

The Red Violin

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Music melts all the separate parts of our bodies together.

—Anais Nin

You are the music while the music lasts.

—T. S. Eliot

In our culture, music has become a standard and integral aspect of film. Directors often use music as a tool, strategically timed to make us cry or scream in fright. However, in *The Red Violin*, music is much more than mere decorative accompaniment, the soundtrack for a movie character's life, or a tool manipulated to better narrate the plot. Instead, the plot, the visuals, and the narrative structure all work together to express the music, which is the center and soul of this film. This reversal is not surprising though, since *The Red Violin* is co-written and directed by the innovative filmmaker, Francois Girard. Girard's very short rap sheet of movies consists largely of music-related films, as he experiments with different ways of capturing the essence of music through the moving image.

In *The Red Violin*, Girard explores music through the film's visual style by making use of tints and color choices throughout the various scenes. The movie includes an extremely wide variety of settings, but all are visually unified by the Red Violin. In five distinct narratives, the film chronicles the life of a very special acoustically perfect violin that houses the spirit of a dead woman, as it passes from owner to owner, traveling across centuries and continents. By the time the movie is over, we have followed the Red Violin from its birth in 1681 Cremona when a grief-stricken violin-maker varnishes his masterpiece with the blood of his dead wife, to 1700s Austria, to 1800s

England, to China during the Cultural Revolution, and finally to its present showcasing at a posh auction house in modern-day Canada.

Somehow, despite the diversity of settings, at each step of our odyssey, we find ourselves inevitably immersed in a sepia-tinted world of violin-colored reds and browns. The walls of the Canadian auction house are a rich polished wood color; the soil, creaky carts, and warm candlelight of 1700s Austria tint the scenes an earthy natural brown; the Chinese khaki uniforms mixed with the red flags of revolution invoke a starker brown and red as well. The reds and browns spread liquidly from scene to scene, expressing the fluid and continuous qualities of music, in spite of the film's inherent tendency to chop up pictures into individual finite scenes, limited by time and space. We can leave Vienna of yesteryear and move on to the story of the next owner, but we can never escape the red-brown wash of the film's visual style; it follows us throughout the length of the film, just as actual music is present throughout the entire movie and the timeless melody of the Red Violin recurs in its various reincarnations like themes in a fugue.

Also, the different ways that the reds and browns are expressed in each setting visually convey the different faces of music. The red-brown of music equally encompasses the luxurious wooden staircase of an Englishman's estate and the vagabond gypsies' earthy forest alike. Music is not static, playing in only one monochromatic flat brown tone. Music is unifying in its ability to touch people across any boundaries, whether they be social status, nationality, or generation. Music is also unique to each person, expressing itself in a rich palette of shades, sometimes a passionately screaming red, sometimes a lyrical polished brown, and other times, just a subtle ashy wood.

Girard has experimented previously with the portrayal of music through film in his only other well-known work, *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould*, telling the life of Glenn Gould, the eccentric brilliant pianist, through thirty-two short disconnected vignettes. For example, in "Variation in C Minor," we listen to Gould flawlessly perform the piece on the piano. However, as we hear the music play for the entire length of the short film, all we see on the screen are two white squiggly frequency lines against a black background, fluctuating with each note as it is played. We marvel that all the infinite textures and flavors of music can be reduced to quantitative generic blips dancing on a screen. We are presented with the technological face of music.

Another one of these short films, "CD 318," consists only of close-ups of the inside of a Steinway grand piano. As Gould performs Bach's "Prelude No. 2 in C" with impeccable precision, the camera pans across the piano's body:

elegant polished wood, expansive rows of metal strings, and hammers jerking neatly as each note is played. There is a beauty in the mechanical aspect of music. With each of these visual tactics, Girard attempts to do the impossible: to portray accurately music through the visual medium; to use apples to make orange juice. Even though his ends are impossible, Girard manages to use these attempts to uncover small windows of truth, borrowing brief glimpses into this larger unfathomable being that is music.

