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Article

Music with a British Accent
Underscoring in British Films of the 1930s

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A NUMBER OF NOTIONS PREVAIL about the music composed for British films in the 1930s. One is that underscoring (a term that has now developed a specific meaning: the non-diegetic musical accompaniment of dialogue) was kept to an absolute minimum.[1] Further, within this apparent restriction, the closely synchronized recitative-style of underscoring so prevalent in Hollywood was very unusual in films produced in the United Kingdom. Another, and related, issue is the tendency for critics to analyse British film music alongside the "production line" system already established in the Hollywood studios, the most common conclusion of this comparison being that there was no real equivalent in the UK film industry (and usually this implies London and the associated studios in the home counties: London Films at Denham, ATP (later Ealing), Gaumont/Gainsborough, and so on). In this article I will be examining these received perceptions of film music culture in Britain, with particular reference to the music composed for London Films Productions, the company founded by the Hungarian Alexander Korda in 1932. The choice of this company is important: while on the one hand it might be seen to be a flexible and open-minded venture—anti-Hollywood, as it were—with regard to the many composers who became

associated with it (some of whom worked on very few pictures but who had good reputations in the concert hall), on the other hand the company had a commercial drive which some critics have found lacking in other British companies of the period. Such considerations have important implications for the actual practice of film scoring in Britain, and analysis of contemporary film industry journalism on the subject further illuminates that there were significant trends in the general attitude towards how music should be used in narrative film, and in particular towards the use of music under dialogue. In this article I intend to examine some such sources alongside discussions of a handful of films from the period in an effort to challenge assumptions about British film music, and to show that although the scene in the UK contrasted with the Hollywood system in several important respects, musical diversity, versatility and flexibility were the touchstones of the British style.

One caveat must be raised before any discussion of this nature—quite what constitutes a British film score by definition is of course mutable and subject to a certain amount of reasoning. Many of the prominent composers working in Britain in the 1930s were not British, and in countless cases they were working for immigrant producers and directors. As important writers have explored, 'British film' has been an inconsistent and slippery concept from the earliest years of the country's industry to the present day.[2] For the purposes of this article, I loosely but reliably define a British film as a work the vast majority of whose creation (development, writing, shooting and post-production) was undertaken in the UK, and most of whose financing was from British-based sources.

The first third of the significant modern text on this subject, Jan G. Swynnoe's *The Best Years of British Film Music, 1936-1958*, is a comparative discussion of the American and British systems, and their respective effects on the film music being composed and produced in the 1930s. Much of this debate, as Swynnoe points out, centres around the audio-visual parallelism and leitmotivic approach seemingly favoured by the Hollywood system, no doubt due in part to the influx of European musicians to California in the inter-war years. The generation of Max Steiner, Erich Korngold and others arriving in America brought with it a tradition steeped in high Romanticism, a musical outlook dominated by the music dramas of Richard Wagner, the programmatic tone poems of Richard Strauss and the vast thematic structures of late-Romantic symphonism. During these early years of the sound film in the US, high production values began to be applied to all aspects of the filmmaking process, and an emphasis on expression as opposed to reserve in musical composition resulted in the gestation of a classical Hollywood style suffused with codes of thematic development and, importantly, close musical treatment of dialogue.[3] The US studios were famously organised around a conveyor-belt system of contracted composers, orchestrators, copyists and others working closely to tight deadlines. Swynnoe asserts that British-based composers, not being tethered to studios in the same manner as their Californian counterparts, collectively formed a far more reticent style, rarely underscoring dialogue and eschewing the 'mickey mousing' that the major Hollywood studios apparently favoured.[4] Swynnoe makes several keen observations to account for the perceived differences in style that resulted from the contrasting systems in the two countries. One is the strong theatrical tradition in Britain, to which the country's filmmakers naturally deferred in matters of source material, screenwriting and casting. Conversely, the Hollywood approach to cinema was untarnished by established codes of stagecraft and dramatic presentation but drawn towards the legacy of

melodrama, a form which had appealed to the East Coast immigrant population in particular because it didn't rely on spoken language. The influence of the British theatrical heritage is inescapable when analysing films made in the UK in this period. Indeed, the relative ease and rapidity with which figures like Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson, John Gielgud and Charles Laughton gained currency in motion pictures as actors (and in the case of Olivier, also as a top-flight director) influenced the cinematic language of British work to a significant degree. The result, to critics such as Swynnoe, is a peculiar insularity, a focus on character and dialogue presented in often awkward, stagey *mise-en-scène*. Hollywood, however, had purely cinematic outlook from the outset, freed from these traditions and under no obligation to draw upon the dominant figures from the theatre. Swynnoe summarises the situation thus:

> Ultimately, it is the fundamental divergence of primary motivation between the British and the Americans which is the dominant factor in their comparative affinity with the cinematic medium. The inwardly directed impulse of the British, manifested by their reticence and inhibition, contrasts with the undiscriminating self-aggrandizement of the outwardly directed American.[5]

Swynnoe's thesis implies a lack of ambition and sweep in the film scores of the 1930s in Britain, but she makes a clear distinction between British composers and foreign composers, a distinction that is not normally made when discussing the classical Hollywood style, usually because the assumption is that California's composers were by-and-large immigrants. Much of my focus here will be on films made by Korda's London Films company, most of which boasted Muir Mathieson as Musical Director. Undoubtedly a key figure in British film music of any decade, he was a champion of British music. Indeed some have argued that Mathieson was actively against the hiring of foreign composers. Swynnoe asserts that

> Mathieson was vehemently against the scoring of British films by foreign composers… Korda's productions have an unmistakeably cosmopolitan feel about them. For this reason Korda's output of films made at Denham do not serve as any kind of model for an establishment of the British picture as a genre. Korda had always worked with one eye on the overseas market, especially the American market… this tendency to 'angle' a film for its potential customers was to prove disastrous for the British film industry… Korda's 'revival' of the industry in this country was misleading in that it did not create a precedent that could be followed by other film companies, because they did not enjoy similar financial backing.[6]

While Swynnoe is correct in her assertion that London Films made pictures which crossed cultural boundaries, to disqualify their contribution to the development of British filmmaking is a flawed approach. Both British and American studios were hugely reliant on foreign practitioners in every department. If a British company is to be judged for its cosmopolitanism and targeting in terms of jeopardizing the gestation of a national cinema, then Hollywood must be seen in the same terms. I would argue that Korda's output is quintessentially British, if only for its variety. The musical approach to dialogue, similarly, differs significantly from film to film and—as I will show here—can be defined by its fluidity.

For a company that constantly shifted its focus in terms of subject matter in the films it made, one element about the scoring procedures remained largely constant, with only a few exceptions. The convention was giving top

billing to a 'musical director' (MD) rather than a composer; this was as prevalent in London as it was in the US. It usually acted as a convenient cover for the fact that the composer was only one member of a team overseen by the musical director. Orchestrators, copyists, conductors, librarians, recordists and orchestral fixers made up a small army of personnel for every picture which called for original music. This was the case in large-scale productions in both the UK and the US, but the terms of employment for those working in American studios were on the whole more controlling and rigid. For musicians as much as actors or directors, it was harder to work as a freelancer in Hollywood once you had signed on to a particular studio.[7] By the latter half of the decade, Muir Mathieson had already established himself as the regular MD at London Films; he also quickly gained a reputation as broker of composer-director collaborations, perhaps the most prominent early project being Arthur Bliss's monumental *Things To Come* (William Cameron Menzies, 1936), to which I will return. Starting out as an assistant to Kurt Schroeder, who was known to Korda in early days of the company, Mathieson brought conducting experience from the musical theatre and time spent on the continent. Early in his association with Korda, Mathieson declared his belief that concert composers should be persuaded to write for the cinema; his championing of 'serious' composers continued throughout his tenure at London Films. While there is some evidence to suggest that Mathieson did not wish foreign composers to work on British films, the canon of London Films projects he worked on seems to discredit that notion. Foreign composers were frequently hired to write for London films, at least one of whom, Miklós Rózsa, later became one of Hollywood's most treasured musical assets. The only constant in terms of employment criteria for composers under the direction of Mathieson was the requirement that they be respected musicians beyond the film studio gates.

While this maintained his links with the musical establishment and raised the status of film music, Mathieson's stance on the aesthetic *raison d'être* for the craft remains ambiguous; although he constantly lobbied for major concert composers to write for the medium, he also felt that their music should not rise above its station. Writing from London Films' recording facility at Denham Studios, he took a pragmatic, audience-aware approach when he stated that '[a]s things are now, pictures are designed to be seen only once'.[8] Here the implication is that Mathieson's views were sympathetic to the commonly held notion, articulated by a wide range of critics, composers and filmmakers (Roy Webb, Hanns Eisler, and, more recently, Claudia Gorbman among them) that film music should remain 'unheard', that a movie score must not distract the audio-viewer's attention. Mathieson seems to be writing as a filmmaker and not a composer, since he places himself in the shoes of the cinema-goer, whose sensibilities and priorities are generally not focused on the development of musical material but on visually driven narrative. However, many in the trade press and in critical literature of the 1930s felt that sound had let cinema down to some extent by becoming too important at the expense of the image; it was the beginning of a literature that grapples with the question of whether film music can have inherent meaning of its own. If the novelty of sound enabled characters to converse naturally on screen, giving voice to their emotions, then the need for emotions as expressed through music running along with the scene must now be questioned. Caryl Flinn (quoting Bazelon) asks whether film music—in the classical Hollywood mode, being used to enhance emotions as presented in image and dialogue and therefore potentially being seen as '*almost*

composing'[9]—might actually have significant meaning for exactly the same reasons, otherwise its use would be entirely redundant:

