

Document Citation

Title	Film music of the quarter
Author(s)	Lawrence Morton
Source	<i>Hollywood Quarterly</i>
Date	1948
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	4
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The fugitive, Ford, John, 1947 The Treasure of the sierra madre, Huston, John, 1948

Film Music of the Quarter

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LAWRENCE MORTON is a critic and an orchestrator of film and radio music. This review of film music is the third in his series in the *Hollywood Quarterly*.

DROUGHT was inevitable after the year-end flood of important films released by studios with aspirations for Academy Awards. The scarcity of good pictures during these months furnished abundant ammunition to those critics who charge that Hollywood at its best achieves nothing more than a straining for mediocrity. Certainly this has been true of recent music. When the scores have not been downright bad (and there have been plenty of these) they have exhibited a high degree of functional competence without revealing the least spark of genuine musical creativeness. Artfully fabricated have been scores like Skinner and Rozsa's for *The Naked City*, Amfitheatrof's for *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and *Another Part of the Forest*. In the last of these, there was a most adroit handling of a sequence of shots alternating between the interior of a tavern and a lynching scene outside. But the split-second precision of the cueing only made one more impatient with the triteness of the musical material, and proved again the familiar contention that it is more difficult to teach a clever craftsman how to be a good composer than it is to teach a good composer the tricks of the trade.

In a different category are pictures like *The Miracle of the Bells* and *To the Ends of the Earth*, in which the music appears to have been sacrificed

to whatever gods rule the dubbing room. *To the Ends of the Earth* began bravely with some fine main-title music by George Duning, music in a contemporary vein finely constructed over an eloquent bass line; but for the rest, the score existed on that plane of bare audibility where its course and character were obscured, but where it contributed to the general air of luxury that no expensive film can afford to do without.

Two films, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *The Fugitive*, had exceptional scores. And these were exceptional not because of musical virtues but because of the particular way in which they militated against the expressive qualities so carefully calculated by the scenarist, director, cameraman, actors, and editors. *Sierra Madre* is throughout a wonderful blend of film crafts. All of them were perfectly focused, through the dominating personality of John Huston, on the objective of portraying what happened to three American huns on a treasure hunt in the wild mountain country of Mexico. In many ways it is a cruelly realistic picture, but it is also full of subtlety. Its characters are neither heroes nor villains, although both heroism and villainy are potential attributes of all of them. A large part of the cast is composed of Mexican natives, semi-professional and amateur actors; as characters in the play they have the complexities peculiar to semiprimitives. The locale of the film is nature at its most desolate and raw. The action

is violent. It is, in short, an adventure story rich in tragic and poetic overtones and with a strong undertow of bitter comedy.

The only out-of-tune element is Max Steiner's score. This is not because Steiner is not a competent film composer. He is, indeed, one of the best, although much of his recent work has been tired. Never can it be said that he earned his reputation by bad performances; nor has he come to be regarded as one of the founding fathers of film music without having made large contributions to its technique and its literature. Of atmospheric and dramatic music of the plainer sorts he is a real master; and he has a formidable repertory of devices to fit almost any movie situation. Hollywood produces a hundred pictures every year that would profit from his music. But *Sierra Madre* is not one of them. It is not amenable to the routine procedures he has established for himself in twenty years of composing. He appears not to have recognized that *Sierra Madre* did not fit into any of the usual categories, that it required a fresh approach, that it was a challenge to match in musical terms the special mood and emotional tone of Huston's remarkably integrated workmanship. The picture needed musical local color, to be sure, but not the romantically Mexican kind that Steiner provided with his fandangos and snatches of amorous-nostalgic folk music. For there was not a hacienda, a fiesta, or a señorita within a hundred miles of where the action takes place. And this was not musical comedy.

It is characteristic of Steiner's approach to films that the most imaginative bit of scoring occurs in a scene where music was least needed—the

windstorm at the end of the picture. Already on the sound track was a realistic windstorm of epic size; to this was added a musical windstorm that was no doubt a marvel of ingenuity, one that may indeed prove to be the classical example of its kind. The two were so artfully blended in dynamics and pitch that one could hardly tell what was music and what was noise. But certainly the music was gratuitous, for all its ingenuity. It was Pelion piled upon Ossa.

