



Miklos Rozsa: A Singular Life

"In 1947, I wrote the music for a film entitled *A Double Life*," explains the composer Miklos Rozsa. "[I]n it an actor playing Othello (Ronald Coleman) becomes obsessed by the part to the point of murdering the woman he imagines to be Desdemona. In other words he allows two quite independent strands of his life to become enmeshed, and tragedy is the outcome.

"Now this is precisely what I have always been at pains to ensure did *not* happen in the case of my own professional life. My 'public' career as composer for films ran alongside my 'private' development as composer for myself, or at least for nonutilitarian purposes: two parallel lines, and in the interests of both my concern has always been to prevent them meeting. ... This has been the dominant theme of my creative career ..." ¹

And yet, despite his attempts to keep these "parallel lines" separate and distinct, Rozsa became "the object of admiration and condemnation on both sides of his musical life," as pianist Andre Previn puts it. "His serious music is performed and held in high esteem by orchestras and soloists on two continents," Previn writes, "and few composers of film music have ever achieved as high a standard of excellence as he. At the same time, the community of critics, resentful of the fact that his concert music is assimilated and cheered by audiences, has damned him for being a 'Hollywood' composer, while some of the movie producers, made ill at ease by Miklos's illustrious reputation, have mistrusted his regular absences from California." ²

Still, as film music scholar Christopher Palmer has observed, whatever criticisms Rozsa faced in straddling two sides of the great divide, "Rozsa *needed* to write the kind of music films demanded of him; it was a side of his musical personality that had to find an expressive outlet." ³ And like the great composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Rozsa paid a price for his film score successes. ⁴ Music critic Terry Teachout observes: "Before going to Hollywood, Korngold and Rozsa had been viewed as distinguished composers; afterward, it was all but impossible for them to find an audience for their concert music." ⁵ This

didn't stop Rozsa from becoming "the most famous film composer of the post-war studio era," even as he continued to write "extensively for the concert hall." ⁶

Living in Extraordinary Times

Rozsa was born in Budapest on April 18, 1907. Though his father wanted him to study chemistry, Rozsa's musical talents led him eventually to the Conservatory in Leipzig, where he studied with such people as Hermann Grabner. Eventually he made his way to Paris, where he tried to make a living composing music, but found that he had to author a few popular tunes under the pseudonym Nic Tomay, just to keep food on the table. "So my *Double Life* began," Rozsa writes in his autobiography of the same name. ⁷

Working in Europe throughout the 1930s, Rozsa witnessed first-hand the darkening clouds of the political and military firestorm that would consume the continent. He recalled the day he encountered Adolf Hitler at a German music festival, and how the people around Der Fuehrer had lost all sense of reason and reality:

The cordon was close around us. A man in S.A. uniform with a boy of about eight wearing a Hitler Youth outfit came up to speak to one of the men in it. He was explaining how much it would mean to the little boy if he were allowed to go up to Hitler and salute him. The S.A. man let him through. The man turned to his son and said: "My son, you must understand that this is the greatest moment of your life. Go up to the Fuehrer, salute him and say, 'Heil, mein Fuehrer.' You will remember this moment as long as you live." The little boy burst into tears and said he didn't want to go. The man tried to tell him that he was too

young to understand, but that he would never again have another chance like this and that he should go and do what he was told. But the child was frightened by now and said no, he didn't want to. The man became furious, his face turned bright red and he was so angry that his son had dishonored him in public that he slapped the boy's face twice and dragged him away. ⁸

When, later, Rozsa sat in the same restaurant as Hitler, he recalls seeing Der Fuehrer drinking milk, while everybody else was slugging beer. "He made a big point of being a vegetarian and of not drinking alcohol or smoking. He was the perfect German, an example to everyone, a paragon of every conceivable virtue," Rozsa writes. "So he ostentatiously drank milk and ate salad." ⁹

Ordinary citizens felt the presence of the Nazi menace in their everyday lives. Rozsa himself experienced the fear of living in a society where privacy was slowly becoming a thing of the past. In Munich, on his way to Leipzig, Rozsa was stopped by a Nazi Stormtrooper. "Are you Miklos Rozsa?" he was asked.