> … in the end, it is hard to consider the classical musical score to be as passive and inactive as these claims suggest. For at the same time that the score conveys a sense of deficiency or lack to its classical proponents, so too does it also offer them the promise of making good this lack.[10]

Despite this, filmmakers and critics alike noticed the rapid divergence of styles, particularly with regard to the scoring of dialogue, that occurred between the US and Britain. Alfred Hitchcock, speaking as early as 1933 (before his departure for the US), discusses what he sees as the rather reserved nature of British film scores in the wake of the sound revolution. The interview coincided with the release of *Waltzes from Vienna*, a self-consciously musical film and regarded as a minor work, but one which clearly galvanised the director's film-musical outlook:

> The arrival of the talkies, as you know, temporarily killed action in pictures […] but it did just as much damage to music. Producers and directors were obsessed by words. They forgot that one of the greatest emotional factors in the silent cinema was the musical accompaniment. They have gradually realised that action should still come first–that, talkies or not, they are still making motion pictures. But music as an artistic asset of the film is still sadly neglected.[11]

Hitchcock's remarks are interesting in light of the musical approach adopted in his next two projects. Arthur Benjamin's score for *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) features atmospheric orchestral items for crowd and party scenes and very little accompaniment to moments of acute dramatic import. I would argue that even the famous Albert Hall sequence does not qualify, being as it is a very interesting case of *diegetic* music providing dramatic energy. The violent and drawn-out denouement, containing several shifts in point of view and verbal exchanges, has no musical material until the end titles. Similarly, *The 39 Steps* (1935) features one exterior chase sequence cue and one other diegetic cue for an interior scene with little dialogue. In championing music as an 'artistic asset', on the evidence of these films Hitchcock falls shy of encouraging the non-diegetic underscoring of dialogue. Indeed, he continues:

> [T]he first and obvious use [of music] is atmospheric. To create excitement. To heighten intensity. In a scene of action, for instance, when the aim is to build up to a physical climax, music adds excitement just as effectively as cutting […] Music can also be a background to a scene in any mood and a commentary on dialogue, but, frankly, I have not made up my mind about the function of music in relation to dialogue in general. I can only give specific instances where I think it might be profitably used.[12]

Hitchcock's approach was to identify the kinship between music and editing, and to emphasise that these processes should be invisible in order to prioritise storytelling. His vocabulary is self-consciously musical as he continues:

> Film music and cutting have a great deal in common. The purpose of both is to create the tempo and mood of the scene. And, just as the ideal cutting is the kind you don't notice as cutting, so with music.[13]

Thus Hitchcock's reluctance to embrace wholeheartedly the underscoring of dialogue seems to reflect that of others in Britain during the decade. The jazz musician and journalist Spike Hughes, writing in the trade press in 1936,

contributes to the debate:

> Music, in the commercial film, has played the part of a glorified Master of Ceremonies, keeping the audience amused during the long credit titles, adding a little atmosphere here and there to shots of landscape that should be accompanied by nothing but natural background sounds, if any. Perhaps this reluctance on the part of directors to use music in a big way is due to a fear of its distracting the audience's attention.[14]

I would venture that this standpoint was not a uniquely British one, but can be discerned in other European cinema traditions as well. In the same issue of *World Film News*, an interview with Darius Milhaud aligns his views with those of Hughes, at least in regard to the risk of music interfering with a film: 'Film music must never be obtrusive. It should be a necessary function of the film, simple and sparing. Therefore I always use a small orchestra for film work. Too many instruments sound thick and confused when reproduced in the cinema.'[15] One must be careful though, when reading these lines, to distinguish between the visual and dialogue: long stretches of a film can of course contain no vocalisation whatsoever but plenty of visual development. In 1936 Maurice Jaubert made the case for silence as an effective tool, but also seemed to collate what he calls the 'visuals' with sections that might contain dialogue as well:

> In The Lost Patrol—otherwise an admirable film—the director was apparently alarmed by the silence of the desert in which the story was laid. He might well have realised the dramatic possibilities of silence, but instead he assaulted the ear—without a moment's pause—with a gratuitous orchestral accompaniment which nearly destroyed the reality of the visuals.
>
> Another attitude was well illustrated in The Informer where music was used to imitate the noise of coins falling and even the gurgling of beer in a man's throat.
>
> This is not merely puerile, but a misconception of what music is, for it takes away its continuity and reduces it to the level of raw sound…[composers] should be reminded that we do not go to the films to hear music. We want music to give greater depth to our impressions of the visuals, but to add to them by differing from them. In other words, it should not be expressive, in the sense of adding its quota to the sentiments expressed by the actors or the director, but decorative in the sense of adding its own design to that proper to the screen.[16]

