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IMPROVISATION AND THE COMPOSED SCORE: A consideration of spontaneous and predetermined compositional processes in the production of screen music

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- 1.2. M2 – Street Walk
- 1.3. M3 – Flying

2. ***No Country for Old Men***
- 2.1. M1 – Gas Station
  - 2.1.1. Predetermined
  - 2.1.2. Improvised
- 2.2. M2 – Hotel
  - 2.2.1. Predetermined
  - 2.2.2. Improvised
- 2.3. M3 – Carla
  - 2.3.1. Predetermined
  - 2.3.2. Improvised

3. ***They Shall Not Grow Old***
- 3.1. M1 – Preparing for War
  - 3.1.1. Improvised
  - 3.1.2. Predetermined
- 3.2. M2 – Same as a Rabbit
  - 3.2.1. Improvised
  - 3.2.2. Predetermined
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[This audio-visual material can be found on the accompanying USB drive]

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Early accounts of silent film accompaniment at the beginning of the twentieth century show that improvisation was a major part of film music performance in both the United States and Europe (George 1914, 29). Musicians performing in theatres would often base their improvised material on pre-composed music written in cue sheets and 'photoplay' books. In the mid-1910s, as the burgeoning Hollywood studios sought to exert greater control over both the production and exhibition of their products, the practice began to die out (Messenger 2010, 14-15). However, it is possible to argue that in a number of ways improvisation never truly left cinema. Riding the wave of the 1950s cool jazz period came the improvised score by Miles Davis to Louis Malle's *Ascenseur Pour L'échafaud* (1958, released as *Elevator to the Gallows* in the US). More recent examples of improvised film scores include Neil Young's score to Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995) and Antonio Sanchez's score to Alejandro Iñárritu's *Birdman* (2014). The practice of staging live improvised accompaniment to classic silent films persists in niche entertainment sectors around the world. Moreover, accounts from composers of using improvisational techniques in their creative processes, as well as incorporating improvised performances into their predetermined scores, show that improvisation has remained a feature of screen music.

Aim

My creative research project, consisting of written and composed works, sets out to explore the nature of improvisational practices in screen music. It is the aim of my thesis to examine a range of creative processes employed by screen composers, and how improvised scores on one hand and 'composed' scores on the other might have different effects on the nature of the art form. In this introductory chapter I lay out the key terms that are used in my thesis, provide a context for research into the field of screen music improvisation and explain how my thesis is structured.

It is clear from the potted history above that it is impossible to maintain 'improvised' and 'composed' screen music as clear binaries. I will consider both how improvisation might inform predetermined music, and how predetermined musical material, structural

harmonic forms or thematic ideas might be used as the basis for improvisation. The relationship between improvisation and predetermined music is further complicated by the inherently collaborative processes of screen music production: a score is the product of interactions with both musical and non-musical actors throughout the creative process. Examples of this are the director and picture editor's involvement in the synchronisation of music to film and the composer employing improvising performers to record for their 'composed' score.

Scope

My thesis explores how the screen composer might approach and execute improvised and predetermined compositional processes and whether those approaches and executions are vastly different or maintain commonalities. It also investigates how improvisation might play a role in predetermined scores, either in the composer's development of musical material or through collaborative processes with other musicians, as well as how pre-prepared musical material might be used in improvisation. My research project examines these subjects through the lens of film production, the collaborative relationship between musicians and non-musicians and the working practices of various composers. The research questions are also explored through my own creative practice as a composer, as well as with analyses of film scores that make specific use of improvisation. I draw on interviews with screen composers and improvisers within both South African and international contexts. My research identifies certain trends that have emerged in compositional and creative processes, which I hope will aid in understanding the nature and role of improvisation in the production of music for screen.

Methodology

My research project is qualitative, a model Merriam describes as "an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena" which includes "interpretative research, field study, participant observation, inductive research, case study, and ethnography" (Merriam 1998, 5). Qualitative "researchers develop knowledge by collecting primarily verbal data through the intensive study of cases and then subjecting these data to analytic induction" (Gall et al. 2003, 24). The research I undertook includes case studies, interviews, and auto-

ethnography where I reflect on my own experience as a composer and improviser. On the subject of personal experience, James Key writes: "total participation means the researcher is a natural participant. This is the highest level of involvement and usually comes about when the researcher studies something in which he or she is already a natural participant" (1997). I place myself within the context of the research that I undertook and I gauge the ways in which I myself am a participant in the research.

Interviews constitute the greater part of my research methodology as my thesis topic lends itself to that means of investigation. Just as Patton describes below, entering into the perspective of the composers/musicians through my interviews allowed me to gain privileged insight into their creative practices and to explore how and why they work in certain ways:

> We interview people to find from them those things we cannot directly observe … we cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviours that took place at some previous point in time … situations that preclude the presence of an observer … how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. *The purpose of interviewing, then is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective.* (Patton quoted in Merriam 1998, 72)

The interview subjects I chose are composers and/or musicians who have contributed to screen music composition across international, cultural and methodological spectra. Primary subjects include Philip Cox, Mychael Danna, and Carlo Mombelli. Cox is an experienced practitioner who has contributed to screen music production in South Africa. His usual role as a classical trumpeter unaccustomed to improvising, made his analysis of his performance of a live-to-screen improvisation, noteworthy and informative. Danna is an internationally renowned Canadian composer. His unique methodologies provide invaluable insight into the scoring process not least because improvisation is the bedrock of his practice. Danna's collaboration with musicians and his guiding and shaping of their improvisations is a key aspect of his approach to film scoring, and is therefore of direct relevance for the questions this thesis raises. Mombelli is a South African music industry stalwart and his creative practice is equally relevant to the process-centred questions this thesis seeks to answer. Mombelli's approach to composition privileges improvisation and personal expression over external imperatives and his opinions on the role of improvisation in screen music stem from his iconoclastic personality.

My thesis also makes use of audio-visual media as primary source case study material. Umberto Eco writes that

> there are also cases in which the object is a real phenomenon … In these cases, primary sources may not yet exist in an organized written form. Instead you must gather and create your primary documents, including … interview transcriptions and … audiovisual documents. (2015, 45)

Miles Davis' music to Louis Malle's 1958 film *Elevator to the Gallows* is one such "audiovisual document" that I investigate in order to answer questions regarding the reintroduction of improvisation as a foundational scoring approach post the silent-era, and to explore the nature of the ensemble score. *Birdman* (2014, dir. Alejandro Iñárritu) is examined as a contemporary case study that sheds light on how the manipulation of improvised music in collaborative filmmaking redefines how one might think of improvisation and questions of authorship. I also focus on Danna's films, including *Life of Pi* (2012, dir. Ang Lee), and Mombelli's works, including *Story of a Beautiful Country* (2004, dir. Khalo Matabane). These are key documents for seeing how the composers I interview put into practice their ideas around improvisation informing predetermined music, and predetermined material becoming the basis for improvisation in ways unique to their particular music-making epistemologies.

Purpose

There has been little serious scholarship on specific production processes in screen music (some exceptions include the *Film Score Guide* series published by Rowman and Littlefield). It will become clear throughout my thesis that improvisation, in different forms, is an inescapable factor of the contemporary film production process, yet the study of improvised creative processes employed in contemporary scoring practice is relatively virgin territory. Much research has been written on the history and origins of musical improvisation in the silent film era in works by Rick Altman (2004), Mervyn Cooke (2008) and Martin Miller Marks (1997) but subtle distinctions within improvised and predetermined music have not been explored sufficiently. Some cursory research has been conducted on the scores for *Elevator to the Gallows* and *Dead Man* in works by Krin Gabbard (2007) and Danijela Kulezic-Wilson (2015) respectively. However, there has been little detailed consideration of the improvised processes and the method by which

the music was arranged for those films. Only by exploring those areas can we hope to learn more about, for example, the ways in which improvised music is inexorably linked with the director and editor's choices and how they become co-conspirators of sorts in the music-making process.

Benefit to the Field

My research project aims to benefit screen composers who wish to better understand the compositional process and to implement the methodologies of past and current composers. It also aims to benefit filmmakers in general, as the interplay between composers, editors, producers, directors and other creative personnel is redefined through the course of this thesis, challenging the lay notion of the composer as the sole creator of a score. I document the creative process to discover first-hand how improvised and predetermined music interface in order to more fully consider improvisation's role in the contemporary score.

As a young composer and pianist, I am interested in both screen music and improvisation. Upon first embarking on screen music research as a field of interest, I was bothered by how screen music and 'pure' improvisation seemed not to intersect in contemporary scoring practice, as improvisation has always been a dear and essential element of my own music-making process. However, as I began to compose for screen myself I realised that this was not the case, as I employ many of the methods I use when improvising, yet within an altogether different context. I also noticed that both internationally acclaimed composers and those whose processes I observed first-hand made use of improvisatory techniques in one form or another. This fascinated me, and although I had some idea of the origins of improvisation in film music from what I had studied in university about the silent film era, I conducted further research and began to uncover a complex network connecting improvised and predetermined screen music. I also found that many areas in which the two interface would benefit from clarification and that my own work as a composer has been directly affected by my research.

Cinema Improvisando: Setting the Scene

On 30 January 2017, I attended an annual event called *Cinema Improvisando*, held at the Bioscope Independent Cinema in Johannesburg. It is hosted by South African pianist and composer Paul Hanmer who provides a live improvised score to a silent film. That year the film was Ernst Lubitsch's 1918 romantic comedy *I Don't Want to Be a Man* (*Ich möchte kein Mann sein*). Hanmer performed with classical trumpeter Philip Cox. In past years Hanmer had rehearsed his performances but in my interview with him he told me that he found that the rehearsals always "felt better" than the final performances and that consequently he decided to "come in fresh", refraining from watching the film at all (Hanmer 2018). Although, in my interview with Cox he claimed that Hanmer had watched or at least "glanced over" the film (Cox 2018). There was clearly a certain degree of preparation: the performance was part of the annual "Johannesburg International Mozart Festival" and Hanmer had notated themes beforehand, based on Mozart's music underscoring the Papageno and Papagena characters in *The Magic Flute*, to be employed and manipulated throughout the film (Hanmer 2018). Cox, who rarely improvises, opted to watch the film multiple times and formulate fixed musical ideas in advance. He selected visual anchors for the pre-prepared themes to help enforce a cohesive film/music relationship (Cox 2018).

On the evening of the performance, an unexpected disruption occurred two-thirds of the way through the film screening when a power outage plunged the theatre into darkness. When the power was restored, the film started up again but from a point a few minutes prior. It seemed to me that the majority of the audience was somewhat annoyed at having to re-watch the film, expecting what followed to be superfluous. I was intrigued as to how the music might differ from what had initially accompanied the film. The way in which the performers chose to handle the situation was noteworthy. Cox replicated certain lines or sound effects at similar junctions to the initial screening, whereas Hanmer's performance varied more. Cox describes the process:

> It was an opportunity to be a bit more expressive. It allowed us to maybe put another layer on top of it and although we didn't really stray beyond the general tonality, there probably was the odd little moment that we popped out of it. And those [visual] anchors were very defined moments ... We allowed those to be anchors but we were given the opportunity to allow things to go off on a tangent a bit more. In many ways it was a bit of a blessing really because it probably

> made the remainder of the film way better than it would've been if the power hadn't gone off. (2018)

Cox said of the experience: "the way in which we interpret the music changes from moment to moment, from scene to scene, which makes this, for both of us, hugely satisfying" (Cox & Hanmer 2018). Music philosopher Marcel Cobussen, borrowing from sociologist Bruno Latour, coined the term *actor-network theory* as a way of tracing the multiple associations and conversations between the subjects and objects involved in the production of music (2017, 43). He understood that when one actor instigates or experiences a significant change, the entire network is altered, and thus the nature of the music is altered (48). The processes at play during the *Cinema Improvisando* performance revealed a particularly complex network of actors – interactions and transformations between the musicians, the pre-prepared material, the audience, and the film itself.

The above example has introduced us to a few key terms that require further definition. Understanding exactly what is meant by the terms 'improvisation' and 'composition' is necessary because it is unclear whether it was Hanmer who was doing the 'real' improvising while Cox was merely reading and performing composed material with minor adaptations or whether both performers were improvising. Hanmer had decided beforehand on the core musical material from which the performance was to be generated – does that mitigate in any way the extent to which improvisation was involved in the music-making? These questions require us to more accurately define the terms 'improvisation' and 'composition'.

Improvisation Versus Composition

The Role of Time

One might at first assume that there is a clear distinction between 'improvisation' and 'composition'. After all, it seems obvious that there is a difference between Miles Davis' solo in "So What" and Mozart's "Symphony no. 40 in G minor". But are they indeed generated through antithetical creative processes? Jazz musician Russ Nolan offers the following definitions for the terms:

> Composition and improvisation are one and the same, just at different speeds. Composition is improvisation out of time, and improvisation is composition in

> real time. Every piece of music is penned improvisation, and every improvisation is spontaneous composition. (2013)

Nolan identifies the salient difference between what we conventionally understand as 'composition' and 'improvisation' as the element of time. Of course we intuitively know this to be true, but the significant ramifications that this distinction reveals regarding the compositional process might not be that obvious. Composer Karlheinz Essl expands on the relationship between time and improvisation:

> In composition you are, in a way, outside time, abstracting therefrom; one tries to imagine the whole process and can zero in on time microscopically – stop it, so to speak … But improvisation is completely different: you are inside time in the moment, form time and its passing in "real time"; and now, within this mercilessly passing time frame you have to follow a certain way which maybe you've thought about before or which turns out to be negotiable during the improvisation. (Essl & Jack 2017)

Crucially, by composing outside of the confines of the moment in which the music was originally generated – what Essl terms "real time" – one is afforded the opportunity to rework and revise the material. This process might occur actively, for example by sitting down and consciously reworking the material through single or multiple overwrites, or it might occur more passively, for example by 'sleeping on it' and revisiting the material a week later. In the latter example, throughout that time-gap, the reworking process might be happening despite the fact that the material is not being tangibly or objectively altered because the reworking is taking place unconsciously (and is perhaps automatic and unavoidable). With improvisation, however, the material is restricted to what one is able to produce in real time.

Past, Present and Future

Essl goes on to describe the interplay between the past and the present during improvisation. He explains that improvisation is not a senseless ploughing forward with a performance, but rather the intentional revisiting of musical ideas and points of reference in order to transform them in real time – "again and again, building bridges to the past" (2017). What Essl doesn't mention here is how one also builds bridges to the *future* when improvising. In actuality an improviser operates within all time zones simultaneously to varying degrees because they think ahead in order to imagine and prepare their next choice, whether it be one note or many phrases ahead. 'Future thinking'

is informed by what the improviser enacts in the present which is in turn formulated with reference to the past. Thus, improvisers must also be conscious of 'future thinking' if they are to build a cohesive improvisation. Educator Stephen Nachmanovitch refers to compositions that are not "presented as is, whole and at once" as "doctored improvisations" (1990, 6). As composer Steve Lacy responded when asked to describe in fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation: "In composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in fifteen seconds, while in improvisation you have fifteen seconds" (quoted in Bailey 1993, 141). It is important to note that Lacy does say you have fifteen seconds to decide rather than that you are completely at the mercy of the present moment in time – blind to the future. Perhaps Lacy means that one thinks in increments of time when improvising (though not *specifically* fifteen seconds increments of course). One cannot only think about the absolute present moment in time. Rather, one constantly shifts between the present moment and a time-frame projected into the future, and back again. In improvisation, there *is* some space for forethought and planning your next move, just not *a lot* of space. Factors such as the complexity and tempo of the music and the musician's level of training and experience will determine how hesitant or confident they might be to plan beyond the immediate present. In theory, a skilful improviser could at least convincingly emulate music that has undergone the process of being reworked and, similarly, a skilful composer could convincingly emulate an on-the-spot improvisation. What does become clear is that when one takes a closer look at improvisation and composition, the 'common-sense' distinctions begin to evaporate.

Improvisation and Screen Music

Let me discuss the relevance of all this to the subject at hand: screen music. Perhaps the perceived 'authenticity' attached to whether music is generated purely through improvisation or through a reworking of the material is not of ultimate importance. On a rudimentary level, film scores generally come out sounding very different depending on degree of improvisation employed. For example, Miles Davis' jazz score for *Elevator to the Gallows* has an improvised sound – an off-hand, impromptu feeling and a 'freshness' that isn't present in, for example, Hans Zimmer's ostinato-driven *Dark Knight* scores (2005-2012, dir. Christopher Nolan). This has a lot to do with style, personality and the

musical choices that are appropriate for the particular film. Importantly, one could argue that audiences can feel a difference between a worked-upon as opposed to a spontaneous-sounding score and that the approaches ultimately generate different effects.

Structure of Thesis

In Chapter Two of this written thesis, I explore improvisational processes in a range of early- to middle-period (1892-1958) film music practice in order better to understand the ways in which musical improvisation developed alongside film, forming an inexorably interdependent and dynamic relationship with film rather than being merely an obsolete historical curiosity. In Chapter Three I investigate improvisational processes in select contemporary scoring practice to answer the question of how improvisation has endured as a through-line in the production of screen music. In Chapter Four I explore the scoring processes of composer Mychael Danna though his film work and my interview with him. Danna presents a useful case study for examining how a contemporary Hollywood composer approaches the use of improvisation. In Chapter Five I discuss the scoring process of South African composer Carlo Mombelli by drawing on my interview with him and examining the improvisational techniques that he employs in scoring. In Chapter Six I reflect on my own creative process in light of what I've investigated in other people's work by engaging analytically with my portfolio of compositional works.

The list of components as they are arranged in my accompanying portfolio of works can be found on pg. *ix*. This portfolio contains, first, my predetermined re-scorings of three scenes from a film that originally had an improvised score: *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014, dir. Alejandro Iñárritu). I also re-scored three scenes from *No Country for Old Men* (2007, dir. Joel and Ethan Coen) with the intention of engaging in a predetermined approach to scoring and subsequently re-scored the same scenes by engaging instead in an improvised approach in order to examine how those processes differ in compositional practice and with regards to the comparative effects of the final products. I created an improvised score to three scenes from *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018, dir. Peter Jackson) by performing with an ensemble and guiding them based on my pre-prepared musical material. I subsequently re-scored those scenes in a predetermined fashion and provide a comparative analysis to determine what it is about

both the improvised and predetermined scores that 'works' and how that might have been achieved. Utilising an ensemble, I created an improvised score for a livestreamed short film dubbed *Melville Meander* which was a revelatory experience in terms of understanding the nature of real-time improvisation to screen in an ensemble context. I subsequently reworked the music for one scene from the film by writing predetermined material that overlays and recontextualises the original improvised score.

In the chapters ahead and through the portfolio of works, I examine different processes in the production of screen music, primarily music for the narrative fiction film. I explore answers to the following questions: what is meant by the term 'improvisation'? How might we understand the role of improvisation in the context of screen music production? What compositional processes are employed, and how might these processes dictate the development of musical material and determine the effectiveness of the resulting score? By examining the role of improvisation in the creation of music in general and its function within the making of screen music specifically, this thesis will allow for a more nuanced understanding of the distinction between 'improvised' and 'composed' scoring practices.

CHAPTER 2: IMPROVISATIONAL PROCESSES IN SELECT EARLY- TO MIDDLE-PERIOD SCREEN MUSIC PRACTICES

Introduction

In order to better understand the role of improvisation in screen music, it is useful to examine how improvisation and the filmic experience are historically connected. By understanding that musical improvisation and early film did not arise independently of each other but rather interdependently, the concomitant nature of improvisation and contemporary screen music begins to make more sense. My intention is not to provide a comprehensive historical account of improvisation in international scoring practices, an undertaking that would be beyond the scope of this project, but rather to present an overview of the origins of improvisation in select early Western film production in order to explore a trajectory and evolution of improvisational processes in those scoring practices. In this chapter I explore improvisational processes in the music of the so-called silent film era (1892-1927). I show how technological advances and changing expectations of standards for a film-going experience led to the demise (for the most part) of the live and improvised film score, and a broad-spectrum shift in the role of improvisation in film music – away from live accompaniment and towards a compositional technique in the beginning of the twentieth century. I discuss how improvisation and composition emerged as functionally discrete modes of film scoring in the 'Golden Age of Hollywood' from the 1930s to the 1960s. I conclude by looking at an example of improvisational scoring practice from the French New Wave, and consider how the aforementioned improvisational processes have persisted and evolved in contemporary scoring practice.

Improvisational Processes in Silent Film Music

Overview

The term 'silent film' is considered a misnomer by many early-film historians (Cooke 2008, 4). Rick Altman points out that "silent films were in fact sometimes silent … and what's more it did not appear to bother audiences a bit" (1996, 649), but it is also clear

that, more often than not, music accompanied film right from the outset. The first examples of 'substantial' film music have their roots in Paris in the 1890s: Emile Reynaud's 1892 *Pantomimes Lumineuses* (a moving picture show of painted images and a precursor to the first film), with piano music by Gaston Paulin, and the Lumière Brothers' public screening of their short films in 1895, with piano accompaniment by Emile Maraval (Cooke 2008, 7). Historian Jacques Deslandes notes that Paulin had explanatory cues set above his original sheet music that tied it closely to the film's narrative (quoted in Marks 1997, 29), an early forbear of the cueing method that was widely employed later on and which I discuss further in the next chapter. Mervyn Cooke expands on the ubiquitous role that music played in early film, indicating that it was a focal point for audiences:

> It has always been an inevitable adjunct to all forms of popular entertainment. Early moving-picture shows in the mid-1890s were little more than show-booth attractions: fairgrounds, vaudeville and travelling shows have traditionally been noisy affairs and for the latest novelty spectacle to have been presented without some kind of aural stimulation would have been inconceivable … As cinema music became more elaborate and of better quality, the live performance of musical numbers – again not necessarily related to, or played simultaneously with, the films being shown – could be as strong an attraction to customers as the moving pictures on offer. (2008, 4-5)

In the early 1900s the first indoor projection theatres, called Nickelodeons, became popular in the United States and the practices around musical accompaniment changed. Writing in 1903, musical director George Beynon recounts that "during the 'packing' process, the pianist regaled the seated ones with some music, mostly apropos of nothing, being an extemporization hastily improvised from his admittedly fertile brain … The moment the lights went out he could no longer be seen" (quoted in Altman 2004, 197). At that time most films were not accompanied by music at all. It is worth noting that the presence of music at silent film screenings does not reveal much about accompaniment practices. The music was primarily incidental to the picture because musicians played to the audience, not to the film (195-196). Will Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributers of America at the time, recalls what he claims was the first instance of music accompanying a film in the United States. He recounts a story of the yet-to-become head of Universal Studios, who had bought a theatre:

> He then hired a little boy to play the piano and do the 'tinkling' before and after the picture … he watched the effect on the audience … After one show, he

> suggested to the boy at the piano: "At the next show 'tinkle' the piano during the picture and see what happens." (Quoted in Altman 2004, 197)

As cinema developed, films began to be shown inside theatres. Audience noise, the sound of traffic and the whirr of the projector were motivators for the provision of music as a purely functional method of masking noise (Cooke 2008, 1-2). Another reason was that music, along with sound effects and live narration, was there to provide compensation for the void that resulted from the absence of synchronised sound (5). Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler write that one of the purposes of having music in the cinema was to humanise the then disconcerting experience of witnessing soundless yet moving and speaking characters and thereby to allay the audience's anxiety:

> Music was introduced as a kind of antidote against the picture. The need was felt to spare the spectator the unpleasantness involved in seeing effigies of living, acting and even speaking persons, who were at the same time silent … Music was introduced not to supply them with the life they lacked – but to exorcise fear or help the spectator absorb the shock. Motion picture music corresponds to the whistling or singing of a child in the dark. (1994, 75)

Music continued to be viewed as an important part of the way audiences made sense of film. On a psycho-cognitive level, Claudia Gorbman writes that one of screen music's goals "is to render the individual an untroublesome viewing subject: less critical, less 'awake'", which "increases the spectator's susceptibility to suggestion … [and] removes defences to access to unconscious fantasies" through a process similar to "hypnosis" or the induction of a trance-like state (1987, 5).

In the latter part of the silent film era, the primary function of music was to bind the narrative structure of the film by joining individual distinct shots into larger continuous sequences. Unlike in the early silent film period, music was now no longer incidental to the picture but was constructed to help tell the story as the images unspooled. Siegfried Kracauer writes that film music compensates for the failure of film editing and "causes us to perceive patterns where there were none before" because "confused shifts of positions reveal themselves to be comprehensible gestures; scattered visual data coalesce and follow a definite course" (1997, 135). The intention was to create a continuity that complements the image and conveys to the audience a cohesive narrative contour. Some believed that this approach to scoring as subservient to the functional edit was not ideal: writing in 1921, Beynon asserts that film music "was most effective when it respected its

own integrity, completed its phrases, followed its own logic, without becoming merely indifferent to the images … not structured primarily … in terms of sync points" (quoted in Buhler & Neumeyer 2013, 20). Buhler and Neumeyer propose that it was not of paramount importance for music to be synchronised with the image because music still "belonged to the world of the audience, the world of live performance, rather than the world of the film" (20-21). Screen music was always produced in the same physical space that the audience occupied – live and in real time. Each performance was inevitably distinct from the others. Conceptually, this represents a very different relationship between music and image to the far-more 'fixed' sound/image relationships of the synchronised sound period. While improvised or predetermined music could clearly be features of either setup, the distinction between live and recorded music allows for the capacity to edit, re-take, and shift pieces of recorded music into positions in the film for which they were not initially intended. These processes, whether spontaneous, predetermined or somewhere in between, are examined in detail in later chapters.

During the silent film era, having improvised musical accompaniment was borne out of necessity. The lack of opportunity to rehearse to picture and the absence of any standardisation in practice generally resulted in subpar musical performances. Publishing clerk Max Winkler describes the situation at the time:

> Only in a few isolated theatres in big cities was any effort made to coordinate the goings-on on the screen with the sounds in the musical pit. Thousands of musicians never had a chance to see the picture before they were called upon to play music for it! They were sitting in the dark, watching the screen, trying to follow the rapidly unfolding events with their music: sad music, funny music, slow music – sinister, agitated, stormy, dramatic, funeral, pursuit, and amorous music. They had to improvise, playing whatever came to their worried minds, or whatever they came up with on the spur of the moment. It was a terrible predicament – and so, usually, was the music. (1951)

Conductor Tyacke George's instruction book *Playing to Pictures* (1914) sets out guidelines for the film accompanist. In it he discusses "whether it was better to play selected items of appropriate music to the pictures, or 'extemporise' on any tune, so long as feeling and expression was put into every bar" (8). His answer to that question is:

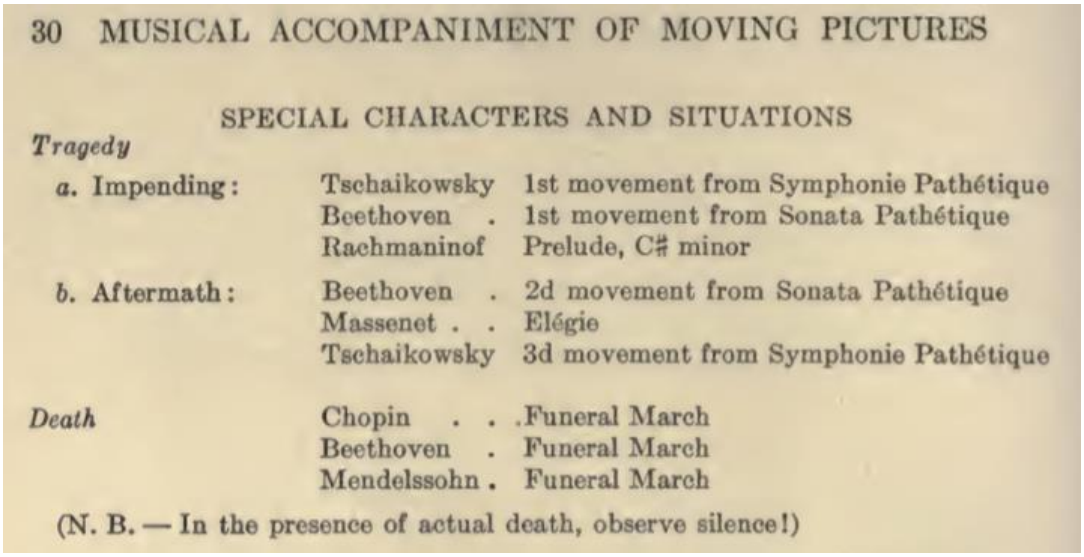
> To my mind, both are bound up in each other, and are inseparable – you cannot, as a musician, associate one without the other. To play anything out of harmony with the subject would be ridiculous, as it would also be if played without expression. The two must go together, otherwise you are a failure. (Ibid)

George equates improvisation with the potential to imbue "feeling and expression" into music. This is a point that I revisit in future chapters in the quest to define and evaluate the nature and role of improvisation in screen music.

