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DOUBLE LIVES: FILM COMPOSERS IN THE CONCERT HALL

Edited by
James Wierzbicki

Double Lives

Double Lives: Film Composers in the Concert Hall is a collection of fifteen essays dealing with 'iconic' film composers who, perhaps to the surprise of many fans of film music, nevertheless maintained lifelong careers as composers for the concert hall. Featured composers include Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Franz Waxman, Miklós Rózsa, Bernard Herrmann, Nino Rota, Leonard Rosenman, and Ennio Morricone. Progressing in chronological order, the chapters offer accounts of the various composers' concert-hall careers and descriptions of their concert-hall styles. Each chapter compares the composer's music for films with his or her music for the concert hall, and speculates as to how music in one arena might have affected music in the other. For each composer discussed in the book, complete filmographies and complete works lists are included as appendices. *Double Lives: Film Composers in the Concert Hall* is accessible for scholars, researchers, and general readers with an interest in film music and concert music.

James Wierzbicki is an associate professor of musicology at the University of Sydney.

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Introduction

James Wierzbicki

For his 1982 autobiography, Miklós Rózsa shamelessly borrowed the title of a 1947 *noir* film for which he had provided an Oscar-winning score. The film, Rózsa writes in his Prologue, ends tragically, because the central character – an actor cast in the leading role in a production of Shakespeare's *Othello* – 'allows two quite independent strands of his life to become enmeshed'.[1] It seems that long before he established himself as a film composer Rózsa anticipated the problems of such enmeshment, and vowed never to experience them first-hand.

In 1931, after graduating with honours from the Leipzig Conservatory and then moving to Paris, Rózsa naively expected that he would earn his living as a composer of modernist classical music; little did he know that the only way he could keep body and soul together was by turning out 'silly little pieces' that would promptly be recorded and played as background music during intermissions at the many cinemas owned by the Pathé-Nathan company.[2] It was 'light trash of the kind I had so despised in Budapest and Leipzig', Rózsa recalled, but 'I consoled myself with the knowledge that Wagner, living in Paris a hundred years before me, had had to make piano arrangements of Donizetti operas, and later Bizet did the same'.[3] Mindful that Rózsa aspired to succeed not as a tunesmith but as a composer of music for the concert hall, his friend Alexis Roland-Manuel advised him that for his commercial work he should use a pseudonym. 'I shouldn't jeopardize my reputation by linking my real name with what the French call *musique alimentaire'*, Roland-Manuel told him. 'And so I became Nic Tomay. Tomay was the name of a family I knew at home, and Nic was short for Nicholas, of course, which in Hungarian is Miklós. So my Double Life began, after a fashion, there and then in Paris'.[4]

Rózsa did not feel the need to use a pseudonym after he moved to London in 1935 and two years later wrote his first film scores, for Marion Gering's *Thunder in the City* and Jacques Feyder's *Knight without Armour*. He used his own name for the several London films that followed, and for the dozens of films he scored after his 1939 relocation to Hollywood. Indeed, Rózsa by this time was confident enough in his abilities as a composer to affix his name proudly to everything he produced. At the same time, he was adamant about keeping separate the music he

composed in order to satisfy his artistic needs and the music he composed in order to earn a living. In *Double Life* he writes:

> My 'public' career as composer for films ran alongside my 'private' development as composer for myself, or at least for non utilitarian purposes: two parallel lines, and in the interests of both my concern has always been to prevent them from meeting. Of course, some contact was unavoidable, but in the main I am convinced that, for me, it was best that they be kept apart. This has been the dominant theme of my creative career, and is therefore the theme of this book.[5]

And that is the theme of *this* book, a collection of essays about the music that film composers have created not for the cinema but for the concert hall.

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Lest there be any confusion, let me clarify the terminology. By 'film composer' I mean not simply a composer who has written a film score but a composer whose reputation, at least in the collective mind of the general public, rests *primarily* on what he or she has written for films. By 'concert hall' I mean not just the venue that in many cities goes officially by that name but the entire culture for which the physical concert hall is just a symbol, a culture that embraces and promotes what until not so long ago (before persistent critics challenged the labelling) might have been called 'serious music' or 'art music'.

