2022-04-30

Roar of the Dragon: An Explorative Precursor in Film Scoring

Hyrum Kohler
kohler.hyrum@gmail.com

Hyrum Kohler
April 30, 2022

Roar of the Dragon:
An Explorative Precursor in Film Scoring

Abstract:

Roar of the Dragon (1932) was an important work in film composer Max Steiner's transitional period before *King Kong's* success. While other substantial films of this period have been analyzed and treated in regard in the film community, *Roar of the Dragon* is a relatively overlooked entry that shares many similarities with *King Kong* and Steiner's other early lengthy scores. Because the original score of *Roar of the Dragon* has been lost, the work I did in 2020 as a research assistant in the Harold B. Library's department of cataloging and metadata to recreate the score through ear transcription allowed for this further analysis and research. All of the music figures included below are from my ear transcription. Because of the recreated score, others can soon study and research the film further. While it does not have as much music as other Steiner films leading up to *King Kong*, it certainly showcases Steiner's skills in thematic variation and motivic integration with very simple music. I present a discussion of the dramatic usage of a chord like Wagner's Tristan Chord or Weber's Samiel Chord. Steiner utilizes existing connections between his setting and musical techniques in order to further establish the diegesis or narrative of the film. His score exhibits a kind of folky impressionism, rife with modal harmonies, whole-tone harmonies, and planing. Up to 45% of the film score is based on the same two ideas found in the villain's theme, which is uncommon for this point in Steiner's career.

Keywords:

Parallelism, Pentatonicism, Phrygian Mode, Film Score, Motivic Integration, Thematic Variant, Villain, Leitmotif, Ear Transcription

It's 1932. Just five years prior, the first feature-length film with synchronized voices was released. *The Jazz Singer* (1927) marked the decline of silent movies and the rise of sound films. This early, pre-code period marked a season of experimentation and exploration, especially for film composers. With the potential of adding specific music to the voiced lines and camera work, films had untapped potential for riveting diegesis and more believable worlds. The future of sound films was a relatively new frontier.

In contrast to this exciting potential, the film industry in Hollywood faced financial struggles. Following a downturn in box-office sales in 1930, undoubtedly related to the Great Depression, filmmakers turned to new strategies and ideas to reach a wider audience. Some of the most noticeable differences in 1931 and 1932 was the genre shift away from musicals and the quality of music shifting away from the diegetic side. Diegetic music is simply music that comes from within the world of the film, perhaps with a radio or on-screen instruments. Among many factors, reports of films being too dialogue-heavy as well as music editing becoming more complicated when under dialogue helped in this shift.[1] There were also concerns with foreign dubbing over the dialogue.[2] The result was an increase in films that utilize music to convey the emotion and tone of a film's world.

Max Steiner was one of the early film composers to capitalize on this change the most. This transitional period exemplifies Steiner's progression towards Hollywood's classical style. Max Steiner spent some time of his early career as a film composer working for RKO Studios. During his time there, he went from using almost only diegetic music to using only borrowed tunes to establishing nondiegetic music as the industry standard.[3] Leading up to his breakthrough score of *King Kong* (1933), there are several scores preceding up to it that tested his limits of score length, style, and genre. Some of these are *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932), *Symphony of Six Million* (1932), and *Bird of Paradise* (1932). While these three films have been analyzed and treated in regard in the film community, *Roar of the Dragon* (1932) is a relatively overlooked entry that shares many similarities with *King Kong* and Steiner's other early lengthy scores. Because the original score of *Roar of the Dragon* has been lost, the work I did in 2020 to recreate the score through ear transcription allowed for further analysis and research. All of the transcription figures included below are from my ear transcription.

One of the Stepping Stones to King Kong

Music-to-Runtime Percentages

To give a more accurate measurement of how other films compare to *Roar of the Dragon* and *King Kong*, I compiled data from research done by the Harold B. Lee Library's Max Steiner Project to compare the duration of music in a film to its total runtime. I call this a music-to-runtime percentage. For example, *Roar of the Dragon* has a music-to-runtime percentage of about 37%, meaning that almost 26 minutes of its 69 minute runtime is filled with

[1] James Eugene Wierzbicki, *Film Music: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 118-22
[2] Slowik, Michael, *After the Silents: Hollywood Film Music in the Early Sound Era*, *1926-1934,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 181-82
[3] Wierbicki, 130

music. In contrast, *King Kong* has 78% of its runtime filled with music, setting it apart significantly from other films that preceded it.

From my compilation and comparison, I made some interesting findings. The Harold B. Lee Library had data on 53 of the films Steiner worked on from 1931 to 1933, but 36 of them did not have more than 20% in their music-to-runtime percentages. This data compliments the research done by Peter Slowik and James Wierzbicki mentioned previously about the decline of popular musicals and an increase of music in films that had less dialogue. None of the films in figure 1 below are musicals, but rather they are listed on IMDb's database as comedy, romance, crime, drama, adventure, music, action, horror, mystery, western, and sci-fi genre films.

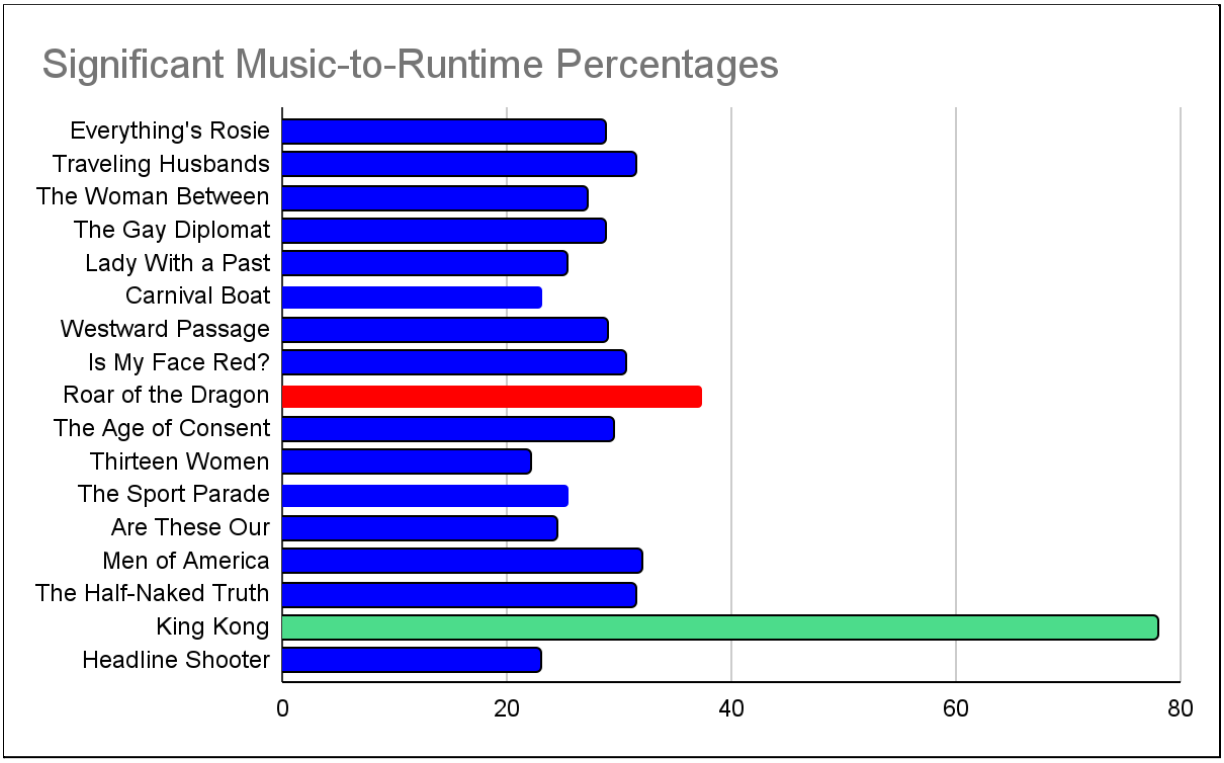

Figure 1: Significant music-to-runtime Percentages. The top 17 music-dense RKO Studios Steiner films for which the Harold B. Lee library had data for from 1931 to 1933, ranging from 20% to 78%, presented in chronological order by release date. I transcribed fourteen of the films on the list.

