

## **For the SCL Score**

### **Everything Old Is New Again**

**By  
Michael Isaacson**

Several of my students have asked me how to go about finding a “sound” for their media projects. In this time when period pieces often disregard the music of the historic or stylistic period and rock songs with even the most remote literary association are enlisted for these visuals’ accompaniments, this is an interesting musical (not literary) question to discuss.

It is no secret that many young film-goers (the desired demographic) have limited experience with concert, chamber, and solo instrumental works. All their lives they have heard a rather narrow spectrum of music. This is both a limitation and a wonderful opportunity to introduce “DWM - dead, white men’s music” in a new situation thereby making “everything old, new again”.

I recall how refreshing Mendelssohn’s Symphony #4 Op. 90, the A Major “Italian” Symphony was used in the 1979 bicycle racing film *Breaking Away*. Even though the music had nothing to do with Indiana, or bicycle racing, the film score’s decision maker (probably the director Peter Yates who knew concert music) thought that, as the character Dave Stoller saw himself as an Italian bicycle racer preparing for Indiana’s *Little 500* state-wide race, Italian music would be affectively appropriate.

Here’s where creative obliqueness often works in spite of a mistaken genesis. The symphony is not Italian; it is German. While Mendelssohn wrote the symphony in 1831 in Berlin for a concert in London, he sketched it remembering a trip he took to Italy. Its minor tonality and concluding lively dance movement a *saltarello* rhythm provided just enough ethnicism to suggest Mendelssohn’s title. I can just hear the expedience of the film production meeting “Give us Italian music ... ya know like an Italian symphony”. To Peter Yate’s and composer Patrick Williams’ finely honed credit, if they were brought only demos of music with the word Italian in it they, undoubtedly, would still be searching for that “sound”. However, Mendelssohn’s *Italian* symphony had a filter attached; Mendelssohn’s ebullient spirit, focused intellect, and astounding musical craft. Some say the real *wunderkind* of the classical period was not Mozart but Mendelssohn. His music still works beautifully today ...even on an Indiana highway.

Having noted the irony, the music succeeds brilliantly not so much because of its title and quasi-Italianate quality but because it is wonderfully exotic music (for a kid from Indiana) created by a classical master and skillfully adapted by Pat Williams. Rent the DVD and check out Dave’s distance run on the highway alongside the semi for yourself. The music’s adaptation makes it an overwhelming experience.

The point to all this is that when you or your music supervisor are searching for a “sound” for your project remember that there’s more to be found out there than rock songs with the word “bicycle” or “Italian” in it. There’s also DWM music that gloriously filters these subjects into musical abstract energies that can serve you well either as a source or as a stylistic model for your own original composition.

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