Kenneth LaFave’s *Experiencing Film Music: A Listener’s Companion* highlights the landmarks of Hollywood film-music history through the presentation of central figures, practices, and documentary accounts. The musician and journalist LaFave has been active as a composer and commissioned both concert and stage works, as well serving as a music critic for local American newspapers. Having performed as a pit musician for the production of Leonard Bernstein’s uncompleted musical *The Race to
LaFave and worked as a collaborator with him, LaFave later wrote *Experiencing Leonard Bernstein: A Listener’s Companion* (New York and London, 2014) in the same series (Rowman & Littlefield’s *The Listener’s Companions*) as the volume under review here. This series is meant to provide comprehensible information on leading composers, performers, or music genres for an amateur readership. In this context, the series’ writers are directed towards employing their own expertise as musicians or music scholars to reveal to the general public the life and work of prominent musical figures, coupled with the appraisal of their major works.

The book calls attention to US film music by utilizing a ‘film genre’ methodology. The straightforward presentation of the volume’s principal sections is occasionally suspended for small chapters (entitled ‘Spotlights’) that—like musical interludes—examine or simply offer extended comment on a relevant subject. *Experiencing Film Music* opens with a timeline that displays various instances of film-music history and finishes with suggestions for further reading and a useful annotated listening guide of those film soundtracks available on commercial CD recordings. Although holding a Ph.D. in philosophy, the author offers a handbook eschewing specialized film and music vocabulary, one that at the same time has didactic applications. As the series editor Gregg Akkerman conveys in the foreword, LaFave has the ‘ability to take music that is originally intended to support a visual medium and break it down in language without jargon in a manner that is educational without becoming ponderous’ (p. x).

In his introduction, LaFave gives a definition of the term *incidental music*, namely the background scoring or underscoring of a scenic show (p. xvii). Yet he claims that this label, when attributed to film music, often becomes misleading, since music has always been an important element in cinema, one that operates synergistically with the other components of a film. He also uses the American Film Institute list of the twenty-five best film scores and their composers (compiled in 2005) as a point of reference for summing up deficiencies in Hollywood soundtracks, such as the lack of recent films, of comedies, and of women and black or ethnic-minority composers. Methodologically, LaFave organizes material from the dozens of films he watched according to their genres. It may be worth noting that the author documents more than 200 films in the index at the end of the book.

LaFave begins his examination with the cinema’s so-called ‘Silent Era’—an era that was apparently not so silent after all, as many film-music theorists have already argued. In the book’s first chapter, the author maintains a historical orientation and designates the basic practices and functions of live music accompaniment for silent films. He focuses his attention on the use of precomposed cue sheets of adapted classical, folk, or light-music pieces as well as original scores. He also makes special mention of Charlie Chaplin’s *City Lights* (1931) as a silent movie whose background music was actually composed by the director himself.

The next chapter, ‘Max Steiner and the First Generation’, covers the period when the classical age of Hollywood film composers was established. The author credits the work of Max Steiner (King Kong, 1933, and *Gone with the Wind*, 1939) and Erich Wolfgang Korngold (The Adventures of Robin Hood, 1938)—for transforming the status of music ‘as a major contributor to the artistic nature of the film’ (p. 21). The first two chapters are followed by a short explanatory text on the process of film music spotting session (i.e. the meeting between the director and the composer of the film, in which they watch the movie together in order to decide where to place music and what kind of music it will be), as well as the technique of click-track synchronization of the score with the moving images.

In contrast to the heroic character of music in epic films, subtler and gloomier soundtracks are provide in mysteries, thrillers, and *film noir*. LaFave discusses this issue in the third chapter of his book, giving examples from outstanding films such as *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Laura* (1944), *Notorious* (1949), *The Third Man* (1949), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *Touch of Evil* (1958), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), *Chinatown* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *L.A. Confidential* (1997), to name but a few. He also emphasizes Bernard Herrmann’s music as the most evocative of all and tries to come up with a consistent and convincing answer to a key question: how did *film noir* get associated with the sound and, sometimes, the image of a ‘sexy’ saxophone? He concludes that this is a cliché that has become a myth, since it hardly relates to the actual sonic atmosphere of classical *films noirs*. The following section is a brief chapter that pertains to the essential and highly demanding skill of film-music orchestration, as well as the importance of the composer and his (or her) crew’s involvement in the project.

