

SCORING MUSIC TO FILM: A PERSONAL PROCESS

(BLACK NAMETAG)

by

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(BLACK NAMETAG)

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ABSTRACT

This paper tracks the process I took for scoring the student-made film Black Nametag. While it is personal, this paper attempts to connect my process to the larger world of film, establishing the importance of music underscoring. By providing a timeline of events, I articulate my thought process and the development of ideas that occurred as I scored the film.

I begin with the initial assignment of the project, providing background on the student organization and the film itself. Then, I discuss specific milestones for the music's development. The trailer and sample clips largely influenced the music that ultimately made it to the film. I touch on my first experience with syncing music to some of the sample clips of the film and conclude with the final product. The final step utilizes all of the resources I gained from earlier steps in the process and combines them to create the final score.

The compositional process described in this paper illustrates the thought and intent that go into composing a score. The understanding of this process can lead to a greater appreciation for the role of music in filmmaking.

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INTRODUCTION

Music is the life of a film. Without musical underscoring, movies would be only halfway complete. The music in a film tells the audience what to think, how to feel, and ultimately enhances the plot of the film, taking it to a level that feels larger or more grand than real life. As a society, we are able recall many movies when we hear music from the score or soundtrack; the film's visuals and music are forever married together in our memory. The music of a film enables sensible connections between scenes or cuts that would otherwise appear very confusing or disjoint.

In this paper I will delve into the process required to compose music for a film. More specifically, I will discuss the process I devised to write original music for a student film at TCU. Every composer has his or her own process, so in no way is this paper seeking to propose the "correct" way to score a film. This paper will simply walk through the personal approach I took scoring a film for the very first time, in order to demonstrate the details and intention behind the music that ultimately makes it in to the final product.

BEGINNING OF THE PROJECT

This project began in during the Fall 2013. I joined TCU's Student Filmmaker Association, SFA, at the beginning of the semester. Each semester SFA votes on three scripts submitted by members to shoot and bring to fruition as films. Including myself, there are three music composition majors in the organization, so we were each assigned to one of the films. I was assigned a film named *Black Nametag*, directed by Steven Veteto. Initially, all I received was the name of the film, the basic premise, and a rough copy of the script.

The plot follows a young Mormon man on the last day of his mission. Men of the Mormon faith are required to spend two years as young adults living with a fellow Mormon in order to focus on their faith and to share it with as many people as possible. The main character is named Ben Turner and his companion is Matt White. The plot of the film follows Ben as he struggles with the fact that he has not successfully converted anyone. Nevertheless, he learns a great deal about self-acceptance from a non-religious man who runs a soup kitchen where he and Matt volunteer. The title of the film comes from the fact that Mormons wear black nametags when they go on their mission. The scenes for this film were shot toward the end of the fall semester, so final production of the film did not begin until the beginning of Spring 2014. My work could not begin until then.

The Script

I got a finalized script in January of 2014 and proceeded to read through it marking spots where I thought music might go. With the script finalized I had a better idea of what the film would look like as a whole. I visualized the images and scenes

described in the script to determine if music would fit. After that read through, I analyzed the film as a whole to determine its prominent themes. I first observed a dichotomy between spirituality and reality and the idea of faith versus the lack of it. These themes are represented in the characters. The main character Ben is very focused upon his faith, whereas Josh, the owner of the soup kitchen, is nonreligious and much more centered in the real world. Another important theme in the film is self-doubt. Ben begins to doubt not only his faith but also his own intentions. This theme is juxtaposed with self-acceptance exhibited by Matt and Josh.

After this, I read through the script a second time making note of these themes. I developed a better understanding of the film's progression and also of where musical cues could reinforce these thematic ideas. The themes influenced the sounds and the music I chose to use.

Problems and Concerns

At this point in the process, I had written no music, nor seen a single second of footage. This made me very anxious, as this was my first film. I used this time to become immersed in the film and better understand its thematic content. I took a proactive approach and utilized the material I did have, the script. I knew that getting familiar with the film's script and themes would lead to musical themes and ideas. In an effective film score the music should ultimately reinforce the ideas the film's constructs.

