

Before *Kong* Was King: Competing Methods in Hollywood Underscore

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Abstract

In many histories of American film music, Max Steiner's score for King Kong (1933) marks a new era by establishing norms in original, symphonic underscoring that would dominate Hollywood for decades. Kong's reign, however, eclipses diverse approaches to underscoring practiced at studios before and after its release. In this study, I compare the methods of Max Steiner at RKO and Nathaniel Finston at Paramount to show how both influenced film music implementation and discourse in the years leading up to Kong. Steeped in the practices of silent cinema, Finston championed collaborative scoring and the use of preexistent music in films like Fighting Caravans (1931). Steiner preferred to compose alone and placed music strategically to delineate narrative space in films, as in Symphony of Six Million (1932), a technique he adapted for mediating exotic encounters in island adventure films preceding Kong. Although press accounts and production materials show that Steiner and Finston's methods proved resilient in subsequent years, Kong's canonic status has marginalized Finston's role and threatens to misdirect appraisals of Steiner's other work. Considering Finston's practices at Paramount alongside Steiner's pre-Kong scores at RKO illuminates the limitations of using only Kong as a model, and shows that Finston's perspective on film scoring in the early 1930s provides a corrective balance for understanding film musicians' work before and after Kong.

In the prevailing histories of American film music, the first three notes of Max Steiner's score for *King Kong* (1933) bear much weight. As the film's block-lettered title surges from background to foreground, low brass intone a chromatic descent—B, B-flat, A—each slab of sound foreshadowing the approach of an oversized ape and, ostensibly, an era of original, symphonic underscoring in Hollywood sound film. The cinematic gesture is assured and emphatic, but the conceit that Steiner's *Kong* marked a breakthrough sits at odds with the historical record. At RKO, Max Steiner had already composed musical accompaniments for isolated scenes in films like *Cimarron* (1930), *Roar of the Dragon* (1932), *The Conquerors* (1932); he had composed lengthier scores for *Symphony of Six Million* (1932), *Bird of Paradise* (1932), and *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932). By March of 1933, the month of *Kong's* premiere, most studios incorporated—at least

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occasionally—background scores into their films. Many of these scores received acknowledgement in newspapers, yet *Kong's* music went almost completely unnoticed by critics during its initial release, its presence not as noteworthy as the film's hokey-yet-novel special effects.¹

These circumstances have prompted scholars to qualify *Kong's* achievements. Recent film music histories, for example, assert that the music of *Kong* signaled a “coming-of-age of nondiegetic film music” and “model for scoring practice,” but they also draw attention to earlier Steiner scores that had received notice in the press.² Other studies have parsed specific pre-*Kong* scores to illuminate sophisticated musical accompaniments that clearly informed Steiner's work on *Kong*.³ This article builds upon this work by directing scrutiny at the *Kong* myth itself. How did *Kong* become such a compelling cornerstone for early Hollywood underscore, and how does its canonization continue to shape expectations of what film music was, is, or should be? Possible responses to these questions are many, and this study offers one by comparing Steiner's pre-*Kong* career trajectory alongside another film music practitioner of the early sound era: Paramount music director Nathaniel Finston.

Although Finston is little known today, his widely aired views on film music reflected his experiences as a silent cinema music director and clashed markedly with Steiner's. Finston endorsed the compartmentalized, assembly-line methods of Hollywood music departments, including the pragmatic recycling of preexistent music. In contrast, Steiner—and those writing about Steiner—described his contributions as evoking the musical spirit of silent cinema but framed his methods as those of an art composer working alone on original work. Close examination of compositional trends, press accounts, and critical reception of select films from the 1930s, reveals that *both* Steiner's and Finston's conflicting methods proved resilient in subsequent years, but growing critical acclaim for Steiner's *Kong* marginalized collaboratively produced film scores and threatens to misdirect appraisals of Steiner's other work.

¹ For a survey of press commentary on pre-*Kong* scores and critics' neglect of *Kong's* music, see James Wierzbicki, *Film Music: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 127–33. There are several important exceptions, including a review in the *Hollywood Herald*: “Steiner deserves a special paragraph for his musical score. Without it much of the sense of realism would have been lost. If ever a picture demonstrated what proper musical scoring can do, this one does. Steiner's work definitely helps to make ‘King Kong’ a big picture.” “King Kong,” *Hollywood Herald*, 18 February 1933. James D'Arc has also located several passing mentions, including Louella Parsons's verdict—“curiously appropriate”—and a doggedly resistant review by Molly Merrick: “we hear a full symphony orchestra in the heart of the dangerous Kong country when there should have been nothing but tom-toms.” Quoted in James D'Arc, “Curiously Appropriate,” liner notes for Max Steiner, *King Kong: The Complete 1933 Film Score*, cond. William Stromberg, Moscow Symphony Orchestra, Marco Polo 8.223763, 1997, compact disc.

² See Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 87–88; and Wierzbicki, *Film Music*, 130.

³ See Michael Long's extended discussion of Steiner's music in *Symphony of Six Million*, particularly when he argues that *Symphony* might serve as a better model of underscoring that “prefigures the next several decades of film-music practice.” *Beautiful Monsters: Imagining the Classic in Musical Media* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 88. Other studies include Mark Slobin's discussion of *Bird of Paradise* in “The Steiner Superculture,” *Global Soundtracks: Worlds of Film Music*, ed. Mark Slobin, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 3–35; and Michael Slowik's “Diegetic Withdrawal and Other Worlds: Film Music Strategies before *King Kong*, 1927–1933,” *Cinema Journal* 53/1 (2013): 1–25.

The musical contents of *Kong* are therefore not of prime importance here. Instead, this investigation of film music discourse addresses the emergence of biases and expectations that would later be used by critics to leverage Steiner's *Kong* to the position of Hollywood's model underscore—years after the film's initial release. Considering Finston's practices at Paramount alongside Steiner's pre-*Kong* scores at RKO illuminates the limitations of using only *Kong* as a model, and shows that Finston's perspective on film scoring in the early 1930s offers a corrective balance for assessing film musicians' work before and after *Kong*.

Roads to Hollywood

Finston and Steiner had tellingly different résumés when they arrived in Hollywood; not surprisingly, these experiences informed their approaches to film scoring. Raised in fin-de-siècle Vienna, Steiner (1888–1971) was the son of theater scion Gabor Steiner, whose accomplishments included the building of the Riesenrad, the city's largest Ferris wheel.⁴ Max took to musical theater at an early age and spent the pre-war years composing and conducting operettas across Europe, from Moscow to London. With the outbreak of World War I, Steiner came to Broadway, where he continued to conduct, compose, and arrange music for various shows, including the Gershwins' *Lady Be Good*, and productions by Victor Herbert. After working on Harry Tierney's *Rio Rita*, Steiner received an invitation to Hollywood in 1929 to assist with a film version of the Broadway production at RKO.

It was an inauspicious arrival, and Steiner almost returned to the East Coast when work proved scarce. Production of film musicals declined sharply in 1931 and many musicians were removed from studio payrolls.⁵ Instead of letting Steiner go, RKO executives appointed him head administrator of the studio's reduced music department. The position initially involved little composition, but in the early thirties Steiner began fielding requests from producers—notably David O. Selznick—for original music for main titles and dramatic sequences. From these efforts the career of Hollywood's most prolific composer was born. Steiner continued to shoulder administrative duties through the early 1930s at RKO and later Selznick International Pictures, but Steiner's rise to prominence in the press came through his efforts as a composer, not administrator. By the late 1930s he had shifted his efforts entirely to composition. Steiner continued writing film music through 1965; tallies of his filmography vary but extend well beyond two hundred.⁶

⁴ Although outlines of Steiner's biography are included in many film music texts, more thorough surveys of his life are Tony Thomas's "Max Steiner: Vienna, London, New York, and Finally Hollywood," and Edward A. J. Leaney's "A Max Steiner Chronology," both published in *The Max Steiner Collection*, comp. and ed. James V. D'Arc and John N. Gillespie (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1996), 5–31. They are also available through the online finding aid to the Max Steiner Collection at Brigham Young University: <http://files.lib.byu.edu/ead/XML/MSS1547.xml>

⁵ Wierzbicki, *Film Music*, 120–21.

⁶ Clifford McCarty counts 236 titles in *Film Composers in America: A Filmography, 1911–1970*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 310–13. Even this list, however, does not include projects such as *Rio Rita* (1929), for which he did not compose original music.

