

For the SCL Score

The Idea of Counterpoint in Film Music

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Beginning with musicians in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, counterpoint was understood as *punctus contra punctus* note against note. In species counterpoint we manipulate one note against one, one note against two, one against three, and one against four and finally a free adaptation of all those techniques. Whether its Baroque or contemporary in style, species counterpoint changes our way of thinking about melody, harmony and texture.

Anyone who has experienced multiple explorations by setting a *cantus firmus* understands that the best melodies contain the DNA of much larger potentialities and harmony is hardly a vertical phenomenon but the intersection of two or more melodic motions. Ultimately effective textures depend on the organic relationships consistently alluding to that initial melodic gene.

As of late, I've been hearing either no counterpoint or *faux* counterpoint in over orchestrated, inorganic film cues composed by younger writers. When I had the honor of orchestrating some of his later works, I remember marveling at Alex North's five, six, and seven lines sketches brimming with counterpoint. Here was a master composer who knew how and why to apply it and where and when to abstain.

In this article, I'd like to offer an additional perspective for the film composer in contrapuntally setting a visual *cantus firmus*; that is treating the visual like a generating melodic line. This represents a new application and redefinition of counterpoint for film composers.

I will suggest that the visual and its attendant dialogue is also a *cantus firmus* and the accompanying music cue should be an organic (growing out of the spoken or visual source) accompaniment employing several species (or manipulations) of counterpoint in relation to these generating visual and spoken stimuli.

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For the purposes of redefining counterpoint for film composers I will treat the term *species* as different levels of contrapuntal sophistication in providing an accompaniment to the visual. The most basic would be first species while the most creative (and challenging) would be the fifth species.

First Species – Play the Visual. This is the most obvious technique usually found in basic TV writing that gives one little time to reflect on the deeper implications of the visual. You see something menacing-you write something menacing, you see something funny –you write funny etc. It is literally a parallel to the visual stimulus reinforcing the main thrust of the action in mirror fashion but adding little or no new information.

Second Species – Play the Scenery (location), the period costumes, the style, etc. This strategy is often employed when the drama of a scene is arbitrary and contains little or no conflict. While it is oblique to the visual action and adds some background information, it, too, minimally furthers the drama of the narrative under scrutiny.

Third Species – Play the Characters. This is a much finer feature film counterpoint as it could be very different than what is actually being seen or spoken on the screen. For example if you play a character's anger, sadness, happiness or fear under anything the character's doing or saying, you add a dimension, generated by that character, that furthers our understanding of his past, present, and future actions; and, ultimately, the power of the larger drama. While it might not reflect the overt action of the present visual it adds textures of past resonance or future inevitabilities to our understanding.

Fourth Species - Play the Sub-text. This is the most sophisticated film scoring technique used by our greatest film composers. A sub-text is to a plot what a theme is to a subject. While the plot answers who, what, where, when, and how, the sub-text provides the all-important context of why. If you can play the undercurrent, you've mastered true dramatic writing. When Elmer Bernstein (happy 50th anniversary as a film composer Elmer) plays the sub-text of unanswered mysteries of innocent childhood in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, he transforms and elevates the visual into something that touches our most inner core of memory.

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Fifth Species – A combination of all previous species. It is a virtuosic contrapuntal setting of all the implications of the visual in one scene creating a polyphony of counterpoint servicing the scene's multiple needs. For example, one might begin with the scenery, add a touch of parallel action, segue to underscoring the characterization that swells to an insightful sub-textual commentary all in a single scene.

This free, extensive menu of contrapuntal insights provides an enriched meaning to the visual and the dialogue that explains, illuminates, and emphasizes less exposed structural details. In short, it makes the film come alive!

It is my observation that, after mastering musical species counterpoint, a composer fully understands the contrapuntal ramifications of a scene, he (or she) tends to write less notes but chooses the right ones. Think of your score not as a monolithic entity, but as a running contrapuntal commentary always revealing, explaining, clarifying and adding an adjunct context to the visual and the dialogue.

One needn't compose Baroque music to be a successful contrapuntalist. It is not about style as it is about understanding how to squeeze the sweet juices of meaning out of the audio and video stimuli that you are asked to musically underscore.

Remember: Think of your visual as a musical line that seeks an appropriate contrapuntal accompaniment; then rise to your highest level.

Michael Isaacson is a versatile composer, conductor and orchestrator who, aside from his own extensive credits, has assisted Alex North, Elmer Bernstein, Walter Scharf and Charles Fox. He now gives private composition and conducting lessons. Dr. Isaacson may be reached at: Eggcreamer@sbcglobal.net