

The Functional Music of Gail Kubik: Catalyst for the Concert Hall

Alfred W. Cochran

From the late 1930s through the mid-1960s, three composers for the concert hall profoundly influenced American music and exerted a strong influence upon music in the cinema—Virgil Thomson (1896–1989), Aaron Copland (1900–90), and Gail Kubik (1914–84). Each won the Pulitzer prize in music, and two of those awards, Thomson’s and Kubik’s, were derived from their film scores.¹ Moreover, both Thomson and Copland earned Academy Awards for their film work.² All three men drew concert works from their film scores, but only Kubik used functional music as a significant progenitor for other pieces destined for the concert hall. An examination of his oeuvre shows an affinity for such transformations. More common, perhaps, was the practice of composers using ideas derived from previously composed works when writing a film score. In Kubik’s case, the opposite was true; his work for radio, films, and television provided the impetus for a significant amount of his nonfunctional music, including chamber pieces and orchestral works of large and small dimension. This earned well-deserved praise, including that of Nadia Boulanger, who was Kubik’s teacher and steadfast friend.

Kubik was a prodigy—the youngest person to earn a full scholarship to the Eastman School of Music, its youngest graduate (completing requirements in both violin and composition), a college teacher at nineteen, the MacDowell Colony’s youngest Fellow, and the youngest student admitted to Harvard University’s doctoral program in music. In 1940, he left the faculty of Teachers College, Columbia University and became staff composer and music program advisor for NBC. There he discovered that he could write media music with ease and assurance. Kubik knew his craft, had

¹Thomson’s *Louisiana Story* (1948) earned his award, while Kubik’s was given for *Symphony Concertante* (1951), which was derived from his film score *C-Man* (1949).

²Kubik composed music for the Academy-Award-winning cartoon *Gerald McBoing Boing*, but did not receive an Oscar. At the time, the Academy did not award a prize for best cartoon score.

an intuitive dramatic sense, and was quick and reliable—important attributes for a composer of functional music. Early in 1941, when his contract with NBC expired, Kubik left the network with a large collection of musical ideas derived from his radio scores. He recalled,

So I wound up with that notebook of sketches, and I have written I don't know how many big, abstract movements that are based in the essential idea on something that I wrote in those seventeen weeks.³

One of Kubik's orchestral pieces, *Music for Dancing* (1952), was derived from these radio scores. The piece was in four movements and he described it as "a kind of *Gebrauchsmusik* intended mainly for the non-professional orchestra."

While at NBC, Kubik accepted an offer for his first film score, George Gercke's *Men and Ships* (1941), from which he derived the orchestral composition *Bachata: Cuban Dance Piece* (1947), which was published by Southern Music. Kubik's score for this outstanding documentary earned him immediate critical attention, an invitation to conduct the NBC Symphony Orchestra in the work's radio premiere, and an offer to write a second film score, *The World at War* (1942). That film and its music also garnered acclaim in the press and led to Kubik being hired by the Office of War Information, which was interested in producing wartime documentary films. While there, Kubik composed a number of film scores and supervised other notable composers, including Virgil Thomson, Morton Gould, and Paul Creston. One of his OWI scores was *Paratroops* (1942), from which he derived a suite of the same title. His last assignment for the governmental agency was *Dover (Twenty-One Miles)*; portions of it, along with *The World at War*, subsequently made their way into his Third Symphony (1957).

In 1943, Kubik joined the Army Air Corps and was assigned to the First Motion Picture Unit in Culver City, California. There he wrote several scores, including one for the film considered by many to be the finest wartime documentary, William Wyler's *The Memphis Belle* (1944). From this score, he drew *The Memphis Belle: A War Time Episode for Narrator and Orchestra* and a movement for his piano suite *Celebrations and Epilogue* (1950) entitled "Four Planes, Forty Men: An Elegy." Later in 1944, he scored *Air Pattern Pacific* and refashioned parts of it in the Third Symphony. His last military

³Gail Kubik, "Functional Music," interview with Ralph Titus, Manhattan, Kansas, 1979.

assignment was again for Wyler, the documentary film *Thunderbolt* (1945), from which he drew an overture of the same name in 1952.

