

A LITTLE ABOUT MOVIE MUSIC

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THE trouble with most movie-music is its lack of continuity. The cinema is naturally a discontinuous medium. Narrative or dramatic continuity is achieved therein only by effort and much care, against the grain, as it were, like playing *legato* on the trombone. Musical accompaniment should be an aid to continuity. It should establish and preserve an atmosphere, a tone of augmenting or unrolling drama. It should envelope and sustain a narrative the cinematographic recounting of which is after all only a series of very short incidents seen from different angles. To break the music with every shot or change of scene is an error and ineffective.

Curiously enough, the best union of movies and music that has ever been made, so far as I know, is a work in which this "ineffectiveness" is committed so systematically that it is not ineffective at all but a strong procedure. I mean *Entr'Acte*, film by Francis Picabia and René Clair, music by Erik Satie. This is not, however, a narrative film. It is pure dada and *jeux d'esprit*. The successive incidents are of similar or progressively changing length. The accompaniment is made up of little musical blocks, each of which is a repeating-formula continued without any change till time for the succeeding one which accompanies a succeeding incident. Each of these musical units is stationary within itself and goes nowhere. The succession of them is, as in the case of the film-incidents, the continuity and the form. The whole is like a train of dominoes. A very brilliant success is thus achieved, as in cubist painting, by the elimination of a major difficulty, in this case that of narrative continuity.

The Russian film *Odna*, on the other hand, tells a simple and continuous story. Shostakovich's musical accompaniments,

most of them quite pleasing in themselves, tend by their abrupt changings to break up the drama rather than to continue it.

I have often felt that the playing of movements from the better-known symphonic repertory, as was commonly done for the pre-talkie pictures, and as is still done in small theatres where a gramophone is the only available music, I have often felt that the artistic result of that habit was superior to that achieved by the most expressive and competent modern music. Honegger has made movie music. So have Ibert and Rivier and many others. With the exception of Auric's music in the court-yard scene of Cocteau's *La Vie d'un Poète*, which is very fine music, I have never heard anything especially written for the films which seemed to me as beautiful and as appropriate as those tremendously dramatic, intimately dramatic (like close-ups), narratively dramatic movements from the symphonies of Beethoven and Mozart that used to envelope us and carry us along through the sorrows of Lilian Gish, the epic adventures of Fred Thompson and of Buck Jones. If any one piece deserves the palm for services to cinematographic art, it is easily, I should say, Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*, which year in and year out has provided an appropriate dramatic continuity for a larger number of stories than any other single piece classic or modern.

Another trouble with movie-music is the tendency to introduce song-numbers into talking-plays. The trouble rather is not the tendency, which is legitimate like any other tendency, but the way of doing it. Songs add to entertainment, but they break up the show unless the incident of the singing has some real place in the story. Even then, the change of medium is very expensive to the story. The problem of the film-with-songs is one which the French talkies have made peculiarly their own and for the solution of which they have come nearer to providing a good working-formula than have any other group of studios. I except isolated successes like Mae West's *She Done Him Wrong* and Kurt Weill's *Dreigroschenoper*. (Personally I find the songs in the latter film interminable, very heavy, and quite overpowering to the effectiveness of the rest of the film.)

The films of the French Paramount and of René Clair are, however, somewhere close to an effective dramatico-musical form.

The integrating center of that form is always a scene in a night-club. The night-club scene is just as important and as rigidly *réglementaire* to the French talkie as the ballet is to the French opera. In Clair's films it occasionally takes the less conventional form of a *fête de famille*, a wedding, or a household celebration of some kind; but it is always there. It occurs about three fourths of the way through the picture. It shows dancing and singing, the throwing of confetti and the drinking of champagne. It is the moment when the story and the music become really coordinated.

A third movie problem and one that has been very little worked at is the making of films to accompany music. Animated cartoons are usually made this way. At least the writing of the music usually precedes the actual drawing of the pictures. The result is a closer collaboration than is possible by the reverse process. As in choreography, the story is determined first of all and outlined into its main sections with appropriate timing. Then the music is written. Finally, the visible thing is made to fit the details of the musical inspiration.

There is no reason, in fact, why movies should not be made to accompany all sorts of classic pieces, as ballets have been danced to music of Schumann and Chopin and even Bach. Schumann's *Carneval*, Rimsky's *Schéhérazade*, Weber's *Invitation à la Valse*, Debussy's *Afternoon of a Faun*, have been in no way demeaned, rather enhanced in all eyes, from having provided inspiration for some of the most agreeable choreography of our century.

Henwar Rodakiewicz's *Portrait of a Young Man* was made on a musical inspiration, Dvorak's *New World Symphony*, if I mistake not. The failure to tie up the musical basis and its visible expression into a single sound-film, a procedure impracticable to amateurs at the time of the film's making, removed from the film its *raison d'être* and left the spectators confused before a series of very beautiful but empty shots of movement in natural scenery.

The other kind of movie-music I wish to note is the case of music used not as accompaniment but as part of the drama. The quotation of familiar hymns or popular tunes to accentuate or

to comment a situation is of course an old and very useful device. Here the music becomes more than tune. It speaks its name. It is present on the stage. The most remarkable usage of this kind that I know is the playing of *Tristan and Isolde* in *L'Age d'Or* of Bunuel and Dali. In a film containing nearly every subversive gesture imaginable, there is, curiously, no attempt made to violate the bourgeois ideal of simultaneous love. On the contrary, that ideal as represented by the music of *Tristan and Isolde*, is the one element of bourgeois civilization that remains intact. Its frustration provokes the catastrophe of revolution. *Tristan*, as the form and model for sexual desire and experience, is played all during the scene of erotic frustration. It does not express the drama that is taking place. It is there as an actor or a chorus calling attention to what is not taking place, or rather to what is taking place in a very different way from that depicted by the music. The music is there for its associations and its prestige as well as for its character. It is the official, the impressive, the impotent god. A god, nevertheless, whose desecration provokes disaster. It is heard in close-up and at a distance. Through ten minutes of shifting scenes it continues unimpeded, only giving place at the final frustration to the drums of revolution.