

“Moaning Woman”
by Tim Greiving

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Moaning Woman

Beauty is in the ear of the beholder.

By Timothy Greiving

Remember that scene in *Gladiator* when Russell Crowe discovers the lifeless bodies of his wife and son? Try forgetting about how he distractingly gets snot all over his wife's feet—it was a zeitgeist moment in film music. During that and a few other key scenes from Ridley Scott's epic descended the now famous Lisa Gerrard wailing vocals, which subsequently ignited the trend, the phenomenon...the moaning woman.

The “moaning woman”—that cliché female vocalist wailing her wordless, ethnic dirge like an alto yodeler over the strains of the orchestra—can be heard in everything from *The Prince of Egypt* to *Duma*; *300* to *The Gospel of John*; *Minority Report* to *Black Hawk Down*. Nearly every major composer has tried their hand at it, and it has often appeared in almost cut-and-paste similarity. It's even been parodied in the scores for *Team America* and *Tropic Thunder*. How and when did this technique claim such a monopoly on the market?

Let's define terms. The “moaning woman,” for our purposes, is a female vocalist—typically an alto—performing an improvisatory, dirge-like melody. It is full of voice-cracking sorrow, and rarely attempts a go at any known language. Its primary function has been to lend a Middle Eastern or “ethnic” aura to a score. It is, essentially, the musical representation of a woman crying out in anguish or giving birth.



Moaning Origins

The craze can arguably be traced back to Hans Zimmer's *Gladiator*. The use of wordless female vocals in film music goes back much farther (think Morricone), but in *Gladiator* Zimmer and Gerrard employed this very niche style of ethnic singing (wailing, moaning) that struck a chord with moviegoers and composers, and the aftershocks are still quaking cinema walls today.

Moaning woman expert (and composer) Jeff Beal links the genesis of the phenomenon to the popularity of new age and world music in the 1980s. “I think that was the decade where we became enamored with all sorts of indigenous gestures,” Beal says. Before *Gladiator* even came out, the technique was “already starting to percolate up.”

Doug Adams, a recognized authority on the moaning woman, remembers first noticing prominent female vocals in Wojciech Kilar's *Dracula*. “It was such an unusual thing to have a film score where the performer was so noticeable, especially in a vocal way like that,” Adams says. “And then it kind of caught on as sort of a kitsch thing; Goldenthal would use it here and there for something that was out of control, or even Elfman. I always felt that sort of got cross-pollinated with the world music trend.”

“At some point,” Adams continues, “it just became, everybody has to use something that doesn’t sound western just to prove that it’s somehow exotic. It doesn’t matter if it actually matches anything in the piece. Those two things really fell together to get to the point where *Gladiator* could be forced upon the world and accepted.”

The musical phenomenon is surely also a reflection of the politics and world events of our times. As conflict and subsequent interest in the Middle East intensified, American filmmakers began dealing more and more with the locale and its related subjects. Composers followed suit and grabbed onto one of the more obvious traits of Middle Eastern music.

Is it effective? “It is a tremendously evocative sound,” Adams says. “It’s about as close as you can get to just yelling in the background. It’s a very primal form of self expression. The whole idea of this type of vocalization is really a beautiful thing in the proper context, in the native cultures. We only think of it as just this very base form of expression. It’s certainly very nuanced and very interesting.”

Raping and Pillaging

Most film score lovers would agree that the moaning woman is nearly always emotionally effective. The problem is that it is often a very shallow and unintelligent means of representing the Middle East, or simply anything “ethnic.”

“We’ve white-guyed this thing to death,” says Adams. “It doesn’t really have anything to do with the beauty that it has in its actual culture.”

Hollywood has long possessed the bad habit of raping and pillaging other cultures for musical ideas that tie a score to its film’s setting. Rather than intelligently studying and employing a foreign culture’s musical styles and traditions, composers have often opted for simply grabbing a musical instrument or idea that represents a surface level understanding of that culture’s music.

“That’s what we call the augmented second approach,” Adams explains. “If you throw an augmented second into your scale, it immediately becomes exotic.”

The shakuhachi is one of those famously overused and misused instruments that serve to give a score an “ethnic” flair. Just think about all of the bagpipes, didgeridoos and Arabian double harmonic scales that have been slapped onto an otherwise typical western, Hollywood score. The moaning woman falls into that same, time-honored tradition.

