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THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY

Endless hours, day after day ... never before had he worked so hard on a score, and under so much pressure. Max Steiner still felt exhausted from the ordeal, when late on the 9th of September, finally the phone rang. As expected, it was Selznick. Before Max could say a word, Selznick shouted breathlessly: "Max, we've made it. They absolutely loved it! They cheered just when they saw what was coming, and after the whole bloody four hours of it, they were on their feet!"

"How did the music work out?" asked Max.

"Couldn't be better, old man, couldn't be better. But we knew this all along, didn't we? After all, I knew what I'd get when I brought you in on it ..."

That was true, Max thought. Ever since he had first worked with Selznick, seven years ago, on *Symphony of Six Million*, he had proven again and again that his musical ideas, his scores could make a big difference. That film had been a wonderful success, for Selznick, for himself, for everyone else involved in making it.

Hard to imagine now how dismissive producers had been right up to that point of film music. Today, everyone knew that

the music could make or break a film, could elevate the acting to a degree of realism previously thought impossible or expose it as shallow pretense, could draw in an audience or utterly shatter the illusion. In the end, it was all composition ... carefully assembling the dialogue, the images, the music, to create a story, a credible illusion on the screen that could transport an audience to another world or time. *Gone with the Wind*, exhausting as the work on it had been, certainly appeared to be poised to succeed in that respect.



When Margaret Mitchell's novel appeared, in June 1936, her publisher fully expected it to become a best seller. In fact, he had rarely seen a more promising manuscript, and that was before the rather substantial changes Mitchell had made subsequently, especially to the opening chapter. What neither he nor anyone else could predict was that one year later, Mitchell would receive the Pulitzer Prize for *Gone with the Wind*, and that subsequently, her novel would become one of the most widely read books in American history.

Mitchell, who since her college days had gone by the name of Peggy, began writing her novel in 1926, when she was stuck at home with an ankle injury caused by a car crash. For several years prior to the accident, Peggy had written feature articles, news stories and book reviews for the *Atlanta Journal*. In fact, she had started writing stories as a child – stories carefully collected and stored by her mother, a leader in the movement for women's voting rights in her home state of Georgia.

The novel built on Mitchell's childhood experiences in the American South, on the stories she had heard and read about

the Civil War, and on the tragic loss of the love of her life, a lieutenant who was killed in the Great War when she was seventeen. *Gone with the Wind* was set against a backdrop of life in the South, including much of the culture experienced by Frederick Delius when he lived in rural Florida in the 1880s, and by W. C. Handy, when he collected songs in the cotton and sugarcane plantations around the turn of the century.

The film rights to *Gone with the Wind* were offered to several Hollywood studios before the book was published. Interest was limited, but urged by his business partner and story editor, David O. Selznick finally acquired the rights, for 50 000 dollars, shortly after the book appeared. Production of the film did not start for another two years, as Selznick worked on casting the two lead roles of Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler. To find an actress to portrait Scarlet, a nation-wide casting call had been issued, and 1400 candidates interviewed, of which 31 were ultimately selected for screen-testing. In the end, two choices remained: Paulette Goddard, who had worked with, and at the time was married to Charlie Chaplin, and Vivian Leigh, a relatively unknown English actress.

In the end, Vivian Leigh landed the role and starred together with Clark Gable; once completed, *Gone with the Wind* would define both their careers, with Leigh receiving an Academy



Poster for the 1939 film
Gone with the Wind

Award for her performance and Gable being nominated for one. Overall, the film won an unprecedented eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director and Best Screenplay, as well as five additional nominations, one of which was for Max Steiner's soundtrack. *Gone with the Wind* was an instant success with audiences throughout the United States and would become the highest earning film in history.



Max Steiner was born into a prominent and wealthy Viennese family. In 1895, his father had opened *Venice in Vienna*, an amusement park that artfully recreated the ambience of Venice, with canals, gondolas, shops, restaurants and several theatres; shortly after, he instigated the construction of the *Riesenrad*, the large ferris wheel that would quickly become one of the most distinctive landmarks of Vienna.

