

## *spellbound*: theremins and phallic frescoes

You need that music to give Gregory Peck some emotion.

—Jules Feiffer

Wouldn't it be nice if psychotherapy were like *Spellbound*? The leading man is so beset by neurotic guilt that he doesn't know his own name and is worried he may be a murderer. Not to worry, says his beautiful psychiatrist (Ingrid Bergman, no less); just tell me a dream. He does, whereupon she unveils his identity, cures his illness, solves the murder, nails the villain, rescues him from jail, and goes away with him on a train.

We aren't meant to take any of this seriously, of course. As Michael Wood puts it, "Hitchcock is showing us the utter impossibility of such things: you want a solution, he says, I'll give you a solution."<sup>1</sup> *Spellbound* is as much a fairy tale as *Rebecca*, though with gender roles reversed, and with psychoanalysis standing in for magic. A consummate professional, Hitchcock knew that the best way to put over such stuff was to play it straight. The story is mined for maximum thrills and romance, with music to match, the most romantic score in any Hitchcock picture, and also, thanks to the theremin, the spookiest. The theremin quivers through *Spellbound* like a sorcerer, giving the characters' anxieties and identity crises an otherworldly aura.

Hitchcock called the movie standard mystery fare "wrapped up in pseudo-psychoanalysis," but for its time, *Spellbound* was quite daring.<sup>2</sup> Analysis, pseudo or not, was new to motion picture entertainment (though in 1941 Kurt Weill had paved the way on Broadway with *Lady in the Dark*). To increase the novelty, Hitchcock hired Salvador Dalí to give the movie a new surrealist look and Miklos Rozsa to give it a new sound. Rozsa's theremin and Dalí's "phallic frescoes" (as a Selznick flack called his sets) added greatly to the film's exotic allure.<sup>3</sup>

As usual, Hitchcock was culturally prescient: a rash of psychiatric movies followed *Spellbound*, just as the theremin became the instrument of choice for spooky characters or transnormal scenarios.<sup>4</sup> David Selznick was deeply worried that audiences would stay away from such untested material, but curious moviegoers on both sides of the Atlantic flocked to *Spellbound*. To this day, it is more popular with the common viewer than with critics. (It also continues to be popular with Rozsa and theremin cultists, two intensely loyal constituencies.) Rozsa's score was a significant factor in the film's success, both before and after its release, so much so that it is a milestone in the history of cinema music. For many, *Spellbound* is the quintessential Hitchcock score. Michael Dirda, the Pulitzer Prize-winning literary editor at the *Washington Post*, told me that when he thinks of Hitchcock and music, "the first movie that comes to mind is *Spellbound*. Rozsa's score makes a deeper impression than the music in any other Hitchcock film."<sup>5</sup>

Yet Rozsa was not the first choice. Selznick wanted Bernard Herrmann, who would later become Hitchcock's longest-standing musical collaborator. "I still can't see anyone to compare with Herrmann," he wrote in a memo, a sign of a musical astuteness at odds with his reputation for crassness.<sup>6</sup> Herrmann's music for Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* was celebrated, but the film was not, to put it mildly, a commercial success. That Selznick would rate Herrmann the premiere Hollywood composer is admirable, though he apparently did not know of Herrmann's reputation for irascibility.

Once Herrmann made it clear that he was unavailable, the choice of Rozsa was mutual between producer and director. Hired for four thousand dollars, Rozsa was first approached by Hitchcock, who admired the score for Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*; Hitchcock thought Rozsa's style had the "right kind of tension" for *Spellbound*, Rozsa recalled.<sup>7</sup> But the critical player in his hiring was apparently Lionel Barrymore, who wrote Selznick an enthusiastic letter of recommendation, to which Selznick replied with a warm thank-you note.<sup>8</sup> Rozsa's moody, noirish style seemed right for *Spellbound*, and indeed it was—though one would never know it from what went on behind the scenes. Rozsa's relationship with both Hitchcock and Selznick deteriorated to the point of near-total alienation. It is remarkable that the *Spellbound* score got written at all, or that it was used.

Hitchcock's attraction to Rozsa illustrates his willingness to try innovative music. Although fetishized by fans now, *Double Indemnity* was a controversial score for its time. As Royal S. Brown points out, its refreshingly nonmelodic style broke away from standard Hollywood melodic lushness. Rozsa's signature sound, unabashedly sensuous yet curiously stark in its preference for octaves, parallel fifths, and other open sounds, suited *Spell-bound*'s narrative, one that combines high dementia with high romance.

