

SECOND THOUGHTS ON HOLLYWOOD

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EVERYONE is so prepared to hear the worst about Hollywood that it is a pleasure to be able to start these observations on a cheerful note. The best one can say about Hollywood is that it is a place where composers are actually needed. The accent is entirely on the living composer. Day after day and year after year there are copyists, instrumentalists, and conductors who do nothing but copy, perform, and conduct the music of contemporary composers. Theoretically, at any rate, the town is a composer's Eldorado.

For the movies do need music, and need it badly. By itself the screen is a pretty cold proposition. In Hollywood I looked at long stretches of film before the music had been added, and I got the impression that music is like a small flame put under the screen to help warm it.

It is this very function, however, which so often gives the composer a minor role. There is no sense in denying the subordinate position the composer fills. After all, film music makes sense only if it helps the film; no matter how good, distinguished, or successful, the music must be secondary in importance to the story being told on the screen. Essentially there is nothing about the movie medium to rule out any composer with a dramatic imagination. But the man who insists on complete self-expression had better stay home and write symphonies. He will never be happy in Hollywood.

Whether you are happy or not largely depends on two factors: the producer you work for, and the amount of time allotted for completing the score. (I am assuming that the film itself is an intelligent one.) The producer is a kind of dictator, responsible only to the studio executives for every phase of the picture's production. This naturally includes the musical score. The trouble is not so much that these producers consider themselves musical connoisseurs, but that they claim to be accurate barometers of public taste. "If I can't understand it, the public won't." As a result of this the

typical Hollywood composer is concerned not with the reaction of the public, as you might think, but with that of the producer. It isn't surprising therefore, that all film music originating in Hollywood tends to be very much the same. The score of one picture adds up to about the score of any other. You seldom hear anything fresh or distinctive partly because everyone is so intent on playing safe. A pleased producer means more jobs. That alone is sufficient to explain the Hollywood stereotype of music.

The demand for speed from the composer is familiar to anyone who has ever worked "in pictures." The composer may sit around no end of time, waiting for the picture to be done; as soon as it's finished the director, the producer, the script writer – everybody is in a frightful hurry; valuable time is passing and the studio has visions of the money it is losing each day that the film is not in a theatre. It is difficult to make studio executives realize that no one has yet discovered how to write notes any faster than it was done circa 400 A. D. The average movie score is approximately forty minutes long. The usual time allotted for composing it is about two weeks. For *Of Mice and Men* I had about six weeks, and I believe that other composers insist on that much time for writing an elaborate score.

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The purpose of the film score is to make the film more effective, that's clear enough. But I don't think anyone has as yet formulated the perfect solution for this problem. In fact I came away with a sense of the mysterious nature of all film music. In retrospect, I can see three important ways in which music helps a picture. The first is by intensifying the emotional impact of any given scene, the second by creating an illusion of continuity, and the third by providing a kind of neutral background music. Of these three, the last presents the most mysterious problem – how to supply the right sort of music behind dialogue.

Intensification of emotion at crucial moments is, of course, an old tradition of theatre music. True, it is no more than the Hearts and Flowers tradition, but still, perfectly legitimate. The one difficulty here is to get the music started without suddenly making the audience aware of its entrance. To use a favorite Hollywood term, you must "steal the music in."

Obvious too is the continuity function of music. Pictures, jumping from episode to episode, from exterior to interior, have a tendency to fall apart. Music, an art which exists in time, can subtly hold disparate scenes together. In exciting montage sequences where the film moves violently from shot to shot, music by developing one particular theme, or one type

of rhythmical material, or some other unifying musical element, supplies the necessary continuous understructure.

But "background" music is something very special. It is also the most ungrateful kind of music for a composer to write. Since it's music behind, or underneath the word, the audience is really not going to hear it, possibly won't even be aware of its existence; yet it undoubtedly works on the subconscious mind. The need here is for a kind of music which will give off a "neutral" color or atmosphere. (This is what creates the indefinable warmth that the screen itself lacks.) To write music which must be inexpressive is not easy for composers who normally tend to be as expressive as possible. To add to the difficulty, there's the impossibility of knowing in advance just what will work in any given scene. If one could only test the music by adding it to the scene before it is shot, or have the music performed while the actors speak their lines! But this is utopian. Once the scene is done and the music is added, the result is fairly problematical. Even dubbing it down almost below the listening level will not always prove satisfactory.