Is such loose adherence to the music of other cultures...wrong? Renowned moaning woman satirist Theodore Shapiro argues: “It’s not unethical. That’s been going on forever. You can hear the Turkish March in the finale of Beethoven’s Ninth. That probably doesn’t sound too Turkish to people in Turkey. But it doesn’t make it an uninteresting moment of that symphony.”

“I think it can always be done in a way that is interesting and breathes life into music from another culture,” Shapiro continues. “There are times where it feels like exploitation. Ultimately it’s up to each artist to handle that material in a way that doesn’t feel like exploitation.”

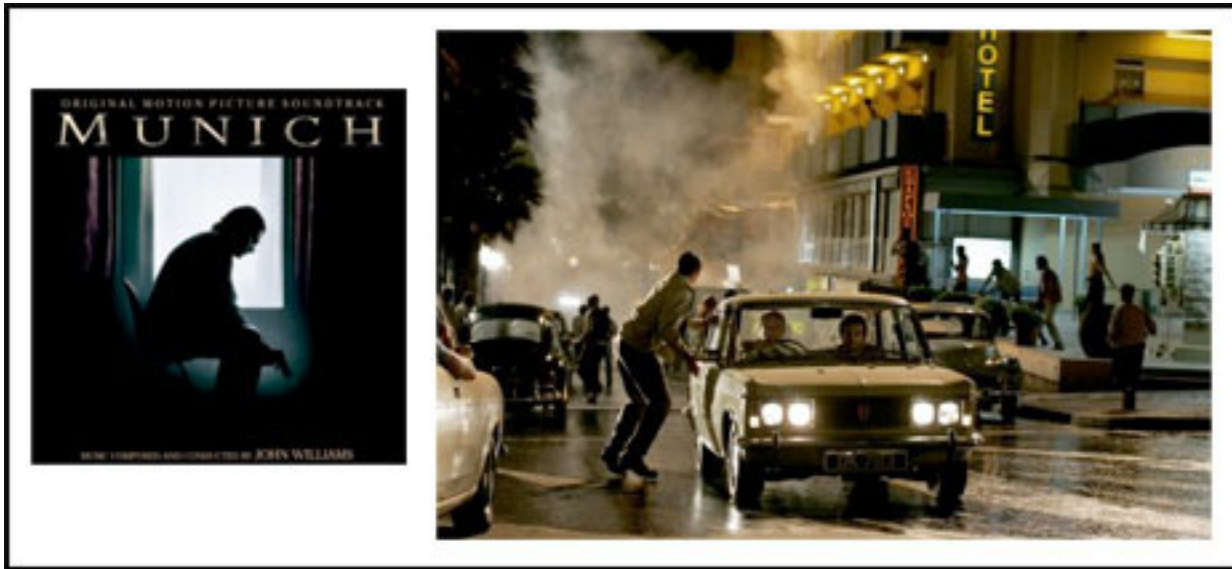
The overuse of the moaning woman can certainly be blamed, to an extent, on directors and producers; the same directors and producers who clamor for the Media Ventures sound, and who generally clamor for a “more-of-the-same” musical approach with big cartoon dollar signs in their retinas. Any time there is a massive trend in film music, it is too easy to blame the composers. Composers are often hogtied to a temp track or told by a producer, with the cold end of a pistol to their head: “Give me *Gladiator!*”

Even John Williams has been swept up in the phenomenon, on display in *Minority Report*, *Star Wars: Episode III: The Revenge of the Sith*, and his haunting score for *Munich*. The latter score, while employing the familiar melismas of Lisbeth Scott, somehow still works superbly. Here is a film that is not just set in the area to which this vocal technique is native, but is—in the words of Jeff Beal—“such a languid and anguished story of moral compromise and horrible hatred, that you needed something that embodied that soul.” It is one of the rare occasions where the gesture is appropriate

and entirely effective.

Doug Adams compares Williams' usage of the moaning woman to "your grandpa buying a cell phone." "You know everybody else has already done this," he says, "and he's finally just getting around to the cliché a little bit later than everyone else."

