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Too Much Change: How *Fantasia*'s Cinematic Innovations Overwhelmed the Audience of 1940

by Vanessa England Ross

In the present day, most look at the Walt Disney studio and buy into the assumption that its films are, and always have been, directed at a juvenile audience. During the studio's first period of production, this was not the case; initially, every film Disney produced was aimed at what was then the general public consisting mainly of an older audience (Allan 121). In this period, Walt Disney was iconic in the film industry: by some, he was called without question a "genius" next to Charlie Chaplin (Culhane 12), and prominent silent film actress Lillian Gish met with Disney and praised him for creating "the only really new thing in pictures" (qtd. in Pegolotti 242). In correspondence with Gish's statement, Disney truly did want to create something new in Hollywood: one of his ultimate dreams in the late 1930s was to "captur[e] an audience of millions for a musical film," by introducing the world to a "new form of entertainment," popularising animation and classical music as one union (Culhane 10). Bearing some similarity to a few of the stage musicals being produced at the time, this film, soon realized as the multi-directorial *Fantasia* (1940) was to consist of no dialogue or sound effects, relying solely on the power of the music and the movement of the animation without the typical slapstick humour for which the medium was then known (Culhane 16). Referring to *Fantasia* as a "musical" may now seem surprising, and this perhaps explains why the film's initial release received fairly poor box office attendance: it seemed so different from the other movie musicals that no one knew what to expect. While Disney's feats were indeed revolutionary for 1940, he struggled with keeping a fine balance between familiarity and disparity so as to not alienate the public. This analysis of the film—particularly its music, animation, and structure—seeks to discover *Fantasia*'s connection with the musical and why its dramatic differences from the genre led to its mediocre reception in 1940.

Not surprisingly, music formulates a musical's entire structure and narrative through the score and the organisation of the songs. This traditional model was slightly altered, however, when the musical was transferred from stage to film, removing many of the original songs in place of speech and a more clearly defined plot (Hischak 2). As previously mentioned, though, *Fantasia* has no dialogue and the plot relies solely on the film's animation, so music dominates the film (alongside its drawn visuals) in dramatic contrast to the other movie musicals of the time. As Richard Dyer has pointed out, entertainment of this era was made as a means for profit (17), and Disney did not differ from this philosophy as he had always been working on advertising his films as products suitable for a mass audience (Allan 91). During the Depression, classical and swing music became more accessible to the public through radio stations (owing to a lack of record sales), the former even taking up twenty-six percent of the airtime (94-95); therefore, classical music was not *too* unpopular a musical genre to incorporate. Stokowski and Disney both saw the benefits in their

project: the former wished to reintroduce the masses to classical music, while the latter wished to educate them through the marriage of music and animation without having to be too commercial (Gabler 300-301).

The majority of classical music known by the general American public at the time was European, and every single piece used in *Fantasia* was composed by European artists; "Americans wouldn't feel insulted if you left the American music out," decided Disney as they discussed musical possibilities (qtd. in Gabler 307). Indeed, all of the pieces were chosen for variety and current popularity, Disney wanting ones considered "state-of-the-art" (Culhane 31). This desire for quality was reflected in Disney's intense ambition to record the music using a nine-channel technology—specifically designed for the picture—named Fantasound; this process enabled a level of sound quality far superior to even that of a concert's, where the audience could hear several notes being played by quieter instruments that would otherwise be drowned out by the louder ones (20), and allowed for the invention of more powerful chords impossible to create outside such technology (191). Disney could afford to install the necessary equipment for this special effect in theaters, making *Fantasia* the first film screened in stereophonic sound (11).

