

MUSIC DIRECTORS AND COMPOSERS IN BRITISH CINEMA OF THE 1930S: THE CREATIVE PROCESS AND WORKING MUSICAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract. *British film music in the 1930s might be defined by its variety. Unlike its Hollywood counterpart, there was no fully developed 'production line' as an alternative to creating film scores. Nevertheless, most studios had a musical director, who was responsible for the brokering of composer deals and seeing a project to completion. This paper aims at examining a few individuals working in Britain at the time, such as Muir Mathieson, Arthur Bliss and Mischa Spoliansky, and revealing some of the diplomacy that had to be negotiated to produce some of the major scores of the period. I ask to what extent MDs actually engineered the stylistic direction of the music.*

Key words: *British film music, 1930s, Arthur Bliss, Muir Mathieson, Mischa Spoliansky*

In an article published in 1922, fourteen years before *Things to Come* (William Cameron Menzies, 1936), Arthur Bliss opined at length on film music, and the nature of cinema-going:

“[L]et me state this as the first cinematic axiom – the picture house is no place for those who feel the need of a mental stimulus. It is primarily for the inert, the exhausted, the feeble minded, the unimaginative, and those who have not seen LIFE. That is why we all go. Have you ever floated down the rapids tucked up on an iceberg or felt the grip of the hangman's rope while your best friend raced his car against the train that carried the governor and your pardon? If you have – you will flee the cinema – it is too painful. We have not, and therefore through there” (Bliss, *Musical News and Herald*, 18 February 1922, 220, cited in Roscow, 1991, 32).

Perhaps more interestingly, he ends his article with the declaration: “What a proud day it will be for some of us to be featured as the sound-producing experts on a real live million-dollar movie!” (ibid, 33).

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Bliss had that chance in 1936, with *Things to Come*, produced by London Films. Whether he would stand by those comments about the nature of cinema-going or not is unclear. Yet, it might be worth bearing them in mind, since in this article I hope to show how a certain cultural tension existed behind the scoring process of films in Britain at the time. The tension was created by the realistic need for commercial film-making on the one hand, and an environment of craftsmanship, classical musicianship, and (arguably) a sense of duty towards the cinema-going public on the other. I will be discussing various collaborations involving the young Scottish musician, Muir Mathieson, including his work with Bliss, an Englishman – on *Things to Come* – and his partnership with Mischa Spoliansky, a Russian-born composer who had settled first in Poland and then in Berlin, on several films from the same period.

Founded in 1932 by the Hungarian Alexander Korda, London Films became an international phenomenon. Korda's biographical epics of the 1930s have never lacked critical attention. Most notably Korda's early directorial project *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933) became the most successful film that Britain had ever produced. This company represents much of what I want to discuss in relation to the realities of collaborative work in film music at the time. London Films might be seen to have been a flexible and open-minded venture with regard to the many composers who became associated with it (some of whom worked on very few pictures but who had good reputations in the concert hall), but the company had a commercial drive in a broader sense in terms of its international outlook and ambition which some critics have found lacking in other British companies of the period. Further, it represents in many ways the kind of company that might be seen as typical, turning out self-consciously 'British' pictures on 'British' themes (whatever those may be, and there are numerous volumes written on what exactly defines 'Britishness' in film) but staffed and crewed by an international team.

Korda typified the pragmatic movie mogul, searching for original ideas and finding the means to make them work. It was Korda who suggested in 1937 to Chaplin that he might be the perfect performer to impersonate Hitler; the outcome was *The Great Dictator* (Charles Chaplin, 1939) (Chaplin 1964, 386–387).

