

# Film Culture and the Psychology of Sound.

## A Case Study

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### Abstract

*Nowadays, although the cinema is seen as a way of entertaining the masses, of keeping people abreast of what is going on outside their homes, we sometimes fail to notice that, like any mass media, it 'injects' certain values, ideas, even feelings and reactions. Speculating on the conscious and unconscious state of the millions towards which they are directed, the cinematic representations are social constructions rather than value-neutral reflections of the 'real' world. Although seen as being essentially visual, because it mimics our mental constructions of life, and the way our consciousness shapes the world, the film 'touches' deeper aspects of our inner world, such as emotion, attention, and imagination. The aim of this study is to put forward the idea that music plays a central role in film contexts. Being an all-encompassing and organic tool, music has the power to convey meaning and emotions, at times even more efficiently than images. An analysis of the soundtrack of Disney's Frozen was attempted in order to highlight music's potential to influence one's perception and interpretation of the film.*

**Keywords:** mass media, cinematic experience, music, rhythm, emotional depth, empowerment, self-acceptance

### Introduction

Despite the concerns many people have about them, the mass media are among the most powerful modern-day authorities. Most people say they trust television more than any other source of information. Television wins the credibility contest because it is visual, immediate, and convenient. In an era in which our experiences are rooted in the process of consumption, and not that of production, television not only constructs identity, but also becomes a means of expressing it. Feeding on our needs, be them false or genuine, the media leave the impression that anything can be possible, that perfection can be achieved.

What better way to reflect the other's desire, to reflect its demand like a mirror than through images? Images push their way into the fabric of our social lives. They affect the way we look and think and are still with us in our everyday domestic activity. If an image is worth a thousand words, how much more valuable are the film's hundreds of shots as they interweave with sounds, written material, and music? It is

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because of its heterogeneous matter of expression that the film grows to be a precise medium for conveying thoughts and feelings.

In this respect, one may add that music, one of the film's inconspicuous constituents, plays an important part in creating rhythm and depth as its force enhances the power of images. Film music has the ability to create atmosphere or mood, fashioning emotions which are timidly referred to by images. It may highlight elements onscreen or offscreen, in order to elucidate the progression of the plot, or it may support or anticipate narrative developments. Nonetheless, despite its multifarious functions, film music has always been considered subordinate to a film's primary content, being complementary to elements, such as imagery, narrative flow or dialogue. "In filmic hierarchy the telling of the story has always reigned supreme, and film music has almost always been at the humble service of the storytelling" (Wierzbicki 2009: 20).

The present study attempts to analyse the soundtrack of Disney's animated movie, *Frozen* (2013), in order to see how the architecture of the musical 'text' complements and transforms the film into a visceral, heightened experience. Moreover, it is the aim of this paper to contest the conventional perception according to which music should be seen primarily as an element that conveys emotion, highlighting that it becomes the perfect, subtle tool that, in the hands of the filmmaker, proves to be a device that adds depth and complexity even to an animated film, whose entire foundation is basically designed to meet the expectations of children.

### **The case of *Frozen***

Since its release in 2013, Disney's animated film, *Frozen* (2013), has become the fifth highest-grossing film, earning \$1.2 billion worldwide. The film's success was also 'validated' by two Academy Awards, a BAFTA, a Golden Globe, a soundtrack that has recorded more than a million album sales and a DVD that became Amazon's best-selling children's film of all time based on advance orders alone. But what makes Disney's film so special? The current study focuses on the soundtrack of *Frozen* (2013), written by Robert Lopez with lyrics by Kristen Anderson-Lopez, in an attempt to reveal the noteworthy contribution of the film's music to its success.

*Frozen* (2013) won acclaim for promoting sisterly love and for creating strong, independent female characters. Although the movie

shares many typical story elements with other Disney films, such as the quest to meet one's true love, royalty symbols, tragedy and grief (the death of Elsa and Anna's parents) and the comic character (Olaf the Snowman), it also brings forward a number of twists on the traditional Disney template. The classic hero's journey traces the development and empowerment of two princesses, neither of which fits the mould. Both Elsa and Anna depart from the standard gender stereotyping found in Disney movies, offering a different perception, an antidote to the challenges of life. The popularity of these characters, of Elsa in particular, is attained through the complexity of their personalities, flawed but honourable, attractive but strong, hesitant and scared at times yet fearless and determined.