If Hollywood has its problems it has also its well-known solutions. Most scores, as everybody knows, are written in the late nineteenth century symphonic style, a style now so generally accepted as to be considered inevitable. But why need movie music be symphonic? And why, oh why, the nineteenth century? Should the rich harmonies of Tchaikovsky, Franck and Strauss be spread over every type of story, regardless of time, place or treatment? For *Wuthering Heights*, perhaps yes. But why for *Golden Boy*, a hard-boiled, modern piece? What screen music badly needs is more differentiation, more feeling for the exact quality of each picture. That does not necessarily mean a more literal musical description of time and place. Certainly very few Hollywood films give a realistic impression of period. Still, it should be possible, without learned displays of historical research and without the hack conventions of symphonic music, for a composer to reflect the emotion and reality of the individual picture he is scoring.

Another pet Hollywood formula, this one borrowed from nineteenth century opera, is the use of the leit-motif. I haven't made up my mind whether the public is conscious of this device or completely oblivious to it, but I can't see how it is appropriate to the movies. Sitting in the last row of the opera house, it may help the spectator to identify the singer who appears from the wings, if the orchestra announces her motif. But that's hardly necessary on the screen. No doubt the leit-motif system is a help

to the composer in a hurry, perhaps doing two or three scores simultaneously. It is always an easy solution to mechanically pin a motif on every character. In *Drums Along the Mohawk* this method was reduced to its final absurdity. One theme announced the Indians, another the hero. In the inevitable chase, every time the scene switched from Indians to hero the themes did too, sometimes so fast that the music seemed to hop back and forth before any part of it had time to breathe. If there must be thematic description I think it would serve better if it were connected with the underlying ideas of a picture. If, for example, a film has to do with loneliness, a theme might be developed to induce sympathy with the idea of being lonely, something broader in feeling than the mere tagging of characters.

A third device, and one very peculiar to Hollywood, is known as "Mickey-Mousing" a film. In this system the music, wherever possible, is made to mimic everything that happens on the screen. An actor can't lift an eyebrow without the music helping him do it. What is amusing when applied to a Disney fantasy becomes disastrous in its effect upon a straight or serious drama. Max Steiner has a special weakness for this device. In *Of Human Bondage* he had the unfortunate idea of making his music limp whenever the club-footed hero walked across the scene, with a very obvious and it seemed to me vulgarizing effect. Recently Mr. Steiner has shown a fondness for a new device. This is the mixing of realistic music with background music. Joe may be walking around the room quietly humming a tune to himself (realistic use of music). Watch for the moment when Joe steps out into the storm, for it is then that Mr. Steiner pounces upon Joe's little tune and gives us the works with an orchestra of seventy. The trouble with this procedure is that it stresses not so much the dramatic moment as the ingenuity of the composer. All narrative illusion is lost the instant we are conscious of the music as such.

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It may not be without interest to retrace some of the steps by which music is added to a film. After the picture is completed it is shown in the studio projection room before the producer, the director, the studio's musical director (if any), the composer and his various henchmen, the conductor, the orchestrator, the cue-sheet assistants, the copyists—anybody in fact who has anything to do with the preparation of the score. At this showing the decision is reached as to where to add music, where it should start in each separate sequence and where it should end. The film

is then turned over to a cue-sheet assistant whose job it is to prepare a listing of every separate moment in each musical sequence. These listings, with the accompanying timing in film footage and in seconds, is all that the composer needs for complete security in synchronising his music with the film. The practised Hollywood composer is said never to look at a picture more than once. With a good memory, a stop-watch, and a cue-sheet he is ready to go to work. Others prefer to work in the music projection room where there is a piano, a screen, and an operator who can turn the film on and off. I myself used a movieola, which permits every composer to be his own operator. This is a small machine which shows the film negative through a magnifying glass. Using the movieola I could see the picture whenever and as often as I pleased.

While the music is being written the film itself is prepared for recording. Each important musical cue must be marked on the film by some prearranged signal system that varies in every studio. These "signals" show the conductor where he is. If he wants to hit a certain musical cue which, according to the cue-sheet, occurs at the forty-ninth second, the negative must be marked in such a way as to indicate that spot (always with sufficient warning signals) and if the conductor is competent he can nearly always "hit it on the nose." In Hollywood this knack for hitting cues properly is considered even more important in a conductor than his ability to read an orchestral score. Another method, much more mechanical, but used a good deal for Westerns and quickies is to synchronize by means of a so-called click-track. In this case, the film is measured off not according to seconds, but according to regular musical beats. There is no surer method for hitting cues "on the nose". But only the experienced composer can ignore the regularity of the beat and write his music freely within and around it.

