



A FILM COMPOSER'S PERSONAL VIEW

By Stephen Daltry

I am very much of the persuasion that 'less is more' as far as film music is concerned. I like first the simplicity of the image, the empty frame that is filled with light, with movement or stillness, the quiet hum of a fridge, voices whispering, the distant sound of a school playground, the purposefulness of place and personality that sound, dialogue and image give. Upon this one can lightly paint in musical notes or, if it requires, a huge splash of brass or a ragtime piano, but I find it helpful to start with the naked image and sync sound of a rough cut: to think of music as one element that can be added, rather than coming to a film with the attitude 'how can my music fit this?' In this sense I veer more towards Fellini's point of view and the functionality of Huston's attitude to music.

I have been writing music for film and television for about ten years. I remember from my first degree at Canterbury seeing the documentaries of Grierson, the lyrical films of Robert Flaherty, *Nanook of the North* and *Louisiana Story*, the fusion of poetry and brass in Britten and Auden's *Nightmail*; the murky timbres of Herrmann's score accompanying the opening of *Citizen Kane*, as Greg Toland's camera cranes down through the rain deep into the bowels of a nightclub; Joseph Kosma's lullaby-like music to Jean Renoir's *Partie de Campagne* that suggests the innocence of young love; the voices like humming bees following the young girl downriver as she stares dreamily up at the sky. Together with the works of classical composers these were inspirational experiences; seeing Tati's *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* and Robert Bresson's *A Man Escaped*.

In the latter, Bresson shows how, without music - or by reducing it to a minimum - the creative use of sound can really have such a bearing on film narrative. He builds up sound 'motifs' that engage us in the prisoner's (Fontaine's) predicament: the bell and motor of a streetcar that we hear offscreen every time Fontaine speaks to someone through his cell window, emphasising the space outside. Music is used - a Mozart mass - that reflects the religious faith referred to through the film, but it occurs at odd, arbitrary moments, when Fontaine is emptying the slop bucket for instance, not at the moments of breakthrough or tension as one would normally expect.

My first job after leaving film school was to score a BBC documentary, *Not Waving But Drowning*, about a river policeman who recovers and identifies bodies, mostly suicides, from the River Thames. The director wanted the music to express something about the river, its force, its presence; I looked at the 'fine cut' over and over and would visit the Thames, even going out on the boat. I conceived a score that used murky wave-like sounds. I wrote no audible melody for instruments but concentrated on tone

colours and short self-contained phrases. I gave the violin piercing, arching strokes that would rise up from the surface now and then, and used the bass clarinet in a rather monotonous repetitive pattern that accompanied an image of traffic at night, of people lost under umbrellas. I think the music served, in Fellini's terms, as a 'secondary element', a layer to help 'glue' the various scenes together. I used a theme in minor key on clarinet over a constantly moving string pattern to give an emotional momentum to the police officer's voice-over at certain points, as he would drive along the city roads, deliberating over the progress (or not) of a particular case. It was all largely what is termed 'underscore', almost 'underwater' in this case.

I think in terms of textures, and whether they contain the emotion or tone required for a particular

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scene. In a recent documentary, on the novelist Catherine Cookson, I did use Geordie folk melodies like the *Keel Row* but they were disguised within the instrumentation or softly sung by a child. Both in that programme and in a recent film on child abuse, the director wanted the music to express trauma and pain dramatically but it took me several attempts before the music reflected the scene authentically rather than straying into 'Hammer-horror' territory. What is often more effective in such projects is a creative sound design, using samples of real sound mixed with one or two 'live' solo musical instruments.

Another composer whose work has influenced me is Alain Romain, who wrote the music for Jacques Tati's *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*. Music here is chiefly an anchor of personality and place: giving the film a hugely warm, holiday sound, with the irresistible arc of the saxophone's theme, rising like the child from his bucket and spade, and forging a link with Mr Hulot as he jumps into his spluttering car. Its repetition does serve to link the scenes together but, in contrast to Huston, Tati uses music creatively to

Federico Fellini
Music for a film is a marginal, secondary element that can hold first place only at rare moments: in general it must simply sustain the rest.

point up the images rather than for any narrative purpose. In *Mon Oncle* fast brassy music mimics the complete chaos at a railway station, like the 'mickey-mousing' of animation scores, or instantly transforms the cars jammed around a traffic island into a fairground carousel.

