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Max Steiner and the Music of *Casablanca*

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Not only did Max Steiner not like the song, he thought that it was not appropriate for the film. Nevertheless, as every film buff knows, “As Time Goes By” stayed in the film *Casablanca*, and the song has almost become emblematic of the film itself. However, it is but one song in a very musical film that proved challenging for veteran film composer Max Steiner. It was not the amount of material that he had to compose (as with *Gone with the Wind*), but rather the music that was already built into the drama that he had to incorporate into a meaningful score. Steiner, one of the most thoughtful of film composers, masterfully wove the diegetic music (music that functions as part of the story and that the characters onscreen can hear) and nondiegetic music (music that functions outside of the story that the characters do not hear) of *Casablanca* into an evocative score that illuminates and connects the political and romantic conflicts in the film.

Since much of *Casablanca* is set in a rather typical nightclub, Rick’s Café Americain, where music is played almost constantly, Steiner had to deal with an incredible amount of diegetic music, composing a score around the musical numbers in the nightclub. “As conspirators, refugees, Fascists, patriots, and desperate gamblers take the foreground, those songs, subliminally, make the café an outpost of America, an oasis in a foreign land.” As one would expect in a nightclub owned by an American, the music is “up-tempo, easy-going, and nostalgic.” The blanket of background music includes titles such as “Crazy Rhythm,” “Baby Face,” “I’m Just Wild About Harry,” “Heaven Can Wait,” “Love for Sale,” and “Avalon.” This music “was familiar to an audience and spoke to that audience about America—an America of the past as well as of the future.”

Often these songs underscore the dramatic content on the screen. For example, “Tango della Rose” makes viewers “aware of the multicultural milieu at Rick’s: probably, too, the Spanish flavor is meant to be symbolic, as [viewers] learned only a few minutes previously that Rick fought in Spain against the Fascists.” Another example includes the band playing “Speak to Me of Love” when Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) enters Café Americain for the first time. On other occasions, the association between the source music and the action on the screen is ironic, as when the audience is introduced to Rick (Humphrey Bogart): while he stands in the inner doorway to his casino and refuses admittance to a pompous German banker, the energetic music heard on the background piano is “Crazy Rhythm,” whose chorus begins “Crazy rhythm, here’s the doorway, I’ll go my way, you’ll go your way.”

The one original source song, “Knock on Wood,” written by M. K. Jerome and Jack Scholl, sounds like it could have been written any year between 1919 and 1943. The song unfolds through a series of brief eight-bar choruses (with no verse-chorus structure). The song is not constructed to climax at all, but rather to move along like an unrushed conversation among friends. In the onscreen performance, the African American leader Sam (Dooley Wilson) coolly poses a series of questions to which his white band mates respond in unison. The partly sung and partly spoken melody creates an antiphonal chorus of questions and answers between Sam and the band. The lyrics of the first chorus establish the eight-bar pattern of antiphony:

Sam: Say, who got trouble?

Band: We got trouble.
 Sam: How much trouble?
 Band: Too much trouble.
 Sam: Well now don't you frown. Just knuckle down, and knock on wood.

The song's tempo, neither brisk nor crawling, provides a suitable accompaniment to the lighthearted discussion of how to manage mounting troubles through a discourse of luck rather than the grander talk of destiny and certainty, enabling the crowd to make light of their troubles.

A second challenge for Steiner was *that song* that he did not like—"As Time Goes By." When playwrights Murray Bennett and Joan Allison collaborated on a play, *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, they made "As Time Goes By" the song that Rick and Ilsa loved when they met in Paris before the war. Since it was already in their catalogue, Warner Brothers kept the song when they bought the screen rights to the play. Steiner pleaded with producer Hal Wallis to let him write a replacement, and Wallis finally agreed. However, before they could substitute a different song, shooting was complete; and when Wallis tried to bring back the cast for a reshoot with a new song, he found that Ingrid Bergman had cut her hair short to play Maria in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

Since Steiner was stuck with "As Time Goes By," he "did more than give in gracefully. He proceeded to make "As Time Goes By" the centerpiece of his score. The song was not only Rick and Ilsa's love theme but Steiner's main connecting device. The song linked Rick and Ilsa, [the] present and past, the source music to the underscoring, and the audience to the characters in the movie." Being permanently entwined with *Casablanca*, "As Time Goes By" has "increased the fame and longevity of the movie that, in turn, ensured the fame and longevity of the song."

Nevertheless, "As Time Goes By" works both musically and lyrically in the film. Even though the song had not achieved its status as of 1941, the song had been around for years. Consequently, audiences would have known it, lending authenticity to Rick and Ilsa's romance (as the song could have been a song that they made their own in the past). Lyrically, the song helps create and connect the overarching themes of the film, helping viewers understand the purpose or meaning. Specifically, "As Time Goes By" speaks of romance and eternal love. "It reminds us that in matters of the heart, 'fundamental things apply' and that there is one thing 'that no one can deny': The world will always 'welcome lovers / As time goes by.'" The lyrics also prophetically anticipate and smoothly reinforce both the private and political romances in *Casablanca*. "It's still the same old story / A fight for love and glory / A case of do or die / The world will always welcome lovers / As time goes by."

