



They Shot, He Scored: The Life and Music of Eldon Rathburn. By James K. Wright. Montreal, QC; Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019. 362 pp. ISBN 9780773557154.

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In composer Miklós Rózsa's autobiography, *Double Life*, an oft-quoted anecdote about Heitor Villa-Lobos and the 1959 Hollywood film *Green Mansions* is amusingly told. The Brazilian maestro had been given a Portuguese translation of the script at an early stage of production, and used it as if writing an opera or ballet, arriving in Los Angeles with a complex completed score that he handed to the music department at MGM. "But Maestro," Rózsa asked when he

was shown the score, "what will happen if your music doesn't match the picture exactly?" Villa-Lobos, obviously talking to a complete idiot, replied, "In that case, of course, they will adjust the picture." A few days later, he was politely paid his fee and sent back to Brazil so that Bronislau Kaper, an experienced MGM staff composer, could fit his music to the visuals as best he could.

The history of concert composers who have written for the cinema indicates that Villa-Lobos is emblematic of a particular profile—the difficult fit. But Rózsa himself represented quite another profile: a three-time Oscar winner with nearly 100 feature film scores to his credit, he maintained a devotion to concert music composition throughout his career, and had a clause in his contract with MGM that allowed him three months of the year to work exclusively on it.

With the publication of James K. Wright's biography, *They Shot, He Scored*, readers have the opportunity to learn about a Rózsa-like figure in Canadian film, Eldon Rathburn. A rough contemporary of Rózsa (born eight years after him in 1916), Rathburn had varied musical interests from the outset. He began composing for orchestra while still in his teens and won several major awards for his classical work before turning thirty (including first prize in the L.A. Philharmonic Young Artists' Competition, whose chief adjudicator was Arnold Schoenberg). Wright lists 100 concert compositions in Rathburn's catalogue, written between 1933 and shortly before his death in 2008 and including orchestral as well as chamber pieces. But that significant body of work was the fruit of only one half of Rathburn's "double life." While pursuing conservatory studies in composition and piano in Saint John, New Brunswick, in the



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late 1920s, other dimensions of his creative expression began to emerge. Both continued to evolve in more or less simultaneous fashion over the course of his long career, running on parallel tracks of equal magnitude and importance.

Rathburn's principal musical mentor at the time was William Bowden, who worked regularly as an accompanist, arranger and conductor at Saint John's newly opened Imperial Theatre, a venue with a fourteen-piece orchestra. The young Rathburn became fascinated by the musical accompaniment for silent film. A regular attendee at his teacher's engagements, he was able to study cue sheets and closely observe the craft of the silent film accompanist-composer-arranger-conductor before the talkies made those roles obsolete in the early 1930s. And during that same early period, Rathburn was recruited for his piano playing skills by the legendary Maritime fiddler Don Messer, beginning his professional musical career recording and touring with Messer's New Brunswick Lumberjacks and mastering their repertoire of country reels and jigs, folk songs and popular tunes. Both of these lines of musical development would deeply inform Rathburn's compositional pursuits over the coming years, baking a core eclecticism into his *modus operandi*, as it were.

And so it was that when Rathburn accepted a staff composer position at the National Film Board in 1945, he brought a multi-faceted approach to the movies that he scored. These totaled nearly 250 over the 50 years he was associated with the Board and included outstanding collaborations with legendary NFB animation department head Norman McLaren (e.g. *Short and Suite*, 1959). In 1960, he collaborated on *Universe*, the multiple award-winning educational documentary about planetary science that caught the attention of American filmmaker Stanley Kubrick as he was preparing for his space epic, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Wright does a commendable job of chronicling this best-known part of Rathburn's career, providing some fascinating accounts of the similarities and differences between Canadian and Hollywood production approaches to the soundtrack during and after the "classical" studio period that wound down during the 1950s. He also gives detailed descriptions of Rathburn's more unusual projects, including his music for the multi-faceted Labyrinth installation at Expo 67, and the soundtracks he composed for various IMAX features in the 1980s and '90s.

Further to Wright's credit (and in spite of the somewhat misleading title of his book), the other half of Rathburn's "double life" receives equal attention. Extensive chapters are dedicated to his concert music, to the idiosyncratic works he created for unusual instruments such as the banjo, calliope and other historical keyboards, as well as to the encounters Rathburn had with various luminaries of 20th-century music (including Schoenberg, Varèse, Ives, and Virgil Thomson) and the specialized repertoire he created that was dedicated to his lifelong fascination with trains.

Wright's biography features fifty-six figures, including score excerpts, archival photographs and memorabilia from Rathburn's estate, and extensive appendices (a filmography, lists of works, and a discography). Cutting across Canadian biography, film studies and musicology, *They Shot, He Scored* is both a welcome contribution to scholarly research and an entertaining read for a more general audience.