Nathaniel W. Finston (1890–1979)⁷ had much more experience in film than Steiner when he arrived in Hollywood in 1928.⁸ Born in New York and trained as a violinist, Finston began working in his teens with the Fifth Avenue Hotel orchestra, an experience that exposed him to a wide variety of light classical fare. He soon graduated to more prestigious ensembles, including the Russian Symphony Orchestra, the orchestra of the Boston Opera, New York Symphony, and New York Philharmonic. While serving as concertmaster in one of Samuel “Roxy” Rothapfel’s moving picture palaces in the late 1910s, Finston accepted conductor Hugo Riesenfeld’s invitation to take up conducting. Finston served under Riesenfeld as associate conductor at the Rialto (1917–19) and also music director at the Capitol (1919–21), where he oversaw an orchestra of 74 pieces and helped compose and compile scores. A job overseeing music operations in the Chicago-based Balaban and Katz theaters, led to an even higher administrative position as music director for the entire Publix Theatre chain, operated by Paramount studios (1925–28).⁹

In an undated publicity bio written for Publix ca. late 1920s, Finston divulged his enjoyment of the business side of music:

I was not inclined towards a musical career for possibly the first 20 years of my life. It was only the necessity for succeeding as a player to improve my income and living which interested me in music. I was rather inclined towards a commercial or law course of training. However my mother had a different opinion about this, and I guess my closing chapter will be the death of a musician not a businessman. Some of my friends insist that as a musician, I am a good businessman. My business associates are positive that as a businessman, I am a fine musician.¹⁰

⁷ There is some disagreement between sources concerning Finston’s birth year. His biographical entry in *Music and Dance in California* (1940) lists 1894. Finston’s studio publicity bio from the early 1930s, however, lists 24 February 1892. His obituary in the *Los Angeles Times* from 24 December 1979 states that he passed away at age eighty-nine, which would put his birth year at 1890.

⁸ A year before his death, Steiner explained in an interview that he did write a score for one silent film, *The Bondsman*, in New York in 1916. If accurate, it presents a fascinating but meagerly documented film experience in Steiner’s pre-Hollywood career. See Bernard Rosenberg and Harry Silverstein, *The Real Tinsel* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 389. As Edward A. J. Leaney observes, however, “Steiner’s musical involvement with this film has been repeatedly attributed to him, but not, as yet, substantiated.” “A Max Steiner Chronology,” *The Max Steiner Collection*, eds. James D’Arc and John N. Gillespie (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1996), 28.

⁹ Finston’s biography has been gleaned and corroborated through multiple sources. One important reference has been the studio publicity biographies drafted in the late 1920s and 1930s for Paramount. These are now held in the Finston’s file in the core collections of the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California. Other sources include Finston’s biographical entries in the directories of *Who’s Who in Music and Dance in Southern California* (1933), *Music and Dance in California* (1940), and *Music and Dance in California and the West* (1948). An earlier biographical survey of Finston that provides more detail of his pre-Hollywood career includes G. W. Beynon’s, “Playing the Pictures: Music Directors,” *Musical Presentation of Motion Pictures* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1921), reprinted in *Film History* 14/1 (2002): 9–10. Finston’s obituary also provides key information: Ted Thackrey, “Conductor Brought Melody to Silent Films,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 December 1979.

¹⁰ The undated studio biography, a profile written in the form of a conversation between Finston and an anonymous interviewer, makes reference to Finston’s duties as head of Paramount’s Publix Theater chain, which dates the document from 1925–1928. This story proved an important part of Finston’s self-image. A studio publicity questionnaire, evidently filled out by an interviewer, ends with a section titled “Miscellaneous comment on self, or motion pictures.” The scrawl reads: “Showed no interest in Music during early years—but forced to it by MOTHER . . . Economic necessity created

Finston's tongue-in-cheek admission suggests he enjoyed deflating romantic ideals attached to his profession. He was, after all, that rare creature whose entry to the arts came through parental pressure and the lure of monetary reward. Hardly a suffering artist, Finston's pragmatic coordination of business and music interests made him well suited for the rapidly growing film industry, where success depended upon savvy negotiation of budget and craft.

In 1928 Finston moved to Hollywood, where he aggressively promoted music's contributions to the film industry generally and Paramount's films in particular. In terms of influence, these were Finston's critical years, a crest made evident by his increased presence in mainstream and trade press publications. Indeed, Finston's evident availability to journalists was likely strategic: a step that brought greater public awareness to Paramount's music department and Finston's expert managing of it. Multiple reporters from the *Los Angeles Times* marveled at his encyclopedic grasp of film music facts. In 1929 Speed Kendall lauded Finston's ability to identify the "melody, title, composer, and publisher" of any of the Paramount music library's holdings, often having to "produce a piece from a few faulty bars of it, whistled or hummed in his delicate ear."¹¹ The same year Edwin Schallert noted Finston's advocacy for collective scoring methods, in which each composer specializes in one scene type and then composes only that type. "There are many composers who are individualists," acknowledged Finston, "but there is a great difference in screen work. It is a difference often times better understood by the industrialist than the artist. He knows that in a factory each man can specialize in doing something exceedingly well and will confine his efforts chiefly to that thing."¹² Finston's factory friendly analogies and anti-artistic rhetoric appear, much like Finston's earlier comments on music and business, intentionally provocative: sly jabs at the romantic ideal of the isolated composer. In an article titled "Commerce and Art United in Talkie Business" for the *Los Angeles Daily News*, Harry Mines detailed the rationale behind Finston's views:

Art and big business have never agreed in the past. But necessity makes even miracles possible. . . . Take the music department of Paramount studio, for instance. Here, Nathaniel Finston . . . is attempting to form tin-pan alley into an organized department that turns out songs and music as you order them. In other words, Finston is making a business of composing music. Inspiration is out. To go about this successfully, he had and still has to battle temperament. He has a staff of musicians working constantly under him. Each man specializes in a particular phase of music.

early reason for THORO application & studies" (ellipsis in original). This tidbit was one of the few pieces of information left out of the formal, typed studio biography, dated April 1930. Finston file, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California.

¹¹ Speed Kendall, "Emotion Rules Music Library," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 October 1929. Several years later Edwin Schallert would claim that Finston "can furnish you at a glance with the amount of music that has gone into any production that his music department has been connected with since melody started in the films." "Slugger Hero in Spotlight, Finston Tabulates Cinema Music Happenings," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 May 1932.

¹² Edwin Schallert, "Screen Music Made by Rule," *Los Angeles Times*, 8 December 1929.

Mines surveys some of these phases by following film songs and music cues as they pass among composers, lyricists, arrangers, conductors, and musical advisers. He concludes:

His idea to apply big business efficiency methods to song composing and the music department came to Finston when he once visited the Armour Meat factory in Chicago and watched their methods of slaughtering and preparing livestock. Each man at Armour's, he explained, had his own particular piece of work and knew it so well, that the job was finished speedily and neatly and saved many hours of labor a single man would have had to go through. Now he is trying this time saving system on the department of music at Paramount and so far everything has worked well.¹³

Although the journalist does not specify when this music-as-meatpacking revelation visited Finston, the Chicago setting suggests 1921–25, when Finston was overseeing musical operations in that city's Balaban and Katz theatrical circuit. With new silent films arriving weekly, perpetual time shortages meant that musical directors needed a system that worked “speedily and neatly.” Hence music directors typically worked collaboratively with their staffs and drew liberally from preexistent music to compile accompaniments. None of these practices was unique to Finston, but whereas some musicians expressed public dismay at what they perceived to be hasty and irreverent methods (contemporary Max Winkler likened these accompaniments to butchery in the non-complimentary sense¹⁴), Finston embraced collaborative techniques in both silent and sound eras. Rather than arguing for greater artistic originality and autonomy for film musicians, Finston emphasized music's important service to silent film and its capacity to render similar enhancements in the sound cinema. In 1931, Philip Scheuer related:

Music, points out Nathaniel Finston . . . is too much a part of our lives to be ignored in our cinema. He recalls that in those halcyon days when he, along with Hugo Riesenfeld, Erno Rapee, David Mendoza, William Axt, and the late Josia Zuro were arranging scores for New York's Capitols and Rialtos, these musical accompaniments were regarded as a good 50 percent of the success of any picture. He asks who can deny the enhancing power of the scores for such spectacles as “Way Down East,” “The Birth of a Nation,” “The Big Parade,” and the rest; and adds that all this was forgotten over night with the astounding discovery

¹³ Harry Mines, “Commerce and Art United in Talkie Business,” *Los Angeles Daily News*, 1 January 1930.

¹⁴ Recollecting the hasty compilation of cue sheets for silent film accompaniment, Winkler wrote: “But no matter how hard we pushed our composers, they had only twenty-four hours a day to put music on paper and that just wasn't enough. . . . The cue sheets plus the actual music were to be in [the theaters'] possession a week before the picture went on. The demands upon us grew into staggering dimensions. In desperation we turned to crime. We began to dismember the great masterpieces. We began to murder the works of Beethoven, Mozart, Grieg, J. S. Bach, Verdi, Bizet, Tchaikovsky and Wagner—everything that wasn't protected by copyright from our pilfering. . . . Today I look in shame and awe at the printed copies of these mutilated masterpieces. I hope this belated confession will grant me forgiveness for what I have done.” Max Winkler, “The Origin of Film Music,” *Films in Review* 2/34 (1951), reprinted in *The Hollywood Film Music Reader*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11.

that voices could be made to come out of the mouths of babes. On that day, he says, the work of twenty years went for naught. Recovery is only now beginning.¹⁵

Finston's gripe was a familiar one among orchestral film music practitioners. Steiner later outlined a similar problem in his essay "Scoring the Film," from 1937. Looking back on the early sound era, he noted a combination of factors both technical (it was not easy to record music on the set and rerecording sacrificed audio clarity) and aesthetic (would audiences grappling with the heightened realism of sound film find music distracting?) that prompted the disruption of orchestral scoring techniques associated with the silent era.¹⁶ Whereas theater orchestras had played more or less continuously for silent films, studio orchestras had comparatively less to do. For the most part, orchestral music continued to be used only in parts lacking synchronized dialogue, including title sequences and montages, and scenes in which music could be justified through genre (i.e., musicals) or narrative circumstance (i.e., diegetic music). This summary is admittedly tidy, and recent scholarship by Michael Slowik has shown that select filmmakers deployed multiple strategies to incorporate background scoring into early sound films like *Lights of New York* (1928) and *The Big Trail* (1930).¹⁷ The extent to which these exceptional films proved—or disproved—the rule described by practitioners, however, has only begun to be addressed in the scholarship.¹⁸ At Paramount, Finston viewed his efforts as music administrator as key to effecting a more deliberate and calculated "recovery" for music in the industry.

