

Abstract

The decisive contribution of popular music to the configuration of cinematic music has not been exhaustively tackled by the traditional studies about music in cinema. The approach of these studies has been mainly conditioned by a Eurocentric cultural view which tried to connect the symphonic music from classic American cinema (which aimed for realistic narrative and artistic status) with the European cultivated musical tradition, thus failing to adequately appreciate the importance of other American music forms with popular roots, more imaginative and more unpredictable at the narrative level.

In this sense, the Marx Brothers' career is the optimal medium for studying these musical influences. Before they made their debut in film with *The Cocoanuts* (1929), the Marx Brothers had accumulated more than 20 years of experience in vaudeville and musical comedy. Despite this, the research carried out so far on the Marxian filmography has prioritized the films from their most successful period, which started with *A Night at the Opera* (1935) and was censored under the Hays Code and controlled by the production team at Metro Goldwyn Mayer, and has paid little attention to their earlier films, in which the popular music influence of vaudeville is much more evident. Besides, musical contents have been only tackled in a tangential, inventory-like way, having been isolated from their expressive context and artistically underrated (from an ethnocentric perspective) due to their comic and popular nature.

In light of the above considerations, this study aims at validating or refuting the following hypothesis: the Marx Brothers use popular music in their films by integrating it in their performances according to the expressive devices of vaudeville, and it is necessary to know these devices in order to understand the true meaning and expressive function of this kind of music.

To achieve this, after completing an artistic-biographical sketch (Gehring, Louvish and Marx), we have carried out a thorough analysis of the musical contents present in the vaudeville shows performed by the Marx Brothers before they made the leap into cinema, and we have connected them with the usual forms of artistic expression at that time (Snyder and Lott). Equally, while stressing the sociological aspects of this tumultuous period, we have researched into the typical music and topics of the cinema of that time (Altman) as well as into the musical theatre of Broadway (Bordman and Jones), in which the Marx Brothers also worked.

Finally, we have exhaustively analyzed the first seven films by the Marx Brothers from a musical (but also sociocultural) perspective, thus proving the importance of popular music contents in the construction of expressive meaning. Besides, we have noticed the use of popular music as a vindication of the popular roots of cultural identity against the irruption of European traditional music into classic American cinema.