



# FILM MUSIC

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QUO VADIS

NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 1951

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# FILM MUSIC

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## THE MUSIC IN QUO VADIS

Miklos Rozsa

A motion picture with historical background always presents interesting problems to the composer. There have been innumerable other historical pictures produced before QUO VADIS, and they were all alike in their negligent attitude toward the stylistic accuracy of their music. It is interesting to note what painstaking research is usually made to ascertain the year of publication of, let us say, "Yes, we have no Bananas", if it is used in a picture about the twenties, but no one seems to care much if the early Christians in the first century sing "Onward Christian Soldiers" by Sir Arthur Sullivan, composed a mere eighteen hundred years later! When a period picture is made, the historical background of the script is naturally based on historical facts and the dialogue tries to avoid any anachronistic term or reference. The art director, interior decorator, costume designer, hair-stylist and makeup man start their work only after thorough research, and the greatest care is taken that every building, every piece of furniture, every costume and every hairdo is absolutely authentic according to the period of the picture. During the actual photographing a historical advisor, usually a scholar of reputation, supervises this procedure so that nothing can slip in and spoil the absolute authenticity.

Why is it then that when we come to music an exceptionally lofty attitude is felt and no one seems to care much about the genuineness of this most important factor of picture making? The countless dramatizations of antiquity in operas and oratorios naturally have not attempted to recreate the music of the period, as opera is stylized art and, therefore, the music is also a stylized adaptation of a certain historical or nationalistic style. No one expects to hear sixteenth century Minnesinger music in the "Meistersinger", antique Greek music in "Electra" or ancient Hebrew music in "Salome". The orientalism in "Aida", "Samson and Delilah" or "Queen of Sheba" is only used as color and they are fullblooded, romantic operas mirroring the style of the period of their creation with no attempt whatsoever to represent the true style of the period of their action. But motion picture art is different. It is realistic and factual. It not only tries to capture the spirit of bygone eras but also tries to make believe that it projects before the eyes of the spectator the real thing. There are no painted backdrops, fake props, cardboard shields and wooden swords as in an opera, but everything is realistic to the fullest limit and if the public doesn't believe that the Christians were actually eaten by the lions, the photoplay would have completely failed in its object.

When QUO VADIS was assigned to me I decided to be stylistically, absolutely correct. First, thorough research had to be made. Though my old studies of the music of antiquity came in handy now, I am most indebted to the librarian of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios, Mr. George Schneider, who with unfailing enthusiasm and unceasing effort produced every reference to the period that could be found in the libraries throughout the four corners of the world.

Our first duty was to prepare the blueprints for the antique instruments which had to be made. We reconstructed these from Roman statues, (in the Vatican and Naples museums) antique vases and bas-reliefs on columns and tombstones, giving exact measurements for all details. The actual instruments were then produced by Italian instrument makers, so a great array of lyras and cytharas, (the chief instruments of the Romans) double pipes, (aulos) curved horns, (buccina) straight trumpets, (salpynx or tuba), tambourines, drums, sistrums, clappers and other percussion instruments were made with amazing likeness to the real ones.

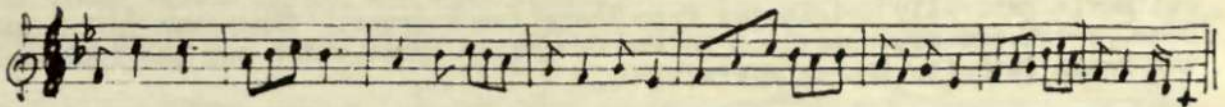
Then the music which was to be performed on scene had to be prepared. To select music for a historical picture of the middle ages, for instance, would have been an easy task, as there is a wealth of material available. But this is not the case with Roman music from the year 64 A.D. In spite of the fact that a great amount of Roman literature, painting, architecture and sculpture

has been preserved, there is absolutely no actual record of any music of the classical times of Roman history. There are a lot of references to music in literary works of the time so we know what an important part music played in the life of the Romans. Seneca complains that orchestras and choruses grew to gigantic proportions and often there were more singers and players in the theatre than spectators. There were numerous schools of music, and daughters of the rich bourgeoisie had to learn to play the lyre just as they have to learn the piano today. The slaves of the aristocrats entertained constantly and Seneca complains that "at table no one can talk for the music!" (An early fore-runner of the menace of our radios) All this proves that music was widely practised and belonged to everyday life.

