Syracuse University

SURFACE

Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects

Spring 5-1-2009

Film Score

Jeff Peters

Recommended Citation

Personal Reflection

Success is a journey, not a destination. The doing is often more important than the outcome.
- Arthur Ashe

My particular journey, towards the completion of an original film score for a student film, had all of the proverbial "ups and downs" associated with a project of such magnitude. Beginning only with the notion of combining all of my areas of interest and collective majors and minors, I decided that putting music to picture was the most interdepartmental capstone I could think of. Having little to no experience in the field, my choice at this point just seemed logical; I like writing music and I like movies. Whether it was impeccable foresight into my future interests or just pure luck, this logical decision turned out to be precisely what I want to do for a career.

Before the reality of my decision set in, I was in the midst of two music and film classes, one discussing the historical and theoretical aspects behind film music and the other a hands-on application of underscoring. Taking the two classes simultaneously threw me right into the practice. On one day I was learning the composition processes of ~~how the~~ early masters ~~composed,~~ like Bernard Herrmann, Miklos Rozsa, Max Steiner, Franz Waxman and others, and the other I was actually playing instruments, attempting to emulate the style of Mark Mothersbaugh, John Brion, and the music production company Robot Repair. This exploratory or discovery period laid the foundation for me to create my own style.

Since I was quite aware that I wouldn't be jumping into the studio with the London Philharmonic to record my grand orchestral score to the next Peter Jackson epic anytime soon, I focused my attention towards styles incorporating electronic instruments and "rock" instruments - guitars, bass, drums, piano - in order to develop a specific process for setting music to picture. Though my primary instrument is percussion, I have retained my music theory pedigree from piano lessons when I was younger and my ability to play by ear. Armed with the musical skills and instruments, the next step involved my other, related passion - audio engineering.

Upon entering college as an undecided freshman nearly four years ago, I knew that whatever I ended up doing had to be music-related. The creative side of me wanted just to play, but the stronger, practical side said that I should use my college education to provide me with more job options. Utilizing the resources of a large university, I crafted a program for myself integrating music culture, technology, and performance (which, two years later, had financial backing and a name: The Bandier Program for Music and the Entertainment Industries). It was through the Television, Radio, and Film, Music History and Cultures, and Music Industry departments that I realized audio engineering had the ability to incorporate music culture, technology, and performance, giving me the skill sets required to be a very marketable employee in the music industry (of course, this is pre-recession thinking, mind you).

With the ability to both play and record my music, there is no technological or creative barrier preventing me from successfully completing a film score. With this notion in mind I began work on my film score. The only thing standing in the way? Getting a copy of said film to score. While I knew that working on a student project would make me dependent on another person completing his or her part, the long period leading up to the day I received the film, before even putting a single note to paper, was filled with many situations that have shaped my knowledge of the film scoring process. Throughout this reflection, I will describe these experiences in detail. Organizing this reflection by key aspects involved in completing my score should provide a comprehensive look at the entire process.

Technical

Only with the advancement of recording technology and resulting price drops in digital recording programs was I able to devote so much time and energy towards my creative output. Without programs such as Pro Tools, Final Cut Pro, Kontakt, Structure, and a plethora of others, there is no way that this project would even be feasible. Needless to say, technology has played a large role in this score. Whether virtual instruments, audio processors, effects, or microphones, these tools are the conduits through which creative expression can be conveyed.

As any struggling film production company can attest to, both financial interests and time constraints usually mean that the score might not have authentic instruments. In my case, this decision was more related to time than money. Having the Belfer Audio Laboratory at my disposal, complete with tens of thousands of dollars worth of microphones, software, and hardware, afforded me the luxury of working with state-of-the-art technology. Despite having free reign over such equipment because of my role as an audio engineering teaching assistant, scheduling issues prevented my use of the studio more than twice a week. As a result, some parts had to be performed via MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface). Parts that I would normally play on real instruments, like the drum set or piano, were all virtual. Though the artistic side of me felt that abandoning my instrument was a sacrifice in quality, my knowledge of the film industry made me realize that this is how things go for many composers. As Richard Davis says in his book *Complete Guide to Film Scoring*, "for television, cable, and low-budget films, often the film's music budget would not allow the use of an orchestra, and electronic instruments became a necessity." (63). However, since this film didn't call for a large orchestral score, only the piano, drums, and upright bass were synthesized.

