

rebecca: music to raise the dead

A peculiar sound of unreality.

—Franz Waxman’s description of the novachord in *Rebecca*

In *Rebecca*, Hitchcock’s Hollywood debut, music has uncanny powers. It conjures the illusion of Rebecca de Winter’s jealous ghost roaming the gigantic rooms of Manderley, watching her living love rival. It is a siren call tempting the new Mrs. de Winter to her doom as Hitchcock’s claustrophobic camera locks her and her tormentor, the spectral Mrs. Danvers, in a double close-up framed by Rebecca’s window. “You’ve nothing to live for,” whispers Danny, urging Maxim de Winter’s new wife to end her struggles with the old by leaping out the window. “Look down there, it’s easy, isn’t it? Go on, go on, don’t be afraid.” As Danny’s mantra mingles with a crashing sea, a seductive two-note suspension sounds again and again, seeming to draw the despairing Joan Fontaine out the window—until suddenly, a real sound, a brilliant fireball exploding in the sky, startles her out of her trance, and agitated strings bring her back to the present. Here is a supreme example of what Hitchcock called “pure cinema,” a treat to the eye and ear no matter how many times we experience it.

Rebecca marked the first time Hitchcock had access to a lush Hollywood score, and he used it to full advantage. Arthur Benjamin’s *Storm Clouds* Cantata, Korngold’s full-bodied orchestrations of Strauss in *Waltzes from Vienna*, and the lengthy quotation from *Tristan* in *Murder!* showed he was willing, in his British period, to experiment with big Romantic sounds, but only on a relatively restricted basis. Wagner on the radio was one thing, a Wagnerian score coursing through a two-hour picture something else altogether. Part of Hitchcock’s inhibition was undoubtedly budgetary: commissioning a long score with a full orchestra was difficult in the rickety British cinema industry in the 1930s. It was far easier in Golden Age Hollywood, which enjoyed a tradition stretching back to Max Steiner’s *King Kong*. Part of Hitchcock’s restraint was also aesthetic, a matter of choice: he was fundamentally a classicist, and his willingness to use a rich, extended symphonic score—the most radical instance being *Vertigo*—was reserved for projects that seemed to demand such music. Hitchcock’s distinctive contribution was his ability to make music the center of the narrative even when its actual use was concise and spare. *Rebecca* marked the first time a symphonic composer was allowed full rein. Counting the Selznick “Trademark” overture by Alfred Newman, the dense three-and-a-half page cue sheet lists seventy-one items, most by Waxman but also six by Max Steiner and two by Johann Strauss. In *Suspicion* and *Shadow of a Doubt*, Hitchcock would distort classic waltzes for suspenseful purposes; here they provide a grandiloquent backdrop for the “whirlwind romance” between Max and the anonymous heroine. (The waltz playing during the “Hotel Lobby” cue is Waxman’s own.)¹



Rebecca. Music as siren call.

This symphonic lavishness is a startling contrast to the skimpy cues in British Hitchcock. More spare scores would follow, but subtlety was not the point of *Rebecca*. This is Hitchcock's Cinderella story, and music supplies enchantment. With few exceptions, Waxman's complex tapestry of moods and character sketches envelopes the movie from beginning to end: the haunted hero and heroine float through Monte Carlo and Manderley in a sonic dreamscape, carried along by anxieties and impulses powered by Waxman's sensual harmonies.

British Hitchcock relied heavily on source music, the sounds of real life, to make its dramatic points. This method worked admirably both as sonic realism and as a practical response to budget austerities of a film industry that by the onset of World War II was in depressing decline. *Rebecca*, Hitchcock's most dreamlike movie, deals in psychological realism only. "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again," begins Joan Fontaine's nocturnal voice-over, wrapped in harp glissandos; the movie records that dream, beginning with a wistful woodwind melody associated with the great house. Manderley is now "a desolate shell, with no whisper of the past about its staring walls. We can never go back to Manderley again; that much is certain."

But is it? An ascending brass chorale takes us back anyway, moving up a steep cliff to the top of the precipice from which Laurence Olivier's Max de Winter stares, contemplating suicide, the camera watching his feet move slowly to the edge until the young dreamer, powered by a redemptive love theme, intrudes to save his life. "Stop!" she cries, the first line in the scene. They meet and fall in love, then slowly into nightmare. Dissonant glissandos depict "I," the young heroine, dreaming uneasily of Rebecca after merely hearing her name; from there on, music becomes the sounding board for the subconscious.

Dreams this elegant are costly, but since the film was financed by David Selznick, Hitchcock was able to bring it to life with star power and glossy production values, including the high-Gothic cinematography of George Barnes. Selznick hired the best—not only Waxman, but Hitchcock himself. Indeed, Hitchcock came to America at Selznick's request. He put out the word that he wanted to relocate in Hollywood, and Selznick was shrewd enough to respond.²

It was an admirable arrangement: Selznick wanted stars for his four-year-old Selznick International Studio and knew Hitchcock was one of the few directors—in an era before auteurs were celebrities—who qualified as one. Hitchcock wanted more money for his projects, but he also wanted respect, something he would never get in a country that regarded movies as vulgar entertainment for the working class. For a European artist, Selznick represented an American ideal. America might be a philistine society, but Hollywood's tradition of blending high- and middle-brow culture into one glamorous product was Hitchcock's cup of tea.

In a happy coincidence, Franz Waxman, Dimitri Tiomkin, Miklos Rozsa, and other Hitchcock composers came to America during the same period. Max Steiner, who was working on *Gone With the Wind* with Selznick across the street from *Rebecca*, was already established, a role model for what could happen under the right circumstances. As Jews fleeing the Nazis, these composers had far more at stake than Hitchcock. They fit perfectly into his projects; thorough professionals and quick studies, they soon learned to combine European formalism with Hollywood glamour, exactly as Hitchcock would. Their scores provided the complex emotional undercurrent for Hitchcock's mixture of European sophistication and American brashness.

