

Emotional Compensation, Emotional Echo, and Self-Confessional Solo: Musical Numbers and Emotional Function in La La Land

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Abstract. Musical numbers function as the main narrative mode and emotional code in Damien Chazelle's *La La Land*. Drawing on foundational theories of the film musical, audio-visual analysis, and affect, this paper analyzes the main musical numbers of *La La Land* to discuss how the film creates emotional compensation, memory, and narrative through musical numbers. *La La Land* designs a utopian emotional compensation with jazz improvisation, melodic repetition and variation, and the rhythmic diminution and melodic continuity in self-confessional solos. This paper argues that *La La Land* redefines the narrative logic of contemporary musical cinema in three dimensions—emotional compensation, emotional echo, and self-confessional solo—to realize its narrative logic: creating audience emotion through musical numbers.

Keywords: *La La Land*; musical number; leitmotif; affect theory; musical narrative.

1. Introduction

Damien Chazelle's film *La La Land* [1] has been a canonized text in new musical film studies since its release. Although it adheres to classic Hollywood musical form, his film re-invents the genre through postmodern narrative strategy and realist affect. Employing a twin canon of music and image, the film narrates the loss and rebirth of Mia (Emma Stone) and Sebastian (Ryan Gosling) as they pursue dreams and romance and demonstrates how music functions as a narrative and emotional medium. The film's key musical numbers, including *Another Day of Sun*, *City of Stars*, and *Audition*, demonstrate a musical narrative logic, in which emotions are systematized into temporal structures through melody, rhythm, and lyrics, allowing audience members to experience affective change through repetition and variation in musical sound.

Since the 1930s, the musical film genre has been viewed by academia as an "aggregate of emotions" [2]. Scholars like Altman [2] have defined the genre by its emotional logic over narrative, while others like Dyer [3] point to its creation of "utopian emotional satisfaction." Concurrently, theorists such as Gorbman [4] and Chion [5] have provided frameworks for understanding how film music and sound function narratively and psychologically, which are essential for analyzing a modern musical. In *The American Film Musical*, Altman [2] claims that the essential component of musicals is not narrative logic, but "the illusion of emotional extension and social harmony conveyed by song." Subsequently, Dyer [3] also proposed the concept of "utopian emotional satisfaction," claiming that musical films grant audiences a form of psychological comfort through the genre's formal beauty and rhythmic sensibility.

Although some scholars have studied *La La Land* through genre study, character gender politics, and visual style, there has been little systematic study of how music functions as a canonized temporal structure, a systematized memory mechanism, and a mode of emotional signification. Previous studies on the film tend to view film music as an accessory emotional layer, which serves as an emotional background for narrative organization, thus neglecting its structural agency in narrative construction. This paper re-explores *La La Land* through the question of "how music constructs emotion and time" to bridge a theoretical gap in the field of music-narrative studies in contemporary film research.

Applying close reading and musical narrative analysis, this paper explores the emotional and psychological functions of musical numbers in *La La Land* [1]. The rhythmic, melodic, and emotional

transformation of musical numbers in the following parts of the film—Another Day of Sun, A Lovely Night, City of Stars, Audition, and Epilogue—will be analyzed. In section “Emotional Compensation: Utopia and Improvisational Freedom,” based on Dyer’s [3] utopian affect theory and Adler’s [6] and Frijda’s [7] emotional compensation theory, this paper analyzes how emotional compensation is realized by music creating temporary psychological equilibrium and social illusion through collective revelry and jazz improvisation. In section “Emotional Echo: Repetition and Variation of Leitmotifs”, this paper analyzes how emotional memory and psychological temporal structure are built by repetition and variation of melody based on Winters [8] theory, Margulis’ [9] theory, and Huron [10] theory. In section “Self-Confessional Solo: Narrative Completion Through Song”, this paper analyzes how audiences’ emotion is aroused by singers’ rhythmic diminution and melody continuation in self-confessional solos based on Cohen [11] and Juslin & Västfjäll’s [12] psychoacoustic models. In conclusion, this paper argues that *La La Land* makes breakthroughs in structural functions and affective evocation functions of musical cinema by using Emotional Echo and Self-Confessional Solo techniques.