Along with Belfer, albeit *much* less expensive, my room served as my second studio in which a significant amount of recording and mixing took place. Due to the technical discrepancies between these two venues, there

soon arose some issues. The most significant problem encountered involved the processing speed of my computer. My processor runs at 1.86 gigahertz (compared to the dual 3 gigahertz processors running the computer in Belfer), meaning that Pro Tools hogs most of the processor while in use. Since the score only got bigger and bigger the more I added on to it, my computer sometimes couldn't handle it, forcing me to work in spurts at home. While this was frustrating, it was a lesson to be learned, considering the dependency on computers that those in the audio field have.

A good soundtrack doesn't sound forced. It fits naturally to the on-screen action. This is achieved both through creativity and technical assistance. A certain scene needing music might be forty-five seconds long, but the perfect part might be just too short to fit it correctly. Through a creative use of technology, this can be fixed. Changing the tempo slightly could add a few seconds or, depending on if it fits the mood of the scene, an extended release can be added by using a delay or reverb effect. Being in the position to adjust both the creative element, the music, and the technical element, recording tools and techniques, provided me with multiple solutions to a timing problem such as this.

However essential to the completion of my project, the technology behind the score plays second fiddle, pardon the pun, to the music. My recording skills couldn't get me a job scoring a film. Thus I have learned, through experience and advice given to me by professors and advisors, that all

of the assistance that hardware and software can provide means nothing if the performance behind it is uninspired or lacks artistic creativity. Without taking too much of the aura away from the creative process, I will explain certain artistic choices made while scoring the film.

Creative

From a composer's standpoint, the feeling of watching a film with no sound can be quite overwhelming. Twenty minutes never seemed longer than when I finally got the film. Though I had met with the director to go over certain moods, styles, and scenes in regards to the music, they were just concepts. Before we would get together in Belfer to continue work on the score, I wanted to complete as much as possible on my own so as to have more material to work with. At first I didn't know where to start. Should I write a theme first? Just watch it and play to it with the record button on, and sift through the ideas that came through? Ultimately, it doesn't really matter *how* you start. There is no set way to score a film; each person has his or her own methodology and technique. As this was my first film, I discovered that I just need to sit with the film and watch it.

Before I could decide what to record, I needed to *get* - to understand - the film. What is the overall concept? What is the director trying to say? Is that conveyed through the visuals, or is it up to the music to convey that mood

or feeling? Each scene has a purpose within the frame of the narrative. They are meant to progress the story. I needed to understand what each scene was saying before I could score it. As it turned out, the first scene I scored was the first one of the film.

The narrative follows the ending of a relationship, framing it within the context of a childhood friendship. Throughout the film the adult life is juxtaposed with childhood flashbacks. As these are two distinctly different moods, the director and I agreed beforehand that there should be a sonic difference as well. My initial idea was to use instruments in the flashback different from those used in the adult life. At the same time, I knew that it was also my job give the director what he wanted which, in this case, proved to be the toughest part, creatively, in the entire process.

The director wanted to have a "band" feel in the flashbacks, hoping to achieve the carefree mood of youth through rock and roll. After hours of wrestling with this possibility I realized that I just couldn't make it work. The style was too much of a departure from the more melancholic feel of the adult life. What ended up on the film is the result of many rewrites, attempting to satisfy the visual mood, narrative feeling, and director's vision all at once. Though I love the song that is there, I am not convinced that it works. These multiple negotiations--between the music and the film, mood and music, director and composer--are the framework behind building a successful film score. I will discuss my experiences in this area later on.

