

Stefan Schmidl

The Film Scores of Alois Melichar

Studies in the Music of Austro-German Cinema 1933-1956

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Alois Melichar conducting the Vienna Philharmonic (Atelier photo 1948)

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Introduction: Film Music and Modernity

With his writings composer Alois Melichar (1896–1976)¹ vehemently attacked Arnold Schoenberg and other proponents of 20th century's musical avant-garde and thus made himself a mouthpiece of the opposition to a radical musical modernity. The public spotlight he stepped in with often-polemic dismissals overshadowed his own creative efforts, especially his primary calling: movie music. But insofar this oeuvre represents a major contribution to German and Austrian cinema between 1933 and 1956, it is worthy of a closer examination, which aims to trace the composer's techniques of sonic suggesting and emotionalising within the filmic narrative.

Among Austro-German movie composers of his time Melichar's trademark was a 'classical' sound, which excelled through his expertise in adapting, paraphrasing and appropriating the canon – a practise that represented a rare case where one of the paradigms of silent cinema music was transferred into sound film. On the other hand, there are scores of his that show an outspoken audacious character, which – to a certain degree – would relativise the conservative attitude he was blamed for by apologists of the avant-garde.

It is an ambiguity of this kind that makes Melichar a rewarding subject for research. By no means attempting an apology of his stance and attitude, a consideration of Melichar's allusive film music can be seen as an exemplary, yet unforeseen instance of Walter Benjamin's 'work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' – in view of the fact that Melichar typifies the case of a classically trained composer who without bias grasped at the possibilities of modernity's mediality. This is exemplified first from 1927 until 1933 with his work as a conductor and musical consultant of the *Deutsche Grammophon*, producing a whole catalogue of records,² then as a film composer, who quickly acquainted himself with the new art form and therefore became a respected collaborator of directors like Josef von Bány, Géza von Bolváry and G.W. Pabst.

I. Adaptations, Paraphrases, Appropriations

Melichar, son of a Kapellmeister, entered the film business in 1933. This was preceded by studies with Joseph Marx in Vienna (1917–1920) and Franz Schreker in Berlin (1920–1923), as well a three-year-stay in Goygol, Azerbaijan (1923–1926), where he served as a music teacher,³ then commencing the aforementioned activities at the *Deutsche Grammophon*. His thitherto output as a composer manifested mainly in the *Variations and Fugue on a theme by Max Reger* for piano solo, which he was able to publish through the prestigious *Universal Edition* in 1923. The ultra-chromatic piece⁴ was reviewed in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* as a ‘pretty problematic Op. 1 of great technical difficulty’,⁵ but at least appreciated for its craftsmanship by the journal. However, when Melichar submitted the *Variations* for the second Donaueschingen Festival in 1922, the piece was rejected.⁶

So, the unfolding of Melichar as a sought-after composer began in fact only with the start of his film career in 1933, the year when Max Steiner wrote his landmark score to *King Kong* and therein triggered a paradigm shift in film music. But also Melichar would explore the prospects of the medium, albeit following different principles and convictions.

Composer-Melodramas and Singer Films

Although it is not verifiable whether it was indeed Erich Kleiber who recommended Melichar to the *Ufa*,⁷ the composer was entrusted in 1933 to fill in the spot for completing the score of Ludwig Berger’s *Walzerkrieg* (The Battle of the Waltzes) about the rivalry between Johann Strauss Sr. (Adolf Wohlbrück) and Joseph Lanner (Paul Hörbiger). The scoring of the film had to be put on a hiatus because the initial composer Franz Grothe was severely injured in a car accident and therefore could not finish his task.⁸



Walzerkrieg (Poster by Anton Ziegler, 1933)
 (Wienbibliothek im Rathaus, Plakatsammlung P-13087)

It cannot be determined what scope Melichar's completion of the music for *Walzerkrieg* comprised. This opaqueness in the production led to some controversy on the authorship of the final score – a controversy that was even mirrored in the media, as it could be read in the following exchange between two fictional newspaper humorous characters, Puck and Pick:

'Puck: Especially upset is Mr. Franz Grothe, because the UFA designates him just as the composer of the song *An der Donau, wenn der Wein blüht*, while he claims that he has a significantly bigger share in the music.