Jaubert's article is, curiously, one of the most effective passages in terms of describing the British approach in the 1930s. It makes a subtle distinction between the close alignment with, and consequent subordination of music to the onscreen action (including dialogue), and the augmentation of the scene by musical means. Jaubert's work on *Le Quai des Brumes* (Marcel Carné, 1938) gives strength to his argument, being a score which operates largely as a horizontal expression of underlying tensions and moods, and not in the vertical, close-synchrony mode. Music under dialogue does occur, but it does not illustrate specific conversational turns. Bearing this example in mind, the stance of a continental musician is perhaps an easier route into the psychology behind British film scoring of the period.

As I have mentioned, London Films itself thrived thanks to contributions from a host of foreign filmmakers, not least its founder. Korda's biographical

epics of the 1930s have never lacked critical attention, most notably Korda's early directorial project *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), which at the time became the most successful film that Britain had ever produced. Its leading actor Charles Laughton carried the film admirably, launching the company into the forefront of British movie making. Kurt Schroeder's score for the film, concentrating on transitions and the occasional diegetic cue, contains several pieces which are examples of a generic 'early music' style, a peculiar kind of pastiche which bears little resemblance to historically-informed composition but is what Russell Lack describes as 'stylistic shorthand'.[17] The music generally stays out of dialogue; instead, it bookends scenes and marks important plot transitions. If anything, this score's key characteristic is that it is so slender compared with the lengthy scores already coming out of Hollywood—Steiner's famously long score for *King Kong* emerged the same year.

An early project for the newly promoted Mathieson, following Schroeder's departure from the company, was *Rembrandt* (Alexander Korda, 1936), scored by Geoffrey Toye. Another star vehicle for Laughton, it was envisaged as a follow-up of sorts to *The Private Life of Henry VIII*. In 1936 Toye was the general manager of the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, having forged a reputation as a conductor and music director for the stage, notably of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company. He was a beneficiary of Mathieson's remarkably brave declaration to Korda, on being asked to succeed Schroeder at London Films:

> If you will guarantee me first-rate composers for every score, I'll take on the job, but I am not going to write you one note of indifferent music, which is the only kind of music I can write. It is ridiculous that you should pay vast sums of money for the finest of everything in the film and then, when it comes to adding the music, let the whole thing down by getting me or some other 'hack' to supply the score.[18]

Toye's *Rembrandt* is constructed from musical segments which match clearly defined sections in the narrative, often acting as transition between acts. One important cue comes at the end of the exposition part of the film, after the death of the painter's wife and just as he declares his interest in seeking another. His commission from the local dignitaries has been rejected as inadequate, and he is at a particular point of personal and professional crisis. Toye's music here is tumultuous and swirling, reflecting the gothic staircases and moody lighting and set design, but crucially, it does not begin until after he has given an important speech to his servants. This leaves the music to run without interference from dialogue—and vice versa. *Rembrandt* is dominated by only one theme, characterised by the first four notes of a descending natural minor scale (A reasonable comparison may be drawn with Walton's score for Olivier's *Hamlet* twelve years later: a distinctly modernist take on a score for a 'period' film).[19] This theme recurs throughout the film, and might be said to be the only such melody. Toye's approach is indeed not leitmotivic but is based around the development of this lonely theme.

Another German composer, Ernst Toch, like his Hungarian contemporary Rózsa, spent formative years working in London before leaving for the United States. Toch's score for *The Private Life of Don Juan* (Alexander Korda, 1934) is another excellent example of a work which utilizes a significant amount of underscoring but stops short at close illustrative effects. It opens with a diegetic serenade scene, a song accompanied by onscreen guitar in a suitably quaint Spanish courtyard. Later, there is an exotic dancing sequence with Spanish-flavoured chromaticism and an effective transition

from a love scene (with gentle, broad underscoring) into the grand exterior of a mountainside, whereupon the material swells into full orchestral colours. A funeral scene is scored in sombre tones, with woodwind, bells and a choir. In the same year, Toch's *The Rise of Catherine the Great* (Paul Czinner, 1934) also featured solemn choral material in its wedding scene, a cue almost certainly overseen by the Englishman Roy Douglas, who recalled rehearsing the choir at Elstree.[20] There is no direct underscoring but atmospheric scene setting, e.g. Viennese-style waltzes for the society balls. Like *Don Juan*, the film features a startling amount of bell ringing, a sound that is more flexible in terms of semiotic reference than it might seem. In both of these productions, bells of different kinds are variously heard to announce a significant time of day, to herald weddings, funerals, coronations and executions, or simply a straightforward alarum; not all of these instances are clearly diegetic. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the London Films logo at the opening of every film features the image of London's iconic Westminster Palace clock tower and the sound of its great bell, Big Ben.