Most of the early discussions regarding possible musical choices took place between Stokowski and music critic Deems Taylor (who would become the film's host), as Disney claimed he lacked the musical knowledge to provide valid input (Allan 96). Eventually eight pieces were chosen: Bach's *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*, Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker Suite*, Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, Ponchielli's *Dance of the Hours*, Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain*, and Schubert's *Ave Maria*. Bach's piece became the opening number for the film due to its three-phrase intro that "call[s]... attention" through its trumpets (Culhane 39). Critics complained that *Fantasia* had abridged certain pieces, but Stokowski was content so long as the "spirit of the music" remained (39). *The Nutcracker Suite*, for instance, experienced an omission of two of its songs, Tchaikovsky's work typically being considered more mainstream than other composers and thus acceptable to tamper with a little for the sake of entertainment value (Allan 115) – the ballet was rarely ever performed at the time anyway, so the *Suite* was all most audiences of 1940 could recall of Tchaikovsky's rendition of the story (Taylor 37).

The Sorcerer's Apprentice, on the other hand, was kept firmly intact for the film and was the first piece to be selected as the original choice for a cartoon short featuring Mickey Mouse in the title role. For this, the piece obviously had great narrative potential, already telling a story in its music and transitions to depict Goethe's original work (Taylor 11-12). Taylor and Stokowski, however, decided on *Rite of Spring* not because of its popularity but its lack thereof; since its riot-induced premiere back in 1913, the public had "sneer[ed] at it", and Stokowski believed that Disney "[could] bring this music to the consciousness of people so they [would] see

how great it really is" (qtd. in Culhane 109). He thought that since the piece wasn't "absolute music" that it needed motion and sound to increase its popularity (110). The *Pastoral Symphony* was actually chosen to replace Pierné's *Cydalise* because the latter piece had proven too difficult for the intended animation and was considered disposable for the project because of Pierné's low popularity in the late 1930s (Allan 136-138). *Dance of the Hours* was chosen rather early because of its potential for comedy; Stokowski called it an "enjoy yourself" number, while Deems Taylor claimed that "[y]ou could 'horse' it all you like and nobody would feel annoyed. You'd be at liberty to kid *Dance of the Hours*" (qtd. in Pegolotti 236). The musical composition of *Night on Bald Mountain*, although rather complicated for Disney to "comprehend" (Allan 158), was pointed out by Deems Taylor to originally depict something of a "witches' Sabbath" (qtd. in Pegolotti 236-237), which later directed Disney toward the animation plans for the segment. The musical choices for *Fantasia* emphasise Disney's goal to introduce the 1940s' public to a new cinematic experience, through the incorporation of popular and unpopular, to create an overall smooth series of narratives using animation and classical music.

As stated by Warner Bros. animator Chuck Jones, animation gives a major advantage in the world of graphic art, able to take the art of painting and give it motion – a feat that humans have strived for ever since ancient times (364). No one knew the potential success of this medium more than Walt Disney, who insisted all throughout his life that creating cartoons was a "profession" (Culhane 9). He grew exasperated when a colleague asked him during production if they were taking full advantage of the "cartoon medium"; he countered with, "[w]e have worlds to conquer here" (qtd. in Allan 170). Jones emphasises that animation's biggest detriment will always be its low status among the general public (370) – Walt Disney believed that placing animation alongside something as "classy" as classical music would improve the medium's reputation and remove its "low brow" approach from the public (Pegolotti 234). Doing this required a perfect marriage of both sound and visual within the film – its animation had to match the music intrinsically so an audience would think the two were intricately a part of one another. Jones believes there is one particular moment in *Fantasia* where this is achieved: in the *Toccata and Fugue* segment which consists of a giant, coffin-shaped rock moving away from the screen accompanied by the powerful bass (365). This is probably the moment when the animators appear to have the most confidence in their work.

