

For SCL's SCORE

## ***Why is Happy Film Music Harder to Compose Than Sad Music?***

**By Michael Isaacson**

An interesting musical issue came up at one of my student's recent lesson that I think we might all do well to consider. This conservatory-trained composer was asked by a film's director to write "happy" music. Although this musician had no trouble composing Stockhausen-like rhythmic complexities and cutting edge post tonal harmonies, all the "happy" music he created sounded inane and "goofy". What was the solution? He asked me.

First, let's think about his and most of this generation's musical training. For many schooled musicians, complex music – the music that is taught and lauded at most music schools - sounds necessarily dark, brooding, and either mad or sad but certainly not glad. Consequently, younger writers are more at home expressing rage, depression, and angst than lighter emotions. It is also the prevailing mood of a contemporary generation that is experiencing war, AIDS, epidemics and all kinds of other tragic events in their lifetime. These are hardly happy occurrences.

There is also the unspoken anxiety in most young writers that complex music will represent them better as sophisticated creators than more simple constructions. This is also known as the school of more notes, more orchestration, and more density, per square inch.

In other words happy music equates to simpler music; and we certainly know that it is the hardest thing to write simply yet expressively and dramatically.

So, what is the answer to writing simple, happy music for a scene that requires it?

The answer is that sad or mad music is music in turmoil and, in its unresolved character, can be accepted in more general terms. Happy feelings, however, are more precise than general feelings of malaise. If you'll dolly in on the reason for the dramatic happiness you'll be able to score it more aptly.

Treat "happy" as the text and it's hyphenated identity as the sub-text and then score the subtext. For example: Happy/purposeful, Happy/in love, Happy/hopeful, Happy/energetic, Happy/innocent, or yes, even Happy/goofy.

You might, then, care to meditate on all the joy that co-exists with the tragic in our lives. Remember "these are the best of times and the worst of times". Every film composer should know how to write mad, sad, and ...glad.

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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@sbcglobal.net](mailto:Eggcreamer@sbcglobal.net)*