

COMPOSING FOR GOVERNMENT FILMS

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IN 1942, shortly after I was appointed Director of Music for the O.W.I. (domestic) Film Bureau, one of our senators in Washington put this query to his confreres: "Did the Administration (meaning at that time, Lowell Mellett, chief of O.W.I. films) think Hollywood music not good enough for its films? Was it necessary to use a highbrow modernist? Wasn't the old familiar music good enough?"

Mr. Mellett must have reflected on the irony of being cast in the role of film music champion – and "modern" film music at that. It was known that he had objected to the importance of Louis Gruenberg's music in *Fight for Life*, and he had expressly asked Sam Spewack, writing and directing *The World at War*, not to let the music be too conspicuous. Plainly, he subscribed to the Hollywood dictum that music should be felt but not heard and his unit would probably have been happier with an Industry man as its musical director.

The film scores by Virgil Thomson for *The River* and *The Plow that Broke the Plains* were the consequence of the happy selection of Pare Lorenz to head the film division of the Department of Agriculture during the early thirties. The differences in the Mellett and the Lorenz attitudes merely emphasize the fact that the United States Government has never consciously or officially promoted any policy about the use of music in its many films. Whatever has been done, good, bad or indifferent, simply expresses the varying attitudes towards music of the many men who in the last twelve or fourteen years have launched the United States Government into the documentary film field. Thomson's scores and my own *World at War* score were not the result of a deliberate policy which might have dictated the employment of creative professional composers wherever possible.

Looking back, it is clear that even without such a policy, government agencies did manage to employ a fair number of serious composers in their film programs. For the period from 1940 to 1943 (about which I have first-hand knowledge), there should be mentioned the Morton Gould

score for Garson Kanin's *Ring of Steel* (1941), Oscar Levant's for Kanin's *Fellow Americans* (1941), the single sequences written for various films by Paul Creston and Morris Mamorsky (1941), George Gerke's *Men and Ships* (1940) and the Spewack feature, *The World at War* (1942), these last two with scores by myself. During this same period Marc Blitzstein's *Night Shift* was started by Kanin, but shooting on it was never completed. Later, in 1942, when the O.W.I. unit was set up, Arthur Kreutz wrote, besides a score for *Salvage*, a concert march for the unit's stock music library; Gene Forrell did a score for *Farmers at War* while I turned in music for *Colleges at War*, *Paratroops*, *Dover* and *Manpower*. During the last three years, I understand the O.W.I. Overseas Film Unit has employed a few serious composers; Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, and Alex North are among the men credited with scores.

However, if a fair number of serious composers have been used in the Government's documentaries, we have Hollywood mainly to thank. For the Industry's insistence on employing the synthetic musical style that makes an MGM score sound just like one from Warners, Twentieth Century, or Paramount, has had the effect not only of divorcing the country's serious composers from the film factories, but also of throwing them into the arms of the documentarians. These gentlemen, though they may not have much money, do not, at least, subject their composers to the standardizing pressures which are the fate of the men on the West Coast. Let the Hollywood producers allow the serious composers the exercise of their prerogatives as creative artists and you will find few of them available thereafter for a government documentary.

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Like the privately produced documentaries, the Government films have had a relatively small distribution, have not been intended as money makers, have had the same shoe-string budgets. With limited means musicians, performers as well as composers, have been the first to feel the pinch. The result is scores that are either "paste jobs" — a series of *segues* from one printed bit of music to another — or original tailor-made works for which the composer, as *composer*, is often not paid at all but is given only the union scale for having orchestrated his own music! Even where the film's budget has allowed for a composing, as distinguished from an orchestrating fee, it is relevant to compare the fifty to a hundred dollars per minute Hollywood rate with the one to three hundred dollar fee per documentary reel.

Performers have been affected too by the small budgets. "Orchestras" of six, eight or ten men are not uncommon. The large orchestra of forty-one men under Alexander Smallens which recorded *The World at War* is the rare exception.

Unfortunately this is not all. During the war the O.W.I. unit, under a special arrangement with the Musicians' Union, scored many films with stock music track – music track written for and heard first in another film. The justification for this practice was certainly in most instances not debatable. Many films – one on rationing, for instance – had to be shot, edited and dubbed in a matter of days. But like myself, others can testify that on too many occasions the unit for reasons of economy stock-scored a picture that could have awaited the writing and recording of an original score. It strikes me that on these occasions there was a dubious justification for the United States Government declining to observe the same labor practices (and charges) involved in producing music for a film that Hollywood, not to mention the private documentaries, under agreement with the union had observed for many years. Many more original scores could have been written, many recording orchestras hired, had the government used stock-track only when absolutely necessary.

To sum up, the government films have of course benefited through the inaccessibility of Hollywood to most serious creative composers. While the government has not always sought out the creative men, it has certainly not discriminated against them. That is something! On the economic level, little need be said. The government has made films with an economy that most Hollywood studios would regard as almost visionary. Fear of the charge that it was competing with private enterprise has forced it to operate on the scantiest of budgets. This would explain its miserly attitude toward music costs, its unnecessary use of stock-track. But on this last point government policy is open to serious criticism.

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The enlightened attitude of another Government film set-up should be placed on record, that of the First Motion Picture Unit of the Army Air Forces at Culver City, California. Since it was primarily to make training films, the music department of FMPU necessarily had to stock-score hundreds of them. Time here was even more of a factor than with the non-military government films. But let it be recorded to the everlasting credit of the military that the need for original scores wherever possible, was quickly recognized. A music department equipped to score any film which could wait for the writing and recording of original music was established. All personnel, including composers Alexander Steinert, David Rose and myself, were in uniform. The recording orchestra was the famous Air Forces Orchestra at Santa Ana, California, the nucleus of the AAF, First Radio Unit.

The guiding spirits of FMPU, William Keighley and Owen Crump, both Warner Brothers directors, were strong in their conviction that the FMPU training and documentary films, to maintain interest, should utilize

all the skills and entertainment techniques that the industry had developed. Of what value was a training film if, for want of these skills, it was dull and the soldier – or the lay audience – went to sleep? From this policy, which assigned to music the task of helping to make vital and interesting subjects more glamorous or exciting, come such film scores as David Rose's *Resisting Enemy Interrogation*, Alex Steinert's for *Camouflage*, and my own for *Memphis Belle*.

At Culver City there was, for once, a realization of the Army's stated intention of putting the soldier in the job he could do best and from which the Army would profit most. It is clear that if the government during war time recognizes the value of the composer, orders three composers in uniform to write music for its service films, believes original music important enough to send a soldier-composer like myself to England in the middle of the war to write a film score – in short, makes clear its faith in original music to do an important military job then it can, and we hope it will, recognize more clearly than in pre-war days the composer's value to the government's peacetime film program. The State Department has recently inherited certain information and propaganda units of the now defunct O.W.I., among them the O.W.I. Overseas Film Unit. What will be the fate of original film music under this new boss is at this moment uncertain.