In the same article in which Finston recalls silent era accompaniments he also singles out *Fighting Caravans* of 1931, a western starring Gary Cooper in which music plays under dialogue and action for the entire film. The sustained use of

¹⁵ Philip K. Scheuer, "Musical Picture Quietly Undergoes Renaissance," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 February 1931. Reprinted in James Wierzbicki, Nathan Platte, Colin Roust, eds., *The Routledge Film Music Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 69–72.

¹⁶ Max Steiner, "Scoring the Film," in *We Make the Movies*, ed. Nancy Naumburg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1937), 216–18.

¹⁷ See Slowik, "Diegetic Withdrawal," and Michael Slowik, "Experiments in Early Sound Film Music: Strategies and Rerecording, 1928–1930," *American Music* 31/4 (2013): 450–74. See also Lea Jacobs, "The Innovation of Re-recording in the Hollywood Studios," *Film History: An International Journal* 24/1 (2012): 5–34.

¹⁸ Slowik, who has viewed over two hundred films from the early sound era, writes "Though percentages are difficult to determine, my viewing of existing sound films suggest that at least half of all films produced from 1929 to 1931 contained music—in addition to the opening and closing credits—that ventured into ambiguous or outright nondiegetic territory. Still, nondiegetic was used sparsely, and diegetic withdrawal [that is, shifting directly from diegetic to nondiegetic scoring] was often the preferred strategy." "Diegetic Withdrawal," *Cinema Journal* 53/1 (2013): 6.

Another telling indication of exceptional cases of underscore usage turns up in Scheuer's previously referenced article "Musical Picture Quietly Undergoes Renaissance" from 1931, which describes differences of opinion among studio music directors who weigh the risks of "overloading" a picture or setting dialogue to "musical obbligato." Ironically, Steiner is singled out as one who "does not believe in the abstract underscoring of a movement of a picture by an orchestra, differing in this respect from [Warner Bros. director Arthur] Franklin, [MGM director William] Axt, and Finston. 'Music will be largely incidental, and often atmospheric,' he amplifies. 'It will not come into a picture from some mysterious source (the orchestra pit?) but by some logical and, if possible, visual means—such as the turning-on of a radio or a phonograph in a scene, or a glimpse of an orchestra or chorus.' Steiner soon changed his mind. For a close reading of this article and its historical significance, see Wierzbicki, *Film Music*, 122–24.

symphonic underscore beneath synchronized sound was unusual for the time, but it went largely ignored by critics and remains understudied.¹⁹ The reasons are telling. First, no composer is listed in the credits and a team of nine actually worked on the film.²⁰ Familiar melodies like “Oh! Susannah,” and “Arkansas Traveller” comprise the most prominent melodic materials of the score. Thus, not only is its authorship both hidden and collective, but the music’s “originality” is diminished by reliance on preexisting melodies. Finally, the music plays at a very low volume for most of the film. Although the entrances of several recurring themes and textural changes occasionally correspond to narrative events, the music’s ubiquitous presence and imprecise correlation to onscreen action makes it easy to ignore, which is precisely what most critics did. Finston himself expressed reservations about the film’s music, admitting that he “is not altogether positive that a complete musical underscore is advisable for a talkie, certain episodes lending themselves better so silence; but he is convinced that no music at all is infinitely worse.”²¹

Steiner’s *Symphony* and Island Adventure Trilogy

As Finston toiled at Paramount, Steiner assisted with musicals at RKO. Although he penned a few minutes of symphonic underscore for *Cimarron* (1930), his orchestral compositions for film did not otherwise extend beyond main and closing title sequences. When producer David O. Selznick arrived at RKO in 1932, he requested that Steiner provide more for their second film together, the aptly titled *Symphony of Six Million* (1932). Unlike the music for *Fighting Caravans*, which had been assembled by a team, the single name of Max Steiner in *Symphony*’s credits helped clarify and elevate authorship in mainstream publications like the *Los Angeles Times*:

An “operatic underscoring” is the technical designation of the musical complement composed by Max Steiner for RKO Radio Pictures’ “Symphony of Six Million.” . . . [Steiner] credits the original idea for this treatment to David O. Selznick, executive vice-president in charge of RKO production.²²

Even though *Symphony* was not as “original” as Selznick and Steiner let on, it did mark an important step in film music accompaniment. In *Fighting Caravans* Finston’s crew had essentially slipped a continuous, silent-era film score behind dialogue and effects. Part of *Symphony*’s success rested on a more judicious and bold implementation of music. By having music enter and leave the film’s soundtrack, audiences would be more aware of music’s presence and—just as importantly—absence.

¹⁹ Wierzbicki mentions the film in passing. Wierzbicki, *Film Music*, 123 and 261.

²⁰ John Leipold, Max Bergunker, Emil Bierman, A. Cousminer, Karl Hajos, Herman Hand, Emil Hilb, Sigmund Krumgold, and Oscar Potoker contributed. None received screen credit. Wierzbicki, *Film Music*, 261.

²¹ Scheuer, “Musical Picture Quietly Undergoes Renaissance.” Rosar has shown that Paramount’s use of continuous background scores in 1931 compelled executives at Universal Pictures to entertain briefly a similar strategy. See Rosar, “Music for the Monsters,” 395.

²² “Picture to be Given Operatic Underscore,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 April 1932, B18.

Despite its title and musical facets, *Symphony's* central story has little to do with music. The title refers to the inhabitants of the film's setting—New York City—and is explained through a foreword following the opening titles:

A city—
Six million human hearts—
Each with a dream—
A hope—a goal—
Each soul a vagrant—
melody in the eternal
Symphony of life!

The film, based on a story by Fannie Hurst, follows the life of Felix Klauber, a boy who dreams of becoming a great doctor for his neighbors in the Lower East Side. Plans go awry when his brother convinces him to leave the low-paying neighborhood clinic and work privately for wealthy uptown clients. Although his boosted salary allows his family to enjoy greater creature comforts, Felix (Ricardo Cortez) gradually becomes estranged from his family, his childhood friend Jessica (Irene Dunne), and his community. After losing his father (Gregory Ratoff) in an unsuccessful operation, Felix resolves to return to the clinic, where he saves Jessica through surgery and rededicates his life to serving the Jewish community of his youth.

Throughout *Symphony*, music's presence characterizes narrative space, contrasting the poor, Jewish home of Felix's family with the uptown office that he eventually opens. Throughout the first part of the film, Steiner's underscore accompanies scenes of the aspiring doctor at home with his family, at the local clinic, and at the Braille institute where Jessica, his love interest, works. The music emphasizes Felix's cultural milieu through the inclusion of Jewish melodies, such as "Auf'n Pripotchok" (Warshawski, 1913), "Hatikvah" (Imber and Cohen, 1888), "Eli, Eli," and the *Kol Nidre*, which become associative motives linked to characters and ideas.²³ The music's "Hebrew idiom"—as noted by critics—is also reinforced through klezmer-inspired passages and original themes set in the harmonic minor mode.²⁴ When Felix moves from ghetto to uptown office, the music stops. Scenes in which Felix serves rich women while ignoring his father unfold without musical comment. The silence expresses audible disapproval, exemplifying Mark Slobin's concept of *erasure*: "Who gets soundspace [in film] and who gets silence carries major cultural

²³ As Mervyn Cooke has observed, the film's similarities with *The Jazz Singer* (1927), another *bildungsroman* in which a Jewish man must reconcile obligations to family and community with life in show business, are reinforced through Max Steiner's music (Cooke, 87). More specifically, Steiner's score incorporates the solemn "Kol Nidre" for scenes preceding and following the father's death, just as Louis Silvers had done in *The Jazz Singer*. The script also emphasizes the connection: when the father in *Symphony* shows off his new car horn to his neighbors, he echoes Al Jolson by declaring "You ain't heard nothing yet!" See also Michael Long's insightful discussion of musical and thematic relationships connecting these films in *Beautiful Monsters*, 75–88.

²⁴ "Picture to be Given Operatic Underscore."

meaning.”²⁵ More important, however, is when the musical division between ghetto and uptown dissolves. When a preoccupied Felix forgets to operate on a boy at the local clinic and the boy dies, Jessica makes an unprecedented visit to confront him in his uptown office. Music anticipates her entrance, and Steiner marks her arrival with the melody of “Hatikvah.” The unsung lyrics echo her own plea that Felix return to his community:

As long as deep within the heart
A Jewish soul stirs,
And forward, to the ends of the East
An eye looks out, towards Zion.
Our hope is not yet lost.

