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Spirit: Stallion of the Symphony

by Colleen Cavanaugh

(English 1102)

Music has the ability to universally unite people and cultures. The emotions that are linked in music have the ability to cross all boundaries. Composer Hans Zimmer crossed the boundary between humans and animals by creating a score that evoked the emotion of a horse and made it something a human audience could relate to. The instrumental music of the 2002 animated film directed by Kelly Asbury and Lorna Cook *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* not only makes up for lack of dialogue, but also reflects larger themes of freedom, love, brotherhood, and inner strength in repeated musical motifs throughout the story.

“They say the history of the west was written from the saddle of a horse, but it’s never been told from the heart of one. Not ‘til now,” the narrator declares at the opening credits (“Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron”). The movie is a voyage and return story centered on a wild stallion born and raised in the unsettled western plains of what would eventually become known as the Midwest of the United States. While investigating a campsite belonging to a group of cavalry soldiers, Spirit is captured trying to protect his herd. He is brought back to their training camp where he is put through a series of disciplinary actions aimed at “breaking” the horse (“Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron”). While at the headquarters, a young Lakota named Little Creek is captured as well and is also put through punishment. Neither of them breaks but instead they break out of the camp using teamwork to rescue themselves and all of the other horses at the camp. Just as Spirit thinks he is free to run home, Little Creek ropes and steers him back to his village. Although still captured, Spirit experiences different treatment in the Lakota village, one of respect and brotherhood. He also meets a female horse named Rain there and falls in love, experiencing the feeling of romance for the first time.

If home is where the heart is, Spirit feels very conflicted about where his home is because “for the first time in [his] life, [he] felt [his] heart torn two ways” (“Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron”). Just as Spirit is allowed to leave, the cavalry comes and raids the Lakota village. Because of the love Spirit has come to gain for the village, he feels obligated to protect them so he charges into the camp to save Rain and Little Creek. He is washed down a waterfall with Rain after saving her but is then captured again by the Cavalry. He is put on the railroad project to pull trains but then escapes by causing a scene that flips a train. Little Creek comes and saves Spirit from the fire the accident causes and they escape to safety with the aid of one another. The Cavalry then comes after them, but again they evade them for the last time. Little Creek then finally lets Spirit free and he takes Rain with him back home.

In order to convey genuine emotions, the directors decided not to incorporate dialogue directly into the horse’s character for a more realistic approach. Thus, the thoughts and emotions of Spirit are told only through the score and supported by minimal narration. This unique story-telling method challenged composer Hans Zimmer to make music not just to fill the sound but also to express the emotion and even the dialogue of the characters. “For the first time on an animated film, I am a voice,” says Zimmer as he describes the challenging yet fulfilling task of taking on this unprecedented project (Zimmer). In this sense, the music has to be like a translator, expressing the inner workings of a horse’s mind in a way that would be received and understood by a human audience.

Zimmer uses repeated melodies to capitalize on Spirit's emotions each scene of the plot. For example, whenever anything posed a threat to Spirit, Zimmer would employ the use of a dogfight melody. In other words, a distressed call-and-response between the brass and woodwinds creates tension as if the brass and woodwinds were fighting each other, reflecting how Spirit is fighting with his threat. This is used in multiple scenes when Spirit encounters danger, like in the beginning of the story when he fights off a cougar to protect his herd (8:42-9:00) or multiple times after when he has to maneuver around his captors in order to evade the multiple attacks from the cavalry (16:21-17:17, 1:06:21-1:09:24).

The musical motifs intertwined in the plot of *Spirit* reflect deeper connections to emotions by representing specific themes. The tone in which a specific motif is played represents the emotion behind the correlating theme in a specific situation. The most prevalent theme in the movie is freedom, represented by the melody in the motif found in the main title track, "Homeland." This song consists primarily of strong brass and a steady bass line of string instruments that creates a powerful, forward moving melody that amplifies the feeling of freedom because it is played only in scenes when Spirit feels at home. For example, "Homeland" is the opening song, which plays in the background when Spirit is running with his herd in the western plains. This motif emphasizes that freedom is synonymous with home to Spirit because he is most free when he is at home with ones he loves. The song also has a constant bass line that plays long and strong chords that emulate an everlasting power, signifying that the horse's spirit is undying in the pursuit of freedom.

Another motif played throughout the movie is titled "Nothing I Have Ever Known" and represents the love between Spirit and Rain. The melody played in this song consists of four repeated notes, emphasizing the simple relationship of love between animals. The motif is played several times over the development of their love story, but it varies in instrumentation and tone each time it is played to differentiate the emotions within the romantic theme. For example, it is played first when the horses are roped together when they first meet and they are both being stubborn about which way to travel. The melody in this scene is played with violins in a tango-like fashion to display a back-and-forth dance between the playing-hard-to-get horses, creating an undertone of romantic tension. Later, however, the melody is played with a heavy brass ensemble, when Spirit is trying to save Rain from drowning in the river (48:50-50:08). The powerful brass emphasizes the intensity of their love and Spirit's willingness to sacrifice himself to save her. This version of "Nothing I Have Ever Known" displays how the love story has grown from the horses feeling infatuation to recognizing each other as family, one of Spirit's strongest values.

Furthermore, the theme of brotherhood is portrayed by the motif in the melody, "Brothers Under the Sun." The motif is played whenever Spirit and Little Creek are working together to fight for their freedom. The majority of times this melody plays, the main instruments used are the Native American flute and the keyboard. They harmonize together to form a beautiful melody that would be incomplete without the other. In the same way the flute and keyboard play together, Spirit and Little Creek need each other on multiple occasions to escape the cavalry. For example, this melody plays when Little Creek takes off Spirit's reigns after they escape from the training camp (35:56-36:04) and again when they escape the train accident (1:03:53-1:04:19). The camaraderie of the Spirit and Little Creek is reflected in the music as the Native American flute represented Little Creek and the keyboard represents Spirit. Through this relationship, Spirit's love stretches not just beyond his herd but beyond his species and "Brothers Under the Sun" emphasizes that respect.

Hans Zimmer's original score for *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* plays a vital role in the story, representing the thoughts and emotions of the horse and indicating important themes through repeating motifs. The music makes up for lack of dialogue that has been left out in order to convey more realistic emotions. It also reflects themes deeper than the surface of the plot by repeating

motifs throughout the movie and changing the tone and instrumentation to correlate different emotions with those themes. In this way, Hans Zimmer translates the thoughts and emotions of a horse in order to make a connection with human emotion and experience.

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