Max Steiner: Maestro of Movie Music – Information

**Documentary Description:**

Music is the invisible heartbeat of a movie. This is the story of a man who invented a new art form and changed Hollywood forever.

Max Steiner arrived in America as a penniless musician from Europe at the beginning of the last century. After a productive career on Broadway he headed west to Hollywood and introduced the musical underscore. His ideas were revolutionary. He worked on over 300 films, including timeless classics such as *Gone with the Wind*, *King Kong* and *Casablanca*. He was nominated for over 24 Academy Awards and won three.

His legacy lives on today through the many composers who followed in his footsteps.

**Producer and Director Diana Friedberg:**

Diana Friedberg ACE is a multiple award-winning film editor and producer. In 1967 she began her career in her native South Africa. There, in 1972, she became the first woman to direct a feature film. She moved to Hollywood with her husband and family in 1986. With an MFA from USC in film production she has edited and produced features, episodic television, animation series and non-fiction productions for companies as diverse as Disney, HBO, National Geographic, The History Channel, A&E, Discovery, NBC, USA and others.

In 2020 Friedberg produced and directed a documentary entitled *Max Steiner: Maestro of Movie Music*. The film has screened in 18 festivals and won nine awards. She produced and directed the five-part documentary series *World on a String* which won 31 international awards. Co-chairing the American Cinema Editors intern program for 18 years, she mentored many young editors to successful careers in the industry. In 2017 she was the recipient of American Cinema Editors Heritage Award, presented in recognition of her commitment to advancing the art of the film editor, cultivating respect for the editing profession, and tireless dedication to American Cinema Editors.

**BYU’s role in the documentary:**

Max Steiner Collection: Max Steiner’s original film sketches (as well as his correspondence, Academy awards, and other memorabilia) are preserved in the Max Steiner Collection in the Special Collections division of the Harold B. Lee Library. Film scholars from around the world come to BYU regularly to study these sketches (including over 27,000 pages of hand-written music composed for over 200 films between 1930 and 1965). The collection was obtained from Steiner’s widow by retired BYU film curator James d’Arc in 1981.

Documentary recording sessions: In the Fall of 2018, the BYU Philharmonic Orchestra participated in recording sessions for the documentary *Max Steiner: Maestro of Movie Music* (by award-winning film producer Diana Friedberg). The recording sessions were organized and cheer-led by BYU music faculty member and film music scholar Brent Yorgason. For these sessions, Los Angeles film composer and conductor William Stromberg directed the orchestra. His colleague John Morgan, who personally knew Steiner as a young man, supplied the orchestral scores and parts, which he had carefully re-
created from Steiner’s original sketches (housed in BYU’s Special Collections). As a result of these recording sessions, the director of the BYU Philharmonic, Kory Katseanes, suggested a collaborative project involving the performance of a complete Steiner film score on the concert stage, which led to the world-premiere performance of Steiner’s groundbreaking 1933 score to *King Kong* (played live to film) in November 2019.

Research: Two BYU faculty members, Brent Yorgason (associate professor of music theory) and Jeff Lyon (music cataloger and director of BYU’s Film Music Archives), acted as research assistants for the documentary, helping to gather, identify, and photograph materials from the Max Steiner Collection. Yorgason and Lyon are co-directors of the Max Steiner Institute of film music research, publishing transcriptions of Steiner’s sketches and analyses of his work in the Max Steiner Digital Thematic Catalog ([https://maxsteinerinstitute.org/](https://maxsteinerinstitute.org/)). They have also published Steiner-related research in journals such as *Music Theory Online* and the *Journal of Film Music*. They organized and directed the 2019 Max Steiner Symposium at Brigham Young University and were guest editors for a special edition of the *Journal of Film Music* dedicated to the music of Max Steiner.

Awards:

See: [https://dianafriedberg.com/max-steiner/](https://dianafriedberg.com/max-steiner/)

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Notable segments from the documentary: (with links to short film clips)

1) **0:44 to 2:11** – This segment shows the BYU Philharmonic playing the main theme from *Gone with the Wind*, leading directly into a comment by renowned film critic Leonard Maltin. The clip begins and ends by highlighting some of the materials from BYU Special Collections: historical photographs, hand-written sketches, the Oscar for *Now, Voyager*, and Steiner’s personal (and still working) metronome. (Materials from BYU’s Special Collections continue to be used throughout the documentary).

