

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Violin as Archive: Genealogies of Sound and Memory in Holocaust Film

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Abstract

The solo violin in Holocaust cinema functions not as a static or sentimental symbol but as a historically contingent sonic mechanism whose meaning evolves across time through specific cinematic and memorial frameworks. Through a comparative analysis of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), *Schindler's List* (1993), and *The Song of Names* (2019), this study traces the violin's transformation from sentimental universalism to moral certitude to speculative absence. Synthesizing Michel Foucault's genealogical method, Michael A. Figueroa's musical adaptation of it, and Amy Lynn Wlodarski's theory of musical witnessing, it develops a hybrid framework for analyzing how sound accrues historical authority and organizes ethical orientation in Holocaust cinema, without claiming transparent access to testimony. In addition to offering a genealogy of sonic symbolism, the article proposes a periodization of Holocaust film through sound—the Normative Period, the Era of the Witness, and the Post-Witness Period—each marked by distinct listening practices and memory-making strategies. This model shifts the analytic center from visual tropes to auditory ones, treating sound as a mediated mode through which Holocaust memory is constructed, stabilized, and contested. In the Post-Witness Period especially, the violin emerges not as testimony but as a speculative, prosthetic form of witnessing whose authority derives from its circulation within institutional memory cultures. By positioning the violin as a discursive and affective site of memory work rather than an autonomous agent, the article reorients Holocaust film analysis toward the politics of sound and underscores the urgent relevance of listening as Holocaust memory becomes increasingly mediated.

“Holocaust.” A term loaded with meaning, yet instantly recognizable. To the public, it evokes a clear historical catastrophe: the genocide of six million Jews and five million others, the Final Solution, and the atrocities of the Nazi regime. Yet, as Deborah Lipstadt observes in *Holocaust: An American Understanding*, this recognition emerged gradually rather than immediately:

In 1945, at the Nuremberg trials, the word *Holocaust* was not used. In 1960, NBC aired *Peter Pan*, in which Captain Hook proclaimed, “A holocaust of children, there is something grand in the idea.” No one objected. In 1968, the Library of Congress added *Holocaust* and *Jewish* as classification categories for works on the genocide. In 1978, NBC aired its blockbuster miniseries *Holocaust*, with no subtitle—just the word itself.¹

Over the course of several decades, “Holocaust,” with capital letters, became synonymous with the genocide itself to the point where any other usage—such as “Black Holocaust” or “nuclear Holocaust”—requires a modifier for clarification. As the preeminent Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg famously put it, “In the beginning, there was no Holocaust.”²

¹Deborah Lipstadt, *Holocaust: An American Understanding* (Rutgers University Press, 2016), 1.

²Raul Hilberg, “Developments in the Historiography of the Holocaust,” in *Comprehending the Holocaust: Historical and Literary Research*, ed. Asher Cohen, Yoav Gelber, and Charlotte Wardi (Peter Lang, 1988), 21.

This evolution of terminology accompanied a larger codification of Holocaust memory, one shaped by trial coverage, survivor testimony, popular media, and institutional frameworks. A recognizable iconography emerged: the infamous *Arbeit Macht Frei* slogan, striped uniforms, Anne Frank's diary (and even the image of Anne herself), and the rail car. Holocaust scholar Oren Baruch Stier refers to these as "the cultural lexicons that the Holocaust bequeathed us," symbols that cultivate an illusion of historical familiarity.³ Yet, while these visual markers may appear stable, their meanings are not. They are continually reinterpreted and recontextualized, especially in Holocaust cinema, where sound, particularly music, plays a powerful yet often overlooked role in structuring the affective and interpretive frames through which cultural memory takes shape. Among sonic elements, the violin has emerged as one of the most persistent auditory symbols through which Holocaust cinema has been made emotionally and culturally legible. But what does the violin *signify* in these films, and how has that meaning changed?

This article argues that the violin's recurring use in Holocaust cinema reflects broader transformations in how sound participates in the mediation of Holocaust memory. Far from being a fixed or sentimental motif, the violin shifts over time: from sentimental universalism (*The Diary of Anne Frank*, 1959) to moral certitude (*Schindler's List*, 1993) to speculative absence (*The Song of Names*, 2019). Tracing this trajectory not only reveals the violin's symbolic plasticity but also illuminates how music participates in the mediation, commodification, and abstraction of trauma across different historical and aesthetic moments. In examining these shifts, the article contributes to ongoing conversations about the politics of representation, the sonic shaping of memory, and the evolving cultural legibility of the Holocaust. Importantly, I approach the violin's "agency" as relational: the instrument does not act outside history, but within historically specific aesthetic and institutional frameworks that both constrain what the violin can mean and enable music to organize both affect and ethical orientation for its consumers.

To analyze these transformations, I draw on Michael A. Figueroa's concept of musical genealogy, which builds on Michel Foucault's genealogical method.⁴ Rather than searching for a single origin or stable meaning, genealogy interrogates how cultural symbols accrue discursive authority across time through ruptures, institutions, and aesthetic labor. In *City of Song: Music and the Making of Modern Jerusalem*, Figueroa traces how musical practices mediate sacred and national imaginaries. Similarly, this article traces how the violin accrues memorial significance in Holocaust cinema not inherently, but through its evolving representational function. The violin thus becomes a site of sonic memory work—not because it carries fixed memorial meaning, but because cinema and memory culture repeatedly recruit it, allowing its role to shift across historical and aesthetic frameworks while still mediating audience affect.

This methodological approach complements musicologist Amy Lynn Wlodarski's concept of musical witness, which theorizes witnessing as both the product (witness as noun) and the process (witness as verb) of Holocaust memory, focusing on mediation rather than transparent access to testimony.⁵ Wlodarski's model emphasizes music's capacity to mediate ethical engagement with the

³Oren Baruch Stier, *Holocaust Icons: Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory* (Rutgers University Press, 2015), 1.

⁴Michael A. Figueroa, *City of Song: Music and the Making of Modern Jerusalem* (Oxford University Press, 2022). Michel Foucault outlines his concept of genealogy in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," where he distinguishes genealogy from traditional historiography. Rather than tracing a linear origin or stable essence, genealogy seeks to uncover the contingent, discontinuous, and power-laden processes through which meaning is produced. See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Cornell University Press, 1977), 139–64.

