

Hollywood as Music Museum & Patron: Bringing Various Musical Styles to a Wide Audience

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Abstract: The role of Hollywood films in holding up a mirror – albeit sometimes a distorted one – to the American public is indisputable. Less discussed is their role in bringing a wide range of music – popular, classical, jazz, avant-garde, ethnic – to an unsuspecting audience. Whether the music is in the foreground, as in biographical movies about composers, for example, or in the background supporting the narrative, watching a movie educates the viewers' ears. Indeed, the role of movies in widening the public's aural palate has parallels with the role of art museums in broadening the public's visual taste. To supply the music needed for movies, Hollywood studios have employed a large number of composers of the most varied backgrounds, taking on a significant function as patron of contemporary music. This essay briefly examines some of the varied interactions of movies, music, and the public.

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The Hollywood film industry plays a crucial role in the preservation and dissemination of music of many styles. This role is not much discussed, however, because it is an unintended side effect of most Hollywood films, the primary aim of which is commercial success. Nevertheless, despite differences in stated or inherent aims, and despite differences in financial structure, the effect that Hollywood studios have on the American public with regard to music is surprisingly similar to the effect the great museums have with regard to art.

The first two major art museums in the United States, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, opened their doors in the same year, 1870. From the outset, they were committed to the education, enlightenment, and one might say elevation of a democratic populace. In her study of American art museums, Nancy Einreinhofer recounts how during "the opening ceremony of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston's mayor described the city's museum as "The

crown of our educational system.”¹ Similarly, the 1876 Annual Report of the Metropolitan Museum declared, “The Museum today is not surpassed as an educational power among the people by any university, college, or seminary of learning in the metropolis.”²

The educational aim in bringing great works of art to the attention of large numbers of people was not primarily aesthetic – this was not art for art’s sake. Rather, it was believed that elevated taste led to elevated morals, and that a more educated populace produced a stronger democracy. The sheer pleasure arising from contact with works of art was not denied or eschewed, but it was not highlighted as a principal part of the mission of the museum.

In contrast, bringing pleasure, or at least entertainment, to the largest possible paying audience was very much the *raison d’être* for the first American moviemakers. Despite the slogan *ars gratia artis*, adopted by the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio in 1917, commerce rather than art or edification guided decisions about movies. The heads of studios wanted to make a product for profit, just as other moguls produced steel or built railroads. Yet over time, the power of movies to influence and educate could hardly be ignored.

The purported ability of movies to affect the consciousness, attitudes, and morals of their audiences has been much debated. For instance, the effect of violent movies and video games on people in possession of guns is just one aspect of this discussion that has received recent attention. My interest here is in one small corner of the debate: namely, the ability of movies to expose usually unsuspecting audiences to a wide range of musical styles.

Musical indoctrination through Hollywood films often began early in the life of a moviegoer. Many people claim to have

had their first contact with classical music while watching cartoons as children. In his book *Tunes for ’Toons: Music for the Hollywood Cartoon*, musicologist Daniel Goldmark notes:

If cartoons have become associated over time with any one musical genre, it is classical music. When I talk to people about cartoon music, that is inevitably what they first think of and talk about: “Cartoons are where I learned all the classics.” . . . With the increasingly limited attention given to classical music in primary and secondary schools, cartoon scores have managed to keep the classics in the public’s ears, albeit in a context that gives them an entirely different set of meanings.³

To be sure, the “classical music” that viewers are exposed to via cartoons is in fact only melodies or motives from larger pieces, fragments meant to capture a mood or semaphore a situation within seconds. The Wedding March from Wagner’s *Lohengrin*, the Funeral March from Chopin’s Piano Sonata No. 2, the Ride of the Valkyries from Wagner’s *Die Walküre*, the Overture to *William Tell* by Rossini, and many other works by Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, Schumann, Liszt, and Tchaikovsky: all have been mined for nuggets of instant musical meaning. Of course, the extent to which exposure leads to appreciation remains an open question. Familiarity is not the same as knowledge; but surely unfamiliarity is the same as lack of knowledge.

Cartoons were also the entry point, for many innocent observers, into the world of jazz. According to Goldmark, cartoons “became an especially potent site for spreading the sound of jazz nationwide.”⁴ Jazz entered the feature-film sound track in the 1950s, partly to create an atmosphere of alternative morality. Alex North’s jazz-inflected score for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), for example, underlines the hover-

ing sexuality as well as the New Orleans setting. *The Man with a Golden Arm* (1956; score by Elmer Bernstein) is set in Chicago and has as its hero a heroin-addicted jazz drummer. But cartoons featured jazz performances as early as the 1930s. Some of these cartoons suffer from their overt association of the sounds of jazz with racial stereotypes. Still, the musical performances themselves are notable.

