THE TROUBLE WITH LEITMOTIFS: AARON COPLAND AND THE HEIRESS (1949)

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ABSTRACT

GINA BOMBOLA: The Trouble with Leitmotifs: Aaron Copland and The Heiress (1949)
(Under the direction of Annegret Fauser)

Over the course of the 1930s, the standardization of film music in Hollywood progressed rapidly, and the sound tracks became dominated by an Austro-German Romantic idiom. When Aaron Copland first began scoring films in the late 1930s, romances, period pictures, dramas, and other film genres commonly featured sweeping love themes, thick contrapuntal textures, and lush orchestration. In his early writings on film music, however, Copland eschewed the Romantic tropes utilized by most studio composers, specifically deriding the leitmotif as trite and overused. Yet when Copland revised his views on appropriate film-scoring methods in an article published in 1949, he made no mention of leitmotifs. That same year, too, he devised a plan to use leitmotifs when scoring William Wyler’s psychological melodrama, The Heiress. This thesis explores the shift in Copland’s views on appropriate film-scoring techniques between 1940 and 1950, and seeks to address his use of leitmotifs in The Heiress.
Preface

When Aaron Copland began scoring films in the late 1930s, an Austro-German Romantic idiom dominated the American silver screen. Copland, however, believed that this uniform style could be detrimental to the future of film music and therefore championed a more realistic and varied approach to film composition. In his early writings on film music, Copland protested against the Romantic tendencies of film scores, specifically eschewing “overused” compositional techniques such as “Mickey-Mousing” and leitmotifs.¹ Additionally, he attributed the increasing standardization of film music to the “conservative” tastes of studio executives. Advocating for the film composer’s artistic freedom, Copland promoted the possibility for film music to be seen as a creative endeavor rather than a chiefly commercial product.²

For his own career, Copland determined that the medium of film offered the potential both to enlarge his audience and to stabilize himself financially. He also believed that film music could function as a means of music appreciation and saw the opportunity to introduce the general public (beyond the concert audience) to the aesthetics of modern music.³ Indeed,

¹ “Mickey-Mousing” refers to music that mimics or illustrates the physical actions seen on the screen. For more on “Mickey-Mousing,” see Claudia Gorbman, Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 88.

² Movies were branded as commercial products while producers were believed primarily to be interested in accruing profit. During the 1930s, the novelty of “talking” pictures began to subside, and the economic effects of the Great Depression partially contributed to a decline in movie attendance. By 1933, approximately one-third of the movie theaters in the U.S.A. had shut down. See Mervyn Cooke, A History of Film Music (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 67.

³ See pp. 22–24 of this thesis for more on modern music.
Copland’s first two film scores for *Of Mice and Men* (1939) and *Our Town* (1940) exemplified his ideal idiom: a modern yet accessible style of music that reflected American nationalism. Yet as Copland became more financially secure—thanks in part to substantial compensation for his film scores—he directed his attention to composing more “serious” music: art music. With the exception of *The North Star* (1943), Copland did not return to Hollywood until he began scoring *The Red Pony* (1948) and, later that same year, *The Heiress* (1949).

The case study of this thesis focuses on *The Heiress*, a psychological melodrama set in antebellum New York City. Directed by acclaimed director-producer William Wyler and based on the eponymous novel by Henry James, *The Heiress* chronicles the ill-fated love affair between an excruciatingly shy and plain heiress and a fortune-hunting suitor. Unlike the Americana narratives Copland had become used to scoring, *The Heiress* had a plot driven by the protagonist’s psychological development. The film required a musical treatment unfamiliar to the composer, and, deciding to experiment with something new, Copland accepted Wyler’s offer. However, after receiving the first half of the film to score (with the rest to follow when shooting had been completed), Copland found the assignment to be more difficult than he had originally expected. He eventually devised a plan to assign leitmotifs—a technique he formerly claimed as trite and overused in Hollywood—to each principal character to “be developed as the drama unfolded.”

This thesis identifies a shift in Copland’s perspectives on the functions of, and appropriate methods for, film composition between 1941 and 1949—a shift which aligns with changes occurring in film-industry production during and after World War II. As evidenced by an article published in the *New York Times* in 1949, Copland’s views on

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appropriate compositional techniques for film had adapted and expanded since the late 1930s and early 1940s. Unlike his early writings in which he clearly disdained the leitmotif, Copland did not comment on this compositional technique in his article from 1949. Unfortunately, scholarly discussions of Copland’s film music tend to gloss over his use of leitmotifs in *The Heiress* and, moreover, rarely link it to the transition taking place in Hollywood during the 1940s. By situating Copland’s use of leitmotifs within this historical frame, I posit that his motives may partially be understood as a reaction to the changing environment within the broader film industry.

Chapter 1 of this thesis explores the context in which Copland first began composing for films. I provide a brief historical summary of film music from silent film through the late 1930s in order to examine the standardization of the classical film score. Additionally, I compare the (then) customary practices of film composition with Copland’s own views on appropriate approaches to scoring films. In Chapter 2, I compare Copland’s public and private views on film composition by examining both his business and personal correspondence. I seek to illustrate the subtleties between Copland’s publicly professed goals for film music as a potential artistic venture and his privately held views of film music as a source of financial security. In addition, I consider the shifts in Copland’s views on film scoring between 1940 and 1950. Chapter 3 examines the collaboration between William Wyler and Copland on *The Heiress*. I explore Copland’s potential motivations for using leitmotifs in the score in connection with his modified perspectives on film composition.

In writing my thesis, I relied greatly on archival materials retained in the Aaron Copland Collection at the Library of Congress, focusing on Copland’s writings, correspondence, interviews, film scores, and reviews of his film music. Also, before I had
access to the score for *The Heiress*, I consulted James Lochner’s transcriptions of the film’s leitmotifs. After studying the condensed scores found in the Copland Collection, however, I was able to supplement the materials identified by Lochner with a further element in *The Heiress*’s leitmotifs: Copland’s original harmonic material for the “Sloper Residence” motive. Additionally, the excerpt of “The Appointment” is my own. I use the following abbreviations to cite the use of archival materials: the Aaron Copland Collection, ACC, and the Leonard Bernstein Collection, LBC.

I would like to thank my advisor, Annegret Fauser, without whom I could not have accomplished this project. I am very grateful for her encouragement, insight, and clear focus on the “bigger picture,” especially when it became challenging for me to see beyond the details. Also, thanks to my committee: Tim Carter, whose suggestions and advice encouraged me to dig ever deeper into the archives, and Chérie Rivers Ndaliko, whose seminar made me think about film music in an entirely new way. I would also like to thank James and Lilian Pruett for their support; as a recipient of the James W. Pruett Summer Research Fellowship at the Library of Congress, I enjoyed spending a summer processing archival collections in the Music Division of the Library of Congress and conducting research for my thesis. I am also grateful for the faculty and my colleagues in the Department of Music at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their constant support as well as their encouragement to pursue music in the first place.
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Chapter 1

Copland, Hollywood, and the Classical Film Score

In an article printed in the *New York Times* on 10 March 1940, Aaron Copland stated: “The quickest way to a person’s brain is through his eye but even in the movies the quickest way to his heart and feelings is still through the ear.” With one documentary and two feature films under his belt, Copland’s ventures into film composition underpinned a series of articles on what the composer considered to be the “ideal” of a film score—what film music should or should not do—establishing an aesthetic position on appropriate approaches to film scoring from the authoritative stance of a serious art-composer. He contributed articles to newspapers such as the *New York Times* and gave university lectures on the topic, discussing the potential artistic heights that film music might reach. Presenting himself as a rational individual familiar with the ins and outs of film composition—yet distinguishing himself from the standard Hollywood film composer—Copland advocated changes to the standardized practices of film composition within the studio system. Since then, Copland has been heralded for his public criticism of the film-music conventions that developed in Hollywood during the Golden Years. Indeed, he garnered the reputation as the individual who opened the doors for film composers to break away from the standardized musical practices that had come to dominate the American silver screen in the 1930s and 1940s.

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In this chapter, I want to enrich the context in which Copland began both scoring films and writing about appropriate methods for film composition. I am delineating the origins of the studio system, focusing specifically on how music departments operated in Hollywood during the 1930s. In this brief historical summary, I will show that film studios operated like factories, wherein individual departments functioned as units within the larger “industry.” Additionally, I will illustrate how film scoring rapidly became a standardized process and explain how certain compositional techniques such as the leitmotif came to dominate the Hollywood film score. Understanding the mold created by film composers such as Max Steiner and Erich Korngold is an important precondition for analyzing Copland’s objections to the Romantic musical idiom that dominated early cinema. What changes did Copland wish to see take place in Hollywood in regard to the film-scoring process? What were Copland’s views on appropriate approaches to film composition and how did this compare to, and contrast with, the system already in place in Hollywood studios in the 1930s and early ’40s? Furthermore, what were Copland’s goals or motivations for composing for films? This overview provides a framework for the remainder of the thesis by presenting the customary practices of film-scoring collaboration as well as the musical formulas against which Copland publicly protested.

Film-Music Theories and the Development of the Classical Cinema

In the first few years following the premiere of *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and the advent of “talking” pictures, film music became a subject of contestation. Whereas musical accompaniment had played a major role during the silent-film era, the arrival of sound film
negatively affected music’s value as an important cinematic element. In part, sound assumed a subordinate role to the cinematic image because it was a later development in film technology. Early recording technology presented a challenge to engineers, who struggled to strike a balance between a film’s dialogue, ambient noise, and music. When dialogue prevailed as the prioritized sound, music became an afterthought. As director Alfred Hitchcock stated, “Producers and directors were obsessed by words. They forgot that one of the greatest emotional factors in the [era of] silent cinema was the musical accompaniment.”

During this period of early recording technologies, many claimed that a noticeable score detracted from a film because it presented a distraction for the viewer: how could one pay attention to both dialogue and music at the same time?

Film scholar Kathryn Kalinak posits that the bias toward the visual over the aural was also rooted in historical theories of cognition and sensory perception. According to Kalinak, film theory reproduces this bias by prioritizing the visual at the expense of the aural. In Settling the Score, she traces the hierarchy of sensory perceptions from ancient Greek theories of cognitive processes to nineteenth-century scientific discourses related to the theory of audition. Because the ancient Greeks believed that visual perception was both faster

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6 Silent-film accompaniment fulfilled multiple functions: it covered the noise of the projector; it provided a sense of continuity and smoothed over awkward transitions or abrupt cuts; it provided a sense of underlying rhythm; and it created a sense of unity for a film’s narrative. See Kathryn Kalinak, Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 40–65.

7 Sally Bick, “Composers on the Cultural Front: Aaron Copland and Hanns Eisler in Hollywood” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2001), 38.


10 Kalinak, Settling the Score, 20.
and more reliable than aural perception, they valued the act of seeing over the act of hearing. However, they maintained that hearing elicited stronger emotional responses than any other sense. Kalinak points out that these philosophies established a model for understanding sensory perception that would linger well into the nineteenth century. According to her research, nineteenth-century scientific discourse reveals an ideological subtext underpinning the study of acoustics: objectivity was preferred to subjectivity. And since hearing was believed to retain stronger ties to subjectivity than seeing, it was perceived as more uncertain. This “historical legacy” became absorbed into classical film theory, sparking ongoing debates about the hierarchy of image and sound that would continue well into the twentieth century.

By the mid-1930s, technical innovations expanded the role of music in motion pictures. Through the use of multi-channel mixers, engineers exercised significant control over the balance of dialogue, sound effects, and music. The once-prevalent fear that music might obscure a film’s dialogue was no longer an issue, although the relationship between a film’s visual image and sound was still in flux.

