

Michael Schelle: *The Score: Interviews with Film Composers*

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Composers, when asked about their life and work, tell tales. They create narratives concerning this event, that stylistic trait, those bars of this or that composition, and they do so with varying degrees of fealty to what they can recall of the emotions, motivations and thought-processes governing their actions at the time. The rest is invented in the service of interests aesthetic, commercial, and socio-political. Film composers – unsurprisingly, perhaps, given the narrative artworks that they co-create for a living – are no exception to this rule, a fact that is amply demonstrated by the important collection of interviews Michael Schelle has conducted and compiled in *The Score: Interviews with Film Composers* (Beverly Hills: Silman-James Press, 1999). Schelle's book consequently invites the reader not only to reflect at length on its wealth of conversations and film music readings, which are provided by Schelle in consort with an impressively diverse pantheon of famous and less familiar composers (John Barry, Elmer Bernstein, Terence Blanchard, Bruce Broughton, Paul Chihara, John Corigliano, James Newton Howard, Mark Isham, Daniel Licht,

Joel McNeely, Thomas Newman, Marc Shaiman, Howard Shore, Shirley Walker, and Christopher Young), but also to consider the meta-narratives interlinking the tales told by the different composers, in order to assess the broader currents Schelle's book reveals with regard to the theory and practice of recent Hollywood film composition.

That composers lie, spin and filter, as well as (often) recounting events as honestly as they can given the ravages of life and long lunches on the memory, is hardly news, as anyone acquainted with, say, the Stravinsky-Craft "conversations" will know. Nor is the need for scholars to adopt an appropriately sceptical critical stance when evaluating what composers say and, indeed, what their interviewers lead or permit them to say (and, in turn, what is edited out of, or into, the eventually published text by the interviewer and other editorial players). Concerns about the need to read the products of the interview process not as privileged "facts" concerning individual compositions or events, but rather as texts requiring robust critical analysis in their own right, are discussed for instance by Charles Wilson in a penetrating recent

examination of the "rhetoric of autonomy" György Ligeti has spun around his creative output – a narrative as deftly woven as the spiders' webs he dreamt of as a child, or his music's micropolyphonic textures (which Ligeti, spinning his narrative, memorably links to those delicate arachnid threads). The "rhetoric of autonomy," Wilson argues,

has served an especially important function for writers and artists ever since the advent of what Felicity Nussbaum has called "the published self as property in a market economy" – the function, namely, of differentiating them from other creators and proclaiming the uniqueness of their work in a competitive market of symbolic goods.¹

Are there, one might therefore wonder, similarly motivated "rhetorics" to be discerned from the statements of film music composers?

If so, one should not necessarily expect a "rhetoric of autonomy" to be produced by all film composers in their public discourses. Theirs is a substantially different

¹ See Charles Wilson, "György Ligeti and the Rhetoric of Autonomy," *Twentieth-Century Music* 1, no. 1 (2004), 6. Wilson quotes Felicity Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), xiv.

situation from the aesthetic and commercial field of tensions facing mid-twentieth- and twenty-first-century concert music composers. One familiar film music composer narrative, however, is one of self-justification and validation – although, as discussed below, this may no longer be quite so widespread a phenomenon as it was when Hollywood composers of the 1930s and 1940s felt the need regularly to justify their work by equating it with more established multimedia forms, and most obviously the opera.