In contrast to *Fighting Caravans*, in which continuous music was ignored by critics, *Symphony*'s intermittent underscoring received more comment as well as comparisons to silent-era practices:

The [RKO] people who are responsible for underlaying *Symphony* throughout with a splendid musical score have pointed the way which may be followed with profit by others. It was composed by Max Steiner, and as an example of thematic music is worthy of study. In the silent days we had music throughout the picture. . . . With the coming of ‘talkies’ . . . dialogue and the rasping of mechanical contrivances all but eliminated music. . . . Here in ‘Symphony of Six Million’ it is used . . . for the very deliberate purpose of building and sustaining emotional values of both the dialogue, the incidental background noises, and the picture itself.²⁶

There is some irony here, in that Finston's more accurate replication of silent-era music-making within a continuous synchronized soundtrack received no mention while Steiner's more selective cues prompted critics to recall an era in which music had invigorated quiet images. Perhaps it was that *Symphony* had granted space for the musical score to blossom apart from sound effects and dialogue, allowing audiences to contemplate its contribution in real time. When Felix's father dies in surgery, Steiner's cue enters after two nearly silent minutes of the surgery itself. During the operation sound is limited to the clink of surgical instruments and a few words of dialogue. The visual editing, which darts with increasing speed among static shots of the operating room is simple and riveting. When Felix cries over his father, murmuring low strings begin the *Kol nidre*. As the staff wheels the body from the room, “Auf'n Pripotchok” plays slowly on piano, with accompanimental chords on organ (see Example 1). The odd instrumental pairing specified in Steiner's short score simultaneously invokes memory—the piece has been performed previously by Felix's sister on piano—and the hereafter, with sustained organ chords sounding ghostly and funereal.²⁷ The son is left alone in the room. “Auf'n Pripotchok” fades

²⁵ Mark Slobin, “The Steiner Superculture,” *Global Soundtracks: Worlds of Film Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 22.

²⁶ Leo Meehan, “Symphony’ Rated As Classic,” *The Hollywood Herald*, 23 March 1932.

²⁷ In his reading of this scene, Michael Long notes that “Auf'n Pripotchok” here “represents the primary ethical thread that binds the generations. . . . It is the popular foil to *Kol nidre*: not a song of the synagogue but a composed popular song.” Long, *Beautiful Monsters*, 99.

CUE: Papa - Papa!

Adagio molto triste

operating room, Father dead.

(after death)

:13

mf

6 :21 :30 Piano

They wheel the old man out!

p Organ (Talk to Bernard [Kaun])

Example 1. Opening page of Max Steiner's short score for Reel 9 (death scene), featuring the "Kol Nidre" (mm. 1–3) and "Auf'n Pripotchok" (mm. 9–12). Annotations and timing marks are transcribed from the original document. Max Steiner Collection. L. Tom Perry Special Collections Library. Harold B. Lee Library. Brigham Young University. Provo, Utah.

away, its final phrase played *doloroso* on bassoon. Such deliberately wrought musical restraint packs considerable power, especially within the sentimental context of an early 1930s melodrama. The effect, however, is not achieved through breathtaking musical originality: melodic content is almost entirely borrowed and the cue is carried by a handful of instrumentalists, not a straining full orchestra.²⁸ Even so the filmic context encourages close listening, with recognizable melodies unwinding alongside footage that is otherwise silent.

In story and usage of music, *Symphony* may seem as far removed from *King Kong* as Finston's *Fighting Caravans*, but *Symphony* establishes many important precedents that Steiner would carry through to *Kong*, including the reliance upon associative themes, the deliberate withholding of music to contrast one narrative space with another, and even mickey-mousing (Steiner's music matches Felix's footfalls in a hospital scene). Like *Kong*, *Symphony* also includes scenes that creatively intertwine diegetic music-making and nondiegetic accompaniment. Far from being a modest

²⁸ The only "original" melodic material from this cue is a descending chromatic line in mm. 4–6. The three notes echo the contour of the preceding *Kol nidre*; more surprisingly, the intervals and rhythms are the same as *Kong*'s motif.

predecessor to *Kong, Symphony of Six Million* demonstrates elegant integration of visuals, narrative, and music. The only thing missing, it would seem, is complete independence from preexistent music and a denser, more harmonically complex orchestral texture. Both of these facets emerge in *Bird of Paradise* and *Most Dangerous Game*.

Watching *Bird of Paradise*, *Most Dangerous Game*, and *King Kong* in succession reveals immediate parallels. All three films center on an exotic encounter mediated by music: white adventurers find an island populated by exotic others. Their arrival at the island cues both narrative conflict and orchestral underscore. The similarities in plot are heightened by other parallels, including shared casting²⁹, shared sets, shared footage (identical shark footage used in *Bird* and *Game* prompted Steiner to write in the margins of his score “We’ve got a shark in every picture, by Jesus!”³⁰), shared studio, and shared personnel: Merian C. Cooper directed both *Game* and *Kong* while David O. Selznick and Max Steiner served on all three productions. Finally, all three films were deemed by critics to be throwbacks to the silent era, a conclusion abetted by musical accompaniment.

In both *Bird of Paradise* and *Most Dangerous Game*, music delineates narrative space. In the opening scene of *Bird of Paradise*, a boat crew attempts to navigate through a narrow and shallow island reef. Although dialogue is heard, synchronized sound effects are spare. Crashing waves are depicted aurally through Steiner’s evocative ocean music: brass crescendos, closely miked harp glissandi, and a carefully timed cymbal crash evoke a large wave’s crest and hide the fact that not a drop of actual water can be heard even though visually it sloshes over the camera lens. Yet the replacement of aural realism with sprays of orchestral color performs an important purpose. Just as the boat rides the wave crest into a strange, beautiful land, so the gentle dissociation of visual and aural realism eases the spectator over the barrier of disbelief, with music compelling the audience to at least consider a land where “native” Dolores Del Rio pursues amorous entanglements with an impressively clueless Joel McCrea. The effect anticipates the much celebrated island-approach scene in *King Kong* that Claudia Gorbman argues “initiates us into the fantasy world, the world where giant apes are conceivable. . . . [Steiner’s music] helps to hypnotize the spectator, bring down defenses that could be erected against this realm of monsters. . . .”³¹

Steiner’s music for *Bird of Paradise* plays for almost the entire film. Even with this near-continuous score, however, Steiner withholds music for an important scene when the sailors are back at the boat, marveling at Joel McCrea’s easy susceptibility to natives’ charms. It is the film’s one allowance for real world disenchantment and is fittingly confined to sailors crammed inside their ship. When the camera cuts to McCrea enjoying the night air above board, the shimmering texture of the

²⁹ Fay Wray and Robert Armstrong star in both *Most Dangerous Game* and *Kong*; Joel McCrea stars in *Bird of Paradise* and *Most Dangerous Game*.

³⁰ Max Steiner, “Reel 1, Part 2,” *Most Dangerous Game*, Max Steiner Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections Library, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter MSC), Volume 82, 1.

³¹ Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 79.

film's opening returns, marked in Steiner's pencil draft as "very träumerisch."³² For the rest of the film, Steiner generously unfurls theme after theme, with eleven full melodies supplemented by shorter motivic fragments. Mark Slobin observes that "Steiner mixed an orchestral score with depictions of indigenous music-making, tossing in generalized colorful music that drew on the Hawaiian music craze . . . [thereby creating] quite the ethnomusicology of an imaginary community."³³ Contemporary critics were similarly charmed by *Bird*: "Significant in 'Bird of Paradise' [is] the musical background that actually helps to tell the story, enhancing dramatic effects and building up climaxes just as symphony orchestras used to do with big silent films."³⁴

Most Dangerous Game covered what was becoming increasingly familiar ground: underscore is withheld until the adventurers are shipwrecked, melodic gestures ape onscreen movement (in this case, the footsteps of the film's protagonist), diegetic and nondiegetic music share motivic material, and critics lauded once again Steiner's inspired touch.³⁵ Steiner did not compose as much music for *Game*, partly because he was writing a replacement score—an initial attempt by W. Franke Harling had been rejected by director Cooper. With Harling's score cut for being too light, Steiner and orchestrators Bernhard Kaun and Emil Gerstenberger erred on the hefty side, with textures so thick and busy for the film's extended chase sequence that the thirty-two member orchestra had trouble recording it. "There were a great many individual mistakes in the orchestra," wrote sound engineer Murray Spivack in the recording log, "which were not due to lack of rehearsal. These should be considered unavoidable, inasmuch as the musicians were working from 10:00 A.M. to 6:00 A.M., and the music was extremely difficult."³⁶ Steiner's strain as lone composer aided only by orchestrators is also more evident: "Bernard!" Steiner scribbled in one margin to orchestrator Bernhard Kaun, "Help this if you can! It's now 4 a.m. and I can't think anymore. Worked since 8 this morning." In order to generate more music with less effort, Steiner also ordered that more passages be repeated, albeit with different orchestration. For one such passage near the end of the picture, fatigue forced bad puns: "cue the other instruments. Should be very forte. (maybe 80) HA! HA! (4 a.m.)."³⁷ Exhausted and already looking ahead to *Kong*, Steiner had just enough energy to pun at the end of the score: "Grandioso a la Kaun . . . Bernard: Make this as nice as you can its 5:30 and I am dying! Dein [Your] Max."³⁸

³² Max Steiner, "Reel 2, Part 2," *Bird of Paradise*, MSC Volume 16, 1.

