Ennio Morricone, among the greatest composers for the cinema, is dead at 91

Marc Wells
8 July 2020

"In love as in art, constancy is everything. I don't know if there is love at first sight or supernatural intuition. I know that there is constancy, consistency, seriousness, duration… I think that when, in a hundred, two hundred years from now, they'll want to understand what we were like, it's thanks to film music that they'll discover it."—Ennio Morricone

Ennio Morricone, one of the greatest film composers of all time, will undoubtedly be mourned by millions of people around the world. His emotional, evocative and colorful themes brought innumerable movies to life during a prolific and unique musical career lasting more than 70 years. The Maestro died Monday in Rome, at 91, from injuries sustained in a fall.

Morricone composed scores for 70 award-winning films. More than 70 million recordings of his music had been sold by 2016. He was initially identified in particular with the films of Sergio Leone, but he eventually worked with many other film directors, including Pier Paolo Pasolini, Gillo Pontecorvo, Marco Bellocchio, Dario Argento, Don Siegel, John Boorman, Terrence Malick, Samuel Fuller, Roman Polanski, Pedro Almodóvar, Margarethe von Trotta, Barry Levinson, Mike Nichols, Oliver Stone, Warren Beatty and many others.

It can be argued that Morricone's death brings to an end the Golden Age of Italian cinema music. Among his many honors and achievements were the Academy Honorary Award in 2007 (only bestowed on two composers since 1928), six Oscar nominations and one victory (in 2016), three Grammy Awards, three Golden Globes, six BAFTAs, eleven Nastro d'Argento (annual Italian film award), ten David di Donatello (another annual Italian film award), the Golden Lion Honorary Award (Venice Film Festival), the Polar Music Prize (Swedish international music award) and two European Film Awards.

Morricone's music is embedded in the consciousness of a global audience. It accompanied and punctuated the lives and experiences of entire generations, from the immediate aftermath of World War II to the day he died. As such, it was at the same time the product of a historical period in which Italian cinema produced significant work.

Born in Rome in 1928 during the Mussolini-fascist era, Morricone matured musically at a time when Italian filmmakers were defining and developing a new trend: neorealism. Starting in the mid-1940s, directors such as Roberto Rossellini, Luchino Visconti, Vittorio De Sica and Giuseppe De Santis placed considerable focus on the working class and the poor.

Humanitarian sensibility became an artistic necessity after two decades of fascist horror and imperialist war. This quality had a profound impact on the composer's creative consciousness and can be found at the core of his melodies, which reveal Morricone's own human empathy.

Morricone's creativity ranges widely from film music to classical to popular. Starting in 1946, he wrote significant contemporary classical pieces, including four concertos, an opera and numerous chamber and choir compositions. There is no doubt that his technical skills were remarkable. Ultimately, he composed more than 100 classical pieces.

However, his classical compositions never rose to the level of popularity and recognition that his film and popular music reached, much to his own disappointment. Morricone, like a number of other composers who have achieved immense success in the sphere of popular music—Leonard Bernstein comes to mind—felt compelled to demonstrate they could produce works that music critics would accept as "serious music." The problem that Morricone (and Bernstein) confronted was that the very qualities that made their music so popular—an intense emotional empathy that found magnificent melodic expression—was of no interest to academically trained critics. So, Morricone's "serious" music (like that of Bernstein), however technically brilliant, was welcomed by critics but lacked the distinctive voice that appealed to millions.

There is yet another issue. Inspiration comes in different forms and visual art (film in particular) can certainly be a great source. In the absence of such stimulus, a composer may often have difficulty finding a fully inspiring narrative. In other words, musically and emotionally, commenting to a motion picture can be a more congenial task for some than giving musical expression to a more abstractly conceived reality. That, however, would not detract the slightest from Morricone's achievements in film music. He, more brilliantly than even his greatest contemporaries (Nino Rota and Elmer Bernstein), was able to develop thematic material and melodic ideas that captured the emotional essence of a visually presented dramatic situation.

The Maestro's first credited film score was Luciano Salce's movie entitled *The Fascist (Il Federale)*, in 1961. This was the beginning of his most successful artistic endeavor. Morricone eventually could count more than 500 film and television credits to his name, a figure that points to another aspect of his talent: his astonishing productivity.

Melody has consistently been the most outstanding characteristic of his compositions. One is often struck, in Morricone's music, by its "voice," that distinctive Morricone voice (or sound) that has the unique ability to tap into a universal sensibility. In fact, his gift for themes and motifs (For A Fistful Of Dollars, The Good, The Bad And The Ugly) often made decent or even mediocre movie experiences great ones, to the point that the music transcends the films and audiences often remember them by the score.