The Rise of Cue Sheets and Demise of Improvised Accompaniment

From as early as the mid-1890s, there is evidence that pre-existing music matching the mood and action on screen was used in the film accompanist's repertoire, such as the music of Robert Schumann and German pianist Adolf Jensen (Marks 1997, 29). But up until the 1910s the majority of film accompanists would perform a combination of their own improvisations and popular ragtime tunes on the piano. As film studios gained more control over the industry, many studios wished to distance themselves from what they perceived as the 'seedier' lowbrow associations attached to earlier film exhibition (Messenger 2010, 14). Studios attempted rather to attract a wealthier middle class clientele in order to increase their cultural value (and therefore charge higher ticket prices). In the early 1910s, Max Winkler created 'cue sheets' which matched pieces of existing classical music to the type of on-screen action. Winkler recollects that "in desperation we turned to crime … we began to dismember the great masters … to murder the works of Beethoven, Mozart, Grieg, J.S. Bach, Verdi, Bizet, Tchaikovsky and Wagner" (Wegele 2014, 3). Studios also began supplying their own scores in an effort to standardise the accompaniment to their product and raise the cultural cachet of the film-going experience (Messenger 2010, 15).

In 1915, the landmark but controversial *Birth of a Nation* (dir. D.W. Griffith) marked the beginning of the Hollywood studio era. The score by Joseph Carl Breil combined originally composed material with a compilation of Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and Wagner, with the sheet music supplied to the accompanists in the theatres (a version for orchestra as well as for solo piano). From that point on it was standard to have orchestral accompaniments for those theatres that could afford it, even if few could (Messenger 2010, 14). Examples of suggested existing classical pieces appear in Edith Lang and George West's instructional book *Musical Accompaniment of Moving Pictures* (1920, 30).



30 MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT OF MOVING PICTURES

SPECIAL CHARACTERS AND SITUATIONS

Tragedy		
a. Impending:	Tschaikowsky	1st movement from Symphonie Pathétique
	Beethoven .	1st movement from Sonata Pathétique
	Rachmaninof	Prelude, C♯ minor
b. Aftermath:	Beethoven .	2d movement from Sonata Pathétique
	Massenet . .	Elégie
	Tschaikowsky	3d movement from Symphonie Pathétique
Death	Chopin . . .	Funeral March
	Beethoven .	Funeral March
	Mendelssohn .	Funeral March

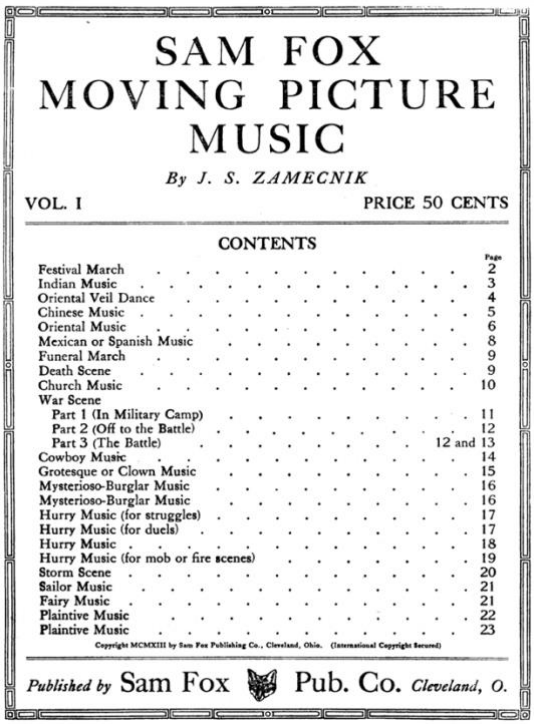
(N. B. — In the presence of actual death, observe silence!)

Fig. 1: Excerpt from Lang and West's Musical Accompaniment of Moving Pictures *(1920, 30)*

However, despite Hollywood studios' desire to implement the cue sheet system, where specific classical music pieces would be played at certain points during the film, this was not immediately adopted. Messenger explains that the studios' wishes for standardised uniformity and the reality for the musicians and audiences 'on-the-ground' were at odds with one another because "with most theatres offering a continuous, all-day show and changing their programs daily, it was nearly impossible for a musician to be prepared for what he or she was to play" (2010, 15). He explains that "musicians were more likely to rely on whatever pieces were already in their repertoire: classical standards, popular hits, and of course 'jackass' ragtime" (ibid). There were other practical and economically expedient reasons that retarded the mainstream adoption of the cue sheet system: "many exhibitors re-edited films, or ran the projector at increased speeds in order to fit more sessions into their schedule, so often the cued scores did not match what was on screen" (ibid). Exhibitors found that "the hit tunes of the day helped bring in audiences, and their more modest arrangements could be accommodated by all but the most inept theatre musicians" (ibid).

Folios of music specifically designed for the silent film accompanist called 'photoplays' gained popularity. One of the earliest anthologies in use was written by John Stepan Zamecnik. The first volume of his *Sam Fox Moving Picture Music* series was published in 1913 and comprises twenty-five short pieces designed for the amateur pianist. Key

signatures are kept simple, with no more than three flats or one sharp and the various compositions flow logically into one another without modulation or jarring juxtapositions between, say, a war scene piece and a death scene piece (Altman 2004, 261).



SAM FOX
MOVING PICTURE
MUSIC

By J. S. ZAMECNIK

VOL. I — PRICE 50 CENTS
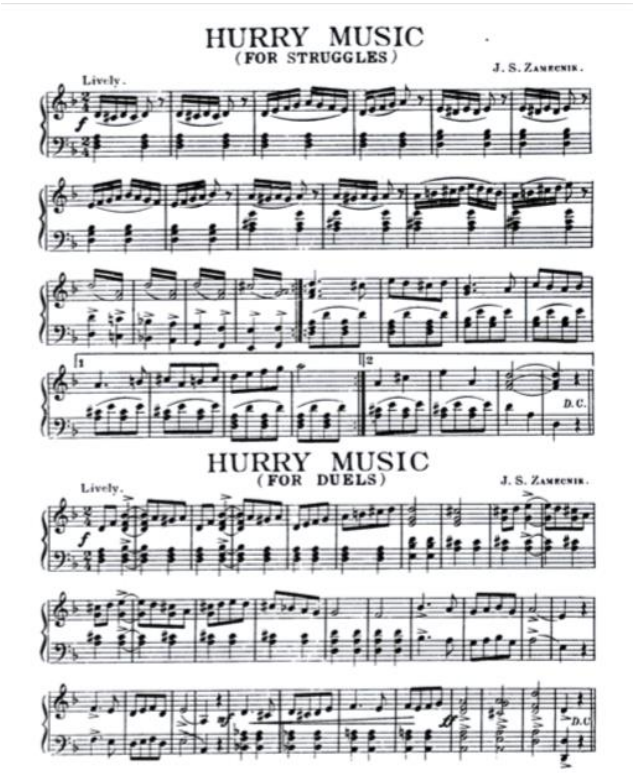
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Fig. 2: Table of Contents from Sam Fox Moving Picture Music Vol. 1 *(1913)*



HURRY MUSIC
(FOR STRUGGLES)

J. S. ZAMECNIK.

Lively.

HURRY MUSIC
(FOR DUELS)

J. S. ZAMECNIK.

Lively.

Fig. 3: "Hurry Music" from Sam Fox Moving Picture Music Vol. 1 *(1913, 17)*

Even when a cue sheet was available, solo accompanists regularly improvised their own music (Mathiesen 1990, 96). Improvisations might be based on the musician's repertoire, in which case they would string together various excerpts to match the broader moods of the film (ibid.). Lang and West write that a musician who can improvise accomplishes more than the average player and is able to "give the spectator that most illusive [*sic*] of all experiences, a thrill!" (1920, 26). However, writing in 1914, George is emphatic that improvising to film remained uncommon, as most musicians were not able to do it successfully:

> A man who can do this would never play in a picture show, for he could command a princely salary on the variety stage, where so many gifted performers are to be seen. True! a man may be able to think of something on the spur of the moment to catch the identical mood of a film before him, but to say that he can go on doing it to any picture from the beginning to the end of the year, requires a large load of salt to swallow; he would repeat his ideas so often that his playing would degenerate into the most painful monotony, especially to the regular patrons, and they are the class to cater for. (29)

From the mid-1910s, improvising was viewed as a practice for only the most highly skilled professional film accompanist, and a practice that was an exception rather than the rule. This was in part because the studios did not want anything to jeopardise the cultural prestige of the cinema experience that they were attempting to cultivate. Theatres supplying what had the potential to be sub-par music was no longer something that studios were willing to overlook. George writes that accomplished improvisers capable of giving performances worthy of the studios' productions were a rarity:

> Many pianists assert that they can improvise to pictures, thus giving better effect than any written music. Except about one in a thousand, this is sheer nonsense. These people have not the slightest conception of what they are talking about, much less playing! ... A musician who really *can* improvise is a *rara avis* [rare bird], for to do it he must have melody, harmony, counterpoint, fugue, etc., at his fingers' ends, and be a thorough master of musical form, as well as possessing a fund of original ideas and inventive capacity far above the average. To say they can do it well enough for pictures won't wash, for it is scarcely a compliment to those men who have sunk millions of pounds in the business to be told by some jumped-up embryo pianist that he can fake music good enough for their productions. (1914, 29)

In their handbook *Musical Accompaniment of Moving Pictures*, Lang and West show how thematic material can be developed through compositional techniques such as augmentation, diminution, variation in rhythm and tempo, etc., in order to understand the different ways in which the material could be tailored for specific moods or scenes (1920,

8-12). Similarly, George suggests that accompanists take an excerpt from a photoplay and extend that fragment until they are familiar with the style and how the material can change key, the melody be inverted, diminution applied, etc. (1914, 30). The processes suggested here are not dissimilar to the processes that many contemporary composers employ, where a short thematic idea is manipulated in an improvisatory fashion based on mood and circumstance and spread across the film. This blurring of the lines between improvisation and composition is something that I explore further in the next chapter.

Improvisational Processes in Early Sound Film Music

Overview

The screen music landscape was forever changed when film and sound were synchronised successfully. The global phenomenon of 'sound film' was heralded in the 1930s with the release of the hit film *The Jazz Singer* (1927, dir. Alan Crosland). As sound film developed in the early 1930s, so did standardisation of the accompaniment expected for film – the large instrumental ensemble (Anderson 1987, 293). Although impressive improvised music could still be heard throughout the 1920s, performances in the average theatre were not well-synchronised and therefore did not sound as polished and cohesive as 'sound film'. This resulted in a general phasing out of accompanists such that improvised piano and organ accompaniment became a thing of the past (ibid).

The so-called 'Golden Age of Hollywood' spanned from the early 1930s till the 1960s. Hollywood consolidated standardised film music practices and exported them globally where they were quickly adopted (Slobin 2008, vii-viii). The remainder of this chapter explores the ways in which technological and cultural shifts in the field of filmmaking resulted in changing trends in the improvisational and compositional scoring practices of the time.

Steiner and Korngold: Paradigms in Scoring Practice

Composers Max Steiner and Erich Korngold were both prominent and successful figures in film music in the 'Golden Age of Hollywood'. I have chosen to discuss these two composers' approaches to scoring because they both involved improvisation to some degree despite the fact that their working methods were very different. Examining their

processes reveals the persistence of improvisation in scoring practice into the era of synchronised sound and of the new roles it inhabited. In his essay "Scoring the Film", Steiner reveals his creative process:

> I begin working on themes for the different characters and scenes but without the regard for the required timing. During this period, I also try to digest what I have seen and try to plan for the music for the picture … I run the picture reel by reel to refresh my memory. Then I put my stopwatch on the piano and try to compose the music that is necessary for the picture within the limits allowed by this timing … Once all my themes are set, I am apt to discard them and compose others, because, frequently, after I have worked on a picture for a little while, my feeling [toward] it changes. (Quoted in Wegele 2014, 8-9)

Steiner would watch the film then work on writing themes away from the image. After refreshing his memory by watching the film again he would work on fitting those themes into the required timing based on cue sheets. He put his "stopwatch on the piano", so it is presumed he would compose at the piano. It seems from his account that he would perform material on the piano that he had prewritten and attempt to fit it into the limits of the timing of the film, as opposed to freely improvising to the picture.

Korngold took a much more improvisatory approach to scoring than Steiner did. As Korngold states, "I am not composing at a desk writing music mechanically, so to speak, for the lengths of film measured out by an assistant and accompanied with sketchy notes on the action … I do my composing in the projection room" (quoted in Winters 2007, 22). Korngold's film scoring practice focused on generating musical material from his own improvisations at the piano in tandem with the film and then editing and refining that material afterwards. Hugo Friedhofer collaborated with both Korngold and Steiner as their orchestrator for many years and had therefore attained an intimate understanding of their differing creative processes. He compares their approaches:

> Steiner, after running the picture once – at the most twice – would depend entirely on cue sheets … Korngold did all his work in the projection room – just improvising to the film. After seeing the film the first time … he would go home and start inventing themes. Then his next running would be in the projection room with a small upright piano, and he improvised on the material that he had dreamt up … He'd start making very rough sketches, which he'd take home and refine. Then he'd come back the next day and check and double-check for timing and what-not. (Quoted in Wegele 2014, 211)

The composers also had different approaches to working with external creative forces. Steiner preferred to work alone in a predetermined fashion and did not appreciate

interference from anybody in his music-making process. In an interview regarding the film *Gone with the Wind* (1939) Steiner claims he refused to let even director Victor Flemming work with him on the score (Schreibman & Steiner 2004, 42). In his own words regarding autonomy in his compositional process:

> No, nobody works with me. I don't let anybody ever tell me anything. Nothing! If I did in one or two instances, it was always fatal. People have no feeling. They have no influence at all. Not even [producer] David Selznick. I always write at home. I write all my cue sheets at home. I look at the picture once or twice. I have a very good memory and after I see it twice, I can play every part of the picture. (Ibid)

Unlike Steiner, Korngold was open to collaborating with both musicians and non-musicians in his music-making process, and believed in consulting with his music supervisors and securing consent from producers before proceeding to execute his creative intentions (Winters 2007, 24). During the 'Golden Age of Hollywood', the major film studios released films almost weekly and as a result an efficient division of labour was required to allow the more sought-after composers to be available for as many films as possible. Thus orchestrators were employed in order to help complete composers' scores (Wegele 2014, 13). Roy Prendergast writes that the sketches of composers like Aaron Copland, Adolph Deutch, David Raksin or Jerry Goldsmith were so detailed that the orchestrators acted in essence as "intelligent copyists" – interpreting the material with minimal creative input or interference of their own (1992, 86). Steiner's view was that they should merely follow his instructions: "the orchestrator just takes what he is given to do, and if he has any ideas of his own, he had better not show them" (quoted in Wegele 2014, 14). On the other end of the spectrum, Korngold would occasionally turn to his orchestrators to compose complete cues for his scores (Winters 2007, 24). Orchestrator Friedhofer said of Korngold that "he came to rely more and more on my discretion in the matter of color and voicing, and in many instances would discuss with me the orchestrations of sections" (quoted idem, 26).

It is clear that in the 'Golden Age of Hollywood', improvisatory practice remained a feature of the scoring process, although not necessarily as the *primary* compositional tool employed by every composer. I discuss in the next chapter how contemporary scoring practice mirrors this trend of different composers opting to use varying approaches to improvisation and collaboration.

Elevator to the Gallows: An Example from French New Wave Cinema

Hollywood moved into a different era in the 1950s and 60s: a shift away from the standard studio system that had dominated filmmaking during the Golden Age and towards more independent cinema resulted in the introduction of more popular styles of music, including jazz. This had ramifications regarding improvisation in screen music. Improvisation was reintroduced as a foundational scoring approach in Louis Malle's 1958 French New Wave film *Elevator to the Gallows* (*Ascenseur pour l'échafaud*). Miles Davis provided the improvised jazz ensemble score. Why did Malle choose to employ an improvised score for what is seemingly a straightforward crime caper and how did this decision influence mainstream approaches to filmmaking? Critic Richard Brody writes that "Malle did seek to be of the moment, and deployed documentary-style techniques that both aimed to catch what he thought was its essence and that signified it. He caught it, above all, in Davis's music" (2016, n.p.). Brody claims that through Malle's efforts to create a modern film that employed improvisational techniques, "he sought to refresh the French cinema, and he did so; those who came next … took advantage of the invigorating new atmosphere and revolutionized the cinema itself" (ibid). In a 1988 interview, Davis' tour organiser Marcel Romano recounts the process by which the score was created:

> Miles was explained the details of the story, the relationship between the characters, and he took a few notes. The session was to take place a fortnight later … Miles therefore had all the time to think about this recording. He asked for a piano in his hotel room and when I visited him I saw him work in a very casual way, he wrote a few phrases, and then bits of themes that were used later for *Elevator to the Gallows*. It is therefore with some melodic ideas in mind that he entered the studio on December 5, 1957. (Musiq XXL 2012, n.p.)

It is clear from the above account that Davis engaged in some degree of musical preparation ahead of the recording, inspired by the narrative and characters in an abstract sense. The time-frame in which he contemplated the material was relatively long, which afforded Davis the opportunity for multiple revisions to his foundational and thematic material prior to the first actual recording to picture with the full ensemble. Romano explains that "Malle had prepared scenes that had to include music, and projected them on loop" and then he "supervised the session and decided whether such [music] was appropriate for the image or not" (ibid). Malle directly influenced the score by choosing what he felt worked and discarding what he felt did not. The process of editing, shifting and discarding original music by which directors and other non-musical actors have a

direct influence on the intention and effect of the score, is a phenomenon that I discuss further in the next chapter. Pierre Michelot, Davis's bassist, describes how the instructions given to the ensemble during the recording were rather loose and it necessitated the development of a new perspective on the compositional process:

> What characterized this session is having no defined theme. It was very new for its time, especially for film music … We had nothing from Miles Davis but brief details. In fact, he just asked us to play two chords - minor and dominant 7 - four measures of each and performing *rubato*. This too was new; the songs were not measured in time. There were semblances of structures, but they were slightly expanded in relation to what would usually be played. (Musiq XXL 2012, n.p.)

Elevator to the Gallows tells the story of Julien Tavernier who has taken his boss's wife Florence as his lover. Julien and Florence plot to kill his boss but Julien gets trapped inside an elevator. Meanwhile, a thief steals Julien's car and drives to a motel where he murders a couple and Julien unwittingly becomes the prime suspect of the murder.

Krin Gabbard discusses what he perceives as the limits of jazz and improvisation in scoring narrative cinema: during the scene where Florence sees a man get out of a car that she thinks might be Julien's, Davis holds a long note on his trumpet while the audience has the task of working out whether or not this man is Julien[1]. As both Florence and the audience realise that it is *not* Julien, Davis returns to his agitated improvising (Gabbard 2007, 264). Gabbard believes that Davis knew when it was sensible not to interfere with a crucial plot point in the narrative. If the music is too engaging, one finds oneself listening to it and neglecting the film – a limitation of jazz and improvisation in the scoring of narrative film (ibid). When Gabbard describes jazz as distracting and engaging, he is presumably referring to the fact that improvisation (especially in jazz) often calls attention to itself as a result of its virtuosity. It is true of course that not *all* forms of musical improvisation and not *all* forms of jazz are virtuosic in nature or musically 'busy' and distracting to the standard audience. Moreover, the notion that screen music should necessarily avoid being "too engaging" is not universally held. Claudia Gorbman, in her foundational film music text *Unheard Melodies*, argues "invisibility" and "inaudibility" are two important principles in the classical Hollywood film score (1987, 73-79). Of

[1] See below for further contextual analysis.

course she did not mean *actually* inaudible; her point is that music is subordinate to "the dramatic and emotional dictates of the film narrative" (75).

Gabbard clearly subscribes to Gorbman's view that a successful score should not assert itself as a foregrounded element ahead of the narrative. Other scholars and composers differ, however. Composer Danny Elfman, for example, believes that in some styles of filmmaking, the music is *supposed* to be noticed as much as the main characters (The Hollywood Reporter 2014). Thus, even if an improvised score is at forefront of the film's focus, this is not necessarily a limitation as Gabbard suggests, rather it may simply represent a unified creative choice that the filmmaker and composer have made.

Florence's night-time walk through the streets of Paris is the only scene in which the band plays for more than a few uninterrupted minutes at a stretch. It does seem that Davis followed the image closely. The music is in the Dorian flat five mode and moves along at a languorous pace of seventy beats per minute, despite the frantic thoughts and emotions that Florence experiences.



Fig. 4: Miles Davis improvising to screen for Elevator to the Gallows

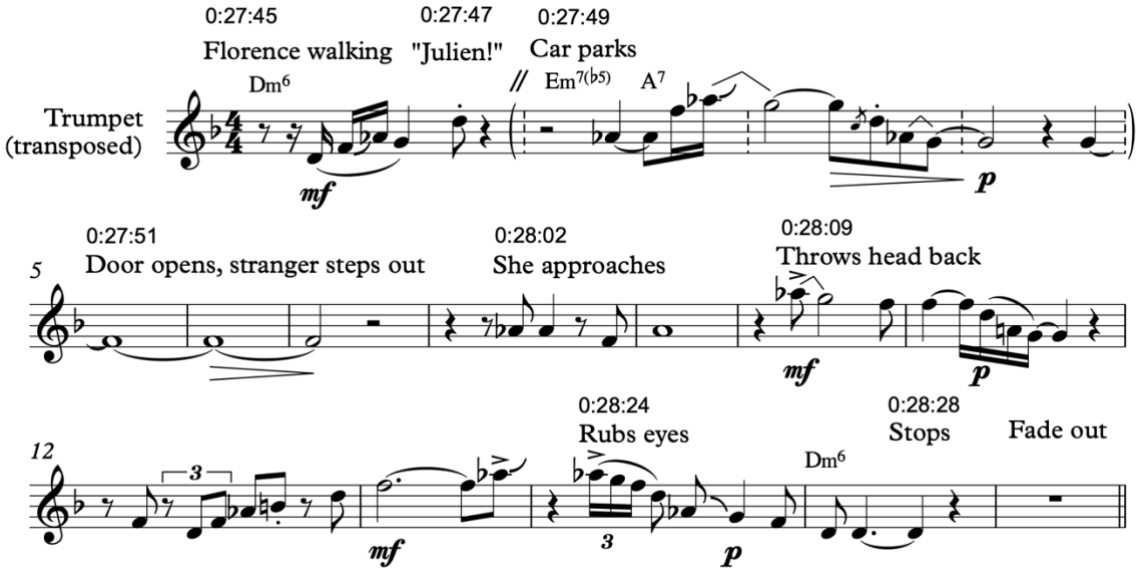


*Fig. 5: My transcription of an excerpt from Miles Davis' trumpet solo in "Générique" with timecodes and annotations (*Elevator to the Gallows*, 0:27:45-0:28:30)*

Florence ambles towards some cars and the music 'ambles' along with her, repeating a four note pattern from earlier that outlines and reinforces the piece's diminished sonority (0:27:45, measure 1). When she sees the car she exclaims "Julien!" and Davis punctuates her hopeful cry with a leap upwards of a perfect fifth to the tonic but supresses its full expression with staccato as Florence and the audience remain expectant (0:27:47, m. 1). At 0:27:29 there is an awkward and abrupt break for silence while the camera pans to the car parking. The music resumes on a soft sustained minor third when the door opens and it is revealed that, anticlimactically, it is a stranger (0:27:51, m. 5). Davis holds the note so as to allow Florence and the audience the space to realise that it is not Julien (Gabbard 2007, 264). Listening to the track "Générique" on the official soundtrack album reveals that three measures have been removed. As discussed above, Malle tampered with the original placement of the recordings and edited them to fit the picture as he desired. The effect of the edit is that the brief and abrupt absence of music disrupts the established flow and focusses the audience's attention on Florence's unresolved expectancy, highlighting the overall tension. Resuming the music when it is subdued accentuates the non-event and Florence's subsequent disappointment. By removing and repositioning musical material he felt should not accompany the film, Malle has arguably left his thumbprint as much on the score as Davis's. The melody resumes as Florence approaches the car (0:28:02, m. 10). When she throws her head back in agitation, Davis hits a high accented

flat 5 and descends from there, mirroring her descent into desperation. As her stony-faced façade falters and she rubs her eyes in frustration, the melody tumbles towards the tonic (0:28:24, mm. 14-15). She stops walking at 0:28:28 and Davis stops too, bringing the energy level down and allowing the ensemble to fade out as the film transitions to the next scene (0:28:30, m. 16).

Improvisation as a Stylistic Sound

This score clearly still resonates: director Lee Chang-dong recontextualises and uses it in the South Korean film *Burning* (2018) for a scene where the characters smoke marijuana and the female protagonist Hae-mi dances:

> I needed the music in that scene to have a sense of freedom since that's what Hae-mi's dance is about. I wanted to use music that has this specific quality that jazz has where it feels like there's no beginning or end. That song is called "Lift to the Scaffold" and I like the sort of bad omen feeling that comes from that title.[2] (Quoted in Ganjavie 2018)



Fig. 6: Hae-mi dancing to Davis's "Générique" in Burning

Chang-dong utilised the music mostly for the improvisatory 'sound' that jazz has (a concept that I engage with further in the following chapter). Chang-dong chose to use this piece of music despite the fact that Davis' original improvisation is no longer pertinent to

[2] *Lift to the Scaffold* is actually an alternative title for *Elevator to the Gallows*. The track is titled "Générique". Chang-dong's mistake further reveals the distance between his thought processes and decisions and the original context of the music.

the narrative that it accompanies. It is an oversimplification to say that what makes a piece of music 'improvised' is its attachment to the moment in time in which it was generated: ultimately, it does not matter how the music was initially conceived and utilised, only how it *currently* interacts with whatever narrative it accompanies. In the example of *Burning*, improvisation is abstracted from its original spatio-temporality, re-appropriated and assessed as a stylistic choice (amongst other things). This does, however, muddy the waters in terms of distilling the critical element of characteristically improvised music, as opposed to non-improvised music. Chang-dong explains his intention:

> The dancing in this scene really signifies her entire presence in the film … searching for the meaning of life and really seeking true freedom … You see all these elements that represent aspects of our lives – even the Miles Davis tune … I didn't want it to feel like it was directed or staged; I wanted it to feel as if we were able to capture this slice of life very coincidentally, and to capture Hae-mi's pursuit of freedom. (Quoted in Brzeski 2018)

Having the music accompany Hae-mi might also in some way reference Florence's yearning energy in *Elevator to the Gallows*. Regardless, its use in *Burning* indicates how improvised music can function to create a sense of liberation and freshness. Chang-dong's choice to use improvised jazz in order to elevate the regular 'slice of life' into the cinematic, shows how central improvisation continues to be to the cinematic experience.

Conclusion

In examining the compositional practices in select early- to middle-period film music, it becomes clear that musical improvisation was part of cinema from the beginning and that it evolved and extended beyond the end of the silent film era. Technological advances and shifting expectations for film did, however, lead to the demise of live, improvised film accompaniment, changing the nature of improvisation's role within screen music.

The scoring approaches explored include:

- Live performance of popular or improvised musical numbers incidental to the film;
- Music constructed to reinforce a cohesive narrative, using 'cue sheets' to match existing music to the on-screen action;
- Performance from photoplay compositions based on specific moods and thematic tropes;

- Thematic material developed through compositional techniques and improvised to specific moods or scenes;
- Predetermined material adjusted into the film's edit, *à la* Steiner;
- Preference for working alone without external interference in the music-making process, *à la* Steiner;
- Material generated at one's instrument from improvisations to picture and refined afterwards, *à la* Korngold;
- Collaboration with both musicians and non-musicians in the music-making process, *à la* Korngold;
- Preparation of musical material ahead of improvisation, inspired by narrative or character;
- Striving for an "inaudible" score;
- Assertion of the score as a foregrounded element ahead of the narrative;
- Utilisation of the 'sound' of improvisation as a stylistic choice.