For example, Russian composer and theorist Leonid Sabeenev addressed this unsettled relationship in his book *Music for the Films* (1935). In a chapter on the aesthetics of sound film, he posited that music could provide a film with an added dose of reality by enhancing its psychological undertones. He also explored the inherent “naturalness” of film,

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11 Ibid., 21.
12 Ibid., 23.
13 Ibid., 24.
stating that both the visual image and its sound components were considered to be reproducions of “certain natural phenomena.” That is, film was perceived as a reflection or representation of things that actually happen in real life. However, the general public also acknowledged that cinema belonged to a realm of fantasy and was therefore considered to be a reproductive art. Consequently, films invited their audiences to suspend their disbelief and enter a realm of “fictive reality.” According to Sabeenev, music helped to reinforce the visual reality of a film by “diegetic” and “non-diegetic” means. He pointed out that the new multi-track recording technology opened up possibilities for non-diegetic music to exist “under” dialogue and create “a certain background in the subconsciousness of the listening spectator.” Since the volume of a music track could now be adjusted so that it did not interfere or disrupt a film’s dialogue, background music—which became known as the “underscore”—could serve as a “psychological resonator” that enhanced the narrative on the screen and augmented emotional passages.

Film composers such as Max Steiner and Erich Korngold experimented with and developed the underscore, expanding its length and codifying certain compositional techniques (such as recurring themes or leitmotifs) for increased unity and musical coherence. Musicologists James Wierzbicki, Nathan Platte, and Colin Roust posit that studio executives—prompted by the box-office success in the early 1930s of films produced by David O. Selznick and featuring music by Steiner—quickly realized that underscores could

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15 Sabeenev, “Aesthetics of the Sound Film,” 213.

16 These two terms have frequently been debated by scholars, but in this particular example they refer to sound located within the film’s narrative and sound added to the film’s narrative.

17 Sabeenev, “Aesthetics of the Sound Film,” 216.

18 Ibid.
serve their products well.  

Hollywood thus became a center of musical activity, offering composers the opportunity to compose original works for a specialized medium. As film composition became more and more standardized, however, contemporary theories of musical meaning, sonic effectiveness, and the hierarchy between image and sound became more commonly contested.

When Copland joined the ranks of Hollywood composers in the late ’30s, he entered the ongoing debate among filmmakers and composers over the function and style of film music. Articles written by both art and film composers frequently articulated the barriers that the Hollywood studio system posed for artistic creativity or musical experimentation. Within this context, filmmakers reputedly stood in the way of composers who sought to free film music from the oppression of nineteenth-century musical traditions. Moreover, composers such as Copland challenged the views of critics who still believed that a film score should be “screened and not heard.”

Copland has been celebrated for challenging Hollywood’s compositional conventions, paving the way for film composers to explore non-traditional musical idioms and scoring approaches. Evidence suggests, however, that Copland was but one voice amongst many. A survey of composers’—and even directors’—commentaries between 1935 and 1941 reveals common themes regarding the multiple functions of film music: that film music should 1) enhance the narrative; 2) heighten emotional impact and dramatic interest; 3) provide continuity between scenes; 4) provide atmosphere of time period or place; 5)

\[19\] Wierzbicki, Platte, and Roust, eds., *Routledge Film Music Sourcebook*, 91.

\[20\] Ibid.

\[21\] Copland, “The Aims of Music for Films.”
regulate the rhythm of a scene; 6) remain subordinate to a film’s imagery and dialogue; and 7) lend a sense of cohesion to an entire film through music’s overall style and recurring themes.\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, the regularity with which these themes appear in source materials demonstrates that film music had still not completely settled into a normative practice.

In general, it was accepted that music could heighten a film’s emotional impact and dramatic interest—although most did not necessarily agree on the best methods for doing so. Composers such as Steiner and Korngold promoted composing in a nineteenth-century symphonic style, which became the dominant musical idiom in Hollywood during the ’30s. Composers such as Virgil Thomson, George Antheil, and Copland strongly opposed this Austro-German approach. They argued that the uniform style was boring, sounded trite, and did not work well with every type of film. As Copland stated, there needed to be more musical “differentiation” between pictures:

Most scores, as everybody knows, are written in the late nineteenth-century symphonic style, a style now so generally accepted as to be considered inevitable. But why need movie music by symphonic? And why, oh, why, the nineteenth century? Should the rich harmonies of Tschaikovsky, Franck, and Strauss be spread over every type of story, regardless of time, place, or treatment? For \textit{Wuthering Heights}, perhaps yes. But why for \textit{Golden Boy}, a hard-boiled, modern piece?\textsuperscript{23}

Like Copland, Antheil argued against the indiscriminate use of Romantic clichés:

I detest the European method of scoring... For European music usually plays so completely “against” the film to which it is “set,” that one cannot imagine why it was placed there, except, perhaps, for the very good reason that the film composer had an octet, a symphony, and a couple of string quartets.

\textsuperscript{22} Wierzbicki, Platte, and Roust, eds., \textit{Routledge Film Music Sourcebook}, 91.

tucked away, and so decided that this sound track was as good an occasion to get them heard as any other.24

Thus, these composers advocated for a new musical idiom that would more directly serve both the film as an artistic genre and the specific needs of each individual motion picture.

Furthermore, some opposed the Hollywood convention of using music to illustrate specific actions seen on the screen; rather, they advocated musical continuity. For example, Virgil Thomson negatively responded to “Mickey-Mousing,” proposing instead that music could help provide a sense of continuity in a film by establishing and preserving “an atmosphere, a tone of augmenting or unrolling drama.”25 Instead of mirroring a film’s many cuts and changes in scene, music could help smooth over these abrupt disruptions by grounding the plot in its overarching sonic narrative.26 On the side of the directors, Alfred Hitchcock, too, contended that music could express the mood of a scene rather than simply mimicking what was seen on the screen; he posited that music could instead be used to support the psychological element of films.27 Both Hitchcock and Thomson indicated that atmospheric music should create excitement, heighten tension, provide background to scenes set “in any mood,” and serve as commentary to the film’s dialogue.28


Producers versus Composers

In less than a decade, motion picture production had quickly become a standardized process. Hollywood studios operated similarly to an industrial factory system—which focused on extreme specialization of labor—and consisted of several departments that each retained a specific function (e.g., costumes and set design). In effect, studios became hierarchical institutions whose management controlled every aspect of film production, including the film score. Compared to a studio’s production chiefs and musical directors who ultimately made decisions on edits and the final product, composers maintained surprisingly little control over their music. Consequently, a film’s soundtrack could be shaped by those who were not necessarily musically knowledgeable. By the early 1940s, anecdotes about the musical ignorance of producers flourished in music circles. As mentioned by both Kathryn Kalinak and Mervyn Cooke in their histories of film music, many of these tales became legendary: one producer requested that Hugo Friedhofer use French horns for a film set in France; another liked Brahms’ music so much that the producer proposed they fly Brahms out to Hollywood; and still another asked that a solo flute play a passage of chordal accompaniment.

For his part, Copland advocated against studio involvement in the creation of film scores early on, even though he had experienced an unusual amount of freedom and flexibility when scoring *Of Mice and Men* (1939) and *Our Town* (1940). In the *New York

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29 Bick, “Composers on the Cultural Front,” 46. See also Cooke, *History of Film Music*, 69–73.

30 Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, 75.


32 Copland, “The Aims of Music for Films.”
Times article from 1940, Copland alluded to the film composer’s problems with the reputedly stifling directives of producers:

Of Mice and Men gave me my first opportunity to understand the problems and possibilities of composing for a major film. There is a tradition that composers are invariably frustrated in Hollywood and never allowed to do just what they want, but here, at least, is one exception. Maybe I was lucky; there are definite advantages in writing for an independent producer like Hal Roach. There is no musical director to act as middleman between the composer and studio bosses and who is therefore reluctant to approve any experimental innovations. Lewis Milestone, the director, expressed his confidence in the composer he had chosen by issuing no advance instructions. I appreciated that. 33

As Copland pointed out, he gained his knowledge from hearsay in the Hollywood community rather than personal experience; the “tradition” in the industry was that all composers were frustrated because they could not compose as they wished. Even though Copland did not experience this seeming travesty himself, he established his position as one who was knowledgeable about—and therefore as one who could sympathize with—the average working conditions of the film composer.

More importantly, however, Copland’s story reveals his conviction that Hollywood’s pursuit of financial gain posed a threat to the composer’s artistic individuality. Indeed, as a composer who valued artistic creativity and experimentation, Copland opposed “interference” by those whose vision for the score may have conflicted with the musical aspirations of the film composer. Clearly, Copland’s experiences as an art-composer affected his outlook of working in films as he pointed out during a lecture, also in 1940, at the Museum of Modern Art:

[It] is a very hard blow to a composer because a composer generally likes to feel that he is the center of things. He liked to feel that people have come to the hall to hear what he has to say, an expression of his soul, and it is hard for

33 Ibid.
him to take this feeling he has in Hollywood that the music, after all, is only there to help the picture and the composer must, of necessity, keep himself in the background.\(^3^4\)

While Copland admitted that “film music is not concert music, and listening to film music is not like listening to a concert,” he struggled with the fact that music played such a subordinate role in film and that the composer’s work therein was not necessarily acknowledged to the same degree as with a piece composed for the concert hall.\(^3^5\)

In response to Copland’s article, Marian Hannah Winter suggested the following year that his assertion of expertise on the subject of film music might have been somewhat presumptuous, especially when considering his inexperience in the field. Indeed, she found Copland’s attitude fairly conceited and his approach to scoring films somewhat problematic. Although she generally seemed to approve of Copland’s ventures into film composition, she noted that they were not perfect by any means. Winter stated, for example, that Copland’s score for *Of Mice and Men* came off as “unperceptive film music” due to his “apparent conviction that films have no sustained and constant rhythm of their own, and need an evangelical saviour in the guise of [the] composer.”\(^3^6\) Winter’s main contention with Copland’s belief in the artistic primacy of the composer seemed to stem from her conviction that film was its own art form: filmmakers were artists, too—not just the composer. Film composers therefore needed to show “humility,” especially since their artistic endeavors would become subsumed into the greater artwork of the film itself.\(^3^7\) As for Copland, Winter

\(^3^4\) Aaron Copland, Talk on Film Music at the Museum of Modern Art, 10 January 1940 (Library of Congress Digital Archive), 6.

\(^3^5\) Ibid.


\(^3^7\) Ibid.
noted that “probably further work in the medium will temper Copland’s lack of restraint and pretentiousness.”

Yet why did Copland seem to object so strongly to the involvement of studio producers in regard to the film score? It seems logical that the producer would want the composer’s interpretation of the film to match his own vision. Moreover, a producer’s guidance might have proven important for the film composer, particularly during scenes in which the visual and narrative stimuli may have come across as somewhat ambiguous. However, according to Copland, producers existed as a kind of “dictator” whose “ignorance” about music perpetuated the “low quality” of contemporary film music: “The trouble is not so much that these producers consider themselves musical connoisseurs but that they claim to be accurate barometers of public taste. ‘If I can’t understand it, the public won’t.’”

Copland saw this as a flawed form of claiming artistic authority based on common sense. Instead he maintained that if producers hired competent composers to score their films, then they should “have sufficient confidence in the composer to let him decide what is best for the film. After all, the composer is not that naive. He has a pretty good idea what his audience understands about music. he is not completely in a fog, and the only way to get the best out of any artist is to let him alone.” Yet we can also see that a power struggle factored into Copland’s argument. In Copland’s opinion, the composer should be allowed to control

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38 Ibid.

39 Copland, Our New Music, 262. See also Copland, Talk on Film Music, 28, in which he states: “So it is very serious about this problem of the producers. A producer can be made frightfully unhappy if he gets a composer who is not ‘in the know,’ who is on the naive side. I heard about one producer who told the composer who worked for him—this is just hearsay—it sounds like the straight stuff—‘I admit frankly I don’t know anything about music, but I am sure I know just about as much as the public knows about music. You better put music to this film that I can understand, and if I cannot understand it, the public with not understand it.’”