That sounded ominous. I said yes, I was. Then he said: "Were you a student at the Leipzig Conservatory in 1928?" Again yes. I was about to give myself up when the two stern S.A. men started to smile; the one who had been asking the questions threw his arms around me and said how nice it was to see me again. It seemed he had been in the same class, studying piano. I didn't remember him at all, but I smiled faintly and said that of course I remembered him and how was he? All three of us shook hands like long-lost friends. The train whistle went and I had to get back in and say goodbye to my "old friend" from the Conservatory who now found it necessary to be a Nazi Stormtrooper. ¹⁰

The *Anschluss* would come, and those who didn't take Hitler seriously enough would soon find themselves engulfed in his Third Reich.

Meanwhile, Rozsa returned to France, and was learning to write fanfares for the cinema, but when the contractors failed

to deliver the promised funds, he decided to move to London. He studied choral conducting at the Trinity College of Music and eventually met a Hungarian compatriot, director and producer Alexander Korda, who greatly influenced his decision to write more formally for the cinema, and to relocate

then a ship to America. Settling in New York for a few days, he was soon off to Hollywood—where he remained for 40+ years, becoming, at first, Korda's "one-man music department."¹²

Rozsa was delighted to be on American

York City, by contrast, he felt like he was "coming back to civilization again."¹³

It was in America that Rozsa's film scoring career took off. He was a serious composer who refused to bow to those critics who had panned film scoring because it provided a regular cash flow. Bach and Haydn worked for money, Rozsa argued, and many classical composers worked on the basis of commission.

In his lifetime, Rozsa scored about a hundred films. At the height of his career, while he was scoring 4, 5 or 6 films a year, he was also producing works for the concert stage. In 1953 alone, Rozsa did five film scores, including *Julius Caesar*, *Knights of the Round Table*, and *Young Bess*, while also working on his Violin Concerto (which made its debut three years later). He was among the very first film score composers to present an orchestral overture as a prelude to the actual film. His output stretched from monumental epics, where he emphasized historical accuracy, to the most intimate love themes. He matched the moods set by directors as varied as Alfred Hitchcock, William Wyler, Billy Wilder, Vincente Minnelli and Douglas Sirk.

