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## Anthem of an Italian Stallion

by Kevin Uvodich

(English 1102)

Composing music that accompanies films, commonly known as film scoring, has been around since silent films were replaced with “talking pictures” in the 1930s. Over time, film scoring has developed considerably, playing an essential role in the success of countless films. Film scores generally feature instrumental music played by an orchestra or band. The most effective scores provide music that relates to and enhances elements of the story that the audience sees, like the behavior of a character or overall plot. The film *Rocky*, released in 1976, is a classic example.

Directed by John Avildsen, *Rocky* is the story of a struggling, working class, Italian-American club fighter named Rocky Balboa (played by Sylvester Stallone), who also works as a debt collector for a loan shark on the streets of Philadelphia. Rocky’s luck changes quickly when boxing heavyweight champion Apollo Creed arrives in the city for a fight to be held on America’s bicentennial, but his opponent suffers an injury weeks before. Creed decides to offer an unknown local boxer a chance to fight him for the heavyweight title. He picks Rocky in an attempt to raise media attention, because Rocky fights left-handed and has a flashy nickname, “The Italian Stallion.” While most fighters would view the opportunity as a way to make some fast cash fighting an opponent they have no chance at beating, Rocky (with the help of his trainer/manager Mickey Goldmill) eventually sees it as a once-in-a-lifetime shot at greatness.

In the weeks that follow, Rocky trains his heart out, and, although he knows he has little chance at beating Creed, his goal is just to go the distance (i.e., not lose by knockout, something no fighter had accomplished against Creed up to that point) and be standing when the final bell sounds. He does just that, and in spectacular fashion, gives Creed a run for his money in one of the “greatest exhibitions of stamina and guts ever in the history of the ring,” according to the announcer after the fight (*Rocky* 01:56:26). Rocky loses by split-decision, but his courageous efforts are an inspiring example of a “rags to riches” story.

The *Rocky* soundtrack, composed by Bill Conti, does an excellent job of supporting the story. It not only parallels the narrative, but takes it to another level, and generates even more appreciation for the character Rocky Balboa. There are many great instances of this support for the story on the soundtrack, but such an extensive discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. The focus here will be on the instantly recognizable and timeless classic *Rocky* theme, “Gonna Fly Now.” This is the theme song that accompanies Rocky during a scene showing the latter stages of his training, in a series of clips commonly referred to as a “training montage.”

During the training montage (which begins 01:30:49), the perseverance of the underdog Rocky is not seen by the audience; it is heard. This scene is nothing without the theme that accompanies it, which is why most people recall the melody of “Gonna Fly Now” before the image of Rocky doing one-armed push-ups. Like the scene, the theme song is upbeat and energetic. The music sets the mood right from the start, with the opening chorus of brass instruments playing the beginning of the “Fanfare for Rocky” track (which opens the film). This sound wakes up the audience as they see Rocky running along the train tracks at sunrise. Then the tubas hit those two decisive low notes, and the familiar melody begins. The music is dominated by the brass section, which is an important aspect and by design. In an interview, Conti describes the theme as “hero music.” When discussing what characterizes this type of music, he points out, “I hear brass, and I hear loud, when it’s time to go into battle” (Conti 0:39). As the scenery changes a couple of times,

Rocky is still running, now through the dirty streets of Philadelphia, then along the Schuylkill River. The music steals the show and solidifies the audience's appreciation of Rocky's persistence and no-quit attitude. Then Rocky is in the gym rolling off push-ups and laying into a speedbag, and the rhythm of the music matches his movements punch for punch. As if the previous clips were not enough, he continues running in the street along the river and the music matches him perfectly. The music gets higher in pitch and faster in tempo, trying to keep up with Rocky as he reaches a dead sprint and then races up all 72 stairs of the Philadelphia Art Museum with energy to spare.

An interesting but overlooked aspect of the *Rocky* theme is its development, because it did not start out sounding like what is heard during the training montage. In his interview, Bill Conti notes that his original theme song for the Rocky character was "a very sad theme" (Conti 1:07). It carries the same refrain as heard in "Gonna Fly Now," only it's played on the piano in a different key and at a slower tempo, which makes it sound very defeated and depressing. This version is heard in various parts of the movie early on. For example, there is a scene where Tony Gazzo, the loan shark Rocky works for, yells at him for not breaking the thumb of a guy who didn't pay up (*Rocky* 00:16:11). The sad piano version follows Rocky as he walks away, feeling dejected. It plays again after Rocky offers advice to a girl who hangs out on the streets, but she curses at him and rejects him (00:28:32). This sad, early version of the theme really highlights Rocky's depressing and unfortunate life.

As the audience hears this tune a few times, they begin to associate it with this sad Rocky character. This perfectly sets up the anthem of his triumph to come in "Gonna Fly Now." After seeing and hearing nearly an hour and a half of the sad, disappointing life of Rocky Balboa, the stimulating and compelling training montage sparks an emotional response out of any audience. This is largely because the same mournful tune, which was heard in earlier parts of the film, now screams perseverance and victory with blaring horns. Conti expresses in his interview that in scoring *Rocky*, he wanted to write "music that moved people" (Conti 4:33). The *Rocky* theme does just that.

Another interesting fact is that the entire *Rocky* theme song was not composed by Conti all at once. It was only about a minute long at first, because that's what John Avildsen had asked him for. Then he asked him for another thirty seconds, and another. In his interview, Conti explains that the piece "was actually these little bitty hunks that kept getting piled on each other" (Conti 2:11). Halfway through the training montage this sort of improvisation is apparent, as the melody switches to harmony for a few bars (*Rocky* 01:32:23). As Conti runs out of ideas, little bits and pieces from earlier in the song and from other tunes in the *Rocky* score are sprinkled in more and more. At 01:32:52, the strings add in their own tune (as heard in the track, "Rocky's Reward"). The music doesn't stop; it just keeps adding and building. This seems to run parallel to what Rocky is doing as he trains harder and harder and just keeps on running.

It's also worth mentioning that the theme "Gonna Fly Now" was originally planned to be purely instrumental, but after the montage scene was shot, Avildsen suggested the addition of lyrics. As Conti explains in his interview, when they reviewed the scene together, Avildsen told him, "Bill why don't you put some lyrics to that because it sure sounds like a song." Conti also mentions how Avildsen remarked, "It's like [Rocky's] gonna fly" (which inspired the title, "Gonna Fly Now") (Conti 2:25). The lyrics, while a bit corny and consisting of only fifteen different words, do add another dimension to the song and the scene.

"Gonna Fly Now" not only makes a big positive impact on the film for which it was composed, but it has and continues to have a positive impact on people who listen to it. Conti discusses in his interview how happy he is that people can use the music that he wrote for many of motivational purposes, saying, "It's just wonderful, if it does, when it does, because music works for me like that" (Conti 5:39). Conti's film score for *Rocky* is a truly inspiring masterpiece, and always seems to lift the spirits of those who hear it.

Works Cited

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