⁵Amy Lynn Wlodarski develops the concept of "musical witness" in *Musical Witness and Holocaust Representation* to theorize how music can function both as a product of Holocaust memory (witness as noun) and as a process of ethical engagement (witness as verb). Her model moves beyond music as an emotional cue or commemorative symbol, instead framing it as an active participant in the construction, transmission, and reception of Holocaust history. In her reading, music has the potential to bear witness—to "speak" or mediate trauma—even when traditional forms of testimony fail, are silenced, or no longer exist. Wlodarski's work provides a crucial bridge between Holocaust studies and musicology, arguing that sound can occupy a space of testimony that is at once affective, interpretive, and ethically charged. This framework is foundational for understanding how Holocaust music—and by extension, Holocaust film music—might function not simply as a representational strategy but as a

past, foregrounding its dialogical potential. While some films align closely with her notion of musical witnessing, others stretch it, asking whether music can substitute for absent testimony or whether it risks aestheticizing loss when direct memory is no longer accessible. Taken together, genealogy and musical witnessing allow the violin to be read not as a neutral sonic marker but as a historically contingent mode of Holocaust mediation.

To situate this transformation historically, the article turns to the broader evolution of Holocaust memory. English and literary scholar Aleida Assmann offers a useful framework, identifying three stages: (1) the postwar era of silence (1945–1985); (2) the emergence of institutional memory culture (1985–2015); and (3) the post-witness era (2015–present).⁶ As she writes:

The first stage relates to the memory of the victims that emerged after 1945 in a culture of forgetting; the second stage started in 1985 when a new “memory culture” was developed as a public and institutional context that established different frames of transmission; and a third stage concerns the current transformation of Holocaust memory confronting us with new challenges as we move across the shadow line of an embodied memory of survivors to an exclusively mediated memory.⁷

Building on Assman’s model, I develop a more specifically cinematic genealogy that traces how these broader shifts are mediated through sound, image, and narrative convention. Film does not merely reflect changes in Holocaust remembrance; it actively participates in shaping collective memory by reinforcing, challenging, and redefining the terms through which the Holocaust becomes culturally legible.

From this perspective, I identify three key stages in Holocaust cinema: 1) the Normative Period (pre-1978); 2) the Era of the Witness (1978–1990s); and 3) the Post-Witness Period (2010s–present). Before the Holocaust was widely recognized in the United States as a distinct historical and cultural category, film often framed Jewish suffering within broader wartime narratives, relying on Hollywood conventions of sentiment, survival, and humanism. By the late 1970s survivor testimony and institutional memory culture repositioned witnessing at the center of Holocaust representation, producing a stronger emphasis on personal narrative and historical reconstruction. In the post-witness era, as living testimony recedes, cinematic representation increasingly turns to abstraction, mediation, and aesthetic experimentation, raising new questions about authenticity, legibility, and loss. Each of these periods is exemplified through one of this article’s central case studies: *The Diary of Anne Frank* situates the violin within Hollywood’s emotional grammar as a symbol of innocence and coming-of-age; *Schindler’s List* recasts it as a moral emblem of historical witnessing, canonized through institutional circulation and popular uptake; and *The Song of Names* renders it as a speculative echo, standing in for voices lost to history. Tracing this evolution genealogically reveals not only what the violin signifies in each film but also how it comes to mean what it does—and at what cost.

In what follows, I first outline the broader evolution of Holocaust memory and its entanglement with cinematic representation before turning to the persistent lacuna in Holocaust and film scholarship: despite the richness of both fields, the role of sound in Holocaust cinema has received little sustained attention. I then examine *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Schindler’s List*, and *The Song of Names* to show how the violin accrues discursive meaning across time, reflecting broader shifts in Holocaust memory. I conclude by considering the implications of this study for both Holocaust and sound studies, arguing for the urgent need for more deeply interdisciplinary approaches to listening, witnessing, and memory production.

medium of postmemorial labor. See Amy Lynn Wlodarski, *Musical Witness and Holocaust Representation* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 3–5.

⁶Aleida Assmann, “Transformations of Holocaust Memory: Frames of Transmission and Mediation,” in *Holocaust Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Memory, Images, and the Ethics of Representation*, ed. Oleksandr Kobrynsky and Gerd Bayer (Columbia University Press, 2015), 23–24.

⁷Assmann, 23–24.

The Evolution of Holocaust Memory and its Cinematic Representation

Understanding the violin's shifting function in Holocaust cinema requires a broader view of how Holocaust memory itself has changed across historical and aesthetic registers. Cultural memory is not static; it is shaped by institutional practices, representational codes, and popular expectations. Cinema has served as one of the most visible and affectively charged areas where these dynamics unfold.

Hollywood's postwar Holocaust films—including *The Stranger* (1946), *The Search* (1948), *The Juggler* (1953), *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), and *Exodus* (1960)—largely avoided explicit acknowledgment of Jewish victimhood.⁸ Antisemitism was often reframed as a generalized threat to democratic ideals, while Jewish specificity was rendered invisible through sentimental and humanist narratives. In this Normative Period, film scores relied on lush orchestration and romantic violin motifs, channeling trauma through a sonic idiom more attuned to love stories than genocide. Even films that confronted trauma directly, such as *The Pawnbroker* (1964), filtered it through experimental aesthetics that emphasized psychological rupture over historical specificity.

By the late 1970s, the landscape shifted with the rise of survivor testimony and institutional memory culture. NBC's *Holocaust* miniseries (1978), the founding of the Fortunoff Archive (1979), and the growing authority of testimonial discourse reframed Holocaust memory around witnessing.⁹ Films such as *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and *Schindler's List* (1993) positioned testimony at the center, with music taking on a more moral, even sanctified role. John Williams's violin theme in *Schindler's List*, for instance, became not just an emotional cue but a cultural artifact, circulated in commemorations, concerts, and social media, detached from its cinematic origin yet still coded as "Holocaust sound."¹⁰ At the same time, films like *Harold and Maude* (1971) complicate this arc: its juxtaposition of Maude's implied Holocaust past with a gently optimistic folk soundtrack (via Cat Stevens) mediates memory through irony rather than solemnity.¹¹ The film never directly addresses Maude's Holocaust past beyond a fleeting glimpse of her Auschwitz tattoo.

More recently, Holocaust cinema's entrance into the post-witness era is shaped by the absence of living testimony. Films increasingly turn towards satire (*Inglourious Basterds*, 2009, and *Jojo Rabbit*, 2019), abstraction (*The Zone of Interest*, 2023), fictional ritual (*The Song of Names*, 2019), and heritage-inflected pilgrimage narratives such as *A Real Pain* (2024).¹² In *A Real Pain*, memory is mediated almost entirely through a non-diegetic score by Frédéric Chopin—music that is at once nationalistic,

⁸These early postwar films exemplify the Normative Period of Holocaust cinema. As Annette Insdorf notes, such films often universalized suffering and avoided graphic depictions of atrocity, aligning with contemporary American sensibilities and Cold War ideological aims. See Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2002). On the representational elisions in early postwar cinema, see also Omer Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema: From the Golem to Don't Touch My Holocaust* (Indiana University Press, 2005).