*Spellbound* was an extreme example of Hitchcock's obsessive theme: a character with identity problems struggling to break out of a terrible past; here he had two, for the heroine must break through repressions of her own. Hitchcock needed music both claustrophobic and soaring, sinister and transcendent. His openness to experimentation was a welcome change for Rozsa, who was eager to try out the theremin, which the producer of *Sundown* had rejected four years previously. He had also wanted to use the ondes Martenot, a keyboard instrument resembling the theremin, in the 1940 *Thief of Bagdad*; that exotic instrument was vetoed as well when it was discovered that no one was available who could play it. "Hitchcock and Selznick hadn't heard of the theremin," Rozsa recalled, "and weren't quite sure whether you ate it or took it for headaches, but they agreed to try it out."<sup>9</sup>

According to Rozsa, whose debunking of Golden Age music is more entertaining than the current adulation, it was unusual to find any filmmaker open to innovation:

The general idiom was conservative and meretricious in the extreme— diluted Rachmaninoff and Broadway. In *Double Indemnity*, I introduced certain asperities of rhythm and harmony which wouldn't have caused anyone familiar with the serious scene to bat an eyelid, but which did cause consternation in certain musical quarters in Hollywood. The musical director couldn't stand the score from the beginning.... Did I really have to have a G sharp in the second fiddles clashing with a G natural in the violas an octave below?... The place for such eccentricities was Carnegie Hall, not a movie studio. I refused to change a note and thanked him for the compliment; he assured me it wasn't meant as such.... The story gives one some idea of how difficult it was to maintain any decent level of musical integrity in the Hollywood of those days.<sup>10</sup>

Ironically, it was the lushness of *Spellbound*'s music, passionately projected by the Hollywood Bowl orchestra and recorded at a high-decibel level, that attracted audiences—and that eventually irritated Hitchcock. It doesn't sound like Rachmaninoff, but any "asperities" have gone largely unnoticed. They certainly exist: the G against G sharp that dismayed the music director is nothing compared to the sustained discords in the Dali dream scene. Still, what Hitchcock regarded as the "terrible" schmaltz of the love theme is what audiences go away with.<sup>11</sup>

Selznick is partly to blame. After Rozsa had scored the main title, he called his secretary and asked how many violins were in the score, wanting to make sure it had at least as many as Franz Waxman had used in *Rebecca*. When it turned out *Rebecca* had more, Selznick demanded that Rozsa make up the difference and re-record the title with the additional complement. The composer "happily did" (it was Selznick's money, after all) but doubted that Selznick could tell the difference.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the early stages of composing, Rozsa claimed he "was bombarded by the famous Selznick memos, which "virtually told me how to compose and orchestrate the music scene by scene." There may be a bit of hyperbole here. The *Spellbound* memos that survive in the archives consist mainly of a seven-page document from Selznick called "Spellbound Music Notes," dated October 6-19, 1944. Unlike Hitchcock's nuanced, detailed musical notes (alas, he apparently did not make any for *Spellbound*), Selznick's are sketchy and curt, essentially a dubbing sheet indicating where the score should be laid in. Selznick does indulge in a few brief characterizations of the type of music he wanted: "JB's arrival" in reel 2 should "pick up with a sympathetic Murchinson theme"; the dining scene should be perked up with "gay music," which should become "slower" during JB's "forgive me" following his first breakdown; the love theme cuing "Constance in bed seeing light under JB door" should have a "warm" version of the love theme, with a sound "like Debussy." Selznick also requested "actual hot dance music from radio" during "Constance packing," his one request for source music.<sup>13</sup> *Spellbound* could have used more hot dance music to rev up its stately tempo, but *Notorious* would compensate for this lack the following year, with Hitchcock rather than his producer overseeing the dubbing of the film. (In the final release, the radio music occurs during JB's packing scene, not Constance's.)

One Selznick directive filled Rozsa with rage: after the "Debussy" moment, Selznick wanted Rozsa to use "cymbals etc." to "sell ... her emotion when she sees the light under his door." Rozsa thereafter "completely disregarded all [Selznick's] musical ideas. I 'sold' Ingrid's love in my own way and with my own theme."<sup>14</sup> As we shall see, Selznick wound up denouncing Rozsa's music even though it was critically acclaimed and adored by audiences. The sourness and personal animosity of his remarks seem to issue from something other than just the music. Something went badly wrong in the relationship between the two; the flap over cymbals seems to have been the beginning.

On the face of it, "cymbals etc." seems another example of Selznick's crassness. But though Rozsa and his admirers ridicule Selznick for wanting cymbals during the love epiphany, Rozsa does "sell Constance's emotion," not with cymbals but with a huge crescendo when Constance sees the light seeping under JB's door. The orchestration is so heavy it doesn't need cymbals. Furthermore, the preceding music, with its soulful cello solo and shimmering percussion, is indeed a warm version of the theme and does carry a hint of Debussy. Selznick was not a musical ignoramus, as sometimes depicted. Rozsa followed the spirit if not the letter of his ideas, producing an unforgettable scene.

Nor is it clear that Selznick was rigid in these minimal demands or that he told Rozsa how to write the music

scene by scene. According to his secretary's addendum to the musical notes, "Mr. Selznick wants you to feel very free to suggest any ideas you may have that are different from his notes on the picture concerning his scoring." The sentence may squint, but its message is clear: the creative freedom Rozsa insisted on having was granted, at least after October 6, 1944, when this postscript was attached.

