

ROMANTICISM AND MODERNISM AS RELATING TO
HOLLYWOOD FILM MUSIC

British film music pioneer Muir Mathieson, to whom Huntley's book was dedicated, observed in a 1971 interview that film fulfilled the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* to an extent never envisioned by Wagner.¹² This is at least part of the point of Max Steiner's previously quoted comment about Wagner. In the first decades of sound films the techniques and conventions informing the work of Wagner, along with Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler and the rest of the composers Steiner cites, were consciously and vocally applied to film music problems.

One of the most important of these techniques, and a staple of classical Hollywood composition, was the leitmotif, a marked melodic phrase or short passage by which characters and situations were identified and elaborated. The leitmotif was also a means by which otherwise diffuse and gap-filled scores were given musical unity. Of course, use and defense of the leitmotif partook also of the legitimizing influence already discussed. Once again it was not only Wagner's technique, but Wagner himself that was being appropriated.

This at least was the idea. As years passed, however, observers became less convinced of claims by film music to Wagnerian vigor and validity. Hanns Eisler and Theodor Adorno asserted that because scores and films alike were generally substandard, leitmotif in film was doomed to mere and maddening repetition.¹³ Wilfred Mellers, writing in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1954), echoed the argument, finding film to be too fragmented and episodic to successfully utilize a technique designed after all for large musical structures.¹⁴

As with the leitmotif, so too the idea of the integrated artwork, at least as conceived by Wagner, came to be seen as foreign to film realities.

It is worth reconsidering here Wagner's interest in *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Hollywood's own investment in unified, coherent texts, since both maintain that textual components should work toward the same dramatic ends. . . . The difference between Wagner and classical film commentators, however, comes from the fact that while for Wagner the unity of the music drama was achieved