

Title:

MUSIC AS NARRATOR IN *CALL ME BY YOUR NAME*

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Introduction

In a way the narrator became Sufjan Stevens with his new songs, made contemporary, about our story, which is back. We wanted a sort of narrator that could make justice of the book, of the film, drawn from the narrative of Elio (Luca Guadagnino, in Encinias 2017)

This chapter examines the significance of music as a carrier of expositional information within the 2017 feature film *Call Me by Your Name* and how it is used to distinguish different narrative spaces for the audience – of the moment depicted, or of recalling memories of the past – and how music provides the subtext for the emotions of, and relationships between, the central characters Elio and Oliver. Adapted by James Ivory from a novel by André Aciman, the film tells the story of the arrival of the 24 year old American doctoral student Oliver at the home of the 17 year old Elio Perlman. Elio is the son of a professor who arranges for one of his students to stay with his family in their Italian holiday home each summer; an annual tradition that requires that Elio give up his room for this academic houseguest. As the film progresses, Elio's feelings for Oliver develop and the two embark on a summer affair.

In interviews at the time of the film's release, the director Luca Guadagnino acknowledged the significance of music in articulating the subjective experience of his film's protagonists, as their relationship develops over the course of an Italian summer in 1983, explaining to Anne Thompson, that music could be 'less heavy, less present, and more enveloping than a voice and text' (2017). Unusually, a large amount of narrative information is communicated through the deployment of the original score and existing music often written into – and foregrounded – in scenes. Elio's relationship to music is made explicit through the Talking Heads t-shirt he wears and also in his performances, and consideration of, music, where he is shown listening to, transcribing, or playing on guitar or the piano. As the film's music supervisor Robin Urdang notes: 'music is a layer of the film that's telling a story' (in Wheeler 2017), this layered approach ultimately acknowledged by an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Song for Sufjan Stevens' 'Mystery of Love', which accompanies a central montage within the film.

The Piano As Motif

Embedded as a motif within the film, the piano as an instrument serves a psychological, in addition to a representative, function – a cipher of the lead character Elio's desire to interpret, perform, and touch. Guadagnino had used piano music prominently in the preceding films in what the director has retrospectively described as his 'trilogy of desire' (In Laffly 2017); *Call Me by Your Name* forming the third of this series, following the earlier *Il Sono L'Amore (I Am Love)* (2009) and *A Bigger Splash* (2015). Nine pre-existing compositions by American composer John Adams pepper the first film of the trilogy, with both the director and film's producer

Tilda Swinton having reportedly spent 10 years pursuing Adams to secure his involvement (Maddocks 2010). The director described at the time this music as having influenced how the script had been written, and that Adams' music was 'a crucial emotional anchor' and that he had played the composers' music on set as motivation in some of the scenes (Ng 2010).

It is the first movement of Adams' 'Hallelujah Junction' that accompanies the opening credits of *Call Me by Your Name* – serving as a peritextual connection with the first film in the trilogy, in addition to establishing immediately the significance of the piano to this specific film. This establishment of the piano at the audience's first encounter with the film situates it in a story where the instrument is prominent and has a significance throughout the film, both in terms of the use of music inside and outside of the filmic world but also more directly within the story itself, the piano representing Elio's preoccupation with music and musicianship. Significantly, and more obliquely, 'Hallelujah Junction' was written for, and is performed by, two pianos. In the cue, melodic phrases shift back and forth between these two pianos – what Adams has described as a 'phased sequence' (2010) in which the repetition of phrases between the instruments echoes and repeats and presents as a mirroring both Elio and Oliver's developing relationship, and of Elio's struggle to communicate.

The use of the piano is further reinforced through the use of the music of Japanese pianist and composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, whose spiky 'M.A.Y. in the Backyard' forms the first non-diegetic cue in the film. This music accompanies a sequence where Elio and Oliver make their first excursion into the local town and makes a second appearance in a later scene during which Elio shaves and dresses for dinner. Unlike Adams' music, Sakamoto's cue - originally released in 1984 - is contemporary to the early eighties setting, made explicit in an introductory on-screen title card announcing the period as Summer 1983.

