

# Ealing and Denham – golden years for British film and British film music

By Mark Fishlock

British film composers continue to punch well above their weight. David Arnold has another Bond score under his belt, while George Fenton, Dario Marianelli, Rolfe Kent and Mark Thomas have all had very busy years.

Several years ago, Stanley Myers helped opened doors for Hans Zimmer and

following the success of 'Rain Man' in 1988, the former Buggles synth man decamped to Hollywood and proceeded to offer a leg-up to a number of British composers, including Harry and Rupert Gregson-Williams, John Powell, and Nick Glennie-Smith.



George Auric and Ernest Irving

Armstrong ... the list goes on.

While British composers hold their own against their American counterparts, the British film industry itself ducks in and out of rude health, frequently confounding those who announce its demise.

There are the golden periods,

such as the gritty urban dramas of the sixties and the self-confidence of the early eighties when 'Chariots of Fire' scriptwriter Colin Welland confidently announced to the Oscars audience that "the British are coming". Hollywood patted the old country on the head and got on with making blockbusters.

Another golden age of British cinema was the 1940s and two studios that generate particularly moist-eyed reverence of film enthusiasts are Ealing and Denham.

This period arguably began in 1938 when Michael Balcon took over as Head of Production at Ealing and lasted until the mid fifties, by which time the studio had turned out British masterpieces such as 'The Ladykillers', 'Passport to Pimlico' and 'The Lavender Hill Mob'.

Balcon gave special attention to the music commissioned for Ealing productions. Up to this point a great deal of music for British films had been provided by big bands of the time, who although accomplished, were not able to tackle the breadth of dramatic possibilities offered by movies.

Balcon understood the value of a good score and with Ealing's musical director Ernest Irving he set about bringing major figures from Britain's musical establishment into the world of films.



Producer Sidney Cole, George Auric and the director Alberto Cavalcanti at Ealing during the making of 'Dead of Night'

Then there's Rachel Portman, Trevor Jones, Patrick Doyle, Anne Dudley, Alex Heffes, Debbie Wiseman, Stephen Warbeck, Barrington Pheloung, Ed Shearmur, Craig



Arthur Bliss (centre) with Muir Mathieson and concert pianist Eileen Joyce

Down the road at Alexander Korda's Denham Studios, music director Muir Mathieson had already persuaded Arthur Bliss to score 'Things to Come', a film based on a novel by H.G. Wells and remarkably, if not altogether successfully, directed by the author.

Irving pulled off a coup for Ealing by securing the talents of Ralph Vaughan Williams and William Walton for '49th Parallel' and 'Henry V' respectively, while John Ireland made his first venture into film music for the west London studio, scoring 'The Overlanders' in 1946. As a composer, Irving also has a special place in British movie history, having scored two of the best-loved Ealing comedies, 'Whisky Galore' and 'Kind Hearts and Coronets'.

Another composer closely associated with Ealing Studios is George Auric. A child prodigy, Auric was born in Languedoc-Roussillon and studied under Vincent D'Indy at the Paris Conservatoire. He was a friend of Eric Satie and also a member of a group of composers known as Les Six, which included Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Arthur Honegger, Germaine Tailleferre and Louis Durey.

Auric got to know the playwright Jean Cocteau and set a number of his works to music. When Cocteau moved into movies, Auric followed. He wrote the music for many French films, including Cocteau's 'The Blood of a Poet' and 'La Belle et la Bête', before crossing the Channel to become the resident composer at Ealing.

It is ironic that the music for some of the most quintessentially

English films of all time - 'Passport to Pimlico', 'The Titfield Thunderbolt' and 'The Lavender Hill Mob' - is written by a Frenchman.

As well as lighter scores for the Ealing Comedies, Auric also composed the music for the horror movie 'Dead of Night', which has been likened by critics to Richard Strauss and Stravinsky. He also scored the Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn classic 'Roman Holiday', as well as the French thriller 'Wages of Fear' starring Yves Montand.

When he gave up writing film music, Auric returned to France to become director of the Paris Opera and was also chairman of SACEM from 1954 to 1977.

Another stalwart of Ealing was Richard Addinsell. Educated at the Royal College of Music (although he left without formal qualifications), Addinsell was one of Britain's most versatile film composers. He was equally accomplished writing music



William Walton, conductor John Hollingsworth and music assistant Marcus Dods at Denham

for historical drama ('Beau Brummel'), thrillers ('Gaslight'), contemporary drama ('Love on the Dole') and comedy ('The Prince and the Showgirl').

His most outstanding work is generally regarded to be the *Warsaw Concerto*, which featured in the 1941 film 'Dangerous Moonlight'. The producers wanted something in the style of Rachmaninov, but after a failed attempt to persuade the great

Russian composer to write it himself, Addinsell and his orchestrator Roy Douglas came up with a spectacular piece for piano and orchestra. It appears throughout the film and is heard almost in full during a concert sequence at the end.

Addinsell worked with director David Lean on 'Blithe Spirit' and also 'The Passionate Friends', a 1949 film based on a novel by H.G.Wells. The score was performed by the Philharmonia Orchestra of London and conducted by Muir Mathieson.

Also a former student of the Royal College, Mathieson was first signed by Alexander Korda as musical director in 1934. At Denham and later as MD for the Rank Organisation, Mathieson conducted virtually every classic British film score until the late fifties. It has been said that he has more screen credits than any other figure in British film history. The movie database IMDB lists no fewer than 450 since Mathieson was assistant musical director on 'The Private Life of Henry VIII', the film that provided the impetus for Korda's grand project at Denham.

Like Ernest Irving, Mathieson brought leading composers of the day to cinema, with the first forays into film by Arnold Bax and Malcolm Arnold the result of commissions by Mathieson. Arthur Bliss went on to score a number of films, including 'Men of Two Worlds', also made at Denham in 1945.

Benjamin Frankel was one of the busiest film composers of the forties and fifties and at his peak was said to be the highest paid in Britain. Between 1944 and 1957 he wrote some 70 scores including 'The Seventh Veil'

and 'Footsteps in the Fog'.

Demands on Frankel by the film studios limited the time he was able to devote to his concert work and in 1957 Frankel moved to Switzerland, largely in order to have the seclusion to concentrate on his non-commercial composition.

While only writing 10 film scores in the 15 years from 1958 until his death in 1973 - including 'Battle of the Bulge' for which he was nominated for a Golden Globe - Frankel did complete eight symphonies, the opera *Marching Song* as well as a great many other concert works.

He returned to Denham in 1972, where the Buckinghamshire village was the venue for the wedding of Frankel to his third wife Xenia. By this time, Korda's vast Art Deco complex was already in ruins and little more than five years away from being demolished altogether.

Ealing Studios have fared better. They were bought by the BBC in 1959 and many episodes of 'Colditz', 'Dr Who' and 'Quatermass' were produced there. The National Film and Television School bought the studios in 1995, before ownership passed to a group dedicated to returning it to the centre stage of British film production. Features that have since been worked on at Ealing include 'Notting Hill', 'Shaun of the Dead' and another remake of 'The Importance of Being Earnest'.

British composer Charlie Mole wrote the score for the 2000 version, which starred Judi Dench as Lady Bracknell. Edith Evans played Oscar Wilde's most enduring female character in the 1952 film, while in a neat completion of the circle, the composer was Benjamin Frankel.



Richard Addinsell (right) with director David Lean during the recording of the score for 'Passionate Friends'



Benjamin Frankel (right) with John Hollingsworth