The personality who shaped much of the musical output of Korda's company was Muir Mathieson, a Scot who fell into the business when barely out of college. Mathieson was undoubtedly a key figure in British film music of any decade until his death. To a certain extent, he was a champion of British composers and believed that 'serious' British musicians should be given the opportunity to write film scores for the benefit of both concert music and the film industry. Indeed some have argued that Mathieson's attitude stopped just short of xenophobia. Jan Swynnoe, who wrote one of the only books dealing with this period, asserts that "Mathieson was vehemently against the scoring of British films by foreign composers" (Swynnoe 2002, xiii–xiv). Swynnoe goes as far as stating that London Films made pictures that crossed cultural boundaries, largely due to the variety of nationalities working with them. Yet, she is misguided in her wish to disqualify their contribution to the development of British filmmaking. Both British and American studios were hugely reliant on foreign practitioners in every department. If a British company is to be judged for its cosmopolitanism and targeting in terms of jeopardizing the gestation of a national cinema, then Hollywood must be seen in the same terms. I would argue that Korda's output is quintessentially 'British' if only for its variety. I will not discuss some of the other major collaborations here, such as those with Richard Addinsell or Miklós Rózsa, although the latter's remarks are quite helpful. Rózsa remembers Mathieson: "He was kind and helpful to

me when I was first learning the job, although he didn't, I think, particularly like my music and never forgave me for not being British. He used to make fun of my poor English, and in return I would tease him about his Scottish accent” (Rózsa 1982, 85).

Rózsa discusses the predominance of Hungarians in London Films at the time: “It was the easiest thing in the world to be a Hungarian at the Denham studios. The three Korda brothers were Hungarian; so were Lajos Biro, the head of the script department, and Stephen Pallos, the head of the sales department. [...] There was an underlying resentful feeling against this Hungarian invasion of the British film industry, and a popular joke was that the three Union Jacks flying over the Denham Studios were one for each of the Englishmen working there” (ibid).

For a company that constantly shifted its focus in terms of subject matter in the films it made, one element about the scoring procedures remained largely constant, with only a few exceptions: the convention of giving top billing to a ‘Musical Director’ rather than a composer. This was as prevalent in London as it was in the US, as a way of showing that the music was produced by a department of people with various roles. In many ways it is a fairer convention than today's insistence on a named composer, particularly for certain kinds of big-budget films. This Music Director billing convention was the case in large-scale productions in both the UK and the US, but the terms of employment for those working in American studios were on the whole more controlling and rigid. For musicians as much as actors or directors, it was harder to work as a freelancer in Hollywood once you had signed on to a particular studio. David Raksin wrote a revealing account of the professional fall-out resulting from a musician moonlighting for another studio (see Raskin 1989). By the latter half of the decade, Muir Mathieson had already established himself as the regular M.D. at London Films; he also quickly gained a reputation as a broker of composer-director collaborations. Early in his association with Korda, Mathieson declared his belief that concert composers should be persuaded to write for the cinema; his championing of “serious” composers continued throughout his tenure at London Films. While there are some claims – as I have noted – that Mathieson did not wish foreign composers to work on British films, the canon of London Films projects on which he worked seems to discredit that notion. Foreign composers were frequently hired to write for London films, at least one of whom, Rózsa, later became one of Hollywood's most treasured musical assets. As for Spoliansky, he continued to work as a composer in the industry until the early 1970s.

The only constant in terms of employment criteria for composers, under Mathieson's direction in the 1930s, was the requirement that they be respected musicians beyond the film studio gates. This is true of most of those whose work is heard in London Films productions in the decade. An early project for Mathieson was *Rembrandt* (Alexander Korda, 1936), scored by Geoffrey Toye. Another star vehicle for Charles Laughton, it was envisaged as a follow-up of sorts to *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, which had made Laughton an international star. In 1936 Toye was the general manager of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, having forged a reputation as a conductor and music director for the stage, notably as musical director of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company. He was a beneficiary of Mathieson's remarkably brave declaration to Korda, on being asked to succeed Kurt Schroeder at London Films:

“If you will guarantee me first-rate composers for every score, I'll take on the job, but I am not going to write you one note of indifferent music, which is the only kind of music I can write. It is ridiculous that you should pay vast sums of money for the finest of everything in the film and then, when it comes to adding the music, let the whole thing down by getting me or some other 'hack' to supply the score” (Hetherington 2006, 42).