Rebecca's story line also fit the émigré pattern. Like Hitchcock and Waxman, its nameless heroine is an orphan, a stranger in a bizarre, glamorous new world. Manderley is a stand-in for Hollywood, a wondrous but artificial place full of seductive wealth and great peril. By marrying Maxim de Winter, "I" found herself hitched up with romantic excitement but also terrible trauma, as did Hitchcock-Waxman when they linked their fortunes with Selznick: as his studio began looking for a composer in August 1939, World War II erupted, leaving both men—along with Laurence Olivier and the rest of the British cast—shaken and worried about their loved ones back home. Hitchcock had chosen to come to America, but Waxman, after being attacked on a Berlin street by Nazis, left Germany for Paris and then America. He could never go back; for him, the Old World was lost forever.³ It is not surprising that *Rebecca's* music, despite its silken veneer, has a bleak, haunted undertone, nor that its most celebrated cues resurrect a dead past.

Like many of Hitchcock's composers, Waxman was well regarded, though not yet a heavy hitter. He had scored *The Bride of Frankenstein*—another Gothic thriller directed by a British auteur produced in Hollywood with a British cast—but James Whale was not yet a cult figure. (With its soaring "Bride" theme, its sustained pedal points, and its spectacular final inferno, *Bride* has eerie parallels to *Rebecca*.) On loan to Selznick International from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Waxman had scored Selznick's 1938 *The Young in Heart*, receiving two Academy Award nominations. After *Rebecca*, he would make three other Hitchcock pictures: *Suspicion*, which has a Gothic splendor not unlike *Rebecca's*; *The Paradine Case*, which is more experimental; and *Rear Window*, which maps out new territory altogether. Waxman was valuable to Hitchcock not only for his reliability and professionalism but for his remarkable versatility: a bearer of the Mahler-Strauss late-Romantic torch, he nonetheless got his start orchestrating Friedrich Hollander's *Blue Angel* and Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein's *Music in the Air* and would go on to write scores ranging from the jazz in *Crime in the Streets* to the Rimsky-Korsakovian *Taras Bulba*.

Initially, Selznick wanted Hitchcock to direct a disaster movie about the *Titanic*, but prospects for that project suddenly sank when he discovered that the *Leviathan*, the World War I ship he wanted to use, was prohibitively expensive. Deeply skeptical of the project, Hitchcock was relieved and happy that *Rebecca*, Daphne du Maurier's best-selling Gothic, would be their first project. Both men had read the novel and sensed it could make a sensational picture.

But that was about all they agreed on. Hitchcock and Selznick had very different ideas about moviemaking, and both were powerful personalities obsessed with control. Each assumed from the beg inning that he was the auteur. For Selznick, Hitchcock was a star hired to sell his product and submit to his authority; to Hitchcock, Selznick was a welcome entree to America but also an interfering annoyance. His relationship with Selznick quickly became a struggle for control foreshadowing many others, including his crisis with Bernard Herrmann thirty years later.

From Hitchcock's point of view, the most revealing and critical fight was over *Rebecca's* ending. The producer wanted a giant supernatural R to appear in the clouds as the final image, but Hitchcock found this idea unspeakable and managed to dissuade Selznick from perpetrating it; instead the R naturalistically goes up in flames on a pillowcase against a final orchestral blast of the *Rebecca* theme. As late as the 1970s, Hitchcock was still telling this story. He recounted it to John Williams during work on *Family Plot*, finding by then mischievous irony rather than scorn: "His point," says Williams "was that Selznick was not very talented, and had ideas that were not particularly good, but 'from bad ideas, good ones can come.'"⁴

Selznick won other struggles, however, and to this day, controversy continues over who is the real auteur. Selznick was determined to get all of Daphne du Maurier's popular, bleakly detailed novel up on the screen in linear narrative sequence, a method far more literal than Hitchcock's jagged, nonlinear eccentricities would allow. Selznick hated Hitchcock's "goddamn jigsaw cutting," even though he liked Hitchcock personally and admired his

professionalism.⁵

Some argue that *Rebecca* was Hitchcock's picture for the simple reason that Selznick was preoccupied with principal photography for *Gone With the Wind*, his most famous production then, or ever: "Selznick just did not have time to interfere much," writes Hitchcock biographer John Russell Taylor, "beyond the usual barrage of memos."⁶ According to John Waxman, *Gone With the Wind* was "the thousand-pound gorilla in the room" throughout the production of *Rebecca*.⁷ Hitchcock's idiosyncratic method of "cutting in the camera," shooting only what was in the script rather than using lengthy master shots that allowed extensive reediting by the producer, was abhorrent to Selznick, who wanted control over the final picture. But he was too obsessed with *Gone With the Wind*, firing one director after another and ultimately directing it himself, to control *Rebecca* as well. He allowed Hitchcock to have his way, and *Rebecca* turned out to be such a hit, winning the Oscar for Best Picture, that conflicts on the set were forgotten. "Hitch was vindicated, and in after years Selznick would say that Hitch was the only director, absolutely the only director, whom he would completely trust with a picture."⁸

But others, especially highbrow Hitchcockians who love to sniff at *Rebecca* and Selznick, insist that Selznick won the battle. Since he had the power, they argue, he prevailed, resulting in an entertaining but non-Hitchcockian product.⁹ This view extends to *Rebecca*'s music. According to Rudy Behlmer, "The musical decisions were made by Selznick, not Hitchcock. David was the guy who did the postproduction. He was responsible for *Rebecca*'s music."¹⁰ (A third view holds that *Rebecca* is the product of a creative, mutually enriching tension between producer and director that forced each man to learn from the other: Selznick about visual composition and narrative suspense, Hitchcock about psychological nuance, good production values, and good taste.)¹¹

The archives make it clear that Hitchcock was a strong force behind Waxman's music. Hitchcock did have a conference with Waxman in late November, after which the composer presented voluminous music notes to Selznick. This fascinating document, which Waxman calls "a rough outline on the musical score of *Rebecca*, with a few ideas of mine," is detailed and specific. It is one piece in the complex drama of a film composer caught between two powerful artists with conflicting agendas and demands. Some of the issues—the ethical appropriateness of a producer inserting other composers' cues, the argument over whether the script should precede everything else—are contentious controversies to this day, in television as well as film.

