



### Indispensable Film and Theatre Composers

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#### THE MUSIC OF FILM AND THEATRE COMPOSERS: WHY IS IT INDISPENSABLE

Throughout the centuries the dividing line between concert music and popular music occasionally got blurred. To make ends meet **J.S. Bach** played his sacred music in church services on Sundays and his secular music in cafés in the evenings during the week.

In Italy, the operas of **Verdi** and **Puccini** (pr: poo-tchee-nee) were enjoyed by all classes – the wealthy folks in the orchestra section and the members of the working class in the upper balconies of the theatres. **Mozart's Magic Flute** played for weeks at **Schikaneder's** (pr: shee-kah-neh-dehr) theatre, enjoyed by many of Vienna's working class.

**Hitler** banned music by Jewish composers along with anything else that might remotely be considered "experimental" as "dirty" art (*Entartete Kunst*.) **Stalin** cracked down on "formalist" art. As the generations passed, the loathing of the racial policies of the Nazis and the Soviets caused postwar musical tendencies to swing 180 degrees in favor of "experimental" music, created by talented composers, although appreciated and understood by a select few.

As an unintended side-benefit of sorts, many European musicians – among them many composers – came to America, where quite a few found work in Hollywood. The achievements of **Max Steiner** ("*Gone with the Wind*") or **Miklós Rózsa** ("*Ben Hur*") and those of many other composers who made careers by writing for movies were huge.

But, to this day their music is dismissed in the higher realms of Academia as “showbiz” junk. And yet, the film scores of Erich Korngold, Alfred Newman, Miklós Rózsa, and John Williams, and the Broadway shows of Leonard Bernstein helped to make palatable to the public the kind of music that before they might have thought of as “long-haired.” All these composers were writing in an idiom much like the symphonic music being played in the concert halls of America.

As the years passed, music began to split up into camps: concert music with its centuries-old, White, European roots became more and more a rarefied, expensive commodity often inaccessible to many, eventually achieving a limited success and enjoyed by a minority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century audience. Meanwhile the audience for “popular” American and European music rose in numbers, thanks first to the arrival of “talking” movie, and later to the advent of radio and later, television.

#### **THE MUSIC IN TODAY’S LECTURE:**

**Igor Stravinsky** (1882-1971) – *Circus Polka*

**Erich Korngold** (1897-1957) – Suite from the film *The Adventures of Robin Hood*

**George Gershwin** (1888-1937) – Concerto in F from the film *An American in Paris*

**Kurt Weill** (1900-1950) – *Mack the Knife* from the play *The Threepenny Opera*

**Alfred Newman** (1900-1970) - *Cathy’s Theme* from the film *Wuthering Heights*

**Miklós Rózsa** (1907 –1995) - *Parade of the Charioteers* from the film *Ben Hur*

**Leonard Bernstein** (1918-1990) – Opening Sequence of the film *On the Town*

**Elmer Bernstein** (1922 –2004) – Suite from the film *To Kill a Mockingbird*

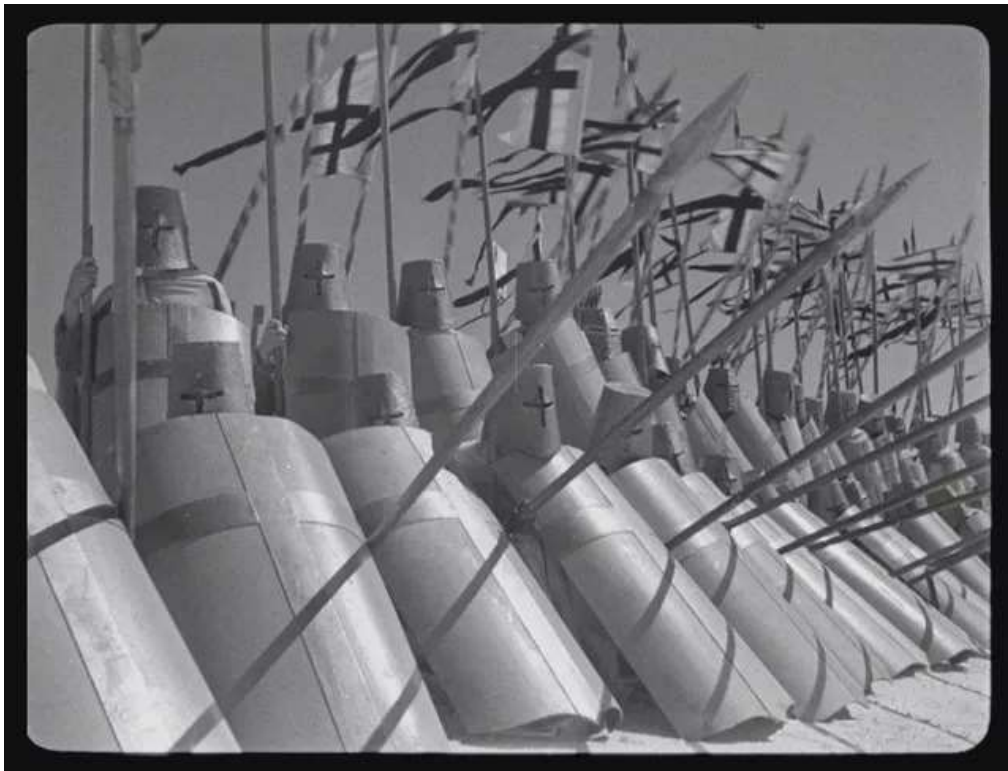
**John Williams** (born 1932) – Soundtrack from the film *Superman*