The following chapter investigates how improvisatory processes remain a feature in contemporary screen music and how those processes are found in a multiplicity of compositional and collaborative creative practices.

CHAPTER 3: IMPROVISATIONAL PROCESSES IN SELECT CONTEMPORARY SCREEN MUSIC PRACTICES

Introduction

In this chapter I investigate different approaches to improvisation in contemporary scoring practice, spanning roughly from the late twentieth century till the present day. This includes an investigation into purely improvised screen music, and the use of improvisation as part of more conventional composition processes. My intention is not to provide a comprehensive account of international contemporary scoring practices but rather to explore trajectories and trends in improvisational processes in specific contemporary scoring practices. I compare the nature and effect of anticipative screen music and reactive improvised screen music, investigate the interplay between collaboration and improvisation, and examine how predetermined material might be used to create improvised scores. I discuss how experimentation is inherent in predetermined compositional modes and conclude with an examination of improvised film music generated within the context of an improvising ensemble.

Anticipative Versus Reactive Music

A constraint inherent in purely improvised scoring is that the music has a limited capacity to anticipate and foreshadow on-screen events – it more naturally functions to highlight and react to events. Of course, this is only the case when the composer knows little about the narrative of the film such that the potential for foresight and planning is limited. It is still possible for a composer who knows little about a film's genre or premise beforehand to provide music that anticipates certain events or moods as the narrative unfolds. It is also possible to anticipate events without necessarily being conscious of what those might be at the time by relying on an intuition for narrative formulae or even coincidence. In any case, predetermined scores allow far more for the possibility of anticipating and foreshadowing on-screen events. One form of anticipative music that is still popular in contemporary scoring practice borrows from a system of leading motifs or *leitmotifs* that Richard Wagner pioneered with his opera *The Ring Cycle*: recognisable musical signifiers

representing characters, locations or concepts in order to foreshadow events or psychologically manipulate the audience. Along with having some knowledge of the narrative and thus the capacity for pre-empting and foreshadowing events comes the capacity to reference the interior life of the narrative or character. As musicologist Robert Donington explains, these are "the motives by which Wagner so often reveals the unspoken thought behind the words, the plotting personality behind the smooth exterior, the unavowed intention behind the actions" (1963, 33-34). Only when the composer has the luxury of having time are they able to dwell on how the score could be constructed so as to reference implicit events and intentions. Completely improvised scores and the human beings with finite resources who create them have limited capacity to afford a film enough thematic intertwining to proactively manipulate the audience.

In the previous chapter I showed that improvised music in early film production existed primarily for pragmatic reasons and that its presence made functional sense. The question that then bears asking is whether film in the era of synchronised sound remains an appropriate medium for improvised musical accompaniment: since filmmaking has progressed beyond the strict *need* for improvised music, why would a filmmaker *wish* to have an improvised score? As I have noted, improvised scores in which the composer performs to screen in real time upon first viewing, seem to have some creative limitations: depending on the extent of their prior knowledge of the film, the composer may be no more 'ahead' of the audience in anticipating the narrative and thus their score is primarily reactive. Surely an improvised score would only serve to hamstring a filmmaker's carefully constructed vision, which makes meticulous use of every creative department, from the script to makeup and costumes, in order to convey the intended narrative and manipulate the audience's response? Yet contemporary filmmakers *do* utilise improvised music in various forms, ranging from scores that are completely improvised to those that employ certain improvisatory elements but that are otherwise premeditatively planned. Examples that I discuss include but are not limited to: *Dead Man* (1995, dir. Jim Jarmusch), *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (1996, dir. Mira Nair), *Story of a Beautiful Country* (2004, dir. Khalo Matabane), *Life of Pi* (2012, dir. Ang Lee), *Rush* (2013, dir. Ron Howard), *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014, dir. Alejandro Iñárritu). As I argue in this chapter, an improvised score may potentially result in a film

that feels ‘fresher’ and more spontaneous. It could be argued that when a composer cedes (some) control and does not attempt to manipulate and micro-manage every part of a score, the music ceases to act as an omnipotent and overly-controlling force. Music that is not over-thought potentially allows for pleasing chance synchronisations of sound and image to occur as a film unspools in real time. The music might be less tied to the need to represent character or intention and function more as a piece of work in its own right – ‘unobtrusive’ to a film. This idea is similar to composer Erik Satie’s concept of ‘*musique d’ameublement*’ or ‘furniture music’. His score to the avant-garde film *Entr’acte* (1924, dir. René Clair) is written in this fashion and is marked by the composer’s “apparent refusal to ‘interpret’ the film” through his music (Marks 1997, 169). He did not write *leitmotifs* or mood pieces to accompany the images but rather composed a score based on brief repetitive patterns and there is at times hardly any relationship between the music and the image. Satie explains that the purpose of ‘furniture music’ is “to satisfy ‘useful’ needs. Art does not enter into this … it fills the same role as light and heat – as comfort in all its forms” (ibid). Music as a type of comforting “vibration” (ibid) can be heard in the form of background music in waiting rooms and supermarkets. Perhaps improvised screen music could be placed in a similar category.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Lang and West write that a musician who improvises accomplishes more than the average performer and is able to “give the spectator that most illusive [*sic*] of all experiences, a thrill!” (1920, 26). They claim there is something refreshing and exciting about improvised music. Perhaps they are describing the excitement of hearing music for a sequence of film that is primarily reactive in nature and therefore departs from the expectations and clichés that primarily predetermined music engenders (like the hackneyed cues for romances, chases, etc., in photoplay anthologies). This ‘freshness’ is discussed by composer Thomas Newman in reference to a favourite moment from composer Alan Slivestri’s film work. Newman recalls a scene from *Romancing the Stone* (1984, dir. Robert Zemeckis) wherein the characters traverse a rickety bridge accompanied by a growling alto flute. Newman suspected that Silvestri told the flautist to improvise and “just blow”. Silvestri confirms Newman’s suspicions to which he excitedly responds “I knew it! I knew it!”. Newman regards that moment as “fresh” and a “true inspiration process-wise” (The Hollywood Reporter 2013).

A final point regarding the primarily reactive nature of improvised screen music is that it might be thought to communicate to the audience a kind of meta-narrative: it tells them how the composer feels while watching the film (to all intents and purposes, with them), which in turn affects their own reactions to the film. This could of course be said of all screen music and other filmmaking elements too, but in the case of improvised screen music accompaniment, the audience is especially aware of the composer as a corporeal conduit for communicating a generally unmediated response to the film. The audience has little choice but to be aware of the humanity behind the music because it is clearly present and tangible. That process has become somewhat obscured in the conventional contemporary film-going experience: the audience is not forced to think about the humanity behind any of the filmmaking elements. With the synchronisation of film and sound, music could also become as spatio-temporally abstracted and impersonal an element as any other in the filmmaking process. It could be argued that sharing a connection to another person's unmediated experiences of a film (in this case, an improvising musician's) might amplify of the film's emotional effect.

Collaborative Improvisation in Scoring Practice

Redefining Authorship

The filmmaking process is particularly collaborative in comparison to other art forms. Individuals not trained in music are inevitably involved in the production of music for screen. It is not uncommon for a director or picture editor to move pieces of music around so that they accompany scenes that the composer may not have intended them to, undermining the composer's autonomy in the scoring process. How is the idea of authorship affected when a screen composer collaborates with improvising musicians, orchestrators or non-musicians? If the director or editor repositions a piece of music that had been improvised over a specific sequence of film, might such an intervention redefine whether or not that score could still be considered improvised?

In the previous chapter I discussed how composers have different approaches to working with external creative forces. Max Steiner preferred autonomy in his compositional process and Erich Korngold invited collaboration. Contemporary scoring practice continues this trend: some composers (such as Hans Zimmer and Danny Elfman) always

hand over their sketches to orchestrators, while others (such as Alexandre Desplat and Howard Shore) usually prefer to orchestrate their own music. As a result of his limited understanding of formal music theory and high work volume, Zimmer always employs orchestrators: on the film *Gladiator* (2000, dir. Ridley Scott) he had a team of six orchestrators.

Another aspect of screen music that often goes uncredited and is seldom critically examined is the practice of drawing on improvising musicians and incorporating their improvisations into the score. I observed the phenomenon of composer collaborating with improviser when I visited the studio of South African composer Philip Miller. He was working on Andrew Dosunmu's film *Where is Kyra?* (2017) and had employed violinist Waldo Alexander to record a part that he had written. Miller had only a rough cut of the film at the time and was ostensibly writing and recording a suite for the director as opposed to scoring to picture. The first few takes were recorded as 'straight' as possible, with Alexander sight-reading Miller's notation. Alexander then procured an effects pedal and the session evolved into an experimental improvisation where the original articulations, timing and bar divisions were no longer of prime focus – only the core notes remained the same. The above instance shows how the notion of composition is often fluid and complex, and can be redefined based on the particular creative process that is undertaken. Further examples of scores wherein composers collaborated with performing musicians whose improvisations are incorporated into or fundamentally inform the music include Miles Davis's and others' contributions on Jack Nitzsche's score for *The Hot Spot* (1990, dir. Dennis Hopper) and Mychael Danna's score for *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (1996, dir. Mira Nair). I discuss the latter example and how it fits into the wider context of Danna's creative process at length in the following chapter.

Post-Improvisation Manipulation

Directors sometimes intervene in improvised scores by rearranging or editing parts of the improvised music – transforming the score into something that is in some way 're-composed' in a predetermined fashion. This process is not specific to improvised scores of course, but with improvised scores the result may be music at some remove from the composer's original intention. As noted previously, for Miles Davis's score to *Elevator*

to the Gallows, Malle decided which takes were most appropriate for particular scenes and would discard those he did not wish to use and place those he preferred in the relevant positions (Musiq XXL 2012). Similarly, director Jim Jarmusch states that the final edit of *Dead Man* (1995) changed after Neil Young had improvised the score, allowing for the possibility that Young's music was subsequently edited and repositioned in relation to the sequences of shots (Film Society of Lincoln Center, 2014). I explore the compositional process employed for *Dead Man* in further detail later.

A more recent instance of 'tampering' with an improvised score is *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014, dir. Alejandro Iñárritu). It is the story of Riggan, a washed-up actor who tries to reclaim his fame on Broadway with a new play. Iñárritu employed jazz drummer Antonio Sanchez to create the score. Iñárritu sent Sanchez the script and he began working on passages that were "very pattern-oriented, where each character had a different rhythmic theme" (quoted in Pond 2014). Iñárritu told Sanchez that approaching the score thematically was the wrong way to go about things and suggested a more spontaneous, organic and improvisational approach. Sanchez explains how he and Iñárritu would sketch out the film scene by scene:

> I said to Alejandro, 'Why don't you sit in front of me, and think of the scene as I'm playing? … When you see him [Riggan] leave the dressing room, raise your hand. When he enters the stage, raise your hand' … Every time he raised his hand, I would change texture. It was an amazingly fun challenge. Being a jazz drummer, I am used to improvising, but I usually don't do it with imagery. (Quoted in Pond 2014)

It is interesting to note that Sanchez improvised to Iñárritu's *descriptions* of the scenes and not to the moving images themselves, yet Sanchez refers to this abstract mental picture of the narrative as "imagery". I expand on this particular compositional process in Chapter Five. Iñárritu adds to the above account: "We recorded something like 70 pieces based on the emotions that I needed, and when I was assembling the film I started playing with them" (quoted in Pond 2014). While assembling the film, Iñárritu rearranged and edited the seventy or so pieces of improvised material that Sanchez had generated. As such, one could consider the director in this case to be a composing agent who transformed the improvised music into somewhat of a predetermined score.



Fig. 7: Riggan in his dressing room in Birdman

I look now at a specific scene and investigate how the synchronicity of image and sound operates. On the official soundtrack album, the cue is titled "Internal War".[3]

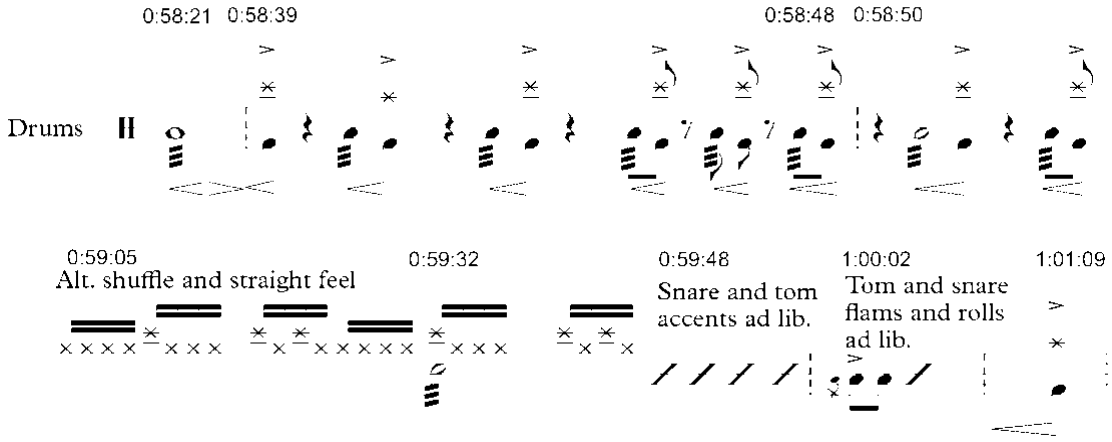


Fig. 8: *My score reduction of an excerpt from Sanchez's* Birdman *score with timecodes (0:58:21-1:01:20)*

Sanchez employs dynamically varying floor tom rolls which build tension and set the scene for an emotionally turbulent Riggan as he storms off to his dressing room following a scuffle with his co-star (0:58:21, m. 1). A successively shortened series of floor tom

[3] I have re-scored sections from *Birdman* in my portfolio of works, including this cue. Further discussion appears in Chapter 6.

rolls with china and crash cymbal accents give expression to his aggression, as he pounds his fist on the wall of the hallway (0:58:39, m. 2). The score allows for silence while Birdman berates Riggan in an internal dialogue (0:58:50, m. 3) followed by two more rolls and cymbal hits, the last of which is synchronised with him smashing a tray against the wall. A driving cymbal pattern pushes and pulls by alternating between shuffle and straight feels (0:59:05). Irregular accents on the hi-hat and china cymbal create a sense of frenzied and continuous movement which acts as a counterpoint to Riggan's failing attempts to calm himself down and quieten Birdman's voice. Birdman's verbal torrent continues unabated while snare rolls thicken the texture and increase tension (0:59:32). As Birdman gains more of a hold over Riggan's mind, snare and tom accents create a sense of chaotic aggression (0:59:48). Tom and snare flams, drags and rolls enter sporadically, broadening the dynamic range and texture as Birdman reminds Riggan of his successful past and present failure (1:00:02, m. 4). There is a final build-up to Riggan smashing his Birdman poster accented with a cymbal and kick drum hit (1:01:09, m. 5), ending with silence while the audience re-adjusts into 'objective reality' as his agent enters the room (1:01:20). Sanchez improvised the material for this scene to a description of the events and not to frame, and as such many of the aforementioned synchronicities must have been cultivated primarily by Iñárritu during the editing process. It is therefore a noteworthy example of how the manipulation of improvised music in collaborative filmmaking compels one to reassess notions around improvisation and authorship.

Predetermined Material as a Basis for Improvisation

As has been shown, multiple methods that incorporate improvisation are available to screen composers. One method is to utilise predetermined material as a foundation for building improvisations, and there are a multiplicity of ways in which that process might take shape. A relatively recent example of improvised music functioning in this mode is evident in Neil Young's score for *Dead Man*. It is the story of William Blake, who in the late nineteenth century travels to the West and ends up a wanted criminal. He meets a Native American called Nobody who leads him back to the 'land of the spirits'. Young viewed his role as similar to that of a traditional silent film accompanist, improvising to the film in real time:

> *Dead Man* was basically a silent movie … I had the film projected on TV screens, and I had, like, about 20 TVs all around me, big ones, little ones, tiny little

> portables, and wide screens and everything hanging from the ceiling in a big semicircle all the way around me … I had my instruments inside the circle. So the instruments were always close enough for me to go from one to another, and they were all set up and the levels were all set, and everything was recording … I played all the way through live. I'd put my guitar down and walk over and play the piano in the bar when there's a bar scene … then I'd pick up the electric guitar again and get all my distorted sounds out of that to go with the Indian drums and the things that were happening in the film. (Quoted in Gross 2004)

Although Young describes it as "all a real-time experience", he did prepare thematic material to use as the basis for his real-time improvisations:

> I actually had two themes that I used. And one of them had to do with violence because there was a string of violence … and the theme was very simple. It only had three notes in it, so I just, you know, replayed it, repeated it in different ways and explored it live during the playback of the film. (Ibid)

Young's method involved improvising to an uninterrupted rough cut of the film that he watched several times in a row (Kulezic-Wilson 2015, 129). He created a theme and sub-theme then recorded improvisations to picture in real time which followed the diegetic on-screen events, extemporised on the predetermined thematic material and improvised new material. In a sense, Young did not rework and edit his initial drafts further, but rather left them as they were and considered them to be the final product. This is a similar process to other composers who 'jam' to the film in order to summon some initial material, however they continue to rework that material in relation to the film an indefinite amount of times (deadlines permitting) until they are satisfied with what they deem a finished product. In this case, Jarmusch deemed Young's work on the project a finished product from which to pick and choose for the final takes.



Fig. 9: Blake and Nobody in Dead Man

I look now at a particular scene and investigate what is effective about Young's score. I transcribed the "A" theme and "B" sub-theme that he manipulates melodically, harmonically, rhythmically and sonically throughout the film:

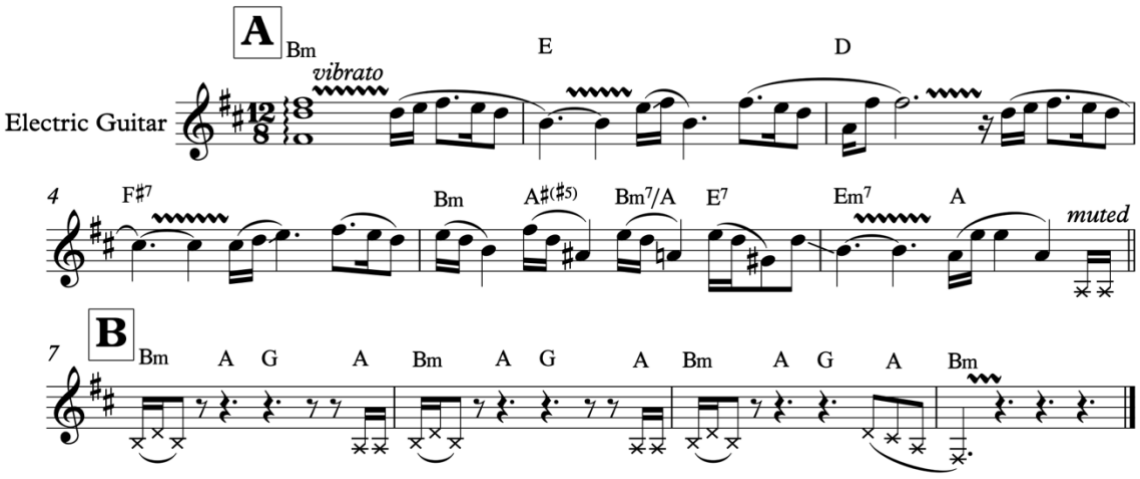


Fig. 10: My score reduction of Young's theme and sub-theme for Dead Man

The predetermined material is improvised upon notably in a cue where Nobody is travelling with an injured Blake:

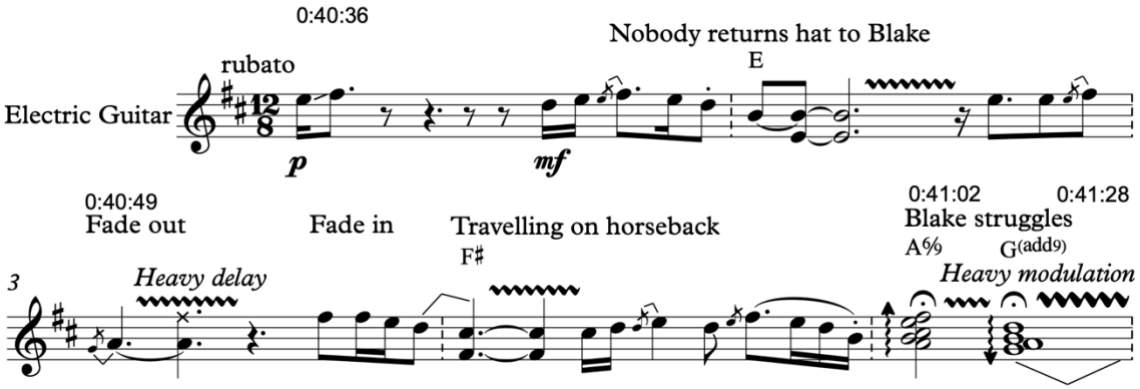


Fig. 11: My transcription of an excerpt from Young's Dead Man *score, with timecodes and annotations (0:40:36-0:41:28)*

While Nobody tries on Blake's hat, a playful rising dyad sounds softly (0:40:36, m. 1). As he returns the hat, the melodic content from the first phrase of the "A" theme is heard, leading into an implied E chord ringing out (m. 2). Young uses a rhythmic cell of two short note values followed by one longer value as the foundation for the "B" theme. This cell appears and is manipulated throughout (for example at the end of m. 2). As the scene fades out and back in to find them travelling, the distorted notes hang in the air laden with

reverb and delay effects, fluidly bridging the sequences (0:40:49, m. 3). The "A" material continues to be referenced in mm. 3 and 4, with improvised tweaks to the pitch content and a rubato rhythm. The angle switches to Blake's point of view while he struggles and sways deliriously in his saddle, and Young reinforces this motion and the feeling of unease by playing halting stepwise descending chords with modulating vibrato and pitch bends (0:41:02-0:41:28, m. 5). Young utilises predetermined material (*Fig. 7*) as a foundation for building improvisations (*Fig. 8*), one methodology for incorporating improvisation in scoring practice that a contemporary screen composer might employ.

Experimentation

Creating an improvised score based on predetermined material as Young did is by no means the only way that a composer might generate a thematically driven score using improvisatory techniques. The process of generating musical material for a score can and often does necessitate experimentation and thus improvisation. Howard Shore's music for *The Lord of the Rings* films (2001-2003, dir. Peter Jackson) is built on a vast interconnected network of predetermined themes. Shore explains how musicologist Doug Adams has analysed the scores:

> I consider music an emotional language, particularly with this kind of subject, and my approach was often intuitive, an expression of the moment. Doug was a detective uncovering clues, tracing how one theme or character related to another. He not only shows the themes and motifs for characters, cultures, and objects and their connection to Tolkien's work but also the ideas that were sometimes buried deep inside the writing … Even now when I approach the score, I am still uncovering things about it. (Quoted in Adams 2011, xi)

Shore's process was one of comprehensively planned writing taking into account much of Tolkien's body of work before committing any music to picture. It is interesting that he claims he is "still uncovering things about the score", which seems to indicate that although he wrote the music with immense forethought, the element of intuition, which guided his decisions in the first place, emanates from a place that he cannot fully access at will.[4] Of course, we cannot know how much of the material's interconnectedness is owing to intuition, or possibly even chance, and how much of it is a case of pre-calculation and editing. Although Shore primarily used pencil and manuscript paper to create the thematic material, that process was not devoid of organic experimentation. As

[4] I briefly examine intuition and improvisation in Chapter Five.

he explains: "I was imagining and creating music; then, only after I'd written a few hours, I could see what was evolving in the writing"[5] (quoted in Adams 2011, 7).

Hans Zimmer employs an altogether different approach to predetermined writing:

> When you're writing on the computer, the way I do, you're performing every note. At one point or another every note that is in the score has been played by me and been fiddled around with by me … The thing I'm trying to do is change the whole way we look at the process. We start forming the sound, shaping the sound from day one. Before the shoot even starts we start doing the final mix, we're heading towards that. And so the recording engineer and the mix engineer should be involved in the writing process. (Quoted in Soundworks Collection 2016, n.p.)

Zimmer uses a sound-focused methodology that takes into account the film as a whole. Although he claims he "performs" all the music he composes, he is clearly not referring to the parts of his scores that require recording live instrumental specialists (a topic I discuss further in the following chapter). What Zimmer means by "fiddling around" includes recording improvised performances on the MIDI controller – 'throwing things against the wall and seeing what sticks' and then editing that material. This is a process that is common in contemporary scoring practice but was not the primary approach in Shore's *Rings*. Zimmer is not trained in music theory and therefore his inability to approach a score through technical aspects such as harmony and counterpoint has led him to compose primarily through trial and error, improvisation and collaboration with other musicians (Hexel 2016, 36).

In the modern-day studio, recording and editing technology that is available to composers, such as Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs), allows for easy and limitless self-editing. This creates a freedom to experiment and capture improvised passages, be they MIDI or acoustic recordings, and manipulate the sound endlessly. The improvisatory process of trial and error is what composers Danny Elfman, Trent Reznor and others term "laboratory time" in which to experiment by "trying everything but the kitchen sink" (quoted in The Hollywood Reporter 2014). This is a factor in how contemporary composers incorporate improvisation in both more and fewer ways: the ease of inputting

[5] This may have been achieved by entering a 'flow' state, employing something akin to 'active imagination', see Fertel 2017.

improvisations can be a catalyst for generating material but it also allows for almost infinite second-guessing and the 'killing' of improvisation, potentially mitigating any gains that the process might encourage. The way that current technology easily manages the synchronisation of music and image can help to facilitate an improvisational 'flow' state but it could also be argued that using DAWs innately forces composers to think more in terms of sync points, direct response to micro-moments and getting caught up in endless possibilities for instrumentation, as opposed to thinking about scoring in more abstract terms of harmony, melody and general emotional response to narrative.

Ensemble Improvisation

Another practice employed to create improvised screen music is composition within an ensemble context. An amusing example of this took place during the third American Presidential Debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in 2016. The television show *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (Columbia Broadcasting System) released a video on *YouTube* titled "Requiem For A Debate" with the description:

> To help improve the viewing experience of the final 2016 Presidential debate, we added the only thing that could possibly even attempt to make it civil – a live, improvised string quartet score, courtesy of PUBLIQuartet. (CBS 2016)

The quartet watched the previous two debates to get an idea of how the format works. They prepared a few themes and "musical jokes" (such as "Yankee Doodle") in advance but otherwise the accompaniment was entirely improvised (Midgette 2016). Instances in which the music follows the developments on-screen include:

> 47:30 – Descending glissando screeches with Trump's tax talk. 1:11:00 – Darkly menacing cello figures to accompany those assertions of a rigged election. 1:28:30 – Comically raspy motifs when Trump interrupts Clinton over Russia. Throughout – Lots of percussive bluegrass influenced moments, and a jazzy nod to those swing states. (Ibid)

By having a relatively fluid overall structure, the quartet was able to improvise while still staying closely in sync with each other, much like Davis's ensemble for *Elevator to the Gallows* where "there were semblances of structures" (Musiq XXL 2012, n.p.).

There is a distinction to be made between music that is improvised to picture and music that is improvised without picture or away from the picture. Korngold wrote a regal theme for *Kings Row* (1942, dir. Sam Wood) before reading the script, assuming it to be a tale

of kings and queens rather than a story of small-town intrigue. After he read the script he still retained the theme. Ben Winters believes that "the idea that superior film music requires constant reference to the image does not necessarily stand up to scrutiny" (2007, 23). For Ron Howard's film *Rush* (2013), Hans Zimmer improvised a lot of the score with a band, before any visual material was available for reference (Chitwood 2013). There is also a distinction to be made between the type of improvisation that Davis captured in his recording session and the type of improvisation that Phillip Miller or Zimmer captured in theirs: Davis's music attempts to capture the narrative, to tell the story of, say, Florence's thought processes (Gabbard 2007, 264). His music is locked to the linear time of the film. Whereas, in Miller's case, he and Alexander were thinking conceptually about mood. By thinking in those terms, an enclosed musical landscape is created that can then be arranged afterwards in relation to the image. I revisit these ideas with regards to Carlo Mombelli in Chapter Five and discuss my own experience creating an improvised score within an ensemble context in Chapter Six.