³³ Slobin, "The Steiner Superculture," 6.

³⁴ Robbin Coons, "Vidor Uses Technic [*sic*] of Silent Days," undated clipping in Scrap Book 1, MSC Oversize Box 8.

³⁵ For more on the score for *Most Dangerous Game*, see Platte, "Musical Collaboration in the Films of David O. Selznick," 59–63; and Slowik, "After the Silents," 12–14.

³⁶ Murray Spivack, "Recording Breakdown," 13 August 1932, RKO Studio Records, Performing Arts Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles (hereafter abbreviated as RKOSR), Box P-18, Folder A602.

³⁷ Max Steiner, "Reel 7, Part 3," *The Most Dangerous Game*, MSC Volume 82.

³⁸ Steiner, "Reed 7, Part 3."

Notes like these remind us that Steiner controlled more of the compositional details, whereas Finston oversaw the collaborative efforts of others. Viewed in relation to Finston's team-approach, some of Steiner's stylistic decisions also become more understandable. Mickey-mousing, a device often dismissed as overly obvious, served to emphasize the customized contours of Steiner's music. If a melodic line perfectly matches the erratic footsteps of an onscreen character, as it does in *The Most Dangerous Game*, then it is clear the music has not been recycled from a studio library, as at Paramount. Similarly, the shift away from *Symphony of Six Million's* Jewish melodies to the original music of *Bird of Paradise* and *Most Dangerous Game* raised the cachet of the original, individualist composer. Nowhere is this more explicitly celebrated than in an article titled "Classical Composers Banished from Films":

To be unceremoniously ejected from the RKO lot was the fate of Ludwig van Beethoven, Peter Ilyitch Tchaikowsky and other dead composers! One living man will supplant them! Original music, never played or heard before, is being fitted to such cinema plays . . . and it is being composed by one man! That man is Max Steiner, musical director for Radio Pictures. Not one note, not one bar of music, will come from any other brain.³⁹

This statement was likely provided by a studio publicist. Even Steiner depended on orchestrators and assistants to realize his drafted short scores. Nevertheless, the copy reveals a myth in the making. The idea that a critic might focus attention on the efforts of one composer stands in strong distinction to Finston's openly collaborative and derivative models. These models withheld from journalists a strong personality, other than Finston's, on which to lavish attention.

The consequences of these different strategies can be seen in the press. Finston coached Scheuer, for example, to give heed to the music in *Dishonored*, a film starring Marlene Dietrich about a female spy who encodes secrets into music: "In this picture we have made a piano an integral part of the plot, so that the music played on it becomes important to the actors involved; and as the result of this piano-playing is made visually apparent, a full symphony orchestra develops the original themes to terrific proportions."⁴⁰ (The role of the piano is intimated in the main titles, which present an orchestral fantasia on the opening of Beethoven's Piano Sonata, No. 8 "Pathétique.") But when Scheuer reviewed *Dishonored*, his description of the music—"tremendously effective, especially in its orchestral finale"—left out Karl Hajos and Herman Hand, the musicians responsible for the original material and arrangements.⁴¹

In contrast to this anonymity, Steiner received increasing attention, with critics beginning to note patterns in his most recent RKO production, *The Most Dangerous Game*. One *Los Angeles Times* critic even echoed Finston's words on music in the silent cinema:

³⁹ "Classical Composers Banished from Films," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 October 1932.

⁴⁰ Scheuer, "Musical Picture Quietly Undergoes Renaissance."

⁴¹ Philip K. Scheuer, "Witchery of Cinema Intrigues," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 May 1931.

A thing that should be noted, and more than just in passing, is the work that this musician, Max Steiner, is doing in bringing out atmospheric possibilities in pictures. He contributes measurably to “The Bird,” and even more to “The Most Dangerous Game,” which is soon to show.

In silent pictures music supplied much of the emotional sweep of a production when it was exhibited on the screen. In fact, I would be inclined to say that 50 per cent of this sweep was due to the influence of the theater orchestra, when there was an orchestra, and 25 per cent when the organ had to be depended on for accompaniment, provided both the orchestral leader and the organist were equal to the occasion.

For portions of “The Bird of Paradise,” and also for fully half of “The Most Dangerous Game,” music does its old share in providing the stimulus.⁴²

Ironically, praise for Steiner’s ability to revitalize silent-era sonic grandeur breaks sharply at *King Kong*. As stated above, the music of received little comment during its initial release. By itself, this is not terribly surprising; background music in films was regularly ignored by critics in the 1930s. But *Symphony*, *Bird*, and *Game* all received significant notice. Why not *King Kong*? As James D’Arc and Wierzbicki have noted, part of the reason was likely the film’s special effects and novel story—both of which preoccupied critics at length.⁴³ It is also likely, however, that by *King Kong*’s release in March 1933, background orchestral music was no longer the novelty it had been eleven months earlier with *Symphony of Six Million*. Rather than breaking new ground, *King Kong* followed a well-trod path blazed by the earlier films. Indeed, the very fact that RKO’s executive producer, David O. Selznick, approved the larger orchestra⁴⁴ and \$30,603.48 bill for *Kong*’s music—a cost that nearly matched the collective salary of the cast (\$35,956)—speaks to the studio’s prioritization of Steiner’s contribution.⁴⁵ Without the demonstrated success of music in the earlier films, it is difficult to conceive of any studio spending so much on music.

Crowning *Kong*, Forgetting Finston

If the very traits that Steiner’s music for *Kong* purportedly introduced into the cinema were already well established in earlier films, why then is *Kong* still depicted as a historic achievement? Renewed attention from journalists helped. One commentator in *Variety* returned to the film months after its release to ruminate on its music:

⁴² Edwin Schallert, “Rivalry Seen in Film Plots,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 September 1932.

⁴³ D’Arc, “Curiously Appropriate”; Wierzbicki, *Film Music*, 133.

⁴⁴ Days before *Kong*’s premiere an article touted that Steiner had “assembled one of the largest orchestras ever used in synchronization of pictures at RKO studios.” “Large Band Assembled for Cinema,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 March 1933. Rudy Behlmer states that forty-six musicians were gathered to record *Kong*. For *Symphony of Six Million*, Steiner had gathered as many as thirty (some recording sessions employed fewer); for *Bird*, as many as forty. RKO Studio Records and Rudy Behlmer, “King Kong: Eighth Wonder of the World,” liner notes essay for Max Steiner, *King Kong: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, Rhino Movie Music R2 75597, 1999, compact disc, 25.

⁴⁵ Budget figures taken from a letter by E. L. Scanlon to Merian C. Cooper, 14 September 1938, Merian C. Cooper Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections Library, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Box 9, Folder 15.

Going back over recent months, and keeping away from the straight musicals for the moment, the picture which seems to be a shining example for its musical score is *King Kong* orchestrated [sic] by Max Steiner. Memory and physical restrictions necessarily limit a summary on every picture which has come out of Hollywood in the past six or eight months, but it is logical to presume that no regular release has contained a more expert emotional buildup via music than 'Kong' did for the introduction of the giant gorilla. This was truly a fine piece of work, both as to scoring and staging, and undoubtedly was responsible to a definite degree for that picture's box office success, although many were seemingly unconscious of it.⁴⁶

Bruno David Ussher, a musicologist and music critic who wrote regularly about film music at a time when most music critics ignored it, also contributed. In 1937 Ussher wrote:

A good deal of music is used that suggests the smell and the surge of the sea. As far as I can recall, no one in or out of Hollywood, as far as films are concerned, has ever surpassed Mr. Steiner as a tonal distiller of the watery elements. He waxed most subtle in that Frankensteinian, *King Kong*. To me a stupid adventure tale, Steiner compensated with music at once exotic and convincing, direct of atmospheric effect while employing technical means as modern harmonically as ever went into a picture.⁴⁷

In 1940, Ussher would assert that Steiner:

made film history with a background score for a picture in which a mechanical gorilla was the villainous central figure of that amazing (and unintentionally funny) fantasy.

Max Steiner's music for the boatride scene over the waters surrounding the isle of lost men still stands out in my mind as an exceptionally artistic piece of atmospheric composition in all the enormous quantity of film music written in Hollywood since then.⁴⁸

In his own writings Steiner argued that his music helped *Kong* succeed in theaters, but *Kong's* resilience as a pop culture icon sustained Steiner's music in cultural memory—especially at a time before commercial soundtracks, VHS, DVD, and internet formats facilitated the study of films outside theaters.⁴⁹ Other factors helped as well. Months after *King Kong*, RKO released *Son of Kong* (1933) a half-hearted sequel that parodied the original but gave Steiner opportunity to reuse thematic material.⁵⁰ *King Kong's* popularity prompted numerous theatrical rereleases of the

⁴⁶ "Music on the Screen," *Variety*, 27 February 1934.