40 Copland, Talk on Film Music, 29.
most musical decisions, and producers should not try to tell the composer “what kind of music to write” for the film.\textsuperscript{41} Still, Copland was not entirely against input from directors or producers: “It is all right... for the director and producer to discuss in advance with the composer the idea, what they are trying to get across in a particular scene. It is even all right to say—write some kind of music that will intensify the idea, make it more effective, more climactic.”\textsuperscript{42} Copland seems to have been most irritated by producers who told composers to imitate someone else’s work: “They ought not to say, ‘like the theme in the other picture.’”\textsuperscript{43} This would undoubtedly have conflicted with Copland’s belief in individual expression. Indeed, this particular point seems to have been the crux of the matter. For example, Copland proposed that, in regard to film music, Hollywood should take its cues from the practices of European film composers. According to Copland, the composers that worked in the European film industry “are all composers primarily, and film composers in the second place. That is wiser, because if you want music with personality, with individuality, you’ve got to go to a composer who has an individuality of his own, and if you just take somebody who is very competent on a composer staff, you are bound to get something that is an imitation of something else. For a real serious film score you had better go to a real serious composer.”\textsuperscript{44}

Moreover, Copland determined that the hierarchical structure of the studios negatively impacted film music. Producers, he believed, were a “limitation” to the film composer. According to Copland, film composers were more concerned with pleasing their bosses than anyone else:

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 35–36.
I find that composers out there who live there and make their living by writing movie music, and are thoroughly established, are enormously conscious, not so much of the movie public and what they will think, but of the producer and what he thinks, because in his hands lies their well-being. It is the producer who decides, and that is very important to somebody who has a house and tennis courts and all the other things that composers don’t usually invest in.45

To Copland, the studio system smothered an individual’s artistic expression and creativity by establishing an environment which promoted financial gain over the advancement of art.

**Romantic Idiom and Leitmotifs in Film Scores**

In his writings on film music, Copland may come across as harsh in his condemnation of certain Hollywood film practices. However, he seemed not to be as disturbed by the quality of the musical production as he was by the “unvarying style” of the film score:

> From a technical, almost mechanical, standpoint there is no doubt that the usual Hollywood scores are perfection itself. Their artistic weaknesses have been pointed out so often that they hardly bear repeating, but perhaps their most annoying fault is their stubborn similarity. No matter what the period of a picture is, or its setting and story, the average musical background is intrinsically the same, usually in the lush tradition of the late nineteenth century.46

Yet how and why did this post-Romantic idiom come to dominate the Hollywood film score so rapidly?

First, it stemmed from the traditions of the silent-film era. As Kalinak indicates, accompanists decided on what to play by relying on their own “acumen and experience in discerning a scene’s content” and/or by referring to musical encyclopedias assembled specifically for the motion pictures.47 These encyclopedias contained numerous examples of


46 Copland, “The Aims of Music for Films.”

47 Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, 60.
music selections, both transcriptions from the classical canon and originally composed music associated with particular emotions or common narrative sequences. Kalinak notes that the “basis of the conventional practice established in these texts was a body of collective musical associations largely derived from nineteenth-century Western European art music.” Much of the compiled scores and cues for silent films drew on the classical repertoire for “proven examples of music fitted to narrative situation,” derived from opera and program music by composers such as Liszt, Puccini, Rossini, Richard Strauss, Tchaikovsky, Verdi, and Weber. When talking pictures became the status quo in the late 1920s, the musical traditions conceived in the silent-film era retained their influence.

By the 1930s, early film composers such as Max Steiner and Erich Korngold had emigrated from Europe, bringing their musical traditions to Hollywood and infusing the underscore with Austro-German Romanticism. Moreover, some studio producers such as David O. Selznick believed that film was an art form and that film music consequently needed to reflect this construction of high art as well. To Selznick, music composed in a Romantic idiom did just that for his motion pictures.

On the other hand, the perpetuation of a post-Romantic style stemmed in part from a business-like approach to film production as well as the condensed time span in which composers were expected to score a film. After the shooting of a film was completed, composers were allotted four to six weeks to finish the score. Because film shoots typically

48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 61.
50 Ibid.
51 Wierzbicki, Platte, and Roust, eds., Routledge Film Music Sourcebook, 91.
fell behind schedule, however, the time set aside for the composer was often shortened. Since the delayed release of a film could result in lost revenue for a studio, composers resorted to a limited repertoire of musical formulas.

One such compositional technique that dominated early sound-film scores was the use of recurring themes to unify the score. A holdover from opera and the silent-film era, leitmotifs became widely used amongst film composers, most notably by Steiner. Kalinak suggests that Wagnerian opera provided the “most direct model” for the silent-film accompanist due to its continuous musical expression and use of the leitmotif as a unifying structural device.\(^{52}\) In addition, Wagner’s theories of Gesamtkunstwerk that did not prize one element of opera over another provided a popular model for the relationship between music and spectacle.\(^{53}\) Kalinak posits that “the notion that the silent film score should be a structurally integral discourse with a unity separate from that imposed by the narrative” relates to Wagner’s concept of leitmotifs as unifying material within a narrative.\(^{54}\) In the 1930s, therefore, the maxim that a score should function, in part, as a means of providing a cohesive structure for a film derived from the musical practices of the silent-film era. Consequently, the adoption of the leitmotif by early film composers quickly became a standardized practice.

What distinguishes the leitmotif as it was used in talking films versus silent-film accompaniment is its function and length. During the silent-film era, leitmotifs tended to be longer, which, as Kalinak indicates, derived from the nature of the silent film when musical

\(^{52}\) Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, 63.
\(^{53}\) Ibid.
\(^{54}\) Ibid.
accompaniment was continuously played.\textsuperscript{55} Substantial musical themes often functioned as aural identifiers. As early as 1910, leitmotifs were associated with individual characters, and, by 1920, Edith Lang and George West had published a film-score manual that specified appropriate uses for the leitmotif: “This theme should be announced in the introduction, it should be emphasized at the first appearance of the person with whom it is linked, and it should received its ultimate glorification, by means of tonal volume, etc., in the finale of the film.”\textsuperscript{56} With the invention of sound film, the leitmotif became shorter in length although it was still associated with individual characters.\textsuperscript{57}

According to Copland, however, studio composers utilized “Wagnerian” leitmotifs too indiscriminately in their scores.\textsuperscript{58} By this, Copland meant the association of each character with their own theme. The “pet Hollywood formula” appears to have especially irritated him:

I haven’t made up my mind whether the public is conscious of this device [the leitmotif] or completely oblivious to it, but I can’t see how it is appropriate to the movies. It may help the spectator sitting in the last row of the opera house to identify the singer who appears from the wings for the orchestra to announce her motif. But that’s hardly necessary on the screen.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 64.


\textsuperscript{57} Kalinak, \textit{Settling the Score}, 64.

\textsuperscript{58} See Cooke, \textit{History of Film Music}, 80–84. The term “Wagnerian” is much debated in film scholarship. As Cooke points out, “Some commentators... strongly objected to film composers’ apparent obsession with leitmotifs because it departed from a (widely misunderstood) Wagnerian model, few apparently realizing that Wagner’s own deployment of them had been remarkably flexible and undogmatic, and that he himself never used the term.” See also James Wierzbicki, \textit{Film Music: A History} (New York: Routledge, 2009), 143–45.

\textsuperscript{59} Copland, \textit{Our New Music}, 266. I believe that Copland is specifically referring to motives which represent a specific character.
Copland’s main point seems to be that the visual elements of a film are easily seen by any audience member. Thus, the music does not need to “tell” the viewer what they already know. Leitmotifs, he contended, had become a mere formula that was applied “almost mechanically” to most films. He did not seem to think that it was a creative approach to creating a film score, but acknowledged that the limited amount of time in which composers were expected to finish a score may have been one of the reasons why the leitmotif became so widely used: “It is a rather easy solution, as a matter of fact, if you are in an awful rush, or if you are doing music for two different films at the same time. All you have to do—when your main character comes on the screen, you conceive a theme which seems to belong to him. Every time he comes on the screen, you get his theme in some form or another.”\(^6\) Even so, Copland adamantly argued that he did not think it a “wise solution” for film music and that it must be “discouraged” as it was simply a “mere hangover” from the days of Wagner and the music drama.\(^6\) Instead, he proposed that if one had to compose themes, one should connect them with ideas rather than with characters.\(^6\) That is, an overarching narrative element of the plot could be associated with a musical theme.\(^6\)

Because motion pictures required considerable financial investment, producers and directors tended to embrace the styles of music with which they were familiar. As a result, they most likely believed that it was “good business” to endorse the established patterns of

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60 Copland, Talk on Film Music, 15–16.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 16.

63 Ibid., 16–17. The example that Copland offered in this talk was the theme of “sickness” or the “meaning of being sick.” He proposed that it would be acceptable to write a musical theme that made the listener “sympathize with or be sympathetic to the idea of being sick” because the music would convey a “broader meaning” rather than the simple tagging of a character with a theme.
film music. Why change a “presumably profitable” business practice? Preferring the comfortable melodies and tonal harmonies heard in nineteenth-century music, many studio executives avoided the more unfamiliar, modern musical styles of the twentieth century. Although some composers expressed interest in exploring more recent compositional idioms, musical experimentation was generally viewed as an unnecessary risk by movie moguls. Consequently, many composers outside the industry came to view film music as commercial and conventional rather than an expression of individual artistry.

By the late 1930s, however, change came to Hollywood in the guise of a new modern aesthetic. Copland saw this as a product of the times: a modern age needed modern music. According to him, young composers simply had “had their fill” of Austro-German Romanticism by 1920: “You couldn’t write a piece and get rid of this kind of heavy, romantic flavor. You couldn’t write with ease, I mean, without having to deal with this thing that we had, so to speak, on our backs and couldn’t get off. Because Wagner was a terrific fellow and filled the whole scene during his period for a number of years later.” In Copland’s opinion, Romantic music was too “overly-expressive, bombastic, and long-winded,” lacking in “freshness” and opportunities for musical innovation. However, his training in the French school as one of Nadia Boulanger’s students undoubtedly informed his taste in music. As Carol Oja notes, French-influenced American composers such as Copland

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64 Frederick W. Sternfeld, “Copland As a Film Composer,” *Musical Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (April 1951): 163.
65 Ibid., 163.
66 Kalinak, *Settling the Score*, 78.
67 Aaron Copland, Television interview by Edwin Newman, *WNBC: Speaking Freely*, 6 April 1969, Box 218, Folder 13, ACC.
68 Aaron Copland, Radio script, *WABC (Columbia Broadcasting Symphony): Howard Barlow Series*, 2 June 1940, Box 216, Folder 41, ACC.
valued the aesthetic of contemporary French music which they reflected in their music through economical means of expression, thin textures, and well-ordered structures. Thus, Copland’s advocacy for a new film-music style clearly stemmed from his own preference for a modernist French musical idiom.

At the same time, a growing sense of American nationalism among certain filmmakers and composers entered Hollywood during the 1930s. Directors shooting Americana narratives and documentaries about the American way of life looked for composers who could score appropriate music for their films. Composers such as Virgil Thomson and Copland were happy to do so. Copland in particular saw film as a means through which one could establish an American musical identity. Yet while Copland became heralded as the composer who both provided the United States with a national musical heritage and film composers with a musical style that lent itself well to Westerns, Americana narratives, and patriotic films, his “American sound” had been greatly influenced by Thomson’s music. With their simpler textures and inclusion of American folk tunes, Thomson’s scores for the U.S. documentaries *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1938) established an aural basis for Copland’s own nationalist musical endeavors.

Indeed, Copland was not the only composer to advocate a new musical idiom for film. Many modernist composers lamented the predominance of the Austro-German Romantic style, claiming that it was too overblown and emotional. As a collective, these modernist composers saw their duty as a new generation to break away from the past in order to create something new. Thomson, for example, maintained that the Romantic film score

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simply did not suit the “middle-class narratives” coming out of Hollywood, nor the film industry’s philosophy of naturalistic filmmaking—that is, the ability of films to imitate real life. According to Thomson, the Romantic score “almost inevitably” turned every story into a melodrama. Moreover, he argued that the “nearly continuous accompaniment” of the film score came across as “over-sufficient and tiresome.” Unlike the Romantic score—which was too noticeable and expressive—modern film music should function, according to Thomson, as a natural background that threw “whatever is seen against it into high expressive relief.”

