

HOLLYWOOD

RHAPSODY

MOVIE MUSIC AND ITS MAKERS
1900 TO 1975

ARY MARMORSTEIN

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GARY MARMORSTEIN

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For Mary and for Rebecca

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Hollywood Rhapsody is a history of American movie music, from the days of the silent movies to the maverick productions of the seventies. It tells the story of how talented, if sometimes invisible, musicians, composers, and lyricists have created some of the most memorable music of our time. The stirring, slashing music from *Psycho*; the sweeping score for *Gone with the Wind*; the swooning notes of “As Time Goes By” from *Casablanca*—these and so many more are imprinted on our cultural memory.

Even in the era of silent film, scores were written for piano and organ players and pit bands for performance while the films were shown. But when sound came in, movie music really took off. Some of the greatest American songwriters were placed under contract at the various studios in the late twenties and thirties, as well as distinguished European and American classical composers. The Tin Pan Alley composers—Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, and Harry Warren, among others—came to Hollywood and helped create an entirely new genre of film: the movie musical. European émigrés such as Max Steiner and Franz Waxman brought with them a fiery romanticism of the concert hall, creating scores of depth, power, and imagination.

Each studio had its own staff of creative minds at its beck and call. Most notable was Twentieth Century-Fox, where the composer Alfred Newman ran the music department for decades. Newman’s famous fanfare that opened each Fox picture is probably as well known as the opening notes of Beethoven’s Fifth.

At MGM, producer Arthur Freed took the movie musical to new heights in the forties and

(continued from front flap)

fifties. His productions—including *Singin' in the Rain* and *The Band Wagon*—wed Technicolor worlds to popular song. Meanwhile, at Paramount songwriting teams flourished—from Rodgers & Hart to Burke & Van Heusen, who wrote hits for Bing Crosby.

Gary Marmorstein delves into various genres of motion pictures—from cowboy pictures to pioneering animation and rock 'n' roll—to show how music has enhanced the movies. He also discusses the end of the classic era of film scoring and its impact on American music. *Hollywood Rhapsody* combines history and biography for an entertaining trip through the world of movie music.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GARY MARMORSTEIN has worked in the movie industry since the early eighties. He has contributed articles to *Stagebill*, *Performing Arts*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, and other film, music, and theater publications.

With more than 50 photographs

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INTRODUCTION

WHERE YOU'RE TERRIFIC IF YOU'RE EVEN GOOD

Movie music: junk; trash; schmalz. One more shallow product of an art form that routinely aims at the lowest common denominator.

These equations have been made since a soundtrack was first spliced onto celluloid. Like all time-worn clichés, they contain degrees of truth. "Go to the movies," instructed Vernon Duke, who spent a fair amount of time composing for the Hollywood studios; "the feature will be accompanied by impressive sounds, scary and treacly by turn, borrowed from the Masters in public domain and subtly disguised as the film composer's own." Duke's is a common assessment among serious composers, even those who, like Duke, earned a comfortable living from the movies.

Most music written for the movies has a singular purpose: to enhance the film. It suggests that film composers and songwriters have never been really free to write what they please; they must address their compositions to the story ideas given to them, in and around the settings and stars of the film, and they must do it under the frequently extreme hardship of the deadline. Since the beginning of the 1930s a ten-week deadline to create an entire film score has been common; three weeks isn't unheard of. The miracle is that out of such time and style restrictions has come some of the most memorable music of our century.

And it comes despite the crassness of moviemakers—studio heads, executives, producers—who hire the composers and songwriters. Hugh Fordin describes Oscar Hammerstein's experience writing lyrics, including the gorgeous "The Folks Who Live on the Hill," for *High, Wide and Handsome* (1937):

The night the film was first sneak-previewed Adolph Zukor walked across the polished floor of the Riviera Country Club in Hollywood to wring Oscar's hand and say, "That's the greatest picture we ever made!" A few months later, with the picture's road-show exhibition backfiring and producing less revenue than expected, Zukor walked past Oscar in a restaurant and stared through him as though he had never seen him before in his life.

Three years earlier, after his first collaborator Larry Hart completed new lyrics for Ernst Lubitsch's version of *The Merry Widow*, Richard Rodgers went to MGM's Culver City studio to say goodbye to Irving Thalberg, his employer of the past few months. "I walked over," Rodgers remembered in his autobiography, "and said, 'Larry and I are leaving today and I just wanted to say goodbye.' Thalberg looked up with an uncomprehending, glassy stare on his boyish face, and I suddenly realized that he hadn't the faintest idea who I was."

Nearly thirty years later, New York-based composer David Amram describes an incident that occurred after he had worked on the music for *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), written by William Inge and directed by Elia Kazan:

After I had completed the score, Jack Warner came to New York to see a preview. Apparently he fancied himself a kind of stand-up comic. After he had completed a few jokes that I remembered my grandfather telling me and I failed to laugh, he suddenly looked at me and said, "Who are you, the undertaker?"