⁹NBC's *Holocaust* miniseries marked a turning point in American public engagement with the genocide, drawing massive audiences and helping to mainstream Holocaust discourse. Around the same time, the establishment of Yale University's Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies in 1979 institutionalized survivor voices as a primary mode of remembrance. Together with the televised Eichmann trial nearly two decades earlier, these developments catalyzed a broader cultural turn toward testimony as both moral imperative and representational mode. See Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (Yale University Press, 1991); Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Cornell University Press, 2006); and Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁰*Sophie's Choice* (1982), directed by Alan J. Pakula and based on William Styron's novel, is widely cited for its emotionally charged depiction of Holocaust trauma, particularly through the figure of the "choiceless choice." The film relies heavily on melodramatic conventions, including Marvin Hamlisch's lush, romantic score, which amplifies the personal tragedy of Sophie's past while framing her experience within a broader narrative of loss and sacrifice. While the film was critically acclaimed and earned Meryl Streep an Academy Award, it has also sparked debate among scholars for its narrative focus on a non-Jewish survivor and for aestheticizing atrocity through sentimentality.

¹¹The use of Cat Stevens's upbeat folk soundtrack against Maude's unspoken past and her character's existential outlook in historical trauma creates a poignant dissonance, reflecting the emotional complexity of Holocaust memory in postwar American cinema. See William C. Pamerleau, "The Nietzschean Free Spirit in *Dead Poets Society* and *Harold and Maude*," in *Existentialist Cinema* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 193–217.

¹²*The Zone of Interest*'s dissonant soundscape and refusal to visualize atrocity construct a sonic architecture of horror that displaces traditional modes of representation. *Jojo Rabbit* mobilizes satire and irony to critique Nazi indoctrination while maintaining an emotional core. *Inglourious Basterds* uses counterfactual history to explore revenge fantasies and the spectacle of violence. On the ethics and implications of such aesthetic approaches, see Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust*, 9–10, 26.

canonical, and historically overdetermined. Such nationalism reflects what Abby Anderton describes as asserting one's "own cultural or military dominance through their musical choices."¹³ Detached from explicit scenes of atrocity, Chopin's piano works function as ambient memorial sound, mapping Poland as both cultural homeland and site of loss. This strategy, in turn, echoes the use of Chopin in *The Pianist* (2002), but without anchoring music to lived testimony. Instead, Chopin circulates as an inherited effect, carrying the weight of prior cinematic memory as much as historical reference.

Tracking the evolution of the violin genealogically allows us to move beyond questions of historical accuracy or emotional authenticity and instead ask how symbols like the violin acquire—and lose—discursive authority. In *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the violin is a sentimental leitmotif, embedded within Hollywood's emotional grammar. In *Schindler's List*, it becomes a moral emblem, tethered to testimonial gravitas. In *The Song of Names*, the violin is no longer stable—it becomes absence, speculation, and substitution. It does not confirm memory but invokes what cannot be remembered.

There has been a substantial amount of work dedicated to Holocaust film over the past several decades spanning historical analysis, visual culture, narrative ethics, and trauma aesthetics. Foundational texts such as Annette Insdorf's *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* and Joshua Hirsch's *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust* helped establish cinema as a central medium through which Holocaust memory is constructed and consumed.¹⁴ Scholars such as Omer Bartov and Barbie Zelizer have explored how film mediates the unspeakable through visual narrative strategies.¹⁵ Brad Prager's work, particularly on Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), has expanded this field by analyzing the boundaries between reverent and transgressive representation. Rich Brownstein's *Holocaust Cinema Complete* further provides a sweeping pedagogical and archival survey, illustrating the breadth of Holocaust film as both a historical and cultural category.¹⁶

Despite this vibrant body of literature, the sonic dimensions of Holocaust film remain underexplored. Sound is often treated as ancillary—an emotional cue or atmospheric layer that supports visual storytelling. Yet music, like image, participates in the construction of memory. In musicology, Włodarski's scholarship has been foundational in arguing for music's capacity to function as a form of witnessing, particularly in her work on Holocaust music and its ethical implications.¹⁷ Building on this foundation, scholars such as Anderton and Elias Berner have more recently contributed to the conversation: Anderton explores how Allied propaganda and sonic imagery shaped cultural memory of concentration camps, while Berner examines the role of music in films about the Shoah, foregrounding sound as a cultural and historiographic agent in its own right.¹⁸

¹³Abby Anderton, "The Sound of Atrocity Propaganda: Listening to the Concentration Camp in Allied Cultural Memory," *German Studies Review* 42, no. 3 (October 2019): 502.

¹⁴Insdorf's *Indelible Shadows* and Joshua Hirsch's *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust* (Temple University Press, 2004) are both foundational works in the field of Holocaust film studies. Insdorf offers one of the earliest comprehensive surveys of Holocaust cinema, examining its ethical, narrative, and aesthetic dimensions. Hirsch extends this conversation through the lens of trauma theory, arguing that post-Holocaust cinema functions as a medium of "post-traumatic" witnessing, shaping how historical trauma is processed and visualized.

¹⁵These scholars have analyzed the challenges of visually representing the Holocaust and its aftermath. Bartov interrogates how cinematic depictions often obscure or distort the specificity of Jewish suffering in favor of broader humanist narratives. Zelizer explores how the camera constructs collective memory and historical meaning, particularly through imagery of trauma. Kapczynski examines the ethical and political implications of postwar and contemporary German cinema's engagement with Holocaust memory. See Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema*, and Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye* (University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁶Rich Brownstein, *Holocaust Cinema Complete: A History and Analysis of 400 Films, with a Teaching Guide* (McFarland, 2021).

¹⁷Włodarski (69) offers one of the earliest sustained musicological analyses of Holocaust film by examining Hanns Eisler's score for *Night and Fog* (1955). She argues that Eisler adopted what she terms "a practical strategy of empathic unsettlement" to convey Holocaust trauma while maintaining a necessary critical distance. Through close readings of three pivotal scenes, Włodarski demonstrates how the score operates as a form of musical witnessing, each instance illuminating a distinct aspect of how music mediates memory, emotion, and ethical engagement.

¹⁸Anderton, "The Sound of Atrocity Propaganda," 499–518, and Elias Berner, *Music in Films about the Shoah: Commemoration, Comfort, Provocation* (Springer, 2024).

This article builds on these interdisciplinary efforts by foregrounding sound not as an accessory to Holocaust film but as a central discursive and memorial force. Through a genealogical reading of the violin's evolving role in Holocaust cinema—from sentimental universalism to moral certitude to speculative absence—sound serves as a dynamic and historically contingent medium of Holocaust memory. Rather than acting as a stable or singular symbol, the violin accrues meaning across time through its entanglement with popular aesthetics, institutional frameworks, and shifting modes of witnessing. By attending to what is sounded, not just what is seen, this study offers a new way of listening to Holocaust film and of understanding how memory is mediated through both presence and absence, resonance, and silence.