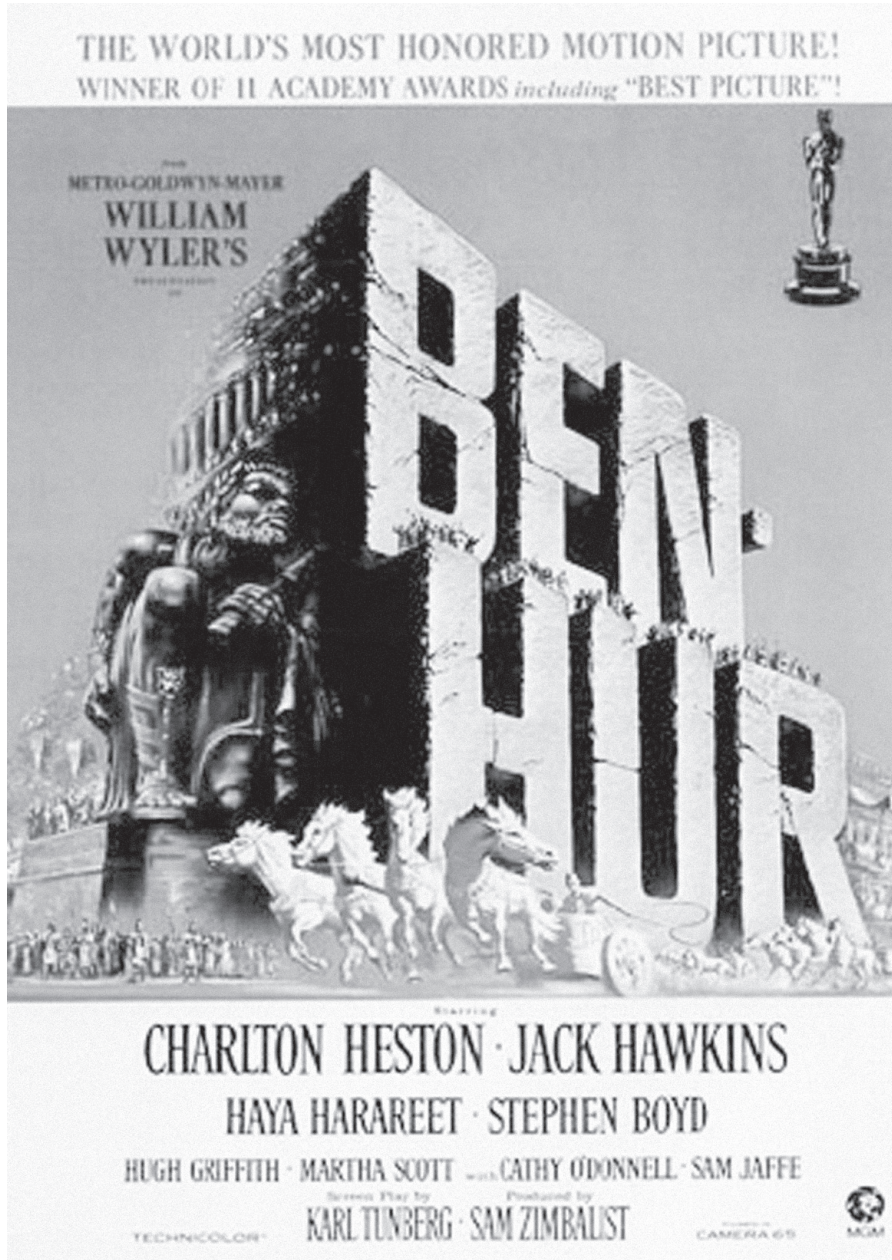
Rozsa's scoring was marked by five distinct "periods": The first, Rozsa called the "oriental" period, with films featuring exotic locations (e.g., *Thief of Baghdad*, *Four Feathers*, *Jungle Book*); the second featured his "psychological" portraits (e.g., *Lost Weekend*, *The Red House*, and the Oscar-winning score for *Spellbound*); the third was his "film noir" period (e.g., *Double Indemnity*, and his Oscar-winning score for *A Double Life*); the fourth was his Historico-Biblical Period (e.g., *Madame Bovary*, *Quo Vadis*, *El Cid*, *Lust for Life*, and his Oscar-winning score for *Ben-Hur*); and the fifth was his sci-fi phase (e.g., *The Power*, *Time After Time*).

When Rozsa turned 80, he was given a touching tribute by colleagues and friends; even world leaders—such as Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and the Pope—sent him congratulations. Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley dubbed the composer's birthday, April 18, 1987, "Miklos Rozsa Day."

Eight years later, on July 27, 1995, Rozsa died, after a lengthy period of mounting health problems.

The Romantic Manifesto

"Motion pictures are by definition a non-naturalistic medium," Teachout explains.¹⁴



eventually to America, where he could continue to compose for both films and the concert hall. He was forced to weigh the relative risks of going by plane or ship to the New World. "You stand a good chance of being shot down over the Channel, which at least has the virtue of a quick death," an acquaintance warned him. "Or you could be sunk, which would be considerably less pleasant. It's up to you."¹¹ So Rozsa flew back to Paris, took the train to Genoa, and

soil; his autobiographical recollections of life in America, a country he eventually made his own, are filled with humor and grace. By 1943, he had conducted his first Hollywood Bowl concert; five years later, he'd conduct the same orchestra behind the celebrated Mario Lanza, who would also record a vocal version of Rozsa's *Quo Vadis* composition, "Lygia." Rozsa was none too thrilled with the superficial Hollywood lifestyle, however; anytime he visited New