Schelle's book reveals that the rhetoric of film composer self-validation still has legs. Shakier legs than before, perhaps, not least because it is increasingly hard to think of Hollywood film composers as being especially benighted when their scores reach hundreds of thousands more listeners than a concert music composer's entire oeuvre will reach during her lifetime. Then there are the CD releases, with even minor soundtracks shifting many more units than contemporary concert music CDs. But the issue, for the time being, appears still to be relevant, and Schelle nails his own colours to the mast on page one of his introduction, highlighting both the aim of his project and the manner in which, in his view, "classical musicians and the musically 'educated' public" have tended to draw "an inappropriate and unfair distinction between the so-called 'real' composers and their film music brethren":

This distinction has led to the erection of hastily cobbled walls that are meant to separate the misunderstood, unappreciated, visionary, starve-for-your-art "serious" composers from what many ill-informed "music lovers" perceive to be the "artistically-limited prostitutes" who cater to

the public as they ply their trade in Hollywood for the big bucks. (p. xv)

No doubt some "educated" listeners do make such a distinction, although one might feel wary about making such a blanket claim (especially one which uses so many unattributed quasi-quotations/scare quotes). Existing praise for Schelle's book, however, as evidenced on its cover blurb, takes a similar line, as in Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski's statement that, "For once, [film] composers are truly appreciated: They [sic] come across as smart, funny, and quite opinionated. This is a book which needed to be written."

To whom, then, will this book's attempts to combat misperceptions most appeal? Historians and biographers will certainly find details in which to revel (Barry's discussion of his low boredom threshold while saturating himself in films at his family's picture house casts light, for instance, on both his life and musical development). Critical theorists will also find a number of loose threads to tug on. Gender is one such strand, particularly as it might apply in readings of Walker's case, the only woman interviewed here and, as a "ghost writer," literally a phantom (i.e., uncredited) presence in many films. Herein lies a meaty case study-in-waiting on the invisibility, at various intersecting levels, of the female composer in discourses surrounding Hollywood film music as much as within the system itself. (And if male film composers feel benighted, what about their female colleagues?) Politics of a different stripe arise in Bernstein's interview, which touches on his "left-wing causes" and grey-listing, before moving on to discuss (albeit without

making an overt connection) his subsequent scoring of some of the wryest satires of the American Dream ever produced (from *Animal House* to *Far from Heaven*, although the latter is too recent to be discussed in Schelle's book).

It is the analyst-critic of film music, however, who will potentially derive the most value from this book. As Schelle explains in his introduction,

the real insight into a composer's creative heart, mind, and soul can only surface when we learn why he or she wrote a retrograde double-fugue exposition for the bloody decapitation scene or why spiral notation and serial procedures were unleashed for the white-tie-and-tails ballroom sequence. (p. xvii)

Leaving aside the rhetoric (the idea that one might unproblematically "learn" a "real insight," phrases which are partly a result of Schelle's accessible but occasionally overly chatty style), this is an admirable strategy. One of the great necessities in film music analysis is, arguably, the development of a theory of filmic narrativity capable of embracing the role of music within film's contrapuntal and dialogic discourse.² At times, Schelle's interviews do not quite live up to this aim, zooming in on style and technique rather than panning back to consider why a musical idea is woven into a film's narrative. His best questions, however, in tandem with his non-combative style, encourage his interviewees to move beyond technique in their comments, and when Schelle steers them in the direction of their music's narrative function, the tactic often yields fascinating

² This, at least, is my opinion; my own film music research is focussed, in part, on developing such a theory.

results. In doing so, the interviews may even begin to suggest a site within which a more judicious appraisal of the value of a film composer's work might be made: the success or failure, richness of paucity, of her or his contribution to the narrative texts that he or she has helped to co-create.

Schelle therefore adopts the strategy of the fan with a plan in his interviews, and with mixed results, as in the following exchanges from his interview with Howard:

[Schelle]: Your music for *ER* is a classy tune for a quality program.

[Howard]: Thanks. (p. 193)

...

[Schelle]: *Waterworld* has a lot of rhythmic 5/8s and 7/8s that keep you on the edge, but I also noticed a real attraction to those classic Hollywood minor-third progressions. The C-minor area moves to E-flat minor to F# minor, but [you] take your time, stretch the modulations. It works well because of its association with endless stretches of water. Was it your conscious choice to use these classic, suspense-building progressions that allow you to take a long time to get where you're going?

