

COMPOSING FOR FILMS

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"When you have thought in terms of music as long as I have it is easier to write original music than to bother recalling appropriate bars of music written the past."

In the years that I have been composing and conducting motion picture scores, the importance and value of back-ground music have been increasingly recognised. Only a few years ago music was considered a pleasant, unobtrusive re-enforcement of a sequence's tempo and mood. Today it is far more.

Screen music is still unobtrusive, for being so is the primary characteristic of any movie score that is good. But screen music is now so artfully and effectively integrated with script, direction and the actors themselves, that it has come to be one of the means of story-telling. It is easy to prove this. Just try to transplant any picture's musical score to similar scenes in another picture. You will find that the transplantation doesn't live.

It is of incalculable value to the composer to be able to sit in on story conferences from the beginning. He will not only better comprehend the total trend, mood or purpose of the story, but he will be able to make suggestions that will enable the music to strengthen and fulfil the story.

For example, at random: consider the point in a story at which a man suddenly, without warning, slaps a woman. Let us say the writers conceived the scene to be with two characters standing together talking by a window. Now sudden violence like a slap in the face has more impact if *something unobtrusive* prepares the audience a second or two in advance. If this split-second preparation is not provided the mind will resent being taken by surprise. The best "something," it has been found, is music.

When this slapping sequence is discussed in a story conference I might say to the writers, or the director: "I will have to have a few seconds in there just before the slap in order to prepare for it. And we would talk it over and conclude that the man will have to take a few steps in order to slap the woman. This will give me the time I need to presage the violent change of mood. I have found that a composer will get full cooperation unless his requests alter the story line. Directors and writers know a composer's technical problems. They also know the importance of his contribution.

Not a few writers, and even some directors, have asked me whether a retentive and facile memory of what others have written, or one's own musical inventiveness, is more valuable in scoring a motion picture. I cannot remember ever deliberately cribbing music from others, except when it was intentional, legitimate, and acknowledged, as my arrangements of Debussy's music for David Selznick's *Portrait of Jennie*.

Possibly even the most conscientious composer no and then inadvertently uses a fragment of melody that has stuck in his subconscious. But deliberately lifting phrases from the compositions of others is not only musical bankruptcy but incompetent craftsmanship.

Maybe I am fortunately equipped. I was born into family of concert musicians, and have studied music since I was five years old. When you have thought in terms of music as long as I have it is *easier* to write original music than to bother recalling appropriate bars of music written the past. After all, scenes and even sequences change swiftly on the screen that very often there isn't time for more than a couple of measures. It is really *simpler and more effective* to compose than to rummage around in classical music to find something that expresses the idea.

My first scoring of background music, if it can be called that, was when I was accompanist for the great European comedian, Max Linder. I sat at the piano and improvised all through his act. He was brilliant and unpredictable, and ad libbed freely and frequently. It was impossible for me to arrange and follow a definite score because he never did his act the same way twice. Consequently I watched him and listened to him and learned to divine instinctively what he would do, and thus to improvise what was actually pure mood music. I would even throw in sound effects, such as laughter, at what I thought were the right times. Linder was one of the truly great comedians of our time. He worked dumb, in the inelegant show business phrase, but his pantomime and his appeal were eloquent. The only comparable artists today are Chaplin, Jimmy Savo, and possibly Cantinflas, the great Mexican clown.

Some gifted comics are so because of blind and blessed instinct, uninhibited by cerebral processes. Not Linder. He had an inspired comedy sense, of course, but he also had an analytical, ingenious mind. Except for Chaplin, I have never known another comedian who had such an objective view of his own art. Linder was sensitive and responsive to any audience, and could talk audience psychology with the intellectual perspective of a professor. On stage he would introduce a new bit suddenly and without previous thought, but later he could give a profound and apposite reason for having done what he did spontaneously.

My first contact with Linder was typical. A few months before World War I began he was making a triumphant tour that brought him to Petrograd. He arrived in the city by train, but flew from the station to the Astoria Hotel by plane. The effect of such an arrival, especially in 1914, was spectacular. History is beginning to distort Linder as an eccentric given to flashy public appearances and outré living. But it wasn't self indulgence, merely good business. Like Houdini, he was a showman off-stage, too. Probably because movies were a nearly-perfect vehicle for his pantomime, Linder was enormously enthusiastic over the future of films. Also impatient, because their technological advance seemed to him so slow. All that now seems to me a far cry from scoring a motion picture, but it was my first step. After that experience I learned that it was easier, *for me*, to improvise than to recall and use bits of music from the classics or other sources.

After some years of composing symphony and concert music, I became interested in the ballet. It had always been one of my favourite arts, but at that time in my life I became fascinated by the astonishing correlation of sound and sight, or music and movement, that is the essence of ballet. It was also in this period of my life that I realised, for the first time, how much music contributed to story-telling, or more accurately, to the transmission of mood to the audience. I wrote considerably for the ballet. My numbers met with varying success. I found this my introduction to the composition of "background music."

