

Christopher Reynolds and Mark Brill

ON THE ART AND CRAFT OF FILM MUSIC: A CONVERSATION WITH JAMES NEWTON HOWARD

James Newton Howard has for the past twenty years demonstrated a versatility rare among film and television composers. From early film scores such as *Pretty Woman* (1990) and *The Fugitive* (1993) to his recent work in M. Night Shyamalan's films, Howard has earned his reputation as one of the top film composers of his generation. There are various ways one can measure his success: in awards and award nominations (there are many of both), in the critical acclaim of films he has done, or in the number of websites and YouTube postings devoted to his work. Ultimately the most significant indication of his standing is simply this: only a handful of film composers active today will attract musically aware viewers to a film, and Howard is one of them.

Howard's film career shows a trajectory from keyboard to symphony, exhibiting in his early years the influences of the pop and rock styles of his friend and employer Elton John to more recent scores that have been influenced by composers such as Stravinsky. The chance to work with orchestra and choir in *Flatliners* (1990) opened new possibilities for Howard, but the pop background still shows in the electronic percussion sounds of his first action movie, *The Fugitive* (1993). By *Wyatt Earp* (1994), after a decade of writing for film, Howard had begun to think orchestrally. Howard's music can rival the aggressive rhythms of Stravinsky or the airy melodies of Copland when the dramatic moment calls for action or heroism. His penchant for driving rhythms has led him to use meters that have five or seven beats to a bar in several films (*Waterworld* from 1995 and *King Kong* from 2005,

for example), and in *Wyatt Earp*, one of his best scores (whatever one thinks of the film), he even managed to pull off the sauntering walk to the OK corral in 5/8 time, a feat worthy of Bartók.

The best of the symphonic film composers have closely studied the scores of great classical composers such as Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky. They may have gleaned even more from the ranks of the near great such as Anton Bruckner, Aaron Copland, and Gustav Holst. One difference between James Newton Howard and some of his contemporaries is that his debts to these composers rarely call attention to themselves. There is little in his work that compares to the overt debt that James Horner owes Aaron Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* in *Apollo 13*, or that John Williams has to Holst, Bruckner, and several others in *Star Wars* or to Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* in his brilliant score for *Home Alone*.

Successful film composers often find themselves collaborating repeatedly with a particular film director, notably as in the partnerships of John Williams and Steven Spielberg or that of Nino Rota and Fellini, both of which spanned decades. In these two cases, as in that of Bernard Herrmann and Hitchcock, it is frequently difficult to separate images from sounds, so thoroughly do they contribute to each other. Among many recent pairings, Hans Zimmer has scored half a dozen films for Ridley Scott, James Horner has partnered often with Ron Howard, and Danny Elfman with Tim Burton. Howard has worked extensively both with Lawrence Kasdan and M. Night Shyamalan, composing all of Kasdan's films since 1991 (including *Grand Canyon*, *Wyatt Earp*, *Mumford*, and *Dreamcatcher*) and all of Shyamalan's since 1999 (*The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable*, *Signs*, *The Village*, *Lady in the Water*, and *The Happening*). The next installment of this latter collaboration will be *The Last Airbender*, scheduled for release in 2010.

Howard's versatility is evident in his willingness to accept markedly different projects at the same time. In the eighteen months during 1999–2000 that he worked on *Dinosaur*, for instance, he also composed

The Sixth Sense, *Runaway Bride*, *Stir of Echoes*, and part of *Snow Falling on Cedars*—a remarkable variety (not to mention productivity), and testimony that one Howard film does not necessarily sound like another. He is, as he describes himself, a chameleon. The epic sound of one of his Disney scores, with lots of brass and wordless choirs, cannot be confused with one of his efforts for Shyamalan, which approach chamber music in texture. If Howard is closer in style to Jerry Goldsmith or Elmer Bernstein than to John Williams, it may be because short motives are often more important than fully developed themes. Repetitive clusters of two, three, or four notes occasionally compete with each other, oscillating and full of menace as in *A Perfect Murder* (1998) or layered dissonantly on top of each other as in *The Happening* (2008).

Like Goldsmith, Howard appreciates the contribution of understatement and restraint, conveying the impression that he thinks music can actually get in the way of the movie, that a musically heavy hand detracts from drama rather than supports it. In comparison to many of his contemporaries', his scores are often distinguished by a simple gesture that is unexpected, or even by complete musical silence. Howard's restraint also shapes the overall pacing of music within a film. Particularly in his suspense films, he typically builds anxiety with low rumbly pedal tones that enter unobtrusively and ostinatos that, without resorting to melodrama, convey the sense that all is *not* right in the world. In *Just Cause* (1995) the first loud sustained orchestral writing only arrives after an hour of slowly escalating anxiety. Tension in a thriller scored by Howard builds incrementally to a scene likely to be scored with high violin tone clusters, swooping brass, and hard-driving percussion.

The conversation that follows took place on September 19, 2009, in Howard's studio in Santa Monica. He sat behind his desk, an electronic keyboard at hand, sheets of manuscript scores filling the desk drawers, and a bust of Beethoven observing the scene. The interview

has been edited to eliminate fragmentary utterances and instances of repetitious colloquial vocabulary. But it unfolds in exactly the sequence of questions (or comments) and answers in which the conversation occurred. For many of the films named in the conversation, including thirty-four by James Newton Howard, we have inserted the year they were released in order to give a sense of where they stand in Howard's career. (The questions or comments from either of the interviewers begin with the letter "Q".)

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Q: A discussion of a James Newton Howard "sound" or style would have to include musical devices such as loud rhythmic thuds, ostinatos, high drones, low drones, dissonant clusters, microtonal slides, and so on. But all of these are devices that other film composers use, too. Do you have a sense of what it is you do that makes them sound different in your hands?

JNH: That's always a tough question. I think I've both benefited and suffered from my sense that I am very much a chameleon. People tell me that I have influenced certain styles of film composing, specifically a lot of electronics melded with orchestral elements, but hopefully in a somewhat seamless fashion so that it didn't feel like the two were opposites, that they are all felt "of a piece," that the electronics really felt part of the orchestra, or the orchestra felt part of the electronics. It just had a natural quality to it.

I think a strong rhythmic element is something that I've always been [interested in]. When I say rhythmic element, I mean electronically generated or acoustically generated percussion, although that has been something that I have consciously been trying to move away from for a number of years now, because I felt that I had done it, and then done it, and then done it again, and I was really getting tired of doing it; within my career, probably most memorably in movies like *The Fugitive*, or even most recently with *Dark Knight* (2008)

and *Collateral* (2004). The Holy Grail, of course, is to create that kind of excitement and that kind of momentum and that kind of energy within the orchestra itself without having to rely on a drum track. Even though I'm in the middle of doing a big score now for Phillip Noyce [*Salt* (2010)], which is going to involve a lot of drums and percussion and a lot of orchestra on top of it, I'm much more aware and much more interested now in trying to do it without the drums and the percussion when possible. But—getting back to your question—for me, I think the hallmark of what I do, and I can't avoid it even if I want to, is a very melodic kind of take on a piece, even in tiny little bits and pieces, little motifs, “motifinal” bits, little snippets. I try to be more gestural and less “notey,” but it turns out that it's really hard for me to do that. I've gotten better. But I see that as a weakness, not a strength.

