

13. The Finishing Touches



Murray Spivack, RKO's thirty-one year old director of sound effects, had prepared on July 19, 1932, a cost estimate for his department's contributions to Production 601, which had just been entitled *Kong*. With only a hazy idea of how some of the effects could be accomplished (the "talkie" was not having previously brought forth anything comparable), Spivack studied the script and itemized the unusual sounds he was expected to provide. His notes reveal a great deal about the concept of the film at that stage of production.*

All sound effects were added after filming was completed, including Fay Wray's celebrated screams, which were recorded in one session and dubbed in where they were needed.

"*Kong* presented many problems," Spivack says. "I worked on it for about nine months and we had to come up with a lot of new ideas. Sound equipment was very limited then, although we no longer had to record music, effects and dialogue all at the same time the way we did a couple of years earlier."

In his native New York City Spivack had been a percussionist in a symphonic orchestra that specialized in recording music for silent pictures. The group was made up of first-chair musicians from the best symphony orchestras in the East

and its conductors included Hugo Riesenfeld, Erno Rapée, David Mendoza and Josiah Zuro. Spivack says this all-star orchestra had one flaw:

"In the strings we had sixteen concert masters and this caused us a lot of trouble because they were individuals rather than ensemble players." Spivack's recognition of the desirability of proper ensemble work makes his soundtracks distinctive. To date his work has earned for various studios eight "Oscars" and fourteen Academy nominations.

He entered the infant sound-film recording field in New York and in 1929 came to Los Angeles as recording technician and assistant musical director for Film Booking Offices (FBO Pictures), which shortly after became RKO-Radio. The studio used the Richard Dix film *Seven Keys to Baldpate* as a testing ground for sound effects and Spivack created wind and thunder effects that were considered sensational at the time.

The creation of a voice for Kong was a unique task because nothing like it had been attempted before. The sound department had amassed a library of sounds made by living animals comprising about 500,000 feet of roars, barks, growls, snarls and hisses. Spivack knew that any of these sounds would be too familiar as well as too brief for a monster of Kong's proportions. Even an elephant's roar lasts only eight or nine seconds,

* See Appendix 9.

whereas Kong was shown silently roaring for as long as thirty seconds at a time.

"I went to the Selig Zoo and arranged to record some lion and tiger roars at feeding time," Spivack recalls. "The handlers would make gestures as though they were going to take the food away from them and we got some pretty wild sounds. Then I took some of these roars back to the studio and put them together and played them backward. I slowed them down, sort of like playing a 78 r.p.m. record at 33, until the tone was lowered one octave, then I re-recorded it. From this we took the peaks and pieced them together. We had to put several of these together in turn to sustain the sound until Kong shut his mouth, because Kong's roars were many times longer than those of any living animal. Then we added a sound tail to the end so it would die down naturally instead of coming to an abrupt stop. That's how I conceived the roar of Kong."

There was no precedent to guide the sounds made by Kong when he tried to express his affection for Fay Wray. For these scenes the voice of Kong was that of Spivack, who uttered low, guttural grunts of varying duration into a megaphone. By slowing the track and re-recording it, he achieved a depth of tone suitable for a simian seven times as tall as a living gorilla.

"I wrote to the curator at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago and asked for advice regarding the voices of dinosaurs," Spivack says. "When the reply came I had to translate his scientific language into English. It seemed to be saying, 'You fool! Those animals didn't have vocal chords and therefore they didn't have voices.' Well, I couldn't tell that to Mr. Cooper. We couldn't show a fifty-foot-long monster and not have it roar—it would be laughed off the screen!"

Dr. J. W. Lytle, curator of vertebrate paleontology at the Los Angeles County Museum, told him that various degrees of hissing sounds would be appropriate for the dinosaurs. Because the brontosaurus was amphibious, Spivack added some croaking sounds to the reptilian hisses of the gigantic sauropod.

"For the screeches of the tyrannosaurus I made most of the sounds with my mouth and then slowed the track down," Spivack says. "Most of the animal cries were made this way. The pterodactyl squawks were those of some bird—I forget

which kind—which were slowed 'way down in depth. Almost all of our animal sounds were slowed down because we wanted a 'big' sound."

The heavy breathing of the monsters was sometimes simulated by use of a bellows. Compressed air and unusual noises such as a panther's purr were combined in certain instances with the voice of Spivack or of his assistant, Walter G. Elliott. The bellowing of the triceratops was simulated by grunting and growling through a double gourd. The death-rattle of the dying tyrannosaurus was recorded as Elliott, with a mouthful of water, gurgled through a megaphone.