The Diary of Anne Frank

In *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), the solo violin does not bear witness in the robust, dialogical sense that Wlodarski outlines in her theory of musical witness. While the instrument carries expressive weight and deep emotional resonance, its function aligns more closely with Hollywood's sentimental conventions than with historical testimony. Here, the violin's role is shaped less by dialogical engagement with Holocaust history than by a romanticized aesthetic framework that foregrounds Anne's personal development over the genocide that ultimately claims her life. The violin offers an emotional throughline but not a testimony; it moves the viewer but leaves the historical specificities of Jewish persecution largely unarticulated.

Directed by George Stevens and based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning Broadway play by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, the film adapts Anne's diary into a narrative shaped by American ideals of innocence, moral clarity, and courage under pressure. It earned eight Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture and Best Original Score, and won three. While embraced by contemporary audiences, the film has since been critiqued for its universalizing lens, framing Anne's story as emblematic of human resilience rather than Jewish suffering. This interpretive mode is characteristic of what I identify as the "Normative Period" of Holocaust cinema: a time when the Holocaust had not yet been firmly established as a distinct historical category in American public discourse and when its representation was shaped by preexisting cinematic codes of sentiment, romance, and uplift.

Hollywood's "Golden Age" orchestral style—spanning roughly the 1930s through the early 1950s—established a musical vocabulary defined by lush string writing, lyrical solo violin passages, and sweeping harmonic progressions that signaled emotion and inner transformation. Composers such as Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Max Steiner, and Miklós Rózsa codified this idiom with leitmotifs, symphonic orchestration, and tight synchronization between music and narrative, creating a system in which sound reinforced character psychology and dramatic arcs.¹⁹ Within this tradition, the violin came to signify nobility, innocence, romantic longing, and redemptive suffering—an expressive shorthand that shaped how audiences were taught to feel.

Composer Alfred Newman's score for *The Diary of Anne Frank* inherits and repurposes this established sonic lexicon. Drawing on the conventions of Golden Age scoring, Newman employs string arrangements, prominent solo violin lines, and harmonically expansive cues to guide the viewer through Anne's emotional arc. Within this framework, the violin functions less as a historical witness than as a sentimental narrator, softening the historical gravity of Anne's context in favor of interior transformation. From a genealogical perspective, this use of the violin reflects not a neutral or spontaneous expressive choice, but the inheritance of a specific discursive tradition. Returning to Figueroa, genealogy functions as a "history of the present," illuminating the historical conditions that make musical meanings possible while resisting teleological narratives that render them inevitable.²⁰ Read in this way, the violin's affective power in Newman's score emerges not as an intrinsic response to

¹⁹See Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (BFI, 1987).

²⁰See Figueroa, *City of Song*, 16–17.

Anne's story but as the product of historically conditioned listening practices shaped by Hollywood's scoring conventions. The violin's associations with innocence, spiritual longing, and redemptive beauty thus derive not from Anne's historical reality, but from Hollywood's well-established emotional lexicon. The sonic inheritance shapes how viewers are taught to feel: not toward atrocity, but toward interior transformation. The violin, in this case, operates not as a witness to rupture but as an aesthetic residue of prior sentimental codes. As Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert argue, film music does not simply accompany narrative but actively participates in cultural representation—shaping how audiences interpret memory, identity, and emotion through sound; thus, music should be understood “not as a scarcely noticed background . . . but as an agent, force, and an object engaged in ongoing negotiations with image, narrative, and context.”²¹ Newman's score draws on this cinematic grammar, in which the violin reliably evokes interiority, nostalgia, and moral uplift—even in the context of mass atrocity.

The first appearance of Anne's theme occurs in the film's opening sequence, after the war, as Otto Frank returns to the annex to retrieve his daughter's diary. As Miep Gies hands him the diary, a solo violin line emerges—delicate, lyrical, and unmoored from historical specificity. At this point, the violin is not yet connected to Anne as a character but rather to the object of her voice, her written words. It functions as a kind of sonic prologue, framing the diary not as testimony to atrocity but as a symbol of memory and loss rendered in familiar Hollywood emotional language.



Example 1: Alfred Newman, Anne's Theme, from *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

The theme's association with Anne's personality begins shortly thereafter, in one of the first scenes inside the annex. Upon learning that Peter van Daan owns a cat, Anne gleefully exclaims, “I love cats!” At the precise moment she says the word “love,” her violin theme returns (see Example 1), highlighting the instrument's alignment with childlike wonder and non-romantic affection.²² Here, the violin communicates exuberance, curiosity, and youthful joy—qualities that foreground Anne's character as vibrant and emotionally open. This moment also marks the violin's shift from diary-object to character-theme, but its function remains sentimental, not testimonial.

As the film progresses, the theme adapts to mirror Anne's maturation. It appears during episodes of familial tension, holiday reflection, and especially her evolving relationship with Peter. Halfway through the film, in a scene marked by introspection, Anne's voice appears acousmatically—that is, as a sound we hear without seeing its source, a phenomenon that Michel Chion identifies as central to cinema's ability to evoke memory, presence, and absence simultaneously.²³ For Chion, the acousmatic voice holds particular power because it is disembodied and yet intimate, hovering between the real and the imagined. In this moment, Anne's voice emerges in voiceover: “There is one great change, however—a

²¹Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert, eds., *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema* (University of California Press, 2007), 3–4.

²²All musical transcriptions are done by the author unless otherwise stated.

²³Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (Columbia University Press, 1994), 71–74. For further discussion on acousmatic theory, including critiques and expansions of Chion's framework, see Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2014), and R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Destiny Books, 1994).

change in myself.” The violin reenters at this moment with a newly extended, upward-moving variation, coinciding with her admission that she has gotten her period. The development in the theme corresponds not to external trauma but to personal transformation, underscoring the score’s focus on interiority and adolescence. The violin serves here as a musical metaphor for growth, rather than a vehicle for reckoning with the war unfolding outside the annex walls.

Here, the expansion of Anne’s theme underscores her transition from childhood naivete to a more reflective self-awareness (see Example 2). The lush orchestration and lyrical development of the theme exemplify Hollywood sentimentalism, guiding the audience’s emotional response to Anne’s experience. Rather than engaging with the historical weight of the Holocaust, the film’s score, coupled with Anne’s voiceover, frames this moment within a romanticized coming-of-age narrative, reinforcing a tone of nostalgia and wonder rather than tragedy. As a result, the audience becomes more invested in Anne’s personal journey—her emotions, aspirations, and budding love story—than in the inevitability of her fate.



Example 2: Alfred Newman, Culmination of Anne’s Theme, from *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

As the film moves toward its conclusion, the violin reaches its emotional and thematic apex. The final example I want to discuss marks the culmination of Anne’s theme—a moment that encapsulates the film’s full realization of her character arc. By this point, the naïve child from the beginning has been replaced by a young woman who, through Hollywood’s sentimental lens, appears wise beyond her years. The scene presents Anne as a figure of moral clarity, reflecting on the ethical challenges of the world, the depth of her personal growth, and her evolving relationship with Peter. Here, the score reinforces the film’s universalizing tendencies, framing Anne’s development not through the historical specificity of her fate but as part of a broader, almost timeless coming-of-age journey.