The significance of the piano is made most explicit by Elio's skill as a pianist within the story. In a scene where Oliver asks Elio to play a piece he has been strumming on the guitar in the garden, Elio invites him into the house where he performs his own interpretation of a Bach piece for Oliver on the piano. Music supervisor Robin Urdang has suggested that the director had wanted to record this music on set, explaining that the actor 'Timothée [Chalamet] took piano lessons and guitar lessons' in order to play this himself within the film, rather than miming (in Wheeler 2017). Ivan Raykoff notes the significance of this element of Chalamet's performance as Elio, suggesting that this use of music in the film serves to heighten its 'visual vocabulary with a palpable tactility of sound', where the film makes extensive use of close-up shots of hands, feet, and skin - all accentuating the significance of the body in the story (2018). In the next scene, as Elio writes in a diary, a second Bach piano piece - 'Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme' - is played non-diegetically. This is foregrounded in the audio mix and shifts to diegetic, filmic music in the next scene as we come to understand it is a piece that Elio is transcribing from his Walkman as he sits in the garden, and situates Elio as the centre of the story – where his personal listening choices drive the film and dominate the spaces he occupies.

Later, an extract from John Adam's 'Phrygian Gates' (1977-1978) plays as Oliver's supervisor – and Elio's father - Samuel Perlman makes an archaeological find in the

sea off the coast. The cue plays again later when Elio invites himself along with Oliver into town and Elio takes him to a small lake, where they kiss for the first time. In this instance and earlier, the piano signifies discovery; in Oliver's arrival at the villa for the first time, during these sequences of the archaeological find and latterly in the consummation of love between these two principal characters. As with 'Hallelujah Junction', this piece of Adams' draws from minimalism – making use of a limited palette of musical ideas that are repeated and built upon. As in the previous Adams' piece, 'Phrygian Gates' speaks to dualism – modulating between the Phrygian and Lydian musical scales which come together and drift apart over the course of the piece. Adams' has referred to the piece as his 'opus one' (Adams, n.d.), an artistic work that could be considered the start of a career, and all of these explicit and contextual points serve to mirror Elio's discovery of his identity, sexuality, and search for his voice in his music, discovered – in part - through his developing relationship with Oliver.

Following this kiss, the first of three cues from the songwriter Sufjan Stevens soundtracks a dream-like montage where a remix of a pre-existing track 'Futile Devices' is played through in its entirety, as a non-diegetic device. The sequence appears at the mid-point of the film and takes place at the end of a day when another academic couple has visited the Perlman's villa, and Oliver has unexpectedly left the family to explore the area on his own, leaving Elio with his friends Marzia and Chiara, and then alone. The montage begins with Elio sat outside on the terrazza, the colours are bleached out initially and the sequence appears to be shot on celluloid, a device typically used in film to present as memory or recollection before shifting back to the crisper images more familiar from earlier in the film. Elio ruminates on his day first outside the house, and then at his desk in his room. When he hears Oliver return, Elio leaps into his own bed and pretends to be asleep. The music in the sequence is connected to the previous music through its piano introduction, but it is the lyrics that throw light on Elio's feelings. Although not a direct break in the action, the combination of the celluloid film form and foregrounding the song in the sound mix privileges Steven's music over and above other diegetic and non-diegetic cues in the soundtrack. Allowing it to play through is a stark and deliberate device, drawing attention to the lyrics that actualise Elio's thoughts - of his feeling of safety in Oliver's company, of his love for him, and of his difficulty in articulating this in words. As Stevens explains, the director: 'was entranced from the very beginning with the idea of using that song. I think it's just serendipity that the nature and content of the material fits so well into the film. It was a lucky accident' (in Utichi 2018).

This is deployed more subtly in other places. In a sequence where Elio's mother Annella reads to her son a tale from 'The Heptaméron', a series of stories by Maguierite de Navarre (1558) she is accompanied by a turntable softly playing a piano rendition of Ravel's 'Le Jardin Féerique'. The story she selects is of the knight Amador who is uncertain of speaking of his love for a high-born princess and asks her whether it is better to 'speak or die', not knowing whether his feelings are reciprocal. Zora van Harten recognises that this musical cue serves as both a mirror of the fairy tale being read, in that Ravel's piece forms the final part of his *Ma Mere l'Oye* collection that accounts for the waking of sleeping beauty by a prince's kiss. She observes that Ravel's piece, and the manner with which these musical and

literary renditions operate, work in parallel to Elio's sexual awakening as his relationship with Oliver develops (2018: 8).

