In 1967 Myrl Schreiber was a senior at UCLA, enrolled in a class called “Background Music for Motion Pictures.” As the topic for his final paper, he chose Steiner’s score to *Gone with the Wind*. Like many contemporary undergraduates, he found library research daunting and tedious, so he decided instead to interview Steiner himself. The 79-year-old composer graciously invited Schreiber into his home, and spoke to him at length about his work on the film.

In response to one of Schreiber’s questions about the function of the “Tara” theme, Steiner said:

*Gone with the Wind*, like all my scores, is written like an opera. If you listen to Wagner’s *Ring* you will find the same theme throughout. It goes from one end to the other, except *Meistersinger* doesn’t have it. But it is in the others—*Gotterdammerung* (sic) and *Das Rheingold*.

Any opera is like a symphony. A theme reoccurs in different ways. I did it with every one of my scores.

**ARTICLE**

“Leitmotif”: On the Application of a Word to Film Music

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Abstract: The idea that the film-scoring procedures of classic Hollywood composers descend from the leitmotif technique of Wagner (and other composers such as Richard Strauss) is so firmly embedded in narrative histories of film music that it hardly needs to be rearticulated. It stretches back beyond Max Steiner’s frequently quoted comments about his own indebtedness to Wagner into the very earliest years of sound film. The first section of this essay offers a critique of this interpretative tradition, by placing it in the context of Wagner’s own discussion of the term “leitmotif” (in his essay “On the Application of Music to Drama”) and its use in subsequent analytical works. Classical Hollywood film-music scoring, I will maintain, fits very uncomfortably with this analytical tradition. In many ways, the invocation of the leitmotif in film-music discourse during the 1930s and 1940s was driven by a desire to establish the cultural legitimacy of sound film: to establish (we might say) Hollywood as the logical successor to Bayreuth. In the second part of this essay, I use Miklós Rózsa’s score to *Ben-Hur* as a kind of limiting case for the application of the leitmotif principle to film music. The highly transformative network of motives that Rózsa uses in this score is similar—in terms of its structure if not its specific melodic/harmonic content—to those through which Wagner organized his music dramas. The drafts and revisions to the “Aftermath” cue, however, suggest that Rózsa’s early intentions in this regard were far more thoroughgoing than the final cut of the film would suggest. In this final cut, Rózsa’s original concepts were simplified: the network of motives through which the scene was organized was—so to speak—partially unraveled. In this sense, the evolution of Rózsa’s “Aftermath” cue illustrates the tension between cultural pretensions and cinematic practice: between film music as “high art” and film music as functional entertainment.

Keywords: Leitmotif; Ben-Hur; Rózsa; Steiner
you listen to them carefully you will find they are all written the same way. I start out with a basic theme and then I keep going.¹

The quotation reinforces the idea that Steiner used Wagner’s motivic technique as what Darby and Dubois called an “embryonic model” for film-music scoring, an idea that pervades the secondary literature on Steiner and on the history of film music more generally. Similar statements that Steiner made in other interviews—or on liner notes and other ancillary materials—support the “Wagner connection.” Few of these statements give such a distorted or simplistic description of Wagner’s music: Die Meistersinger, after all, is not a part of the Ring.² In none of them, however, does Steiner provide a particularly rich or nuanced account of Wagner’s technique. Instead, Steiner typically references the idea of linking a particular character or dramatic idea with a recurring theme: an idea that can be found in the work of countless other composers besides Wagner. During the period of so-called “silent” film, and well into the 1930s (as Bill Rosar and others have pointed out) the practice of adding music to film had more in common with the traditions of theatrical music than with those of the Wagnerian music-drama. Indeed, Steiner’s various references to Wagner have frequently overshadowed the words of other musicians from the prewar period, who recognized ways in which the leitmotivic practice in film scoring differs from the Wagnerian model. In the 1927 edition of the Handbuch der Film-Musik, for instance, Hans Erdmann writes that:

[T]he deeper effectiveness of the leitmotivic technique does not lie on the surface, but rather belongs to a more genuine knowledge of the specific work, which can only be instilled through repeated listening. From this perspective, the temporary and ephemeral nature of film is very decisive; one might even say that it is not exactly “leitmotive-friendly.”³