To some, however, the motivation behind the modernists’ campaign to infuse the Hollywood system with new music seemed to stem from the desire to simply be “innovative” and break with tradition. According to music critic Winthrop Sargeant, it was a trend to express dissatisfaction with the music of the “established masters” of the nineteenth century. Sargeant appears to be biased against modern music, and argues, in regard to Copland’s music, that it reflected the philosophies of a younger generation of American composers. For Sargeant, the early twentieth century was “the period when it was customary among smart American composers to laugh at Romantics like Brahms, Wagner, and Strauss, to treat the fashionable revolutionary ideas of Igor Stravinsky with enormous reverence and to cultivate a ‘style’ at all costs.”

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71 Ibid.

72 Ibid., 188.

73 Winthrop Sargeant, “The Case of Aaron Copland,” 1946, Box 222, Folder 18, ACC.

74 Ibid.
Film Scores as Music Appreciation

While advocating a more modern musical idiom for films, Copland also believed that film music should serve as a means of music appreciation. Scores for “first-rate” films should consist of the best that America had to offer the public. As Copland expressed during a radio show aired in 1940:

One way of getting better film music is to draw into the industry the best composers that America can produce. Perhaps, then, the wide-awake music critic will think it worth his while to write about Hollywood’s more ambitious scores. This, in turn, will help to make the movie public more aware of the music. Finally, the producer himself may come to put more stock in the importance of his music, if he knows that it is being heard and criticized.

To Copland, film music in general would become much better if it reflected the creativity of serious composers. Like Virgil Thomson, he also believed that music criticism could assist in elevating film music to the level of art music by bringing increased awareness to the merits of the film score.

Although partially motivated by the opportunity to stabilize himself financially by scoring films, Copland believed that film music presented an opportunity to influence the musical taste of the country:

Considerable influence is being exerted on the musical taste of the country by this continual stream of music emanating from the loud-speakers of thousands of movie-theatres in America. Millions of people hear this music each week. Unconsciously, their musical tastes are formed, to a certain extent, by the quality of the music they hear.

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75 Copland, Radio script, WABC.

76 Ibid.

77 Thomson, Virgil Thomson, 115–21.

78 Copland, Radio script, WABC.
Intrigued by the challenges of film scoring and the possibility of enlarging new music’s audience, Copland hoped to demonstrate that movie music could be taken seriously. If given the opportunity, composers like himself could introduce the greater public to modern—yet accessible—music.

Since the term “modern music” may imply many things, it is important to clarify what Copland meant by it.\(^79\) In *Our New Music*, he stressed the fact that although American audiences may believe that modern music primarily consists of dissonant chords and complex rhythms, new music is simply composed of the same elements as older music. Moreover, music should move away from the Romantic period because “the new vein of expressiveness opened up by Beethoven at the beginning of the century had reached the exhaustion point by the time Wagner died in 1883.”\(^80\) For Copland, German music was clearly incapable of renewing itself or inspiring anything new by the turn of the century. Thus, a “fresh start had to be made.”\(^81\) His own enthusiasm for the “extension” and “enrichment” of music spurred him to assure the listener that becoming accustomed to newer music only takes a little time. Couching modernity in positive terms such as “innovative” and “objective,” Copland appealed to listeners by claiming that modern music was indeed their music.

\(^79\) Unlike the “ultramodern” composers who valued experimentalism, Copland believed that modern music should be accessible to the general public. He declared that composers could “cash in” on the innovations and new techniques discovered by the experimentalists to create a modern style that reflected the modern day. At the same time, he coupled this quest for an accessible modern music with the desire to establish an identifiable American idiom. See Elizabeth B. Crist, *Music for the Common Man: Aaron Copland during the Depression and War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3–5, Aaron Copland, “The Composer in America, 1923–33,” *Modern Music* 10, no. 2 (1933): 91, and Copland *Our New Music*, 116–20.

\(^80\) Copland, *Our New Music*, 11.

\(^81\) Ibid.
Concerned by the increasing gap between the tastes of listeners and composers, Copland strove to reach a broader audience through cultivating a more accessible style. Composers, he claimed, had mistakenly come to assume that only forward-looking concert audiences could be interested in modern music. Copland, however, believed that all audiences could appreciate it. Rooted in the tradition of American folksongs, Copland’s new idiom—which he described as “imposed simplicity”—evinced simpler textures, tonal harmonies, and tuneful melodies. Yet in order to reach audiences beyond those that frequented the concert hall, Copland needed to find another venue.

Thus, he turned to the more popular movie theater. As a medium with a vast audience of varying demographics, film presented Copland with an intriguing medium for circulating his music. Akin to the phonograph and the radio (which reached millions on a daily basis), a film soundtrack retained unlimited potential for “revolutionizing” contemporary music. Consequently, Copland believed that it could assist him in fulfilling his goal to introduce the movie-going public to accessible modern music. While acknowledging that most audiences probably did not think about the music when watching a film, he asserted that they heard it nevertheless. Copland therefore proposed that, through such strategically enabled

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82 Copland, Our New Music, 117. See also Crist, Music for the Common Man, 5–13. Crist defines “imposed simplicity” as a “newly melodic idiom” that often incorporated folk song—either borrowed or imitated—and that relied on triadic harmonies and diatonic melodies. For more information on the American idiom, see Howard Pollack, Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 107–20. See also pp. 57–75 for more information about Copland’s stylistic influences and perceptions of European composers.

83 Crist notes that Copland’s conception of “imposed simplicity” was connected to an “aesthetic orientation, a compositional attitude that focused on accessibility and conceived of the musical work as a functional as well as artistic creation.” See Crist, Music for the Common Man, 6.

84 Copland, Our New Music, 260.

85 Ibid., 274–75.
unconscious listening, the cultural level of U.S. music life would undoubtedly be raised if films featured “better music.”

86 Copland, Our New Music, 275.
Chapter 2

Copland as Film Composer

In this chapter, I contrast Copland’s public and private opinions about film music by surveying his writings, interviews, speeches, radio appearances, and correspondence. Publicly, Copland expressed interest in capitalizing on the popularity of film to spread an appreciation for modern music, on the one hand, and to cultivate an American musical idiom on the other. His private records and correspondence reveal lesser-known facets of his personal opinions of film music and motivations for composing for the films. Do these letters complement or conflict with his public advocacy for film music? While it is not altogether unusual (or objectionable) for an individual to say one thing and think another, any disparities often invite further inquiry. Indeed, the differences in Copland's opinions about film music are subtle rather than extreme. However, since the “Dean of American Music” is generally perceived as both a reliable source of information for the historian as well as a candid person whose musical aspirations were oriented toward enriching the good of the common man, an examination of these differences nuances his reasons for, and approach to, scoring films.

Moreover, while many themes can be traced consistently throughout Copland’s speeches, radio appearances, interviews, and writings on film music, I underline subtle shifts in Copland’s views on appropriate film-scoring techniques between 1940 and 1950. In his early writings (1940-41), Copland outlined what he determined to be the proper functions of film music and addressed contemporary problems with the standardization of film-scoring
techniques and studio practices. By the late 1940s, Copland had reassessed how music could function in a film. I propose that Copland’s perspectives on the functions of a film score and on compositional technique fitting the genre shifted—both as he gained more experience working in film and in response to changes occurring in Hollywood following the aftermath of World War II. To illustrate my point, I compare Copland’s publications from the early and late 1940s and briefly address the changes within the postwar film industry.

Copland’s Public and Private Thoughts on Film Music

While Copland publicly championed the potential benefits of film music—it could raise the cultural consciousness about music and serve as a means of music appreciation—his personal and business correspondence reveal a more self-directed interest in the genre. By working in Hollywood, Copland intended both to attract a wider audience for his own music and to gain financially. For example, in a letter to Leonard Bernstein dating from 1939, Copland wrote: “Something new has come up. I’ve been approached from Hollywood. Actually! To do the music for ‘Of Mice and Men!’ I’ve asked a fat price, which they are unlikely to accept. (I thought if I was to sell myself to the movies, I ought to sell myself good.)” Tellingly, Copland indicates that he asked the studio for a higher fee than may have been expected, especially for scoring a film for the first time. Even more significant, however, is his use of the word “sell.” As evidenced by his constant comparisons of the merits of art-composers versus film composers in his writings and speeches, Copland may have privately considered

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87 I could only find one article from this time period that specifically mentioned Copland composing film scores for financial gain. See Virginia Wright, “Cine...matters,” 30 October 1939, Box 407, Folder 15, ACC.

88 Letter from Aaron Copland to Leonard Bernstein, dated September-October 1939, Box 16, Folder 2, LBC.
film composition to be indeed a form of “selling out”—a declaration that conflicts with his public praises of film music as a field of untapped potential for art-composers.

Moreover, letters from Copland’s Hollywood agent, Abe Meyer, also indicate that Copland may have believed his status as a well-known American art-composer warranted a substantial fee.89 Dating from the beginning of Copland’s career in films, these letters suggest that Copland drove a hard bargain as regards negotiating compensation. For example, Copland requested the “fat price” of $7,500 to score his first Hollywood film Of Mice and Men, a request which the studio turned down because it was more than they could “afford to spend.”90 When they countered with an offer of $5,000, Copland only agreed on the condition that he would pocket that exact amount while the studio paid other expenses.91

Indeed, Meyer seems to have found it somewhat difficult to secure film engagements for the composer. Copland would only consider composing for films that he perceived to be better than average, and his reputation as a modern composer undoubtedly worried some producers. Additionally, his scathing assessments of producers in his speeches and writings may have dissuaded some from hiring him. Following his initial successes in Hollywood with Of Mice and Men and Our Town, Copland may have grown discouraged with the seeming lack of interest in his music; a letter from Meyer to Copland dated 7 April 1941 assured the composer: “Don’t despair of getting another big picture soon. Everybody out

89 Letters from Abe Meyer to Aaron Copland, 1939–1953, Box 347, Folders 4–9, ACC.

90 Letter from Meyer to Copland, dated 22 September 1939, Box 347, Folder 4, ACC. Howard Pollack notes that, at the time, $5,000 was a substantial fee for an untried and unknown film composer. See Pollack, Aaron Copland, 91.

91 Letter from Meyer to Copland, dated 22 September 1939, ACC. A year later, Copland again asked for $7,500 to score Our Town. See letter from Meyer to Copland, dated 8 January 1940, Box 347, Folder 4, ACC. In comparison, Copland received $100 for the Second Hurricane (1937) and $1,000 for Rodeo (1942). See Pollack, Aaron Copland, 90, 366.
here thinks that you are great, but they also think that your particular talents are best suited to ‘different’ pictures.”92 According to Meyer’s correspondence, producers seemed to think that Copland’s music was most appropriate for Westerns and films based on American life or biographies of American historical figures. For example, Copland had been considered for films such as Howard Hughes’ *The Outlaw* (1943) and possibly William Dieterle’s *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (1941).93

As Copland’s reputation as an art-composer continued to grow and his financial status became more secure, however, his attention turned away from films toward the concert hall. According to business correspondence from the 1940s, Meyer repeatedly attempted to secure film contracts for Copland, but either Copland’s busy schedule prevented him from flying out to Hollywood for any length of time or studio producers gave the assignment to other composers. In addition, Copland’s financial demands still deterred many studios.94 Subtly implying that Copland should lower his fee if he wanted to be considered for more films, Meyer wrote: “Incidentally, I have been quoting a minimum of five thousand dollars against a thousand dollars a week for you. I don’t think that this price is too high, although this naturally limits the number of pictures for which you could be considered. If you have any

92 Letter from Meyer to Copland, dated 7 April 1941, Box 347, Folder 4, ACC.

93 Letter from Meyer to Copland, dated 7 April 1941, ACC.

94 Copland’s price continued to rise during the 1940s. In 1944, MGM Studios offered Copland a contract to do two pictures a year for three years starting on 1 July 1944 at $6,500 a picture minimum eight weeks. Copland responded: “Can handle one picture in 1944 after July 1st at $10,000 on condition that MGM signs me for two pictures in 1945 at $12,500 each, with similar arrangement in 1946 if mutually agreeable. Please tell Finston I positively will not consider any lower figure than those quotes above.” See telegram from Meyer to Copland, dated February 1944, Box 347, Folder 4, ACC.

ideas in this connection, please let me know.” Although Copland took note of Meyer’s suggestion—he wrote the word “hint?” in red next to this last line on the letter—he seemingly did not wish to be considered for more films.

