

For SCL's SCORE

Employing Dramatic Opposites in Film Scoring
By
Michael Isaacson, Ph.D.

In previous articles I've opined that the essential difference between TV scoring and feature film scoring lies not in the size of the orchestra nor in the music budget but in the time and theatrical license to score the drama's sub-text as well and as often as the obvious parallel text of the visual.

In TV scoring because there's an urgency to spill the beans as quickly as possible while cutting through the commercial and promotional intrusions that diffuse our focus, the music most always reinforces the visual in a parallel way. While this is certainly expedient it is not the best theatre.

In the cinema however, we are neither bombarded by commercials nor promos and have the luxury of giving our deeper, fuller concentration to the story's more profound import. We also have an extended amount of time to unfold the narrative in a less frenetic fashion.

Consequently, the savvy film scorer is wise to consider the use of dramatic opposites in his or her music and how they may impact upon the dramatic gestalt.

Here's how it works: In drama, saying or doing something different than what is thought or felt heightens the moment's dramatic reality. For example, "I don't love you" most often means the opposite and giving a smile to the enemy most often suggests anything but happiness or pleasure. This heightened reality in the form of an opposite action or bit of dialogue is simply good theatre.

How do we underscore an opposing subtext?

Melody – If there is an underlying tension to what, at first appearance, might seem a placid scene play a restless melody. If there's sadness to a contained cheerfulness play a sad tune. If there's a comic satire inherent in what at first appears to be a sad scene play the comedy.

Harmony – Sadness may be bittersweet or comical one might call for a minor mode while the other may not. Conversely, happy scenes are not always as they appear; don't hesitate to write in minor or in a diffused modality.

Rhythm – If there's an underlying tension under a calm scene, suggest the subtext of discomfort by playing jagged or edgy rhythms. If a character's confidence suggests that in spite of the current malaise everything will turn out hunky-dory, play that heroism (Indiana Jones)_

Instrumentation – If there's an emotional tug over a rhythmic scene play the long line in winds and strings as well as the visual movement in the rhythm section, If a big person is funny consider using a piccolo or other diminutive sound to underscore their fragility. Conversely, if a small person is brave, underscore that bravado with a full battery of brass or percussion.

Texture – If a character is thinking in silence, the density of his thoughts might call for a lot of notes and turgidity. Conversely, if a charming airhead is blathering away at a mile a minute, no music or the most transparent texture might do the trick.

Remember our job is not so much to underscore what they are doing or saying on the screen (the visual or the dialogue track covers those aspects rather nicely) but what they are thinking or feeling and what we are being asked to feel about them at that moment (often, the opposite of the dialogue or action).

Why does this affect of opposites work dramatically?

Because as Shakespeare wrote: "All the world's a stage". We are compelled to be brave when we are scared, cheerful when our hearts ache; calm when we are anxious, and resolute when we have lost our way...or vise-versa.

Never mind what we say and do, employ dramatic opposites and enable your music to reveal what we think and feel.

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