### ***Frozen Heart***

*Frozen Heart*, the opening song of the movie *Frozen* (2013), is performed by a group of ice men who are harvesting ice blocks from a frozen lake. This mood-establishing tune, composed in Dorian mode, proves to be the perfect instrument for the filmmaker to establish a thematic connection between the dichotomic pair cold/ice – warmth/heart. The rhythmic sound of the ice saws cutting through ice, accompanied by the same rhythm of manly, raspy voices, all unified, completes the visual image and foreshadows Elsa's struggle with her cryokinetic competence, on the one hand, and on the other, one of the movie's themes: the strong, courageous woman who is feared of.

The song serves as a warning against the Ice Queen (reference is also made to Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Snow Queen*) – “Beware the frozen heart” (*Frozen* 2013, 00:03:04–10). Elsa is seen as “Beautiful! Powerful! Dangerous! Cold!” as an “icy force both foul and fair [who] has a frozen heart worth mining” (00:02:33–35, 00:02:01–08). Her inability to control her magical powers has made her fear any human interaction and thus, she poses as the unapproachable, cold woman who is incapable of love. Elsa is subliminally compared to the infamous Queen so often represented as evil and powerful, a role she unconsciously assumes at a certain point in the narrative. This idea is also supported by the visual image of the six virile men who rhythmically pierce the ice and then pull the ice cubes out of the water using drag tongs, ice hooks and fork bars, all these instruments emphasizing the power of the ice and the strength one needs to contain it. The three-pronged fork used for harvesting resembles Poseidon's

trident, the same trident that is owned by King Triton in Disney's 1989 animated film *The Little Mermaid*, is a male symbol of power that may be seen in connection to the male fear of castration by a strong female like Elsa (Dundes and Dundes 2002). As if attempting to reassert their masculinity, the men stress certain verbs while singing their power anthem ("So **cut** through the heart/ Cold and clear/ **Strike** for love and **strike** for fear/ See the beauty, **sharp** and clear/ **Split** the ice apart/ And **break** the broken heart" – *Frozen* 2013, 00:01:13–26). The intensity of these verbs and their association with violence emphasizes the attitude men have towards empowered women, that of fear ("Ice has a magic/ Can't be controlled/ Stronger than one! /Stronger than ten!/ Stronger than a hundred men!" 00:01:38–45). Moreover, the playfulness of words such as "cold", "frozen" and "ice" serves to reinforce the strength, male force required when 'handling' ice, on the one hand, and on the other it offers an indirect characterisation of the main female character, Elsa. Her indirect portrayal as emotionally cold, secluded and uninterested in men is also evoked latter on in the film's famous song *Let It Go*.

### ***Do You Want to Build a Snowman?***

Considered one of the saddest songs of *Frozen*, *Do You Want to Build a Snowman?* follows Anna's emotional journey throughout the years as she tries to reconnect with her sister. After accidentally injuring Anna while playing, Elsa resolves at hiding her powers and herself from everyone. Although Elsa's coldness and solitude spring from love and desire to protect her sister, Anna grows up lonely, alienated from Elsa and yearning for her sister's attention and presence, completely unaware of the reason why they cannot play anymore.

*Do You Want to Build a Snowman?* is a beautiful, captivating musical number that unfolds the different moods and feelings experienced by Anna who becomes the central point of this scene. The fact that Anna is awarded a song just for herself, while Elsa has *Let It Go*, conveys Disney's preoccupation with offering their female characters the possibility to grow and evolve individually and equally. As co-director Chris Buck stated, they "needed the songs to be telling a story rather than stopping the action" (Buck 2013) and, in this respect, Anna's song perfectly covers a ten-year span with a clear-cut demarcation line between the child, young Anna and the adolescent. The three time periods vividly encapsulate Anna's growth as a

character: from the five-year-old who is cheerful, sparkling and naïve, the lively, witty nine-year-old to the mature, heartbroken young lady. The song begins with an animated, optimistic rhythm as sweet, little Anna attempts to convince her sister to come out of her room and play in the snow. Her childish behaviour as she peeps under the door or tries to curve her lips so as to fit the keyhole is a delightful portrayal of purity and naïveté which easily allows the younger viewer to connect and identify with Anna.

As time passes, so does Anna's voice, although the medium tempo is preserved. The nine-year-old Anna sings the same refrain, one that becomes a leitmotif for sibling love and connection ("Do you want to build a snowman?" – 00:07:53). The snowman is the only thing Anna scarcely remembers from the time the two sisters were still close, a memory that, although erased by the trolls in order to save her, has permeated her entire existence ever since. The snowman, at first a 'product' of Elsa's power to create anything out of snow and ice and then a character in its own right, Olaf, functions as a bridge between the two sisters, a representation of their emotional bond that transcends time and any barrier. Endowed with good humour, empathy and understanding, Olaf will stand by Anna's side throughout the entire narrative, offering his aid or a kind word in need, as a substitute for Elsa and her role as a big sister.

