

An Analysis of Almost There from the Disney animation The Princess and the Frog

Yuxuan Miao*

Department of College of Primary Education, Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

*Corresponding author: 1213010011@cnu.edu.cn

Abstract. This paper analyzes the song *Almost There* from the film *The Princess and the Frog*. Four aspects will be taken into consideration: the plot, the music, the dance and the stage art. The author will focus on the integration of jazz and symphonic musical elements in this song discuss why the combination of jazz and symphonic musical elements can achieve a better experience for the audience.

Keywords: *Almost There*; jazz fusion; Disney film.

1. Introduction

The music style, storyline, and protagonist portrayals in Disney films have undergone significant transformations from 1950 to the present. It started with the big band style and gradually evolved into full-fledged musicals, eventually culminating in the integration of various elements. However, the one constant in Disney cartoons is the storytelling aspect. Through various content, emotions, and musical styles, Disney employs songs and music to convey the emotional states and thoughts of different characters within the cartoons [1]. This paper will focus on the success and influence of *Almost There*, the soundtrack of *Princess and Frog*, within the context of three generations of princesses characterized by independent female perspectives. It will also explore the portrayal of the protagonist, Disney's first black princess, and how various styles of music fused properly in this context. Fusion means to merging or blend different things together, whether they are material or immaterial, as if they were melting, ultimately forming a single, unified entity or whole [2]. It is a unity without a sense of separation. This paper will analyze the success of the role image shaping and its integration from the aspects of musical elements, performance characteristics, the combination of sound and picture.

2. The Princess and the frog and the Disney style

2.1. The animation film

The Princess and the Frog is a 2009 animated film produced by Walt Disney Animation. It was released in the United States on December 11, 2009. The film tells the story of a prince who is cursed and transformed into a frog, only to be restored to human form by a princess's kiss. Eager to break the curse, the prince mistakenly believed the girl was a princess. However, after the kiss, not only did the prince remain unchanged, but Diana herself transformed into a frog. In pursuit of a solution, they embarked on an adventure through the enigmatic swamps of Louisiana, beset by their own obsessions and confusions. Finally, everyone understands what they cherish in their hearts, and true love still finds its own place, where there is not only a new princess born in modern society, but also a different frog prince.

2.2. Disney style shaped by the music

The Disney style is primarily depicted as a creative symphonic style [3]. Disney music is renowned for its strong synchronization with the visuals and its effective incorporation of sound effects in musical performances to enhance the overall visual experience. The style of *The Princess and the Frog* can be characterized by its primary use of symphonies, with musicals serving as a supplementary

component. Different elements are seamlessly integrated into the composition based on the setting and requirements of the plot.

The story of *The Princess and the Frog* takes place in the New Orleans area, so swing, boogie-woogie and other jazz music styles are chosen to shape the background. The Disney fairy tale series is rooted in classic fairy tales, which is why it maintains a substantial symphonic musical style throughout the entire series. This approach keeps the series cohesive while still preserving its individuality. This chapter begins with *Down in New Orleans* (prologue), followed by the main body of *Down in New Orleans*, which is the similar vibe to the main part of *Almost There*, with symphonic accompaniment and operatic singing. The character monologue is used as the introduction to shape the narrative atmosphere of the fairy tale, and then the rhythmic drum pattern is used to transform the jazz style, to complete the transformation from the time, the story background, or the character's mood and perspective.