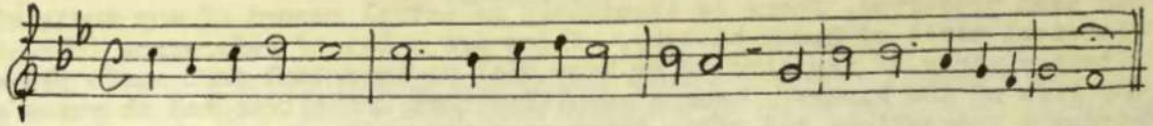


In Quo Vadis there were three distinguishable styles in which music had to be created. Firstly, the music of the Romans, such as songs of Nero and the slave girl Eunice, sacrificial hymns of the Vestals, marches and fanfares. Secondly, the hymns of the Christians; and thirdly, the music performed by slaves, which I call the Roman Empire music. As nothing remains of Roman music, this had to be recreated by deduction. We know that the culture of the Romans was entirely borrowed from the Greeks. Greek civilization and religion dominated Roman life and Nero himself preferred to speak Greek rather than Latin. As Greek musicians and instruments were imported and Greek musical theory adopted, the music of the Romans cannot be separated from its Greek models and ideas. It was, therefore

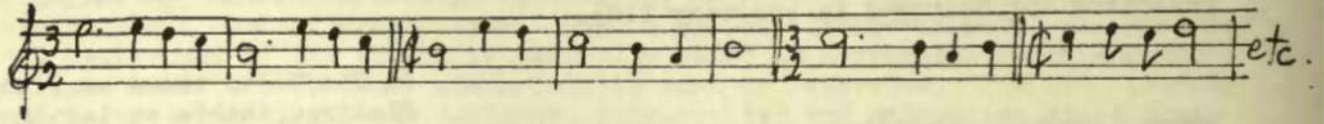
not incorrect to reconstruct this music from Greek examples. About the music of the Greeks we know considerably more. We know their thorough and involved musical systems, we can read their musical notations and we also have about twelve relics of actual music, preserved mostly on tombstones and old papyri. These were of the greatest value in this attempt at reconstruction. The Skolion of Seikilos, which is perhaps the oldest known musical relic with a definite melody in our modern sense, became the basic idea from which I developed Nero's first song, "The Burning of Troy". It is in Phrygian mode and dates from the first or second century.



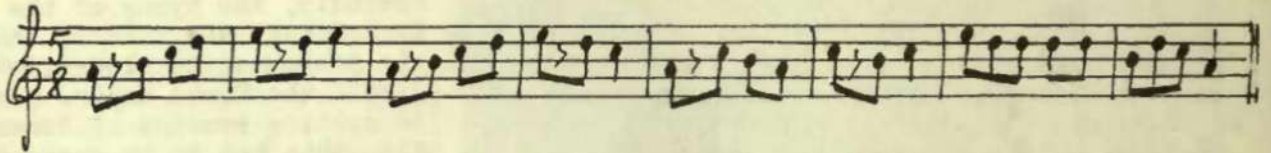
The second song of Nero "The Burning of Rome", uses a Gregorian anthem "Omnes sitientes venite ad aquas" as a point of departure. This is a reverse method of reconstruction, but if we accept the theory that much Roman music became Christian (as we shall see later,) we can select from the early Christian music where the origin cannot be proven, and presume that the original source was Roman.



For Eunice's song I have used the first Ode of Pindar, which was allegedly found in a Sicilian monastery in 1650. Its authenticity is doubtful, but it is constructed entirely on Greek principles and it is a hauntingly beautiful melody.