"The sound of Kong beating his breast proved to be one of our most difficult problems," Spivack says. "I simulated that by hitting Elliott on the chest with a tympanum stick while an assistant held a microphone to Elliott's back. Kong's footfalls were made by walking plumber's friends covered with sponge rubber across gravel and recording the sound with plenty of bass.

"We had trouble with gunshots in those days because the loud noise would sort of 'paralyze' the mike. A lot of sound men had to simulate them with slapsticks. I discovered I could record real shots by using a .22 bullet and removing half of the powder. In *Kong*, the rifle shots are real."

"When we were doing the train sequence I had such a confusion of sounds the noise was terrible. When Cooper saw it he said, 'Murray, there's a car going by; he should honk his horn.' We only had three tracks at the studio then—one for dialogue, one for music and one for effects—which is pretty primitive when you consider that I had 77 channels in the parade sequence of *Helios*. Really! Our equipment was so limited that if we needed additional sounds we had to go through another generation of recording. I told him that would lower the quality of the recording. He got mad. I said, 'Be sensible, Merian; you couldn't hear a car horn in all that noise if we did it.' He insisted he wanted it. Pretty soon we were shouting at each other, and right in the worst part of it I started to laugh. He looked surprised and asked, 'What are you laughing at?' I told him, 'Do you know that when you get mad your whole head turns a bright red?' He started laughing then and finally he said, 'Okay, have it your way and left.'"

Working closely with the musical director



Marching through the native village

Spivack developed an unusual "first" for *Kong*: the harmonising of sound effects with music. After the score had been prepared the sound effects were altered in pitch to conform to the music. This unprecedented technique made bearable the almost uninterrupted cacophony of roars, shrieks, crashes and thunderous music heard during the last two-thirds of the movie. Murray Spivack spared millions of moviegoers from headaches when he conceived this idea.

The head of RKO's music department was an energetic little Austrian whose father and grandfather were the biggest impresarios in Vienna. Richard Strauss was his godfather and his youth was spent in the company of Jacques Offenbach, Johann Strauss and Gustav Mahler. A musical career was inevitable for a man with such a heritage and a name like Maximilian Raoul Walter Steiner.

The musical world took note of Max Steiner

when, at the age of fifteen, he won the Emperor's Gold Medal for completing the four-year course of study at the Imperial Academy of Music in one year. The following year he was conducting "The Beautiful Greek Girl," an operetta composed by himself, which ran for a year at Vienna's Orpheum Theatre. Several of his compositions were published and a symphonic suite was performed by the Vienna Philharmonic. In 1906, at the age of eighteen, he went to England, where he established himself as a composer, concert pianist and conductor of the 110-man orchestra of the London Opera House.

In 1914, he was declared an enemy alien and subject to deportation. Through the intervention of the Duke of Westminster he was able to go to America. He practically starved during his first weeks in New York City, but in a surprisingly short time he rose from vaudeville pianist to orchestrator and conductor for the chain of theatres owned by William Fox. During the next fourteen

years he orchestrated and conducted for the "Ziegfeld Follies," "George White's Scandals," and shows by Victor Herbert, Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Harry Tierney and Vincent Youmans.

While he was conducting Jack Donohue's "Sons O' Guns" in Boston, Steiner was approached by William LeBaron, then production chief of RKO, who wanted him to come to work at the studio at \$450 per week. Steiner arrived at RKO in 1929 and orchestrated Tierney's music for the film version of *Rio Rita* and another musical, *Dixiana*.

Studios at that time were steering away from background music because of recording problems and a prevailing theory that dramatic scoring was a *passé* hangover from non-dialogue films. Nevertheless, when the spectacular *Cimarron* was filmed, LeBaron decided an impressive score was needed. W. Franke Harling was supposed to do the music, but was occupied at Paramount and couldn't accept. Steiner, as musical director, was instructed to hire a "name" composer for the film, which was scheduled to open in four weeks. Accordingly, he approached George Gershwin, Leopold Stokowski and Percy Grainger, all of whom asked for a year's time and from \$250,000 to \$350,000 to do the job. Steiner composed the music eventually and his work was so highly praised by reviewers that he was given a raise of \$50-per-week.

By 1932 Steiner made innovations in film scoring that gave RKO's soundtracks a distinctive sound. He liked to use leit-motifs for the major characters somewhat in the manner of Wagnerian opera. His most unusual practice was the accenting and enhancing of film visuals with music cues, underscoring each bit of action instead of providing merely an overall mood for scenes or sequences. While there are many who express distaste for this approach (known derisively as "mickey-mousing"), several important films would doubtless have been far less impressive without the dramatic emphasis provided by Steiner's intricately conceived scores.

