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Editorial

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In February 2018, a group of archivists, scholars, students, performers, and filmmakers gathered at California State University, Long Beach for the symposium “Max Steiner: Man and Myth.” Steiner’s film music had drawn the group together, and, by the end of the first day, they had joined voices on “Full Speed Ahead,” a song featuring Alfred Perry’s lyrics and Max Steiner’s main title theme from The Caine Mutiny (1954). It was a lovely way to end the day. Additional highlights from the weekend are recorded in a conference report by Aaron Fruchtman, who joined me to co-edit this special issue of The Journal of Film Music, which represents a selection of research presented at the symposium.1 We are thrilled to make these twelve articles available to a broader readership.

Frequently introduced as the “dean of film music,” Max Steiner’s work enjoys and suffers from a peculiar form of over- and underexposure. Steiner contributed to approximately three hundred Hollywood films between 1929 and 1964. His music accompanies many of Hollywood’s iconic titles of the studio era, including King Kong (1933), Gone with the Wind (1939), and Casablanca (1942). Countless audiences, students, teachers, and aficionados of Hollywood film have encountered his work, which has circulated the globe for nearly a century on formats ranging from celluloid to CD to streaming platforms. The broad influence of Steiner’s work is widely acknowledged in film music studies. In her foundational text, Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music, Claudia Gorbman uses Max Steiner’s film scores and, in particular, his work on Mildred Pierce (1945) to identify key methods and strategies of “classical Hollywood practice.”2 In his introductory chapters to Global Soundtracks: Worlds of Film Music, Mark Slobin considers the international reach of a “Steiner superculture,” in which Steiner’s music for early 1930s films came to represent an “industry and world standard” and not “just another eclectic experiment in film music accompaniment.”3

Steiner’s legacy is hardly neglected. On the other hand, Steiner’s prolificacy and peripatetic pre-Hollywood career are still far from being thoroughly documented and contextualized. At the time of the symposium in 2018, published

2 Claudia Gorbman, Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 70-98.
accounts of Steiner’s biography were limited to chapter-length surveys. Despite a growing number of case studies on individual scores, there was no book-length “life and works of Max Steiner,” although one symposium attendee was at work to change this (see below). The scale and format of Steiner’s output also presented challenges. Similar to Baroque-era predecessors like Antonio Vivaldi and Georg Philipp Telemann, Steiner’s personal capacity and professional circumstances produced a stunningly large body of work.4 Reckoning with such volume can be both exhilarating and intimidating. As Steiner’s music was composed for specific films, access to his work was frequently dependent on access to the films. Fortunately, the rise of home video and historical soundtrack album releases in the late twentieth century and new forms of digital circulation in the twenty-first century ameliorated this challenge considerably. Another critical contribution to Steiner studies came through the expansive efforts of archivist James D’Arc, who oversaw the acquisition, preservation, and cataloging of Max Steiner’s papers at Brigham Young University.5 A curator at BYU’s Special Collections from 1976 until 2017, D’Arc also produced twenty-four historically annotated album releases of film music by Steiner and his contemporaries from the mid-1990s until 2019 on the BYU Film Music Archives label.

The 2018 symposium sought to build on the energy and curiosity cultivated through these developments. By exchanging research that scrutinized Steiner’s work from different perspectives and disciplines, attendees sought to better appreciate Steiner’s music, relationships, cultural context, and influence. The articles shared here are organized to acknowledge this range of approaches.

The first four articles by William H. Rosar, Brent Yorgason, Jeff Lyon, and Jordan Stokes offer insights into Steiner’s compositional style and method as developed across multiple productions of his career. The next four articles by Stephen Butler, Aaron Fruchtmann, Jonathan L. Friedmann, and Nathan Platte contemplate facets of Steiner’s career and identity that informed his work and later appraisals of it. The final four essays by Roger Hickman, Charles Leinberger, Peter Wegele, and Michael Lee present a range of analytical strategies for studying Steiner’s music within individual films and genres.

Although varied, the dozen articles shared here do not represent the 2018 symposium in its entirety.6 Fortunately, some of the work not included here is available elsewhere. At the symposium, Steven C. Smith generously shared from his then in-progress biography of Max Steiner. Smith’s Music by Max Steiner: The Epic Life of Hollywood’s Most Influential Composer was published by Oxford University Press in 2020. Similarly, Diana Friedberg was still at work on her documentary Max Steiner: Maestro of Movie Music at the time of the symposium. Finished in 2019, her film has been shown at multiple film festivals and is now available on DVD and Blu-Ray.7 Perhaps best of all, the 2018 symposium was soon followed by a second iteration, hosted at Brigham Young University in November 2019. The proceedings of that symposium are currently being edited by Brent Yorgason and Jeff Lyon for publication in The Journal of Film Music. Videos of the conference presentations are also available on the website of the Max Steiner Digital Thematic Catalog.8

Although the completion of this issue follows several years after the symposium itself, it is heartening to know that work on Steiner’s music continues, even as everyone has reckoned with the disruption and tragedy of the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, Aaron and I wish to express special thanks to all of the contributors, copyeditor Dean Bargh, and Equinox Publishing. Their commitment, care, and patience during extraordinary times made this issue possible. We hope you enjoy reading it.

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4 Steiner also shared with Telemann the added pressure of gambling debts. Whereas Telemann’s problem was familial—his wife Maria Catharina gambled and his friends helped bail the couple out—Steiner’s fiscal troubles were largely self-inflicted. See Steven Zohn, “Telemann, Georg Philipp,” Grove Music Online (2001), https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000027635. Max’s love of gambling is a recurring motif in Steven C. Smith’s biography of Steiner. See especially Music by Max Steiner: The Epic Life of Hollywood’s Most Influential Composer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 226.

5 MSS 1547, The Max Steiner Collection, Film Music Archives, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

6 The full symposium program is available at https://web.csulb.edu/colleges/cota/music/areas/music-history/max-steiner-symposium.php.

7 Readers may find Max Steiner: Maestro of Movie Music (2019, dir. Diana Friedberg) at: https://dianafriedberg.com/shop.

References