It all started with a hectic Selznick memo to the music department on August 14, 1939, engaging Max Steiner to score *Gone With the Wind*—and more: "If you can arrange for Max to start at once, please do so, and have him report to me. The arrangement should include, if possible, our privilege to use him in whatever capacity we want in connection with the final scoring of 'Intermezzo.' ... If you could arrange for him to stay here after 'Wind' to do the 'Rebecca' score, I would like this too."¹²

Max Steiner, then, was the original *Rebecca* composer. It is fascinating to contemplate how his broad, sweeping style, so different from Waxman's veiled impressionism, would have changed the tone of the picture. We'll never know, for typically and impossibly, Selznick wanted everything, all at once. Scoring *Gone With the Wind* at Selznick's breakneck pace almost did Steiner in, as it did nearly everyone connected with the project; the notion of creating three big scores simultaneously was unthinkable, even for the prolific Steiner, even if such a thing was normal for the maniacally workaholic Selznick. Two months later, Selznick signed on Waxman in a loan-out arrangement with MGM. "I am delighted," he wrote, "that you are going to be doing another job for us, and a very important one."¹³

By November, Selznick was having doubts about Steiner's ability to complete *Gone With the Wind*, so much so that he hired Waxman not only for *Rebecca*, but also as an "insurance composer" for *Gone With the Wind* against "the possibility that Max will not be ready by our deadline." In a frantic memo to Lou Forbes in the music department, Selznick demanded "a daily report from you, without fail, telling me the exact progress of each score." Adding to the freneticism was Selznick's determination to get *Rebecca* out in time for Christmas, even in the tumult of completing his two other projects: "This is an awful thing to bring up in the middle of our rush on 'Gone With the Wind,' and while Hal is still breaking his neck to get 'Intermezzo' out, but I regard it as of the most vital importance that we should get 'Rebecca' out with more speed than we have finished up any other picture."¹⁴

Selznick acknowledged that the December release date sounded ridiculous but insisted on pushing for it anyway. By early December, he had abandoned this fantasy, but not before subjecting everyone in the project to tremendous stress. The fall was flooded with Selznick memos denouncing the "wretchedly organized" music department and demanding that Waxman produce everything immediately. Despite Selznick's skepticism, Steiner produced a score of sweeping grandeur and confidence, one of the most popular and enduring features of *Gone With the Wind*. Yet Selznick used the score as a template for disaster—he was convinced the score would flop and worried that the fiasco was about to be repeated: "Obviously," he warned on November 29, "we are about to be in for a repetition of our unfortunate Steiner occurrences, with Waxman."

SELZNICK INTERNATIONAL PICTURES, INC.
CULVER CITY, CALIFORNIA

INTER-OFFICE COMMUNICATION

TO Mr. Lou Forbes - cc: Mr. Ginsberg, Mr. Kern

SUBJECT:

OFFICE OF
DAVID O. SELZNICK
PRESIDENT

DATE 11/7/39 (Dict. 11/6/39)

copy

Commencing today, and daily until the score of "G.W.T.W." and the score of "REBECCA" are completely finished, I should like a daily report from you, without fail, telling me the exact progress of each score. In the case of "Gone With the Wind," this should include exactly what Mr. Steiner and his associates have accomplished, and exactly, also, what has been accomplished by Mr. Waxman on the so-called insurance score that we are having him write against the possibility that Max will not be ready by our deadline date. Please be sure that this report does not include hearsay information, but only facts that you yourself have checked.

Copies of this report should go to Mr. Ginsberg and Mr. Kern.

dos:bb

DOS

A demanding memo from David Selznick. Franz Waxman hired for *Rebecca* and as "insurance composer" for *Gone With the Wind*. (David Selznick Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center)

Yet surprisingly, he submitted to an eccentric, time-consuming request by Hitchcock. Perhaps as a way of dealing with abandoning England for America, Hitchcock became obsessed with finding Norman O'Neill's music for a J. M. Barrie ghost drama he had seen in 1920 at London's Haymarket Theatre, a score he had never gotten out

of his head. The play, *Mary Rose*, tells of a young woman who disappears while visiting an enchanted Hebrides island, reappearing unaltered twenty-five years later to find her young son gone; heartbroken, she dies and appears as a ghost in the family home. But she is too lost to remember who she is searching for when her son finally returns. The music in this production made a profound impression on the young Hitchcock; he was especially struck by “the Call” connected with the heroine’s disappearance, an effect produced by bagpipes and “wordless voices” sounded from a musical saw. He remembered it as “celestial voices, like Debussy’s ‘Sirenes.’”¹⁵ Desperate to recapture that lost moment, he engaged Selznick’s management in a month-long search, hoping to fuse the *Mary Rose* music with Waxman’s score.

On November 9, Selznick fired off a memo to his music department: “Can you dig up the music score which accompanied part of the J. M. Barrie play produced in New York fifteen or twenty years ago called ‘Mary Rose’ and starring, I believe, Ruth Chatterton.... Need this promptly if we can get it.” The next day, he sent a follow-up to Daniel O’Shea, clarifying that the musical title was “The Call”: “It is Waxman that I wanted to hear this music, and I want to hear it myself.” We’ll never know what Hitchcock said to tweak Selznick’s interest, but it was obviously persuasive. (Selznick had heard the music himself but could not remember it.)

Unfortunately, no one ever got to hear *Mary Rose*. A series of futile searches by Selznick’s searchers culminated in a bizarre November 15 memo describing a “most peculiar time trying to obtain Mary Rose music.” The woman in charge of the estate was “slightly crackpot.... She does not feel well and it takes great energy to get into the files. We converse with her daily about her health.” Apparently, they conversed with her for weeks, because Hitchcock did not abandon the search until late November, after *Rebecca* was officially in postproduction. The search itself may seem slightly crackpot, but Hitchcock somehow managed to communicate the lost, otherworldly tone of the *Mary Rose* score to Waxman early on. A memo to Lou Forbes on November 28 shows that Selznick encouraged Hitchcock to do precisely that: “Mr. Hitchcock agrees that the ‘Mary Rose’ music might be useful to Waxman in indicating what we are after for the ‘Rebecca’ theme.” The same memo clarifies Selznick’s own vision of *Rebecca*’s motif: “Please make clear to Mr. Waxman that the ‘Rebecca’ theme should not be depressing. If anything, it ought to be on the sensuous side.”

