

# Soundtrack in British Wartime Propaganda Films: How Does It Cultivate National Character and Inspire People?

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## Abstract

This paper describes the important propaganda role played by British composers and their music (soundtrack) in wartime propaganda films in order to boost the morale of British soldiers and people's patriotism, mostly in the historical context of the Elizabethan period, the Napoleonic Wars and the mid-twentieth century. The methodology used in this study was based on a qualitative approach: documentary analysis, using the relevant literature searched for to analyse the information and draw conclusions. Details about the following information were obtained by the author: the findings showed that, firstly, most orchestral-based scores are used because only orchestral music can express a majestic atmosphere and give images of victory and triumph; secondly, in terms of harmonic structure, tonality and orchestration, most use major keys, eighth and sixteenth notes, and some historical instruments to evoke and conform to historical memories of the war scenes. In the end, the aim of all composers' scores is to have a positive effect by inspiring patriotism in Britain with music that is fanfare.

**Keywords:** wartime propaganda films, British, soundtrack, *The Hamilton Woman*, *Coastal Command*, *Fire Over England*

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## 1. Introduction

With the advent of war, it was inevitable that the film makers felt it was their duty to play a part in the patriotic cause. During the Second World War, over a thousand official British films were produced for use at domestic, military and foreign use, in what was probably the largest propaganda campaign ever undertaken through a medium such as film. There are two themes present here: historians can observe and analyse the war films that survive to this day to understand what the British had to face; and,

contained within are the reformist spirit of the film-makers who wanted to go about breaking down the barriers of the British class system in 1940 (Stumpf, 1973).

This paper focuses on how film score composers of the period conveyed patriotism and the revival of British music to British audiences by combining soundtrack and content and by evoking historical events of the period through the pastiche of historical music, often in the context of wartime propaganda films set in three periods: the Elizabethan period (represented by

the film *Fire Over England*), the Napoleonic Wars (*The Hamilton Woman*) and the mid-twentieth century (*Coastal Command*). However, as musical analyses focusing on the soundtracks in these films are rare to be found, I consider my analysis of the music to be limited. In the essay, I verify whether the music in wartime films had a motivating and morale-boosting effect on the soldiers of the time by analyzing the soundtracks in each of the three films corresponding to the three periods mentioned above, as well as in the context of the film's plot and content.

## 2. The Revival of Patriotism in British Music

Due to the Queen's inspiration, Elizabethans were well-versed in and loved music, and it has since become a source of entertainment for the people, as well as a necessary element for religious and national occasions, plus, it has become an essential element in the newly emerging drama. Therefore, music had a place at the time, musicians frequently won the favor of Elizabethan. Moreover, all Tudor monarchs show their talents for music, whatever performance or theory, they are superb scholars and musicians. Henry VIII's music collection catalogue includes 36 clavichord, virginal class and 78 flutes. But neither the appreciation and knowledge of music nor the ability to play the various instruments was restricted to the educated upper classes of the Elizabethan era. Renaissance universities did not only teach music courses, they required them to be offered. Furthermore, much of the religious music was created by Elizabeth I, at that time the language of the Church changed from Latin to English (Martin, 1981). In short, according to the analysis, the English Musical Renaissance sought to build a separate national identity within such an art form, it is simply an artistic phenomenon, a cultural construct carefully crafted and controlled as part of a broader push for national identity and unity.

Like most movements of the nation, the British music revival movements of the 19th and 20th centuries have always attempted to reach beyond music and the intellectual elite to deliver a message to the public. If musicologists did not attempt to situate it in a wider social and political context in order to articulate its meaning and function in the nation (Frogley, 2003). As for how English composers went about promoting a musical renaissance through music in films set in history? Some supporters of

wartime propaganda film production believe that this kind of medium is beneficial to raise patriotism. First of all, it is worth considering that these composers tried to use music to inspire patriotism in the film viewer, combining the history of the film with the soundtrack to enhance or foster patriotism. In fact, many people reinforce national consciousness through the combination of audio-visuals in the propaganda film. That's why I am going to introduce a propaganda film set in the Elizabethan period, when England and Spain (the Armada) were at war.

In 1937, Korda produced *The Fire Over England*, directed by William Howard, which saw the culmination of England's defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and Elizabeth's speech at Tilbury, which both reappeared in Korda's 1939 documentary *The Lion Has Wings*. (Robison, 2020). As you know, since the period in which the film is set does not take place in the present, the composer would go on to evoke the feeling of that period through a certain musical pastiche; the imitation could be through the instruments or through the compositional style of the composer of the time. The war film score is mainly orchestral, using the symphony as a base for the entire score, as only the strings, winds and bottom drums of the symphony can conjure up a sense of the tragedy and historical mission of the war.

