CHAPTER 5

Musical Styles 1950 to 1975

Putting music in a film is not an arbitrary thing.
There's a form and a shape, an overall
pattern of where you put music in.
—Jerry Goldsmith[1]

In any discussion of artistic and historical styles and eras, it seems to be human nature to want to delineate and mark a specific date, year, or piece that ushers in the new era. But it is never really so cut and dry. Monteverdi did not wake up on the morning of January 1, 1600 and proclaim, "Ah-ha, let us begin the Baroque period of music!" Beethoven knew he was breaking away from the old classical style of Mozart and Haydn, but he was not consciously creating a new musical period called "Romanticism." Most new trends are the result of evolution, drawing upon the old and breaking ground for the new. Film scoring styles are no different. The Romantic style of Steiner, et al, remained prominent for about twenty years, from 1930 to 1950. But there were signs of experimentation, and certain scores written during that time seem to point to the future use of more dissonance, atonality, and eventually popular, jazz, and rock vocabulary in scores.

Remember that by the late 1930s the art of synchronizing music with film was quite new—only ten years old. Although composers, directors and producers were still heavily reliant on conventions that were tried and proven, there was always the occasional innovation that stood aside from the crowd. In 1941, in the midst of the Romantic style of Korngold and Steiner, a film was released that was to break the mold of the time, both visually and aurally. This was *Citizen Kane*, a film by Orson Welles with a score by Bernard Herrmann. Many of the more modern compositional techniques used by Herrmann in this film were not in common use until the 1950s—he was about ten years ahead of the pack. What *Citizen Kane* pointed to was the eventual use of con-

temporary sounds and textures influenced by Bartók, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and other 20th century composers. In addition, it presaged the rise of American-born composers in the film industry.

By the early 1950s, there were many conservatory-trained American musicians working for the studios as composers, orchestrators, pianists, songwriters, and arrangers. This included Bernard Herrmann, David Raksin, Alex North, George Antheil, Leonard Rosenman, Elmer Bernstein, André Previn, and Jerry Goldsmith. With a firm grounding in traditional harmony, theory, and counterpoint these men had not only studied the new music of Bartók, Schoenberg and Stravinsky—many of them also had a thorough knowledge of jazz styles.

Although Steiner, Korngold, Waxman, and others of the previous generation were often "genius" composers, they remained, for better or worse, heavily rooted in 19th century music and somewhat uninterested or even opposed to newer musical styles. When asked to comment about contemporary music, Max Steiner said: "I have no criticism. I can't criticize what I don't understand."[2] This comment really points up the difference between the old and new generations of film composers.

One composer working occasionally in films who was a great influence—not only on film music, but on all of classical composition—was Aaron Copland. By the time he scored his first film, *The Heiress*, in 1949, he was a world-renowned composer of ballet, symphonic, and chamber music. He only scored a few other films after that, including *The Red Pony* and *Of Mice and of Men*, but Copland left a large musical impression on all who followed. In fact, it was his ability to convey drama in the music to the ballets *Rodeo* and *Appalachian Spring* that brought him to the attention of Hollywood producers. He brought a new and fresh sensibility in his use of instrumentation and harmony. The instrumental textures in Copland's film scores are softer than the big Romantic scores of the time. He used smaller ensembles and avoided the big, overblown orchestral tuttis found in many films. His use of pandiatonic harmonies, polytonality, and controlled dissonance was imitated by many composers.

Aside from musical development and evolution in films, there were several other factors both in the kinds of films released and in American culture itself that must be taken into account when considering the sound of movie music in the 1950s. Perhaps the most important of these is the arrival of the invention of television. There was also the popularity of "rebel" films—films dealing with youth, rebellion and the darker issues of life including alcoholism and drug addiction. The McCarthy committee of the United States Congress, which instigated and led a witch hunt for Communists in many industries, but especially the entertainment industry, had an impact not only on who worked and who didn't, but also on the content of the films themselves. The rise of jazz—big-band swing and bebop—created a new musical culture, especially amongst the nation's youth. Add to all of these events and trends the birth of rock-and-roll music in the mid-fifties, and the need for new styles in film scoring can be clearly seen.

The Arrival of Television

Beginning in the late 1940s television was readily available to the general public. As the cost of TV sets became more accessible, and as more programming was aired by the networks, more and more people made TV a regular part of their lives. At first, the Hollywood studios looked down on this technology as someone might look askance at an unwanted relative who shows up uninvited for dinner. They refused to release their catalogue of movies to television stations, and did not produce shows for TV. In many cases, the studios hoped and believed television was going to be a passing fad. As we know today, they were quickly proven wrong.