As Deems Taylor mentions at the beginning of the film, Bach's piece exists "for its sake," proven even further through its title, which "has no meaning beyond a description of the form of music." Therefore, since the music was abstract, Disney decided that the animation would be too; however, abstraction was not a popular art form in the late 1930s (Culhane 43), and while Disney wanted to popularise it as well, he did not know enough about the form to properly depict it in a feature (Allan 108). As a result, the segment, combined with live action in the *Toccata* portion, alienated the audience too much from the picture through its combination of unusual aesthetics

for the period. The segment marks the first time abstract art ever became present in a commercial film (Culhane 43). Because *The Nutcracker Suite* consisted of several musical numbers, Disney decided to join them by creating a nature theme where fairies prepare the Earth for the various seasons of the year (Taylor 17). Jones's favourite moment here was probably everyone's in the segment, if not the whole film – the dancing mushrooms from the *Chinese Dance* portion of the *Suite* (365). Here the Disney animators do what they did best: they create a silent yet distinctly personalised character in the tiny mushroom named Hop Low, who boldly attempts to match the movements of the much larger mushrooms only to constantly fall behind. Culhane recalls memories of people laughing and genuinely enjoying this particular scene in the film during the first release, and it remains one of the film's most loved moments into the present day (46-53). In contrast to the first segment, confidence is indeed abundant in *The Nutcracker Suite* in its rich visions of colour, sharp movements of the leaves, and overall depiction of nature's beauty (Allan 115).

The third section, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, is the reason for *Fantasia*'s initial conception; Mickey Mouse was losing his popularity to Donald Duck by the mid-1930s, and Disney's solution was to refine the Mouse's reputation and distinguish him from his cartoon counterpart. As a result, he hired Fred Moore and Ward Kimball to give Mickey a fuller, more familiar, "cuter" appearance than his original look (Gabler 296-297). This change, combined with the use of classical music, was an attempt to reintroduce Mickey Mouse to the public as a more appealing character. Both Mickey and his master Yen Sid represent different sides of Walt Disney himself, the latter obviously sharing his name reversed, while the former usually has his voice in cartoons. In this case, Yen Sid represents Disney in his most powerful role as head of the animators, full of discipline and sharing his distinguishable raised eyebrow; Mickey, on the other hand, portrays a child who receives magnificent power and fails to control it (Allan 121-123). Stokowski's power is also evident in this part, as Mickey's motions when he directs the clouds and the waves in his dream imitate almost exact movements of an orchestra conductor – Stokowski's particular role within the film (Culhane 84). While most movie musicals feel the need to cut several times in one number rather than prolonging a take to revel in the music (Hischak 3), the closing to *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* contains twenty-four shots in one minute and twenty seconds with little camera movement throughout, the motions relying solely on the music, waves, and the relentless actions of the brooms (Allan 126). Mickey's role in this segment advances him from merely a cartoon character to a dignified symbol as a survivor of the Depression, his lack of voice universalising him to represent the entire American population and not just his creator (126-127).

The animation ideas for *Rite of Spring* were just as immediately determined; as soon as Disney heard the piece, he envisioned a telling of prehistoric animals and Earth's creation all the way to before life formed (Allan 97). The theme of primitive life and its conception had already played a part in Stravinsky's piece, but the music seemed too savage, too elemental to portray in human terms (Taylor 70). The

formation of the Earth had never before been depicted in cinema until this segment (Allan 129), making it one of the most significant portions of the picture. Disney's animation of the dinosaurs was ahead of its time, as no live-action film could achieve the lifelike transformation that the imagination of the animators provided (Culhane 126); through studying images and comparing them with other animals, they managed to determine how the creatures (likely) would have moved every single body part. Comments from nationally-renowned scientists after seeing the film attest to the accuracy of the final product. These scientists claimed that the animators had made prehistory into a reality (121). Disney had also considered including the rise of humans and their discovery of fire in this segment but ultimately decided against it after receiving threats from religious fundamentalists (126). The whole tone of *Rite of Spring* presents a harsh, "dog eat dog" scenario for Earth (108), and is arguably one of the most serious moments in the entire picture, as Disney removed almost all the intended gags for this sequence during the animation process. The water imagery consistent throughout all portions of *Fantasia* (which will be analysed in full detail later) disappears completely in the second half as the dinosaurs wander through a now-deserted Earth desperately struggling in the mud as they slowly die of thirst (Allan 131). No other imagery could have envisioned such a violent outlook on the planet's life as conveyed in Stravinsky's original work.

