

# SOUND-FILM AND MUSIC THEATRE

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EVER since there has been a theatre, there has been some sort of music for the theatre; and ever since theatre-music in one form or another has been composed and performed, it has been and it remains a problem never completely solved. The stage-director and the conductor embarrass, if they do not directly oppose each other. The actor is at odds with the singer, and both contend against the music itself. For the audience, the stage is the focus, the center of action. The orchestra is a second focus—supposedly serving the first, but in reality always fighting it. The audience has to overlook the fact—and it does so out of habit—that while the performance is in progress on the stage, the members of the orchestra are engaged in all kinds of gymnastics that have nothing to do with the stage-action, and that between stage and orchestra stands a man going through even more startling contortions in order to unite these two sources of illusion.

The attempts to eliminate this duality by making the orchestra invisible, lowering or covering it, have not worked. The conductor lost control of both the orchestra and the stage, and the music lost glamor.

It remains for the sound-film, which has from the start included music as a matter of course, to solve this problem automatically. Here we have only one focus, the screen. The sound that seems to flow freely through space, accompanying the picture, has been tried out and gauged to the last degree in a complicated process of acoustic recording. Each musical scene is recorded a great many times, the best result chosen, and thus all accidental causes of error, such as the momentary condition of singers, conductors and actors, are also eliminated. The sound-track opens up new territory in the realm of acoustics in the same way that trick-

photography does in the field of optics. The sound can be filtered in part or as a whole, subdued, split, its timbre changed by repeated passing through the loud-speaker; and the outcome can be recorded over and over again. This permits sound-effects of a new and special kind. And it leads to a technical solution of the problem of melodrama.

Melodrama (using the word in the European sense, to connote the combination of spoken words and music) has always remained an unfortunate hybrid, although masters have worked so much with this form. More than in any other type of applied music, words and tone are left in a hopeless state of war because of the unsolved or insoluble question of mutual balance. Suppose a speaker's recitation is accompanied by varied lighting. The effect may be artistically good or bad, tasteful or tasteless, but technically—with regard to media—it is in either case incontestable. The situation can never arise that Medium A, sound, and Medium B, light, dispute each other's place. However, when Medium A, the spoken word, is joined by Medium A', music, a collision and constant interference and friction result. This is precisely what happens in melodrama.

In the sound-film, on the other hand, the conjunction of words and music becomes entirely natural. There are a number of reasons for this surprising fact. In the first place, the utmost flexibility of sound and therefore the most subtle shadings can be achieved; secondly, words and musical sound are fused—at least so far as the hearer's consciousness goes—and proceed together from the same unknown source. No doubt psychological reactions also play their part. Experiments have been made, for instance, proving that the perception of identical sounds can be changed by adding certain color impressions.

The sound-film, equipped with such potentialities and having so great a scope, is adapted as no other medium is to bring music to "the masses." Many people have no approach to music except when it interprets and communicates specific associations, that is, associations established *in advance* (as in church or in the theatre). Wagner's music could never have become so popular without the stage. And very recently even "atonal" music as problematic and complicated as Alban Berg's "Wozzeck" was

able to win a large public because its impassioned interpretation of the events on the stage spoke directly to the audience, superseding any questions of the musical "direction" or style. With the aid of visual and dramatic symbols, even musically unschooled listeners are capable of appreciating untraditional musical expression, provided its severity, hardness, dissonance and unconventional melodic treatment are true and inspired.

Nevertheless the musical theatre, frequently even operetta, does not reach a really large public because it demands too much of an effort—a far greater one, at any rate, than the sound-film does. There the music can—or rather, it could—steal its way, so to speak, into the minds of the listeners, and, by imperceptibly making their reactions subtler, more sensitive and more sensible, and increasing their conscious enjoyment, could educate them into an audience receptive even to modern music. The decisive factor in any such process, of course, is the selection of the music, its quality, placing and apportionment. On the whole, little attention has been paid to these questions, and music has been treated merely as a necessary evil.

A certain film needs music: so something is pilfered from the rich stock of musical literature. For what other purpose did Wagner, Tschaikowsky, Brahms and the rest live? On the other hand, why are they dead and unable to defend themselves? The scenic setting of a film is adapted with the most painstaking care to the time, country, subject and style of the picture. The costumes likewise are minutely considered with regard to all these aspects; for people would notice it if rococo costumes were worn in a film playing in present-day China. But what does the music matter? Who will pay any attention to it? The *Unfinished Symphony* of Schubert manifests a positively Biblical patience; it lets itself be used indiscriminately for a Moroccan landscape, a scene in the schoolroom or a love-match in an airplane. When a smart young man is shown playing tennis or riding horseback, he does not appear in a purple coronation cloak or an ancient coat of mail resuscitated from the attic; his faultlessly tailored suit is designed in material and cut for his figure, his character. But the music is dug up from among old "props," and its ridiculous nature overlooked, without further compunctions. Few people,

so far, realize that the music as well as the costumes must be made "according to measure" if it is to "fit." There is no doubt that although the public accepts unfitting music indifferently or leniently it would be sure to notice and value the moving and enhancing power of appropriate music. There is also no doubt that the public is underestimated and that it would be grateful if this were no longer the case. And lastly, there is no doubt that if the people in charge would devote as much attention to the quality of the music as to the other items in a film they would deserve great credit. Nor would they harm the box-office—in all probability, it would be helped.

This state of affairs once achieved, the composer could begin an extremely promising collaboration with the films. There are great artistic and educational tasks to be undertaken that have scarcely been touched on up to now. But the sound-film is young. The silent film also had its childhood ills; but it did not ask us for long to content ourselves with the comic bicyclist who kept running into the woman selling eggs and the pursuing policeman. At present the sound-film frequently offers us the musical equivalent of this bicycle episode; but it too will outgrow this stage. The justly popular "silly symphonies" point the way to unpretentious, entertaining short film operas. Thence the road will lead to other types of short opera-films and finally to the real film-opera, which, to be sure, will be something quite different from the grand opera of the day before yesterday.

It is a question when the sound-film will have the courage to create its own opera—not filmed theatre-opera, but the genuine film-opera of today. Of its eventual success, however, there is no question.