

Quintessential Western Sound in Tiomkin's *Red River*

Howard Hawks' 1948 film *Red River* is one of the quintessential Westerns. The film is about Tom Dunson and the first successful drive up the Chisholm Trail. The cinematography in the film is expansive, showing broad swaths of sun-scorched earth and cattle as far as the eye can see. At the center of it all is the Red River, a marker for Dunson's territory and the namesake of the film. Although the film is not as well-remembered as others, Dmitri Tiomkin's score is the essence of Western film music. The film falls in the middle of Tiomkin's screen composing career and lacks much of his personal style. Since the score lacks almost any personal touch from the composer, what we get is an exemplar of the genre's established conventions. By drawing heavily from conventions of American nationalism created by Copland and Virgil Thomson to personify the West, Tiomkin's score for *Red River* establishes itself as the quintessential Western film score.

I will now offer an overview of the mythology of the American West. The region has been romanticized by people even since the "wild West" as it were, was still a thing. The myth of outlaws and rugged cowboy heroes saving towns and damsels is well documented in American media. The cowboy hero in question is almost always "rugged", an outcast from established society who finds himself in the West forging the only path he can. He is sharp-witted with an even sharper tongue and aim with a pistol. The mythological cowboy hero is always, without question, a white man. These cowboy heroes often find themselves in epic adventures such as in *The Magnificent Seven* where our hero and his team must trek across the land to save a small town of peasants, terrorized by fearsome desperados. In *Red River*, the protagonist Tom Dunson, played by John Wayne, begins the film in perhaps a tamer fashion than the typical cowboy: he

defects from a wagon convoy headed West to go find his own land to start a ranch. Him and his Sancho Panza-esque sidekick traverse through desert and brittle prairie until they find their paradise. The viewer thinks, perhaps that our hero is not the typical cowboy. That is, until, he quickdraws to shoot a man who questions his “claim” on the expansive swath of prairie he has staked.

Tom Dunson “adopts” a young boy, Matt Garth, portrayed by Montgomery Clift, who stumbles into his camp with a cow in tow. Fourteen years later in the film we get in Matt another cowboy hero, but this time he is young, charismatic, and handsome. He fills in Tom’s gaps in the cowboy archetype and provides the viewer with one whole example of the cowboy hero.

Not only do the characters in the film fulfill genre expectations, so do the plot and the visual elements. *Red River* is filmed on site in various parts of Arizona, allowing for the film makers to display the vast landscapes of the mythological West. The land is mostly flat with a few rolling hills, mountains are seen rising in the distance. The occasional river winds over the earth and trees are few and far between. Covering the earth we see Dunson’s 9,000 head of cattle, accompanied by a band of horses, a few wagons, and Dunson’s men on horseback. This is an epic party for a suitably epic voyage for a Western. Until Dunson’s group, no one has ever successfully driven cattle from Mexico to Missouri, but our cowboy heroes are determined to be the first to accomplish such a feat. And though they do not make it all the way to Missouri, when they arrive in Abilene, Kansas they are received like the heroes the film makes them out to be. The entire town runs out to greet them, musicians play in the street as the vast herd of cattle is funneled through the center of town to the stockyard. A hero’s journey completed to a hero’s welcome.

The myth of the West with its expansive lands and opportunities spread not only into the music of film but also into art music. Composers in the early twentieth century read in their audiences the desire to break from the complicated forms and increasingly dissonant harmonies of European styles. Americans wanted to hear their own land and stories in music, not the established works of old Germans. Two young composers in this era took up the task to prolific success: Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson. Neither of these composers were from the West and had likely never seen the immensity of America when they set out to represent it in music. Nevertheless, these two composers managed to develop a new style that resonated with audiences as truly American. The music used folk songs and hymns as a basis for its ultra-melodic style. The harmonies were as open as the prairie, drawing on fourths and fifths, stacked across octaves to emulate the space that the West was supposed to offer. A guise of purity and simplicity was the defining characteristic of Copland and Thomson's new American style. This style, pioneered in the 1930s and 40s, was quickly incorporated into the Hollywood musical language. As the Western film genre increased in popularity, so did the appropriation of a Coplandian idiom in scoring the music for these films. The crowning jewel of this musical idiom, is found in Dmitri Tiomkin's score for *Red River*.