But "Williams' techniques almost transcend his style," Adams argues. "Whatever he's dealing with he elevates it, even if it's something that began as a trope. And he's a guy, if he's going to do this, he doesn't just trot it out. He does something with it."



Portrait of a Cliché

The moaning woman is not just hazardous because of its "white-guyed" representation of its native culture. We've heard it so many times that it could accurately be labeled a trope or a cliché. Can a cliché ever be truly effective?

Clichés are, by nature, very predictable—and an effective score often hinges on its unpredictability. "There's an element of surprise that you're always trying to create for the audience," says Beal. "If things seem too expected and too [much of] what you're anticipating, you lose the ability to really give the audience an experience of something proprietary."

Gladiator was effective, perhaps, because no one expected it. But then proverbial sales of the moaning woman gesture went through the roof, and it seems like every other film has one in their proverbial house.

Who doesn't laugh every time they hear James Horner's danger motif? It may be a completely effective—even appropriate—use in whatever film you're watching, but its sheer abundance in his oeuvre undermines its efficacy. The same goes for the moaning woman. It takes the observant filmgoer out of the film; its omnipresence in modern film music is simply too distracting. It takes an otherwise serious or even tragic moment and often turns it into a joke.

The moaning woman is, in many ways, worse than the danger motif (or any other instrumental cliché), because of just how upfront a vocal solo is in a score. "The thing about the voice," says Beal, "is that it really brings the score much further forward in the listener's consciousness. It's hard to have a vocal element and have it sort of fade away in the background. I think it has to do with the physiology of the human psyche and the voice being the ultimate instrument, that as soon as you hear the voice your ear just latches on to it in a way that it probably doesn't in other underscore-type textures."

"A little bit goes an awful long way," he says soberly.

The Final Moan

Have filmmakers and composers finally seen the error of their ways? With the exceptions of Steve Jablonsky's desert-themed *Transformers 2: Revenge of the Fallen* and John Debney's Middle East-leaning *The Stoning [and Moaning?] of Soraya M.*, the moaning woman has not been featured in any prominent score so far this year (to my knowledge). Could it be that she has wailed her last breath? Theodore Shapiro, who thinks he may have helped put the "nail in the coffin" when he satirized the gesture in *Tropic Thunder*, doubts it is completely dead. "Nobody ever has the last word on how things can be done," he says. "And that's what we're all striving to do, is find a way to rearrange the elements and come out with something fresh."

"I think that certain stylistic elements have a longer lifespan than others," Shapiro continues. "In a sense, the ideas that are as bold and more instantly recognizable as that one probably have a shorter lifespan before people start picking up on it."

"Like anything else it'll get passed by," weighs in Doug Adams. "We're sort of back to the giant drum sound from the Zimmer school again, aren't we? *Batman* certainly bled over to *Star Trek*—you've got Giacchino using giant drums and whacking coke signs and stuff. I kind of feel like moaning woman may have played out."

The new trend du jour also seems to be the touted string soloist—recent films like *The Village*, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, *Defiance*, *Iris*, and *The Soloist* boast a celebrated solo violinist or cellist. Even Hans Zimmer shared billing with Joshua Bell on this summer's *Angels & Demons*.

"Moaning woman got replaced by moaning string player," Adams says.

So much more could be said about trends and clichés in film music. Why do they occur? Who is to blame? Do they work? But what eventually surfaces with any trend, from those of us who are actually listening, is a cry for innovation.

"That's the thing with film music always," adds Adams. "The simplest, most ripped-off things always work—it just depends on whether you want to bring any artistry to it." Adams contends that if a composer is working on a quality film, "you should be serving the needs of that project not the tropes of that genre."

The conclusion of the matter is that this gesture can be done tastefully, appropriately, intelligently and effectively. In the hands of a skilled composer it can notch up the drama or transport the viewer to another world (or at least another country). Perhaps, in time, it will make more infrequent and thus surprising appearances—rendering it much more powerful.

But for now it is simply too commonplace and too cheaply stapled to too many scores to have its intended impact. Its dangers range from making a score predictable and forgettable, to transforming a serious score into a parody.

With the exception of Lisbeth Scott lampooning herself, the only place I want to hear the moaning woman for now is a birthing ward. So, realistically, not at all.

—FSMO