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Scoring an Abstract Contemporary Silent Film

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
Los Angeles

Scoring an Abstract Contemporary Silent Film

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Music

by
Crystal Frost

2014

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Scoring an Abstract Contemporary Silent Film

by
Crystal Frost

Master of Arts in Music
University of California, Los Angeles, 2014
Professor Ian Krouse, Co-Chair
Professor Peter Richard Golub, Co-chair

I composed an original digital audio film score with full sound design for a contemporary silent film called *Apple Tree*. The film is highly conceptual and interpretive and required a very involved, intricate score to successfully tell the story. In the process of scoring this film, I learned new ways to convey an array of contrasting emotions through music and sound. After analyzing the film's emotional journey, I determined that six defining emotions were the foundation on which to build an effective musical narrative. These six moods required clearly differentiated underscore and sound design, just similar enough for the film to maintain overall cohesion. Contrary to general assumption, I learned that even story-telling scores such as this must first reflect a movie's shifting moods before reflecting the action. This ensures that the score won't disrupt the natural unraveling of events - an especially important principle in silent films where music is always at the forefront.

The thesis of Crystal Frost is approved.

Michael E. Dean

David S. Lefkowitz

Peter Richard Golub, Committee Co-chair

Ian Krouse, Committee Co-chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

1. MOV File

Apple Tree Final 6-02-14.mov

7:42

Short film by Merlin Camozzi and Jesse Russell

Original Score by Crystal Frost

The primary component of my thesis was composing the score and designing the sound for an independent film. This movie file contains the official thesis project. All audio and sound you hear, apart from the four 1-second sounds retained from the original footage, is my creation. This includes the ambience, the sound effects, the mix, and all music. The proceeding pages report on the thesis project itself, detailing the challenge, the process, and the results.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to acknowledge Merlin Camozzi and Jesse Russell who are responsible for the production aspects of *Apple Tree*, the short film that makes up my thesis project. Creating and finalizing *Apple Tree* was a collaborative filmmaking project between myself and these two incredible filmmakers.

Apple Tree

Cue for Orchestra

Crystal A. Frost

Sneaky and Deliberate (♩ = 112 - 120)

Piccolo

2 Flutes

2 Oboes

English Horn

4 B♭ Clarinets

4 Bassoons

3 F# Horns

Trumpet in B♭

2 Trombones

Tuba

Claves

Temple Blocks

Glockenspiel

Sneaky and Deliberate (♩ = 112 - 120)

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

Contrabass

p

mp

p

v

Divisi

9

2

Apple Tree

11

Picc. Fl. Ob. E. Hn. B♭ Cl. Bsn. Hn. B♭ Tpt. Tbn. Tuba Clv. T Bl. Glk. Vln. I Vln. II Vla. Vc. Cb.

11

11

11

11

Apple Tree

16 17

Picc. *mf*

Fl. *mf*

Ob. *f*

E. Hn. *f*

B♭ Cl. *mf*

Bsn. *mf*

Hn. *mf*

B♭ Tpt. *mf*

Tbn. *mf*

Tuba *mf*

Clv. *mf*

T Bl *mf*

Glk. *mf*

16 17

Vln. I *arco* *mf*

Vln. II *mf*

Vla. *mf*

Vc. *mf*

Cb. *mf*

Apple Tree

20

Picc.

Fl.

Ob.

E. Hn.

B♭ Cl.

Bsn.

Hn.

B♭ Tpt.

Tbn.

Tuba

Clv.

20

T Bl

20

Glk.

20

Divisi

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

Apple Tree

25

Picc. *f*
 Fl. *f*
 Ob. *f*
 E. Hn. *f*
 B♭ Cl. *f*
 Bsn. *f*
 Hn. *f*
 B♭ Tpt. *f*
 Tbn. *f*
 Tuba *f*
 Clv. *f*
 T Bl. *f*
 Glk. *f*
 Vln. I *f*
 Vln. II *f*
 Vla. *f*
 Vc. *f*
 Cb. *f*

The musical score for 'Apple Tree' spans measures 25 to 28. The instrumentation includes Piccolo, Flute, Oboe, English Horn, B♭ Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn, B♭ Trumpet, Trombone, Tuba, Cymbal, Tom Tom, Glockenspiel, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The score is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first system (measures 25-28) features a Piccolo melody starting on G4, with Flute and Oboe playing a similar melody. The English Horn and B♭ Clarinet play a sustained chord. The Bassoon and Horn play a melody starting on G3. The B♭ Trumpet and Trombone play a sustained chord. The Tuba plays a sustained chord. The Cymbal and Tom Tom play a rhythmic pattern. The Glockenspiel plays a melody starting on G4. The Violin I and Violin II play a melody starting on G4. The Viola plays a sustained chord. The Violoncello and Contrabass play a melody starting on G3.

