful chords and polyphonic melodies. In contrast, instead of using Mendelssohn's music, Hoffman employs vocal soloists in Italian opera for the same section. For example, a soprano sings as Oberon reverses the spell, lending a more emotional and less intense experience. The resulting forest scenes seems less dreamlike and more realistic than Reinhardt's portrayal.

The Nocturne and Wedding March are the two most famous and most emotive movements of Mendelssohn's opus, so their location in the film is extremely important. The Nocturne begins softly with a French horn solo accompanied by two bassoons playing the theme softly and expressively. Additional instruments join, and the music gradually crescendos and includes the entire orchestra playing variations on the theme in a full, broad, and flowing style. The Nocturne is the most climactic movement because of its memorable theme coupled with an intense buildup. The Wedding March is the distinctive, brass-heavy theme interspersed with pulsating string sections. Regal and authoritative, this march is a stark contrast to the Nocturne.

In the 1935 version, Reinhardt pairs the Nocturne theme with the scene where Oberon restores order to the dream. It starts small with the squeezing of the flower, and the music escalates as more dancers join from both groups of fairies. At the peak of the movement, Oberon mounts his horse as his epic black cape blows behind him. It is clear that Oberon's restoration of order is the musical and thematic climax of the movie. The final act, which includes the marriages and inner play, begins with the Wedding March in a joyous

celebration that the dream is over. The location of the Wedding March here marks the festivities after the climax, ending the dream and showing the characters' celebration is ignorant of the tragedy narrowly avoided.

In contrast, Hoffman, after exclusively playing Italian opera during the dream sequence, returns to Mendelssohn's work when the lovers awake. Here, Hoffman uses selections from the Nocturne just as Demetrius declares his love for Helena, transforming Mendelssohn's "music of the night" into a love theme. The shiver down the listener's spine is proof enough that this event, the awakening into the real world again, is the climax of the 1999 film. Additionally, the theme is briefly repeated as Bottom, who Hoffman made into an important character, recognizes his Titania in the statue. This time, the love theme brings forth pity and sorrow as he reminisces on his dream, providing a foil to the six happy lovers and forcing the viewer to acknowledge that the midsummer night's dream does not end ideally for everyone. Because musically it is the same theme that stood for romantic triumph before, clearly the music must be taken in context with the plot and visual context. Hoffman only plays Mendelssohn's Wedding March at the introduction to the inner play. It is worth noting that the love theme was played through the wedding instead of the Wedding March, showing both Hoffman's recognition of the power of love and his mockery of the "true" love. The Wedding March is a celebration of the marriages, but it serves as a musical and thematic resolution.

The music cannot be fully analyzed without respect to film techniques. In terms of setting the mood of the film, both works open with the Overture, the first four chords of which evoke a majestic image of an eerie breeze through a forest. Reinhardt, however,

used music very differently because he was filming in black and white. Films of the era used music as color and provide the enriching details the set could not. A huge part of this manifested itself in scene transitions, which lasted several minutes and were shown during alongside shots of the forest. In particular, the scherzo, with chattering strings and dancing winds introduces Act II, along with a long, onscreen ballet sequence of fairies and Puck. The ballet are of critical importance to the 1935 version. The dancing only occurs in the dream sequence, and it serves to jointly depict a detailed and beautiful setting and to point out the exaggerated fancifulness of the dream. In addition, Reinhardt goes out of his way to make sure characters in the play are filmed playing the music the audience hears. The fairies themselves are the ones singing before Act II, Puck plays a tree as a percussion instrument, and later on, a band of Dwarfish creatures plays music. Seeing the source of internal sound draws the viewer into the film.

In contrast, Hoffman's musical task is a far different one than Reinhardt's. With the technology to build a realistic fantasyland and film it in color, music is not as essential in describing scenes. For example, the flower for the love potion did not need the dramatic background music in Reinhardt's film because Hoffman was able to achieve a vivid color of red by contrasting it with a washed out pallet background. Nevertheless, despite the later film's ability to use color, multiple camera angles, and dramatic lighting to carefully express actions, emotions, and themes, music still makes an important contribution particularly when emphasizing subtle elements of the film. For example, the background music dramatically crescendos as Bottom runs up the hill to return to the theatre troupe, adding to the excitement brought by showing a colorful, lush background and by switching between multiple camera angles.

Because the climax and theme in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* are left largely ambiguous, the addition of music makes the climax and message of each of the films more definite. Reinhardt's portrayal of the dream as the period where the characters are overtaken by the love potion emphasizes the theme that true love, while mysterious and difficult to attain, is permanent outside the dream. Hoffman's characterization of the dream as the events that occur after the potion wears off highlights the darker message that our lovers could awaken from their romance and descend once again into the real world of unrequited love. Shakespeare puts forth both themes for the consideration of the reader, but alterations in Mendelssohn's score allow for dramatic differences in timbre, orchestration, thematic placement, and film techniques to change the way we listen – and look – at a film and its theme. Reinhardt's characterized the dream as the characters' experiences in the forest, while Hoffman incorporated Mendelssohn's music along with Italian opera to depict the dream as the pairs' idealistic rousing from their strange and misfortunate romantic entanglements into an life of everlasting love.

#### Works Cited

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