With those two terms understood, it should be obvious why *Double Lives: Film Composers in the Concert Hall* pays scant attention to such familiar figures as Aaron Copland and Sergei Prokofiev, composers who contributed famously but only occasionally to the repertoire of film music and whose enduring reputations rest solidly on their music for the concert hall. It should be just as obvious why this book pays little attention to such equally familiar figures as Max Steiner and Dimitri Tiomkin, composers who wrote not just famously but prolifically for films and who apparently felt no need to display their musical wares elsewhere. Like the two just named, the fifteen composers represented in this book are indeed known mostly for their film music, yet each of them has pursued a parallel career that is perhaps less well-known, a career whose products include operas and ballets and art songs as well as works for orchestra, chorus, chamber ensemble, and various solo instruments. These individuals are of course not the only successful film composers who have ventured into the concert hall. Were this book larger, it might include chapters on, say, Danny Elfman, Johnny Greenwood, Alex North, Michael Nyman, David Raksin, Zbigniew Preisner, Howard Shore, and John Williams, all of whom similarly gained fame with their film music yet nevertheless led – or still lead – the 'double life'. Were the book even larger, it might include chapters on such British composers as Malcolm Arnold and Benjamin Britten, or such 'Eastern bloc' composers as Arvo Pärt and Dmitri Shostakovich, each of

whom today looms large in the world of concert-hall music yet has to his credit – perhaps unbeknownst to their many admirers – a *huge* number of film scores.

In any case, Rózsa and the other composers whose music is indeed discussed here had, or still have, in common if not a downright need then at least a desire to share their music with more listeners than those who go to the movies. None of them 'received a vocation' to write for the concert hall *after* they had established themselves as film composers; all of them simply – although often not without difficulty – sustained activities that they had begun *before* embarking on their film careers. To be sure, these composers' individual musical personalities were in various stages of development when they accepted their first film assignments. But also to be sure, these personalities continued to be cultivated even *as* their owners' burgeoning success in the film industry brought them more and more scoring assignments.

Because he had both the technique and the facility to quickly give filmmakers what they seemed to want, Rózsa soon after his move to Hollywood was in effect typecast both as a composer for dark-shaded mysteries and as a composer for technicolour historical epics, the musical essence of neither of which had anything at all in common with Rózsa's 'true' musical identity. Similarly, Bernard Herrmann wrote as easily for melodramas as for thrillers and fantasy-action films, but none of this dissuaded him from the neo-Romantic path that even as a student he had charted for himself. Trained in and committed to post-Weberian serialism, Leonard Rosenman early in his Hollywood career was indeed able to exercise his personal style in his score for Vincente Minnelli's 1955 psycho-drama *The Cobweb*, but his music for the two better-known films that first shot him to prominence (*East of Eden* and *Rebel without a Cause*) sound nothing at all like that, and neither do any of his many film scores – for films in genres ranging from Westerns to science fiction – that came later.

It should be no surprise that the term 'double life' appears in several chapters of this book, but it is interesting that in two of the chapters – those devoted to the Italian composer Ennio Morricone and the Spanish composer Alberto Iglesias – the term is used not just by the chapters' authors but by the composers themselves. It is interesting, too, that the chapters on both Rosenman and Franz Waxman quote music journalists who, in their commentary on these composers, make reference to Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and that the chapter on Wojciech Kilar has the Polish composer himself calling up that particular image. Surely none of these composers felt his situation to be as dire as that of Stevenson's protagonist(s), or of the murderous character who prompted the title of Rózsa's autography. Just as surely, though, these composers and the others dealt with here were/are keenly aware that in order to have the careers they wanted – that is to say, careers that rewarded them financially and at the same time afforded them time in which to explore their artistic interests – they needed to keep their film work somehow separate from their concert work.