2) **35:00 to 38:53** - This segment shows retired BYU film curator James d’Arc as he leads the viewer through the depths of the Harold B Lee library (it also features the BYU Philharmonic playing the “Jungle Dance” cue in the background). As James d’Arc continues to describe the score to *King Kong* (1933), we see an excerpt of the Philharmonic playing the “Boat in the Fog” cue, featuring student soloists Brian Moose (oboe) and Charlotte Harrison (English horn). The narration next describes Kong’s “Jungle Dance,” and we see several shots of the Philharmonic playing this cue, interspersed with scenes from the film.

3) **39:38 to 41:11** – this segment begins with a description of the music from *King Kong* by entertainer (and “Ambassador of the Great American Songbook”) Michael Feinstein. This is followed by the climactic Empire State Building scene from *King Kong*, with underscoring being provided by the BYU Philharmonic, featuring soloist Adam Woodward (violin). The playing in this cue is particularly fine. The segment ends with commentary by film scholar Leonard Maltin.

4) **41:40 to 42:16** – in this segment we hear the BYU Philharmonic playing another excerpt from “Jungle Dance” as noted film scholar Nathan Platte describes the role of sound effects in *King Kong*; we also see archival materials from BYU Special Collections, including photographs and newspaper clippings.

5) **42:37 to 43:13** – in this segment, James d’Arc displays the sketch for Steiner’s first Academy-award winning score, *The Informer* (1935) and a portion of Steiner’s unpublished autobiography “Notes to You” is read (both kept in BYU Special Collections).

6) **47:52 to 48:16** – in this segment, James d’Arc displays Steiner’s first Academy Award

7) **49:19 to 49:55** – here film composer John Morgan describes Steiner’s scoring methods; in the background we see rehearsal shots of the BYU Philharmonic (although the music is not played by them) and materials from BYU Special Collections (sketches and photographs)

8) **50:36 to 51:15** – in this clip, James d’Arc describes how Steiner would write notes to his orchestrators in his sketches, and we see several shots of the sketches in Special Collections

9) **51:40 to 52:42** – in this segment, James d’Arc displays the score for *Gone with the Wind* and the BYU Philharmonic performs the opening title music from the score, interspersed with shots from the film
10) **1:08:05 to 1:09:18** – this segment begins with an overhead shot of Hollywood Blvd. while underneath we hear the BYU Philharmonic playing the main theme from *Gone with the Wind*; we then shift to the archives of BYU Special Collections, where James d'Arc describes the music of the film; the segment ends with him boxing up the score and putting it away.

11) **1:10:21 to 1:10:57** – this segment begins with Steiner biographer Stephen C. Smith, then we see BYU Philharmonic performing a cue from *Johnny Belinda* (1948) [in actuality, this is a mismatch – I believe they are playing something else here!]; onscreen we see numerous letters from Jack Warner to Max Steiner (from BYU Special Collections).

NOTE: we see more shots of the BYU Philharmonic playing from 1:11:17 to 1:11:38, but this is another mismatch – they are obviously not playing the music that we hear!]

12) **1:12:08 to 1:13:37** – this segment features the sketch from *Tovarich* (1937), for which Steiner composed the Warner Bros. fanfare; then James d'Arc displays the sketch for *Dodge City* (1939), describes Steiner's contributions to Westerns.

13) **1:13:37 to 1:14:56** - in this segment, James d'Arc describes Steiner's compositional style in general and his influence on later composers such as John Williams.

14) **1:21:50 to 1:22:45** – in this segment we materials from BYU Special Collections related to *Casablanca* (1942), followed by clips from the film; underneath this segment, the BYU Philharmonic plays “As Time Goes By” (beginning with a piano solo).

15) **1:25:39 to 1:26:26** – behind this segment the BYU Philharmonic [I believe] plays a cue from *Now, Voyager* (1942) and we see sketches from the Max Steiner Collection lined up on a shelf.

16) **1:29:49 to 1:30:38** – James d'Arc shows all of Steiner's Oscars and describes the score to *Since You Went Away* (1944).

17) **1:36:24 to 1:37:29** – James d'Arc describes Steiner's score for *Adventures of Don Juan* (1948).

18) **1:44:37 to 1:46:36** – this segment first highlights the collection of Steiner sheet music in BYU Special Collections; Michael Feinstein plays some of this music in the background; film scholar Nathan Platte talks about the significance of the sheet music; we then hear BYU Philharmonic playing the ending to *King Kong* and see James d'Arc pulling some of the original sound recordings off of the shelves in BYU Special Collections.