3. The scenario of *Almost There*

The heroine refuses to marry and have children like others. She wants to understand and support her great ideal, the song *Almost There* is very suitable for the protagonist's mood, and it is perfectly in tune with the story and the dialogue of the characters. The song presents a dialogue between the heroine and her mother, and then a dialogue with her own thoughts. At the beginning of the song, the heroine is still in a state of dialogue. The most exquisite part of the song is that she quietly enters the song, followed by her mother's line, "Mama, I don't have time for dancing!" Even the dialogue lines are introduced with music similar to opera recitals. At the same time, the flute in the music plays quietly, and then the second sentence "That's just gonna have to wait a while." begins to bring the lyrics with melody, perfectly. Silently complete the conversion between reciting and singing. It also uses indirect description with subjective consciousness to summarize the previous experience in the way that the heroine asks herself and answers herself. In my opinion, the narrative of music is far worse than that of novels, and it is an art form that emphasizes lyricism and emphasizes the narration. However, on the premise of the film and with the assistance of lyrics, some narrative trends can be unexpectedly expressed, which is a very progressive innovation. From declining her mother's marriage suggestion to expressing her great dream to her mother's excitement, recalling the hardships she has overcome before and therefore deciding to work harder, the ups and downs of the mood are perfectly presented in the background of music. "Mama, I don't have time for dancing! That's just gonna have to wait a while. Ain't got time for messing around. And it's not my style. This old town can slow you down. People taking the easy way." The dialogue with the mother is conversational and soothing, and the music at this time also uses a soft piano harmony as the emotional foundation, which is like the comfort of the protagonist, while the bass group's weak response is also like the mother's response. The musical trend of the whole segment is from higher pitch to lower pitch, giving people the feeling of telling them with sighs. It fits the mood of the plot to gently decline the mother's offer. "But I know exactly where I am going." A sentence in the plot is the prelude to the turning point that leads to the following, and the rhythm of the music starts to speed up. The speed of the music now reaches the speed at which the jazz element is added to the second half of the song, which is the highest speed of the song. The word uses the dotted rhythm, which is fast and light. The stress of the music changes from the forward beat to the back-half-beat, reflecting the heroine's eagerness and high enthusiasm for the content to say later. Then all the way up to "People gonna come here from everywhere. And I'm almost there. I'm almost there." The mood is very uniform, all describing the heroine talking about her dream endlessly. These two lines are paired with a memory of a difficult situation: "There's been trials and tribulations. You know I've had my share." The melody goes soft, and the volume suddenly drops. But the whole song is about the heroine's hopeful mood about her future, so the song reverts to a lively and hopping style with the line "But I've climbed a mountain, I've crossed a river." At the end of the three repeated "I'm almost there!", a progressive superposition of emotions, and the mood of the entire song reach a climax and end up with a sudden pause.

4. Music analysis

The theme of the song *Almost There* runs through the whole movie. When the heroine and her father establish the desire to open their restaurant one day, the theme emerges. The entire song is displayed when the heroine saves the down payment of the restaurant through her efforts and goes to clean it with her mother. Mother loves her hard work, wants her to get married and have children, and she is determined, like the mother to tell her vision of the dream appeared, and then she encountered difficulties, and the male chief says his dream reproduced this theme. The main melody of this song, as the embodiment of the heroine's dream, runs through the plot and plays a role in promoting the plot.

A general impression of the song is elastic and jumping, Swing elements distinguishes the style from classical music in terms of rhythm. There are many tone pauses in the song, and the percussion stops or cancels part of rhythmic accompaniment chords, to achieve the effect of contrast between dynamic and static. When the music expresses frustration or hardships, the content of the music becomes softer, and when the output appears, it is accompanied by musical expressions such as sudden intensity. These contrasts and pauses divide the story into three parts. The words “almost there” are accompanied by column chords for piano or brass instruments in the song. It plays an emphatic role. In the middle and later parts of the song, the method of ascending root notes is used to highlight this emphasis before the keyword appears, and the root pitch and the volume of the song are maximized when the key word “almost there” appears.

4.1. Jazz chords

Chords have a direct effect on shaping the emotional color of music. Some composer even made use of chord inversions to present musical effects. So chord progression plays a very important role in music [4].

Seventh chords are mostly used in this song within the chord progression of I-VI-II-V. When the root sound is smoothly connected, the change of three notes and five notes is increased, which provides a feeling of stability and slight change, so that the music will not become unpredictable and increase the uncertainty of the music causing the listeners to feel uneasy. The flexible rhythm of the music and the repeated chords provide a sense of contradiction. This makes the musical impression of the film more colorful than the previous symphonic style. Jazz also often uses chord extensions (Nines, 11s, 13s) and substitution chords to create colorful harmonic effects, and in this case brass and piano take on this role.