For the composer the day of recording is perhaps the high point. He has worked hard and long and is anxious to test his work. He hears his music sounded for the first time while the film is being shown. Everything comes off just as it would in a concert hall. But if he wishes to remain happy he had better stay away from the sound-recording booth. For here all the music is being recorded at about the same medium dynamic level so that later on the loudness and softness may be regulated when the moment comes for re-recording.

Re-recording takes place in the dubbing room. This is a kind of composer's purgatory. It is here that the music track is mixed with other

sound tracks – the dialogue, the “effects” track, etc. It is at this point that the composer sees his music begin to disappear. A passage once so clear and satisfying seems now to move farther and farther off. The instant a character opens his mouth, the music must recede to the near vanishing point. This is the place that calls out all a composer’s self-control; it’s a moment for philosophy.

From the composer’s standpoint, the important person in the dubbing room is the man who sits at the controls. It is he who decides how loud or soft the music will be at any given moment, and therefore it is he who can make or ruin everything, by the merest touch of the dials. But surprisingly, in every studio these controls are in the hands of a sound engineer. What I don’t understand is why a musician has not been called in for this purpose. It would never occur to me to call in an engineer to tune my piano. Surely only a musician can be sensitive to the subtle effects of musical sound, particularly when mixed with other sounds. A Toscanini would be none too good for such a job – certainly a sound expert is not qualified.

While on the subject of sound levels I might as well mention the unsatisfactory way in which sound is controlled in the picture theatre. The tonal volume of a picture is not set for all time; no mechanical contraption permanently fixes the loudness or softness of the music. The person who decides on the sound levels is not even the film-operator but the individual theatre manager who is of course susceptible to advice from Tom, Dick, and Harry sitting anywhere in the house. People who love music tend to prefer it played loudly. Those who don’t care for it especially want to hear it only at a low level. So no matter how much care is taken in the dubbing room to fix proper tonal levels, the situation will remain unsatisfactory until a method is found to control the casual and arbitrary way in which dials are set in the theatre operator’s booth.

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Hollywood, like Vienna, can boast its own star roster of composers. Alfred Newman, Max Steiner, Victor Young, Anthony Collins are composers created by the film industry. While it is easy enough to poke fun at the movie music they turn out as so much yardage, it would at the same time be foolish not to profit by their great experience in writing for the films. Newman, for example, has discovered the value of the string orchestra as a background for emotional scenes. Better than the full orchestra, the strings can be de-personalized. This is important in a medium where the sound of a single instrument may sometimes be disturbing.

Another secret of movie music which Steiner has exploited, is the writing of atmosphere music almost without melodic content of any kind. A melody is by its nature distracting since it calls attention to itself. For certain types of neutral music, a kind of melody-less music is needed. Steiner does not supply mere chords, but superimposes a certain amount of melodic motion, just enough to make the music sound normal, and yet not enough to compel attention.

Composers who come to Hollywood from the big world outside generally take some time to become expert in using the idiom. Erich Korngold still tends to get over-complex in the development of a musical idea. This is not always true, however. When successful, he gives a sense of firm technic, a continuity not only of feeling but structure. Werner Janssen, whose score for *The General Died at Dawn* made movie history, is still looked upon as something of an outsider. He shows his pre-Hollywood training in the sophistication of his musical idiom, and in his tendency to be over-fussy in the treatment of even the simplest sequence. Ernst Toch, who belongs in the category with Korngold and Janssen, wrote an important score for *Peter Ibbetson* several years ago. On the strength of this job, Toch should be today one of the best-known film composers. But unfortunately there aren't enough people in Hollywood who can tell a good score when they hear one. Today Toch is generally assigned to do "screwy music." (In Hollywood music is either "screwy" or "down to earth" – and most of it is down to earth.) Toch deserves better.

The men who write Hollywood's music seem strangely oblivious of their reputations outside the West Coast. I have often wondered, for instance, why no concerted effort has ever been made to draw the attention of music critics to their more ambitious scores. Why shouldn't the music critic cover important film premieres? True, the audience that goes to the films doesn't think about the music, and possibly shouldn't think about the music. Nevertheless, a large part of music heard by the American public is heard in the film theatre. Unconsciously, the cultural level of music is certain to be raised if better music is written for films. This will come about more quickly, I think, if producers and directors know that scores are being heard and criticized. One of the ways they will find out what's good and what's bad is to read it in the papers. Let the press now take this important business in hand.