Q: Two of the things we would have put right at the top of the list you haven't mentioned: an ability to be silent and an amazing restraint, a calculated restraint, which of course ultimately leads towards a big punch that everybody knows is coming, at some point or other.

JNH: I'm flattered that you feel that way. The restraint issue is very important to me, but it's one that I think all composers with a certain amount of facility, and a certain amount of technique, have to labor mightily to achieve. Because the first thing I always do is write too much. Every time. No matter what, I write too much and I have to go back and start culling it out. But I'm glad it ends up sounding like restraint. [*Laughing*] Calculated, indeed.

Q: Is there a point in your career at which you felt: “I've got a sound. This sounds like me”? Or is the notion of a James Newton Howard sound a construct that other people place on you?

JNH: Well sure. I think they do expect it. I hear myself in other peoples' music. I hear them replicating, imitating, which I'm always flattered about. I think I try to avoid sounding like James Newton Howard, if at all possible, at this point. I just did this little movie, *Duplicity* (2009),

which is a small ensemble score, but I worked so hard on it, very closely with Tony Gilroy, and in the end, we got an interesting score, and almost the universal comment from people was: “Doesn’t sound like you.” And that’s the best thing somebody can say. And they don’t mean it as an insult. They just mean . . .

Q: . . . that you surprised them.

JNH: Yeah! It was a surprise.

Q: I had the same reaction to *Duplicity*. But also, once again, lots of percussion.

JNH: Lots of percussion. Yeah. There was no getting around that. That was sort of an order from on high. I thought we found a tone for the movie that worked, that was distinctive, and that’s always the challenge.

Q: While we’re talking about silence: when do you decide that no music is better? We saw that little promotional clip that you did on the bonus features for *The Sixth Sense* (1999), where you and M. Night Shyamalan indicate that Shyamalan initially didn’t want any music at all.

JNH: He never wants music.

Q: So in that case, you prevailed. But how does the interaction between you and Shyamalan, or any director for that matter, allow you both to decide when music is appropriate?

JNH: That’s forever changing, depending of course on a number of issues. One of them is the degree to which the filmmaker has confidence in his or her material. Some filmmakers are very sure about their material, and they just [say], “I don’t need music here. I don’t need any help here.” Or: “I feel that we really need bla-bla-bla.” Number two, I feel that film scores are terribly overspotted. There’s too much music in most movies. There’s just too much music. And most of it is terrible, most of it is not saying anything. It’s just there. And that’s really a security blanket. It’s a hallmark of a—sorry—a bad director, really, in collaboration with a mediocre composer, dare I say

it. But they just come up with crummy movies with just kind of a wall-papery score. I'm not saying all. I'd say there's a lot of it there.

I have tried to start off from the following: only put the least music in the movie that is possible. And then always add more. Because that's always going to happen. So if one takes that attitude, and if the filmmaker, the director is willing to collaborate on that level, and really trust the collaborative process, then between the two of us things are revealed about the film that nobody knew. That's the best part, to say: "I know you didn't want any music here, but look what happened when I put it in here." And I put it in here and the scene is transformed, and the director goes: "I didn't know I was that brilliant!" And it's true. And there are things like that that do occur all the time. In the case of *Night* [Shyamalan], *Signs* was the best example. Originally *Signs* was not going to have any music until the last ten minutes. And then we screened it. So let's just see if I can create—thinking about *The Birds* (1963)—a piece that would just be so bursting with tension that you didn't need anything. Of course then we screened it, and it was ZZZ [*snoring sounds*]. It obviously needed more music than that, so . . . I actually wrote the end first. I sent him—and this is the truth—forty-six different versions over a period of six months.

Q: Of the ending?

JNH: Of the ending. Not completely different, but changes within, so many versions, fully realized demos on CDs for him to hear. And we kind of worked backwards, worked our way up to the front of the movie. However, with one exception: the main title was written before we started shooting. So, spotting—where you decide the music's going to be, where it's not going to be—changes and is different in every case, for me. Some directors don't even want to spot. They just want you to start working, start making demos. They'll come over and listen to what you've done. And I think that's kind of an interesting idea, because it really is a virgin tableau for a composer at that point, with zero input from anybody. "Show me the picture, no temp score,

no input from you.” Inevitably then there’s a lot of backtracking, we go back and talk about what I missed, or what we should do.

Q: What you were just saying about *Signs* you could also say about *The Interpreter* (2005). There’s so little music in the first hour, it is as if you were using about thirty seconds of soft music as a kind of punctuation every few minutes for the first hour. When you have done something like that successfully, is it a template then for a project that comes later?

JNH: I know it would be very convenient and interesting to box it, in a way, and say, “Well, yeah, this is an approach that I take,” and try and do it on more than one film. But I feel that every film I do is the first of its kind that I’ve done. One could say I’ve done everything. I’ve done a million chase movies, I’ve done a million love stories, a million psychological thrillers, comedies, da-da-da-da-da. How many times can you . . . ? And yet, from a talented film director, the movie will have a tone that is unique to it. And that is the wonderful infinity that we’re dealing with here, as is obviously the case with the music that can accompany it. So there is no set way.

It’s funny you should mention *The Interpreter*. That was a tough time for me, because I had gotten divorced and—I won’t go into the details, but—I never have writer’s block. Ever. I mean, I’m famous for writing just massive amounts of music. And I never had it. Well, I had it. I had finished, I think, *The Village* (2004) and *Collateral*, and then had gone on tour with Elton John conducting his orchestra for ten concerts. I’d just separated, and I came home and I was just really tired, and I was so excited about working with Sydney Pollack. We started, we sat and spotted like mad, and I went to the studio and . . . nothing. And I mean . . . nothing. This went on for almost two months, and I had about three-and-a-half months to do it. I mean, I couldn’t put together four notes. It was the most terrifying thing I’ve ever been through. It was as though a construction worker’s brain had been put into my brain all of a sudden, which is fine but the construction worker didn’t know how to play the piano. I couldn’t put two notes together.

Q: The only place I would sense that is perhaps in the end credits.