4.2. Jazz rhythm

In *Almost There*, the bass and drums create the rhythm. This song has achieved to have an average and stable grasp of the music rhythm, and the performance is relatively flexible. Here, it is mainly used to perform various rhythmic patterns and divide the beat into small beats and the emphasis on rhythm is the means of jazz expression, which can be said to be the soul of jazz, so the west of this song is endowed with the feeling of jazz.

4.3. Jazz metre

The measured flow of words or phrases in verse, forming various patterns of sound as determined by the relation of long and short [5]. It is both rhythmic and dynamic. As a jazz piece in 4/4 time, *Almost There* adopts a typical eight-beat rhythm, which is characterized by eighth notes as the basic unit and the stress occurring on the two-four counter beat. This rhythm changes the smooth music into light and heavy, like a person who is walking smoothly suddenly starts to jump and dance. It increases the sense of dance and swing of the whole music, and makes people to move their bodies together with the rhythm of the music

4.4. Walking bass

Walking bass is a way of playing three to five notes in a sequence or out of order [6]. The rhythm of his swing comes from highlighting the second and fourth beats of each bar. It gives the impression that the music is swaying naturally, like a dancer who is dancing to the music, and his step is swaying to the beat of the music, and his dancing step is what we call a walking bass. When this technique is added in the section started at 00:27 of this song, the musical transformed to jazz. This transformation reflects also in the change of protagonist's mood. Compared with the previous part of the song, the sense of narration almost disappeared in the bass part. In this part, walking bass with rich pitch is added to each bar to make the whole music more thick and attached. The addition of walking bass can not only dilute the tough marching feeling brought by the drum with the resonance and musicality of the double bass, but also emphasize the root marching of the entire music, making the complex and flexible jazz chords more supportive and not top-heavy.

4.5. Sync with the action

Music is a lyrical art, not a direct narrative, but images can compensate for the abstraction of music. To describe the music in picture, Disney's animators provide members of the audience with, as Taylor explains, "abstract images that might pass through your mind if you sat in a concert hall listening to this music." Therefore, the combination of music and images is particularly important [7].

This song makes full use of the jazz rhythm and the designs of body movements of the protagonist. The switch of the picture and the flow of the plot are also considered as an unity. The song *Almost There* presents the inner monologue of the protagonist, and uses time suspension in the artistic narrative technique to break away from the time space. That is, the technique of describing the inner heart and emotional world of the characters. The transformation of its musical style has become a very favorable support. When watching the film, one can see that the picture gradually changes from the original dilapidated cabin to an imaginary luxury restaurant, which achieves a fading effect with the gradual entry and integration of the sense of swing. With the rising emotions of the descriptors, the contrast between the strengths and weaknesses of the music gradually increases. The range and speed of the dance movements of the characters also gradually increased, forming a unique tension for the music and painting. As the heroine began to recall the hardships that she has experienced before, the conversation gradually ends. The music returns to calm, and the picture gradually comes back to reality.

5. The fusion

A successful fusion entails the harmonious integration of the plot, the music structure, the singing style, the sync with the action, and the inner emotions of the singer into a unified whole. The song *Almost There* is introduced with the long notes of piano and flute as the foundation, and the protagonist's narration is introduced into the song. With 0:25 as the dividing line, different styles are transformed and integrated in the same tone by changing the rhythm, speed and tension. The theme of the play contains strong fairy tales and regional colors, so the excessive use of symphony and jazz music is extremely reasonable. The music style of the song is highly unified with the lyrics.

This song also use a special jazz trick called antiphonal structure [8]. In this song, this mode of response is modified and applied to the echo between the voice and the instrument. It is easy to confuse it with Silence here [9]. To my point of view, the difference between them is that one does not represent the end of the meaning and the phrase, but represents the echo of the music, and the other means the end of a piece of music, similar to the tone pause and punctuation of the music. The musical score of this film is also a successful integration of the skills that originally belong to the human voice into the skills of life and instruments.