For Hitchcock, this was only the beginning. *Mary Rose* became a lifelong obsession, one not unlike those suffered by many of his characters who try in vain to resurrect lost loved ones. As Christopher Husted points out in a groundbreaking essay, the narrative as well as the tone of *Mary Rose* fit *Rebecca* with uncanny exactness: “Not entirely unlike Mary Rose, Rebecca ‘returns’ from the sea after a long absence.”¹⁶ And it fit other movies as well. As we shall see, Hitchcock instigated another futile search during *Vertigo*, again a film about an obsessive inability to bury the past. Again, he ended up with a sublimely ghostly score from his composer, Bernard Herrmann.

Immediately after the *Mary Rose* search, Hitchcock met with Waxman. Finally, he was able to deal with real rather than remembered music, with an artist in the present rather than an ephemeral, Proustian recollection. Produced through consultation with Hitchcock, Waxman’s “Music Notes, Rebecca” are the earliest and one of the clearest revelations of how Hitchcock worked with a composer. Waxman sent them on December 2, along with his usual request to Selznick: “I hope you will have time to run the picture with me before you leave.” In his memo, he expressed relief that Hitchcock agreed with his ideas; in the notes, he welcomed Selznick’s input. Where Hitchcock and Waxman were undecided on whether or not to use music, or what kind, he left question marks and asked for Selznick’s judgment (e. g., “Marriage Scene: Attention Mr. Selznick: Do you want music?”).

Waxman’s notes are similar in attitude and even style to those Hitchcock himself made, particularly in his later films, leading one to wonder whether Hitchcock was influenced by his association with Waxman in this, his first Hollywood picture. In the elaborate confession cue, Waxman stated that the music would be “very low in volume and register,” building

very slowly and very gradually, keeping the suspense higher and higher until after Maxim says “I hated her”—The Rebecca theme, which so far has been highly emotional and haunting, suddenly and very abruptly turns to an almost vicious character revealing the real character of Rebecca. We keep this mood through the following scene of his description of the life Rebecca was really living until he says: “She was alone.” Only a faint tympani roll is heard, and at the moment the camera shows the close-up of the coffee table and couch, a new strain of melody starts ascending from a ghostly pianissimo, following the camera movement of Maxim’s description of the accident. Together with Maxim’s description of the boat capsizing and sinking the music comes to a tragic end, leaving the two people in silence. I am sure the following scene where “I” restores Maxim’s confidence and encourages him not to give up, will be twice as effective without music, especially after the long and stirring dramatic sequence which has just ended.

The precision and accuracy of this description, realized in the final film almost exactly, reveals a composer in total charge of his craft, and thoroughly in tune with his director. Numerous details—the faint tympani roll, the subtle crescendo, the directive that the dramatic final moments should be shrouded in silence rather than concluding with a big cadence—were methods that had been part of Hitchcock’s musical signature since *Blackmail*, as was Waxman’s concept of music as a character marker and mood setter.

Many other scenes described in the notes emerged intact as well. An example is Beatrice's revelation about Mrs. Danvers's love for Rebecca during the dramatic profile shot of "I": "After Beatrice says 'she simply adored Rebecca,' we pick up the Rebecca theme with a chord as camera discovers profile closeup of 'I' turning around—music out as we dissolve to luncheon scene." The introduction of Mrs. Danvers and her dour woodwind theme is also clearly noted: "Music playing the Manderley theme during entrance changes with Mrs. Danvers' appearance—stops with dropping of gloves—a moment of embarrassing silence in the music—and with the picking up of the gloves the music slowly sneaks in reestablishing the former mood."

In these and other instances, Waxman was thus able to anticipate shifting moods and silences of the most minute sort. But other scenes were changed in postproduction. Selznick had his own music notes (apparently now lost), which, on November 28, he asked the music department to share with Hitchcock "in case he has any suggestions." Hitchcock's participation in the musical process, therefore, included consultations with both Selznick and Waxman, and he may well have concurred with some of Selznick's emendations. The most striking example of a scene changed after the Hitchcock-Waxman meeting is Max's explosive honeymoon slide viewing, an early instance of Hitchcock's fondness for movies within movies: "After 'I' says 'there would never be any gossip' music sneaks in under noise of camera—as a matter of fact, the first bars of music should mix with the camera noise so that when Max stops the camera the music will be there without having a noticeable entrance. Music will continue until the fade-out." Waxman's preference for music sneaking in without an entrance, blending subtly with other sound track noise, contradicts the myth that he was interested only in italicizing emotion. But his intentions were sabotaged, for there is no music in this scene at all. Its stark power, darkly shadowed except for Max's demonically lit face, is emphasized by deadly silence broken only by the clattering home-movie camera. Did Selznick make the decision to opt for grim silence or did Hitchcock, who had a penchant for quiet where we least expect it?

The notes reveal that Waxman shared Hitchcock's preference for counterpoint over imitation, as shown in the Manderley Ball scene: "As 'I' comes downstairs the orchestra strikes up some music of a neutral, rather conventional character which they would play at the beginning of the ball before the guests have arrived ... music which should be in contrast to the excitement of 'I' and the nervous reaction of Maxim." This indeed turned out to be the scene with the greatest tension between music and the emotion shown on the screen. The note also clarifies what is implied but (because we never see an orchestra) not shown: the lengthy "conventional" waltz here is one of the few instances of source music. It is also—in contrast to the straightforward Strauss cues in the opening courtship scenes—another example of Hitchcock's use of waltzes as a veneer covering impending disaster.

Waxman made rough sketches of central themes early on. Like Hitchcock, he had an uncanny ability to see and hear things in advance. But because he had seen little of the picture, he could not, as executive manager Daniel O'Shea patiently pointed out in a memo to Selznick, work on the score in any sustained way "until he had complete sequences from us so he could accomplish his timing." While he was waiting, he was hard at work on *Florian* for his regular employer, MGM.

