

# THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Report by Peter Dasent - 2003 Churchill Fellow

Researching the music of Nino Rota composed for the films of Federico Fellini  
from 1951 to 1979

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Peter Dasent

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## INTRODUCTION

This report details my research from a 2003 Churchill Fellowship into the music composed by Nino Rota for the films of Federico Fellini. This involved the following specific activities

- \* Interviews with relatives, colleagues, pupils and friends in the US and Italy
- \* Examination of the composer's archives in Venice, Italy

My trip would not have been possible without the following:

1. The financial support from the Churchill Trust.
2. The support of my referees.
3. The assistance given to me by everyone I contacted and met overseas, especially Nina Rota, Francesco Lombardi at the Fondazione Cini and Federico Savina at the Film School in Rome
4. My family - Sally, Tosca, Frank and Coco, who supported the application and survived without me, and my parents, who enabled us to have a family holiday in Italy.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Project Description

To research the music of Nino Rota composed for the films of Federico Fellini from 1951 to 1979

### Fellowship Highlights

1. Interviewing Nina Rota, the composer's daughter, in Los Angeles.
2. Examination of the Archivio Nino Rota at the Fondazione Cini in Venice.
3. Interviewing friends and colleagues of the composer in Rome and Bari.

## Findings

My main reason for undertaking this project in the first place was that very little information exists about one of the most important director/composer collaborations in the history of the cinema. Thanks to the Fellowship I now have a wealth of information, contacts and scores to assist me in writing a book on this subject, provisionally titled "Fellini's Composer - Music by Nino Rota". The book will include detailed analysis of the

musical scores of each of the seventeen Fellini films Rota worked on, using the recordings, scores and sketches and notes from the Fondazione Cini, In addition to purely musical analysis (use of themes, instrumentation etc) I will also discuss how music is used in Fellini's films, and how Rota and Fellini worked together, with reference to anecdotal evidence from friends and colleagues gained in the course of my travels.

I intend to use a month long artist residency at Bundanon in July to write two chapters of my book, one concerning Rota in general and his relationship with Fellini, and another being a detailed analysis of one film score. I will then be approaching publishers in Australia and overseas for funding to complete it. In the meantime those two chapters will be offered to periodicals for publication.

I have also offered to conduct seminars for the AGSC (Australian Guild of Screen Composers) and the AFTRS (Australian Film TV and Radio School).

## PROGRAMME

### March 9 - 16, Los Angeles

Interview with Nina Rota, and examination of relevant archives at her house.

(March 17 - 20, London, private visit)

### March 21 - 30, Venice

Examination and photocopying/photographing of eight of the seventeen scores held at the Archivio Nino Rota at the Fondazione Cini. I had access to these from 9.30 am to 4 pm Mon - Fri, and was able to take digital photographs of the material, which included scores, sketches and notebooks.

(March 31 - April 24, Italy, holiday with family)

### April 25, London

Attended concert of Nino Rota's music at the Barbican Centre, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the composer's death. While not on my original itinerary, I considered this an essential diversion as it was produced by Hal Wilner who produced the seminal "Amarcord Nino Rota" album in 1981, and featured Carla Bley, whose arrangement of Otto E Mezzo on that album inspired my own interest in the music. Thanks to Francesco Lombardi from the Fondazione Cini (who also flew to London to attend the concert) I was able to meet both Hal Wilner and Carla Bley backstage.

### April 26 - May 8, Rome

Interviewed Rota's long time friend, the noted Italian scriptwriter Suso D'Amico.

Interviewed Suso's daughter Caterina, who is director of the Film School in Rome.

Interviewed Federico Savina and Fausto Ancillai, sound engineer and mixer respectively on many of Fellini's films.

Examined Carlo Savina archive at the Film School (Carlo Savina conducted many of Rota's scores).

Met with Agostino Campi at CAM Original Soundtracks, Rota's publishers.

Visited the Library of the "Lincei" National Academy, which contains the Rota-Verginelli collection of alchemical books and manuscripts.

**May 9 - 16, Bari**

Visited Bari Conservatory, where Rota was director for 25 years.