These examples support Swynnoe's contention that Hollywood-style underscoring is 'nowhere to be found' in British films of the 1930s.[21] However, seeking aesthetic drawbacks in the reticence of composers working in British films in the 1930s, especially in regard to dialogue (which is what is implied in much similar criticism, whether intentional or not), is problematic because it tends to suggest that the Hollywood model was somehow superior artistically and more commercially and critically desirable. In fact, the evidence from contemporary journalistic and critical writing points to the contrary. As the American composer Fred Steiner observes of the film music criticism of the period,

> [A]s the search for an ideal film music style went on, one of the most frequent subjects of debate was that of musical illustration. This technique, denoting a style of film music that closely follows changes of scene or mood (sometimes to the extent of changing with every shot) or that attempts to imitate and synchronize with actions on the screen, was to become a frequent target of scorn in the coming decade and even beyond.[22]

Steiner goes to great lengths to expose the enormous antagonism among musicians towards the practice of mickey-mousing in the sound film ('illustration' is the term he seems to prefer; he does not refer to 'mickey-mousing' until late in the chapter). Citing M.D. Calvorcoressi, George Antheil, Leonid Sabaneev, Jaubert and others, he produces an impressive chorus of voices against the practice; but after finally summoning Paul Bowles to testify,[23] Steiner makes the crucial point:

> It is interesting to discover from Bowles that the polemics against synchronized or 'illustrative' music, which had begun during the infancy of the sound film, were still continuing at the end of the decade. This clearly indicates that the much-decried type of scoring was still being used in some quarters, despite the many declarations against it.[24]

Walter J. Turner wrote one such 'declaration' in 1940. He begins by describing *Honeyland* (Rudolf Ising, 1935), an animated film about bees in the MGM *Happy Harmonies* series. A respected music critic, Turner was struck by the

> badness of the music for a subject which to a composer of taste and some invention offered exceptional opportunities… But those who know the conditions under which music is manufactured for films will not be surprised at opportunities missed. The wonder is that anything

> tolerable in the way of music is ever produced at Hollywood.[25]

When describing Hollywood's musical culture Turner uses unflinchingly industrial language, for example when he describes the convention of composers working with orchestrators:

> This division of labour has proved extremely successful as a practical method of manufacture, and has resulted in a formidable degree of specialisation which is already proving a barrier to all further development. Like most efficient manufacturing methods it produces standardisation.[26]

Standardisation is a dirty word for Turner: it means the removal of the individual artist and his or her own mode of expression and creative freedom. Perhaps the really alarming aspect of the Hollywood system for Turner was the irony that the development of Hollywood's musical style was drawn from a late-19th century tradition that fetishised the individual artist, the very cornerstone of artistic endeavour for which Turner grieves. His critique penetrates the infrastructure of the business; less than a decade later Theodor Adorno and Hans Eisler's Marxist treatise *Composing for the Films* again points a scornful finger directly at the close-synchrony of the Hollywood underscore. Music should not be required to provide emotion for a scene that is properly presented, because the emotion should already be there:

> Illustrative use of music today results in unfortunate duplication. It is uneconomical, except where specific effects are intended, or minute interpretation of the action of the picture. The old operas left a certain amount of elbow room in their scenic arrangements for what is vague and indefinite; this could be filled out with tone painting. The music of the Wagnerian era was actually a means of elucidation. But in the cinema, both picture and dialogue are hyperexplicit. Conventional music can add nothing to the explicitness, but instead may detract from it, since even in the worst pictures standardized musical effects fail to keep up with the concrete elaboration of the screen action.[27]

Eisler in particular was famously furious at many of the practices that became habitual in the music departments of Hollywood studios, and this truculence informs the tone of the whole book. For a more British view, Kurt London's *Film Music* (1936) remains one of the most valuable large-scale works on the subject from the period. As far as the accompaniment of dialogue is concerned, his opinion on the drawbacks of Hollywood-style underscoring is made clear in a typically light-hearted descriptive passage:

> A pair of lovers speak of their feelings for one another; or a tearful parting is enacted; or a dead man is being mourned. The list can be enlarged at will: any emotional moment in life is appropriate. Suddenly – no one can tell why – a violin starts sighing out some tearful phrase. Result – a terrible strain on the lachrymal glands. It is an abuse of music to obtain with it any dramatic effect which should be achieved in any case, provided the situation be well founded, well acted, and well staged.[28]