After composing for several Broadway shows I fell under the spell of the motion picture camera. There is a much closer affinity between ballet and movies than casual thought suggests. The story becomes more involved in ballet, for the screen is a more plastic medium, and its storytelling is therefore simpler. Nevertheless, the eloquence of music is as indispensable to film as to ballet. Sometimes I think a good picture is really just ballet with dialogue.

Dialogue, of course, is of primary importance in determining the genre of background music. It entails problems that must be overcome, and can be overcome only by certain musical techniques. It is difficult for a layman to realise that speaking voices have astonishing variation in pitch and timbre. It may seem incredible, but many actor's voices, however pleasant in themselves, and regardless of pitch, are incompatible with certain instruments. Clarinets, for instance, get in the way of some voices and magnificently complement others. Further, clarinets may be alien to the spirit of a play, or the characterisation of a part.

Some actors have voices that are easy to write for. Actors like John Wayne impose almost no burdens on the composer. Wayne's voice happily happens to have a pitch and timbre that fits almost any instrumentation. Jimmie Stewart is another actor for whom it is a delight to write music. Paradoxically, his speaking voice is not "musical." But it has a slightly nasal quality and occasionally "cracks" in a way that is easy to complement. Jean Arthur's voice is somewhat similar.

Just why this type of voice should be easy to write for, I don't know. One might speculate that since these voices have little colour in themselves, the complementary musical backdrop doesn't bump into or fall over the dialogue. The mere fact that such voices are unmusical gives them an additional definition.

Imagine an actress whose voice has the right harmonics and overtones of a low register clarinet statement. Assume a voice of incredibly pure, round tones. It might be nice to listen to unaccompanied, but it would be a damned nuisance to write for. You'd have to breach the 13-tone chromatic scale and even abandon Standard Pitch before you got a congenial musical background.

The "crack" in Miss Arthur's and Mr. Stewart's voices is one of those strangely appealing imperfections, like a single strand of rebellious hair on an otherwise impeccable moonlit coiffure. But don't pursue this appeal of imperfect voices too far, or you'll run into Andy Devine.

Jean Arthur and James Stewart also illustrate another point; utilising music to "soften" a face, or to give it qualities it does not have inherently. This is not necessary with Stewart or Arthur because both have faces that reflect great sincerity. (Frank Capra, with whom I have had the pleasure of working on a number of pictures, once pointed out to me that unless a player has the sort of face that bespeaks sincerity he is not likely ever to become a great star.)

The camera is a merciless, analytical instrument. Even after every artifice of lighting and make-up, the close-up can be cruelly revealing. The composer, by providing pleasant melodic music, can direct attention from what the make-up artist could not hide. And in doing so the composer is surprisingly successful.

To comprehend fully what music does for movies, one should see a picture before the music is added, and again after it has been scored. Not only are all the dramatic effects heightened, but in many instances the faces, voices, and even the personalities of the players are altered by the music.

Because music can add to a personality and even to a player's physical appearance, I paid particular attention to Mala Powers as Roxanne in *Cyrano De Bergerac*, for which I composed and conducted the music. Miss Powers has a lovely, interesting face, but somehow it just didn't look French enough for me. In real life, of course, there are hundreds of thousands of pure-blooded Frenchmen who wouldn't look French. But on the screen a French woman should look like one. Consequently, I used French thematic music for all her appearances in *Cyrano De Bergerac*. By doing so, I like to think, I helped Miss Powers to project the effect of a daughter of France.

While on the subject of typically French music, I would like to point out that much of the music that is accepted as typical of certain races, nationalities and locales, is wholly arbitrary. Audiences have been conditioned to associate certain musical styles with certain backgrounds and peoples, regardless of whether the music is authentic.

For instance, all audiences think a certain type of steady beat of tom-tom or tympani drum, and a high, wailing wind instrument performing in a simple four or five-tone scale, connotes one thing: Indians. I have conducted no exhaustive research into the American Indian's music, but I suspect that this particular stylisation of "Indian music" has very little similarity with the genuine article. In the past some composer freely adapted some possibly authentic Indian song, changed and altered it, and came up with the tom-tom effect we all know.

This "conditioned reflex" music, of course, is wholly arbitrary, but it is so effective that sometimes its use is compulsory. I have employed it in any number of Westerns, including Howard Hawks' *Red River*, which, in my opinion, is a classic movie. I have used the "Indian music" that everyone knows not because I am not resourceful enough to originate other music, but because it is a telegraphic code that audiences recognise. If while the white settlers are resting or enjoying themselves, the background music suddenly takes on that tympani beat, the effect on the audience is electrifying. All know the Redmen are on the warpath even before the camera pans to the smoke signals on a distant hilltop. If I introduced genuine, absolutely authentic Indian tribal music, it probably wouldn't have any effect at all.

This musical conditioning underlies much screen composing. But it must not be hackneyed if it is to be effective. In the Indian music mentioned above I never used standard bars and phrases. I simply employed their mood. The idea is to avoid the usual and the trite, and at the same time to retain the basic ingredients of the musical "codes."

The screen composer, like every artist, must work within limitations. No matter how inventive and resourceful he is, he must also be disciplined. He must, to some extent, compromise. For a motion picture is a collective art, and the composer's contribution must enhance, not dominate.