'Don't Be Scared About Going Low-Brow': Vernon Duke and the American Musical on Screen (Revised version submitted February 2010)

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A contemporary of Johnny Mercer, Russian-born poet, composer, and pianist, Vladimir Dukelsky (1903-1969), wrote his first ballet at age eight, gained note as one of Serge Diaghilev's favorite classical composers, and counted Prokofiev and Horowitz among his close friends and colleagues. But there was another side to Dukelsky's genius – a side named Vernon Duke – whose rise to fame in the United States was linked to names like Gershwin and Ziegfeld, and to the scores of the Follies and Broadway productions that brought us "Taking a Chance on Love," "Autumn in New York," and "April in Paris" – all of which became classic tunes in motion picture musicals.

Following Gershwin's urging to "Try to write some real popular tunes--and don't be scared about going low-brow. That will open you up,"[1] Duke's career straddled two worlds – classical and popular – divided for decades between composing songs for stage and screen under one name, and penning symphonies, oratorios, and chorales under the other. While not as well known as other figures of his ilk, notably Mercer, Oscar Levant, Virgil Thomson, and Jose Iturbi, Vernon Duke exemplifies American Music at its fullest and in its many media incarnations.

Even in his youth, long before George Gershwin ever referred to him as "Dukie," Dukelsky's musical vision was bold and expansive. He charmed instructors with his bravado, and explored the sonic world beyond the boundaries of his respectable Kiev Conservatory training – causing his grandmother to lament:

> You undoubtedly have talent, but your musical style is already polluted with that horrible futuristic hogwash; all those Rebikovs, Scriabins, Debussys, and, God forbid, Schoenbergs. Ugh![2]

When his mentor, Conservatory director Reinhold Gliere, chided him and one of his fellows over their infatuation with modernist French composers, the young Dukelsky retorted:

> You and Glazunov have said all that could be said in Russian; we shall have to learn another language![3]

And by 1920, the language that spoke to the young Dukelsky was the language of jazz. Not just any jazz – George Gershwin's jazz. Gershwin's inventiveness and musicality captivated Dukelsky, with its boldness and innovative rhythms, and soon, Dukelsky was wrestling with efforts to make the new medium his own. He recalled that it was "like playing golf, after reading too much Schopenhauer."[4] His first attempts at writing jazz were also his first forays into another

musical persona – all signed, at first, "Ivan Ivin," and later, "Alan Lane."[5] Glimpses of changes yet to come.

In the ensuing two years, Dukelsky would travel to America, write and play for vaudeville and burlesque –as well as for Artur Rubenstein – and make his way to Paris, where he would finally receive notice as a composer, writing for Diaghliev. In a review of the ballet, Poulenc lauded:

> This score, so new and so alive, seems to me, next to the gigantic productions of Stravinsky's, one of the most significant works of modern music, and Russian music in particular.[6]

And as Dukelsky came into his own, so did Vernon Duke. In 1926, Duke was "born" – suggested by Gershwin as a suitable *nom de plume* that would allow Dukelsky to publish outside his contract with Asherberg, Hopwood & Crew – his first song: "Try a Little Kiss." As the years, and the songs, passed, the Duke handle "stuck" as the composer's official name, and in March of 1939, his *legal* name, with Dukelsky relegated to the status of pseudonym, employed only for classical compositions, less recognized by the listening public. Duke's popular music animated the performance world, from the Ziegfeld Follies to the Silver Screen, until – and beyond – his death in 1969.

Short of patience with characterizations of his career as "Janus-faced," or which referred to him as "the Jekyll and Hyde of music," Duke expressed both irritation and amusement at critics, producers and others in the music world that had difficulty reconciling the two poles of his career. He wrote:

> The critical boys seem to think there is something monstrous and unnatural about a composer writing two different kinds of music under two different names. It annoys them not to be able to say that I go slumming when writing jazz, and it annoys them still more not to be able to classify me as an ambitious peasant gazing at the musical Olympus behind a Lindy's herring.[7]

Duke and Dukelsky were, indeed, two very distinct composers and personas, and it was this that set him apart from other composers of his era who crossed genre boundaries. There was not a shred of jazz to be found in Dukelsky's serious music, and no symphonic pretensions in Duke's musical comedy -- unlike Gershwin, Weill, or Bernstein, who, as he pointed out, were all easily recognizable, whether high-brow or low – but regardless of the genre, Duke and Dukelsky composed for decades with the same boldness and innovation that drew his grandmother's ire and Poulenc's praise in his youth.

