

Oohs and Oz: Dramatic Vocalization in Film Music

Philip D. Nauman
Boston University

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This paper traces the use of wordless vocalise (here referred to as dramatic vocalization) from its historical antecedents in nineteenth-century opera to its occurrence in modern film scores.

Dramatic vocalization derives from lower-class entertainments such as the phantasmagoria, which were popular at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In an attempt to exploit these newer resources, the composer Carl Maria von Weber included phantasmagorical elements in the “Wolf’s Glen” scene from his opera *Der Freischütz* (1821). Dramatic vocalization in the nineteenth century, as in the Weber example, typically occurs offstage: performers are removed from the audience’s view; one is seldom sure whether the onstage characters are supposed to perceive their sound as the audience does. Further examples are found in Verdi’s *Rigoletto* (1851), Berlioz’s *Les Troyens* (1863), Massenet’s *Thaïs* (1894), and Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* (1904).

As technology developed, it would be a natural consequence that the associations between certain *topoi* and dramatic vocalization would be transferred from the stage to screen. In film scores of the twentieth century, dramatic vocalization accompanies the depiction of supernatural events. The sound of wordless singing appears to have metaphysical connotations.