As mentioned previously, there are at least three more films that belong on this list: *The Most Dangerous Game*, *Symphony of Six Million*, and *Bird of Paradise*. The research team at the library simply has not yet gathered concrete data on these three, but they have been studied elsewhere due to their noteworthy scores. For example, *Symphony of Six Million* is noted for having one of Steiner's first instances of originally-composed underscoring. *The Most Dangerous Game* has significant thematic development and representation. *Bird of Paradise* has at least 210 pages of score on file at the library. Based on these accolades, it can be predicted that these three films would have music-to-runtime ratios somewhere between *Roar of the Dragon*'s

and *King Kong*'s. Nevertheless, *Roar of the Dragon* is valuable for illustrating more examples of Steiner's scoring techniques as he worked towards the breakthrough that was *King Kong*.

Staircase Descent

In *King Kong*, there is an instance where Steiner mickey-mouses the chief stepping down the stairs in sync with descending pizzicato gestures from the low strings. The tense tone of the scene is amplified by the addition of music of the same tempo. I have a unique perspective of this scene, because the BYU Philharmonic Orchestra played the original film score in sync with a live screening of the film. Steiner undoubtedly altered the tempo of that section of the score in order to match the inconsistent stepping tempo of the chief, since I can remember our director needing to rehearse those measures with click-track a few times.

In *Roar of the Dragon*, Steiner does something similar. The villain, the bandit Voronsky Tartar, furtively sneaks down some stairs (in contrast to the more dramatic entrance of the chief), and there is a pizzicato gesture from the low strings, shown below as figure 2. While the pizzicato gesture from the low strings somewhat matches the movement of Voronsky on screen, it is not executed as well as in *King Kong*. The pizzicati do not match as closely with the movement of the characters on screen. In this section of the score, the pizzicati serve more like a transitional passage sandwiched between passages of tense underscoring. The pizzicati are also simply not as important. The brass in the top staff are much more in the foreground as Voronsky's Theme (discussed later) is stated on the bottom staff in a warped, whole-tone sonority. Instead of connecting this outside of the film, I would rather draw a connection within the same score. A similar pulsing ostinato is heard from the very beginning of the film in the timpani. I would also argue against this being directly converted into *King Kong's* score, because the two instances in question serve different purposes and functions. But, perhaps Steiner adapted the technique from this scene later on to greater success.

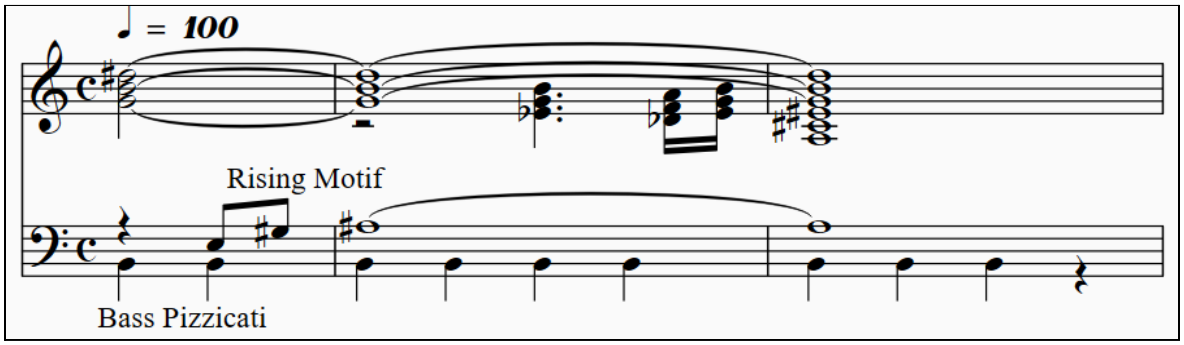

Figure 2: **Transcription of Voronsky's Theme (Stairs)**. The pizzicati discussed in this section are on the bass staff with stems down.

Setting

Where is Yolung?

The majority of the film takes place within the small Chinese village of Yolung. Yolung is most likely based on what is known today as Yilan, in China's Heilongjiang province. The real-world Yilan borders the Songhua River in northeast China. In Russian, the Songhua River is called the Sungari, which is shown on screen to be the name of the paddle-boat that gets

damaged by Voronsky's bandits during the opening sequence. The local radio announcer later mentions the bandit raids happening in the Sungari Valley. The Russian transliteration of Sungari also fits with main characters' (Voronsky's and Natascha's) assumed Russian origins.

This exotic setting is similar to other popular and complex Steiner scores released that same year. Both *It's a Dangerous Game* and *Bird of Paradise* take place in foreign lands accessed by the seas. In all three films, the leading characters become trapped in a dangerous situation, whether it's a mob of bandits threatening a hotel, being hunted like animals on an island, or the impending doom of natural disaster. Unlike these others, *Roar of the Dragon* takes place in a known location like Manchurian China instead of an unnamed, fictional island. These settings provided Steiner with leeway to have more expansive and dramatic scores. But, because of the Chinese setting, Steiner used several techniques throughout the score that were specifically associated with the country.

Pentatonic Scale

In the score to *Roar of the Dragon*, Steiner utilizes pentatonicism and planing to set up and compliment a more believable world. While planing is known to be associated with Claude Debussy and other impressionist composers after hearing it at the World Fairs, pentatonicism seems to naturally be inherent across the world. There are two common types of pentatonic scales, the major and the minor. As shown in figure 3 below, the two scales are based on the same set of pitches. The only major difference between the two is the starting pitch. As will be demonstrated later, most of the major motifs are derived from this set of pitches.

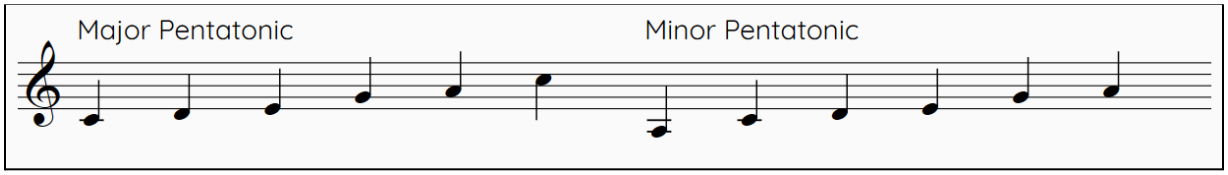

Figure 3: Major and Minor Pentatonic Scales

The major and minor pentatonic scales are associated with many cultures and are used in Western cultures to evoke exoticism and foreign settings. In a 1894 issue from *Music: A Monthly Magazine*, French ethnomusicologist Jean Moos lists these types of five-note scales coming from all over the globe: "They are in use among the peoples inhabiting China, Japan, the Malaysian Archipelago, New Guinea, New Caledonia, North and West Africa, Scotland, and among the North American Indians. Distinct traces of this scale form have been discovered, and in remote antiquity also among the Greeks, Assyrians, and Babylonians."[4] He also cites the pentatonic scale being common in the history of so many cultures because of the natural division of the octave and the overtone series instead of alternate theories consisting of one civilization being the sole source of the scale.

Planing

Planing or parallelism is perhaps associated the most with Claude Debussy, but it became a standard technique by the 1930's. Because of its transcendence of the music theory standards of

[4] Jean Moos, "Harmonic Nature of Musical Scales," Music 6, no. 1 (1894): 18-19

the common practice period, it brings a sense of exoticism. There are two main types of planing: diatonic and chromatic. Both types are represented here in figure 4, where Steiner compliments the on-screen object of a typewriter in the setting of a newspaper office with quick and percussive sounds from the upper strings. As in the first two measures, diatonic planing is when two or more voices move parallel to each other at the same interval quantity or spacing without deviating from what is in the key signature. In the third measure, however, Steiner switched to chromatic planing (or at least confirmed his intent to retain the same interval quality throughout) by having the lower voice altered to an F#.