[Howard]: Yeah, it was conscious. I resisted those kinds of chord progressions for years. I really did. I would hear them in horror movies and I would hear them in Goldsmith and in John Williams. I still hear them. But I resisted and resisted. It became self-deceiving in a way. I was in a kind of denial about it, because audiences, directors, producers – everybody watching the movie – has certain expectations. Even though you aren't necessarily expecting a progression of minor thirds, there is a sound to that sequence which, when tied to an image, particularly

when tied to a spectacular, ultra-large image, is hard to resist . . . It was just a matter of consciously bringing those chord progressions into my toolbox as just another place to think and another place to go. (p. 192-3)

Schelle's *ER* comment is a sop to Howard's taste and talents. The *Waterworld* question, however, in adopting a position and providing a detailed reading, requires more from its answerer than merely trotting out a familiar response. Schelle is well-placed to do this. Time and time again in his book, one suspects that he knows the films and scores better – and accords them considerably more value – than the composers, some of whom seem slightly bemused, if flattered, to be engaging in detailed dissections of certain examples of their work. And Schelle is using a classic interviewing tactic here, not quite good cop/bad cop, but one in which well-placed daubs of praise (as much to boost an interviewee's confidence as to ingratiate oneself with them) can be used to create an atmosphere within which more detailed questions can be posed and in which composers feel relaxed enough to answer them in depth.³ One must also remember that film composers (and many other kinds of composer) do not necessarily reflect deeply on their practice: they are often too busy composing. Ample encouragement is thus a necessity.

The arrangement of the interviews is alphabetical, and one wonders if Schelle was attracted to this arrangement because, while being ostensibly democratic, it places his lengthy John Barry interview first and his discussion with Christopher Young last. Both

³ I recognise this technique as I use it in my own interviewing of (concert music) composers, in which, in retrospect, the sops occasionally make me wince, but not when they lead to greater depths being reached elsewhere in the interview.

are clearly composers Schelle admirers deeply, and one of the most enjoyable moments in the book comes when he tells Young that the first thing his film music students at Butler University hear is a cue from *The Vagrant*. Young's response is winning: "You are fucking kidding!" (p. 394). But the arrangement, as Schelle predicts but does not pursue in his commentaries, also permits several examples of what he describes as "just good old Jungian synchronicity" (p. xviii). That synchronicity is certainly in attendance, in the form of a number of contrasting takes on identical issues which pop out between different, and sometime adjacent, interviews.

The Barry interview sets up the first of the themes that ripple across the surface of the book: the issue of the film composer as sole auteur vs. compositional collaboration. Most obviously, this relates to the role of orchestrators. Barry and Howard's views may be constructively contrasted here, Barry reflecting an old-school belief in the desirability of doing it oneself, Howard the need to be realistic in changing times, albeit while also recognizing the dip in musical value which results when one is not working quite so intimately with the sonic realization of one's musical thoughts. The issue of co-creating those musical thoughts also rises in the case, for example, of the sonorities with which Newman (who refers to the ludicrous ritual of the orchestral score) and his collaborators Rick Cox and Chas Smith tinker in the studio. Newman and Co.'s cooperative approach can be contrasted to some more painful stories about co-creation. In this regard, Walker's take on her work on *Black Beauty* with Carmine Coppola and

on her “split” with Danny Elfman (due, in part, to the persistent rumours that she was creating much of “his” music – a charge she refutes here) makes for compelling reading. As Shaiman points out, however, one point where greater collaborative proximity is surely needed in current practice is during the final sound mix of a movie, in order to counter the narrative obfuscations that can result when SFX and dialogue editing do not take into account a musical perspective.

