

CASTING THE FILM COMPOSER

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LED astray by the great artistic success which several European films have had in this country, Americans might think the movie studios abroad are little paradises with Art the only ruler and the box office a negligible consideration. It may be that European producers working, as they must, on a much smaller scale make fewer errors, but mistakes are made, and not the least of them are in the field of music. But since they are often no more than a wrong move in the right direction, they are worth reviewing, especially because the interest of film circles in what we still call "modern music" is decidedly keen, much keener over there than on this side of the ocean.

Misplaced ambition is one of the vices from which many producers (and consequently their pictures) suffer; and a lack of real understanding of music and its film function is another. Let me illustrate what I mean. A few years ago, I met Darius Milhaud on the boat bound from England to France. He was terribly sick, *le pauvre matelot*, but later when he had recovered, he told me this little story in the dining car on our way back to Paris. In London a group of producers had asked him to write the score for a new film. Before the contract was signed they implored him to be good, not quite so "modern." "You know, we are no idealists, we are business men—we do not pretend to believe in divine Art, we must think of the box-office and the public just doesn't like that atonal stuff." So it was decided that he should come back after a time and give them an example of what he intended to compose. When all had assembled expectantly in the studio, Milhaud sat down at the piano and started with a majestic C-major-chord. But before he could go any further, one of the big shots interrupted him; "No, really, Monsieur Milhaud, that

is absolutely impossible: our audiences would never put up with such dissonances. . . ."

This very nice, malicious anecdote may prove nothing but the well-known fact that M. Milhaud is a witty man. Nevertheless it embodies a truth. Many producers who have the courage to engage an "advanced" composer all too soon regret their audacity. They really do not want to let fresh air into the stale atmosphere of the sound-recording studios; they want only a new name for their credit titles. They are looking for the easiest way of getting a credit to which they are not entitled. If only the composer didn't insist on having his own way but instead would turn out decent music like Mr. Romberg or M. Vincent Scotto!

Film making is certainly an industry, its object the greatest possible profit. Any responsible executive whose eyes were not fixed upon the box-office would be fired in no time, and rightly so. Moreover, film audiences do not like to be the victims of musical experiments.

It is easy to see why the French industry has made contact sooner than others with musicians of the modern school, and with more confidence and better results. In France there has never existed (and presumably never will exist) that abysmal gap between music and public which one found in Central Europe after the war. I do not intend to enlarge on this subject now, but it is fairly obvious that the twelve-tone system as well as the rather scholastic principles of Hindemith and his followers would need much transformation and adaptation to get onto a sound track without upsetting the whole balance.

There are no such problems of "reconciliation" in France. Think of what an ideal film composer Ravel would have made. It is easy to imagine Debussy as the composer of a tender, melancholy love film; or Roussel as a writer for something ironical, serene or else majestic. These, of course, are dreams. But the present day reality in France is not disappointing either. Milhaud's little adventure in London could hardly have happened in Paris.

Miscasting a composer, a frequent mistake elsewhere, is rare in a French production. Producers on the whole know who is who and what to expect of everyone. Nobody looking for an oper-

etta score, for example, would go to Honegger. He would at least take the trouble to find out that the merits of this foremost of Paris film musicians are on the heavy side. So they have him compose the scores for *Les Misérables*, three full-length features to whose grandiloquence he is well adapted, as also to the tension and despair of Dostoyevsky's *Crime et Châtiment*.

If, on the other hand, the film is one of those charming gay, insolent little things which the French do so enchantingly, they will make a choice between Auric, Poulenc, Wiener, Sauguet—and they make it usually with a nice application of common sense. How great the number is of these light-handed, nimble-witted, elegant musicians may seem astonishing. But then, after all, Paris was (and in a way still is) the city of *Les Six* who first discovered that serious music need not be dull, that light music need not be without value, and that jazz, too, may be very good music, if it is only good jazz.

So far Milhaud has had fewer screen tests than one would expect. His *Madame Bovary* was not very encouraging. There are, of course, always the handicaps of the trade. The greater the personality of the composer the less likely he is to put up with them. But Milhaud's talent is so manifold that he should be a composer for almost any film if only it has artistic significance. A man whose imagination has ranged from *Le Boeuf sur le toit* to *Christophe Colomb* should be one of the greatest assets of any serious producer.

However, for those who follow the path of least resistance, Paris contains a host of good composers who are equally well adapted to the most divergent tasks and less obstinate in their personal habits. Ibert, for instance, or, though a lesser man, Jaubert, who has just recently shown that one need not be a genius to find the right style for the right film. His score to *Carnet de Bal* is good just because it is so modest, and the way he has matched his simple music to the picture, the way he has adapted his waltz, so to say, to the slow-motion camera, is original and excellent.

