

The Cinderella of the Cinema

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An Evaluation of Film Music and a Review of Its Progress

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY created a new form of expression in the field of dramatic music: the music for motion pictures. It is derived from incidental theatre music, a form which was used largely in the last century. Its role, however, is considerably more important since it creates a homogeneous art-form and does not function merely as a stop-gap during entre-acts and decor changes, or as accompaniment for songs and dances, as customary theatre music had done up to now.

It not only poses new artistic problems to the composer and presents him with new possibilities for artistic expression, but, from a purely social point of view, it plays an important part, not to be underestimated, in the life of the composer of the twentieth century. It offers new economic advantages, defying the old tradition that a composer of serious or even progressive music cannot make a decent living by his art. This is one of the reasons why nearly all the foremost contemporary composers do already or will, sooner or later, contribute music to motion pictures.

More than ninety years have passed since Richard Wagner defined the aesthetic of his artistic program, calling it *Gesamtkunstwerk*, all-comprising work of art, meaning the perfect combination of music, drama, and acting. In his works, the music was the most important and dominating factor.

Today, no art comes nearer to the Wagnerian ideal than the most vigorous, spontaneous and popular art form of the twentieth century: the cinema. It is a synthetic art, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the best Wagnerian meaning, being again the combination of drama, acting and music. However, and this is the greatest difference between the cinema of today and the Wagnerian ideal, music plays only a minor part in it, and is for the time being a Cinderella of the cinematographic art.

Let us examine briefly the history of music in motion pictures. The showmen of the early cinematographic days soon found out that it was necessary to find an aural element to accompany the strictly visual one. When pictures became more pretentious in length and content, showing real life on the screen, they still lacked a third dimension. They were sadly soulless, being without the sounds of real life. We had to watch people enact life, we saw them speaking, and we heard no sound; and the uncanny silence of the cinema was broken only by the nerve-wracking and monotonous

noise of the projection machine. Music was therefore inevitable. It could fulfill a double function: to make the picture more enjoyable and, at the same time, to cover the humming noise of the projection machines.

The very first use of music for the early pictures was mechanical. Short scenes were accompanied by phonograph records which had actually no relationship whatsoever to the content of the picture. When pictures began to grow in length, and the picture theatres in size, the phonograph record proved insufficient, since amplification was yet unknown, and a piano took over its role.

With this single piano, there began the important functioning of music in the films. At first the piano music continued the practice of the phonograph records, and had little or no connection with the screen. It had no more relationship to it than the music in a restaurant has to the conversations at the tables, or the noise of the hurdy-gurdy to the side show. It had to create a merely agreeable atmosphere by playing popular tunes and well-known melodies, and thereby satisfying the spectator's ear, as the picture did his eye.

With the development of pictures, cinema music underwent a parallel rapid development. The piano soon was augmented by other instruments, and as the motion picture houses grew in number and seating capacity, so grew the orchestra in size and quality. Toward the end of the "silent" era, the orchestras of picture houses attained the size of fully-grown symphony orchestras, numbering sixty to eighty pieces. First-class conductors and musicians supplied the music, which gained importance in this new and popular entertainment.

At the beginning of this period of film music, the pianist, and later the conductor, had to use the available and—according to their taste—most suitable compositions. These consisted mostly (apart from the current hit-tunes) of light classical and semi-classical music—mainly those pieces which were old, well tried war-horses of the *musique de salon* literature. It was soon found out, for instance, that the *William Tell* overture (a favorite piece of the silent days) doesn't fit a love scene, and that Mendelssohn's *Spring Song* (another favorite) sounds comic when played for a funeral. Therefore the conductors began to select more carefully the music for different parts of the photoplay. They found out also that the dramatic effect of the silent action could be augmented by suitably selected music. A love scene will become more tender or passionate, the latent elements of a drama will come more to the surface, and a chase (an indispensable part of the early pictures) will be more exciting if appropriate music accompanies them.

This practice was naturally nothing new, as incidental theatre music had experimented with similar effects for a long time. But the art of the cinema was so novel that

it had to undergo the birth-pangs of every phase of an evolution of its own. In the silent picture, no emotion could be expressed through the most intense medium of expression—human speech. Only music could replace it. Besides creating the atmosphere of the action, it made one really understand and feel what was impossible to express with gestures and disturbing titles. Also, the latter stopped the tempo of the action. Music gave real pulsation, blood, color, and life to the silent picture. The language of music therefore became the medium of aural expression for the silent movie.

