

Musical Treasure Chest #47

My discussion last week of the 1930s Jeanette MacDonald/Nelson Eddy movies triggered a lot of thinking about other great classic film scores. Movie music scores are displays of the highest level of art of the past century. And symphonic and opera composers such as Korngold, Vaughan Williams, Walton, Prokofiev and others all contributed to the genre (particularly Korngold, who enjoyed a long and successful career in Hollywood after escaping from Nazi-held Austria in the 1930s). Many of the "studio" composers of the 1930-50s in America, were European born and trained musicians pursuing concert careers, who landed in Hollywood either through financial hardship or political escape. And because of their affiliation with movies, their names are still recognized and associated with the film industry.

But there is also a body of American-born film composers of this era such as Bernard Hermann, Victor Young, Elmer Bernstein and even Aaron Copland that contributed greatly to the development of the movie score. Two of my most-loved film scores are for wildly different genres of movies: the romantic-fantasy *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947) and the drama *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962).

Bernard Hermann had a distinguished career outside of the film studio. He attended Juilliard studying with Percy Grainger. By the age of 23 he was a staff conductor for the Columbia Broadcasting System and within the next decade worked himself up to music director of the CBS Symphony. In this role he conducted many important American premieres, including the Third Symphony of Charles Ives. Hermann's concert music was championed by Sir Thomas Beecham, Leopold Stokowski and Eugene Ormandy. Hermann's long professional relationship with both Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock produced several fabulous scores, including *Citizen Kane* and *Psycho*. But Hermann's personal favorite (and mine too) is the gorgeous *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*. The fantastic cast featured Gene Tierney as Lucy Muir and Rex Harrison as Captain Daniel Gregg. The music is glorious and captures the roiling sea, the romance and the eerie quality of the fantasy, as well as a bit of humor. Hermann has a brilliant

orchestra and his pairing of winds (particularly bass clarinet and contrabassoon) is brilliant. The ascending leitmotif sounds both uncanny and unsettling; it is also unforgettable.

I give you two links: one with the composer conducting the studio orchestra (you can hear him speak as it starts and it is just a short suite) the other with Elmer Bernstein conducting from the soundtrack.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHyXnEytO9g>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAiN9R1RAII>

Elmer Bernstein also was a finely trained musician, studying piano with Juilliard teachers and coming to the attention of Aaron Copland. During WWII, Bernstein worked as a composer for Armed Forces Radio. His career in Hollywood dates to the 1940s, where he began as a conductor and orchestra, and then started writing film scores in the early 1950s. His first notable project was for the 1956 *Ten Commandments*. Bernstein's career was quite broad, with work not only for the screen, but also for Broadway and television. His list of film scores is as wide genre-wise as it is long; even I am surprised that the composer of the *Magnificent Seven* score also wrote the music for *National Lampoon's Animal House* and both *Airplane* movies. The score of ***To Kill a Mockingbird*** falls relatively early in his career. Like Hermann, Bernstein is a brilliant and effective orchestrator, though there is perhaps a bit more edginess to his palette. The *Mockingbird* score begins simply, with a solo piano playing a folk-like melody that is joined soon by a harp and flute, only after this rather unassuming beginning does the full string section come in. There is a sense of unrest that permeates this score, and it marries perfectly with the action.

Here is the composer conducting the soundtrack. (I apologize if advertisements appear between the sections).

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zh-yXMdm77E&list=PLh3-](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zh-yXMdm77E&list=PLh3-icSKVfhnovULrVNXpN5Ozqnhzcjkk&index=4)

[icSKVfhnovULrVNXpN5Ozqnhzcjkk&index=4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zh-yXMdm77E&list=PLh3-icSKVfhnovULrVNXpN5Ozqnhzcjkk&index=4)