His retinue automatically roared with laughter.

"No, I'm David Amram," I said. "I wrote the music."

"Well, here's another bright boy," he said. "Listen, there's a lot of young people nobody knows about, they got a big break working with this guy, Kazan. Leonard Bernstein did his first film score, *On the*

Waterfront, for him. Who knows?" he said, looking around at his retinue and throwing up his hands, "this boy may be another Leonard Bernstein." Then, looking at me again, he said, "Who's greater than Leonard Bernstein?"

"Beethoven," I answered. Mr. Warner turned back to his retinue and didn't bother me anymore.

It's a tradition for studio heads and producers to consider a well-known contemporary composer—the more involved with movies or musical theater, the better—far more important than any longhair who didn't earn millions in his lifetime; and Leonard Bernstein, whom Jack Warner could identify as great because he'd worked in the industry and received acclaim for his music, was the last word in composition to him. Amram, wary of the Hollywood juggernaut even before his first visit there, would have none of it, refusing to butt heads with men whose minds were crosshatched with dollar signs. ("That's a nice little quartet, Ludwig, but give us something we can hum.")

Zukor and Thalberg exhibited the obliviousness of studio chiefs toward songwriters—musicians, after all, are not movie stars—while Warner is the jokey lunkhead whose personal, cigar-chomping crassness stands for the crassness of all Hollywood. Yet Warner also stands for one of the great paradoxes of Hollywood: that some men who appear to be devoid of imagination could sponsor, if not actually supervise, the creation of such memorable music. Among the composers and songwriters in Warner's employ, over the course of forty years, were Max Steiner, Dimitri Tiomkin, Erich Korngold, Franz Waxman, Alex North, Harry Warren, Al Dubin, Richard Whiting, Johnny Mercer, Harold Arlen, Jule Styne, Sammy Cahn, and Ira Gershwin. And what was true for Warner was true for the other studio giants, most of them Warner's equal in taste(lessness).

This book is about the men—and a handful of women in a male-dominated industry—whose music accompanied the romances, comings of age, murders, suicides, battles, wars, marriages, miscarriages of justice, and births that movies are about. It covers how these musicians did their work, and the development of that work over the course of seventy-five years, from approximately 1900 to 1975, when the studios' music departments had all but disappeared due to a combination of

union squabbles, television, and the new predominance of the rock music soundtrack.

Most of my subjects are composers and songwriters—lyricists as well as melodists. In some cases—particularly regarding Bing Crosby, Fred Astaire, and Frank Sinatra—there was no way to avoid discussing movie stars at length. But orchestrators, conductors, and soundmen have also been important since the advent of the soundtrack. “With the development of recorded music and broadcasting,” Robert Russell Bennett wrote in the late 1940s, “orchestration assumes greater and greater importance.” This applies as well to the movie soundtrack. Consequently, I discuss the orchestrators who have been at least as responsible as the composers for the film scores. In the movie industry, for the most part, the terms *orchestrator* and *arranger* are used interchangeably, except on vocal numbers, in which their responsibilities are distinct from one another. In discussing movie credits, I tend to assign the possessive to the individual who exerted the most clout during a production. Sometimes this is the producer (e.g., David Selznick’s *Gone with the Wind*), sometimes the director (e.g., Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest*), occasionally the star and almost never, sadly, the writer. This isn’t arbitrary—there’s always a reason for the attribution—but when writing about the collaborative world of moviemaking I’m bound to be wrong here and there. To those who may take offense at arguable attributions, please forgive me.

Although I refer to some foreign film composers, particularly in the material on the silents, they appear here primarily in relation to the American movie industry. I wish I’d had more space to discuss, say, Georges Delerue and Maurice Jarre. Is there any reader who doesn’t know a Lara born shortly after 1965, when *Doctor Zhivago* appeared on the screen accompanied by Jarre’s music?

John Barry, who composed the James Bond theme for *Dr. No* (although British composer Monty Norman is credited), is a much more important figure than the following text would suggest, as are other British composers such as William Walton, William Alwyn, Richard Addinsell (composer of “The Warsaw Concerto”), John Addison, and Malcolm Arnold. In *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, Arnold’s use of the “Colonel Bogey” march, by British military composer Kenneth Alford, was so effective that it influenced almost every war

movie to be released in the following decade. From Italy, no film composer has been more prominent than Nino Rota, but most of Rota's work was for Federico Fellini, and there was little room to talk about his blockbusting themes for Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Godfather*.

Instead, the focus is on Hollywood, and on its music makers who worked under the familiar tension between art and commerce. Given the strictures of time and style these musicians faced, it's a wonder that so many of them completed their assignments; given the extraordinary music—songs as well as scores—that has come from the movies, their achievement at times is positively heroic.