With the progress of motion-picture art, with the coordination of dramatic scenes with the methodically organized repetitions of pictorial material, and an improved literature of explanatory or dramatic titles—with all these, films found their own tempo, and individual scenes their own rhythm, a rhythm of motion and action. Besides the accentuation of expression, music had now the additional role of accentuating this rhythm with audible sounds; and the rhythm of the picture, combined with the rhythm of the music, gave a remarkable and hitherto unknown effect: synchronization.

Conductors had now not only to select music for the film, but in order to make the musical accompaniment more effective, they had also to adapt the classical literature to different scenes, and to make modulations between the selections; in short, to bind continuity in the film drama together with continuity in the music. The single pianist of the small picture house had an easier job in this respect; for if he had the ability, he could improvise for those scenes for which he could not find suitable printed music and, not unlike the organist in the church, could celebrate his profane service with preludiums and postludiums, transitions and modulations!

As these procedures became more and more complicated for the conductor of larger groups, and as the musical demands of cinema patrons grew more and more exigent, a new printed literature appeared on the market, supplying every combination of cinema orchestra with so-called dramatic and illustrative music. The quality of this music, which grew like weeds in every country, was appallingly low.

This fact is more unfortunate than would appear, since this music, being the first in the category to be written directly for the films, was responsible for the commonplace quality of the early music composed for sound films, which blossomed naturally from this commercial output. Since a full program of musical accompaniment was put together by borrowing from a great number of such pieces written by different composers, and from standard numbers of semi-classical literature, striking originality was not expected but rather undesired. The most obvious operatic and programmatic devices for dramatic effects in rhythm and harmony were employed, and use was made of the commonplace melodic tradition of the nineteenth century. Stereotyped dramatic titles, such as *Agitato* and *Appassionato* were filled with stereotyped content; and later, when more specialized problems were presented, such as music for fights, battle scenes, love scenes, catastrophes, storms, tension, mournful scenes, laments—in short the whole gamut of dramatic expression—they were solved with more or less artistic results.

This music had to be written in a fairly simple manner, as very little rehearsal time was allowed for each

program. Furthermore, it had to be orchestrated in such a way that it could be performed by any orchestral combination. In the true tradition of *musique de salon*, a piano-conductor part served instead of a full score, and this unfortunate custom still retains its place in present-day recording sessions.

No outstanding musical personality of those days was employed to write such music. This was the main reason for the indifferent artistic quality of the first original film music. The only quality which was expected was descriptive effectiveness. Descriptive music was naturally no invention of the cinema, as composers of the Middle Ages had already described musically scenes from the Bible. Classical examples of musical illustration can be found later in Bach's *Passions*, Haydn's *Creation* and Beethoven's battle music; and finally, in its highest form, in the program symphonies of the Romantic period.

The fundamental difference between symphonic program music and descriptive cinema music lies in the fact that the former, though following a programmatic purpose, creates freely its own form. It is not bound by detailed description of a dramatic outline. Descriptive cinema music, however, illustrates slavishly the happenings of a given scene. This deprives it of logical musical development, logical musical form; in short, it deprives it of its own musical *raison d'être*.

This must be one of the reasons that out of the large repertoire of early cinema music, not one piece has survived its original purpose and can stand, so to speak, alone on its own musical feet.

Toward the end of the silent era, pictures attained a highly artistic level and found their own aesthetics. Motion-picture producers realized the importance of the accompanying music, and although it was still assembled mostly from classical repertoire and printed cinema catalogs, we begin to find commissioned scores composed specifically for certain pictures. Stylistically, however, they were still mere continuations of previous cinema music.

Long before the invention of the sound film, the so-called talkie, the evolution of sound recording offered new possibilities for the film industry. The invention of electrical sound amplification made it possible to record a whole musical accompaniment on records, replacing the live cinema orchestra. This novelty not only offered economic advantages to the exhibitor—that is, consequent unemployment to thousands of musicians—but made it possible for the smallest theatre in the country to have the same appropriate and high-class musical accompaniment which up to then only the large luxurious theatres of the great cities could afford.

The quality of the music composed and assembled for the pictures remained unchanged. The practice of musical illustration only became more prevalent and specific, as a closer synchronization of music with happenings on the screen could now be achieved.