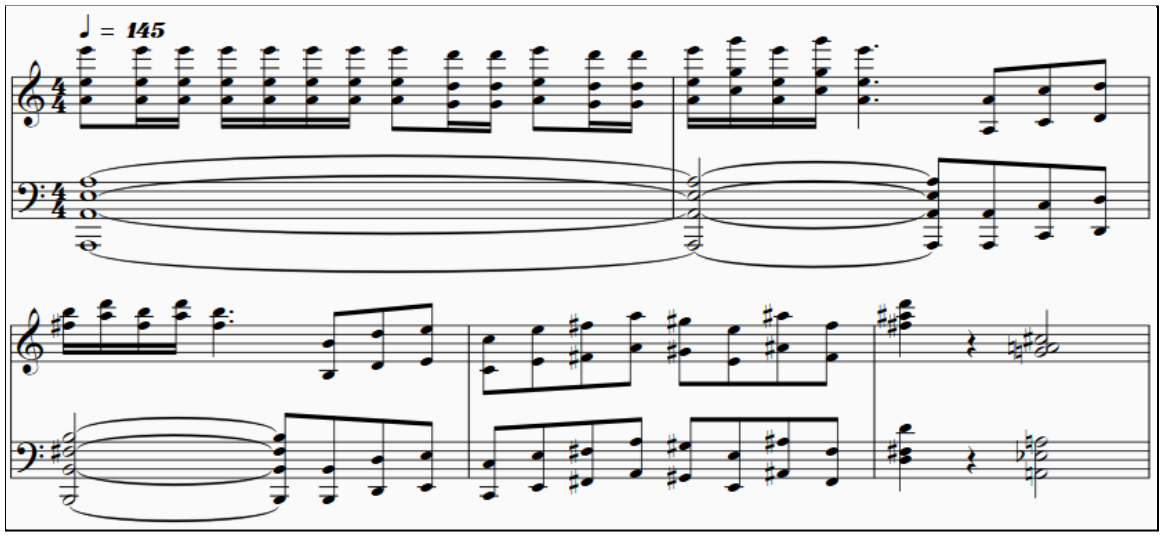

Figure 4: Transcription of Manchuria (Typewriter).

Phrygian Mode

The aforementioned opening sequence of *Roar of the Dragon* is excellent at establishing both the setting and the mood of the film. Steiner uses the phrygian mode extensively throughout the opening sequence. Unlike planing and pentatonicism, the phrygian mode is not as strongly connected to a specific culture or region, it certainly stood out from traditional harmony in order to evoke an exotic or foreign mood. When compared to the usual ionian or major mode, the phrygian mode starts on the third scale degree. One of the unique or different qualities to the phrygian mode is its initial half-step between the first two and the fifth and sixth scale degrees, as shown in figure 5.

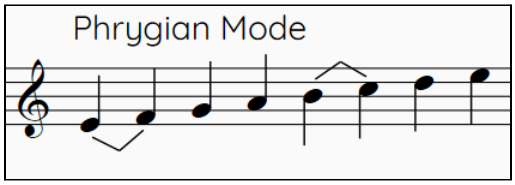

Figure 5: Phrygian Mode. Half-steps are marked with symbols between the notes.

The placement of the half-steps lends itself to being used complimentary with planing. For example, take this excerpt from an eerie variant of the Manchuria theme early on in the score, shown in figure 6. The bass staff establishes the tonal center on E, yet the key signature having no sharps leads to the conclusion that we are not in a standard major or minor mode. In

this instance we see both diatonic planing and phrygian mode simultaneously. As opposed to the standard major mode, the phrygian mode retains a perfect fifth interval from the subtonic or seventh scale degree, allowing for greater flexibility for planing surrounding the tonic.

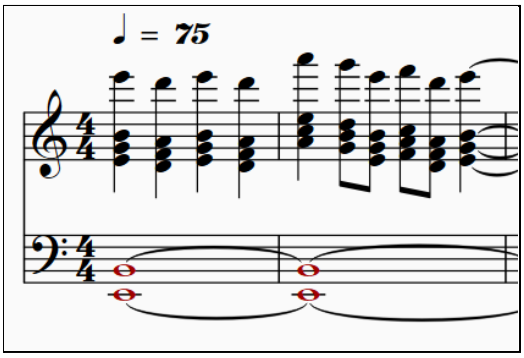

Figure 6: Transcription of Manchuria (Eerie).

The Manchuria Chord

One of the significant and unique features of *Roar of the Dragon's* score is the repeated use of a specific chord structure as a leitmotif. Because of its usage in early themes that establish the setting, I dubbed it the Manchuria Chord. Essentially, it is identified as a dominant seven flat-five or enharmonically equivalent to a German augmented sixth chord, but in function and composition, it sometimes does not function like either. This section will explore the four ways in which Steiner utilizes and transforms this chord throughout the film.

A fitting comparison could be drawn between Steiner's usage of the Manchuria chord and similar chords in earlier operatic scores. Perhaps the most famous of these is Richard Wagner's Tristan Chord in his *Tristan und Isolde*. The Tristan Chord is enharmonically equivalent to a half-diminished seventh chord, but its function is treated like its own leitmotif instead of a predominant harmony. Nearly forty years earlier, Carl Maria von Weber used the fully-diminished seventh chord to represent the treacherous and otherworldly Samiel in his *Der Freischütz*. Weber and Wagner both explored the dramatic possibilities of using chords in a non-traditional, novel way, and perhaps Steiner was following in this Austro-German tradition.

After the regular RKO radio tower introduction, the first thing that is presented to the viewer in the film is a pair of dramatic stingers. With gong, swooping trombones, shrieking string accents, and thundering bass drum, this introduction quickly establishes an exotic and ominous mood, shown in figure 7. The first stinger can be interpreted as a G major-seventh chord with an altered dominant, and the second is simply a D half-diminished-seventh chord in first inversion. The Manchuria Chord is presented here for the first time. Steiner most often uses the Manchuria Chord as a stinger. This same stinger is repeated after the first presentation of the villain with an on-screen wanted poster under two minutes later. Granted, there are bound to be other instances in which Steiner uses an altered dominant in this way.

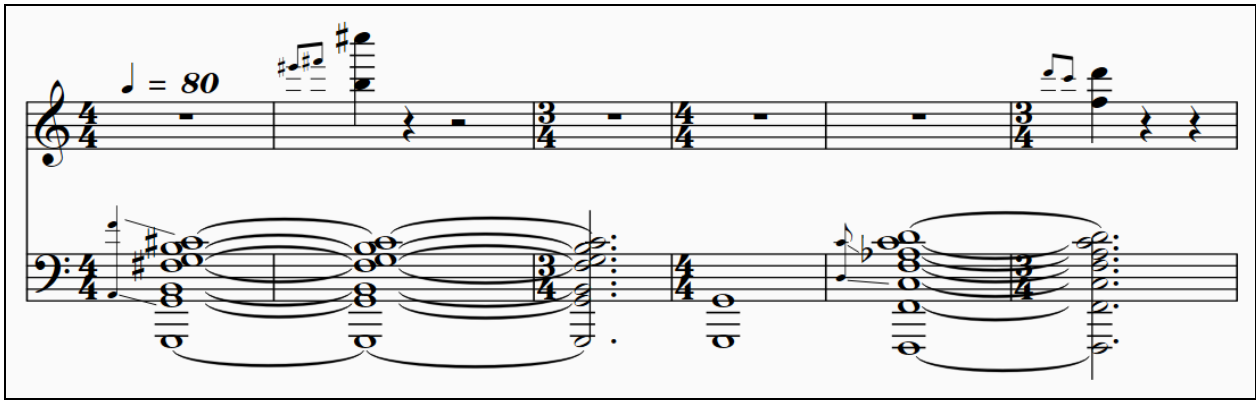

Figure 7: Transcription of Manchuria (Stinger). This is the first music that plays in the film.