JNH: That was a struggle. I don't mind talking about it. The way I got out of it, because I was really going down, I was ready to quit the movie, call Sydney, I was going to quit *Batman Begins* (2005), which was happening right after that. I was ready to say, "You know what, I just need to take a year off!" And then I thought: "Oh, wait a minute, why did Sydney . . . ? Sydney hired me because five months ago I wrote a piece and sent it to him and I thought it'd be good for *The Interpreter*." And I said: "What is that piece?" I put it up [on] the sequencer in the studio: "Oh, yeah! That's what I was thinking," and I dove in, and then I was, boom! It was all there. It was never *all* there. I got over it. But it was a struggle.

Q: The flow of time in a movie, the pacing, can vary widely, at times seeming to crawl by, while at other times seeming to race. Do you ever think that you want to help a slow section speed up or put the brakes on a section that strikes you as accelerating to a climax a little too quickly?

JNH: As a composer you don't want to feel that you have to save a scene. But oftentimes, we do. And oftentimes we take a scene that is okay, and make it much, much better. We can certainly take slow moving sequences, and because of the architecture—not because of the tempo, but because of the architecture, in terms of playing the moments, and where the timing is, where we shift to another idea or color within that scene—it can move much more quickly. A lot of people make the mistake of thinking: "Well, if you want to speed a scene up, you put fast music in it." And of course that could be completely out of sync with the rhythm of the movie, and make it seem twice as long. It's very rare that a movie is moving so fast that we have to try and slow it down. I can't think of . . . I think it's just about making the scene feel right. So much of this is unteachable and unquantifiable. I think if you're successful as a film composer, you just kind of sense and you feel what the right music is for the scene.

Q: Maybe by slowing a fast scene down, what I mean to say is that you could push a dramatic scene too hard or over the top.

JNH: Easy!

Q: One sees that in movies where, by the time you actually get to the dramatic moment, it's anticlimactic.

JNH: Right! So, yes, you're talking about really pacing yourself, and making sure that it doesn't reach some premature kind of climax.

Q: *Falling Down* (1993) is an example where the restraint that you put in from the beginning is crucial for the success of the movie. Or *Just Cause*, another movie that's very restrained at the beginning. Does this vary by genre? Is a Disney film or any film for kids different in terms of how you determine the right pace?

JNH: I think you just have to keep the audience engaged. I just did a sequence for Phillip Noyce on this movie called *Salt* that I'm doing with him. There was a scene, a flashback sequence, where Angelina Jolie meets her husband. And he's not your typical hunky guy. So people were feeling a little uncomfortable, they weren't really accepting the relationship as well as they were hoping. So I took it and I wrote a piece that sort of used its weaknesses as its strength. In other words, he's an odd guy, but I played it more as a fantasy, as a magical moment, because he had this wonderful quality, and all of a sudden people care about them now. They're interested in the scene, and they're paying attention to what he's saying. You can just feel it. So I think music has great power just to keep people's interest. That can also happen by getting out of the way, and not being there, as you have said.

Q: The question that we're getting at is the extent to which you are conscious of writing in different voices. To contrast Disney once again with a very different type of film, Shyamalan's movies, do you think: "Okay, this is appropriate for Disney, but not here," and vice-versa?

JNH: Very much so. When we [Shyamalan and I] did *The Sixth Sense*, which I thought was a pretty good score, we had a very short time.

I think I did it in six weeks. The movie came out and it got a few Academy Award nominations, but the score was not nominated. And he called me up and said: “See?” and I said: “See what?” He said: “The music wasn’t singular. The music did not have a singular quality. It was okay, it served the movie, but it doesn’t have a life of its own.” And he’s right, in a way. It served the movie incredibly well. But it’s not like you could hear one note of *The Sixth Sense*, and go: “That’s *The Sixth Sense!*” As opposed to *Signs*—you know that’s *Signs*. *The Village*—you know it’s *The Village*. And so with *Night*, it became about the most disciplined kind of composing that I’ve ever done: “Why are we putting music here?” and “What is the music we’re putting here?” and “Why are you putting *that* music here?” and “Where else does that music play?” and “Is that the orchestration?” There were very few woodwinds in a traditional kind of melodic role. There were woodwinds kind of in a percussive filigree role. Very little brass, other than soloistic, solo French horns, solo trumpet. Most of it: piano, harp, strings. The hard and fast rule: no electronics. *Night* doesn’t want electronics. I sneak them in there anyway, and he doesn’t know.

Q: He’ll know now!

JNH: He knows. But I put one in once in a while. And I understand his point. He doesn’t want to be looking at his film in twenty-five years and have it sound like . . . *Superfreak!* You know, some really cheesy, dated moment from . . . electronic music in the ’90s. He wants a very classic sound. And that’s what we’ve done. But that voice is unique to *Night*, although it’s essentially rooted in a minimalist approach, in many ways—at least my perception, my understanding of what minimalism is—as opposed to a Disney movie where the full power of the orchestra is available. It’s much more rooted in nineteenth-century Romantic orchestral writing, where you’re free to do that. I think that we’ve taken a lot of those tools out of my tool chest for *Night*. He’s saying: “These are the tools you can use.” It’s more like chamber music, and it’s just very little ornamentation. There’s a place for every note, and every note has a place.

Q: Does it matter to you how long the movie is? That is to say, in pacing, in your sense of the architecture of the whole, is a three-hour soundscape different than a ninety-minute one? Or do you work in chunks of five or ten minutes, regardless of the overall length?

JNH: I work in chunks. My process is so demo-dependent, which most people are now, too. And it's so that I can put all my demos in the movie, and watch the movie, and see where it's building up in a bad way, or [identify] overuse of thematic material, or underuse, or "we haven't got enough music in this area." It's very hard to get the big picture when you're working in two-minute, three-minute, six-minute segments, unless you try and step away from it, seeing this canvas, and look at it from a while back. So I would say, I'm not thinking about, "Oh, this is a three-hour movie. I either need more music, or I've got to be careful not to put too much in." Again, I approach it really the same way: I'm in the moment, with the picture—"What feels best for this?"—throwing out my first idea a lot of times, throwing out my second idea a lot of times, loving my third idea, the director hates the third idea, going back to the first. It's all of that stuff. But . . . again . . . it doesn't matter how long the movie is. I don't think that makes any difference.

Q: I want to touch back on an earlier comment of yours, when you said, "It serves the movie well" (talking about *The Sixth Sense*), and that it doesn't really "sound" like you specifically. It serves the movie. Isn't that really what you're here for? Aren't you here to serve Shyamalan's vision, rather than to write for an Academy Award? It's great if you could do both, but . . .

