

For the SCL Score

Film Music as Half of a Two Part Invention

By

Michael Isaacson

In one of my first columns for the SCORE, I suggested that the system of species counterpoint could be creatively applied to film music. Regarding this contrapuntal relationship, I'll continue this notion even more specifically here and consider music and a visual as two equal and reciprocal elements of a two-part invention.

Now, I'm sure you remember from studying Bach two-part inventions that when one voice has the theme, the other plays the counter-theme and vice-versa. But actually when the theme is being played the other voice has the option of one of four textures:

1. Silence
2. Parallel accompaniment
3. The counter theme
4. Connective material leading to either parallel accompaniment or the counter theme.

When you factor these possibilities at any given time you have 24 in either voice or 48 in both voices. When we apply this to music and film, the same 48 possibilities present themselves.

This means that when you are scoring a musical moment (before you even think about melody, rhythm, harmony, et al.) you must decide whether to play the moment at all or leave it to the other elements, or "Mickey Mouse" it in parallel fashion, or play a sub-textual counter theme, or create connective musical material leading up to one of these other structural decisions.

Let me remind you that, just as in a two-part invention, it is the content of the other voice that most often impels your musical decisions. For example:

In the visual

1. Do the visual and/or dialogue elements communicate so strongly that no music is needed? Does silence contribute more actively than "muzak" would?
2. Does the visual need reinforcement with music that "goes along for the ride" in a parallel fashion?
3. Is there an element to the larger meaning of the visual that can only be added by introducing ancillary (not parallel) music that comments on the visual as a counter theme would in a two-part invention?
4. Is there a visual or dialogue sound event that needs setting up and preparation for bringing us logically to one of these previously stated moments?

When you think of the visual and the music as a two-part invention (or by adding dialogue creating a three-part invention), then you will actively create a vibrantly reciprocal dance of equality between the collaborative stimuli rather than “wall to wall” passivity.

Finally, when you think of a two-part invention, you don't only remember the music played by one voice, but, mostly, the interplay of both voices with each other. This is what we also aspire to accomplishing in good film scoring. While at times, we'd like attention paid to a particularly beautiful melody or a rousing, rhythmic groove, most of the time we'd hope that the music, dialogue, FX, and visuals combine together to create a synergistic super structure that seems, indivisible, inevitable, elegantly logical, and dramatically compelling.

You can accomplish this by making your musical invention a reflective extension of the visual and other sound elements as they, in turn; become a reflective extension of your music. In other words, the creative illusion in film music should be posed as “Which came first... the music or the film?”

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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 and Charles Fox. He now gives private composition and conducting lessons. Dr. Isaacson may be reached at: Eggcream@sbcbglobal.net