Composing for the Films
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With a new Introduction by
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Chapter One

PREJUDICES AND BAD HABITS

The character of motion-picture music has been determined by everyday practice. It has been an adaptation in part to the immediate needs of the film industry, in part to whatever musical clichés and ideas about music happened to be current. As a result, a number of empirical standards—rules of thumb—were evolved that corresponded to what motion-picture people called common sense. These rules have now been made obsolete by the technical development of the cinema as well as of autonomous music, yet they have persisted as tenaciously as if they had their roots in ancient wisdom rather than in bad habits. They originated in the intellectual milieu of Tin Pan Alley; and because of practical considerations and problems of personnel, they have so entrenched themselves that they, more than anything else, have hindered the progress of motion-picture music. They only seem to make sense as a consequence of standardization within the industry itself, which calls for standard practices everywhere.

Furthermore, these rules of thumb represent a kind of pseudo-tradition harking back to the days of spontaneity and craftsmanship, of medicine shows and covered wagons. And it is precisely this discrepancy between obsolete prac-
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tics and scientific production methods that characterizes the whole system. The two aspects are inseparable in principle, and both are subject to criticism. Public realization of the antiquated character of these rules should suffice to break their hold.

Typical examples of these habits, selected at random, will be discussed here in order to show concretely the level on which the problem of motion-picture music is dealt with today.

The Leitmotif

Cinema music is still patched together by means of leitmotifs. The ease with which they are recalled provides definite clues for the listener, and they also are a practical help to the composer in his task of composition under pressure. He can quote where he otherwise would have to invent.

The idea of the leitmotif has been popular since the days of Wagner. His popularity was largely connected with his use of leitmotifs. They function as trademarks, so to speak, by which persons, emotions, and symbols can instantly be identified. They have always been the most elementary means of elucidation, the thread by which the musically inexperienced find their way about. They were drummed into the listener's ear by persistent repetition, often with scarcely any variation, very much as a new song is plugged or as a motion-picture actress is popularized by her hair-do. It was natural to assume that this device, because it is so easy to grasp, would be particularly suitable to motion pictures, which are based on the premise that they must be easily understood. However, the truth of this assumption is only illusory.

The reasons for this are first of all technical. The fundamental character of the leitmotif—its salience and brevity—was related to the gigantic dimensions of the Wagnerian and post-Wagnerian music dramas. Just because the leitmotif as such is musically rudimentary, it requires a large musical canvas if it is to take on a structural meaning beyond that of a signpost. The atomization of the musical element is paralleled by the heroic dimensions of the composition as a whole. This relation is entirely absent in the motion picture, which requires continual interruption of one element by another rather than continuity. The constantly changing scenes are characteristic of the structure of the motion picture. Musically, also, shorter forms prevail, and the leitmotif is unsuitable here because of this brevity of forms which must be complete in themselves. Cinema music is so easily understood that it has no need of leitmotifs to serve as signposts, and its limited dimension does not permit of adequate expansion of the leitmotif.

Similar considerations apply with regard to the aesthetic problem. The Wagnerian leitmotif is inseparably connected with the symbolic nature of the music drama. The leitmotif is not supposed merely to characterize persons, emotions, or things, although this is the prevalent conception. Wagner conceived its purpose as the endowment of the dramatic events with metaphysical significance. When in the Ring the tubas blare the Valhalla motif, it is not merely to indicate the dwelling place of Wotan. Wagner meant also to connote the sphere of sublimity, the cosmic will, and the primal principle. The leitmotif was invented essentially for this kind of symbolism. There is no place for it in the motion picture, which seeks to depict reality. Here the function of

1 A prominent Hollywood composer, in an interview quoted in the newspapers, declared that there is no fundamental difference between his methods of composing and Wagner's. He, too, uses the leitmotif.
the leitmotif has been reduced to the level of a musical lackey, who announces his master with an important air even though the eminent personage is clearly recognizable to everyone. The effective technique of the past thus becomes a mere duplication, ineffective and uneconomical. At the same time, since it cannot be developed to its full musical significance in the motion picture, its use leads to extreme poverty of composition.

**Melody and Euphony**

The demand for melody and euphony is not only assumed to be obvious, but also a matter of public taste, as represented in the consumer. We do not deny that producers and consumers generally agree in regard to this demand. But the concepts of melody and euphony are not so self-evident as is generally believed. Both are to a large extent conventionalized historical categories.

The concept of melody first gained ascendancy in the nineteenth century in connection with the new *Kunstlied*, especially Schubert's. Melody was conceived as the opposite of the 'theme' of the Viennese classicism of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.² It denotes a tonal sequence, constituting not so much the point of departure of a composition as a self-contained entity that is easy to listen to, singable, and expressive. This notion led to the sort of melodiousness for which the German language has no specific term, but which the English word 'tune' expresses quite accurately. It consists first of all in the uninterrupted flow of a melody in the upper voice, in such a way that the melodic continuity seems natural, because it is almost possible to guess in advance exactly what will follow. The listener zealously insists on his right to this anticipation, and feels cheated if it is denied him. This fetishism in regard to melody, which at certain moments during the latter part of the Romantic period crowded out all the other elements of music, shackled the concept of melody itself.

Today, the conventional concept of melody is based on criteria of the crudest sort. Easy intelligibility is guaranteed by harmonic and rhythmical symmetry, and by the paraphrasing of accepted harmonic procedures; tunefulness is assured by the preponderance of small diatonic intervals. These postulates have taken on the semblance of logic, owing to the rigid institutionalization of prevailing customs, in which these criteria automatically obtain. In Mozart's and Beethoven's day, when the stylistic ideal of filigree composition held sway, the postulate of the predominance of an anticipatable melody in the upper voice would scarcely

² As a matter of fact, the modern concept of melody made itself felt as early as within Viennese classicism. Nowhere does the historical character of this apparently natural concept become more manifest than in the famous Mozart critique by Hans Georg Naegeli, the Swiss contemporary of the Viennese classicists, which is now made accessible in a reprint edited by Willi Reich. Musical history generally recognizes as one of the greatest merits of Mozart that he introduced the element of cantability into the sonata form, particularly the complex of the second theme. This innovation, largely responsible for the musical changes that led to the crystallization of the later Lied melody, was by no means greeted enthusiastically in all quarters. To Naegeli, who was certainly narrow-minded and dogmatic but had rather articulate philosophical ideas about musical style,
have been comprehended. 'Natural' melody is a figment of the imagination, an extremely relative phenomenon illegitimately absolutized, neither an obligatory nor an a priori constituent of the material, but one procedure among many, singled out for exclusive use.