Through the audio we can hear that the symphonic theme of *Fire Over England* gives a picture of victory and a triumphant return through the brass and drums. For example, in the most famous scene from the Agincourt Battle in the film *Henry V*, the composer uses the sound of drums and brass to imitate and accompany the sound of horses' hooves and armour, using music to propel the soldiers forward, these composers used the power of music to enhance the atmosphere in their propaganda films, and used the character of the musical notes or the timbres of the instruments to imitate the historical images in the films, which is the style of "Mickey mousing" method of filming, giving the viewer a greater sense of immersion and patriotism (Palmer, 1972).

## 3. How Does the Composer's Score Work in Wartime Propaganda Films?

There are also a number of wartime propaganda films set during the Napoleonic Wars, notably the Battle of Trafalgar and the Battle of Waterloo

which was a great British victory over the French Emperor Napoleon I. As I mentioned earlier, the wartime propaganda films of the time were designed to inspire their countrymen and create an atmosphere of patriotism. So the composers who worked on the film scores took on a large part of the responsibility, and indeed in addition to the actual film setting, the real-life British army during the Napoleonic Wars also needed the bands to boost morale. During the conflict, for example, bands were called upon to play “warlike airs” for the troops to lift their spirits, to play cheerful tunes for the camps, and to provide beneficial comfort to the injured and sick in the hospitals. But in fact, it was not simply to cheer up the troops, but to drown out the sound of French rifles. Just as Byron said at the Waterloo Eve Ball that “music arose with its voluptuous”, so too did the film’s soundtrack (Farmer, 1962).

When *That Hamilton Woman*, a propaganda film set during the Napoleonic Wars, was shown in Britain, it was easy to see it making a similar contribution to domestic morale. Less obviously, the importance of propaganda was placed on the role of Emma, her role in Britain’s victory over its continental foes was highlighted in the script. For Korda and his writers, Emma represents the British women who worked in the factories and defended the great rear, supporting the men who fought to snatch victory from the depths of defeat. Her devotion

meant that the viewers saw her as the key to the British victory, just as I would say that the soundtrack in a wartime propaganda film is the equivalent of the dedication behind a successful film, so are the composers.

The script submitted to the Royal Naval Command suggests that the climax of the film was based on a parallel action that happened on 21 October 1805. With the twist of Emma meeting Horatio Nelson, the Royal Navy’s legendary captain, in a scene where the two of them are having a chat, the image then shows her voice appearing over a picture of a map of Europe and recalling what happened afterwards, followed by the strain of the soundtrack *Rule Britannia* fading into silhouette (Short, 1991). The lyrics of this episode of *Rule Britannia* give us a sense of confidence that the British Navy would eventually win the battle at sea, as for the tune itself, eighth and sixteenth notes appear frequently throughout, and the tune is in B flat major, which is generally a major key with a vibrant feel that corresponds to the lyrics and the plot of the film itself. Any thought of using an orchestra in the Straussian, Elgarian, or even Debussian sense should be abandoned by the composer of a score, there is a big difference between a concert score and a microphone score. While the latter will “come off” in the concert hall, the former tends to become muddy and dull through the “microphone”.

**Rule, Britannia!**

DR. ARNE, 1740.

1. When Bri - tain first,..... at Heav'n's com - mand, A -  
2. The na - tions not..... so blest as thee, Must

Figure 1. Score 1: International Music Score Library Project. 2019. Rule Britannia.

Source: [https://imslp.org/wiki/File:PMLP146712-Rule,\\_Britannia!.pdf](https://imslp.org/wiki/File:PMLP146712-Rule,_Britannia!.pdf) [access date: 14 May 2022]

Since Stradivarius's day (c. 1700) the construction of stringed instruments changed considerably to meet the acoustic requirements of the nineteenth century repertoire and of large concert halls. Unless Nagyvary's instruments were able to withstand the lower string tension (using catgut strings) and other features of unmodified ancient instruments, performed by musicians using baroque bowing and playing techniques (such as the Dutch violinist Jaap Schroeder). I do not see how any claims about the discovery of Stradivari's secrets might be tested (Benjamin, 1937). Also, regarding the harmonic structure in the soundtrack, although pure harmony has been used very well to convey some dramatic concepts. For example, dissonances are often chosen to suggest a climactic point of tension, while harmonies usually enter the background and serve as the psychological basis for a scene. Harmonies can also distinguish historical or contextual periods well, and in the hands of a competent and skilled composer, they are able to immediately establish and maintain the historical character of a film (Sun, 1979).