2. Musical Numbers and Emotional Function

As a holistic art form incorporating narrative, music, and dance, the typical characteristics of a musical film can be distilled into two aspects: the structure and emotional function of the musical number [2]. As the musical number is the basic unit of a musical film, it not only determines the film’s rhythmic pace and emotional variation but also establishes the primary system through which we digest characters and situations in a musical film. As Altman [2] wrote in *The American Film Musical*, musical portions are “the smallest units of narrative meaning made available in musical films.” Whenever there is music, we are expected to step down from the narrative level to the emotional level, from logical thinking to emotional logic. Therefore, in addition to being formal divisions, musical portions are also triggers for emotional flow and psychological transformation.

There are three indicators of the appearance of musical snippets. First, the musical entrance—the point at which a character or score disrupts the flow of dialogue to enter an emotional space. Second, changes in space and time, such as lighting, camera movement, or stage-like composition, indicating that a character has entered an emotional or fantasy space. Finally, the release of built-up emotional tension—when it is no longer possible to use dialogue as a “nonverbal expression” [4]. This narrative disruption caused by music is the fundamental difference between musical films and standard dramas. In classic Hollywood musicals such as *Singin’ in the Rain* [13], musical numbers are clearly demarcated, and most songs line up with plot points. Thus, the rainy-dance routine not only expresses the heroine’s romantic delight but also reflects her transition from hollow pretense to genuine emotion. In modern musicals such as *Chicago* [14] or *Moulin Rouge!* [15], musical numbers have become more sophisticated, weaving together reality and fantasy through dream sequences, stream-of-consciousness camera movements, or theatrical staging techniques that make music secondary to psychological space.

Take *La La Land* for instance, as shown in Table 1, the six major musical numbers aggregate into a complete emotional arc: *Another Day of Sun* employs group dance and jazz rhythms to build a utopian illusion and to give birth to the dream-crashing reality; *A Lovely Night* reflects freedom and tentative love through improvisational rhythms; *City of Stars* builds a ring of emotional memory with a recurring leitmotif; *Planetarium* builds an illusion of love for *Clippers* with orchestral fusion and floating rhythms; *Audition* raises the dreamer’s folly to sing for the universe with solo singing; finally, *Epilogue* rewelds the previous emotional memory into a farewell to memory through variation. The musical architecture of the film creates an emotional loop from hope to farewell through temporal recurrence.

Table 1. Six Musical Segments in La La Land and Their Functions.

Musical Segments	Function	Musical Characteristics	Emotional Symbolism
Another Day of Sun	Opening	Upbeat group dance, jazz rhythm	Dreamlike Illusion
A Lovely Night	Meeting	Jazz and Tap Dance	The Test of Love
City of Stars	Theme Song	Lyrical Melodies, Jazz Chords	Acoustic Memories of Love
Planetarium	Fantasy	Orchestral fusion, floating rhythms	Sublimation of Love
Audition	Climax	Confessional Solo	Dreams and Sacrifice
Epilogue	Final Movement	Variations and Reprise	Memory and Reflection on Life

3. Emotional Compensation: Utopia and Improvisational Freedom

Another Day of Sun serves as a utopian emotional preparation for the film. When the story begins, LA commuters—at first impatient—jump out of their cars and sing and dance together under the burning sun. The musical rhythm, here, with its strong percussive and brass impact, blends multi-layer harmonies with syncopated beats to produce a pulsating mass enthusiasm. This musical design creates a visual and auditory mass celebration scenario. Audiences are lured to think that real harmony and joy do indeed exist in urban life. Dyer [3] wrote in *Only Entertainment*: “The utopian quality of the musical film does not reside in a reflection of reality, but in an emotional release that enables audiences to forget for a while the reality and its harmony and oppression.” In this sequence, the rhythmic composition and mass dance of Another Day of Sun are exactly this “temporary harmony”.

Yet this imagined shared carnival spirit instantly fades. The music finishes, and the camera cuts to the protagonists’ car: Mia is practicing lines, having to wait for her audition to get out of traffic, while Sebastian blows up and keeps flashing his lights and cutting off cars. Their first meeting, in other words, starts with a clash. This moment of utopian feeling created by the song turns out to be nothing more than a temporary emotional illusion. Through this musical opening cut with the moment of reality, Chazelle allows audiences to witness the clash between music and reality: shared joy hides separate loneliness and struggle. Altman [2] argues that the essence of classic Hollywood musicals is to “create temporary harmony through music to mask the fundamental imbalance between societal and individual conflicts.” In this light, the group dance scene in Another Day of Sun is not an authentic social solidarity, but a temporary musical utopia illusion.