The final words the audience hears are Anne’s: “In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.” Otto Frank, holding her diary in the annex, replies: “She puts me to shame.” The solo violin returns once more, now surrounded by full strings, lifting Anne’s words into a space of emotional transcendence. And yet, this sonic culmination leaves her fate untouched. The film ends without depicting the arrest, the camps, or her death; instead, it closes on a note of affirmation, shaping Holocaust memory into a narrative of idealism and emotional resilience. The violin, here, serves as a sonic container for this uplift—eloquent, moving, and profoundly American in its sentiment.

In interviews, Newman described his approach as one of spiritual and emotional elevation. “All the music,” he explained, “would be motivated by high ideals, the tenderness and the spiritual qualities inherent in their family life . . . For Anne, I tried to achieve in her music her youth, her simple candor, her warmth, and her abiding and inspiring faith.”²⁴ These are not the materials of testimony, but of American sentimentality. The violin, in this context, is not a witness to atrocity but an emotional register of coming-of-age, rendered in a sonic idiom familiar to midcentury audiences.

To return to Wlodarski, *The Diary of Anne Frank* offers a case in which music participates in Holocaust representation, but not as a full musical witness. It does not emerge from the imaginative engagement with genocide that characterizes witness as a noun, nor does it invite audiences into an interpretive dialogue with historical trauma as witness as a verb. Instead, the violin theme functions as a

²⁴Cook, *A History of Film Music*, 502.

stabilizing emotional guide, channeling feeling toward Anne's personal growth and philosophical idealism rather than toward specificities of Jewish persecution. Its power lies in its beauty, not its testimony.

As Deborah Lipstadt notes, the Broadway adaptation—and by extension, the film—deliberately softened the horror of Anne's fate, opting instead for an “optimistic upbeat note” that reassured audiences through hope rather than historical reckoning.²⁵ Similarly, Lawrence Epstein observes how Anne's explicitly Jewish reflections were recast in the film as a universal meditation on human suffering—an approach that, while emotionally resonant, flattens the specificity of Jewish persecution and reshapes Holocaust memory into a more palatable, Americanized form.²⁶ Seen through the lens of musical genealogy and witness, the violin in *The Diary of Anne Frank* exemplifies the Normative Period's reliance on inherited sonic tropes. Its emotive power is undeniable, but its role in mediating Holocaust memory remains tethered to the aesthetics of uplift and emotional coherence. Crucially, this affective strategy does not disappear with the close of the Normative Period. Rather, it establishes a sonic logic—one in which the violin confers moral or emotional resolution at moments when historical representation comes under strain—that will later be reconfigured within new ethical and institutional frameworks.

Schindler's List

Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* debuted in 1993, the same year the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened in Washington, DC, a convergence that cemented the Holocaust's place in American public memory.²⁷ By this time, Holocaust remembrance had entered what Assmann calls the Era of the Witness, a period defined by the institutionalization of testimony, the proliferation of educational and memorial practices, and the growing authority of visual and narrative representation in shaping cultural memory. *Schindler's List* was both a product and a catalyst for this moment. Widely praised for its humanitarian message and pedagogical potential, the film won seven Academy Awards and drew over 25 million American viewers in its first year. Yet, like the museum, the film also contributed to the crystallization of a particular moral framework—one in which the Holocaust was to be remembered through reverence, realism, and redemptive narrative arcs.

Schindler's List draws on the visual grammar of classical Hollywood not through sound, but through its carefully composed images and narrative structure. At the heart of this is pastiche—a deliberate blending of visual and narrative techniques from multiple cinematic traditions to produce a layered and multifaceted representation of the Holocaust. Spielberg borrows from earlier styles associated with both Hollywood realism and historical spectacle, but without the critical distance of parody. He blends documentary aesthetics with dramatic visual techniques, producing an ambiguous realism that heightens the film's emotional impact while making it susceptible to mass reproduction and reinterpretation. This visual pastiche references both Holocaust documentaries, such as *Night and Fog* (1955/56) and *Shoah* (1985), and canonical films like *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Godfather* (1972). *Night and Fog*, one of the earliest cinematic treatments of the Holocaust, juxtaposes archival footage with present-day images of abandoned camps, cultivating a reflective, unsettling tone. *Citizen Kane*, by

²⁵See Deborah Lipstadt, “America and the Memory of the Holocaust, 1950–1965,” *Modern Judaism* 16, no. 3 (October 1996): 197.

²⁶For more on “Universalization,” see Lawrence J. Epstein, who critiques the screenplay's transformation of Anne's historically grounded reflections on Jewish suffering into a generalized statement about human oppression. Lawrence J. Epstein, *American Jewish Films: The Search for Identity* (McFarland, 2013), 67. Further, Cynthia Ozick wrote that Anne Frank's story has been “bowdlerized, distorted, transmuted, traduced, reduced; it has been infantilized, Americanized, homogenized, sentimentalized, falsified, kitschified, and *in fact*, blatantly and arrogantly denied.” See Cynthia Ozick, “Who Owns Anne Frank?,” *The New Yorker*, September 28, 1997, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1997/10/06/who-owns-anne-frank>.

²⁷Edward T. Linenthal documents the political and curatorial struggles that shaped the Holocaust Memorial Museum's development, highlighting how debates mirrored broader anxieties about Holocaust representation in the United States. Both the film and the museum contributed to what Linenthal describes as a new civic sacred space that positioned the Holocaust as a central moral reference point in American culture. See Edward T. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (Penguin Books, 1997).

contrast, exemplifies Hollywood's narrative and visual sophistication, with its deep-focus cinematography, nonlinear storytelling, and psychologically complex protagonist, techniques echoed in Spielberg's portrayal of Schindler.

In *Schindler's List*, Spielberg employs long takes and deliberate camera movements to construct a visual language that draws on both documentary and classical cinematic traditions. He explicitly references *Night and Fog* through the interweaving of color and black-and-white sequences, reinforcing a connection to earlier documentary forms. Spielberg has also acknowledged that his portrayal of Schindler was influenced by Charles Foster Kane, the central figure of *Citizen Kane*, describing both as "larger-than-life figures who become rich, who contain both good and evil, and whose motivation is ambiguous."²⁸ These formal and intertextual choices situate Schindler within a lineage of morally complex protagonists while grounding the film's aesthetic in recognizable cinematic conventions.