And music has been a vital part of the cinema ever since the first piano accompaniment was used with silent films in 1895. Many of the early film score composers, most of whom were “musicians of high accomplishment,” looked to “the 19th-century Romantics as their musical models.” So, while “serious” contemporary concert music embraced atonality, the melodic and the lyrical found refuge in the cinema. And it was this romanticism that played a great part in Rozsa’s repertoire, in his concert work, and in his film scores, especially those written for sweeping historical epics: “For me, legends spell romance,” he wrote, “and in my music I must evoke them romantically.”¹⁵

For Rozsa, this always meant an emphasis on tonality and melody. “My music had originally started from folk song, which was melody pure and simple,” he observed; “it would end as melody pure and simple.”¹⁶ Not all of Rozsa’s contemporaries had the same approach. He remembered attending a performance in the presence of Arnold Schoenberg. “Every time there was a tonal melody, or a movement ended with a consonant chord, his face became contorted,” Rozsa recalls, “in the way people react when listening to the most excruciating dissonances.”¹⁷ Stravinsky, says Rozsa, had taken to calling Schoenberg “the ‘Alchemist of Music.’”¹⁸ Ironically, the only time Schoenberg’s influence ever showed in Rozsa’s work was in a single track in the film score for the 1961 biblical epic, *King of Kings*—music for a scene where Jesus roams through the desert, resisting Satan’s Temptation. “I did my best to explain it musically,” he writes, “and in spite of (or rather because of) my disbelief in Schoenberg’s twelve-tone system, I wrote the only twelve-tone theme of my career for the Devil. For my twelve-tone music is a stillborn idea and thus naturally and admirably suited to the Devil, the ‘Spirit of Negation,’ the ‘Father of Lies.’ This was an in-joke; I didn’t expect a cinema audience to get the message but thought it might rehabilitate me with the avant-garde. No such luck.”¹⁹

The avant-garde never embraced Rozsa; he remembers meeting the composer Gyorgy Ligeti (whose themes were used by director Stanley Kubrick to express the blackness and vastness of outer space in *2001: A Space Odyssey*). Ligeti remarked that Rozsa’s *Overture to a Symphony Concert* “was very contrapuntal. Not knowing whether I was supposed to say thank you or apologize, I kept silent. When in later years I got to know some of Ligeti’s own works,” Rozsa writes, “I realized that the idea of contrapuntal

activity went as much against the grain of his musical nature as his eternal homophonous *pianissimos* went against mine.”²⁰

Rozsa repudiated “those who would allege that my music, through its refusal to take cognizance of modish contemporary trends, can play no part in the present-day scheme of things, and is therefore devoid of meaning and value.” He aimed to create music that “brings joy to people, stimulates pleasure in life and pride in life. And as an *apologia pro vita sua*—whether that life be single, double or quadruple—this is the most, and the best, that any creative artist has the right to expect.”²¹ Rozsa saw his “music as a celebration of life, of the joys I have experienced in many spheres over the last eighty years—a lifetime of music-making, happy and fulfilled ...”²² For Rozsa, music is a “form of communication ... an expression of emotion.” His manifesto is worth quoting at length:

Like Sir Thomas Beecham I have no time for any music which does not stimulate pleasure in life, and, even more importantly, *pride* in life. For this reason I find myself as out of sympathy with the so-called avant-garde of today as I did with the avant-garde of my own youth—Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School. I am an unashamed champion of tonality. Its possibilities were supposed to be exhausted at the turn of the century; yet today, eighty years later, composers are still finding new and vital things to say within its framework. I am a traditionalist, but I believe tradition can be so recreated as to express the artist’s own epoch while preserving its relationship with the past. ... I have tried always in my own work to express human feelings and assert human values, and to do this I have never felt the slightest need to move outside the orbit of the tonal system. Tonality means line; line means melody; melody means song; and song, especially folk song, is the essence of music, because it is the natural, spontaneous and primordial expression of human emotion.²³

Confronting the Musical Snobs

Interestingly, despite Rozsa’s traditionalism, his work for the concert hall was often ignored. “[V]ery few conductors are interested in new music,” he explains, and “most stay with the established repertoire for their entire lives.”²⁴ So typical was their playing and re-playing of the works of the same classical composers that it was rare to hear anything new in the concert halls

across America. Worse still, Rozsa’s concert work was often dismissed by critics simply because he was a composer of “movie music.”

