# DANNY ELFMAN

## TEACHES MUSIC FOR FILM

MASTERCLASS

## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

For more than 30 years, Danny has established himself as one of the most versatile and accomplished film composers in the industry. He's been nominated for four Oscars and has collaborated with directors such as Tim Burton, Gus Van Sant, Sam Raimi, Peter Jackson, Ang Lee, Rob Minkoff, Guillermo del Toro, Brian De Palma, James Ponsoldt, and David O. Russell.

Beginning with his first score on Tim Burton's *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, Danny has scored more than 100 films, including *Milk* (Oscar nominated), *Good Will Hunting* (Oscar nominated), *Big Fish* (Oscar nominated), *Men in Black* (Oscar nominated), *Edward Scissorhands*, *Batman*, *To Die For*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Silver Linings Playbook*, *American Hustle*, *Justice League*, *Spiderman*, *A Simple Plan*, *Midnight Run*, *Sommersby*, *Dolores Claiborne*, Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, and the Errol Morris documentaries *The Unknown Known* and *Standard Operating Procedure*. Most recently he has provided the music for Tim Burton's *Dumbo* and *The Grinch*.

A native of Los Angeles, Danny grew up loving film music. He traveled the world as a young man, absorbing its musical diversity. He founded the band Oingo Boingo and came to the attention of a young Tim Burton, who asked him to write the score for *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*. Thirty-four years later, the two have forged one of the most fruitful composer-director collaborations in film history.

In addition to his film work, Danny wrote the iconic theme music for the television series *The Simpsons* as well as the series *Desperate Housewives* and *Tales from the Crypt*.

***Welcome to Danny Elfman's MasterClass.***

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# *THE HIT PARADE*

Danny has more than 100 film and television scoring credits to his name. Here are some career highlights:

***Pee-wee's Big Adventure* (1985)**
Winging it on his first film score for Tim Burton, Danny combined his love for Nino Rota's music in Fellini's films with Bernard Herrmann's wondrous fantasy music that he grew up on to create a childlike, manic innocence that perfectly captures Paul Reubens' Pee-wee Herman character.

***Back to School* (1986)**
Danny's breakout success on *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* was so unexpected that the score wasn't released on CD until a year after the movie premiered. Varèse Sarabande Records combined it with Danny's infectious, classical score from Alan Metter's *Back to School* for an Elfman comedy doubleheader.

***Beetlejuice* (1988)**
Danny's diabolical, frolicking score for Burton's macabre tale shows the composer stretching beyond his unique comedic approach into fantasy and horror.

***Scrooged* (1988)**
Danny created an iconic but dark Christmas score for Richard Donner's comedy, featuring a pulsating "la-la-la-la" choir ostinato and an orchestra.

***Batman* (1989)**
With a rep as the go-to composer for quirky comedies, Danny repositioned himself as an A-list blockbuster composer with his gothic, propulsive score to Burton's dark superhero flick.

***Edward Scissorhands* (1990)**
Danny's keenly sensitive and magical compositions for Burton's semiautobiographical oddity became one of his most imitated and influential works.

***Sommersby* (1993)**
Danny tackled Jon Amiel's epic romance with an opening title featuring orchestra and solo trumpet to characterize Richard Gere's haunted, solitary antihero. Strings and woodwinds surge to reflect both the sweeping period landscape and the story's tragic potential.

**Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993)**
Danny helped come up with the film's story as he worked with Burton to write songs and ultimately a score for the spooky, holiday-themed film. It went on to become one of Burton's biggest cult hits.

***Dolores Claiborne* (1995)**
Taylor Hackford's adaptation of the Stephen King novel gave Danny the chance to delve into psychological scoring, distinguishing Kathy Bates' caretaker character and her troubled relationship with her charge with piano, plucked strings, and an erratic, scratchy fiddle-like performance on solo violin. It all adds up to a portrait of mental illness and regret.

***To Die For* (1995)**
Danny's rewarding collaboration with filmmaker Gus Van Sant started with this quirky independent comedy. He wrote music for strings, choir, and some electric guitar feedback to underscore the relentless ambition of Nicole Kidman's manipulative TV reporter character.

***Dead Presidents* (1995)**
Danny created a kaleidoscopic mix of pulsing timpani, strings, choir, mixed percussion, wailing rock guitar, and various processed effects for Allen and Albert Hughes' gritty crime caper.

***Mission: Impossible* (1996)**
Danny teamed with Brian De Palma—one of the last living directors to have worked with Bernard Herrmann—for this thriller. Danny responded with a score influenced by Herrmann that also incorporates composer Lalo Schifrin's themes from the *Mission: Impossible* TV series.

***Mars Attacks!* (1996)**
Danny tackled Burton's wacky alien invasion film with a focused march. It underscores footage of an ominous armada of flying saucers that rise up from Mars and head toward Earth.

***Good Will Hunting* (1997)**
After being overlooked by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for almost a dozen years, Danny finally earned an Oscar nomination in 1998 for his inspiring work on this Gus Van Sant drama.

***Men in Black* (1997)**
Danny's witty score for Barry Sonnenfeld's sci-fi action comedy earned him a second Oscar nom in 1998.

***A Simple Plan* (1998)**
After scoring two of Sam Raimi's deliberately cartoonish horror films (*Darkman* and *Army of Darkness*), Danny collaborated with the director on this low-key suspense film, creating a musical portrait of backwoods avarice and impending disaster using microtuned piano, banjo, an eight-piece flute ensemble, and strings.

***Sleepy Hollow* (1999)**
Danny wrote a grand, lush, symphonic score for Burton's vivid take on the classic American horror tale. Danny's mysterious main theme stands in both for the saga of the Headless Horseman and, when voiced by a solo male soprano, for Ichabod Crane's childhood memories.

***Hulk* (2003)**
After scoring other famous superhero characters, from Batman to Spider-Man, Danny was tasked by Ang Lee to leave most of his familiar action hallmarks behind. This score features wailing female vocals and a descending ostinato for six flutes to underscore Bruce Banner's "hulk-out" transformations.

***Big Fish* (2003)**
Danny earned a third Oscar nomination for his lyrical score to Burton's phantasmagorical film.

***Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005)**
Danny created a bold orchestral fantasy score as well as a collection of amusing songs done in a variety of styles for Burton's kooky reimagining of the beloved Roald Dahl tale. He was also the singing voice for many Oompa Loompas.

***Milk* (2008)**
Danny earned his fourth Oscar nom for his deft and sympathetic musical portrait of San Francisco politician Harvey Milk in Van Sant's biopic.

***Alice in Wonderland* (2010)**
Danny took a unified approach to Burton's version of the Lewis Carroll classic, centering his score around an inspiring theme for Alice and an accompanying driving ostinato figure that helps propel her on her journey through Wonderland.

***Real Steel* (2011)**
Danny created a score that's moving, uplifting, and thrilling for Shawn Levy's film based on an old *Twilight Zone* episode about boxing robots. It's Danny's *Rocky*.

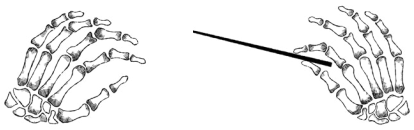
***Silver Linings Playbook* (2012)**
Danny got into the tragicomic mindset of this David O. Russell movie with piano, strummed guitar, and vocal harmonies inspired by the Beach Boys (that he sang himself), creating a kind of love song without lyrics for the film's main characters.

***Hitchcock* (2012)**
Danny took his lifelong love of Bernard Herrmann and applied it to the perfect subject: Alfred Hitchcock. He wrote a playful, mystery-tinged score for this Sacha Gervasi biopic starring Anthony Hopkins as Hitch.

***The Unknown Known* (2013)**
This score—the second in Danny's collaborations with documentarian Errol Morris—creates an ambiguous feeling around former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld as he discusses his involvement in the Iraq War.

***Justice League* (2017)**
For the apotheosis of his superhero movie work, Danny got the opportunity to employ his own classic *Batman* theme, John Williams' 1978 *Superman* theme, Hans Zimmer's *Wonder Woman* theme, and a new shimmering motif for the Flash, all wrapped up in Zack Snyder's epic action movie canvas.

***Dumbo* (2019)**
Danny's most recent collab with Burton features a purposely remote theme for Dumbo that emphasizes the lonely elephant's mystery and isolation. The score opens up with some rousing and majestic flight music as Dumbo soars into the air.



# CHAPTER TWO

# BEGINNINGS

## *MONSTER KID*

Danny Elfman grew up a free-range kid. With both parents working as teachers in Los Angeles's Baldwin Hills neighborhood, he was living in a cookie-cutter American suburb. Even as a child, he found himself quietly rebelling against its reassuring sameness. Danny and his friends were drawn to the bizarre, particularly in movies. He spent practically every weekend of his childhood hidden away in the local movie theater. A steady diet of films like *The Brain That Wouldn't Die*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Jason and the Argonauts*, *Eyes Without a Face*, and *The Time Machine* would transform Danny into what a whole generation would later describe as a typical "monster kid"—a child for whom horror movies, the weirder the better, were the ultimate high.

Danny's exploration of horror and fantasy movies eventually led to a thorough, self-taught education in film and a growing fascination with filmmakers. Music wasn't even on Danny's radar. He wanted to be a scientist—preferably a mad scientist like the ones in the movies he craved. He began taking classes in radiation biology at age 12, but by the time he entered high school, he imagined a career in film as a cinematographer or editor.

While he wasn't studying music, Danny couldn't ignore music's contribution to the fantasy, horror, and science-fiction movies he was watching. He began to pay attention to the names of composers he saw in movie credits, in particular that of Bernard Herrmann, whose inventive, outlandish scores are featured in Ray Harryhausen films like *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* and *Jason and the Argonauts* (both of which are laden with the kind of stop-motion animation creatures that director Tim Burton would later feature in some of his movies). It wasn't until his late teens that Danny took an interest in music outside of the cinematic realm: At 17, he was introduced to Igor Stravinsky (whose violent ballet, *The Rite of Spring*, changed Danny's life). He also found

himself deeply drawn to other Russian composers, particularly Sergei Prokofiev, who was one of the great "classical" composers of the 20th century as well as a prolific film composer.

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"Stravinsky turned my whole reality around of what music could do. And Prokofiev got right into my soul."

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## *LEARN MORE: IGOR STRAVINSKY*

Stravinsky's work ranged from his early romantic Russian period under the influence of Nikolai Rimksy-Korsakov to serial compositions written from the late 1950s through the 1960s. But his influence on movie music mostly derives from his 1913 ballet, *The Rite of Spring*. Stravinsky was a pioneer in the use of offbeat, violently driving rhythmic material, creating a new and savage sound compared to the more formal orchestration approaches of his predecessors. This opened up a new language to underscore violence and tension in motion picture scores. The fight music in scores like Leonard Rosenman's *Rebel Without a Cause* or Jerry Goldsmith's *Logan's Run* is highly influenced by Stravinsky's jagged rhythms and repeating figures; the throbbing jungle music in *King Kong* or even the playful but primitive-sounding music for the Jawas in John Williams' *Star Wars* score derives from Stravinsky's woodwind writing in *The Rite of Spring*. (Williams' *Jaws* motif was also inspired by a pulsing string section in the ballet.) Despite his obvious influence on 20th-century film music, Stravinsky never wrote a film score. While *The Rite of Spring* was adapted for the Disney animated feature *Fantasia* (it underscored a sequence of animated dinosaurs), Stravinsky reportedly disapproved both of the film and the way his work was adapted for it.

## *FIDDLING AROUND*

Before graduating high school, and with so many of his friends evolving into musicians, Danny bought a violin—in secret. He was embarrassed that his other friends had already progressed in their musical studies and performance abilities, and he thought it might be too late for him to catch up. Nevertheless, he began teaching himself to play.

By that time, Danny was absorbing more and more music, particularly jazz, which to him had the same vivid, uncontrolled energy he so appreciated in Stravinsky's work. In his violin playing, Danny was inspired by his love of the gypsy-influenced performances of Stéphane Grappelli, who often played with jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt. Danny also came into a small fortune—$1,800—in the form of a car accident insurance settlement, which he and his friend Leon Schneiderman spent on a trip around the world. While the pair were en route to Morocco, they stopped off in Paris, where Danny's brother Richard was performing in a troupe called Le Grand Magic Circus.

Danny's ability to improvise on violin captured the notice of the troupe's director, Jérôme Savary, who would later become head of France's National Theater. Danny performed with the troupe for a month before heading down the west coast of Africa, where he began a lifelong fascination with African percussion instruments. He collected a number of them before several bouts of malaria forced him to cut his trip short.

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"On my travels through Africa it wasn't like I was becoming a much better musician. That's where I was starting to absorb music and listen to it in a different way."

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## *FROM THE MYSTIC KNIGHTS TO OINGO BOINGO*

By 1972, Richard had returned to the States and formed another performance group called The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo. He elected 19-year-old Danny to be its musical director. It was during this period that Danny began to teach himself to write music. Still in love with the classical approaches of Stravinsky and Prokofiev, he wrote a performance piece called *Oingo Boingo Piano Concerto No. 1 ½* and found his palette further transformed when he heard a piece of ska music on the radio. The throwback sounds of ska—a combination of rhythm and blues, Caribbean sounds, and jazz—fit in perfectly with Danny's sonic aesthetic.

Danny eventually transformed the Mystic Knights into Oingo Boingo—a rock band. Oingo Boingo soon began earning a solid reputation as a progressive rock group, and, in his capacity as front man for the band, Danny contributed to movies like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Weird Science*, and *Sixteen Candles*. But it was always in the form of songs.

## *THE BIG ADVENTURE*

In 1985, director Tim Burton sought Danny out to talk about *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, a cartoon-like Warner Bros. comedy about an impetuous man-child on a cross-country odyssey in search of his stolen bicycle. Danny thought he was being tasked with writing a song for the movie, as he'd done for other projects. So he was flummoxed when Burton asked him to write a score for the picture.