After the war, Kubik scored a drama, *C-Man* (1949), for Laurel Films in New York City. This caught the attention of musicologist Frederick Sternfeld, who contacted Kubik, asked to study the music, and wrote about it in *Hollywood Quarterly* and *Musical Quarterly*. Soon thereafter, conductor Thomas Scherman of the Little Orchestra Society commissioned Kubik to write a piece featuring three of the society's soloists on viola, trumpet, and piano. By chance, the *C-Man* score featured these instruments prominently, and Kubik transformed that music into his *Symphony Concertante* (1951), which earned him the Pulitzer prize. It also provided the impetus for an article by Everett Helm that discussed this unique metamorphosis from cinema to concert hall.⁴ He lauded Kubik's achievement, saying,

Of course, the function of the film industry is not to commission scores that may later be transformed into symphonies. When more film scores are *capable* of such transformation, however, the industry will have made a very definite advance in quality—assuming that such an advance is considered desirable. . . . The principal conclusion to be drawn from the Kubik example may well be that, despite all differences of technique, approach, and underlying philosophy, effective film music and good abstract music should have—can have—much more in common than is considered possible, judging by the current product.⁵

Meanwhile, Kubik journeyed to Hollywood where he met John Hubley of United Productions of America, Columbia Pictures' forward-looking cartoon unit. That association yielded Kubik's extraordinary scores for *The Miner's Daughter* (1950) and the Dr. Seuss cartoon *Gerald McBoing Boing* (1950). *McBoing Boing* won the Academy Award for best cartoon in 1951, and from this work Kubik derived his successful concert piece *Gerald McBoing Boing: A Children's Tale*, which was published by Southern Music. *The Miner's Daughter* was later refashioned as *Boston Baked Beans: An Opera Piccola* and was published by Chappell.

Kubik's score for *Gerald McBoing Boing* received well-deserved critical attention when an issue of *Film Music Notes*, penned by Frederick Sternfeld,

⁴Everett Helm, "Gail Kubik's Score for *C-Man*: The Sequel," *The Quarterly of Film, Radio, and Television* 9 no. 3 (Spring 1955): 263–82.

⁵*Ibid.*, 282.

was devoted to it.⁶ Transforming the music into a concert piece was easy for Kubik, as the cartoon score was cast in a straightforward five-part form that had a high degree of internal unity.⁷

Kubik also won the *Prix de Rome* in 1950 and left that fall for the American Academy in the Eternal City. Before departing, he gave an interview and spoke about how his cinema music helped him win the prize. The article read,

Kubik says he did it by submitting the usual cluster of formal opuses, but characteristically, he was most jubilant about the judges' approval of his most recent film score. Since his AAF days of scoring wartime documentaries he has been enthusiastic about the musical potentials of the films, and feels the fact that a movie score has now been accepted by a board of judges as valid evidence of a composer's gifts confirms his own confidence in the cinema medium.⁸

Kubik's success with movie scores was not accidental; he devoted the same hard work and energy to them as to his other compositions. The interview continues,

“I don't agree that a serious composer should reserve his finest ideas for his own writings and merely turn out pot-boilers for pictures,” Kubik declares. “You can't lead two separate lives as a creative artist. The lines may start out parallel, but inevitably they will converge and ultimately a composer will not be able to tell whether the Jekyll or the Hyde in him is writing his music.

“The only safe way is to give the very best he has to whatever his job may be at the moment. It is quite as challenging to turn out a piece of film music you can be proud of as to write a sonata; there are limiting factors to any form of music, and a person can approach the special problems of film composing with quite as much artistic integrity and satisfaction as he can those of any other form.”⁹

Such a philosophy explains, in part, why Kubik was able to make the difficult transformation of music for movie scores to music for the concert

⁶See *Film Music Notes* 10, no. 11 (November-December 1950).

⁷See this author's “The Spear of Cephalus,” *Indiana Theory Review* 11 (1990) for a discussion of this music.

⁸Mildred Norton, *Los Angeles Daily News*, 21 March 1950.

⁹*Ibid.*

hall. Despite obvious, surface-level differences, quality and substance were already present in the cinema music. He possessed a special ability to use that seminal material in a new and independent manner.