⁴⁷ Bruno David Ussher, "Max Steiner's Good Work," *Hollywood Spectator*, 20 November 1937. Clipping held in Scrap Book 1, MSC Oversize Box 8.

⁴⁸ Bruno David Ussher, "Music in the Films," *Los Angeles Daily News*, 19 August 1940.

⁴⁹ Steiner wrote in 1937 that *Kong* "was successful and the studio again attributed at least 25 percent of its success to the music, which made the artificially animated animals more lifelike, the battle and pursuit scenes more vivid." It is important to note, however, that at this time Steiner himself did not depict *Kong* as singularly distinctive. In the preceding paragraph he observes that "One-third to one-half of the success of [*Symphony of Six Million* and *Bird of Paradise*] was attributed to the extensive use of music." Steiner, "Scoring the Film," 220.

⁵⁰ The chromatic "Kong" theme also returned in extended form for *She* (1935), a film based on the H. Rider Haggard novel in which white explorers visit "primitive" tribes who worship not an enormous ape but instead a white queen. Steiner's pointed reuse of the theme underlines the film's indebtedness to the island adventure films made at RKO three years previously. As a contemporary critic noted: "[*She*] still cannot be accounted much more than a King Kong edition of 'lost kingdom' melodramas." Frank Nugent, "The Screen," *New York Times*, 26 July 1935. Soon after Steiner's *Kong*

film from 1938 onward, which may well have assisted the memory of critics like Ussher.⁵¹ When *King Kong* was remade in 1976 and 2005, Steiner's music resonated implicitly and explicitly in each production.⁵² Journalist Tom Shales even set John Barry's score for the 1976 version alongside a newly recorded album of Steiner's score, declaring: "it's hardly a challenge to pick the superior score. It's Steiner by a mile . . . [Steiner's] principal theme is three descending notes that have in fact become nothing less than a musical icon, like the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth."⁵³ In contrast to *Kong's* accumulation of films, soundtracks, studies, and assurances of canonic status, *Fighting Caravans*, *Dishonored*, *Symphony of Six Million*, *Bird of Paradise*, and *Most Dangerous Game* survive at best as minor classics.⁵⁴

Kong also satisfies musicological preoccupations. It was composed (albeit not orchestrated) by an individual; it features original content; its textures are frequently dissonant and dense⁵⁵; and it is musically organized around a melodic cell, an *idée fixe* that undergoes thematic transformation.⁵⁶ In addition, it is more self-consciously operatic than its predecessors. The spirit of Wagner is appropriately invoked in discussions of *Kong* and Steiner himself cites Verdi in his short score. As *Kong* bids farewell to Ann before falling from the Empire State Building, Steiner writes a halting descending line in the violins, accompanied by a note reading, "This should sound about like the 'Miserere' from *Trovatore*,"⁵⁷ an unexpected connection that links *Kong* to Leonora. Aside from the melodic resemblance, the

motive made another cameo in an RKO production: in "Bojangles of Harlem" from *Swing Time* (1936), arrangers playfully inserted the *Kong* motive for the sequence in which gargantuan shadows of Astaire appear behind the actor.

⁵¹ Ussher's comments from 1937 on *Kong* may also stem from his involvement as "Assistant to the Director" on a WPA Federal Music Project concert held in Los Angeles, 15 May 1936. The program included "Tone Pictures" by Steiner, including "The Ghetto" from *Symphony of Six Million*, "The Yacht Arrives in the South Seas" from *Bird of Paradise*, and "Fog," "The Forgotten Island," and "African Dance" from *King Kong*. WPA Federal Music Project Program, 15 May 1936, Scrap Book 1, MSC Oversize Box 8. Additional theatrical rereleases occurred in 1942, 1946, 1952, and 1956. In 1956 the film was also sold to television, followed by an art house release in 1971. In 1975, a year before Dino De Laurentiis's remake, the film was included on the American Film Institute's list of the fifty best American films ever made. From the early 1980s on it has been available on various home video formats. See Ray Morton, *King Kong: The History of a Movie Icon, from Fay Wray to Peter Jackson* (New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2005), 83–85.

⁵² In Jackson's version, for example, excerpts from Steiner's original score play during *Kong's* New York debut.

⁵³ Tom Shales, "The Monkey That Made Movie Music," *Washington Post*, 13 February 1977.

⁵⁴ *Symphony*, for example, only became available on DVD in 2011.

⁵⁵ Although still conservative by contemporary concert music standards, *Kong's* chromaticism was a defining feature for the composer. Toward the end of his short score, he jotted in the margin: "Hurrah! The first pure triad!" Max Steiner, "Reel 10, Part II," MSC Volume 91.

⁵⁶ Peter Franklin offers a particularly engaging discussion of Steiner's reconfiguration of *Kong's* theme for sequences involving Ann (Fay Wray). See "King Kong and Film on Music: Out of the Fog," in *Film Music: Critical Approaches*, ed. K. J. Donnelly (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2001), 88–102. See also Platte, "Music Collaboration in the Films of David O. Selznick," 64–68.

⁵⁷ Max Steiner, "Reel 11 Part II," *King Kong*, MSC Volume 91. Steiner paraphrases the end of Leonora's exclamation from the *Miserere* Chorus in Act IV of Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. The text is most applicable to *Kong*, who stands besieged not by the sound of prayers, but by the roar of airplanes: "That sound, those prayers, so solemn and dire, fill the air with baleful terror! The distress that fills me almost deprives my lips of their breath, my heart of its beating!"

passage does not sound at all like Verdi, but the annotation suggests that Steiner was drawing—likely with tongue in cheek—musico-dramatic parallels between Verdi's task and his own. All of these characteristics might be mustered to argue that *Kong* does represent an early pinnacle in Hollywood film scoring. Whether it served as a model for subsequent efforts, however, remains debatable. Steiner's later scores, for example, did not build directly upon these ideas. Instead, many of the scores historians favor—*The Informer* (1935), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Casablanca* (1942), *Since You Went Away* (1944), *The Searchers* (1955)—foreground preexistent music and less dense orchestration. Collectively, they have more in common with *Symphony of Six Million* than *King Kong*. In other words, *Kong* is indeed exceptional, but not because it provided a particularly useful compositional model.⁵⁸

If overemphasis on *Kong* threatens to skew perception of Steiner's other work, it also pushes figures like Nathaniel Finston to an ahistorical periphery. As a music administrator, Finston's contributions do not fit easily into a critical framework built—however misleadingly—around individual composers furnishing complete scores. Yet despite neglect at the hands of critics and scholars, Finston and the methods he endorsed figured critically in Hollywood before and after *King Kong*. In 1933, Finston topped *Los Angeles Times* critic Edwin Schallert's list of individuals leading Hollywood's musical "renaissance"; Steiner followed second.⁵⁹ In 1935 Finston became head of MGM's music department, a prestigious post that he held for the next nine years.⁶⁰ In the early 1940s, Finston also served as chairman of the music branch of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. During Finston's time at MGM, publicists sought to depict his musical authority in accessible terms that nonetheless stopped short of composition. Images show Finston with baton in hand, iconography that acknowledged his skills as a conductor⁶¹ and also suggested that his directorial command extended well beyond any podium (see [Figures 1 and 2](#)).

Although historical distance makes it more difficult to assess Finston's influence within individual productions, glimpses of his efforts can be caught through the eyes of contemporaries. Observing Finston at Paramount, Dorothea Cartwright described his blending of compositional talents in nearly culinary terms:

⁵⁸ Ironically, the sound of Steiner's music for *Kong* lived on in the form of studio library cues that were selectively reused in various RKO films during the 1930s. See Roy Prendergast, *Film Music: A Neglected Art*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 31–32.

⁵⁹ Edwin Schallert, "Music for the Screen and Stage," in *Who's Who in Music and Dance in Southern California*, ed. Bruno David Ussher (Hollywood, CA: Bureau of Musical Research, 1933), 62.

⁶⁰ "Finston Gets Studio Post: Veteran in Charge of MGM Music," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 October 1935.

⁶¹ Finston conducted extensively during the silent era, occasionally led concerts in Los Angeles, and also conducted select film scores at MGM. Music critic Isabel Morse Jones lauded Finston's performance in 1933 with the Los Angeles Philharmonic: "Finston is not unknown to the orchestral world. Members of the Philharmonic have played with him and under his direction in many different organizations. Their response to his baton was 100 percent and with that co-operation and his considerable knowledge, experience, and serious attitude of mind, he achieved a notably fine performance." Isabel Morse Jones, "Finston Concert Success," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 April 1933. The eclectic program included Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, excerpts from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, and Finston's own "elaborate experiment in rhythm and counterpoint upon the theme of 'Turkey in the Straw.'"