Pick: If he did as much as the other - what is his name again? He has such a funny name!

Puck: Hang on ... Alois – yes, Alois Melichar.

Pick: Never heard of him - so if Grothe has composed as much as Alois, well, then you have to give him equal credit, right? And he's absolutely right when he complains.'⁹

Apart from this dispute, the score of *Walzerkrieg* stands out through its complex interweaving of the diegetic and the non-diegetic, by its support of the film's narrative flow and ultimately its structuring of the movie.¹⁰

Another composer biography, *Abschiedswalzer. Zwei Frauen um Chopin* (Farewell Waltz. Two Women Around Chopin; 1934), followed in 1934, this time giving Melichar a sole credit for the score. Here, director Géza von Bolváry embraced the subject of Frédéric Chopin's (embodied by Wolfgang Liebeneiner) passionate endeavours.

The majority of the musical material used in *Abschiedswalzer* was, similar to *Walzerkrieg*, pre-existent and Melichar's adaptations of this original music was inventive as in the former feature. As a matter of fact, it was imbued into the narrative of the plot even more than in *Walzerkrieg*, as it can be spotted in the scene when Chopin's Paris performance of his 'Winter Wind' Étude is crossfaded by images of the Warsaw uprising of 1831 and musically thwarted by throw-ins of trumpets and snare drums, as well as of sonic insertions of the

Polish national anthem. Another example of this kind of interplay is presented in the linking of the C-minor Prelude, Op. 28, No. 20 with images of the execution of the Polish rebels.

The crucial aspect of *Abschiedswalzer*, however, can be found in the practise of adding lyrics to well-known classical tunes – a technique that proved to be of success already in *Walzerkrieg's* 'An der Donau, wenn der Wein blüht'. In *Abschiedswalzer* Melichar drew to Chopin's Étude in E-major, Op. 10, No. 3 and gave it over to screenwriter Ernst Marischka, who provided the lyrics 'In mir klingt ein Lied, ein kleines Lied, in dem mein Traum von stiller Liebe blüht.' The first appearance of the song happens to be a scansion by the composer himself, whereas it is not until later in the film that the song is vocally performed by the character of Constantia Gladkowska (Hanna Waag).

The appropriation technique of 'In mir klingt ein Lied' became a fad for the genre and Melichar himself would go on with it in *Liebeserwachen* (Love's Awakening, 1936, based on Tchaikovsky) and in *Drei Mädel um Schubert* (Three Girls Around Schubert, 1936), where he used Schubert's 'Sehnsuchtswalzer' (D 365, No. 1), already popular in the vocal form of 'Es soll der Frühling mir künden', featured in Heinrich Berté's singspiel *Das Dreimäderlhaus* (1916).

Also in *Vergiß mein nicht* (Forget Me Not, 1935), the first of his scores for films featuring the popular Italian tenor Benjamino Gigli, the method of adding lyrics to popular classical melodies is applied. For the Italian version of the film Melichar created the song 'Mille cherubini in coro', a conglomerate of two Schubert pieces, the *Andante un poco assai* from the Ballet No. 2 of the incidental music to *Rosamunde* and the *Wiegenlied* D 498.

But *Vergiß mein nicht* and the Carmine Gallone-directed follow-ups *Ave Maria* (1936), *Mutterlied* (Mother Song, 1937) and *Dir gehört mein Herz* (My Heart Belongs to Thee, 1938), allowed Melichar to compose original diegetic music as well. For *Vergiß mein nicht* he contributed a *Serenata Veneziana*, for *Ave Maria* the song 'Anima Mia' (producing a separate German-language version with tenor Julius Patzak).