The Steiner family was very well connected in Vienna's musical circles and beyond; thus, when Max was baptised, Richard Strauss, whose star had just begun to rise, became his godfather. Max's musical talent was recognised and nurtured early; at the age of six, he received regular piano lessons and soon began to improvise. His father encouraged Max in his musical pursuits and, at the age of twelve, gave him the opportunity to conduct an orchestra in one of his theatres. Four years later, he enrolled in the Vienna Conservatory, where he received formal instruction in composition and continued studying the the piano, along with the organ, trumpet and trombone. Within two years, Max wrapped up his studies with a stunning success, winning the Emperor's Medal – a coveted distinction for the very best students of the Conservatory. Soon

after, in 1907, Max Steiner completed his first operetta, *Die schöne Griechin* (*The Beautiful Greek Girl*), which was subsequently performed for several months at *Danzers Orpheum*, a well-known Viennese theatre formerly owned by his father.

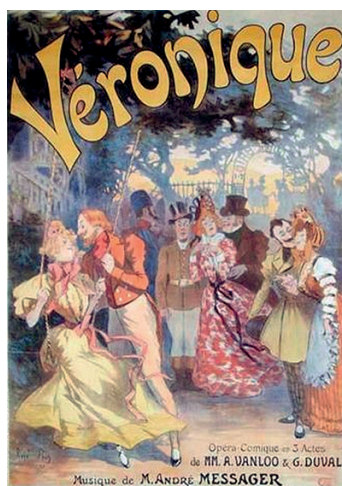


While Max stood on the threshold of his first success as a composer, his father, overwhelmed by debts amassed from building and ambitiously operating *Venice in Vienna* and several other ventures, had been forced to declare bankruptcy. This resulted in considerable hardship for the family. Max, whose life had been more than comfortable up to that point, did what he could to help manage the situation, which meant letting go of some of his prized possessions. When in 1909, at the age of twenty, he was offered an opportunity to move to England to conduct a performance of Franz Lehár's operetta *Die lustige Witwe* (*The Merry Widow*), Max didn't hesitate. A fresh start in a new city was exactly what he was looking for.

However, despite his talent and the plentiful musical activity in London, finding further work as a conductor, orchestrator or performer proved difficult. His fortunes turned when he serendipitously ran into an old friend of his father's, who introduced him to an assistant of George Dance, one of Britain's most successful theatre managers. Dance had made a fortune with *Chinese Honeymoon*, a musical he had written together with Howard Talbot that had been performed over 1000 times between 1901 and 1904. He immediately recognised Steiner's abilities and soon made him musical director of one of his major projects, the re-launch of André Messager's operetta *Véronique*.

In the years that followed, Max Steiner became well established in London. For a while, he worked as musical director of the theatres owned by the famous impresario Edward Moss, and in 1913, he was hired at the London Opera House – a role in which he became acquainted with Hugh Grosvenor, the second Duke of Westminster.

One year later, war broke out in Europe, and soon, German and Austrian citizens were banned from most jobs. Fearing arrest and internment, Max Steiner, who had never become a British citizen, was looking for a way to leave the country for America. In late 1914, with some help from the Duke of Westminster, he finally obtained the required exit papers, but not before all his property had been seized.



Poster for André
Messager's operetta
Véronique (1898)



For the next fifteen years, Max Steiner lived in New York and worked as music director, orchestrator, arranger and conductor for a variety of Broadway productions. Among others, he worked with George Gershwin and Paul Whiteman on the 1922 edition of *George White's Scandals*, for which he had been given the role of music director; working with Gershwin, Steiner acquired hands-on experience with jazz that would significantly influence his later work. During his time in

New York, Steiner composed relatively few pieces. *Peaches*, a musical he had written in 1923, failed to draw major audiences during a short run in Philadelphia and Baltimore, never making it to Broadway.