Rozsa arrived at the *Spellbound* theme quickly. He saw an early preview of the movie in Pasadena, with images accompanied by stock music from other films (an odd but common practice). Emerging from the theater, he "immediately jotted down the love theme—it came to me, as it were, straight from the picture."<sup>15</sup> (This was the deliberate method of Rozsa's émigré colleague Erich Korngold, who would sit in the projection room and bang themes on the piano as scenes unrolled.)

Another cue composed early on was "Razor," the fearful nocturne for Gregory Peck and his shiny blade, a marvelous specimen of "silent" Hitchcock in a talkie. This exercise in sustained anxiety was Rozsa's test for the film. Hitchcock and Selznick both liked the double theme of love and paranoia when Rozsa played it for them but were still dubious about the theremin. Selznick finally suggested that Rozsa write the razor scene and include the controversial instrument. They liked what they heard. The contrast between shadowy darkness and clinical whiteness in George Barnes's photography, crucial to the solution of the film's puzzle, finds an exact counterpoint in Rozsa's bleakly colorful sounds: the theremin sliding into the foreground, frenetic snare ostinatos in back, and a plunging motif that captures JB's descent into madness. Hitchcock and Selznick approved the tryout recording, encouraging Rozsa to continue using the theremin throughout the score.

Despite having had only two conferences with Hitchcock, Rozsa precisely understood the director's concept—the thin line between passion and anxiety, love and terror. The resplendent love theme and the creepy theremin motif are variants of each other: in the romantic version, the melody's four-note nucleus soars up and down with plush harmonies, igniting the romance between JB and Constance; in the "paranoia theme," the four notes slither up and down chromatically, shadowed by the theremin. The two versions of the same idea, one lyrical, the other sinister, reflect Hitchcock's preoccupation with doubles. This is a story about sexual ambivalence: the first big kiss, with Salvador Dali's doors flying open into infinity, features "The Awakening," the most dramatic statement of the love music, followed immediately by the theremin paranoia variation as JB sees parallel lines on Constance's robe. In the second kiss scene, during the couple's honeymoon in Alex's house, Rozsa's music repeats precisely the same attraction-repulsion pattern, as JB notices the straight lines on Constance's bed covering.

*Spellbound* was the most luscious and atmospheric Hitchcock score since *Rebecca*. Its dark sensuality is the sonic equivalent of George Barnes's seductive shadings and shadows. Unlike Roy Webb's surgical, spare music for Hitchcock's next film, *Notorious*, it surges through the movie practically from beginning to end. Only the opening scenes of mental cases, the documentary exposition, leave music out. (Selznick's notes specify "no score as Harry enters and goes toward nurse" and ask for continued silence until JB's arrival.)

But it was the theremin that made the score a sensation. Here was an instrument that seemed magic, in both its sound and the way that sound was created. One plays the theremin without ever touching it: the performer moves his or her hands above the object exactly like a magician, producing otherworldly sonorities that theremin lovers call ether music. (The magician in *Spellbound* is Stanley Hoffmann, the reigning wizard of the instrument, who went on to play it in *The Lost Weekend* and many other films.) It isn't really magic, of course, but an electronic field that produces the sounds. The theremin was heard as a "primal scream," the first "coming together of science and music."<sup>16</sup> It was therefore perfect for *Spellbound*, where it invokes the science of psychiatry in the guise of what seems like supernatural spookery (or, depending on one's point of view, the reverse). It is impossible to understate the PR value of the theremin: in the twenties and thirties, it was regarded as a revolution, a phenomenon that might well replace pianos and records. And here it was for the first time in a movie, reaching a bigger audience than ever.<sup>17</sup>

The beneficiaries were Selznick and Hitchcock. The former referred to Rozsa's theremin idea as the "white theme," tapping into an identification of terror with whiteness that goes back in American culture to Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville. Melville's "Whiteness of the Whale," a chapter in *Moby-Dick*, links whiteness with blank, nameless terror, a primal fear of annihilation—very much like the symptoms of *Spellbound*'s crazed, clueless hero. Snow, white gowns, shaving cream, and bathroom porcelain send JB into his worst spins, with the theremin following him down into madness. In an addendum to his music note, Selznick asked Rozsa to "use 'white' theme whenever JB has a breakdown—a mixture of romance and psychiatry with build and excitement in tempo." He specified JB's anxious observations of "fork lines on tablecloth in dining room scene," "lines on Constance's robe," "surgery," and "other spots in later reels." Rozsa followed these directives precisely, with all the "build and excitement" one could ask, delivering the "mixture of romance and psychiatry" that defines the film.