From a musicological perspective, Justin Hurwitz’s composition uses polyphonic chorus and brass ensemble arrangement to push the melody upward with dense rhythm and to build up collective emotion. Audiences get to taste occasional excitement and belonging in this rhythm-and-dynamics environment. Gorbman [4] argues that film scores are used to “organize the audience’s emotions into an ordered sensory experience, and in that way generate psychological satisfaction.” In this sense, Another Day of Sun builds a “temporarily harmonious, hopeful” sonic utopia with its harmonic structure and the collective kinetic energy of dance.

In this sense, the collective celebration built in Another Day of Sun is a typical “collective emotional compensation” — music helps audiences get the temporary pseudo sense of “belonging” and “happiness” by creating psychological peaks such as “rhythmic density” and “going-up melodies” during enjoying intense stimulation. Compensation could be traced back to individual psychology’s founder Alfred Adler. In *Understanding Human Nature*, he argues that compensation is a psychological defense method to restore the balance of the whole self when people feel inferior,

deprived, or lost by enhancing themselves in other aspects or seeking symbolic fulfillment [6]. This concept was further extended to “emotional compensation” by affective psychology—when individuals seek emotional restoration by releasing themselves in imagination, art, rituals, or group behaviors after they are deprived of emotions or suffer in social aspects [7, 16]. Altman [2] argues that the main mechanism of classic Hollywood musicals is “creating temporary harmony through music to mask the basic imbalance between societal and individual conflicts.” The lively group dance at the beginning of the film seemingly suggests resonance and solidarity among urban individuals. However, this “harmony” is only a pseudo sense in psychological terms—it is a compensated emotional structure built upon the rhythm power of music and the “infectiousness” of collective performance.

In sum, *Another Day of Sun* plays the role of a utopian prologue in the narrative of *La La Land*. The main protagonists create a pseudo sense of communal joy by enjoying music and collective performance to temporarily escape from their real-world problems and social worries. As Dyer [3] argues, this utopian happiness is not a real social solution. Instead, it is a “utopian fulfillment” offered by art through music. The film starts with joyful music but ends with abrupt reality and solitude. The “illusion of harmony” becomes a psychological consensus between audience and character.

Besides, in *La La Land*, another piece in the form of *A Lovely Night* uses the improvisation of jazz to convey the idea of freedom. Jazz is not only a musical genre but also a narrative language. The film uses the main features of jazz—improvisation and freedom—to show the mental states and emotional dilemmas of the characters. According to Gioia [17] in *The History of Jazz*: “At its most fundamental level, the essence of jazz is the individual’s resistance to structure, a perpetual struggle between order and freedom.” This is the language through which Chazelle composes the birth and the break of love in the double tension of “freedom and rebellion”. The first meeting between Sebastian (Ryan Gosling) and Mia (Emma Stone) takes place to the tune of *A Lovely Night*. In the night, they walk, they sing, and they dance—they exchange obvious pick-up lines, but little by little they unveil their feelings for each other through the play of melody and rhythm. The music of Justin Hurwitz uses jazz improvisation in this sequence: light melodies, agile chords, and discreet syncopation—all of these portray the couple feeling each other out through music in a delicate way. When Sebastian joins a commercial band and starts using electronic effects in jazz shows, the melody of musical freedom is gradually replaced by market logic. His new modern clothes and electronic piano symbolize the domestication of jazz and the characters’ submission to reality. This contrast reveals the tension between ideals and compromise. Only when jazz returns to its primitive nature does the film complete its spiritual cycle from “rebellion” to “self-reflection”. Thus, *A Lovely Night* is not only a romantic interlude but also a macro-context of the film’s “jazz spirit”, revealing a truth shared by both love and art: true freedom is not about escaping rules but about continually finding oneself within them.

4. Emotional Echo: The Repetition and Variation of the Leitmotif

In *La La Land*, *City of Stars* is a main leitmotif that repeats in different narrative phases and thus creates the emotional and temporal structure of the movie. This repetition serves not only as a musical integrity but also creates viewers’ “emotional memory” on a psychological level. Winters [8] notes that recurring melodies create “emotional memory connections” in the audience and consolidate the narrative through music. In the movie, the song *City of Stars* first appears in a scene where Sebastian whistles alone in the middle of the nighttime docks—the song is presented through soft piano and whistling, its rhythm is calm, the melody is simple, it holds a mood of solitary yet hopeful state of mind symbolizing the protagonist’s pursuit of dreams and love. When the song repeats for the second time, it becomes a duet between Sebastian and Mia. The melody and lyrics are the same, yet the orchestration is richer—it includes strings and soft percussion. The emotion is now in the service of romantic monologue and a slightly faster tempo. From a static emotional monologue to a feeling of romance. This repetition is not a simple musical reprise, but rather a rewriting of context: the same

melody gets a new emotional charge due to the changing relationship between the two main characters. Just as the multiple reappearances of Edelweiss in *The Sound of Music* [18] raise it from an individual emotional cry to an anthem of collective memory, *City of Stars* rises from an individual emotional cry to an anthem of collective memory. And Chazelle accomplishes one of the most impressive and characteristic aesthetic features of all great movies in musical cinema: the repetition and variation of melodies makes music the main language of narrative emotion.