Conclusion

From my brief survey of contemporary scoring practices it is clear that improvisation continues to play a large, if often unacknowledged, role. I have isolated the scoring approaches discussed as itemised below. They are not mutually exclusive strategies – a single project may utilise a number of these approaches at different times, with one or more approach in operation during any instance of music – and may also involve diegetic or nondiegetic, pre-existing or specially composed music.

- Fully improvised score, where the composer improvises to screen in real time upon first viewing, less tied to the need to represent character or intention;
- Predetermined music and its capacity for proactive audience manipulation;
- Collaboration with
    a. Orchestrators
    b. Improvising musicians
    c. Directors, rearranging or editing the score;
- Improvisation based on predetermined building-blocks;
- Experimentation, using intuitive writing and (e.g. Shore) or recording improvised performances, 'seeing what sticks' and editing (e.g. Zimmer);

- Improvisation within an ensemble context, directly to picture or away from picture.

In my own compositional experiences I confronted and worked through many of the issues raised in this chapter. I have also shown throughout that improvisation never left screen music. It has only found new and adaptive ways to manifest in the multiplicity of processes that constitute contemporary scoring practice. In the following chapter on Mychael Danna's scoring practices, I investigate his unique approaches to incorporating improvisatory processes in contemporary screen music.

CHAPTER 4: IMPROVISATORY PROCESSES IN MYCHAEL DANNA'S SCORING PRACTICE

Introduction

Mychael Danna is a Canadian film composer recognised for his distinctive integration of non-western musical traditions, orchestral and electronic elements. His notable works include the score for Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* (1997), the Academy Award and Golden Globe-winning score for *Life of Pi* (2012, dir. Ang Lee), and his scores for long-time collaborator Atom Egoyan, such as *Exotica* (1994) and *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997). Over the past decade, his works have run the gamut from experimental and genre-bending (e.g. his quirky score for *(500) Days of Summer* with Rob Simonsen (2009, dir. Marc Webb) or the minimalist score for *Moneyball* (2011, dir. Bennett Miller)) to traditionally orchestral and mainstream 'Hollywood' (e.g. the lush orchestral score for the animation *The Good Dinosaur* with brother Jeff Danna (2015, dir. Peter Sohn)). Along with his use of 'world' musics (a term he dislikes for reasons I discuss below), a trademark of Danna's scoring practice throughout his career has been his unique use of improvisatory processes. This chapter explores this in more depth by investigating a variety of his works and compositional philosophies. It serves as an examination of how a successful Hollywood screen composer approaches the use of improvisation. Although, as becomes clear throughout this chapter, Danna can hardly be considered a 'typical' Hollywood composer.

In discussing his processes, I draw extensively upon an interview I conducted with Danna at his studio in Hollywood, Los Angeles on 20 February 2017. I am also indebted to the work composer and musicologist Miguel Mera has done in his book *Mychael Danna's* The Ice Storm: *a Film Score Guide* (2007) on aspects of Danna's compositional process. It is an invaluable resource but far from exhaustive on the subject of Danna's approach to improvisation. This chapter seeks to expand on those aspects, as well as to consider Danna's screen work and compositional processes post-2007. Much of the analysis does not concern 'pure' improvisation *per se*, but rather investigates the profoundly premeditated aspects of Danna's scoring practice, which, as will be shown, are key to understanding his approach to integrating improvisatory processes in his work. A period

of conceptualisation, especially in the early stages of scoring, is a fundamental element of Danna's creative process and often defines his approach to scoring. I turn first to investigate that process.

Approach to Predetermined Scoring

Conceptualisation and Experimentation

Danna's scoring process almost always begins with a period of conceptualisation. His philosophy is that "the first step is not to do anything. You have to think" (quoted in Larson 2002, 33). Danna learned this uncompromisingly logical approach to composition from his tutor Walter Buczynski, during his time as a student at the University of Toronto. Buczynski ensured that Danna was "very disciplined about every note. Every note had to have a justification, a reason, and you had to really think before you wrote" (quoted in Mera 2007, 6). In order to arrive at an authentic musical representation of a film's aims and themes, Danna has taken great care to heed that guidance "to have a skeleton of structure and philosophy underneath what you were doing" (ibid). The conceptualising stage could sometimes take more time to complete than the stage of actual composition, as was the case with the film *Felicia's Journey* (1999, dir. Atom Egoyan) where "it took Danna three months to discover the conceptual framework, but only two weeks to write the actual score" (Mera 2007, 19). This was the result of Danna finding "himself compositionally blocked because he was not close to the reference material that Egoyan brought him; he was struggling to understand what the function of the score should be within the film" (20). Mera points out that "the period of conceptualization is not, of course, a passive process; it involves experimentation, acceptance and rejection of ideas, and attempts to find conduits into a film that allow music the opportunity to make dramatically intelligent and emotionally perceptive comments" (19). In this regard, Danna could be thought of as having a fairly unique approach to balancing predetermined and improvised scoring strategies: his approach is in some ways a fairly extreme version of the predetermined – spending a great deal of his time conceptualising, yet, at the same time he relies on a large degree of experimentation and improvisation within his initial conceptualisation process.

The utility of investing time and resources to experiment during the conceptualisation stage is that "the discovery of an appropriate conceptual framework leads to music that creates layers of signification, rather than opting for more easily encountered solutions" (Mera 2007, 19). Danna engages in actively investigating which framework to employ in order to determine a mode of scoring that will best serve the film, even if it means forgoing seemingly obvious or traditional resolutions to compositional problems that might arise. In the case of *8MM* (1999, dir. Joel Schumacher), his conceptual framework has Moroccan rhythms as its foundation despite it being a film about a detective's investigation into Los Angeles' seedy 'snuff film' underworld. Danna explains why:

> A detective gets drawn into this world of pornography and he knows nothing about it, and gets pulled deeper and deeper into it. And I wanted to symbolize that by having the music go into a place that is uncomfortable for people. Moroccan music has this otherworldly quality of pulling you deeper … they get faster and faster as the rhythms go and repeat and repeat and it's very hypnotizing and it pulls you and drives you in. So this quality of music just seemed so perfect for the theme of the film. (Quoted in Benítez and Sánchez 2006)

Mera adds that "unexpected sounds color narrative locations that seem familiar on the surface, yet which hide dark secrets" (2007, 13). However, *8MM*'s experimental score was not well-received by one reviewer:

> This is one of the few scores that has ever, for instance, raised questions about whether the composer's approach was distinctly racist … it doesn't make sense in the context of the film. By associating the white criminals in the film (and their industry) with an extremely heavy Moroccan influence, Danna risks drawing the conclusion that Moroccans are savage barbarians who would kill a person in a sex film. So awkward is the Moroccan music in the film that it just begs such questions. (Filmtracks Editorial Review: 8MM 2007)

Yet Danna commits to his compositional vision, however experimental, in spite of the possibilities for safer, well-worn approaches. "I've studied the picture very carefully," Danna told me,

> I have a whole plan written down of "OK I need this instrument in this, this, and this scene and I want it to play these *raags*"[6] … once I start working with the player I'm applying it to the picture in my head. So it's never just me sitting back and saying "Oh, play, and I'll record three hours and hopefully something will stick to this film". I mean, that would be risky and probably hopeless. I'd studied Moroccan music and I knew what it was that I was going to get and what I needed. Of course there were surprises and that's what's fun about doing this. But I was

[6] Widdess provides a definition for *raag*/*raga*: "In Indian musical theory and practice a melody-type or mode, suitable for expressing aesthetic ethos and religious devotion … provides the melodic material for the composition of vocal or instrumental melodies and for improvisation" (2001).

pretty on top of what I was going to get and what my concept for the film was and how it was going to work. (Danna 2017)

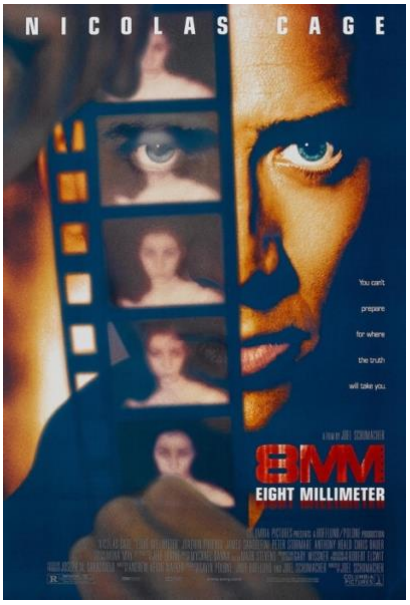


Fig. 12: Promotional image for 8MM

Danna's experimental approach to scoring is sometimes rejected outright. He was fired by the studio from Ang Lee's summer blockbuster *Hulk* (2003) days before the intended recording sessions and replaced by Danny Elfman. Danna had written a "score with a lot of ethnic touches, including, with perhaps some poor political timing, Arabic singing. The studio was not thrilled when they heard it" (quoted in Mera 2007, 15). Mera elucidates that "just prior to the release of the film, American troops were engaged in the second Gulf War against Iraq … the notion of a powerful green monster – a threat to civilized society – being represented through the use of Arabic-influenced music at this time was simply too delicate an issue", and that as a result "when mainstream concerns are at stake, mainstream scoring is expected" (ibid). Ironically, Elfman retained some Arabic singing, rhythmic and harmonic elements, as is evidenced by the track "Captured" on the official soundtrack album. Danna explains: "they did leave some of my music in the movie … What happened is that they panicked, they brought in Danny and he heard what I've been doing and I guess he liked it" (quoted in Benítez and Sánchez 2006).

Subtext and Meaning-Making

> *Our goal as a cinematic audience is to attempt to understand what is being expressed, and the collaborative process of filmmaking is about the struggle to communicate that meaning. When we interpret an artwork, we attempt to*

> *determine the author(s)' intentions as they are evinced in the work of art itself … understanding intention can unlock meaning and support interpretation.* (Mera 2007, 77)

As I discussed in Chapter Two, premeditated scoring makes it possible to address various aspects of narrative in a purposeful and engineered manner and thereby intentionally create levels of meaning to aid audience interpretation. I noted that this may be less true of improvised scores because the element of time is restricted and therefore what it affords a composer in terms of freedom of intentionality is also limited. At the same time, it is important to reiterate that musical meaning cannot be limited to authorial intention, and audiences may well seek connections and meanings whether intended by the composer or not. Danna's approach to conceptualisation "leads to the scoring of subtext rather than surface narrative" (Mera 2007, 19) and allows the music to work metaphorically, alluding to themes not necessarily evident or foregrounded in the *mise-en-scène*. He values a subtextual approach to scoring because "the aim is to avoid patronizing what Danna believes to be a highly cine-literate audience, allowing them the freedom to engage in a personal way with the content of the film. It is a mode of scoring that intends to evoke rather than to represent" (ibid). I asked Danna about his intentionality and whether scoring subtext is a primary concern:

> I think if [the score] only worked at the deeper level, at the intellectual level, you will have failed because you will probably have a lessening percentage of your audience that digs that deep. I literally had a meeting with a director last week who said, "I saw *The Ice Storm* years ago but I didn't notice the music". So we have that level of complete obliviousness, consciously. But of course we assume and hope that the music is working even on people who are completely oblivious to what the music is and what it's saying. But we're able to work in a subconscious way. (Danna 2017)

Danna distinguishes between modes of meaning-making that operate 'consciously' and 'subconsciously'.[7] He uses these terms to delineate between scores that work on a functional and aesthetic level and scores that require the audience to engage in further analytical reflection. In Danna's opinion, scoring primarily "in a subconscious way" is a risky proposition because, although composers "assume and hope" that the audience somehow automatically internalises the meaning embedded in the music, this is likely not

[7] Danna uses the terms as they are used in common parlance as opposed to their definitions in neuroscience or psychoanalytic theory.

always the case.[8] Danna explains why he advocates for a mode of scoring that primarily satisfies utilitarian requirements:

> I think that music needs to first of all work on the superficial level. It has to be the right mood and the right atmosphere for the scene and for the picture as a whole … The foundation under that is secondary … to most people, and certainly when you're working with directors and especially producers, they're mostly concentrating on that upper level anyway. So you're not going to get to the scoring stage unless you satisfy that kind of surface level in some way. (Ibid)

Danna believes that first and foremost, the music must serve the film on a "superficial" level by evoking the intended mood, creating atmosphere and operating in a functional capacity. Because filmmakers and producers often wish to cater to audiences who may not be sensitive to subtext, creating a deeper layer of meaning is of secondary importance.

This bifocal approach to scoring is evident in *The Ice Storm*, a film about the emotionally troubled lives of two middle-class families in Connecticut during the 1970s. Rather than making use of well-worn Hollywood film scoring tropes that would reference the period and place, Danna combines Indonesian and Native American instrumentation and harmonic practices in order to simultaneously satisfy both the surface and subtextual levels of the film:

> … the nice thing about the gamelan[9] for instance is that it has a quality that, just on a tactile level, conjures up the idea of ice and water. It has a watery, icy sound to it. So just on that very superficial colour level it kind of already works, and that's a great thing. So there the layers of meaning under it are a richness: an extra bonus to those who care to be sensitive to the music and to the tiny percentage of people who would actually know what that instrument is, and then the tiny percentage of those who would actually think further: "Oh, I see – this is a contrast between this ancient tradition of a society that's been extremely stable for thousands of years, and compare it to this upheaval of America in the 1970s". That's the bottom, deepest level that you might get to intellectually if you're able to and have a mind to, but it's got to work on all the levels above it. (Ibid)

By addressing the surface events as well as 'getting under the skin' of the narrative, Danna avoids alienating viewers while still encouraging them to engage with the film on a deeper level. Danna's seemingly bizarre instrumentation choices demand the listener's analytical attention: "The fact that the instrumentation is used without an immediate and direct narrative justification forces the audience to search for meaning … Unlike a great deal of

[8] A satisfactory investigation into how aesthetics, intentionality and neuroprocessing interface is beyond the scope of this thesis.
[9] Predominantly percussive instruments used in traditional ensemble music of Java and Bali.

film music, therefore, the score for *The Ice Storm* provokes the audience, rather than acting purely as a generator of narrative affect" (Mera 2007, 132).



Fig. 13: The Hood family in The Ice Storm

I asked Danna whether he thinks that ideally the aim is for the audience to understand the deeper interpretations embedded within the score, notwithstanding that it needs to work principally on a superficial level. He appears to adopt a multidimensional approach to aesthetic inquiry that also recognises that a work of art is an autonomous entity with internal structures that carry meaning, resulting in a viewer-centric interpretive model. This is in line with philosopher Paul Ricoeur's belief that there is "a world of the text that lies not behind the text but metaphorically in front of it as something to be explored by the interpreter's imagination … a world that we can think of ourselves as inhabiting" (Pellauer & Dauenhauer 2016). In Danna's words:

> I think every audience member has their own answer depending on where they are in their own life, their development, where they are spiritually and intellectually and all those other things. You can't impose what the answer for me is on a 12-year-old boy who's watching it – somebody at a different stage of life or somebody from a different place. I think that's the amazing thing about art. It has the ability to speak to you on whatever level you're at and the best works are like that. You can have a popcorn-movie that makes the 12-year-old sitting beside you happy but gives you something deeper to think about or a reflection of where you are that enlightens you in some way. (2017)

Though it is often his mandate, Danna claims he is not always interested in addressing deeper subtextual levels of meaning in his scores. This is evident in his score for *Life of Pi* (2012, dir. Ang Lee), the story of an Indian boy on a Canada-bound boat who meets

with disaster, leaving him lost at sea. Danna told me his motivation for what he claims is a more "superficial" score:

> *Life of Pi* is one of the more superficial scores I've done in that that there is no deeper concept going on … and the reason I think it works is because the film is already so profound and layered – it's already doing the things the music might do in a simpler film. So in this case the music has to do less work or the audience will get overwhelmed with processing. (2017)

Danna's claim that he had no subtextual aims when scoring *Life of Pi* requires further critical investigation. In a CBC Radio interview, he clarifies that he initially approached the score by attempting to imbue it with deeper levels of meaning but that it was not working and therefore a change of tack was necessary:

> For two years while [Ang] was filming it and working on it, he would call me up in the middle of the night and say "OK, rationality versus irrationality. Pi's mother is irrationality – she's religion. His father is the zookeeper, he's about the human urge to blah blah blah." So I have notes and notes, pages and pages. There's all this philosophy and all this heavy stuff. So when I started writing the score I was trying to stuff all that into the notes – all this heaviness. And it just didn't work, it was painful to listen to. (2017)

In order to make the film and score work better together, Danna decided to 'simplify' the music and compromise on his usual approach to meaning-making:

> So it took a long time but we learned: now that you know all that – forget it … Pi is on this journey of discovery and incredible loss, be compassionate to him and be compassionate to our audience for God's sakes. Something gentle and beautiful, something easy to listen to and nice … By the way, simple is hard. Well, *I* made simple hard, maybe for other people it's not. When we finally ended up in that simple place, I think that inside it and in its spirit were all these ideas but in a way that was listenable. (Ibid)



Fig. 14: Pi and Richard Parker the tiger in Life of Pi

I examine the title sequence from the film, called "Pi's Lullaby" on the official soundtrack album, in order to explore Danna's assertions regarding his approach to intentionality and meaning-making.
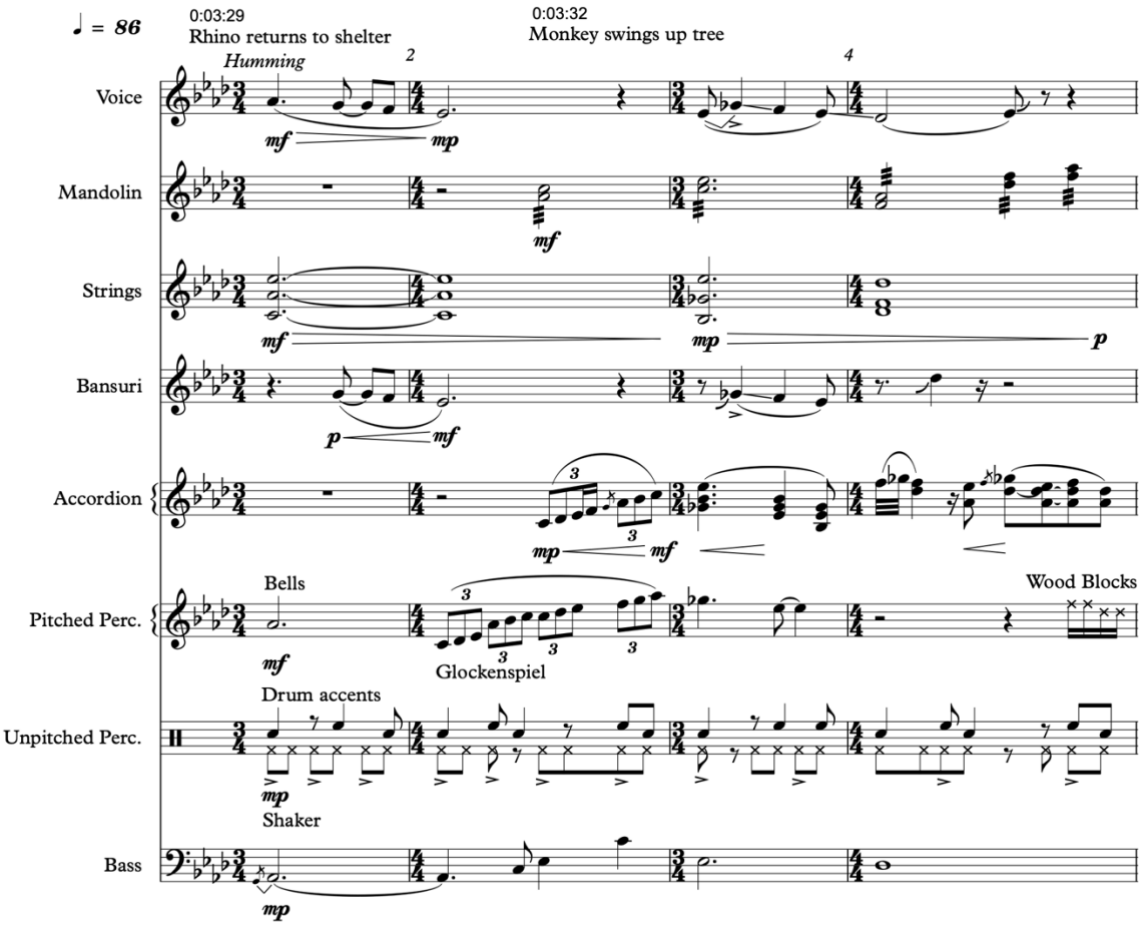


Fig. 15: My transcription of an excerpt from Danna's "Pi's Lullaby", co-composed with Bombay Jayashri, with timecodes and annotations (0:03:29-0:03:39)

The above figure shows music that accompanies a montage of zoo animals in the opening credits. Danna describes the on-screen events and their subtextual meanings:

> [Pi was born] in a place with all these wild animals but they're all behind cages, hemmed-in and controlled … He's surrounded by Mother's love, symbolised here by the song that I wrote with Bombay Jayashri. It's a lullaby in the South Indian language that Pi would've grown up with. It's got the feeling of comfort, love and of being in a safe place. We have to establish that because we're about to throw this poor boy into the Pacific where he's going to almost starve to death and be eaten by wild animals. (CBC Music 2017)

Danna explains that the subtextual meaning (not necessarily evident in the images) that Lee wished to communicate is that of controlled safety. The compositional choices that

he made regarding mood, instrumentation and aesthetic are tied to this premise. This is a clear indication that the score by no means purely attends to the "superficial" and that the music *is* intended to work symbolically to address deeper levels of meaning-making, regardless of Danna's own assertions to the contrary (although perhaps not in as oblique or extreme a way as the instrumentation in *The Ice Storm* was designed to operate).

Jayashri's voice operates primarily as an aesthetic choice and cultural indicator of India (along with *tabla* and other Indian instruments), and secondly as a representation of "Mother's love" for Pi. In lieu of his actual mother who will die when the ship sinks, this recurring maternal presence drives him to continue to survive throughout the film. Theorist Michel Chion discusses the effect of using a disembodied voice in screen music: "When the acousmatic presence is a voice, and especially when this voice has not yet been visualized – that is, we cannot yet connect it to a face – we get a special being, a kind of talking and acting shadow to which we attach the name *acousmêtre*" (1999, 21). Using voice in this way creates a 'voice-character' that, as a result of its disassociation from any one specific image, has the potential to effect omniscient change in the overall narrative. Perhaps Jayashri's voice does not function as a fully fledged 'voice-character', but it does intentionally operate as a subtle maternal presence throughout the film. It is easy to construct a case that challenges Danna's assertion that this is primarily a "surface" score that never addresses deeper levels of meaning.[10]

The music is an amalgam of aesthetics: traditional Indian instrumentation, including the *sitar*, *bansuri* (side-blown flute), *santur* (hammered dulcimer) and *mridangam* (double-sided drums), is combined with French instrumentation (mandolin and accordion) and conventional Western instrumentation (orchestral strings and woodwinds). Danna makes use of instrumentation primarily as a geographic locator. This is evident when a brief but distinctly 'French' aesthetic dominates the score (0:03:32, m. 2). Danna explains that Pi "is born in Pondicherry which is a French colony … so you can hear the accordion wisping in there and playing Indian melodies and being very comfortable with this incredible multiculturalism that is the *Life of Pi*" (CBC Music 2017). However,

[10] To understand why Danna would assert otherwise, it might be useful to imagine how the Academy holding this score in acclaim but not recognising Danna's previous more 'personal' and experimental works could exacerbate such a conviction, see interview in Appendix B.

interpreting this music purely as a geographical and cultural indicator is to limit its potential for multidimensional meanings. For example, in the above instance the music accompanies visuals of a monkey swinging up a tree: the breath-like stretching of the accordion's bellows in triple metre and the ascending melodic line could clearly be construed as mimicking and highlighting the monkey's playful swinging ascent. In this instance the music works very much on the surface level of the film. I asked Danna how he decided when to use instrumentation for deeper metaphorical reasons as opposed to aesthetic reasons or for the purposes of cultural and geographic identification:

> The touches of colour are meant to be what they are. Things are kind of what they seem in the score, which often isn't the case with what I do. The film itself is not what it seems to be, so things kind of got reversed … When I started writing, I was writing complicated … and [Ang] said "look, the film is complicated. You need to be simple. You need to be just one big long line, one big arc" … I wouldn't put *Life of Pi* in my list of best scores, ironically. But I think it works with the film beautifully and that is the be-all and end-all of what we do. That's the final judge. (2017)

Danna addressed the downside of having an intentionally 'over-coded' and sonically dense score through a process of eliminating and distilling the original ideas until he arrived at a score he deemed more "simple" and "listenable".

Iterations and Revisions

> *It's overwhelming because you're never finished the score and they grab it away from you. You're still writing and you're changing and they're mixing it into the film and its done … I think that keeps me going and I still have this incredible hunger and desire because I don't ever feel like I've nailed it yet.* (Danna on CBC Radio 2017)

Part of Danna's approach to experimentation is to allow for the material to undergo multiple revisions as various iterations for the work before completion. Danna believes that the process of editing cues though collaborative revision only serves to create a better end-product. Mera explains how the process of iteration and revision during the production of *The Ice Storm* resulted in a more cohesive score:

> The composer faced a significant creative and technical challenge due to the constant re-shaping of the edit, but it is also important to establish that the score could not have developed into what it eventually became without taking this iterative journey. Since the music grew from the process of uncovering the emotional centre of the film, the composer and production team were constantly forced to revaluate the precise purpose and nature of the score. The music grew organically from detailed collaboration, rather than as a response to a finished

> visual product. This process had a profound effect on the expressive register of the score and on the film as a whole. (2007, 82)

A major factor that necessitated the process of simplifying the music for *Life of Pi* was the production company 20th Century Fox Studio's involvement in the creative development of the score. An interview with Danna on "Score: The Podcast" reveals what took place behind the scenes. Robert Kraft, President of Music at Fox at the time, recalls:

> The chairman of the studio came to hear the film … and he called me out in the hallway afterwards and said some version of "that doesn't work for me". He said "there are too many sitars … It's also all too slow … That guy that's composing it … you sure Ang has the right guy?" (Quoted in Epicleff Media 2018)

The studio had concerns over how the score would translate to a mainstream Western audience who they imagined would expect a familiarly palatable blockbuster. Kraft describes the ensuing conversation with Danna:

> I said something silly like "that first cue feels so slow, what if you added a shaker? It may do a kind of psycho-acoustic trick that makes it feel faster? … Let me talk to the boss and let's play it again for him in a week and see if maybe he appreciates it." (Ibid)

Danna explains the subsequent amendments he made to the score, "Yeah, we put the shaker in … A lot of things weren't working a lot of the time so there was a lot of panic because it's a hundred million dollar-plus movie" (ibid). His view is that "almost all notes make the music better",

> If one person says "I have this concern: it's too slow" then you have to look at it and think "OK, well what could we do to have that? Yes, there's something meditative about it but we also *do* want the sense of youth and energy here too." (Ibid)

Danna's initial vision for "Pi's Lullaby" was to create a contemplative and anodyne mood to set the tone at the start of the film but it became clear that this choice was at cross-purposes with what the studio had in mind. His philosophy that most constructive criticisms make the music better originated in university:

> I still can hear the words of one of my professors in my ears while I'm writing. Just having your music criticized every week and torn apart, it is very useful and basically in film that is what your whole life will be. (Quoted in Mera 2007, 7)

For Danna, a score that could ultimately be deemed more "listenable" should always trump any efforts at subtextual coding or integrated complexity that might run counter to achieving such a goal. Mathematicians Michel France and Alain Hénaut write that "it is

the duty of all artists to provide information and hence complexity … But the question then arises: can and should an artist strive towards the extreme limits of complexity? One would be inclined to think not" (1994, 220). Their reasoning falls in line with Danna's approach to meaning-making: "Infinite complexity is randomness, and randomness … is not a vehicle for communication between two human beings. It is up to the artist to discover what the acceptable limits are, and hence avoid being too simple or too complex … They depend on the current cultural climate" (ibid). In this case, to make "Pi's Lullaby" more energetic, Danna added a shaker playing eighth notes for a more urgent rhythmic pulse as well as various 'mickey-mousing' moments such as the flurry of flutes entering with the on-screen appearance of birds (0:01:36), generating more aural interest.



