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A Star is Born: Max Steiner in the Studios, 1930–39

From his appointment as RKO's music director in 1930 through *Gone With the Wind* (1939), his last film score of the decade, Max Steiner contributed music for over a hundred films and served as music director for dozens more. Through this prolificacy Steiner played a widely acknowledged role in establishing the sound and function of Hollywood underscore. Less discussed, however, is how the studios shaped, promoted, and fought over his work. For the first half of the decade Steiner worked at RKO; for the second half, he divided time between Selznick International Pictures and Warner Bros. At each studio, Steiner confronted different film genres and negotiated shifting alliances among collaborators and competitors. Whether Steiner viewed a production as a breakthrough, a mere notch in the belt, or undesirable typecasting had much to do with his perception of the studio environment.

Traces of Steiner's work for the studios survive in archives sprinkled across the United States. Each offers the historian a slightly different view of Steiner, as glimpsed through contracts, production documents, memos, and scores. This presentation draws upon research conducted at all three studio archives (RKO, Warner Bros. and Selznick International) as well as Steiner's personal collection to illuminate his ascendancy as a film composer in the 1930s. By foregrounding the archival materials and their provenance, I show that a fuller appraisal of Steiner's talents must extend beyond composition to his shrewd navigation of the studio system itself.