On the psychological level, the repeated appearance of *City of Stars* not only frames the emotional process of the whole film but also triggers the activation of viewers' emotional memory system, that is, *City of Stars* plays the role of music as a stimulus of emotional recollection and resonance. Based on the research findings of affective psychology, musical repetition can enhance the process of both memory encoding and memory retrieval, which can strengthen people's emotional experience on the level of cognition. Musical repetition brings about "predictive pleasure" to listeners, that is, the psychological pleasure people get from satisfying familiar tunes [9]. Only when we analyze psychologically why audiences unconsciously sing along with the tunes of *City of Stars* appearing repeatedly in the whole film can we explain why the melody of *City of Stars* recurs in the background of the film unconsciously. The predictability of music brings about psychological pleasure, and the emotional rewriting of the melody in different scenarios brings about new emotional fluctuation, which creates two kinds of psychological pleasure, that is, "familiarity and change", when audiences listen to the repeated appearance of *City of Stars*. Moreover, Huron's [10] "theory of expectation" can further explain how music stimulates complex emotions from the perspective of repetition and delay. He believes that repetitive patterns in music compose an "emotional script", and the delay of emotional satisfaction forms a dynamic equilibrium of anticipation and delay within listeners, which brings about a cyclical pleasure, that is, "satisfaction–deprivation–resatisfaction." In *City of Stars*, the whole process of "satisfaction–deprivation–resatisfaction" is realized by the repeated appearance of melody and change of key.

In *La La Land*'s ending sequence, it is music that takes charge as the narrative divides time and memory through variations of themes to bring the film to a satisfying close. Sebastian steps up to play the Mia & Sebastian Theme solo. The visual aid, along with the Epilogue's auditory design (such as switching playing techniques, instruments, and rhythms), creates a fantasy of "what if...". Here, Mia and Sebastian meet, fall in love, and share a bright future in another timeline. As an orchestral variation of the Mia & Sebastian Theme echoes, they kiss. On a variation of *Another Day of Sun*, Sebastian rejects Keith's advances, and Mia's personal drama hits big. Suddenly, the music is no longer clamor but an orchestral variation of *Someone in the Crowd* as they enter Hollywood together. Now, with Mia's audition silhouette in view, a violin solo of *The Fools Who Dream* gradually gives way to a brass ensemble, then a jazz variation. Finally, amid variations of the Mia & Sebastian Theme, the pair dance smoothly into matrimony and then share a quiet moment to the piano melody of *City of Stars*. The camera then returns to a piano solo of the Mia & Sebastian Theme as the dream gradually fades. As Chion [5] notes, film music can "contribute emotional continuity on the temporal plane and suggest psychological impossibility on the spatial plane." This rivalry between the aural and visual is such that Epilogue is not only the last chapter of the movie, but also the philosophical summation of feeling: the song is here, but it's changed; the dream is whole, but it dissipates into a fantasy. Therefore, the variation structure of Epilogue shows us the true logic of *La La Land*'s musical narrative—through iteration and transformation, music records memory, organizes time, and expresses loss. It is both a look back into the past and a goodbye to ideals. *La La Land* uses music to tie together all the film's possibilities of love, and its variations hint at the divergence between ideal and reality.

5. Self-confessional Solo: Narrative Completion Through Song

In the narrative structure of musical films, the self-confessional solo is incredibly expressive. It usually crops up at psychological peaks and lows and reveals a character's inner drama—the hidden

emotional conflict and crisis of self-definition. As opposed to the song-and-dance numbers or the romance duet, the agency of voice means that when a character reaches a peak or a trough of emotional or existential intensity, words break down and music becomes the only possibility for expression. From the mid-to-late 20th century to the present, the function of solos has begun to turn inward, to become “the musicalization of inner monologue”. This inward-turning function reflects both the psychological trend in musical-film storytelling and the contemporary artistic emphasis on modern individual consciousness. In the musical *Les Misérables* [19], when Jean Valjean’s solo *Who Am I?* sets up and then resolves the dialectic of morality and identity, it does so with one voice. The song’s melody soars from a low, pained register to a near-shout in the upper register, and this musical ascent represents the struggle and rebirth of Jean Valjean’s self-identity.