It's important for the composer to look carefully not just at the story but at its main characters, at their traits, personalities and desires. There you can often find clues to what kind of music is required. Claude Chabrol observes how the high violin screeches in the shower sequence in *Psycho* sound like birds, recalling the specimens Norman stuffed. On his first major commission, for *The Man With The Golden Arm*, the veteran American composer Elmer Bernstein told Otto Preminger, somewhat hesitantly, that he felt he should score it for jazz rather than symphony

orchestra because "after all, it was a film about a junkie (Frank Sinatra) who wants to be a jazz drummer".

It is always exciting to start from scratch, to spot music cues with a director, to discover what works and what doesn't, what makes the cuts seem to jump out at you and what makes them blend seamlessly together, to develop a musical theme in different ways through the course of a film, experimenting with leitmotifs, responding to directorial requests that 'I'd like it funny yet sad and with a hint of bitterness and in 30 seconds... and by Tuesday!' But I remain convinced that where music is used most successfully - Lynne Ramsay's film *Morvern Callar* is a good example - there has to be space to let the power of the image come through. To borrow again from Bresson, space is 'the silence that music leans on'. **v**



Robert Bresson
Music. It isolates your film from the life of your film (musical delectation). It is a powerful modifier and even destroyer of the real, like alcohol or dope.

Stephen Daltry trained at the National Film School. His music credits include Keith Rynink's *The Hunt* (Prix Italia 1999) and *Two Loves*; *Diana: Secrets behind the Crash* and the DH Lawrence drama *Odour of Chrysanthemums* (1st Prize, Milan, 2002).

1. *M. Hulot's Holiday* dir. by Jacques Tati, 1952
 2. *A Man Escaped* dir. by Robert Bresson, 1956

THE SCHOOL OF SOUND OF STORY

John Huston
I hate decorative music. I want the music to help tell the story, illustrate the idea, not just to emphasize the image.

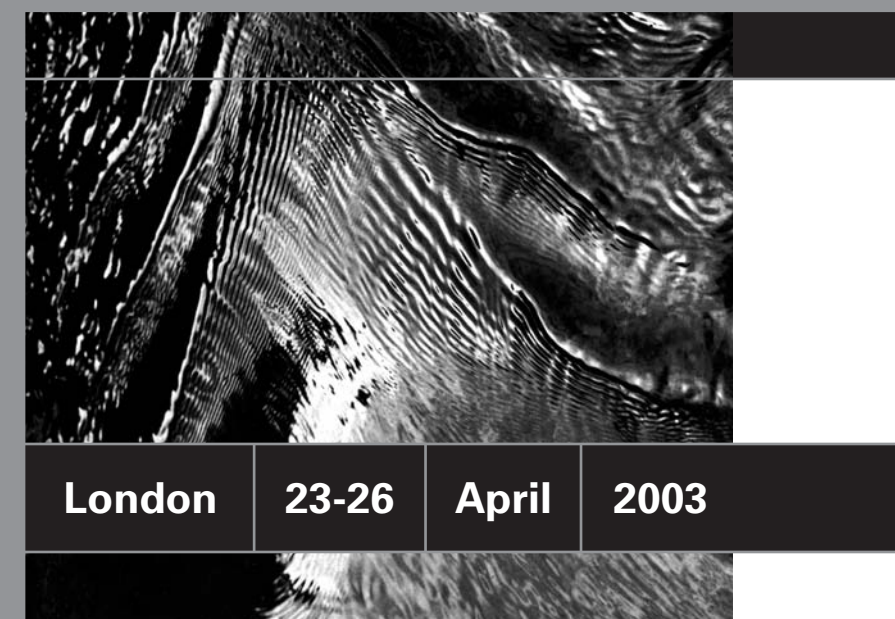
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