While Newman's score for *The Diary of Anne Frank* employed the violin as a romanticized leitmotif, John Williams's score uses it sparingly, reserving it for moments of moral and emotional reckoning. The solo theme, performed by Itzhak Perlman, is not background music—it functions as a sonic claim to witnessing—it is a musical gesture that renders judgment rather than fact and that derives its authority not from testimony itself but from the cinema's capacity to position music as an ethical surrogate. It does not recount the events of the Holocaust, but it asserts their moral weight. The violin's restrained, mournful voice occupies a symbolic space, calling the audience not to historical accuracy but to ethical recognition. And yet, the violin's authority in this context is precarious. While the film uses it sparingly, the cultural afterlife of the theme has made it one of the most recognizable musical motifs of Holocaust representation. Its very success as a sonic icon raises questions about the tension between witnessing and commodification, between ethical sound and marketable sentiment. Read genealogically, the violin's authority in *Schindler's List* does not emerge *ex nihilo* with the Era of the Witness, nor does it represent a clean break from earlier modes of Holocaust representation. Rather, it reconfigures an affective strategy inherited from the Normative Period—one in which music stabilizes meaning at moments when historical representation strains. What distinguishes Spielberg's film from *The Diary of Anne Frank* is not the violin's structural function but the moral framework within which that function operates. In both films, the solo violin ultimately confers emotional coherence at a point of narrative closure; yet where Newman's score lifts Anne's idealism into sentimental transcendence, William's violin anchors ethical judgment and collective reckoning. Attending to this overlap complicates a strictly linear periodization of Holocaust memory and reveals how Hollywood's sentimental grammar continues to shape—even under conditions of heightened ethical seriousness—the sonic architecture of cinematic Holocaust representation.

This ambiguity begins with the film's opening. After a brief candle-lighting ceremony, the image shifts from color to black and white, and the screen is filled with the elegant figure of Oskar Schindler preparing for an evening out. Over this sequence, we hear "Por una Cabeza," a tango by Carlos Gardel arranged by Angela Morley for the film, performed by solo violin and accordion.²⁹ Initially ambiguous in origin, the music is revealed to be diegetic, emanating from a radio in Schindler's hotel suite. In this moment, music is aligned not with memory or mourning, but with style, seduction, and moral ambiguity. Schindler, adorned with a swastika pin, is not yet positioned as a moral agent but as a man absorbed in the performance of his own charisma, aimed both at those around him and at us as viewers. The tango's violin strains do not complicate this portrayal; they elevate it, wrapping his self-styling in sensuality and spectacle. The music flatters his image, inviting aesthetic admiration rather than ethical judgment. That the violin first appears as an instrument of Schindler's self-stylization—and later reemerges as a marker of victimhood—is not incidental; it reveals the instability of musical meaning in a film that repeatedly displaces ethical authority onto sound.

²⁸See Miriam Hansen, "Schindler's List is Not Shoah: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 292–312.

²⁹For discussion of arranger Angela Morley's contribution, see "Question About the Tango from Schindler's List," *John Williams Fan Network Forums*, <https://www.jwfan.com/forums/index.php?topic/19328-question-about-the-tango-from-schindlers-list/>.

It is not until much later in the film that the solo violin returns, now as non-diegetic score. In a pivotal scene, the women from Schindler's factory are mistakenly rerouted to Auschwitz. The camera follows them as they are unloaded, their heads shaved and led into a shower room. This sequence, which sparked critical debate for its depiction of the gas chambers, with some scholars like Yosefa Loshitzky accusing Spielberg of violating a visual taboo, is underscored by the mournful return of the violin. The music's entry is carefully timed: it begins as the women confront the unknown.³⁰ Their silence is met not by dialogue, but by the violin's voice, a substitution that invites the viewers to hear where speech is structurally foreclosed, rather than a recovery of testimony itself. Here, the instrument functions as both an emotional cue and an ethical frame. Its wordless lament locates the audience's sympathies and guides affective response. The violin does not just heighten the scene's intensity—it frames its moral stakes, guiding ethical interpretation without claiming to speak from within the historical event.

I have described this elsewhere as a “moral diegesis,” or a sonic structure in which non-diegetic music is deliberately reserved for the victims, constructing a moral distinction between the perpetrators who are surrounded only by the diegetic sounds of their own violence and those they harm.³¹ However, this moral function is not achieved through clear-cut separation alone. The violin often occupies what Robynn Stilwell has termed the “fantastical gap,” a liminal space between the diegetic and non-diegetic realms, where music hovers as if it could belong to both the audience and the characters.³² In *Schindler's List*, the gap is crucial to the violin's power. Though the music is formally non-diegetic, it registers affectively as if it emanates from the internal world of the victims, a ghostly lament, a voice assigned to those who cannot speak within the film's representational limits. In this way, moral diegesis and the fantastical gap work in tandem: the former sets the ethical parameters of sonic alignment, while the latter enables emotional slippage across narrative boundaries. The result is a form of musical witnessing that is both authoritative and intimate, external and yet deeply embedded in the felt world of the film.



Example 3: John Williams, Theme from *Schindler's List*.

³⁰Yosefa Loshitzky, *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List* (Indiana University Press, 2000), 111. In turn, Alison Landsberg has also mentioned the *Bilderverbot*, writing, “has been criticized explicitly for its realism, for the very strategies that make identification possible. Such attacks derive both from Adorno's proclamation that there could be no poetry after Auschwitz and from the *Bilderverbot*, the taboo against representation, which is a fundamental tenet of Judaism.” See Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2004), 124.

³¹Kathryn Agnes Huether, “Moral Diegesis in *Schindler's List* (1993),” *Music and the Holocaust*, 2023, <https://holocaustmusic.org/memory/holocaust-film/the-diegesis-of-schindlers-list/>.

³²Robynn J. Stilwell, “The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic,” in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, 185–87. Elias Berner discusses the linkage of emotion building to the nondiegetic and diegetic as well, noting that they were used “as a means to link these characters affectively with the audience and thus ‘authenticate’ them, and in particular, their emotions.” See Berner, *Music in Films about the Shoah*, 60–61.

The final and most iconic use of the violin comes near the film's end (see Example 3). Schindler, now a fugitive, is given a ring by his Jewish workers, engraved with the Talmudic phrase, "Whoever saves one life, saves the world entire." As he breaks down, lamenting that he could have saved more lives, the solo violin enters. It plays the full statement of Williams's theme and crystallizes the film's moral architecture. Schindler is not only forgiven; he is mourned in advance. The violin here is elegiac, not just for the dead but for the possibility of redemption. It is now a musical witness as a product, a crafted musical object that carries the emotional charge of memory, even if it cannot offer documentary precision. The very clarity with which the violin is positioned as an ethical voice within the film is what enables its later detachment, making it both legible and transferable across contexts that no longer require historical specificity.

But it is precisely this powerful legibility that renders the theme vulnerable. In the years following the film's release, the *Schindler's List* violin theme became one of the most circulated pieces of film music in history. Skater Katarina Witt performed to it at the 1994 Olympics. It has been arranged for solo piano, cello duet, and electronic remixes and appeared in countless memorial events and popular playlists.³³ On Spotify alone, it has been recorded and redistributed in over 250 different versions. Its original context, carefully tethered to a specific moral diegesis, is no longer required.