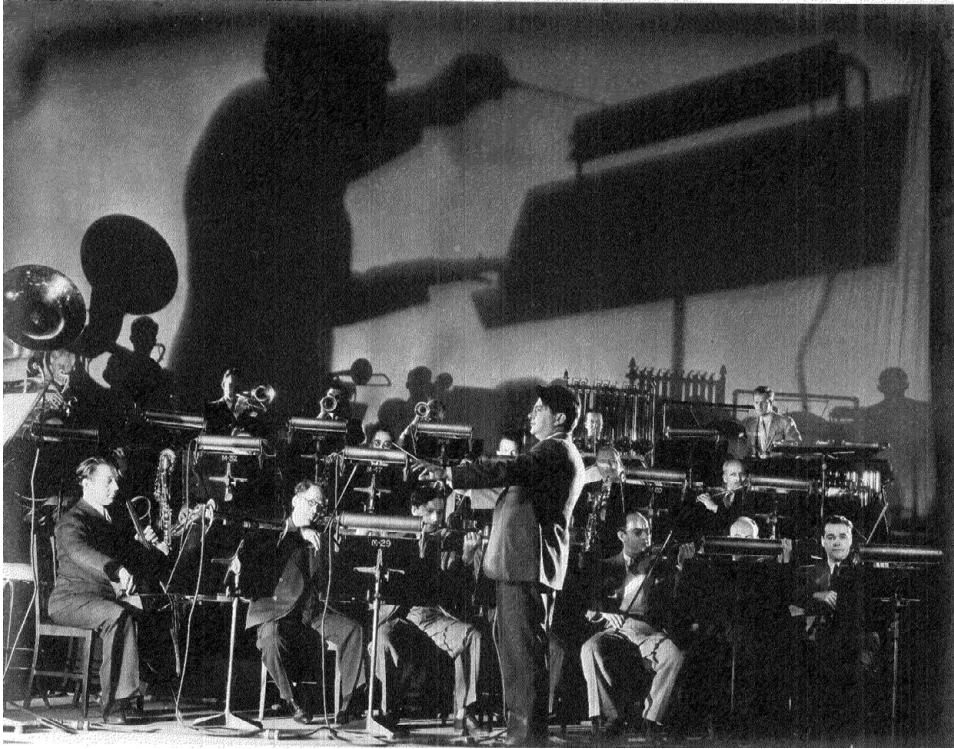


Figure 1 Nathaniel Finston poses with MGM studio musicians, ca. 1941–44. Nat Finston Collection. American Heritage Center. University of Wyoming. Laramie, Wyoming.

Finston first determines the type of music necessary, then assigns the composers and lyricists best suited to produce it. If, for example, an operatic type is desired, the assignment is turned over to W. Franke Harling. Karl Hajos . . . handles a rather serious type of composition written in the Viennese style. Sam Coslow does the modern Gershwin sort. . . . In order to get an ‘all-around result,’ Finston combines several individuals. . . . On *Monte Carlo* [1930], Harling gave an esthetic quality to the music, while [Leo] Robin and [Newell] Chase sprinkled it with spice.⁶²

A full-page, single-spaced studio document from December of 1944 also offers a fascinating window onto Finston’s accomplishments, which included recruiting almost the entire MGM music staff, from orchestral musicians to orchestrators, from conductors to composers. In addition, Finston was praised for his most recent contributions to musicals and music-laden films including *Bathing Beauty* (1944), *As Thousands Cheer* (1943), *Song of Russia* (1944), *Meet Me In St. Louis* (1944), and *Anchor Aweigh* (completed in 1944, released in 1945), “all made possible by Finston’s selection and knowledge of fine—in fact, the finest of—musical craftsman.”⁶³ The author also acknowledged Finston’s work at the podium, where he had recently

⁶² Dorothea Hawley Cartwright, “Tuning Up the Talkies: Watching The Music Departments Function,” *Talking Screen* 1/6 (1930), reprinted in *Cue Sheet* 20/3 (2005): 9.

⁶³ “Nat Finston, General Music Director,” 2 December 1944, Box 2, File 13–5, Nat Finston Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

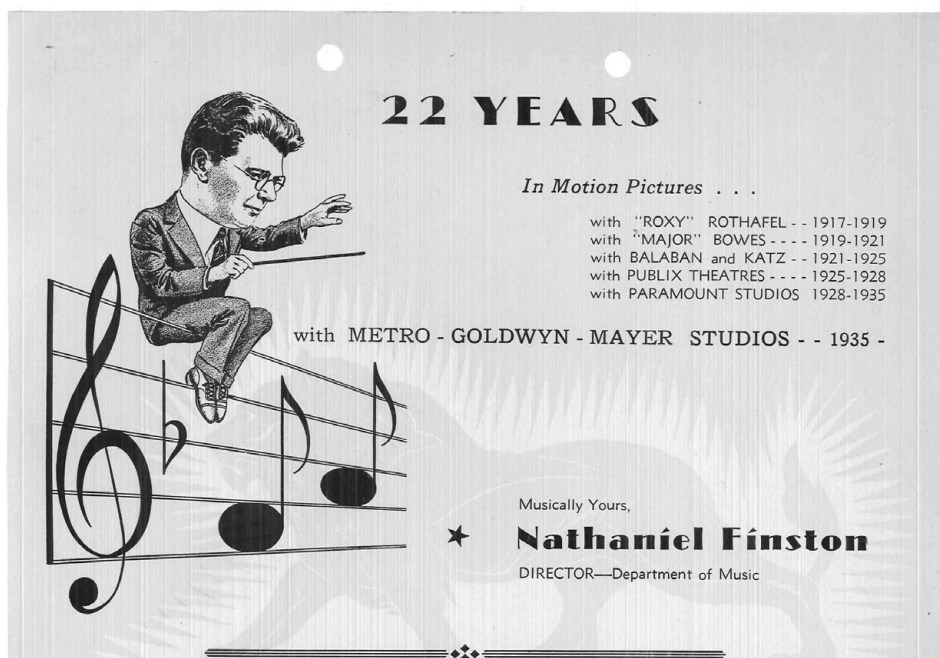


Figure 2 This advertisement appeared in various trade presses after Nathaniel Finston moved to MGM. It continued to be reprinted throughout the 1940s. Nat Finston Collection. American Heritage Center. University of Wyoming. Laramie, Wyoming.

conducted a handful of scores by Bronislau Kaper.⁶⁴ In December 1944 Finston resigned from his post at MGM, citing “disharmony in the music department.”⁶⁵ Although his old methods of managing musicians across diverse productions had ended, Finston found occasional work arranging film scores around preexistent selections. Both *Song of My Heart* (1948) and *The Second Woman* (1950) featured Finston’s own arrangements of Tchaikovsky’s music. Writing in 1948 for *Music and Dance in California and the West*, Finston looked back to his time as a music administrator. Twenty years ago it had been his “good fortune to be then an executive and the musical head of this major film company, and to convert and install the music requirements, at the transitional point, from silent to sound pictures.”⁶⁶ By the late 1940s, Finston may have already sensed that his status in the profession was fading swiftly from public consciousness. When Finston died thirty years later, the headline of his *Los Angeles Times* obituary confirmed this disconnect: “Conductor Brought Melody to Silent Films.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ “Nat Finston.” The titles, all with music by Bronislau Kaper, are *Bataan* (1943), *Gaslight* (1944), and *Mrs. Parkington* (1944).

⁶⁵ Isabel Morse Jones, “Nat Finston Quits M.G.M. Music Director Post,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 December 1944.

⁶⁶ Nathaniel Finston, “Time Tells the Tale,” *Music and Dance in California and the West*, ed. Richard Drake Saunders (Hollywood, CA: Bureau of Musical Research, 1948), 78.

⁶⁷ Ted Thackrey, “Conductor Brought Melody to Silent Films,” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 December 1979.

While Finston was still at MGM, pianist-composer-actor Oscar Levant found him poring over charts and allocating studio musical responsibilities in a “commodious office.” Levant’s memorable sketch shows Finston flourishing in a music machine of his own making:

As Commissar of Music for the MGM enterprises, Finston was as closely in touch with the activities of his vassals as the tovarisch in charge of a salt mine in the Ukraine.

He then launched into a long exposition of his career at the studio, detailing the chaos in which he found the music department and the perfection of organization that now prevailed. “I’ll tell you,” he said, “it’s running like a well-oiled machine.” The phrase appealed to him, and he repeated it, “Like a well-oiled machine. Every man a cog in the wheel.” . . . “Mr. Finston,” I answered, “My greatest desire in life at this moment is to be a cog in the wheel.”⁶⁸

Taken from the unabashedly self-indulgent *A Smattering of Ignorance*, Levant’s stories are pitched for dramatic effect, but his point is accurate. Finston’s administrative approach continued to thrive in Hollywood throughout the studio era. David Raksin and Henry Mancini, for example, developed their craft through years of anonymously writing isolated music cues and arranging library selections for productions at Universal and Warner Bros. in the 1940s and 1950s.⁶⁹

Studio music departments’ regular reliance upon teams of composers and assistants to tackle individual films is not news. In a foreword to Clifford McCarty’s 1953 *Film Composers in America*, a vast index of film composer credits, Lawrence Morton acknowledged that McCarty’s resource favored one concept of film composition at the expense of others:

The anonymous score might escape attention because it must be observed, so far as this book is concerned, *in absentia*. . . . Many of these scores, especially those of the early ’thirties, were created not by individual composers but by a music staff working under the supervision of a music director. They collaborated in a practical way by using common thematic material and employing one or another of the currently fashionable styles. . . . In many of these scores, collaboration was a very successful procedure from the standpoint of music-department operation and theatrical effectiveness, whatever the strictly musical results may have been. Screen credit, if it was given at all, usually went to the music director, though there were exceptions, as in *Stagecoach* and *Union Pacific*, where plural authorship was acknowledged on the screen.⁷⁰

Sixty years after Morton’s observation, these collaborative methods remain understudied in part because the rise of Steiner’s *Kong* and the forgetting of Finston are interrelated phenomena, reflections of value placed on credited composers that is

⁶⁸ Oscar Levant, *A Smattering of Ignorance* (New York: Doubleday, 1939, 1940), 110–11. This memorable anecdote is also featured in the introduction to Wierzbicki, *Film Music*, ix.