Ernst Toch, an Austrian émigré and respected composer who would in 1956 win the Pulitzer Prize for Music, worked on a handful of scores for London Films during Mathieson's early years before heading to Hollywood. Mathieson's teacher at the RCM, the esteemed Australian composer Arthur Benjamin, was brought in to score *The Scarlett Pimpernel* in 1934, and would also work on its sequel three years later. So any claims that Mathieson actively avoided booking foreign composers seem to be false according to this roster. Korda certainly did not have the depth of musical knowledge and networking that Mathieson had in order to procure these individuals. Mathieson undoubtedly had Korda's trust, but their relationship frequently became fraught, as with any kind of working environment where the deadlines are tight and pressures are high.

In contrast to what we know about Mathieson, Gaumont Pictures' Louis Levy was considerably more commercial in outlook and much less of a musical idealist. To put it briefly, one might say that Mathieson did far more than he ever claimed credit for, and Levy apparently claimed credit for far more than he ever did. Levy was a showman, more 'Hollywood' in style than Mathieson ever would be. Levy's (almost certainly ghost-written) autobiography doesn't mention Mathieson, and I can't help but imagine that had Mathieson written one himself he would have been far less ruthlessly self-promoting.

As for London Films, its cosmopolitan outlook informed the scope of its films in terms of their source material, cast and crew and indeed musical elements; the result is a series of scores that, whilst never quite adopting the full Hollywood underscoring idiom (I use 'underscoring' as a term to indicate the musical accompaniment of dialogue), nonetheless showed remarkable breadth and imagination throughout the decade. Taken as a whole, this body of work represents a company that refused to stagnate in working methods or creative vision. To adopt this company as an analogy for the ever-changing British industry as a whole is therefore fully appropriate.

Things to Come represents is an early example of a composer being given relative freedom and early involvement on a picture. Furthermore, from a modern point-of-view, the fact that the author upon whose work the film was based was heavily involved in the scoring process is surprising. H. G. Wells, the author of the book on which the film is based, wrote the following to Arthur Bliss in 1934:

Dear Bliss

I am at issue with Korda and one or two others of the group on the question of where you come in. They say – it is the Hollywood tradition – 'We make the film right up to the cutting then, *when* we have cut, the musician come in and *puts in his music*.'

I say Balls! (I have the enthusiastic support of Grierson, who makes Post Office films, in *that*). I say 'A film is a composition and the musical composer is an integral part of the design. I want Bliss to be in touch throughout.'

I don't think Korda has much of an ear, but I want the audience at the end not to sever what it sees from what it hears. I want to end on a complete sensuous and emotional synthesis.

Consequently I am sending you Treatment (Second Version). It is very different from the first and in particular the crescendo up to the firing of the Space Gun, which is newly conceived. I think we ought to have a Prelude going on to the end of Reel I, but I won't invade your province.

Will you read this new Treatment and then have a talk with me sometime next week. Then when we two have got together a bit, we will bring in Biro the scene artist, and then Menzies and my son who are busy on the scenes. I have already a definite scheme for drawings and models.

So far from regarding the music as trimming to be put in afterwards I am eager to get any suggestions I can from you as to the main design.

Yours ever
H. G. (Roscow 1991)

Both were to become rather disillusioned as the process developed. Bliss describes Wells' building frustration as the film progressed. Wells wanted the film to be "an educative message to mankind" (Bliss 1989, 105) but "the financial necessity of having to appeal to a vast audience meant a concession here and a concession there, a watering down in one place, a deletion in another, so that, instead of having the impact of a vital parable, it became just an exciting entertainment" (ibid, 106).

