

# Laura

*Soundtrack by David Raksin*

The story about LAURA that seems to interest most people is how I happened to compose it. I was assigned to the picture because it was thought to be a “detective story,” and at the time I was writing scores for such films as well as many of 20th Century-Fox’s “grue-and-horror” B pictures. For the first time I got to attend one of the executive group showings in the projection room of the Studio’s chief, Darryl Zanuck. There I realized that LAURA was not a melodrama but a love story in a detective milieu and that the validity of the film depended greatly on how the audience perceived one scene in which Dana Andrews, as a detective assigned to solve the ostensible murder of a young woman, wanders about morosely in her apartment at night.

I was therefore disheartened to hear Zanuck, a very intelligent filmmaker, zero in on this scene, saying that he intended to edit it down severely. At this I said to him, “But if you cut that scene nobody will understand that the detective is falling in love with Laura.” There followed a silence of embarrassment, after which Zanuck replied that he was going to trim the sequence precisely because of its ambiguity. But I persisted. “This is one of those scenes in which music could tip the balance—tell the audience how the man feels,” I said, “and if it doesn’t work you can still trim it.” My audacity in challenging the boss had been overlooked, and I had permission to give it a try.

Once the music became an integral part of this scene, there could be no doubt that the detective is “falling in love,” as Clifton Webb says, “with a corpse!” You see, there are two crucial points in that scene. One where he slams the closet door closed on her negligee, and the other, when holding love letters to her from unknown sources, he jams his

cigarette out in the ashtray, accenting his growing frustration. But I didn’t hit that with a musical accent. What I did was start something else when he’s sorting through her letters. It was building, and sounded really strange because it was totally unmotivated by the action. But it built so I could get to its loudest point just as he is about to jam the cigarette. And when he does, the music suddenly disappears. It works. That was a really very different score in some ways, because in those days it was a sure bet that when they scored a scene like that, when Dana Andrews walked into the apartment and stood in front of the portrait, the love theme would start and not stop for the full three minutes. What a way to wear out your welcome.

When I wrote the liner notes for my album of my film music which included the concert piece from LAURA I tried to minimize the transparent sentimentality of this part of the story by quoting from a letter I wrote many years ago to a young writer who simply *had* to know:

“All weekend I struggled with the idea. Ordinarily, at the mere suggestion that someone would be willing to put up with my music, it flies out of me in all directions. But this time I was tied up in knots, in trouble emotionally and out of touch with myself. On Saturday I had received a letter from a lady with whom I was in love and to whom I was married. All I could make of it was that it said something I didn’t want to hear, so I put it in my pocket and hoped it would go away.

“By Sunday night I knew that my big chance was fading fast: I didn’t really believe in any of the themes I had written and I was beginning to think that a wiser man would have known it was time to end the pain and give up. When I was a boy, if the music

wouldn't flow I would prop a book or a poem on the piano, and improvise. The idea was to divert my mind from conscious awareness of music-making. I hadn't done that for a long time, and certainly didn't intend to try to outwit my sorrowing mind, but I took the letter out of my pocket, put it up on the piano and began to play. Suddenly the meaning of the words on the page became dear to me: she was saying Hail, farewell, Better Luck Next Life *and-get lost!* Knowing that, I felt the last of my strength go, and then-without willing it-I

was playing the first phrase of what you now know as LAURA.

“To reflect upon all that at this distance is to be aware once more that there are some truths which in their naïveté and lack of guile encourage the commonly held belief that although truth may be stranger, fiction pays better. But you can't really be as cynical as that and still be the composer of *Laura*. Whatever that melody was 'about' was *me* at that time, and probably still is.”

