

Cristina “Trinity” Vélez-Justo
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The Bells of Notre Dame: Ringing with Exoticism

Riddled with immersive historical references, Victor Hugo’s acclaimed book, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1833), draws readers into a thought-provoking and rather depressing story taking place in 1482, Paris, France. Motivating the city to repair Notre Dame (Borrus, p. 5), the book revolves around the magic and influence of the cathedral and its inhabitants, specifically Quasimodo, the disfigured bellringer of Notre Dame. Disney created an animated film adaptation of the book depicting Quasimodo’s struggle to gain acceptance into society, with the underlying “tale of a man and a monster” - though if we were to speak in reference to the music, the man is Alan Menken, and the monster, his ambitiously dense score.

Unlike the majority of Menken’s work, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* has a Middle-Age quality with nuances that are not caught by the average spectator-listener, subtleties that transport viewers to another time and place. Menken composed an enthralling score that emotionally complements the characters and story while supporting the historical setting, using specific instruments and compositional techniques reflective of the culture and era: the late Medieval and early Renaissance periods. In order to secure a successful and positive reception, Menken had to cleverly compose the score to appeal to contemporary audiences, creating music that was both immersive and catchy. In doing so, the average spectator-listener may not consider *Hunchback* an “exotic” score; however, I aim to show, through examples of instrumentation, compositional mechanisms and

techniques, and Latin lyrics (incorporated by Stephen Schwartz), how the first musical number, “The Bells of Notre Dame” (BND) evokes the “exotic” complexities of Medieval-Renaissance France. (*Note: Exoticism – n – In music, a genre in which the rhythms, melodies, or instrumentation are designed to evoke the atmosphere of far-off lands and/or ancient times.* Definition provided by [https://dictionary.onmusic.org.](https://dictionary.onmusic.org/))

Instrumentation

Many of the instruments listed below, such as choir or pipe organ, may seem conventional considering they can be heard daily (if, say, one lived near a religious institution such as a church or cathedral), but their use is considered *unconventional* for a contemporary film score. The purpose of these instruments, whether familiar today or not, is to draw viewers into a specific realm, away from contemporary Western society, and into the oppressive Church-ruled environment of 1482 Paris; therefore, these instruments can be considered exotic elements in this score.

Choir – [The film is introduced](#) with a reverent melody sung by a men’s choir, flowing in step-wise motion with a few jumping fifths, using Latin lyrics which will be discussed further in the next section. This melodic line functions as a Gregorian-style chant introducing the significant role of the Church, specifically that of Notre Dame and its central placement in the depicted Parisian community. Gregorian chant was developed in the late eighth and early ninth centuries in Western Europe and became a repertory for almost every occasion of the liturgical

year celebrated by the Roman Catholic Church; the dominant force that oversaw both religion and law in late medieval France (Falconer, p. 69).

After the chant ends with a sustain on the tonic, the rest of the choir joins and sings homophonically (singing in different pitches but rhythmically moving in unison) with harmonies reminiscent of polyphony in liturgical music of the late fifteenth century – perfect fourths or fifths, but rarely thirds (Falconer, p. 71). However, the musical **cue**, or piece associated with a scene or section, ends with a complete or well-balanced chord by today’s standards, most likely to create a cinematic cadence on the root of the chord, [resonating on the main title](#) and opening to the film’s “present day.” This complete cadence is standard practice in current Western film music, acting as: (1) a mechanism to mask traces of exoticism and (2) as a vessel to bring the exotic into a place of familiarity.



Large Cathedral Bell – Considering the story revolves around Notre Dame, the cathedral bell’s timbre emphasizes the dark, brooding, and supreme power of the Church (and the Law), as featured in the [very beginning of the film](#). The large bell’s tolls accompany the Day of Judgement that Judge Frollo often refers to in the story and becomes a key allegorical character in the score when he dies at his own hands.