As Rózsa acknowledged in his autobiography, between his film music and his concert music 'some contact was unavoidable'. Indeed, a survey of both the film

music and the concert music of the composers who led, or still lead, 'double lives' reveals numerous instances of 'cross-over'. Erich Wolfgang Korngold's 1946 Cello Concerto, for example, makes use of themes created for his score for the same year's *Deception*. Waxman's *Carmen Fantasie* for violin and orchestra predates its use in the 1946 film *Humoresque*, but many of his concert pieces for orchestra alone (*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, *Elegy*, *Athaneal the Trumpeter*, the suites titled *Rebecca*, *A Place in the Sun*, *Ruth*, *Taras Bulba*) are based on his music for films.[6] Jerome Moross's aptly named 1965 *Music for the Flicks* draws from no less than five of his film scores.[7] Morricone's recent (2015) *Mass for Pope Francis* recycles themes from his 1986 score for *The Mission*. Two of Herrmann's more popular orchestral suites (the 1943 *Welles Raises Kane* and the 1963 *A Portrait of Hitch*) are based on music originally composed for films directed by the dedicatees.[8] With Herrmann, of course, the exchange worked in both directions; just as he recycled music from film scores into his orchestral suites, so did he recycle music from his orchestral works into his film scores.[9] And, as is explored in detail in Stephen C. Meyer's essay, Rózsa based his score for the 1970 *The Private Lives of Sherlock Holmes* almost entirely on his 1953 Violin Concerto.

The many examples of 'cross-over' notwithstanding, it remains that most composers whose music is heard in the cinema as well as in the concert hall have followed Rózsa's example and somehow kept the two kinds of music separate. That generalisation applies easily to all of this book's composers who pre-date the 'digital age', that is, to those who established themselves in both the film industry and in the concert hall by writing notes on paper and then having those notes realised by ensembles of performers. But it also applies to the late Jóhann Jóhannsson and other composers who nowadays create with synthesisers and computer files, whose treasuries of multi-track recorded material make it much more convenient to recycle bits of film music into concert works (or vice versa), whose success in film as much as elsewhere is arguably based on a single 'trademark' sound. It may well be that for Iglesias, and perhaps for other 'post-modern' composers, the boundaries between such once well-defined musical genres as 'classical, pop, avant-garde, and so on' no longer exist. But even the prolific Iglesias, who readily acknowledges that his film music and his concert music complement one another, says that the need to lead a 'double life' – to 'llevar una doble vida', as he told his Spanish interviewer – is crucial to his artistic fulfilment.

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Two themes run through these chapters.

One of them has to do with the painful fact that in the musical world to 'wear different hats', as they say, is often not easy. The problem results not from the considerable intellectual challenges involved with composing in various styles but from coping with the negative prejudices that many concert-hall critics and audience members harbour towards musicians who have 'made it' in show business.

To write successfully for the screen *of course* requires facility and versatility, yet a sizeable portion of the classical music crowd has long associated those particular gifts with glibness and superficiality. If a composer with his or her film scores can again and again 'so easily' appeal to the broad public, their false argument goes, how can anything he or she writes for the concert hall be taken seriously? Most of the composers who figure into this book, alas, have had to put up with that kind of thinking.

The other dominant theme, not at all painful to consider, has to do with how the composers handled the just-mentioned problem and other problems associated with maintaining simultaneous careers in the film industry and in the world of concert music. There is plenty in this book's chapters, I trust, to suggest that these composers took, or still take, their music for the concert hall quite seriously. But they did/do not seem to take *themselves* all that seriously, which is to say that they were/are not much bothered by the self-absorbed egotism that has been the bane of so many 'serious' composers especially since the days of Mahler and Schoenberg. They regard(ed) themselves as artists, certainly, but first and foremost they were/are artisans, plying their craft to the best of their abilities in whatever arena they happened to be working and under whatever circumstances the moment afforded. And one suspects that it was/is precisely because of this shared attitude – a rare combination of self-confidence and humility – that these composers were/are able not just to lead but to enjoy their 'double lives'.

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Contributors to this collection were invited to treat their subjects as they saw fit, the only restriction being to keep their commentary on the composers' film music to a minimum and, indeed, to include it in their narratives only when it had a direct bearing on their composers' concert music. My original plan, in order to remind readers that all of these composers of concert-hall music are known *mostly* for their work in cinema, was to preface each chapter with a brief summary of the composer's film music. I realised soon enough, however, that by writing such summaries I would be exercising editorial judgements that by their very nature would run counter to the book's premise and purpose.

This book, I reminded myself – and I will remind readers – is *not* about film music; rather, it is about music that film composers have produced for the concert hall. About these composers' film music much information is available elsewhere. Significantly, specific scores by seven of the composers discussed here are the subjects of monographs in Scarecrow Press's series of 'Film Score Guides', and in each of these monographs readers will find a succinct account of the *entirety* of the composer's film music career.[10] To get a sense of the extent of that entirety, and perhaps to prompt readers to marvel that such busy film composers could ever find the time for other musical activities, the reader can refer to the filmographies – some of which are staggeringly long! – and the set of works lists that form this book's appendices.