The third part of the song, envisaging Anna as a heartbroken teenager who has lost her parents and needs to be comforted by her older sister, is marked by the change of Anna's voice as she matures, but also by the change of mood, tone and rhythm. This variation may also be observed at the end of each part interpreted by Anna when Elsa briefly intervenes either directly ("Go away Anna" 00:08:18), or obliquely ("– Conceal it. – Don't feel it. Don't let it show" 00:08:29–34). If Elsa's 'intrusions' were meant to complement and reinforce the inner struggle of each of the female characters, each trying to cope in her own way, the ending of the song places them, for the first time, in the same context, that of loneliness and abandonment ("We only have each other/ It's just you and me/ What are we going to do?" 00:10:16–26). In this respect, music itself conveys a certain sense as strongly as the lyrics do, the last part of the song being characterized by a powerful, gloomy tone, accentuated by the instrumental passage that accompanies the visual image of the royal ship being 'swallowed' by the waves. Despite the song's joyful title and energetic rhythm, *Do You Want to Build a*

*Snowman?* proves to be a melancholic and touching song, its theme being splendidly encapsulated in the final scene, in which the two sisters are on opposite sides of the same door, both desperately wanting to open it and yet being unable to.

### ***For the First Time in Forever***

The first song where the audience is offered the chance to hear Anna and Elsa sing as equals, *For the First Time in Forever* highlights the role played by these women in the narrative. The song presents Anna's declaration of hopes and dreams as her castle opens its doors for the first time for her sister Elsa's coronation, while Elsa sings a counterpoint melody, expressing her fear of accidentally revealing her true nature. Once again, the rhythm of the song, its tonality and lyrics perfectly match and amplify the feelings of each female character. Anna's emotional state is constantly presented in contrast with that of her sister. Anna's parts composed in a major key convey happiness and hopefulness, while Elsa's counterpoint is in a minor key, highlighting fear, melancholy and a certain degree of hopelessness.

This song is a great example of original, yet organic integration of different tones, rhythms and mood that subliminally alters the atmosphere of the scene. *For the First Time in Forever* follows the joyful, innocent Anna, ecstatic at the chance of getting to see the real world and finding true love, feelings that are reinforced by an upbeat mood and a high tone, combined with the delicate, gentle sound of flutes, violins and piano. One might read that this lovely tune is not just an entertaining act: it presents a subtle, yet revealing portrayal of young Anna, who she aspires to be a graceful woman ("Tonight imagine me gown and all/ Fetchingly draped against a wall/ The picture of sophisticatedly grace" 00:14:37-46), who finally has the chance to meet her true love ("What if I meet the One? [...] To dream I'd find romance" 00:14:33-36) and be noticed ("For the first time in forever/ I could be noticed by someone" 00:15:14-23).

However, this vibrant, lively tune is harshly set in opposition with the minor chords of the last part of the soundtrack. This brilliantly accomplished mashup that combines and overlaps two contrasting songs, having different styles and rhythm, enhances Elsa's inner struggle: "Don't let them in/ Don't let them see [...] Conceal/ Don't feel/ Put on a show/ Make one wrong move/ And everyone will know" (00:15:44-16:03). Although the lyrics and the narrative may

suggest a wide gap between the two sisters, they share the same feeling of insecurity, indulging in thoughts of how they will be seen by the people outside the castle. While Anna apparently seeks male validation of her beauty and charm, Elsa is forced to hide her true self for fear of rejection. In the end, they are both pretending to be something they are not and are relying extensively on the illusion of the power of perception, on the notion that we identify ourselves not with our own image, but with the reflection seen through the eyes of the other. These powerful feelings which are skilfully touched upon through the artistry of music are further emphasized in another song, *Let It Go*, where Disney manages to break new ground.

### *Let It Go*

Performed by the voice of Elsa, Idina Menzel, *Let It Go* stands as the most important musical moment in the animated movie, not only for its commercial success (it became the first song from a Disney animated musical to reach the top ten of the Billboard Hot 100 since 1995), but due to the originality of the music and lyrics, composed by husband-and-wife songwriters Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez, and of the message it encapsulates: one of self-acceptance and of female power.

*Let It Go* traces the emotional and psychological development of Queen Elsa who decides to leave her kingdom and her loved ones behind after publicly losing control of her magical powers. As she climbs the mountain, Elsa understands that she does not have to hide anymore and celebrates her freedom, independence and, apparently, solitude as well. In an interview for SSN, co-director Chris Buck admitted that the song became essential in the film's characterization of Elsa for her character was originally written as a villain and then gradually moulded into the strong, determined protagonist of the film: "*Let It Go* was one of the first songs written and it really defined Elsa. At one point she was a little more villainous. With *Let It Go*, we went 'No, we can't go that way with her.' [...] 'the minute we heard the song the first time, I knew that I had to rewrite the whole movie'" (Studio System News).