However, the singer's film was also the subject of a theoretical prognosis for Melichar. In 1937 he stated:

'In the future, the singer in the musical film will be forced to impress rather with his musicality than with his profound stylistic devices. The success of certain singer films does not affect this predicament. Years ago, the horrendous Al Jolson movies were successful because they were just the first. Today, only the most naive audience would find them humorous.'¹¹

The aging that Melichar observed in the films by Al Jolsen was also the reason for the bane of the movies starring Gigli. With the temporal gap from 1945, neither Gigli, who admitted the generic nature of his films,¹² nor Melichar, who dismissed it as an 'aesthetic monstrosity'¹³ had a lot of praise for the genre.

Das unsterbliche Herz

In essence, the films starring Gigli were 'Künstlermelodramen'¹⁴ (artist-melodramas), a genre that was catered by Melichar intensely. Next to Carmine Gallone's movies, which also included one feature with an appearance of Franz Liszt's character (*Wenn die Musik nicht wär'* [If It Were Not for Music], 1935), he wrote the music to Bolváry's *Stradivari* (1935) and Veit Harlan's *Das unsterbliche Herz* (The Immortal Heart, 1939), the highlight of his adaptation scores. For Harlan's film about Renaissance craftsman Peter Henlein (Heinrich George), sacrificing himself for the higher cause (a story principle in which Harlan projected tenets of National-Socialist ideology into history), Melichar found it appropriate to utilise the music of Johann Sebastian Bach.

But Melichar did not meet undivided acclaim for this decision. Under the title 'Bachsche Musik als Film- und Geräusch-Kulisse' (Bach's Music as Filmic and Noisy Backdrop), Richard Ohlekopf heavily criticised the composer in *Signale für die musikalische Welt*:

'The grand D-minor toccata for organ quite literally bumbled past the ears of most of the listeners, and with its moving figurations it acted simply as a soundscape of the waves and the rocking ship. The same applies, of course, to the 1st C-major Prelude from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, which is

intended to illustrate (with timpani and trumpets) the agonising ascent of the ailing Peter Heinlein. On this highly esteemed subject, Peter Heinlein, a gifted film composer would have had to adapt to what his particular audience expected of him. That means he had to write his own music.¹⁵

Indeed, Melichar's score to *Das Unsterbliche Herz* distinguishes itself among the sound tracks of Harlan's films, as the director preferred scores with completely original music by their respective film composers. Only once more he would require the incorporation of a piece from the classical music literature – Smetana's *The Moldau* in *Die goldene Stadt* (The Golden City, 1942). However, this time it was not Melichar, but Harlan-regular Hans-Otto Borgmann who fulfilled the duty.

Bach would be a source of inspiration again for Melichar in *Das Fräulein von Barnhelm* (The Miss of Barnhelm; 1940, dir. Hans Scheikart), an adaptation of Lessing, where Bach's aria 'Willst Du Dein Herz mir schenken' is employed.¹⁶

II. Experimentalising with the *Tonfilmoperette*

Melichar's early film music was twofold: On one hand it was based on the practise of paraphrasing the classical music canon and adapting operettas for the silver screen (*Zigeunerbaron* [1935], *Der Bettelstudent* [1936] and *Die Fledermaus* [1937]), on the other his career benefited from the relatively new 'Tonfilmoperette'. Ufa had established this genre,¹⁷ successfully taking advantage from the potentials of sound film to redefine operetta's appeal and popularity. By the time Melichar scored *Walzerkrieg*, the Tonfilmoperette was starting to experience a brain-drain as its most prominent composers like Werner Richard Heymann and Friedrich Holländer had to leave Germany.¹⁸

In this creative rift, Melichar acted initially as a substitute for them, but with time attempted to step out of their shadow and, with his versatility, to give the genre a new direction. His approach to the musical film not only manifested itself as an audible product, but also as a theoretical reflexion, published in form of an article in *Deutsches Musikhandbuch* in 1937,¹⁹ where he did not shy away from drawing a line from antique drama over opera to film.