The silent pictures, lacking the quality of human speech and real noises, developed more and more the tendency to become an unrealistic art. This tendency should have been helped and accentuated by the abstract and truly unrealistic art of music, creating thus a homogeneous form of expression. The music of the first film scores, however, by trying to replace the missing sound, often degenerated into cheap imitations of realistic

noises, destroying thus the aesthetic unity of the pictures. We shall find this technique of imitation again later in the sound film. We can only hope that this naive method of music-making is merely a relic of the silent era, and will disappear completely from serious background scores.

Music has its own logically continuous form and rhythmical organization. If we try to imitate musically the sudden happenings and naturalistic sounds of a picture, which follow each other without any coordination or logical rhythm, the music will completely lose its true significance and will sink into a disorganized, meaningless bedlam of noise.

But let us follow the development of film music with the beginning of the sound film.

Introducing the actual sound of speech and noise, pictures became more realistic, and the music carried on alone the irrational, unreal element. It didn't stand alone any more as the only aural expression; it had not only to share its role with the dramatic dialog and naturalistic noises, but even subordinate itself to them. This all applies, of course, to the atmospheric, descriptive, and emotionally expressive music that we call background music. But before discussing this most important factor of the film music of today, we have to survey the first achievements of the sound film.

The phenomenal success of the first sound film which introduced songs stamped its mark on the beginning of the sound film era. With the exception of the technical novelty, the first pictures didn't bring anything new to the screen. They were merely photographed operettas or musical comedies. Pictures seemed to lose for a time the aesthetic integrity which they had already achieved in the silent era. The song hit became the most important element, and everything else was built around it and sacrificed for it. Really artistic music seemed to disappear from pictures, and the scarce background music satisfied itself with repeating again and again the meaningless and emotionally uninteresting theme songs.

In Europe, pictures descended to an even lower level than in America. Film composers were only songwriters who were responsible for the whole musical part of the picture. Just as pleasure in the novelty of sound emphasized every possibility for noise-making (footsteps sounded like earthquakes, a knocking on the door like cannon shots), so musical numbers were dragged into every picture, whether the plot called for them or not.

There were, of course, other pictures produced where no song hits could be introduced, such as historical or documentary films and travelogs, which played a considerably more important role in the silent and early talkie eras than they do today. Those films had continuous musical scores, conceived mostly on the same principle as accompanying music had been with live orchestras in the silent days. A great number of silent pictures made at an earlier date had to be supplied with recorded musical scores, as orchestras were no longer employed in the theatres. These scores were also compiled by the same well-tried assembly-line methods.

It took some years before motion-picture art recovered from this relapse and found its own form again but coming nearer and nearer to the Wagnerian ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where music of high standard is one of the components of the form.

Let us now see the role of musical background in the

THIS article was prepared for the Music Educators Journal at the request of the Chairman of the Film Music Division* of the MENC Committee on Audio-Visual Aids in Music Education. Film music—a term used for want of a better one—is recognized by music educators, to some extent at least, as something to be reckoned with. Few, however, are fully cognizant of its tremendous import as an influence upon the musical taste and upon the musical future of our nation—and all nations. From the standpoint of music education it is impossible to look into the future without taking into account the potentialities of this influence of the films. By the same token music education should be, and to some extent now is, recognized by film music makers and the film producers as an important factor in the composite of elements responsible for the present status and future trend of the cinematographic art.

In line with the purpose of the Committee to study all phases of the relationship of film music to music education and to initiate procedures for increasing the efficacy of this relationship, it is felt that the accompanying article provides an important contribution.

The author's prestige as a composer and as an authority on music in the film industry is well known to all readers, who will recall many films for which he wrote the music, including "The Thief of Bagdad," "Double Indemnity," "The Jungle Book," "Spellbound," "The Lost Week-end," and the Chopin film, "A Song to Remember."

* Chairman of the Film Music Division of the MENC Committee on Audio-Visual Aids is Helen C. Dill, Los Angeles. Chairmen of the Radio and the Records and Recording Equipment divisions, respectively, are Osbourne McConathy, Glen Ridge, New Jersey, and D. Sterling Wheelwright, Palo Alto, California. Hazel B. Nohavec, Cleveland, Ohio, is coordinating chairman of the Committee.