The second occurrence of the stinger variant of the Manchuria Chord (mentioned above) is tied over to the next section of music. The Manchuria Chord is versatile enough to even be used as a drone beneath other music. Steiner utilizes this during the underscoring of a campfire scene, shown below as figure 8. The figuration of the viola voice over the drone in the top staff highlights pitches of the chord in a sinuous line. The drone resolves just like in the initial stinger cue. This drone is used again later under whole-tone woodwind music when Voronsky is having his injured ear cauterized.

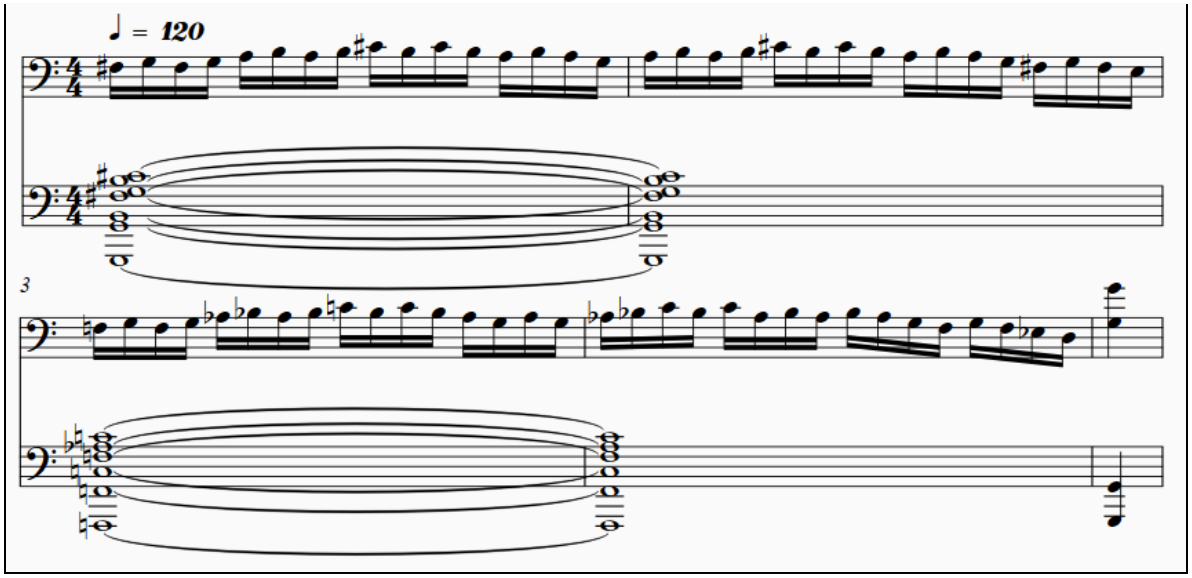

Figure 8: Transcription of The Campfire.

In its second chronological appearance, the Manchuria Chord acts more like a proper dominant harmony. Directly before the first statement of Voronsky's Theme, there is an instance of the Manchuria Chord being used like a dominant-functioning chord. The last measure of the typewriter variant of the Manchuria theme we saw before in figure 4 contains this moment. Unlike the stinger variant we saw before, its root is A, and the seventh is minor instead of major. Because of the resolution to four octaves of unison, tutti Ds (shown later as figure 13), we can interpret the chord as being dominant in function.

Twice in the film, the Manchuria Chord reappears as a traditional German augmented-sixth chord, resolving the augmented sixth outward by step and the others as usual by staying the same or down by a step. The inversion is also different from the other iterations so that the altered dominant of the seventh chord is in the bass. The first of these instances is shown below as figure 9. The other of the two is different, since the Manchuria Chord is present in the high strings whilst below it is a horn call in a whole-tone pitch set, much like what is shown in figure 2.

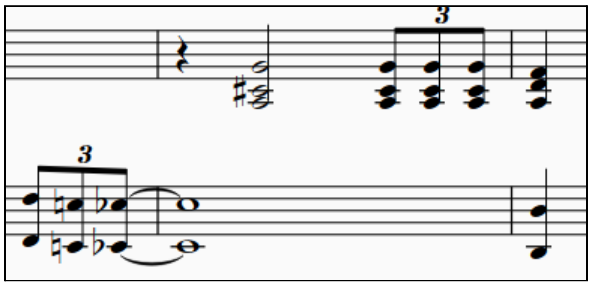

Figure 9: Transcription of Voronsky's Theme (Bold). This excerpt is the last full measure of a six-measure cue of the villain's theme. The falling motif of Voronsky's Theme discussed later is in the bass staff.

From the examples shown and discussed above, we can see that Steiner used the same uncommon chord at least seven times and in four different ways. Given the frequency and placement of this chord in important places throughout the film, it cannot simply be written off as a coincidence. This complex chord stands out from the planing and pentatonicism of the Manchuria themes. Since the original score is not preserved, we do not have sufficient evidence to show his intentions beyond that they are observed in the final product. Regardless of what his intent was, Steiner shows his skill and potential to use recurring musical ideas in creative ways.

Voronsky's Theme

Steiner and the Villainous

It seems that Steiner had some dark and suspenseful themes reserved for the villains in his early films, though he was not always consistent in developing or even including themes for the villain at this point in his career. One of his first projects at RKO Studios was orchestrating Harry Tierney's musical *Dixiana* (1930) to be adapted for film. He was responsible for the villain's music, featuring a rising horn call in a whole-tone pitch set. In *Bird of Paradise* and *The Most Dangerous Game* both, the villains each received themes that were developed and integrated throughout the film. *The Most Dangerous Game* is significant in the context of *Roar of the Dragon* because the villains are so similar. Both Count Zaroff and Voronsky Tartar are expatriate(perhaps define) Russians that exact fear on the main characters from afar. On top of this, their themes share some similarities as well. We can also consider the extensive attention given to the descending chromaticism of Kong's Theme in *King Kong*, which mirrors or imitates the falling chromatic motion of Voronsky's Theme (see figure 11). Steiner again shows his expertise and preference for creating exceptional and effective villainous themes in *Roar of the Dragon*.

The distribution of music with respect to the total runtime of the film has already been discussed, but the distribution of the thematic content through the score has not. Given the data that was gathered by the Harold B. Lee Library team, I determined that about 12% of the film score contains direct statements of Voronsky's Theme and 34% contains music based on the motifs in Voronsky's Theme. The blue sections of figure 10 show that nearly half of the film score is devoted to the villain. Let us also consider the observation James Wierzbicki made about the shift in film scores from using almost exclusively diegetic music and borrowed tunes to the opposite. This film shows the transition from all borrowed music to mostly original music. We will also discuss the possibilities of even the borrowed and diegetic music in the film being related to Steiener's original Voronsky's Theme.