A major effort in the musical film for Melichar was *Der junge Baron Neuhaus* (The Young Baron Neuhaus), directed by Gustav Ucicky in 1934 for the Ufa.²⁰ This comedy was set in Vienna during the reign of Maria Theresa, revolving around her moral laws, giving actor Hans Moser ample room for development of his comic character. Obviously, Melichar's main task was to give the film an essential 'Viennese' sound. His efforts succeeded in providing a sound track full of *Heurigen-bliss*, peaking in the *Wiener Lieder* 'So schön hab'n die Geig'n noch nie gespielt' (The violins never played so beautiful) and 'Schönen Gruß Dir, liebes Wien' (Good day to you, dear Vienna). Besides, the film score's gracile Neo-Rococo (including an equestrian ballet) is worth mentioning. Melichar extracted a suite from the score and published it as *Baron Neuhaus-Suite*. However, the collaboration with Ucicky would not continue, probably because the director did no more musical films and concentrated instead on melodramas.



Alois Melichar
(Portrait photo, published in *Radio Wien*, January 1936)

Land der Liebe

Accepting the challenge to score Reinhold Schünzel's *Land der Liebe* (Land of Love, 1937), Melichar took a risk, artistically and even more as a political statement, as the director's film was a thinly veiled parody of the overblown, Potemkin-esque representation of the Nazi leadership, specifically that of Joseph Goebbels. Of course, the stakes were higher for Schünzel, who due to his heritage was labelled as 'half-Jew',²¹ but was nonetheless still allowed to remain in his trade as a director.

Previously, Schünzel had worked with composers Werner Richard Heymann (*Saison in Kairo*, 1933) and especially with Franz Doelle (*Victor und Victoria* [1933], *Die englische Heirat* [1934] and *Amphitryon* [1935]). In *Land der Liebe*, Melichar continued with the paradigms of his predecessors, but put greater emphasis on the finesse of the vocal parts and in that strengthened the sensation of the diegetic. This is ostensible particularly in the extended

parlando-recitatives, as well as in the ensemble pieces, like the trio of the minister (Oskar Sima) and his two appointees.

Parallel to that, the harmonic language of Melichar's music reflects the dramatic irony of the plot, realised most effectively in the waltz of the princess 'Ich wußte nie, was Liebe ist' (I never knew, what love is) with its meandering modulations, creating a dizzying effect. But the score of *Land der Liebe* also features grotesque Mickey-Mousing like in the passage where the limping of the minister (who thereby becomes discernible as a parody of Goebbels) is imitated by a likewise limping music.²² Scenes like this made *Land der Liebe* deemed unacceptable for the Third Reich's officials and, although the film was released, the repercussions from its message forced Reinhold Schünzel ultimately into exile.²³ Melichar's career in this daring escapade was unscathed, as it can be seen by his further work.

Capriccio and Nanon

Like *Land der Liebe*, also *Capriccio* (1938), the next musical film Melichar scored, did not attain the approbation of Goebbels, who scolded it as 'furchtbarer Dreck'²⁴ (awful muck). In fact, director Karl Ritter, mostly known for his military history features in accordance with National-Socialist ideology, but not well versed in the genre of musical comedy, could not fulfil the expectations the Minister of Propaganda had set in him.

The flaws of the film, a Lilian Harvey vehicle, are numerous. Among those is the exaggeration of the music, whether it be the grotesque Mickey-Mousing or the super-artificial and drawn-out singing sequences. Melichar's music was not only criticised because of these shortcomings, but also due to the irreverent toying with the classical canon:

'Even more serious are the musical lapses in the movie *Capriccio*, for which Alois Melichar is to be held responsible. In addition to a parody of the Italian aria style, and a quote from Mozart (...), in the final scene the transformation from Beethoven's Ode to Joy from the Ninth to a bromidic dance

piece is downright outrageous. (...) This tastelessness makes every other word superfluous.'²⁵