#### 4. The Importance of National Uplift of Music in Wartime Propaganda Films

The timeline moves to the Second World War, when the British film industry was cut off by the war and unable to develop properly. But the film screening and production industries were on the opposite trend, with cinema audiences instead increasing and box office receipts for films

skyrocketing. As a result of wartime developments, the British Post Office film agency was merged with the Ministry of Information and became the Royal Film Institute. Documentaries became the main genre of the time, and a huge amount of documentary filmmakers were given scope to produce some of the best wartime documentaries (Coulthass, 1984). The great British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams made a great contribution to wartime propaganda films in the mid-20th century. In the early days, whether it was Walton or Williams, it meant nothing to the propaganda of British film distributors because these people just didn't care.

But today, the studios are only really beginning to realize that music is an essential part of modern cinema and that the most brilliant composers of today are using their talents to add colour to their films (Goldmark, 2003). In the social context of the time, it was a show of ability for the composer to set historical music in the film appropriately, and they should have made the soundtrack itself national in order to revive British music. Convinced that the origins of music must be national, Vaughan Williams agreed with Hubert Parry that "style is ultimately national" and that the greatest musical relics must, above all, appeal to people in the context in which they were created. For example, Vaughan Williams marks the excerpt from the film *Coastal Command* reproduced in Score 2 as a "cantabile".

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**Figure 2.** Score 2: Movement one of Vaughan Williams's Sixth Symphony at Rehearsal Eight (Howerton, 2019, p. 173)

Owing to its sublimity, this motif is clearly intended to act as propaganda, as it leads the viewer to identify with the RAF Coastal Command staff. Such composing of lyrical melodies for the heroes of the film further

provides an emotion that promotes a patriotic response from the viewer (Howerton, 2019). Meanwhile, one of the extra movements included in composer Arthur Bliss' suite is *Reconstruction*, which in the re-recorded version

is much longer than the ending section in order to conspicuously emphasise a sequence from the film. This *Reconstruction* version opens with 16 dramatic chords, leading directly into the familiar Utopia of two complete statements of the hymn-like Epilogue tune (with a very prominent gong). Bliss' recordings were not intended for commercial release, but rather to give the filmmakers a sense of the scale and location of the music that his collaborator, Wells, valued so much, and which Wells saw from the outset as an integral part of the film.

A later review in a paper in *The Times* was crucial, particularly regarding the sound quality of the music tracks, commenting that if the sound in a film is over-amplified, the music becomes mere noise; and in wartime propaganda films, the emotions evoked by the combination of scenes of terror and destruction and noise are unbearable (Lloyd, 2003). A film score is a score that carries with the composer's hope for the country's victory and passion for the motherland, and it is supposed to lift the spirits. If for other reasons, such as the soundtrack being placed where it shouldn't be, it can have a negative effect instead. Korda, who produced *The lion has wings*, was quoted as saying that although the film was not a masterpiece (because it was made in a hurry), it showed "how far film propaganda and other tools of war had progressed since the last war". *The Lion has Wings* was made in haste to be released in British cinemas on 3 November 1939, exactly two months after war began, setting off an extensive pre-screening campaign in the Britain two weeks after the first previews (Farmer, 1962).

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to argue, through an analysis of the soundtracks of wartime propaganda films, whether the idea that film score composers could use musical imitation as a way of lifting the spirits of the people of the period and strengthening their patriotism has proved to be correct. Composers of film scores such as Vaughan Williams or Williams Walton, for example, have mostly based their scores on symphonic music. The reason for this is that orchestral brass instruments can give the listener a majestic and atmospheric feeling, which is relatively in line with the historical plot of war films, and can also be used to imitate the sound of some weapons through the instruments, to push the plot and enter the climax through the

music, especially after the victory and the orchestra gives people an exciting and shocking feeling when they return from the triumph.

Conversely, it is counter-productive if the soundtrack doesn't work well with the plot of the film. What I mean by this is that if the composer is only there to show off, then its work is unsuccessful. Composers of film scores are supposed to produce their work with a positive sentiment, and as Williams says in the article (2003), the origin of the music has to be national, and the idea that artists write for themselves is wrong, because anyone who wants to be cosmopolitan is leading to failure. Instead, what they want to do is to convey a real message to people through music, to show the world how patriotic and proud the British people are.

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