The conventional demand for melody and euphony is constantly in conflict with the objective requirements of the motion picture. The prerequisite of melody is that the composer be independent, in the sense that his selection and invention relate to situations that supply specific lyric-poetic inspiration. This is out of the question where the motion picture is concerned. All music in the motion picture is under the sign of utility, rather than lyric expressiveness. Aside from the fact that lyric-poetic inspiration cannot be expected of the composer for the cinema, this kind of inspiration would contradict the embellishing and subordinate function that industrial practice still enforces on the composer.

Moreover, the problem of melody as 'poetic' is made insoluble by the conventionality of the popular notion of melody. Visual action in the motion picture has of course a prosaic irregularity and asymmetry. It claims to be photographed life; and as such every motion picture is a documentary. As a result, there is a gap between what is happening on the screen and the symmetrically articulated conventional melody. A photographed kiss cannot actually be synchronized with an eight-bar phrase. The disparity between symmetry and asymmetry becomes particularly striking when music is used to accompany natural phenomena, such as drifting clouds, sunrises, wind, and rain. These natural phenomena could inspire nineteenth-century poets; however, as photographed, they are essentially irregular and nonrhythmic, thus excluding that element of poetic rhythm with which the motion-picture industry associates them. Verlaine could write a poem about rain in the city, but one cannot hum a tune that accompanies rain reproduced on the screen.

More than anything else the demand for melody at any cost and on every occasion has throttled the development of motion-picture music. The alternative is certainly not to resort to the unmelodic, but to liberate melody from conventional fetters.

Unobtrusiveness

One of the most widespread prejudices in the motion-picture industry is the premise that the spectator should not be conscious of the music. The philosophy behind this belief is a vague notion that music should have a subordinate role in relation to the picture. As a rule, the motion picture represents action with dialogue. Financial considerations and technical interest are concentrated on the actor; anything that might overshadow him is considered disturbing. The musical indications in the scripts are usually sporadic and indefinite. Music thus far has not been treated in accordance with its specific potentialities. It is tolerated as an outsider who is somehow regarded as being indispensable, partly because of a genuine need and partly on account of the fetishistic idea that the existing technical resources must be exploited to the fullest extent. 

Despite the often reiterated opinion of the wizards of the movie industry, in which many composers concur, the

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8 In the realm of motion pictures the term 'technique' has a double meaning that can easily lead to confusion. On the one hand, technique is the equivalent of an industrial process for producing goods: e.g. the discovery that picture and sound can be recorded on the same strip is comparable to the invention of the air brake. The other meaning of 'technique' is aesthetic. It designates the methods by which an artistic intention can be
thesis that music should be unobtrusive is questionable. There are, doubtless, situations in motion pictures in which the dialogue must be emphasized and in which detailed musical foreground configurations would be disturbing. It may also be granted that these situations sometimes require acoustic supplementation. But precisely when this requirement is taken seriously, the insertion of allegedly unobtrusive music becomes dubious. In such instances, an accompaniment of extra-musical sound would more nearly approximate the realism of the motion picture. If, instead, music is used, music that is supposed to be real music but is not supposed to be noticed, the effect is that described in a German nursery rhyme:

Ich weiss ein schönes Spiel,
Ich mal' mir einen Bart,
Und halt mir einen Fächer vor,
Dass niemand ihn gewahrt.

[I know a pretty game:
I deck me with a beard
And hide behind a fan
So I won't look too weird.]

In practice, the requirement of unobtrusiveness is generally met not by an approximation of nonmusical sounds, but by the use of banal music. Accordingly, the music is supposed to be inconspicuous in the same sense as are selections from La Bohème played in a restaurant.

Apart from this, unobtrusive music, assumed to be the adequately realized. While the technical treatment of music in sound pictures was essentially determined by the industrial factor, there was a need for music from the very beginning, because of certain aesthetic requirements. Thus far no clearcut relation between the factors has been established, neither in theory nor in practice (Cf. ch. 5).

* Translated by N. G.

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Typical solution of the problem, is only one and certainly the least important of many possible solutions. The insertion of music should be planned along with the writing of the script, and the question whether the spectator should be aware of the music is a matter to be decided in each case according to the dramatic requirements of the script. Interruption of the action by a developed musical episode could be an important artistic device. For example, in an anti-Nazi picture, at the point when the action is dispersed into individual psychological details, an exceptionally serious piece of music occupies the whole perception. Its movement helps the listener to remember the essential incidents and focuses his attention on the situation as a whole. It is true that in this case the music is the very opposite of what it is conventionally supposed to be. It no longer expresses the conflicts of individual characters, nor does it persuade the spectator to identify himself with the hero; but rather it leads him back from the sphere of privacy to the major social issue. In pictures of an inferior type of entertainment—musicals and revues from which every trace of dramatic psychology is eliminated—one finds, more often than elsewhere, rudiments of this device of musical interruption, and the independent use of music in songs, dances, and finales.

Visual Justification

The problem relates less to rules than to tendencies, which are not as important as they were a few years ago, yet must still be taken into account. The fear that the use of music at a point when it would be completely impossible in a real situation will appear naive or childish, or impose upon the listener an effort of imagination that might distract him from the main issue, leads to attempts to jus-
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tify this use in a more or less rationalistic way. Thus situations are often contrived in which it is allegedly natural for the main character to stop and sing, or music accompanying a love scene is made plausible by having the hero turn on a radio or a phonograph.

The following is a typical instance. The hero is waiting for his beloved. Not a word is spoken. The director feels the need of filling in the silence. He knows the danger of nonaction, of absence of suspense, and therefore prescribes music. At the same time, however, he lays so much stress in the objective portrayal of psychological continuity that an unmotivated irruption of music strikes him as risky. Thus he resorts to the most artless trick in order to avoid artlessness, and makes the hero turn to the radio. The threadbare-ness of this artifice is illustrated by those scenes in which the hero accompanies himself 'realistically' on the piano for about eight bars, whereupon he is relieved by a large orchestra and chorus, albeit with no change of scene. In so far as this device, which obtained in the early days of sound pictures, is still applied, it hinders the use of music as a genuine element of contrast. Music becomes a plot accessory, a sort of acoustical stage property.