Wells' didactic streak is something he shared with Mathieson. The latter rarely theorized on the educational aspects of his work, but he was undoubtedly an educator. Throughout his career he worked closely with youth orchestras and various concert series aimed at a younger audience. Another Bliss collaboration, *Conquest of the Air* (Zoltan Korda et al, 1936) is essentially a documentary, partly dramatized but closer in spirit to the GPO productions under Grierson than the majority of projects from London Films or Gaumont. This was a period during which the BBC was still young, and significantly under the influence of John Reith's strong ethos of public service broadcasting, drawn partly from his strict Scottish Presbyterian upbringing. In this we might draw a parallel with Mathieson and Grierson (indeed the film critic David Thomson makes a similar connection between Grierson and Reith) (Thomson 2012, 184).

The manuscript for *Conquest of the Air* has only recently turned up among Mathieson's papers, having been apparently given to him by the composer as a gift in the 1970s. Bliss and Mathieson shared a love for musical forms that blended with other artforms. Bliss wrote in his autobiography that "I have always found it easier to write 'dramatic' music rather than 'pure' music. I like the stimulus of words, or a theatrical setting, a colourful occasion or the collaboration of a great player. There is only a little of the spider about me, spinning his own web from his inner being" (Bliss *As I Remember*, cited in Palmer 1971, 558). Christopher Palmer, discussing Bliss, made the connection between ballet music and film scores, in the sense that composers for both media find themselves having to write in "small time-units" (ibid).

However, other evidence suggests that Bliss lost his enthusiasm for film music, and indeed he only revisited it as a craft a handful of times. In an anonymous article in *Tempo* magazine, some years later, the favorable working conditions afforded Bliss on *Things to Come* are discussed: "Although one might think that the resounding success of this music would have encouraged film directors to proceed farther along these lines, this unfortunately does not appear to be the case, and Bliss therefore considers film-music primarily as routine work, and not at present an art-form" (*Tempo* no. 3 1939, 3).

Along with Miklós Rózsa, who eventually settled in the United States after his own success with London Films and other companies, Mischa Spoliansky entered Britain shortly after Hitler's rise to power in 1933. Prior to this, he had established himself as a cabaret musician on Berlin's thriving inter-war theatre scene. He was instrumental in giving Marlene Dietrich a significant break on the stage, in *Es liegt in der Luft* ("It's in the Air"), by insisting that she repeat her audition song at a lower pitch, thus reversing the panel's decision not to cast her. Premiered on May 15, 1928, at the Komödie on Berlin's Kurfürstendamm, the show was a great success (Cornforth). Dietrich herself traced much of her success to this moment, and Spoliansky's encouragement.

It is important to bear in mind Spoliansky's background in the cabaret of the Weimar Republic: an art-form beset with paradox. In its early incarnations cabaret struggled to find an identity that pleased audiences, since for the *literati* it was too populist and often crude; for those seeking entertainment, cabaret's patchwork of theatrical *kleinkunst* proved too

highbrow. As Alan Lareau writes, “[t]he dilemma of mediating between the public taste and the ideals of artistic style was to plague the cabaret of the Weimar Republic” (Lareau 1991, 474).

In a sense, this atmosphere was ample preparation for Spoliansky's entry into the British film industry since, if we are to believe Rachel Low (and indeed some have emphatically disagreed), British films in the 1930s were “either quality or quota” (the ‘Quota Act’ was government legislation that forced distributors to meet a certain percentage of British films in their rentals to cinemas; the effect it had on the industry was that many cheap productions were made by subsidiaries of US companies). Like German cabaret, British filmmaking did not tend to reflect in a direct sense the hardships of the time. According to Christine Gledhill, “these films adopt a whimsicality or feyness of tone, espousing romanticist escape into costume and disguise, using late-Victorian and Edwardian popular middle-brow sources and aesthetic predilections” (Gledhill, cited in Murphy 2009, 163).

Spoliansky is admired by the Australian composer and conductor Hubert Clifford in an article written in 1945, as representing the kind of composer who might be trusted not to appeal to an “imaginary lowest common denominator” (Cliford 1945, 10).