Speaking of originality, one must touch on Sacha Guitry. Though a newcomer to film production two years ago, he is already in a class of his own. His wealth of imagination is as

great as his lack of esthetic principle. Perhaps that is why his films are so outstanding. Sometimes he just shoots his theatre plays and then neglects the music, which is only sensible. But when he made that extraordinary and almost revolutionary *Roman d'un tricheur*, he chose Adolphe Borchard who surely is neither outstanding nor "advanced" but did a highly adequate job. Then someone seems to have suggested that, being a pioneer in film-land, he should pick out a young and more daring musician; so he took Jean Françaix, another promising and very *photogénique* composer who turned out not the least important contribution to the *Pearls of the Crown*.

From this short survey, one might get the impression that everything is lovely in the gardens of Joinville, Neuilly and Epinay. But of course there is also much bad routine. Composers are seldom granted the freedom and generosity they need to work out an artistic purpose, and the percentage of bad music is all the more regrettable since the arsenal of talented, adaptable musicians is vast, most of them are certainly willing and able to co-operate. On the whole though, it is a fact that when they are made use of it is very often with insight, taste and discrimination.



I wish I could say as much of conditions across the Channel. But there developments are much less satisfactory. The English industry, being still comparatively young, technically inferior to Hollywood and artistically far behind the French, should take advantage of its defects and make good with a daring of spirit what it lacks in accepted values. But that it seldom does, and least of all where music is concerned.

One producer sets a man like Milhaud to the menial task of accompanying a conventional picture. Another decides to make a *Pagliacci* film and engages a member of *la jeune élite* for the musical adaptation, with catastrophic results. I omit for the moment the much more important question that it is altogether very difficult, if not impossible, to translate the conventions of opera into the movie-style. If there is a way of doing it, it lies much rather along the lines of the Austrian attempt in Kiepura's *Charm of La Bohème*.

Imagine, for example, asking Richard Wagner to write the score for the libretto of *Fledermaus*. That sounds preposterous but something very similar often does happen, especially in England where the musical conditions in the studios still are evidently chaotic. A casting director hunts for weeks to get the right actor for a given role, and he is not very likely to choose Gracie Fields for a part that needs Bergner. But the choice of a composer is, as often as not, entirely haphazard. Korda, in London, years ago gave a contract to Spoliansky who is a master of small form and witty comment. And he had him compose for nearly all his Superfilms! Spoliansky only began to find himself when working with Clair in *The Ghost Goes West*. Now it seems, with *Gaiety Girls*, he has come into his own.

Or take the case of Walton. He is, doubtless, one of England's best; together with Walter Leigh, the French trained Lennox Berkeley (whom I consider especially talented) and a few others, he is among the most likely to become an excellent film composer. But which of all films was allotted to him? The sentimental *Escape Me Never!* What clever things could the author of *Façade* have done for Wells' ironical *The Man Who Could Work Miracles*.

Korda's other Wellsian fantasy, *Things to Come*, was given to Bliss. Not a bad choice, this; but then the boredom of such an everlasting film was so overwhelming that even Stravinsky in his most ingenious mood would not have saved it.

But England has demonstrated that reason can prevail time and again in its documentary films. This is the field in which the British industry, or rather some independent producers, have always excelled. Rotha, Grierson, Cavalcanti and others have turned out first class, highly imaginative little works of art and documentation which have been significant also for their intelligent use of music as an integral part and not as a more or less contemptible accessory.

One need not, however, climb to such a high level to show that the right attitude to film music is, after all, no magic secret. It can be found by anyone who will use judgment and refrain from putting good names in the wrong place, or vice versa. Korda, for instance, has taken for his charming little movie *The Divorce*

of *Lady X* a hitherto unknown, presumably Hungarian composer. His music is neither original nor outstanding in any way, but his style is apt and his score modest and short.

And that brings me finally to another important point, the evil of musical surfeit. This, of course, is one of the deadly illnesses from which our epoch suffers. But nowhere, not even on the radio, I think, is it so conspicuous and so devastating as in pictures. We know by now that even a talkie need not talk all the time. Why must the films sing and sob and swing so continuously and especially in places where nobody cares? I do indeed believe that less music, or at least less background would be a very desirable slogan to be adopted by the musicians. Its effect when achieved, should provide a pleasant relief for the movie-lovers of five continents: and it certainly would mean a gain for the films as an art. In this respect, too, there is a lesson to be learned from the European, or rather from the French films.