Moving away from the flashbacks, I believe that the sonic moods in the adult life are successful in supporting the various visual and narrative moods portrayed. The opening scene is a montage showing the stale state of the protagonist's relationship with his girlfriend. They go through the morning with minimal conversation, expressing even less emotion. The music, I felt, should convey this sedentary feeling while also serving the purpose of being "morning music." The synthesizer and vibraphone together have a softness that achieves the light, morning feel while the arpeggio eighth note pattern and 6/8 meter gets at the routine-ness that both characters are in; they are together, but moving on auto pilot, avoiding confronting the deteriorating state of their relationship. This scene also introduces the primary theme/motif of the film, heard in the piano.

My initial idea was to have two themes: one for the "good" times and one for the "bad" times. This transformed into a theme representing youth and friendship and another representing, for lack of a better description, the protagonist's relationship with his girlfriend. In a twenty-minute film, this turned out to be quite difficult to do without sounding repetitive. To avoid this, I moved the melody to different instruments (from piano to synthesizer to guitar, etc.) and placed it in different settings (solo, duet, band). Whether the casual viewer would be aware of this is a fact to be considered, but nonetheless it was a conscious decision.

One of the many experiences on my journey involves becoming more conscious of how I work. In a band setting, I thrive off of collaboration. Coming to the table with an idea and having others interpret it, I've found, leads to a whole greater than its parts. This project has shown me that film scoring is quite different. While in class working with friends on a score is more like a band, working with a director as collaborator can slow the creative process. Having an immediate opinion on the material I create stressed me out from time to time. While the benefits of having instantaneous feedback from the person whose vision you are scoring forced me to evaluate every note I wrote, I prefer to score the entire film and submit it for critique and revisions. Regardless, this made me keenly aware of the factors involved in seeing a film score through to the end.

My musical creativity is essential in having raw material for a soundtrack, but after it is recorded everyone has a say as to its effectiveness. Essentially, there could have been five or ten different scores to this film - and that's just on my part. Anyone who believes in the notion that there is only one proper score for a film has either a warped sense of artistic pretension or hasn't had any experience in the process of scoring films. Besides my five potential scores, the director could have another five, the music director another three and so on. Everyone has an opinion; the challenge is finding a way to negotiate amongst them to find a score that satisfies (or attempts to satisfy) everyone involved. In the end, though, it is the director's vision. He or

she has the final say. While the John Williams' of the composing realm may have nearly complete artistic control over the music for a film, they've worked for that privilege. Their successes are proof that what they've got works. As I work my way into and up the music production industry I hope to achieve such status.

Negotiation and Communication through Music

A work of art, as Walter Benjamin stressed, has an aura, an effect on those who make it and consume it. Music is influenced by specific feelings inside the creator, and in turn brings out sometimes very specific feelings in those who listen to it. Though these two things are certainties, analysis beyond this can only be postulated. Are the feelings that the musicians put into their music the same ones that are evoked in the listener? Does it matter if they aren't? How can music be consciously used to make someone feel a certain emotion? These questions have no concrete answers, but serve as guides to my work.

The purpose of a film score is to work in conjunction with the visuals in order to tell a story. Music, just as strongly as visuals, can make a character "evil," "clumsy," "innocent," "sad," or any number of traits. It can cue the audience in to plot elements--a love motif introduced earlier in the film then placed underneath the visual of two strangers on a park bench; emphasis of

the minor third as the camera focuses on a man walking behind another on a crowded sidewalk to signal tension. But at best these are standard, learned film scoring techniques that the composer hopes the audience picks up on. Again, there is no concrete way to make sure that these are the actual emotions felt by those watching.

When discussing the score with the director before I began to record, we talked about the mood of the scene or what the characters were feeling. Tossing around words like melancholic, depressed, carefree, love and more, it was my job to turn these words into music. How do I make this scene melancholic? I'll try switching the progression from a I-IV to a I-VI and see how that makes me feel. However many times I do this, though, it is still only my opinion and my emotions that are being used. On a couple occasions I wrote something that I felt fit the mood of the scene only to have the director ask me to make it "more (emotion)". In no way am I saying that I was right or he was right. It just highlights the differences from person to person when considering music.