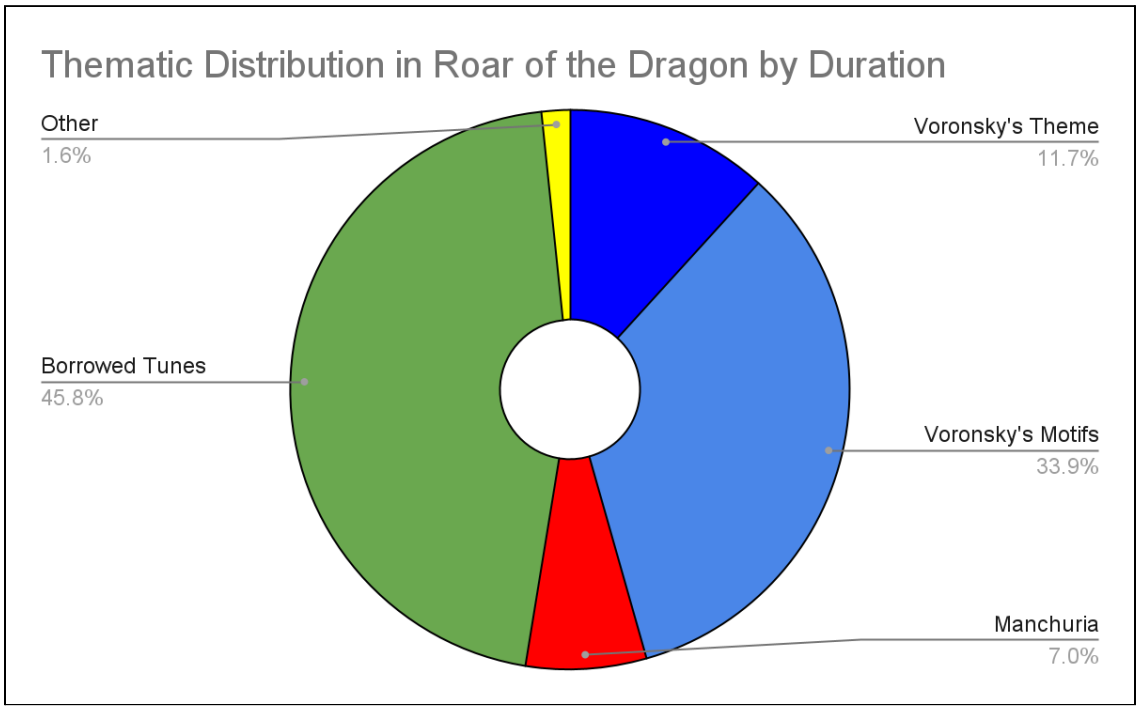

Figure 10: Thematic Distribution in *Roar of the Dragon* by Duration. The summations had some overlapping or double-counting with the addition of the section of Voronsky's Motifs, so the other sections should have higher percentages if considering only the total score duration.

Two Motifs

Voronsky's Theme consists of two motifs or ideas: one going up, and the other going down. A simplified reduction of Voronsky's Theme is shown below as figure 11. The rising motif consists of only three notes, and the falling motif has four notes. The rising motif fits naturally within the minor pentatonic scale, being its first three scale degrees (see figure 3). The falling motif consists of simple chromatic motion.

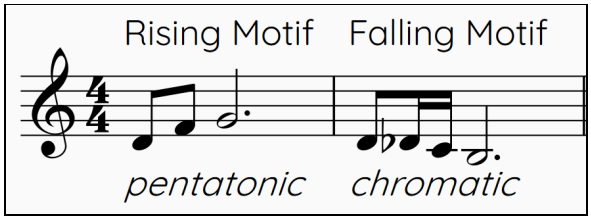

Figure 11: Rising and Falling Motifs of Voronky's Theme. This is a simplification taken from the initial statement of the theme (shown in figure 13).

Within every statement of Voronsky's Theme, pentatonic music is juxtaposed with chromaticism, perhaps emphasizing the conflict between the peaceful natives(this isn't meant to be narratives right..?) and the terror of Voronsky. The pentatonicism could represent the folk music of the Chinese natives, and the chromaticism could represent the imposing threat from a bandit militia descending from the north. We know from Steiner's *The Most Dangerous Game* that he attached the simple motif of a melodic minor third to the Russian expatriate Count Zaroff. An example of that theme can be found in *His Greatest Gamble* (1934), in which he self-borrowed from the earlier film.[5] Natascha's waltz from *Roar of the Dragon* also establishes Russian ties connected to falling chromaticism. It is shown below as figure 12. It can be no surprise then that Steiner chooses to represent the Russian bandit Voronsky Tartar with both of these elements.

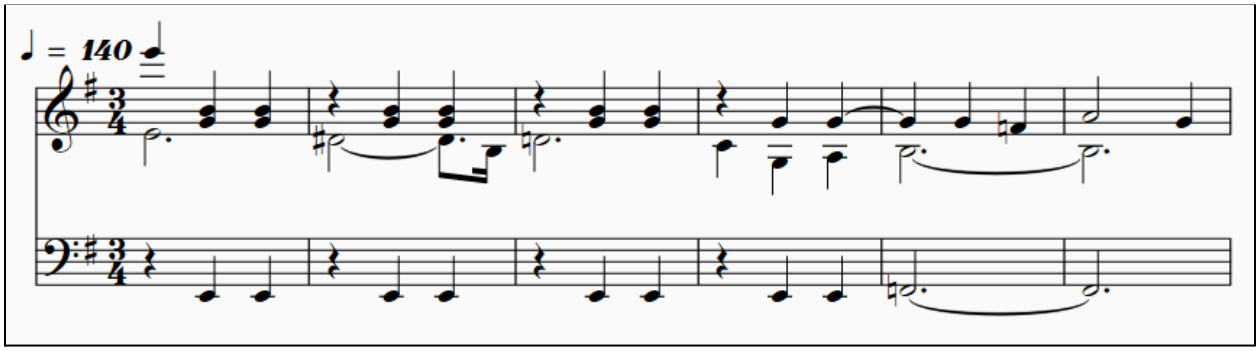

Figure 12: Transcription of Natascha's Waltz. The discussed chromatic motion is in the top staff with stems down.

Theme Variants

Voronsky's Theme is presented in its original form only once. The transcription of the initial statement is shown below as figure 13. Throughout the film, we hear 17 variants ranging simple rhythmic displacement and augmentation to complex time signatures and sequenced fragmentation. The rhythmic displacement was noticeable as I was transcribing the rising motif. I had a difficult time deciding if I was really hearing the start of the motif as the first beat of the measure or a pick-up gesture into the beginning of the bar, as is shown in figure 14. We can tell from this cue that the chromatic, falling motif was paired with planing as well as some rhythmic syncopation. Simple variants of the theme are common and frequent throughout the entire score.

[5] Jeff Lyon and Brent Yorgason, "His Greatest Gamble: Russian Waltz," Max Steiner Digital Thematic Catalog, Brigham Young University, accessed April 29, 2022, https://www.maxsteinerinstitute.org/instance.php?film_id=310&theme=Russian%20Waltz&cue=Gamble-9.

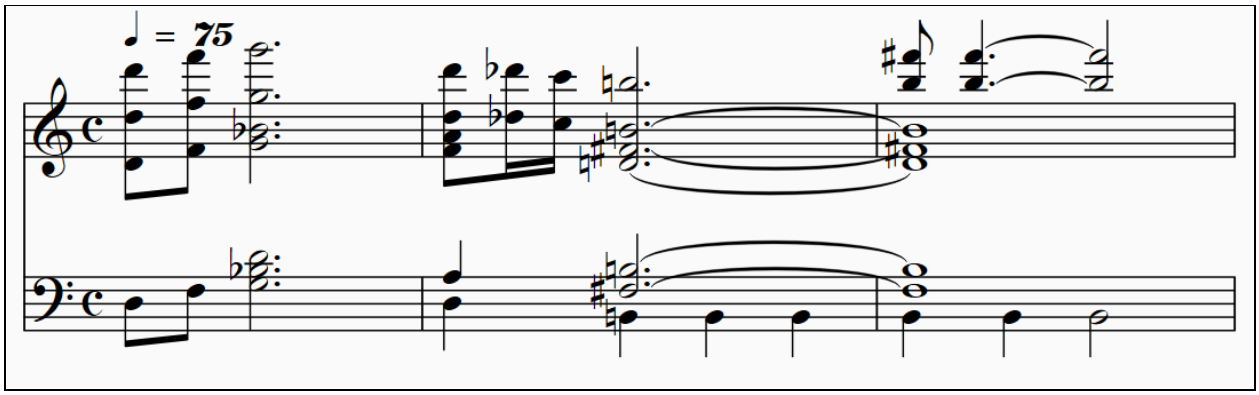

Figure 13: Transcription of Voronsky's Theme. This is the initial statement of the theme. The beginning of this excerpt is the resolution from the ending of the typewriter variant of the Manchuria theme (figure 4), in which the Manchuria Chord is treated as a dominant harmony.

