

# Sublime Perversity

## *The Music of Carl Stalling*

by WILL FRIEDWALD

“EITHER MR. STEINER is going up those stairs or I’m going up them,” Bette Davis supposedly threatened, regarding the climactic scene in *Dark Victory*, “but we’re *not* walking up them together!”

Certainly, that no-less-histrionic thespian Mr. Daffy “Dumas” Duck was no less capable of displaying such a despicable demonstration of temperament. However, far from feeling that the musical score would compete with his function as an actor, the little black duck realized mightily sportingly that there could be no such thing as “overkill” in a cartoon. Where the dahling Miss Davis had two hours to inspire the audience’s tear ducts to swell to capacity before that payoff of an emotional dam burst, ducks and wabbits were allotted a mere seven minutes to move their viewers to hysterics—and therefore needed all the help they could get. Just as Bette Davis’s melodrama (a term derived from *mellos*, Greek for *music*) rates as a broad caricature of drama that requires a relentlessly exaggerated score, the Warner Bros. cartoons demand the most outrageous possible music.

But it ain’t the bodacious battiness of the Warner ’toon tunes that makes it worthwhile to isolate them as a purely aural (non-visual) experience. Nor is it the remarkable craftsmanship and productivity required to assemble as many as three completely different one-reel symphonettes per month for nearly twenty years. Perversely, it’s Carl Stalling’s subtlety that makes him a musical auteur (or, to use Chuck Jones’s term, *otter*) of sheer, unadulterated genius. Stalling and his orchestrator, Milt Franklyn, employed Sinatra- or Jones-like attention to the tiniest of details and the most minuscule of nuances, so that the most minute dynamic fluctuation on a violin string or flutely flutter carries with it mountain-moving significance.

Today we marvel that lush “full” animation, fifty-piece orchestras, and unfettered creativity were once taken for granted by Hollywood cartoonists, who generally looked at these somebody-chasing-somebody opuses as mere potboilers. The production schedule itself—it isn’t important that it’s good so long as it’s on time—ultimately proved to be Stalling’s greatest creativity factor. Determined to come up with a perfectly appropriate score for each film, and required to do so in less time than it takes to write most songs, the necessity for shortcuts became Stalling’s numero uno artistic boost.

First consider the unavoidable diegetic elements of character, action, and setting: Tweety not yet having seen (tawn) a pudgy tat in an apartment sounds different than Bugs being chased by Yosemite Sam in the wild west. Cataloging the contents of Stalling’s tooney toolbox takes a little longer: blending the leitmotif concept of specific musical phrases for characters and ideas (as definitively delineated in Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*) with the expansions on those ideas in terms of jazz’s new expressive possibilities—



A publicity photo of Carl Stalling at the piano at Warner Bros. in the 1950s.

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especially by way of using horns as voices and vice versa—as effectively explored in Duke Ellington’s instrumental oratorios (most notably *Black, Brown, and Beige*). However, Stalling uses them merely as landmarks, for no one before or since has displayed such sublime perversity in subverting the mainstream into the avant-garde.

Not that there was anything commonplace about Stalling’s selection of pop tunes as raw material (no less than, say, Thelonious Monk’s); ex-colleagues reduce him to a mere Mickey Mouse musician when they claim his free-association method extended only as far as playing “A Cup of Coffee, a Sandwich, and You” behind tableaux of caloric intake. Stalling’s strength was his specificity: he could very cagily distinguish a love theme underscoring the scopophilic encounter of a suddenly feminized Daffy Duck stripteasing and the barely-able-to-look Mr. Meek (based on “It Had to Be You”), from a more voracious but inescapably French (albeit one-sided) amorous affair for Pepé Le Pew (“Cherie, Je t’Aime”).

The ability to identify these themes doesn’t necessarily help, for Stalling relies on the collective unconscious which, after having followed enough of Bugs Bunny’s episodic adventures, unknowingly makes the connection between the few bars of the motif Stalling sneaks by and the plot development or idea put across on screen. As Stalling’s tenure stretched from years into decades, he increasingly depended on the ability of the audience to decode his musical hieroglyphics and shorthand, and would fragment these familiar leit-motifs into ever tinier and tinier pieces of the musical mosaic. Just as Tex Avery made a systematic study as to the ultimate minimum number of frames needed for an audience to comprehend a visual gag, Stalling could transmit a musical joke or idea with an ever-decreasing number of notes.

Indeed, no other music maker so creatively stretched the iconography of western music, codified by Bach and Mozart, all the while still pledging allegiance to its basic precepts. Stalling and Franklyn’s stiff adherence to classicism wasn’t merely conceptual, but often textural—as both volumes of the two CDs devoted to Stalling’s music (*The Carl Stalling Project*, volumes one and two) prove. Once the music is isolated from the dialogue and sound effects (read: screams and explosions) it could easily be, on a blindfold test, taken for any of the more durable contemporary classics.

Stalling ever more aggressively reduced the duration of themes, especially after they were established, to mirror the tension mounting in the narrative. However, he (with Franklyn’s help) also expanded them, played them

excruciatingly slowly on out-of-tune violins to underscore a frustrated Fudd's slow-burn torture, or transposed them to staccato 32nd notes at the high end of the piano to portray a perspicacious pudgy tat prancing behind trees and mailboxes, out of his prey's line of vision; as molehills metamorphize into mountains, the theme gets reharmonized into a monstrous mess of unresolved dissonances conveying colossal c-c-cat-astrophe. It gets wilder when themes collide, Bugs's cucumber coolness contrasted with his foe's (take your pick—Elmer, Sam, or even the redoubtable Pete Puma) frantic finagling.

You couldn't say which aspect of Stalling and Franklyn's art rates as the more satisfying: the individual elements of the concoction or the way they put them together. As orchestrators arranging tunes for conventional listening or dancing purposes, they could have probably earned a better living. What swing bandleader or Tin Pan Alley publisher wouldn't want Carl Stalling on the payroll? Surely celebrity would have beckoned had he toured the country with sixty pieces (plus Treg Brown on half-trombone as a special added attraction) as "Carl Stalling and his Famous Orchestra."

Perhaps some wily band booker even made him such an offer, but Carl Stalling undoubtedly said, "It will never work." He knew full well that his destiny remained at Schlesinger's, forever shouting, "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain" as he worked the musical alchemy that inspired laughter and tears, and forever makes us looney-tooney.

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