> "He said, 'I'd like you to do a score'— and I said, I think, 'Why me?' And he goes, 'I don't know. I've heard Oingo Boingo. I see the band. And I just think you could do it.'"

The pair's sensibilities couldn't have been more in sync. Danny found himself responding to Pee-wee's outsize personality and Burton's distinctive visual style. He immediately conjured up music in his head upon viewing the movie's opening scenes. Drawing from the influence of Bernard Herrmann and Italian composer Nino Rota, Danny composed a rambunctious score, circus-like in its childish energy but with Herrmann's grinding sense of obsession—the perfect comic accompaniment to Pee-wee's manic drive.

Danny's music for *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* caused a sensation among audiences and critics when the movie hit theaters in 1985. Music for movie comedies, trapped in a no-man's land between the cutesy tunes written for Neil Simon adaptations and the electronica of the 1980s, now suddenly had a new direction. After that, Danny became the go-to composer for comic movies and quickly became one of the most imitated up-and-coming composers in Hollywood.

## *A Quickie Guide to Some of Cinema's Greatest Composers*

### *IGOR STRAVINSKY*

**Listen:** "L'Histoire du soldat," *The Rite of Spring*

Igor Stravinsky's groundbreaking music, much of it written in the early part of the 20th century, helped establish standards like offbeat rhythms and powerful repeating figures (ostinati) that are still found in both concert and film music today—particularly in movie sequences of violence or primitivism, as in Max Steiner's *King Kong* (1933) and Jerry Goldsmith's *Logan's Run* (1976). The 1913 debut of Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring*—the music of which NPR describes as "angular, dissonant, and totally unpredictable"—was reportedly so shocking to audiences that they responded with catcalls and hissing.

### *STÉPHANE GRAPPELLI AND DJANGO REINHARDT*

**Listen:** "Minor Swing"

French jazz violinist Grappelli formed one of the first all-string jazz bands, Quintette du Hot Club de France, with guitarist Django Reinhardt in 1934. Grappelli recorded hundreds of performances with artists like Duke Ellington, Oscar Peterson, Claude Bolling, Jean-Luc Ponty, André Previn, Yo-Yo Ma, and others.

### DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

**Listen:** Fifth Symphony

Shostakovich wrote his First Symphony at age 19. His music was often highly experimental prior to 1936, when his work was publicly denounced by the Soviet newspaper *Pravda*, resulting in a nationwide campaign against him. After this Shostakovich wrote more conservatively and later found himself back in favor, but he remained under intense political pressure throughout his life and career. He scored more than 100 films in his lifetime and his music still finds its way into movies, from *Children of Men* to *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice*.

### *SERGEI PROKOFIEV*

**Listen:** The scores from *Alexander Nevsky* and *Lieutenant Kijé*

Prokofiev was one of the giants of 20th-century music. He was just as comfortable writing his harsh and dissonant early piano concertos as he was writing easily hummable melodies for children. His work *Peter and the Wolf* (1936), designed to help acquaint children with the instruments of the orchestra, is a textbook example of leitmotif scoring, as Prokofiev applies easily recognizable, repeatable themes to identify specific characters. His grand, gorgeous, and sprawling film scores for *Lieutenant Kijé* and *Alexander Nevsky* are considered early masterworks of the form that Prokofiev adapted into renowned concert works.

### *DUKE ELLINGTON*

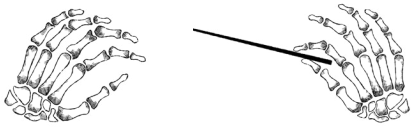
**Listen:** "Black and Tan Fantasy"

Composer, pianist, and bandleader Ellington spun a 50-year career that started with his band's appearances at Harlem's Cotton Club and eventually took him on a worldwide tour. He also recorded some of the most lasting jazz and song standards in American culture. His composition "Black and Tan Fantasy" (1927) features a brash performance from a solo piano as well as muted and stopped trumpets over a pulsing rhythm. It was recorded for multiple record labels the year of its release.

RECOMMENDED VIEWING

*Forbidden Zone*, directed by Richard Elfman

*Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, directed by Tim Burton



CHAPTER THREE

# STARTING YOUR SCORE: THE SPOTTING SESSION

**"We're basically just starting and stopping."**

The first step in any scoring process is actually watching the film—getting an instinctive feel for its rhythms, its tone, and the areas where music will play an important role. Ideally you can find an informal way to do this before sitting down to work—at a screening, public or private, or even in an editing booth, where you can absorb the film as a complete work and react to it as a viewer.

Your first professional viewing of the movie will likely be in a spotting session, which is usually held in a small screening room. During a spotting session, you and the director can sit down and go through the film scene by scene, making note of where music should start and stop, how long each cue or combination of cues will be, and numbering each cue. Cues in the first section of the film are numbered 1m1, 1m2, etc.:

- The first number indicates the *reel*, or section of the film, in which the music will be placed.
- The *m* indicates *music*.
- The second number indicates the cue's placement within the reel.

## *LEARN MORE: ANNOTATING YOUR MUSICAL CUES*

A *reel* refers to a reel of 35mm film, the industry standard medium before most theaters switched to digital projection. Each reel consisted of 1,000 feet of film, which would run for around 11 minutes before it had to be changed. Movies are still measured in these 11-minute increments, and film score cues are labeled accordingly. Therefore 1m1 would be the first piece of music in a movie, 1m5 would be the fifth piece of music within that reel, 2m1 would be the first piece of music in the second reel, etc. Pro tip: Giving each cue a descriptive title—even if it's just "Fight Scene"—will help you keep track of what's going on in the movie and the structure of your score.

## *COMMUNICATION IS KEY*

One of the biggest challenges you might face in writing a film score is communicating with your director. The spotting session is your first opportunity to formally discuss the director's thoughts and feelings about what they want from your music, and music can be a notoriously difficult thing to describe and discuss (even for a composer). Some directors have musical experience, but even if you can discuss musical terms in detail with the director, you may not hit on exactly what they want out of a score. Discussing the feelings, the intensity, perhaps the tempo—does your director want fast-paced music, stately music, insistent music?—can often help indicate what the director is looking for better than technical jargon. In some cases, a director may be uncomfortable discussing anything about the film's music, so it is your responsibility to draw them out as much as possible at the spotting session.

## *NOW START WRITING*

Once you've finished spotting, you can begin writing and planning. It's been a standard rule of thumb since the early days of motion picture scoring that the average amount of music a composer can write is about two minutes per day—less for particularly complex, note-heavy music and more for simpler, more textural or lyrical writing. So conservatively, you'll likely need at least 30 working days to write 60 minutes of music (on average, most films have about 60 to 70 minutes of music, but there is a wide range of variation).

As you write, you can also start to determine how many recording sessions you will need. You may record a very simple television score in a day with two three-hour sessions. At the other end is something like John Williams's

score for *The Empire Strikes Back*, which required 18 three-hour sessions spread over two weeks. The *Empire* score was an elaborate, difficult-to-perform, and lengthy score (with two hours and three minutes of music) and probably represents the maximum amount of rehearsal and recording time a modern movie score would use.

If you're trying to gauge how many recording sessions you may need for your own score, you'll want to consider the caliber of musicians you're working with. If you're recording in Hollywood with professional studio musicians, you'll find that they can generally execute a music cue to perfection in only a couple of takes. But if you've written a particularly complex score or you're working with less experienced musicians, it will likely take longer to get the usable takes you need. Better to estimate that you'll need more time rather than less. (For reference, Danny usually averages about eight to 10 minutes of music per three-hour orchestra session, which includes separating instruments like woodwinds and brass from the strings.)

## *LEARN MORE: FILM VS. DIGITAL*

Virtually all movie theaters now use digital projection as opposed to film reels, which predominated the industry prior to the 21st century. The reason that film composers have worked around the "reel" system of determining where music is placed in a film is due to the fact that reels of film once had to be physically changed by projectionists, so music cues had to end just before the end of a given reel. The next cue could not begin until the next reel was playing. If you watch a physical film in a theater, you can often see a brief white dot or flash in the corner of the screen just before a reel change—a signal to alert the projectionist when to switch reels. (Yes, like in that one scene from *Fight Club*.)

The standard for most theatrical films for many years was 35mm film—a frame of film about 1⅓ inches wide. During the 1950s, as a tactic to deal with the growing competition of television for viewing audiences, studios developed larger film formats—65mm (frames a little more than 2½ inches wide) and 70mm (2¾ inches wide), which created a wider aspect ratio image with much more detail, and which were also capable of holding much more sound information in their magnetic "soundtracks." This led to an era of wide-screen epics like *Ben-Hur*, *Spartacus*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, as well as lavish motion picture scores performed by large orchestras.

Digital film has many advantages over analog film—you don't have to protect and load canisters of film, and you can do far more takes and shoot more footage than you can practically shoot with film. Cinematographers will argue the pros and cons of the final results of either medium, but digital film allows for the manipulation of first-generation images as well as digital editing (not to mention it's more cost-effective). Certain directors—Quentin Tarantino is one—still prefer the look and feel of analog film both for shooting and for the final viewing experience.

## *TEMP MUSIC*

**"Temp music is the bane of every composer. Sometimes, I'm looking at a rough preview, where there's a full temp score from beginning to end. And I hope never to see it again."**

Temporary scores, or temp scores, are compilations of music from other sources—usually, but not always, from other movie scores—that are edited to punctuate an early cut of a movie. At one time this was done just by film editors, often to help provide a rhythm or outside structure to their cutting, or to suggest the mood or feel of a scene before it has been scored. Sometimes this can be done at the suggestion of a director, and in some cases it actually indicates his or her ultimate goal for the music in the film. Probably the most famous example of this is director Stanley Kubrick, who hired well-known composer Alex North to score *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But during filming, as he began to assemble sequences, Kubrick used pieces of classical music like Richard Strauss's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Johann Strauss's "The Blue Danube," and the Adagio from the *Gayane Ballet Suite* by Aram Khachaturyan for various scenes. Kubrick was eventually convinced that the classical pieces worked better than North's original pieces ever could. North didn't realize that his music was cut in favor of the classical recordings until the composer saw the movie at its premiere. These days, temp music is generally used as a guideline for composers.

## *TEMP LOVE*

Temporary music is meant to be just that: temporary. It's almost never intended to remain in the completed film, particularly as licensing rights for specific pieces of music must be purchased (which can tack on exorbitant costs). For the composer, a temp score may serve as a guide to what the filmmakers hope to achieve in terms of tone, tempo, and intensity for the final score. The danger is that, in viewing the movie countless times with the temp score in place, filmmakers can develop a case of "temp love"—and they're loath to kill their darling. In other words, a director is so used to seeing the movie with its temp score in place that any new music written for the movie pales in comparison, and the composer is strongly encouraged to more or less reproduce the music heard in the temp score.

That means you as a composer are consequently stuck in a double bind—reproducing the temp score exactly is out of the question because of legal and copyright issues, but failing to capture the aspects of the temp music that please the filmmakers can put you out of a job. Maintaining strong communication lines with your director and providing options for particularly challenging moments increase the odds that your score will make it into the film intact. But even well-known, established composers can struggle to overcome a filmmakers' affection for a temp track. For 1979's *Alien*, Jerry Goldsmith wrote a highly effective, avant-garde score—but the final cut of the movie retained some temp music from Goldsmith's 1962 score to *Freud*, and Goldsmith's end title music was replaced with music from Howard Hanson's Symphony No. 2 ("Romantic"), another piece of temp music preferred by the filmmakers over Goldsmith's original compositions.

## *KEEP IT FRESH*

Your options in dealing with temp music are either to slavishly reproduce the temp track, creating music that is very similar but different enough to avoid copyright issues, or create music that is so fresh and compelling that you convince the director that yours is the perfect music for the movie. It's clear where Danny stands on this: "Your job," he says, "is to come up with something fresh and new. And yeah, there's a certain point where the director could beat you down by refusing your music two times, five times, seven times, 10 times. But you try. You gotta try."

Danny encourages being fierce but polite when it comes to expressing your opinions to a director. "When you're fierce with a director, you have to do it in a very careful way, because if you just come off as arrogant and fiercely attached to your own ways, the director's gonna equally dig in," he says. "And you're gonna end up coming to a real problem."

When you've hit that crucial point with your director where they like the way a piece of your music works with the film, you can use that as leverage to convince them that a similar approach will work during other moments, or that you can create a variation that will work in an equally effective way for another scene in the film.

## *WORKING ON VARIOUS BUDGETS*

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"Scoring a film with big or small resources is not even something I give two thoughts about. ... You're gonna encounter every kind of big, small, in-between [budget] during your career."

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On a medium-size motion picture budget (somewhere between $10 million and $25 million), you may plan for a 24-piece orchestra. For a small-budget production (anything under $10 million), you may hire seven musicians for two days of recording sessions, using three or four of the players as soloists on one of those days. Often low-budget scores can be crafted with synthesizers

and a soloist or two, but any group of players—whether it's 16, 30, 64, or 90—will give you a different sound, and you must plan your score around the capabilities of your musicians.

You will almost always be asked to create digital demos to audition cues for filmmakers. If you're creating demos for a score that will ultimately be performed acoustically, you may need to reassure the filmmaker that demos cannot create the expressive and emotional quality that live players provide and that a whole new dimension to the score will be added when it is finally performed by trained musicians. Action music and other hard-edged music can often be expressed very effectively by synthesizer demos, but more romantic or sentimental melodies require live performers to inject life and emotion.

## *PART OF THE PACKAGE*

One aspect of budgets that has changed over the years is the use of package deals, particularly on movies with midrange budgets. Since the early days of movie scoring, composers would receive a separate set fee for their services, which included conducting and overseeing the recording of their music, while studio musician fees, recording studio costs, recording engineer fees, orchestrators' wages, and other wages were paid separately. Now, for movies with low to midrange budgets, composers are often hired as part of a package—meaning that the composer is paid an overall fee for the end-to-end production of the score, from which costs for musicians, studio space, and any other workers necessary to complete the score are derived.