Undoubtedly, Morricone's collaboration with Leone, the legendary director of the Italian Western, was a turning point in his career and helped produce an internationally acclaimed series of movies. The "Dollars Trilogy"—*For A Fistful Of Dollars* (1964), *For A Few Dollars More* (1966) and *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly* (1966)—and *Once Upon A Time In The West* (1968) defined the genre and achieved enormous popularity. A distinctive element was the music and the use of unique instruments, including the human whistle.

The power of Morricone's talent was in fact not limited to the depth of his scores, but was also expressed in the colors, versatility and even the comic element they contributed. There is great humor, irony and pathos in his Western motifs, which had the ability to raise low-budget films to the level of worldwide recognition. Indeed, it is not unusual for composers to be at their most expressive under conditions where money is tight.

The collaboration with Leone lasted until the director's death in 1989. Their final project together was *Once Upon A Time In America* (1984), whose theme and soundtrack create a unique and memorable aural depiction of a complex period in US history.

As noted above, Morricone developed important artistic collaborations with other prominent filmmakers, including Bernardo Bertolucci, Pasolini, Pontecorvo and Sergio Corbucci. Some of these movies contain a great deal of political or social commentary, such as Bertolucci's *Before The Revolution* (1964) and 1900 (1976), Pasolini's *The Hawks And The Sparrows* (1966), Pontecorvo's historic *Battle Of Algiers* (1966) and Giuliano Montaldo's *Sacco And Vanzetti* (1971).

Although Morricone deliberately remained outside the sphere of progressive politics and supported the Christian Democrats (later the Democratic Party), there is no doubt that the social atmosphere of the 1960s and '70s, especially among artistic layers, had a substantial impact on his creative sensibility.

His musical and intellectual capacity for compassion, understanding and empathy for others was not primarily the product of his religious faith, but to a large extent resulted from the changes in social relations and his own artistic associations developed during several explosive decades, characterized by mass struggles and social conflicts.

In 2016, in an interview with the *Corriere della Sera* he acknowledged such influence: "I've never been communist or socialist… Italian cinema was all left-wing… With Sergio Leone we never discussed politics, but *Duck, You Sucker!* is a political film on terrorism and revolution."

Whatever his political views, his artistic genius had a broad international appeal. Through the language of music, by a thematic succession of notes (melody), their relationship (harmony) and time intervals (rhythm), he was able to connect with mass audiences. Moreover, his musicological knowledge was able to express profound emotions through the use of ethnic or nationally based instruments.

The Battle Of Algiers certainly comes to mind, in whose score the sounds of *tabla*, *qraqeb* [a castanet-like instrument] and a *muezzin*'s chanting are used to emphasize the conflict between the oppressed masses of Algerians and the French colonial military. The result is an overwhelming sense of heart-pounding tension.

From the 1970s onward, Morricone's association with Hollywood films progressively increased. One of his remarkable talents was the ability to compose in a wide range of genres: art film (*Days Of Heaven*, 1978), horror (*Exorcist II*, 1977), historical drama (*The Mission*, 1986) and crime (*The Untouchables*, 1987).

So powerful were some of his themes that several were made into popular songs. Such is the case with "Gabriel's Oboe" in *The Mission*, recorded as a song by Sarah Brightman, as well as by Il Divo, Jackie Evancho and The Tenors, to name a few.

But the power of *The Mission*'s soundtrack (nominated for an Academy Award), as in all other cases, did not lie simply in the theme. The movie's complex historical background, the conflict between Spain and Portugal in Latin America, the plight and suffering of the Guaraní indigenous people and the perfidious role of the Jesuits overwhelmed Morricone.

He was initially hesitant to take the assignment, especially after a first screening, and producer Fernando Ghia's insistence that there be "a social commitment. We provide entertainment, but we should also provide food for thought." The score Morricone wrote masterfully respected not only the producer's wishes; it creates a sensitive musical frame to a historical period that required enormous insight into human suffering. In 2013, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation ranked the score first in its Classic 100 Music in the Movies.

Similarly, the theme to *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), a movie by Giuseppe Tornatore, another close collaborator of Morricone, was made into a song and recorded by artists like Josh Groban, Andrea Bocelli, Katherine Jenkins and others.

In 2016, he won an Academy Award for Quentin Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight*. This is perhaps the most striking case in which the music made a bad film somewhat tolerable. Morricone's use of low woodwinds adds class and colors Tarantino never had.

An extraordinary talent like Ennio Morricone cannot be summed up in one obituary, and too many wonderful soundtracks are not appropriately credited or even mentioned here. The writer hopes those less familiar with his enormous contribution to the film and music universe will be impelled to acquaint themselves with this unparalleled composer's body of work.