JNH: I think you can do both. That doesn't mean I didn't do the right score for *The Sixth Sense*. I think some opportunities are more workman-like, and I think [the music for] *The Sixth Sense* supported the movie. The movie wasn't scary without the music, I guarantee you. But he knows that, we all know that. It's why he values me as much as he does. Then there is *Signs*, for instance. I felt that *Signs* should

have been nominated, because that was an accomplished score, and I thought it really did a lot in the movie. But it was the kind of movie they didn't want to do. They finally gave me a nomination for *The Village*. But I think *The Village*, and *Signs*, and somewhat *Unbreakable* (2000)—those [scores] served the picture really well; but there is a thematic discipline, there's a central idea in each one of those movies that came later, that I think is more distinctive [than the score for *The Sixth Sense*] and yet serves the film brilliantly, or very well. So *The Sixth Sense*, if I had to do it over again, I'd probably do it differently. If I did it from who I am now as a composer, it would probably end up coming out differently, because maybe I would overthink it, now that I have these kind of hard-fast rules with Night.

I will say this: I think some of my best work has been with Night, or distinctive work. I'm very proud of our work together. I really liked my score to *Lady in the Water* (2006), even though I don't think it was a particularly great film. I've written the main title to all of Night's movies before he started shooting, to *Unbreakable*, *Signs*, *The Village*, *Lady in the Water* . . .

Q: Based on the script?

JNH: Yeah, based on the script and storyboarding. *Unbreakable* was the first one. And I sent a CD of four or five different ideas. My least favorite one, naturally, was the one that he really liked. That was that one that had this kind of slightly trip-hop drum thing that went with it. It ended up working well, and people seemed to really respond to it, so what do I know?

Q: We'd like to ask you about your influences. How important to you are the scores for movies from the 1940s, '50s, and '60s?

JNH: I think I am influenced by them, without question. I've never been a cinephile. As a kid, even, I was not a fanatical movie-watcher, one of these kids that just knows every movie and every score. I remember being aware of certain scores in the '50s, when I was five and six years old, and the scores that I feel most aware of were some Max

Steiner things. I think, oddly enough, I remember watching this movie I always thought was the scariest movie I'd ever seen with Peter Lorre called *The Beast with Five Fingers* (1946). And [Steiner] uses that Bach Chaconne [*hums and plays silently on the keyboard* (Example 1)]. To hear this passage, go to *The Hopkins Review* website on Project Muse at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/the_hopkins_review for the left hand alone, the hand would just play it. [*As the hand begins to play the Bach Chaconne, it is actually the version that Johannes Brahms arranged for left hand alone.*] But the score had that kind of Lionel Newman-y music, beautiful music, violins and these sort of heart-breaking chords. I remember hearing that and loving that. And I remember *The Ten Commandments*. Elmer [Bernstein] wrote probably . . . at least three of the scores that were most influential on me, which would be *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), and *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). Just *To Kill a Mockingbird*, with [*hums and plays silently on the keyboard* (Example 2)] that raised fourth, that I was just huge on. I know it was there somewhere before, but he really brought it into the . . . into my forefront. Miklós Rózsa, of course, *Ben-Hur* (1959) and all those big things. I really liked the big things.

Then I really got into Goldsmith. I loved Jerry Goldsmith. I listened to the movies in the '50s, *The Twilight Zones* [television episodes]. The Bernard Herrmann stuff, Bernard Herrmann big time, for some of his last stuff, but even more so for *Mysterious Island* (1961), even *Citizen Kane* (1941), his dark moody, dark woodwinds things, his harmonic sensibility [were] huge for me. But Goldsmith . . . and Franz Waxman, I guess, did a bunch of that stuff, too. Didn't he [Waxman] do *The Twilight Zone*? [*Franz Waxman did a single episode of The Twilight Zone in 1959.*] I just bought the whole collection. I sit in my car and still listen to that. I'm just amazed, because it's a very small, little chamber band. He had eight strings and four woodwinds and a harp, and maybe somebody on a tubular bell. And it's just chilling and beautiful. I wish I'd had to do that. I wish I'd had to start with a small little TV group like John Williams did, because you really learn to make the

most out of very little amounts. Instead of starting with a hundred-and-eight piece orchestra, where it's easy to make anything sound good, throw enough bodies at it.

Q: What do you see as the turning point between the orchestral sounds of the past and today's electronic (or electronically enhanced) sounds? To a certain extent, this is a technology question. But it's also stylistic, a move from an old to a new guard.

JNH: This whole technology issue is obviously a mixed bag. For the first time in history it's allowed non-musicians to write music, which is kind of regrettable in many cases. It has allowed people with minimal training or even minimal ability to compete on the same playing field to some extent with people that have enormous amounts of training and ability, and leaving it up to people who you're hoping are able to perceive the difference, but oftentimes don't.

Q: Your career spans an enormous change in the way it's possible for a composer to do a film. One might compare the rapid evolution of computers and music to the early nineteenth-century development of the piano, and the impact of that development on Beethoven's compositions for piano. So the development of piano technology then, and the development of computer technology now, and their impact on composers is to some extent analogous in the way that the change expanded the musical possibilities.

JNH: Certainly analogous.

Q: And so if you look back at your earlier things, you were working in a different technological world then.

JNH: Well, I was. I came up through the ranks. I was like the perfect film-music animal, because I'd started off as a classical musician, for my first fifteen years, so I had a very good exposure to the repertoire, and I was a good pianist. But then I went into rock-and-roll, really good rock-and-roll, played with Elton [John] and got to orchestrate for him. And then I learned about synthesizers and could do a lot of electronics and I combined orchestral work with rhythm tracks and

came back and got to produce albums. So by the time I did a movie, I certainly felt I had a very good education in terms of electronics. Even then, electronics just felt like an extension of what was available in the palette. I think what happened with the movie business as soon as *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) [appeared]. . . . I don't know the order, but Harold Faltermeyer came out with that [*hums Beverly Hills Cop theme* (Example 3)], all of a sudden everything had to have more bass, and in the '80s things got really "synth-ey" and really cheesy for a long time. There were a few hold-outs. Certain directors would want not to have that sound at all, but a more classic, sort of orchestral sound.

And then fortunately a lot of the cheese went away. Certainly now the advancement of technology is such that anybody can have a number of very cheap devices in the studio where you play one note and it sounds amazing, great complex sounds that are built on acoustic samples combined with all kinds of different processes. So that stuff is available, but for it to really succeed, the ultimate impact is still a blending of the [electronic and orchestral] worlds into one idea. I'm doing *Salt* right now. It's become the state-of-the-art for me. State-of-the-art is: I've got a huge complicated orchestral score and a big complicated electronic component to it. And it's all part of it. But I think complexity is part of what's been set aside as well, that with the technology, somehow intricate writing and moment-to-moment architecture of the scoring has become much less fashionable.

Q: Counterpoint is out of fashion.