The celebrated love-terror music was only one of numerous themes evoking a disturbed subconscious. The ugly brass dissonance following JB's outburst—"Edwards is dead.... I killed him!"—is one of the most ghoulish stinger

chords from the period, and the dream sequence is a masterpiece of Schoenbergian chord coloring. This is not the first Hitchcock film in which music represents the alternate world of the psyche, but it is the first to make that world the movie's theme. Never before had there been a sustained music of mental disintegration like this in the movies.

The score, however, does not always correspond with the images. Again, Hitchcock used music to depict feelings at odds with what characters say on the screen. This is especially important in a movie about how the subconscious speaks the truth: when Constance, who has almost as many repressions as her patient, claims her feelings about the latter have "nothing to do with love, nothing," the juicy crescendo tells us the opposite; when she debunks falling-in-love myths during the picnic pastoral, the seductive wind music wafting through the trees makes one wonder if she really means it; when JB snarls hatefully at Constance on the train that she is a "smug woman... babbling like Solomon," mellow horns reveal that the psychoanalytic healing process is gradually winning the day. In *Spellbound*, people tell lies, especially to themselves; the music shows what they really mean.

The most celebrated depiction of the subconscious is the famous nightmare sequence. Selznick was puzzled by Hitchcock's insistence on hiring Dali, but the director knew that Dali's theatrical surrealism would help deflect attention from Ben Hecht's didactic script. Like Rozsa's music, Dali's sets were a far more compelling evocation of the inner life than psychiatric jargon. They also matched Hitchcock's double aesthetic: the classicist who preferred Romantic material and the meticulously logical craftsman who depicted the chaos of the subconscious. Hitchcock admired Dali's hard literalness, his rejection of vagueness and atmosphere when evoking dreams.<sup>18</sup> Thanks to music, Hitchcock was able to have it both ways. Rozsa provided all the atmosphere one could desire, and his sounds are not vague; the icy clusters, plummeting scales, slashing chords, and swooping glissandos provide a sharp parallel universe to Dali's staring eyeballs, free-falling men, giant scissors, oversized playing cards, and monstrous Hitchcockian birds.

The conductor John Mauceri argues that composers like Korngold and Rozsa kept the Romantic flame alive in the movies even as it was being snuffed out by serialists in the concert halls. Rozsa's "Awakening" cue makes his point, but the nightmare music, where the sounds are nontonal, reveal that Hollywood émigrés did modern music a favor as well. Rozsa's dreamy discords also saved the sequence from the clunkier effects of voice-over. Selznick insisted on having Gregory Peck's voice explain Dali's images. Hitchcock's compromise on September 11, 1944, was to have Rozsa "score [the] entire sequence"; if music could not eradicate the scene's didacticism, it could at least mitigate it. Selznick apparently agreed: his own notes say "score all illustrations."<sup>19</sup>

Rozsa was forced to write the dream scene near the end of postproduction: terrified of alienating audiences, Selznick cut a large chunk of Dali's surreal images (to the sadness of many, including Ingrid Bergman, who in the excluded footage dramatically exploded from a statue wearing a death mask). Rozsa had to wait until the end of 1944 for a leaner dream sequence to get his timings. This was the first of many delays. After a February preview, Selznick tried to fix everything the audience found wrong; this tinkering, plus a string of summer hits, forced him to delay the release until November 1. On May 4, Selznick expressed regrets to Rozsa and his lawyer about the delays but gruffly threatened to "hire another music director and scorer to take over Dr. Rozsa's music" if Rozsa did not agree to stick around. He did, recording the "Gambling Dream" and "Rooftop Dream" in September (apparently, with difficulty: the latter went through seven takes).

An instructive contrast to the overly explanatory narration during the dream is Leo G. Carroll's voice-over in the murder-mystery revelation, an example of this Hitchcockian device at its best. This is one of the great frissons in the film: Carroll's voice is a mysterious fragment "explained" only by Rozsa's goose-pimpling music, Ingrid Bergman's trembling body language, and a powerful crescendo of repetition ("knew him slightly... knew him slightly ... knew him slightly!") that allows us to piece together the voice's meaning ourselves. The vocal sonority becomes a grim bass instrument; as in the voice-overs in *I Confess* and *Psycho*, it becomes part of the music.

*Spellbound*'s images of a downhill mental plunge find their dizzying climax in the skiing scene. A Selznick memo from October 30, a few weeks after his unwelcome music notes, requested that Rozsa create a "distorted treatment of whatever theme you are using throughout the picture for each psychoanalytical reference to childhood causes, which should be used here very strongly as a counterscore to the suspense of the scene. Please note that the last part of the childhood illustration will have no narrative—just music scored." This is exactly the kind of memo telling him his business that Rozsa resented; to make matters worse, Selznick substituted Franz Waxman's "Too Fast," the out-of-control driving scene from *Suspicion*, also a dizzying sequence involving dangerous speed and the heroine's anxiety over whether the leading man will murder her.