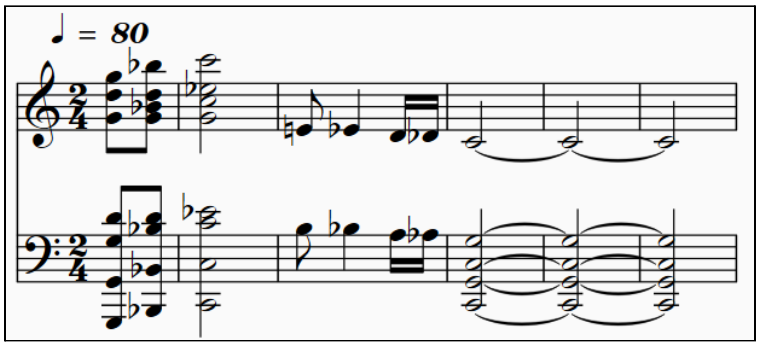

Figure 14: Transcription of Voronsky's Theme (third occurrence). Compare the rhythmic placement of the rising motif with figure 13.

The longest variant of Voronsky's Theme is called The Telegraph (shown below as figure 15). It exhibits many of the techniques used to create thematic variations throughout the film. This music plays as Voronsky's bandits pull down the telegraph lines with horses and ropes. It has rhythmic placement for the rising motif that matches the initial statement, but it adds new material to build a fleshed-out phrase structure. The extension of the rising motif sticks to the E minor pentatonic scale, supporting my earlier identification of the initial statement. After a repetition of the new rising motif phrase, Steiner inserts a repeated passage of quartal and quintal planing hearkening back to the Manchuria cues of the opening sequence (see figure 6). Starting at measure seven, Steiner extends the falling chromatic motif over two measures and nine half steps. We will see Steiner extending this downward chromatic motion even further in the second half of the film. He decorates the downward scale with sixteenth notes from the brass in the treble staff, but it is essentially just a falling chromatic scale. On screen, this falling gesture is matched with the collapse of the telegraph pole, which is an example of mickey-mousing. Landing at the bottom of the scale, Steiner again goes back to the rising motif, but he combines it with the falling chromatic motif at the same time. This fragmentation is repeated at a rhythmic tala or cycle downwards a half-step each time. During these measures, the tempo accelerates for a transition back into the pentatonic planing material of the Manchuria thematic material.

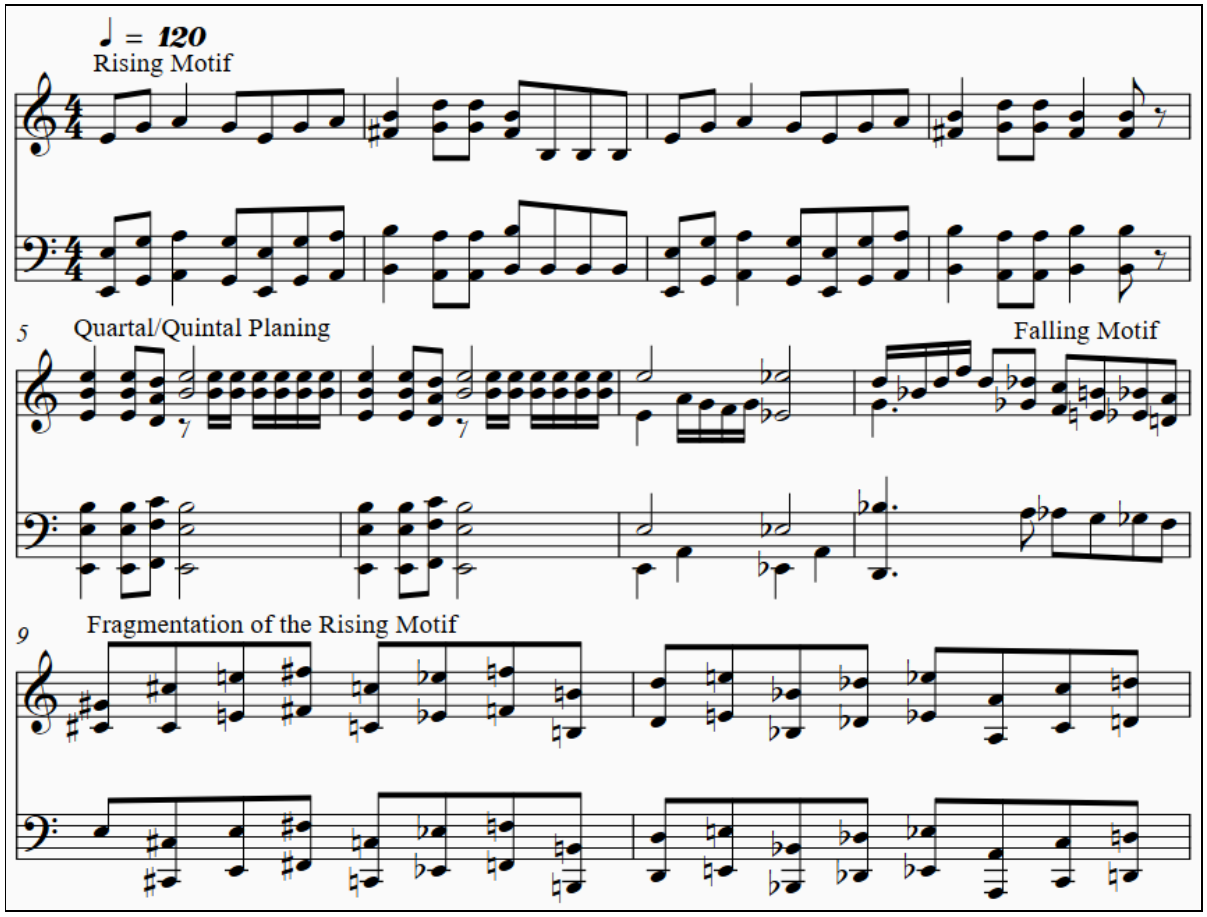

Figure 15: Transcription of The Telegraph. The variant continues for another three measures after what is pictured, but it breaks the pattern shown in the last system before transitioning into the next idea.

The most complex thematic variant of Voronsky's Theme is the running variant. This music plays in the second half of the film when Voronsky's bandits are running up to infiltrate the walled hotel to recover Natascha and get revenge on Captain Carson (the main characters). The short, percussive sounds from the orchestra accompany the running and pounding on the gate of the hotel. The first section of this variant (shown below as figure 16) features complex and changing meters. I notated the starting time signature with a 3+3+2 in the numerator in order to show the uncommon and complex division of a normal 8/8 meter, but it is likely that Steiner used a normal 8/8 or even 4/4 time signature.

The rising motif is extended by adding leaps of perfect fifths and fourths, complimenting the simple harmonic content established in the first half of the film. It is harmonized by a triad of diatonic planing, which is quickly traded for chromatic planing that continues for the rest of the segment. Although, this could be considered chromatic planing for the entirety of the variant, since it is likely that Steiner did not use a key signature for this section. There is some mickey-mousing in measure four in which the on-screen bandit's pounding on the front gate of the hotel is precisely matched with the staccato notes from the strings. Perhaps Steiner left open

sonorities (without a major or minor third) in the second halves of each system in order for the audience to be able to hear the pounding better.