During the intermission, Disney animators pose abstraction far more innovative than the *Fugue* portion at the beginning of the film: inspired by the soundtrack's own audio waves (Culhane 128), they present the soundtrack as something alive, animating with certainty the distinct 'visual' of a specific instrument and the music it creates. They portray the soundtrack as a retiring artist who typically shies away from public appearances but is literally coaxed onto the screen by the host. The character and tone of the soundtrack in this minor portion has proven to have had a more memorable impact on audiences than in the first abstract visual in *Fantasia*. The second act begins with the segment that continues to receive more criticism today than any other piece in the film: Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* (Culhane 134). While much of the negativity derives from Disney's heavy edits towards the music, the animation itself has also received a great deal of criticism. The music is visualised in a Greek mythological setting, the piece opening with unicorns, fauns and pegasi, the latter containing the most grace and beauty throughout the section. This first movement contains few issues, but the remainder of the piece, which includes centaurs and what the Disney animators referred to as "centaurettes", deviates a little too much from its inspiration; instead, Disney appears to be trying too hard to appeal to the mass audience by providing a romantic premise of matchmaking and courting (Allan 146). While centaurs were originally seen as having "wisdom and sexual licence", the centaurs here appear almost emasculated, degraded to what was then the ideal American college boy (139-140). The centaurettes were no better off, as their hairstyles and fashion statements much better reflect the fashion models of the late 1930s than anything from Greek mythology – they even parade in between columns in

a show-like manner, which the Disney merchandising department's house bulletin boasted as being "eyed with interest" by "designers and manufacturers" (qtd. in Allan 145). All of this leaves the segment with a much weaker presentation than the others, which didn't go unnoticed by Stokowski who was worried that audiences would become enraged if they used too much slapstick due to Beethoven's prestige in the musical world (Allan 138-139). The reduction to typical cartoon tactics in this segment was a bigger struggle for Disney, and it unfortunately shows.

Dance of the Hours, in contrast to the previous portion, became very popular, perhaps because of its clever union of parody and the musical. The animals serve as caricatures of human beings in their tutus and capes (Culhane 163), providing exaggerated movements of dance in a theatrical setting (Allan 151). A fellow movie musical, *The Goldwyn Follies* (George Marshall, 1938), receives a tribute during Hyacinth Hippo's entrance, the characters in both films rising up from a pool of water surrounded by their fellow dancers (152-153). Romance, which always blossoms in musicals with a dance scene (Willett 48), even introduces itself here when Ben Ali Gator first encounters Hippo; animation provides weightlessness to these dances as it defies gravity, most evident when Hippo leaps onto Gator, flattening him before he lifts her back up again (Culhane 164). Regardless of the segment's comical quality, Disney still insisted the animators refrain from too many gags, emphasising that "you can't be screwy all the time or it isn't appreciated when you do a good screwy gag" (qtd. in Culhane 171). Such a refrain has paid off, as *Dance of the Hours* continues to be one of the most favoured sequences in the film.

Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain* challenged Disney's musical knowledge, as he first struggled with what to do for the animation; he did not want to repeat all the usual visual motifs of bats and witches and skeletons he had used in previous cartoons (Allan 159-160). Eventually Deems Taylor's suggestion of treating the music as it was initially conceived—as a Sabbath—became the catalyst for the final visuals of the segment. The number partners with Schubert's *Ave Maria* as a "good versus evil" theme that Disney had hoped to include in the picture since the beginning (Culhane 182). The "good" half of the film's finale suffered from many revisions and edits throughout its production, as Disney intended it to be the most beautiful scene in the picture (199), and for one reason or another, the problems with camera movement kept on forcing the company to redo the entire scene (Allan 170). Beauty does show through in the scene's lack of detail, the figures moving among the trees carrying lights always being seen as just figures with nothing distinguishing one from the other (165-166), leaving the audience to simply focus on the aura of the music and the simple divinity of the landscape. As quoted by Stokowski, the animated visuals viewed in *Fantasia* are just "one way… of visualising the music," and the ideas posed for each segment depended entirely on the imaginative minds of Disney and his animators (7). While Disney attempted to provide the film with both innovative and popular concepts for the audience, some parts in particular appeared weak compared to the more confident pieces, and this could have likely confused the 1940s audience.