As the composer, you are essentially paying all the costs of producing the score out of your own pocket—meaning you may have to think about whether you want to add to the production value of a score (reducing your take-home pay in the process) or find ways to cut costs that won't noticeably reduce the quality of your score in order to keep your compensation equitable.

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**"There are great scores from small ensembles—from inventive composers. And to show invention is a great thing."**

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CHAPTER FOUR

# STORYTELLING THROUGH MUSIC

"*King Kong, Bride of Frankenstein*—it's amazing to listen to those scores again. You have to understand: Nobody had done that before."

You can't work as a film composer without having a love for and a deep understanding of film. Viewing films in the context in which they were made is challenging—to comprehend the style and effectiveness of a film like *King Kong* is not only to try to comprehend something made decades before you were born, but to put yourself in the frame of mind of an audience member who lived and died long before you existed. And yet, primal, iconic elements of these films and their music can still speak to modern audiences, and the best of them remain part of our cultural conversation and mindset.

Narrative music existed before film in the form of operas and ballets that applied music to visual imagery, but played out on theatrical stages instead of on movie screens. These operas and ballets were (and still are) performed as concert works without their original staging and choreography—but their narrative ideas conjure up images, characters, and ideas in the mind of the listener. The best film music can do this on its own by re-creating a movie's key scenes and emotions in your mind or even inspiring imagery and feelings irrespective of the film it was written for. Even when it's played outside of the context of the film, John Williams's chopping motif from *Jaws* instantly conjures up the image of a marauding shark; Maurice Jarre's sweeping theme to *Lawrence of Arabia* summons the sight of desert vistas; Jerry Goldsmith's solo trumpet theme from *Chinatown* evokes 1930s Los Angeles. Modern scores often

create a mood, but that mood itself can be indelible. You may not remember the exact theme to Howard Shore's score from *The Silence of the Lambs*, but you certainly remember the feeling of dread and foreboding it created.

If you're looking to do a little research, streaming platforms make a huge amount of cinema history available to you—Amazon is particularly good for older movies, while other platforms like Netflix offer a handful of classic films. YouTube is great for more obscure movies. Start with genres that appeal to you and work your way outward, or explore the output of film composers who sparked your interest in the field in the first place. Remember, Danny was a "monster kid," in love not just with music but with films themselves. If you're going to tackle as many different genres as he has, you need to see how other composers have taken on a variety of films. Another research suggestion: Pick one of your favorite directors and follow the chronology of his or her films. How do they work with their composers from film to film, and how does the way they employ music progress or change?

## *THE INNOVATORS: STEINER AND WAXMAN*

In the creation of Max Steiner's score for *King Kong* and Franz Waxman's score for *Bride of Frankenstein*, technical and artistic approaches to movie music were invented that are still in effect today. Steiner and Waxman, along with Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Miklós Rózsa, came from an era of narrative storytelling: Steiner wrote and conducted operas and musicals in Europe before relocating to the U.S. He spent 15 years as a musical director, orchestrator, arranger, and conductor on numerous Broadway musicals—including works by Jerome Kern and George Gershwin—before joining RKO Pictures, where he scored the western *Cimarron* (1931), followed by *Symphony of Six Million* (1932). Waxman studied composition at Dresden Music Academy in Germany. He supported himself and paid for his education with the money he earned performing with dance bands, which caught the ear of film composer Frederick Hollander. Hollander brought Waxman into the German film industry as an orchestrator, and after a year, Waxman left Germany for Los Angeles. Almost immediately, he wrote his *Bride of Frankenstein* score.

Steiner's throbbing, sometimes frenzied score for *Kong* helped bring to life not only the shambling beast but also the world that it lived in—a steamy, multilayered jungle made deeper and more dangerous by Steiner's primitive-sounding, Stravinsky-inspired music. Waxman's music for Elsa Lanchester's

fright-wigged titular character in *Bride of Frankenstein* is lilting and beautiful but also spine-chilling and eerie, a majestic counterpart to Lanchester's twitchy, spitting performance.

## *THE NEW GOLDEN AGE*

When John Williams wrote the scores for *Jaws* in 1975 and *Star Wars* in 1977, he was looking back to Hollywood's Golden Age of the 1930s through the 1950s—recalling not only *King Kong* (Williams's motif for the shark was the equivalent of Kong's ominous jungle music) but also pirate epics from Korngold, 1950s Waxman swashbucklers like *Prince Valiant*, and even Rózsa's sword-and-sandal spectaculars like *Ben-Hur*. And he filtered all of these through his own distinctive sensibility. Williams gave composers license to return to the lush, symphonic orchestrations of a bygone era, and Danny's earliest film work—*Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, *Back to School*, *Batman*, *Dick Tracy*—featured grand and heavily ornamented orchestral music molded in this same tradition.

You may never have to write a Golden Age-style film score, but you can still find a wealth of inspiration in the different approaches and techniques the composers from this era employed on their projects. Find a few films from this era and examine how the composers approached drama—what kinds of emotions did their music evoke? How did they underscore character and motivation? What moments did they choose to score, and what moments did they leave free of music? See if you can update any of these ideas or approaches for a project you're working on.

"[Williams] was illustrating exactly how the masters would take a thematic narrative and weave it into a score. And on the other extreme you have contemporary music, which can be extremely effective: There's no melody at all, but there could be a motif, and the motif says a lot."

One of Danny's childhood obsessions was the Peter Lorre thriller *The Beast With Five Fingers*, with Lorre as a pianist pursued by a disembodied hand. The hand had its own disturbing melody composed by Steiner. A fascination with Ray Harryhausen movies like *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, *Jason and the Argonauts*, and *Mysterious Island* led to one of Danny's most profound artistic influences in the form of composer Bernard Herrmann. Danny was captivated by Herrmann's science-fiction score for *The Day the Earth Stood Still,* which used an electric instrument called a theremin to create deep, humming sci-fi sounds for a lumbering alien robot called Gort. But Herrmann was also a master at creating psychological music, particularly in his work for director Alfred Hitchcock on films like *Vertigo*, *Marnie*, *North by Northwest*, and *Psycho*—the last of which being the best score Danny had ever heard when he finally caught up with the film. Herrmann was remarkably ahead of his time in using ostinatos, or repeating musical figures (anywhere from two notes to a dozen or more), in a way that almost prefigured minimalism as it would be ultimately expressed by composers like Philip Glass and Steve Reich.

In terms of its intense, obsessive quality, there's a direct link between the work of Herrmann and that of a modern composer like Mica Levi, whose score for *Under the Skin* returns to the same skin-crawling material every time Scarlett Johansson, who plays a seductive, emotionless alien, leads a victim into the black liquid pool of her apartment. It's not a traditional melody in that you probably won't find yourself humming it, but it creates a specific and unforgettable mood for the character.

"You want [the audience] to go, 'I'm not sure if this character is good or bad. Maybe they're both.' And you can do that with the music."

## *The Composers of Hollywood's Golden Age (and More Recent Composers Who Influenced Danny)*

### *MAX STEINER*

Steiner is often credited with inventing film music with his elaborate score for the 1933 thriller *King Kong*.

**FAMOUS SCORES:** *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *Casablanca* (1942), *A Star Is Born* (1937), *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948)

### *FRANZ WAXMAN*

Franz Waxman fled the rise of Nazism in Germany to seek refuge and find work in Hollywood in the 1930s. His finale for Gloria Swanson's character in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) is one of the most unforgettable musical sendoffs in movie history.

**FAMOUS SCORES:** *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), *Rebecca* (1940), *A Place in the Sun* (1951)

### *BERNARD HERRMANN*

Herrmann arguably had the most prestigious career in film music apart from John Williams. His first score was for Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), and his work for Alfred Hitchcock made Herrmann almost as well-known as the director. Herrmann died in his sleep the night he finished recording his score for Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976).

**FAMOUS SCORES:** *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966)

### *ERICH WOLFGANG KORNGOLD*

Korngold, an Austrian concert composer, left Nazi Germany at director Max Reinhardt's urging and came to the U.S. to score movies. He defined brassy "swashbuckler" music by providing stirring fanfares and choral arrangements for pirate movies. His bravura opening to 1942's *Kings Row* prefigures the brilliant opening of John Williams's score to *Star Wars*.

**FAMOUS SCORES:** Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935), *Captain Blood* (1935), *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), *The Sea Hawk* (1940)

### *MIKLÓS RÓZSA*

Rózsa made his name in the U.S. after scoring *The Thief of Bagdad* in 1940. His distinctive style, highly influenced by his Hungarian upbringing, gave him an almost instinctive talent for fantasy films and lavish epics.

**FAMOUS SCORES:** *The Jungle Book* (1942), *Julius Caesar* (1953), *Ben-Hur* (1959), *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (1973)

### *JERRY GOLDSMITH*

One of the most eclectic film composers of the 20th century, Goldsmith worked across a variety of genres—science-fiction, war movies, horror films, dramas. While Goldsmith applied unusual effects to many of his scores, he was also adept at creating subtle shifting moods through his use of strings.

**FAMOUS SCORES:** *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Patton* (1970), *Poltergeist* (1982), *L.A. Confidential* (1997)

### *ENNIO MORRICONE*

Perhaps the most prolific composer working in film, Morricone can claim more than 500 film and TV scoring credits since starting his career in 1960. He first gained fame for his wildly stylized scores for a series of spaghetti western movies featuring Clint Eastwood and directed by Sergio Leone. He won an Oscar in 2016 for his score to Quentin Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight* (2015).

**FAMOUS SCORES:** *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966)

### *NINO ROTA*

Rota wrote operas and ballets before his film composition career kicked off in 1933. He eventually went on to work for almost all of Italy's top film directors and became famous for his work with Federico Fellini.

**FAMOUS SCORES:** *8 ½* (1963), *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965), *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), *The Godfather* (1972)

### *MAURICE JARRE*

Jarre became known for his lush romantic music for 1960s epics. Throughout the '80s and '90s, he continued to write large orchestral scores for big action films while also developing a spare and unnerving electronic style for thrillers like *Fatal Attraction* (1987).

**FAMOUS SCORES:** *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Dr. Zhivago* (1965), *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), *Witness* (1985)

CHAPTER FIVE

# THEMES AND MELODIES

**"Melody can be as simple as a bass drum. It could be as complicated as a full-blown theme."**

## *SEEING THE LEIT*

As a composer you use melody in any number of ways. You may construct a melody or theme to provide a structure for your score, or you may use a leit-motif approach to apply specific themes or motifs (shorter musical phrases) to specific characters or story elements.

The leitmotif approach is part of the grand tradition of film music going back to the 1930s, and it is still in use today. This technique is also referred to as the "Peter and the Wolf" approach because of Sergei Prokofiev's classical piece for orchestra in which a narrator assigns highly memorable themes to characters in a story for children. Animated movies directed at children and other tentpole franchises will often lean on at least one big, recognizable melody to tie the story together. A superhero movie or an epic fantasy with a large cast of colorful characters may feature identifiable leitmotifs that can help reinforce and delineate characters in the viewers' minds. Take *Lord of the Rings* as an example: Composer Howard Shore used a different leitmotif for scenes featuring the Shire, for scenes that took place in Rohan, and for scenes focused on the fellowship in an epic score that resulted in more than 100 recurring themes in total. In the *Star Wars* movies Luke Skywalker has a bright, optimistic theme, while Darth Vader has a grandiose, menacing march. If

you're working on a movie in which the moral lines are not so easily drawn, you may not want to give your characters individual themes at all—you may just want a neutral theme that allows viewers to determine their own feelings about the characters and story.

## *KEEPING IT CLASSIC*

As a rule of thumb, the broader the story is, the more likely it will lean toward a classic approach to melody and theme. Classical melodies often follow an A-B-A pattern: Much like a song, there's a main melody (A), a B theme or secondary melody (aka the bridge), then a restatement of the main A melody. More complex themes can add a C section and so on. Once you have a fully composed theme, you can break sections of it down into smaller fragments and create variations—flip a series of notes upside down, reverse them, or reduce them to create shorter motifs.

Musical themes can run the gamut from fully expressed melodies that can be easily remembered and sung to more subdued melodies, including complex minor-key themes that are memorable but less hummable. Contemporary scores are often constructed out of simple pieces of material, sometimes even centering on rhythmic motifs or motives. You can even build a score out of a two-note motif; the shark motif in John Williams's *Jaws* is the most familiar example (although, if we're being hypertechnical, there's a third, lower note that usually plays after the two-note figure repeats six times).

## *MIX AND MATCH*

Danny's music has embraced all of the above approaches. Scores like *Black Beauty* or *Alice in Wonderland* are constructed around elaborate, vividly memorable, long-line melodies that are expressed completely at key moments in the film. *Beetlejuice* is an example of a more subdued melody: Bouncing, antic rhythms provide the spine of the score, supplying the Beetlejuice character with all the underscoring he needs, while a mock jolly theme plays only in the opening credits and during the climactic action. For *Dead Presidents*, Danny created a simple motif out of three bass drum notes. The main title features numerous other percussion and synthesizer effects, but it's the low, heavy tread of bass drums that drives the score, intensifying the movie's heist sequences and creating a mood of inevitable doom.

Director Brian De Palma asked Danny for something similar to *Dead Presidents* for the first film in the *Mission: Impossible* franchise. The score required Danny to adapt Lalo Schifrin's famous *Mission: Impossible* TV theme and integrate it into parts of his score. Danny wrote a subdued theme for Tom Cruise's character, an eerie love theme, and a percussive suspense motif to meet De Palma's requirements.

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**"Finding a tune is actually one of the hardest things there is."**

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## *SCORING* THE SIMPSONS

Danny's famed, Emmy-nominated theme for *The Simpsons* came to him in a flash of inspiration. Upon seeing creator Matt Groening's pencil sketch of the opening sequence, Danny immediately thought of classic cartoon themes from the 1960s, like *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*. "If you want something contemporary, something modern sounding, I'm not the guy," Danny told Matt. "But if you want something that's retro, I got it." Danny worked the entire theme out during a 45-minute drive from Hollywood to Topanga Canyon.

