

Nathan Platte, *Making Music in Selznick's Hollywood*

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PAUL MERKLEY

University of Ottawa
Merkley@uOttawa.ca

It is important to understand the musical score not only from the single standpoint of the composer but in relation to the work of others—in this case, one of the most renowned Hollywood producers. In order to do that, evidence from inside the production is required. These are the principal working premises that inform the approach of Nathan Platte's illuminating study of music in the productions of David O. Selznick, a central figure in the Golden Age of Hollywood film and an extraordinary *mélophile*.

Platte recounts this history mainly in chronological order, the exceptions being quotations of Selznick from different years, often because these refer to the film being discussed. He reports Selznick's statement that he devoted ten times the energy and time of every other producer to the music in his films. Indeed, the evidence supports that contention.

Platte begins his discussion with the silent-film era to establish a foundational context for the producer's later work. Selznick began his career working chiefly as a publicist in his father's silent-film production company. Platte explains that their offerings were noteworthy for high production values and for the important role of music, both in the feature films themselves and in sales of sheet music. An example of this practice was *War Brides* (1916), for which a title song was marketed.

The history continues with the producer's "studio period" which followed the bankruptcy of the family business in 1923. The book follows Selznick through Paramount (a time he regards as developmental for the producer) and on to RKO, where the partnership between Selznick and Max Steiner began. RKO's

music department was small (five contract employees versus thirty-eight at MGM's music department). Quoting Max Steiner's stated approach to film music before Selznick's arrival at RKO (Steiner was skeptical of what he called "illogical" music, i.e. underscore as opposed to source music), Platte makes a strong case for Selznick's influence on the composer's work at this time.

Platte argues that the film *Symphony of Six Million* was an example of the growing importance of music in RKO's feature films. Video clips are available on a companion website for some of the examples discussed, including this film. As the film dealt with the lives of Jewish immigrants, a great deal of source music was called for. However, the script calls for additional underscore, called "background music" in the industry's early years. Platte wonders whether these additions reflect the ideas of Selznick or Steiner. One film certainly demonstrates Selznick's influence in this regard: *Bird of Paradise* (1932). For this film, Platte reports that Selznick encouraged Steiner to write a score that filled almost every moment of screen time. It is an observation of considerable importance in that Steiner's extensive musical output is almost all underscore or interstitial music; in fact, historically, it is understood to be the foundation of underscore composition.

Platte also argues that the small size of RKO's music department and that studio's affiliation with RCA made it possible, even necessary, for music to be used in experimental ways. He cites radio broadcasts explaining the musical components of productions,

as well as seamless transitions between source and background music.

Regarding the early 1930s in MGM, Platte draws a neat contrast between Selznick and star producer Irving Thalberg. The latter was uninterested in music, and disliked the use of it in film, once even taking the ridiculous stance of prohibiting minor chords in MGM films. Eventually, in 1935, Selznick left MGM to form his own company, Selznick International. Platte notes that this independence meant that the producer had to find his own personnel for each film rather than having a stable of permanently contracted musicians. Notes on the recording sessions of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and an article in *Variety* reveal the speed at which composer Max Steiner wrote the score, and the number of takes required (six or seven) to arrive at the final recording of a cue. Selznick's spotting notes for *The Prisoner of Zenda*, score by Alfred Newman, compared to the cues in the recorded score, show details of the process of musical development and revision, as required by the producer. It is in this section of the book that Platte's use of evidence (Selznick's memos and other communications) is strongest and most compelling.

Additionally, Platte explores the role of music director Lou Forbes in Selznick's studio, effectively a liaison between producer and composers. Over the years, Steiner and Selznick had an on-again/off-again working relationship. Selznick complained privately that the composer used too much Mickey Mousing, and that he would not use music that had been already composed (for many sequences Selznick favored a compilation score and Steiner did not). For *Intermezzo*, Selznick wrote that Steiner and Forbes would have one week to prepare the score because it could be compiled from classical and motion-picture music.

Such was not the case for *Gone with the Wind*, the four-hour epic with three hours of music scored by Steiner and others, with many changes demanded by Selznick who wanted to feature traditional music of the old South. Platte takes the reader through the serpentine process of the composition of the score with attention to detail. Steiner and Selznick had parted ways after their creative differences in *A Star is Born*, but, having considered other possibilities, Selznick settled on Steiner. The producer insisted on hearing the whole score played for him before recording, and also asked to hear the themes before the arrangements would be made. He asked Steiner to prepare a score with "little original music . . . based on the great music . . . of the South . . ."

Platte carefully analyzes payments to estimate the work that other composers did on the score for *Gone with the Wind*. He notes that the Tara theme is written in the hand of Hugo Friedhofer, not in that of Max Steiner. At the same time, he writes that the Tara theme is quite close to the main title music by Steiner for *They Made Me a Criminal* (1939), although Platte does not show the readers that music. In the end, Platte demonstrates that the celebrated score is the work of many hands and also the product of Selznick's requirements. As is often the case on successful large scoring projects (*Lawrence of Arabia, 2001: A Space Odyssey*), many musicians were involved in *Gone with the Wind*, and tempers were tested.

In the case of *Spellbound*, Platte compares the notes for the music prepared by Hitchcock with those by Selznick, and with Milós Rózsa's score. He finds that the composer followed the specifications of the producer. Platte shows that much uncredited work on that score was done by Audrey Granville, who edited and placed the cues to Selznick's satisfaction. Granville also kept track of the composer's progress and reported to Selznick. After Rózsa finished work on the project, Granville and Selznick continued to edit the score.

Selznick was not an *auteur*. He did think carefully about the role and influence of music in his pictures. He made many demands of his composers and he considered musical cues in great detail. Platte's account lets us see inside the complex, often vexing, enervating, deliberate process that brought about some of the most appealing, intricate scores of the era. The collaborations were sometimes strained, but the conflict cannot always be heard in the outcome. Platte has written a careful history of an interesting and important subject.

Paul A. Merkley is an emeritus professor of the School of Music of the University of Ottawa, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and a winner of the Deems Taylor award for his article (this journal) on the process of decision-making towards Kubrick's compilation score for *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He teaches courses on Film Music and Music of the Renaissance as part of the lifelong learning academy of Seniors Junction, an organization of which he is a co-founder.