1930s entertainment sought to present a feeling of utopia for its audience as a form of escapism during the Great Depression (Dyer 18), and *Fantasia* was no different. While analysing the music and animation provides vital information on how *Fantasia* would have appealed to the American public in this manner, the best method for discovering the film's impact is viewing how it is presented as a whole. When Disney and Stokowski decided to work together on the project, Stokowski was already very popular in the public's eye, having previously performed with the Philadelphia Orchestra for a Paramount film in 1937 (some of its mise-en-scène inspired the opening to *Fantasia*) [Allan 95]. Deems Taylor was also highly-regarded as a music critic and composer when he joined the film's production (95-96), and his role in the film now probably marks his most memorable appearance, considered by Pegolotti as a moment that "ought to be cherished forever," *Fantasia* being "the ideal environment in which he should be remembered" (344). Within the film, Deems Taylor serves as a host, introducing the film and each section, describing what the audience will see alongside each piece of music.

Fantasia's atmosphere was always intended to imitate that of a concert hall, the original title labelled as *The Concert Feature* before everyone settled on Stokowski's working title for the film, *Fantasia* (Culhane 18) ("We mustn't call it a concert… We mustn't make it seem like a lecture" [Allan 96-97]). Indeed, the film shows the orchestra seating themselves and tuning their instruments at the very beginning, everyone donning their most formal outfits to emphasise the prestigious presentation of orchestral concerts (98). Then Deems Taylor steps up and introduces the film as a "new form of entertainment", inviting the audience to pretend they are seated in a concert hall with their eyes closed: "At first, you are more or less conscious of the orchestra, so our picture opens with a series of impressions of the conductor and the players. Then they begin to suggest other things to your imagination. They might be… cloud forms, or… geometrical objects, floating in space." This introduction describes perfectly the transition from live action to animation in the opening portion, the silence right before the music starts symbolizing Stokowski as an "artistic creation," just like all his other appearances in the film, preparing to start the orchestra before the first set of notes begins with a sudden burst of colour (Allan 101). The animation starts as soon as the *Fugue* division of the music does, and then it returns to Stokowski's conducting at the very end when the *Fugue* returns to the *Toccata*.

Just like a concert, the sections are only ever introduced with spoken word as opposed to a title card presented on the screen (Taylor 12-15). The episodic format of the entire film reflects that of a film revue, a cinematic format of the musical revues on stage where the performance contains a series of musical numbers strung together loosely through a narrative (Hischak 93); the biggest difference here is that each number contains its own narrative while Deems Taylor and the orchestra itself ties everything together. Soon after 1940, audiences grew tired of film revues solely for these narrative differences, as it was commonly believed that films needed plot in order to work successfully (Hischak 94), and this dissatisfaction might explain why

Fantasia was not as popular as it could have been if released just a few years earlier. There was much argument among the Disney staff as to the order of the segments, Deems Taylor reacting negatively to the decision of foregoing an overture and instead beginning with *Toccata and Fugue*: "There you are doing the only not strictly legitimate thing in the whole program" (qtd. in Culhane 42). His opinion differed when they decided to smoothly transition from the orchestra to the animation in this portion, but more debate revolved around how the film should end. For the longest time, Disney insisted that the last section should be *Rite of Spring*, claiming that no other segment would appear as magnificent after such a powerful piece, but it was suggested that the film end on a more pleasant note (no pun intended) [Allan 129]. Instead they settled on *Night on Bald Mountain* with *Ave Maria*, the latter contrasting the former "perfectly" through its dramatic difference in atmosphere (Taylor 152-153), a much more peaceful experience after all the profanity presented in the preceding piece.