Not long after arriving in Rome, Kubik returned to New York to score the United Artists release *Two Gals and a Guy* (1951) for Laurel Films. Afterwards, he went back to Rome, where his next film work awaited—a cartoon for Philip Stapp and Madeleine Films (Paris) entitled *Transatlantic: A Short Cut Through History* (1952). This remarkable film is stylistically similar to United Productions of America's forward-looking work, and Kubik's music is especially effective. The film contains neither dialogue nor narration, which increases the music's importance. Kubik met this challenge expertly. He set the film using five sections of music, each of which has internal logic and coherence related to the film's story line. Kubik was pleased with the result, and the film won top honors at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1954. The nature of the music made it ideal for refashioning into a concert piece. Kubik used four of its five sections to create *Divertimento I*, which was published by MCA Music and recorded by Contemporary Records. In liner notes, Nadia Boulanger mentioned Kubik's experience writing for the cinema and added, "He succeeded in finding freedom, not in spite of, but very likely on account of this exacting discipline."¹⁰ She continued,

We would advise [the listener] to surrender without reservation to the music itself, to dedicate himself simply to the pleasure of hearing. He will discover in time the quality of imagination as the mark of the music's style, the constant renewal of invention revealed in these pages. He will bethink himself of their fundamental characteristics: fantasy, strength, gaiety, wit, but lyricism, dreaming power, seriousness too, directed by an evident technical mastery, partly intuitive, partly acquired. Each audition will disclose new details: meaningful, savoury, ingenious, amusing, expressive—all conspiring to bring to light the whole in its unity.

The perspicacious listener will also perceive that such naturalness has nothing to do with any form of *laissez aller*, but presupposes a keen *esprit de finesse*, and the faculty of discrimination and economy. . . .

These . . . are pages of great and meditative poetry. To make music of this depth with such skill and wit shows real understanding and taste. . . .

¹⁰Nadia Boulanger, liner notes for *Gail Kubik: Divertimenti Nos. I & II/Sonatinas for Piano & for Clarinet and Piano*, Ingolf Dahl, William O. Smith, and others, Contemporary Composers Series M6013 (1964).

No riddle to decipher. . . . The real enigmas are always: how can so much be done with so little.¹¹

Kubik was always interested in getting the most from his musical ideas, which partially accounts for his penchant for reshaping media works into concert pieces. In an address to the 1959 Venice Film Conference entitled “The Functional Difference Between Film and Abstract Music,” he mentioned such transformations, including that of *Transatlantic* into *Divertimento I*:

These examples would seem to indicate that much film music, far from being—as some film producers, directors, and critics would like it to be—innocuous perfume, something to be “felt” but not heard, is instead pregnant with life, with the strong possibility of containing other and different musical forms and shapes to help illuminate our interior life.

1955 was a busy year for Kubik. He returned to the United States after a five-year hiatus to score Paramount Pictures’ taut crime drama *The Desperate Hours*—Humphrey Bogart’s last movie. Kubik’s music for the William Wyler film was extraordinarily effective, though quite modern by Hollywood standards. Skeptical at first of their new composer, Paramount’s music staff was soon won over by Kubik’s strident score. His friend Miklos Rozsa told him, “If you get away with this, you will be the greatest man in Hollywood,”¹² and it appeared that Kubik was set to earn an Academy Award with his trenchant music. At trial screenings of the picture, audiences gave the music unprecedented praise, but Paramount’s head, Don Hartman, was unimpressed. He told Wyler, “Willy, we’ve never had music like this and we don’t plan to start now.”¹³ David Raksin recalled the incident vividly:

The people at the studio didn’t understand what the hell Gail was doing. His style was much more acerbic than was usually accepted. When he did the score, all hell broke loose.¹⁴

The result was that most of the music was cut, robbing the film of the power and vigor the score provided. Amazingly, two years later, Paramount

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Miklos Rozsa, letter to the author, 24 July 1989.

¹³Kubik, “Functional Music.”

¹⁴David Raksin, interview with the author, 16 June 1989.

returned the music rights to Kubik—a rare gesture—and published, at their expense, a suite derived from the score, *Scenario for Orchestra* (1957). It is possible to get an inkling of the tension-laden atmosphere he conceived and created for the movie by comparing the musically barren film, as released, with a recording of *Scenario*. Kubik’s music is supercharged—powerful and propulsive—and forward-looking. A description from Paramount’s publicity brochure for *Scenario* reads,

Savage in its use of dissonance and of percussive effects, intriguing in its experimentation with novel sonorities . . . and its Webern-like melodic fragmentation . . . , yet tender and lyrical . . . , the Kubik *Scenario for Orchestra* is a large-scale symphonic work that is, like so much of Kubik’s music, powerful and compelling in its dramatic effect.¹⁵