19) **1:48:27 to 1:49:42** - in this segment, John Morgan and William Stromberg pose (in one of the practice rooms in the HFAC) with various items that belonged to Max Steiner and that are preserved at BYU, including his grand piano, his metronome, and his conducting baton, while looking at a score from *King Kong*; in the following scene, we see some original movie posters from Special Collections and a lamp made from a tuba that belonged to Steiner; another shot of the Max Steiner Collection sketches on a shelf; all of these are housed at BYU. The narration talks about how John and Bill have restored and recorded Max's music.
Access to the full documentary:

Vimeo (free [temporary] access):  

HBOMax (streaming from October 1; membership required):  
https://www.hbomax.com/feature/urn:hbo:feature:GYw-69QyqfrTCKgEAAAiN

Turner Classic Movies (streaming begins November 15):  


Other Links:

IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11789508/


Quote: “The film was truly a labor of love. Everyone was excited about the project and gave generously of their time and talent without renumeration. The team at BYU under the leadership of the ex-curator of the Steiner Collection, James D’Arc worked with me every step of the way as we combed through the rich treasure trove of material that they had archived concerning Steiner’s life. It was all used to flesh out and illustrate his story. The university even generously gave permission to use the talents of their 100-piece Philharmonic Orchestra to play Steiner cues that we were able to film. Morgan and Stromberg gave their time and extraordinary expertise preparing the musical scores for these cues. They rehearsed and conducted the students who did a masterful job playing film music for the first time. And all this for a pizza lunch for the students! It really was extraordinary how everyone rallied around to help make the film happen.”

Quote: “One of the exciting things that came out of this project was that BYU and curators of the Max Steiner Collection went ahead and organized a second Max Steiner Symposium at the end of 2019 which would coincide with a screening at the university of the first cut of the film. Another highlight of the weekend would be a live performance by the BYU Philharmonic of the full score of King Kong played along with the film. It was wonderful to know that a whole new generation of young people had learnt about Max Steiner and were exposed to a live performance of a film music score. This was all stimulated by a renewed interest in film music generated by our project.”

Register of the Max Steiner Collection at BYU: http://files.lib.byu.edu/ead/XML/MSS1547.xml

A short video about the Max Steiner Collection at BYU (featuring Brent Yorgason):  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_M_TbR65vZU
Possible Interviewees

- Brent Yorgason (brent_yorgason@byu.edu / 422-4232)
  BYU music professor / film scholar who set up the recording event with the BYU Philharmonic

- Jeff Lyon (jeff_lyon@byu.edu / 422-6447)
  BYU music librarian and director of the Film Music Archives

- Kory Katseanes (kory_katseanes@byu.edu / 422-3331)
  Director of the BYU Philharmonic and conductor for the King Kong concert

- Jim d’Arc (wingsforeagle@gmail.com)
  Recently-retired BYU film-music curator and historian, with a wealth of knowledge about Steiner’s career and the library’s collection of his work

Image:

Several of the people involved in the making of the documentary posing in front of a giant King Kong in the Harold B. Lee Library for the Max Steiner Symposium (2019)
Max Steiner was born in Vienna, Austria in 1888, where his father and grandfather were well-known impresarios. The Steiners were associated with many famous artists and musicians in Vienna like Johann Strauss, Jr., Richard Strauss, and Gustav Mahler. Emperor Franz Josef himself visited one of the theaters that Max’s father managed, within an amusement park he developed that recreated the canals and palazzos of Venice.

Max began composing at the age of 9 and began conducting at the age of 11. By 15 he dreamed “only of becoming a great composer,” receiving his formal training at the Imperial Academy of Vienna, where he completed his studies in half the normal time. He wrote a successful operetta at the age of 19 and was on track to follow in the footsteps of Strauss when his father’s business went bankrupt.

This unfortunate turn of events led him to move to England, where he worked as a conductor and musical director in notable theaters and opera houses, sometimes under the pseudonym of Mr. Phil Saxe. Again his career was taking off, but when Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated in 1914, he became an enemy alien and was forced to emigrate to the United States.

After struggling to find work in New York City, Steiner became a U.S. citizen, joined the musician’s union, and started work conducting an orchestra that accompanied silent films at William Fox’s Riverside Theater.