While Kurt London, Adorno and Eisler raged against over-cooked dialogue scoring, others took a more philosophical, optimistic approach, asking how film music might find maturity beyond the row over underscoring. A more nuanced assessment thus becomes possible when one finds critics who neither dismiss wholeheartedly the British approach nor embrace it as the only alternative to the Hollywood model. The British composer Walter Leigh found in film music the potential for a unified art form that actually raises the standards of both music and film:

> Now that synchronized sound is no longer a novelty, there are signs of the development of a new technique in the use of sound, not merely as an explanation to the ear of what the eye is watching, or as a background to keep the ear pleasantly occupied while the eye devotes itself to the action, but as a part of the action itself, as expressive in its own way as the visuals, and a necessary complement to them. And it is in this field that the musician can prove of direct use in the making of a film, and take a more responsible part than hitherto.[29]

While critical opinion seemed to rail against the Hollywood idiom, it did not at all preclude versatility or pragmatism in British film scoring. Two contrasting productions by London Films from the same year serve to demonstrate that there was a significant amount of variation in musical approach in the London Films output. *Action for Slander* (Tim Whelan, 1937) and *Elephant Boy* (Robert Flaherty and Zoltan Korda, 1937) could not be more different either in their subject matter or their scoring. *Action for Slander,* a legal drama about a soldier trying to clear his name after he is accused of cheating at cards, restricts itself to music only at transition points. Cues are placed to accompany title cards for new locations: Paris, Monte Carlo etc. Some diegetic cues occur in party scenes where a dance band is called for. There is no composer credit on *Action for Slander*, but Mathieson is named as Musical Director—this implies that he used stock music or rearranged existing music himself.[30] John Greenwood's score for *Elephant Boy*, in contrast, contains extensive mickey-mousing and expressive illustration of onscreen events. The exotic story of an Indian boy who has a close connection with elephants, set in rural India and with long sections that serve as little more than wildlife footage, *Elephant Boy* is an oddity whose otherness seems to have prompted the relaxing of the routine British film music inhibitions that we had come to expect. In transplanting the action from the familiar to the far-away, the composer is allowed, or allows himself, a rare flamboyance.

Mischa Spoliansky's work on *The Man Who Could Work Miracles* (Lothar Mendes, 1936) is another example of a picture that seems to allow itself imaginative underscoring simply because of its unreal subject matter. Its light-hearted comedy plot, concerning a man who is suddenly given the ability to perform miracles of his choosing, invites a significant amount of colourful dialogue scoring from Spoliansky, whose music betrays a clear debt to Debussian textures and Mendelssohnian wit. Developing the lead from Spoliansky, Tim Whelan's *The Divorce of Lady X* (1938) gave Miklós Rózsa an early opportunity for a leitmotivic approach, assigning specific themes to each of the two main protagonists. In the comic scene in the hotel suite during which Laurence Olivier's barrister meets Merle Oberon's mysterious young lady for the first time, Rózsa's music see-saws between the two, clearly according to their respective onscreen time. John Huntley proclaims his enthusiasm for Rózsa's approach:

> The Divorce of Lady X was a light, witty and humorous score, delightfully off-setting the slick comedy of the long, opening, bedroom sequence with wailing brass, grunting bassoons and trilling flutes in the Walt Disney style.[31]

Mervyn Cooke has made much of Rózsa's tendency toward angular rhythm and a high level of dissonance, betraying a close kinship with his fellow Hungarians Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály.[32] I would suggest that even in the context of light-hearted moments such as the bedroom scene in *The Divorce of Lady X*, Rózsa engineers a subtle language of comedic dissonance while

maintaining thematic precision, a system that would inform the development of his mature style. Thus in the war epic *The Four Feathers* (Zoltan Korda, 1939) he imbued the desert scenes with imaginative eerie symphonic textures, and hinted at a Hollywood sensibility which, from the perspective of a post-golden era audio-viewer, matches the sweep and scope of the picture.

Bliss's *Things to Come* is still well-known by means of its concert hall incarnation, and its success might partly be attributed to the unusual conditions of its composition. H. G. Wells, having been granted a certain amount of creative control, asked that some of the music be composed before the film was shot. Furthermore, as Swynnoe notes, 'the extraordinary, grand rhetorical style of the actors' delivery […] gives an opportunity for a far more extravagant underscoring than would be possible for most dialogue scenes even from that period of British film making, when vocal inflection was generally less realistic than it came to be in subsequent decades.'[33]

In *Q Planes (Clouds Over Europe)* (Tim Whelan, 1939) there is more music than his earlier *Action For Slander* but, again, there is no composer credit. Stock music by various British-based composers, including the prolific Richard Addinsell is used where appropriate, presumably for budgetary reasons. Interestingly though there is room for instances of romantic comedy underscore but predictably there are no sting points because the music was not written for these scenes specifically.