THE TRAILER

Shortly after receiving a finalized script, I received the film's trailer. The editor, Hunter Jackson, put together a few scenes the crew shot in order to promote the film at SFA's January showcase. The trailer became a significant part of the process. I now had

actual footage to solidify mental images, and I was now able to see how the characters and themes were represented visually. This gave me an idea of the overall mood and tone of the film. The trailer did not provide me with scenes in any particular order. There were just random scenes from various parts of the film. I still had no idea of the sequential progression of the scenes and had no sense of how the film was framed beginning to end.

Sounds

After reviewing the trailer, I contacted the director to get his input concerning the film's music. He responded by email:

I just want the music to have a simple, clean sound without being too slow and dark, but not quite light and happy. I was thinking probably just a piano or acoustic guitar, but like I said, always follow your gut, it's more important to me that the music gives the right feeling, and I'm sure you know much more about that than I do.

This quote was not very specific, but it suggested three things. First, the desire for specific instrumentation, second that the music was ultimately being left to my own discretion, and third, that the music should capture the mood suggested by the film.

While keeping these things in mind, I thought of two soundtracks that had the kind of sound I thought might be appropriate for Black Nametag. The first was the score from *The Social Network* composed by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross. The main theme of the score features a synthesizer pad (an electronic instrument) creating a harsh, atmospheric background for a soft piano melody in the foreground. This theme had the kind of subtle piano sound I wanted, and gave me the idea to use synthesizers to create

background sounds. I would take this sound idea and use it to represent spirituality. The piano and synthesizer pad combination has a majestic or divine quality. The second soundtrack is from the video game *The Last of Us* composed by Gustavo Santaolalla. The main theme used on this soundtrack featured acoustic guitar. The guitar part and background noises create a gritty sound. For me this sound seemed appropriate as the “realistic theme.” The guitar theme would oppose the piano theme; the former representing reality while the latter would be used to evoke spirituality.

Melodic Content

I now had the timbral palette, but I needed actual melodic content. I needed a tune to use to start working with these instruments, especially one that would serve as the main theme. Since the film was about a Mormon missionary, I began to research hymns from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I chose the hymn “Follow The Prophet,” as it is fairly well known and relates to the main character’s problem of trying to follow his faith even though he is having doubts. The tune of the hymn is fairly simple and repetitive, so I decided to take the main tune from the refrain and sequence it using my own harmonies. This led to a four-chord progression and motive that would serve as “Black Name Tag Theme.”

Problems/Concerns

Thus far, I had no footage with which to work, and I had only a general idea of how the film might look because of the scenes in the trailer. Concerned with the timing, I grew anxious. Scoring a film is a lengthy process, and I wanted to be working with images as soon as possible. However, I now had thematic, melodic and timbral ideas at my disposal for when I received useable footage.

SAMPLE CLIPS

In February the editor sent me a compilation of edited scenes from various parts of the film in chronological order. The sample clips contained the beginning scene and the ending scene with two scenes from the middle. This allowed me to see how the film was framed. It also provided a better sense of the tone of the film. After receiving these clips I had my first chance to use Logic Pro, the Digital Audio Workstation software to sync the music my music to the film. The program allowed me to upload the scenes and write music into the software instruments to be performed as the clips played. These sample clips provided the first opportunity to score some actual footage from the film.

The first scene I scored was the second scene, which follows Matt and Ben as they walk to the soup kitchen. This is where the majority of the film is set. For this scene, I decided to write a new theme that represented “reality,” rather than use the “Black Nametag Theme,” which I wanted to reserve to represent “spirituality.” The soup kitchen music would be dominated by acoustic guitar in timbre, leaving the piano to be the more divine timbre. The outcome was an active guitar motive that featured steady eighth notes with a descending bass line going from E3 to D3 to C3, alternating with a pedal tone above it on B3. This motive contrasted with the “Black Nametag Theme” well, as it was more active and had a gritty, rugged quality to it. After writing this cue, I proceeded to sync it to the scene.