The unhappy events associated with the reception of *The Desperate Hours* soured Kubik on cinema work, and he vowed never to return to what he called “the cesspool of Hollywood.”¹⁶ He was hurt by Wyler’s bowing to studio pressure in removing his music from the film, but he soon set to work on commissions from the Louisville Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic. These became his second and third symphonies. Symphony No. 2 in F (1956), written for Louisville, was nominated for a Pulitzer prize and was published by G. Ricordi. The third movement reveals its derivation from a section of *Transatlantic: A Short Cut Through History* not used in *Divertimento I*. The music is quirky, though appealing, and garnered special attention, including that of Kubik’s friend, poet Theodore Roethke, who wrote:

We listened to the symphony the other evening, and enjoyed it thoroughly. . . . What we enjoyed most, however, may surprise you: the third movement—witty, imaginative, and thoroughly delightful.¹⁷

How amazing that a movement from a symphony that earned a Pulitzer prize nomination was conceived in an avant-garde European cartoon!

¹⁵*Scenario for Orchestra*, publicity brochure from Paramount Music Corporation, New York (undated).

¹⁶Kubik, “Functional Music.”

¹⁷Theodore Roethke to Gail Kubik, letter of 30 August 1956. This letter is part of the Gail T. Kubik Collection, Hale Library, Special Collections Division, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.

Kubik's New York Philharmonic commission produced Symphony No. 3 (1957). It borrows even more heavily on ideas from his film scores than did its predecessor. Program notes from its premiere read:

In a practice for which there are many honorable precedents, Kubik identifies some materials of the present work as derived from certain earlier (film) scores. . . . In discussing this matter, Kubik says: "Whereas in the film score these tunes were at best 'bit players' contributing but to the mood and atmosphere of the total dramatic story, in the symphony they are leading characters occupying the center of the stage and acting out dramatic roles that are every bit as real to the composer as were the flesh and blood creations to the writers of these three documentary films." For completeness's sake, the sources may be identified as *Twenty-One Miles* and *Air Pattern Pacific* (both providing material heard in the slow movement) and *The World at War* (derivatives are heard in the finale).¹⁸

The critic for the *New York Times*, while not fond of the piece, commented on the music's transformation from cinema to concert hall, saying, "These 'bit players' turned 'leading characters,' as Mr. Kubik describes them, help to make this section the most rewarding of the work."¹⁹

As 1957 drew to a close, some of Kubik's friends in Hollywood urged him to return there. But Kubik had no desire to leave New York. He was still interested in functional music, however, and accepted a commission in early 1958 from CBS to score an episode of *The Twentieth Century*—his first work for television. The program was "Hiroshima," and it told the story of the dropping of the atomic bomb on that Japanese city in 1945. Choosing Kubik to write the music was easy for the network—who better than the acknowledged master of World War II documentary films? His music for this episode is a masterpiece of television scoring—bold, forward-looking, and incisive. It attracted immediate critical attention and led to his being offered another episode—*The Silent Sentinel* (1959), the story of the development and use of radar. The assignment posed problems for the composer, however, as radar makes no sound; he struggled with how to capture the idea musically and was successful in his efforts. Kubik's tightly-knit score fit the bill superbly, with a principal theme that functions like an *idée fixe*. It attracted immediate praise. His friend Joseph Machlis wrote him

¹⁸New York Philharmonic program notes of 28 February and 1 March 1957.

¹⁹Howard Taubman, "Music: A New Symphony," *New York Times*, 1 March 1957.

after seeing the program, “The music was very effective—it was a natural for you—radar and all. Incidentally, it also sounded good as music. Long live Sir Robert Watson-Watt and Gail Kubik!”²⁰ The commendation was echoed in a *New York Times* article, which said, “One observer praised especially Mr. Kubik’s music for *Silent Sentinel*, concerned with radar warning systems. It was exactly the sort of sound you imagine a radar station would make . . . if a radar station made sound.”²¹ The score provided the musical basis for a subsequent documentary series, *The Eisenhower Years* (1970), produced at Kansas State University for National Educational Radio.²² It also reappeared as a movement of his *Five Theatrical Sketches (Divertimento III)* (1971), for violin, violoncello, and piano, and as the first movement of his orchestral composition *Pastorale and Spring Valley Overture* (1972, revised 1973).