**Stephen Sondheim** (1930-2021) – *Sunday* from the Broadway show *Sunday in the Park with George*



**Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)**

With the arrival of the movies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, pianists and orchestras accompanied silent films often improvising and sometimes playing music written by composers like **Sergei Prokofiev** (pr: Sehr-ghey Proh-kohf-fyev) in Russia, who wrote scores to accompany the films of **Sergei Eisenstein** (pr: sehr-ghey eye-zehn-shteyn)



The "Battle on the Ice" sequence from Eisenstein's film *Aleksander Nevsky*, with music by Sergei Prokofiev

<https://youtu.be/pXr0m7SaGvs>



### Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

***Circus Polka*** was commissioned by choreographer **George Balanchine (PR: Ba-lahn-sheen)** for the *Barnum & Bailey Circus*. The Russian choreographer asked his fellow Russian, the “serious” composer **Igor Stravinsky** to write a short ballet for the circus’ baby-elephant act. It premiered in 1942 with fifty baby elephants in Madison Square Gardens, New York.

Stravinsky’s composition contained only two bars of music featuring a typical polka rhythm, past which frequent changes of rhythm took place. This presumably led to difficulties getting the baby pachyderms to perform like pros, as most show elephants react to irregular rhythms by getting stressed out and having digestive “accidents” in the middle of their routines.

George Balanchine remembered his first discussion with the notoriously grumpy Stravinsky:

Balanchine: *“I want to ask you if you would like to make a little ballet with me.”*

Stravinsky: *“A ballet?”*

Balanchine: *“For a few elephants.”*

Stravinsky: *“Elephants! How many?”*

Balanchine: *“About fifty”*

Stravinsky: *“Big Elephants?”*

Balanchine: *“Baby elephants.”*

Stravinsky: (after a long pause): *“If my fee is good and the elephants are young, I will do this.”*



***Circus Polka***

## Erich Korngold (1897-1957)



Austrian-born, child prodigy, noted pianist, composer of classical music, Erich Korngold became a successful composer of film scores, *The Adventures of Robin Hood* among them.

The 1938 film starred Erroll Flynn, Olivia de Havilland, and Basil Rathbone. Produced at a staggering cost of \$2 million, it was also the studio's first film utilizing the Technicolor process, a switch that happened just three months before shooting started. The first draft of the script was written in a heavily fanciful dialogue along the lines of "Oh my lord, tarry not too long, for I fear that in her remorse she may fling herself from the window!"). The script was heavily rewritten to modernize the dialogue, but the music by Korngold kept the period flavor of the story.

Suite from *The Adventures of Robin Hood* - [https://youtu.be/jfJ0hBK\\_rpk](https://youtu.be/jfJ0hBK_rpk)



## George Gershwin (1888-1937)



On March 7, 1928, a birthday party was given in honor of the composer **Maurice Ravel**, who was in New York for the start of his one and only North American tour. One of the guests that evening was **George Gershwin**, a successful Broadway composer whose show *Funny Girl* was a current hit at the time. At one point in the evening the young American songwriter was asked to entertain the guests with *Rhapsody in Blue*. Gershwin obliged and followed it up with a medley of some of his songs.

Ravel was amazed by Gershwin's technical command of the piano and by his melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic genius. When he finished playing, Gershwin asked if Ravel would consider giving him a few lessons in composition. Their conversation remained private, although Ravel supposedly replied: "*Je n'ai rien à vous apprendre, mon ami!*" (I've nothing to teach you, my friend!) Ravel later consoled Gershwin in a letter, saying: "*Pourquoi être un Ravel de second ordre alors que vous êtes déjà un Gershwin de premier ordre?*" ("Why be a second-rate Ravel when you're already a first-rate Gershwin?")