Selznick would have none of this. Furious, he sent out a barrage of the cranky memos for which he was notorious. The most extraordinary one, dated December 1, the day before Waxman sent over his music notes, blurts out a theory of film composing that had been implicit in his previous demands: "I have maintained for years, and still maintain, that the idea that music cannot be written until a picture is finally cut is so much nonsense. It is the equivalent of saying that the score for an opera or a musical comedy could not be written until the libretto was finally completed and cut." Like Hitchcock, Selznick saw film music as similar to opera. For composers, however, words to songs were not equivalent to images on a screen. Even in its early stages, film music was contracted to be written after edited scenes were available. Composers were put under tremendous time constraints but at least were able to see precisely what they had to do. Their talent consisted in being able to work quickly once they had what they needed; a genius like Korngold was capable of banging out the score on the piano as the scenes rolled by on a screen, much like a jazz improviser, but he needed to see and to measure.

This universally understood process was not fast enough for Selznick: "I think that scores have suffered tremendously because of this attitude, and that release dates have suffered also." As far as he was concerned, such expendables as melody, rhythm, and continuity could simply be adjusted after the fact. "There is no reason on earth why a score shouldn't be written from a rough assembly, even if it involves a certain amount of rewriting when the picture is finally cut. The exact timing of music has little or nothing to do with the composition of it, particularly as to the themes, and in fact all the music strains, regardless of whether a scene is ten feet or a hundred feet longer or shorter." Ultimately, Selznick wanted to take music out of post-production altogether: "It is my conviction that as time goes on the score of a picture will be written from the script so that by the time a picture has finished shooting, the score is complete as far as composition goes, and only such rewriting and rearranging is necessary as editing indicates.... I think this ought to be hammered into Waxman."

The notion of music as an infinitely malleable piece of putty shaped in advance as the script was written may have been a Selznickian fantasy, but so determined was he to get his way that he came up with yet another plan for having the music when he wanted it: a corporate cannibalization (already in progress with a movie called *Raffles*). In a December 12 memo, he wrote O'Shea and the music department of his desire to experiment with a "Music Corporation scoring method" whereby MCA would cobble together a score based on the broad outlines of Waxman's themes. Typically, Selznick was simultaneously preoccupied with something huge and impending—the Atlanta premiere of *Gone With the Wind*, no less—and so delayed making a decision on this scheme until he came back: "I'd like to have all the information by the time I return, meanwhile letting Waxman proceed, without discouraging him with any knowledge that we are considering any other plan."

By January, when Selznick came back from Atlanta, some in the music department were having doubts, as indicated by a memo from R. A. Klune: "In order to have the Music Corporation estimate the cost of scoring *Rebecca*, using Waxman's compositions," Klune wrote on January 6, "it would be necessary for us to request Waxman to turn his compositions over to us for a period of a few days. In this event, we might be hard put as it would be difficult to employ subterfuge as a reason for this, and anything else would undoubtedly immediately make Waxman very recalcitrant."

Klune was not convinced that any subterfuges would actually save money: "Waxman has sworn to me that the cost of the *Rebecca* score, which would include arrangements, copying, and all musicians, would be kept within \$12,000, including Waxman." Two days later, Selznick told Klune that he, too, was having doubts about making away with Waxman's manuscripts without his knowledge. Perhaps complete openness was the best policy, especially since Waxman was not costing the studio an inordinate amount of money: "Handle this matter any way you see fit, including possibly telling Waxman very frankly what we are doing. However, Waxman's estimate, if it can be accepted, seems reasonable enough. If you want to show the picture to the Music Corporation representatives, feel free to do so." Others in the music department, unaware of the plan, were urging Selznick to sit down with Waxman and hear his themes before storming through to completion with edited scenes. On January 15, Klune informed Selznick that the MCA "arrangement" of Waxman's sketches would still cost \$12,000. Then there was the delicate problem of a maestro: "MCA feels that any arrangement calculated to use Waxman's compositions with somebody else conducting would not work out satisfactorily."

Here the paper trail ends, and so, apparently, did the proposed plan. By February 3, matters were back where they started, with Klune reminding Selznick that Waxman could not begin sustained work until he has completed sequences, and Selznick grumbling back: "I don't understand why it isn't possible for Waxman to go right ahead with the completion of his scoring.... The cutting is practically final on almost the entire picture and I think it is a pity that the music for the entire picture has not yet been even composed." There was no further mention of the proposed corporate scoring shortcut.

The good news was that the final cut was indeed nearly complete. Once edited scenes were available, Waxman worked intensively and completed over two hours of music, which he recorded in time for the New York premiere on March 28. Waxman was surely correct in insisting that he needed complete sequences to get right those pesky timings that Selznick deemed so insignificant.

The entire process had taken just over six months, with a big push at the end. Given the complexity and poetry of the score, this brief amount of composing time seems remarkable, but it was by no means unusual in the movie-music business. Hitchcock's contribution was scantier than Selznick's behind-the-scenes maneuverings, but more fruitful. His search for *Mary Rose* was a failure, but through it he communicated the haunted tone that Waxman got into the music; and his conference with Waxman certainly seemed more productive than Selznick's fretting.

John Waxman points out that his father and Hitchcock were together more than they were apart and speculates that they were "allies against Selznick's interference."¹⁷ We can be grateful that Waxman was allowed to write his own score rather than having it snatched away and reconstituted by a corporate entity. But it was a close, scary call: "I think there is tremendous saving to be effected here," Selznick wrote in his memo of December 12, "and if the product doesn't suffer too greatly, I think we should go for it commencing with *Rebecca*." How greatly is too greatly? When music is seen as a product, one shudders to contemplate the answer. (This cannibalizing process was eventually unleashed on television, as we shall see, in *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.)

Hollywood is as unreal as the movies made there; once *Rebecca* was released and became a hit, the tensions suddenly evaporated as if they had never existed. The score that had been so troublesome and the occasion of so much vitriol and manipulation became a hit, making lots of gravy both for the movie and for Waxman personally. Selznick's memos and Waxman's references to his producer became mutually benign and cheery.

On April 12, within a month of *Rebecca*'s release, Klune wrote his superiors that Waxman had been asked to arrange and conduct a twelve-minute *Rebecca* Suite for the *Standard Symphony Hour*, "as you know a very popular

program,” sponsored by Standard Oil on NBC. “Franz tells me,” continued Klune, “that to the best of his knowledge this will be the first time” a film score would be used on the show. Sensing a golden publicity opportunity, Selznick encouraged Waxman to go ahead. He did, creating a suite consisting of variations on the *Rebecca* theme and conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic in a performance that was recorded for Selznick by his music department. This was the first of many Waxman arrangements of his music for concert purposes, including another request by the Standard Oil program to use the *Rebecca* Suite in 1942. It was an early example of film scores used for concert purposes: Hollywood music would continue to cross over into classical, as it regularly does today. It was also an enterprising use of a score to promote a movie over a long period, a phenomenon that would continue with the next Hitchcock-Selznick production, *Spellbound*.