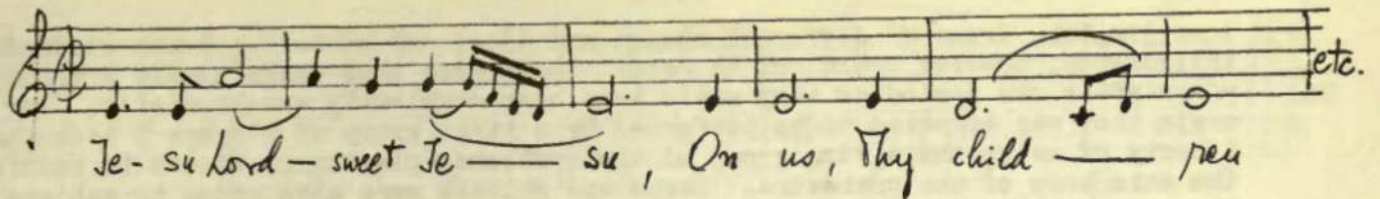
Fragments from an anonymous composer from the second century, which probably were written for a cythara school, were interesting enough to serve as a point of departure for an instrumental piece, used as a bacchanale at Nero's banquet. The 5/8 time is characteristic of Greek music.



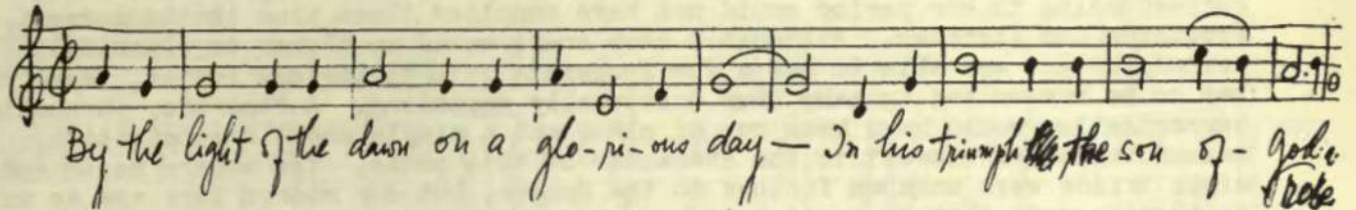
The main problem that arose with all these original melodies was how to harmonize them. Whether the Greeks or Romans knew harmonies, or was their music entirely monodic, is still a hotly debated question. Polyphony in our modern sense was, of course, unknown, except that of parallel octaves, which hardly can be called polyphony. Only six intervals, the fourth, the fifth, the octaves, and their higher octaves were known and allowed as consonances.

As the music for QUO VADIS was intended for dramatic use and as entertainment for the lay public, one had to avoid the pitfall of producing only musical oddities instead of music with a universal, emotional appeal. For the modern ear, instrumental music in unison has very little emotional or aesthetic appeal; therefore I had to find a way for an archaic sounding harmonization which gives warmth, color, and emotional values to these melodies. A parallelism with open fifths and fourths came in most handy and also a modal harmonization suggested by the different (Lydian, Phrygian, Dorian, Mixolydian, etc.) modes of the melodies in question. In the second category for which authentic music had to be supplied, were the hymns of the early Christians. These also had to be reconstructed by deduction. Saint Ambrose's collection of liturgical music for the Catholic Church appeared about four hundred years after our period and I wanted to go back to the very source from which the Ambrosian plain chant and later the Gregorian hymnology blossomed. As the early Christians were partly Jews and partly Greeks their liturgical music naturally originates from these two sources. These two influences have been proven and are prevalent in the Gregorian hymns which are the fundament of the Roman Catholic Church music.