In 1929, William LeBaron, head of production at the newly formed RKO film production and distribution company, went to the Imperial Theatre in midtown Manhattan to see Max Steiner conduct. LeBaron had an important decision to make; his company was about to begin making Harry Tierney's musical *Rio Rita* into a film, and Tierney had insisted they hire the man who had orchestrated and conducted the highly successful Broadway version of the show. "Steiner is the man we need," he had said, "he's the one who made my songs dazzle and shine." Seeing Steiner conduct his 35 musicians, many of whom played multiple instruments, was all it took to convince LeBaron. Max Steiner didn't hesitate to take the offer and move to Hollywood – a move that would make his career.



Under its Radio Pictures label, RKO initially focused on producing film versions of Broadway musicals. *Rio Rita*, for which Max Steiner had been brought on board, had been a big success on Broadway; released in September 1929, the lavishly produced movie turned out to be a major success at the box office. Apart from musicals, RKO and other Hollywood studios took a conservative approach, which limited the use of music in film mostly to the openings and closings, as well as to scenes where musicians could be seen on screen. There was a concern that music whose source could not be seen would confuse the audience and distract from the action.



During the final years of the war, as nearby cities were being bombed, the Heckel family had gradually filled their spacious house with friends and relatives who had lost their homes. Wilhelm Hermann Heckel and Elsa Groffy had kept the business going, although most of the instrument makers had been drafted into the military, and materials, especially metals, had become nearly impossible to procure. Three incendiary bombs detonated in their garden, but didn't leave any damage other than craters and broken windows. The house and the workshop, much of whose contents had been evacuated into the Taunus hills north of Wiesbaden, had been spared.

In early June 1945, a US officer called on Wilhelm Hermann Heckel in Biebrich. Colonel Douglas Waples, former professor for educational method at the University of Chicago and an avid amateur bassoonist, told an astonished Heckel how happy he was to see that the house and workshop had escaped major damage from the bombings. Waples, now working for the US military administration, had come to offer his help in sourcing supplies and materials desperately needed to resume the production of instruments. Heckel gratefully accepted and presented Waples with an assortment of instruments, including a heckelphone that had been kept for many years in the so-called pattern vault as a sample specimen – an instrument without a serial number.

Slowly, many of the old employees who had also survived the war found their way back, and late in the year, Franz Groffy finally returned; serving with the airforce, he had been captured and imprisoned for several months. While he waited to be cleared by the occupation authorities to resume his work,

he spent much of his time painting. In 1946, after years of much reduced activity, the Heckel workshop once more turned out a steady stream of fine instruments.



Richard Strauss, now over 80 years old, had spent most of the war in Garmisch. From 1942 onwards, he had experienced an unexpected increase in his creative forces, leading to the composition of a wonderful horn concerto, which had been premièred in 1943 in Salzburg, his *Metamorphosen* for 23 solo strings, completed just before the end of the war, and an oboe concerto, written in late 1945, inspired by conversations with John de Lancie, a corporal in the US Army stationed near Garmisch, who in his civilian life had been principal oboist of the Pittsburgh Orchestra.

After the war, Strauss had fallen on hard times. Most of his assets had been seized or frozen, so that he had to start relying on the generosity of some of his friends and admirers. Moreover, his health was failing. Nonetheless, he was composing, travelling and conducting. In September 1947, during a rehearsal in London, he remarked with characteristic self-deprecation: *"I may not be a first-rate composer, but I am a first-class second-rate composer."*

In early 1948, Strauss was depressed, and his son Franz worried, advising: *"Papa, stop writing letters and brooding, it does no good. Write a few nice songs instead."* Several months later, near the end of a visit of Franz's wife Alice, Strauss pulled from a drawer a wad of paper. *"Here are the songs your husband ordered."* Dealing with the subject of dying and based on poems by Herman Hesse and Joseph von Eichendorff, two of



Death mask of Richard Strauss (1949)

Germany's foremost poets, these four songs for soprano and orchestra would turn out to be Strauss's last major composition. One year later, on his death bed, Strauss said to his daughter-in-law, still with a twinkle in his eye: "*you know, dying is just as I composed it in Tod und Verklärung*" – the tone poem he had written sixty years earlier, at the beginning of his career as a composer.