In this tradition, *Audition* from *La La Land* is a kind of modern confessional solo. Here, after several failed auditions, Mia speaks to the judges through a song and tells her story and her dreams. She sings about the aunt who “jumped barefoot into the Seine” — a “fool”, someone who’s willing to take a risk, who’s willing to fail for her dreams. This lyric serves more than just the plot service of the song: it is also Mia’s psychological confessional. Language has been replaced with music as the source of new clarity in the narrative about the character’s inner psychology and spiritual life. In this way, *Audition* serves not only a personal narrative function for Mia, but also a thematic reiteration of the entire film. “Here’s to the mess we make” is a kind of meta-reflection that hints at the nature of dreams (and of life). There’s the chaos implied in the word “mess”, and, more explicitly, it echoes the loss and farewell in the film’s closing *Epilogue*. Altman [2] notes that lyrics in musical films “serve the function of emotional verbalization; that is, the singing of the unspeakable.” *La La Land*’s unspeakable thing is *Audition*: through the interaction between lyrics and music, we can hear what the girls are vulnerable, what their ideals are, and how strong they are. Through a combination of poetic lyricism and an authentic emotional performance, the film rises above its narrative and makes Mia’s dream a universal vow for art and freedom.

This is the formula rhythmical deceleration of the monologues give prolonged reinforcement. The lyric line that opens the song, “Barefoot, she smiled / leapt without looking”, appears as a solo without accompaniment, the melody being plain and the rhythm scarce, almost breathing rate. This “bare voice” not only shows the heroine in a vulnerable and solitary situation, but also that she is giving away real, rough feeling. The lyric line of the second verse, “She caught a feeling / Sky without ceiling / Sunset inside a frame”, continues the poetic context and uses metaphor to describe the sensory experience of artistic creation. The lyric line of the final verse, “I trace it all back to that / Her and the snow and the sand / Smiling through it, she said she’d do it again”, brings the melody to a gentle end; the rhythm slows down step by step to create a “cyclical sense of time”. From the perspective of psychoacoustics, Juslin and Västfjäll [12] proposed that the rhythmic deceleration, tonal softening, and melodic recurrence in music can create an “emotional prolongation effect” and prolong people’s emotions physiologically. That is, from the end of Mia’s solo, the audience still feels emotionally resonant. It is because the melody gradually decays, and the warmth of the timbre make people feel that emotions are “coded with a delay” in the auditory memory. From a more fundamental psychological perspective, Vuoskoski and Eerola [20] proposed that the sadness triggered by music does not necessarily lead to negative experiences; instead, it often induces “aesthetic empathy” that allows audiences to achieve psychological catharsis and emotional identification through sorrow. Therefore, at the end of *Audition*, the decay of melody is used in conjunction with the “emotional delay” of the image, allowing the audience to experience a transcendent inner tranquility in the sorrow together.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the musical film *La La Land* creates a unique narrative and emotional system for films through the musicals. Creating the emotional value of “emotional compensation” through the utopian group rhythm and improvisational jazz music. Then, the film creates the emotional echo

through the repetition and variation of leitmotifs, awakening the listeners' emotional memory connection through listening to the familiar melody and allowing the audience to continuously experience the emotional regeneration through the familiar melody. Finally, the confessional solos transfer the musical film from externalized performance to internalized psychological narrative. Here, the function of "emotional verbalization" reaches its extreme: language is given way to song and performance is given way to emotion. Music creates the emotional resonance through activating the mirror neuron system and allowing the audience to experience the characters' emotions through physiological experience. This "emotional persistence effect" may explain why the slowing of the melody at the end of the film causes the emotional reverberation to last longer.

Overall, *La La Land* positions music as the emotional core of the narrative system and completes an artistic cycle that transfers the narrative logic from social illusion to psychological narrative and from repetitive memory to emotional extension through three dimensions: emotional compensation, emotional echo and self-confessional solo. The film allows audiences to experience emotion through the gradual musical sequence and thematic recurrence from pleasure to reflection and empathy, using modern and psychological audiovisual language to innovate the structure of classic Hollywood musicals.

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