Illustration

There is a favorite Hollywood gibe: 'Birdie sings, music sings.' Music must follow visual incidents and illustrate them either by directly imitating them or by using clichés that are associated with the mood and content of the picture. The preferred material for imitation is 'nature,' in the most superficial sense of the word, i.e. as the antithesis of the urban— that realm where people are supposed to be able to breathe freely, stimulated by the presence of plants and animals. This is a vulgar and stereotyped version of the con-

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cept of nature that prevailed in nineteenth-century poetry. Music is concocted to go with meretricious lyrics. Particularly landscape shots without action seem to call for musical accompaniment, which then conforms to the stale programmatic patterns. Mountain peaks invariably invoke string tremolos punctuated by a signal-like horn motif. The ranch to which the virile hero has eloped with the sophisticated heroine is accompanied by forest murmurs and a flute melody. A slow waltz goes along with a moonlit scene in which a boat drifts down a river lined with weeping willows.

What is in question here is not the principle of musical illustration. Certainly musical illustration is only one among many dramaturgic resources, but it is so overworked that it deserves a rest, or at least it should be used with the greatest discrimination. This is what is generally lacking in prevailing practice. Music cut to fit the stereotype 'nature' is reduced to the character of a cheap mood-producing gadget, and the associative patterns are so familiar that there is really no illustration of anything, but only the elicitation of the automatic response: 'Aha, nature!'

Illustrative use of music today results in unfortunate duplication. It is uneconomical, except where quite specific effects are intended, or minute interpretation of the action of the picture. The old operas left a certain amount of elbow room in their scenic arrangements for what is vague and indefinite; this could be filled out with tone painting. The music of the Wagnerian era was actually a means of elucidation. But in the cinema, both picture and dialogue are hyperexplicit. Conventional music can add nothing to the explicitness, but instead may detract from it, since even in the worst pictures standardized musical effects fail to keep up with the concrete elaboration of the screen action. But if the elucidating function is given up as superfluous,
music should never attempt to accompany precise occurrences in an imprecise manner. It should stick to its task—even if it is only as questionable a one as that of creating a mood—renouncing that of repeating the obvious. Musical illustration should either be hyperexplicit itself—over-illuminating, so to speak, and thereby interpretive—or should be omitted. There is no excuse for flute melodies that force a bird call into a pattern of full ninth chords.

**Geography and History**

When the scene is laid in a Dutch town, with its canals, windmills, and wooden shoes, the composer is supposed to send over to the studio library for a Dutch folk song in order to use its theme as a working basis. Since it is not easy to recognize a Dutch folk song for what it is, especially when it has been subjected to the whims of an arranger, this procedure seems a dubious one. Here music is used in much the same way as costumes or sets, but without as strong a characterizing effect. A composer can attain something more convincing by writing a tune of his own on the basis of a village dance for little Dutch girls than he can by clinging to the original. Indeed, the current folk music of all countries—apart from that which is basically outside occidental music—tends toward a certain sameness, in contrast to the differentiated art languages. This is because it is grounded on a limited number of elementary rhythmic formulas associated with festivities, communal dances, and the like. It is as difficult to distinguish between the temperamental characters of Polish and Spanish dances, particularly in the conventionalized form they assumed in the nineteenth century, as it is to discern the difference between hill-billy songs and Upper Bavarian *Schnaderhüpfeln*.

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Moreover, ordinary cinematic music has an irresistible urge to follow the pattern of 'just folk music.' Specific national characteristics can be captured musically only if the musical counterpart of beflagging the scene with national emblems like an exhibition is not resorted to. Related to this is the practice of investing costume pictures with music of the corresponding historical period. This recalls concerts in which hoop-skirted elderly ladies play tedious pre-Bach harpsichord pieces by candlelight in baroque palaces. The absurdity of such 'applied art' arrangements is glaring in contrast with the technique of the film, which is of necessity modern. If costume pictures must be, they might be better served by the free use of advanced musical resources.

**Stock Music**

One of the worst practices is the incessant use of a limited number of worn-out musical pieces that are associated with the given screen situations by reason of their actual or traditional titles. Thus, the scene of a moonlight night is accompanied by the first movement of the *Moonlight Sonata*, orchestrated in a manner that completely contradicts its meaning, because the piano melody—suggested by Beethoven with the utmost discretion—is made obtrusive and is richly underscored by the strings. For thunderstorms, the overture to *William Tell* is used; for weddings, the march from *Lohengrin* or Mendelssohn's wedding march. These practices—incidentally, they are on the wane and are retained only in cheap pictures—correspond to the popularity of trademarked pieces in classical music, such as Beethoven's E-flat Concerto, which has attained an almost fatal popularity under the apocryphal title *The Emperor*, or Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*. The present vogue of the latter is
to some extent connected with the idea that the composer died before it was finished, whereas he simply laid it aside years before his death. The use of trademarks is a nuisance, though it must be acknowledged that childlike faith in the eternal symbolic force of certain classical wedding or funeral marches occasionally has a redeeming aspect, when these are compared with original scores manufactured to order.

Clichés

All these questions are related to a more general state of affairs. Mass production of motion pictures has led to the elaboration of typical situations, ever-recurring emotional crises, and standardized methods of arousing suspense. They correspond to cliché effects in music. But music is often brought into play at the very point where particularly characteristic effects are sought for the sake of 'atmosphere' or suspense. The powerful effect intended does not come off, because the listener has been made familiar with the stimulus by innumerable analogous passages. Psychologically, the whole phenomenon is ambiguous. If the screen shows a peaceful country house while the music produces familiar sinister sounds, the spectator knows at once that something terrible is about to happen, and thus the musical accompaniment both intensifies the suspense and nullifies it by betraying the sequel.