In November 1943, Copland made it clear that he was not to be bothered with offers to score “mediocre” pictures. He wrote to Meyer: “In order to guide you in regard to the present offer or any others that may come along, I thought it best if I list a few minimum requirements. I am taking it for granted that you already know I am only interested in top-notch scripts which are assured of major exploitation.” While Copland evidently did not want his music to be associated with something that could be perceived of as low quality, he retained an interest in composing for films so long as they could garner a wide audience. Moreover, as outlined by his requests in regard to billing and remuneration, Copland seems to have believed that his music could draw a crowd and therefore be a selling point for a film. He asked for 1) “separate screen credit;” 2) “music by ‘Aaron Copland’ in all paid advertisements and promotion material in general, similar to that given Max Steiner and Korngold at Warner Brothers;” 3) “a minimum of six weeks employment at $1,500 per week;” 4) “not to be required to undertake the orchestrating or conducting of the score, except that both are to be done under my supervision;” and 5) “the right to take part in the dubbing of the musical score, and to be paid accordingly.” Copland acknowledged that these might be considered “stiff terms,” but proposed that they were not “unreasonable” for his time and talent.

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95 Letter from Meyer to Copland, dated 7 April 1941, Box 347, Folder 4, ACC.

96 Letter from Copland to Meyer, dated 3 November 1943, Box 347, Folder 4, ACC. The offer was for Columbia Pictures’ Address Unknown (1944), a film about an American art dealer who returns to his native Germany and becomes attracted by Nazi propaganda.

97 Ibid.
From the Hollywood perspective, however, Copland’s requests may indeed have been somewhat demanding. According to Meyer, Copland’s salary expectations were “a little bit higher than the usual price,” a comment perhaps directed toward Copland’s limited experience in working in films. Meyer also reminded Copland that since these were his minimum requirements, he would probably only be able to secure one film contract per year. Still, Copland may have intended this all along, especially since he did not want to become a full-time film composer. Meyer concluded by saying that he imagined that one picture a year “is all you would want to do anyhow.”

Indeed, after working on *The North Star* (1943) Copland would not score another film until *The Red Pony* (1948).

Still, Copland publicly maintained his persona as a serious art-composer who championed scoring films as an artistic endeavor rather than as a means of personal marketing or financial benefits. For example, when asked whether he would write film music “even if it were less well-paid,” Copland responded positively: “I think that I would, and, moreover, I think most composers would, principally because film music constitutes a new musical medium that exerts a fascination of its own.”

Yet Copland’s private correspondence suggests the opposite. After Copland won an Oscar for his score for *The Heiress* (1949), he wrote to Bernstein: “Did you hear? I won an Oscar for *The Heiress*. Price goes up.”

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98 Letter from Meyer to Copland, dated 3 November 1943. In this letter, Meyer added that Copland could not secure *Address Unknown* because Columbia Studios did not “have sufficient money allowed for the music” to afford Copland’s services.

99 Copland received $10,000 for five months’ work on *The North Star* and $15,000 for *The Red Pony*. See Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, 91, 379.


101 Letter from Copland to Bernstein, dated 27 May 1950, Box 16, Folder 2, LBC.
Copland and Hollywood: From the 1930s to the Early 1940s

When Copland first began composing for the movies, the Great Depression had been taking its toll on American businesses for nearly a decade. However, the film industry seemingly remained untouched by financial problems. By the early 1930s, theater attendance had reached an all-time high with eighty million people flocking to the movies at least once per week. Motion pictures provided an element of escapism that helped Americans cope with the hard times. Screwball comedies regularly made fun of the foibles of the wealthy, dashing detectives solved dastardly deeds, and glamorous historical dramas—otherwise known as “prestige pictures”—regularly transported the viewer to a different time and place.

During the 1930s and '40s, the Hollywood film industry underwent a series of changes. Audiences’ enthusiastic response to the new sound film soon turned to concern, and the public began to protest against Hollywood’s “moral laxity.” The absence of a committee or association in charge of regulating film content left the studios to determine individually what could be included in a film. As a result, films increased their inclusion of violence and immorality. Certain factions of the public responded by threatening the industry with a boycott. Worried about the potential loss in revenue, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association reacted by establishing the Production Code, a set of guidelines outlining what was and was not acceptable in a film. The code was not truly enforced until

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103 Ina Rae Hark, ed., introduction to American Cinema of the 1930s, 1–24.

104 Julie Hubbert, ed., Celluloid Symphonies: Texts and Contexts in Film Music History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 171. See also Cooke, History of Film Music, 69.
1934, when the newly created Production Code Association officially began to approve
scripts and levy $25,000 fines against films released without certificates of approval.105

According to Julie Hubbert, changes within the film industry also stemmed from a
change in the tastes of audiences.106 Audiences turned away from violent thrillers and risqué
comedies, which spurred the studios to shift production to films with “more elevated and
morally unquestionable material.”107 As a result, they turned to classic literature,
Shakespeare, award-winning contemporary plays, contemporary best-sellers, and biopics of
prominent historical figures. In accordance with the overall standardization of the industry,
these films followed well-established narrative formulas—and featured similar music.108

By the late 1930s, when Copland first began scoring films, romances, period pictures,
dramas, and other film genres commonly featured sweeping love themes, thick contrapuntal
textures, and lush orchestration. In his early writings, we have seen, Copland disparaged the
use of Romantic tropes, indicating that studio control over composers was part of the
problem and that this could be remedied by allowing composers more freedom. Proposing
that a score should reflect the time period, geographical location, mood, and genre of a
motion picture, he advocated a “realistic” approach to film composition. Copland derided
“Mickey-Mousing” and the overuse of leitmotifs as trite compositional techniques.
Moreover, he suggested that music could help a film in three main ways: by intensifying the

105 Hubbert, Celluloid Symphonies, 172.
106 Ibid., 172.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid., 171–72.
emotion and aids the “climactic sense;” by creating a sense of continuity; and by serving as background music.\textsuperscript{109}

Copland considered continuity in a film to be an important tool for smoothing over the abrupt cuts within and between scenes; jumping from indoor scenes to outdoor scenes often made it a “little difficult for the person who sits in a movie theatre to make the connection smoothly.”\textsuperscript{110} He illustrated this point: “Let us say, if one is writing a melody which underlines a scene inside the house, that same melody may seem to flow, as the scene changes, to out-of-doors, and thus seem to connect two pictures which have no connection.”\textsuperscript{111} Music, therefore, could aid a film’s narrative by functioning as a sort of sonic glue.

However, Copland considered background music, which he identified as the music that “goes on behind dialogue,” to be perhaps the most challenging and mysterious sound world of all: “It does not serve primarily to intensify the emotions or help the continuity. It just seems to be there in order to warm the screen.”\textsuperscript{112} This last metaphor recurs in many of Copland’s discussions of film music. He proposed that a film’s visual images lacked some sort of necessary human quality; a two-dimensional screen could only make people seen on the screen seem real. Like Virgil Thomson, Copland claimed that background music added a certain quality to this cinematic experience that made the screen “warmer” and somehow more human. Yet this type of music did not necessarily appeal to the art-composer: “That kind of background music […] is a very ungrateful sort of thing for the composer to have to

\textsuperscript{109} Copland, “Music in the Films,” 263.

\textsuperscript{110} Copland, Talk on Film Music, 8.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 9.
write. He knows the audience is not going to hear it; possibly they won’t know it is there.”\textsuperscript{113}

At the same time, Copland acknowledged its value as music that worked subconsciously on the audience’s emotions, and therefore it could not be disregarded.

According to Copland, however, background music needed to be “neutral” in order for it to work properly on the audience. While admitting that this might seem problematic to some—“the whole point and purpose of music would seem to be to give off some kind of emotional feeling, color or whatever you want to call it, something emotional”—Copland believed that this type of music could inject “warmth” in a scene without commenting on the dialogue.\textsuperscript{114} That is, background music should do the opposite of what a composer typically tries to do in writing other types of music—by remaining as inexpressive as possible.\textsuperscript{115}

Attuned to the established values placed on the visual image and dialogue, Copland was keenly aware that music played a subordinate role in films. He reflected that, albeit at the expense of the personal desires of the composer, a score should help a film in whatever way possible as long as it did not interfere with the narrative.

**Copland and Films: After World War II**

During the 1940s, the film industry underwent another series of changes. The social and political concerns affecting the nation after the end of World War II spilled over into Hollywood, and the studios responded by releasing a wave of motion pictures that echoed the

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 9–10.

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 10.
American public’s darker postwar sentiments.\textsuperscript{116} In 1946, inflation created economic instability while wholesale and retail prices jumped; women were expected to give up the jobs they had occupied during the war and return to their former roles as housewives and stay-at-home daughters.\textsuperscript{117} Many refused. Marriages dissolved and families broke apart. Moreover, the emergence of new forms of technological warfare such as the atom bomb sparked fear in the hearts of American citizens, and the threat of Communism bred distrust amongst the country’s populace.

One of the ways in which Hollywood responded to this uneasy climate was to turn from the light-hearted comedies, the history or literature-based prestige pictures, and wholesome Americana films to grittier genres such as \textit{film noir} and the psychological melodrama.\textsuperscript{118} Between 1941 and 1949, Hollywood studios began manufacturing a number of films that relied upon a special type of musical score, one that could communicate a plot’s “inner action.” As Hubbert notes, \textit{film noir} in particular proved “fertile ground for the angst-ridden postwar psyche.”\textsuperscript{119} Indeed, by the late 1940s the film score encountered a “crisis of confidence that affected musical, sound, style, and structure.”\textsuperscript{120}

Hubbert points out that art-composers and film composers alike began to question both the conventions of film music as well as the status of film music itself.\textsuperscript{121} Indeed, Igor Stravinsky condescendingly proposed that, rather than enhancing the emotions represented

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\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{118} On \textit{film noir} and psychological films, see ibid., 1–21.

\textsuperscript{119} Hubbert, \textit{Celluloid Symphonies}, 189.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 191.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
on the screen or providing continuity, the only function of film music was to “feed the composers.”\textsuperscript{122} In other words, film music could fulfill practical purposes (e.g., “filling the emptiness of the screen” and supplying a movie theater’s “loudspeakers with more or less pleasant sounds”), but it did not have any great aesthetic value.\textsuperscript{123} Stravinsky’s statement (and others like it) sparked a debate amongst members of the film-music community, who began to reevaluate the purpose of their work.\textsuperscript{124} The lines between music and sound became increasingly blurred.\textsuperscript{125} New compositional techniques needed to support the “psychological complexity of contemporary films.”\textsuperscript{126} Some composers resorted to a collection of noises, discontinuous pitches, or arhythmic motives.\textsuperscript{127} Others, such as Copland, grappled with using more standard musical techniques to underline a film’s “psychological refinements” and depict “internal action.”

When asked by producer-director William Wyler to score a historical drama, \textit{The Heiress} (1949), Copland entered unknown territory. Unlike the Americana narratives Copland had grown used to scoring—with mostly straightforward plots that relied on explicative dialogue—\textit{The Heiress} was a period picture whose plot was driven by the main character’s psychological development. Consequently, the film required a musical treatment

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid. See also Ingolf Dahl, “Igor Stravinsky on Film Music,” in Cooke, ed., \textit{Hollywood Film Music Reader}, 277.

\textsuperscript{123} Dahl, 277.

\textsuperscript{124} Hubbert, \textit{Celluloid Symphonies}, 192.

\textsuperscript{125} Cooke notes that, over the course of the ’40s, film music gradually began to show more signs of “a limited modernism,” especially in contexts where the film’s subject-matter justified its use. He defines this as music that contains a “relatively high level of dissonance and an avoidance of fully blown melodic statements in favour of stream-of-consciousness fragmentation.” See Cooke, \textit{History of Film Music}, 109.