In *The Red Violin*, Girard explores the charismatic and living quality of music by literally encasing the spirit of a woman in the Red Violin. Woman and violin are inseparable, as the woman's blood coats the violin, the violin's f-holes are superimposed on the woman's bare back (in the cover art), and her voice sings from within the violin's hollow body. The curves of the violin and the curves of the woman reinforce each other, together invoking their common connotations of warm sensuality, graceful musicality, and beautiful objectification.

The first time we see the Red Violin, the context is in a wood-paneled room full of well-dressed people at an exclusive Canadian auction. A slightly balding, genial auctioneer prefaces the violin's anticipated appearance with the words: "The last sale of the evening, lot number seventy-two on the turntable there, the star of the night...the last violin of Niccolo Bussotti 1681, a masterpiece of the golden age. If she would give us the pleasure...the so-called...Red Violin." And with those words, we get our very first glimpse of the highly coveted instrument. For all that hype, the Red Violin looks unassuming enough: a well-worn violin with a beautiful warm glow. Its reddish varnish has faded to a plainer brown in some areas with the naturally eroding effects of time and history, but it is still lovely. The camera caresses the violin in a gradual close-up as the dead woman's voice sweetly fades in, filling our heads with her haunting wordless melody. And somehow, we are irresistibly drawn into the intriguing aura of the Red Violin. It sings to us like a charismatic siren as the auctioneer's voice fades out, sounding like irrelevant jabber. It is as if the Red Violin is beckoning us, privately letting us in on a secret as the rest of those in the room bustle about with their own irrelevant affairs, oblivious to our exclusive connection with her. From the start, we are under the spell of the Red Violin.

However, we are only the first of many to succumb to the enticing music of the Red Violin throughout the course of the movie. Though the personalities and settings of each owner are both distinct and diverse, their stories are ultimately connected by a common trend. Each owner of the Red Violin cherishes the violin and becomes a virtuoso, creating incredible music on it.

But eventually, each one also becomes increasingly consumed by the violin, losing rational control of themselves in a bewitching obsession. One owner of the Red Violin (who ultimately commits suicide), Frederick Pope, delivers a breathtaking cadenza performance. Mr. Pope plays an extremely difficult fast passage with frenzied energy, completely immersed in the music. The violin is almost organically part of his body, as he plays with a longing expression on his face, and exhales almost violently with each forceful accent of his bow. After his performance is over, the audience responds with overwhelming applause. But Mr. Pope's condition is similar to one who has just been possessed; he stares at the violin awestruck as if he doesn't know where the music came from. He is oblivious to the hundreds clapping and staring at him. It takes him several seconds to break out of his trance-like state and regain control of himself again.

This scene is breathtaking. The music is simply amazing. *The Red Violin's* suspenseful, passionate, virtuosic score is composed by John Corigliano, and performed by the renowned violinist Joshua Bell. (Bell's performance in this movie is stunning; I was extremely impressed by his intensity, control, and precision throughout, especially in passages as difficult as Pope's cadenza. However, the violin-synching in this movie could use some work). But aside from the music itself, which is of course awesome, I find the visible effect that the music has on Mr. Pope and the audience members to be stunning as well. Girard makes an art of capturing people's reactions to the music; the power that the music has to move people is at least as beautiful as the actual music itself.