Barry also initiates a thread on the merits of composing with or against the action, discussing how the sight of Sharon Stone’s automatic weapon jutting out of her stocking-top in a church-set scene in *The Specialist* is scored against “this big God music” (p. 35), thereby shaping a deliciously surreal moment of sacred profanity. The issue of composing in counterpoint to/parallel with other aspects of the filmic discourse – and primarily the most obvious emotional undertow of the action being depicted in a particular scene – has been debated since Eisenstein and the earliest sound films. What becomes clear here, however, is the dangerous simplicity of critical views in which more recent “Hollywood” scoring practices continue to be construed in terms of parallelism (via discussions of Mickey-Mousing, transparency, and thus suturing and forced audience assimilation into ideologically motivated subject-positions), as opposed to the more liberated agendas of (non-Hollywood) film-making teams which seek to use music contrapuntally. Certainly, the composers Schelle interviews don’t appear to have been reading up on the relevant Grand Theorizing. Instead, a wealth of approaches to the issue

of parallelism and counterpoint in recent Hollywood practice emerges from the book.

Several composers accept that subjugating a scene’s music to the articulation of a broad narrative point via unabashed parallelism is often an imperative. Even Corigliano, who unsurprisingly takes a relatively ambivalent stance on such issues (as part of his intersecting concert music composer’s “rhetoric of autonomy”), admits as much:

[Schelle]: The film score [for *Altered States*] has a natural dramatic flair, but knows when to use traditional film-scoring techniques in the tradition of Max Steiner, Hans Salter, Tiomkin, et al. – the door opens to very low strings, the baboon man jumps out to a big shock chord, and so on.

[Corigliano]: Well, there are times when you want to do that, or just *have* to do that, and times when you want more of a fabric, a texture, an atmosphere. (p. 168)

The risk of going against the grain in such situations, moreover, is articulated in Shore’s sardonic discussion of the unceremonious dumping of his edgy score for Ron Howard’s *Ransom* (“All I can figure out,” Shore suggests, “is that [Howard] came into the picture wearing a black leather jacket and left wearing a white sports coat,” p. 346). And as Newman points out to Schelle, who at times seems a little too keen to validate all Mickey-Mousing as tongue-in-cheek postmodernism committed with a knowing smirk on the composer’s face, “sometimes I’m [not smiling, I’m] weeping” (p. 280).

In this respect, one of the most striking instances of synchronicity in the book comes from the

adjacent interviews of Newman and Shaiman, both of whom discuss their approaches to scoring the build-up to a gunshot:

[Newman]: I remember when I did *Flesh and Bone*, a movie about little ideas becoming huge ideas, there was a piece of temp music in it just before a gunshot went off. It climaxed with a crescendo to a single gunshot – *boom!* So I think, well, of course, you gotta go *boom!* Sometimes we get into these lethargic places where we think, well, that’s just how it’s gonna go down. But Bill Bernstein said, “This just sucks. It’s just too dramatic.” So in this case, we decided to subdue the crescendo, so everything dissolves and you get this deadly silence . . . and then . . . *boom!*, the gun goes off.

[Schelle]: You went in a reverse direction from the temp.

[Newman]: Totally. And it was a great dramatic idea.

. . . .

[Schelle]: Your score for the opening scene [of *Ghosts of the Mississippi*] is layer upon layer of transparent yet tense forward motion to the gunshot climax.

[Shaiman]: I remember watching the opening scene on television and just being so intimidated. How can I possibly score this scene? Someone’s getting murdered. How can I not write trivial music for such a powerful moment?

. . . The music comes right back in after the guy is shot, but, as you said, the whole first section is just building and building. It’s the tension of the inevitable. (p. 310)

Not only, therefore, do a variety of responses to such situations exist in contemporary Hollywood scoring practices (and was it not ever thus?), but even those

responses which do seek to move in parallel with the emotional content of the action (Shaiman's "tension of the inevitable"), as opposed to sculpting the rhetoric of the filmic discourse in an ostensibly more subtle and contrapuntal manner (Newman), may be made with admirable degrees of artistic awareness. Both, in turn, can carry the weight of ideologies, with the nuances of the practice having an impact on the message being promoted.