Directors of museums were aware that while one can put works of art on view, there is no guarantee that the observer will be elevated. To address this issue, museums added staff members whose principal concern was the education of patrons. The Cleveland Museum of Art, a leader in this field, gives the director of these services the lofty title Curator of Education. Gallery talks and museum tours, public lectures and publications, classes in studio art and art history for both children and adults, and outreach programs to local schools are among the tactics that today's museums use to help the public understand their collections.

When and why the impulse to educate took hold of Hollywood film studios is more difficult to pinpoint. The Disney film *Fantasia* (1940), however, represents a decisive moment in the coming together of music, cartoons, and the educational urge. At a chance meeting in the West Hollywood restaurant Chasens, Walt Disney explained to conductor Leopold Stokowski his idea to use Paul Dukas's tone poem *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* as the basis for a film. Mickey Mouse, Disney's first star, would be featured as the apprentice in an effort to expand the character's dramatic range. Stokowski was enthusiastic, offering his services as conductor and suggesting that *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* be just one part of a more extensive work combining animation and classical music. Deems Taylor, a noted commentator on classical

music, was brought in to help select the pieces. In its finished form, *Fantasia* ran two hours and comprised eight musical segments: the *Tocatta and Fugue in D minor* by J. S. Bach, transcribed for orchestra; excerpts from *The Nutcracker Suite* by Tchaikovsky; *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* by Dukas; *The Rite of Spring* by Stravinsky; Symphony No. 6 (the "Pastoral") by Beethoven; *Dance of the Hours* by Ponchielli; *Night on Bald Mountain* by Mussorgsky; and Franz Schubert's "Ave Maria."

The aspirations of Disney and Stokowski were related, though not identical. Both men wanted to bring classical music to a larger audience, but Disney was also keenly aware that *Fantasia* would raise the prestige of the work coming out of his studio. He and his colleagues envisioned a brave new world for animation. In the program book written to accompany the limited-release showing in 1940, one can sense the almost messianic fervor the creators felt. "The beauty and inspiration of music must not be restricted to a privileged few but made available to every man, woman and child," Stokowski declared. "That is why great music associated with motion pictures is so important, because motion pictures reach millions all over our country and all over the world." Disney added: "In a profession that has been an unending voyage of discovery in the realms of color, sound and motion, *Fantasia* represents our most exciting adventure. At last, we have found a way to use in our medium the great music of all times and the flood of new ideas which it inspires." As one unnamed writer put it:

Hereafter, the average listener should be much less humble about his ability to understand good music.... In the past, composers have been able to turn only to the comparatively limited mediums of opera and ballet for an interpretation of their works in color and motion. Stokowski, Taylor and

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Disney believe that *Fantasia* will suggest to the great composers of our day, a third medium – a medium where color and motion are restricted only by the limits of imagination – the medium which is giving to the public *Fantasia*.

Critical reception of the film was divided. According to media-studies scholar Moya Luckett, “While film critics almost unanimously praised the film as ‘important,’ music critics despised the way it diluted the classics.”⁵

Starting in the late 1930s and continuing for three decades, classical music also was showcased in Hollywood movies through a number of biographical films about famous composers. Romantic-era composers were the preferred subjects of these “biopics,” including one of Chopin called *A Song to Remember* (1945), one of Schumann called *Song of Love* (1947), one of Rimsky-Korsakov called *Song of Scheherazade* (1947), one of Tchaikovsky called *Song of My Heart* (1948), and one of Liszt called *Song without End* (1960). The similarity of the titles gives some hint of the sameness of the biographical approach. The musical performances in these films, however, were of genuine value.

The problem of what the film audience should see while listening to the music was solved in many ways. Frequently, scenes of concerts are shown, with the camera switching from the performance to reaction shots of the concert audience. While the *Fantasia* approach had to do with what the music made the animators think of – be it abstract colors, mice, mushrooms, centaurs, or demons – the biopics sometimes focused on what the composer was thinking of when a piece of music came into his mind. In other words, these films took up the question, what does musical inspiration look like? Admittedly, except in rare cases such as when a com-

poser has expressed something about his thinking or motivation, this question is unanswerable; nevertheless, most composer biopics include scenes of composers composing just as biographical films of artists have scenes of painters painting.