As in many other aspects of contemporary motion pictures, it is not standardization as such that is objectionable here. Pictures that frankly follow an established pattern, such as 'westerns' or gangster and horror pictures, often are in a certain way superior to pretentious grade-A films. What is objectionable is the standardized character of pictures that claim to be unique; or, conversely, the individual dis-

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guise of the standardized pattern. This is exactly what happens in music. Thus, for example, throbbing and torrential string arpeggios—which the guides to Wagner once called the 'agitated motif'—are resorted to without rhyme or reason, and nothing can be more laughable to anyone who recognizes them for what they are.

Such musical conventions are all the more dubious because their material is usually taken from the most recently bygone phase of autonomous music, which still passes as 'modern' in motion pictures. Forty years ago, when musical impressionism and exoticism were at their height, the whole-tone scale was regarded as a particularly stimulating, unfamiliar, and 'colorful' musical device. Today the whole-tone scale is stuffed into the introduction of every popular hit, yet in motion pictures it continues to be used as if it had just seen the light of day. Thus the means employed and the effect achieved are completely disproportionate. Such a disproportion can have a certain charm when, as in animated cartoons, it serves to stress the absurdity of something impossible, for instance, Pluto galloping over the ice to the ride of the Valkyries. But the whole-tone scale so overworked in the amusement industry can no longer cause anyone really to shudder.

The use of clichés also affects instrumentation. The tremolo on the bridge of the violin, which thirty years ago was intended even in serious music to produce a feeling of uncanny suspense and to express an unreal atmosphere, today has become common currency. Generally, all artistic means that were originally conceived for their stimulating effect rather than for their structural significance grow threadbare and obsolete with extraordinary rapidity. Here, as in many other instances, the motion-picture industry is carrying out
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a sentence long since pronounced in serious music, and one is justified in ascribing a progressive function to the sound film in so far as it thus has discredited the trashy devices intended merely for effect. These have long since become unbearable both to artists and to the audience, so much so that sooner or later no one will be able to enjoy clichés. When this happens there will be both need and room for other elements of music. The development of avant-garde music in the course of the last thirty years has opened up an inexhaustible reservoir of new resources and possibilities that is still practically untouched. There is no objective reason why motion-picture music should not draw upon it.

Standardized Interpretation

The standardization of motion-picture music is particularly apparent in the prevailing style of performance. First of all, there is the element of dynamics, which was at one time limited by the imperfection of the recording and reproduction machinery. Today, this machinery is far better differentiated and affords far greater dynamic possibilities, both as regards the extremes and the transitions; nevertheless, standardization of dynamics still persists. The different degrees of strength are levelled and blurred to a general mezzoforte—incidentally, this practice is quite analogous to the habits of the mixer in radio broadcasting. The main purpose here is the production of a comfortable and polished euphony, which neither startles by its power (fortissimo) nor requires attentive listening because of its weakness (pianissimo). In consequence of this levelling, dynamics as a means of elucidating musical contexts is lost. The lack of a threefold fortissimo and pianissimo reduces the crescendo and decrescendo to too small a range.

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In the methods of performance, too, standardization has as its counterpart pseudo-individualization.4 While everything is more or less adjusted to the mezzoforte ideal, an effort is made, through exaggerated interpretation, to make each musical motif produce the utmost expression, emotion, and suspense. The violins must sob or scintillate, the brasses must crash insolently or bombastically, no moderate expression is tolerated, and the whole method of performance is based on exaggeration. It is characterized by a mania for extremes, such as were reserved in the days of the silent pictures for that type of violinist who led the little moviehouse orchestra. The perpetually used espressivo has become completely worn out. Even effective dramatic incidents are made trite by oversweet accompaniment or offensive over-exposition. A 'middle-ground,' objective musical type of interpretation that resorts to the espressivo only where it is really justified could by its economy greatly enhance the effectiveness of motion-picture music.

4 'By pseudo-individualization we mean endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization itself.' (T. W. Adorno, 'On Popular Music,' in Studies in Philosophy and Social Science, vol. ix, 1941, p. 25.)
Chapter Seven

SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

SUGGESTIONS for improving the quality and the methods of using motion-picture music are naturally open to suspicion. The cultural industry as a whole, and particularly the realm of motion-picture music, is characterized by the fact that all the people concerned in it are fully aware of its defects and often denounce them; at the same time, any innovation, even the most modest, that is not in complete conformity with the prevailing trend encounters the most stubborn opposition, which defies the best intentions. What is in question here is not the arbitrary decisions of the 'big bosses'—these are invoked only in extreme cases, because anyone who enters the lion's den is so resigned and prepared to adjust himself to reality that dramatic clashes are ruled out in advance. The artists know that any reference to art is apt to infuriate the management, and that showmanship and box-office receipts must be accepted explicitly or implicitly as the guideposts of their work.

However, even within the limits set by showmanship and box-office success, every genuine innovation meets with opposition that manifests itself not as censorship, but as inertia, as the rule of 'common sense' in a thousand little matters, or as respect for allegedly irrefutable experience.

Attempts at reform degenerate into guerilla warfare, and in the end break down completely because of the disproportion between the hypertrophied power of a system rationalized to the point of absurdity, and any possible individual initiative—not because of objections on the part of the executive, who intervenes only occasionally, to teach the artist that he is only a cipher.

There are various ways of adjusting oneself to this situation. Some—those who are most successful from the pecuniary point of view—go over to the enemy and embrace the cause that they hate; they see in the mass base of the motion picture a guarantee of its truth; they declare solemnly that the artist can do anything, no matter how audacious, provided that he knows his trade, and use their spurious authority as experts to throttle the boldness in others that they themselves dare not display. Others are vociferous in their disapproval; rebel, claim to be enemies of the whole business; but in the end their products are curiously like those of the people they profess to despise. Still others—the intellectuals of the motion-picture world—adopt an extremist attitude and decide that the motion-picture industry has nothing to do with art, and that culture is doomed in any event. This idea is used as an all-embracing mental reservation, which enables them to yield in every detail while preserving their good conscience. Such people are even more cynical than the businessmen. Proud of their superior knowledge, they discourage every would-be innovator by giving him a hundred reasons why his proposals must fail. In their priggishness and learned conceit they condemn the naive reformer on the ground that he is resorting to patchwork instead of doing a thorough job.