Fig. 16: Danna's title sequence credit in Life of Pi

It is clear Danna puts in a great deal of preparation before creating a score, but that is not to say he does not value improvisation and spontaneous creative processes. On the contrary, he believes that "although conceiving ideas under extreme pressure (during the fifteen-minute break of an orchestral recording session for example) can be extremely stressful and ideas can be weaker than when there is more time to develop them, those moments are an integral part of filmmaking and are when it becomes a 'living, breathing, vital art'" (Mera 2007, 114). This aspect of his philosophy is something that composers like Carlo Mombelli might agree with more than some of the previously discussed aspects, as I will explore in the next chapter. Not only does Danna value the role of

improvisational processes within composition, he also makes extensive use of improvising musicians in order to shape his scores. The following section examines how he strikes a unique balance between different modes of scoring.

Approach to Improvised Scoring

Collaboration with Improvisers

Danna's approach to scoring is often defined by a clearly predetermined methodology that he implements throughout the ensuing formation of the score. Yet, he often collaborates with improvising musicians in order to generate the material. As has been shown above with regards to his compositional process on *8MM*, Danna is not interested merely in having the musicians improvise freely and have the score take shape as a result of their improvisations. Rather, he has a particular way of using improvisation functionally as it relates to the themes of the film itself in order to best achieve his predetermined vision. This process entails a unique approach to collaboration with improvisers within scoring practice.

Danna's score for *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (1996, dir. Mira Nair) combines traditional classical Indian instrumentation and improvisations with Western instrumentation and synthesisers and provides a useful case study for investigating his improvised scoring processes. It is the story of two girls, Tara and Maya, in sixteenth-century India. Years later, Tara marries the king but he pursues Maya and makes her his courtesan, forcing the women to become sexual rivals. Mera describes how Danna worked with improvising musicians on the score: "Each theme in the film was created from a different improvised *raga*, and shaped to specific scenes under Danna's direction. The materials could then be edited and a full score shaped around these elements" (2007, 10). In my interview with him, Danna expands on this account: "I'd get the musicians to come in, and by guiding them but not showing them the film – I never do that, I keep the film away from them … It's not their strength, it's not their skill to score picture. Those decisions were compositional and not improvisational" (2017). He guided the improvisers by allowing them to be creatively autonomous whilst still ensuring that the improvisations would have functional utility within his predetermined compositional framework for the film. He did not attempt to have them score directly to picture, as is often done (e.g. Miles Davis'

ensemble improvising to *Elevator to the Gallows*), because he had found in the past that it had not supported his broader compositional aims:
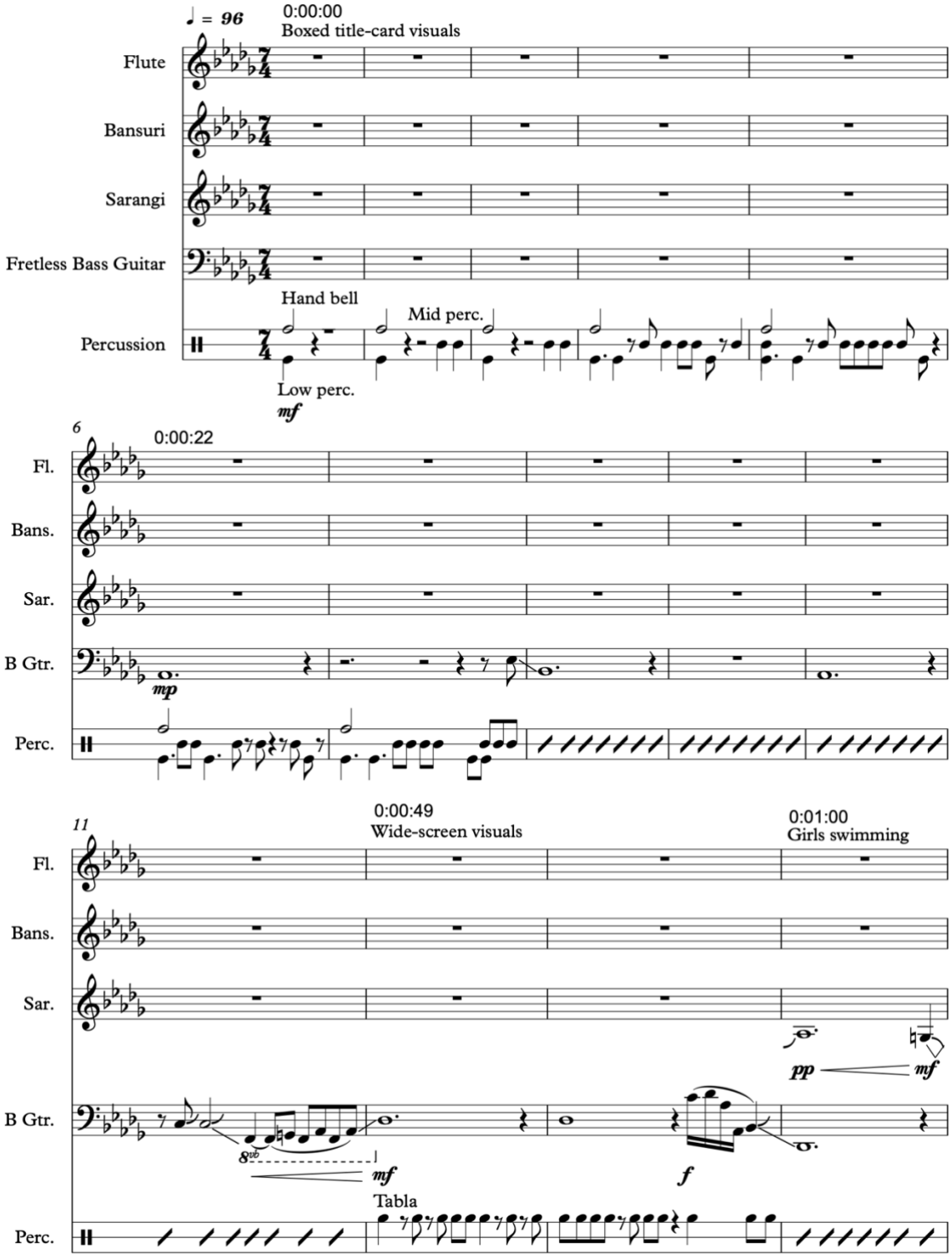
> It was a very different result and I just quickly figured out that it was far better to just have a discussion on a musical level with these players and say "OK, we're in *raag Desh*.[11] Let's keep it in the lower register. OK, yeah, that motif that you played there, can you play with that a little bit?" So guiding them like that and tracking in my head what it is that we needed and for which areas we needed it and making sure I got it that way. (Danna 2017)

Utilising improvisation is purely a means to an end, and that end is a creating better filmic experience. He has always felt that improvisation is not a meaningful end in and of itself and he therefore does not have any preference for improvisational process over premeditated ones, nor does he treat improvisational music with any particular reverence. As Mera notes, "Danna recalls that the jazz music he heard as a child never 'took root' and did not touch him emotionally, a prejudice that he still holds to this day" (2007, 2).

Guided Improvisation

The title sequence to *Kama Sutra* offers a valuable opportunity to explore how the process of collaborating with improvisers by guiding the material that they generate has resulted in a cohesive cue:

[11] For further investigation into the tonal makeup and emotional utility of this and other *raga*, see: Mathur et al. 2015.


♩ = 96
0:00:00
Boxed title-card visuals
Flute
Bansuri
Sarangi
Fretless Bass Guitar
Hand bell
Mid perc.
Percussion
Low perc.
mf
6
0:00:22
Fl.
Bans.
Sar.
B Gtr.
mp
Perc.
11
0:00:49
Wide-screen visuals
0:01:00
Girls swimming
pp
mf
8vb
mf
f
Tabla
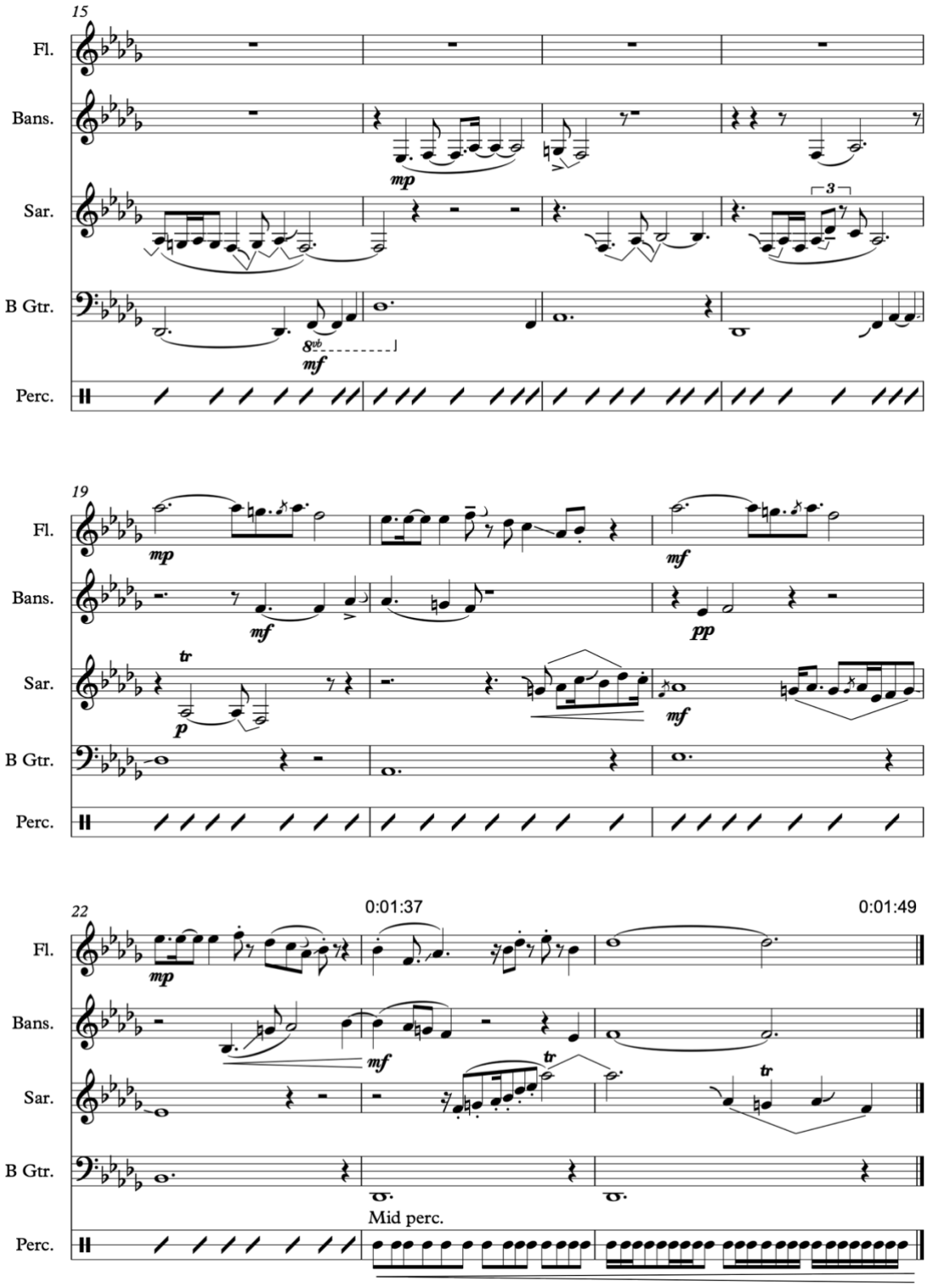


Fig. 17: My transcription of an excerpt from Danna's Kama Sutra *title sequence with timecodes and annotations (only primary percussion events) (0:00:00-0:01:49)*

Danna told me the score "was probably ninety percent improvised" (2017) and it is evident from the title sequence that the material was generated through improvisatory processes. The time signature is 7/4 and the cue begins with traditional Indian percussion, including a hand bell, *ghatam* (clay pot), *kanjira* (frame drum), *tabla*, *dhol* (large double-sided barrel) and *pakhawaj* (small double-sided barrel). The first downbeat is emphasised by the hand bell and *ghatam*, syncronised with the appearance of each production credit and accompanying boxed title card visual (0:00:00-0:00:48, mm. 1-11). The polyrhythm becomes progressively more intricate and the texture thickens with the introduction of the *tabla* as the visuals expand into wide-screen (0:00:49, m. 12). Florid mid-range percussion parts feverishly propel the cue towards its conclusion (0:01:37, mm. 23-24). Throughout, the beats primary stressed are 1 and the anticipatory 7. A precise transcription of the percussion parts would be difficult to achieve, as this music is governed by the complex improvised performance processes inherent in *Tala* (Indian classical metric cycles). Moreover, Danna himself would have found it unnecessary to do so. This is evidenced by his view that orchestrator Jamie Hopkings' meticulous work on *The Ice Storm* was "too detailed to be fit for purpose",

> Danna's music involved a group of percussionists playing a 7/8 hand-drum groove. The composer had, of course, created a mock-up of these cues which Hopkings had transcribed "rather carefully, with accents, and ghost notes – probably a little overboard, but I was expecting Mychael would want to hear his own groove." Danna was surprised that the notation was fastidiously written out, expecting to create the groove through discussion and improvisation with the performers during the recording session. In practice, most percussionists would rather improvise on cues when the music requires a certain looseness rather than reading detailed notation. Hopkings explains that "it took a while for it to stop sounding stiff." (Mera 2007, 112)

The rhythmic pulse is defined while the fretless bass guitar enters with legato improvisations, creating a sense of spontaneous and impromptu musical flow (0:00:22, m. 6). One might not always think of the bass as an improvising instrumental element, but it is clearly the case here that the bassist was not expected to read and perform the part note for note. The microtonal looseness is what gives the bassline 'life'. For example, the fill on beat 6 of m. 13 is undoubtedly an elegant and improvised method of getting from D3 at the beginning of the measure to D2 an octave below in m. 14 (0:01:00).

The entrance of the *sarangi* (fiddle) accompanies visuals of the young protagonists swimming while intimately touching each other (0:01:00, m. 14). Danna's usage of the *sarangi* is undoubtedly intentional. He explained to me that his shaping of improvisers' performances is "guided by the necessity of the film and what it is that I need the music to be doing. But I've selected the instrument for a specific reason, because of a character, because of an ability that it has to be something very specific" (2017). The acoustic quality of the *sarangi* with "the shimmering resonance of numerous sympathetic wire strings … is expressive, nuanced and … lends itself to imitation of the … woman's voice" (Qureshi 2000, 805-806). Historically, *sarangi* players were a mainstay in "salons of courtesan-singers and dancers" (806) and the instrument is therefore "inexorably linked to the licentious and immoral social space where a woman offers her art and, by implication, herself" (813). Feminine sensuality is so integral to the *sarangi* that "the structural parts of the instrument are identified as parts of a female human body: the forehead, the chest, the waist, the belly, the skirt" (821). The sound of the *sarangi* coinciding with an introduction to the protagonists in this visceral way foreshadows the complex sexual rivalry that is to ensue as the film progresses.

The *bansuri*, flute and *sarangi* improvise overlapping melodic ideas (m. 14 onwards). Each line is replete with ornamentation, glissandos and pitch bends that it is again difficult, and unnecessary, to notate accurately. My focus here is not so much on the music's 'Indian-ness' or the fact that Indian classical music is rooted in specific kinds of improvisation, but on the kinds of effects that improvisation might generate in order to aid the filmic experience. These effects are difficult to 'compose', and not just for a composer ill-trained in this particular style of music. Although there are clearly melodic and rhythmic ideas that are repeated with variations (for example, the flute phrase in mm. 19-20 reiterated in mm. 21-22), there is a freedom to the melodic line which would be extremely difficult to achieve if it were merely notated and a performer required to read it (for example, the *sarangi* part in m. 15). Danna did not compose these musical ideas within a Western 'leitmotivic' construct. He explained to me that "with non-Western instruments, I want to try and understand them on a cultural level as best as I can",

> When you do that you don't want to impose your colonial vision onto players who have lived their tradition their whole lives. In the give-and-take, I'm more interested in what *they* have to say". (2017)

His method for shaping the improvisers' performances is to "work with them in their system as opposed to imposing your system on them" (ibid). He explains: "instead of me sitting down with my quill pen and my manuscript, it was done through this other way of working with somebody inside their culture to get something very authentic and real and something meaningful that's also meaningful for the film" (ibid). He achieved this here not by premeditatedly composing and notating material for the musicians to perform but rather by ensuring that "the themes and the things that I wanted to attach motifs to were given *raags*" (ibid). The direction he gave the musicians was "more of an emotional thing, in the same way I want a director to talk to me. I want him to tell me emotional directions, I don't want him to start telling me what key to play in" (ibid).



Fig. 18: Tara and Maya in Kama Sutra

Integrating Predetermined and Improvised Strategies

I look now at another cue from *Kama Sutra*, the thematic content of which first appears after Maya reveals to Tara that she slept with the king (0:19:20). A more tender and heartfelt rendition is titled "Maya's Theme" on the official soundtrack album and is heard when Maya is emotionally torn between the king and her new lover (1:16:50). The theme is used overtly in the film only three times to underscore emotional scenes that are dramatic turning points in Maya's narrative. At 1:16:50, the instrumentation is an amalgam of synthesiser pad, acoustic guitar, bass guitar, orchestral strings, traditional

Indian percussion and *santur*. A synthesised string pad establishes the harmonic structure while exploiting chordal suspensions and resolutions to create an emotionally resonant soundscape. The melody is played gently on an acoustic guitar. Halfway through the cue, traditional Indian percussion enters abruptly and imposes a strict rhythmic pulse and the melody line shifts to the *santur* while conventionally 'Hollywood' orchestral strings provide harmonic movement (1:18:00).

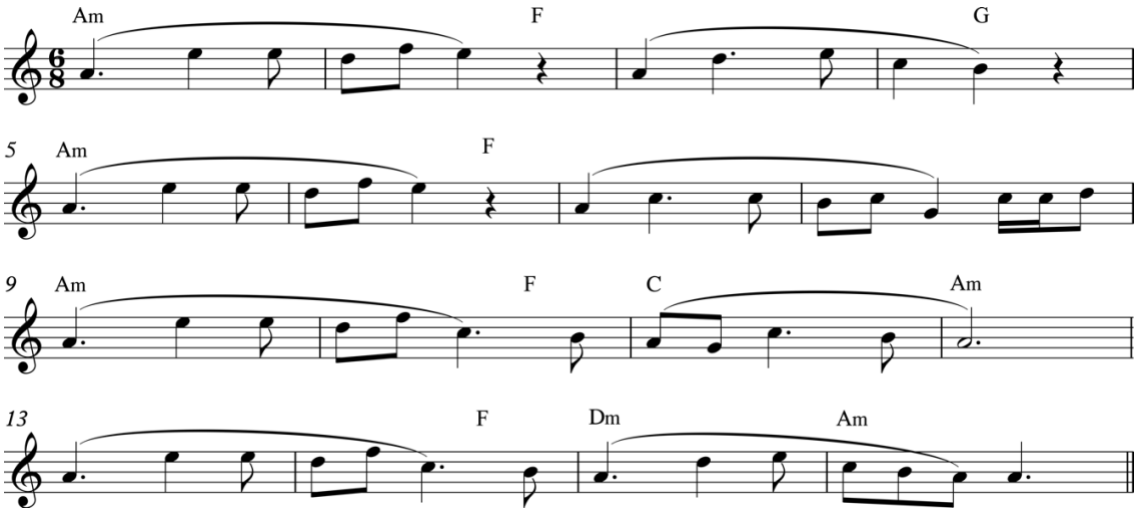


Fig. 19: My thematic reduction of Danna's "Maya's Theme" from Kama Sutra

"Maya's Theme" provides an opportunity to investigate a counterpoint within Danna's scoring practice. The music sounds much more rigid and 'square' in comparison to the title sequence cue. It has symmetrical phrases – mm. 1-2 are mirrored in mm. 3-4 and so on, and the rhythmic and melodic cells are repeated and varied in what sounds like a far more calculated way. The overall effect of the music is quite different to that of the majority of the film's free-flowing and improvised sound. In an interview with an expert in Indian classical music, Dr Arindam Mukhopadhyay, I asked whether he thought this music was improvised in a collaborative fashion similar to the majority of the score or whether it was more of a predetermined composition. Mukhopadhyay concluded that Danna approached this composition from a more melodically abstracted and conventionally Western standpoint (2018). I asked through what compositional methodology he thought Danna arrived at the thematic material. Mukhopadhyay believes Danna likely wrote the theme, but had it operate within the *Carnatic* music system, which has more of a pre-set compositional approach than the more improvisatory and free-

flowing *Hindustani* music system (ibid). Danna's decision to employ different scoring strategies makes functional sense within the film. The utility of "Maya's Theme" is to underscore the emotions of the protagonist during pivotal narrative moments. The primary function of the title sequence music, however, is to establish the sound palate and tone for the world of the film and act as an 'authentic' geographic locator, and it thus calls for a different scoring strategy.

'World Music', Authorship and Appropriation

Because collaboration with musicians is often a foundational element in Danna's scoring practice, considerations around authorship, appropriation and the potential for exploitation bear mentioning. I believe that in the case of Danna's work it is best to consider this as a legal issue and not simply an ethical one. For *Exotica* (1994, dir. Atom Egoyan) Danna told me he went to India and captured "field-recordings, not people that I'd brought in, but walking around in the jungle or the temple or the streets with a microphone and recording snake-charmers" (2017). Such musicians are "going to play their thing, they're not going to be guided" (ibid). In such cases, Danna's authorial role is to identify the useful musical material "and then you manipulate it – cut it, slow it down and do whatever" in the studio during post-production (ibid). It is true that the snake-charmers and other musicians were not individually credited in the film or on the official soundtrack album but it is unknown how and to what extent they were reimbursed for their contributions. In general, Danna is quick to point out that the improvising musicians he collaborates with are an integral part of the score. During his acceptance speech for 'Best Original Score' Academy Award for *Life of Pi*, he said "musicians from around the globe came together to breathe life into this music and I hold this award on their behalf" (Oscars 2013). Likewise, the title credits to *Kama Sutra* include on-screen: "Composer: Mychael Danna, Featuring musicians: Subha Mudgal, I. Subramaniam, Ustad Vilayat H. Kahn" (0:01:24).

Nevertheless, the question of what we mean by 'composition' is raised: is it unfair not to regard improvisers as the authors of the melodies, rhythms etc. that they produce? Though Danna guides their improvisations, he still is not 'writing' that music himself. One wonders whether the title 'musical director' might not be a more appropriate than

'composer' in certain cases? Mera defends Danna's authorial status and claims that "his role in shaping performances and structuring musical resources should not be underestimated simply because it does not conform to traditional notions of how composers instigate and project their ideas" (2007, 11).

Given the syncretic nature of Danna's scoring practice, it seems there is potential for cultural appropriation to turn exploitative. However, Mera refutes the blanket claim that "hybridity and cultural imperialism are inextricably linked" because,

> The problem with this type of interpretation is that it implies that anybody … who draws on ethnic influences is somehow an agent of cultural domination … this seems to me a rather reductivist critique that paints every creative musician with the same sweatshop-exploitation brush regardless of content or context. There would be no option but to judge all hybrid works as at the mercy of the global condition and, consequently, as artistically bankrupt. (2007, 29-30)

Danna's incorporation of ethnic musics is anything but "artistically bankrupt". As discussed above, the conceptual framework of the project determines for him the compositional choices that must to be made, whether or not they include non-Western cultural elements. Mera gives support to Danna's authenticity: "when 'world music' is used it always forms the nucleus of his score, rather than starting with an orchestra and affixing token 'world' instruments afterwards" (2007, 27). When asked if there is a common thread throughout his work, Danna replied: "I'm open to finding any means possible to help tell the story. Because of my background, starting in theatre and falling into film music … Story comes first" (CBC Radio 2017). He believes that as a result of his non-traditional background, his approach to scoring is non-traditional in its values: "I wasn't brought up in the Hollywood system of '*this* is how we do Hollywood films'. Now that I live in Hollywood I get that system but I thank God that I didn't grow up in it, or I wouldn't have done it" (ibid).

Danna also refutes the idea that filmmaking, scoring included, could have any single authorship claim over it. When discussing *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006, dir. Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris), Danna expressed his view that the work of art is paramount and no single creative force can lay claim to it:

> This is what's incredible about film: the ability to make this huge thing that no one really has control over. Directors think they do but they don't; it has a life of its own. All these people, hundreds of people come together to do this. Musically,

> I worked with the band Devotvhka on this and they were a real joy to work with. (CBC Radio 2017)

It may be the case that Danna would now no longer conduct himself in the same way that he did during the collecting of 'ethnic' music for *Exotica*. Times have changed and people are certainly more aware of the power differential between collaborators. Mera notes that "as his career has progressed, Danna has found it increasingly important to support musicians in their home environment … this is partly in response to the ethical factors outlined above, but also because Danna believes that there is a palpable difference in the quality that the music possesses" (2007, 32). Danna is aware of contributing musicians' reimbursement and affirms "I respect the culture … by actually hiring them and paying them money. I've consciously gone to countries like Armenia, for instance, and brought funds to musicians there that otherwise would have ended up in Los Angeles or some other urban center" (quoted ibid). Mera makes clear Danna's personal philosophy on the matter:

> Danna revels in the music of other cultures because it allows him to say more, access greater emotional range, and to create many layers of signification. Indeed, Danna's compositional approach suggest a shift away from a model of the exotic within western music to challenge exactly what is 'exotic' or 'western' in music. (idem, 32-33)

Conclusion

I have shown that Danna's approach to scoring usually involves a process of conceptualisation and experimentation in order to discover and define the compositional framework that best serves the project. This process marries a predetermined intentionality with a reliance on the freedom to experiment, all in the service of creating music that best communicates subtext and meaning as well as providing an enjoyable listening experience. I investigated Danna's approach to utilising improvisation as the bedrock of his scoring practice through collaboration with improvising musicians. His unique method of guiding and shaping improvisations is defined by his vision for the score, and it raises interesting notions regarding compositional authorship and a reassessment of how improvisation might find its role within traditional Hollywood screen music. Danna is not interested in making traditional scores with additional 'world music' flavours, rather his approach is always determined by the film's narrative.

The following chapter examines the role of improvisation in South African composer Carlo Mombelli's scoring practice. Much like Danna, Mombelli has a unique approach to the integration of improvisatory processes within screen music that involves conceptualisation, experimentation and collaboration. However, his methodology is wholly his own. As becomes clear throughout the following chapter, important insights into the nature of improvisation in screen music can be gleaned from investigating his compositional philosophy and selected works.

CHAPTER 5: IMPROVISATORY PROCESSES IN CARLO MOMBELLI'S SCORING PRACTICE

Introduction

In the previous chapter I showed how investigating the improvisatory processes central to Mychael Danna's scoring practice reveals a more nuanced understanding of the role of improvisation within screen music. A similarly complex interaction between improvisation, premeditation and collaboration can be found in South African composer and performer Carlo Mombelli's works for screen. However, an exploration of his unique philosophies and compositional practices exposes an entirely different approach to the integration of improvised processes within scoring practice. Mombelli's primary focus over the past forty or so years has been on original recorded compositions for his solo discography, but he has also made many forays into composing for screen. His works include the conservation documentary *Roads to Restitution* (2003, dir. Karin Slater), the documentary *Story of a Beautiful Country* (2004, dir. Khalo Matabane), the television series *The Devolutionaries* (2005, dev. Luma Animation), the film *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* (2007, dir. Khala Matabane), and the mobile game *Dragon's Watch* (2017, dev. The Secret Police).

In examining Mombelli's approach, I draw upon an interview I conducted with him at his home in Johannesburg in 2019. I examine his improvisational and compositional processes within the collaborative ensemble environment primarily through an analysis of his score for *Story of a Beautiful Country*. I begin by investigating Mombelli's philosophy of music-making and how that informs his approaches to screen composition.