He praises *Don't Take it to Heart* (Jeffrey Dell, 1944), scored by Spoliansky, as a film which “combines the virtues of intelligent and technically skilful direction with an adroit use of music” (ibid). One can understand therefore why Mathieson might warm to such a character, very much drawn from the musical establishment of Vienna and Berlin but also a composer with a keen sense of how to entertain. Spoliansky scored a number of pictures with Mathieson, notably comedies, such as *The Man Who Could Work Miracles* (Lothar Mendes, 1936), the story of an ‘everyman’ character who is suddenly given god-like powers. The handwritten notes (at the Mischa Spoliansky Archive, Akademie der Künste, Berlin) for a proposed sung-through sequence of *The Man Who Could Work Miracles* attest to the spirit of self-improvement and classical education that permeates the film, a trope that would resurface later in Powell & Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946). Indeed these two films share a supernatural flavor and are comparable in their highly stylized portrayal of a deific realm.

The Ghost Goes West (1936) was another major collaboration between Spoliansky and Mathieson, but this time with the director René Clair. The comedy plot concerns the ghost of a Scottish laird played by Robert Donat, who also plays the ghost's modern-day descendant. An American businessman buys a castle and has it moved from Scotland to Florida, and the ghost comes with it. The cue sheet for Reel 10 of *The Ghost Goes West* is a rare glimpse into the working methods of Spoliansky and Mathieson. The sheet is divided into columns: “Scene” (description); “Time on watch” (i.e. timing of the cues, not from the beginning of the reel); “Music” (description). There are references to specific themes and multiple penciled corrections over the typed text, diegetic notes (“Introduction to love theme played by radio”) and indications of ideas that have been rejected. Documents such as this imply a layered approach over time to whole sequences of scoring, and show that Spoliansky and Mathieson revised and updated their scores according to editorial changes or meetings with the director or producers.

What emerges from these film music collaborations in Britain in the 1930s is a variety of different approaches and collaborative modes, but always a sense of craftsmanship and conscientiousness with regard to producing scores of quality which nonetheless met demands for a film's mandate to entertain (much to H. G. Wells' discomfort). Muir Mathieson was a key figure, brokering collaborations and overseeing the scoring process at London

Films with various composers, most of whom he seems to have appreciated for their reputations beyond film scoring. It was a time when even the author of a film's source material could become heavily involved in the composing of its score; it would be hard to imagine such a dialogue occurring today. Furthermore, despite Mathieson's alleged suspicion of foreign composers, immigrant or exiled composers thrived in Britain, often under the guidance of Mathieson himself. Bearing in mind that this is a relatively neglected period in terms of academic attention to the scores themselves, the works examined here attest to the vibrancy of some of the film music being produced at the time.

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MUZIČKI UREDNICI I KOMPOZITORI U BRITANSKOM FILMU TRIDESETIH GODINA PROŠLOG VEKA: STVARALAČKI PROCESI I USPOSTAVLJANJE MUZIČKIH RELACIJA

Osnovna karakteristika muzike u britanskom filmu tridesetih godina prošlog veka je raznovrsnost. Za razliku od Holivuda, u Britaniji nije u potpunosti bio razvijen sistem "proizvodne linije" u stvaranju filmske muzike. Ipak, u većini britanskih studija postojali su muzički urednici koji su bili odgovorni za saradnju sa kompozitorima. U ovom radu bavimo se pojedincima koji su radili u Velikoj Britaniji tokom tog perioda: Mjuirom Matisonom, Arturom Blisom i Mišom Spolianskim. Nastojaćemo da osvetlimo specifične, gotovo diplomatske odnose, zahvaljujući kojima su stvorene neke od najznačajnijih muzičkih partitura za film. Suštinsko pitanje na koje rad pokušava da odgovori je u kojoj meri su muzički urednici zapravo kreirali stilski pravac u filmskoj muzici.

Ključne reči: *britanska filmska muzika, tridesete godine prošlog veka, Artur Blis, Mjuir Mateson, Miša Spolianski*