“One must be emphatically warned,” Erdmann continues, “against going too far in this area. To be sure, in the ‘Ring,’ Wagner built up an entire leitmotivic system. This, however, remains the brilliant achievement of an individual genius.”⁴

I am going to take it as self-evident that what Erdmann calls “leitmotivic technique” has widely varying relevance for film scoring. What interests me here is not the “accuracy” of leitmotivic analysis as a description of selected film scores, but rather the ideological and cultural resonance of such analyses. As David Neumeyer and others have pointed out, invoking the Wagnerian connection was a way for film music—and, by extension, the medium of film itself—to establish its cultural legitimacy. Scott Paulin and others have already critiqued this effort by putting pressure on the idea of film as a twentieth-century Gesamtkunstwerk. What I would like to do here is to apply a similar kind of pressure on the idea of Wagner’s thematic practice as an “embryonic model” for twentieth-century film scoring. What is at stake here, therefore, is not potential procedural or theoretical links between film scores and specific Wagnerian works—works that after all manifest quite different practices of thematic transformation and development—but rather, the relationship to an analytical tradition.

Musicologists typically trace the use of the term back to descriptions of Weber’s operas in the work of Ambros and Jähns. But it was through the thematic guides to Wagner’s works that Hans von Wolzogen published in the last decades of the nineteenth century that the term “leitmotif” entered the mainstream of musical discourse and acquired its Wagnerian associations. From Wolzogen, the idea of the leitmotif passed into the work of countless other theorists and music historians, reaching its climax, perhaps, in the series published as Das Buch der Motive.⁵ The fact that so many piano-vocal scores of Wagner’s operas include relevant examples from Das Buch der Motive as a prefix is just one mark of the extent to which the leitmotif became a nearly ubiquitous tool for the understanding of Wagner’s works.

Few if any scholars today would apply the term “leitmotif” as uncritically as Wolzogen did, and I think it unnecessary here to recapitulate the extensive critique to which the concept has been subjected. Indeed, the critique of the leitmotif may be said to begin with Wagner himself, in particular, with his 1879 essay “Über die Anwendung der Musik auf das Drama” (which Ashton Ellis translated as “On the Application of Music to the Drama” and whose awkward syntax I have borrowed for the title of this article). The concern that Wagner voices in this essay is that his technique might be confused with other—

² We should not necessarily assume that Schreiber’s text accurately reflects what Steiner actually said. It is more likely to be Schreiber than Steiner who is responsible for the misidentification of Die Meistersinger.
⁴ Erdmann, 52.
⁵ Eventually encompassing all of the canonical Wagnerian works, the series was edited by Lothar Windsperger.
more mechanical—means of linking music and drama. Wagner’s concerns were—so to speak—taken up into the mainstream of the analytical tradition. With a great deal of simplification and generalization, we may identify two key ideas in this regard. The first is that the various individual motives are related to each other through an organic process of growth and development. An iconic illustration of this kind of relationship may be found in the famous motive-diagrams from the *Revue wagnerienne*.6

The second idea is that these processes of musical transformation reflect and articulate the drama. A classic example in this regard concerns the famous transition between the first and second scenes of *Das Rheingold*, in which the Ring motive is progressively diatonicized so that it develops seamlessly into the Valhalla motive. The musical relationship between the Ring motive and what Robert Donington (in his well-known book *Wagner’s Ring and its Symbols*) calls its “near relative” (the Valhalla motive), enacts, illustrates, or symbolizes the relationship between Wotan’s power and that of Alberich. If Alberich has been able to seize the Rhinegold by forswearing love, so too has Wotan been able to create Valhalla by agreeing to give Freya—the goddess of love and youth—to the giants in payment for their services. In the appendix to *Wagner’s Ring and its Symbols*, Donington provides a concise illustration of this process:7

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6 *Revue wagnerienne*, vol. 1 (February 1885-January 1886), facing page 330.