The violin now functions as a sort of "severed sonic icon": a sonic artifact so thoroughly abstracted from its historical origins that it no longer bears witness to a specific past but instead operates as emotional shorthand for generalized sorrow, loss, and moral gravitas. It cues audiences to feel, but not necessarily to remember, to respond affectively without the burden of context or historical specificity.

Applied here, a genealogical perspective helps illuminate how the Holocaust violin came to carry its specific constellation of emotional and ethical meanings. Rather than asking where this sonic figure "came from," the question becomes: how did the *Schindler's List* violin theme come to signify grief, moral clarity, and Jewish memory at a specific historical moment—and how did that signification mutate over time into something more symbolic than situated and more consumable than commemorative?

In the case of *Schindler's List*, the violin's authority emerges from a convergence of 1990s memory politics, Holocaust institutionalization, and the stylistic legibility of classical Hollywood scoring. Williams's theme, anchored by Perlman's performance, is placed carefully within the film's moral diegesis, used sparingly and only for the victims, establishing it as a sonic vessel for ethical weight.³⁴ However, the theme's post-film afterlife on skating rinks, playlists, and TikTok reels reveals how easily its affective resonance could be detached from that moral structure. What once marked ethical seriousness now risks flattening historical complexity.

Schindler's List thus marks a turning point in the sonic representation of the Holocaust. The violin becomes not just a musical instrument but also a carrier of memory, judgment, and mourning. Yet, in its very success, it also illustrates the risk at the heart of Holocaust representation: that in striving to witness through beauty, we may unwittingly aestheticize trauma into a gesture of feeling that no longer asks anything of us.

The Song of Names

The Song of Names (2019), directed by François Girard (also the director of *The Red Violin*, 1998) and scored by Howard Shore, is based on Norman Lebrecht's historical novel of the same name. Though a Canadian production, the film resonates broadly with contemporary global trends in Holocaust cinema, especially the increasing turn toward aestheticized, post-testimonial forms of remembrance. Winner of Canadian Screen Awards for both Best Original Score and Best Original Song, the film departs from the testimonial realism of earlier Holocaust films and instead offers a speculative, affective meditation on absence, identity, and the limits of memory.

³³Axel1996, "Katarina Witt (GER) – 1994 World Professionals, Ladies' Artistic Program," YouTube video, 5:37, posted February 28, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JESp-O0EwRY>.

³⁴John Williams, *For Itzhak Perlman: Three Pieces from Schindler's List: Violin and Piano* (Hal Leonard, 1994).

Spanning fifty years, *The Song of Names* traces the story of Dovidl Rapoport, a gifted Jewish violin prodigy from Warsaw who is taken in by the non-Jewish Simmonds family in London in 1939. As Dovidl's family is deported to Treblinka and contact with them ceases, the violin becomes both his expressive outlet and the symbolic site of a growing rupture. When Dovidl mysteriously vanishes just before his concert debut in 1951, the act fractures both his surrogate family and his own sense of belonging. It is only decades later, in 1991, that Martin Simmonds—Dovidl's foster brother—follows a musical clue to a hidden community in New York, where Dovidl has become a Talmudic scholar. Across this journey, the violin emerges not only as a narrative thread but also as a speculative sonic archive, its meaning accruing genealogically, layered through historical fracture, invented ritual, and cinematic memory work.

The violin in *The Song of Names* tests the boundaries of musical witness. Rather than offering a clear act of testimony, it gestures toward what cannot be remembered firsthand, positioning music as an imaginative stand-in for historical absence. If earlier films relied on music to underscore lived experience or to universalize emotional resonance, this film asks, what happens when music must carry the burden of what was never known, never recorded, never named? In this context, the violin operates at the speculative edge of Wlodarski's model; it becomes a surrogate for a voice that does not exist. Its authority does not stem from origin but from its accumulated resonance across cinematic and ritual forms. This shift raises urgent ethical questions: Can invented music bear witness to historical trauma? What are the risks of transforming unrecorded suffering into a beautiful, mournful sound? And how might such a gesture honor the dead without aestheticizing their erasure?

Read through Assmann's model, *The Song of Names* exemplifies the post-witness condition not simply because it turns to imaginative or invented forms, but because it stages those inventions under the lingering authority of witness-era memory culture. The film's temporal structure—moving between 1939, 1951, and 1991—folds multiple memory regimes into a single narrative, placing the remnants of testimonial realism, institutional commemoration, and postmemorial speculation into uneasy proximity. In this sense, the post-witness does not replace the Era of the Witness; it metabolizes it. The violin's "speculative archive" is therefore not free-floating aestheticization but a historically conditioned response to an epistemic limit: the desire to sound what cannot be recorded in a cultural landscape still shaped by expectations that remembrance be publicly performable.

From its opening scenes, the film positions the violin as inseparable from Dovidl's identity. In his early youth, he is depicted as brash and self-assured—a virtuoso who tells his instructor, "Kreisler is not Rapoport."³⁵ While his brilliance marks him as singular, it also isolates him from others, underscoring the tension between individual artistic expression and communal belonging. The violin here represents both potential and precarity: a sonic embodiment of Dovidl's ability to survive through art, but also a harbinger of the dislocation to come. At this point in the film, the violin remains tied to ego, to performance, and to exceptionalism—its symbolic meaning still closed off from the genealogical work of memory.

That shift begins when Dovidl encounters a recitation known as the Song of Names in London's Jewish district. After falling asleep on a bus, he wakes in an unfamiliar neighborhood and stumbles into a gathering of Polish Holocaust survivors. There, he hears the Song for the first time—a chant in which the names of murdered Jews are spoken aloud in a melodic cadence that recalls both *Yizkor* (memorial) services and the lamentations of *Tisha B'Av*, the annual day of mourning for the destruction of the Temples and other Jewish tragedies.³⁶ Shore's composition, though fictional, draws deeply from Jewish

³⁵Fritz Kreisler (1875–1962), though Jewish by birth, converted to Catholicism and cultivated a cosmopolitan Romantic persona that became central to the twentieth-century violin canon. His expressive style and frequent use of stylistic pastiche reflect an ideal of musical universality often dissociated from specific Jewish identity. Dovidl's rejection—"Kreisler is not Rapoport"—functions as a refusal of inherited assimilationist models and a gesture toward a different sonic genealogy, one rooted not in continuity or canonization but in rupture, loss, and speculative reclamation. This moment marks an early break from Romantic norms, foreshadowing the film's broader post-Holocaust meditation on musical identity and memory.