RKO President B. B. Kahane had his doubts about *Kong* and was sceptical that the public would accept an animated ape as a film hero. "We've spent so much money in the year-and-a-half we've worked on it, so please don't spend any additional money on music," he told Steiner, instructing him to put together some music from existing tracks. Steiner was disappointed, because

he saw tremendous musical possibilities in *Kong*. Cooper, realising that proper scoring would lend a greater semblance of life to the animation, told Steiner to get an original score under way. "Don't worry about the cost because I'll pay for the orchestra or any extra charges," Cooper said. Steiner set to work with enthusiasm and the close collaboration of Cooper and Spivack.

"Maxie, that music isn't right for *Kong*," Cooper said when he heard part of the proposed music. "It sounds too much like something out of a Broadway stage show." Steiner, appalled, replied that he didn't understand what Cooper wanted. "I mean that we can't use that damned stage music for this picture," Cooper said. "This is a movie. Now I don't know anything about music, but I do know we need movie music, not stage music. That stuff might be all right for those pictures everybody's making where the camera's in an icebox and everybody is standing around in those little sets, but this picture is made out in the open with the camera moving."

It was true that Cooper knew what he wanted and he spent many hours consulting with the composer during the eight weeks the score was being written. Steiner has said, "I write what I see on the screen," and he became excited by what he saw in *Kong*. He timed each scene with a stop watch so that his musical phrases would complement each nuance of action. He worked day and night, until he was near collapse. Finally, he conducted an eighty-man orchestra for the music track, which was recorded by Spivack. The music added \$50,000 to the budget, and a good investment it was, for no wedding of music, sound effects and pictures has ever produced a more winning offspring. Cooper arranged a bonus for Steiner, stating that 25 percent of the effectiveness of the film could be credited to the music.

It is difficult to imagine such an impassioned, often dissonant, hair-raising score coming from the genial composer of "The Beautiful Girl." Steiner called it one of his few "modernistic" scores and said that it "worried" some of his friends in Vienna and America but won him admirers in France and Russia.

The music is built largely upon three motifs. "King Kong," a descending three-note figure, is the leitmotif of the title character; "Jungle Dance," which symbolises the natives of the

and "Stolen Love," a plaintive melody used to suggest the "beauty and the beast" longed for Ann. These themes are paraphrased and deployed throughout the film in numerous variations. Among other compositions are "The Forgotten Island," "A Boat in the Fog" and "Sea at Night," all of which have about them a suggestion of Debussy tone poems. "The Sailors," introduced as a march as the men plod through the jungle, is developed as exciting chase music during several episodes. "Aboriginal Sacrifice Dance," scored for orchestra and male chorus, is heard during the first native ceremony. Kong's arrival on Broadway is heralded by the "King Kong March," which is done in the style of a theatrical overture.

Music is present through most of the film, the exceptions being during the New York and shipboard scenes prior to the arrival at the island, the fight with the Tyrannosaurus (which is so filled with furious sounds as to make music superfluous) and the battle with the airplanes.

The earnestness of Steiner is transmitted to the subconsciousness of the viewer, contributing immeasurably to the suspension of audience disbelief in an entirely fantastic tale. The precise conformity of the music to the flow of images results in a unity seldom achieved in the combining of visual and sound arts. The growing love of Ann and Jack is emphasised by waltz-like string passages in a lush Romantic style, the mystery of an uncharted sea by softly ominous chords with the disturbing rhythm of distant drums in the background, the frantic terror of pursuit by cyclopean giants by *scherzi* calculated to accelerate the beating of one's heart. Music accompanying the native ceremonies conveys the frenzy of barbaric religious passion.

It is in the delineation of the complex emotions and personality of Kong, himself, that the music achieves its greatest expressiveness. His savage brutality is accented by brassy, dissonant variations on the King Kong theme. The "Stolen Love" motif subtly underlines the tragic side of his nature, portraying his loneliness and the painful bewilderment inherent in unrequited love. This theme is developed to its apogee of power and finally resolved in the finale as Kong mutely bids Ann farewell and gives himself up to the sacrifice that was, from the beginning, inevitable.

It would be difficult to overestimate Steiner's share in creating a classic tragic figure from what could have been just another monster.

