

For The SCL Score

The “Falconetti Motto”

By

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Media composers spend a lot of time thinking of fresh ways of musically underscoring the action of a film; but equally or, at times, more important than underscoring the action is underscoring the personality of the protagonists.

I recall a musical motto that I inherited from Alex North when I continued his ground-breaking underscoring work on TV's first mini-series *Rich Man, Poor Man*. There was an evil character named Falconetti who was portrayed brilliantly by the actor William Smith. Whenever Falconetti was on screen and up to no good, Alex used the “Falconetti motto” to underscore the scene. Alex almost totally disregarded the particulars of the current scene's action and kept stressing and re-emphasizing Falconetti's evil character. The dramatic results, of course, were marvelous. Every time that the “Falconetti motto” was heard the audience knew instantly that terrible malevolence would occur.

This is a classic usage of the PRESENT tense in underscoring. But what about using information from the PAST to inform the PRESENT?

Quite often at the beginning of a film's exposition there will be a scene that suggests a moment from one's childhood or a seminal moment that will influence a character's point of view and initiate subsequent dramatic action. This PAST moment is a wonderful opportunity to use characterization scoring rather than action underscoring. Once a musical motto or sequence is established revealing an Achilles Heel or a dramatically dysfunctional point of view, it can later be brought back and used to address diverse actions or point of views.

Another application is the “Aspiration motto” using the PRESENT tense in underscoring to suggest FUTURE outcomes or inevitabilities.

Many films are about becoming someone new or achieving something unique. Both these processes are, again, inherent in the personality of the character aspiring to these goals. Rather than playing the struggle of the PRESENT action why not remind the viewer of the nobility, or intensity of the character's persona that compels him or her to persevere and succeed triumphantly in the end. This aspiration motto can also be employed to keep the viewer focused on the thematic goals of the plot no matter what temporary scenic detours might occur.

Because television writing leaves less time for the exploration and development of a protagonist's character, TV musical scoring has traditionally emphasized action underscoring. In contrast, feature film writing allows more time for getting to know the inner dynamics of a

character and, consequently, this higher form of underscoring can emphasize the personality forces that drive the dramatic moments quite effectively.

What I am suggesting to you here, whether you are scoring a TV show or a feature film, is that a salient bit of character underscore (leitmotif) can work consummately in either medium for quickly filling in the characterization's less developed information omitted from the script.

So, when debating whether to musically underscore the action, the scenery, the period, or other dramatic issues, remember Falconetti and remind the viewer that what we do, what we achieve, and, ultimately, what we become is most often influenced by who we are. Underscore the personality drives of a character and many other issues will fall neatly into place.

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