Internal and External Imperatives

Mombelli is a rather unique subject for my research, not least because despite the good handful of credits mentioned above, he does not consider himself to be a screen composer. For him, scoring is a definitive compositional skillset that he claims he is not naturally geared towards. This is partly because he views the scoring process as one that inherently

limits creativity. The requirement to adhere to guidelines set out by non-musical collaborators especially perturbs him:

> When composing for film there is always another party involved aside from fellow musicians: the director, and behind him or her, the producers – and ultimately the funders, and the market. There is the stress of trying to keep everyone happy – giving them the feeling that they are getting value for their money and getting what they want – as well as produce something I am satisfied with. (Mombelli 2007b, 35)

Mombelli asserted that the limiting nature of the scoring processes "has never stopped me from starting at an artistic level, even if I have to (and I'm afraid this is how it sometimes happens) dilute the work until director and producers are satisfied" (2007b, 35). When I asked him how he felt now about the collaborative filmmaking process and the necessity for "dilution", he said "maybe I'm not the best film composer because I don't compromise any more" (2019a). He told me he now chooses projects that have little to no external imperative that might force him to compromise his creative expression:

> I did a film recently but I did it because they came to me and played "Motian the Explorer"[12] and said they want a soundtrack like that. So I was the right person for it. It was the easiest thing on the planet because you can hear it's me playing. I'm not trying to play anything else. Maybe I'm not the right guy for this interview because I *am* writing film music, but people come to me because they want *my* sound. They don't want a sound like Hans Zimmer. They come to me because they want a sound like Carlo Mombelli and I'm able to give them that because that's who I am – I'm being myself. (2019a)

Mombelli does not consider himself a screen composer; he feels the scoring process often makes it impossible to achieve an ideal he prizes – that of making one's musical output as 'pure' an expression of one's personality as possible by ignoring external objectives.

Mombelli favours the notion of a composer creating music that bears their distinctive "sound" – in his case, "you hear it's me playing" (ibid). Imitating aspects of a specific composer's 'sound' or writing idiomatically in a way that bears little resemblance to other works of one's own, is often required of a screen composer. This is something Mombelli avoids: "There has to be what, as a jazz composer, I can only call a vibe, a connectedness with my deeper self, regardless of the uniqueness of each piece and the (in some cases enormous) differences between them … I have found it to be particularly true of my work for film" (2007b, 37). He does not appear to acknowledge the possibility that screen

[12] A track from his *Stories* album (Mombelli 2014).

composers he considers to have such vastly different approaches to music-making to him, might still find ways to maintain a satisfactory connection to their original 'sound' despite external requirements. It is true that most screen composers find the strictures of following a 'temp track' generally restricting and frustrating – "the tyranny of the temp track" as author Kathryn Kalinak terms it (1992, 192). Unsurprisingly, Mombelli is no exception. "I hate the temp track" he told me,

> On this last film I did [*Salvation* (2019, dir. Carmen Sangion)], they set up a temp track to the start of the movie using Massive Attack ["Teardrop"] and they said "can you write something similar to this?" I wrote an amazing piece using a cello and I got [drummer] Jonno Sweetman in here to play the grooves, with me on bass, and we recorded the whole thing. An amazing track on its own. But they always had that song ["Teardrop"] in their heads. They could not get it out of their heads. So do you know what they did? They contacted Massive Attack and bought the rights to use it in their movie. (2019a)

Given his view that scoring is a compromising, limiting and frustrating artform and profession, I asked Mombelli why he thinks it is that musicians are nevertheless drawn to it (I myself am, but I cannot always justify it). He responded that "if you can find the formula, that other stuff is not going to bother you. But I'm not that type of musician. I'm searching for ways of expressing myself. So I'm not really a film composer even though I've done many films" (2019a). What he refers to as "the formula" seems to be his idea of specific systematised compositional methodologies one follows in order to produce musical material regardless of, or in spite of, the lack of any personal expression of reactivity. As he puts it: "Hans Zimmer has formulas and he can churn [scores] out. There's another guy in Joburg … he can churn out a documentary score for National Geographic in one afternoon" (ibid). He maintains that although this supposed tactic of dispassionately generating music appears to work for other composers, it is not one that he himself is able (or wishes) to adopt. For him, this extends beyond the field of scoring and applies to composition in general: "That's why I don't really teach composition. I don't have a formula for how I go about composing my music" (ibid).

In my interview with him, Mombelli related an incident that occurred while working on a particular film in order to illustrate to me his uncompromising nature when it comes to his musical expression:

> I'm a nutter, OK? There was this famous film director in Cape Town, I'm not even going to mention his name. It was a documentary and he wanted drones all

> over the place. So I made drones, but not by sitting on the synthesizer and tweaking sounds. No. I composed all these amazing drones with bowing cellos … when I saw the film I saw that they had replaced my drones with someone playing a synth. Then I saw at the end of the movie it said "music composed by Carlo Mombelli" … I'm a purist in the sense that I believe in my own work: I felt an emotion so I wrote this. And that's what [the filmmakers] wanted but then they put this shitty synthesizer in instead. (2019a)

He continued to describe his reaction to having had his music summarily replaced:

> I went to the SABC [South African Broadcasting Commission] and I said "I'm the composer, there's something I still need to have done to the film". The director was down in Cape Town. I withdrew the film and took it to a big editing and publishing suite in Auckland Park and got them to delete my name off the credits. So it comes to the end of the movie and it says "Music composed by" and there is no composer. Needless to say, the director was hellishly upset with me and I never got a film out of them again, but that's OK. I thought what they did was not cool, so I stuck to my principles. (Ibid)

Mombelli believes the reason he is uncompromising in this way is because of how his past has shaped his relationship with music: I asked him whether he thinks more in terms of narrative, character or aesthetics when scoring, and he replied, "I don't think I'm *thinking* about anything. I'm wanting to see what it's *doing to me*" (2019a). He explains why, for him, musical expression is an extension of the 'self' and emanates from his deeply personal reactivity and interactivity with the world around him, and not from any external or artificial mandate:

> Things weren't given to me. Every note I play is fought for. My father didn't want me to be a musician. My mother didn't want me to be a musician … she thought all my music came from the devil … I ran away from home when I was sixteen … All the demons from my youth are in my compositions. I come from a hectic background and that's why when I play a note – I *mean* it … But beauty *is* born out of a lot of that bullshit. It's angels and demons.[13] (Ibid)

Mombelli insists that the core of his creative expression must be a deeply personal reaction and that "writing for visual media is less intuitive in the sense that one decides what type of emotion it must project" (2007b, 35). This is opposed to the way he usually makes music. Even so, he maintains that for screen music, "I still have to try and get in touch with my own emotions in order to compose" (ibid). The way he gets in touch with his own emotions is to draw parallels between the film's thematic material and his own experiences in order to channel his authentic reactive impulses into musical expression: "it's these situations that affect me, and if I can find it in a film – if the right film comes

[13] Also the title of his 2018 album, *Angels and Demons* (Permanent Records).

along for me – I can write deep music for it because I've been through some of those things that I've seen in movies" (Mombelli 2019a). Composer Jan A. P. Kaczmarek describes a similar process: "I watch it and I have an emotional reaction … I don't employ my intellect yet. I need to feel the essence of the picture … then under the influence of the first emotion, I write a theme" (quoted in DesJardins 2006, 142).

Mombelli finds what he considers typical scoring practice unsatisfactory because he sees it impeding his natural creative process, forcing him to release music that is either malformed or merely provides a functional support. He illustrates this with regard to the time-frames and external requirements imposed on him for the documentary film *Roads to Restitution* (2003, dir. Karin Slater):

> The producer needed the music to be composed, recorded, and mixed within two weeks. I did it, but with very little sleep, working through the night. This is one of the biggest differences between this and the other ways I compose: deadlines. The music definitely does not have time to unfold, to emerge, from a "deeper space". The purpose of writing is [merely] to support the visual image, or the scene. (2007b, 35-36)

He finds that the suboptimal music-making process draws focus away from creating 'art'. He claims that "writing to visual image can be an art, but so far (for me) it is more a case of working to order, the end being entertainment rather than art" (ibid). He asserts that although "some film composers place quite high value on entertainment", he himself does not. For Mombelli, making the artificial manipulation of an audience's emotions one's primary objective is, "if anything, an art of deception" (ibid). He feels that screen music must have the freedom to "unfold". For him, the external imperative of scoring to frame with precise 'sync points' is at odds with a natural 'unfolding' process:

> As we get excited or more emotional, our heart rate changes, and I think it is a natural process that the music should change tempo naturally … we cannot subdue emotion at the expense of a slight tempo change: the spirit of music is more important than the mathematics of music." (Mombelli 2019b, 11)

A comparison with Mychael Danna's approach to scoring, as outlined in the previous chapter, is instructive here. Both composers resist the idea of being a 'typical' screen composer. I posit that the crux of the ontological difference in approach between the two is that Mombelli believes music should develop as a reactive expression of one's personality within the creative moment (regardless of whether one calls it improvisation or composition, as I show later), whereas Danna believes that it is the work of art itself

that should be the arbiter of one's creative method, and should therefore be served by whatever means necessary, regardless of one's personal disposition. Mombelli writes, "I find it impossible to compose completely 'objectively' even if I'm constructing music to a sequence of images" (2007b, 36). He recounts how "even if those images are distasteful" he must access his own emotional response to them before he can generate a score:

> When I did a session for the film *Slash* (2002, dir. Neal Sundstrom) I was booked to set up all my looping devices and gadgets and play solo bass; the film was screened on a big screen and I simply had to improvise to what I saw – which was unexpectedly horrific; one murder after another, heads rolling. After an hour, I had to stop the improvisation session because of a migraine from the effect of the film; and they had to cut and paste what I had done to complete the soundtrack. (Ibid)

On the other hand, Danna's approach is to subsume his creative expression into the service of the narrative: "I think everything comes down to 'what is the story we are telling here?' What the music is required to do and all your decisions are based on that. How it serves the film and the theme of the film" (Danna 2017). He is therefore "open to finding any means possible to help tell the story" (CBC Radio 2017), and, in aid of that, is perhaps more willing than Mombelli to sacrifice previous ideas about creative strategy. Danna puts a positive spin on the perceived restrictions traditional scoring practice has on creative expression. For example, in response to time limitations when scoring for television, Danna told me, "for TV you have to write fast, which is really fun. It's enjoyable because you don't have time to second-guess and overthink. It gives you that constant positive reinforcement of churning out two minutes a day" (Danna 2017).

The above assertions notwithstanding, one might also conclude that it is partly Mombelli's character to be quite forthright and to 'play up' the contrarian and creative "purist" (Mombelli 2019a). It may be more a persona that he chooses to adopt. In many ways, he presents an idealised concept of musical composition, while perhaps misrepresenting the role of the screen composer by claiming limited potential for the production of original, imaginative and heart-felt music. The reason he does not "teach composition" (ibid) is because, for him, composing music is so clearly an extension of himself that it would be pointless and nonsensical to attempt to distil it into a methodology for others to successfully employ. While it is often the case that screen music relies on

pre-existing models and external frameworks or structures, the same might be said for other kinds of composition – for example opera, musicals, and standalone popular music – that fit pre-existing formal structures. But Mombelli obviously also understands the advantage and utility of setting up limitations so that creativity might blossom – a 'box' to work within and around. What he is averse to seems to be the possibility of creating music impersonal in nature: "I have a given task and given boundaries, but I try to find inspiration for the events my music will accompany" (Mombelli 2007b, 35). He believes most working screen composers are often required to create music in a state of impassionate disconnection with themselves. It is true that the possibility *does* occur, but Mombelli seems to be quite absolute about this point, refusing to acknowledge that there is a balance that might be struck in one's creative process that on the whole still qualifies as a "connectedness" to one's "deeper self" (idem, 37).

Mombelli clearly agrees with what most screen composers would likely say is their motivation to compose for screen: "I love the challenge of seeing if I can bring out the emotion in a scene. I'll watch a scene over and over again until I can find what that scene is trying to tell me" (Mombelli 2019a). He also does advocate for the notion that creativity should be in service of the music and not the musician, especially in reference to performance: "The music takes centre stage and not the musician, as the musician is the vessel" (Mombelli 2019b, 20) and, quoting Stephen Nachmanovitch, "For art to appear, we must disappear" (idem, 24). I will continue to investigate below how a musician becomes "the vessel" in the creative moment and whether or not Mombelli draws any distinction between 'composition' and 'improvisation' in this regard.

Approach to Improvised Scoring

On the Nature of Improvisation

Mombelli does not draw much of a distinction between 'composition' and 'improvisation' in his music. As he writes, "In my world, composition, improvisation and performance are so entwined with one another that each co-exists because of the other" (Mombelli 2019b, 23). This chimes with ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl's argument that "the juxtaposing of composition and improvisation as fundamentally different processes [is] false, the two are instead part of the same idea" (1974, 6). Mombelli believes that

improvisation is always innate and so to make a clear distinction between the processes of improvisation, composition or performance is to effortfully impede intuitive music-making:

> We are all born improvisers. Even those who aren't playing music are improvising … I don't understand why they teach classical musicians not to improvise. Every child learns to improvise the first time they tinkle on a piano, then they go to a teacher who tries to take that intuition away. (Mombelli 2019a)

He writes that "with a beautiful sound, one beautiful note, you can create emotions … if it is played or sung with intent, emotion and with meaning, but it has to come from a place deep inside of you" (2019b, 9). I probed him to try describe to me how the process of improvising "from a place deep inside of you" takes shape for him. He explains:

> When I play, I cut myself off. An 'artificial loudness' happens where I'm so focussed on the music that everything in my environment becomes soft and starts disappearing. Then I don't hear the plates clanging or the ice-machine at the bar and I can really play. It's making the stuff inside you come out louder. (2019a)

The ability to instigate this state of "artificial loudness" becomes more challenging for him when there are visual elements at play, making scoring a difficult practice for him: "I find that if I keep my eyes open or focus on a visual thing, I can't reach that space. When I close my eyes my aural sensitivity to the music becomes greater"[14] (ibid). In his scoring practice, Mombelli attempts to access a similar internal state to that of his improvisations.

Experimentation and Iterative Improvisation

> *Musicians are explorers. If I'm walking on a canyon and I don't walk next to the edge, I won't see all the amazing things in the valley below.* (Mombelli 2019a)

Mombelli's primary approach to composition is to develop music based on material generated initially through improvisation, "composing out of improvisation" as he calls it (2007b, 3). His scoring process for the documentary *Roads to Restitution* followed this procedure. He told me his approach to the music was typical of his scoring practice generally: having the film in front of him and his instrumentation options prepared. "I have all my effects, soundscapes and loops set up. So if I know I need something to build

[14] My hunch is that perception of visual data seems subjectively more directional and volitional compared to auditory data, therefore offering greater impedance to the accessing of a non-judgmental awareness of the present and the state of "artificial loudness" that Mombelli seeks, see Kondo et al. 2017.

up here [for a scene] … I put that particular scene on loop and I start improvising to that on my own with my bass or piano" (2019a). He continues to capture the improvisations until he feels he has successfully generated the appropriate musical material that best expresses his emotional interpretation of the scene: "I start recording while experimenting and improvising with sounds until suddenly you find something and then you have it" (ibid). After the improvisations are captured, he identifies and extracts material useful for developing the compositions: "afterwards I go back and listen to them and transcribe the improvisations and make compositions out of them" (ibid). This processes of crafting compositions out of improvised building-blocks is similar to Danna's general approach to composing – the difference being that Danna is not always the musician directly generating the improvised material.[15] For example, Danna explained to me that for *8MM* (1999, dir. Joel Schumacher) "the flute theme, that kind of mysterious thing – that was definitely pulled out of a field recording" (2017). He determined that it should be an elemental building-block for the composition because "it caught my ear then I pulled it out and found that one section. I probably had thirty more minutes but that was the nugget within all the sand" (ibid). Mombelli described his similarly subtractive process to me:

> In improvisation there's many things that don't work, so I tend to do too much and then start subtracting until I've got hardly anything. But I'm left with the jewels, with the magical stuff. (2019a)

Part of Mombelli's approach to improvisation relies on his acknowledgement of the randomness inherent in the internal processes of music-making. On this subject, mathematicians Michel France and Alain Hénaut write:

> Any given complex work of art has its own internal dynamism. The dynamic force of the work dictates what the artist may do, and is not entirely within the artist's control … the degree to which randomness was an integral part both of their creative activity and of the life of the work itself. (1994, 220)

Mombelli told me that he subscribes to the notion that music "has a life of its own" (ibid) that is beyond his control, and that he embraces this acknowledgement wholeheartedly and composes based on this philosophy:

> Good artists are always searching for new angles. If I read a book and I can predict what's coming on the next page – that's cool. But if you can always predict what's coming, that's boring writing that's going nowhere. I can't predict my own compositions. (2019a)

[15] It is also similar to the process I employed in my predetermined re-scoring of scenes from *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018, dir. Peter Jackson), albeit within an ensemble context, see following chapter.

In his estimation, this is as a result of an early fascination with sounds appearing in nature, forcing him to acknowledge the aleatoric quality of sound: "as a child I used to listen to nature: the wind and the rustling of leaves. I started hearing loops from birds and crickets responding to one another" (ibid). He draws no distinction between the sounds generated in nature and a potentially separate category labelled 'music'. He was therefore influenced to reproduce within his own music the randomness and unpredictable internal dynamism inherent in those sounds: "I learned a lot about orchestration from nature and how nature creates composition completely spontaneously. I always wanted to do that" (ibid).

The external mandate of composing to film is one that Mombelli grapples with for multiple reasons, and I turn now to investigate his approach to improvising as a direct response to an image, as opposed to an abstracted and internalised representation of the material.

Direct-to-image Versus Abstracted Scoring

As has been established, Mombelli feels that screen composition is somewhat unnatural for him, as it is "calculated or constructed because of the external imperative of film – I cannot necessarily work intuitively" (2007a, 3). In order to foster an "intuitive" scoring approach, he actively diverts his attention *away* from the image in order to draw creative inspiration:

> Where I have a set task and boundaries (a script or set of images), I try to find inspiration somewhere outside of the boundaries of the film for the musical accompaniment to images or scenes. (Ibid)

This is similar to the way Danna described to me his development of musical material divorced from the image: "you might come down to make tea and it's running in your head … I've written away from it, just completely in my head" (2017). I asked Mombelli what his creative process is when approaching screen composition as abstracted from the image as opposed to improvising or composing as a direct response to the image. He explained, "I watch it and I listen to the lyrics [dialogue] very much. I see what [the characters] are saying or the emotion on the faces. Then I play to try to get that emotion out" (2019a).

I asked him whether he had ever approached screen composition with a predetermined or calculated methodology, scrutinising the on-screen activity and synchronising music directly to the images. He responded:

> The only time I've done that is for animation films … Animation scoring is really rough because you have to sync everything. When that little cartoon blinks, you've got to have something happening with the violin pizzicato, so you've really got to score it. (2019a)

In scoring the animated television series *The Devolutionaries* (2005, dev. Luma Animation), Mombelli "started work on the story, assigning a sound to each character" (2007b, 219). I asked him whether he finds he often composes with predetermined recurring musical themes or *leitmotifs* and he responded that it is not his preferred method of screen composition: "I did use themes in the latest film [*Salvation*]. I found a theme for the characters … and I would bring them back throughout the film. But that's not my go-to and I wouldn't do that now" (2019a). He maintains that in general this deliberate approach to composition is unusual for him: "usually the way I compose is I *don't* compose. I don't sit down at the piano and go 'OK, I'm going to compose this now'" (ibid). This is because the majority of his compositions "come out of improvisation" (ibid) and, as explained above, he insists: "my improvisations come out of emotional experiences and stories I want to tell … So for me to put a movie on and try to write music to it is hellishly difficult" (ibid).

Mombelli's preferred approach to scoring is to improvise directly to the images and build the score from the material generated. "I would try to improvise to screen" he told me,

> I want to watch the film and have it affect me while I'm playing and improvising and record that. And then afterwards I want to go back and say [for example] "OK, this part would be beautiful if I added three cellos to that melody I improvised". (2019a)

Investigating Danna's approach to scoring for projects, like animations, that might call for a compositional process that is tied more directly to the on-screen activity, provides an interesting comparison to that of Mombelli. For scores that he feels don't require much in the way of improvised musical material, Danna makes efforts to compose using a meticulously predetermined approach:

> If you heard the mock-ups for *Storks*[16] or *The Good Dinosaur*[17] or bigger orchestral scores and then heard the final version, they're *precisely* the same. Except they sound good instead of terrible. (Danna 2017)

However, Danna also describes his compositional process through the lens of visceral improvisational reactivity, similar to Mombelli:

> Often I'll watch a film and maybe the second time I see it alone in my studio I'll just let it run and I sit back. Then I might jump up and throw something down as it's running and keep it just so I have this impression of what I felt the first time I saw it … I'll improvise to certain areas in certain scenes … generally it's improvising with MIDI in front of the film. (Ibid)

Mombelli does not only score based on improvisations generated as a direct result of responding to the filmic material. He also experiments with incorporating musical material that was initially generated within a disassociated context, and which later strikes him as appropriate and useful. He told me he might think "wait a moment, that melody that I have there in that box that I wrote five years ago is exactly what I need for this scene" and proceed to "fetch that melody from five years ago, place it into the music and start working on it" (2019a).

As I mentioned in Chapter Three, author Ben Winters makes the case that screen music does not necessarily have to be composed directly to picture for it to be considered a successful score. It can equally be composed away from the picture and imposed on the film afterwards, and often is:

> The idea that superior film music requires constant reference to the image does not necessarily stand up to scrutiny and perhaps merely betrays an ideological bias in favour of single creative figures working in isolation, the genius composer cocooned in his projection room. (2007, 23)

There also exists the convincing possibility that composing to an abstracted image that exists in one's head is to some degree always unavoidable when composing screen music. This is because abstracted imagining is exactly the process by which we as human beings are ever able to assimilate any meaningful information at all. The 'in-one's-head' process of abstraction might equally govern the ability of a composer or an audience member to filter, comprehend and interpret visual media regardless of the 'objective' images on-

16 2016, dir. Nicholas Stoller & Doug Sweetland.
17 2015, dir. Peter Sohn.

screen.[18] I have previously shown that an interplay between direct-to-image and abstracted composition is evident in the music that Phillip Miller created for *Where is Kyra?* (2017, dir. Andrew Dosunmu), where Miller focused on creating semi-improvised mood pieces to be arranged afterwards in relation to the image rather than compose music in direct reference to the images. I turn now to explore how Mombelli undertook a similar process for *Story of a Beautiful Country* (2004, dir. Khalo Matabane), albeit within an ensemble context.

Collaborative Scoring

Ensemble Improvisation

Mombelli improvised the music for the documentary film *Story of a Beautiful Country* in collaboration with an ensemble consisting of himself on bass, Marcus Wyatt on trumpet, Andile Yanana on piano and Kesivan Naidoo on percussion. Wyatt is credited as a co-composer. In the film, director Matabane travels across South Africa in a minibus taxi, ten years on from the abolition of apartheid, and captures provocative interviews and candid encounters with people across the racial spectrum. Mombelli told me that the scoring process included a sort of 'spotting' session where he determined, in reference to the image, what kinds of music would be required. The material was then improvised by the ensemble away from the image:

> Marcus and I watched the film before and made notes of what we needed. We went "OK this interview scene here needs this type of style of music" and then we set up grooves and improvised over them and recorded that. (2019a)

To determine appropriate music for particular scenes, they assessed what the emotional centre of the scene was and agreed on the general mood and tempo that could successfully be imposed on the images afterwards:

> We found the emotion of the scenes and improvised the takes. We'd look at a scene and go "OK, we need something up-tempo" and then we would go and improvise some up-tempo stuff. We made notes on what the different scenes needed – if it needed to be quirky, happy or sad and whether it had space to fill with motion or if it needed silence around the dialogue. (Ibid)

[18] A thorough discussion on this subject is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Then, similar to Danna's guiding of improvising performers on many of his scores, Mombelli informed the ensemble of the sound he was after and allowed them to improvise freely with that as their directive:

> We got Kesivan and Andile in and told them "OK, we need maybe a heavy bebop thing here" and I'd start playing a bassline then the band would start jamming. We generated all this music and then we went back to our notes and placed the takes exactly where we wanted them in the film. (Ibid)

I asked Mombelli whether he found that, in the subsequent placement of the music to the film, unexpected processes took place – things that he thought would work but did not and vice versa. He replied:

> There were definitely things that were too busy in the music. When you've got people like Kesivan playing drums it can sometimes be a bit overpowering and then you can't use it. (Ibid)

In such cases, music that was generated for a different scene would be used to replace the music that was deemed unsuitable in retrospect for the scene in question. Mombelli explains, "we'd take music that we'd played for a different scene and use it there, and it doesn't matter if you repeat things and if themes come back" (ibid). He exploited the convention of using thematic recall to construct a cohesive cinematic arc, despite the fact that doing so was not his intention prior to the process of assembling and arranging the music to image.

An example of musical material that was clearly improvised in a single recording session and subsequently split across two distinct scenes in the film, appears first when a bereaved mother visits the grave of her murdered son (0:49:20). It is heard again when Matabane visits Vasco Da Gama Cross in Cape Point (1:06:48). Mombelli's choice to associate these two scenes with similar musical material may have simply been one driven by the need utilise mood-appropriate accompaniment and nothing more. Nevertheless, making this association through the score creates to some degree what editor Walter Murch calls "a perceptual vacuum into which the mind of the audience must inevitably rush" which is then seen "as a deeper truth about the thing named and our relationship to it" (1995, 247).



Fig. 20: Bereaved mother in Matabane's taxi in Story of a Beautiful Country

It is evident that the music was improvised in reference to notes taken to determine style, tempo and mood during the 'spotting' session. The score is therefore somewhat of a mixed bag with no obvious through-line. It ranges from up-tempo bebop, frenetically propelling forward a montage of people calling in to a night-time radio programme to complain about racism in post-apartheid South Africa (3:43-5:12), to a light-hearted mid-tempo swing with a plodding walking bass to accompany a right-wing farmer encouraged by Matabane to show off his karate moves (24:00-24:30). The film opens with an altogether different style of music – a contemplative solo piano piece.
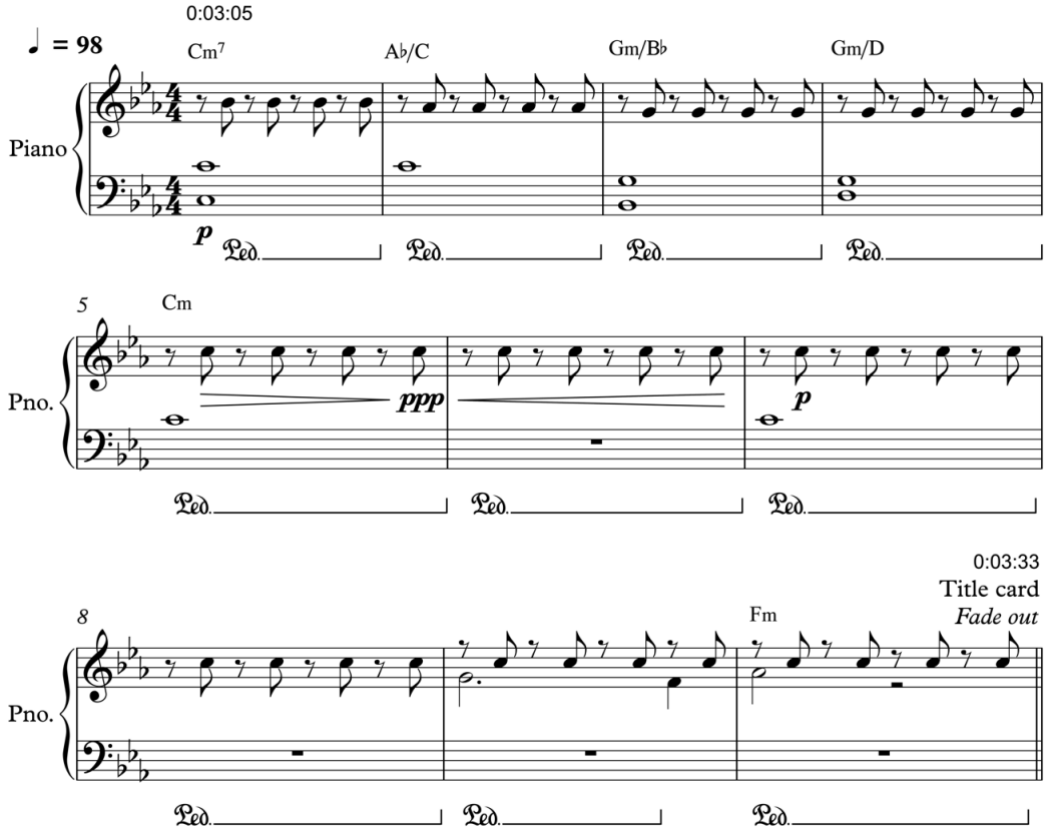


Fig. 21: My transcription of an excerpt from Mombelli's Story of a Beautiful Country *score, with timecodes and implied harmony (0:03:05-0:03:33)*

Matabane's voiceover ruminates about revisiting the northern village where he grew up, isolated from what was happening in the broader South Africa. The music enters after the line: "The best way to understand the world is by going on a journey" (0:02:33). The music fades out once the title card is established (0:3:33, m. 10). This music is somewhat at odds with the majority of the score in that it uses solo instrumentation, as opposed to the ensemble. More significantly for this study, it does not come across as obviously improvised; the regular and repeated off-beat syncopated rhythm of the upper voice and conventional harmonic movement gives the impression that the piece is of a more predetermined nature. The melodic content is formed around the three note cell G-F-Ab that appears in the lower voice in mm. 9-10. The music is performed in a sparse and restrained manner and it seems likely that Yanana had worked on some iteration of the piece prior to the recording of it. It stands in contrast to the more 'improvised' music that the ensemble generated for the majority of the film. I turn now to examine one such instance: a scene mentioned above, where Matabane documents a bereaved mother visiting the grave of her murdered son (0:49:20).