After the Standard Oil commission, Waxman was asked to deliver a talk to the Federation of Women’s Clubs in Hollywood. His lecture, entitled “History of Motion Picture Music,” centered on *Rebecca*. As we shall see, it offered illuminating commentary, especially on the *Rebecca* theme. Waxman used the occasion to praise Selznick: “His interest and painstaking work for the minute detail in the production of a motion picture is stimulating to the creative artist.” In addition, Waxman celebrated having become an American citizen, which he termed “the happiest day of my life.” Klune, who encouraged Waxman to go forward with the lecture, attended and on May 3 sent Selznick an ecstatic letter: “Approximately two hundred women were present.... Every one of them had seen *Rebecca* once and better than half of them had seen it twice.”

Allegro moderato
 Conductor **Rebecca Suite**
 Music by **Franz Waxman**

Allegro moderato
 S.M.C.T.
 piano
 S.M.C.T.
 poco a poco cresc.
 2. Marimba
 Horns
 m. 4 5 6
 m. 7 8
 Stgs. & Horns.
 maestros
 Ging 2
 Tr. 3/4 p

Rebecca Suite. An early instance of music enlisted to sell a movie. By Franz Waxman. (Courtesy of John Waxman. Copyright © 1940 by Bourne Co. Copyright Renewed. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured.)

For years, highbrow critics sniffed that *Rebecca* was a middlebrow women's picture, but the musical community was not so snooty. After the Los Angeles Philharmonic commission came a request by Gregor Piatigorsky, a lifelong friend of Waxman's and a great *Rebecca* admirer, for a symphonic poem for cello and orchestra based on

Rebecca. In asking for permission from Selznick, Waxman stated that Piatigorsky “as you probably know is one of the two great living cello virtuosos [Casals, presumably, being the other].”¹⁸ Selznick immediately responded to the music department regarding Waxman’s query: “I think we should do this for him, and that we shouldn’t try to make any money out of it.”¹⁹ Waxman, alas, never wrote the piece, but the incident illustrates that Selznick’s behavior could be graceful as well as crass.

Crassness was nevertheless just around the corner, as was the need for control. Waxman could not have been happy (though he never said so publicly) that the music in the final cut of *Rebecca* was not entirely his. Fearing that the Waxman’s score was insufficiently lush, Selznick had called on Steiner at the last minute to enrich several scenes, an ironic reversal given his hiring of Waxman as Steiner’s “insurance composer.” He inserted a Steiner cue from *Little Lord Fauntleroy* into *Rebecca*, and, much more bizarrely, stuck snippets from all sorts of things—Waxman’s “Trouble for Two” from *He Goes to Court*, “Brink Is Back” from *On Borrowed Time*, “George Anne” from *The Young in Heart*—into the spare woodwind music for Mrs. Danvers. Out went Waxman’s evocatively descending parallel chords; in went arbitrary tunes from other Waxman cues. He also yanked out Waxman’s cool, elegant music for Beatrice, an incisive character portrait, again substituting a Steiner cue.²⁰ The conviction that a given score lacked Romanticism became a kind of obsession with Selznick: even *Spellbound* didn’t meet his requirements, and at the end of postproduction he demanded that Miklos Rozsa add as many violins for the main title as Waxman had used in *Rebecca*. By this time, bolstered by the public’s enthusiasm for the film, he had concluded that *Rebecca* was indeed lush enough a model for how souped up a movie score could be.

Even this eccentric tampering did not fundamentally alter Waxman’s music. With more than seventy Waxman cues, Selznick had time to corrupt only a few of them. It was Hitchcock who gave *Rebecca* its distinctive flavor. According to John Waxman, Selznick had a “finger in the music,” but the mood conjured by his father’s music was “established by Hitchcock’s vision. Hitchcock knew what he wanted.”²¹

Selznick’s influence was by no means all negative. It is hard to ignore his role in Hitchcock’s initiation into Hollywood music, especially since some of the most striking Hitchcock scores were made in the Selznick Studio. Selznick was a lavish producer whose taste in music was, as with everything else, larger than life. Often in *Rebecca* one can sense the double imprint of producer and director, and Waxman’s score reinforces the strengths of both. A stirring example of music playing out in both Selznick and Hitchcock styles is a cue called “Arrival at Manderley,” which builds a crescendo on the courtship theme, continues in an impressionist wash of rain music, and culminates in a major-key explosion of the Manderley theme as Max, seeing the great house looming ahead, shouts “That’s it! That’s Manderley!” The majesty of the scene is Selznickian, like a black-and-white outtake from *Gone With the Wind*. But the camera closes on anxiety and awe in the close-up of Joan Fontaine, whose face precisely embodies Waxman’s music, converting the scene into a Hitchcockian shot. This type of car scene, music coursing through rapid motion and close-ups, became a Hitchcock signature in *To Catch a Thief*, *Vertigo*, *Psycho*, and many other of his films.

The interaction among Selznick, Hitchcock, and Waxman, the New World and the Old, full of tension yet often complementary, parallels the *Rebecca* story line. The unnamed heroine played by Joan Fontaine—young, naïve, and clumsy, yet brave and spunky—is a stand-in for America, though not identified as an American, a breath of freshness and innocence, her identity unformed; her lover, Max, played by Laurence Olivier—brooding, burned out, given to sudden rages, obsessed by a dead past—is a European with lots of baggage, the Old World aristocrat reinvigorated and saved by the New. “You’ve blotted out the past for me more than all the bright lights of Monte Carlo,” Max tells his “child” bride.