JNH: Counterpoint. Taken to the extreme in movies like *Babel* (2006, scored by Gustavo Santaolalla), where there's just like one little guitar note going du-du-du-du or something, just the most minimalist sound you could ever imagine, and the director really not wanting any more than that, not wanting the music to comment on the film in any way beyond that. And who's to say that's a mistake? I don't know. I have other issues with *Babel*, but I don't know if a different score would have made me like the movie more—I don't want to get into that. But

Children of Men (2006) is an interesting example. The contemporary composer that he used [John Tavener], he just took bits, snippets from this and that, and somehow that idea worked for that director. What I see happen a lot is directors who make a movie that needs a more sophisticated, more complex score, feel that they can say what they want to say with a kind of a dumb score. It sounds dumb because it's in that movie. There's just a disconnect of sensibilities between one style and the other. But I think most people now feel that electronics are here to stay, obviously. And they've just been absorbed into the orchestra, I think. I hope so.

Q: A related question: you are, as you've just said, a classically trained pianist, and at some point you must have lived and breathed Chopin and Beethoven and Debussy.

JNH: I did.

Q: But a lot of that doesn't come out in your music. The Liszt virtuosity is not there. The Bach counterpoint . . . sometimes it's there, in a few movies where there are layers of ostinatos on top of each other, as in *The Happening*. But the whole fifteen years of your life that you dedicated to classical music doesn't always appear.

JNH: Well, because I never studied composition, I never studied orchestration. My counterpoint is not particularly good. I have to struggle to provide counterpoint. But again, part of that has to do with how quickly we all have to write. Sometimes, you're in a mode where you have a theme and you have harmony and you're done! Next! But that's not always the case. I try and be more aware of counterpoint. I wish I was better at it, I wish I'd studied it, and I wish that I had more time and wasn't in the habit of going so quickly, because I think what happens to composers, what's happened to me is, I am so used to working so fast that it's hard for me to pull out a piece of manuscript and a paper and say: "You know what, James? You have to stop here and figure this out." I don't like to do that, because it slows me down. But sometimes . . . I'll just put in a phrase here and there, but I don't

take the time to write the counterpoint, because there usually isn't [time].

Q: Between *Flatliners* in 1990 and *Wyatt Earp* in 1994, you've previously said you went from composing pianistically to orchestrally. What does that mean? Is it just method? Or is it an approach?

JNH: It's both. It's both method and approach. The idea [was] that everything would be written on a piano; if it sounded right on a piano, then I would just orchestrate that for the orchestra. That's when I was getting very sort of "scalar," and I'd be writing these things [*plays silently on the keyboard*]. It's just so "notey" that I finally started thinking about trying to write a little bit away from the piano, and just thinking about what the orchestra could do that has nothing to do with the piano. And of course, when you think like that, your universe opens up in ways that terrify me, and I quickly retreat back to the piano [*laughing*]. But, you know, in the beginning I think people take a Midi sound, they take a piano, and they put a string [sound] on it.

The biggest example of this would be somebody like Rachel Portman—I'm going to get killed for all this, but I don't care—and she's written a lot of really pretty scores. But if you listen to *Cider House Rules* (1999), it's like tenths swirling in the bass, and you've got a pretty melody on top, and it's piano and strings, doing everything together. That's kind of the way I wrote *Dying Young* (1991), and . . . I can't think . . . a hundred-and-five or so movies later, I just forget. . . . But I used to write with that kind of sensibility, very pianistically. I would think about it like that. I've been on a mission for the last fifteen years to try and think orchestrally, and it's still a constant struggle for me. At a certain point one thinks, "You know, I've been hired a hundred-and-fifteen times, or whatever it is, to do movies, I've had this huge career, so I must be doing something that they like." So, that's why occasionally I'll write a concert piece. There's nothing wrong with doing what you do really well, I guess.

Q: There's been a lot said about your collaborations with Hans Zimmer

on the Batman movies, and you've both spoken about it. Compared to somebody like John Williams, the two of you seem fairly close in style, and yet you're hardly identical. How would you say he is different from you musically?

JNH: I think we're wildly different musically. I think our process is very similar. We both tend to record, make film scores the way somebody would make a record: it's very produced, high production value, we're very careful about all the synthesizers, all the electronic sounds, we record all the percussion separately, we get it all sounding amazing, then we layer it with the orchestra, get that sounding amazing. So in the end you're bringing to the mix five Pro Tool rigs with a thousand tracks of information. Just massive amounts of stuff, that then has to be mixed. It's not like recording an orchestra live. There's a huge amount of layering, pre-recording, over-dubbing that goes on for months. So he and I both do that. We have the same rigs, the same kind of set-up here.

He does many things, I think, brilliantly. One: he's an amazing synthesist. He really just is one of those guys that will fiddle around with a piano hung by a chain upside down and sample it for two weeks. He's constantly looking for great sounds. So he's a sound designer *par excellence*. [Two:] He's a conceptualist *par excellence*. He knows he's not a trained composer, he'll be the first to admit it. But he really can write a great tune and he knows the way the music's supposed to sound and feel in a movie, I believe, very clearly, always. Obviously, he's doing all right, too. But he'll come up with a central device. For instance, Lisa Gerrard in *Gladiator* (2000): stroke of genius! Sit there, come up with that tune, and let her go. And then put that against Russell Crowe. I mean forget it. Drop-dead gorgeous. *Thin Red Line* (1998), another great idea. *Dark Knight*, all that Joker music, that one screechy horrible thing that went on, bzzzzhh-da.

Q: The industrial sound.

JNH: Fantastic, you know? Just great. He's a really smart guy. I tend to be . . . he's always referring to me as the gentleman of the duo, the

more elegant, more melodic, more refined, more orchestral. In the case of *The Dark Knight* and *Batman Begins*, it was a perfect complement because of the schizophrenic nature of the main character. You've got Bruce Wayne, and you've got Batman. So there were really opportunities for the music to sound completely different in certain cases, in certain scenes. That collaboration has been unique. I don't think I could do it, nor would I really want to do it, with anybody else. When we started doing it, it was either—we were good friends before it started—we would either remain good friends or become better friends, or never speak again.

Q: Collaborations are risky.

JNH: It *was* risky! And it worked really well. I would say, I did a lot of the heavy lifting in *Batman Begins*. He did a lot of the heavy lifting in *Dark Knight*. But you know, in *Batman Begins*, there was no cue that both of us didn't work on. He's not a great player, I'm a very good player. So he'd be doing something, or I'd be over his shoulders [*plays silently on the keyboard*]. Or if he wrote something he would come into my studio, and we would just cross-pollinate on everything intentionally. *Dark Knight* tended to be less so. Hans started working on the Joker music months before I came on board. He really worked on that one sound for like three months. My big thing was the Harvey Dent character and all of the sort of psychological stuff, but there's a lot of action stuff that we co-wrote, and we got to the point where, with the exception of the Joker music and the Harvey music, we really couldn't tell you who wrote what. Which is really true, and we're very proud of that. We're actually collaborating again on a romantic comedy right now, a Nancy Meyers movie [*It's Complicated*, 2009], which is a different kind of thing.