In retrospect, it is not so difficult to see why many Hollywood people had a hard time accepting television. This new form of entertainment arrived only twenty years after the arrival of talkies. The studio system was powerful, smoothly oiled, and very profitable, and many people were very comfortable with it. The "Golden Age" of films was generating millions and millions of dollars in profits from the millions of people that attended movies on a regular basis.

In 1946, an estimated revenue of 1.7 billion dollars was generated by theatrical movies. By 1962, this figure was down to 900 million dollars, just over half the 1946 amount. This was the effect that TV had on the movie business. It threw studios, executives, actors, and all the creative people into turmoil as a new playing field and a new ball game were created.

The period from 1955 to 1970 also saw the demise of the old studio system. Two factors were most important in contributing to this: the advent of television, and a court decision citing antitrust laws that required the studios to break up their chains of self-owned theaters. This was a true "double-whammy." First of all, the popularity of TV meant that many people stayed home and stopped attending movies in the theaters, causing a severe drop in revenues. Secondly, with the loss of the studio-owned theater chains, they lost the automatic distribution of a studio-produced film. Previously, a studio could make a film, and no matter how good or bad it was, release it to as many theaters as they wanted, for as long as they wanted to keep it in circulation. Under the new system, if a film was not accepted publicly, the independent theater owner could withdraw it. In addition, because the audience now had the option of staying home and watching TV, if the film wasn't of fairly high quality, or if it didn't strike a chord in the populace, it would fail in the theaters.

With a real pinch in the flow of cash, the studios could not afford to keep thousands of people under contract. So they had to let go of many employees: actors, directors, musicians, and even producers. In the space of a few short years, the dynamic of producing a film completely changed. Producers became independent, using studios to provide financing, a place to shoot, and a distribution network. No longer could the studio control everything from start to finish, though they could approve or disapprove the final product. But the process itself became removed from studio control. Those involved in the production could move from studio to studio as the projects required. This became the norm for all involved in film production, including the composers.

After a few years of refusing to show films originally released in the theaters on television, the studios finally relented in an attempt to gain at least some profit from the new technology. This gave rise to the TV shows that featured movies from the studio's catalogue, albeit frequently edited for length and content, and often interrupted for commercials. This marked the defeat of the anti-TV forces in Hollywood, and was the first step toward fully mobilizing the extensive studio machinery to include the production of television shows. It was only a short time before the studios were actively involved in producing sit-coms, dramas, and TV movies.

The New Music and the Composers Writing It

There were many composers and many films that are excellent examples of the different kinds of scores written in the 1950s and 1960s. Several are worth mentioning because they broke new ground, or in some other way stand out from the rest.

One of the young composers making a mark on Hollywood was Alex North. Brought from New York to Hollywood by director Elia Kazan, his score to *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) was a landmark musical event. For the first time, a raw, edgy, and modern sounding score with many jazz elements was accompanying a popular film. It was not only the use of jazz but also the use of dissonance (influenced by modern classical composers) that gave this score a unique flavor. This opened the floodgates for other composers to incorporate jazz into their scores and a whole new musical style began.

In 1953, Kazan again gave an opportunity to a young composer. Juilliard-trained composer Leonard Rosenman wrote a score to *East of Eden*, starring James Dean. Another dissonant, edgy score accompanying a successful film with a popular star did much for establishing that dissonance as an acceptable sound both in the ears of the audience and the minds and pocketbooks of the producers.

In addition to the darker kinds of films that were being produced, there was also a great deal of activity in producing big epics, often based on biblical stories. These films, like *Ben-Hur, The Ten Commandments, Quo Vadis, El Cid*, and many others, required a more conservative score harkening back to the Romantic approach.

Some composers, such as Elmer Bernstein, had the facility to write a contemporary, edgy score like *The Man with the Golden Arm* and then switch gears and write a Romantic score to an epic or adventure film. Here is Elmer Bernstein speaking about creating the score to *The Ten Commandments* (1955) according to the musical tastes of director Cecil B. DeMille:

> *DeMille was a great Wagner lover. His concept of film scoring was utterly simple and very Wagnerian. Every character had to have a theme or motif. In addition to the characters having themes and leitmotifs, certain philosophical concepts had to have motifs too. God, good, and evil each had to have a theme. The idea was that whenever a particular character was on the screen, his theme had to be present as well. It was all very Wagnerian.*

Because of the leitmotif nature of the score and DeMille's desires, this score was more Romantic than modern in its musical language. That is what was necessary, and yet it didn't prevent Bernstein from being able to create a jazz score to *The Man With the Golden Arm* in the same year.