Addinsell's film music did much to raise the stature of the craft, if only in the sense that his scores, along with Rózsa's, represented integrated efforts to bring music into the fabric of the narrative via dialogue underscoring; in contrast to pictures like the aforementioned *Action for Slander*, whose music is compiled from extant recordings, Addinsell's music for *Dark Journey* (Victor Saville, 1937) and *Fire Over England* (William K. Howard, 1937) are two valuable additions to the British portfolio. A spy thriller starring Vivien Leigh and Conrad Veidt as two spies who fall in love, *Dark Journey* begins with boldly experimental opening titles—contrasting themes compete against one other with a clearly intentional jarring quality. In one sense this takes the stage-overture form as its blueprint—offsetting different themes is standard—but like the plight of the characters in the story, one feels that this sequence lacks a secure identity. Just when a musical phrase is settling down it is replaced by another, seemingly unrelated piece, with no effort to create a smooth transition. Frequent diegetic cues—dance bands, concerts, singing sailors—embellish the soundtrack. Addinsell incorporates the German national anthem in scenes featuring German soldiers and diplomats in a manner that was to become commonplace in Hollywood war films, most notably Steiner's *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942). In terms of dialogue treatment, *Dark Journey* certainly raises the game, risking long passages of music under important spoken exchanges. In the revelation scene after the party the music is mixed quite low, but Addinsell's music recapitulates themes from earlier in the picture, which to our ears draws his sensibilities much closer to the American model of a unified work. This material develops through the whole conversation until the end of the scene, when the visual cut brings more diegetic material. However, again Addinsell stops just short of actually punctuating key sentences or words. The underscore is just shy of the recitative style. *Fire Over England* is similarly imaginative, and again makes use of what might now be termed historically informed music to enhance the Elizabethan flavour (albeit a musical history as viewed through a 1930s lens, prior to the major developments of the early music revival). Roy Douglas was again almost certainly involved as an orchestrator and harpsichordist on this

score.[34] There is a particularly daring moment in *Fire Over England* when Queen Elizabeth I actually interrupts Addinsell's score, so powerful is her character deemed to be. Flora Robson's Elizabeth walks in on a romantic encounter and the music is cut mid-phrase, clearly intentionally and with great effectiveness. The historical aspects of *Fire Over England* might be compared with C. Armstrong Gibbs' period score for Ealing's *Lorna Doone* (Basil Dean, 1935), under the musical direction of Ernest Irving. In *Lorna Doone*, the musical approach is admirably careful and precise in terms of the synchronisation of onscreen instruments to those heard on the soundtrack.

For a field relatively neglected in film music scholarship, the 1930s in Britain was wide-ranging, varied and temperamental. Mathieson oversaw a constantly shifting series of collaborations between composers and directors who responded in unique ways to each project. While Hollywood's classical style of underscoring consolidated itself into something akin to a standard practice, the British scene departed from homogeneity largely through its reluctance to treat dialogue in quite the same manner. My purpose here has been to show that this situation should not necessarily invite a judgement based on apparent aesthetic inferiority simply because there was *less* music, or *less* 'illustration' of the spoken word in the early sound film. Furthermore, I have argued that in some films there was in fact a quantity of music comparable to any given contemporaneous US production but that its craft was palpably other, and its sense of purpose formulated from a slightly different set of priorities. Critical and journalistic writing of the decade and the years immediately following it was overwhelmingly sceptical of the merits of the dialogue scoring style that had already established itself in the US industry; this reflected the practice of many in the UK who chose to score films in a variety of ways appropriate to the material in hand.

As for London Films, its cosmopolitan outlook informed the scope its films in terms of their source material, cast and crew and indeed musical elements; the result is a series of scores that, while never quite adopting the full Hollywood underscoring idiom, nonetheless showed remarkable breadth and imagination throughout the decade. Taken as a whole, this body of work represents a company which refused to stagnate in working methods or creative vision. To adopt this company as an analogy for the ever-changing British industry as a whole is therefore fully appropriate.

A note on sources

Film music of any decade is notoriously difficult to analyse simply because so few scores are available either in manuscript or in print. Some of the major studios have archives of musical material whose publishing rights they continue to hold, but they do not have the means to allow researchers any kind of reasonable access. There have been incidents of entire major studio music libraries being thrown away in a matter of hours with no prior consultation. Where a score was written for a smaller company, the chances of finding any notes on paper, hand written or printed, are extremely slim. Film composers themselves have historically been rather blasé about the fate of their written scores. My own view is that this attitude is naturally encouraged by the constant reinforcement of their status as members of a team working on a final product which, when completed, is no longer theirs either legally or, because so much creative interference has usually occurred,

emotionally. While this is a constant frustration, especially when studying scores from a relatively early period, I am fortunate to be working at a time when access to the films themselves (where they survive) is increasingly straightforward. Many of the films under discussion in this article are not easily available to buy but are legally accessible online via streaming and DVD rental services. Where copyright allows, some can be found on video-sharing sites. Some libraries (including that of my own university, Goldsmiths) thankfully retain their VHS collections at the time of writing, which often include films taped from television.