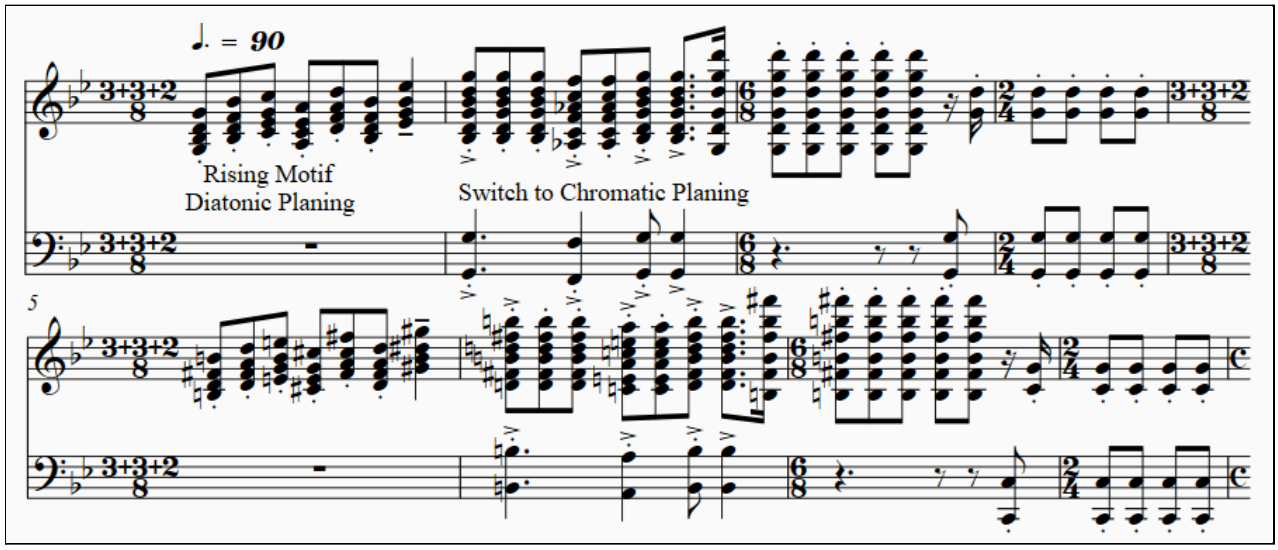

Figure 16: Transcription of Voronsky's Theme (Running). This is only the first half of the thematic variant. The second half is shown below as figure 17.

The second half of this theme variant further exemplifies Steiner's complex variation of simple motifs. The rising motif is present, if only in basic concept, in the octaves of the bass staff in measures nine and eleven. The disjunct, leaping motion by fourths and fifths is most like the extension shown in the first system of the Typewriter (figure 15). The falling motif is present in the tenth and twelfth measures, but in a warped whole-tone sonority. It is surprising and impressive to see what Steiner was able to do with so little.

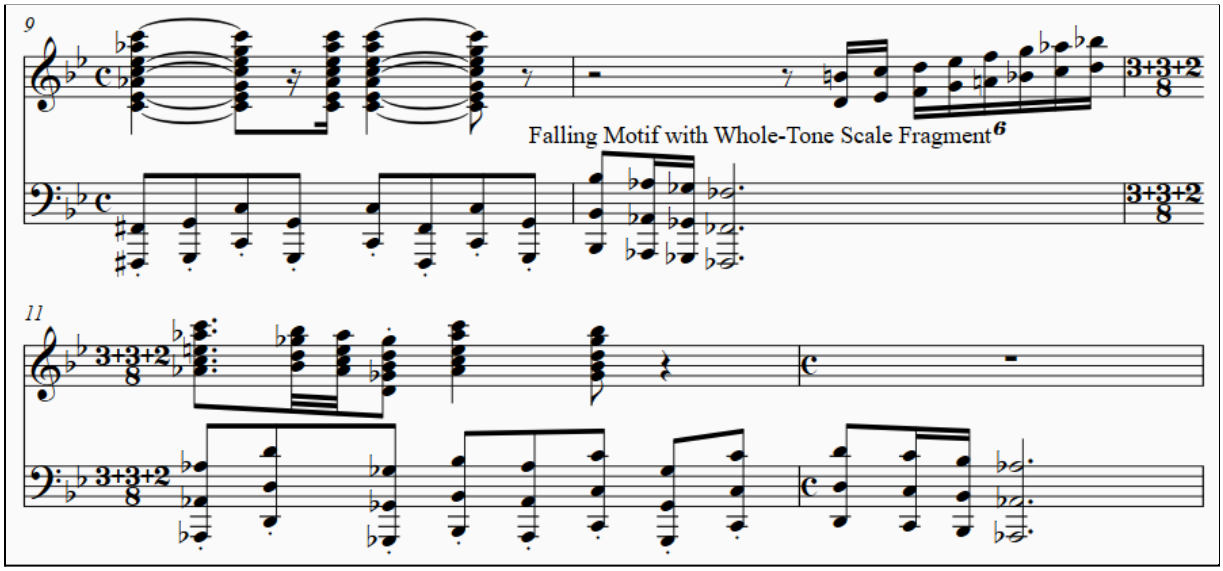

Figure 17: Transcription of Voronsky's Theme (Running). This is the continuation of the music shown in figure 16.

Motivic Integration

In addition to the outright thematic variations of Voronsky's Theme we discussed, Steiner integrated the motifs and ideas of Voronsky's Theme into other themes throughout the film. These motivic integrations are subtle and probably not easy to notice on the first listen. I will discuss the motivic integration of Voronsky's Theme into the underscoring called Suspense in Steiner's cue sheet, the Heartache theme, and perhaps even a borrowed tune written by Irving Berlin.

During the tense scenes when the civilians and tourists are facing the threat of infiltration by Voronsky's band, the underscoring named Suspense is heard. It is repeated three times, becoming increasingly complex and restless as the conflict mounts. During the last instance of this theme (shown below as figure 18), Voronsky's theme has infiltrated the music, mirroring the events portrayed on screen. The slowly advancing theme resolves in a downward planing motion reminiscent of the falling, chromatic motif of Voronsky's Theme. As Steiner again does in the running variant of Voronsky's Theme, he swaps a descending chromatic gesture for a whole-tone gesture of the same direction (see figure 17). Perhaps this integration of Voronsky's falling motif is an implicit explanation that the tense mood of the film is because of the bandit.

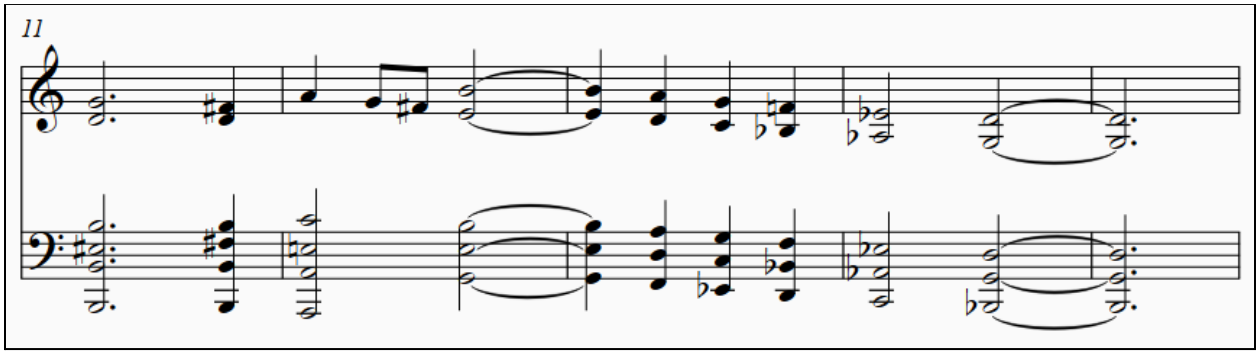

Figure 18: Transcription of Suspense (Voronsky's Theme). This excerpt is the last five measures of the section. The tempo is 95 beats per minute assigned to the quarter-note.

After Voronsky throws a knife in Busby's (a supporting character to Captain Carson) back, we hear the Heartache theme as he collapses, shown as figure 19 below. At this point, Voronsky has been killed at the cost of the supporting character being fatally wounded, so it should be no surprise that his theme would appear. Steiner chose the poignant key of C# minor or Db Minor for this tragic scene. We can see why Steiner would choose to name this section Heartache from the rhythm of the French horn in the top voice of the bass staff. The syncopation mimics the characteristics of a heartbeat.

The somber, slow melody played by the strings is similar to the rhythm of the Suspense themes heard before (see measure 11 of figure 18 above). At the height of the first phrase (measures four and five), the descending line is the same as the descending chromatic gesture of Voronsky's Theme: four descending chromatic notes in a line (see figure 11). Perhaps the presence of the falling motif is the bandit getting his last laugh. Another descending, four-note, chromatic gesture is heard directly following the previous one in measures six and seven in the

top voice. This was one of the less subtle instances of motivic integration as I was listening and transcribing the score, since the descending chromatic lines are repeated in the top voice.