As a composer you would like to think that inspiration will always strike this quickly. But writing something as memorable as the theme to *The Simpsons* in 45 minutes doesn't happen often, even for a composer like Danny. Typically you will have to sit down at the piano, keyboard, or computer and experiment with notes and sounds until you discover something you can develop. If you're beholden to a production schedule for a film or a television show, chances are you'll have to generate ideas immediately and then hone them as you work. Practice this skill by challenging yourself to come up with a theme or melody on a strict timeline. See what you can come up with when you give yourself only two weeks, one week, or three days to create.

"Themes and melodies hit you at the most inopportune time. And the big fish, the ones that get away, are your best ideas you ever had."

## *THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY*

If you express yourself through music, chances are you're constantly at work because your mind can come up with a melody at any time. Preserving that moment of inspiration is important, especially for those times when inspiration isn't coming easily. Certain melodies may not work for the project you're assigned to at the moment, but they could be perfect for a project you'll work on later. Fortunately, you live in the era of the smartphone, and voice memos are an easy way to make sure your finest ideas don't escape you—even if you have to step outside of a quiet event to hum something into your phone. You can still lose data that's on your phone, however, so backing up is critical—that moment of inspiration for that specific melody may never come again.

Work on keeping your ears open: Rhythmic and melodic ideas can derive from anywhere, from the sounds in nature to the din of machinery to the weird blend of noises you're exposed to every day.

"Sometimes a theme plays a feeling in the movie. It's related to the character and it will often play when the character's involved, but it's not *his* theme."

## *SEARCHING FOR THE THEME: HANDS ON KEYS*

Once you've developed material for your score, you'll discover how your themes and motifs work—or don't work—within the context of your project. You may find that a theme that was intended for a character may work better as an overall theme for the story or that a grand theme for the film as a whole may work better for a specific situation. Getting the filmmaker's perspective can be invaluable in determining this.

If there is ongoing communication between you and the filmmaker, you will find out early on whether or not your material is functioning in context.

Being flexible with the "meaning" of your themes can also benefit you: John Williams created a specific "Force" theme associated with Ben Kenobi and a sweeping theme for Princess Leia in *Star Wars*. But when it came time to score the dramatic death of Obi-Wan Kenobi, Williams chose to apply Leia's theme instead of the "Force" theme because he felt the former served the scene and its emotions more accurately.

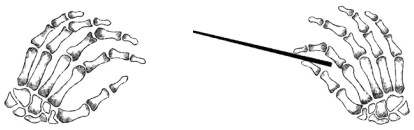
## *MORE IS MORE*

While developing your score, you may find yourself with more usable themes than you anticipated—which is a good problem to have. As Danny discovered with *Edward Scissorhands*, several fully expressed themes may come in handy to address different parts of a story. John Williams found this to be the case after writing what he thought were two different themes for Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Williams asked Spielberg to choose between the two themes, but Spielberg liked them both. So Williams used one as the A theme of the film and the other as the B theme for the familiar *Indiana Jones* "Raiders March."

Sometimes the themes you come up with will tell you how they should work—and it may not be in the way you originally planned. Danny had already written his themes for *Edward Scissorhands* when he found that they weren't working the way he conceived them. Danny finished the project believing that he hadn't succeeded in finding the proper applications of his themes, convinced that he might have found the correct structure if he'd had more time. He left the project with a feeling of failure. Ironically, his *Edward Scissorhands* score became one of the most influential and popular pieces of music he'd ever written. Ideally, you can reach out to other composers or filmmakers—a mentor, as Danny describes—to give you a second opinion when you're uncertain about your instincts. But ultimately, your instincts and feedback from the filmmaker may be all you have to go on.

In certain cases, you may be asked to *avoid* melody. Some filmmakers feel a catchy tune will take viewers out of the movie experience or lead them too insistently to an emotional conclusion. You may instead be asked to create a more general mood with your music—something warm, chilling, disturbing, tense, or indefinable.

Practice your melody-making skills by trying to generate between three and a dozen different melodic ideas. Choose two of them. Develop one into an 8-, 16-, or 24-bar work that embodies a hummable tune, and develop the other into an 8-, 16-, or 24-bar work that embodies a mood.



CHAPTER SIX

# REAL-TIME LISTEN: *A SIMPLE PLAN*

**"In *A Simple Plan*, I wanted to take something that was kinda sweet and simple but mess it up."**

Danny's music for *A Simple Plan* shows how a variety of techniques can be used to apply a twist to familiar sounds. Danny utilizes microtuning—the use in music of microtones, intervals smaller than a semitone—to create a disturbing effect with just three notes on the piano. He transforms those notes into three off-kilter, slightly dissonant chords and immediately alerts the viewer that something unsettling is about to occur. A banjo progression—also slightly out-of-tune in a less pronounced way than the piano—and flute on Danny's main theme suggest a backwoods setting. Danny shifts the melody into a minor key, making an already ambivalent-sounding theme into something that's even more detached and remote. The plucked banjo provides an offbeat rhythm that strains against the time signature of the piece, creating its own uncertain tension.

Danny describes the string chords that underlie the piece as "traditional"—that is, they foreshadow underlying drama as expressed by film composers since the early days of scored motion pictures. With their expressivity and ability to shift easily and subtly between soothing tonality and suspenseful tension, strings can help communicate emotions, establish an atmosphere, or unsettle the viewer by suggesting the familiar sounds of past movie music while supporting less traditional sounds and instrumentation. Danny's basic melody on strings suggests the essential decency of Bill Paxton's character while the shifting harmonies of the piano and banjo create the sensation that we're at the beginning of a journey that will eventually detour into a disastrous, downward spiral.

CHAPTER SEVEN

# INSTRUMENTATION

**"I just love the ability to make noise."**

## *BREATHING LIFE INTO YOUR SCORE*

When you first sit down to work on thematic and orchestration ideas for your score, use an instrument you're comfortable with (even if that particular instrument doesn't end up in your final score). Historically, film composers have used the piano to experiment with themes and material, not only for themselves, but to demo scores for filmmakers. The range of a piano's sound creates a perfect test bed for melodies, rhythmic material, and chords. These days composers have a wide array of software, synthesizers, and samples to work with as well.

When you begin laying down a track, you may start with an ostinato—a repeated figure, usually played expressively (*marcato*), as in Bernard Herrmann's title track for *Vertigo*. Or you may be looking for long, sustained string tones that establish an atmosphere. You can find or edit samples to establish the type of attack—the way the beginnings of the notes are played—you're looking for to create the proper feel. You can further manipulate these samples, then use faders and filters to change the attack. You can also use filters to produce a variety of pulsating, vibrating rhythms in synthesizer samples. Layering these elements—ostinato, sustained tones, and rhythmic pulses, along with melodic material—allows you to experiment with different textures and relationships among sounds.

## *EXPERIMENTATION NATION*

The early stage of the composition process is the perfect time to experiment with unique sounds that will give your score its own distinctive character. Danny often plays with the percussion instruments he's collected on his travels—the gamelan, the marimba, the bafalon. He also uses other acoustic percussion instruments, as well as a synthesizer, piano, or even a prepared piano (which has metal objects placed among the piano strings to deaden or otherwise affect the sound of the notes as the keys are struck).

Danny also incorporates nontraditional percussion into his music: military surplus gear, beer cans, measuring cups, and other objects that can be added to the sounds of the standard orchestra or synthesizers. Endless effects can be achieved with this kind of experimentation, but if you want to incorporate them in the final composition, you'll need to select and prepare them well before you're on a recording stage using up precious time with expensive session musicians. You may want to prerecord any kind of special percussion effects in your own studio and bring them into the recording sessions as preexisting elements. You can also sample your instruments, which will allow you to process and manipulate them in any number of ways in your score.

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**"The digital realm vs. the orchestral realm—I see them as two hands on the same body."**

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## *SYNTH HAPPENS*

Your production may not be able to afford the luxury that is a full orchestra. In that case, you may be limited to a small ensemble or strictly synthetic music.

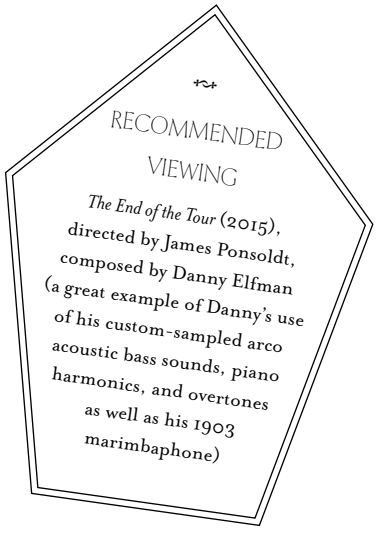
Synths and samples offer a whole range of sounds and rhythms—digital instrumentation, percussion, vocals, and orchestra—that could never be created or duplicated by an orchestra. You may even prefer the level of control you have on the overall sound of your score when you're adjusting every fader and filter. Conversely, you may want to capture some of that sound with live players.

You'll see a lot of synthetic music in the suspense and horror genres because of the way it can create piercing, atonal attacks or subtly menacing atmospheres. Achieving the warmth and beauty in a synthetic score is much more challenging. (Pro tip: If you're limited by budget, grounding a synthesizer score with piano is a good way to create an emotional connection with the viewer while still exploring the experimental potential of synthetic sounds.)

## *LEARN MORE: DIGITAL SAMPLES AND PLUG-INS*

If you're looking to experiment with digital samples and plug-ins, here are a few Danny-approved libraries to kick things off:

- Spitfire Audio: Woodwinds & Percussion
- Spitfire Albion: Strings
- Cinematic Strings: Short strings
- Cinesamples: Brass
- East West: General orchestral
- Native Instruments: General orchestral & Kontakt Player for making your own custom samples
- Heavyocity: Aeon, Evolve, Damage
- Zebra: Synth
- Spectrosonics Omnisphere: Synth
- Alchemy: Synth
- Absynth: Synth
- Massive: Synth



CHAPTER EIGHT

# TIM BURTON'S *THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS*

**"It was unique because there was no script. There was no guidebook or manual to look at in how to begin a musical animation that doesn't have a script."**

Your relationship with a director is among the most important professional relationships you'll have on a film project. Once you've earned a director's trust, you may be able to look forward to gainful employment on his or her future projects (as has been the case with Danny and Tim Burton). Even more important, it's possible you'll be able to play a role in the creative process.

Composers are often among the last artists to imprint their vision on a film, but if you've developed an ongoing creative relationship with a director, you may find yourself with more time and resources at your disposal to work on the score. In the ideal scenario, you'll get in on the ground floor of a film's production and help generate and shape the film's story. That's what happened to Danny with *The Nightmare Before Christmas,* Burton's ode to the animated holiday specials of his childhood (the Dr. Suess cartoon *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, or the Rankin-Bass stop-motion animation specials *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* and the Halloween-themed *Mad Monster Party*).

Burton hired stop-motion animator Henry Selick to direct *Nightmare*, but Burton only had a rough story outline and some production sketches to

illustrate what the concept could be. The animated holiday specials that inspired him featured catchy songs, and he wanted *Nightmare* to have songs, too—luckily, he happened to know an experienced songwriter in Danny.

With production ready to gear up, the movie lacked a script, but Danny and Burton began to work on the songs. Burton would describe scenes and story elements while Danny jotted down ideas for songs that he would turn around quickly (usually in three days). Danny knew he didn't want to write the kinds of songs that were in the Disney musicals of the time (*The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*). Instead, he wanted to do something that was "contemporary but retro," as he puts it. So he looked to *The Threepenny Opera*—the Kurt Weill/Bertolt Brecht stage play (1928) that combined early jazz and dance hall music—and comic operas like *H.M.S. Pinafore* and *The Pirates of Penzance* by Gilbert and Sullivan, which featured songs with brilliant wordplay. He was also inspired by Cole Porter.

The result was an antic, playful, haunting musical perfectly attuned to Selick's animation and the alternately graceful and naive character of Jack Skellington. Burton contributed ideas for lyrics, and Danny came up with the final melodies, lyrics, and song arrangements—he even performed the character of Jack so indelibly while laying down the demos that Burton cast him at Jack's singing voice. Danny's songs became the spine of the picture and ultimately helped dictate the full story and screenplay by Caroline Thompson. In many cases, Danny's songs worked so well that they replaced what otherwise might have been expository dialogue scenes in the movie.

## "Tim and I were in complete synchronicity. It's like, let's just do our thing and have fun."

It's rare for two artists to have so much creative freedom on a movie as Burton and Danny did on *Nightmare*, and it's rarer still for a composer to contribute so much to the artistic vision of a film. But animated musicals offer a chance for film composers to step outside the box and collaborate with singers and other artists to create songs as well as underscore.

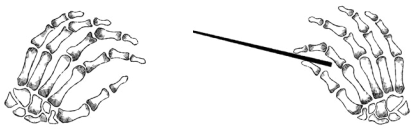
RECOMMENDED LISTENING

*The Threepenny Opera*, by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht
*H.M.S. Pinafore*, by Gilbert and Sullivan
*Pirates of Penzance*, by Gilbert and Sullivan

## *LEARN MORE: OTHER EPIC COMPOSER-DIRECTOR COLLABS*

Danny and Tim Burton, Alfred Hitchcock and Bernard Herrmann—some composer-director duos go together like peanut butter and jelly. Here are a few other creative relationships that have resulted in some of film's most memorable scores:

- Steven Spielberg and John Williams (*Jurassic Park*, *Schindler's List*, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, *Jaws*)
- Wes Anderson and Alexandre Desplat (*Fantastic Mr. Fox*, *Moonrise Kingdom*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*)
- Darren Aronofsky and Clint Mansell (*Requiem for a Dream*, *The Wrestler*, *Black Swan*)
- Paul Thomas Anderson and Jonny Greenwood (*There Will Be Blood*, *The Master*, *Inherent Vice*, *Phantom Thread*)



# CHAPTER NINE

# WORKFLOW

## *TIME MANAGEMENT*

**"The number-one law, the first commandment, is you must finish on time."**

Music for film is produced to meet an immovable deadline. Failure to meet that deadline is simply not an option, regardless of how much (or how little) inspiration is flowing. Realistically, a film composer can generate around two minutes of music per working day. For elaborate, detailed music that requires complicated parts—say, for an action film—you may be reduced to a minute or a minute and a half per day. If you're writing ambient material you may be able to write two and a half minutes or more, but the best rule of thumb is to plan on generating somewhere around two minutes of music per day.