Every portion of the film presents water in some form or another, along with the themes of power and balance; the former, as claimed by Allan, relates to Los Angeles itself and its constantly dry climate, especially during the Depression (102). Utopianism was always present in 1930s films as a form of anticipation (Dyer 24), and *Fantasia*'s natural order provides a similar forecast for the audience (Allan 105), with the exception of the *Rite of Spring* sequence, which is easily redeemed by the sections following. The harsh feelings in this same sequence are also contrasted by a more light-hearted event occurring right before Deems Taylor's introduction, where one of the orchestra players "accidentally" knocks over a stand of chimes. To further lighten the dark tones of *Rite of Spring*, the following intermission features an improvised, more modern jazz rendition from the players while Stokowski is presumably absent from the stage. However, the most memorable moment between any of the segments is the one following *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* where Disney and Stokowski symbolise their partnership in the film's production through Mickey Mouse's silhouette shaking hands with Stokowski's at the podium (Allan 99). The ending to the film differs from most musicals of the time; where musicals usually concluded with a "unifying set-piece" (Willett 46), *Fantasia* simply finishes with the *Ave Maria* segment, fading out with no credits or even a title stating, "The End."

When Disney and Stokowski worked together on *Fantasia*'s production, they believed that film audiences could appreciate "the good, the true, and the beautiful", this being the sole reason why they opted to make a film with so many innovations and radical differences from more typical movie musicals (Culhane 10). The result of such a project left what Allan describes as a "muddled" response (104-105); whether or not audiences favoured the film depends on whose opinion one heard. Movie critics appeared to give *Fantasia* immense amounts of praise after its New York premiere, Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* calling it "terrific as anything that has ever happened on screen" (qtd. in Gabler 342). Music purists, on the other hand, argued against these positive statements and denounced the film for its use of "the masters" as its score (Pegolotti 248). Nationally syndicated columnist Dorothy Thompson's

response is one of the most notorious, in which she apparently suffered from "a condition bordering on a nervous breakdown," calling the film a "brutalisation of sensibility in this remarkable nightmare" (qtd. in Gabler 343). Potter points out how audiences react poorly to the synchronisation of music with animation if they feel that the two mediums do not blend (67), and this likely reflects the negative opinions of the music purists as well, simply because the type of entertainment was so different. Disney had hoped that the film could be showcased in the same way as *Gone with the Wind*, where seats would be reserved with matinee and evening performances so word of mouth could enhance *Fantasia*'s popularity and bring more people to the screenings (Culhane 10-11). However, the film's requirement for Fantasound proved too expensive for most theatres, which limited its release or its sound quality, making box office records too low for distributor RKO Radio Pictures's liking; the Second World War also made international release impossible, serving as a further detriment to the film's success. As a result, they cut the film down from 124 minutes to 80 minutes which even further damaged the film's quality. *Fantasia* was re-released in 1946 at its original length but maintained its poor attendance. It was not until its release in 1956, sixteen years after its premiere, that *Fantasia* would finally be recognised for its revolutionary achievements and be deemed a classic among the general public (Culhane 11).

As presented in the choices made for music and animation during production, combined with the overall structure of the film in its completed form, *Fantasia* was undoubtedly revolutionary, yet differed so much from the movie musicals audiences were used to in 1940 that they did not know what to make of it. Animation was still ultimately considered "low brow" entertainment, and the critics who had experienced classical music thought that the visual medium tainted the pieces rather than enhanced them. Its reliance on the Fantasound system, while innovative for the film industry, disadvantaged it from gaining a more widespread release, and its appearance in the middle of World War II only made distribution more difficult. Therefore, one may conclude that the film was simply too ahead of its time to be fully appreciated at the beginning of the 1940s. Now, soon after the film's 70th anniversary Blu-Ray release, this author believes that *Fantasia* truly deserves recognition and appreciation in both the public's eye and the academic field.

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