What would have been helpful in my continuing education in the field would have been to get as much audience feedback as I could on the effectiveness of the score. Simply put, does it work? The director screened an incomplete version of the film, without proper mixing, and was told that the music was too overpowering. Would it have been different if the music was just completed and lower in the mix? Is this a reflection on my work, or the

director's direction? After spending so much time with the film, it is hard for me to separate myself and think very objectively about it. Unfortunately, even the highest echelon of composers is only afforded the opinions provided by pre-screenings. In the end it is important to stick with your gut feeling.

Industry Insights

A film production company-has a very hierarchical structure. While each person involved has his or her own expertise, the issue of authority or final say is dependent on the internal hierarchy within the company. In the music department alone there are roles for music director, music supervisor, orchestrator, arranger, sound designer, Foley artist, and many others. Yet these people still report to the director who has the final say. The necessity for having one authoritative voice makes sense, but it can sometimes be hard to swallow when you have so much invested in your art.

Isolated from Hollywood or the film industry of New York City, I often thought about how my experiences on this journey would translate into the professional world. Perhaps it was wishful thinking on my part, but before I received the film I believed that I would just put music to it and that would be the end of it. I didn't even think about the effect of working on someone else's idea or vision. I believed that my musical ability, as a creative entity, would be trusted. To an extent this was true; many tunes in the film were

relatively untouched from creation to completion. But the reality of having to come up with new material for something that I thought was quite appropriate was a new feeling for me. In retrospect, though, it pushed me to try something new. It got me out of my comfort zone just a little bit, and I am grateful for that.

My goal for this film score, besides its role as my Honors Capstone project, was to provide me with both my first glimpse into the film composition industry and portfolio material with which to begin my career. All of the eagerness I could have for film scoring would mean nothing without some sort of tangible evidence of my abilities in the medium. The realities of graduating from college and embarking on a career were far stronger motivators than any sort of requirement for graduation. If I was proud enough of the work to show it to potential employers then I was confident that it would meet the requirements for graduation.

Conclusion

Watching a movie in the theaters or on DVD has become a completely different activity for me since I conceived of this project. Instead of sitting back and consuming the movie as a whole I am now an active listener to the entire sound design of the film. I notice the various levels of the dialogue, sound effects, and music in the overall mix and contemplate the reasoning

behind it, and if I would have done things differently. The only way to effectively convey feelings through music is by studying the conventions already used within film. If a certain chord progression or instrument works in a particular scene I take note.

While it may seem like this analysis takes away from the entire effect of the film I can assure that, at this point, it has become a subconscious process. It has turned me into a better film critic as the blatantly out of place music found in quite a few movies sticks out, and the sublimely effective use of music amplifies the impact of the film even more.

If in five years I am able to support myself through music composition--be it songwriting, underscoring, music for advertising, or any other musically creative career--I will always remember this introductory experience in the field. I am very proud of my destination, but the journey to get here has been the most significant part.

Thanks

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my advisor, Stephen Meyer, and reader, Bob Halligan Jr., for their input on my project. Due to the tight time frame that is inherent in film scoring, there were a few times when I thought that I would be unable to complete the project. Usually I just needed to vent or have someone to commiserate with my situation, which Professor

Meyer did on a few occasions. Since he is currently doing research for a book

on film scoring, we were in parallel, though somewhat opposite positions. I

was in the midst of doing what he was researching and analyzing. Having the

opportunity to discuss the process from both sides was really beneficial in

helping me organize my thoughts, and for this I am grateful.

Professor Halligan has been, if you will, my "creativity guide"

throughout. With his extensive experience in songwriting for film and bands,

his input in my music underscoring class and songwriting class has helped me

hone and tighten my musical skills. Whether it is trying a different creative

approach or critiquing my musical output, his advice has been invaluable.

Again, I am indebted to his services.