Scat Singing is a unique and attractive artistic technique, mainly used in jazz singing. This method uses onomatopoeia or meaningless syllables to improvise the melody, which is similar to the expression technique of contrast words in Chinese folk music. That is to imitate the singing method

of instrumental music, reflecting the integration of human voice and music, and adding lyrics in the singing process so that it can add narrative sense in the style of meeting its original lyricism. It is not exactly that the “song” is separated from the “script”, but more that the anecdote relies on an oral/written split to figure the way that Armstrong’s voice peels gradually away from the reiteration of the chorus, and from linguistic signification altogether [10]. The story is complete and coherent, and the structure is ABA mode, complete and unified, because the introduction of the pronunciation part is added, the appearance of the actual singing is reasonable. While enhancing the expressive force, it also increases its emotional expression, which can be called a successful integration.

The success of Disney's music integration lies not only in the brand effect of music style formed by its insistence on establishing and running through the symphonic style before, but also in the unity of sound and painting, the unity of music and narrative content, the unity of music structure and logic, the introduction of plot to the verse, and the high unity of emotion, lyrics and music. *Almost There*, as the soul of the princess and the frog, is also the core verse, which makes a major breakthrough in the independent thinking of women, the portrayal of the protagonist and the integration of completely different styles. It is a success at the North American box office with its high praise rate. However, the degree of excellence and innovative integration of the works does not represent the acceptance of the market, and many excellent works will not be quickly accepted by the public when they first come out. Although the film made great achievements in the North American market at the initial stage of its release, it failed in the box office in China, but with the test of time, it was finally found and loved by the Chinese audience. The final attention and box office also achieved very good results, on major Chinese video apps such as Rotten Tomatoes are also rewards for this excellent work.

6. Summary

Almost there is a successful fusion that combines music, visuals, and plot. It effectively shapes the characters, facilitating smooth transitions between style changes and the connection between the storyline and the lyrics. It created a breakthrough in the fusion of classical music style and jazz, and on top of that, it also provides strong support for shaping independent women in the new era. Certainly, the quality of a piece and its degree of innovation and integration don't correspondingly reflect the acceptance of market. Many outstanding works may not gain quick public recognition upon their initial release. Nevertheless, on the path of music integration and innovation, it's crucial to have the courage to seek breakthroughs in order to drive more remarkable works to emerge in the field .

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support from Professor Ken Ueno, UC Berkely and Academic Committee Chair of Path Academics.

References

- [1] KE Lina. The development and creative characteristics of Disney animated film music. *Art Review*, 2016, 169-170.
- [2] XU Xing. Analysis on the expression techniques of jazz singing. *Music Time and Space*, 2014, 1-21.
- [3] YE Qingqing. Research on jazz rhythm. *Shanghai Conservatory of Music*, S1, 2011, 1-48.
- [4] Stuckenschmidt, H.H., and Piero Weiss. Debussy or Berg? The Mystery of a Chord Progression. *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol.51, No.3, 1965, 453-459.
- [5] JIANG Shaoshi. Analysis on the composition and performance of "walking bass line" in "12-bar Blues". *Popular Arts*, 2015, 145-146.
- [6] ZENG Rui. Style Interpretation and technical training of swing music in Jazz saxophone performance. *Xinjiang University of Arts*, 2023, 1-26.

- [7] Clague, Mark. Playing in 'Toon:Walt Disney's "Fantasia"(1940)and the Imagineering of Classical Music.American Music,Vol.22, No.1, 2004, 91-109.
- [8] Koger, Alicia Kae. Jazz Form and Jazz Function:An Analysis of Unfinished Women Cry No Man's Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage. MELUS. Vol.16, No.3, 1989-1990, 99-111.
- [9] Elizabeth, Hellmuth Margulis. Silence in Music are Musical Not Silent:An Exploratory Study of Context Effects on the Experience of Musical Pause.Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Vol.24, No.5, 2007, 485-506.
- [10] Hayes Edwards, Brent. Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat. Critical Inquiry.Vol.28, No.3, 2002, 618-649.