

FILM MUSIC—WORK IN PROGRESS

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IT seems a long way now from the Baden-Baden Music Festival of 1927, when the first German sound-films were presented with scores by Paul Hindemith and myself. The succeeding years cover the entire history of the sound-film with all the splendid achievements in camera technic, lighting, sound recording, studio equipment, directing and story writing. But during all that time the position of the movie-music composer has not been appreciably affected.

There are, of course, signs that the industry now shows more interest in co-operating with modern musicians. But compared to the extraordinary technical and artistic advances of the film producer, the film composer's theoretical and practical work has progressed very little. The years have given him almost nothing, nothing but a crude praxis and some rules-of-thumb. The industry itself has made no contribution toward solving the innumerable problems the sound-film has brought to the fore. Any achievement outside the bounds of vulgar routine has been the result of the composer's personal talent, individual courage and character, and good fortune. The problems of adapting the technic of composition to film purposes — quite different from writing for concert hall or opera house — of using advanced musical material and forms, of appropriate instrumentation, of determining the basic function of movie music, have been generally ignored. Even purely technical matters — recording and mixing from the composer's point of view — have not received adequate attention.

To make a more systematic approach to a study of this field I am now conducting certain broad experiments at the New School for Social Research under a Rockefeller Foundation grant. The work follows the usual laboratory pattern — theoretical determination of a special problem, its treatment in a practical experiment and, finally, a public test. To illustrate the method, assume that I have decided to use the theme-and-variation form in a film score. I choose a sequence from an already existing picture;

I write the score, using the form mentioned, and then I record it. The final step is a public showing with supervised check of reactions.

What has brought about this research project is the question raised in recent years by musicians everywhere – is it really necessary to continue the current Hollywood practice of re-hashing “original” scores with crumbs picked from the tables of Tchaikowsky, Debussy, Ravel, Richard Strauss and Stravinsky? Is a new musical material possible? May it not even be more useful and effective?

To give this hypothesis the severest trial, I have at times utilized advanced and complicated technics of composition, the twelve-tone system, which was invented and first applied by Arnold Schönberg. We know how difficult the music of this great master is even for musicians, but it is not often realized that the main complication in Schönberg’s complicated style is Schönberg. The twelve-tone technic itself imposes no more specific a style than the major-minor tonality. But it does have a tendency to produce a more involved musical structure, and to exclude the conventional melodic and harmonic musical manners normally supposed to guarantee easy understanding and popularity. To introduce this technic into the world of the movies at first blush seems as absurd as using Hegelian terminology in a gossip column. My own experience with this extreme technic, however, has been quite rewarding. In two film scores that I wrote before undertaking this experiment – *Four Hundred Million* and *The Living Soil* – I used the twelve-tone system exclusively. The fact was not exploited, and – perhaps because of that – the scores were quite well received.

Apparently advanced musical material, which average concert-goers may find indigestible and non-relevant, when applied to films loses something of its forbidding qualities. Even the unaccustomed ear finds complex musical devices more understandable and effective when accompanied by visual images. In a new documentary, *White Floods*, which is being prepared as part of this project, I found sequences extraordinarily suitable for such experiments. The picture consists of a series of scenes from nature – mountains, rivers, sunrises, snow storms, earthquakes, glaciers. These suggested the composition of five musical pieces which would follow each other, as in an orchestral suite, and cover the whole run of the picture. In order to deliberately emphasize the musical material, I started by selecting the simplest relation between film and music, known in Hollywood as the “Micky-Mouse technic.” This is a realistic method in which the music follows the camera as closely as possible, describing every detail of the

action. And yet, using this approach, I was able to write the five pieces in five distinct musical forms: passacaglia, chorale variations, scherzo, etude and finale (sonata form). I did of course meet a number of obstacles. First of all, there is the inherent contradiction between the twelve-tone technic and these older musical forms. The step-by-step relation between picture and music contributed a further difficulty. Here the essential problem is to resolve the contradiction between the film's action and a score which must at every moment be vivid and comprehensive. This is difficult with any scene, and particularly in the representation of a nature picture. Specifically, the task was to avoid all the conventional, the hackneyed associations of movie-music with such natural phenomena as snow, rain, flowers, floods. Nonetheless the musical structure should not emphasize or even reveal any of the underlying difficulties. The task was not easy, yet the sixteen-minute score was finished and recorded in the usual Hollywood schedule of three weeks.