⁶⁹ Jon Caps, *Henry Mancini: Reinventing Film Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 22–29. Elmer Bernstein, “A Conversation with David Raksin (Part II),” *Elmer Bernstein’s Film Music Notebook: A Complete Collection of the Quarterly Journal, 1974–1978* (Sherman Oaks, CA: Film Music Society, 2004), 264.

⁷⁰ Morton goes on to claim that the practice is less “normal” in 1953, although “it may be revived from time to time . . . [and] still persists in a somewhat modernized version . . . in the scoring of low-budget films produced by the major studios” (Foreword, xii). In other words, the practice was far from defunct.

often withheld from others, whether administrators like Finston or orchestrators like Bernhard Kaun, who assisted Steiner at RKO. It is not the point of this study to argue equivalency across Steiner's and Finston's skills and work. Rather, examining Steiner's pre-*Kong* work alongside Finston reveals a widening rift in practice and discourse that had consequences on how film music was (and largely is) critiqued. Finston's memorable lampooning of concert music ideals during Hollywood's early sound years offers a helpful jolt today: rather than disavowing Hollywood's semi-industrial models and the perpetuation of silent-era methods, Finston touted them. Critics may object on aesthetic grounds to these methods, but as even Morton himself conceded, these preferences should not obscure historic practices.⁷¹

The example of *Stagecoach* (1939), a film that followed Finston's methods and provoked Steiner's ire, offers a case in point. For this production Walter Wanger hired Boris Morros, Finston's successor at Paramount, to direct the film's score. By Kathryn Kalinak's count, a seven-member team incorporated fifteen traditional and popular melodies into the underscore, an approach that echoed the tactics used by Finston's team on *Fighting Caravans* (John Leipold even contributed music to both films).⁷² Whereas *Fighting Caravan's* music went largely unnoticed by critics, *Stagecoach's* music received an Academy Award, an unusual recognition for a team effort⁷³ that annoyed Max Steiner. "They had nine composers [*sic*] on that," Steiner griped in an interview, "They did all the western tunes. No one will ever

⁷¹ Composer George Antheil was especially dismissive of what he termed Hollywood's "group formula for making music." His description of the division of musical labor closely resembles Finston's, albeit with more sarcasm: "Every studio keeps a staff of seventeen to thirty composers on annual salary. They know nothing about the film till the final cutting day, when it is played over for some or all of them, replayed and stopwatched. Then the work is divided; one man writes war music, a second does the love passages, another is a specialist in nature stuff, and so on. After several days, when they have finished their fractions of music, these are pieced together, played into 'soundtrack,' stamped with the name of a musical director, and put on the market as an 'original score.' This usually inept product is exactly the kind of broth to expect from so many minds working at high speed on a single piece." George Antheil, "On the Hollywood Front," *Modern Music* 12/2 (1935): 63. A more sympathetic and detailed insider's account is offered by David Raksin, who participated in the "movie-score-by-relay" system at 20th Century-Fox, Warner Bros., and Universal in the 1930s and 1940s: "With several composers working on one film score, it would seem inevitable that disparity of styles would be a problem. True; yet it is surprising to recall how well, despite unfavorable odds, we managed to accommodate to one another. With little or no time consult among ourselves, we sought to minimize differences. . . . And one reason why we put in the incredible hours we did was to make sure that we were not compelled by the pressure of time to produce shoddy work." David Raksin, "Holding a Nineteenth Century Pedal at Twentieth Century-Fox," *Film Music* 1, Clifford McCarty, ed. (Los Angeles: Film Music Society, 1989), 174–75.

⁷² Kathryn Kalinak, *How the West Was Sung: Music in the Westerns of John Ford* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 57. Kalinak devotes an entire chapter to the musical materials featured in *Stagecoach* and director Ford's input to the music staff.

⁷³ As Kalinak notes, collaborative scoring techniques "were not exceptional in 1939, but what was unusual about *Stagecoach* is the extent to which that collaboration was openly acknowledged. . . . Morros gets a credit for musical direction . . . and five composers share screen credit." Kalinak, 56. Richard Hageman, W. Franke Harling, John Leipold, Leo Shuken, and Louis Gruenberg received screen credit. Gerard Carbonara, and Stephan Pasternacki, who also contributed music to the film, do not. What also is unusual about *Stagecoach* is that a collaborative score from the studio era has received an entire chapter treatment from Kalinak; it remains exceptional.

understand what happened [with the Academy Award] there.”⁷⁴ Steiner resented *Stagecoach* in large part because his music for *Gone With the Wind* (1939) did not win similar recognition the night of the ceremony.⁷⁵ But Steiner’s objections left unmentioned that substantial swaths of *Gone With the Wind*’s score had been composed and arranged by assistants who, along with Steiner, had interwoven period appropriate melodies.⁷⁶ Unlike *Stagecoach*, the “plural authorship” was not recognized on screen; only Steiner and music director Lou Forbes receive screen credit.

Examining the role of music administrators like Finston and the collaborative model he employed illuminates the prevalent contradiction embedded in Steiner’s dismissal of *Stagecoach*’s music. More importantly, it enriches our understanding of film scoring in early 1930s Hollywood and reveals the formation of certain critical prejudices that persist today. Although orchestrators and other collaborators frequently receive screen credit in current films, the habit of attributing a film score’s creative content to a single composer remains strong. Music supervisors charged with selecting preexistent music for a film also receive less credit for their efforts than composers. As noted in a 2013 *New York Times* article, music supervisors “don’t exactly *create* anything,” and acknowledgement of their contributions remains contested among industry powerbrokers, including the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.⁷⁷ Increased critical scrutiny of figures like Finston—past and present—and the collaborative scoring methods practiced at Paramount and other Hollywood studios may help realign this historically skewed emphasis on lone composers and increase awareness of film music’s profound yet complicated relationship to collaborative creativity.

In the end, the methods Finston advocated also prompt a reevaluation of the principles that quietly uphold *Kong*’s subsequent sway over film music historiography. Steiner’s *Kong* is an important, distinctive effort, but sustaining its prominence in historical narratives threatens to overshadow the more diverse and collaborative situations in which Hollywood underscore was typically assembled, with

⁷⁴ Steiner, as quoted by Myrl Schreibman in “On *Gone With the Wind*, Selznick, and the Art of ‘Mickey Mousing’: An Interview with Max Steiner,” *Journal of Film and Video* 56/1 (2004): 45.

⁷⁵ The score for *Gone With the Wind*, however, did not lose to *Stagecoach*, as they were in different categories: “Scoring” and “Original Score,” respectively. *Gone With the Wind*’s score lost to *Wizard of Oz*, yet another collaborative scoring effort directed by Herbert Stothart.

⁷⁶ Lou Forbes served as music director and received screen credit for his work on the film. Hugo Friedhofer, Adolph Deutsch, Heinz Roemheld, and Joseph Nussbaum assisted as composers, arrangers, and orchestrators, contributing about forty minutes of music to the film. Orchestrators for *Gone with the Wind* included Reginald Bassett, George Bassman, Bernard Kaun, Arthur Kay, Leo Arnaud, Albert Hay Malotte, Maurice De Packh, Darol A. Rice, Cecil Copping, and Dudley B. Chambers, who handled vocal arranging. For more on this collaboration, see Platte, “Musical Collaboration in the Films of David O. Selznick,” 124–35. Bruno Ussher, the very same critic who had celebrated Steiner’s accomplishments in *Kong*, published an article at the time of the film’s release that praised Steiner’s interweaving of original and preexistent melodies but made no mention of the considerable help Steiner had received. Ussher, “Max Steiner Establishes Another Film Music Record” (1940 pamphlet), reprinted in *Gone with the Wind as Book and Film*, ed. Richard Harwell (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1983), 161–69.

⁷⁷ Steve Chagollan, “Add a Song, Make a Movie: Music Supervisors in Film Seek More Recognition,” *New York Times*, 27 February 2013.

individual circumstances changing across productions and studios. Placed within this historical context, *Kong's* music did not just draw upon earlier models; it pointedly eschewed others, including the preexistent music of *Symphony of Six Million* and the collaboratively constructed, loosely-synchronized accompaniment in *Fighting Caravans*. Once *Kong's* relationship to these productions and its *ex post facto* elevation to Hollywood masterpiece is better understood, *King Kong* appears less like a new standard to which subsequent films hewed and more a remarkable oddity. In the spirit of its gigantic namesake, Steiner's music remains impressive but infrequently imitated.

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