Film composers, and especially Hollywood film composers, are the easiest prey for critics. You can positively sense them waiting to pounce, and once you bear the cinematographic taint nothing you write in any context is inviolate. My *Theme, Variations and Finale* was once described as “typical film music”: this was a work written in 1933, at which time I knew nothing of films and had written not a note of film music. Admittedly vast quantities of bad music were manufactured in Hollywood during the so-called Golden Age, but no more proportionately than was written and performed in concert during the same period.²⁵

Rozsa certainly had pegged correctly the musical snobs of his time. “If the audience walks out in droves, the critic will praise the piece to show his appreciation of a work far too esoteric for the common herd. If they love it, he will sneer because their vulgar taste cannot accord with his refinement. Many are poseurs, who know that controversial reviewing makes good ‘copy’ which is appreciated by editors.”²⁶

As Teachout explains, Rozsa’s concert works were very much grounded in his Hungarian upbringing, offering “sharp-cornered rhythms and strong modal coloration—particularly the major-minor fluctuation and flattened sevenths that can also be heard in the music of Bela Bartok.” Unlike Bartok, however, Rozsa’s “melodies were more overtly lyrical.”²⁷ Teachout ranks Rozsa’s “Violin Concerto, Op. 24” among the Top 50 compositions of the twentieth century. “Snobbish critics and performers reflexively dismissed his classical compositions without listening to them,” Teachout maintains, “but recent recordings of his music leave little doubt that he was, after Bartok, the foremost Hungarian composer of the 20th century.”²⁸ Jascha Heifetz, for whom that concerto was commissioned, recognized Rozsa’s greatness and “genius,” and it was in his gifted hands that the piece deserved its own “prominent place in the standard repertoire.”²⁹ Its “warmly romantic, modally colored melodies,” with “a pinch of harmonic acerbity,” included a “frankly emotive” central movement, illustrating Rozsa’s unswerving belief in the central position of tonality in Western music, something that “would have struck many influential musicians as reactionary,

if not absurd."³⁰ But Teachout concludes persuasively that

Rozsa's concert music is due—overdue—for a thoroughgoing reevaluation. For all the impeccable craftsmanship and dramatic appropriateness of his film scores, it is in pieces like his concertos for violin, viola (premiered by Pinchas Zukerman), and cello, the two string quartets, and the marvelous 'Theme, Variations, and Finale' that the best of Rozsa is to be found. These are major works by any reckoning, strongly individual yet unfailingly accessible. It can only be a matter of time before their chronically undervalued composer wins the recognition he deserves as a master of modern music.³¹

I agree wholeheartedly with Teachout's evaluations here. Nevertheless, I have to say that my favorite Rozsa remains the film score composer, the man who produced magnificent scores for *Double Indemnity*, *Spellbound*, and the intimate *Providence* and for such monumentally scaled films as *Ben-Hur*, *King of Kings*, and *El Cid*. Traditionalist or not, Rozsa experimented with all sorts of techniques to match the films he scored. For example, in the 1944 film noir *Double Indemnity*, starring Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck, Rozsa gives us sounds that Teachout aptly describes as "joltingly dissonant" for its time.³² In the 1945 classic Hitchcock film, *Spellbound*, starring Gregory Peck and Ingrid Bergman, Rozsa's use of the theremin to create sounds of paranoia was revolutionary. In fact, Rozsa commented that "Salvador Dali's designs for the central dream-interpretation sequence immediately suggested a musical complement, and literally colored my concept of the score as a whole."³³ The main theme for that film became the most recorded theme of Rozsa's corpus.³⁴ Rozsa even experimented with recording effects to create an "unearthly quality" for music to match the themes of a 1948 Fritz Lang film, *The Secret Beyond the Door*, by having the orchestra play its music backwards, recording it "back to front" as it were, and then "playing it back as usual."³⁵