Sources Cited and Consulted

Davis, Richard. *Complete Guide to Film Scoring*. Boston: Berklee Press, 1999.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 217-51. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

Written Capstone Summary

A good film score is woven seamlessly within the visuals and the narrative. It should serve the picture, in order to amplify its meaning and emotion. This underlying concept is behind my score to this film. When coming up with possible Capstone project ideas, scoring a film proved to be the perfect interdisciplinary idea, combining my interest in music, film, and music history and cultures. I knew ~~that~~ this could be a project that I could spend hours on and not get sick of it. Kind of a negative way of looking at this. Maybe "…that I could spend hours on and still remain passionate about." Something like that??

To start out, I took classes on the history of film scores and on the actual creative process of putting music to film. These two courses, taken in conjunction with one another, helped to lay the groundwork for my burgeoning compositional knowledge. By studying how, for instance, Bernard Hermann wrote and used the "Rosebud" theme in *Citizen Kane* or the functionality of Simon and Garfunkel's "pop score" in both the social and narrative contexts of *The Graduate*, I was slowly learning the film music conventions and techniques that have shaped the industry. Taking this knowledge and then applying it in another class allowed me to begin forming my own sound, finding out what works and what doesn't.

While in these classes, I found myself paying closer attention to the scores of every film I watched, also trying to figure out how things work in terms of placing specific music to picture. Perhaps my strongest influence to come out of this active watching and listening is Mark Mothersbaugh, who works on all of the Wes Anderson films. His quirky but catchy and extremely accessible scores are usually the highlights of the films (with no disrespect to the movies themselves, which I also enjoy). But as far as my compositional sound, my main influences are the artists and bands that I listen to every day. I listen to what I create and can immediately tell what influenced that particular piece.

The completed score to the film has certain characteristics that I would like to point out in order to disclose some of the meaning it represents.. A standard scoring method is to develop a theme or motif to represent something within the narrative: a place, emotion, person, etc. It can be a melody that is a few notes long, or quite a few measures long. Depending on the visual and narrative situations within the context of the film, this theme can be manipulated to add another meaning to it, usually tied to a certain transformation of a character or scenario in the plot. The theme can sonically clue the viewer into a deeper meaning or foreshadow a future relationship or event. I decided to use a theme in order to focus the music and connect it to the events transpiring on-screen.

The first theme, for categorization sake, is called the "relationship" theme and can be heard in the piano in the very first scene. Throughout the film, it is used in both positive and negative lights, depending on the underlying orchestration (chord progression, instrument choice, or number of instruments). The second theme, roughly labeled the "friendship" theme, pops up for the first time in the first flashback to the protagonist's youth. Again, it is heard in the piano. An example of how this is used in a different context can be heard in the airport scene. The melody is there, in the lower synthesizer, to allude to the fact that the person on screen who we are seeing for the first time is the same friend in the flashback, only grown up. Instead of hitting the viewer over the head with the melody, I put it in lower, both the mix and tonally, so as to subtly suggest the relationship between the two characters.

One of the primary tasks that a film composer must be able to do is translate adjectives (feelings, moods, tones, descriptions into music. The ability to craft a contemplative, pensive, or ominous tune is paramount to both the film's success and the composer's ability to get a job. Given that there is no way to be sure that the song fits the mood, a lot of decisions are made on a combination of instincts and convention. To make a song turn from reflective to regretful, such as the final song in this film, there are methods in music theory to help out (for a simple example, minor keys or chords are often associated with sadness, and so on), but ultimately the final litmus test is to

simply watch the scene with the music and ask yourself, do I feel (insert

desired emotion)?

     My work on this project has taught me many things about the

technical, creative, and practical sides of film scoring. Despite being a creative

project, the actual composing and placing of music under a film was only part

of the project. Learning the in's and out's of the scoring process--working

with the director to establish a musical creative concept and mood, scheduling

time in the studio to record, utilizing available technology, working within a

tight time frame--was just as important as the music written. I hope that my

work is as effective for my audience as it has become for me.