At least, *Nanon*, directed by Herbert Maisch and released in the same year as *Capriccio*, met more favourable reviews. Loosely based on Richard Genées homonymous operetta, the film was set during the reign of Louis XIV and followed the amorous adventures of a chanteuse (Erna Sack) and her gallant bachelor (Johannes Heesters). Considering the cast of such eminent actor-singers, the press was convinced that: 'Hardly any other modern film composer could have been more qualified to write the score of such a work than Alois Melichar (...)'²⁶ With virtuoso coloratura, the composer took full advantage of Sack's vocal capabilities, calling it a 'physiological-anatomical wonder'.²⁷ Apart from that, the film score of *Nanon* excelled in a witty interweaving of Neo-Rococo, in which Melichar was already adept with his *Alt-französische Suiten*, and anachronistic elements (like the jazzy syncopations in 'So verliebt wie heut').

III. Dramatic Scores

Before Melichar teamed with Schünzel for *Land der Liebe*, he had written a dramatic underscore for the same director's melodrama *Das Mädchen Irene* (The Girl Irene, 1936), which would become Schünzel's last film for the Ufa.²⁸ The movie told the story of a girl's opposition against the remarriage of her mother (Lil Dagover). Melichar's score was of illustrative nature and traced divergent nuances, from the feverish over the sentimental to the exotic. A lyrical 4/8-theme acted as a unifying element of the score.

Das Mädchen von Fanö

Next to *Das Mädchen Irene*, it was Géza von Bolváry's *Maria Ilona* (1939), which offered Melichar an opportunity to write a dramatic film score. The plot of Bolváry's movie, the inner struggle of a noblewoman (Paula Wessely) against the background of the Hungarian uprising against Habsburg dominion in 1848, almost inevitably determined a sound track from the contrasting juxtaposition of the 'Volkshymne' and the popular Hungarian Rákóczi march.

It was notwithstanding the subject of *Das Mädchen von Fanö* (The Girl from Fanö), released in 1941, which provided the composer with a differentiating task. The film, directed by Hans Schweikart, told the story of two fishermen (Joachim Gottschalk and Gustav Knuth) whose close friendship is shattered by the appearance of a fatal woman (Brigitte Horney) in their lives.²⁹

Set on the coast of the North Sea, the movie called for an exaggerated musical treatment that expressed the sublimity both of the wild sea and of human emotions. In accordance to representing the dramatic images, Melichar structured his score around the ballad 'Wenn hoch im Norden' (When up in the North), composed specifically for this feature (Fig. 1). An obvious reference to Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* is given in the theme's characteristic ascent of the fourth.

Trumpets in B, Horns in F (transp.)

Violins

Cellos

ff

f

Figure 1 Alois Melichar, *Das Mädchen von Fanö* (1941), 'Wenn hoch im Norden'
 (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Musiksammlung, Mus.ms. 20364;
 Estate of Alois Melichar)

The peculiar aesthetics of the score to *Das Mädchen von Fanö* is also present in its subtleness, most notably in the scene where Patricia, the girl from Fanö, and Ipke, one of the fishermen, are enjoying the promenade on the sand beach. As they converse about the legendary submerged city of Vineta, Melichar corresponds to the scenery with a musical stylisation of the city's imaginary bell tolling (Fig. 2.).

Tubular bells

Glockenspiel Tubular bells

Neo-Bechstein

Celesta

p

p

Figure 2 Alois Melichar, *Das Mädchen von Fanö* (1940), Bells of Vineta
 (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Musiksammlung, Mus.ms. 20364;
 Estate of Alois Melichar)



Joachim Gottschalk and Brigitte Horney in *Das Mädchen von Fanö* (1941)

The chiming is carried out through a dialogue of a Neo-Bechstein, an early electro-acoustic piano, and a celesta. This is a precedent in Melichar's film music, given the utilisation of an impressionist, whole-tone harmony, dominating the tonal spectre. Not quoting discernibly, the passage recalls Debussy's poignant piano prelude *La Cathédrale engloutie*.