But of all his scores, Rozsa said that the music of *Ben-Hur* was "very close to [his] heart."³⁶ Teachout describes that score as "richly expansive,"³⁷ but that phrase doesn't begin to capture the magnificent breadth of Rozsa's work here. This film score, like those of his other epic scores, plays like an instrumental opera: Hours of composition, with themes integrated into an organic whole, each part expressive of that

whole, and the whole shaping each part, carrying forth its drama toward an ultimate resolution. *Ben-Hur*—with its sounds of conflict, struggle, and redemption, from its opening overture to its paeans to friendship and love to its "Parade of the Charioteers" and its "Halleluah" finale—remains one of the greatest and most moving film scores ever written.

Rozsa approached his scoring with equal parts logic and emotion. For Rozsa, the



craft of film scoring is fully in keeping with the constraints placed on other aesthetic modes. "To me, time in music is like space in painting," he explains. "When Michelangelo was asked to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, it wouldn't have done him much good to ask for another ten feet in one direction and another five in the other, because what he had in mind wouldn't fit the space available. It is exactly the same with film music. The discipline of having to compose to a given duration need not affect the quality of the music so composed at all."³⁸ As Rozsa maintained: "Inasmuch as more people are exposed to music through the cinema than through any other medium I feel it my duty to ensure that any music of mine they may hear shall be of the highest possible quality; it is, if you like, a way of educating people musically."³⁹

But, for Rozsa, whether he wrote for the cinema or the concert hall, the didactic element remains subordinate to the primary aesthetic purpose of projecting human feelings and values. Rozsa admitted to being "old-fashioned enough also to maintain that no art is worthy of the name unless it contains some element of beauty."⁴⁰ On these grounds, Rozsa's musical legacy is art incarnate.

Notes

1. Miklos Rozsa, *Double Life*. Foreword by Antal Dorati. Preface by Andre Previn. New York: Wynwood Press, [1982] 1989: 15.
2. *Ibid.*, 13.
3. Quoted in Terry Teachout, "The Double Life of Miklos Rozsa," *Commentary* (December 2001): 64.
4. *Ibid.*, 62.
5. Terry Teachout, "I heard it at the movies," *Commentary* (November 1996): 54.
6. *Ibid.*, 55.
7. Rozsa, 54.
8. *Ibid.*, 64-65.
9. *Ibid.*, 65.
10. *Ibid.*, 67-68.
11. *Ibid.*, 101.
12. *Ibid.*, 108.
13. *Ibid.*, 127.
14. Teachout 1996, 54.
15. Rozsa, 180.
16. *Ibid.*, 223-24.
17. *Ibid.*, 109.
18. *Ibid.*, 116.
19. *Ibid.*, 192.
20. *Ibid.*, 183.
21. *Ibid.*, 233.
22. *Ibid.*, 232-33.
23. *Ibid.*, 233.
24. *Ibid.*, 56.
25. *Ibid.*, 201-2.
26. *Ibid.*, 202.
27. Teachout 2001, 62.
28. Terry Teachout, "Masterpieces of the Century: A Finale," *Commentary* (June 1999): 57.
29. *Ibid.*, 58.
30. Teachout 2001, 64.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Teachout 2001, 63.
33. Rozsa, 181.
34. *Ibid.*, 146-47.
35. *Ibid.*, 151.
36. *Ibid.*, 191.
37. Teachout 2001, 64.
38. Rozsa, 204-5.
39. *Ibid.*, 232-33.
40. *Ibid.*, 233.