Another composer to take on scoring several epic films was Miklos Rozsa. A Hungarian-born composer with a doctorate in music, Rozsa had a passion for musicology. For films involving historical subjects, he did extensive research and tried to create a musical sound that was palatable to the average audience, yet based on real historical musical premises, motives, and instruments. His scores to *Ben-Hur, El Cid, Quo Vadis*, and others are large, grand and well thought out. They established a standard to which many composers writing these kinds of scores had to bear up.

Theme Songs and Rock 'n Roll

In every period of movies there has been the issue of the theme song, pop song, or end-title song. From the early days of sound films, producers realized the financial benefits of having a hit song. Not only could they entice more people into the theater to see the film, but they could sell more records (CDs in modern times) and sheet music. And because they owned the copyright to the song, they could collect on performance royalties if the song became a radio hit. This "theme song" craze has never really been a craze; it has always been present, only sometimes the frenzy has been slightly greater than others. Every era has had its hit songs, from the '30s and '40s onward to today and the success of "My Heart Will Go On" from *Titanic*.

A significant wave of theme songs began in the 1950s with the huge popularity of the song, "Do Not Forsake Me, Oh My Darlin'," written by Dimitri Tiomkin and Ned Washington for the movie *High Noon*. However, the popularity of this song doesn't come close to the ongoing success of Henry Mancini's 1961 hit, "Moon River," from the film *A Breakfast at Tiffany's*, starring Audrey Hepburn.

Mancini was another Juilliard-trained composer with a strong jazz background. He had his first major success with the theme for the 1958 TV show, *Peter Gunn*. Then there came "Moon River" followed the next year by "The Days of Wine and Roses" for the film of the same name. He went on to score dozens of films of every dramatic style, but remains best known to the general public for "Moon River," "The Days of Wine and Roses," and the scores to the Peter Sellers comedy series, *The Pink Panther*.

By this time, the early 1960s, producers could not get enough of the theme song. The producer of the film *Dr. Zhivago* was so enthralled with Maurice Jarre's melody to "Lara's Theme" that he basically discarded much of the original score and substituted tracks of the song melody. Later in the 1960s we get "Raindrops Keep Fallin' On My Head" in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and "Mrs. Robinson" in *The Graduate*.

What these songs did was pave the way for a different use of songs in film. Instead of having the song be sung by a character on screen, or be part of the credits, all of a sudden a pop song, which is seemingly disembodied from the film, became an integral part of the soundtrack. The style evolved where a song was just "dropped in" to the movie soundtrack. Maybe the lyrics were applicable, maybe not. Maybe there was a dramatic reason to have a song, maybe not. For some producers, the only reason to have a song in the film was to hope it became a hit, generated lots of royalties, and caused people to go see the film. And as the popularity of theme songs grew, at least amongst Hollywood producers, more and more films came to rely on songs rather than specifically composed instrumental underscores.

Another factor contributing to this was the rock 'n roll soundtrack. Beginning with the beach movies of the early 1960s, given a mighty push forward by the Beatles films, *A Hard Days Night* and *Help*, and coming to full fruition with the cult classic, *Easy Rider*, films consisting completely of rock songs as underscore became vogue. As the dark, edgy films of the '50s appealed to that audience, these rock 'n roll films of the 1960s were aimed at the ever-expanding audience embracing the values of the "Woodstock generation." They were pertinent and popular. And truly, the use of songs was completely appropriate. How else to express the tone of those times but through the music of popular songs? The Grateful Dead. Simon and Garfunkel. Bob Dylan. Buffalo Springfield. Steppenwolf and The Flying Burrito Brothers were perfect for *Easy Rider*. This was absolutely the right music in the right place for certain films.

The problem that arises when this kind of trend hits is that producers and directors jump on the bandwagon rather blindly. When something new works in one movie, there are always several people doing imitations within a short period of time. So instead of choosing a style of music that serves the dramatic intent of the picture, they choose music that they believe is popular or will sell a lot of records. This was a problem in the 1960s, and it is still a problem today.

This is not to say that instrumental underscore in the 1960s became a lost art. Although some prevailing trends favored rock songs, and even jazzy underscores (*The Pink Panther*, some of the James Bond movies), there were many excellent orchestral-type scores. Elmer Bernstein's score for *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a beautiful example of the marriage of compositional structure and dramatic intent. Many other composers of note were active in keeping alive the orchestral vocabulary, including Jerry Goldsmith, Leonard Rosenman, John Barry, Georges Delerue, Maurice Jarre, and John Williams. The trends became parallel. One kind of movie still used traditional orchestral scores, another used pop and rock songs, another kind used jazz-influenced scores, and yet another used more dissonant and avant-garde twentieth century compositional techniques. The possibilities were expanding even as they were heavily weighted towards songs and jazz music during the 1960s.