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Notes

1 'Diegetic' / 'non-diegetic' have been the predominant terms to describe music as either arising from the space/time of the narrative, or music imposed from without respectively, since the publication of Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: BFI Publishing; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). The theorist Michel Chion prefers the terms 'screen music' and 'pit music' (the latter a theatre analogy).

2 See Pam Cook, *Gainsborough Pictures* (London: Cassell, 1997); Christine Gledhill, *Reframing British Cinema, 1918-1928: Between Restraint and Passion* (London: BFI Publishing, 2003); and Robert Murphy, *The British Cinema Book* (3rd ed.; London: Palgrave Macmillan / BFI, 2009).

3 My use of the term 'classical Hollywood style' is drawn from the work of David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

4 'Mickey-mousing' has long described the close synchronization of onscreen events with illustrative musical gestures. The term usually applies to visual events and their musical counterparts but is sometimes applied to significant moments of musical accompaniment of dialogue.

5 Jan G. Swynnoe, *The Best Years of British Film Music, 1936-1958* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002), p. 18.

6 Ibid., pp. xiii-xiv.

7 David Raksin wrote a revealing account of the professional fall-out resulting from a musician moonlighting for another studio. See David Raksin, 'Holding a Nineteenth Century Pedal at Twentieth Century-Fox', in *Film music 1,* ed. by Clifford McCarty (New York & London: Garland Pub, 1989).

8 Muir Mathieson, 'Introduction' in John Huntley, *British Film Music* (London: Skelton Robinson, 1947), p. 7.

9 Irwin Bazelon, *Knowing the Score: Notes on Film Music* (New York: Arco Publishing), quoted in Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1992), p. 39.

10 Flinn, p. 39.

11 Stephen Watts, 'Interview with Alfred Hitchcock', in *Cinema Quarterly,* Vol. 2, No. 2 (1933).

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Spike Hughes, 'Music in Films', in *World Film News*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (April 1936), p. 26.

15 Darius Milhaud, Interview in *World Film News*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (April 1936), p. 26.

16 Maurice Jaubert, 'Music and Film', in *World Film News*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (July 1936), p. 31.

17 Russell Lack, *Twenty Four Frames Under: A Buried History of Film Music* (London: Quartet Books, 1997)

[18] Sheila Hetherington, *Muir Mathieson: A Life in Film Music*, ed. by Mark Brownrigg (Edinburgh: Scottish Cultural Press, 2006), p. 42. Hetherington does not make it clear whether this is a verbatim quote or an authorial paraphrase.

[19] See Alexis Bennett, 'The Ghost of Early Music in Walton's *Hamlet*', *Historični Seminar 9*, (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2011).

[20] Swynnoe, p. 197.

[21] Ibid., p. 127.

[22] Fred Steiner, 'What were musicians saying about movie music during the first decade of sound? A symposium of selected writings', in *Film Music 1*, ed. by Clifford McCarty (New York & London: Garland, 1989), p. 86.

[23] 'To ask that music be synchronized as exactly as sound-effects is the same thing as asking that the execution of the dancer's steps and gestures exist in some sort of fixed relation to the beat of the music, and not that they should merely come to pass during a given section of it'. Paul Bowles, 'On the Film Front', in *Sight and Sound* 17/1:60-62, quoted in Steiner, p. 97.

[24] Steiner, p. 97.

[25] Walter J. Turner, *The New Statesman and Nation*, April 13, 1940.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Adorno and Eisler, p. 13.

[28] Kurt London, *Film Music: A Summary of the Characteristic Features of its History, Aesthetics, Technique; And Possible Developments* (London: Faber, 1936), p. 123.

[29] Walter Leigh, 'The Musician and the Film', in *Cinema Quarterly*, 3/2: 70-74, quoted in Steiner, p. 89.

[30] 'Stock music' can refer to material held in music libraries and made available cheaply due to full copyright control by the holders. Here I imply music owned by the London Films production company; its use in this film was therefore inexpensive compared to a commissioned score.

[31] John Huntley, *British Film Music* (London: Skelton Robinson, 1947), p.41

[32] Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 111.

[33] Swynnoe, p. xiii.

[34] Ibid., pp. 195, 215.

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