

ROCKY

Directed by John Avildsen
Produced by Irwin Winkler and Robert Chartoff
Distributed by United Artists
Released in 1976

In 1976, altogether-unknown film composer Bill Conti got the chance of a lifetime, being asked to score a small film shot for under a million dollars, the eventual Best Picture Academy Award winner, *Rocky*. His theme for the underdog pugilist brought to life by real-life long shot Sylvester Stallone has become something of legend, encapsulating the indomitable spirit of man like few pieces of music ever committed to film.

The score is very economical, very simple. Conti had little money to work with, so sparse instrumentation and piano predominate. Repeated chord patterns and oft-used motives are the rule. Despite the limitations Conti labored under, the score works splendidly. The C-minor motif (G-B \flat -C, B \flat -C-G) played slowly and delicately on piano, first becomes Adrian and Rocky's love theme. It is not further developed until the training montage over half-way into the film. Played for a larger ensemble with rhythm guitar, drums, brass, strings, and (a mere) two voices, it now it emerges, like a butterfly from a cocoon, as the *Rocky* Fanfare. The sequence must have been edited to Conti's music; it works exceptionally well, especially when Rocky ascends the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The strings swirl in their full glory on the bridge of the theme, lifting Rocky up to this urban height he has claimed as his own. Complementing the theme is the tasteful use of a synth gliss common for the time.

Source music is used very wisely. The corner street singers (headed by Sly's brother Frank Stallone), the groovy synth sounds on the record Rocky listens to as he broods in his apartment, and the use of happy Christmas tunes from the TV as Paulie and Adrian rip into each other are each, in their own way, inspired.

Most of the film is left unscored. And in quieter moments, the transitions from one setting to another (especially when Rocky is wrestling with his destiny), a slight piano cue helps to convey his un-spoken thoughts. What is curious is the way a cue stops just before the cut, so the next scene begins with no score at all. It's less a bridge than a tag, and this movie's frequent use of such a device is relatively uncommon.

The climactic fight against Apollo Creed is scored largely with a previously unheard theme, a fugue played primarily in the brass, consisting of the following: A-A-A-A-A-A-E-D, C, D-B-G-A, E-D-E. When, in the fourteenth round, Rocky is knocked down and Mickey yells for him to stay there, the bridge of the Rocky theme picks up: A-B-C-E, F-E-F-E-F-E-D-C-B, etc. But Rocky does get up, and as Apollo reels, Rocky delivers devastating blows to the abdomen and kidneys, punctuated by bells and drums on the soundtrack, timed to coincide with the punches. It's very exciting stuff.

The credits feature a slow string quartet rendition of the A-A-A-A Big Fight theme. It's a curious choice of instrumentation. But the story goes that John Avildsen, the director, was looking beyond the mean streets of Philadelphia, seeing Rocky and Apollo as warriors for the modern age. He wanted a big sound, Beethoven's "Eroica." Conti knew they didn't have the budget for this, and also felt a dated, intellectual sound would alienate the audience, so they compromised and went for a "baroque-rock" synthesis.

Rocky's Fanfare starts out with a not-so-obvious...appropriation, to put it generously. It's the exact-same opening as the first of Three Sonatinas for Two *Clarini*, an anonymous Baroque miniature from the 17th Century probably composed as a *musique de table* for an Italian court. Conti adds a snare drum to the first repeat, as we remain in C-major, then kicks everything into high gear with an E-minor chord (voiced by three trombones, a tuba, an electric bass, and low strings) that launches us into one of the most famous themes in movies.

But the best scoring in the film, perhaps one of the best-scored sequences in film history, shows what can be accomplished when delicate gestures are employed wisely. Rocky begins his training for the big fight, and he is not in good shape. Waking before dawn, he struggles to keep his eyes open in his run-down apartment. He very methodically (hopelessly?) cracks open five eggs in a glass, then tips the slime down his gullet.

With the cut to the outside the cue begins. We start with a lonely French horn, descending slowly from B-flat to F to C. Rocky stretches in the bitter cold. After a pause, the melody begins to ascend, and is joined after a time by unobtrusive brass playing quietly in support. The horn line, striving for heights, comes back to earth, as if in defeat, and is silent. Now, with the cut to the empty street, seen from above, the strings join in, with an emphasis on the guttural clout of the cellos and basses; the violins take up the last pitch of the French horn, now two octaves higher. We get into a rhythm of G-minor and F-minor chords exchanged in directionless repetition (emphasizing the steady pain of Rocky's workout) as we approach City Hall. With the cut to the art museum, a disjointed version of the Rocky Theme starts up in the piano, and eventually the strings drop out as the piano line becomes, for a time, a little more steady, even as Rocky is faltering up the steps. Our hero gasps for breath, and the piano loses its flowing bass line and manages a brief D/E-flat/D/G repetition. The low strings, in the same G-minor configuration as before, return, concluding the sequence, as Rocky begins the long walk home.

The music strikes a blow—it's like he's made no progress at all.