But keeping the past at bay is not easy. *Rebecca* is about the terrible struggle to break out of obsession with a deadly yesterday and to live for today, a conflict embedded in every phrase of the music. *Rebecca* was the beginning of a post-British Hitchcock sound that captured the suppressed obsessions of his characters more eloquently than words, even the torrent of them in this, the master’s talkiest film. Waxman’s music doesn’t accompany the story so much as dramatize it, pitting the Rebecca melody, a siren call of the dead, against the music associated with the new Mrs. de Winter, including an airy courtship tune, an exotic car-driving melody (both part of a “Tennis Montage”), and a full-blown love song. This symphonic struggle is resolved only at the end, as the latter has the last word in the final cadence, after a climactic brass chorale of Rebecca’s music and the omnipresent R on her pillowcase go up in flames.

Waxman’s score provides inner momentum for a story line more languid than Hitchcock’s usual. From the mysterious horn motif rising from dark string tremolos opening the title sequence through the secretive chords of the confession scene to the cathartic fire music, the score moves the drama, creating a meaning behind the images. Menacing variations on the *Rebecca* theme trouble the heroine’s dreams even before she knows what the nightmares are about, suggesting what is behind the door as she moves trancelike toward Rebecca’s bedroom to the strain of

haunting string tremolos. These become more sinister as Mrs. Danvers, suddenly appearing like a ghost, opens the drapes to magical harp glissandos that fill the huge room with Rebecca's presence, the music enlarging its great space as it intones one of her many incantations: "Do you think the dead come back to haunt the living? Sometimes I wonder if she doesn't come back here to Manderley to watch you and Mr. de Winter." It is Mrs. Danvers, of course, Rebecca's emissary, who does the haunting and watching, her penetrating eyes (which Hitchcock "directed," Judith Anderson once said with admiration) moving about the enchanted room as it dissolves into the sea, its crashing waves mingling with the Rebecca theme.

Rebecca may be dead, but Waxman is the talisman who brings her back, much as Bernard Herrmann resurrected Carlotta in *Vertigo* and Norman Bates's mother in *Psycho*. In his speech to the Hollywood Federation of Women's Clubs, Waxman revealed that this was his most daunting challenge in the film: "The really dominant character in the story is dead.... Yet the entire drama revolves around her. Through the speech and action of others, and particularly through the use of music, her character, with all its powerful effects, had to be revealed to the audience." In its early stages, movie music was experienced by audiences as inherently mysterious and disturbing, so why not exploit its uncanny capabilities? "Whenever a scene involving Rebecca appeared on the screen, it was up to the music to give Rebecca's character life and presence."

This idea of music hovering about as a supernatural presence capable of revealing the character of someone living or dead was a Hitchcock signature, but it went against the academic notion, already hardening into cliché, that film music should be unnoticed and unnoticeable. Waxman was aware of his heresy: "I read a statement in one of the musical papers the other day where somebody said that a good motion picture score should be of such nature that you don't notice it.... It should be unobtrusive and so much in the background that on leaving the theater one wouldn't be sure that there was any music in the picture at all." Waxman thought this was silly: "If it is so subdued that its only virtue lies in the fact that it is not noticeable, it can hardly be effective. A motion picture score should be noticed just as much as you notice the other elements."

Waxman's vision of music as a palpable presence was precisely in line with Hitchcock's. From the opening timpani rolls and swirling string glissandos, *Rebecca's* music is anything but subdued. Dramatizing James Joyce's dictum in *Dubliners* that "absence is the highest form of presence," Waxman evokes a character who is not there, yet always present, enabling Hitchcock to give us his most mysterious femme fatale, one never shown even in a flashback or photo. The *Rebecca* melody is omnipresent, though not always in full orchestral regalia. The lush orchestra of the title sequence is sometimes reduced to a smaller ensemble, a "ghost orchestra," in Waxman's words, colored by the unearthly sound of an electric organ and two electronic instruments called novachords, the predecessor of Miklos Rozsa's theremin in *Spellbound*. To Waxman, the novachord had "a peculiar sound of unreality—of something that you cannot define." Its "sinister purr," in Christopher Palmer's phrase, floats through the Gothic spaces of Manderley, appearing with the phantomlike Mrs. Danvers.²²

Like a seductive disease, the Rebecca theme insinuates itself whenever the drowned femme fatale is mentioned or when the young bride blunders into one of her haunts, as in the discordant eruption of the tune in the boathouse scene. So potent is this idea that often only a fragment suffices, as in its brief return when the heroine's friend Beatrice dissolves and vanishes behind the anxious profile of "I" after revealing Mrs. Danvers's "adoration" of Manderley's former mistress (exactly as sketched in Waxman's notes).

But the love music is powerful as well and becomes a match for Rebecca's deadly siren call. The struggle between the two Mrs. de Winters, between life and the pull toward death, is dramatized symphonically. Stubbornly intervening during the haunted couple's worst crises, the love melody gradually solidifies the heroine's fragile identity, as when she summons her courage to demand that Mrs. Danvers throw out Rebecca's papers: "I am Mrs. de Winter now!" By the end, we know this is fully true as she leads Jasper, Rebecca's dog, from the flames of Manderley. Mrs. Danvers perishes in her own inferno as the love theme, rising from the ashes, does final, triumphant battle with the Rebecca motif.

Until recently, commentators tended to dismiss Waxman's *Rebecca* as gushy and overly italicized, but many cues tease the ear with irony and subtle counterpoint. Sometimes the score is comic, as when impish winds accompany Max's request, "Would you kindly ask Mrs. Van Hopper to come see me in my room?" or when collapsing strings draw "I" down into a chair at Max's exasperated marriage proposal: "I'm asking you to marry me, you little fool!" Sometimes it is whimsical, as in the delightful scenes where "I" sketches Alice in Wonderland and Joan of Arc for possible costumes. Sometimes it contradicts what is on the screen, as in the neutral waltz accompanying the disastrous masked-ball scene or the bland Monte Carlo restaurant music as the klutzy "I" has breakfast. Many cues have a rigorous classicism, including "Fireplace Tableaux," the creepy canon in Mrs. Danvers's penultimate scene, and the astringent waltz during her fiery immolation.