So now, let's take a look at some of Duke's "low brow" contributions to the scores of American movie musicals ….

The Goldwyn Follies (1938)

While the first of Duke's musical motion picture credits are found in the 1930 films *The Sap from Syracuse*, *Follow the Leader*, and *Hold Your Man*,, it was in 1937 that Duke's career as a composer for film experienced a significant shift, again linked to George Gershwin. Gershwin's untimely death, in the midst of working on *The Goldwyn Follies*, left his friend despondent, but also left an opening working for one of the most influential, and temperamental, producers in Hollywood – the legendary Samuel Goldwyn. " … You won't get a firm footwork on the film industry until you've worked for me," Goldwyn told Duke after Ira Gershwin recommended him as his brother's replacement, and the composer soon found himself surrounded by the likes of Balanchine, the Ritz Brothers, Adolphe Menjou, and Edgar Bergen.[8]

Picking up work on the soundtrack where Gershwin had ended, Duke faithfully reconstructed Gershwin's "Love is Here to Stay" from a bit of lead sheet, and wrote two songs of his own, "Spring Again," sung by Kenny Baker, and "I'm Not Complaining," which was later dropped from the film. He also wrote two ballets – "Romeo and Juliet," and "Water Nymph" – and anonymously supplied the lyrics for the three existing Gershwin songs. A full seven-and-a-half minutes long, "Water Nymph" employs classical themes of folk mythology, as dancer Vera Zorina emerges from a mirror-like pool. Duke artfully weaves Gershwin's musical voice throughout the number, with phrasings and rhythms reminiscent of the early tunes that had captivated Duke and drawn him to the world of popular jazz.

In an entirely different vein, "Romeo and Juliet" reflects Duke's own innovative spirit, pitting the serious, classical strings of the Capulets against the hot jazz reeds of the Montagues. The families battle, the lovers lyrically couple, and in an unconventional resolution, strings, brass, woodwinds, and reeds all join in a frenzied celebration, as the lovers rise at the end, the families reconcile, and everyone lives, well, happily ever after.

Balancing Identities

Never forgetting his musical fraternal twin, Duke's Hollywood earnings were used, in part, to support Dukelsky. When Hugh Ross, director of the New York Schola Cantorum offered to program his *St. Petersburg* cantata, but lacked funding for orchestral accompaniment, Duke provided enough support to pay for the services of the New York Philharmonic for an evening and three rehearsals.[9] The *St. Petersburg* premiere, along with that of his piano concerto, *Dedicacies*, made 1937-'38 a very good year for Dukelsky, as well as Duke. In support of these efforts, music writer Nicholas Slonimsky wrote to Duke:

> While I'm always glad to read in Winchell's column that you are quite the dandy ... and am delighted to watch your triumphant progress along the combined Broadway and Hollywood boulevard(s), I feel that your primary importance lies in what, for lack of a better term, is called serious music …[10]

but the reviews were mounting in favor of Duke's popular fare.

Critic Isaac Goldberg wrote:

> The man has an individual gift that makes him stand out in the company of those who have made our musical comedy something more than the dull routine it once used to be … if he is not allowed to find his place in contemporary revues, musical comedies, and even comic opera, the loss will be, to us and to him, artistically considerable.[11]

And of course, as music publisher and 'dean' of Tin Pan Alley, Max Dreyfus, was quick to remind him, it was fine to be a 'class' composer, but turning out song hits was infinitely healthier.[12]

Cabin in the Sky (1943)

Both Duke and Dukelsky continued to be productive over the next several years, on both stage and screen. They had a banner year, though, in 1943, when the Broadway musical, *Cabin in the Sky*, which Duke had scored, was adapted for the Silver Screen. At the same time, the theatrical musical *Dancing in the Streets*, which featured his score, was premiering at Boston's Schubert Theatre, and Dukelsky's Violin Concerto also saw its Boston premiere.

Although Duke was serving in the armed forces during MGM's production of *Cabin in the Sky*, three of his songs from the stage musical were retained (Harold Arlen supplied the rest of the film's music): "Honey in the Honeycomb," "Taking a Chance on Love," and "Cabin in the Sky."