It's one thing to expand a cue, as Selznick had done to "Mrs. Danvers" in *Rebecca*, and quite another to lay in someone else's entirely, especially in an extended, climactic scene. Yet Waxman's cue does work: against the white *mise-en-scène* with parallel lines, the design of the movie, the lovers plunge downward as the music moves inward, beginning with Constance's anxiety and resting deeply within JB's repressed memories. Propelled by a relentless

ostinato, the snow peak becomes a child's sliding board leading toward the fatal spikes from JB's childhood—the subconscious finally erupting. When Edwards, now Ballantine, cathartically shouts, "I didn't kill my brother. It was an accident, an accident!" the music winds down: the terrible dissonance of repressed guilt is gone.

Again, Selznick's crudity and high-handedness are balanced by shrewd musical judgment. This is not a case of Selznick simply throwing in one of his favorite tunes. Although intended for frenetic car driving rather than skiing, Waxman's breathless cue provides the distorted sound he wanted. For the gruesome spiked-fence image, he requested "no narrative, just music": Waxman's piercing discords provided that as well.

Once JB is cured, there would seem to be no more need for nightmare music. Not quite. Freed from his inner prison, he is hauled off to a real one by Hitchcock's typically wrong-headed police, in one of the master's most concise jail montages. (Alas, with John Ballantine cured, there is no more need for a theremin, and we never hear that magnificently creepy sound again.) With Gregory Peck in jail offscreen, Rozsa needed to provide new music for Constance's confrontation with Dr. Murchinson. This he apparently failed to do, at least to Selznick's satisfaction. Again, the producer went to another composer, this time Roy Webb, soon to be the composer for *Notorious*, and got what he wanted.<sup>20</sup>

Light seeps under Murchinson's door—an exact parallel to the first door image when Constance approaches JB for the big love scene, now guided by a sinister crescendo rather than a romantic one. Once Constance is in Murchinson's room, at the mercy of his gun, we get Webb's shivery cue, full of grim tremolos. This is Constance's moment and hers alone, without her lover or mentor—the Hitchcock heroine taking command. Once she is back out the door, we are left with Murchinson's suicidal despair, again, fearlessly captured by Webb's music, the most disturbing in the film. In the famous revolving gun scene, Murchinson blows his brains out—and ours—as the score explodes into madness and death, an aural equivalent of the red gore Hitchcock splashed across the black-and-white screen. Again, the artistic and ethical issues are murky and complex: the effectiveness of Webb's cue makes it harder to deplore Selznick's high-handedness, one more blow to the integrity of the film composer.

In any case, Rozsa had the last word. He won the Academy Award for Best Score, and the theremin became a stock device for scary music in both film and television. (Where would *The Thing*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Alcoa Presents*, *The Outer Limits*, and *When Worlds Collide* be without its slithery sound?)<sup>21</sup> Hitchcock himself returned to it in the rooftop finale of *To Catch a Thief* and in the flashback of "Mrs. Blanchard's Secret."<sup>22</sup>

On the surface, everything seemed to go relatively well with this score, but behind the scenes were dark rumblings. Indeed, just before the film's release, Rozsa found himself embroiled in an odd and ugly controversy. Hitchcock complained to Audray Granville, head of the music department, that Rozsa's music for *The Lost Weekend*, shot after *Spellbound* but released just before it, had a duplication of the *Spellbound* theme. On October 8, Selznick made the same discovery on his own, sending a scorched-earth memo to Granville before she got to him: "Unless I am very much mistaken, one of the few measly melodic themes that Dr. Rozsa gave us in *Spellbound*, and the most important of these, has been used by him again in *The Lost Weekend*, with even the exact instrumentation and orchestration.... I would be interested to know how Dr. Rozsa explains this." Granville responded with an equally tart letter: she had questioned Rozsa "about this similarity. He admitted using the theremin as the alcoholic motivation in the same manner as it is used in our amnesia sequences, but that the melody was not the same. He evidently wrote three different notes. Am sorry about this, but if Dr. Rozsa chooses to repeat himself, we of necessity must suffer along with him."<sup>23</sup>

Furious, Selznick called Rozsa's office and demanded that he explain himself. Rozsa's unrattled rejoinder became the best line in *Spellbound* lore: yes, I did use the theremin, "and I used the violin, the oboe, and the clarinet as well. Goodbye."<sup>24</sup>

Good-bye, indeed. Rozsa never saw Selznick again. It is just as well. Selznick's memo, copied to everyone but Rozsa, reveals a more far-reaching bitterness than his annoyance over the composer's alleged self-plagiarism. He was clearly disappointed with the score, judging it to have only a "few measly melodic themes." If Hitchcock found the music overwrought, Selznick found it under. In a memo of September 11, he warned Granville that he was "deeply concerned" that the film would have an "unsatisfactory score." In addition to demanding more strings from Rozsa for the main title and substituting cues by Webb and Waxman taken from other movies, he asked Granville to make whatever changes she could in the remaining three weeks before the opening to improve the music. Granville was the editor, not the composer, and it is not clear how far Selznick wanted her to go. She apparently did tinker with the score, but declared she was "not satisfied.... I don't believe there are over 20 bars of original music in the score, and the repetition is maddening. Under these circumstances, I found what melody was there and tried to use it to advantage."<sup>25</sup>

Apparently then, the producer, director, and music editor all disliked a score that the public, critics, and Academy Award judges adored. Selznick's objections are particularly odd: for anyone with two ears, it is simply not



true that *Spellbound* has only a few measly themes that are recycled in *The Lost Weekend*. (The “Nightmare” cue in the latter, the one most similar, resembles *Spellbound* only in the theremin coloring and Rozsa’s signature chords.) The power of the music resides precisely in its unity, its uncanny ability to generate a variety of powerful ideas from the small nucleus that registers both love and terror.