The climatic scene of *The Red Violin* is not one of action, but reaction. It involves Charles Morritz, a violin appraiser with the task of testing and preparing the Red Violin for auction. During this scene, another gentleman casually picks up the Red Violin to test its sound quality without knowing that it is *the* Red Violin. But somehow, he unwittingly starts to play the violin's signature melody that drew us in from the very beginning. The croon of the violin is all at once passionately suspenseful, calmly urgent, and eerily beautiful; if this music were part of the soundtrack of another film, it would probably be the accompaniment for a significant, apocalyptic scene. However, while the gentleman is playing this intense melody off-screen, the picture accompanying such poignant music is strangely still. It almost looks as though nothing is happening: all we see is a very prolonged close-up shot of Mr. Morritz's face as he listens. The high drama is not physical; it is entirely internal and emotional. Over the course of several seconds, we watch his expression gradually and involuntarily melt in tender wonderment as the music of the Red

Violin crescendos off-screen. This scene is chilling in its raw nakedness. We starkly see the extent to which Mr. Morritz is consumed by his love for the Red Violin in an absolute uninhibited surrender. This emotional scene is yet another way that Girard visually portrays music; Mr. Morritz's face, or Mr. Pope's body, is what music looks like when it takes over a person's soul.

Girard's genius in portraying the impact of music on individuals also expresses itself in some truly beautiful scenes in *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould*. In one of the short films, "Passion According to Glenn Gould," the recording studio technicians play Gould's playback recording for his approval. Scenes of Gould listening are interspersed with scenes of the recording staff in their sound booth. A man in the sound booth pushes the play button, and we hear the first notes of "Gigue from English Suite No. 2" which lasts throughout all the scenes of this vignette. Immediately, Gould crouches low on the ground, his face serious with the intensity of listening. His hands wave gently, conducting at nobody, as he starts to mouth along passionately to his wordless piano music. Meanwhile in the recording booth, a pudgy man says, "I really shouldn't be giving this [coffee] to you, you know. It's not very good for you." The clear counterpoint of the gigue continues to flow out of the speaker in a controlled tumble of notes. Gould is gesticulating wildly now, his movements made spectacular and graceful by slow motion effects. The camera starts to circle around him, the whole world an out-of-focus blur except for Gould and his music. "It just sits in your stomach like, like asphalt," the pudgy balding man discloses darkly, "I read it in a magazine." Gould swings his arm grandiosely with the music, causing his whole body to spin around recklessly off-balance, his hair flying and his white baggy shirt untucked. It's so powerful and breathtaking, to see someone completely consumed by such an intangible, invisible force. Girard's use of juxtaposition here is brilliant: it seems almost sacrilegious for the recording people to be talking about something as unimportant as coffee while Gould's music is playing. The music is a mystical sacred entity that needs to be respected. Not only is music everywhere, tinting our world; it can get inside of us. One of its most beautiful visible expressions is the glow of a possessed human being.

We've all probably experienced this at one point or another, locked in our bedroom when no one's home and blasting that amazing song that will send us over the edge every time—unable to stop our feet from tapping or from mouthing along while listening to that song through headphones, even though we know that we're being inappropriate because we're on public transportation. You know that feeling: like you're absorbing the music

through your very pores, and it glows warm inside of you, rushing alongside your blood, until you breathe it out again.

Girard makes it clear in his films that music is an organic, independent entity that commands respect and adoration. In one scene of *The Red Violin*, he chooses a camera angle from within the body of the violin. We watch the world gaze in at the violin through its f-hole, and we see from the personified violin's perspective. This is Girard's way of physically portraying the personality of music; music has a will, and its own desires, and a point of view. It looks out at the world and has its own agenda, as we experience it. It is by no means passively waiting to be created. As Girard stated in an interview: "the sculptor's only freedom is to choose a piece of stone or of wood and eventually the nature of that thing will express itself through his talent, maybe, but the notion of the artist as the creator of things, the free will of the artist, I think are totally foolish...we submit ourselves..." (interview). Girard's sentiments are made abundantly clear in the film, as each "owner" submits himself to the music of the Red Violin with reckless abandon and is ultimately destroyed or sacrificed in a frenzy of brilliant creation. The individual vessels are irrelevant; music is all that matters. It is a mystical entity so profound that we can only chip at its essence through fragmented attempts at understanding small aspects of it at a time. Unless, of course, like countless souls before us, we are willing to let the music consume us.

WORKS CITED

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