³⁶*Tisha B'Av* is observed with fasting and the chanting of *Eikha* (Lamentations), marking historical destructions—including, for some, the Shoah. For a comparative study of Jewish mourning rituals and liturgical structures, see Vanessa L. Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (Jewish Publication Society, 2007).



Example 4: Howard Shore, *Song of Names*, Violin Theme.

liturgical structures, anchoring the film in sonic traditions of grief and spiritual continuity. Yet, this moment does not reclaim a lost tradition so much as construct one. The invented ritual performs a kind of genealogical recomposition, borrowing liturgical texture and affective cadence to manufacture continuity in the wake of rupture. The violin, too, begins to shift in meaning: no longer just an instrument of virtuosity, it becomes a vessel for memory, a possible bridge to the dead.

Although there is no historical precedent for a literal *Song of Names* ritual, the film treats it as an act of musical witnessing—and in doing so, foregrounds the ethical volatility of invented memorial forms in the post-witness era. It neither reconstructs historical experience as in *Schindler's List* nor sentimentalizes childhood as in *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Instead, it fabricates a sonic rite—part prayer, part performance—through which Dovidl can finally confront the ungrievable. This culminates when he travels to the fields of Treblinka, violin in hand. There, he performs his own version of the Song (see Example 4), not a spoken naming of the dead, but a wordless instrumental elegy.³⁷

The absence of actual names becomes the point: the violin voices what cannot be said, what was never recorded. As the melody dissipates into silence, the act of playing becomes dialogical—not with a known past, but with a historical void. The violin here performs genealogical labor, standing in for a ritual that never existed, sounding the rupture left by lives that cannot be named. In Wlodarski's terms, this is a moment of speculative witnessing: music standing in for a historical record that never existed, an elegy for the 800,000 unnamed victims among the approximately 925,000 murdered at Treblinka.³⁸

When Martin confronts Dovidl about his vanished concert decades earlier, Dovidl agrees to return to the stage—but with a redefined purpose. In the film's closing scene, he performs not as a prodigy but as a mourner, converting the concert hall into a ritual space where personal catharsis and collective remembrance briefly merge. The music here does not testify to what was seen or survived but to what was irretrievably lost. It is not archival. It is not a documentary. Instead, it is a postmemorial act of sonic speculation, shaped by the aesthetic and ethical pressures of a world without witnesses.

The ethical stakes are significant. The film risks aestheticizing trauma through invention, but it also resists the narrative closure or redemptive arc that often characterizes such gestures. Rather than presenting the violin as a transcendent solution, it acknowledges its limitations: the performance does not resurrect the dead, nor does it fully repair Dovidl's ruptured identity. Instead, it offers an attempt, a sonic gesture toward what Wlodarski describes as a living, evolving dialogue between past and present, one that resists finality.

In this final phase of the violin's cinematic genealogy, its meaning is no longer anchored in sentiment or testimony but in the speculative labor of post-witness sound. The violin becomes a discursive site where cultural memory is not recovered but assembled layer by layer, through rupture, ritual, and cinematic aesthetics. The film thus confronts the central dilemma of twenty-first-century Holocaust remembrance: Can imaginative forms of witnessing honor the dead without distorting them? Can art

³⁷This excerpt is a direct screenshot from the *Song of Names* score and is not an original transcription by the author.

³⁸See *Memory of Treblinka Foundation*, specifically "The Wall of Names," <https://memoryoftreblinka.org/>. The site estimates that approximately 925,000 Jews were murdered at Treblinka, of whom at least 800,000 remain unnamed due to the destruction or absence of deportation lists.

mourn what history cannot name? *Song of Names* offers no definitive answer, but in its refusal of resolution lies its power. The violin is not a fixed symbol; it is, once again, an ever-changing, mediated process.

Sonic Afterlives and the Circulation of Memory

Listening genealogically to Holocaust cinema reveals something that visual historiographies often obscure: memory regimes do not replace one another cleanly but overlap, layer, and recur—often audibly. Across seventy years of film, the solo violin has returned not as a fixed symbol of suffering or remembrance, but as a historically contingent sonic mechanism whose authority is repeatedly reconfigured. Its persistence marks neither linear progress nor simple rupture, but the accumulation of affective, ethical, and institutional expectations about how the Holocaust should sound. Tracing the violin's cinematic genealogy from *The Diary of Anne Frank* to *Schindler's List* to *The Song of Names*, this study has shown how the instrument shifts from sentimental universalism to moral certitude to speculative absence. Yet these modes fail one another neatly. Elements of Hollywood uplift and persist within witness-era solemnity; witness-era authority continues to shape post-witness invention. Sound makes this porosity audible. The violin stabilizes meaning at moments when historical representation strains, even as the ethical frameworks governing that stabilization change.

Taken together, these case studies suggest that Holocaust memory does not advance by shedding earlier representational forms but by reworking them. In the Normative Period, the violin channels memory toward emotional reassurance, shaping atrocity into interior development and moral affirmation. In the Era of the Witness, it acquires institutional gravity, positioned as an ethical voice capable of conferring seriousness, judgment, and legitimacy. In the Post-Witness Period, that authority does not disappear; it is reactivated under conditions of absence, where music is asked to sound what was never recorded and to mourn what cannot be named. What changes across these films is not simply what the violin signifies but what cultural and ethical labor it is asked to perform.

This sonic genealogy complicates a strictly linear reading of Holocaust memory and modifies existing periodizations by revealing their permeability. While Assmann's model remains indispensable, attending to sound exposes how earlier listening regimes persist within later ones, shaping affective response long after their original historical contexts have passed. Musical meaning accrues historically, but it also travels—detaching, recombining, and acquiring new force as it circulates across films, institutions, and media environments.

The afterlife of the violin theme in *Schindler's List* makes these dynamics especially visible. Once abstracted from its carefully constructed moral diegesis, the theme circulates as an emblem of generalized sorrow and ethical seriousness, often without reference to its original narrative or historical specificity. Its portability raises pressing questions about how sonic recognition can substitute for contextual knowledge, how inherited musical gravity shapes contemporary commemorative practices, and how sound participates in the normalization of Holocaust memory within late-capitalist media ecologies.

Approaching Holocaust cinema through sonic genealogy thus opens new avenues for inquiry. It invites scholars to examine not only how memory is represented but also how it is *heard*—how sounds accrue authority, how they migrate across platforms and institutions, and how their ethical meanings shift in the process. It also asks us to reckon with the risks of sonic mediation: that music may offer affect without obligation, feeling without friction, or mourning without historical demand. To listen to the violin in Holocaust cinema, then, is not to encounter testimony itself, but to confront the conditions under which memory continues to be made audible. In a post-witness world, where the past no longer speaks for itself, how we listen—and what we allow sound to stand in for—becomes an ethical question. Attending to sound and its genealogies is therefore not simply an aesthetic concern but a critical necessity for understanding how Holocaust memory endures, transforms, and sometimes drifts beyond its historical moorings.

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