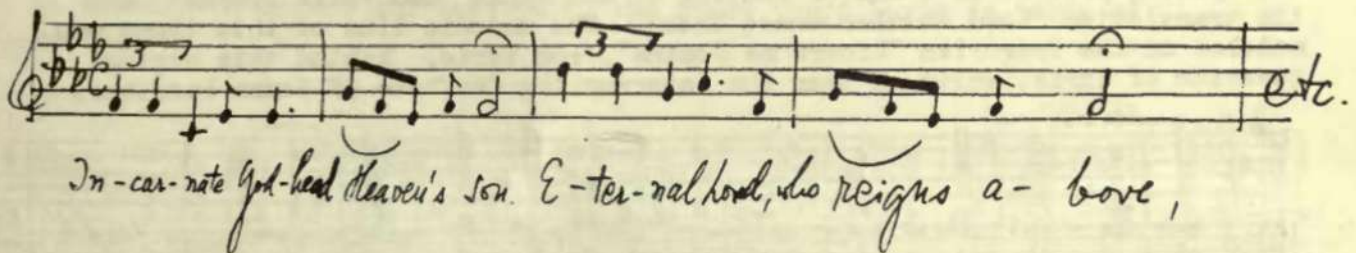
The first time we meet organized Christianity in the picture, we see Saint Paul baptizing new believers and we hear them singing a hymn. A Babylonian Jewish liturgical melody (which found its way into the Gregorian hymnody, becoming a Kyrie) served as basis for this hymn. I used it in the manner of a cantus responsorius, where the priest intones a phrase and the congregation answers it. To achieve the authentic timbre and feeling of its rendition, we engaged a Jewish cantor to sing the part of the priest.



As the second major influence on the early Christian music was Greek, I selected a melody from a Greek hymn which had the beauty and fervor needed for the Christians to sing in the arena. The Hymn to Nemesis which was discovered by Vincenzo Gallilei in the seventeenth century but dates from the second century, seemed to me perfect for this purpose.

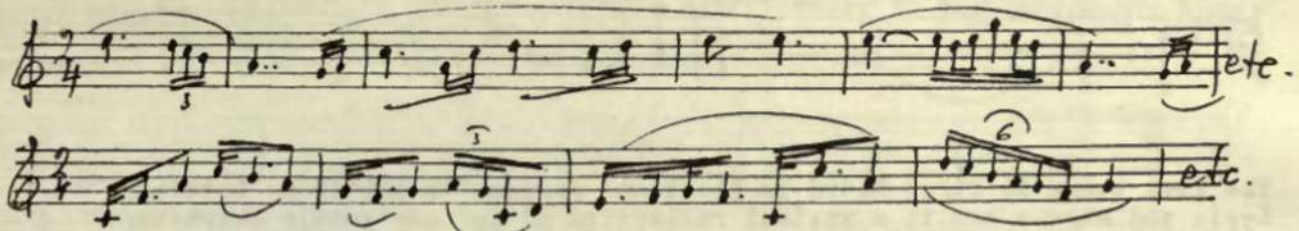


The third hymn which is sung by the Christians burning on the crosses in the arena, had to have a plaintive character which I found in the Ambrosian Aeterna Conditor.



It goes without saying that all these hymns are performed in the picture in unison (or octaves) unharmonized, as they were sung two thousand years ago. The English words were written by Hugh Gray, who also served as historical advisor on the picture and displayed great feeling for the style and character of the time of antiquity.

The third category of the music was the music of the slaves, mostly Babylonians, Syrians, Egyptians, Persians and other conquered nations of oriental origin. There were fragments of the oldest melodies found in Sicily (a Roman province) with Arabian influence, and others found in Cairo, which I could utilize.



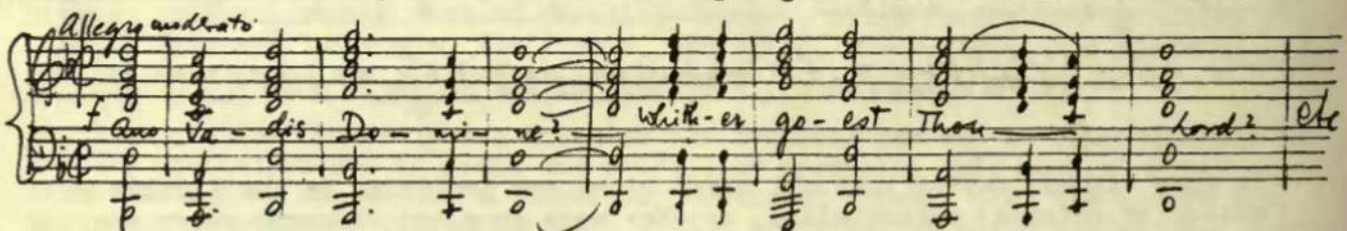
The orchestration of the music performed on scene was another problem. None of the old instruments were available and, therefore, an archaic sound had to be created with our modern instruments. I used a small Scottish harp, the clarshch, and this delicate instrument gave a remarkably true likeness to the sound of the lyre and antique harp. For military music cornets, mixed with trumpets and trombones gave the roughness of the early brass instruments. Bass flute and English horn replaced the sound of the aulos. Our modern percussion instruments come close to the antique ones and therefore it was safe to use Tambour-