Steiner first briefly incorporates "As Time Goes By" early in the film when Rick and local police captain Louis Renault (Claude Rains) sit outside Rick's Café and see a Lisbon plane flying over. However, it is not until later, when Ilsa arrives at the nightclub and insists that Sam "Play it," that this song becomes central.

Once Ilsa presses Sam to sing, the generic text of the song points to the secret it holds: an old romance. The music makes Ilsa see, but as we see her, we cannot see what she is seeing. We know that the song is a carrier, but we don't know the cargo. In a brilliant stroke, this lack is compensated by showing the music's effect on Ilsa—perhaps the most beautiful shot of a woman's face ever.

This extended and immobile close-up of a tearful Ilsa lasts no less than twenty seconds. "[I]t is the triple counterpoint of words, music, and photography—the soft lighting that perfectly captures the gleams of her hair and jewelry, her beautiful face a frozen, introspective mask—that makes for such a powerful effect." Moreover, viewers "never hear the song played all the way

through in one sitting in the film. As Rick and Ilsa's love is fated to be never completely fulfilled, so the song presents itself to the viewer in fragments and is never complete." For, a little more than half way through the second A section, Rick bursts out of his office to reprimand Sam ("Sam, I thought I told you never to play..."), but he is brought up short as he notices Ilsa. With a dissonant chord, Steiner accents the moment when Rick and Ilsa first make eye contact. "Sam stops, but the last note he plays is sustained by the orchestra in the background; then the theme is stated but this time in a darker and more melodramatic mood..." Consequently "the song becomes a lament, owing to the music's slow tempo, the sustaining of the opening dissonant chord, the use of plangent woodwinds, and the solemn half-cadence in D minor with which it concludes."

The closest that viewers get to hearing "As Time Goes By" played straight through is a little later during Rick's flashback sequence. The theme's appearance in this segment helps to move the film from the present to the past. The flashback sequence begins with Rick sitting in his darkened Café Americain, drinking himself into a stupor and demanding Sam, "You played it for her and you can play it for me...If she can stand it, I can. Play it!" As Sam starts to play "As Time Goes By," the "camera closes in on Rick. From his expression [viewers] know that he is thinking of the past. Slowly the sounds of an orchestra join into Sam's playing as the scene dissolves." Now the audience sees in an extended flashback what the music makes Rick see and made Ilsa see before. Viewers see snapshots of Rick and Ilsa in the past: a happy Rick driving around Paris with Ilsa close beside him, the two on an excursion boat on the Seine River, and the couple inside Rick's Paris apartment with flowers and champagne. This entire sequence is accompanied by the score's happiest transformations of the song; and it makes sense that the song would be the happiest and most complete during this sequence—this was the time in Rick and Ilsa's relationship when they were the happiest.

Of course, what finally makes the song work in the film is Steiner's masterful handling of it. It really becomes the theme of the film and part of *his* score—as opposed to just being a popular standard that pops up every once in a while...In his hands, it became a symbol of fulfillment, a melody expressing the happiness that comes with love. But because Rick and Ilsa's love is unfulfilled, it is a melody that is fragmentary and unfinished, at times sad, at times brooding, and at times angry. It is also a connecting link to the past in which that sense of fulfillment was at hand but had slipped away.

To further complicate matters, Steiner also had to incorporate two other non-original songs: "Wacht am Rhein" (a German patriotic anthem), and "The Marseillaise" (France's national anthem). One of the most dramatic and dynamic musical sequences in the film is the famous contest of anthems in Rick's Café, when a group of German soldiers gathers around the piano and attempts to sing "Wacht am Rhein," only to be drowned out by the café's international crowd of refugees singing a stirring rendition of "The Marseillaise."

Up to this point in the film, the source music from Rick's has reflected a breezy, non-involved attitude; it is definitely music played in a place owned by a man who sticks his neck out for nobody. As Laszlo talks to Rick about the letters of transit, we hear the Germans breaking into a stirring version of "Watch on the Rhine." Laszlo immediately jumps into action. He goes to the band and orders it to play "The Marseillaise." The orchestra leader looks around nervously, and the camera finally settles on Rick, who gives him the nod. The band breaks into the song, and eventually the French partisans drown out the Nazis.

This is an extremely powerful and dramatic scene because it communicates the patriotic fervor of those seeking freedom. When the employees and clientele of Rick's Café Americain spontaneously sing "The Marseillaise," this political sing-along functions to unite the multi-national crowd at the café. Their tribute to French republicanism makes a symbolic stand against the German soldiers seated nearby and the Vichy collaborators who accommodate them. As a result, this musical battle causes German Major Strasser (Conrad Veidt) to close up Rick's Café, and it is not until the final scene at the foggy airport that these national tunes reappear.