\textsuperscript{126} Hubbert, \textit{Celluloid Symphonies}, 194.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 193.
unfamiliar to the composer. Deciding that it was time to experiment, Copland accepted the job. Challenges included what special technique he could employ to bring out a movie’s unspoken “inner action” and the use of music to convey a character’s thought processes and/or changing mental state.\textsuperscript{128} Remarkably enough, Copland resorted to the use of leitmotifs.

Although Copland had heatedly disparaged the use of leitmotifs and other Romantic tropes in 1940-41, it appears that he had changed his opinion somewhat by 1949. In November 1949, Copland published an article entitled “Tip to Moviegoers: Take Off Those Ear-Muffs” in the \textit{New York Times}. In general, the article chiefly reiterates material from his chapter on film music in \textit{Our New Music}, albeit in greater detail. Still, there are a few subtle changes. For example, he increased the number of film-music functions from three to five. In addition to serving as “neutral background filler,” to “building a sense of continuity,” and to “underpinning the theatrical build-up of a scene, and rounding it off with a sense of finality,” film music could also create “a more convincing atmosphere of time and place” and “underline psychological refinements.”\textsuperscript{129} This last category is especially significant. It encompassed music which could convey the “unspoken thoughts of a character or the unseen implications of a situation.”\textsuperscript{130} Although Copland again noted critically that the nineteenth-century symphonic style of composing was still dominant in the late 1940s, he did not mention the use of leitmotifs in this article. While this may seem like a minor point to make, very few scholars have attempted to engage with this quandary. Why would Copland resort

\textsuperscript{128} For the purposes of this thesis, “inner action” or “internal action” will be defined as a character’s unspoken/un-narrated thoughts or mental processes.

\textsuperscript{129} Copland, “Tip to Movie-Goers,” 322–23.

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 322.
to a technique that he so clearly despised at the beginning of his film career? In my final chapter, I address this issue in my discussion of *The Heiress.*
Chapter 3

The Heiress (1949)

Copland’s views on appropriate film-scoring techniques shifted in the late 1940s as more “hard-boiled” genres grew in popularity. Many films turned inward, focusing on the characters’ psychological processes and unspoken thoughts. In these films, the characters did not necessarily voice their thoughts and intended actions aloud; rather, this “inner action” was implied through the use of specific camera angles, shots, and precise editing. Although music had been used to foreshadow events or underline unspoken mental processes in films since the 1930s, the post-war psychological dramas relied even more on a film’s underscore. As a result, collaboration between the producer, director, and composer seemingly became more important, especially since there were fewer cues in the script to indicate what should be conveyed through the music.

In this chapter, I assess Copland’s motivations for using leitmotifs in The Heiress. Why would Copland resort to leitmotifs in his score when he so adamantly opposed them at the beginning of his film career? How did the leitmotifs function within this film? I suggest that the film presented multiple challenges for the composer, in part because he was unfamiliar with scoring psychological dramas but also because the film’s storyline differed greatly from those of the Americana narratives he had grown accustomed to scoring.

Moreover, I examine the collaboration between Copland and William Wyler, the director-

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131 See Cooke, History of Film Music, 109–19 for more on the music of film noir and the psychological melodrama.
producer of *The Heiress*, to explore what Copland’s and Wyler’s written accounts of this collaboration reveal about conflicting interpretations of the film and/or conflicts of interest between the producer and the composer.

**Copland Returns to Hollywood**

A few months after finishing the score for *The Red Pony* (1948), Copland returned to Hollywood to work on William Wyler’s period drama, *The Heiress* (1949). The film was an adaptation of the stage play (of the same title) by Ruth and Augustus Goetz, which was originally based on the novel *Washington Square* by Henry James. James’s novel tells the story of Catherine Sloper, a plain and painfully shy heiress, who falls in love with Morris Townsend, a handsome and charming fortune-hunter. Catherine and Morris make plans to marry, but Catherine’s emotionally distant father, Dr. Austin Sloper, disapproves of the match and threatens to disinherit her. Convinced that Morris truly loves her, Catherine informs her fiancé of her disinheritance. Morris professes his undying love, and the couple arranges to leave town at midnight and elope. To Catherine’s sore disappointment, Morris jilts her. Embittered, Catherine resigns herself to a life of spinsterhood. Years later, an impoverished Morris returns to New York, hoping that the wealthy Catherine will agree to “pick up where they left off.” Catherine assents, only to jilt Morris in return.

Unlike the play—which relied on extensive dialogue to drive the plot forward—the screenplay by Ruth and Augustus Goetz focused on Catherine’s psychological development.

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132 According to Copland, *The Red Pony* called for simple harmonies and clear melodies in addition to the “inevitable steady rhythmic accompaniment to simulate cowboys on horseback.” See Copland and Perlis, *Copland Since 1943*, 88–89.
Consequently, it contained little external action.\textsuperscript{133} As such, Wyler considered the musical score to be an essential part of the film, especially for the scenes with extended close-ups and sections without dialogue.\textsuperscript{134} Despite the objections of Paramount Pictures’ production chief Y. Frank Freeman—who was concerned that Copland’s involvement with Samuel Goldwyn’s pro-Soviet propaganda film \textit{The North Star} would harm the success of \textit{The Heiress}—Wyler insisted on giving the job to Copland.\textsuperscript{135} He most likely felt that Copland’s “American sound” would be appropriate for the historical melodrama. Wyler forwarded the screenplay to Copland and asked the composer to send him a list of musical ideas for the film.

Copland, who had both read James’ novel and seen the Goetz’s stage adaptation, liked the script. After “giving it some serious thought,” he wrote to Wyler:

In my opinion, the picture does not call for a great deal of music, but what it includes, ought to really count. It should contribute to the tone and style of the picture. My fear is that a conventionally written score would bathe the work in the usual romantic atmosphere. What I would try for would be the recreation in musical terms of the special atmosphere inherent in the James original. That atmosphere—as I see it—would produce a music of a certain discretion and refinement in the expression of sentiments.\textsuperscript{136}

\textsuperscript{133} Sternfeld, “Copland As a Film Composer,”163, 167.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 167.

\textsuperscript{135} Believing that they were “violations of freedom of thought and association,” Wyler had been outraged by the House Un-American Activities Committee’s subpoenas that had begun in 1947. He was not willing to submit to the fears of association that were rampant in Hollywood. For more detail on Wyler’s political involvement, see Sarah Kozloff, “Wyler’s Wars,” \textit{Film History} 20, no. 4 (2008): 456–73. While he was working on \textit{The Heiress}, Copland was not yet targeted by HUAC. He would be called to testify as to his involvements in the communist party the following year, 1949. See Jennifer DeLapp, “Copland in the Fifties: Music and Ideology in the McCarthy Era” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1997), 107.

\textsuperscript{136} Copland and Perlis, \textit{Copland Since 1943}, 98.
While Copland felt that the music needed to “recreate the feeling of life” of the past, he did not wish to restrict himself to period harmonies and melodies. Since *The Heiress* was set in New York, he most likely considered using modern techniques to evoke “American-ness” in the score. Moreover, Copland’s aim to express the sentiments of the film in a discreet and refined manner undoubtedly stemmed from his aversion to the overblown emotionalism of the Austro-German Romantic canon.

Wyler responded to Copland’s ideas positively:

I agree with what you say about the “conventionally written score” and feel that a special Jamesian tone of discretion and refinement is necessary for *The Heiress*. Naturally, I would not be so mechanical in my thinking as to throw out any music which postdates the technique and development of music up to 1850. I, too, want to take advantage of the growth in music during the past hundred years and create the feeling and emotion of the past through proper use of modern musical resources.

As one of the more experimental directors in Hollywood, Wyler was not afraid to break with tradition. Indeed, as his filmography indicates, Wyler did not “play it safe” when making films. Rather than mastering only one or two film genres, he engaged with a wide variety: westerns, epics, comedies, melodramas, and even a musical. Additionally, Wyler disagreed with studio executives who would only make films based on unadventurous or conservative topics; instead, he frequently made films that confronted social issues or dealt with more realistic topics.

As a filmmaker, Wyler’s perfectionism, attention to detail, and commitment to realism are legendary. As English scholar Gabriel Miller notes, Wyler was “adamant about

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137 Ibid.


respecting the integrity of space, movement, and sound, always intruding minimally of the illusion of reality."140 In making The Heiress, for example, the director required that the set design of the Sloper mansion be as detailed and historically accurate as possible. In conversation with the film’s set designer, Harry Horner, Wyler observed: “Almost the entire picture plays in one house. It will depend a great deal upon the designs and the arrangements of the rooms in this house, upon the style in which the story is told—in other words, upon the conception of the designer,—how convincing the characters will become, and therefore how successful the motion picture, The Heiress, will be.”141 To prevent any overcharacterization, however, Wyler instructed Horner that the set designs, especially that of the house, should not “give the secrets of the story away [...] since the structure could not know in advance what its inhabitants would do.”142 Consequently, Horner traveled to New York to survey the Washington Square district in order to familiarize himself with the style of architecture circa 1850 and any other aspects of the location that would enhance the reality of the film’s sets.143 Similarly, Wyler’s attention to detail and desire for historical appropriateness also extended to the music for The Heiress.

From the outset, Wyler seems to have been quite willing to accommodate Copland’s conception of the score. He asked whether Copland had any “specific suggestions for any scenes in regards to music.”144 Indeed, Wyler seems to have been quite conscientious in

140 Ibid., ix.
142 Horner, 2–3.
143 Ibid., 3. Wyler’s attention to detail and desire for historical appropriateness also extended to the diegetic music for The Heiress. For example, he had the music department send Copland a set of period-appropriate dances for the scene of the garden party. See Pollack, Aaron Copland, 436.
144 Letter from William Wyler to Aaron Copland, dated 19 June 1948, Box 265, Folder, 9, ACC.
respecting Copland’s vision for the music: “You may have some thoughts which I ought to
bear in mind while shooting, such as allowing enough time for music, etc.”145 In response,
Copland acknowledged that he did not have any specific suggestions in regard to the music,
stating that he would “find it hard to foresee” Wyler’s treatment of the various scenes.146
Copland seems to have preferred to wait for further clarification of the underlying premise of
the plot before hashing out any specific musical ideas.

In July 1948, Paramount sent Copland a contract for the film.147 Unlike the situation
with Copland’s previous films, money did not appear to be a primary issue in the contract
negotiation for The Heiress. In this case, instead, there appears to have been a disagreement
between the studio and Copland as regards advertisement. A letter addressed to Copland
from Wyler indicates that Copland was upset because Paramount did not agree to include his
name in their advertisement campaign.148 Although Wyler had told the studio’s music
director, Louis Lipstone, that he would “be very pleased” to include Copland’s name on the
ads “because it would add prestige to the picture,” the studio refused.149 Convinced that
motion-picture advertisements had included “too many names” in recent years, Paramount
decided to cut back on, what Wyler called, “this trend.”150 The trailer for The Heiress used
Copland’s title music to great effect, heralding the text promoting the actors and the director

145 Ibid.
146 Undated letter from Copland to Wyler, probably June/July 1948, Box 265, Folder, 9, ACC.
147 Pollack, Aaron Copland, 434.
148 Letter from Wyler to Copland, dated 24 July 1948, Box 265, Folder, 9, ACC.
149 Ibid.
150 Ibid.
while concluding with the tagline: “What makes a motion picture truly great? The stars, the director, and the story!”151

The Trouble with Leitmotifs

Although The Heiress was set in the mid-nineteenth century, Copland did not want to “bathe” the film with symphonic music. Rather, in order to evoke the atmosphere of antebellum New York City, he composed in an idiom reminiscent of his Americana films and ballets from the late 1930s and early ’40s. In true Copland-esque fashion, the texture for the score tends to be thin and clear, mostly homophonic and occasionally hymn-like. Except for moments when the story necessitates a harsher treatment or greater intensity, the film’s harmonic language is diatonic and contains an abundance of open fourths and fifths. The melodic passages also feature the jaunty skips and leaps found in many of Copland’s works, particularly Appalachian Spring (1944). Unlike the “wide instrumental range” heard in his other film scores, however, Copland used a smaller-than-average orchestra to evoke the necessary “intimate” and “refined” sound of Jamesian New York, emphasizing the violins, flutes, clarinets, and harps.152

In addition to evoking the atmosphere of antebellum New York, Copland believed that the score needed to underline the psychological aspects of the plot. Yet he found that “experimenting” with a psychological drama proved to be more challenging than he had expected.153 In his autobiography, Copland admitted to lacking inspiration.154 Unlike his

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151 Official trailer for The Heiress, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBtIN2he4IE (accessed March 3, 2013). To my knowledge, composers were not typically included in movie trailers at this time.