ines, jingles, drums of different shapes and sizes and cymbals. Bowed stringed instruments, however could not be used! These came into usage nearly a thousand years after our period so they would have been completely anachronistic. For music that was supposed to be performed by a large group of players I took the liberty of using the string group of the orchestra playing pizzicato to reinforce the main body of the orchestra. Harps and guitars were also added to achieve the percussive quality. Melodic lines, however, were only given to the woodwind and brass instruments to perform.

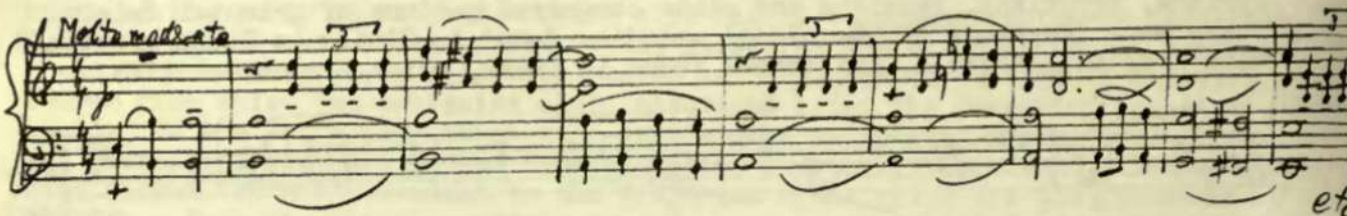
"Another part of the forest" is the dramatic accompanying music which, for yet undetected reasons, Hollywood semantics call "the score". The main function of this music is to heighten the drama, create the atmosphere and underline the emotional content of certain scenes. A stylistically, strictly correct music corresponding to our period could not have supplied these aims to the modern spectator and listener. Although I have constructed my themes on classical principles and was able to use a few fragments from historical relics, these had to be harmonized to make them emotionally appealing. A romantic, chromatic harmonization would have been out of place and a simple modal harmonization seemed to me the closest to the character of this music. The modern major and minor triads were unknown factors to the Romans, but our modern ears are so used to these sounds that it would have been impossible to ignore them completely.

The main themes of the score of QUO VADIS are the following:

The opening prelude is a choral setting of the words "Quo Vadis Domine?" and its translation "Lord Whither Goest Thou?" The melodic line of this theme was modeled on the Gregorian "Liberate me Domine", and Kyrie. Behind this urging question of Christianity we hear the interrupting fanfares of Roman buccinas.



A recurring of faith first appears in the garden where Lygia draws a fish, the symbol of the early Christians.



The love theme is first heard in Plautius' gardens in the scene between Lygia and Marcus and is a musical reflection of Lydia's gentle character and deep faith.

*lento*

*p*  
*doled*

*etc.*

The Triumph introduces Marcus Vinicius' contrasting theme of pagan heroism and self-confidence.

*Mazurka*

*etc.*

An interesting chromatic motif from the second Delphic hymn was utilized as a motif of menace and tension in the scene where Lygia is taken as hostage.

*Moderato*

*pp 3 Hms.*

*Cel., Bass. etc.*

*etc.*

A motif from "The Hymn to the Sun" appears majestically in the brass when Rome is in flames.

*Tab.*

*Pia*

*etc.*

Petronius is the noblest character in the picture and the following theme tries to describe him musically.

*Lento*

A motif of 4 chords introduces the Miracle scene, when the Lord talks to St Peter and then the voice of angels intones the Quo Vadis theme.