Obviously, the time needed to conceptualize your score and determine your thematic material and instrumentation is part of the schedule—some composers may take a week or more to work out themes. Once you have your material, be it written themes, customized digital samples, or something else, it's wise to organize it so it's at your fingertips during the composing process.

Danny's method of organizing time involves his big board, a simple wall chart outlining how many days are in a score's production schedule. A countdown shows how many days are left, and a count *up* keeps track of the date. Cues identified from the spotting session are included on the big board, along with their cue number and length in minutes. As Danny crosses off each finished cue, he looks ahead on the schedule to measure the remaining days

against how many minutes of music he has left to write. This lets him make allowances for the complexity of upcoming cues that will take longer to write while helping him monitor how much music he is generating per day.

Keeping track of your cues is helpful, but make sure you're staying on top of the lengths and types of cues in your queue (see what we did there?). Typically, longer, more elaborate cues arise as a film's story moves toward its climactic action.

## *LEARN MORE: HOW MUCH MUSIC WILL YOU NEED?*

Movies these days have much more music per minute of film than they once did: In 1970 a three-hour war movie like *Patton* could get by with a little over 30 minutes of music. Today most of that movie would be scored. Just as the depth of sound effects has expanded since the advent of Dolby sound, the function of music has evolved from punctuating important scenes to providing a full-on sonic landscape. There are exceptions—extremely realistic, low-key dramas (think Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma*) may feature less music. But standard Hollywood films—genre films or bigger, glossier dramas (like *Alice in Wonderland*)—tend to have music underscoring most of the run time.

## *STEPPING UP YOUR SOFTWARE GAME*

Virtually any film scoring project will have a digital component. Since you'll almost always have to create demos of your score and audition cues for the filmmakers, a digital audio workstation (DAW) will be your primary tool for composition. Pro Tools and Logic Pro have been industry standard DAWs for a number of years, but there are other options including Studio One, Steinberg Cubase Studio, FL Studio, and Danny's preferred Mac-based Mark of the Unicorn (MOTU) Digital Performer.

Digital Performer and other DAWs allow you to create multiple variations of complex musical material, track changes, and copy/paste sections of MIDI notes to increase your productivity. Digital Performer also has the advantage of keeping the elements you're working with in front of you constantly for easy reference and access: multiple sequences, songs, and multiple variations of complete music cues (collectively referred to as sequence chunks). Each sequence chunk has its own tracklist, start time, conductor track, and mixer, which allows you to see multiple versions of your cues in one file. You can also add notes to keep track of the differences between them.

## *WHO'S WHO IN A STUDIO CREW*

**"In my own studio, I keep a very small crew of people that I work with. I like to keep things as simple as possible."**

Most composers get by with a little help from their friends. Here's a breakdown of two hires you may need to make depending on the scope of your project:

### *Orchestrators*

Your most important working relationship as a composer, apart from the filmmakers you write music for, is with your orchestrator. Danny's orchestrator, Steve Bartek, played with Danny in Oingo Boingo and has orchestrated for Danny ever since *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*. An orchestrator gets into the weeds of a composition and prepares it to be performed by live players. With an ear toward creating the best overall sound, they focus on making the music playable by humans as opposed to digital performers. If Danny has written a divisi—something where, say, the violins play two different parts—the orchestrator will determine exactly how the music will be divided, whether it's simply between first and second violins or a more unusual arrangement. It's up to orchestrators to pass a complex brass or woodwind part between players rather than have it be performed by one person.

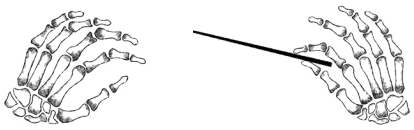
### *Music Editors*

Music editors keep track of how a movie is being edited after the initial spotting session, since it is likely that a movie will continue to evolve well after it is spotted. A music editor keeps the composer updated on how the cutting is affecting cues, how many bars of music are changing, and more. Your music editor may even inform you that new shots, or even scenes, are being added that haven't been accounted for in your score. The music editor will also stay in constant communication with the orchestrator in regard to how the music is changing.

## *SO YOUR SCORE IS FINISHED … BUT THE MOVIE ISN'T*

Music scoring occupies a space around the middle of a film's postproduction process. You'll typically begin scoring after the film editor is well into their work, the actors have recorded automatic dialogue replacement (ADR), and the foley artists—people who reproduce mundane sounds that were lost during filming, like footsteps—have recorded effects. Once you've completed your score, it will be incorporated into the final sound mix as well as a music and effects (M&E) track that excludes dialogue so that the film can be sold to foreign markets with lines recorded in another language.

Editorial changes may still be made to a film after you finish your score. Your music editor may be able to stretch the material to fit, but a major reediting of sequences often calls for new music to be written and recorded.



CHAPTER TEN

# CREATING YOUR TEMPLATE

**"On occasion, I have an idea and I don't have the sound for it. Then I've gotta find the sound—or I've gotta make the sound."**

The early conceptualization of a score must include the sound palette you're going to use—the instruments you will feature and the types of sounds you will build into the work to create the appropriate tone. Using your digital workstation, you'll create an organized library of sounds, instrumental groupings, and solo instrumental performances that will be featured in the score. Just as you don't want to waste an hour looking for your hammer when you're building a chair, you don't want to waste time searching for your instrumental colors once you're into the actual writing process.

Danny explores a score's sound palette before putting down any themes; he wants to know how his material will ultimately be voiced and supported because the overall sound and instrumental approach will dictate much of the score's tone. If he's writing a string-based score or a smaller score, he's going to put more time into making sure he has a good variety of string variations, or he's going to look for smaller ensemble samples to avoid a large orchestra sound. A heavy, violent score might need a great deal of synthetic sounds or prepared piano, or some of the heavy percussion he has available in his libraries. An eerie score might require the ethereal sounds of synthesizers or bowed string effects, and he'll want a good variety available. This means he's going to put in some serious synth programming time before he even begins writing.

## *MAKING YOUR OWN SOUNDS*

There are infinite ways to create sounds for your composition. One approach is simply using your voice: You may make vocal sounds as a base to process them, or you may hire a vocalist to create the kind of sound you're looking for. The natural feedback you get between a microphone and a loudspeaker can also be sustained and shaped into patterns and textures.

Many of Danny's early conceptual ideas have to do with harmony, harmonics (unusual, high-pitched tones typically produced on strings), or figuration (creating short musical phrases—motifs or repeating figures). If these will be played by orchestra musicians, he's simply working out which instruments will be voicing these ideas and how. With percussion, Danny often performs and records his own loops in his studio, particularly when he's looking for an unusual percussion sound like gamelan or found instruments like beer cans or food containers.

While acoustic instruments offer a wide spectrum of potential sounds, you may want to create a library of basic tones starting with something like an amplified electric guitar, which you can perform and record yourself (or hire someone to perform) and then manipulate with effects from a preamp.

Danny uses a hardware preamp/effects processor by Fractal Audio Systems called an Axe-Fx. It boasts an extensive virtual library of vintage and contemporary guitar amps, guitar stompbox, and other studio effects. Danny used the Axe-Fx plus processed guitar on *Men in Black* and *The Girl on the Train*. You can set up hundreds of preset effects then scroll through and edit them with software on your desktop that connects to the hardware. Combining these sounds and working them into your score can create a vivid sense of texture and ambience without giving the audience the obvious, recognizable sounds of musical instruments they've heard in a hundred other films.

## *Adding Unusual Instruments to Your Library*

***THEREMIN***

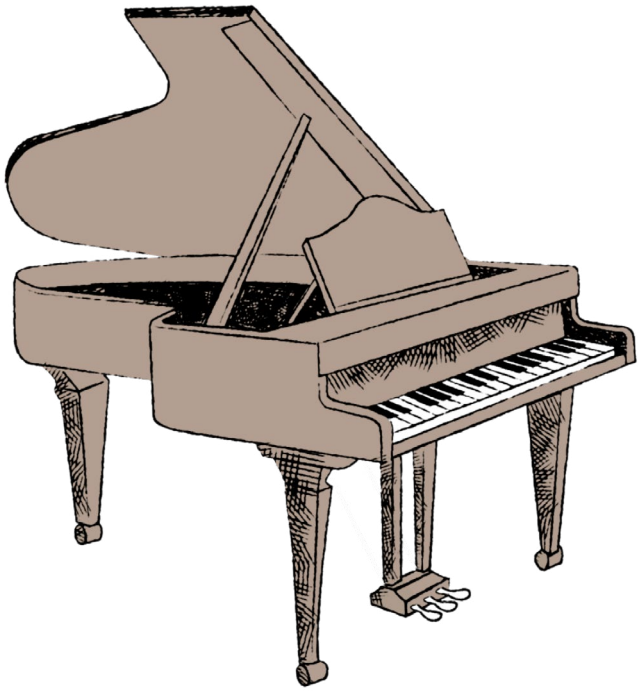
An electric instrument that produces an eerie, wailing sound created by the proximity of the player's hands to two antennae extending from the main body. Performers achieve changes in pitch and volume as well as effects like vibrato without ever touching the instrument—they simply wave their hands in the air around the antennae. The theremin was famously used in Bernard Herrmann's 1951 score to *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and is often used or imitated now to lampoon the sound of 1950s sci-fi films—as in Danny's score to *Mars Attacks!*

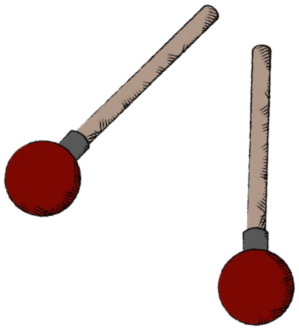
***MUSICAL SAW***

Large hand saws used for cutting lumber can be played with a bow, with the performer holding the saw vertically, as a player would with a cello. A saw produces vibrating tones similar to the sound of a theremin; a saw can be heard in Jerry Goldsmith's score to *Poltergeist* after a scene in which ghostly artifacts inexplicably fall from the ceiling.

***MARIMBAPHONE***

One of Danny's favorite instruments is the marimbaphone, a predecessor to the more modern vibraphone (the main differences are that a marimbaphone's bars are made of steel, and there are neither muting pedals nor motor, the latter of which gives the vibraphone its signature "shimmering" effect). A marimbaphone's sound is mellow and warm. Danny has used his marimbaphone—which dates to1903—on many of his scores in the last decade, including *The End of the Tour, Dumbo*, and *Alice in Wonderland* to name a few.





CHAPTER ELEVEN

# INSECURITY AND INSTINCTS

**"I'm constantly insecure about what I'm doing."**

## *COMBATING IMPOSTER SYNDROME*

The most successful people in the world suffer from imposter syndrome—the feeling that you'll be found out and exposed by the more experienced professionals around you. The truth is, if you've never experienced self-doubt, you're probably a sociopath. It's normal to feel doubt, not only at the beginning of a project but throughout the process and even after you've completed it.

Like all fine arts, composing involves a high degree of insecurity. You start most of your projects with no idea what the finished score will sound like—its thematic material, instrumentation, and key effects are all up in the air. You must also please filmmakers who often don't understand the process of composing, and you will struggle, at least initially, to articulate a clear vision for the score. As Danny says, there's a difference between what you feel internally and what you project to others. The filmmakers (who no doubt have their own insecurities) need to feel like they're in safe hands. They need to know they've chosen the right composer, so it's important to project confidence about your abilities. Problems, issues, and frustrations can be shared with your trusted inner circle, but your public face has to be one of complete assurance. Once you've sharpened your skill set and instincts, you'll find it's easier to project confidence.

## *TRUSTING YOUR INSTINCTS*

**"Your instincts are gonna be your life."**

The directive to "go with your gut" is a cliché for a reason. Creativity does involve instinct—you will feel yours pretty intensely when something is working perfectly (or when it's not working at all). You may not recognize it so intensely, however, when something is just starting to work (or just starting to go off the rails). As your experience increases you will work increasingly from a place of mastery, but in the early stages of any project you will always be "grabbing at bits," as Danny says—clinging to any fragment of an idea that seems to have potential.

Stepping away from a project, even just to sleep, allows time for your ideas to gestate. When you sleep, your mind is unconsciously organizing thoughts and memories, and you may find that an idea that seemed completely out of your grasp at the end of one day may come into focus the next morning. (If you're anything like Danny, though, you might also find that sleep isn't always an escape—he often suffers from insomnia because the pieces he's working on run through his mind on a loop.) Your mind is working on your score even when you're unaware of it, so pay attention to music-related ideas that seem to pop up out of nowhere. (And, as you learned in Chapter Five: Themes and Melodies, you should always be prepared to record these ideas before they disappear.)

Ultimately you will learn to grab on to ideas quickly because you have no choice—the schedule dictates that you have to start working *now*, whether you've come up with the greatest thematic idea in history or not.

## *PICKING AND CHOOSING JOBS*

When you're starting out as a film composer, you'll need all the experience you can get—so take any and every job that you can work into your schedule. You may have to work for free (although this is not recommended); you may sacrifice your fee paying for players and a recording studio to make your first scores sound as good as they possibly can. It might not be your dream gig, but your earliest scores will be your calling card for future assignments.

