

# The Hollywood Composer†

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**F**or the composer, Hollywood is the most vital musical center in America today. In addition to the opportunities inherent in a vigorously expanding awareness of things musical, as evidenced by the activity of such organizations as the Southern California Symphony Association, the Monday Evening Concerts group, the music and concert departments of two major Universities and numerous smaller educational institutions as well as individual and various independent group efforts, Hollywood offers the young composer a “workshop” facility without parallel in the world.

Unless he has the financial resources of a Sir Thomas Beecham, who, according to the old story, hired a symphony orchestra so that he could learn to conduct, every young composer suffers qualms, questions and indecisions as a result of not being able to hear his music played. Although it would be a distinct emotional boost and, in some cases, a musical advantage, to hear the works played in their entirety, the questions are usually confined to limited areas where the composer has experimented with some color, texture, quality or inflection of sound not already a part of his musical vocabulary. Here the “workshop” possibilities, available only in Hollywood, can be used

in the service of music as a whole. Every year there are hundreds of scores written, extending in length from the three or four minute score for a TV comedy show, through eight to 20 minutes of music for half-hour and hour TV shows, and on to the 30 minutes to three hours of music (according to the magnitude of the film) for theatrical pictures. Somewhere in almost any of these scores a place could be found to test a version of an untried device or effect.

Additionally, the writing of music to fit a given set of terms and conditions is the best possible discipline for increasing facility in the handling of musical materials. No composer has ever achieved complete freedom of expression without first learning to control the progression and development of his work so that it will sound effectively within prescribed limits. Film scoring provides this discipline in its most demanding form.

One further consideration—economics. For the composer whose financial backlog is not sufficient for his needs, there is an alternative to taking an unremunerative, time-consuming position teaching or, as many have been forced to do, finding part-time work in some other field of endeavor. Composers for television and motion pictures are paid well by any standards and the amount of work accepted in these fields is matter of personal preference.

This is not to say that if the exchequer runs low on Wednesday evening that a financially restoring score can be arranged for early Thursday morning. But with a little forethought, economics and the creative life can be made to sit down together even as the Lion and the Lamb. Many composers find they are able to lead a kind of dual life, maintaining a consistent output both in film scoring and their personal work.

To this point we have considered only the opportunities available to the composer in Hollywood. Now let us consider the demands made on a composer by Hollywood.

First, a definition of composer might be in order. In addition to a knowledge of style and form, he must be the complete contrapuntalist, have a good knowledge of the various forms of harmony and melodic construction and, last but not least, he must have an extensive knowledge of orchestration. Hollywood has more brilliant orchestrators per square block than any other musical community in the world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The following digression was crossed out in the manuscript: “This stems from the way the use of music developed when sound was introduced in films in the late ‘20s. The first sound films continued the practice (previously established in theatres all over the country, where a pianist or small orchestra accompanied the silent film) of using existing cue or mood music libraries to approximate the mood of the various scenes. As the novelty of sound wore off it became apparent that music could make a greater contribution than just accompanying or paralleling the action and mood of the dramatic progression.”

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To these basic qualifications must be added an interest in and respect for music of the theatre, for scores for films are music of the theatre in the same way as opera, ballet, pantomime and music for the New York stage represent various types of music for the theatre.

It would be well to stress the phrase "interest in and respect for music of the theatre," for many composer have arrived in Hollywood with the avowed intention of revolutionizing the writing of music for films. This attitude has been fostered by critics and musicians who insist on equating film music with that of their favorite composer,<sup>2</sup> be he the Classicist, Romanticist,

<sup>2</sup> At this point in the manuscript, the sentence originally read, "equating film music with Brahms, Beethoven, Mozart, Wagner and the non-theatrical music of contemporary composers."

Impressionist, or Contemporary. Such thinking indicates a lack of information and that no consideration has been given to a proper evaluation of the function of music in films. Music written for films should be designed as a part of the larger theatrical entity. This does not mean that it is subservient to any other element in the entity but at the same time it does not necessarily mean that it can be transferred to the concert hall with complete success.<sup>3</sup> There have been a few cases where music written for a film has achieved some measure of acceptance

<sup>3</sup> The following passage was crossed out in the manuscript here: "Music must not duplicate or complete with any other element in the motion picture but should make it's own particular contribution completing the whole. For example, blood is an important element in the human body, remove it and the body collapses, and yet we do not expect blood to set up house keeping on it's own, in a jar. Even when transferred to another human body care must be exercised that the type and RH factors are appropriate."

in the concert hall but in every example that comes to mind the material was reorganized and often rewritten to the extent that the concert version should properly be termed "based" on the film score. Here as in every other area, one piece of music can not be designed to serve two masters and the composer who makes the attempt is deluding himself, for the work cannot serve it's proper function in either medium. As stated above, music written for motion pictures is theatrical music in its most exacting and demanding form. It requires an exceedingly extensive and subtle musical vocabulary.