Large Cathedral Organ and Chapel Organ – Most organs in Europe, the Americas, and Australia, can be found in Christian churches. The organ was

introduced to the Church in the late seventh century and prominently used in fourteenth and fifteenth century music to primarily accompany vocalists (the congregation, a choir, or a cantor) because of its ability to support above and below the vocal register; thus, providing a foundation, accompaniment, and brightness to the vocalists (Knighton & Fallows, p. 403). Menken used the organ to support the choir - this provides further harmonic depth and thematic meaning because the organ either acts as the bells or accompanies the bells or choir to emulate the church's influence and prominence in the story. The Chapel Organ also accompanies Frolo whenever Clopin sings of him in BND, most likely to emphasize Frolo's thoughts of [self-righteousness to cleansing the streets](#) of gypsies or to embody the [fear of harsh judgment](#) from the Saints.

Calliope - It is a musical instrument that produces sound by pushing gas, such as steam or compressed air, through small pipes or large whistles. Calliopes were and are often used in traveling entertainment, such as the circus, to accompany the dramatic parade that introduces the circus troupe (Hathaway, *Air Calliopes*). Menken used the [calliope to follow Clopin](#), who hosts the Festival of



Fools and leads the Romani community, to emulate his comedic and often foolish role. It is also used as a vessel in the above example to bring audiences into the familiar Disney atmosphere, moving from a heavy liturgical presence to a light-hearted musical number with Clopin singing of the town and its people. Though it does not set a time period or location, the instrument provides an exotic

tone to the score due to its unconventional use and presence in a church-driven narrative.

Timbrel – The timbrel is an ancestor of the tambourine. It was introduced to Europe during the Crusades and often used by women in dances or by nomad entertainers (in this case, the Romani – derogatively nicknamed the “gypsies”) (Montagu, p. 46). Romani music, often referred to as “gypsy” music, was brought to France during the Romas’ journey from Northern India, where the people originated, in the thirteenth century via the Balkans (Alcoy, *Left Voice*). The timbrel accompanies the film’s Romani characters, such as Esmeralda, Quasimodo’s love interest, and Clopin. Considering its origin, the timbrel works well to represent the time period and the characters it follows.

Carillon bells – The carillon, also known as “swinging bells”, consists of up to twenty-three bells of varying sizes, all smaller than the large Cathedral bell. Swinging bells were attached to wires for ease of practice and performance, allowing the player to play intricate melodies and fast phrases.



Hopeman Carillon, Eastman Community Music School

They were used in the medieval era to notify townspeople of church services, as well as imminent dangers like storms and fires. In the early Renaissance, carillon bells were utilized to play more melodic lines in times of celebration, unlike the large cathedral bell which only plays a single deep tone; often to accompany clock

tolls or church services (Montagu, p. 110). Menken used the bells to embellish cues, accentuate the importance of the Bells of Notre Dame, and to further pronounce the film's setting.

Pipe and Tabor – The pipe, also known as the tabor pipe, is a duct flute with three finger holes, similar to a recorder – two in the front of the pipe near the bell and the third resting behind the other two, controlled by the thumb. Though the instrument has only three finger holes, depending on the embouchure of the player and placement of the fingers, the tabor pipe can perform notes of a contiguous scale comprising an octave and a fifth.



The tabor, a small hand drum, can be found in artwork and literature as early as the twelfth century and is usually used with a pipe. Players would hold the pipe in one hand and hit the tabor with the other. The tabor usually hung by a strap that the player would sling over their shoulder and rest at the waist. The pipe and tabor were instruments of basic dance bands “from the thirteenth century onwards and survived among folk players to the end of the nineteenth” centuries. They were commonly used in Britain and continue to be used in Latin America, where they were “introduced by the Spanish Conquistadors,” and other parts of Europe (Montagu, p. 45).

Because Menken wrote rather complex melodic lines for the recorder (substituting a tabor pipe), it was impossible to have a performer play both the tabor and the recorder simultaneously. So, to compensate, he had one musician

perform each instrument separately but usually had the two musicians playing together – the recorder playing a melodic line and the tabor hitting on the down beat of each measure.

The pipe and tabor drum were used throughout the film to accompany the Romani characters, i.e., to underscore Clopin and Quasimodo's mother; not because the instruments are customarily used by the Romani but likely because they were used often in entertainment troupes and in folk music, and therefore support the nomadic nature of the Romani and portraying them as "people of the land". [In this instance](#), the recorder and tabor are used to create a timbral contrast from Frollo's tribulating nature, which is supported by the organ and mid-brass (French horns). As a result, the Romani are presented as innocent and wrongfully oppressed by Frollo and his guards. Every instrument has a role in depicting the setting, representing the characters and their traits, and supporting the message and nature of the story.