Newman, in discussing such nuances, emerges as a particularly incisive and intelligent commentator, not least when he tries to explain the effects one might seek to devise given music's usually (although not exclusively) secondary function as a narrative voice operating within a film's polyphonic discourse:

[Newman]: You can argue that [film music] is heard and listened to, but usually that's accidental or that's because it's appropriate for a particular dramatic moment in the movie, as opposed to, "Well, gee, I really wanna be heard." Find the moments when you can speak out and the moments when it's inappropriate to speak out. I don't want to say, "Well, I'm a composer and I want to be heard" as much as "Here's what I can do in this environment." Some environments are more avant-garde, more progressive, than others. Some are very conservative, and you kind of have to do what you have to do. (p. 269)

Yet film composers can add layers of nuance and perspective to even the most "conservative" of films. Newman's comments, and those of many composers in Schelle's book, recognize that even when it is "unheard," in the sense of not being the conscious focus of the perceiver's attentiveness at a given

point in the filmic experience, music – like the inner voices of a fugue – adds dimensionality to filmic narrativity, affecting and influencing one's perceptions of the more prominent outer voices of that polyphony, and occasionally cresting (like an alto voice rising above the soprano) to steal the limelight and lead the dialogic dance.

Given the gradations which emerge concerning parallelism vs. counterpoint – an issue laden with clichéd associations of sold-out (Hollywood) commercialism vs. (non-Hollywood) artistic integrity – it is not surprising, therefore, that the meta-narrative to emerge from the book regarding the validity of film music composition is also more complicated than one might expect (not least given Schelle's stated aims at the outset of his book). At the risk of substituting one over-simplification for another, two positions seem to emerge in place of the previously more inclusive "rhetoric of validation," interestingly, these positions, in turn, reflect alternative takes on a connected "rhetoric of autonomy." Comparing the stances of Corigliano, Newman and Blanchard, for instance, with Broughton, Howard and Shaiman, one discovers composers positioning themselves, to varying degrees, as outsiders or insiders in relation to the Hollywood machine. The outsiders speak of a desire not so much to go against the grain of the action and to compose contrapuntally ("insider" Howard talks about this as enthusiastically as anyone) but to remain true to broader artistic projects of which their film work is but one component. Corigliano's "classical" voice, Blanchard's jazzier credentials, Newman's sonic experimentalism – all speak to a desire both to create an

autonomous voice and to protect that voice from being sullied through compromise or ill-chosen film collaborations. And yet, who sounds happier? Surprisingly, given the previous paradigm of the "rhetoric of validation," it is the composers who have accepted, and indeed embraced, the need for compromise, in terms of both autonomy of voice and fealty to a personal artistic vision, who sound happier about their work.

Corigliano, for example, carefully positions his own film scoring in parallel to Beethoven's composition of an opera (the simile is, of course, telling regarding Corigliano's construction of his own "rhetoric of autonomy") as a complement to, as opposed to a replacement for, the composing of concert works. Chihara, on the other hand, mounts a passionate defence of compromise that is all the more fascinating coming from a composer who could easily have attained a similar concert music status to Corigliano. Instead, Chihara eschewed the notionally highbrow – "Oh, he's gone Hollywood" (p. 133) Chihara's former peers in academia dismissively stated – as demonstrated by his acceptance, both as a novice film composer but also, retrospectively, in aesthetic terms, of director Paul Bartel's adaptation of the music Chihara had spotted and composed for *Death Race 2000*. As Chihara notes,

[Chihara]: Paul used my Bach fugue over all of the final chase, the climactic chase of the movie. I didn't intend that – I don't know what I wrote the fugue for, but he stuck it over that chase and it was brilliant. I wrote what I thought was appropriate, but Paul Bartel, in his lunatic genius way, put the music wherever he wanted to. I learned so much from that – it was like a great seminar on film composing.