152 Pollack, Aaron Copland, 435.

153 It is also possible that Copland accepted the assignment for The Heiress in part because he was afraid of being classified as a composer who could only compose for one kind of film. As suggested in his journal for
other films which featured many outdoor scenes, most of the scenes from *The Heiress* took place almost entirely indoors. As a composer who helped establish the sound of “wide open spaces,” Copland appears to have been stymied by the interior settings of a genteel urban residence.\(^{155}\) Moreover, with the exception of *Our Town* (which was set at the turn of the century) he had no experience composing for period films nor for films that focused this extensively on “inner action.”

Copland claimed later in his autobiography that his compositional plan for *The Heiress* was “to give each principal character a musical motive, leitmotiv style [sic], to be developed as the drama unfolds.”\(^{156}\) He thus claimed that he intended to incorporate leitmotifs into the score—although it is not entirely clear as to when he devised this plan. Yet why would Copland resort to leitmotifs, a compositional method which he had proclaimed “completely unnecessary” in the movies?\(^{157}\)

Few scholars have addressed this question. Mervyn Cooke proposes that Copland may have felt more comfortable using a nineteenth-century compositional technique because *The Heiress* was set in that period.\(^{158}\) On the other hand, Howard Pollack suggests in his biography that Copland was simply “responding to the film’s psychological focus.”\(^{159}\)

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\(^{154}\) Copland and Perlis, *Copland Since 1943*, 98.

\(^{155}\) Ibid., 101.

\(^{156}\) Ibid., 100.

\(^{157}\) To my knowledge, no published research addresses these issues. Jon Finson has suggested in conversation that Copland must have discovered that there was no way to avoid using leitmotifs in a film score.

\(^{158}\) Cooke, *History of Film Music*, 127.

\(^{159}\) Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, 434.
Indeed, he directs the reader’s attention to the fact that although Copland’s use of leitmotifs in *The Heiress* was mostly traditional, they functioned more like “symphonic themes” than “recognizable tags:”

> Who can easily identify Sloper’s theme merged with the love music as he broods over Catherine’s engagement, or his theme in retrograde as he examines himself, or his theme juxtaposed with Catherine’s as she stonily sits in the park during his death, their themes altered to express her ascendancy over her father?  

Pollack’s implication, therefore, is that Copland did not truly stoop to utilizing conventional Hollywood methods. Even though an audience may not necessarily be able to aurally identify a leitmotif or recognize its significance if they do, however, the composer’s intentions are not negated and the leitmotif’s purpose remains symbolic.

As Pollack indicates, Copland’s use of leitmotifs is mostly traditional; they typically “accompany” a character’s appearance onscreen or symbolize a character’s thoughts and/or memories. Often, they appear in different instrumentation, textures, or in new “harmonic contexts.” However, if Copland did conclude—either as his original plan or later in desperation as his deadline approached—that the only realistic way to underscore a character’s psychological progression was through using leitmotifs, it also seems likely that he would wish to employ them in a subtle manner and not “à la Max Steiner.” This hypothesis may be supported by the fact that while Hollywood composers such as Steiner

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160 Ibid., 435.

161 Ibid.

162 Arnold Whittall, “Leitmotif,” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed March 11, 2013. A leitmotif is simply “a theme or other coherent musical idea whose purpose is to represent or symbolize a person, object, place, idea, state of mind, supernatural force or any other ingredient in a dramatic work.”
and Korngold frequently composed more lengthy and recognizably tuneful leitmotifs, Copland relied upon shorter motives instead.  

Even though Copland indicated that his compositional plan for The Heiress was to assign each principal character a motive, he appears to have changed his mind once he began composing. There are four principal leitmotifs, but only two are associated with characters.  

Catherine’s theme is perhaps the most noticeable because it recurs frequently throughout the film; it is built upon a four-note motive which ascends through a first-inversion triad and then descends by a seventh.

Example 1:
Catherine’s motive

Often played by low strings and brass, Dr. Sloper’s dark and stately theme is slightly more difficult to identify.

Example 2:
Dr. Sloper’s motive

The Sloper residence itself has its own motive, a series of harmonically-shifting triads in mixed meter.

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163 For more information about Max Steiner’s use of leitmotifs, see Cooke, History of Film Music, 88. For Erich Korngold’s, see ibid., 97.

164 I am basing my analysis on a combination of Howard Pollack’s and James Lochner’s observations. See Pollack, Aaron Copland, 434–35, and James Lochner, “You Have Cheated Me: Aaron Copland’s Compromised Score to The Heiress,” Film Score Monthly 10, no. 3 (May 2005): 37.

165 Pollack, Aaron Copland, 435.
Example 3:
Sloper Residence Motive

Lastly, there is a “trouble” motive, which is typically denoted by descending major seconds.\textsuperscript{166}

Example 4:
“Trouble” Motive

Perhaps Copland did not entirely neglect his own advice on the use of leitmotifs in a film score. As he had declared in the early 1940s: if a composer felt it necessary to incorporate leitmotifs into his score, he should at least use them to underscore an important topic within the narrative rather than accompanying a character. The “trouble” motive fulfills this

\textsuperscript{166} Lochner, “You Have Cheated Me,” 37. In some cases, the “trouble” motive is denoted by minor seconds.
requirement by foreshadowing a doomed love affair and the protagonist’s increasing bitterness.

Interestingly, the film’s villain, Morris Townsend, is not associated with a theme or motive. Perhaps Copland did not wish to “alert” the audience to Morris’ mercenary intentions as obviously as other Hollywood composers might (and probably would) have done. On the other hand, Copland and Wyler may have agreed together that the music should not expose Morris’ ill intentions in such a noticeable manner. As Wyler noted in an interview from 1979, Morris needed to “be convincing” as a suitor, or Catherine would look “like a fool” for believing in him. Instead, Morris’ insincere feelings for Catherine are hinted at through subtle musical cues. For example, in the scene where Morris first visits the Sloper residence, the music warns the audience that Morris’ affections for Catherine are not genuine. Morris arrives early in the morning only to discover that Catherine is not at home. Catherine’s aunt, Lavinia Penniman, invites Morris inside to wait in the parlor. As Morris steps inside, the strings play a brief fortepiano “stinger.”

One of the most intriguing facets of Copland’s score is the subtle way in which he underscored the relationships between characters. At the beginning of the film, for example, Copland musically contrasted Catherine’s desire for her father’s approval with Dr. Sloper’s contempt for his daughter. In the scene, Catherine has just put on a new “cherry red dress” to wear to her cousin’s engagement party. She is eager to show it to her father and hopes to please him with her appearance. Mimicking Catherine’s excitement as she skips down the


168 A “stinger” is a sharply attacked chord used to enhance moments of drama. It is often marked as sforzando or fortepiano, but it is not necessarily played loudly. See David Neumeyer, “Film Music Analysis and Pedagogy,” Indiana Theory Review 11 (1990): 4, and Gorbman, Unheard Melodies, 88–89.
stairs, violins leap merrily in fourths and fifths. The camera then cuts to a medium shot of Dr. Sloper, Catherine, and Aunt Penniman. As Catherine shows her father her new purchase, Catherine’s leitmotif is heard repeating in the violins:

*Catherine* (addressing Dr. Sloper): I thought that you would like the color.

*Dr. Sloper:* Yes.

*Catherine:* It’s cherry red.

*Dr. Sloper:* (questioningly) So it is...

*Catherine:* I believe that my mother used to wear it.

When her father remains emotionally distant, Catherine’s excitement drains, and her motive gradually slows and darkens. Immediately following Dr. Sloper’s concluding remark, “Ah, yes. But Catherine, your mother was fair... She *dominated* the color,” the seventh from Catherine’s motive lands on a muted brass “stinger.” This “stinger” is made all the more effective due to the momentary silence which follows.

Throughout the film, Copland underlined Catherine’s psychological progression by transposing or re-orchestrating her leitmotif and sometimes altering the tempo at which the motive is played (as in the “Cherry Red Dress” scene). He also combined or juxtaposed leitmotifs to emphasize particularly emotional situations. One such example occurs in the sequence following Dr. Sloper’s confirmation that Morris is truly a fortune-hunter.

Unbeknownst to Catherine, Dr. Sloper determines to refuse Morris’ request for his daughter’s hand in marriage. After the doorbell rings (signaling Morris’ arrival), Catherine’s motive is played twice in succession by solo violins. As Dr. Sloper instructs his daughter to go to her room, Catherine’s theme clashes with the trouble leitmotif, which is played softly by the brass and low reeds.
Example 5:
“The Appointment”

Before she leaves the room, Catherine begs her father to “praise her a little” to Morris.

Supplanting Catherine’s motive, the “trouble” motive gradually crescendos with each descending major second. Clearly, the lovers’ romance is ill-fated.

Collaboration

While shooting *The Heiress*, Wyler seems to have kept in touch with Copland and alerted him to any changes made to the screenplay. In addition, Wyler’s attention to detail and desire for historical accuracy shaped the film’s diegetic music. Even before Copland began to

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169 While Wyler acknowledged that Copland should not limit himself to period instruments and harmonies in composing *The Heiress*’s underscore, the producer-director had the studio’s music department select period-appropriate pieces for the film’s diegetic (or “source”) music. For more on diegetic music, see Wierzbicki, *Film Music*, 5.
work on the score, an assortment of period-appropriate dances—polkas, waltzes, and mazurkas—had been selected by the studio for the scene of the garden party.\textsuperscript{170}

Moreover, Wyler seems to have had a clear sense of how music could be used to enhance moments of drama and establish thematic unity. He recommended that Copland incorporate “Plaisir d’amour”—an 18th-century romance composed by Giovanni Martini—into his score.\textsuperscript{171} Noting that the “charming” song had “come off very well” when sung by Morris during the courting scene, Wyler suggested that it could also be used “to advantage in the score.”\textsuperscript{172} He therefore proposed that it would work nicely for the scoring of the love scenes, the scene of the jilt, and the final scene between Catherine and Morris.\textsuperscript{173} In compliance with Wyler’s suggestion, Copland wove it into his score.

Evidence suggests, however, that Copland did not intend for “Plaisir” to function as the film’s love theme. Instead, a condensed score reveals that the main theme from the opening title was probably Copland’s attempt at writing a love theme.\textsuperscript{174} As an interview with Otis L. Guernsey Jr. from the \textit{New York Tribune} in 1949 demonstrates, Copland chose to experiment with love music, which he felt had been “conventionalized” since Wagner’s \textit{Tristan und Isolde}.\textsuperscript{175} According to the interview, Copland “analyzed his problem” and decided that the music should first and foremost suggest the time period as well as the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{170} Pollack, \textit{Aaron Copland}, 436. Copland’s assistant and orchestrator, Nathan Van Cleave, arranged the dances which Copland later re-arranged.
\bibitem{171} Letter from Wyler to Copland, dated 24 July 1948, Box 265, Folder, 9, ACC.
\bibitem{172} Ibid.
\bibitem{173} Copland and Perlis, \textit{Copland Since 1943}, 100.
\bibitem{174} Aaron Copland, score for \textit{The Heiress}, dated 30 November 1948, Box 32, ACC. The conductor’s score was published by Paramount Studios for private use within the studio.
\end{thebibliography}
Washington Square setting. Concluding that the film’s love music should play against the light-hearted mood established at the beginning, Copland stated: “Everything at first appears to be normal and happy, but my music is a little disharmonious, suggesting that all is not as well as it looks. I think this makes an effective contrast and helps to establish the mood.”

