

For SCL's SCORE

"What is this Film About?"

By Michael Isaacson

The true kinship shared among SCL composers is found during that bottom-line moment of half panic and half soul searching after an initial viewing of a work print (hopefully without a temp track) when we all ask ourselves the same two questions of primal importance: "What is this film about?" and "What kind of music should I compose for it?".

I wouldn't presume to stylistically speak to the latter question as each musical creator finds an individual way of expressing the essential truth of a visual through his or her personal style. However, directionally these two questions can be addressed.

Good films are not about a lot of things. They may employ several sub-themes or textures in support of a central idea, but the best films are about one, and only one principal issue or emotion that demands to be attended to. Our art hinges on correctly identifying that focus and making sure that, through our musical illumination of it, the audience emotionally agrees.

Consider the following process of separating stylistic motifs, sub-themes, and ornamental gestures from structural ideas to arrive at the essence of a film's meaning.

Since a story is a narrative journey that takes us from one place, state of mind, attitude, belief, or reality to another ask yourself these three fundamental questions about the visual:

1. What has the protagonist lost or what is lacking at the beginning of the story?
2. What has the protagonist sought, found or acquired by the end of the story?
3. How is the protagonist different by virtue of this "lost and found" odyssey?

If you can confidently and satisfactorily answer these three questions then you'll know in what direction to take the music. For example:

If the character lacks or seeks courage and acquires it through a courageous act, heroic music fits the bill.

If the character lacks or seeks unrequited love and then finds or acquires a new love, romantic music works.

If the character is searching for an identity or meaning and finally realizes it, restless, searching music seeks resolution.

The best scores are not primarily about Who? What? Where? When? and How? as much as they are about Why?

Why was this journey undertaken?

Why is the protagonist taking this course of action?

Why is the journey's destination so compelling? ... and ultimately,

Why should we care about this story?

Employ this "Lost and Found" approach, and you will avoid falling into the trap of diffusing the film's meaning by mis-emphasis in your score and you will greatly succeed in enriching the emotional impact of the story by underscoring the essential, correct issue.

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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: Eggreamer@sbcglobal.net