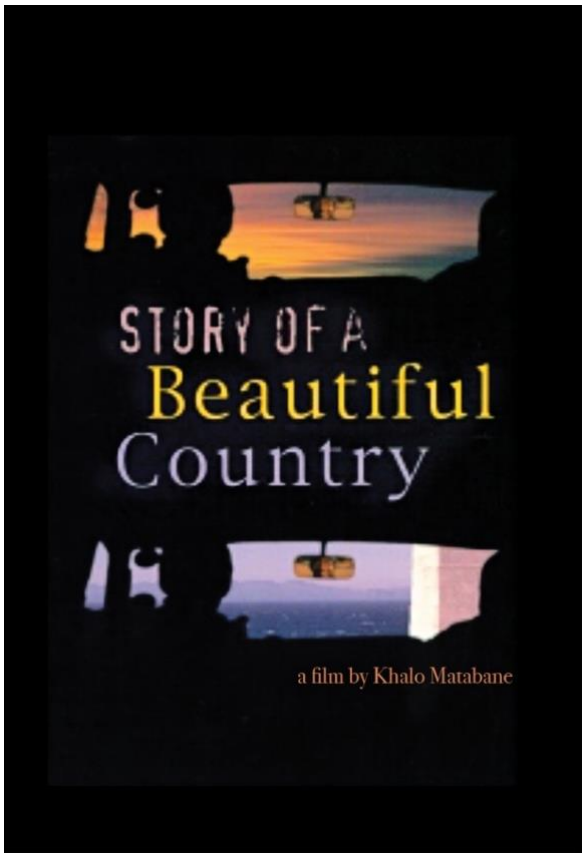


Fig. 22: Promotional image for Story of a Beautiful Country
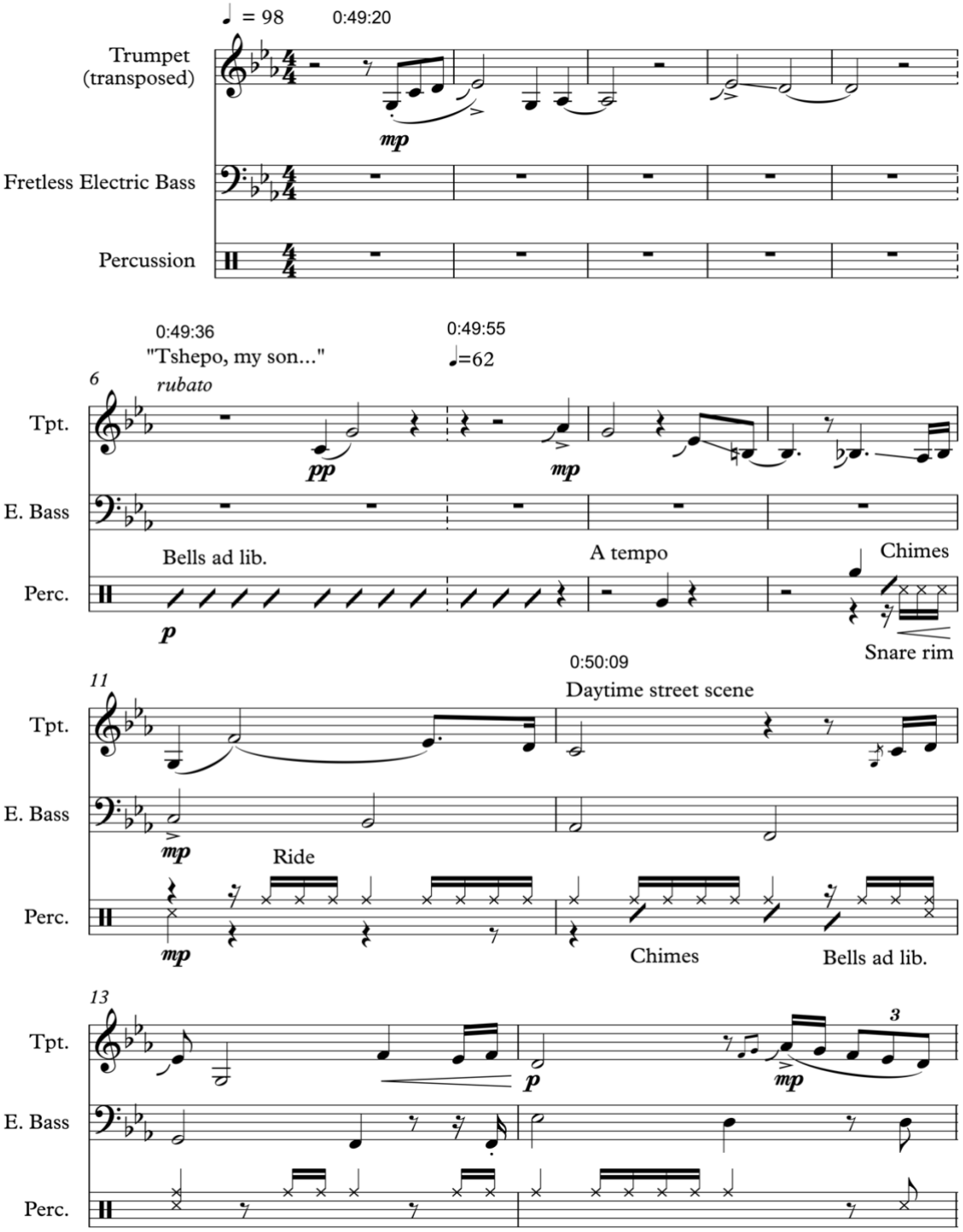


Fig. 23: My transcription of an excerpt from Mombelli's Story of a Beautiful Country *score with timecodes and annotations (0:49:20-0:50:20)*

The music corresponds appropriately with the sombre mood of the scene. There is a free-flowing looseness to Wyatt's trumpet line that marks it as music that was improvised around predetermined harmonic changes. The same freedom in performance is evident in

the percussion and there are moments where Naidoo finds leeway within the established tempo and rhythm (0:49:37, m. 6 and 0:50:10, m. 12). The subsequent editing and assembling of the music to this scene is also apparent in mm. 6-7; the busier trumpet parts have been shifted here to prevent the score from overpowering the mother's dialogue (0:49:36).

Creativity and Compromise

Despite being a regular collaborator throughout his musical career, Mombelli claims that the ensemble scoring process for *Story of a Beautiful Country* is not one he wishes to repeat. This is because he felt it required the kind of creative compromise he resists. "I wouldn't do it like that again", he told me:

> I've moved on from that kind of collaborative process. I don't play in many people's bands anymore because I'm playing so personally now. People can book me only if they want Carlo Mombelli. I'm at that point now. I'm almost sixty – I'm allowed to be at that point. (2019a)

Mombelli makes a strong case for composition and improvisation as an expression of personal creativity versus the creative compromise that can come as a result of collaborative input and interference. However, he would likely agree that through collaboration it is possible to achieve something one could not achieve on one's own – that the whole can be more than the sum of its parts. He cedes creative control within his current ensemble every time he performs with them. He writes regarding the challenge of keeping a uniform tempo within in an ensemble: "When we perform with other musicians, we need to make compromises and shift to the time of the ensemble and not keep strictly to 'our time'" (2019b, 11). His frequent collaborations with vocalist Mbuso Khoza is further evidence for the fact that Mombelli embraces collaboration that, on some level, disrupts his autonomous creativity. He enjoys the fact that Khoza cannot easily be directed (not unlike the snake charmers in Danna's *Exotica* score). Mombelli often tells audiences: "He learned his music in the mountains of KwaZulu-Natal, herding cattle … using clicks and sounds and each animal understood their sounds" (quoted in Milton 2014). This is a perspective on music-making that Mombelli, by his own admission, does not possess and he welcomes the way an oblique outlook might redefine the direction of

his music. For example, Mombelli recalls recording the track "The Hunter"[19]: "I played a groove – not a simple bass groove – and Mbuso said, 'This song, it sounds like a hunting song.' I said, 'You take it: take over and you feel it like it is'" (ibid). It is also true that Mombelli prefers to collaborate with musicians who share a similar vision and methodology, therefore limiting the need to compromise his creativity. As he says:

> If you find musicians that have been inspired by similar artists, then you kind of understand one another's headspace … Kesivan is also inspired by [drummer] Paul Motian, so there's a shared sound when we play … We all play with colours, almost like painting a soundtrack with the music. (Ibid)

As I discussed in the previous chapter, issues around authorship inevitably arise when scoring in a collaborative context. Of Mombelli's collaborators on *Story of a Beautiful Country*, only Wyatt received a co-credit as composer. He and Wyatt took the lead during the initial spotting session in determining what music would be required, but it is not necessarily clear how this earns them authorial status at the expense the other collaborators in the ensemble whom, it could be argued, had an equal hand in the creation of the score. One is inclined to assume that, given Mombelli's philosophy that composition should be derived from the same kernel of personal creative expression as improvisation, he would believe that it is unethical to claim authorship over music that collaborating improvisers have co-created. Perhaps the shaping, guiding and subsequent arranging of the music to film is the reason Mombelli and Wyatt are considered its composers. A similar argument is put forward by Mera regarding Danna's "role in shaping performances and structuring musical resources" (2007, 11) for the musicians on his scores, defending his authorial status in relation to their improvisations.

Conclusion

I have explored Mombelli's approach to screen composition and found it to be one that privileges improvisation and personal expression over external imperatives and collaborative creativity. A comparison between the scoring practices of Mombelli and Danna suggests a fundamental philosophical difference regarding music-making: Mombelli is of the opinion that a score should develop based on one's personal creative response in the moment, and Danna believes that the film itself should be the sole arbiter

[19] Track 7 on *Stories* (Mombelli 2014).

of one's scoring process. For Mombelli there is little distinction between composition and improvisation as both are contingent upon accessing one's own emotions and embracing the aleatoric nature of sound production. Mombelli's navigation of the process of improvising directly to image versus away from the image, helps us explore the composer's autonomous creativity in relation to the images. An analysis of Mombelli's score for *Story of a Beautiful Country* reveals his approach to collaboration within an ensemble, the process of assembling improvised material in reference to picture, and a critical look at his stated unwillingness to compromise his creative control.

The following chapter attempts to digest the concepts and conclusions in this chapter and the preceding chapters regarding the role and function of improvisation within screen music. In it I re-examine those ideas in relation to my own portfolio of works and analyses of my compositional approaches.

CHAPTER 6: SELF-REFLECTION ON THE PORTFOLIO OF WORKS

Introduction

In the previous chapters I investigated select improvised scoring practices within screen composition from the silent film era to contemporary times. I looked at trends of scoring methodologies as well as specific composers' practices in an attempt to uncover and examine the various creative dynamics at play in improvised screen music. In this chapter, I turn the lens upon my own composition portfolio and conduct an analysis and examination of the improvisational and compositional processes in my works. Below, I reflect on my own creative processes for each piece in light of what I have learned from examining other composers' work. See pg. *ix* for the list of components as they are arranged in my accompanying portfolio of works.

Birdman

One of my compositional mandates was to use predetermined processes to re-score three key sequences from a film that originally had an improvised score in order to investigate the ways in which my musical material differed from the improvised music and how it might alter the filmic experience. For this task I selected *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014, dir. Alejandro Iñárritu). As discussed in Chapter Three, the film tells the story of a washed-up actor who tries to reclaim his fame on Broadway. Alongside compiled pieces of pre-existing music, *Birdman* contains improvised sequences by jazz drummer Antonio Sanchez. I analysed some of the improvisatory processes Sanchez and Iñárritu employed in Chapter Three. Sanchez's initial idea was to compose music that was "very pattern-oriented, where each character had a different rhythmic theme" (quoted in Pond 2014, n.p.). Iñárritu told Sanchez that approaching the score thematically was not what he had in mind. He suggested a more spontaneous, organic and improvisational approach (ibid). With Iñárritu's guidance, Sanchez's scoring process sought to capture different emotional states through textural changes:

> I said to Alejandro, "Why don't you sit in front of me, and think of the scene as I'm playing? … When you see him [Michael Keaton's character] leave the dressing room, raise your hand. When he enters the stage, raise your hand" … Every time he raised his hand, I would change texture. It was an amazingly fun

> challenge. Being a jazz drummer, I am used to improvising, but I usually don't do it with imagery. (Quoted in Pond 2014)

In re-scoring the film, I had to decide whether to base my predetermined music on the original improvised score in some way, or to actively disregard the original material. In order to deviate from his free-flowing textural score, and despite Iñárritu's expressed wishes to the contrary, I chose to pursue Sanchez's initial line of thought and approach the composition from a thematic standpoint. My theme would transform throughout the film, as opposed to being a plain recurring statement and would therefore function somewhat as a leitmotif.[20] While I was concerned that 'over-coding' the music by sowing seeds of insight into character development and foreshadowing the narrative could be counter-productive in an intentionally ambiguous film, I pressed on, reasoning that a leitmotivic approach would at the least offer an opportunity to observe and note any interesting transformations in the functions and effectiveness of the different kinds of scores. I began by creating the thematic material and writing a short suite of sorts in order to ascertain appropriate moods and instrumentation.

Birdman's protagonist is Riggan Thomson (Michael Keaton), a washed-up actor famous for playing the superhero Birdman in a film trilogy twenty years earlier. Riggan is trying to gain recognition as a serious actor for writing, directing, and starring in a Broadway play. However, he is tormented by a taunting and critical internal voice that takes the form of his alter-ego, Birdman. In a case of the film's casting mirroring reality, Keaton is famous for portraying the character of Batman in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992). Subsequent to those films, he made forays into more 'serious' dramatic acting. There are parallels between Keaton's and Riggan's careers and the meta-narrative looms large throughout *Birdman*. As a result, I decided to make reference to this in composing my theme. Composer Danny Elfman's *Batman* score is an iconic representation of the superhero, especially the five-note leitmotif:
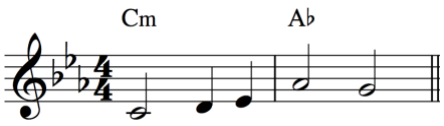


Fig. 24: Reduction of Elfman's "Bat-theme"

[20] See Chapter Three for further discussion on the functionality of the leitmotif.

The “Bat-theme” melody is rooted in the tonic of the minor mode, ascends stepwise then leaps up a perfect fourth into the relative major harmony outlining a major sixth and lastly descends by a semitone, pulling us back to the tonic by way of its dominant relationship. The theme is rooted in a minor tonality but has a heroic and soaring quality, reflecting the character of Bruce Wayne; to use Janet Halfyard’s description, “he is a deeply troubled and traumatised individual and, just as he is positioned somewhat flexibly between the opposing powers of crime and law, so his music is also ‘flexible’” (2004, 65). His struggle to “escape the irrationality of his dark side and mature into a full-fledged superhero and just warrior” is represented in the music (idem, 150). Riggan is also plagued by his “dark side” and struggles throughout *Birdman* to let go of the past and stop obsessing over his self-worth and relevance. However, unlike Bruce Wayne, Riggan allows himself to regress and become defined by his past and his egotistic tendencies, and it is unclear by the end of the film whether he is able to overcome the darkness within himself. In order to represent this musically, I decided that the theme I would use should be the “Bat-theme” in retrograde:

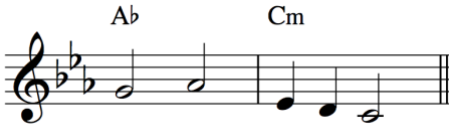


Fig. 25: Reduction of my “Birdman Theme”

The semitone ascent from the pleasantly serene major seventh degree of the harmony to the tonic, followed by a fall into a decidedly minor mode represents Riggan’s consistent stifling of the potential for happiness by descending into self-doubt and nihilism.

Before scoring to picture, I created a short musical demonstration titled “Birdman Theme (Early Mock-up)” (which can be found in the “Compositional Exercises” folder) in order to better define for myself the functionality of the thematic material and my decisions around instrumentation, orchestration and mood. This was a useful first step in that, as will be discussed below, it became clear that I should discard many of my initial ideas regarding creating a sonic landscape typical of superhero films in favour of a more intimate, unconventional and process-music driven score.

M1 – Internal War

The title of this cue is taken from the official soundtrack.[21] In this scene Riggan is wracked with self-doubt, destroying objects in his backstage dressing room whilst beleaguered by Birdman's critical voice. His publicist Jake enters and calms him down, assuring him that the show will be a success. The music begins after Riggan's scuffle with co-star Shiner with a chord in the violins containing the harmonic content of the pitches in the "Birdman Theme" (Abmaj7#11/C) modulating down over an octave and panning the sound field from hard left to hard right (0:06-0:12). This foreshadows what will be unloaded throughout the scene and signifies the two sides of Riggan's psyche. The modulated chord returns with Riggan smashing a pictorial representation of Birdman, but the modulation and panning is reversed, signifying that he is neither convinced by nor free of Birdman (2:44).



Fig. 26: Riggan and Shiner in Birdman

In order to deviate from the original music I chose not to utilise percussion instruments, but that presented the challenge of finding another way to engage with film's sense of flow that is, in large part, due to Iñárritu's extreme long takes – the (apparently) single

[21] Track 11 (Sanchez 2014).

continuous shot that constitutes the film – that Sanchez's score reinforces and supports so well. Iñárritu explains:

> [The continuous shot] was conceived the moment I knew the movie was about the ego … Not just observing the character but living through his mind … We are trapped in continuous time. It's going only in one direction … This continuous shot … has a [different] emotional affect. You get an experience closer to what our real lives are like. (Quoted in Cook 2015, n.p.)

As a result, composing music with a minimalist approach made sense to me. Author Rebecca Eaton explains how minimalist music can create a sense of continuous flow in film: "Because of its constant pulse, its rhythmic impetus also propels the music forward. The music can thus be stretched out indefinitely… assisting with the continuity of the film" (2008, 38). The minimalist approach also seemed fitting as its set process is somewhat antithetical to improvisation and because the music has its own life-force that eschews manual interventions in meaning-making. Composer Steve Reich defines minimalism as "a compositional process and a sounding music that are one and the same thing" (1974, 10). It consequently "determine[s] all the note-to-note details and the overall form simultaneously. One can't improvise in a musical process – the concepts are mutually exclusive" (idem, 11). This aligned with my chosen compositional mandate as well as with the deterministic themes of the film.

The unravelling of Riggan's emotions prompted me to employ the technique of 'phasing' and to have increasing polyrhythmic complexity reinforce the sense of his bifurcated psyche. A gradual phasing approach in the vein of Reich's "Violin Phase" (Reich 1969) has two parts playing repetitive phrases in almost identical tempi so that both parts are perceived to be sounding in unison and over time have the phrases gradually shift apart. This creates, at first, a doubling effect, then complex polyrhythms, after which the parts eventually return to an in-phase position (Mertens 1983, 48). I used my "Birdman Theme" as a repetitive phrase across two octaves. I created two violin parts placed in the centre of the sound field with duplicates panned slightly right and left respectively. One violin part remains constant while the other moves ever further out of synch. This mirrors the idea that although Riggan and his ego constantly diverge and converge, they are in essence inexorably tied to one another and form his personality and perceptions. He is in the clutches of Birdman's influence and his path towards self-destruction appears all but predestined. Music theorist Rebecca Leydon describes this as an "aphasic" approach to

composition and suggests that "repetition conveys notions of cognitive impairment, madness, or logical absurdity" (quoted in Eaton 2008, 45).

I found that employing this technique created two issues for me to contend with. Firstly, the music becomes distracting at times because the listener strains to conflate the complex sounds into something 'stable', to the detriment of the narrative. Eaton writes that "minimalist scores are not always inaudible. Often they draw more attention to themselves than do conventional film scores" (2008, 32). This is because "characteristics of the music itself draw attention to it; it is difficult to ignore a constant, precisely repeating pulse, which is one of the underlying theories behind alarm clocks and telephone rings" (idem, 33). Secondly, letting the parts simply run their predetermined course throughout the cue did not afford me much opportunity for manipulating the music to synchronise with specific actions on-screen in order to assert my musical interpretation of the narrative at specific junctures. As Eaton explains: "conventions making emotion explicit are not part of minimalism … whose slow change rate and continuous form makes stingers and other signals of dramatic surprise completely uncharacteristic" (idem, 35). She goes on:

> These qualities of minimalism do not allow it to reflect every emotional nuance, every action of a scene through dramatic underscoring … The contrast needed to show immediate emotional change is not available. Instead of portraying moment-to moment feelings or drama, the most it can do is bathe an entire scene in affect, reflecting a general mood through its tempo and mode. (Ibid)

In order to address these issues, I determined where certain 'synch-points' in the scene were and discovered that if I had the second violin part shift a semiquaver ahead every eight bars, the musical patterns overlap and form intricate and dissonant melodies around those specific points. This allowed me to create both a less distracting and a more dramatically intentional score. Eaton notes that "the further a cue gets from 'pure' minimalism and the closer it gets to something resembling the Romantic style of the classical scoring model, the more it can take on the functions of that model" (2008, 41). My approach to using thematic material and targeted dramatic underscoring deviates from minimalism in the way Eaton suggests: "a hint of a melody might serve as a sign of emotion or force audience identification with a character, more so than a 'pure' minimalist cue" (ibid).

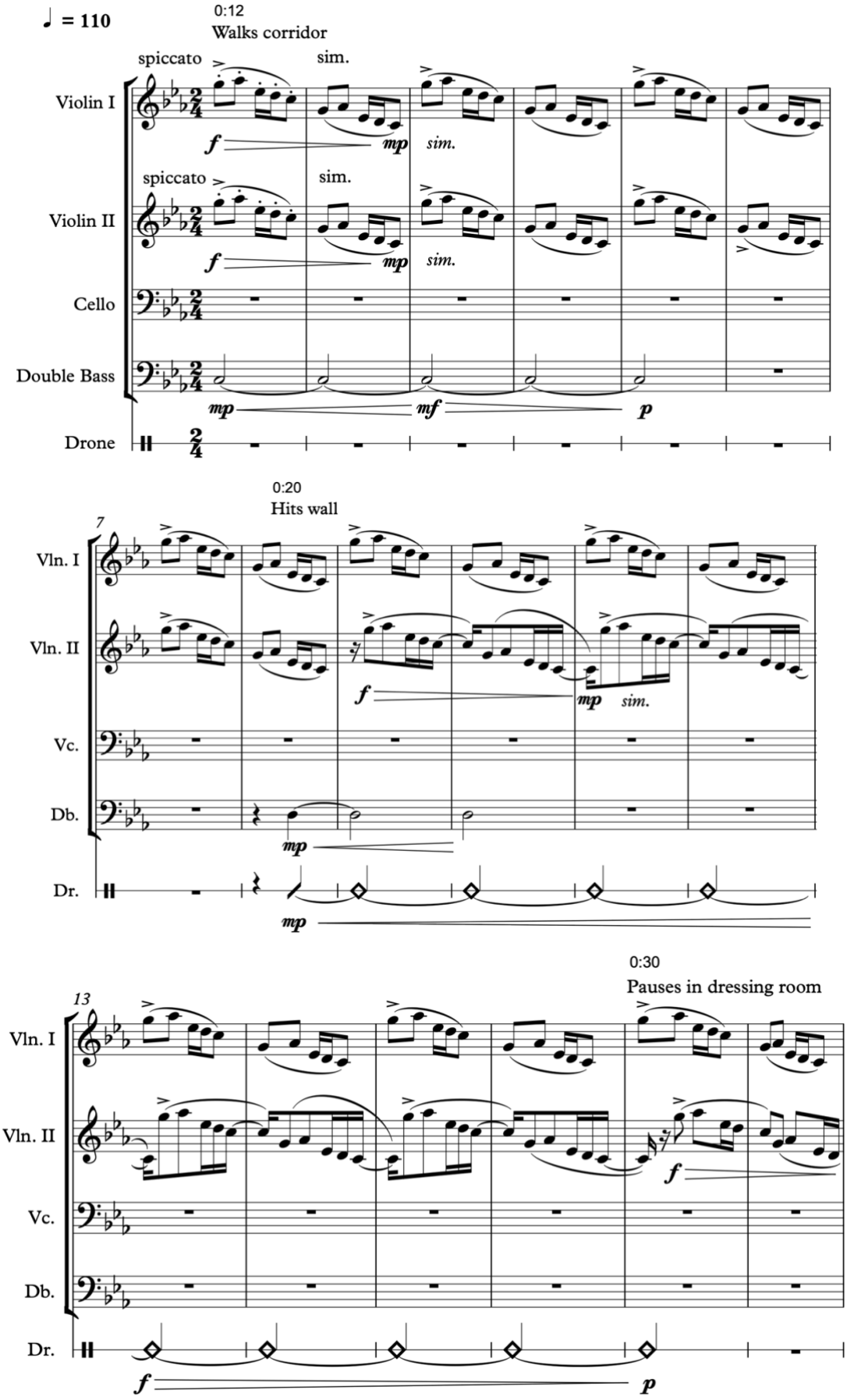

♩ = 110
0:12
Walks corridor
spiccato
sim.
Violin I
Violin II
Cello
Double Bass
Drone
0:20
Hits wall
Vln. I
Vln. II
Vc.
Db.
Dr.
0:30
Pauses in dressing room
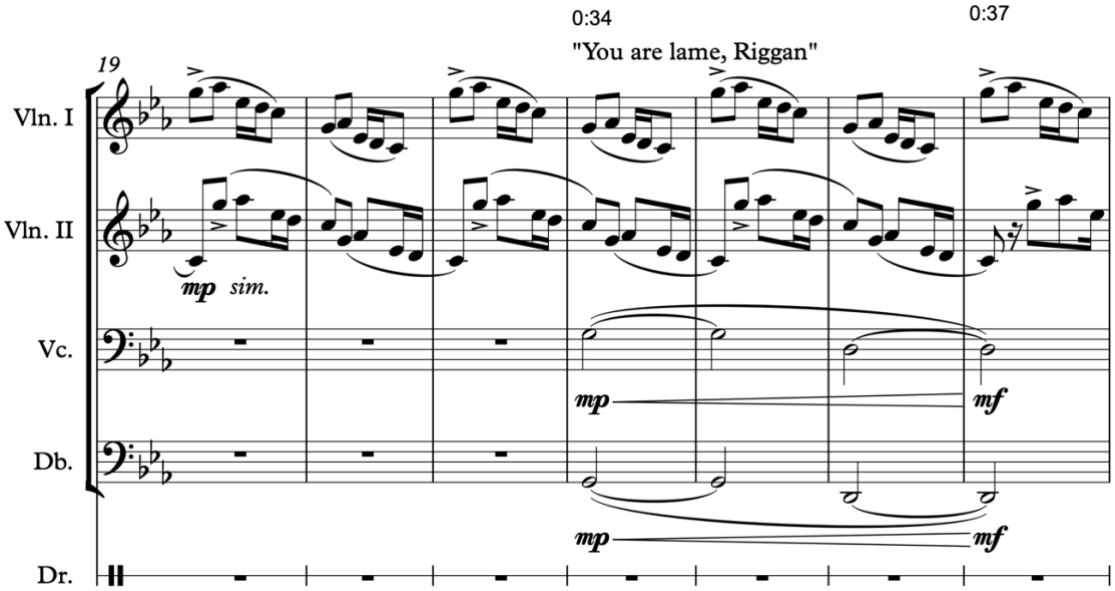


Fig. 27:: Excerpt of my score for "M1 – Internal War" with timecodes and annotations (0:12-0:38)

When Riggan hits the wall, a visible marker that he is losing control, the parts diverge on their predestined paths, while low strings and a synthesiser drone underscore the moment (0:20, mm. 8-9). In this way I took guidance from the original score, as Sanchez explains: "[Iñárritu] wanted me to accentuate with the drums whenever he would hit the wall or drop something on the floor, but he wanted a bed of noise underneath" (quoted in Nelson 2015).[22] The first time that the harmony is outlined in the low strings is when Riggan reacts despairingly to Birdman's line "You are lame, Riggan", anchoring him to his torment, while a further divergence of phase occurs in the violins (0:34, mm. 22-23). The harmonies that act as an anchor for the melodic parts and facilitate a progression of the music are born out of Birdman's agenda.