A series of films about popular American composers preceded most of the Hollywood biopics of classical European composers. Warner Bros., the studio that in the 1930s made a number of uplifting films about great men and women of science – Louis Pasteur and Marie Curie, among others – led the way. Throughout the 1940s, the studio released films exploring the life of George M. Cohan in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), of George Gershwin in *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), and of Cole Porter in *Night and Day* (1946). Other studios followed suit, producing biopics of Jerome Kern, Rodgers and Hart, and others. It is no coincidence that this series began with the most flag-waving of the popular American composers, George M. Cohan, who composed the World War I anthem “Over There” as well as “You’re a Grand Old Flag.” Against a backdrop of war and global turmoil, these films seemed to tell viewers, “This is true American culture. This is what we are fighting for.” *Stars and Stripes Forever* (1952), a biopic about John Philip Sousa, was a kind of coda to this series.

The history of films with music physically linked to them is less than one hundred years old. *The Jazz Singer* (1927), featuring Al Jolson both singing and speaking, is celebrated as the start of sound movies, or “talkies.” Movies had never truly been silent, but before 1927, music to accompany them was usually supplied by a pianist, sometimes improvising or else drawing on a stock of music composed for other purposes. For projects of greater prestige, an orchestra exterior to the film played music specifically composed or arranged for the film.

After 1927, the relationship between music and film changed. Hiring composers to write music specifically for a film became standard practice. Indeed, movie studios became major patrons of contemporary composers. For centuries in Europe, the patronage of composers and the fostering of new musical works had been the province of the clergy and the nobility. Things began to change first in the opera house and later in the concert hall and the musical theater – all venues where a paying public drawn from a wide social spectrum could affect the kind of music composed. Hollywood’s patronage of composers further solidified this trend toward accounting for public tastes and desires in new musical works.

With the coming of sound movies, Hollywood studios took on an extraordinary number of composers of the most varied educational backgrounds and musical styles. They also employed hundreds of the best performing musicians to be found in the United States. The economically unstable and unsettling political events of the 1930s – that is, the Great Depression worldwide and the rise of totalitarianism in Europe – funneled a large number of composers and performers to Southern California. From New York came writers of musicals that Broadway could no longer support, including Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, and Cole Porter – the whole Tin Pan Alley pantheon. From Europe came classically trained composers, with Max Steiner, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, and Franz Waxman chief among them.

Steiner, who was born in Vienna in 1888, trained at the Imperial Academy in Vienna and came to the United States in 1916. He worked for RKO and Warner Bros., and in some thirty years he wrote about three hundred film scores, the most famous of which were for *King Kong* (1933), *The Informer* (1935), and *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

Korngold was born in Brno in 1897 and, like Steiner, showed remarkable musical talent at an early age. He managed to keep one foot in the classical music world – writing five operas, a concerto for violin, chamber music, and piano music – and the other foot in the film industry, writing nineteen film scores, two of which – *Anthony Adverse* (1936) and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1937) – received an Academy Award. Waxman, born in 1906 in Silesia, studied at the Dresden Music Academy and the Berlin Conservatory. After that, he worked for a few years in the German film industry before coming to the United States in 1934. He showed great versatility, writing scores for a range of films in different genres, from horror films to romantic comedies. Like Korngold, he won two Academy Awards, one for *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and one for *A Place in the Sun* (1951). As founder and head of the Los Angeles International Music Festival, Waxman promoted the work of many other contemporary composers. The music of all three of these men reflected their classical training, frequently drawing on a lush, late-Romantic style. Steiner’s “Tara’s Theme” from *Gone with the Wind*, with its threefold yearning octave leaps, is one example among many of this ripe Romantic writing.

In the 1930s and 1940s, sometimes called the golden age of film music, studios had large budgets for music departments with composers, music editors and arrangers, and performers all under contract. The breakdown of the Hollywood studio system, starting in the 1950s, had far-ranging consequences for the employment of composers and for the kinds of music they wrote. The career of Bernard Herrmann, which began in the golden age and continued into the 1970s, is illustrative.