Apple Tree

29

Picc. *ff* *fp*

Fl. *ff* *fp*

Ob. *ff* *f* *fp*

E. Hn. *ff* *fp*

B♭ Cl. *ff* *fp*

Bsn. *ff* *fp*

Hn. *f* *fp*

B♭ Tpt. *ff* *fp*

Tbn. *ff* *p* *fp*

Tuba *ff* *fp*

Clv. 29 *ff* *fp*

T Bl 29 *ff* *fp*

Glk. 29 *ff* *fp*

Vln. I 29 *ff* *fp*

Vln. II *ff* *fp*

Vla. *ff* *fp*

Vc. *ff* *fp*

Cb. *ff* *fp*

THESIS PROJECT REPORT

My thesis project was to compose the musical score for a short film entitled *Apple Tree*. The film has no dialogue and therefore required underscore for the entire duration of the movie. This is not common practice for film composers as they are used to supporting the story through music rather than telling it. However, *Apple Tree*'s biggest flaw was in the incomprehensible story with an anticlimactic ending. The filmmakers asked me to interpret the film's meaning on my own and compose the music accordingly. Their only definitive requirements were that a.) the music suggest a fairy tale story, b.) the music be through composed, and c.) the music help define the environment and thus, the story as well. I took this as a challenge to strengthen my ability to score music that takes the lead, but does not detract from the motion picture itself.

The audio in *Apple Tree* is extremely minimal — so minimal that it is labeled a silent film. (By audio I am referring to sounds retained from the footage itself.) When filmmakers make decisions like this, they are putting even more responsibility composer's hands. How? Life is full of noise — wind, birds, trains and cars, voices, etc. — that, in movies, bring viewers into that world before any other audio or music could. These sounds, though taken for granted, are naturally engrossing and must therefore be mimicked by the composer or sound designer when removed, adding yet another task to the composer's to-do list. These types of sound effects are known as foley, added during post-production stages. Other kinds

of post-production audio that I'll mention from time to time are sound design, ambience, sound effects, source music, and underscore.

The through-composed style of film score is reminiscent of the traditional silent films from the 1910s and 1920s in that music . Composing in this style was a rewarding process from an academic and experiential standpoint. I learned how to compose a very diverse combination of emotions while simultaneously building up an atmosphere through highly customized sound design. In so doing this, I wanted to make a soundtrack that was representative a variety of compositional strengths and me to explore different facets of digital audio creation. This pushed me and forced me to exercise all the skills I've developed during my master's program, and educate myself in the ways of virtual instruments, mixing, and synthestrataing. Catering to such a complex web of thoughts and emotions was the biggest challenge of this project. Presently, I will provide a more detailed account of my approach.

After thoroughly analyzing the film's strengths and weaknesses, I determined that the best way to approach the score is through the emotional intention as opposed to the action or actual plot intention. Since the plot could be interpreted in many ways, I didn't want to the score to center around the actions of the characters. In focusing on the emotions and general mood of the various scenes, I knew I would be able to create a cohesive, through-composed piece of music that drew viewers in. With the emotional context given to them through the music, viewers unconsciously

realize how they're supposed to feel. From that point, the story can essentially tell itself.

I watched the film over and over before writing any music. I wrote a paragraph telling my interpretation of the story, and I wrote down a list of all the different emotions and moods that the film intended to convey but was unsuccessful. Finally, I determined that the following six different emotional tones were absolutely pertinent for relating to the story: love, horror, emptiness, anxiety, nostalgia, and determination. In inspiring these emotions in viewers during their corresponding scenes, they will be able to relate to the film and automatically analyze its meaning as well. This became the central concept of my thesis project.

Music for Love was required at the very beginning and very end of the film. It was the most important in providing a sense of cohesiveness because it rounded out the film. The type of love music needed for this film was something sweet, fairly simple, and melancholy in order to foreshadow the female character's disappearance. As the director wanted, I also composed the music with a fairy tale story in mind. I ended up with a Celtic sounding love theme of sorts in Dorian mode. The theme is for piano and cellos, with the lute as an accent to enhance the music's modal, medieval quality. Figure 1.1 shows the theme's basic melodic phrase.

Figure 1.1



The final product was an intense, strong score that demonstrates several different aspects of my style and ability to compose music to picture. I learned that musical connectivity with the film's emotional journey is one of the most important aspects of post-production. Experimenting with sounds lead to new sonic discoveries that will continue to inspire new ideas moving forward.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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