One important function of film music, which Steiner effectively employs, is its ability to suspend reality for the audience. "When movie-goers sit in a theatre and hear the opening strains of the title theme, they have been conditioned to accept the music as part of the cinematic experience; indeed, many films use opening music to situate the story in a time, place, or context that will help the audience more readily accept the film." This feature is apparent at the outset of *Casablanca* during the main title. The music "contains six distinct bits of music smoothly linked, ranging in length from a few seconds to more than a minute. Each new section is cued by an important change in what is seen onscreen, and each works in musical code, designed to indicate something about the setting and other particulars of the narrative."

The first short bit of the main title (lasting about twenty seconds) is the fanfare for the Warner Brothers logo. Steiner composed this "noisy, memorable signal" for the 1937 film *Tovaritch*, and by 1938 it quickly became the signature of Steiner (and Warner Brothers). Its sequence of rapid harmonic motion without a tonal center can be manipulated to lead to any key one wishes, making it very functional. As the fanfare reaches the dissonant chord, the Warner Brothers logo dissolves to an image of a map of Africa. While the music vamps, the names of the three primary cast members (Bogart, Bergman, and Henreid) appear. Precisely as those names dissolve to the film's title, a flourish sweeps the music to a new key; and, after four measures, while the credits continue, the next theme begins.

The frenzied exotic dance, or second section of the main title, is very rhythmic and has lots of tom-tom in addition to bells and xylophone. The instrumentation and the unyielding ostinato accompaniment can be interpreted as symbols of the African setting, just as the fluid stepwise melody, colored by triplets and augmented seconds, is pseudo-Arabian. "[T]he flailing theme and pounding rhythm work to prepare [viewers] for a breakneck story of desperate people trapped in a dangerous locale." Fittingly, this segment moves ahead in urgent fashion: "there is one eight-bar phrase, that is repeated and then extended in a modulating phrase of six more bars. In this way Steiner makes another seamless musical link, parallel to the continuing credits on screen."

"The Marseillaise" is first heard in the third segment of the main title. After the previous material, this evocative melody in a major key sounds particularly bright and introduces the instrumental leitmotif of political unity and virtuous resistance. Steiner also gave a surprising twist: whereas normally the producer's name would appear onscreen with a new fanfare, this segment heralds Steiner's own name: "Music by Max Steiner." Scored primarily for brass and evoking the march of soldiers, this initial reference to "The Marseillaise" ends with an ominous tritone that does not resolve into a major chord. "For two bars the dissonance holds, while the march beat... carries forward through the director's credit, a fade to black, then into a new image. Thus, the avoidance of closure is deliberate and obtrusive: [viewers] are alerted to understand that the struggle for freedom is still in doubt."

Now the credits have ended, but, before the story begins, a lengthy prologue comes, marking the start of the fourth section, an impassioned lament. The narrator eloquently begins, "With the coming of the Second World War, many eyes in imprisoned Europe turned hopefully, or desperately, toward the freedom of the Americas." As he speaks, the first image is that of a spinning globe, suggesting the story's worldwide significance. While the narrator contin-

continues, another map tracks the movement of refugees toward Casablanca before the audience sees a frozen, aerial view of the city. While this happens onscreen, Steiner's music moves viewers completely into the film's world.

[The music] is lyrical and clearly expresses sympathy for the refugees: a string melody of two broad phrases...It also depicts their weary trek: each phrase begins high in range, meanders more or less chromatically, and ends at a low point; and every two bars the melody pauses, while the march rhythm pushes forward in dissonant chords.

The fifth section, very brief pseudo-Arabian source music, marks the opening scene in the city. Here the first sounds of the film's diegetic world emerge from the bustling street scene: the clamor of voices from the crowd in the marketplace. Steiner returns to the melodic style of his African dance music with "serpentine oboes," but the feeling is more relaxed: "the melody winds about in triplets, the pulse is weak, the harmony unchanging...and the orchestration [is] dominated by oboes, with soft cymbals for color. If [viewers] consciously hear this music at all, [they] are meant to perceive it as a kind of Arabian source music, emanating from the city..."

The sixth and final segment of the main title begins as the police station comes onscreen. In a final dramatic gesture (contrasting "The Marseillaise"), Steiner incorporates the German anthem "Deutschland uber alles" into the score, played loudly by brass. But there is only time for the tune's ominous opening (corresponding to the words "Germany, Germany") because Steiner knows that the music must give way to the action onscreen. So Steiner prepares the viewers for action by making a suspenseful pause in mid-phrase and then resorting to a favorite melodramatic device: a rumble of timpani continuing until the action begins. As a police officer takes a paper from the typewriter, he turns to the microphone and announces the murder of two German couriers carrying important official documents. "Important!" he concludes. Viewers are directed to sit up and take notice as the action begins.

Thus, throughout the film *Casablanca*, Steiner seeks to be a helpful subordinate to the images onscreen. "[H]e shows a keen understanding of the narrative's overall design and music's ability to enhance it." It is to Steiner's credit that, despite having so much of the score determined by diegetic music, he was able to create a score that masterfully adds to the political and romantic conflicts and themes in the film.

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