Herrmann had some things in common with Steiner, Korngold, and Waxman, but there was much that set him apart. Herr-

mann was American born (in New York in 1911) and studied at New York University and at Juilliard. Although he was active as a conductor and composer of concert music, his principal fame came from the sixty-one film scores he wrote. Despite, or perhaps with the aid of, a difficult temperament, Herrmann did some of his best work with temperamentally difficult directors. His first film score was for *Citizen Kane* (1941), directed by Orson Welles. He went on to score several films for Alfred Hitchcock, including *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), and *Psycho* (1960). Herrmann's musical style, as demonstrated in his score for *Psycho*, leaves the romanticism of Steiner, Korngold, and Waxman far behind. He was acutely aware of the essential contribution his music made to the films he worked on, eliciting, at least for a while, an almost reverential respect from Welles and Hitchcock. In "A Lecture on Film Music" Herrmann commented, "[T]he whole recognition scene of *Vertigo* . . . is eight minutes of cinema without dialogue or sound effects – just music and picture. I remember Hitchcock said to me, 'Well, music will do better than words there.'"⁶ He also recalled that Hitchcock was unconvinced about the effectiveness of *Psycho*, but had a change of heart when he heard the score Herrmann composed for the film. At the same time, Herrmann is almost perversely modest about his score for *Psycho*, "universally acknowledged to be one of the most original and influential in cinema history," according to film historian Mervyn Cooke.⁷ Herrmann noted:

Many people have inquired how I achieved the sound effects behind the murder scene. Violins did it! People laugh when they learn it's just violins, and that's interesting to me. It shows that people are so jaded that if you give them cold water they wonder what kind of champagne it is. It's just the strings doing

something every violinist does all day long when he tunes up. The effect is as common as rocks.⁸

As Herrmann's score for *Psycho* shows, new images demanded new sounds. This is perhaps most obvious in the scores written for science-fiction films. Film composers, like brides, may turn to something old, something new, and certainly something borrowed to achieve needed effects. For example, in the sound track of *Alien* (1979), composer Jerry Goldsmith used the sounds of sea shells and the didgeridoo, an Australian aboriginal instrument. John Williams used Caribbean steel drums, out-of-tune kazoos, and other toy instruments for the bar scene in the first of the *Star Wars* movies, producing music that "still sound[s] today like plausible popular music from an alien world."⁹ The "something new" category began with the use of an early electronic instrument, the theremin, in films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951; score by Bernard Herrmann), *The Thing* (1951; score by Dimitri Tiomkin), and *It Came From Outer Space* (1953). Nowadays, startlingly novel sounds can be produced by a wide range of electronic instruments and synthesizers.

Changes in the type of music written for movies encompassed not only instruments used but matters of organizing musical sounds – that is, matters of musical style. Arnold Schoenberg turned down the chance to write a film score when Irving Thalberg asked him to provide music for *The Good Earth* (1937). But Schoenberg's system of composing with twelve tones was studied by other film composers including Franz Waxman, David Raksin, Alfred Newman, and Hugo Friedhofer. Interestingly, as with jazz, modernist styles of music showed up in cartoons before they appeared in feature-length films. Scott Bradley, who scored many of the Tom and Jerry cartoons for MGM, used tone

rows to accompany the antics of the cartoon characters in *Puttin' on the Dog* and *The Cat That Hated People*. Bradley asserted that "any progress in creative contemporary film music will be made in this medium because endless experiments in modern harmony and orchestration are acceptable.... Since beauty in cartoons is rarely even skin deep, we must employ 'shock chords' which sometimes reach the outer limits of harmonic analysis."¹⁰

Film scores continue their role of surreptitiously bringing new styles of music to a relatively unsuspecting audience. Music in the minimalist style can be heard in the scores Philip Glass has written for *Kundun* (1997), *The Hours* (2002), and *Notes on a Scandal* (2006), each of which received an Academy Award nomination. Music from India, Japan, China, Brazil, and other world cultures can be heard in films made in those nations, but also filtered through the ears of composers working for Hollywood studios. African drumming, Bulgarian and Armenian singing, and a plethora of other sounds all make their colors available for the palette of the film composer. The degree to which this borrowing of sounds and styles is deemed problematic, raising issues of ethical compromise in the appropriation of world music, may depend on whether it is viewed as bio-piracy or as fusion cuisine. Perhaps the most important trend in music for contemporary cinema is the use of electronically generated sounds organized through computers. The skill set and sound memories that a composer of film scores brings to his task today may be entirely different from those of composers in earlier decades.

At this point, to continue my comparison of museums and movies, I must look to museums dedicated to modern art and contemporary artists. The Museum of Modern Art opened in New York City in 1929, just two years after the release of

The Jazz Singer. Two other important modern art museums opened in New York City in the 1930s: the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. These museums and their founders served as important supporters, promoters, and patrons of living artists: "The modern art museum and the modern art object came to exist as a symbiotic relationship," writes Nancy Einreinhofer.¹¹ Museums have also shown a certain rapprochement with Hollywood studios by treating their audiences as not just pupils but consumers of art. The public pays admission to see the museum's collections, but may freely enter the gift shop, where objects ranging from postcards and books to household goods, jewelry, and sculptures can be purchased.