After completing *The Silent Sentinel* in 1959, Kubik again moved abroad. In 1962, he was engaged by Anatole de Grunwald to score the MGM-London film, *I Thank a Fool*. Kubik was reluctant to accept, but the producer was determined to hire him and offered extraordinary enticements. Even so, with the bitterness resulting from *The Desperate Hours* still troubling him, Kubik refused to sign a contract unless the studio relinquished its claim to the music rights. Amazingly, the studio waffled on the issue throughout the time he was composing the music and conducting the recording sessions with the London Symphony Orchestra. With the music “in the can,” the deadline approached for the final mix of the soundtrack. Kubik still refused to sign the contract, and the issue made its way to Hollywood and the MGM head. His decision was swift—the music was pulled from the film, and the MGM-London studio boss was fired for incurring the sizable losses from Kubik’s fee and the recording and production costs associated with the score. The music resurfaced as *Scenes for Orchestra* (1962), which was broadcast in the United States in 1968 but never published. Kubik called it “my most romantic work, in a neo-Romantic style but with a twentieth-century sound. . . . It’s music that I really love.”²³

²⁰Joseph Machlis to Gail Kubik, postcard of 22 March 1959. Watson-Watt (1892–1973) was a Scottish scientist and is one of the individuals credited with the invention of radar.

²¹John Briggs, “Aiding the Composer: Original Musical Scores Are Obtained for *Twentieth Century Series*,” *New York Times*, 12 April 1959.

²²Kubik called the music for this work *A Kansas Idyll*.

²³Kubik, “Functional Music.”

It is virtually unknown today, which is unfortunate, for it is an excellent score. Were it not for Kubik's obstinacy, it would have been heard.

Kubik's last transformation from cinema to concert hall involved a cartoon he scored in 1969, James Flora's *Leopold the See-Through Crumbpicker*, with animation by Gene Deitch. An unusual set of circumstances resulted in Kubik's delightful music not being used in the cartoon. However, it later resurfaced as a movement of *Five Theatrical Sketches (Divertimento III)* (1971).

A survey of Kubik's career in music shows that he regularly used his functional scores as the basis of subsequent concert pieces. Interestingly, he did not encourage others to follow his lead, saying, "Don't do that thinking that you're going to save time. It's twice as hard, it's ten times as hard, than to just write a new piece."²⁴ He continued, mentioning specifically the re-working of *C-Man* into *Symphony Concertante*:

If you take [sic] away the action on-screen, then many of the things that were happening in the orchestra made a very arbitrary kind of sense. In other words, they made no sense at all. No, that's the whole point about abstract music. It has the theatre written into it; the theatre is contained in the music itself. And you want that music to reveal something new the second time it's played, and the third, and the thirtieth. As a consequence, you have a music that is written to absolutely command all of your interest, whereas the functional piece, if it commands too much of your interest, it's not very good functional music. Because it begins to get in the way of the dialogue. A music that you start listening to with all of your interest obviously detracts from the film. It was just murder because the things that made the piece work as a functional score were precisely the things that would have ruined it as a concert piece.²⁵

Despite these statements, Kubik reworked his functional scores into concert music to good effect, with consistency and regularity. His success is directly related to his philosophy of composition and his dedication to his craft, which put functional music on the same level as his other works. He wrote,

Composers should live by composing. That is the thing they presumably know most about and do best. Certainly the best way for a composer to keep contact with all the facets of his own times—which, for a composer

²⁴Gail Kubik, interview with Ralph Titus, Manhattan, Kansas, July 1981.

²⁵Ibid.

living today, means a sound-world that involves not only the concert hall, but the microphone, film track, the television screen, and audiences of millions—is for him to compose for *all* the fields that are open to his talents. Always assuming that he writes his own, not somebody else’s music, a composer learns more and becomes more a master of his craft by writing a couple dozen radio scores than he does by teaching or performing, no matter how talented he may be in these latter fields. More than that, he exerts his share of influence in shaping the taste of the mass audience from which, ultimately, the concert-hall audience is drawn. In short, he helps to narrow, not widen, the gulf between himself and his audience. And that, too, seems to me pretty important.²⁶

Kubik’s oeuvre demonstrates that functional music need not be second rate and that the motive force behind quality concert pieces can, indeed, be the cinema screen.

²⁶Little Orchestra Society, program for the premiere of *Symphony Concertante*, Town Hall, 7 January 1952.