If you're in the enviable position of choosing between multiple job offers, there are different factors to consider when deciding among them: Do you like the filmmakers' previous work? Can you meet the filmmakers and establish a rapport with them? Remember, they're going to be your employer, and you're going to be working with them intensely for a number of months; if they set your teeth on edge in the first meeting, imagine what it will be like auditioning music cues for them. On the other hand, the project being offered might be such a great career or artistic opportunity that it would be worth putting up with a difficult director. Of course, a great director can still make a bad movie, and an untested director may make a great movie, so you still have to use your instincts.

## *GETTING YOUR EGO IN CHECK*

> **"Ego, as we all know, can become absurd and unmanageable."**

Bernard Herrmann scored some of Alfred Hitchcock's most famous movies: *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*—scores that made Herrmann almost as well-known as Hitchcock. But in 1966, Hitchcock asked Herrmann to step outside his familiar, heavy orchestral sound and write a pop-flavored score for the Cold War thriller *Torn Curtain*. Herrmann thought he knew better and wrote the score in his usual style. Hitchcock showed up at the recording session, heard what Herrmann had written, and fired him. The two never worked together again.

Herrmann forgot that he was working for the director, not for himself. And while he almost certainly believed he was doing the best thing for the film, ignoring a director's desires for the score won't get you anywhere at any stage of your career. Always consider the filmmaker's perspective on their work, even when it collides with an artistic vision you have for the score. This doesn't mean you can't confidently lobby for your ideas—filmmakers want to hear them—but you must know when to accept that the filmmaker has other ideas in mind and move on.

CHAPTER TWELVE

# WRITING FEATURE SCORES

## *CASE STUDY: FINDING THE THEME IN* BATMAN

The 1989 *Batman* movie was an enormous experiment and a huge, high-stakes gamble for both Warner Bros. and Tim Burton. We're living in a cinematic era that sends several superhero tentpoles into production each year, but in 1989, there hadn't been a successful comic book movie in almost a decade (since Christopher Reeve's *Superman* movies debuted in 1978).

Burton had been hired to make a serious Batman movie—partially inspired by the graphic novel *The Dark Knight*—on the strength of his visual approach to *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* and *Beetlejuice*. Burton and producer Jon Peters immediately invited controversy by casting Michael Keaton, an actor known for comedy, as the titular character. Burton's movie would be edgy and gothic, showing Batman as a psychologically driven vigilante. The score for such a movie would be incredibly important, not only to reinforce the reality of the character and the gothic world he inhabits but as a marketing and promotional tool for the film. There was no model for what the score to a serious Batman movie would be. John Williams's Oscar-nominated *Superman* score was the only precedent, but that bright, optimistic approach wouldn't work for Batman's dark world. There was also the famous Neal Hefti theme from the 1966 TV series that was actually better-remembered than the show itself—and some people assumed the new movie would feature the familiar theme.

There was other critical factor: Producer Jon Peters had his own ideas for the movie's music. He wanted Michael Jackson to write music for Batman, Prince to write music for the Joker (played by Jack Nicholson), and George Michael to write a love theme. Burton wanted Danny to score the movie, and Peters

agreed, but Peters still wanted the three pop stars to provide the main themes. Jackson and George Michael were never brought on board, but Prince—a huge star at the time—was. And after writing some songs for the Joker, Prince proceeded to build out his own soundscape for the movie.

Danny's score for *Batman* was his first lesson in managing himself on a studio blockbuster. He knew the direction he wanted his score to go in: large-scale, dark, and gothic. This was what the studio wanted as well—they just weren't sure that Danny, whose work up to that point had consisted almost entirely of comedies—was capable of it. Danny elected to avoid conflict and wait while the situation with Prince worked itself out. Warner Bros. music executive Gary LeMel traveled to Minnesota to hear Prince's work—and eventually delivered the news that it just didn't work for the movie.

Danny worked out the *Batman* theme under the worst of conditions: while on a plane ride home from the film's U.K. set. But the result goes to show how ideas—even crucially important ideas—can come to you anywhere. With *Batman*, Danny expounded on the stylistic features he'd already been exploring on *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* and *Beetlejuice*. He characterized Nicholson's Joker as a deranged clown using exaggerated circus music, and he made his one concession to Prince by using a cool, subdued romantic melody the rock star had written for Kim Basinger's character, Vicki Vale.

*Batman* was one of the biggest box office hits of its era, and Danny's score was incredibly well-received—a revelation to listeners who had assumed he was only capable of writing quirky comedy themes. Interest in Danny's music was so high that a score-only album was produced. Danny's *Batman* score became the blueprint for every subsequent "gothic superhero" movie, with Danny scoring blockbusters like *Hulk*, *Spider-Man*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, and *Justice League*.

If you're fortunate enough to be chosen to score a studio blockbuster, you might be placed under enormous scrutiny and pressure, political as well as artistic. Perspective from the movie's producers and from studio executives may be more pronounced and determinative than even that of the director. But you can start learning now how to navigate disagreements among creatives on a film project—which, like composing, often depends on your instincts and your ability to read people and situations.

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RECOMMENDED LISTENING

*Superman* (1978), score composed by John Williams
*Batman* (1989), score composed by Danny Elfman
*Batman Returns* (1992), score composed by Danny Elfman
*Justice League* (2017), score composed by Danny Elfman

## *CAPTURING THE TONE*

**"I try to erase every preconceived idea I had going into [a movie]. And now, as I'm watching, what emerges from that? A feeling... a tone."**

You may go into a movie project having read a script or outline, or maybe the director simply told you about the film. Maybe the story is based on a novel you've read or a famous historical event. When it comes time to watch a cut, however, you want to clear your mind and experience the movie for what the filmmakers have created. Your job is to figure out the movie's tone. What is its overall mood? What feelings do you have coming away from it? Is this movie brooding, dark, tense, nervous, funny, fast-paced, romantic, uplifting? The tone you find might be completely different from what you expected.

A film's tone should dictate the sound of your score. Your music for a certain film should work for that film and that film alone.

Often a film's camerawork, lighting, and editing will give you an excellent feel for the tone. Is the lighting bright or moody? Is the color palette brilliant, almost cartoon-like, or realistic? A heightened visual look, whether it's vibrant and colorful or darkly gothic, usually needs a more theatrical approach from the score. A realistic look and feel will likely require a more subdued or understated score. Editing can create a languid, dreamy pace or something more staccato and hard-edged, and the music should be calibrated to match.

Your music must also respond to performance. Danny talks about how *Beetlejuice*'s opening shot soars over a small town, and the temp track was selected to reflect the element of flight. Danny decided to go in a different direction than the temp after watching Michael Keaton's performance: He wanted to foreshadow the entrance of *Beetlejuice*, which wouldn't happen until well into the movie's running time, by imbuing his music with a frantic mood. Danny's pounding, diabolically playful music, with its almost polka-like, oompah-oompah low brass rhythms, contrasts with the pastoral scene and lets the audience know what they're in for.

As you watch a cut of a film for the first time and note the camerawork, editing, and performances, your impressions and ideas may seem far too fragmentary to be useful. Preserve them anyway. Think deeply about them and explore them because chances are they'll be the nuclei for more developed ideas that you can build into your score. Try to generate and hang on to at least three or four initial ideas. Play with them and experiment with them until you have anywhere from eight to 24 bars of music, then get that material preserved and move on to another aspect of the score. Later, you can return to your original material with a fresh perspective and see what's of interest. Can you apply any of those ideas to specific scenes, moments, or characters? Try to develop a number of these ideas to a point where you can present them to the filmmakers, and don't be afraid to offer a range of options for them to respond to. You may hit on something that excites them that you can then explore further.

## *IDENTIFYING A MOVIE'S KEY MOMENTS*

> **"I never believe in trying to create a road map. I look for two to four moments in the film that I'm gonna put my energy into."**

One of Danny's time-tested strategies for breaking a score is to find the film's "key moments"—pivotal scenes that require strong musical support and will ultimately dictate the direction of the score—rather than working through the film chronologically. These key moments may be dramatic confrontations, character choices, action sequences, or plot revelations; obviously they will vary with each film, but Danny recommends that you always build toward the film's climax and final scenes. Once you've highlighted key moments, you can go back and work through the film chronologically, knowing where you're headed musically.

In a very thematically driven score, full themes will likely play at key moments, while motifs will provide the intervening material. As Danny notes, composing is like a jigsaw puzzle—the more pieces you have filled in, the faster the remaining sections of the score will come into focus.

# *SCORING FOR ANIMATION VS. LIVE ACTION*

**"I never score to a younger or older audience. The younger audience can listen to anything, and if it's done well, they just buy into it."**

## *Scoring for Animation*

Writing for animation was once a very specialized discipline practiced by composers like Carl Stalling (whose manic, referential music punctuated Warner Bros.' *Bugs Bunny* cartoons), and Hoyt Curtin (who wrote jolly, catchy melodies for shows like *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*). Stalling's music was famously difficult to perform and hit virtually every physical action on screen in a way that would have seemed insane if applied to live action; Curtin's comedy music was written in bite-size, tuneful chunks to fit in with often repetitive, limited animation and short scenes.

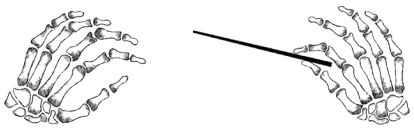
Since the 1980s, more A-list film composers have been getting in on scores for animated movies—Jerry Goldsmith scored *The Secret of NIMH* and Disney's *Mulan*; Elmer Bernstein, known for his scores for *The Magnificent Seven* and *The Great Escape*, scored *Heavy Metal*; James Horner (of *Titanic* fame scored *An American Tail, The Land Before Time*, and others.

Danny has scored all kinds of animated films: *The Grinch*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Frankenweenie, Corpse Bride, Epic*, *Mr. Peabody & Sherman*, and *Meet the Robinsons*. But does he write differently for animation than he does for live action? There's certainly a cartoon quality to the score for *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* and *Beetlejuice*, and even Danny's score for *Batman* had an energy level suitable for animation, so much so that the later *Batman: The Animated Series*, inspired by the success of the movie, largely stuck to a similar style of music with its scores written by Shirley Walker (who also conducted the recording sessions for *Batman*). Tim Burton's movies always have the hyper-designed quality of animation, and a movie like *Mars Attacks!* builds its humor around having the Earth threatened by Martians who look and behave like three-dimensional cartoon characters.

### *Applying Principles of Animation to Live Action*

Live-action films can be cartoonish, and when they feature sharply defined heroes and villains—like the *Star Wars* films—some of the same principles of scoring for animation can apply. For live-action movies that feature well-defined heroes and villains, a classic leitmotif approach can really do its job. For example, when Darth Vader or Kylo Ren appear on screen, you're going to hear their themes from composer John Williams. It's all about finding a movie's tone: A live-action animated movie might have the tone of a cartoon, and an animated film may have the tone of a serious drama. Both must be scored accordingly.

To practice this idea, try watching an animated film and looking for moments that you would score exactly as you would a live-action film. Then watch a live-action film and try to find a moment that could be scored with very upfront, strongly emotional melodies or action that could handle music closely synchronized to its specific beats.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# CHANGING YOUR APPROACH: *MILK*

**"I was working on *Milk* with Gus Van Sant, and his first impulse was 'Harvey Milk was an opera fan, and we should do something operatic.' But I could feel it—it just wasn't working."**

## *THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPROVISING*

Chances are you won't want to waste an expensive recording session with an orchestra on experimentation, but in certain circumstances, there can be room to create improvisational sounds and effects. On *Milk*, Danny began to feel that the original approach (applying operatic principles to the score because of Harvey Milk's affinity for opera) began to feel too preplanned. "That's analytical," he says. "It didn't work."

Danny's main title to *Milk* demonstrates his solution to the problem: bringing improvisation—the central conceit of jazz—into what is usually a hyper-detailed orchestral performance. He came up with a hopeful melody, but it emerges from a bed of tangled, improvised harmonies, something that sounds a little like the string section of an orchestra tuning up. A saxophone takes on the melody later in the main title, with the strings providing soulful, but still somewhat dissonant, support. The approach recalls some of the traditions of interweaving jazz into orchestral music in movies, going back to Alex North's score to *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The strings provide the familiar sound of movie drama, but they can be manipulated and twisted in all kinds of disorienting yet powerful ways.

There are a few ways of building chaos into your music. One of the techniques of 20th-century avant-garde writing is aleatoric writing, or "chance" writing, in which the players are allowed to interpret and improvise certain sections of the music. This can give your music a random, unnerving quality that is almost impossible to reproduce with synthesizers or sequencers. John Williams's "bug" music heard early in the score of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is a prime example: To score a scene in which Indiana Jones discovers tarantulas on his back, Williams allowed his string players to play *col legno* (using the back of the bow to strike the strings instead of bowing) and to play random, plucked notes. The result is random clicking and rustling sounds reminiscent of crawling insects.

Danny plays with chaos by overlapping pitch bends on strings (sliding from note to note instead of moving directly from one note to another) with unpredictable percussion elements rattling on top—an approach you can hear in *Batman* during the first reveal of the Joker (the cue is called "Surgery") and in *Mission: Impossible* during a tense confrontation between Tom Cruise's character and his IMF superior (the cue is called "Mole Hunt"). On *Milk*, Danny found the harmonic feeling he was looking for in the score's strings through actual improvisation with the orchestra—an expensive luxury, but one that can produce unique results.

## *DISSONANCE AND TRAGEDY*

The story of Harvey Milk is both uplifting and tragic. The San Francisco politician—the first openly gay elected official in California—was an inspiring leader who was assassinated by a fellow politician. Danny's melody evokes the hope inherent in the character and the jazzy saxophone suggests his freewheeling capacity to break through conventions—but the soft string dissonances hint at the possibility of chaos and tragedy.