The fifteen chapters are arranged in chronological order according to the birth years of the composers. They begin with discussions of composers who were born in the nineteenth century and who were present at the very beginning of the so-called sound film; they end with considerations of two composers who did not even begin their careers in film until early in the twenty-first century. Two of the chapters – those on Miklós Rózsa and Laura Rossi – focus intensely on single works that, in the opinions of the authors, represent the entirety of the respective composers' approach to non-film music; other chapters include detailed discussions of numerous works, or of certain stylistic techniques, but none of the language is technical to an extreme, and the essence of the discussions is always more descriptive than analytical. The book's intended audience of course includes certified experts in music, cinematic and otherwise, but it also includes those many persons who simply appreciate film music in its natural habitat or who enjoy it when they encounter it in the concert hall, and who are perhaps curious about what else its composers have been up to.

In different ways, each chapter in this book illustrates the point made by Frédéric Döhl, in his piece on André Previn, to the effect that being a film composer and at the same time a composer for the concert hall 'is much more about doing many different things in parallel than about trying to fuse them into new musical forms, genres, or practices'. Beyond that, most of the chapters at least imply, as Stephen C. Meyer states explicitly in his piece on Rózsa, that for a composer the 'double life' is often not a hindrance but a source of creativity, and that to understand any composer's 'double life' not only 'helps us celebrate . . . all the other synergies between concert music and film music' but also prods us 'to imagine new ways in which these synergies might be fostered'. All things considered, *Double Lives: Film Composers in the Concert Hall* is indeed a book about synergies.

Notes

1 Miklós Rózsa, *Double Life* (New York: Wynwood Press, 1982), 15. The 1989 second edition (published by Wynwood) adds the subtitle 'The Autobiography of Miklós Rózsa'. A reprint from later in that same year (published by Seven Hills) features a more verbose and much less provocative combination of title and subtitle: *The Autobiography of Miklós Rózsa, Composer in the Golden Years of Hollywood*.

The film from which Rózsa borrowed his title is George Cukor's 1947 *A Double Life*, which starred Ronald Colman as the ill-fated and eventually murderous actor.

2 Ibid., 53.

3 Ibid., 53–4.

4 Ibid., 54.

5 Ibid., 15.

6 The first three orchestral pieces are based on music from, respectively, the scores for *Edge of Darkness* (Lewis Milestone, 1943), *Old Acquaintance* (1944), and *The Horn Blows at Midnight* (Raoul Walsh, 1945); the suites are based on Waxman's music for the same-titled films from, respectively, 1940, 1951, 1960, and 1962.

7 From *The Sharkfighters* (Jerry Hopper, 1956), *The Proud Rebel* (Michael Curtiz, 1958), *Five Finger Exercise* (Daniel Mann, 1962), *The Cardinal* (Otto Preminger, 1963), and *The War Lord* (Franklin Schaffner, 1965).

8 In the case of the homage to Orson Welles, the music derives exclusively from Herrmann's score for the 1942 *The Magnificent Ambersons*; in the case of the homage to Alfred Hitchcock, the music derives almost entirely from Herrmann's score for the 1955 *The Trouble with Harry*.

9 The most famous example, in Herrmann's case, is his re-use of music from his 1935 sinfonietta for string orchestra in his score for Hitchcock's 1960 *Psycho*.

10 The Scarecrow Press monographs focus on Ennio Morricone's score for *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (Charles Leinberger, 2004), Bernard Herrmann's scores for *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (David Cooper, 2005) and *Vertigo* (David Cooper, 2011), Erich Wolfgang Korngold's score for *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Ben Winters, 2007), Nino Rota's scores and posthumous music for *The Godfather trilogy* (Franco Sciannameo, 2010), Miklós Rózsa's score for *Ben-Hur* (Roger Hickman, 2011), Franz Waxman's score for *Rebecca* (David Neumeyer and Nathan Platte, 2012), and Jerome Moross's score for *The Big Country* (Mariana Whitmer, 2012).