The opening scene is a slow zoom-in on Ben’s back as he is reading, hunched over his bible and praying at his desk. In order to emphasize the spiritual nature of this scene I utilized the piano material I had already written, but it was not enough. To get more musical material to work with, I composed a basic four-part chorale harmonization

of the “Follow the Prophet” hymn tune. I put the tune in the upper voice and wrote three separate parts beneath it, using newly composed harmonies and counterpoint, different from the original hymn. After doing this, I had a basic harmonization of the tune, providing new piano material in addition to the “Black Nametag Theme.” I took this chorale and augmented (doubled in value) the rhythm and slowed down the tempo, giving it a darker, lament-like quality. I took this new creation and synced it with the opening scene. This new composition provided the mood I desired and fit the scene well. In addition to providing the music for this scene, the chorale I composed had the added benefit of providing a resource from which to derive more motives and cues. When looking to compose music for later scenes, I could go to the chorale and take a melodic line or harmonic progression from it to use as a starting point.

Problems and Concerns

At this point in the process, I finally had some scenes at my disposal. I was still in need of a rough cut of the film from beginning to end at the. I was concerned with how slowly the process was moving, as I was eager to continue to write more music.

WRITING MORE CUES

While I was able to sit down with the director and editor and watch all of the unedited footage for the film, I still lacked a full cut to work with. I wanted more music at my disposal, so I spent much of my time in March creating new musical cues. I created a variety of them in order to capture different themes or moods that might prove useful in various parts of the film. Without having the exact scenes and cuts at hand, there was no way of knowing what cues would work, but I wanted to have more than

enough music prepared. While I would not be able to immediately pair these cues with scenes, they would give me a basis from which to create the music for new scenes.

Variations on the Chorale

The first new cues I wrote were variations of the hymn chorale. I placed the parts in a choir sound in Logic Pro and then reworked some of the lines and harmonies. I did this to evoke a sacred sound from the chorale. Since the chorale is derived from a hymn, it seemed fitting to create a choral cue from it. I then took this variation and put it in a brass ensemble sound. Much like the choir sound, this new timbre gave the chorale a more holy quality to it in addition to making it more triumphant in nature. The last variation I did on the chorale was to orchestrate it for string quartet, as I intended to use this timbre to create a “finale” cue. The strings provided a sweeping, lush quality, so I reworked the chorale’s refrain to produce an emphatic ending on a large spread C major chord, in contrast to the original C minor.

By simply revamping the chorale and placing it in new instruments, I was able to create three new musical cues that could be used in different places as well as to characterize different moods evoked throughout the film.

Tension/ Somber Cue

The next cue grew out of the desire for music that painted a more tense or stressful atmosphere. I wanted a dark, foreboding color that went past the grittiness of the guitar cue, so I took the main tune from the guitar and put it in a studio bass sound. I added dissonant cluster chords to a synthesizer pad for atmosphere and lastly added timpani for rhythmic punctuation. The end result is a musical cue that begins very darkly and slowly and then grows in stress and intensity.

Pastoral/ Light Cue

To contrast the tension cue, I went to the other extreme and composed a lighter, happier cue. In order to achieve this sound, I took the tenor part from the hymn chorale and forced it into a compound meter. After tweaking this melody to sound more interesting, I added a simple harmonization. I then gave the tune to an oboe sound in Logic Pro and gave a simple accompaniment to the piano. The combination of the meter, timbre, and melody yielded a light, bouncy tune, pastoral in nature. This cue would be useful to lighten the mood in a portion of the film, perhaps directly contrasting where the tension cue might be placed. I also thought that allowing these two very different cues to intermingle with one another might make for interesting musical development as well as enhance the dramatic flow of the film.