When the omnipresent music vanishes altogether, its sudden absence is shocking, as in the movie-within-a-

movie honeymoon showing that the couple's happiness is "only a movie." The harrowing courtroom, blackmail, and medical-revelation scenes, in which Max must confront the legacy of his dead wife without the usual shields of wealth or charm, are shockingly bereft of music, making his isolation stark and painfully convincing. Although nearly every character has a Wagnerian motif, George Sanders's Jack, the "big bad wolf," has no music at all, allowing his scathing wit to come through unimpeded, keeping the movie from moving too far into Gothic otherworldliness.

The most original music in *Rebecca* consists of unresolved chord chains evoking anxiety and irresolution. These travel languidly around the mortified heroine after she smashes Rebecca's Cupid, drift through the dense fog as "I" searches for Max following her close call on the window ledge, surround the funereal close-ups of Max's feet approaching Rebecca's corpse at the new inquest, give Rebecca's deserted boathouse a mysterious life, and ascend with morbid dissonance through the morning room of Manderley. Full of big Golden Age tunes, the score is most potent in its troubling evocation of ambivalence and mental instability: the hero with his mood swings and dark past, the young American heroine with her precarious identity. Commentators have given Bernard Herrmann credit for this modern musical style in cinema, but the seeds were in *Rebecca*.

The most extended example is in Max's confession scene, where Hitchcock, through music and circular close-ups of cigarette trays and other objects, manipulates the audience into visualizing Rebecca's death without resorting to flashback. As we have seen, Waxman and Hitchcock thoroughly mapped out this scene. It is long—indeed, its length feels risky—but the ever-shifting music brings it to life again and again when it seems to be faltering. This is a modern symphony of dread, repression, and final release based on color and wandering harmony. Scraps of motifs we have already heard—the sea theme, for example, crashing when Max reveals the secret of Rebecca's boat—weave through a haunted stream of tremolos, chimes, and novachords. This slow but strangely powerful sequence is suffused with secretive, anxious chords that speak painfully of Max's yearning for a peace and forgiveness not granted until the denouement.

In the climax of the scene, Max vents his rage at Rebecca, and "I" learns that her rival is a malignant fraud. As Waxman points out in his speech to the Federation of Women's Clubs (in language strikingly similar to his music notes), the revelation is musical: "At this moment, the theme, which so far has been given a haunting and almost lovely interpretation, turns suddenly vicious, revealing the true character of Rebecca, now played by the real orchestra in a dramatic and almost sinister form, ascending to the climax of the picture." The full orchestra takes over as Max sarcastically recounts Rebecca's ostensibly superior qualities—"breeding, brains, and beauty." It is the only full-blown melody in this lengthy musical narrative. The ghost orchestra never appears again; the real one plays Rebecca as she was, cool and vicious.

From here on, as Waxman notes, the real Rebecca is out in the open; the haunting is over. Knowing the true character of her rival, "I" rallies to save herself and her lover, confronting the fully orchestrated version of Rebecca's theme with her own music, which proves equally formidable. "Ascending to the climax of the picture" over the smoke and ruins of Manderley, this "almost sinister" music—a far more compelling embodiment of Rebecca than the supernatural "R" Selznick wanted etched in clouds—is vanquished by the soaring melody that belongs to "I."

Hitchcock was as ambivalent about *Rebecca* as he was about many of his films once they left his head and went into actual shooting. It made him famous in America and launched his Hollywood career, yet he made dismissive comments about it as a fairy tale and a "novellette" rather than a true Hitchcock picture. (His remark that it lacks Hitchcockian humor is odd given the hilarious Florence Bates in the Monte Carlo scenes and the scalding black humor of George Sanders and Gladys Cooper.) He did, however, agree with Truffaut's assertion that *Rebecca* always seemed undated, strangely modern—and confessed he had no idea why.

As we have seen, music is a key to the film's psychological modernity, for it consistently cues the characters' inner turmoil. *Rebecca* is indeed a fairy tale, a Cinderella story, but like du Maurier's gripping novel, is also a realistic depiction of guilt and anxiety. Dealing in psychology rather than physical confrontation, it is filled with suicides, both failed and successful: Max nearly plunges off the cliffs of Monte Carlo into the sea, saved at the last second by "I," who later nearly jumps out a window herself; Rebecca dies through a convoluted suicide designed to drag her husband down with her (a key change from the novel); she nearly succeeds a second time when Max almost surrenders his life to the hangman, again saved by the life-giving stubbornness of "I." In the only overtly physical sequence in the film, Mrs. Danvers consummates her passion for Rebecca by leaping into the flames of Manderley. These characters haunt themselves—they don't need Rebecca—and music unveils their obsessions. The use of a lavish, grandiose score to unveil a troubled inner world would continue in later Hitchcock movies, from *Spellbound* to *Vertigo*.

Waxman always regarded *Rebecca* as the masterpiece of his 144 Hollywood efforts. It was the score that gave

him the most personal satisfaction and the most commercial cachet. The *Rebecca* Suite, the predecessor of his popular suites for *Sunset Boulevard* and *A Place in the Sun*, boosted his personal stock as well as that of the film; it also planted the seeds of Rozsa's *Spellbound* Suite five years later, which was used to plug the film in advance of its release. Waxman was convinced *Rebecca* would garner him an Oscar, so much so that he started to stand when he thought he saw Paramount's B. G. DeSylva looking straight at him before announcing Best Original Score, only to find the composers of *Pinocchio* rising behind him to get their award. As would be the case with later Hitchcock composers, Waxman's score represented a breakthrough in his career that other moviemakers asked him to emulate. Give us a *Rebecca* sound, they pleaded, even if the film had an urban setting. Christopher Husted notes that as late as the 1950s, Waxman films like *My Cousin Rachel* (another du Maurier treatment) and *Elephant Walk* "hoped to mimic the mystique of *Rebecca*."²³

Hitchcockians distrust *Rebecca* because of its Selznickian linearity and lack of quirky eccentricity. The public, perhaps a better judge, has always loved it. Musically, it is one of Hitchcock's richest films, though for years commentators lambasted it for alleged hyperbole. Late in the twentieth century and early in the twenty-first, it got a significant boost with new recordings and reassessments. Robert Townson went so far as to declare it "arguably the best score for any Hitchcock picture."²⁴ Truffaut had it right in the 1960s when he commented that the music leaves a "haunting impression," one that lingers long after *Rebecca*'s R has gone up in smoke.²⁵