Interviewed current director, Nicola Scardecchio, who was a pupil of Rota's.

Interviewed Franco Gianelli, a former teacher at the Conservatory, who also knew Rota, and with whose family Rota lived for many years.

Interviewed Nicola Conte, a music critic who knew Rota

Attended concert of Rota's music by the Jazz Studio Orchestra.

**May 17 - 23, Venice**

Examined and photographed remaining 9 scores at the Fondazione Cini.

## NINO ROTA'S MUSIC FOR THE FILMS OF FEDERICO FELLINI

As mentioned above, this Fellowship came about due to the lack of any information about the music of Nino Rota for Fellini's films. The composer is hardly mentioned in books about Fellini, despite the director's assertion that Rota was his most important collaborator, and there is no biography of Rota in English. The only Italian one, by Pier Marco de Santi, is essentially a glossy picture-book and has in any case been out of print for many years.

Given that collaboration is an essential part of the film-making process, it is surprising that there are few long term collaborations in any area such as that of Rota and Fellini. Theirs spanned 28 years and 17 films. The only other comparable relationships between director and composer would be Alfred Hitchcock/Bernard Herrmann, Sergio Leone/Ennio Morricone, Blake Edwards/Henry Mancini and Steven Spielberg/John Williams. Not only did the Rota/Fellini partnership last an immensely long time (it only ended with Rota's death in 1979) but, unsurprisingly, it produced an exceptional series of soundtracks. These stand out in Rota's catalogue as stylistically different from any of his other scores, and also are able to be performed as concert music, rare for music normally considered as "background" music or underscore.

In my Fellowship I set out to find out how this collaboration worked, firstly by looking at Rota's archives and secondly interviewing people who knew or worked with him.

At this stage I am yet to examine the wealth of material I have in detail (much of it needs to be translated) and I'm still waiting for some dubs of tapes to be sent from Italy. Nonetheless there are still some preliminary observations that I can make.

Rota was prolific, composing 150 film scores and over 100 other "serious" works, such as operas, symphonies, concertos and piano music. He did not distinguish between composition for film or the concert hall; both were equally important to him. Everyone I met described him as generous, if a little eccentric. He and Fellini were opposites as people - Rota was quiet, a little timid; Fellini was verbose and extroverted. Fellini once wrote that he was terrified of music because he did not understand it; Rota's gentle nature allowed him to lose this fear. Amazingly Rota was not interested in seeing any of the movies he was asked to score. This is unusual, as film scoring usually requires the composer to be familiar with the images he or she is writing for. In Rota's case, all he needed from Fellini was a description of the mood, emotion, feeling of a particular scene or character. Sometimes they would watch a scene but only for timing purposes. Fellini absolutely trusted Rota to compose appropriate music.

Rota was able to work very quickly. His sketches show complete ideas rather than lots of false starts, crossed out ideas and so on. He made copious and detailed handwritten notes, some of which I had translated in Venice; most are still to be translated. From the difference in musical handwriting in the scores it appears he delegated a lot of work to arrangers, eg arrangements of popular songs or pieces in a "jazz" style. Thus he was able to concentrate his time on the most important part of his job: composing and orchestrating themes. His great genius as a film composer was his ability to create simple memorable themes and rework them in different ways according to the needs of the film and the wishes of the director.

## CONCLUSIONS

The collaboration between Rota and Fellini was successful because it was based on trust and friendship between people who were both geniuses in their chosen fields. It represents something of an ideal partnership, and as such is something that not only film directors and composers can learn from but also other collaborators in film and other arts. Although we have recordings of Rota's music and some scores, most of the people who knew him and worked with him are now very old and it's essential to document their knowledge and observations of him before it's too late. My Fellowship enabled me to do just that. It also enabled me to expand my network of sources and connections, and to pursue lines of enquiry that were not available to me until I had actually commenced my travels.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Learning can take many forms but one of the most effective is still studying the work of the masters, whether it be in music, film or any other activity. I would like to see courses and seminars available to film and music students on the Rota/Fellini partnership. I would also like to see my book published!