Q: Was there any thought of assigning Bruce Wayne to you, the more "elegant" composer, and assigning Batman to him, the "rougher" composer?

JNH: Yeah, that's kind of what we did. In *Batman Begins* particularly.

Q: Ambient noise seems more important in movies that you score. In *Dark Knight*, as the convoy transfers Harvey to another prison, we hear engine whines, bazooka shots, and car horns racing by complete with Doppler effect . . . do you think of these as part of your score?

JNH: We have to credit that to a guy named Mel Wesson.

Q: The way that you move in and out of the ambient noise, around it at times, was very impressive.

JNH: Well, this is something you might find interesting. I don't know if you knew that that score initially had been disqualified by the Academy, because there were five people on the cue sheet credit. They thought there were just too many writers. Hans and I wrote the score, nobody will argue that. The way you get paid on performances as a composer is if your name is on these cue sheet credits. We felt that Mel Wesson, who did all the electronic sound design, our music editor [Alex Gibson] and one of our orchestrators [Lorne Balfe] had worked so hard that they deserved a taste. So we used the cue sheet credit as an opportunity to say: "All right, Hans gets 30%, James gets 30%, and then Mel will get 10%, da-da-da-da-da," so that these guys get a taste in perpetuity. And they were thrilled, but the music branch saw it and said: "Oh, five writers? You guys are disqualified." We appealed, and we won. So it was reinstated. But by the time it was reinstated, there was such a stink over the fact that we didn't get a nomination, which was disappointing. But what're you going to do?

Q: *King Kong* (2005) is both a movie about an ape and a girl and a movie about a landmark movie from 1933. In what ways did Steiner's score offer you material to incorporate, reference, or avoid? For example, there's a cute little scene when Carl Denham says: "Is Faye available?" "No, she's doing a movie for Cooper." And we hear Steiner's Kong theme, "pooooom-pom-pom."

JNH: That was Peter who wanted me to do that.

Q: Actually, that's part of the question. Was the use of Steiner's music your idea, or Peter Jackson's, or Howard Shore's for that matter?

[James Newton Howard replaced Howard Shore as composer after Shore had more or less scored the entire film.]

JNH: Peter's idea. I never heard one note of what Howard had written. So I don't know what they did. I'm not even going to speculate because I don't know what happened. I know it was very painful for them. All I know is I had to come in with five-and-a-half weeks and write two hours and fifty minutes of score. As far as the Steiner score, I watched *King Kong* a hundred times when I was a kid, so how could it not? The *King Kong* score has a definite, irresistible, undeniable classic '30s-'40s feel to it in places. I may even have . . . I don't think I borrowed, I don't think I ripped off anything, but I certainly did things that are probably reminiscent. And I really intentionally did not listen to the Max Steiner score, because I didn't want to go there. The first part was "dum-da-dee, da-dee-da-dee" [the Skull Island theme (Example 4)], which was so right. You don't get to write that kind of music in most movies anymore. Steiner certainly influenced the majesty, the scale of it, the orchestrations, but I didn't refer to it specifically, so whatever influences are felt in my score were just unconscious, that I picked up.

Q: The most obvious and extended reuse of Steiner's music was the tribal dance playing in the pit orchestra (with Shore conducting). Though Steiner's tribal music was very effective in the original film, it was nonetheless a Golden Age cultural code designed to evoke the "exotic other" without any real attempt at cultural authenticity. By today's standards, the jungle scenes are overtly racist. In Jackson's film, when we first see the islanders, the disjointed and dissonant music is more reminiscent of horror movies. In approaching this part of *King Kong*, did you consciously try to avoid what we might call "ooga booga" sounds, primal sounds?

JNH: I did not try to avoid anything. Peter wanted that island to be scary. And it was plenty scary, to me. I'm guilty of this sometimes. I probably should have paid more attention to the ethnicity of these people, who are from the South Pacific, or Fiji, or Indonesia.

Q: They were a bit nondescript.

JNH: Yeah. I don't think I really did anything to acknowledge the geography there, and I probably should have done a little more. I got criticized for that with *Wyatt Earp*, too: "It doesn't sound like a Western."

Q: But the Irish music you wrote works really well.

JNH: The Irish works great. But maybe I should have made it sound more Western. I don't know. . . . [In *King Kong*] I did not steer away from it. I didn't have time to think about it. When you hear that there's two hours and forty minutes of score, that doesn't count the other hour I wrote that was rejected, and the rewrites. We ended up recording two hours and forty-eight minutes, for a three-hour-and-nine-minute cut. So I really didn't have time to do a lot of research.

Q: When we first see the islanders, it's scary and much like a scene from a horror movie. But then afterwards, during the sacrifice, or during the offering, then . . .

JNH: Yes! All hell breaks loose.

Q: And it's very percussive. Perhaps "tribal"?

JNH: Tribal. That's the sense I would use. Sort of, the global community of tribes, all mashed into one.

Q: That's curious, though, because that was Steiner's approach. It didn't really matter what the plot or the location was. His music could have been used for Tarzan movies or for Westerns, anything about an exotic "other." So are we retracing Steiner's footsteps?

JNH: I think a little bit. You don't want to write a travelogue. In a way, if you get too specific about it, I think it really gets dangerously clichéd and trite. You don't want to be too "on the nose" about stuff like that. Again, I keep referring to this movie *Salt* I'm doing, where she's a Russian . . . a lot of Russian agents involved, and there's a lot of flashbacks to Russia. Am I using some balalaika? A little bit, here and there, just because there's a certain convention and a certain audience expectation that's even unconscious. They may not even be

aware of it, but they know that they respond to it. When they hear it, it sort of transports them. It establishes a sense of place sometimes, in a way that just having the traditional orchestra wouldn't do. So I think you find a balance. I think where you do that more is in animation. In animation, you can be "broadly specific." You can use just those instruments.

Q: You start with a script, and you identify spots that are going to need a theme. The Skull Island theme must have been suggested by the point at which they arrive there, but you have intimations of it earlier. To what extent do you identify key points and then work up to them? That is, how do you blend ideas so that it's not just a chunk of this while you're in one place and a chunk of that while you're in another?

JNH: That's hard. The first thing I wrote, as I said, was [for when] King Kong appears for the first time, because I knew I had to get that right. Which was him coming, "dum-da-dee" [the Skull Island theme (Example 4)], those minor triads. It's not so much a theme; it was just a feeling I wanted to get. Then I had it, "dum-dee-dee-dum" [the descending Kong theme (Example 5)], which somebody said sounds like Steiner. Does that sound like Steiner?

Q: Well, Steiner had the three notes [Example 6: Steiner] and you had four, but, indeed, they are similar.