While up to 1945, the Heckel company had completed and sold 105 heckelphones, only four of these had been made after 1933, and only one after 1939 – during the war, it had been hard to make musical instruments, and demand was low. All this changed as cultural life in Germany and other countries majorly affected by war-time losses and destruction started anew. Soon, Heckel was busy again making outstanding bassoons, contrabassoons and other instruments, and within the first decade after the war, thirteen heckelphones were made, with even more orders coming in.

NOTES

► **Gone with the Wind.** The scene at the beginning of the chapter is freely imagined, but closely follows known facts, as does the remainder of the story related to the making of the film presented earlier. On 9 September 1939, a rough cut of *Gone with the Wind* was screened in Riverside, California, as a complete surprise to an audience that had no idea what was in store for them after the first film of that night's double bill. Even in this unfinished form, *Gone with the Wind* was an instant success, as witnessed by the response from the audience the moment the title was shown and a standing ovation following the close to four-and-a-half-hour-long screening.

As mentioned earlier, Max Steiner wrote the ninety-nine pieces of music that comprise the score for *Gone with the Wind* under tremendous time pressure. Of the five orchestrators he worked with, three also provided him with some assistance in composition, and a small amount of material was taken from scores in the vast music library of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, one of the largest Hollywood studios. The heckelphone part in Steiner's score was played on the instrument with serial number 33, which had originally belonged to Robert Sauer (*cf.* Chapter 2) and later found its way to Hollywood.

Margaret Mitchell's award-winning novel, on which the film is based, remained her only major literary work to be published; a novella written around the same time as *Gone with the Wind* was rejected by its prospective publisher, and some of Mitchell's earlier manuscripts were lost or intentionally destroyed. In 1949, aged 48, Margaret Mitchell was gravely injured in an accident caused by a drunk driver and died several days later. The book that made her famous sold over 30 million copies world-wide, while its movie adaptation has earned more than 100 times the budget expended in

making it and is still the highest-grossing film in history (after adjusting for inflation).

In recent years, the book and the film have been subject to some controversy, in light of their portrayal of forced sex, racial stereotypes and slavery.

► **Max Steiner.** Much of the life of the celebrated film composer is the stuff of legend, and it is well known that Max Steiner's own account of certain details contains inaccuracies and embellishments. Our portrayal of Steiner closely follows the literature (notably, the books by Wegele and Smith) and attempts to stay as close as reasonably possible to known facts.

While Max Steiner knew Richard Strauss from an early age, there is some doubt regarding the veracity of the widespread claim that Richard Strauss was Max Steiner's godfather. When Steiner was born, in 1888, Strauss was 23 years old; he had written well over 100 pieces of music, including his first tone poem, *Aus Italien (From Italy)*, but had not yet risen to fame. Whatever the formal relationship between the two, Steiner is known to have been invited to the première of *Salome* in 1905 and heard a heckelphone there.

Whether Steiner, as he later stated, received piano lessons from Johannes Brahms or whether he studied with Gustav Mahler is also somewhat doubtful; however, he was exposed to the music of both, and almost certainly had personal contact with Mahler at a young age (see also Smith's book). Inaccurate information can also be readily found regarding Steiner's operetta, *Die schöne Griechin*, which some sources claim was first performed in 1903 and running for close to a year, but in reality had its première at *Danzers Orpheum* in late December 1907, after ownership of the theatre had passed from Steiner's father to one of his former employees, and remained on the programme through January 1908. Contradictory information also exists regarding the age at which Max Steiner left for Britain; here, as in other details, our account follows that of Smith.

In April 1912, Steiner returned to Vienna to help his father address his financial difficulties. Later that year, as he was unable to repay some debt, he was briefly incarcerated. After his release from prison, he found a position at the London Opera House and left Vienna for good. As described in the chapter, one year later, in 1914, Max Steiner left Europe for the United States, where he first achieved some success on Broadway, and later found fame and fortune in Hollywood.

By the time he died, aged 83, in 1971, Steiner had composed over 300 movie scores. His influence on film music can barely be overstated. In addition to the movies mentioned earlier, *Casablanca*, released in 1942 and considered by some the greatest Hollywood movie of all times, has a score written by Steiner; however, he did not compose *As Time Goes By*, which plays a key role in the film and the score, and various other songs featured in *Casablanca*. Max Steiner used the heckelphone once more in the score for the 1948 movie *The Woman in White*.

