

For SCL's SCORE

## ***The Scharf Approach: Last Things First***

**By  
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From a film scoring structural point of view, musically triumphant does not mean writing the march from *Aida*. A composer triumphantly composes a finale when that musical moment fulfills an organic inevitability. In other words, what is composed at the end of the film naturally reflects the sum total of the musical ideas that preceded it. It represents an organic realization of the generating energies that have brought us to this concluding moment.

Walter Scharf wisely taught us that in order to create the persuasive illusion of inevitability, one is well advised to compose the last reel (the finale) first (drawing all the film's musical ideas from that moment) and then compose the first reel next. By employing this juxtaposition of the narrative approach, the composer convinces an audience into believing that a musical motif heard at the beginning has logically come to fruition in the finale.

Mr. Scharf's magical scoring technique serves three other valuable purposes as well.

1. It is only in the film's finale (if it is the dramatically correct one) that a film's emotional journey can be properly assessed. Consequently, scoring that first helps the composer provide a musical subtext to all of the former scenes leading up to it.
2. It sets up structural "bookends" that an audience, upon recall, can readily remember. They then can use these supports to retain and process the more easily forgotten musical information in the middle of the film.
3. From a practical strategy, it enables the composer to build a case and write most creatively while still fresh and unimpeded by eleventh hour mental and physical fatigue.

But what happens if, for one reason or another, the film's finale is not an organic inevitability of the story? What if the composer inherits the screenwriter's or director's eleventh hour fatigue?

Then, by creating a compelling musical finale that sustains the integrity of most of the film's intent, a composer helps diffuse the narrative's weakness by featuring a musical destiny that strongly "takes stage" minimizing the present dramatic flaws by recalling and fortifying the strengths of the past.

This is another application of always being mindful of the PAST, PRESENT, and FUTURE in every frame under musical scrutiny. When it comes to creating a satisfying finale, the end really does justify the means. I welcome your comments and suggestions.

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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@aol.com**