Initially, the composer was reluctant to take on a project like *Cabin*, wary of attempting to score an African-American story. But as Duke recounts, when he asked his maid, Florence, if she thought he could write a "colored" show, she was encouraging: You sure could, Mist' Duke. Why, you is the music-writingest gemmun I ever see!"[13] With Johnny Latouche as lyricist, Duke wrote one of the most well-known songs of his career – the song that saved the stage production of *Cabin in the Sky* from closing before it opened – "Taking a Chance on Love." Based on an earlier melody, written by Duke and Ted Fetter, the song was an immediate hit with the show's star, Ethel Waters, who exclaimed "Mister, our troubles are over. That's it!"[14] "Taking a Chance …" was a showstopper on stage, and a hit on the Big Screen. Ethel Waters reprised her stage role in the film, singing the number while Bill Bailey (the brother of singer Pearl Bailey) performed a tap dance routine. During the dance sequence, Bailey performed the screen debut of the moonwalk –made popular worldwide forty years later by Michael Jackson.

"Taking a Chance on Love" is one of the most oft-recorded songs in the Duke songbook. It was recorded by the Benny Goodman Orchestra in 1940 with Cootie Williams on trumpet, and vocalist Helen Forrest, but didn't reach the pop charts until the release of the film. It then spent 14 weeks on the charts, including three weeks in first place. Another 1940 recording of "Taking a Chance …," this time by Sammy Kaye and His Orchestra, also reached the charts that same year, peaking at #13.[15]

April in Paris (1952)

Another of Duke's most popular tunes took twenty years to make the transition from Broadway to Hollywood. "April in Paris," originally written for the 1932 Broadway revue, *Walk a Little Faster*, netted praise in its Boston stage premiere, flopped in New York, and spent nine weeks on the pop charts, before making its way to the Silver Screen, in the film of the same name, starring Doris Day, Ray Bolger, and Claude Dauphin in 1952.

The title song had a somewhat inauspicious beginning on the stage, having been inserted into the revue's score during the show's Boston tryouts. *Walk a Little Faster* was Duke's first complete score for a show – a big, lavish revue, scored for jazz orchestra, rather than the standard theatrical musicians. Producer Courtney Burr had designed the revue to launch scene designer Boris Aronson, who had just returned from Paris. When Aronson crafted a Left Bank set in need of a number, Duke and his cronies, in need of a drink, found themselves at West Side Tony's, quipping about Paris in the spring – "Oh, to be in Paris, now that April's here!" With that wistful comment, as Duke's autobiography relates, "the rest went off in true Class-B musical-picture fashion:" the composer exclaimed "April in Paris …What a title! My kingdom for a piano!" and was immediately led to a creaky old upright on the bistro's second floor, where the song's immortal refrain was born.[16] A week later, "Yip" Harburg wrote the lyrics, and the song took its place in the revue.

Critics, both past and present, applauded the blending of Duke's bold, sophisticated melody, marked by sudden key changes, with Harburg's phrasing and "muted rhymes" in "April in Paris." Their "melodramatic lyrics and urbane music" was a departure from the norm, both melodically and harmonically – the reverse of Rodgers and Hart's popular style – and created a haunting, nostalgic mood that touched audiences and critics alike.[17] Duke was convinced that the song would "make the show," but Harburg never shared his confidence. Following the number's cool reception in New York, he chided Duke: "I told you 'April in Paris' might be alright for decadent Europeans, but not for this country – yet, you wouldn't listen!"[18] Isaac Goldberg later came to the song's defense, maintaining that "'April in Paris' is one of the finest musical compositions that has ever graced an American production."[19]

The song joined Duke's other numbers – "That's What Makes Paris Paree," "Give Me Your Lips," "The Place You Hold in My Heart," and other tunes (with lyrics by Sammy Cahn) – for its cinematic debut in 1952, in the story of mistaken identity, as a chorus girl receives an invitation to Paris intended for Miss Ethel Barrymore. Once again, the tune enjoyed popularity, in its new rendition by Doris Day, but the film, itself, was a flop.

She's Working Her Way through College (1952)

Nineteen fifty-two marked the premiere of another well-known film scored, largely, by Duke – *She's Working Her Way through College* – also the story of a chorus girl, with Virginia Mayo playing Angela Gardner, or "Hot Garters Gertie," and a young Ronald Reagan as her encouraging, and censured, professor. Based on a screen play by James Thurber and Elliott Nugent, the film featured several of Duke's numbers, with lyrics, again, by Sammy Cahn, as well as songs by Harry Warren and Al Dubin, and the title song, "She's Working Her Way through

College," by Richard Whiting and Johnny Mercer. For Duke, the film suffered by comparison to *April in Paris* – referring to it merely as "a poor remake of *The Male Animal"*— substituting the scandal of burlesque for the earlier film's scandal of suspected communism.