From the movie "An American in Paris" based on compositions by George Gershwin. pianist Oscar Levant in the role of a jobless concertmaster dreams about his performing 3rd Movement (Allegro Agitato) from Gershwin's "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in F Major"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wePBkW6WMM8>

## Kurt Weill (1900-1950)



Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya



Raul Julia as Mack the Knife

**Kurt Weill** (pr: Koort Vile) wrote both “serious” music for the concert halls in Germany and “popular” jazzy music for the Berlin theatres. After the success of *Threepenny Opera*, Weill migrated to America, where he wrote several Broadway musicals: *Lady in the Dark*, *One Touch of Venus*, *Knickerbocker Holiday*, and *Lost in the Stars*, among others.



Kurt Weill's American Opera *Street Scene*

For Kurt Weill music was a form of democratic entertainment, available to the masses and enjoyable by all. Here I perhaps his most famous tune: Mack the Knife, from his *Threepenny Opera*.

[Ella Fitzgerald - Mack The Knife - YouTube](#)

## Alfred Newman (1900-1970)



Newman composed, arranged, and often conducted many of his superb film scores: *Wuthering Heights*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *How Green Was My Valley*, *All About Eve*, *Anastasia*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.



Laurence Olivier as Heathcliff and Merle Oberon as Cathy in the 1939 film of *Wuthering Heights*



Itzhak Perlman plays Cathy's Theme from Alfred Newman's *Wuthering Heights*

[https://youtu.be/Gmptr4\\_3E28](https://youtu.be/Gmptr4_3E28)





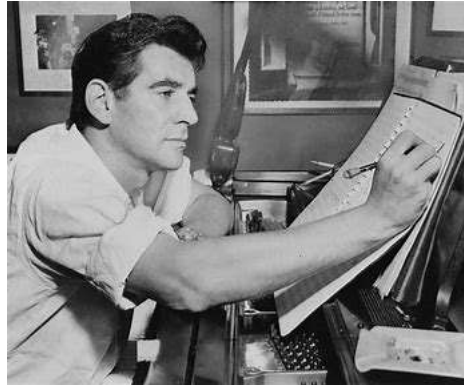
### Miklós Rózsa (1907 –1995)

**Miklós Rózsa** (pr: Mee-kloss Ros-sah) was a Hungarian American composer, trained in Germany, and active in France, in the United Kingdom, and eventually in the United States. Best known for his film scores, Rózsa also maintained a concert music career with his works being played internationally by major artists. During his Hollywood career, Rózsa received 17 Academy Awards nomination and three Oscars for *Spellbound*, *A Double Life*, and *Ben-Hur*.



Parade of the Charioteers from Miklós Rózsa's *Ben-Hur* <https://youtu.be/LIR4L5xD1BE>

## Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)



Leonard Bernstein, took quite a few “detours” to the Broadway stage with his scores for *On the Town*, *Wonderful Town*, *Candide*, and *West Side Story*. Yet, these works did not achieve outside Broadway and Hollywood the recognition they deserved as superb musical compositions equal to those Bernstein conducted.



Jules Munshin as Ozzie, Gene Kelly as Gabey, and Frank Sinatra as Chip in the film of Leonard Bernstein's *On the Town*

Opening sequence of *On the Town* [https://youtu.be/ku5WeNn\\_unE](https://youtu.be/ku5WeNn_unE)

## Elmer Bernstein (1922 –2004)



**Elmer Bernstein** wrote primarily for Hollywood and for television. Among more than 150 titles, Bernstein (no relation to Leonard Bernstein) wrote the film scores for *The Ten Commandments*, *The Man with the Golden Arm*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*.



Suite from Elmer Bernstein's *To Kill a Mockingbird* <https://youtu.be/Qfx6Lea4R0s>

## John Williams (born 1932)



Still classified as “pops,” the music of a good film score by Juilliard-trained John Williams is no different in sophistication and just as inspired as any work of Wagner or Strauss. His successes include *Star Wars*, *Jaws*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *E.T.*, the *Indiana Jones* films, *Jurassic Park*, *Schindler’s List* and the *Harry Potter* films, among many others.



Soundtrack from the 1978 Richard Donner film “Superman” with Marlon Brando, Gene Hackman, Christopher Reeve, Ned Beatty, Margot Kidder, Jackie Cooper, Glenn Ford, Trevor Howard, Valerie Perrine & Terrance Stamp. Music composed by John Williams and performed by the London Symphony Orchestra.

<https://youtu.be/78N2SP6JFaI>

## Stephen Sondheim (1930-2021)



A solo female voice at the end of Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* sings **Stephen Sondheim's** lyric: *"There's a place for us, somewhere a place for us..."*

Indeed, there was a place for the then unknown composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim, whose shows *A Funny Thing Happened to me on the Way to the Forum*, *Company*, *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Into the Woods* later carved a place for him as one of the most sophisticated and versatile composer-lyricists in Broadway history.



*Sunday* from Stephen Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George* <https://youtu.be/PSUx5SjNSiU>