GM

SMILE THROUGH YOUR FEAR AND SORROW

FILM MUSIC BEFORE THE SOUNDTRACK

In 1958, when I was five, my mother took me to the Queen Anne Theater in Bogota, New Jersey, to see a revival of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. The movie was speechless but not silent. Its soundtrack contained recorded music, including the song "Smile," credited to Chaplin. Although *Modern Times* is no longer my favorite Chaplin movie, as a child I hadn't seen anything like it. Only much later I learned that it had been made in 1935, at least seven years after most movies had gone to sound. Chaplin was the last prominent holdout for the feature film that included no recorded speech. But he never worked without music—even in the so-called Silent Era, when he took inspiration for his stories from popular song.

Silent movies had no soundtracks, so there was no speech and no recorded sound effects. But there was almost always music. Music was part of the moviegoing experience long before ads proclaimed JOLSON SINGS!

• • •

Before music was routinely recorded right onto celluloid to enhance moving pictures, it was used, understandably, to muffle the noise of projectors. A single upright piano helped to keep customers from being distracted by the metallic ratcheting. Constant keyboard improvisation also enhanced the movie itself. Near the turn of the century, movies took on the kind of amusement status that vaudeville had; the next step was to use vaudeville's music. A pit band or a honky-tonk piano could produce wondrous sounds for an audience watching images. The bump-and-grind rhythms of the burlesque house became a comic movie staple.

After pictures outgrew storefront cinemas and moved into little theaters, an increasing number of these theaters were equipped with keyboard instruments. This coincided with the years of American piano manufacturers' greatest productivity: in 1909 alone, more than 364,000 pianos, new and used, were put on the market. Many of these found their way into cinemas.

A few years earlier, impresario Mitchell Mark opened the Comique Theater in Boston. The Comique boasted an orchestra pit so deep that the musicians couldn't be seen by the audience. Suddenly a picture's musical accompaniment seemed to be coming from nowhere and everywhere at once. Mark took the presentation of movie music a step further in 1907 when he installed the first church organ to be used for the movies at Cleveland's Alhambra Theater.

Movie accompanists, usually keyboard players with a knack for improvisation and hundreds of riffs at their disposal, tended to be attached to the cinemas they worked for, like the projectionist or the concessionaire. The teenage Fats Waller played piano in Washington and New York, presiding for years at Harlem's Lincoln Theater until 1923, when the cinema closed and he moved on to play the huge organ at the Lafayette. By 1915, thirteen-year-old Louis Alter, who would go on to compose the exquisite "Manhattan Serenade" and "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?," was working as a cinema pianist in Boston. In Kansas City, Carl Stalling, who would produce the music for Walt Disney's *Steamboat Willie* (1928) and lead the Warners music department in scoring hundreds of cartoons, improvised on organ in various cinemas. Harry Warren began his astonishing professional career by playing piano in an East New York

cinema and providing silent star Corinne Griffith with mood music while she acted. In Los Angeles the young Gaylord Carter, who would work into his nineties, played the great downtown picture palaces, with their Mayan or Oriental motifs. These mammoth theaters, the most opulent all over the country, featured Wurlitzers that rose from the floor by hydraulic elevator. (It was from the early cinema organs that we get the phrase "Pull out the stops," referring to the stops on an organ.)

For those musicians who couldn't improvise imaginatively, cue sheets and music books helped immensely. Preeminent among these was *Moving Picture Music* by J. S. Zamecnik. Born in Ohio in 1872, Zamecnik traveled to his parents' native Czechoslovakia to study with Dvořák at the Prague Conservatory. He was an accomplished violinist when he returned to America. After a stint with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, he went back to his hometown of Cleveland to serve as music director for the Hippodrome Theater, a lavish movie house. Already a facile composer-arranger, Zamecnik's responsibilities led him to catalogue his movie accompaniment riffs. The first volumes of *Moving Picture Music* were published in 1913 by Sam Fox Publishing (no apparent relation to early movie mogul William Fox), and included themes for "Defense of Honor," "Remorse," and "Evil Plotter." The success of the volumes kept Zamecnik working for decades.

Zamecnik's European counterpart was Giuseppe Becce, an Italian whose Kinothek ("film library") music series served Berlin-based filmmakers from 1919. But the Kinothek series only exploited and synthesized Europe's more established history of opera and incidental music. In fact, the first original film score we know of preceded Kinothek by a decade. Camille Saint-Saëns's music for *L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise* (1908); the French movie is lost to us (its subject matter appears to have been close cousin to that of the 1994 French film *Queen Margot*), but the eighteen-minute score survives as the composer's Opus 128 for Strings, Piano, and Harmonium.

. . .

America's most innovative filmmaker, David Wark (D. W.) Griffith, was an early champion of film scores. For his 1913 spectacle *Judith of*