Dmitri Zinovievich Tiomkin (1894-1979) was a Russian national who originally came to the US to perform as part of a vaudeville musical duo. He was a classically trained pianist who studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory under the tutelage of Felix Blumenfeld. In America, he met his wife, Austrian ballerina Albertina Rasch and the two moved to Hollywood. Rasch found work choreographing dance numbers in Hollywood musicals and Tiomkin would write the scores to go with these numbers. He began to get credits scoring nonmusical films and what

would become a prolific career was set in motion. Over the course of his career, Tiomkin was nominated for 16 Oscars and won 4. His score for *Red River* comes in the middle of his career in 1948.

The music is scored for full orchestra with the addition of banjo for a more authentic folk effect. Tiomkin has a knack for writing melodies and favors the string section in his writing. He uses the low brass section, especially trombones, as transitional voices to lead into new sections. The music often contrasts between sparsely orchestrated passages of solo flute or soli clarinets and lush sections for the entire orchestra. Tiomkin's score also features a male chorus who sings the main theme, one of the music's only unique characteristics from other scores from the same time period.

The primary theme in the score is first heard at the beginning of the film over the credits and is used with slightly different presentations throughout the film. Its sound is very much within the idiom of Copland and the twentieth century American nationalism, so much so that a few parallels can be drawn between Tiomkin's music, and Virgil Thomson's *Symphony on a Hymn Tune*. In measure 15 of Movement 1 of Thomson's symphony, the trombone enters with a fragment of the melody which is then carried on by the strings in measure 20. This melody in A major ascends with the first notes E-F#-A, or sol-la-do in solfege. Tiomkin's melody in the main theme of *Red River* has the same solfege: sol-fa-do, only descending. The two melodies also have similar rhythmic patterns: two quarter notes followed by a note of a half-note or longer in length. This similarity is striking enough to make one wonder if Tiomkin could have possibly heard Thomson's symphony, premiered in 1945, before writing the music for *Red River* which came out in 1948.

Another aspect of Tiomkin's score that is representative of the genre as a whole is in the rhythmic and articulative use of brass and percussion. One of the prime examples of this in *Red River* is in the "cattle" theme. The trombone melody is representative of the heavy loping of the cows as they drive along the trail. Tiomkin takes advantage of the instrument's capabilities by having them portamento from one note to another. The melody originated by the trombones and subsequently carried on by the horns and trumpets is also heavily syncopated, featuring a dotted-eighth sixteenth note figure. This rhythmic figuration is stereotypical of music in the American idiom.

Tiomkin's use of folk songs in his score is another essential element of American nationalism. In the film, Tiomkin features the melodies or motives from at least two American folk songs: "O Susanna" and "She'll be comin' around the mountain". By using these songs as the basis for his composition, he establishes an air of authenticity that an original melody could not provide. Using a tune that would be familiar to an audience tricks them into a state of belief: if the songs in the movie are real, perhaps the events are too.

One other convention that Tiomkin uses is the musical othering of Native Americans. In the film, there is the near constant threat of attack by "Indians", so musical nods to them sneak into presentations of previous themes. However, they do have their own moment in a track called "Comanche Arrows". This moment in the score utilizes stereotypical musical cues for natives, namely the tom-tom rhythm, which consists of four equal beats with an accent on the first. This section features more percussion than any other in the film, which is supposed to represent the prevalence of drums in Native American cultures. Tiomkin also uses a Romantic, orientalist technique by using the pentatonic scale and movement by parallel fifths to ensure that the

listener feels no confusion: these are not the sounds of our white cowboy hero. These are the Others.

Though I have argued that Tiomkin's score for *Red River* is remarkable in its adherence to established conventions, the level at which the composer achieves is what makes this score stand out. Dmitri Tiomkin's total understanding style and technical flexibility allowed him to write a score that uses all of the established tropes of Western film music without it sounding contrived. He breathes life into the old material so that we may look back at the culmination of old styles before composers started branching out from convention. Even Tiomkin himself, with *High Noon* in 1952 started to break the mold. But he could not have done that if he had not solidified the mold with *Red River*. In this score we hear the heroic brass, insidious tom-tom, and lyrical, pastoral strings that have become so associated with the American West. We hear the West, not as it was, but how we imagine it.

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