

A Musical Analysis of Milk

Movie Review

[ALEXIS HEREDIA]

Milk is an inspirational biopic about the life of gay activist Harvey Milk in the 1970s. Brimming with talented actors, this film serves to revive Milk's legacy in a world that was beginning to forget how much of an impact he made as an individual for the LGBTQ+ community. Released in 2008, this film is still relevant today as it serves as an influence to younger generations, suggesting that they step up and fight for what is right. Interviewed by *The Washington Post* feature reporter Ellen McCarthy about the film, activist and friend, Cleve Jones reflects upon his time with Milk: "In most regards he was an ordinary person. I think there's a great lesson for us... to see an ordinary man who did, in fact, change the world."¹ McCarthy's quote here serves as a testimony to the legacy he left behind and the hope he gave to all. *Milk* effectively leaves an emotional mark on its audience through the use of instrumental score. The film draws on this musical element to elevate the viewer's experience and guide their emotional journey from start to finish.

Many factors, such as editing, directors, sound design, cinematography, etc., go into making a movie soar toward success and, in that regard, composers hold much more power in one's movie-going experience than people recognize. More often than not, audience members take for granted the musical score that plays in the background of a film, never really thinking about how it can drastically affect the mood. The score of a film is non-diegetic sound, which is what the audience can hear on screen that is outside the story's world. When exhibited effectively, it enhances both the film and its message to leave an emotional impact on viewers. Danny Elfman, the composer of *Milk*, does an incredible job

¹ Ellen McCarthy, "Cleve Jones Discusses 'Milk,' a Film About Activist Harvey Milk." *The Washington Post*, November 21, 2008, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/20/AR2008112001079_2.html?noredirect=on&sid=ST2008112002048.

of setting a variety of moods throughout the narrative. For instance, at the beginning when Harvey and his boyfriend at the time, Scott, open up the camera store “Castro Camera” (the Castro in San Francisco, CA is known for being one of the first gay neighborhoods of the United States), Elfman’s score is filled with hopeful, brisk, staccato strings paired with a choral element of uplifting, high voices. This track, “The Kiss,” both optimistically speaks to how much Harvey envisioned for his life with Scott as it also lets the viewer know that they are settling in for a rollercoaster of events to come.

An example of placing the audience in an intensely emotional state is when riots begin to ensue in the streets of the Castro because of the repeal of the gay rights ordinance, a law which would make it legal for employers to fire employees who are gay. Harvey is brought down from his apartment to the streets to help. Once Harvey is outside, the camera turns to direct the audience’s attention towards Scott’s reflection in the glass inside their store window. The track “Politics is Theater” hums as the camera lingers on Scott, who is alone in the shop as he stared at Harvey, saddened and a bit disappointed. He feels abandoned by Harvey, as he picks politics by running for office a fourth time, instead of choosing him. Reflecting on Scott’s mood, the score here is somber and uneasy, which indicates this as an important scene in the film. Like “The Kiss” it relies on strings. However, this time it is much slower and takes on a darker tone. The song sticks to lower pitches, or lower notes; the previous upbeat mood that is portrayed earlier is destroyed by Scott’s feelings of betrayal. This parallel to “The Kiss” is interesting as that track plays when Scott and Harvey first arrive at the Castro while “Politics is Theater” plays as their relationship begins to crumble.

Much later in the film, the suicide scene of Jack, Harvey’s lover in the latter half of the film, occurs and Harvey walks up the apartment stairs with post-it notes blaming him for what he is about to see. During my personal experience watching this film, I immediately got very nervous for Harvey as he cautiously made his way through the apartment, warily repeating Jack’s name. As he finally approaches the bathroom curtain that is hiding Jack’s body, there is a final note that says, “You always loved the circus Harvey. How do you like my last act?”² It is hung up with one of Harvey’s election pins which is a final touch to Jack’s blame on Harvey for focusing so heavily on his political career and not him. The score pauses for what seems like forever when Harvey pulls back the curtain and discovers Jack’s body, making the audience desperate to fill the unbearable silence. This emotionally tormenting scene plays the track called “Weepy Donuts” with a focus on a subtle acoustic guitar solo and strings hauntingly echoing in the background. There are some distinct moments of dissonance—clashing

2 Gus Van Sant, dir. *Milk*. 2008; Universal City, CA: Focus Features, 2010. DVD.

notes, which intensify the unnerving scene. There are also many instances

of legato, or long, drawn-out notes, for the strings that build up the viewer's anticipation for what the next note will be, or in relation to the movie, the audience finally discovering Jack's fate. The guitar then comes in and takes over the focus of the track, placing the strings in the background as the scene comes to a devastating close.

Near the end of this film's emotional journey, archival footage of the Castro's residents holding a candlelit vigil for Harvey Milk and then-Mayor of San Francisco, George Moscone, after they were killed in City Hall is shown. This scene uses a powerful track by Elfman entitled "Give 'em Hope," a famous phrase by Harvey himself, which has sections that are similar to "Harvey's Theme 1" as it contains a leitmotif, or a repeated melody, from the latter track. Just as his theme is throughout the film, Harvey Milk was a symbol of hope not just to the people of the Castro and San Francisco, but to those across the nation, both young and old, who saw the chain reaction that his actions and bravery brought about. Having it repeated during this vigil, when it seems like hope is lost, is very moving because it is a cue to the viewer that slowly but surely things will get better and heal themselves. Though it will not be the same, life will progress, and hope will be restored.

Through his political activism, Harvey Milk became a symbol of hope to the gay community across the country. The enormous, widespread impact that he had on the world is immeasurable. He helped the gay community gain civil rights, created representation for the LGBTQ+ community in a public seat of office, spread awareness for the issues that the Castro community were affected by, and helped pass laws to protect gay people across the nation from the bigoted regulations that stood against them; the list goes on and on. Despite his struggles, Harvey found solace in hope for a "better tomorrow."³ He shared that hope with the world making it a more loving and accepting place than when he was born. Danny Elfman's score beautifully transforms this film into a moving piece of art and underlines the activist's beliefs and hopes for the future. His narrative and musical journey move in tandem with one another as the events of Harvey's life drive this emotional journey. In Harvey Milk's simple yet wise words, "You gotta give 'em hope, you gotta give 'em hope."

3 Ibid.