

FANTASIA

Distributed by Walt Disney Productions
Released in 1940

Two years after he had created the first full-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Walt Disney released the most ambitious project of his storied career. Ever since composer Max Steiner had applied the concept of original scoring (used in select silent films from the decades previous) to sound pictures, music proliferated. Film scoring, year by year, bore an increasing burden of the storytelling, supporting the varied moods of drama and helping to establish location and time. Some of the world's greatest composers, including Aaron Copland and Austrian expatriate Erich Wolfgang Korngold, were writing for Hollywood. And *Fantasia* was the film that took these developments in a whole new direction...but practically no one noticed.

Years later, *Fantasia* is seen as the precursor for music videos, because the movie's visuals were subordinate to the music, which came first. The idea was not all-together unprecedented.

An instrument developed from the beginning of the 18th century dubbed a color organ, which projected patterns of light corresponding with particular musical notes, was used by composers, most notably Skryabin, looking to extend musical art forms. Ballet choreography had often relied on the inspiration of the music. There, adjusting the choreography was far easier than adjusting the music when assimilating the two. Ballet also proved that music could convey a narrative without recourse to singing. But with film, cinematography and editing proved such involved processes that adjusting the music was easier.

This is not to say that music, in a conventional narrative film, could ever drive the story. On its own, music can generate emotions, but those feelings differ from person to person; because it is not a language it cannot bear the weight of storytelling. It can heighten emotion, emphasize for effect and, in rare cases, make the average movie extraordinary, but screenwriting is usually what makes or breaks a film.

In *Fantasia*, the degree of narrative storytelling varies from sequence to sequence, with The Sorcerer's Apprentice and the Toccata and Fugue serving as extremes. *Fantasia* is a silent film, but it tells ten or more stories rather than one.

The film scoring of the 1930s, being heavily influenced by late 19th century Germanic Romanticism, relied on operatic *leitmotifs*. In some films, scene after scene would contain music, even if a dramatic impetus was absent. (An American school of thought, beginning with Copland, and progressing to David Raksin, culminating in Elmer Bernstein, Alex North, and the unparalleled Bernard Herrmann, would diversify scoring techniques in the decades to come.) Through-scoring often meant a lot of 'hits,' musical gestures to call attention to an action on screen. This approach, derisively, was dubbed 'Mickey-Mousing,' since Disney had produced the first sound cartoons, and the scores for these shorts closely followed the action. Now, twelve years after the first sound cartoon, *Steamboat Willie*, introduced the world to Mickey

Mouse, the character, sporting a striking redesign of the eyes, featured in *Fantasia*. Instead of musicians interpreting film, filmmakers interpreted music. Instead of arriving at the end of production, here the process of interpretation proceeds all else.

People unfamiliar with 'serious' music have trouble engaging the abstract. Denied lyrics, they seek to impose images on the music. This is why many, many musicians have trouble with this film—the very ambiguity that attracted them to this mysterious art form is here thwarted by the animators. These men deny the music an opportunity to elicit unique and varying emotions in an audience (while also cutting and re-arranging the music to serve their purposes). Thus the audience and the composer are slighted.

Instead of the music 'Mickey-Mousing' the action, here the action 'Micky-Mouses' the music, sometimes with Mickey, himself, providing the action. For the most part, Walt Disney makes good decisions about how closely to follow the music. Apart from a few moments of hokiness (the film reaching its nadir in the Pastoral sequences), his efforts are inspiring. The problem of combining animation and music is that music dominates picture. Composing for a film, the music can be restrained so not to overpower the film. For example, by keeping down the number of hits and limiting the amount of cues in a film, the music is relegated to a subordinate role. But when music is going crazy, when it is designed to be a world unto itself, for the images to not correspond would be truly awkward. The artists who made *Fantasia* did well to keep their animation as restrained as it is.

The real problem may have been the choice of music. Even though music, on its own, can never tell a definite story, some types of music are more concrete than others. The more abstract the music, the more the animators would have to use their imaginations. Fettered by musical ignorance, tonally abstract music would render them impotent, unable to arrive at any solution generating an appropriate narrative counterpoint for the music. The audience would benefit by the resulting visuals, but the music would become, gradually, unbearable.

Imagery is preferable to storytelling; perhaps if the entire film was like the opening Toccata and Fugue and the closing Ave Maria the film would be improved. These two open-ended sequences engage the mind. Both pieces of music are texturally abstract, but the first is represented with many visual 'hits,' the second with almost none. The contrast frames *Fantasia* well.

Emblazoned on millions of VHS clamshells for Christmas 1991 (*Fantasia's* first home video release), that iconic image of Mickey-as-Sorcerer lured innumerable unsuspecting shoppers into buying this unheard-of Disney movie. Of course, it's no surprise to Disney's marketing department that The Sorcerer's Apprentice is the most popular sequence of the film. It's the only sequence with a Disney character, and it manages to wrap a moral (on the sins of lethargy and impatience) in an uproariously entertaining package. Thus, it is ironic that, in light of the animators' mandate to re-imagine the standards of the classical repertoire, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," an 1897 scherzo by French composer Paul Dukas, was inspired by a Goethe poem that actually finds its roots in a work by the Ancient Roman writer Lucian; his story concerned a man ordering a magician's pestle to bring water, which works well until the house gets flooded, and though the pestle is chopped in two it multiplies uncontrollably until the magician restores order upon his return. So the most popular part of the movie finds story and music firmly wedded even before the animators first listened to the music. For The

Sorcerer's Apprentice, the music was not interpreted as much as the story imbedded in the music was made explicit through animation. This more than anything should prove that letting music dictate story is ultimately futile.

As a one-time experiment, the film is successful for being highly original. But producing another, *Fantasia 2000*, was unwise. Walt Disney is dead and only the corporate structure remains. Though it was produced to honor his memory, as he had hoped that his company would release further projects in the style, the effect is like artists copying the pioneering work of Jackson Pollock. When a mediocre original idea is emulated with no improvement, there is nothing left to applaud.