While it is indisputable that even the most insignificant defects are inseparable from the inadequacy of the whole
system, theoretical criticism of fundamentals should not be
misused as a letter of indulgence with regard to practice.
Irresponsible radicalism of summary rejection is not an in-
fantile disease, but a symptom of senile weakness in those
who are weary of futile opposition. To have a clear insight
into the true nature of the causes of the present evil and
to refuse to indulge in the illusion that the system can be
changed by gradual corrections does not necessarily mean
that one must give up all efforts to bring about a better
state of affairs. Such efforts will not suffice to emancipate
the musical motion picture, but they can give an idea of
what the emancipated motion picture would look like.

Even at the price of daily quarrels with wretched oppo-
nents, it is of great importance that an unofficial tradition
of genuine art be formed, which may one day make itself
felt. For the new motion picture cannot fall from heaven;
it has, not yet really begun, will be largely
determined by its prehistory. The specific requirements of
the material that seem to have a hindering effect in many
respects, in other respects bring pressure to bear in the
direction of emancipation against the intentions of the pro-
ducers and consumers. When subject matter, however un-
worthy it may be, is approached objectively, an element of
truth is introduced that asserts itself against the existing
limitations. This element is contained in the present prac-
tices in a fragmentary and anonymous form; it must be
brought to consciousness, and consciously furthered.

As regards motion-picture music, the possibilities of im-
provement are considerably narrowed down, aside from the
general conditions of production, by a far more primitive
factor, namely, the present nature of motion-picture ma-
terial, pictures, and dialogues. Fundamentally, no motion-
picture music can be better than what it accompanies. Mu-

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sic for a trashy picture is to some extent trashy, no matter
how elegantly or skilfully it has solved its problems. The
postulate that the music must always have some sort of rela-
tion to the picture on the screen defines its limits; it must
follow the lead of the inferior material to which it is subor-
dinated. Good music accompanying hackneyed or idiotic
action and meaningless chatter becomes bad and meaning-
less—and this does not mean that a music as bad as the
picture is more adequate.

It is true that occasionally skilfully composed music can
rebel and disavow the picture that degrades it, either by
ruthless opposition or by revealing exaggeration. But the
value of such stratagems must not be overestimated, any
more than that of artistic sabotage in general. Under the
present cultural conditions, they would hardly be noticed
by the public, and would usually be nipped in the bud by
the agencies of control within the industry. And even if such
extraordinary tours de force could get across, they would
remain exceptions that prove the rule. They would degener-
ate into specialized and ingenious applied art, adding a
'sophisticated touch.' Harsh music accompanying a post-card
love scene, for instance, would not merely contrast with it
and result in a presumably comical effect of the whole; it
would also be ridiculous, naive, and futile. Intended to con-
vinc the motion picture of banality, it would itself be con-
icted of uselessly wasting energy. Likewise, bold musical
colors, whether of harmony or instrumentation, would be
disfigured when associated with sugary sweet technicolor.
Far from 'refuting' technicolor, they themselves would sound 'dirty,' by virtue of the contrast, no matter how
purely they were set forth or how shoddy the visual glamor
on the screen. Most important, however, is the fact that the
seriousness of the musical tone becomes spurious when

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associated with the show. In claiming to be something that is compatible with the picture, it loses all right to function as purely musical expression. In a conventional film, conventional, essentially spurious music can occasionally be 'truer' than genuine music, because the former at least does not degrade truth into an element of spuriousness.

One does not necessarily sanction the complacency of zealous writers of music when one holds that improvement of motion-picture music is inseparable from improvement of the motion picture, that it cannot be undertaken as an isolated specialized venture. However, the following considerations do not take the motion picture itself into account, and are deliberately confined to problems of motion-picture music that reflect the disease of the macrocosm of which it is part.

Technique and Spirit

Superficially considered, the defects of cinema music fall into two groups. First, there are the technical imperfections of all kinds: barbaric vestiges of the early period of motion pictures; avoidable irrationalities of management and working methods; backward machinery and procedures that are still used out of parsimony, despite the prevailing infatuation with inventions and gadgets—in brief, everything that is incompatible with the spirit of technological progress. Second, there are the defects stemming from social and economic sources: deference to the market, particularly to infantile and immature consumers whose bad taste is often enough a mere pretext for the producers; the unconscious will to conform and agree with established norms in every realm, even where the remotest problems of musical structure are concerned; the deep-rooted tendency to frustration—the consumer, instead of receiving something genuinely and substantially new, for which he may be unconsciously yearning, is fed on the endless repetition of the habitual. It is generally believed that the first group of defects might be corrected automatically with the growing rationalization of the industry—this would be progress consisting in the elimination of out-of-date and accidental elements; as for those of the second group, they are believed to be irremediable, and bound to grow in strength. The implicit critique of the motion picture as contained in Huxley's negative utopia, Brave New World, seems to reflect this judgment. In this novel, the talkies are superseded by the 'feelies,' which enable the spectator to experience all the physical sensations shown on the screen—he not only can sample the kisses of his favorite stars, but, greatest triumph of all, he can touch every single hair in the picture of a bear skin; but the content of the 'feelies' is completely moronic, even worse than that of today's pictures, if possible.

However plausible this prognosis may sound, however blatant the contradiction between the technique of reproduction and the content of the pictures, such interpretations oversimplify the facts of the case and lead to romantic distortions. Technical and intellectual inadequacies cannot be mechanically divided. Thus the phenomenon of neutralization discussed in chapter 5, which contributes so much to endowing motion-picture music with the character of a 'digest,' of material predigested by the machinery, and to bringing it down to the intellectual level of all the other elements involved, cannot be separated from the technique of the recording procedures; if the latter is thoroughly transformed, the meaning of the music and even its social bearing may very well be affected. On the other hand, the seemingly technical backwardness of motion-picture music as manifested in many ways, from the taboo against mod-
ern musical resources to the vested privileges of incompetent routinists, is determined by speculation on public taste, by the night-club hedonism of those in control, and by the peculiar social structure of the industry; and there is no symptom that the internal growth of the musico-technological forces automatically does away with all this.