Rozsa never complained about Granville’s “improvements” or Selznick’s string doublings, but his contempt for Selznick spilled out into his memoirs. The story of *Spellbound*’s music inverts what happened with *Rebecca*, where tensions bristled throughout postproduction but resolved into a happy ending and amicable words all around. Here, the snubs and blowups occurred at the end, apparently costing Rozsa a significant commission. As late as August 8, Selznick pondered using Rozsa for *Duel in the Sun*; on September 15, he wrote his associates that he was “awaiting impatiently the score of *Spellbound* so I can decide about Webb or Rozsa.”<sup>26</sup> (He also briefly considered using Korngold.) Ultimately, he hired Dimitri Tiomkin and never used Rozsa again.

Neither did Hitchcock. Indeed, Hitchcock’s treatment of Rozsa was as incomprehensible and unmannerly as Selznick’s. He never thanked him for the score, even after it won the Academy Award. One wonders if this rebuff—even allowing for Hitchcock’s distaste for the gushy string sonorities and the Constance theme—had to do with Rozsa’s success. Hitchcock regarded himself as the auteur and may have resented the composer’s winning an Academy Award when he didn’t. His relationship with Rozsa was a portent of his connections with his other star composers. For Hitchcock, complex issues of authorship were always bound up with how he treated them.

*Spellbound*’s music endured long after the grumblings of Hitchcock and Selznick. Indeed it has enjoyed a curiously long cinematic afterlife. The first spin-off, however, was a spectacular flop, and a fascinating example of how the lure of a hit song could skew the judgments of normally sensible people. The convoluted twists in the story help explain Hitchcock’s exasperation and short temper during his battles with Herrmann over a popular song in *Torn Curtain*. The *Spellbound* incident reveals that these contentious issues were not new with the rock-and-roll period but had been brewing for a long time.

On the face of it, the idea of someone bursting into romantic song in the middle of *Spellbound* seems ludicrous, yet in October 1944, J. J. Robbins submitted a song called “Spellbound” to Selznick for use in the film. No record of a rejection exists, but Selznick apparently (mercifully) rejected it. In March of the following year, Decca approached Rozsa for permission to record an album of *Spellbound* music, the beginning of a far more fruitful idea; Rozsa had enjoyed spectacular success with albums for *The Jungle Book* (the first recording of an American movie score). On March 22, during postproduction editing, Granville wrote Selznick suggesting a *Spellbound* Suite. (Waxman had paved the way with *Rebecca*.) Granville proposed that Rozsa’s suite come out before the picture’s release rather than after, as was customary. This novel idea would work out smashing.

In the same memo, she brought up the notion of a pop song, an idea she attributed to Rozsa: “He says that the love theme would lend itself to a popular ballad, using the title ‘Spellbound,’ but that he is unfamiliar with this field of music and would require a popular songwriter.... Would you be interested in proceeding along this line?” The same day, Selznick fired back a memo declaring himself “heartily in favor” of all “exploitation possibilities on the music of ‘Spellbound,’ including the production of a ‘popular ballad.’” As usual, he wanted it immediately—the deal would be conditional “upon his getting it out earlier than is normally the case”—and he wanted it cheaply, declaring he didn’t “see why we should invest any money.”

Thus began an interminable flurry of memos, permission requests, proposed lyrics, diatribes, and personal denunciations. Contacted by Selznick’s advertising director, Don King, the lyricist Ned Washington expressed interest in writing lyrics but pointed out that he would not do it for free; Granville reminded Selznick that the orchestrator, copyist, and musicians would have to be paid as well. On April 5, King praised Washington’s lyric but expressed dismay that he had asked for eight hundred dollars (“too high”), then had gone ahead and written the lyric “without any authorization from me.” He was also chagrined that King had recorded it “on film with Rhonda Fleming [who plays the viciously flirtatious psychiatric patient] doing the vocal.”

Meanwhile, editor Hal Kern, sensing disaster, complained to Selznick that Granville could not possibly handle these dense *Spellbound* tangles while simultaneously doing tracking for *Duel in the Sun*, Selznick’s already out-of-control vehicle for Jennifer Jones. Firing back that he could easily juggle two complex projects at once (his usual practice), Selznick commanded everyone to shut up.