A theme of doom accompanies the suicide scene of Nero.

*Adagio*

The dramatic music of QUO VADIS is much less polyphonic than my previous film scores, for the only reason that extended polyphony would have clashed anachronistically with monodic music performed on scene throughout the picture. At the end of the picture the voices of humanity take up the QUO VADIS theme and after the answer of Christ they join in a jubilant reprise of the hymn "By the Light of the Dawn."

For those who want to study the music of Quo Vadis more thoroughly, there is a record album from the sound tracks and a piano score, with the most important themes with pictures and historical notes, available.

## ROZSA'S MUSIC FOR QUO VADIS

Lawrence Morton

Long before you will have had a chance to discover what kind of music Miklos Rozsa has written for QUO VADIS, and before you are able to make any critical estimate of it, the quality of the recording, as heard in the theater, will already have impressed you as being extraordinary in its spaciousness. In the main-title, both the chorus and the orchestra sound as though the tones they produced were unconfined by studio walls, as though their resonance and sonority would not only fill Nero's Circus but would reach from there to all of Rome's seven hilltops. It is not only that the music is as grandly loud as musicians like to hear music, but that it has magnificent dimensions. Other scores have indeed sounded louder in the theater - as for instance, some recent MGM musicals; but I can remember no recent score from any studio in which the music has been quite so ear-filling without ever becoming ear-splitting. This spaciousness is noticeable even when the music is quiet. In the scene of Lygia's devotions, in the garden of Plautius' house, for instance, and in the prison scene where Peter performs the simple wedding ceremony for Lygia and Marcus, the music seems not so quiet as far a way. Yet it is clear and has the presence of a live performance. It is as though a very sensitive microphone picked up the sound from a great distance. Whatever the technique and equipment of the recording might have been, they are well worth study by Hollywood engineers if they hope to rival what was achieved here under British conditions.

The job of recording must have been much facilitated by the nature of the music itself. Although I have recently, in this magazine and elsewhere, commented on what has seemed to me an increasing amount of polyphony in Rozsa's music, he has, in QUO VADIS quite completely reversed me. But since he has also reversed himself, I cannot complain that this is another instance of how a sly composer will go to any lengths in order to confound a critic. The truth about QUO VADIS is that the score is remarkably simple in both its textures and its musical shapes. As for the textures; they range from the unison singing of the Christian martyrs to a homophony no more complicated than that of the chariot chase, where the tossing about of several short motifs by orchestral groups, so that the motifs sometimes overlap, gives an impression of polyphony without ever actually becoming polyphonic. The ear is kept busy, to be sure, but it is never in doubt as to where the main musical event is taking place. You have only to listen to one thing at a time - except for the sound effects which, for all their realism, can never excite the imagination as music can.

Another kind of textural complication, but one still within the general area of simplicity, is that brought about by the use of percussion instruments, of which there seem to be a great many, especially in the dance scenes. Here



the combination of variously pitched drums with instruments like antique cymbals, "jingles", and plucked strings sometimes seems to exist on a musical plane of its own, quite separate from that of the melodic instruments, as if it were an antiphonal rather than an accompanying group. In some of the march music, on the other hand, heavy percussion instruments almost obliterate accompaniments, leaving the melodic instruments to generate their own harmony, which they do quite satisfactorily. Here we get the effect of a greater simplicity than is actually present. The "source music" - that is, the dances and marches - are extraordinarily interesting from the acoustical point of view.