Within the motion-picture concerns that have developed in planless competition, spirit and technique appear as alien to one another, and their relationship as one of blind arbitrariness. But socially, these two elements are connected by multiple channels, and although they contradict one another, they are inextricably mingled and interdetermined. The development of technology affects the spirit as much as the spirit affects the selection, direction, and impeding of technological processes. There is no absolute gulf between technical innovations and intellectual reforms, superficial changes and profound transformations, practical and utopian proposals. In a petrified and stationary system the most practical idea may seem eccentric, and at the same time the most extravagant fantasy can come close to realization, thanks to a sudden technical advance.

**Artistic Objectivity and Public**

We must repeat that the use of music in motion pictures should be inspired by objective considerations, by the intrinsic requirements of the work. However, after having shown in detail how preoccupation with the audience spoils cinema music, we wish to state here that the relation between the objective requirements and the effect on the audience is not one of simple opposition, and that there is an ingredient of truth in what the public expects of the cinema. Even under the regime of the industry, the public has not become a mere machine recording facts and figures; be-

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hind the shell of conventionalized behavior patterns, resistance and spontaneity still survive. To imagine that the demands of the public are always 'bad' and the views of the experts always 'good' is to indulge in dangerous oversimplification. It must not be forgotten that the notion of 'the expert' is part of the same machinery that has reduced art to an administrative and commercial matter. The argument of the advocates of the existing motion-picture music is: 'The people want to have it this way, otherwise the thing won't go'—in other words, they invoke the expert's appraisal of the audience, which always amounts to shrewd manipulation of the public. To subject cinema music to objective requirements is to represent the public's objective interests as against its manipulated interests, with regard to which the public is merely the customer.

Thus, the public's vague awareness that music should come to the aid of the picture, that it should 'motivate' the events on the screen, is legitimate. The industry takes this desire into account, but misuses the music in order to give a technically mediated factor the appearance of immediacy. This ideological function is so close to the true and genuine one that it is practically impossible to set up an abstract criterion for distinguishing between the objectively warranted use of music and its bad use for purposes of glorification. Likewise, the public's general attitude expresses both the human desire for music and the troubled need to escape, and no individual audience reaction can be subsumed under one or the other category. The only possible method is to determine in each individual case, on the basis of the function and nature of the music, to what extent it actually fulfills its mission or to what extent its humanity is used only to mask the inhuman.

A more specific principle is that the music should not
over-eagerly identify itself with the event on the screen or its mood, but should be able to assert its distance from them and thus accentuate the general meaning. But even such a use of music is not a panacea; the fraud might very well come in at that point. It will have to be decided in each case with what the music has identified itself and whether the identification—for instance, with the despair of the characters on the screen—is actually achieved or replaced with clichés, which temper this despair and bring it down to the level of conventionally allowed emotions. However, the public is always right in experiencing as boredom what was described, from an objective standpoint, as 'unrelated' music. Even here it should be noted that today almost every product of the cultural industry is objectively boring, but that the psycho-technique of the studios deprives the consumers of the awareness of the boredom they experience.

In the prevailing practice, the effect on the spectator is planned while the content of the music is planless. The situation should be reversed. The music should be planned without an eye for the effect, and then the public will get its due. Genuine planning is concerned with the relation between picture and music and the structure of the music itself. Today the music imitates the play on the screen, the picture, and yet the greater the effort to assimilate the two media the more hopelessly they are split apart. The important task is to establish fruitful tensions between them. A proper dramaturgy, the unfolding of a general meaning, would sharply distinguish among pictures, words, and music, and for that very reason relate them meaningfully to one another.

As compared to the prevailing conditions, the music should in some respects be brought closer to the motion picture and in other respects taken further from it. It should not be a mere additional stimulus, as it is in a farce with songs and dances, a kind of next course in a dinner, or another 'feature'; on the contrary, it should at every moment be an integral part of the picture as a whole. However, it should not be its automatic duplication, it should not decrease the distance between picture and spectator by creating moods; but by virtue of its character of immediacy—and music still possesses this character to a greater extent than any other art—it should stress the mediated and alienated elements in the photographed action and the recorded words, thus preventing confusion between reality and reproduction, a confusion that is all the more dangerous because the reproduction appears to be more similar to reality than it ever was.

'It's Non-commercial'

The film industry opposes objective innovations in the music chiefly on the ground that they would compromise box-office receipts and go against the public's wishes, which the industry has allegedly ascertained, although not even ordinary market research has been carried through in this field. The standard argument against modern music, 'it is non-commercial,' can be challenged on the ground that so-called non-commercial music has never been given a serious trial; that prejudice has made it impossible to discover whether it is really as non-commercial as all that, or whether on the contrary, by breaking through the universal boredom, it would not increase box-office receipts to the discomfort of the old timers. Take, for instance, Edmund Meisel's music to Potemkin. Meisel was only a modest composer, and his score is certainly not a masterpiece; however, it was non-commercial at the time it was written, it
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avoided the neutralizing clichés and preserved a certain striking power, however crude. Nevertheless there is not the slightest indication that its aggressiveness impaired its effectiveness to the public; on the contrary, its effectiveness was enhanced.

Other instances, too, prove that when, by way of exception, serious composers have been permitted to write for cinemas, there was no outbreak of panic among the audience. But until a large-scale experiment with advanced music, masterfully composed and constructed, is made within the big companies and their distributive apparatus—and is made without the mental reservation that it is destined only for highbrows—the thesis that decent and advanced music is non-commercial is nothing but an empty phrase, which serves only to cover up the laziness, slovenliness, and ignorance of vested privilege, and the abominable cult of the average.

New music could indeed be conspicuous, but only in a fundamentally transformed, de-standardized motion picture. The usual argument that new music is unsalable refutes itself when applied to the prevailing practice, for in today’s motion pictures the music is so little noticed that its nature is almost a matter of indifference. The average moviegoer is hardly ever aware of the music, and probably he would be even less aware of the degree of its modernism. This is, of course, no argument for the use of modern music, because it might easily be replied that since the type of music used is a matter of indifference, one might as well continue the existing state of affairs, and even add that radical music would only be dishonored if it were tolerated by the industry. However, such considerations involve the admission that the notion of ‘poison for the box office’ should not be taken as seriously as all that. And those who advocate

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attempts to carry out as many innovations as possible within the existing framework, to serve as an eventual starting point for a fundamentally changed motion picture, certainly have the right to insist that the experiments should also include resources and techniques that for the time being cannot fulfill their proper function, and even those that are still in a rudimentary phase of development.