Not surprisingly, Washington was dropped as lyricist, and by May 21 Granville had selected another for Selznick’s approval, Buddy Morris, who “thoroughly believed in the song” and was “the only publisher on the coast,” a man who had immediate access to Decca and “all the name bands.” In an ecstatic telegram, Don King urged Selznick to grant Morris immediate approval, claiming that “five publishers are clamoring for *Spellbound* song” and that everyone was “raving about it... really, it’s a swell song.”<sup>27</sup>

The next day, Selznick wrote Robert Dann, in the music department, unleashing one of the lengthiest, most bitter

denunciations in the history of Selznick splutterings. It attacked the song as “utterly inane” and “unutterably bad,” but that was the least of it. Selznick, who had never heard of the allegedly famed songwriter, was particularly incensed because he had already rejected the song and already issued instructions to hire a “first-class writer—preferably Johnny Mercer, who did so brilliantly with the ‘Laura’ music.... I want you to send for both King and Audray and tell them I deeply resent this high-pressuring on a song which I turned down cold.” As was often the case, the attack turned personal, with Selznick declaring King incapable of being “the judge of ‘a swell song’” and impugning Granville’s motives: “I resent and suspect Audray’s plugging of the work of this song writer.... There is a personal connection, I believe a romantic one, which I think accounts for all our song problems being routed through this one song writer, which on the face of it is ridiculous.” As far as Selznick was concerned, the messages were trumped up: “I don’t believe ‘five publishers are clamoring for this song.’ ... In any case, publication doesn’t mean a thing. Thousands of songs are published, but very few get anywhere.”<sup>28</sup>

For the next six months, numerous songwriters bid for the song, including such major artists as Mercer and Oscar Hammerstein, and many minor ones as well.<sup>29</sup> Adding to the tangle was the music department’s discovery that twenty-two songs entitled “Spellbound” already existed in copyright. Hitchcock became involved in the back-and-forths as well. He preferred the lyrics by Allie Wrubel:

*I see the stars tip-toe... there they go two by two  
Am I seeing things?  
Or am I spellbound when I'm with you*

This preference “disturbed” Selznick’s editors, and disturbing it is: if this was Hitchcock’s prize lyric, it’s hard to imagine the clinkers. But many other lyrics were equally unimaginable, including this typical one from Al Stewart:

*You sigh, and I'm spellbound  
I can hear angels sing  
And in my heart  
I know the thrill of Eternal Spring.*

To his credit, Selznick denounced all this appalling stuff and demanded that the music department start over again. He also declared he didn’t have more time to devote to the endless mess. That he had bothered for this long indicates that he was deeply worried about *Spellbound*’s reception, increasingly distrustful of Rozsa’s score, and desperate for a hit song.

After a new round of commissions and rejections, a song was finally chosen and published by Chappell, with lyrics by Mack David and an arrangement by Andre Kostelanetz, along with promised recordings on RCA Victor, Columbia, and Decca. (The latter two apparently never materialized.) Chappell wanted to use a choral version of the song for the main and end titles, but Selznick torpedoed the idea in a single-sentence memo. Clearly, he was tired of the whole business.

And in the end, it was all for nothing. Recorded on RCA Victor, the song was promoted and played on Al Goodman’s Prudential Hour, but it never caught on with the public. According to John Waxman, there were “high hopes for the song which never materialized.”<sup>30</sup> Selznick’s outburst proved prescient: “Thousands of songs are published, but very few get anywhere.”

The futile search for a hit song was a forerunner of many other such cases, the most striking being *Vertigo*. As would be the case with that film, which also centers on obsession and breakdown, the failure to find a hit song was fortunate. It is as painful to contemplate Rozsa’s sensuous *Largamente* main title and Herrmann’s haunted *Prelude* being replaced by a pop tune. Moreover, the dreamlike atmosphere of this film, as in *Vertigo*, is created to a large extent by its omnipresent score; for a Hitchcock picture, there is remarkably little vernacular music of any kind (even less than in *Rebecca*) to compromise *Spellbound*’s surreal ambience.

Moviegoers had no problem with this aspect of the film. Indeed, this is a case of the public’s being smarter than condescending studios. Audiences wanted more of the real thing—the full-throated symphonic *Spellbound* concert piece—not a pop-song spin-off. Don King, Robert Dann, and Chappell’s Jean Aberbach all tried to bring out an album of Rozsa’s complete music, but the breakthrough came when Jerome Kern, part owner of Chappell, asked Rozsa to publish the music under the title “*Spellbound Concerto*.” Concertos culled from movie music constituted an odd new 1940s crossover genre, exemplified by the enormously popular “*Warsaw Concerto*” by Richard Addinsell (who scored Hitchcock’s *Under Capricorn*), and Kern wanted to cash in on this vogue. When Rozsa, who was frequently dismayed by Hollywood gaucheness, protested that “it’s not a concerto,” Kern said, “Oh, never mind that!”<sup>31</sup> The word *concerto* had sex appeal, and that’s what he intended to call “*Spellbound*.”