This complementary connotation of the music, with that made explicit by dialogue or action denoted on the screen, is a consistent theme in *Call Me by Your Name* and called upon repeatedly to throw light on Elio's inner feelings. The sophistication extends beyond the direct address of each text, however, with each cultural device having its own multi-layered meaning. de Navarre's book is in fact an anthology of interrelated stories, each individually narrated and providing differing interpretations of recalled events – an extratextual suggestion that the events of the film are being recounted by Elio as a memory of the past. Themes of dualism and duality are also evident in this choice of music for the scene. Ravel's piece was written as a piano duet for – and indeed dedicated to – his friend's children, with Ravel later acknowledging the manner with which two contrasting elements are interwoven in the suite. Emily Kilpatrick notes that both the fairy tale genre and Ravel's musical response form: 'determinable patterns of action and reaction, clearly defined structures and a characteristic directness and simplicity of expression' (Kilpatrick 2009).

The use of music – particularly at the piano – as the mode with which Elio can communicate and connect with Oliver, is expressed in the film's source material by Elio but made much more explicit in the film, where this communication effectively replaces Elio's inner monologue of the novel. Guadagnino acknowledges his use of the piano as a device to replace the interior thoughts of the novel, stating that: 'in *Call Me by Your Name*, we have extensive usage of piano because those notes, in a way, are the interior and exterior dialogue between Elio and himself, and Elio and Oliver' (in Schnipper 2018). Elio's various turns at the piano indicate play and performance – a place to improvise and try out ideas, to communicate, while simultaneously serving as a site of resistance whether to tradition, and what has gone before. At the piano, Elio displays an agency outside of his parents' understanding of his identity, and his knowledge of music echoes a line in the film where he expresses to Oliver the limits of his understanding – of 'the things that really matter' – a coded expression of his feelings for the older man.

In contrast with this complex and multi-layered use of non-diegetic music, and the manner with which Elio's musical performance exists inside and outside of the filmic world, the use of pre-existing source music is much more conventional and literal in its use; typically acting in service of situating or reinforcing the film's period. The Psychedelic Furs' 'Love My Way' is prominent in a key sequence, and a mixture of 1980s pop drawn from Italian radio playlists of the period is woven into the fabric of the narrative. This sense of the contemporary is reinforced in much of the diegetic music within the film, Bandolero's 'Paris Latino' and Joe Esposito's 'Lady Lady Lady' – both released in 1983 – and the aforementioned The Psychedelic Furs cue, released a year earlier, are all played by DJ's at a party where Elio initially watches Oliver lose himself in the music and subsequently joins his friend on the dancefloor.

Music as a Cypher for Feeling

Irina Melnikova has described Guadagnino's films as 'multimedial cinematic texts', noting the manner with which the director makes use of music that relates to itself, in

addition to the intertextual and transtextual significance of music in the construction of the self across all three films of his 'desire' trilogy. Melnikova addresses the significance of nostalgia in all three films – for a place, a time, and the relationships that occurred in this memory – but also in the manner with which memory attempts to 'resurrect the past'. She adds that this closing film of the trilogy – *Call Me by Your Name* - is most clearly in a hypertextual dialogue with the preceding works in addition to its many other referents (2020: 378-9). She highlights the significance of the richness of *hearing*, as opposed to *listening*, to the music in the film, specifically in Elio's performances, but also how this can be extended to an understanding of not just the references themselves as they are denoted in the film, but their wider contextual connotations.