Doubt and Acceptance Cues

The pastoral cue was the last piece of new music I wrote during this part in the process, but while I composed these new cues and timbres, I decided that I wanted specific cues to represent the thematic idea of doubt versus acceptance. As in the film Ben's doubt in the beginning morphs into acceptance by the end, I wanted a musical representation of this to occur in the film. I did not want to write a specific melody or instrument to represent doubt and another to represent acceptance. This idea needed to grow more organically. I decided that this musical cue would be derived from the synthesizing of various motives, melodies, and timbres from all of the other cues. I knew that I wanted all of my musical cues to mesh together as the film progressed.

Problems and Concerns

My problem in March remained the same as the month before. My anxiety increased as the month wore on with no new scenes since February. While I still did not have access to the full film, the process was not halted. I had numerous themes, variations, and new timbres at my disposal. Without seeing much of the film, I completed a lot of the front work of scoring a film. Now that I had something tangible to work with, it would be simply a matter of taking these pieces and molding them into a full, contiguous score that not only synchronized with but enhanced the entire film.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

I received a rough copy of the entire film at the beginning of April. Three months after starting the process, I was finally able to work with the entire film. I came to the realization though that the scoring process is a collaborative one. While I was composing most of the music for the film without the scenes, the editor was working alongside the director in order to get the scenes edited together in a smooth, cohesive manner. Even if not directly, the editor and I had been working synchronously at our respective tasks. With the film in front of me, I now began the final step in my process.

I went back to my script and found all of the spots where I had indicated the music should start and stop. As I watched the film, I wrote down the timestamp for each of these cues. I made a running script in this way, charting out where music began and ended and which cues or sounds I wanted in each spot. This provided a roadmap for the entire eighteen-minute film. After this, I began to underscore the scenes using the musical cues I prepared. The opening scene featured the piano chorale I had used in the sample clip, but I reworked the music to better fit the dialogue in the scene and expanded

it so that it lasted throughout. I continued in this fashion, following the roadmap I had constructed as I progressed through the movie chronologically. I found it most efficient to score each scene in order rather than skip around the film. This allowed for the addition of organic transitions or fade-ins that were in time with my musical cues. This also facilitated the coordination of tempo and time signature changes.

I determined which musical cues worked and which ones had no place in the film. I began to narrow the scope of the timbres I used as I progressed. I found that the many different timbres I had created previously in the process took away from the cohesiveness of the score as a whole. By the end, the instruments featured in the score consisted of only piano, guitar, cello, and two synthesizer pads. I did, however, take fragments from these extraneous musical cues in order to synthesize ideas and craft the final musical material for the score.

Performance

My last step was finalizing the music before handing it over to the film editor. During the presentation of my project, a professor pointed out that by composing this score electronically through digital audio software, I not only composed the music but performed it as well. I adjusted the attack of each note, controlled the dynamics of phrases by each instrument, and balanced the combined sounds when instruments placed together. While I did not physically play and record all of the music I composed, I had to refine it in such a way that it sounded as close to real instruments as possible. This part of my process differs from that used in many film scores. The final step in most professional movies is to get musicians together to perform and record the music to the film. As I did not have access to professional musicians nor the time to find colleagues to

record this music for me, I took on the role of the performer myself within the electronic instrument realizations of my music.

CONCLUSION

Adding the musical score is one of the final steps in the production phase of a film. The timing of the film must be finalized before the music can organically fit. Typically a composer will conduct their score while watching a rough cut of the film. In this case such an approach was not feasible. While the scoring process is still very much a collaborative one between the composer and director, professional film composers must do much of their composing long before they see any scenes. My project has been on a smaller, more accelerated scale, but it has provided a brief glimpse into the process of how a film is produced and how composing a film's score works within that process.

My personal approach in creating the music for Black Nametag is in no way suggested to be the only, or most effective, method for scoring a film, but the process is crucial in understanding the final product. As my process has demonstrated, composing a film's score requires much more time and effort than might be expended in simply writing music while watching the film. In order for the music to enhance the film, the composer must be completely immersed in the script while creating, organizing, and applying their materials. With the process in mind, a better appreciation is gained for that moment when the images and the music finally come together.