To watch and listen to the full number, "Bells of Notre Dame, see here: [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), and [Part 3](#).

Compositional Approaches, Lyrics, & Liturgical Influences

Opening the film with "Bells of Notre Dame," Menken establishes the story's tone, using d minor as its skeleton – the key in which the theme resides. D minor rests as the foundation for many prolific sacred(-esque) pieces, including Mozart's *Requiem* Mass, Beethoven's *9th Symphony*, home to the well-known "Ode to Joy;" Faure's *Requiem* (which is discussed in the article by Alexandra Taliani), and Haydn's

Mass Nelson. Menken may have chosen d minor to embody the cathedral's sacred nature and the Mass-like style (and possible structure or form) of the score, considering its popularity in large liturgical or sacral pieces. (More on Menken's use of d minor later in this section.)

To complement the liturgical nuances of *Notre Dame*, Schwartz implemented rough Latin versions of lyrics from other songs of the soundtrack (specifically "Someday"; Example A) as well as direct texts from various Catholic Mass movements, including the Kyrie, a prayer used prominently during Communion, and Dies Irae from the Mass of the Dead (Example B).

Introducing the film, a men's choir sings, mimicking a Gregorian-style chant:

[Example A \(Click to listen\):](#)

Olim	<i>(Someday,)</i>
Olim deus accelerare	<i>(Someday, Godspeed)</i>
Hoc saeculum splendidum	<i>(This bright millennium)</i>
Accelerare fiat venire olim	<i>(Let it come someday.)</i>

In Example A, Menken (the melodic line) and Schwartz (the lyrics) are referring to the English-language song "Someday," a number that was later removed from the main motion picture and placed [in the End Credits](#). The song summarizes the overall message of the film (paraphrasing): "We must be compassionate and accepting of all people, especially those who are rejected or oppressed, for they too deserve a fair and full life." This melody occurs frequently throughout the film whenever the characters who represent the rejected or oppressed groups (i.e., Esmeralda of the Romani and Quasimodo of the disabled) show kindness to one another. For example, we hear it when Esmeralda stops the crowd from tossing produce at Quasimodo's face during the Festival of Fools and cleans his face with her

skirt ([sung by boys choir](#)), or when [Esmeralda embraces Quasimodo](#) after Phoebus (Esmeralda's love interest and the captain of the city guard) saves him from falling to his death.

I argue that because the melody of "Someday" is (1) the film's central leitmotif (or musical theme) and (2) the theme that begins the film and is used to represent this overall message (the acceptance of, or the act of compassion towards, the oppressed), it functions as the cantus firmus of the entire score. A **cantus firmus** ("fixed song" in Latin) is a plainchant or pre-existing melody used as a basis for polyphonic composition throughout the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries (Knighton & Fallows, p. 382) and was often introduced by the tenor/cantor or tenor section of a choir before the full ensemble (Falconer, p. 71). The use of a cantus firmus was commonly found in Masses during the Medieval era (Jackson, p. 121) (which, with further investigation, one may argue is the compositional form of the score) and therefore, when introduced and incorporated in the opening number and the rest of the score respectively, sets the historical tone and structure of the soundtrack.

The Kyrie prayer, also found throughout BND and the rest of the film's score, is an archaic expression that became commonly used in liturgical Masses to "invoke God" (Fortescue, *Catholic Encyclopedia*). A condensed form of the prayer, "Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison," which translates to "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy," is often used as a response to Biblical recitations or readings as part of the Mass. Schwartz implemented this religious text in scenes that revolved around a sinning person (i.e., immediately after the Archdeacon scolds

Frollo for murdering Quasimodo's mother, warning him of the impression he made on the saints – "[the very eyes of Notre Dame](#)"; the Kyrie implying "Lord have mercy on this character who has sinned before You").