Steiner next began orchestrating Broadway musicals, working with some of the early greats such as Jerome Kern, Victor Herbert, Sigmund Romberg, and Oscar Hammerstein as musical director. He established a close friendship with George and Ira Gershwin and was involved with several of their hit Broadway shows, including *Lady Be Good* in 1924. His own original stage musical, *Peaches*, was unfortunately a flop.

During his Broadway years, Steiner crossed paths with many people he would later work with in Hollywood, including Fred Astaire, Busby Berkeley, and Cary Grant.

At the age of 41, and on the cusp of the Great Depression, which closed many Broadway theatres, Max signed a contract to work as an orchestrator at RKO studios in Hollywood, CA. He soon became the studio’s music director and established himself as one of the leading film composers in Hollywood.

At this time, sound film was still in its infancy and studios were still trying to figure out what role music should play, often asking “but where is the music coming from?” Many early sound films only had music for the opening and closing credits. But working in collaboration with pioneering producer David O Selznick, Max developed a type of underscoring that could enhance the emotions on the screen without intruding on the story. He developed a style of film music that associated musical ideas called leitmotifs with characters in the drama (a technique borrowed from Richard Wagner). He would then vary these leitmotifs as the characters developed and the drama unfolded. He also developed a click track method that would allow him to synchronize music perfectly with actions on-screen. These early developments strongly affected film music composition in the classic Hollywood era, and Steiner’s lush orchestral style was a direct influence on later composers as well, such as John Williams.
Some of Steiner’s most notable film scores at RKO were *Bird of Paradise* (his first wall-to-wall film score), *The Most Dangerous Game, Little Women, The Lost Patrol, The Informer* (for which he won his first Academy Award), and Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers musicals like *Top Hat*. But his magnum opus of this period is undoubtedly the score for *King Kong* in 1933, a massive, modern composition for large orchestra that is arguably the first film score masterpiece (we'll have more to say about King Kong later).

As Steiner’s star began to rise in Hollywood, he found himself in great demand and secured a new contract as a composer at Warner Bros (after a brief stint with Selznick International Pictures). Although he continued to be one of the most prolific composers in the business, writing scores for almost 300 films during the course of his career, now he was being assigned to much more prestigious pictures, working within a well-oiled studio system to produce one fine film after the other.

Jack Warner would have liked all of his films to be scored by Steiner, and asked all of the other composers at the studio to imitate his style. Directors like John Ford requested Steiner specifically, and the films he scored featured top Hollywood stars like Humphrey Bogart, Cary Grant, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, James Cagney, Gary Cooper, Katherine Hepburn, Clark Gable, Bette Davis, John Wayne, Errol Flynn, Olivia de Havilland, and Doris Day.

Steiner was nominated for an Academy Award 24 times and he won Oscars for his scores to *The Informer, Now, Voyager and Since You Went Away*. Today, he is best remembered for his scores to *Casablanca* and *Gone with the Wind*. His score for this latter epic film lost out to *The Wizard of Oz* for best score, but is considered one of his finest achievements as a composer. Other notable Warner Bros. films include *Dodge City, Sergeant York, Arsenic and Old Lace, The Big Sleep, Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, and *The Adventures of Don Juan*.

When the Hollywood studio system began to break up in the mid-50s, Steiner became a free agent, working for different studios on single-picture contracts, creating memorable scores for films like *The Searchers* and *The FBI Story*. And after a lifetime of being in debt, he finally achieved financial stability with his theme for *A Summer Place*, which held the top spot on the pop charts for nine weeks. But now a new generation of film composers was emerging, with new styles that included more jazz and popular music. Classic orchestral scores were becoming less common, partially because they were more expensive. These factors, combined with Steiner’s failing eyesight, meant that he was finding less and less work to do in Hollywood. One of his last scores was for Disney in 1965. He then retired and lived off the proceeds of his Theme for *A Summer Place* until his death at the age of 83 in 1971.

Steiner’s contributions to film music are significant. He was one of the most influential, most talented, and most hard-working composers in the classic Hollywood era, and remains one of the most admired by contemporary film composers like Danny Elfman and John Williams. (Steven Spielberg even named his son Max after Steiner.) And each year, in Vienna, Austria—Max’s hometown—the Max Steiner Award is given to today’s leading film composers, with some of the most recent awards going to Hans Zimmer and Alan Mencken.