JNH: Right, but, I don't care about number of notes, but intervals. There's maybe some similarity. So, that was established. The first time you would have heard that was the main title, I think I did it in the main title, where they're showing just the monkey, when it started. Then, I kept finding [that] in a movie that big I needed so many themes and motifs. Then I needed the "deeee-dah-da-duh," which was kind of the adventure theme [Example 7], like when they set off. Then we needed Kong's theme when he's climbing the Empire State Building, that sort of romantic "doo-dah-doo-daaaaah" [Example 8], which is a cool theme I had to come up with. I thought I was done

with my themes, and then during the T-Rex fight, when Kong wins, Peter said—understand, I had not yet met Peter—so he said over the intercom, “We need a ‘King Kong as the hero’ theme, which we don’t have.” And I said, “Agghh.” Okay, so we came up with that theme, which worked really well, and thank God I did, because that’s the theme I used when he’s climbing the Empire State Building. And then we needed a little bit of a romantic theme between Adrian Brody and Ann Darrow. And then there was a Carl theme, “ta-dee-ta-dee-ta-dah” [Example 9], was that it? Kind of a slick, hustler-type thing. So there were so many things. But I’d say the way I established the architecture was: get Kong revealed first. I knew I had to write a big theme, [so] I wrote the adventure theme; and then I wrote the whole sequence of them leaving on the ship, a six-minute cue that got them up to where the ship foundered on the rocks. That was a big long sequence.

Q: So you’ve got the themes. And then you have to distribute them.

JNH: Then you just have to start covering acreage. And when you have a theme, it’s great, because you can get to a point, and you might be in a corner, and you say, “Oh, theme!” And then it’s just about horrendous hours of work, and the architecture of just putting the whole thing together.

Q: How does that architecture work? Do you sit back and survey the film, and say: “here-here-here-here-here,” or do you just take these ten minutes, and then take the next ten minutes?

JNH: I tend to work in smaller segments, sequences. I take five minutes at a time. And then you have to go back and look at it bigger and say, “Well, does it feel episodic?” That’s the trick. You don’t want it to feel episodic, obviously, so if it does, you have to fix that. It’s constantly, “tch-tch-tch” [*writing motion*].

Q: World music has become increasingly important for some film composers. You’ve used gamelan sounds in *Atlantis* (2001), shakuhachi in *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1999), and African singing in *The Interpreter*. Does your exposure to these sounds have an impact on what you

write for scenes that have nothing to do with foreign cultures? Do you think: "Oh, there's a color that I'd like for *Sixth Sense*?"

JNH: Yeah, unexpected combination of colors. But has it changed me as a composer, compositionally? Probably not. Has it added another interesting color to my choices as a composer? Yes. I do try and blend those when possible, to bring in an idea and double a bass part with a steel marimba or something that's very subtle . . . or a bowed marimba that I may have used, that gives a wonderful modernist approach. One thing I admire so much about Jerry Goldsmith is that he was really the modernist among us. He would start off a score with a conch, in *Alien* (1979), those great horrible sounds. He was always looking for those kinds of elements. But I think, yes, that's a valuable thing to do. I don't do a lot of it. I should do more.

Q: Do you ever listen to a score of John Williams and recognize some classical work underneath a section? Anyone who likes Bruckner, Elgar, or Tchaikovsky will certainly encounter moments in a Williams score that recall some favorite passage. Does this happen to you when you listen to film scores by your colleagues or predecessors? In a way, this is probably unavoidable.

JNH: Unavoidable to borrow or to hear it?

Q: To listen, to hear it. Does this happen to you? Do you listen to other movies and think: "Aha!"

JNH: [*Laughing*] "I caught him!"

Q: What we're asking, in a way, is whether or not your listening is what might be best called "predatory"? To say: "Oh, I really like what he did there, this is something that I can use."

JNH: Sure.

Q: And that can be a technique, or it can be: "Oh, I see what he did with Bruckner," or "I see what he did with Stravinsky."

JNH: Absolutely, in that sense, it's predatory. That's a really good way of putting it. I've never even thought about that.

Q: As opposed to listening that is recreational.

JNH: It's rarely recreational. Isn't that terrible? It is probably more often predatory.

Q: This isn't meant in a negative sense. It's what Wagner, Brahms, and so many others did.

JNH: It's just the way it is. You can't help it. I think you're right. I think you said it's inevitable. And I should do more of that kind of listening, quite honestly, because I don't listen to a lot of music. If I'm writing twelve hours a day, I just don't go home and put on music. You know, my ears are tired, I've got kids. In my car I listen to most of the music I listen to. No, that's . . . opportunistic listening.

Q: But it's not just what sound you're hearing. It's the craft, and at a certain point, I suppose, a composer stops picking up elements of craft from other composers. Maybe you've reached that point, but there must always be new things.

JNH: Oh, listen, I have not reached that point. Speaking of John Williams, I never cease to be amazed by just his limitless imagination, in terms of his rhythmic imagination. I just think he's remarkable. Again, I'm required so often to be writing so much and be done by a certain amount of time that it becomes hard to say: "Wait a minute. I've just written this, stop for a minute. Push back from the keyboard, and just listen, just hear what might else happen, another way that this might happen." In my head. And I can do that. But I don't often let myself do that. Or just stop and put on, you know, a Mahler symphony, or put on Bruckner, or put on Ravel, or put on something, and listen to the infinite pool that is out there.

Q: And were you listening to Shostakovich before *Signs*?

JNH: Oh, I love Shostakovich, absolutely, of course. Not for the car, but I mean in high school, sure.

Q: There's a YouTube video that overlays the second movement of Shostakovich's Chamber Symphony [Op. 110a] with your score for *Signs*. [*The Chamber Symphony of Shostakovich is arranged from his String Quartet no. 8, op. 110, by Rudolf Barshai.*] Although they are not identi-

cal, the beginning of *Signs*, with its obsessively repetitive three-note motif [Example 10], reminds one of what Shostakovich composed [Example 11] even if the intervals are different.

JNH: Oh, really? Is that . . . ? You know, I'm sure that that's true. Is there a three-note motif, just like that?

Q: Yes.

JNH: [*Laughing*] Ugh . . . you know, what're you gonna do?

Q: While we're speaking of that three-note motif in *Signs*, it's remarkable what you've done with just three notes.

JNH: Well, I've realized with *Night* [Shyamalan] that, if I could come up—and this is part of the same thing—if I came up with a three-note-motif, if I changed its musical setting constantly, and just kept using the three-note motif, I could write a much bigger variety of music than he might otherwise let me. As long as we kept hearing the three-note motif, it would feel like . . . and to some extent the same approach took place in *The Village*, where I wrote a lot of ostinatos for Hillary Hahn to play. As long as the violin ostinato was there, that was the linchpin, and I could move around in all kinds of other ways musically.

Q: What are the movies you are proudest of? What are a few of the scenes you are happiest with?