Chapter 4 tackles the music of epic, exotic, and war films. The main aim of LaFave’s
analyses in this section is to bring to light diverse hypotheses and findings considering specific historical and geosocial stereotypes of othering in film music, i.e. the process of labelling cultural groups (archaic, exotic, alien, or hostile) as being different from dominant identities projected in US films, through dietic or background music. To substantiate his account, he points to examples from films like <i>Quo Vadis</i> (1951), <i>Ben-Hur</i> (1959), <i>Lawrence of Arabia</i> (1962), <i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i> (1949), <i>High Noon</i> (1952), <i>The Magnificent Seven</i> (1960), <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> (1962), <i>How the West Was Won</i> (1962), <i>The Good, the Bad and the Ugly</i> (1966), <i>On Golden Pond</i> (1981), <i>Out of Africa</i> (1985), <i>Batman</i> (1989), <i>Spider-Man</i> (2002), and <i>A Serious Man</i> (2009) are only a small number of the films discussed in these two chapters. LaFave mentions Elmer Bernstein, Alfred Newman, Alex North, Dimitri Tiomkin, Leonard Bernstein, Ennio Morricone, John Barry, Danny Elfman, and the Coen brothers’ collaborator Carter Burwell as distinguished film-music creators, often comparing them with other composers of American concert music. In the following spotlight chapter, LaFave laconically explores the narrative occurrences of jazz in films.

The chapter titled ‘Theme Songs, Comedies, and Romantic Comedies’ looks into the presence of songs in cinema. Every song in a movie represents significant ‘added value’, both through its tune and its lyrics, but this is especially true of the ‘theme song’, a signature song that operates as a symbol and becomes especially associated with a particular film or a character in that film. LaFave focuses primarily on the evaluation of Henry Mancini’s theme music in films such as <i>Breakfast at Tiffany’s</i> (1961) and <i>The Pink Panther</i> (1963). This section is followed by a concise account of music in modern animation.

Bernard Herrmann, Jerry Goldsmith, John Williams, and Howard Shore turn out to be the central figures of the next part of the book, on science fiction and fantasy film music. Not surprisingly, John Williams monopolizes the discussion for his awe-inspiring work in <i>Jaws</i> (1975), <i>Close Encounters of the Third Kind</i> (1977), <i>Superman</i> (1978), <i>E.T. the Extraterrestrial</i> (1982), the <i>Star Wars</i> and <i>Indiana Jones</i> series, and many others. LaFave offers a broad exploration of Williams’s film compositions, concentrating on his uses of chromaticism, leitmotifs, and song-like melodies. The author identifies Williams’s music with an expression that ‘returns to the roots of Hollywood music-making in the romantic era that birthed its first generation of composers’ (p. 143).

The last two chapters of the volume cover peculiar cases of music in films and review current and foreseeing issues in scoring movies. In this context, LaFave appraises the eccentric soundtracks of <i>The Birds</i> (1963), <i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> (1968), <i>A Clockwork Orange</i> (1972), <i>The Sting</i> (1973), <i>Barry Lyndon</i> (1975), <i>Manhattan</i> (1978), <i>Apocalypse Now</i> (1979), <i>Platoon</i> (1986), and <i>Full Metal Jacket</i> (1987). These are films which contain either quasi-musical soundscapes or pre-existing pieces of well-known classical or popular composers. In addition, he comments on the ‘increasing sophistication of means and methods’ (p. 172), such as the blurring of diegetic and non-diegetic music and the synthesized effects in contemporary Hollywood sound design.

Film music buffs will acclaim LaFave’s effort in supplying an all-inclusive record of notable examples of classical film scoring. We might note the lack of examination of non-Hollywood traditions, the decision to analyse film music solely by means of major cinematic genres, and the (quite often) biased approach to several film soundtracks as particular weak points of the book; nevertheless, it stands as an important work of reference, chiefly for non-specialist readers who are passionate (or even just curious) about the American film-music scene.

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