

ON THE HOLLYWOOD FRONT

By LAWRENCE MORTON

TEN years ago Raymond Spottiswoode, a critic with a passion for categories and definitions, pointed out how music can imitate natural sounds, assume the role of a spectator commenting on the visual film, characterize the actors by *leitmotifs*, play against the film for ironic effects, or merely coexist on a separate but parallel level with the visual. And about the same time, John Grierson was recommending and experimenting with the combination of composed music and naturalistic sounds. Music, then, has not one but many functions to perform.

The failure of film composers to extend their art as widely as possible is one of their serious shortcomings. Many are content merely to write that illustrative music which parallels the film, by no means an objectionable procedure unless followed to the exclusion of others. How effective it can be has been demonstrated, for instance, by Gail Kubik in *Memphis Belle*, in the scene where the camera moves rapidly from a close-up of one Spitfire to another while the music proceeds in a series of short but massive crescendi, or in the "jump" music that Franz Waxman wrote for the parachuters in *Objective Burma*.

How ineffective the procedure can be is demonstrated by the score for *San Pietro*, the Frank Capra Signal Corps film portraying the battle for a little village in the Italian Liri valley during the winter of 1943-44. It is a heart-

breaking and bitter film, recording not only the grimness of the battle but also its tragic aftermath, the dead to be buried, wounded to be cared for, and living to be brought back into sunlight after fearful days of hiding in caves. Major John Huston, who speaks his own commentary, sets the tragic mood in an ironical opening sequence in which he describes the quiet loveliness of the valley, its olive groves and ancient traditions and peace-loving peasants, while the camera moves among scenes of complete ruin, the countryside laid waste by shell-fire.

The film's sound-track is one of those tussles where the narrator and soundman, having reconciled their own claims for priority, conspire to kick the composer into a corner and smother him beneath their eloquence. Or it may have been that other kind of tussle where the composer has had to be silenced in the dubbing-room because he had not properly calculated his fortissimi. In any case, it is a badly balanced sound-track which finds the music running a poor third. If the film wants a score at all – and I think it does not – it is still a question as to whether Dimitri Tiomkin is properly cast as composer for the job. Tiomkin has written a merely illustrative score, the same full-blown symphonic piece he has been writing for his Hollywood films. It is what Spottiswoode deplored in 1935 as a "meaningless concoction of melodies." Is the composer at all aware of the experiments

and achievements of the past dozen years? It is as if Copland had never written the nocturne for the drunken choirmaster in *Our Town*; as if Hugo Friedhofer had not woven the neurotic themes of *The Lodger* into a contrapuntal texture of brutality for the final chase sequence; as if other chase sequences, such as Roy Webb's in *Hitler's Children* or Bernard Herrmann's in *All That Money Can Buy*, had not revealed new ways of treating hackneyed situations; as if Alfred Newman had not composed the vision scene in *Bernadette*, with its imaginative treatment of nature sounds; or, going far back into the past, as if Auric had not shown the effectiveness of playing against the visual, as in the snowball scene in *Sang d'un Poète* with its wistful, almost emotionless waltz evoking the overtones of tragedy. In *San Pietro* we have mere complacency, a willingness to spin out concert music for an imaginary film. It is almost a mockery to watch soldiers spend their courage and fight and die to music that is better suited to a bourgeois domestic drama. Only Rhadames and Tristan die beautifully; soldiers die in the mud.

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Film music as propaganda might seem to be a far-fetched notion to most peo-

ple, but there is a striking example of it in an RKO short entitled *Power Unlimited*, with a score by Ben Machan. The picture pretends to be a documentary about life in an eastern coal town. It shows miners at work and at home, leading an almost idyllic existence, unmindful of the constant threat of danger, and happy in the consciousness of their service to humanity. Their wives seem to desire nothing more than a continuous opportunity to hang out the family wash, their children thrive in the streets that serve as playgrounds. All this is under the auspices of the company, and so there is an appropriate accompaniment of salon music.

Across the town, on the wrong side of the tracks, there is a mine abandoned by the company but still being worked by a few poverty-stricken families who, for reasons that are not explained, have not joined the happy throng employed by the company. The dreariness of their lives is attested by the dilapidated shacks they call homes, the weary gait and dumb hopeless faces of the women. This record of abject poverty is accompanied by a bucolic shepherd dance which says in effect, "Blessed are the broken in spirit, for no notion of the dignity of man remains to stir their discontent."

IN THE THEATRE

By S. L. M. BARLOW

BEFORE we begin on the more or less painful reflections of this column, I would like to toss into the lap of one of my confrères the suggestion

that an interesting review might be made out of the contrasts — in tempi, orchestration, solemnities, levities, and general effectiveness — offered this sea-