This is the kind of thing that Steiner does marvelously. But it is not the kind of thing that serves well in *Sierra Madre*. Throughout the film the music is singularly inappropriate. No wonder that James Agee was moved to write, "One thing I do furiously resent is the intrusion of background music. There is relatively little of it and some of it is better than average, but there shouldn't be any, and I only hope and assume that Huston fought the use of it." In this comment we observe the otherwise earnest and capable critic floundering when he discusses a department of film making that he only partly comprehends. To assume that Huston fought the use of music is indeed an assumption, and an assumption without grounds. For in Huston's great wartime film, *San Pietro*, there was another score that was directly in opposition to the expressiveness of the film. From this one might assume that, sensitive as Huston is to the powers of other film crafts, he is to the same degree insensitive to the powers of music. One might also assume that the whole matter of music was not within his jurisdiction. But since the picture gives every evidence of his controlling hand in every other respect, it might justly be assumed that he could have had a proper

score, or none at all, if he had known just what he wanted a score to accomplish, and if he had recognized that Steiner was just not his man. Agee's comment exhibits the same kind of unawareness. Furiously to resent background music is sheer prejudice. A more knowing criticism would have resented only the wrong background music. *Sierra Madre* is full of marvelous musical opportunities which might have been realized by a truly creative composer. The trouble here is that Steiner was miscast. Anyone familiar with his work, and aware of the special qualities of Huston's film, would have engaged another composer. This is not a question of Steiner's ability, but of his musical style and methodology. The failure is not his, for he delivered his typical product. He just should not have been hired for this particular job.

The Fugitive was similarly undone by its score. One has come almost to expect the wrong music for John Ford's films—music, that is, composed by Richard Hageman. Their association is one of long standing; and however happy it may be on the personal level, it is, professionally, the wedding of two diametrically opposed attitudes in respect to film making. In *The Long Voyage Home* the mésalliance resulted in a score that was described as "clouds of musical error rolling down across the beauty of the film," and further as "a misdemeanor on the part of the composer."

Now *The Fugitive*, no matter what else might be said about its theme and its political attitudes, is yet a touching film, full of bitterness, and with a stark and tragic monotony. If there is any kind of music that it does not want, it is the melismatics of Italian opera. And

this is just what Hageman gave it. The film cried aloud for modernisms of the most advanced kind—not for dissonance, necessarily, but for the tensions and sparseness and acidity of expression that modern music provides. It may have been the composer's intention to remove the sharp edges from Ford's story, through such devices as the writing of church music in the Italian operatic idiom and the characterization of an enigmatic American character by a most inappropriate Appalachian folk tune. In a somewhat similar way he had attempted to soften the psychotic blow of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. But this kind of mollification should have been undertaken long before the film reached the music department. Once committed to tragedy, Ford should have seen to it that his intentions were not contravened in the scoring. And this should have indicated the hiring of a composer other than Hageman, whose talents lie in the writing of a different kind of music than Ford's pictures want. Not having perceived this, Ford's script and camera insisted on the priest's slow but steady march toward an inevitable doom, while the score kept telling us that *The Fugitive* was a romantic tale that would probably end in a love scene between the peasant girl and her soldier, happily reunited under the blessing of the Church.

I can think of no better illustration of the baleful influence of the "front office" on film music than that provided by these two films. One can be certain that Ford was happy with what he got; and one can guess that Huston was at least content. For it is no secret, at least among musicians, that when the front office is dissatisfied with a score it wastes no time in getting a new one. It has

been said, and truthfully, that film music is written not for audiences but for bosses. And bosses quite cheerfully insist on the satisfaction of their own tastes, poorly cultivated as those tastes are. They cannot even imagine that there might be some disparity between mere opinion and well-informed judgment.

Consequently there is forever being reënacted the comedy of a composer bringing his sketches to a Selznick, a

Zanuck, a De Mille, for approval, an approval that cannot possibly be based on intellectual processes more profound than a statement of like or dislike. So long as authority reposes in the front office, responsibility must repose there too. The essential lesson that still remains to be learned there is that composers must be cast as carefully as actors and actresses. Only then will films like *Sierra Madre* and *The Fugitive* get the scores they need.