Four selections were published as sheet music by Sam Fox Music Company: "The Forgotten Island," "A Boat in the Fog," "Aboriginal Sacrifice Dance" and "King Kong March." A concert suite comprising the main themes was published and recorded much later.

All this music proved extremely durable and was used by Steiner's successors at RKO—Roy Webb, Nathaniel Shilkret and Constantine Bakaleinikoff—for dozens of subsequent features and innumerable editions of *RKO-Pathe News*. Among the soundtracks containing sizeable chunks of the Kong music are *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Muss 'Em Up*, *We're Only Human*, *Back to Bataan*, and *Michael Strogoff*. Steiner, himself, reprised portions of this material in several of his much later works for Warner Brothers. "A Boat in the Fog" builds suspense as admirably for Bette Davis in *A Stolen Life* as it did for the passengers on the "S. S. Venture" fourteen years earlier. Shortly before his death, in 1972, Steiner said that *King Kong* was one of his personal favourites.

The late Oscar Levant, who was employed by RKO at the time *King Kong* was produced, said of this score:

"Full of weird chords, strident background noises, rumblings and heavings, it was one of the most enthusiastically written scores ever to be composed in Hollywood. Indeed, it was always my feeling that it should have been advertised as a concert of Steiner's music with accompanying pictures on the screen."

By March 1933, *King Kong* was ready to be shown to the exhibitors. Insiders predicted it would be a sensation and even the die-hard dissenters in New York gave in, authorising preparation of the biggest selling campaign in the studio's history. A large, garishly coloured press book contained a message to exhibitors that is worthy of preservation:

"Into a show-world grown weary of namby pamby plots stalks the gigantic figure of KONG! The very name conjures up visions of a realm crowded with strange sights! If ever there was a show sired by the spirit of P. T. Barnum it's this Hippodrome of thrills and daring adventure

staged in the Arena of Earth's creation. KING KONG comes like a gift from a showman's heaven . . . a picture . . . big . . . original . . . startling . . . to blast away with its dramatic dynamite the lethargy that now holds show business in its grip! For the first time in months comes a SHOW-MAN'S PICTURE . . ."

The national magazine ads, featuring Mario Larrinaga's drawing of the Empire State Building climax, used only one line: THE PICTURE DESTINED TO STARTLE THE WORLD!

S. L. "Roxy" Rothafel, impresario of New York's two largest theatres, Radio City Music Hall and the New Roxy, knew an audience-grabber when he saw it. Against the advice of his associates he decided on an unprecedented plan: he would open the film at both houses (total seating, ten thousand) on the same day. A large newspaper ad heralded the event on opening day, March 2, and included a description of the accompanying stage presentations:

"JUNGLE RHYTHMS—brilliant musical production. Entire singing and dancing ensemble of Music Hall and New Roxy—Spectacular dance rhythms by ballet corps and Roxyettes—Soloists—Chorus—Symphony Orchestras—Company of 500—Novel features."

Even with tickets selling at Depression prices, Roxy's gamble paid off handsomely. Crowds queued up four abreast at both theatres and in the first four days of its run *King Kong* set a new all-time world attendance record for any indoor attraction, bringing in \$89,931 in hard-earned coin. To accommodate the crowds it was necessary

to run ten shows daily. "Ten thousand seats weren't enough," Rothafel reported joyously.

Sid Grauman, the West Coast's answer to "Roxy," was not to be outdone, although he had to wait until March 24 to stage the official premiere in Hollywood at the Chinese Theatre. A special *King Kong* edition of "The Hollywood Reporter" announced the coming event on March 6 with a unique twenty-eight-page insert printed in four colours on two kinds of heavy stock with parchment end sheets and covers stamped from pure sheet copper. The layout was by Keye Luke, the Chinese artist-actor.

"This is a Grauman opening in the full sense of the word," Louella Parsons reported in the Los Angeles "Examiner." First-nighters had plenty to gape at; in addition to the customary spotlights and celebrity interviews, the life-size head and shoulders of Kong greeted the patrons in the forecourt. On stage, Jimmy Savo headed a spectacular prologue that included a fifty-voice African choral ensemble and a dance troupe of black girls performing "The Dance to the Sacred Ape" and sixteen other musical numbers. Reviewers on both coasts were extravagant with praise for the film.

National release followed on April 10. The resulting flood of badly needed money brought a temporary end to RKO's financial problems, lifting the studio out of debt for the first time.

"We brought that picture in for only \$450,000," Cooper revealed later. "That was the actual cost, but those bookkeepers tacked on the cost of *location* and a lot of so-called 'overhead.' The 'official' cost was \$650,000."