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To comment on some of the broader problems rising in this study, there appears to be no essential link between developing the relation of the music to the film, on the one hand, and the quality of musical material on the other. The solution of the first problem may be unusual, original and provocative, while the music itself may remain conventional and stale. And vice versa. They do not determine each other.

Let us take an example. A film sequence shows the hero walking down a street. There are various approaches to this scene.

- a) The music imitates the familiar noise of street traffic and perhaps the monotonous sound of the steps of the hero.
- b) The music, neglecting the concrete environment, comments on the thought and feeling of the hero.
- c) The music expresses the foreboding of an event that is to occur at the hero's destination.

According to the plot and the nature of the story, one of the other of these approaches, or a *combination* of all, will be more or less effective. But effectiveness does not guarantee good music. On the contrary, there is real danger that the quality of the music may be sacrificed for the sake of an unusual approach. But a piece of really good music may very well overcome the handicap of a "conventional" relation to the picture. It is certainly much easier for a good composer to improve his dramatic technic than it is for a bad one to improve his music. There is no excuse whatever

for writing "photogenic" trash. The ideal, of course, is a high standard for both, dramatic method and music.

The documentary film – as distinguished from the usual romantic story – offers a problem of its own, namely the interrelation of picture, spoken comment and music. I believe the continuous comment accompanied by background music is one of the main shortcomings of this type of film. Three editions of *White Floods* were made, one with the usual tireless narrator, the second with very limited talk, and a third that omitted every spoken syllable and used only subtitles. This last version, in my opinion, is the most effective.

A word is appropriate here about some new possibilities of instrumentation. The use of electrical instruments like the novachord, the electric guitar and the electric piano, I have found very successful in combination with a small group of other instruments. An ensemble of clarinet, trumpet, novachord and electric piano can be made to sound very well indeed.

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Working at this project from still another, more functional angle – to explore the main uses of music in relation to the film – I chose certain sequences from the fairly recent *Long Voyage Home* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. From the first I took the death and funeral of the sailor. My self-imposed task was to write the score for a dialogue. The dying sailor slowly and painfully talks to his friend about their common past. Obviously, the form of music the composer must write here is recitative, especially since the sailor's words come in long intervals. Even with good directing and acting there is danger of cheap sentimentality. The Hollywood method in similar scenes (not in this picture, the original version having no music at that point) involves the soft playing of soldiers' and sailors' songs. My score deliberately disregards recollections and the professional background of the dying man; instead it describes his sinking mainly as a physical process. The music is not sombre like the dialogue, but rather hysterical, full of fear; death is represented as a struggle, not a sentimental affair. The funeral takes place on deck, in a raging rain storm. The captain reads the Bible. The music, this time, describes only the fury of the elements. It reduces the praying of the captain to a monotonous mumbling and expresses, without any attempt at glorification, the indifferent routine which marks the death and funeral of a sailor. The form of the music is a perpetuum mobile, wild in character. Both sequences are written for big orchestras (without electrical instruments). To avoid interference

with the dialogue, the recitative had to be especially carefully synchronized.

Working on similar lines I then took certain sequences of *The Grapes of Wrath* – the voyage of the Joads to California, the death of Grandpa and Grandma, and the eventual arrival of the family. The music in this long sequence should, I felt, avoid the sentimental introspection which the pitiful (and comic) condition of the old truck and its riders might easily evoke. More properly its function, in relation to the heroic, epical character of the story, would be to glorify the spirit and the endurance of one, as one of many, families. It should make the audience aware of a struggle of heroes, not of the miserable odyssey of down-trodden paupers. My score is in the form of a rondo for big orchestra. The musical material is simpler than in the other sequences, but avoids the quotation of folk-song. The noise of the car is used as the ostinato, giving the whole piece a driving, grinding quality.

Without attempting to summarize the results of my as yet unfinished work, I should like to re-emphasize what seems to me to be the main problem of developing film music. The quality of the music and its dramatic function are still two different considerations, which is natural enough in an art no older than fourteen years. It is essential to face this situation frankly and then avoid the possible escapes. There remains ultimately only one goal to follow: that of raising the musical standard within the thoroughly comprehended frame of the movies.