Example 2: The transformations of the Ring motive as described in the Appendix to Donington, Wagner’s Ring and its Symbols

Notwithstanding the comments by Steiner with which I began this article, it is readily apparent that the Ring motive and the Tara motive operate in quite different ways in their respective works. A Donington-like analysis of Gone with the Wind is unlikely to take us very far. Instead, I would like to use another epic score as a limiting case for the applicability of leitmotivic analysis to film music. I refer to Miklós Rózsa’s music for Ben-Hur. Of all the films that may be considered a part of the film-music canon (insofar as we can speak of such a thing), it is surely Ben-Hur that is most amenable to this approach. As Roger Hickman has pointed out in his recently published Film Study Guide to Ben-Hur, harmonic and melodic relationships among Rózsa’s various motives carry important dramatic significance. Numerous examples could be adduced, but one will suffice. As Hickman points out, Rózsa uses the tritone as a prominent melodic interval in both the “Hatred” motive (associated with Judah Ben-Hur’s anger at his and his family’s mistreatment at the hands of the Romans) and the “Friendship” motive (linked to his relationship to Messala). Messala and Judah were boyhood friends, but the tritone in the “Friendship” motive articulates the emotional tensions that lurk beneath the surface of their relationship. When Messala unjustly imprisons Judah and his family, the former friendship turns into hate. Only towards the end of the film, when the conflict has been resolved, is the tritone “diatonicized.”

Example 3: Illustration of the relationship between the “Hatred” motive and the “Friendship” motive from Hickman, Miklós Rózsa’s Ben-Hur: A Film Score Guide

Hickman has enriched our understanding and our enjoyment of Ben Hur, and the kinship between his analysis and Donington’s explication of the Ring motives helps clarify why it is that those of us who come to the study of film music through historical musicology are drawn to Rózsa’s magisterial score like moths to a candle flame. To paraphrase Erdmann, the deeper effectiveness of Rózsa’s leitmotivic technique does not lie on the surface, but rather belongs to a more genuine knowledge of Ben-Hur, a knowledge that can only be instilled through repeated listening. What lies beyond the purview of these kinds of analyses are questions about the phenomenology and ontology of this leitmotivic technique. In order to probe some of these questions, I would like to take a more detailed look at some materials concerning a single cue from the Ben-Hur score entitled “Aftermath.” This cue comes in the second half of the film, after Judah Ben-Hur has won the famous chariot race. Messala—Judah’s principal opponent in the race—has just met a gruesome death, but not before telling the Jewish hero that his wife and sister are lepers. The surviving materials show that Rózsa revised this cue extensively. An inked conductor’s score is dated from June 1959, but Rózsa seems to have returned to this cue in July of
1959, adding some percussion instruments and (more significantly) replacing the final page with new music. The cue—especially in the “June” version—is built around the same “Hatred” and “Friendship” motives whose relationship Hickman describes. Although the “Hatred” motive does not undergo the same kind of transformations as the “Ring” motive in the transition from Das Rheingold to which I referred above, the construction of the cue clarifies the musico-dramatic relationship between these two themes that Hickman describes so well. This relationship is here further reinforced by the fact that each of the motives begins on the same pitch. In the last section of the “Aftermath” cue (in the June version) Rózsa reiterates a trumpet fanfare motive from the “Circus Parade” cue.

Rózsa calls for an antiphonal iteration of this fanfare idea. Not coincidentally, the two statements are a tritone apart, beginning on the same pitches (E♭ and A) that formed this interval in the “Hatred” motive at the beginning of the cue. All of the main musical materials of the cue (“Hatred” motive, “Friendship” motive, and the trumpet fanfare) are thus informed by the same musico-dramatic logic.

These kinds of musico-dramatic relationships may be found throughout the Ben-Hur score. If Donington had turned his attention to film music, he would have found in Rózsa’s music ample grist for his musicological mill. There might, however, have been some sand in this hypothetical analytical machinery. The “Aftermath” cue as it appears in the final cut of the film does not correspond to either the “June” or the “July” versions that I have presented here. Instead, it begins with the transitional passage at the top of the second page of the cue.