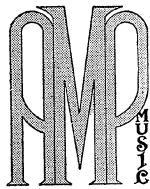
modern film technique. First of all I should like to make it clear that although I am regarding the Wagnerian aesthetic as the goal of cinematographic art, I am fully aware that for the time being nobody goes to the cinema to hear background music!

The music serves the drama and is creating subconsciously an idealistic and irrational dimension against the naturalistic and real part of the photoplay. One could compare its function to that of a Greek chorus, pointing the drama, underlining and psychologically enhancing the action. It is therefore obvious that music is not needed for the whole of dramatic pictures, as scenes of objective realism without dramatic conflict or dialog without emotional content do not have to be accentuated or brought nearer to our consciousness through the medium of music. In such scenes music is superfluous, therefore disturbing. There are, however, many parts in every picture wherein the aesthetic effect can be strengthened through music which focuses attention on dramatic highlights.

Another important function of film music is to bind together into a harmonious whole the short succession of pictures with varying content, such as montage, titles or short cuts of pictorial happenings. Music should not illustrate closely every phase of this kaleidoscopic and entirely technical procedure, but should accentuate its rhythm and express through its medium the general idea which the director has tried to convey pictorially.

The most important function of music in films, then, is not to illustrate the picture but to complete its psychological effect. The first important achievement of the sound film was the almost complete abandonment of the classical and standard literature. The importance of music became more and more acknowledged, and every

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Cinema

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picture had now an originally conceived score, written specifically for it.

The progress in the use of music since the beginning of sound films is not as fast as one could wish; but, as I have pointed out, the young art of the cinema has had to undergo its own natural evolution, and natural evolution knows no shortcuts or jumps.

The general movie style of today is not much more advanced than its early predecessor. Relics from the early days, such as musical imitations and childish quotations of associative titles of well-known music pieces to illustrate certain screen happenings, are still to be found to a large extent. Modern film music has to outgrow these childhood diseases and, since we are rewarded every year with several adult musical scores where music has become an integral part of the drama, we can believe in these sure signs of a healthy recovery. If we compare the early movie piano, playing the *Destiny Waltz* for sentimental scenes, and *Poet and Peasant* for drama, with the elaborate original scores of today, no matter how much we criticize them we must admit that an enormous development has taken place. It is true, though, that the *Hearts and Flowers* of pioneer days are still lurking in many modern scores, and that, while the pictures are depicting contemporary life, contemporary music is not often heard in the background.

Russian and prewar French films showed remarkable dramatic effects achieved by modern composers with modern music. Why, then, is Hollywood apprehensive of the music of the twentieth century? Why does Hollywood make use largely of the language of the romanticism of the late nineteenth century, no matter what the subject of the picture is? The reasons are simple.

First, very few contemporary composers with strong musical personalities have been engaged as yet to write music for films. Those who have been engaged have had to modify and neutralize their style or else their music has been removed or exchanged for more conventional sounds.

Every new art-form, not excluding our contemporary music, presents new problems and is consequently understood at first only by a small group of connoisseurs. Pictures are commercial products of an industry and large sums are involved in their production. The men controlling this industry try, naturally, to please with their products the largest possible number of consumers, and they are not prepared to take risks with anything unproved. This accounts not only for the prevalence of conventional story ideas and treatments, but also accounts for the conventional musical language of many scores. There are, however, numerous attempts showing a tendency to use not only the orchestral resources of the twentieth century, but also its musical language. There are increasingly sure signs of a development in this direction. Of course, this development will be gradual, as one cannot expect a musically uneducated

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audience to understand the musical language of today. During thirty years of cinema-going, our audiences have become accustomed to the post-Tchaikowsky and Rachmaninoff styles of yesterday, so fondly adopted for motion-picture scores.

The composer's task is great and his responsibility enormous. Music in films reaches a greater audience than a composer could ever have dreamed fifty years ago. Its educational value is greater than that of concerts, radio or records. The musically ignorant man receives this music subconsciously in the picture-show, and it becomes imperceptibly an actual part of his musical education. Here the film-composer bears the responsibility for forming the musical taste of a new generation.



Edward B. Marks, president of the music publishing company bearing his name, died December 17, 1945, after some sixty years as a songwriter and publisher, fifty-two of them at the helm of his own concern. Although in his eightieth year, he was active in his firm until the time of his death. His son, Herbert E. Marks, who recently observed his twentieth anniversary with the Marks firm, has been elected president.

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