This soundtrack explores the mysterious power of music to amplify emotions and meanings beyond words and images. The melancholic atmosphere surrounding the downhearted Elsa is conveyed by using the F minor, a key which imprints a feeling of misery and despair, combined with the wide-angle shots of the mountain all

covered in white. Moreover, the rhythm of the song is also connected to the lyrics, transposing the viewer into a state of palpable sorrow: "Not a footprint to be seen/ A kingdom of isolation/ And it looks like I'm the Queen" (00:31:27–36). As her feelings intensify, music intervenes as if adding another 'layer' of meaning: a gradual change in tempo from a slow one in the beginning to allegro towards the end. Music builds to a crescendo in order to explore the complexity of Elsa's personality and her growth as a character: she goes from sadness and hopelessness, to anger and finally joy and acceptance.

Visual images, complemented by lyrics, are also used to mirror Elsa's emotions: the feeling of solitude and rejection is evoked through the white, uninhabited surroundings; her inner turmoil – "The wind is howling like the swirling storm inside" (00:31:38–44); rage ("Well now they know" 00:32:05–07); defiance of the established norm highlighted by the scene in which she throws her crown ("I don't care what they're going to say" 00:32:23–29); empowerment and acceptance ("You'll never see me cry/ Here I stand and here I stay/ Let the storm rage on [...] That perfect girl is gone" 00:33:20–34:26).

Her transformation from a young woman crippled by fear and overwhelmed by emotions (one may interpret these attributes as reinforcing gender stereotypes) to a defiant, powerful full-grown woman is captured by the camera as it progressively reveals the new Elsa: the scene in which she lets her hair down, her dress magically changes into a more sexual outfit becomes an effective example of how camera movement, mise-en-scène, lighting and music punctuate and magnify a climactic moment. Special interest should also be awarded to sound, employed to heighten the sensory experience: the sound of snow, notably that of Elsa's footprints as she walks alone through cold (a sense of isolation); the sound of crystalline icicles as she forges her glacial castle (stresses the magnitude of her powers); the echo of Elsa's footsteps in her ice palace (which required several attempts, including wine glasses and metal knives on ice – offering a sense of loneliness, on the one hand, and one of independence and power of choice, on the other) and one which, although removed in the final moment, is particularly revealing – the sound of her crown shattering into a million pieces as she throws it in an act of rebellion (reminiscent of the magic mirror in Andersen's *Snow Queen* that distorted 'reality' and exaggerated the ugly and the evil; it finally ends up shattered, just like



Elsa's crown, as the evil trolls sinfully believe they can carry it to heaven to mock the angels).

### Conclusions

The viewer's understanding and perception of film is moulded by its numerous constituents, for film operates as part of a larger system of meaning. This paper started from the premise that film music goes far beyond the role of an element that reinforces emotion. The chief ambition of this study was to prove that music's ability to convey meaning turns it into a powerful medium for communication, into an instrument that may greatly influence the viewer's reception of the film. Together with all the other elements woven into the fabric of the film, music offers the filmmaker the possibility to create a whole, perfect experience, a fictional world into which the viewer deliberately plunges. In this respect, it proposed an analysis of the soundtrack of one of the most well-received animated films, *Frozen*, in an attempt to demonstrate that a musical moment may invite different interpretations. Although the songs are primarily used to continue or add to the plot, they also unveil the hidden feelings of the characters and deepen the understanding of the text, thus making one wonder if Disney really intended to create a 'story' for children, as they are, at times, unable to deconstruct the multifarious aspects of the creative process, or for a more 'experienced' viewer who can trace all the nuances and intricacies put forward by the audio-visual medium.

According to Hoeckner and Nusbaum, "a powerful number in a musical or the striking use of a characteristic piece in a non-musical film can become a cue that enables viewers to recall a particular scene or the film as whole" (2013: 242). The soundtrack of *Frozen* (2013) has proven to be not only particularly distinctive so as to be easily recognized and associated with the film, but it became representative of the themes envisaged by the film. Music in *Frozen* (2013) managed to intensify and enhance the filmic experience, guiding the viewer's attention and influencing the interpretation of the visual content. Moreover, Disney succeeded in forging new territory by shifting the definition of what it meant to be a princess through the two female characters, Elsa and Anna. The themes of emotional struggle, isolation, acceptance and empowerment, observed through a close reading of the musical moments, shape a new perspective of the 'classic' animated film, one

that creates characters that are so much alive and 'real' that viewers easily resonate with them.

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