Today, new technologies and new musical sonorities and styles are available to composers for film; yet selections of classical music – written well before the films into which they are incorporated and for entirely different purposes – continue to be featured in film scores, sometimes in surprising ways. In *Die Hard* (1988) portions of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony accompany the actions of the European villain rather than the hero. Mervyn Cooke argues that "[t]he terrorist's elegant appearance and implied musical refinement provide the strongest possible contrast to the all-American vest-wearing Bruce Willis hero who listens to pop music and ultimately saves the day."¹² Director Stanley Kubrick is infamous for rejecting the score he had commissioned from Alex North for *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), preferring the temp track of music by Johann Strauss, Jr., and Richard Strauss. (A temp track is music chosen by the director in the early days of filming to suggest to the composer the sort of sound the director might like.) Kubrick remarked, ingenuously, "However good our best film com-

posers may be, they are not a Beethoven, a Mozart, or a Brahms. Why use music which is less good when there is such a multitude of great orchestral music from the past and from our own time?"¹³ Kubrick's remark also seems to apply to Lars von Trier's extensive use of the overture to *Tristan und Isolde* in his film *Melancholia* (2011). More shocking, perhaps, is Kubrick's ironic or anempathetic use of music: for example, his juxtaposition of a violent rape scene in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) with the relatively cheerful overture to Rossini's *La Gazza Ladra*. At this point, the comparison between a museum and a movie as a means to introduce the public to masterworks of art becomes tenuous – or indeed, untenable. It is hard to imagine a museum displaying a work of art in order to deliberately subvert the intention of the artist.

Appreciation for the art and artistry of the composer of film scores has increased in the past decades. This enhanced prestige can be detected in the growth of film-score recordings and in the consideration given to film scores as a subject of academic inquiry. For the first decade or two after movies began to have attached sound, the scores for movies that were not musicals were equivalent to background music – important in many ways, but not intended to be the primary focus of the viewer's attention. This situation changed with the advent of the movie soundtrack album. In the mid-1940s, a few recordings of parts of film scores were made, although only for distribution to radio stations for promotional purposes. Technological advances – the twelve-inch LP record in the 1950s and the CD a few decades later – made it both practical and desirable to produce and release movie music that could be listened to without the benefit of visual stimulation. The soundtrack CD continues to be a source of considerable profit for studios and composers.

To take perhaps the most successful example, the prolific John Williams, who has won Academy Awards for his scores for the films *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, and *Schindler's List*, has also won more than a dozen Grammy Awards for "Soundtrack Album" or "Instrumental Composition Written for a Motion Picture." The CD of his score for *Star Wars* has long been a best seller.

In addition, film music is now deemed a worthy topic of study in academia. The history and aesthetics of film music is taught in many music and film departments. The two most important programs for the composition of film music can be found at New York University and the University of Southern California.

I end with a final comparison, this one not between museums and film studios, but rather between museums and movies themselves. A principal function of any museum – above entertainment and education – is the protection and preservation of its collection. Museums conserve masterworks of art, but also utilitarian things – coins, or cooking vessels, or perfume bottles – that can become objects of reverent contemplation if they are old enough. Movies, even those of relatively little "artistic" value, can preserve moments of musical performance that retain the power to surprise and delight. This is particularly true of performances by popular singers, dancers, or instrumentalists. The sound of their performances may be captured on recordings, but the fuller picture, as it were, is saved on film. What may have been produced as ephemera is now preserved in film archives, and we are the richer for it.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Nancy Einreinhofer, *The American Art Museum: Elitism and Democracy* (London: Leicester University Press, 1997), 36.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ Daniel Goldmark, *Tunes for 'Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 107.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ⁵ Moya Lockett, "Fantasia: Cultural Constructions of Disney's 'Masterpiece,'" in *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, ed. Eric Smoodin (New York: Routledge, 1994), 216.
- ⁶ *The Hollywood Film Music Reader*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 211.
- ⁷ Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 208.
- ⁸ *The Hollywood Film Music Reader*, ed. Cooke, 220.
- ⁹ Cooke, *A History of Film Music*, 463.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 297.
- ¹¹ Einreinhofer, *The American Art Museum*, 101.
- ¹² Cooke, *A History of Film Music*, 439.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 422.