. . . I would always put fast music on chase scenes, love music on love scenes, and so forth. What did I know? I just gave Paul so many fast cues and so many soft cues, and he assembled them like so many Lincoln Logs. (pp. 134-5)

Appearing next to Corigliano's interview (another pleasingly jarring synchronicity), Chihara offers a tangy rejoinder to the potentially discriminatory subtext of the rhetorics of autonomy and self-validation woven by some film composers, by reflecting an apparently equally prevalent rhetoric of collaboration and accommodation. To be skeptical, one might wonder if some of these conciliatory statements, particularly from Schelle's younger interviewees, relate partly to a desire not to bite the hand that feeds them. But this, too, speaks ultimately to a richness of approaches and contexts within contemporary Hollywood scoring practice.

A few typos here and there disrupt one's engagement with the book's otherwise clearly presented interviews (bold type is used for Schelle's questions, normal weighting for the answers; spacing and margins are ample, structural signposting clear). These appear to be errors of copy-editing (the strange symbols, for example, which creep into Blanchard's discussion of tape sizes on p. 68; "interesting" where "interested" should have appeared in the final paragraph of Schelle's preface, p. x). But this does not greatly detract from what is overall a generous and stimulating book – generous in the sense that analysts, theorists, historians and enthusiasts alike will find much to inform and entertain them within its pages,

stimulating because the detailed discussions of individual scores send one zipping off to the video store (or cueing up yet more movies online with one's home delivery service); composers, too, will find ideas to stimulate their own reflections on composing for the screen, alongside opportunities to revel in the book's more gossipy asides and their colleagues' occasional lapses into hubris. So be warned: if you have yet to experience *Crooklyn*, *Altered States* or *Death Race 2000*, this book could prompt immediate, time-consuming action.

And there are many more prompts to such action here: Barry on scoring around the timbre, cadence and register of Gregory Peck's voice; Bernstein on scoring with, but exaggeratedly and thus at an angle to, comedic narratives; Blanchard on organizing a score; Broughton on performance practice in relation to the vertiginous technical challenges in *Honey, I Blew Up the Kid*; the interplay of Chihara and Bartel to create the sophisticated narrational voice of the music in *Death Race 2000*; Corigliano's organicist approach to unifying *The Red Shoes* through seven source chords; Howard (yes, James Newton Howard) on Elliott Carter; Newman on how to record a door, and on being caught in several minds over scoring the hanging scene in *The Shawshank Redemption*; the serendipity of Shore's seemingly all-important choice of organ sound in *Videodrome*, and the composer's discussion of the Hindemith-influenced preponderance of seconds, fourths, fifths, sevenths and ninths in his harmonies (and how important is that sound to shaping wider perceptions of David Cronenberg's oeuvre?); and Young's unstinting honesty about how damn hard it continues to

be merely to get the work done in time as a film music composer.

The book also reveals itself, therefore, as a potential goldmine for teachers of film music, thanks in part to the composer comments, but also to Schelle's often more illuminating readings of scores and cues. One would not wish for such comments and commentaries to be accepted unquestioningly. On the contrary, Schelle's book could provide a sourcebook for modules in which critical engagement and analysis of the statements made and the scores discussed becomes a site for a dialectical critique, thus opening up aesthetic, economic and socio-political issues including, but no doubt ranging beyond, those mentioned in this review. Consequently, whether or not one agrees with Schelle's readings (and the composers don't always, especially when Schelle rescues their "mistakes" with glowing interpretations of a cue's narrative contribution – see, for instance, his discussion with Howard of a segment of *Falling Down*, pp. 186-7), one must admire Schelle's ability to present reasonably detailed analytical sketches to all of his interviewees. The hard work of analyzing, in musical and narrative detail, a large body of films has paid off in Schelle's book, which leads one to consider a range of issues and to appraise a diversity of films. One finishes the interviews full of questions and a desire to think about and experience the texts concerned – the best outcome that tales told about music can ever hope to achieve.