

BREAKING INTO THE MOVIES

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HOLLYWOOD is undoubtedly preparing to take to its hard and diamond-plated bosom a whole regiment of modern composers. As I have written elsewhere in this issue, Honegger, Schönberg, and Stravinsky, according to latest rumor, are all expected out here this spring. As for modern music *per se*, we have the word of no less a personage than Paramount's music director who feels that "only modern music adapts itself perfectly to the modern film!"

From this it can be seen that something is going on in Hollywood. Composers may remain aloof to it, but only at the peril of being left behind, esthetically perhaps as well as financially.

However, it is not my intention to discuss the esthetics of the modern motion picture. What I want, instead, is to tell any composer who is interested in getting out here, just how to go about it and what mistakes to avoid.

There are a number of men back East who are composing scores to inferior local pictures in the vain hope that these will attract the attention of the Hollywood executives. Others do not attempt to come to Hollywood at all, believing that they lack experience. Still others come and, failing because they cannot write music quickly enough, find themselves without carfare to ride home. Some arrive on their own initiative, and after writing the music to a major production for practically nothing, sit around the rest of their lives waiting for a second picture, which never shows up.

When a composer looks Hollywoodward, he should realize first that previous picture experience will do him but little good. There are several young composers in New York who scurry around writing the scores of little "shorts," or avant-garde pictures, or even major independent productions fondly believing

that these will win them a place in Hollywood's gigantic studios. Nothing could be further from the truth. Let me point to my own experience. I wrote three major picture scores to the Hecht-MacArthur productions made in Astoria, L. I. and released by Paramount. But for some reason, still not clear to me, Hollywood considered the Hecht-MacArthur productions amateurish—and there the matter ended. Similarly Virgil Thomson wrote the score to an excellent agricultural film produced under the auspices of the United States Government, *The Plough that Broke the Plains*. But from the Hollywood point of view it was "amateurish," and so Thomson was labelled.

Eastern pictures and foreign pictures are frowned on in the West. An occasional successful foreign picture will eventually find its director comfortably berthed in Hollywood, but as to most foreign musicians—Hollywood is convinced that they are veritable tyros. This is of course partly the result of the horribly miscalculated sound-track of most European productions.

When I was finally called to Hollywood it was not because of former connections with Eastern studios. What is more, I found to my intense surprise that my previous experience in picture scoring was a little less than useless. I had learned something, of course, and more than anything else I had learned to write quickly. But picture experience is, quite frankly, no longer necessary.

Hollywood assigns to every new musician entering her studios a technician who will attend to everything except the actual composing of the music. This technician (who for some strange Hollywoodian reason, is called a "scorer" although he never writes a note) makes the timings, tells the composer how to fit the music when it will not fit, suggests what kinds of music might be needed here and there, "goes to bat" with the cinema director when the composer has an idea difficult to put across, and in general provides just about all the experience necessary.

Speed, I regret to say, is still imperative. It is often necessary to rewrite an entire fifteen-minute sequence within the space of a single night. This is not a question of "can I?" but a question of "I must;" thousands of dollars hang upon every moment and release dates are ever in the immediate offing.

A composer sometimes comes to Hollywood at any cost, consents to write a picture score for veritably nothing, and then, after it is finished, sits around waiting indefinitely. Out here they call him a "one-picture-jinx." For Hollywood is a brutal city. It esteems its hired help solely in the symbols of how dearly it needs and how much it must pay for their services. A composer who will write one picture at a low price will certainly be asked for his second at a low price—that is unless his personal musical critiques have been phenomenal. But then how few movie critics pay any attention whatsoever to a motion picture score: chances are that the critiques of his first picture will be ordinary; he will eventually wake up to realize that his studio has merely chiseled a modern and well-fitted score out of him for practically nothing. The studios of course tell the young composer, "First you must show us what you can do, afterwards we will give you a second picture for which we will pay you considerably more." But remember that this is Hollywood, and that Hollywood is without a heart. "Once cheap, always cheap" is the rule. A composer who comes out here "to show Hollywood" what he can do, will ultimately find Hollywood not interested. There are a number of such stranded men here right now.

To come to Hollywood one must do two things, (1) secure a reputable agent, and (2) sit back and wait at least six months until the studios come knocking at the door. For come they eventually must. There is no point in writing to the music directors of the big studios. In the first place it is not possible in advance to know just what kind of a "job" one might want, nor can they be expected to know. Reputations mean nothing out here; even Sibelius might write without giving the directors pause. The weeding out process must be done elsewhere, and that elsewhere is logically within the large and sumptuous offices of the agents of Hollywood; they have both the time and the inclination for such letters—that is, providing one has the proper qualifications.

A very young composer who has done nothing to which he can refer with assurance, had first better write a goodly number of works and have them performed in his home town. If he can point to the recent performance of an opera, a symphony, or a

radio overture, he may just barely stand a chance. It is well not to draw the agent's attention to past picture scores if these pictures are not considered phenomenally successful in Hollywood.

Once "sold" to a reliable agent, at least half the battle is won. There are many good agents in Hollywood. A composer with any qualifications at all will usually find at least one of them sympathetic towards his problems.

In Hollywood hardly a single contract is signed without the aid of an agent. Agents are everywhere and part of everything. They know everybody and are upon intimate terms with the executives not of one studio, but of all studios; they know many busy men whom it is impossible for the outsider to meet. They know about every future picture, every vacancy, every possibility. Sometimes with a single phone call they can arrange one's entire business. They are indeed worth their usual ten per cent fee.

The list of these agents can easily be obtained from the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, or from pages 132-33 of *The New Technic of Screen Writing* by Tamar Lane, published by Whitteley House. Any friend in Hollywood, an author, a musician, or a director, can probably suggest which agent is the best for one's purposes. Some specialize in actors and actresses, others in scripts and stories, others in music, orchestras, arrangers, and composers. With a little patience and a few postage stamps one should be able to get in touch with the proper offices. There are, after all, a great many agents, and in consequence, a great many bullets to one's gun.

It is best to inform an agent that one does not wish a *position* in a Hollywood studio. A position as a staff composer is a dog's life; it means that from the first to the last day one will write completely anonymous music. Staff composers very often work upon bits of a picture; their score is a collective and composite one invariably signed by the Music Director—"Musical Direction by——." In general a staff composer does not draw the usual high Hollywood salary though he has a steady job.

For their greatest advantage, composers in Hollywood should remain free lances, working first at one studio, and then the other, for the best pictures and prices available. This shifting about adds to prestige rather than detracts. With aptitude one can

be busy earning \$3,000 to \$8,000 a picture. Choosing to be lazy, or to do other work, one can write film scores one or two months a year and still live extremely well. Or, on the other hand, one can work furiously for several years, and live in ease for the rest of one's life—that is if one doesn't buy a house in the typical Hollywood manner and develop a sudden need for three motor cars and two butlers.

Unlike the writer or actor who works on a film for many months, the composer only works three or four weeks at the end of a picture's production. The composer's job is short and sweet. Therefore he is not paid by the week, but by the picture. Even at \$500 a week, however, he would still be underpaid. Before coming to Hollywood, the composer should decide how much he is worth, and then he must hold out against all persuasion until he is paid that amount. For, as I said before, Hollywood is a peculiar city, beside which New York seems soft and a veritable rosebud. Hollywood is as hard as a diamond.