Pick a movie you're intimately familiar with, and try experimenting with dissonance by creating a few bars of music for one of its more emotional, dramatic, or psychologically fraught scenes. Now create dissonance in a scene with a lighthearted tone. (You can create a jarring effect by scoring against a scene's apparent tone—by adding even subtle dissonance under an apparently happy scene, you can create the effect of hidden anger, tension, or dark humor.)

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# CHASING A MOVIE EDIT

## *FINDING THE EDITOR'S RHYTHM*

**"You've got a tune, and it used to work—but now they cut enough seconds from it that nothing you do makes it happen gracefully."**

A movie edit can have a flow and tempo that's musical on its own. If you look at the breakfast machine sequence in *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, you'll see a rhythmic approach to the editing that allowed Danny to respond with a highly rhythmic piece of music.

Since movies are rarely edited for the benefit of their scores, it's your responsibility to tailor your compositions to the edit. If you're playing out a theme at a certain tempo and three seconds of a scene that features it are edited out, you may have to alter the tempo or write a brief transition to avoid the sound of an abrupt change where there was none before.

This is harder for a romantic scene or an emotionally driven moment than it is for, say, an action scene; in action, you're using repeating figures and percussion patterns, and you're often making rapid rhythmic changes to reflect specific onscreen moments. If you have a six-note ostinato going, it won't feel disruptive to slow down—Danny does just that with a six-note figure

that runs throughout the lengthy "First Confrontation" scene early in *Batman*. Near the end of the sequence, just after the Joker plunges into a vat of chemicals, Danny's six-note ostinato slows to three notes before tailing off, gently releasing the drive and tension of the scene.

In instances where whole scenes are reordered, you may be faced with the task of substantially altering the structure of your music. It's never as easy as reordering the existing music to play under the scenes in their new order—you may have been building an idea to crescendo or resolve in a scene that now plays as the first scene in a sequence of three instead of the last. You'll likely find yourself working outward from the changed section in the film and reconfiguring a great deal of music to get back to an overall approach that functions. And—hate to break it to you—it won't always play out the way you want. Timing and tempo changes will inevitably compromise the expression of themes that worked beautifully before a sequence was changed, but you'll just have to live with it. This is part of the difference between writing music for the sake of writing music and film composition: A score must ultimately serve the film and not vice versa.

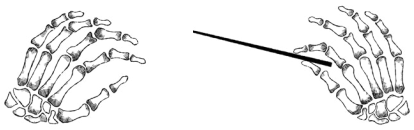
## *SYNCING YOUR MUSIC TO WHAT YOU SEE ON SCREEN*

**"How does one synchronize music with picture? You don't have to calculate it. You feel it."**

Not all scores require extensive synchronization to picture. Two of the most famous scores of the past 50 years—Maurice Jarre's *Dr. Zhivago* and Nino Rota's score for *The Godfather*—feature memorable, long-line melodies, and in both cases the filmmakers preferred to let the tunes play in full without changing the tempo to reflect the onscreen action. For action movies or animation, a great deal of synchronization may be required.

In the early days of motion picture scoring, a common aid to the composer was a click track—a repeating metronome tone that could be heard via headphones whole conducting the score. The composer would calculate how

many clicks they needed to hear between the entrance and exit of their music for a cue. Conductors and performers still sometimes listen to a click track while they play to stay in synchronization. Generally, though, when you're composing at your workstation, you'll be using a Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers (SMPTE) timecode counter to determine exactly where you are in a given movie. The counter will display a sequential number showing hours, minutes, seconds, and frames—so 1:35:12:11 would be 1 hour, 35 minutes, 12 seconds, and 11 frames into the film. You can synchronize a sequencer (any device or app that can record, edit, and play back music in MIDI file form) or your digital audio workstation to the timecode of any video work file given to you.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# THE DEVIL'S IN THE DETAIL

**"I love listening to the great scores that I grew up on and hearing the detail. To me, the detail is what brings it to life and makes it exciting."**

## *SURROUNDED BY SOUND*

The release of *Star Wars* in 1977 wasn't just a landmark in terms of its John Williams score. It was also the first motion picture to demonstrate the full range of four-channel Dolby Sound.

Dolby Stereo sound changed everything: It provided enhanced sonic clarity and fidelity, and the four-track system allowed for stereo as well as center channel and surround output, which immersed audiences in a film's sonic world. Thanks to the advent of Dolby, the sound effects in *Star Wars*—the noises made by lightsabers or ships, for example—became as iconic and exciting as its visual effects and music. Nearly every movie since has made use of the technology, meaning spaces that would once have been occupied by music are now filled with nuanced, imaginative sound effects.

As the presence of sound effects in film scores has increased, so has the presence of music. But even as scores have become more pervasive in modern films, they're often less detailed and emotional than their predecessors. Consider *The Sand Pebbles* or *The Chairman*, both set in China and scored by Jerry Goldsmith. Goldsmith's scores feature indigenous instruments and themes inspired by Chinese music to reinforce the films' settings. Movie scores rarely feature this kind of scene-setting now—instead, they focus

on character or tone. Even Goldsmith began curtailing his penchant for complexity after acknowledging that much of his work was overshadowed by the sound effects mix. The result was scores like *Basic Instinct* and *The Sum of All Fears*, in which Goldsmith strategically chose moments for the score to shine where it wouldn't compete with sound effects.

Try developing a musical approach for a scene that is entirely about the external—a character's physical surroundings and environment. Then try working out an approach for the same scene that is entirely internal—simply about the character, their personality, thoughts, and feelings at that moment, irrespective of where they are.

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**"There are moments where the music can do something that sound effects can never do. And there are moments that the sound effects can do something that the music can never do. Both have their place."**

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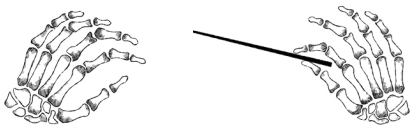
## *ZEROING IN ON THE DETAILS*

You should be able to judge from your first demo auditions for your director how much detail they are looking for from your score. In general, the kinds of expressive performances from strings, brass, and woodwinds that would have been featured in film scores up into the 1980s are not as popular now, and instrumental performances that call attention to themselves are often rejected in favor of more of an overall orchestral sound. Consider creating demos that showcase alternate levels of detail until you determine the comfort level of your director.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# REAL-TIME LISTENING: *THE UNKOWN KNOWN*

**"How do you write a theme for what is Donald Rumsfeld? We can't be on the nose."**

A documentary might seem like a frustrating platform for a film composer, as it often underscores voice-over. But the medium can actually be liberating because there's rarely a need to synchronize any music to onscreen action. Entire segments can be scored by writing in a free composition style. For documentaries like *Standard Operating Procedure* and *The Unknown Known*, Danny was able to structure his music as he pleased without worrying about hitting specific action beats. *Deep Sea*, another documentary, is underscored by Danny's free-flowing concert composition *Serenada Schizophrana*. Because of the freedom he experienced he loved the process and they have become some of his favorite film compositions.

Documentary filmmaker Errol Morris made *Standard Operating Procedure* and *The Unknown Known*, both of which examine the ramifications of the Iraq War. Morris thought Danny was the ideal man for the musical job. "I had talked about it very early on as a nonfiction horror movie because it does represent one of the darkest episodes of American history, and giving it that element of nightmare—who better than Danny Elfman?" Morris said in 2010. "There's something incredibly modern about Danny's writing—not a minimalist, certainly a romantic element, but also a postmodern element just in terms of his eclectic use of instruments and orchestration, odd rhythmic devices."

*The Unknown Known* tells the story of Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush. The documentary's title is derived from a Rumsfeld quote: "Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know." To characterize Rumsfeld and his circuitous nature, Danny built an ambiguity and a sense of mystery into his music.

Most documentary film projects will operate on a limited budget—Danny's score for *The Unknown Known* features a small group of strings and brass, marimba, celesta, piano, and organ. Danny created a theme for the documentary that is neutral if not warm. You hear it first on piano after an introductory figure on guitar. The theme follows a classic A-B structure, with an opening A section and a secondary B section that is stated and restated throughout the score. But sustained brass tones suggest a hint of menace, and a riot of overlapping string ostinati creates a quality that's subliminally disturbing.

The discomfort Danny generates at the score's outset builds with time. The quickening string rhythms and heavier, sustained string chords add a growing unsettling feeling. The brass tones have a militaristic quality, sounding a bit like a foghorn—a nod to Rumsfeld's background and skill set—and chimes add a feeling of fate. In the cue "Dora Farms," which underscores an attempt by the U.S. military to kill Saddam Hussein, Danny adds a rhythmic high-pitched sound wave that is reminiscent of morse code, translating the urgency of the situation into the cold language of military communications. When Rumsfeld actually meets with Hussein, Danny's music erupts with colliding rhythms, reflecting the confrontation between two powerful, opposing forces.

As Danny says, writing "bad guy" music for Rumsfeld would've been too obvious (despite his personal feelings about the guy). Instead, Danny provides darker music for the events that occur in Rumsfeld's orbit and scores Rumsfeld the man almost sympathetically, letting the former Secretary of Defense more or less hang himself with his own words. There's a sense of tragedy and even moments of gothic unease when Danny uses an organ, but the score avoids directly painting Rumsfeld as a villain.

The key to scoring any documentary is to discover the work's perspective and support it without being heavy-handed. Find a news story that's three to five minutes long and write music for it that underscores a perspective for the piece. Is there an underlying bias or attitude that you can find in the story? How far can you go in supporting the perspective without being too obvious?

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# ON FAILURE

**"Here's a word that you're gonna face and you're not gonna like this word. It's the nastiest word in the business: *failure*. You are gonna fail."**

## *MAINTAINING VS. MANAGING YOUR EGO*

No matter how successful you get, there will be times when you're faced with rejection. When that happens, you'll need to know how to handle it.

Danny talks about "managing" your ego so that you can accept input from filmmakers and respond to their feedback on your score. But you also need to "maintain" an ego that's strong enough to handle rejection. Projecting confidence and satisfaction is important in any work situation. If you're frustrated and miserable, you won't be the sort of person anyone wants to work with.

Danny suggests finding a physical outlet for pent-up frustration. For him it's boxing, but any form of intensive exercise is helpful (and something you should do for your own health anyway, right?). Another strategy is to find outlets for composing that aren't necessarily high-pressure movie projects. If you have avenues to write concert music, songs, or anything else where the stakes might be lower and your freedom of expression a little higher, you can blow off creative steam that way.

Ultimately, Danny recommends putting the pain of rejection in perspective. You're not alone in this. Talk to people who've been through it, even if they aren't other film composers. And think about the ultimate impact any one rejection or failure is going to have on your life. Is this going to hang over your head a year from now? In five years? Not unless you allow it to.

## *PREPARING YOURSELF FOR FAILURE*

As with any creative endeavor, film scoring offers multiple avenues for failure: You may not get a job you're going after. You may get the job and then get fired in the middle of the project. You may get the job and finish it only to have your score thrown out without your knowledge. You might be typecast or pigeonholed based on your past successes, or your score might get panned by critics. Failure is inevitable, but you don't have to let it destroy you or your drive. Plus, if one of your scores is ever rejected, you'll be in good company: Bernard Herrmann, Alex North, Jerry Goldsmith, Elmer Bernstein, Howard Shore, Maurice Jarre—nearly all of the best-known, most successful film composers who've worked in Hollywood have had one or more scores thrown out. Even Ennio Morricone's beautiful score to *What Dreams May Come* was replaced with music by Michael Kamen. One saving grace of this eventuality is that you may be able to find a way to reuse your rejected music elsewhere: North reworked his tossed music for *2001: A Space Odyssey* into the 1968 papal drama *The Shoes of the Fisherman* and the 1981 fantasy *Dragonslayer*—and he earned Oscar nominations for both works. Some record labels also release albums of rejected scores by well-known composers, a lesson in how well-written film scores can entertain outside of the contexts for which they were intended.

## *CLASHING WITH A COLLABORATOR*

**"Tim Burton and I used to joke that we'd end up like Hitchcock and Herrmann. And then it kinda happened."**

One of the most difficult rejections you may have to deal with is a parting of ways with a valued collaborator.

Two of the best-known composer-filmmaker relationships are between Bernard Herrmann and Alfred Hitchcock and Danny and Tim Burton. In each pairing, the composer's music came to define the work of the director. Danny and Burton always joked that they'd wind up like Herrmann and Hitchcock, who went their separate ways after a famed breakup over *Torn Curtain*.

They were right—at least for a moment.

At the end of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, Danny and Burton had a massive clash that caused Danny to leave Burton's film *Ed Wood*. The two didn't speak for several years. Danny regretted the blowup that, after some time had passed, didn't seem as important as it once had. Unlike Hitchcock and Herrmann's breakup, though, it turned out Burton regretted his falling out with Danny, too. He and Danny mutually decided to "reset," and they resumed their relationship. In hindsight, Danny blamed the breakup on his own ego and a lack of perspective, and it turned into a significant learning experience that he has since applied in his career. Danny and Burton have done nine additional movies together—with more to come.

Often the combination of strong personalities and intense pressure can be volatile. When you're in the midst of conflict with a collaborator, you need to weigh the pros and cons of continuing the relationship. How much damage will a separation do to the trajectory of your future? When you're a freelance artist, the last thing you want is a reputation for being difficult to work with. Take a long look at the situation and consider whether it's worth burning a bridge. And, as Danny learned, you have to take a hard look at the reasons for any dispute.

Conversely, there are often valid reasons for you to cut ties with a collaborator, and it may take as much strength to know when to walk away as it does to stick with it.

## *MAKING BAD DECISIONS*

How do you know if a job will serve you both creatively and professionally? All you can do as a composer is rely on your instincts and the information you have in front of you.