Along with the Kyrie, Schwartz (and Menken) used Dies Irae with as much intention and purpose. As mentioned previously, BND is in the key of d minor, nicknamed by musicologists as the "key of Death" since they discovered that many Baroque and Classical requiems and Masses commemorating or discussing death were in d minor. I believe that Alan Menken used the "key of Death" to accompany Dies Irae, translated as the Day of Judgment or Wrath (translations vary by Church or denomination) to allegorically emphasize the Catholic Church's intimidating prominence in the story and to use as a vessel for foreshadowing Frollo's fate.

Dies Irae is a medieval poem that "describes the day of judgment, the last trumpet summoning souls before the throne of God, where the saved will be delivered and the unsaved cast into eternal flames" (Henry, *Catholic Encyclopedia*). The text is "traditionally attributed to Thomas of Celano, a biographer of St. Francis of Assisi, who died around 1250," but its origin has been questioned for some time. It may have been written as early as the 11th century (Schubert, p. 209). [The Dies Irae plainchant](#) (or melodic phrase) from the Mass of the Dead erupted around the ninth century and is used prevalently in cinematic scores and pop culture to foreshadow or accompany nihilistic and/or ominous entities or endings (i.e., [The Shining Main Title](#)). It is often used where "death, danger, or the supernatural are invariably part of the story or visual situation" (Schubert, p. 207).

The full text and translation of the words used in the film are directly taken from the Dies Irae plainchant:

[Example B \(Click to Listen\):](#)

Dies irae, dies illa	<i>(Day of wrath, that day)</i>
Solvat saeculum in favilla	<i>(Shall consume the world in ashes)</i>
Teste David cum sibylla	<i>(As prophesied by David and the sibyl)</i>
Quantus tremor est futurus	<i>(What trembling is to be)</i>
Quando Judex est venturus	<i>(When the Judge is come)</i>

To better understand why Schwartz implemented these texts specifically, one must approach the film in its entirety. The story of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* questions the identity of the saved (the true followers of Christ) and the unsaved, as expressed by the film's returning lyrical question, "Who is the monster and who is the man?" (I.e., the pure or holy creation of God). The answer may be left for interpretation, but it is suggested that the choice lies between the Romani and those who abused the power of the Church (Judge Frollo).

In "The Bells of Notre Dame," the choir assertively sings the text of Dies Irae as Judge Frollo pursues the mother of Quasimodo (Example B), emphasizing that Frollo acts as God judging the fate of those he believes to be "the unsaved" of the city - the gypsies. The text and melodic phrase foreshadow the fate of Quasimodo's mother - her death by the hands of the villainous Judge Frollo - as well as the day Frollo destroys the city. Viewers hear the first four notes of the Dies Irae plainchant played by the instruments after the Archdeacon declares, "Look at the innocent blood you have spilt on the steps of Notre Dame," while Frollo sings, "[I am guiltless. She ran, I pursued](#)," as if signifying that if he continues to spill innocent blood without guilt, he will face [the Day of] Judgment.

Dies Irae occurs in nearly every instance the self-righteous Judge Frollo abuses his power to “judge the people,” including the moment he orders his men to burn the homes of the innocent when in search of Esmeralda, the gypsy over whom he lusts. The last time we hear the words of Judgment, Judge Frollo falls into the flames he created; the scene depicts the fate of those “unsaved” as prophesied in Dies Irae. When the moment of Judgment ceases, and the sun breaks through the clouds of ash, the minor modulates to D Major, portraying Judge Frollo’s reign has ended. The film ends with the hope of peace and acceptance towards Quasimodo and the Romani people.

Conclusion

Gathered by this evidence – the use of the Medieval plainchant and text of Dies Irae, the liturgical Kyrie, and the implementation of Latin onto the originally English lyrics of “Someday” – one may see and hear how Menken and Schwartz brilliantly exported spectator-listeners to a Catholic-dominant Medieval-Renaissance France, a realm that is foreign to the average present-day American. Pairing the compositional and lyrical approaches with unconventional instrumentation (in comparison to current/popular electronic and acoustic film scores), audiences experience an interpolation of exotic influences in a contemporary Disney film. The animated adaptation of Victor Hugo’s novel called for a dramatic display of color and sound to fit 1482 Paris. The complex monster of a score was written by a courageous man, Alan Menken, and with the words of his faithful lyricist, Stephen Schwartz, provided the perfect musical soundscape to

illustrate the true nature of a French city facing judgment under Medieval religion and law.

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