As an example, in Elio's first piano performance in the film following a family dinner – he plays Erik Satie's 'Sonatine Bureaucratique'. Elio's performance is energetic, but appears to be made without much feeling. The scene cuts abruptly after only a few bars. A non-diegetic version of the same cue plays a little later, as Elio watches Oliver swim lengths of the villa's pool. The cue is one of Satie's humoristic pieces completed in 1917, a collage of existing musical components by other composers and part of a body of work that parodied existing compositions. In these works, Satie, much like Adams' use of seriality sixty years later, uses repetition and structural reframing of phrases to create entirely new works. The work serves as a critique and expresses an interest in the idea of simultaneity – the relationship between two events, occurring in the same time and space, but altered by their frame of reference (Hare 2005). The selection of the cue – which appears for a few short seconds in the film - sets up an idea that is referred to repeatedly, and is explicitly addressed in the following scene. The next day, Elio takes to the piano after Oliver asks him to replay a piece by Bach – 'Postillion's Aria', from 'Capriccio on the Departure of a Beloved Brother' - he had been playing on the guitar in the garden. As the two men relocate to the piano inside the house, Elio plays the piece very differently. When challenged by Oliver, Elio explains his own variations. 'I played it the way Liszt would have played if he had played Bach's version'. In a second rendition he explains, 'I played it the way Busoni would have played it if he had altered Liszt's version'. His third performance responds to Oliver's requests to play the piece as Bach had intended, and Elio tells Oliver when he finishes that Bach had dedicated the piece to his brother. The intertextuality of the Satie piece requires existing knowledge, but its significance is made explicit through Elio's later dialogue, in the same way that Elio's explanation informs the audience of the significance of his confused feelings – whether of friendship, rather than desire - towards Oliver. In these performances and through his musical knowledge, Elio demonstrates his agency – of the paths ahead of him, and how he will play future events through in his mind - a rewriter of the music, transcribing and reinterpreting each piece in an attempt to understand it, and writing his thoughts and replaying events in his memory in the same, in an attempt to find his true feelings, and ultimately, his identity.

This scene, early in the film, sets the stall for Elio's character – unsure of what he likes and desires, able to perform different roles in reaction to an audience, and driven by a desire for knowledge and understanding work through playing and replaying, altering his interpretations in order to subject a text - and himself - to a thorough examination through these different lenses. In doing so, each musical cue

within the film offers a palimpsest of meaning for the audience and each signposts a richness of the film text inciting the audience to think beyond the literal and contextualise the significance of each cue through the prism of Elio's feelings, and the story as a whole.

The Mystery of Love: Sufjan Stevens' Contribution

André Aciman's original novel, which forms the source material for James Ivory's script, makes use of Elio as a first-person narrator, articulating his thoughts and feelings in his account of his summer with Oliver. The songwriter Sufjan Stevens was initially asked to contribute to a version of this narration as a voiceover for the film, as an older Elio reminiscing on his experience of that summer. Guadagnino first contacted Stevens in 2016, when the musician was on tour for the *Carrie & Lowell* album. Having sent the songwriter Aciman's novel and subsequently the script, Stevens' he wrote two new songs for the film. Stevens recalls that in this initial material: 'They had retained the monologue from the older Elio, and he initially asked me to be the voice of the older Elio; to contribute that voiceover. He also asked if I wanted to appear in the movie as a bard, performing the song, almost as a break in the narrative. I got back to him and I said, "I think this voiceover is a mistake, and I think the interruption of me singing the song is a mistake." I think he was just thinking out loud. I don't know if he was really committed to the idea. So I said, "I'll write you some songs, but that's all I think you need from me." And he agreed' (in Utichi 2017).

Stevens elaborates on this initial idea that this break was intended to provide respite from the film's intensity: "There would just be a scene of me playing the song, almost like an intermission. The whole thing sounded a bit like the singer-songwriter who's in 'The Life Aquatic' (in Greiving 2018). As the project developed, though this role of the narrator was central within the source material for the film, this idea was eventually abandoned by the filmmakers altogether. The script developed into a more explicit framing of memory in the final film where the focus shifts from the past tense storytelling of the novel, where Elio recounts his experience two decades after the events of his summer with Oliver, with the screen version instead occurring entirely contemporary to the characters with a greater subtlety to the notion of this account being recalled by Elio.

The novel's coda, where Elio returns to the house twenty years after the events that had taken place that summer, was also refined and compressed in the film through an ending that instead takes place the following winter where Oliver's departure is still a fresh wound for Elio. Guadagnino explains his approach: 'It's my task, in order to be faithful to the novel, to betray the novel. When you translate any kind of text into a visual storyline, a cinema scene, you have to make sure you don't get crushed and overwhelmed by the weight of the source material (in Hutchinson 2017: 34). This narrative distinctiveness is balanced, in the main, by a cinematic deployment of music to articulate to the audience Elio's feelings, and inner thoughts – rather than a direct voiceover.

This solution of using music as a multi-layered narration of sorts, Guadagnino states, allowed the director to: 'work on a contribution from the standpoint of music that could give the film a precise identity that was going to go beyond the philologic aspect of the '80s and the commentary music of the classical music. And that's why I

was seeking a voice to add itself to the voices of the film -- played by the actors playing the characters -- and that's when I thought of Sufjan Stevens' (Caulfield 2018). Stevens elaborates on this shift in thinking as the project developed: 'Luca designed this project around a more general aesthetic affiliation with me and my music, and what it means to him. He wasn't just thinking about specific content, he was thinking about all of my songs' (in Greiving 2018).