Rozsa let Kern have his way and call his piece a concerto. As Kern predicted, the public didn’t care, but the distortion bothered Rozsa so much that later he revised the orchestration to justify the label, transforming the score

into two concertos, one for piano, another for orchestra. The latter became a popular favorite, brighter and brassier than the movie version, but retaining Rozsa's dark modal harmonies. That it stands on its own in more than one concert version is a testament to the richness of this music.

Indeed, it was popular in this form even before the movie's release or Rozsa's completion of the score. Leopold Stokowski approved the premiere of the "Suite," as Rozsa preferred to call it, for a performance on July 28. Again, Audray Granville demonstrated her shrewdness. "I believe," she wrote Selznick on July 16, "this is of greater advantage to us than having it performed on motion picture night, as it is being performed not just because it is a motion picture score but as an outstanding concert contribution." On the 21st, Rozsa personally invited Selznick to the concert, which he conducted, and sent him two tickets, adding that he would be honored if Selznick would attend. Vanguard Films informed Selznick that they were inviting Gregory Peck, the Hitchcocks, Ben Hecht, Michael Chekov, Rhonda Fleming, and "all critics in the Los Angeles area." The letter asked Selznick for additional names, but a brusque handwritten note responded, "DOS said you handle—he brushed it off—he's in a hurry."<sup>32</sup>

Selznick was no fan of Stokowski's. When early in the project someone suggested Stokowski to do *Spellbound*'s score, Selznick rejected him with the comment that "on the last job he did he drove everyone out of their minds as regards time and expense."<sup>33</sup> Fortunately, Selznick's snubbing of the concert was not a harbinger of things to come: following the Hollywood Bowl premiere, the Suite and Concerto continued to enjoy success both in performance and as recordings.<sup>34</sup> (Selznick did send Rozsa a note of "sincere thanks and appreciation" on July 30.) Most important, a transcription, sent to one thousand radio stations, was broadcast nationwide so that by the time the film was released, audiences already knew the music. Here was an early example of how a strong synergy between a movie and its score could propel the fortunes of both. The *Rebecca* score helped the movie only after its premiere; Rozsa's music, a forerunner of contemporary practices, started the marketing process earlier.

The popularity of the score follows a pattern we see repeatedly in this book. Like other composers, Rozsa received early acclaim for his Hitchcock score, and Hitchcock's cachet gave him a launching pad for later important works, from *Ben-Hur*, whose major motif is anticipated in Gregory Peck's breakdown music, to *Providence*, a surreal dreamscape that picks up where *Spellbound*'s nightmare scene leaves off. Troubled dreams and a theremin evoking mental disintegration also figured in Rozsa's score for Billy Wilder's *Lost Weekend* (the subject of Selznick's temper tantrum), also an instant hit. The "Awakening" cue became a template for a style of unabashed lyricism that would crop up not only in later Rozsa love themes but in the gloriously schmaltzy second movement of his Violin Concerto. For better or worse, Rozsa's name became attached to the theremin, so much so that the makers of *The Red House* demanded he use it, even though he thought it did not suit the movie. Rozsa was Mr. Theremin, said Edward G. Robinson; audiences expected its now familiar sound, and that was that.





*Spellbound* on vinyl. A score promoting a movie before its release. (Courtesy of George Chastain)

In the long run, the theremin played a significant role in keeping *Spellbound* and its music not only alive (being a Hitchcock movie, it would be that in any case) but continually seductive. By the 1970s, the instrument had practically dropped out of sight, replaced by the more practical ondes Martinot, which delivered a less exquisite shiver but had a proper keyboard that made it much easier to play. (Not many musicians, it turned out, were resourceful at producing music out of thin air.) In 1974, Rozsa himself declared the theremin passe, a “lost instrument,” no doubt increasing its romantic cachet. The theremin appeared to be one of those fads that flare up brilliantly for a considerable time, then sputter into extinction.

But wait! In the final years of the twentieth century, mysteriously and unexpectedly, it came slithering back; by 2000, it was all the rage again, not only in concert music but in pop and performance art, with thousands of new theremins being made each year. It even had a poetics: Albert Glinsky’s wonderfully titled *The Theremin: Ether Music and Espionage* (1994). Whenever the phenomenon was mentioned in the press, *Spellbound* was as well, for that was where the theremin first emerged in popular culture. National Public Radio’s piece on the theremin, aired in 2002, began with the spellbinding music from *Spellbound*, followed by Sara Fishko asking, “How could you not want to play the theremin after hearing that sound?” Indeed. And how could you not want to play *Spellbound* on one

of its various DVD releases? Suddenly the movie was back in vogue, propelled by its music and bringing a new generation under its spell. By now, the sound of *Spellbound* is nearly in the same class of audience recognition as *Vertigo* and *Psycho*. It has stood the test of time longer than either.