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Director Irving Rapper's 1942 melodrama, *Now, Voyager*, is a typical Hollywood film of the 1940s in many ways. Starring Bette Davis and Paul Henried, and featuring music by Max Steiner, this film follows many of the conventions of the women's films of the period.

The main character, Charlotte Vale (Davis) is plagued by the ugly duckling syndrome. She is a middle-aged spinster aunt (her brothers are married with families of their own) who lives under the rule of an overbearing mother (Gladys Cooper) in a Boston mansion. As the plot unfolds, she deals with a wide range of emotional situations: a nervous breakdown, new-found independence with the help of a psychiatrist, Dr. Jaquith (Claude Rains), an affair with a married man, Jerry Durrance (Henried), the death of her mother, and becoming a surrogate mother to Jerry's daughter, Tina (Janis Wilson).

The author intends to demonstrate that in one scene, Max Steiner's music works in counterpoint to the image and dialogue, what Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer refer to as "playing against the film."<sup>1</sup> During a confrontation between Charlotte and her mother, Steiner's music is surprisingly cheerful and carefree. It is the opinion of the author that, in this scene, Steiner chose the music not to fit the mood of the scene, but to inform the audience of whom Charlotte is thinking at the time, her lover, Jerry.

At this point in the film (DVD Chapter 21)<sup>2</sup> Charlotte has returned home after a South American cruise on which she met and fell in love with Jerry. Due to reasons too complicated to

discuss here, Jerry likes to call Charlotte “Camille.” As a reminder that he is thinking about her, he sends her a corsage of white camellias, the rose-like flowers of the camellia plant. At this point in the film, Charlotte has just received a corsage of camellias from a florist in New York. Shortly thereafter, Charlotte’s mother enters Charlotte’s room and confronts her about her behavior since returning home. Mrs. Vale demands to know the name of the person who sent the flowers. Mrs. Vale’s body language, including the steady tapping of her fingers on the bedpost, is indicative of her extremely agitated mood. Rather than saying the name of the person who sent the flowers, Charlotte is elusive, and cleverly so, even walking offscreen and out of her mother’s view as she changes clothes, while telling her mother that she can’t be treated like a child anymore and that she needs “complete freedom.”<sup>3</sup> Charlotte never tells her mother, or the audience, who sent the flowers, but Steiner’s music informs the audience as to the sender’s true identity; it is Jerry. The moment Mrs. Vale inquires about the flowers, the audience hears “Jerry’s Theme” in its entirety. Steiner’s use of “Jerry’s Theme” in scene follows the true Wagnerian tradition of the Leitmotif, its presence serving to provide the audience with a musical signifier of something that is otherwise not represented.

This is the theme which was first heard in its entirety as Charlotte was preparing to meet Jerry for cocktails on the South American cruise. Kate Daubney describes this theme as “a lengthy idea, constructed from a number of short motifs joined together: this detracts from its memorability and contrasts it with the simple design of the other main themes.”<sup>4</sup> While it may indeed be less memorable than other themes in this film, attentive audience members will recognize its significance at this point in the narrative. Jerry is a witty and charming middle-aged man who likes butterflies and often lights two cigarettes at once, one for Charlotte and for himself. His theme is likewise charming and light-hearted and featured strings, woodwinds,

piano, and celesta. Additionally, in this cue, Steiner has indicated that the theme should be played “Molto Grazioso e Rubato” (very gracefully and with rubato, the free speeding up (accelerando) and slowing down (ritardando) of the tempo).

To say that Steiner’s music in this scene “plays against the film” would be an understatement. The cheerful quality of Jerry’s theme, played gracefully as Steiner has indicated, is simply contradictory with the confrontational dialogue and body language of this scene between Charlotte and her mother. In spite of this obvious counterpoint, Steiner’s Academy-Award-winning score for this film remains a model of the classic Hollywood Leitmotif film score.

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<sup>1</sup> James Buhler, David Neumeyer, and Rob Deemer. *Hearing the Movies* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2010) 106.

<sup>2</sup> *Now, Voyager*. DVD, Directed by Irving Rapper (1942, Turner Entertainment Company)

<sup>3</sup> *Now, Voyager*.

<sup>4</sup> Kate Daubney, *Max Steiner’s Now, Voyager, A Film Score Guide* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 61.