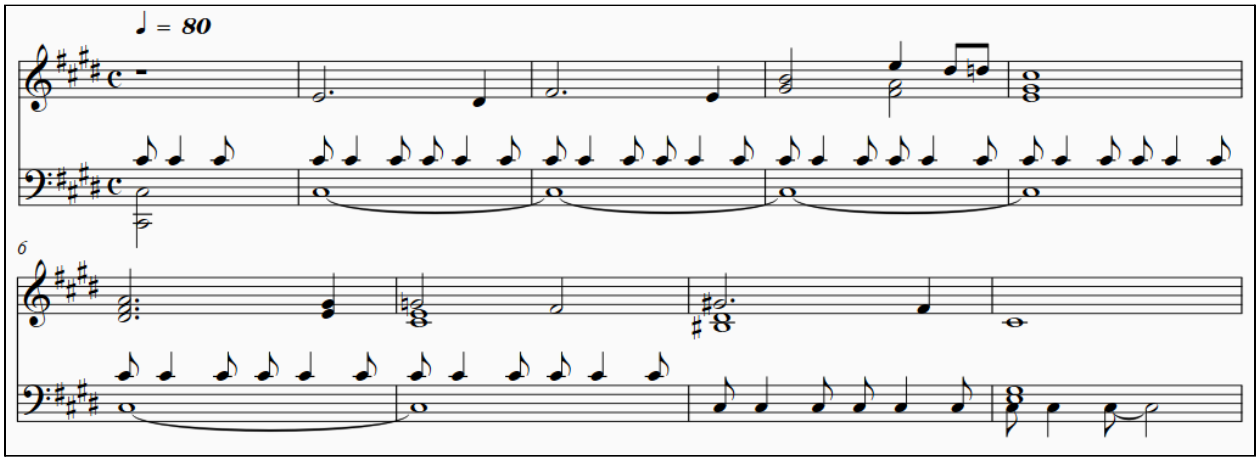

Figure 19: Transcription of Heartache.

In contrast, perhaps one the most subtle integrations of the rising, pentatonic motif is found as Captain Carson escapes to the Sungari with Busby on his back. A heroic brass chorale is sounded in acknowledgement of the beginning of the resolution and the dissipation of the major conflict. Hidden within the inner voices is the rising motif. You can see it in the second measure of figure 20 below. I have supplied a guiding line in the figure to show the movement between the G, Bb, and C on the bass clef staff. This last variant of Voronsky's theme is significant because of the three-note motif being used with major quality harmonies. It could be representing the people's triumph over Voronsky, giving a reason why the motifs are no longer prominently heard for the rest of the film after this point.

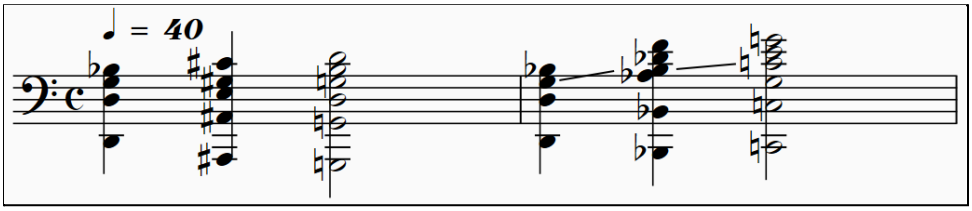

Figure 20: Transcription of Voronsky's Theme (Triumphal).

A curious finding I made after transcribing all of the theme variants and motivic integrations of Voronsky's Theme was that one of the major borrowed tunes shares many traits with the theme. "Always," by Irving Berlin (shown below as figure 21), is a popular tune that Steiner borrowed to use in his film. This was the standard for film music at the time, with many films having only borrowed tunes from sound libraries for their scores. And, as we can see from the thematic distribution chart in figure 10, almost half of the film score consists of borrowed tunes by duration. Granted, most of this weight is pulled from a five-minute organ solo underneath a conversation between Captain Carson and Natascha. But, with so many borrowed tunes, it is no surprise that they have repeated usage and purpose. "Always" is used as a love theme to represent the relationship between Busby and Hortense. It is first established as such when they sit in the hotel lobby, huddled together to avoid potential gunfire through the

windows. Busby turns on the radio and somehow hears music being played by an American dance band.

Steiner takes the theme into his own hands several times throughout the film to accompany tragic moments involving the couple. For example, the radio orchestra transitions into extra-diegetic music in reaction to when Hortense is shot through a window by a spy for Voronsky. We began hearing the music when Busby turned on the radio, but it changed to follow the situation seamlessly. The orchestra transitions into a sappy cello solo of "Always" accompanied by high tremolos from the high strings as Busby holds a dying Hortense in his arms. It is heard a second time in a minor mode when Busby musters up his courage to face Voronsky's invading force and looks at Hortense's makeshift grave. The theme makes a final resurgence as Busby is dying aboard the Sungari after being carried to safety by Captain Carson. From the establishment of the tune as their love theme and his spoken lines, we know that Busby is thinking of Hortense as he is dying without him overtly saying it.

As I alluded to before, Berlin's "Always" shares striking similarities to Voronsky's Theme. In figure 21, I supplied brackets around important parts of the theme. The first bracket is underneath three eighth-notes in an ascending, pentatonic pattern. While they may seem to be different in the context of F major, these three notes are exactly the same pitches as the rising motif from the very first statement of Voronsky's Theme (see figures 11 & 13). Granted, they fall on weak beats instead of strong downbeats, but they are still present. The second bracket is under a falling, glissando gesture at the end of the first phrase in Berlin's tune. While the gesture does not seem related to the falling chromaticism, the interval between the two ends of the glissando is the same as the distance between the four descending chromatic notes: a minor third.

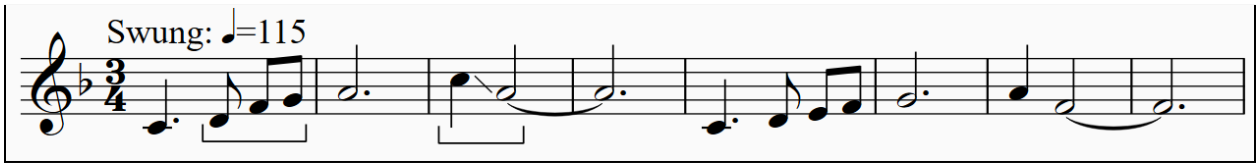

Figure 21: Transcription of "Always." This was borrowed from a popular tune by Irving Berlin.

There are similarities between the two themes, but what does it mean about the creation of *Roar of the Dragon's* score? Since Berlin's tune had been around for years before Steiner started working on the film, if they are connected or related, Steiner's theme must have come after. We do not know how much Steiner even had a say over which tunes go in the film. But, if he did choose to have "Always" in the score, is it possible that he worked half of the score's music around this existing one? It is at least a major cousin of Voronsky's Theme, regardless of Steiner's intentions. It mirrors Voronsky's Theme and is somewhat of a foil.

In conclusion, we have been able to establish *Roar of the Dragon* as an important work in Steiner's transitional period before *King Kong's* success. While it does not necessarily have the most amount of music leading up to *King Kong*, it certainly showcases Steiner's skills in thematic variation and motivic integration with very simple music. Steiner utilizes existing connections between his setting and musical techniques in order to further establish the diegesis

or narrative of the film. His score exhibits a kind of folky impressionism, rife with modal harmonies, whole-tone harmonies, and planing. The score serves as an effective device to communicate the mood. Because of the recreation of the score, others can soon study and research the film further.

Bibliography

Lyon, Jeff and Brent Yorgason. “His Greatest Gamble: Russian Waltz,” Max Steiner Digital Thematic Catalog, Brigham Young University, accessed April 29, 2022, https://www.maxsteinerinstitute.org/instance.php?film_id=310&theme=Russian%20Waltz&cue=Gamble-9.

Moos, Jean. “Harmonic Nature of Musical Scales.” *Music* 6, no. 1 (1894): 18-19

Slowik, Michael. *After the silents: Hollywood film music in the early sound era, 1926-1934*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

Wierzbicki, James Eugene. *Film Music: A History*. New York: Routledge, 2009.