The trumpet fanfare from “Circus Parade” comes near the end of the cue, but its tritone antiphonal answer is absent. The melodic/harmonic similarities that in the “June” version of the Ben-Hur score link the Hatred motive, the Friendship motive, and the Circus Parade fanfare, in short, did not survive into the final cut of the film. The cue is still oriented around motives, to be sure, but the organic and transformational relationships among these motives—in other words, those qualities that make the score more “Wagnerian”—have been attenuated.

I do not know the details of the editing process for Ben-Hur, and I have not been able to find references to this cue or to its revisions in the Rózsa correspondence that I have examined. Some interesting context may be provided, however, by comments that Rózsa made in his autobiography concerning the final cut for the 1951 epic Quo Vadis.

For this score, Rózsa had based much of his music on

Example 4: The final page of the “Aftermath” cue from Rózsa’s “June” version of the Ben-Hur score, showing the antiphonal trumpet fanfare
Example 5: The second page of the “Aftermath” cue from Rózsa’s “June” version of the Ben-Hur score
what he considered to be authentic sources such as the “Epitaph of Seikolos” and the “Ode of Pindar.” He was disappointed, however, in the final version of the film:

I was sure that the music of Quo Vadis was going to be interesting not only to the audience but also to musicologists, on account of its authenticity. Unfortunately this did not turn out to be the case... After all the trouble I went to, much of my work was swamped by sound effects, or played at such a low level as to be indistinguishable.9

What I would like to suggest is that the complex, quasi-Wagnerian leitmotivic technique that Rózsa employed in the Ben-Hur score was—at least in part—analogous to the ideals of musical authenticity that informed Quo Vadis. In each case, Rózsa's contribution can be understood as a musical refraction of the film's cultural pretensions. Like the Overture and Entr’acte that were inserted into the film, the network of leitmotifs in Ben-Hur could thus function as a means of appropriating the magnificence of grand opera.

The editing process for Ben-Hur, of course, did not swamp Rózsa's music by sound effects or “unravel” the network of leitmotifs through which it was organized. But my glance at the “Aftermath” cue does suggest that with Ben-Hur, as with Quo Vadis, Rózsa's musical/musicological ambitions were not completely realized in the final cut of the film. He is hardly the only film composer, of course, to suffer such a fate. What is significant here is not simply the disjuncture between a composer's intentions and the final version of a film, but rather the ways in which that disjuncture operates in the changing arena of cultural signification. For if we accept this reading of leitmotivic technique as a means of associating film music with the cultural prestige of Wagnerian opera, it would place the Ben-Hur score in a deeply ironic historical position. The “Wagnerian connection” that might have helped prewar cinema to establish its claims to cultural significance no longer had much value in the postwar years. Epic films were increasingly seen as “middlebrow” entertainment, and Rózsa's close association with the genre during this period no doubt made it more difficult for him to be taken seriously as a composer of concert music. The tremendous sophistication of the Ben-Hur score, in short, did little to bridge the two parts of what Rózsa called his “double life.”

It is tempting to speak of the editing of the “Aftermath” cue in terms of a “de-Wagnerization” of Rózsa's musical ideas. It is more apt, however, to speak instead of moving the score of Ben-Hur back towards the mainstream of film-music scoring practice. The idea of underscoring a drama with a group of clearly identifiable musical motives, of course, stretches back to the earliest days of film, and beyond that into the theatrical practices of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this long history, it is the philosophical and musico-historical pretensions of the Wagnerian system that are the greatest anomaly. In this light, questions about the ways in which film music inherited the Wagnerian leitmotif belong as much to reception history as to the history of compositional style. It is not only the practice of leitmotivic technique that is inextricably enmeshed in shifting cultural hierarchies, but our understanding of this technique as well.

9 Miklós Rózsa, Double Life: The Autobiography of Miklós Rózsa, foreword by Antal Doráti (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1982), 153-54. The title that Rózsa uses for this work—Double Life—references the 1948 picture for which he won his second Academy Award. But as Rózsa himself makes clear, it also alludes to the split between his work as one of the most famous film composers of the postwar period and a much less prominent career as a creator of “serious” music. Rózsa fell into film composition almost by accident, and during the first part of his career he seems to have thought of cinematic work essentially as a supplement to his real vocation.
References