Equally simple in texture is the underscoring music with which the composer "interprets" the emotions of the characters on the screen. Of this kind of music there are two principal "chunks," one for Lygia and the other for Petronius. The first of these, although it serves for a few scenes between Lygia and Marcus as well as for Lygia herself, is happily free of any sentimentality (it never becomes a "luv theme") and remains lyrical even when infused with dramatic fervor. The music for Petronius, broad and in the cello idiom, is also simple and direct. I could not help feeling that here Rozsa might have abandoned the simple style: this Petronius is hardly the Petronius of the SATYRICON. Rozsa has conspired with the screen writers to make him far too consistently a noble character, not enough of the cynic he tells us he is. I cannot imagine the Petronius of history uttering, as he signs a revolutionary document, such a fatuous and sententious line as "I do this with humility." Evidently Rozsa could not only imagine this but even believed it. He might have added another dimension to the screen character with music of a complexity and sophistication commensurate with the real Petronius, just as (though in a very different way) he made Nero's song, "O lambent flame," tell us a few nasty things about the Emperor that the camera and script could not possibly tell us. In this he was most wonderfully assisted by Hugh Gray's poem and Peter Ustinov's performance.

As for the musical shapes: they are, on the whole, very symmetrical and therefore easy to follow. Phrases follow one another in sequential patterns, particularly in the dance and march music, somewhat less regularly in the Lygia and Petronius music. Most of the rhythms are square, thus contributing to the general feeling of symmetry. (Compare, by the way, the architectural symmetry of the sets, and the parallelisms between groups of characters and between events of the story.) Even in the 5/8 rhythm of the "Bacchanale" the bars group themselves into fairly conventional patterns.

As counterpoint to the simplicity of texture and shapes, there is a genuine magnificence of tone. This is partly due to the recording, which I have already mentioned. More especially it is attributable to the instrumental color. Throughout, the wind instruments dominate the score, and the sound of multiple horns, trumpets and trombones in the fanfares and marches has a truly imperial splendor that rivals the technicolored splendor on the screen. The "elemental" harmonies of fourths and open fifths, especially when fortissimo in woodwinds and brass, are so powerful and effective that I somewhat regretted their occasional resolution into more conventional triads, even though I fully understand how a composer must ask himself many times how long he dare stay with the harmonies of fourths and fifths without letting them degenerate into a mannerism.

I thought it rather curious that the composer sometimes found his way from the conceivably authentic idiom of pagan Rome to the more familiar idiom of medieval Europe. Some of Lygia's music, for instance, suggests faux bourdon and the medieval modes. I mention this not as a criticism, for I did not find it in the least objectionable, but only as a problem of musical style. Authenticity from the musicological point of view is of course impossible, at least until musicologists discover more than they presently know about Roman music. Cinematically, such authenticity would probably not even be desirable. But the pro-

blem of where a composer can go from the fragmentary bits of authentic material with which Rozsa started is an interesting question that can be argued (by amateurs no less than by musicologists) until the next film version of QUO VADIS appears in, say, 1985. And because one answer (such as Rozsa's) may be right, other answers are not necessarily wrong. Now while I thought it curious, as I said, that Rozsa found his way to an idiom suggesting the medieval, I thought it no less curious that in one scene, that of the street fight between the giant Ursus and the gladiator Croton, he found his way to an almost modern, twentieth-century idiom. To my ears there was some inconsistency in this. Although I should hesitate to make a judgment on it, I should not hesitate to argue about it, just as I have frequently argued with musicians about the stylistic inconsistencies in Honegger's KING DAVID, some of Mahler's symphonies and even Schoenberg's ODE TO NAPOLEON - as well as in such famous film scores as Auric's CAESAR AND CLEOPATRA, Thomson's LOUISIANA STORY and Walton's HAMLET. I suggest this stylistic problem as one that might be profitably discussed by students of film music.

On the whole, Rozsa's QUO VADIS is perhaps his most impressive score and certainly his most effective from a theatrical point of view. I found it completely convincing, even when I could think of alternative ways of doing things. If the picture has any qualities of greatness at all (which I leave to the film critics to decide) certainly Rozsa's music, as a thoroughly integrated part of the production, is entitled to a fair share of praise.

QUO VADIS.. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Robert Taylor, Deborah Kerr. Director, Mervyn Le Roy. Music, Miklos Rozsa. Technicolor.

RECORDS: MGM Album Series. Music recorded directly from the sound track of the picture; fourteen selections conducted by the composer. Available in all three speeds. The piano score is published by Robbins Music. Dr. Rozsa has also written a symphonic suite based on QUO VADIS themes, which will be performed this year.