Indeed, Copland’s love theme does not sound like the sonorities typically associated with this emotion. Although it is played by the violins, the theme is more reserved than overly passionate; additionally, certain harmonic shifts occur suddenly or unexpectedly which keeps the music from growing too romantic.

Example 6:
Copland’s Love Theme

Due to editing decisions made later by Wyler, Copland’s love theme is not heard until the proposal scene. Thus, when watching the film, the unknowing viewer might assume that

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176 Ibid.

177 Ibid.
Copland’s love theme was based instead on the “Plaisir” tune—especially since the melody typically is heard in the sweeping strings, and it occurs during many of the romance scenes.

“Plaisir” is first heard diegetically when Morris performs it for Catherine one afternoon in the parlor of the Sloper mansion. After Morris professes to be interested in the young heiress, the tune smoothly transforms into an orchestral statement reminiscent of a Hollywood-style love theme. Copland’s setting of the melody is more reserved than overwhelmingly lush, and it proceeds as a slow, two-part chorale. Strings dominate the texture although they are supported by a woodwind obbligato and arpeggiated harp part.  

The second statement of “Plaisir” occurs during the proposal scene, creating a noticeable juxtaposition with Copland’s own love theme. During Morris’ lengthy proposal, Copland’s love theme is played serenely by violins. Catherine accepts Morris’ offer, and the couple exchange vows of undying love and faithfulness. After Morris departs for the evening and just as Catherine shuts the door, however, the violins transition to a higher register and the “Plaisir” melody swells over harp accompaniment; Catherine’s excitement seems to have grown exponentially. The camera then pans from Catherine’s glowing face to Morris’ forgotten gloves lying on a foyer table. As the camera focuses on the gloves, the arpeggiated harp chords and violin melody seem to momentarily shift into tonal disagreement, creating a brief moment of musical unease. Ever-so-subtly, the “Plaisir” melody becomes momentarily unbalanced by a disharmonious pedal point, perhaps reflecting the false nature of Morris’ love.

\[178\] Although Paramount Studios assigned Copland an assistant, Nathan Van Cleave, Copland orchestrated the music himself. Condensed scores retained in the ACC show Copland’s handwritten instructions to Van Cleave regarding orchestration. See Copland, score for *The Heiress*, dated 30 November 1948, Box 32, ACC.
Copland incorporated a third and final statement of “Plaisir” into the score when the Slopers depart for Europe. Not wishing Catherine to marry Morris, Dr. Sloper hopes to separate the couple by a trip to France. Once aboard ship, Catherine anxiously scans the dock. As she spots Morris ascending the gangway, the now-familiar melody soars in the violins. Instead of a legato accompaniment, the short attacks of the low-strings generate musical tension. The music seems to reflect Catherine’s anxiety about leaving Morris. After Morris gives her a parting gift and bids her farewell, the tune is repeated once again. For the repeat, however, the violins have been transposed down to the middle register, and the accompaniment has been replaced by smooth, bowed strings. Seemingly, Catherine’s nerves have been calmed.

While these three scenes all feature full statements of “Plaisir d’amour,” there is one brief reference to the romance in the jilting scene.\textsuperscript{179} Dissonant music underpins Catherine’s excitement as she waits for Morris to arrive: “There he is, Aunt! I will write to you later, Aunt!” Agitated triplet-runs in the low woodwinds and strings combine with a repeated triplet figure in the upper woodwinds and violins. Sharply articulated muted horns and trombones play a series of jarring chords, and the upper voices ascend through the first four pitches of the “Plaisir” melody. At the climax (the fourth chord), a carriage rushes past the expectant Catherine. Immediately, the brass chords fade away and the music “deflates” along with Catherine’s hopes: Morris is not coming.

While experimenting with The Heiress’ score, Copland found the film’s element of romance to be quite challenging: “I’d never before written a really grown-up love scene [...] but in The Heiress, I had to figure out what to do when the lovers embrace à la Tristan and

\textsuperscript{179} This reference is not mentioned in any scholarly writings that I have read.
Isolde. It seems that nobody has invented a new way to compose love music!“\textsuperscript{180} Certainly, some of Copland’s attempts to write romantic-sounding music did not exactly achieve the desired effect. For example, Copland had originally written a very “romantic kind of music” for the jilting scene, which was meant to express all of Catherine’s “romantic emotions” and joy that Morris was going to take her far away from her father and Washington Square.\textsuperscript{181} However, when the movie was shown in a sneak preview, the audience laughed at the crucial moment when Catherine realizes that her fiancé is not in the passing carriage.\textsuperscript{182} Concerned that the picture would be a flop if audiences laughed at the most serious moments, Wyler asked Copland to “do something” with the scene. At first, Copland protested that he did not know how to stop an audience from laughing. Then, he threw out the romantic-sounding music and substituted music of a “completely different kind, much more dissonant than you would normally hear in a motion-picture theater”—an unused variation from his Piano Variations (1929).\textsuperscript{183} When the picture was screened again, no one laughed.

For the most part, Copland and Wyler seem to have collaborated well together. However, when Wyler asked Copland to “ditch his title music” and substitute it with an arrangement of “Plaisir d’amour” instead, Copland refused, feeling that his own music more effectively set the mood for the film.\textsuperscript{184} Only after The Heiress had been dubbed and released to the public did Copland discover that most of his title music (originally including a statement of his love theme) had been replaced by an arrangement of the “Plaisir” tune,

\textsuperscript{180} Copland and Perlis, Copland Since 1943, 101.

\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., 101. See also Vivian Perlis, Interview with Aaron Copland, dated 1977, Box 226, Folder 7, ACC.

\textsuperscript{182} Copland and Perlis, Copland Since 1943, 101.

\textsuperscript{183} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 105.
which had been quickly composed by his studio assistant Nathan Van Cleave.\textsuperscript{185} In the revised title music, the first three bars of Copland’s music segue directly to Van Cleave’s arrangement. Just as Copland’s name appears in the credits, the final few bars of Copland’s title music return. Copland immediately issued a statement to the newspapers, denying the title music as his own.\textsuperscript{186} Moreover, on the conductor’s score presented to Copland by Paramount Studios, Copland wrote “by and without my permission A.C.” on the first page of the title music.\textsuperscript{187} On the revised version of the title music (which included Van Cleave’s substitution), Copland crossed out his own name as composer and penciled in the phrase “after my departure from Hollywood.”\textsuperscript{188}

There were those in Hollywood who did not feel that the substitution was a wise decision. Film composer Hugo Friedhofer was present when the main title was rerecorded. When Wyler asked Friedhofer what he thought of the new title music, the composer replied: “Well, Willy, it’s none of my business, but I think that Aaron’s main title was probably more apt and more fitting, and I’m sorry you did it, but that’s your business.”\textsuperscript{189} Film-music critic Lawrence Morton, who also heard the original title music, found Copland’s music to be “certainly much more relevant to the film” than the “pretty” substitute, and André Previn likened the return of Copland’s music after Van Cleave’s “Plaisir” to “suddenly finding a

\textsuperscript{185} Pollack, Aaron Copland, 436–37. As Pollack notes, the studio had also replaced Copland’s love music for the scene in which Morris and Catherine are reunited with “a sweeping statement of ‘Plaisir d’amour.’”

\textsuperscript{186} Copland and Perlis, Copland Since 1943, 101.

\textsuperscript{187} Copland, score for The Heiress, dated 30 November 1948, Box 79, ACC.

\textsuperscript{188} Copland, score for The Heiress, dated 30 November 1948, Box 32, ACC.

\textsuperscript{189} Lochner, “You Have Cheated Me,” 38.
diamond in a can of Heinz beans. “\textsuperscript{190} When the score was nominated for an Academy Award, Copland did not attend the ceremony. \textsuperscript{191}

\textsuperscript{190} Ibid. See also Roy M. Prendergast, \textit{Film Music: A Neglected Art}, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 94, and Pollack, \textit{Aaron Copland}, 436.

\textsuperscript{191} Lochner, “You Have Cheated Me,” 39.
Conclusion

Although Copland’s output as a film composer is relatively slim when compared with that of the Steiners of the day—two documentaries and five feature films—he has been credited as a major influence in the history of film composition. While acknowledging that Copland’s film scores and writings on film music played a role in destabilizing the dominance of the Austro-German Romantic idiom in Hollywood, I suggested in this thesis that Copland’s views on film music were similar to those voiced by other contemporary film composers and directors who also advocated for more “realistic” film scores and less reliance on Romantic musical tropes. Moreover, I hope to have expanded the discussion of Copland’s publicized aims for film music and his private motivations for film composition through my comparison of the composer’s published writings with his personal and business correspondence.

In contextualizing Copland’s film-scoring career within the changing Hollywood scene of the 1940s, I suggested that Copland modified his initial aims for film music in response to changes in film production. I also posited that he may have adapted his perspectives on the use of leitmotifs when confronted by the challenges of scoring The Heiress, particularly in regard to both communicating the protagonist’s thoughts and underpinning the film’s psychological elements. If Copland had not so emphatically eschewed the use of the leitmotif in his early writings and neglected—deliberately or otherwise—referencing the technique in his article from 1949, his compositional plan for scoring The Heiress perhaps would not be as problematic or intriguing.
Moreover, an examination of Wyler’s and Copland’s collaboration on *The Heiress* further illustrates Copland’s belief in the primacy of the composer in regard to the film score, underscored by his strong belief that the future of film music lay with the modern art-composer. In his writings, Copland positioned himself as a composer who was well aware of the practical necessity for a film score to remain subordinate to the visual image and dialogue so that it did not obstruct the narrative, yet demanded compositional control over these soundscapes. Ever wary of producers, Copland advocated for greater freedom for the composer and more control over the film score. At the same time, he declared that the art-composer who sought self-expression in composing film scores would not be happy in Hollywood and was therefore better off staying at home. Composing for film from an art-music perspective was thus cast as a delicate balancing act between artistic self-determination and the needs of the production.

After growing more familiar with the procedures of the film industry and its perception of the film score as a collaborative effort between the studio executives, director, composer, and studio’s music division, Copland must have realized that a film score—even those composed by a famous art-composer—might not necessarily be viewed as a work of art. Indeed, by replacing Copland’s love theme with Van Cleave’s arrangement of “Plaisir d’amour” in the opening credits, Wyler—as both the director and producer of *The Heiress*—did not step outside of his prerogative to pursue whatever he determined to be in the film’s best interests. Copland was undoubtedly aware of this, although he was understandably surprised that the studio did not inform him of the switch before he watched the premiere. In fact, Copland appears to have been upset not so much by the substitution of his love music
for Van Cleave’s (although that certainly rankled him) as by the possibility that the public would identify the sweeping “Plaisir” passage as his own.

By the end of the 1940s, Copland noted that film music was moving in the right direction. In an interview from early 1948, he claimed that it was becoming more “sophisticated,” and to confirm this, one need only “look at some of the present scores, which now imitate the styles of Hindemith, Stravinsky, and Bartok, where once Richard Strauss and Tschaikowsky were the models.”

Copland regretted, however, that the standardized sound of film scores had established a dominant aesthetic that might not be easy to change: “The worst feature of most present film music is the kind of orchestral fabric to which the public has become accustomed. If they are not constantly bathed in a certain type of sound they appear to think that something is wrong.” Would it even be possible to write an effective soundtrack that played against the expected and, by this time, coded film-music language? Perhaps Copland simply did not see an alternative to using leitmotifs in The Heiress. What he could do, however, was combine the musical technique with the “remedy” that he proposed for film music in general: a more simple and less symphonic style.

By situating Copland’s career as a film composer within the Hollywood system, examining his compositional goals for film, and illustrating how his personal opinions as an art-composer affected his approach to film, this thesis has attempted to enrich the context in which we place Copland as a film composer advocating for the development of a “true movie music style.”

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192 Aaron Copland, quoted in Wierzbicki, *Film Music: A History*, 155.

193 Ibid., 156.

194 Ibid.

195 Ibid.
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**Videography**