Ultimately, Stevens' contributions came not as a voiceover but as a songwriter, writing two original songs in response to the script that was delivered to the director before shooting. 'When I wrote them I hadn't seen any footage, so I wasn't sure how he was going to use them at all. I just handed them over and had to trust that he would know what to do. And, of course, having seen all his films, and how masterful he is with music, there was no question in my mind he would be responsible about it' (Stevens, in Utichi 2018).

These two songs – 'Mystery of Love' and 'Visions of Gideon' play respectively as Elio and Oliver travel to Bergamo prior to Oliver's departure back to the US, and the second playing out strikingly over the closing titles. As with the earlier deployment of 'Futile Devices' in the montage sequence, Stevens' cues are distinguished from much of the other music in the film – whether source music or diegetic– by being entirely foregrounded in the sound mix where each of the three pieces of his music play through with little or no interruption by dialogue or sound effects. The narrative impact is further accentuated through the deployment of an enhanced environmental sound design in these scenes, extending the sense of these moments as significant, subjective, and centred on Elio's experience.

In the Bergamo montage, 'Mystery of Love' provides the soundtrack of a sequence that begins with the two men boarding a bus and taking a hiking trip through a mountain scene - the first time Elio is apart from his family and where he and Oliver can truly be themselves. With no other sound in the first part of the sequence and dialogue in the distant background of the hiking scene, the music cue dominates the film – Stevens' lyrics foregrounding Oliver's departure – 'cursed by the love that I received'. The music ends abruptly as the men arrive at their hotel in Bergamo. In a call back to the earlier party scene, the two men chance across a group of young men and a woman playing The Psychedelic Furs 'Love My Way' from the radio of their car. As in the previous use of the music, Oliver initially dances with the woman, before dancing on his own and, as before, Elio watches him, though doesn't dance at all this time.

In the closing scene, 'Visions of Gideon' plays in a sequence six months after Oliver's return to the USA. It is a winter's day, snow falls outside the windows, and Oliver has called the villa to tell Elio that he is engaged to be married. After the call, Elio enters an empty dining room where the table is set for the family's Hannukah dinner. He wears a Walkman, but the scene is silent other than the crackle of a open fire and the sound of his footsteps on the wooden floor. He removes his Walkman, and crouches by the fire. The camera is locked, with Elio appearing in close up on the right hand side of the frame. As he looks into the fire, he cries and the first notes of Stevens' song starts to play. The cue begins with the piano, the lyrics directly expressing Elio's thoughts - "I have loved you for the last time [...] I have touched you for the last time

[...] And I have kissed you for the last time'. The title crawl begins, and his family enters the room, but Elio remains oblivious to them. As his tears turn to a smile, and his mother calls his name, Elio looks directly into the camera before he turns in response to his mothers' voice. Guadagnino explains, 'we immediately felt that "Visions of Gideon" was the perfect song for this moment in which Elio thinks of his life. When we shot the scene, I put the earbud in Timothée's ear and played the song for him' (in Schnipper 2018).

Conclusion

Call Me by Your Name is a film about music and its ability to communicate place, motivation, and emotion, but also delights in using film form – communicating endless subtext through its mise-en-scène; the interaction of sonic components on the soundtrack. It rewards a metatextual study of its musical choices and their deployment, where diving into this palimpsest of meaning offers an enriched experience both as a viewer and as a listener. The film is a celebration of the abstraction of music as feeling, of desire, and of its shapeshifting ability to imbue identity through its reception, endless reinterpretation and performance.

The film throws down a gauntlet which challenges filmmakers who do not take such care in the provision of depths of meaning in their use of existing source music or commissioned score and song writing, instead reliant on tired and tested techniques such as the expositional voiceover, or dialogue that doggedly explains the interior motivations of characters.

André Aciman's source material lends itself to the creative approach from the filmmakers in their adaptation, but Guadagnino and his team make bold choices in their selection and use of music both within the diegesis and outside of it. The result to these approaches to both expositional information, and clues as to the motivations of its central characters, presents a lesson in sophisticated approaches to music supervision and editing.

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