One thing is certain—you'll know whether you made the right decision about a project well after it's finished. You may turn down a job because it doesn't feel right and go on to watch the movie become a runaway hit. Or you may take what seems to be a slam dunk of a project only to find it a painful, unrewarding experience that sets your career back a year or two. It's rare that a film score becomes the central factor in a movie's success or failure, so there's nothing more counterproductive than torturing yourself over something that's out of your hands. Take satisfaction in the fact that you did the best you could on the project, and set your sights on the next challenge.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# WORKING WITH DIRECTORS

## *LISTENING TO THE BOSS*

**"When you're talking with directors, if you're smart, you're doing more listening than talking. Because you really want to hear what they have to say."**

One of the most challenging aspects of your job as a film composer is communicating with your director. Your job is to get the filmmaker to discuss their *feelings* about their movie and then to write music that helps to convey those emotions.

If a director has a specific musical idea, your responsibility is to listen and come up with a way to demonstrate it—not to talk the director out of the idea. On the 1978 thriller *The Boys From Brazil*, about a Nazi scientist raising clones of Adolf Hitler, director Franklin Schaffner told composer Jerry Goldsmith to "think 3/4." Schaffner was referring to 3/4 time, the rhythm of a waltz. In response, Goldsmith wrote a monstrous burlesque of Viennese waltzes that perfectly underscores the outrageous ambitions of an aging mad scientist. On the other hand, Gus Van Sant's suggestion that Danny apply opera music to the drama *Milk* ultimately didn't work out—but Danny executed the idea anyway. While reviewing the results, it became obvious to both Danny and Van Sant that the concept wasn't working, and Danny had to go back to square one.

## FIRST PLAYBACKS

Probably the most stressful moment in the process for you as a film composer will be presenting the music you've written to the filmmaker for the first time. It's entirely possible that they won't like what you've done—and while their feedback might be tough to hear, it is yet another opportunity for you to listen closely to what your director has to say. Try not to take it personally; this is your job, and you're getting feedback on how best to execute your job.

Keep in mind that defending your decisions rarely helps you or your position with your director. If they strongly criticize what you've done, ask for more direction on the changes they want. Find out what *does* work for them about the music—that will be crucial going forward. It's also a good way to deal with your own insecurities. By recognizing where you have pleased the director, you'll know that you're capable of doing so, and you can move forward by expanding on the material they liked.

## SUGGESTION MODE

With any luck, the filmmaker will have some concrete suggestions for your score after hearing the first playback. But often a director's only way of communicating about music is to compare it to something else they've heard. If this happens to you, the trick is to try and get to the root of what the director was responding to emotionally in whatever score it is they're talking about. Then, your job is to find another way to achieve the same emotional response. Getting to the bottom of the director's desires will play a crucial part in your process.

## THE POWER OF CHOICES

Ideally you'll present multiple options to a filmmaker for particularly problematic cues or moments. A director will respond much more readily to choices because it gives them room to zero in on exactly what they're looking for by process of elimination. Don't worry about generating too many options; it's rare for a director to be unhappy because they have too many choices, but they may be frustrated if you give them too few.

Practice going through the feedback process by presenting your music to objective listeners—not friends—and indexing their reactions and suggestions. Learning to deal with feedback and criticism without getting defensive will help you prepare for the moment when you have to present your work to a director.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

# CROSSING THE LINE

**"If you're trying to invoke a sound of another composer over an image that is in the vein of what they're conveying in the first place, don't do it. You've lost the battle."**

## *THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INSPIRATION AND PLAGIARISM*

Homage and inspiration are inextricable elements of the composing process. But when you write music that's too similar to another composer's work, you fall prey to accusations of plagiarism (even if the copycatting was inadvertent on your part).

When you look to iconic composers for inspiration, you can find yourself inside a copyright minefield, as Danny found out while working on *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*. For a scene that showed Pee-wee dressed up as a cowboy, Danny planned to use an ocarina to play a riff on the two-note "coyote call" motif heard at the beginning of Ennio Morricone's score to the 1967 spaghetti western *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Danny was not the first composer to think of this. Morricone's score to *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* is probably the most iconic western score ever written. The opening "coyote call," played on ocarina (an ancient wind instrument), is instantly recognizable. Long after Morricone composed his score, the motif became sonic shorthand for loner western movie heros and has been sampled in numerous songs and television commercials. This gave Morricone (who, unlike many film composers, owns the rights to his own music) synchronization rights.

Danny's intended reference to the motif in *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* was as a visual joke, and he changed the motif so it was different than Morricone's. But, as Danny discovered, modifying the motif would not have been enough to avoid a lawsuit from Morricone. You may be confident that you've changed an underlying inspiration enough to win a potential lawsuit, but as Danny notes, that's not the point: The intent is the point, not the exact notes. Had the Pee-wee scene been anything other than a western, it wouldn't have been a problem. But he purposely used similar music to invoke the feeling of a Sergio Leone film. That was the problem. It was a lesson that stuck with him.

Danny cites another example: John Williams's simple, two-note shark motif from *Jaws*. In the time since *Jaws* premiered, various composers have successfully used simple attack ostinatos in their own movie scores without facing legal repercussions, but you could hardly get away with using that approach for another movie about a shark—or even in a scene where the characters are in water and in danger.

In the years since learning his Morricone lesson (thankfully the snafu was caught in time and changed *before* the score was finished), Danny has frequently found himself to be the victim in one of these situations. After *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* and *Beetlejuice*, Danny's distinctive sound became the go-to approach for movie comedies (whether Danny was scoring them or not). The copycats were easy to spot if only because no one but Danny had really taken this approach before. *Edward Scissorhands* went on to become even more influential and thus copied; it seemed that any movie or commercial involving Christmas, snow, or fairy tales inevitably mimicked Danny's distinctive mix of music-box-like celesta and choir.

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**"If there's snow coming down and I start hearing *Edward Scissorhands*, I'm gonna go after you."**

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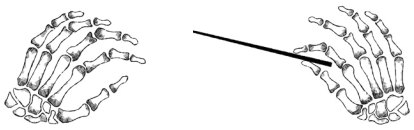
## *GRASPING AT ORIGINALITY*

### "It's impossible to be 100 percent original with anything."

It's difficult to make your music completely original. But taking old approaches and adding a new twist is one way to add your stamp to something. Danny's score to *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* made a huge impact by combining the heavy, obsessive sound of Bernard Herrmann's signature work with a bit of the circus-like feel of Italian composer Nino Rota's music, all filtered through Danny's unique, playful sensibility. People had heard Herrmann and Rota before, but they'd never heard their sounds applied to a comedy.

Danny's style in *Pee-wee's Big Adventure, Beetlejuice, Batman*, and *Edward Scissorhands* was so successful that it essentially became a new genre of film music, and Danny found himself in the rare position of not only being widely imitated but being asked to imitate himself. It's a good spot to be in, but it can also be an artistic straitjacket if you want to be a chameleonic composer. Fortunately for Danny, he was able to demonstrate his flexibility by doing projects like *Sommersby* (a tragic period romance), *Black Beauty* (a lush period adventure), *Dolores Claiborne* (a psychological horror tale), and *To Die For* (a quirky independent comedy).

If you have a style that causes filmmakers to request you specifically, embrace your good fortune. You should be able to work within a familiar sound while still growing and experimenting, particularly if you're having success working within a specific genre. Even so, be on the lookout for projects that can help you break the mold—it can't hurt to get a reputation for success in multiple genres.



CHAPTER TWENTY

# ADVICE TO NEW COMPOSERS

**"I hope you went to film school and you picked up a great knowledge base, because the more you have, the more you're starting out with. The fact that I didn't was a problem for me."**

## *THE CASE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION*

When Danny broke into the film scoring business, he was an anomaly. The vast majority of film composers were classically trained musicians who wrote and conducted their own music, but Danny was entirely self-taught. His early success resulted in a lot of professional jealousy and even suspicions that he didn't write his own music—sentiments that Danny had to fight for years.

These days, composers come from all sorts of educational backgrounds: Some have completed master's degrees in film music, while others have never studied classical composition a day in their lives.

That said, even Danny will tell you that a formal music education is an excellent thing to have. He often wishes he had had one himself, although it was not his fate to go that route. Gaining in-depth knowledge of music history is vital in a discipline in which you may be asked to reference anything from contemporary music to 200-year-old compositions. Schooling will also force you to fill in your blind spots—there will inevitably be areas of composition in which you lack expertise, and taking classes in those areas can strengthen your skill set. Another upside is that music programs can help get you work through their alumni networks and other resources. You may not land a job right after graduation, but getting a job as an assistant or an orchestrator is a great way to learn from working composers about their approaches and experiences.

## *THE CASE FOR INFORMAL EDUCATION*

**"I tried taking music lessons, and I failed dismally every time. But if I could dig into a piece of music ... I knew how to take that piece of music apart and put it back together."**

Danny is forthright and wry about his lack of a formal music education. But at the same time, few people have gotten the crash course in music performance, instrumentation, and culture that Danny got during his trip to Paris and Africa, not to mention during his time with The Mystic Knights and Oingo Boingo. By the time he had the opportunity to score a film, he was able to draw on a vast backlog of cultural, historical, and musicological knowledge and apply it to the project.

Danny's niche obsessions shine through in his music, and they're part of what made him hirable in his early days as a composer. His interest in percussion in particular—from the instruments he collected in West Africa to the gamelans he acquired from Bali and Java—gave his work a unique quality. Danny's early experimentation with shifting interlocking rhythms against one another mirrored the work of minimalist composers like Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and John Adams, but some of the most remarkable rhythmic interplay he'd ever heard was played by a group of children in Mali. All of this informed Danny's music and led to the development of his own style of minimalist writing marked by extensive use of repeating figures or ostinatos.

Odds are you will find a few elements of music that you excel at—writing for smaller ensembles, writing for voice, writing for percussion. Your tendency will be to gravitate toward these areas and excel at them, and this can give you an edge on projects where your specific skill set is needed.

## *GETTING OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE*

**"Every time I was scoring for film, I longed to be on stage. And every time I was on stage, I longed for the simple beauty of being in front of a piano and a keyboard."**

One of the great advantages of composing music for film is the variety the job affords you (even on one individual project). There are so many genres of film—thrillers, comedies, horror movies, action films, mysteries, fantasies, science-fiction movies, dramas—and within those genres, a plethora of settings and characters that call for multiple styles of music. Basically, the creative possibilities are endless.

But, like most jobs, composition can have its ruts: If you're scoring the same kinds of films with the same kinds of music, chances are you'll get frustrated and bored. If that happens, try pushing yourself to work in genres you've never scored before. If you've developed a good working relationship with a director, you may find that trying something new is easier than you thought—filmmakers often want to demonstrate their own versatility, which will inadvertently allow you to demonstrate yours.

If you're not in a position where your director is providing you with the opportunity to stretch yourself, you can pursue more varied projects on your own—which might mean you have to turn down a few projects you would normally take for the sake of pursuing new goals. For the freelance artist, this is always an unnerving prospect—most freelancers never turn down work, and doing it for the first time can be terrifying. But the very fact that you're in a rut means you've developed a body of work that will continue to sell you as an artist, and expanding into new genres and approaches will only magnify that.

Danny started his career with a rock band that demanded his time and attention, forcing him out of his film scoring comfort zone so that he could tour and perform on stage—a radically different discipline from the solitary work of film scoring. In more recent years he has stretched by composing concert music. So if your efforts to stretch within the boundaries of film music aren't satisfying you, try taking on some projects outside of the movie industry.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

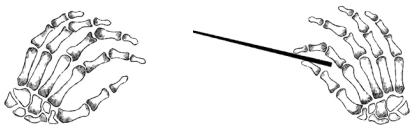
# CLOSING

**"Perhaps you'll find yourself in a moment where you're losing heart and you're starting to doubt yourself. And you go, 'Danny talked about this moment and the incredible persistence and commitment it takes.'"**

## *ART VS. CRAFT // INSPIRATION VS. PERSPIRATION*

Film scoring is an art, but, as Danny says, it's also a craft: The work is done on a precise schedule, and failing to deliver is not an option. That you'd want to achieve your loftiest artistic ambitions with your music is admirable, but sometimes you have to be okay with a great composition, not necessarily a perfect one.

As Danny says, there's no right or wrong way to start a career. There's no perfect background, upbringing, or education that forms a great film composer. You will suffer your own setbacks and disappointments, and you'll achieve your own successes and triumphs. What will make you great is your dedication, hard work, and your striving for artistic expression. Serve the filmmaker, serve the film, then serve yourself and you'll do well.



## *CREDITS*

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**THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL**
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**THE RITE OF SPRING 1929, STRAVINSKY**
By: Igor Stravinsky
Performed by: Belgian Radio and Television Philharmonic Orchestra
Courtesy of Naxos of America, Inc.

**SERGEIPROKOFIEV_LIEUTENANTKIJÉSUITEOP60_1933_EUGENEORMANDY.MP3**
Op. 60: III. Kije's Wedding"
By: Malmo Symphony Orchestra, James DePreist
Performed By: Malmö Symphony Orchestra
Courtesy of Naxos of America, Inc.

**RECORDING OF "DJANGOLOGY" BY DJANGO REINHARDT & STEPHANÉ GRAPPELLI**
By: Django Reinhardt & Stephané Grappeli
Performed By: Stephane Grappelli
Courtesy of Naxos of America, Inc.

**"DANSE BAMBARA KORODOUGA" BY NAHINI DOUMBIA**
By: Nahini Doumbia
Performed by: Nahini Doumbia and Les Espoirs du Mali
Courtesy of Naxos of America, Inc.

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**THE THREEPENNY OPERA (1931) - "DIE DREIGROSCHENOPER, ACT I: JOHN WAR DARUNTER UND JIM WAR DABEI"**
By: Heribert Feckler, Walter Raffeiner, Rolf Wollard, König Ensemble, Jan Latham-König performing Kurt Weill
Performed by: The Threepenny Opera
Courtesy of Naxos of America, Inc.

**SURAKARTA SEKATEN GAMELAN - "SREPEGAN"**
Performed by: Surakarta Sekaten Gamelan
Courtesy of Naxos of America, Inc.

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***Still***
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**SPIDERMAN**
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