► **David O. Selznick.** Born in 1902 into a Jewish family of Lithuanian origins, David Selznick (who had added a freely invented middle initial to his name to make it more distinctive) was originally planning to join his father's production and distribution company for silent movies. In 1926, after that business had to declare bankruptcy, Selznick moved to Hollywood, where he first worked for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), then for Paramount, and, starting in 1931, for RKO, after he had married the daughter of MGM's co-founder, Louis B. Mayer.

As head of production at RKO, Selznick instituted the unit production system, which gave the producers of individual movies much more freedom than the centralised "factory system" used throughout the industry at the time. He was also enormously successful in discovering and signing on talented producers, directors and actors, including Katharine Hepburn and Fred Astaire.

While *Gone with the Wind* would remain Selznick's greatest success – and one that he would later come to believe had set an impossibly high bar for the remainder of his career – he made other very substantial achievements. In particular, he launched Alfred Hitchcock's career by bringing him to Hollywood from his native England and producing his first film there; *Rebecca*, released in 1940, became and would remain Hitchcock's only film to win an Academy Award for best picture.

David Selznick sparked significant controversy over the way in which he treated some of the movie stars he had under contract. He died in 1965, aged 63, after many years of amphetamine abuse. Selznick had produced 68 feature films, of which 21 ended up winning Academy Awards, including 2 for best picture; he was also recognised by the Academy with the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award for his outstanding work as a producer.

► **The origins of film.** Long before the first projected films there were several types of mechanisms for creating the illusion of movement from a series of static images. Since the advent of photography in the late 1830s, around the time when Johann Adam Heckel became the sole proprietor of his business, there had been ongoing attempts to capture motion on film. At first, the goal had been to study motion – as was the case in Eadweard Muybridge's work in the 1870s. Born as Edward James Muggeridge in England, Muybridge emigrated to the USA in 1850, aged 20, and changed his name soon after. His life was decidedly colourful, and he is justly remembered for his inventive and detailed studies of animal and human motion, as well as for his photographic documentation of the American West.

Next came the realisation that moving pictures could have enormous entertainment and thus commercial value. This, along with exposure to Muybridge's work, motivated Thomas Edison to conceptualise the Kinetoscope and his employees to realise the device in the early 1890s. Interestingly, Edison's initial idea was to combine the playback of recorded sound, via the phonograph, with motion

pictures, notably to enable to reproduction of operas. Shortly after it was first presented in 1893, the Kinetoscope became widely popular as well as commercially successful, not only in the United States, but also internationally.

It didn't take long, however, for the Kinetoscope to be superseded by projection systems that permitted the theatrical screening of films for large audiences. As described earlier in this chapter, the Skladanowsky brothers first demonstrated such a system in a commercial setting; however, it was the rapid and broad adoption of Auguste and Louis Lumière's *Cinématographe* that, first demonstrated in 1895 and strongly inspired by Edison's Kinetoscope, ushered in the global age of film.

► **Georges Méliès.** Upon attending an early private demonstration of the Lumière brothers' *Cinématographe*, Georges Méliès – owner of a successful Parisian theatre specialising in stage illusions – immediately saw the potential of the new medium. Not long after the Lumières, anxious to keep control of their invention, refused his offer to purchase one of their devices, Méliès used his contacts in London to acquire a projector developed by an English rival, along with several short films, and began operating it in his theatre. After careful study of the device and its operating principles, Méliès managed to modify it to work as a film camera. This marked the beginning of his passionate and ingenious dedication to the production of moving pictures.

As mentioned earlier, Georges Méliès first made films aimed at taking stage magic to a new level. For this, he pioneered many special effects, including dissolves, time-lapsed photography and multiple exposures, and used those to create movies showing new and spectacular illusions. Soon, however, Méliès began to produce large numbers of films of all genres, from comedies to dramas, from documentaries to advertisements, in many cases using storyboards to develop increasingly elaborate narratives. However, Méliès did not merely produce movies, he also directed them, designed and