JNH: A couple. I like a few things in *King Kong*. I like the climbing of the Empire State Building. And I like his death sequence, to the end, when she's up there, and he drops off, the final scene in *King Kong*. There's a scene in *Snow Falling on Cedars* I like, which is the summation for the defense by Max von Sydow, that sequence that's kind of a montage of him walking on the beach, and the choral bit. I think that's a really nice moment. There's a passacaglia, sort of, at the end of *The Dark Knight*, between Batman and Harvey Dent that is kind of a big emotional peak moment. I think that was pretty successful. I like the score to *Dave* (1993) a lot, oddly enough.

Q: In my film music class, I show the first five minutes of *Jaws*, but with the music for *Dave*, the opening, and then "The Picnic."

JNH: [*Laughing, then humming the Dave theme (Example 12)*].

Q: Right. It completely changes the movie. I just show the first five minutes, and students who've never seen *Jaws*—and there are some—say, “Oh, yeah, it's a romantic comedy.” And then I show the original. It's fabulous, the contrast. It really shows how music shapes the movie.

JNH: I like “The Gravel Road” a lot in *The Village*, where she runs in the end, and crosses the wall. I thought Hillary played just magnificently. Favorite movies? *Michael Clayton* (2007) I think is a really good movie.

Q: Are you talking about the movie or the score?

JNH: Movie. The score's okay. I think the movie was so good. It made everybody look good.

Q: Endings are often a problem, whether it's a poem, a book, or a script. As far as you're concerned, are endings a problem just for the director and the scriptwriter? Or do you also have endgame strategies? Do you have ways you like to move into the credits? And does it matter whether it's a popular song at the end—or Sinéad O'Connor coming in to sing? Maybe you don't always know that at the time you write.

JNH: Well, I have one philosophy about end credits, which is that I like to approach it as the final chapter of the film. It's still a viable part of the construction of the film, kind of a last chapter, if you will. So, oftentimes I like to start off with a new piece of music or something that, certainly, eventually goes into a reprise of material from the movie. I've been able to do that most with *Night*. I did that in *Lady in the Water*, I did that with *Signs* to some extent. I don't have a problem coexisting with popular songs for the most part, as long as they feel like they are of the film, and not sitting there plastered on top of it. But people don't do that too much anymore, you know? I think that's really something that has gone out of fashion. A lot of directors I'm working with are just very reluctant to have any songs in the movie.

Q: And with *Water Horse* (2007), was Sinéad O'Connor's song for the end credits planned from the beginning?

JNH: That was planned from the beginning.

Q: So then, do you transition into that? If you know: "Okay, my last note is at the end of the last scene," does it affect how you get into your last note?

JNH: Absolutely! Obviously, sometimes those events, those song things happen after I'm done. And then it can just sound like a mash-up. But now I'm very careful to try and get in there. I thought that that song worked pretty well, actually. I thought that was okay.

Q: You once told us you wanted to write for ballet. Are you still interested? Any plans?

JNH: You know, I don't know about ballet. I would love to write . . . I mean, I love it when people dance to my music, let me put it that way. I have mixed feelings about the concert hall.

Q: You recently had a symphonic premiere, *I Would Plant an Apple Tree* [on Feb. 28, 2009 with the Orange County Pacific Symphony].

JNH: I did. And I've got another big one now, the Dallas Symphony for next fall, which I'm already fretting about. It's a different planet, and I just hope I have something to say. I think I'm really good at what I do, and I just want to make sure that there's a reason, that I have a reason to go do that.

Q: Might it be a problem that there are no images or text to reference?

JNH: Well, that's always the challenge. I would love to have a text, because I like writing for choir, and I can use their choir, which is really good. You know, I had an idea, which I think is a good idea for a larger work. But I only had a half an hour.

Q: That's a large work.

JNH: That's a large work, but it's not an hour-and-a-half work with an intermission. But no, it's a large work, believe me! And then I thought, well maybe I can do it down to ten little short movements, or . . . I'm thinking about it a lot, though.

I think what I didn't like about my last one . . . I guess by most accounts it was deemed a success. I mean, I survived [L.A. Times music critic] Mark Swed, and everything went okay. People really seemed to like it. The best thing for me is that I was able to just keep people's attention for twenty-two minutes without it getting really boring. But what I didn't like about it was, I didn't know what I was writing about, really. I started off thinking I did, and then I just sort of forgot about any kind of . . . narrative, and just kind of wrote. I tried to wrap it up in some way that connected with the narrative later on in the structure. I just want to be clearer about what I want to do.

Q: Do you ever think, just in closing, that writing for films is a younger man's job?

JNH: You mean how tired I get? Sometimes.

Q: You're in your fifties, and you don't need to prove anything to anybody, and yet you're still doing four projects at the same time.

JNH: Yes I do. But I think you get better as you get older, is the problem. At least I think I've been getting better. But maybe it's not true at all! I'm still liking it, so. . . .

Appendix

The following is a chronological list of films scored by James Newton Howard that are mentioned in the text. Release dates and directors in parenthesis.

Pretty Woman (1990, Garry Marshall)

Flatliners (1990, Joel Schumacher)

Dying Young (1991, Joel Schumacher)

Grand Canyon (1991, Lawrence Kasdan)

Falling Down (1993, Joel Schumacher)

Dave (1993, Ivan Reitman)

The Fugitive (1993, Andrew Davis)

Wyatt Earp (1994, Lawrence Kasdan)

Just Cause (1995, Arne Glimcher)
Waterworld (1995, Kevin Reynolds)
A Perfect Murder (1998, Andrew Davis)
Runaway Bride (1999, Garry Marshall)
Stir of Echoes (1999, David Koepp)
The Sixth Sense (1999, M. Night Shyamalan)
Mumford (1999, Lawrence Kasdan)
Snow Falling on Cedars (1999, Scott Hicks)
Dinosaur (2000, Eric Leighton, Ralph Zondag)
Unbreakable (2000, M. Night Shyamalan)
Atlantis: The Lost Empire (2001, Gary Trousdale, Kirk Wise)
Signs (2002, M. Night Shyamalan)
Dreamcatcher (2003, Lawrence Kasdan)
The Village (2004, M. Night Shyamalan)
Collateral (2004, Michael Mann)
The Interpreter (2005, Sydney Pollack)
Batman Begins (2005, Christopher Nolan)
King Kong (2005, Peter Jackson)
Lady in the Water (2006, M. Night Shyamalan)
Michael Clayton (2007, Tony Gillroy)
Water Horse (2007, Jay Russel)
The Happening (2008, M. Night Shyamalan)
The Dark Knight (2008, Christopher Nolan)
Duplicity (2009, Tony Gillroy)
Salt (2010, Phillip Noyce)
The Last Airbender (2010, M. Night Shyamalan)