In the bigger picture of Duke's popular music career, the 1950s and '60s were a time of change and reflection. His acclaimed contributions to *April in Paris* had all been composed twenty years prior, he scored several stage shows that closed prematurely or in previews (*The Pink Jungle, Zenda, Two's Company),* and the score for *She's Working Her Way through College* would be his last *new* contribution to motion picture soundtracks. Duke's writing attentions turned to projects of reflection and generativity, in the form of his autobiography, *Passport to Paris* (1955), and *Listen Here! A Critical Essay on Music Depreciation* (1963). Interestingly, in the latter, the composer points to the years between 1924 -1954 as "the good years in American music," perhaps hinting at a waning enthusiasm for the popular music environment that influenced his own music writing.[20] While critics have cited these last two decades as the decline of Duke's career – and strictly speaking, rightly so – a closer look at *She's Working Her Way through College* may have something else to tell us.

Duke's early collegiate numbers in the film, "All Hail to Midwest State" and the "Midwest Fight Song" help to create color and context for the film's story, but other songs in the score bring us back to Duke's boldness, playfulness, and innovation. In "I'll Be Loving You," Mayo and her co-star Gene Nelson "jive up" "Midwest Fight Song" as a number for their planned musical revue. Their upbeat rewrite to a romantic song-and-dance number flies in the face of the traditions of the ultra-conservative university. Likewise, Duke's cool jazz piano, sometimes bubbling underneath the playfully romantic lyrics, other times, simmering around them, turns the conservative, straight-ahead melody of the "Fight Song" on its ear.

Even more significant, as we'll see in a moment, is the show-stopping finale, combining three of Duke's jazz numbers into a single revue scene: "The Stuff that Dreams are Made Of," "Love is Still for Free," and "(You've Got to) Give 'em What They Want." Here, Duke and Cahn begin by playing with Whiting and Mercer's title song. "She's Working her Way through College, blended with the jive of "(You've Got to) Give 'em What They Want," now becomes a jazzy theatrical parody of the film's storyline:

> We're doin' a show at college
> to prove you don't need knowledge;
> Education is not what it's cracked up to be

As the on-screen stage show segues into "The Stuff that Dreams are Made Of," a routine performed by Mayo and Nelson as Cleopatra and Mark Antony, and then again, into "Love is Still for Free," where Mayo parodies Madame du Barry, the infamous last mistress of Louis XV, Duke's music greets the audience with a wink and a smile, drawing together many of the elements and influences that shaped his career. Gershwin … Ziegfeld … Debussy … burlesque … Constantinople … Paris … Not an epic "Duke, as he's never composed before," but rather, Duke, in so many of the taken-for-granted ways audiences have always known him.

Conclusion

… And while audiences of contemporary film and television may not know the name, Vernon Duke, they unquestionably know his music. The composer's legacy stretches far and wide, as his most beloved tunes are re-recorded, re-invented, and re-scored time and again. In addition to countless recordings by artists such as Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Zoot Sims, Barbra Streisand, and Rod Stewart, songs such as "April in Paris," "Taking a Chance on Love," "Autumn in New York," and "I Can't Get Started" have been featured in films ranging from *The Last of the Blonde Bombshells* (2000) to *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and numerous television shows. "Taking a Chance on Love" charted in 2004, more than sixty years after it was first heard on stage, when Jane Monheit's album of the same name reached number one on Billboard's jazz chart and then, reached into the top 100 on the pop chart. Similarly, Count Basie's 1955 recording of "April in Paris" was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame. While the artists, productions, and interpretations of Duke's songs change over the decades, each harkens back to years in American popular music which, while maybe not the only "good years in American music," as Duke saw them, were years of promise, innovation, and excitement -- years when a Russian-born classical composer could write songs that would become mainstays of American popular musical heritage.

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[1] Duke. 1955, 90
[2] Duke. 1955, 39
[3] Duke. 1955, 46
[4] Duke. 1955, 77
[5] Duke. 1955, 78
[6] Duke. 1955, 152-3
[7] Duke. 1955, 3-4
[8] Duke. 1955, 355
[9] Duke. 1955, 359-60
[10] Duke. 1955, 360
[11] Duke. 1955, 277
[12] Duke. 1955, 278
[13] Duke. 1955, 383.
[14] Duke. 1955, 391
[15] According to WICN Public Radio archives
[16] Duke. 1955, 268.
[17] Furia. 206.
[18] Duke. 1955, 276
[19] Duke. 1955, 277
[20] Duke. 1963, 9