Specificity and Routine

Whatever the nature of the resources used, motion-picture music should be specific, derived from the particular conditions of the given case, and should not be taken out of the storeroom, in the literal and figurative meaning of this term. When a director makes a picture of anti-Nazi resistance in a country invaded by Hitler, he takes great pains to see to it that the telephone receivers are exactly of the kind used in that country, and that the uniforms of the Elite Guards conform in every detail to the actual garb. Since this kind of surface accuracy is generally achieved at the cost of all genuine political and social plausibility, it is ridiculous and disgusting. But cinema music has not even reached the level of that accuracy. The question is not raised whether it coincides to some extent with even the most trivial interpretation of the subject, let alone whether it expresses any truth of a higher order. To grab what is nearest at hand is considered the best procedure when music is concerned—it is as though, in our example, the director dressed his Elite Guard leaders in the uniforms of the American Coast Guard, simply because they happened to be available.

In other words, motion-picture music falls short even of the miserable standards of the art of make-up, without having anything good by the fact that it lags behind the bad.
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Guerilla heroes in Hollywood garb may be spurious, but to accompany them with the music of a European masked ball of 1880 is more spurious. Before the emancipation of motion-picture music can be discussed at all, it must rid itself of the musical horse-and-buggy atmosphere. This does not mean that music would have to catch up with all the stupidities of literal imitation in order to acquire strength—for instance, that the Elite Guard in our example would have to bleat out the latest Nazi hit. But cinema music will not even begin to improve until every single sequence is treated with exact regard to its special function. Within the existing framework, the most important requirement is to cut through the associative automatism, which always employs a hackneyed type of music for a given sequence, according to the pattern: ‘let’s have more of the same.’ Even the worst music that escapes from this constraint would be better than the routine material that complies with it.

Another requirement, closely related to the preceding, is that no ‘rules of experience’ should be recognized until they have been tried out. When there is no genuine experience there can be no rules. Not even the habitual practices have been developed in a consistent and progressive manner. The approved rules are nothing but the definitions that circumscribe the musical horizon of the department heads. The struggle against them constitutes the composer’s martyrdom in his actual work. Now, one should not cherish any illusions about the alleged power of the personality in asserting itself against the industry. Nevertheless, one should not consider the composer’s struggle against common nonsense completely hopeless. For there is at least one realm in which the will of the low-grade businessman and that of the artist are commensurable over short stretches: the realm of technique. Those who have seen how orchestra players,

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who perform only reluctantly an advanced modern work under a conductor unsympathetic to and intellectually suspicious of modern music, change their attitude the moment they realize that another conductor knows the score and handles it with the same precision as a traditional one, and that it has meaning in his hands, know where the opportunity lies for an uncompromising composer in motion pictures. Masterful handling of resources carries a certain weight of its own, even when it is directed against every idea tolerated by the industry. Orchestra players are in spite of everything most sensitive to it, and their confidence spreads, under certain circumstances, to everyone concerned with the production of the picture.

The responsible composer can assert himself against convention once he gives striking proof that he knows more than the routinist. It is difficult to define in advance what this kind of knowledge is—it refers to a certain familiarity with the sensuous practical aspect of music, to the ability to ‘realize.’ To be sure, technical competence that arouses confidence can degenerate into professional automatism and lead to ultimate subordination to a routine; yet in it lies the only possibility of asserting the new. This possibility is enhanced by the circumstance that actually the critical and advanced musician is to a large extent also objectively more competent, even though he is often less ‘practical.’ It follows that the composer has the duty to translate all his aesthetic and dramatic insights, however speculative they may be, into technical problems. A good deal of the technology of the industrialized work of art is inflated and pretentious; but the composer proves his superiority only by measuring himself against technology, not by abstractly and nobly negating it. If he opposes to the director or producer general considerations about good and bad, modern and reactionary
music, he remains helpless, and his cause is ridiculed with him. But if, against the conventional ideas of his employers, he writes a composition more effective than the one they have imagined, which fulfils its function more exactly than the one they wanted him to compose, he may prevail.

Discretion

A fundamental requirement that taxes all of a composer’s sensitiveness is that he should not write a single sequence, not even a single note, that overlooks the social-technological prerequisite of the motion picture, namely, its nature as mass production. No motion-picture music should have the same character of uniqueness that is desirable in music intended for live performance. In other words, motion-picture music should not become the tool of pseudo-individualization.¹ But therein the greatest, almost insurmountable difficulties are involved. First of all, music, by its nature and origin, seems inseparable from the factor of uniqueness, the hic et nunc. The occurrence of the same music in different places at the same time, especially when the intimacy of the moment, its whim, so to speak, is emphasized, implies something that is almost anti-musical, as manifested most clearly in motion pictures of concerts.² As a matter of

¹ See p. 19.

² More generally, the question must at least be raised whether the technicalization of the work of art does not lead inevitably to the ultimate elimination of art. ‘Art still has a limitation within itself, and therefore passes into higher forms of conscious activity. . . We no longer hold art to be the highest mode in which truth acquires existence. . . With the progress of culture, every nation reaches a time in which art points beyond itself. . . Such a time is our own.’ (Hegel, Vorlesungen ueber die Aesthetik, vol. 1, 1842, p. 132.) In the second part of his Aesthetics Hegel discusses the tendency to self-dissolution historically inherent in art, and connects it with the progress of civilization. The following passage is directly relevant to the problems of the motion picture and aesthetic planning: ‘For the modern artist, to be bound to a particular content and a manner appropriate only

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fact, the motion picture itself consists of mass reproductions of unique events, and thus compels the composer to deal with individual situations, whose very nature resists such mass reproduction.

