

For SCL's SCORE

"THE THEATRICAL SENSIBILITIES OF SOUND"

By Michael Isaacson, Ph.D.

When teaching advanced composition to film composers, I've found it useful to treat each musical parameter as a theatrical metaphor. In other words if you think of the aspects of abstract sound as you would a theatrical performer, your compositions will reflect a dramatic edge that can be of great help in underscoring and providing enhanced dramatic contexts. Consider the following:

1. **MELODY** - A good melody lives in three simultaneous time frames. As soon as the first two tones are articulated there is an intervallic relationship set up that carries with it expectations; all subsequent tones consult the PAST history of that initial relationship. As the melody unfolds the listener is attracted to the drama of the PRESENT sound while creating FUTURE expectations which seek to be gratified as well.

Do your melodies for a visual reflect where the visual began, where it is, and where it is going? Do you think of your melody as an aspect of a character on a dramatic journey?

2. **HARMONY** - When two or more melodies (functioning perfectly well on their own) meet and interact they become larger than themselves. While maintaining their autonomy they acquire a new super identity which seeks to illuminate the other and give added definition to itself in the process.

People live most harmoniously with each other when their own identities are strongly independent and their relationships are founded on desire rather than need.

Are your harmonies simply the obvious vertical chord symbols or do they horizontally reflect each melody (dramatic character) and its parallel relationship with another melody (supporting actor)?

3. **RHYTHM** - The equal importance of sound, and silence in between sound, creates regular and irregular rhythms. All sound is merely a constant hum; it is the importance of silence or negative space that allows the rhythm of the sound to be clarified. Perceiving rhythms is a skill that requires an equal understanding of sound and silence. People who listen as much as they speak increase the rhythm of their communicative success rate. Silence, and the introspection inherent therein, enhances the process.

Is your rhythmic writing incessantly on auto-pilot once it begins or does it organically "listen" silently minding the rhythms of the visual?

4. **TIMBRE** - The color of a sound is not isolated but part of a spectrum or overtone series. The most effective colors are mindful of their place within the full series as well as the needed individual emphasis of appropriate partials to effect the specific color.

One becomes engagingly colorful not by rejecting culture, but by knowing it so well that their individual place in the spectrum becomes dramatically and logically correct; perfect in its effect. Innovation has lasting value when it is the product of informed understanding of what preceded it.

Is your sense of color influenced more by its novelty or is generated by the theatrical imperatives of the visual?

5. **DYNAMICS** - Loud and soft in music is what perspective is to the visual arts or what supporting players and featured players are to the theatre. As we use silence to punctuate the rhythm of sound, so we enhance our individual efforts by allowing others to "speak up" while we "pipe down" for the collective good.

Do you employ dynamics to let your sonic characters take turns coming downstage and then backing upstage to enable other sonic characters to do their turn downstage?

6. **TEMPO** - The speed at which events happen. An **accelerando** is an eagerness to leave the PAST while a **ritardando** is a reluctance to meet the FUTURE. If our PRESENT is filled with meaning of its own rather than acting as a bridge between former and approaching events, the tempo will seem correct; otherwise it will feel inauthentic (too fast or too slow).

Do you consider the tempo of your scene not only by its present activity but also by how anxiously it arrived from the past scene or how urgently it seeks to exit or segue to the next moment?

7. **STRUCTURE** - is the integration of all the previous components into larger aggregates that repeat and vary to emphasize a central musical viewpoint. Balanced repetition and development of small, everyday tasks, values and beliefs is essential in expressing the big picture. Greatness is determined by the meticulousness of this balanced attention to small details.

Does your music merely reflect the visual (TV) or do you add independent, supporting sonic details that will increase the organic logic of the visual structure?

8. **STYLE** - Understanding the particular sound vocabulary or performance rules of the piece (whatever they are set up to be) and finding the freedom within those limitations is the key to stylistic integrity and ultimate creativity. Living creatively within the limitations of society is freeing rather than restrictive. To do so one must understand the boundaries and then joyously ping against these walls much as a racquetball in motion does.

Does your music have the long line, disciplined stamp of stylistic awareness and restraint or is it a patchwork of many different disparate styles?

Even though we never have enough time to consider all these issues when "the meter" is running, try to get into the habit of composing a few measures in between media assignments that investigate these musical parameters. I welcome your reactions and comments

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