There is no sense in covering up such contradictions, the profoundest that confront motion-picture music, far beyond the bounds of the existing practices; on the contrary they should be made apparent. And since the composer cannot evade them, they should enter as an element into his music. The aim is to write music that abandons itself to its concrete occasion as ‘unique’—and this is the basic postulate of specific composing—but at the same time takes care not to seek its fulfilment in the triumph of intruding upon something ‘unique.’ One might almost say that the profoundest requirement of cinema music is that of ‘discretion’—namely that it should not behave indiscreetly with regard to its object, that it should not suggest close intimacy, but that on the contrary it should mitigate the inevitable impression of embarrassing closeness to an intimate event, which every motion picture produces. This is the contemporary form of musical ‘taste,’ and the picture itself can teach us something in this respect. Thus, the portrayal of the departure of a ship and the crowded pier is rightly considered more appropriate than close-ups of kisses; the reason for this is not prudishness, but the circumstance that in the ship scene the element of the uniqueness, of the hic et nunc, although present, is not as pronounced and does not affect the picture to the same extent as in the picture of a lover’s embrace. The cinema composer who in a sense is constantly to a given material, is a thing of the past. Thereby art has become a free instrument, which he can apply equally with regard to every content of whatever nature, according to the measure of his subjective skill.’ (Ibid. vol. n, p. 232.)
driven to behave in the manner of people kissing in public should heed this lesson. From the point of view of advanced composing, music illustrating a noisy crowd seems more appropriate than music illustrating an erotic scene. It is said that a contract with Stravinsky was cancelled because he stipulated that he would not illustrate any love scenes.

The paradox inherent in motion-picture music—the fact that it is both technified and obliged to have a character of uniqueness—if it is really as inevitable as it appears to be—leads to a fundamental consequence concerning the general attitude of the music. Being a ‘multipliable unique’ it is always supposed to achieve what it actually cannot achieve. It must give a hint to this situation unless it is blindly to succumb to this contradiction. In other words, motion-picture music must not take itself seriously in the same way as autonomous music does. Analysis of the most fundamental premises of motion-picture music thus confirms what we have inferred from the fact of its subordination to its purpose and the impossibility of its autonomous development. With some exaggeration it may be said that essentially all motion-picture music contains an element of humor, speaks with its tongue in its cheek, as it were, and that it degenerates into a bad kind of naïveté as soon as it forgets this element.

It is hardly an accident that the music for those pictures in which the idea of technification has made the greatest inroads on the function of music, that is, the cartoons, almost always takes on the aspect of a joke through the use of sound effects. The investigations made by the Film Music Project show that almost all new and unconventional solutions are based on ideas that are at least close to humorous elements. This should not be misunderstood. What is advocated here is not that the music as such should have a facetious character; on the contrary, it should make use of the whole gamut of expression. Nor should the music necessarily make mock of the events on the screen. The element of humor is rather to be found in the formal relation of the music to its object and in its function.

For instance (we refer here to an example studied by the Project), the music imitates caution. Actually, this is impossible; caution is a specific human behavior, and music cannot express it and accurately distinguish it from similar impulses without the help of concepts. The music is aware of this, and exaggerates itself in order to enforce the association of caution, which it actually cannot express. Thereby it ceases to take itself literally in its immediacy; it turns into a joke something that it cannot do seriously. By doing this, it suspends the claim of the physical immediacy of the hic et nunc, which is incompatible with its technological situation. By keeping itself at a distance, it also creates a distance from its place and hour.

Something of this element—the formal self-negation of music that plays with itself—should be present in every composition for motion pictures as an antidote against the danger of pseudo-individualization. The postulate of universal planning leads of itself to such functional jokes, which at the same time are inseparable from technification. The very fact that something is mechanically manufactured and is at the same time music objectively implies a comical element. Music will escape being comical involuntarily only by agreeing to be comical voluntarily. The formal facetious function is nothing but the awareness of music that it is mediated, technically produced, and reproduced. In a certain sense, every productive dramatic musical idea in the motion picture is a paradox. It hardly needs to be shown that such
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an affinity to jokes reflects the deepest unconscious tensions in the audience's reaction to motion-picture music.4

The same problem can be approached from a different angle—in relation to the effect of music, which is today the exclusive consideration, and which, despite its questionable-ness, is nevertheless always to some extent revealing objectively. Cinema music is not carefully listened to. If this fact is more or less accepted as an inevitable premise, the best of which has to be made, the aim will be to compose music that, even though it is listened to inattentively, can as a whole be perceived correctly and adequately to its function, without having to move along beaten associative tracks that help the listener to grasp the music, but block any adequate fulfilment of its function. The composer is thus faced with a new and strange task—that of producing something sensible, which at the same time can be perceived by way of parenthesis, as it slips by the listener. Such a requirement is closely related to that of music that does not take itself seriously. Good cinema music must achieve everything that it does achieve on the surface, so to speak; it must not become lost in itself. Its whole structure—and it needs structure more than any form of autonomous music—must become visible; and the more it adds the lacking

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depth dimension to the picture, the less it must itself develop in depth. This is not meant in the sense of musical ‘superficiality’; on the contrary it is precisely the procedure diametrically opposed to the superficial, fleeting, and comfortable convention. It implies the striving to make everything completely sensuous, in contrast to musical transcendence and inwardness. In technical terms, this means the predominance of movement and color over the musical depth dimension, harmony, which governs just the conventional patterns.

Cinema music should sparkle and glisten. It should attain the quick pace of the casual listening imposed by the picture, and not be left behind. Tonal colors can be perceived faster and with less effort than harmonies, unless the latter follow the tonal pattern and are therefore not registered at all as specific. Sparkling variation and coloristic richness are also most readily compatible with technification. By displaying a tendency to vanish as soon as it appears, motion-picture music renounces its claim that it is there, which is today its cardinal sin.

3 The problem of the comical potentialities of music is inseparable from the meaning of the motion picture itself. This is magnificently shown in the pictures of the Marx Brothers, who demolish an opera set as though to express allegorically the philosophic insight into the disintegration of the opera itself... or smash a grand piano and seize the framework and strings as a sample of the harp of the future... The main reason for the tendency of music to become comical in the present phase, is that something so completely useless should be practised with all the visible signs of strenuous serious work. The fact that music is alien to industrious people reveals their alienation with regard to one another, and the awareness of this alienation vents itself in laughter. (T. W. Adorno, 'Über den Fetisch-charakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens', in Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, vi, 1938, p. 353.) [The English translation is 'On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening', in Andrew Arato/Eike Gebhardt (eds.) The Essential Frankfurt School Reader (New York: Continuum, 1990) p. 297.]