I modelled a synthesiser to underscore the moments when Riggan uses telekinetic powers to lift and smash objects in his dressing room (0:45, 2:43). The alien nature of the electronic sound within the context of an otherwise acoustic environment highlights the magical realism in the scene, what Kelly Kramer describes as the "matter-of-fact inclusion of certain fantastical … elements" in an otherwise realistically told story (Kramer 2016, 2). When his agent walks in and sees Riggan throwing objects around

[22] See Chapter Three for further discussion on how Sanchez's score functions.

(3:06), we are presented with conflicting explanations of Riggan's powers, yet the film refuses to help the viewer decide which one is 'real'. This is because "the core of the film is about what is real, and how we can tell what is real" (idem, 11). I chose to use a synthesiser because its electronic nature invites the idea of detachment from a corporeal reality when contrasted with the sounds of humanly produced acoustic instruments.

M2 – Street Walk

In this scene, Riggan wakes up after having drunkenly passed out in the street. A synthesised piano with phasing and delay plays disorienting major seventh chords while Birdman says, "You look like shit, brother" (0:11). He prods Riggan, "Come on. Stand up!", and a ramshackle 3/4 metre is established by the piano (0:28). As he gets up unsteadily, pizzicato violins with reverb and discombobulating effects counter the piano chords (0:30). Birdman appears behind Riggan in corporeal form and dogs him as he walks, sowing delusions and fantasies in his mind: "We'll make a comeback" (0:50). The music used in the original is John Adams's "Chorus of Exiled Palestinians" from *The Death of Klinghoffe*r, one of the few instances in the film where pre-existing music is used (see also "M3 – Flying" below). I posit that this is because these are times when Birdman has subsumed Riggan's ego so totally that it is no longer appropriate to score with Sanchez's improvised textural mood-painting, which hitherto has been used to indicate his internal struggles. The use of pre-existing contemporary classical music is a marker that Riggan's fantasising has gone rogue.

There is a rising noisy orchestral swell preceding Riggan's ineluctable slip into his fantasy world (1:23). As the action unfolds, I used a chiptune sound inspired by an 8-bit video game aesthetic to express the superficial nature of Riggan's fantasy (1:30). The "Bat-theme" is set unevenly in 7/8 with bit-crushed and distorted synthesisers and electronic drums.
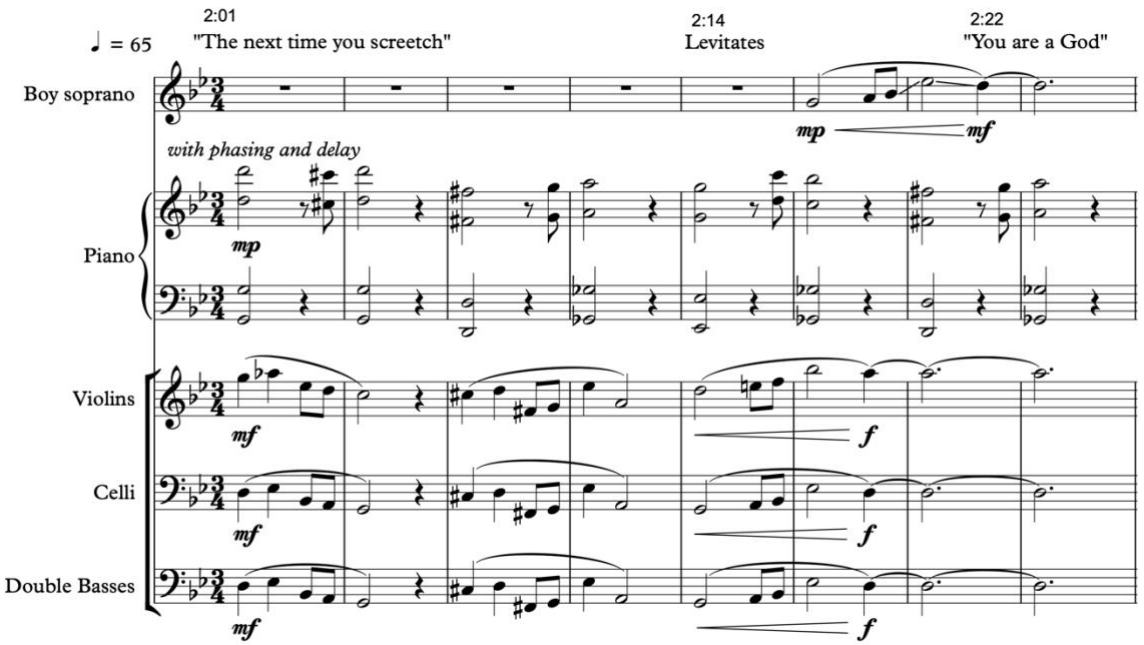


Fig. 28: Excerpt of my score for "M2 – Street Walk" with timecodes and annotations (2:01-2:25)



Fig. 29: Birdman dogging Riggan in Birdman

The fantasy abates and the string section plays variations on the "Birdman Theme" (2:01, mm. 1-4) as Birdman convinces Riggan. He begins to levitate and the "Bat-theme" plays out in full force (2:14, m.5). A boy soprano then sings the theme (mm.6-8, 2:18 and 2:32), signifying that Riggan has been consumed by his inner child who seeks, regressively but innocently, to re-live in a 'safe' past that no longer exists.

M3 – Flying

This is arguably the most conspicuously magical realist scene in the film. As Riggan stands on the rooftop, a woman shouts, “Is this for real, or are you shooting a film?” (0:01), a question that reveals one of the key tensions of the film: is the absurd part of life incompatible with truth? The film portrays the paradoxical interdependence of the real and the unreal in Riggan’s life (Kramer 2016, 7). Riggan jumps off and flies around the city (0:44). The music used in the original is Sergei Rachmaninoff’s second movement from “Symphony No. 2 in E Minor”.



Fig. 30: Riggan flying in Birdman

At this point, the audience does not know whether this is fantasy or reality and simply has to accept the ambiguity. Therefore, I ensured that my music was ambiguous from a Western perspective of tonality and sonority: the sparse instrumentation of piano, woodwinds and chimes creates a sense of space from the beginning, and I used intervals of fourths to build the harmony.
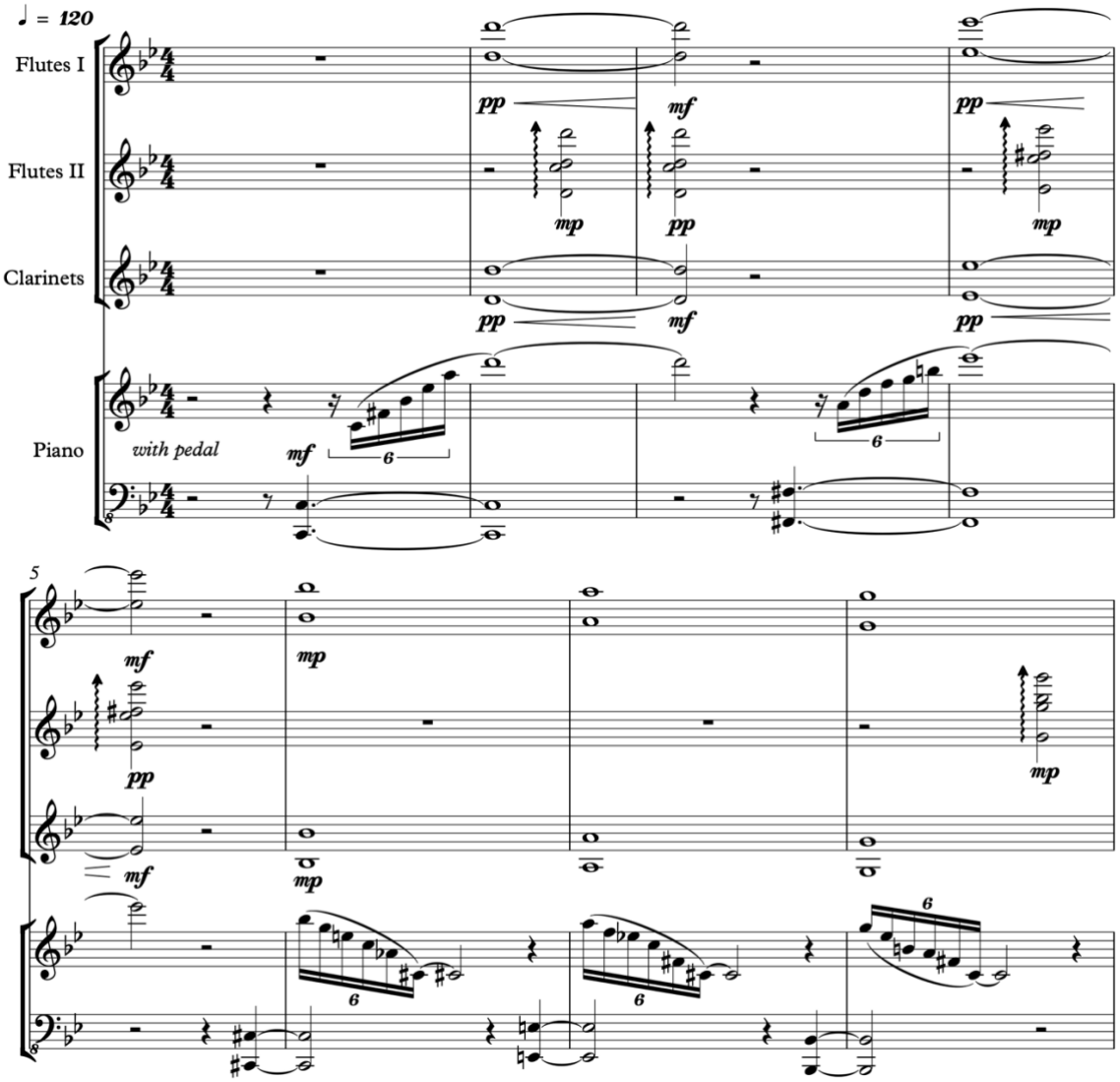


Fig. 31: Excerpt of my score for "M3 – Flying" (0:53-1:09)

In thinking about the harmonic language in this scene I drew on composer Alexander Scriabin's 'mystic chord' (used in *Prometheus*), a chord that Tyler Secor describes as creating "aural ambiguity" (2013, 34). When rooted in C, the mystic chord consists of the following pitches:

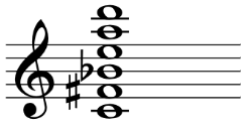


Fig. 32: Scriabin's 'mystic chord' in C

Variations on this chord can be heard throughout my score, (for example at 0:54, mm. 1-2). I wanted to mirror the elusiveness of the scene through these harmonies because, as

Peter Sabbagh writes in relation to Scriabin, "certain constellations of intervals are no longer clear enough to be associated with a certain function … the ambiguity of the chords is the special charm attracting the attention" (2003, 68). However, I still wanted my music to express that this might be a manifestation of Riggan's ego by embedding the melodic content of the "Birdman Theme" in G minor, fragmented across the top-line (beginning at 0:56), outlining D (m. 2) – Eb (m. 4) – Bb (m. 6) – A (m. 7) – G (m. 8).

No Country for Old Men

My mandate here was to engage with a film by employing a predetermined scoring approach and subsequently to explore that same film with an improvised approach in order to examine how the different scoring practices might be informed by one another and how they affect the final product. I chose three scenes from *No Country for Old Men* (2007, dir. Ethan & Joel Coen), partly because there is very little in the way of music in the original. There is not *truly* an absence of an original score, however, because the Coen brothers and composer Carter Burwell purposefully decided to use subtle sound design to shape the tone of the film rather than a more traditionally 'musical' score (I discuss this further below). The film tells the story of Llewelyn Moss, who finds cash left in the aftermath of a drug deal and takes it. An enigmatic killer named Chigurh (played by Javier Bardem) hunts down Moss and his wife Carla Jean whilst being tracked by hitman Carson Wells.

For the task of scoring the scenes with an improvised approach, I was faced with a few possible strategies. One approach was to base the improvisations on elements extrapolated from my original predetermined music: using thematic, harmonic and rhythmic content as building-blocks for a captured improvisation similar to Neil Young's *Dead Man* (1995, dir. Jim Jarmusch).[23] Another was to actively disregard my predetermined music (as much as possible) and instead endeavour to improvise new material on the spot. I decided on the latter approach, to allow for something to arise through the improvisations that was more divorced from the predetermined material. This struck me as being more in line with an important underlying theme in the film: decisions

[23] See Chapter Three.

are unknown until they are actioned in time and arrive at their ultimate and irrevocable destiny.

In order to familiarise myself with the skill of improvising to picture in real time, I practised using scenes from other films. "*The Lord of the Rings* Improvisation" (see "Compositional Exercises" folder in accompanying portfolio) is the result of one such experiment. I showed my improvisation for the dramatic scene to my thesis supervisor and his unfiltered reaction was amusement and not, as I had hoped, being deeply moved by the personal pathos in my music (I write jokingly, as my music was admittedly and understandably rather crude in places). However, this led me to wonder whether there is also something about the nature of a film that might lend itself more or less to an improvisational scoring approach: something less plot-driven and dramatic and less bound to an anticipative-versus-reactive scoring paradigm[24] might work better with improvised music, an idea I revisit further on in relation to *Melville Meander*. As a result, I decided to attempt to engage with these three scenes along a spectrum: from actively responding directly to on-screen events ("M1 – Gas Station Improvised") to letting the music have a form and shape of its own without adhering to each frame, while periodically keeping one eye on the on-screen action ("M3 – Carla Improvised"). However, when it came down to it, I felt odd holding myself to a specific method of improvisational engagement. In a way, it felt disingenuous not to allow for improvisation upon my decided method of improvisation, and so I permitted moments for whatever felt 'right' in real time.

I did find that it was all too easy to fall into the habit of 'mickey-mouseing' and being too obviously reactive. Interestingly, employing a strategy of *ignoring* the images at times helped me follow the thread of a more interior musical narrative. This is a strategy I witnessed Paul Hanmer utilise: when a musical idea had run its course he was content to sit back and allow the film or other musicians to present the next move in an organic way.[25] Ultimately, I found composer John Ottman's advice pertinent:

> You have to not be afraid to have confidence in yourself. Simply let your fingers work on the keyboard and just do what flows freely out of your head. Use the

[24] See Chapter Three.
[25] See discussion on *Cinema Improvisando* in Chapter Two.

> Force! Inevitably something unique is going to come. If you're too paranoid about it and try to refer to too many other people's work, you're going to start to copy something, you're going to come up with something less original. I found that if I just sit in front of the keyboard and just doodle and just have the confidence in myself that "Gee, this might actually be better than what they're thinking," it always will be better. And I can sleep at night knowing that what I wrote was really part of me. (Quoted in DesJardins 2006, 175-176)

M1 – Gas Station

In this scene, Chigurh intimidates a gas station clerk and bets his life on a coin toss.



Fig. 33: Chigurh and gas station clerk in No Country for Old Men

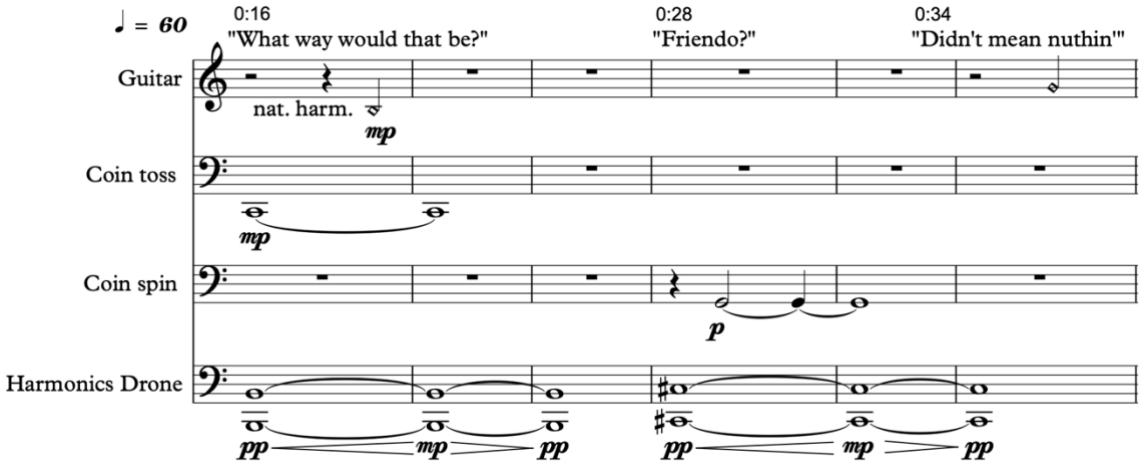


Fig. 34: Excerpt of my score for "M1 – Gas Station Predetermined" with timecodes and annotations (0:16-0:40)

A key feature of my score in this scene is a virtual sample instrument I created using Logic's EXS24 sampler, using a recording of a coin being tossed into the air and another of a coin spinning on a table. I then manipulated the recordings/samples so their sources

were not all that obviously recognisable, but could still work to convey ideas of chance, the contingent, probability, luck and fate. Across the three scenes, I used variations of the "coin toss" to represent junctures where Chigurh's decision whether to gamble with his victims' lives is still just a potentiality – 'up in the air'. My music for this scene begins with a pitched-down coin toss sound as he reacts to the clerk's innocuous small-talk (0:16, m. 1). The shimmering timbre also has a bell-like quality – representative on some level of a death knell being sounded. I played harmonics on an acoustic guitar that reinforces this idea: just as one pitch contains infinite overtones and therefore infinite possible tones to be 'plucked out' of the overtone series based on the laws of nature and physics, so too Chigurh sees himself as destiny personified, the Grim Reaper who must follow a code of 'rules' as to whether someone should live or die by his hand – the outcome of which is realisation of one possibility of an infinite number.

I created a drone-like instrument by layering acoustic guitar harmonics with their fundamental tones removed, eliminating the attack and increasing the sustain and release. What one hears is only the natural result of the sound unfolding, mirroring the idea of Chigurh believing himself merely the facilitator of everything following its natural and predetermined course – if fate puts someone in his way, then so be it. The peanut wrapper uncrumpling captures this tension effectively: Chigurh scrunches it up but it unravels slowly on its own, following its own inevitable course of action (2:39).

Initially, I wrote melodic lines for the scene but found that it was not working. Composer Aaron Copland writes that "melody is by its nature distracting, since it calls attention to itself. For certain types of neutral music, a kind of melodyless music is needed" (1941, 91). I opted instead to oscillate between two pitches a semitone apart (mm. 3-4), building tension and signifying that there are two ways that this scene could pan out, and we, like Chigurh and the clerk, are still unsure.

I was anxious about adding music to a film that, with its extremely minimal score and perfectly tense, often very quiet sound design, feels like a masterpiece. Burwell himself struggled with this:

> It was easier to eliminate musical ideas than to contribute them. What aspect of the film should the music play? Not character; the characters in the film verge on

> cliché to begin with … and underscoring would only exaggerate them. It couldn't play the story, which also is a cliché. (2013, 168)

I took the approach of not covering the same ground as Burwell, while still engaging with the film with a similar mindset to his. The insidious, singing bowl-like effects in my music are similar in some ways to Burwell's subtle sound design but I chose to score the subtext of broader thematic ideas in the narrative.

When scoring with an improvised approach, I found I could be judicial about where I wanted music to be more or less present, as I was now familiar with the contours, overall lengths and specific narrative beats of the scenes. I was faced with decisions about whether or not to adhere to or abandon the template (of tempo, rhythm, texture etc.) that had manifested during my predetermined scorings. My own prior 'ghost-score' was difficult to ignore, and indeed that was an intended purpose of this work: to see to how improvisations would follow or abandon my predetermined impulses. For example, I chose to sustain the music as opposed to punctuating the moment where the wrapper uncrumples (2:40). A comparison of the waveforms of the two versions (Fig. 35) shows clear density differences: my predetermined score is consistently louder and denser overall, with a build-up towards the coin toss reveal (3:56), whereas my improvised score is softer and musical gestures sparser in placement and texture.

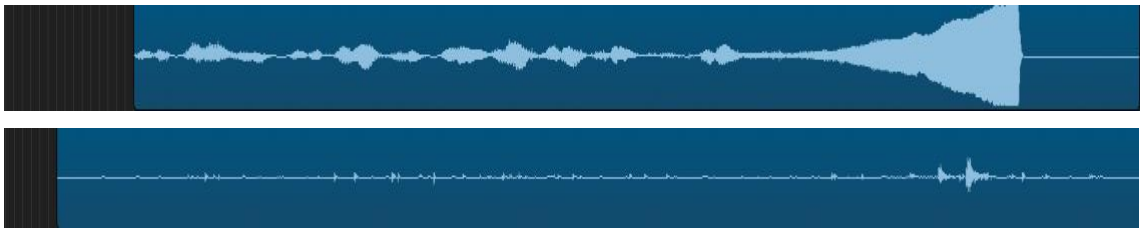


Fig. 35:Waveform comparison of my predetermined (top) and improvised (bottom) "M1 – Gas Station" scores

M2 – Hotel

In this scene, Chigurh tracks hitman Wells to his hotel room and kills him. My score utilises the Shepard tone, a sound consisting of a superposition of sine waves separated by octaves. When the bass pitch of the tone moves upward or downward, it is referred to as the Shepard scale and creates the illusion of a tone that continually ascends or descends

in pitch, yet which seems never to get any higher or lower (Shepard 1964, 2346) – an auditory equivalent of the barber's pole illusion.

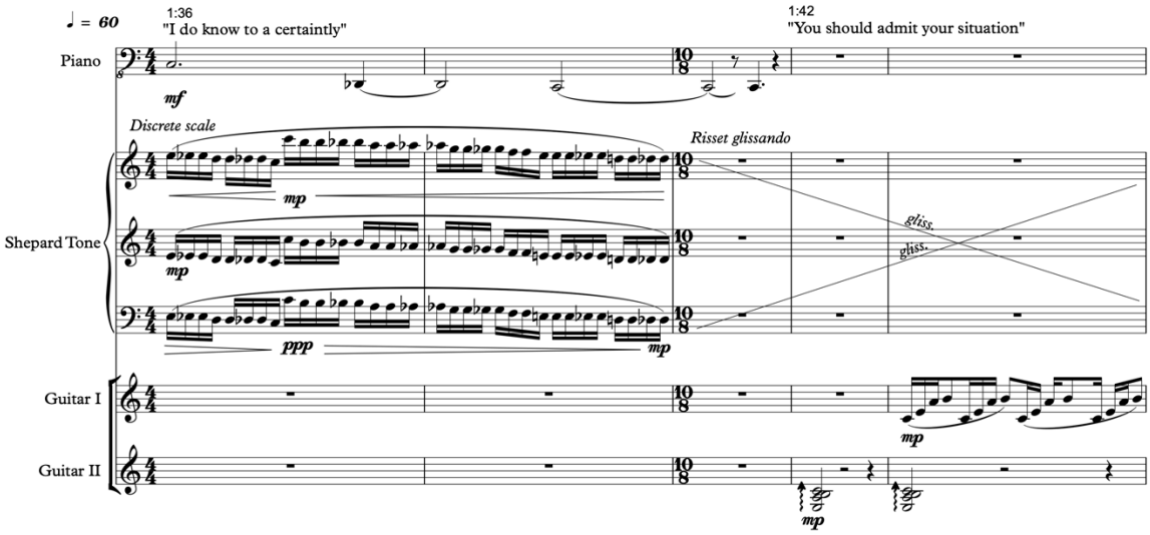


Fig. 36: Excerpt of my score for "M2 – Hotel Predetermined" with timecodes and annotations (1:36-1:47)

This struck me as an appropriate device to employ to act as a corollary to Chigurh's character and behaviour. Chigurh believes that he is merely a force of nature, but in truth this is an illusion – he is just a psychopathic murderer. A discrete Shepard scale plays while he is still humouring Wells (1:36, m. 1) but becomes a drone-like, Risset-Shepard glissando as the decision whether nor not to murder him becomes more imminent: "You should admit your situation" (1:42, m. 3). When the phone rings, I utilise an effects-laden 'tritone paradox', which is two sequential Shephard tones played a tritone apart, creating tonal ambiguity (2:48). Whether it is perceived as ascending or descending is influenced by the listener's relative internal and external contexts (Deutsch 1986, 2). Wells's fate is in flux, the outcome of which is now expedited by his choice about whether or not to answer the phone.



Fig. 37: Chigurh in Welles's hotel room in No Country for Old Men

My improvised version handles the same scene quite differently. It is far more free-flowing in nature and less concerned with underscoring thematic ideas, opting rather to address surface tension through dynamics and melodic gestures.

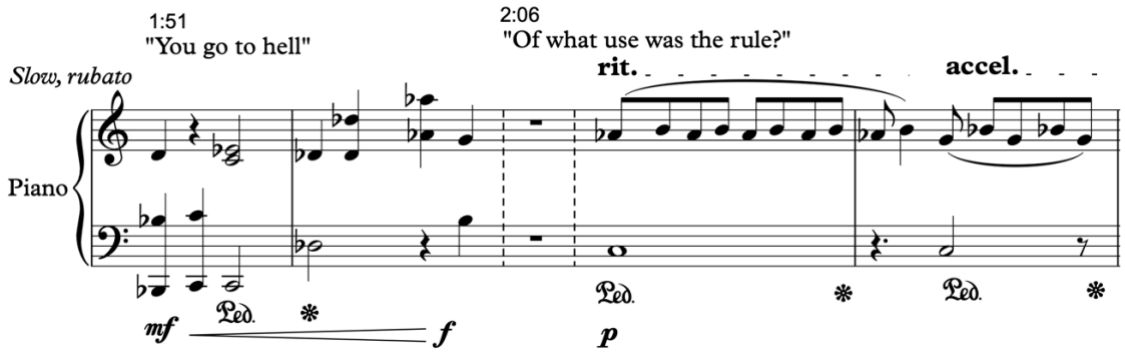


Fig. 38: Excerpt of my score for "M2 – Hotel Improvised" with timecodes and annotations (1:51-2:10)

M3 – Carla

This scene serves as a counterpoint to the scenario in "M1 – Gas Station". Chigurh promised Moss he would kill Carla if he did not give him the money. Now he feels bound to fulfil that destiny.

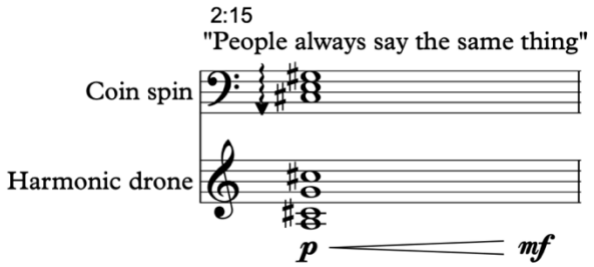


Fig. 39: Excerpt of my score for "M3 – Carla Predetermined" with timecode and annotation (2:15-2:20)

I used manipulated coin spin sounds that 'spill' down when Chigurh replies, "People always say the same thing" (2:15), signifying his diversion to fatalism. As far as he is concerned, he is just the 'means' – the toss and the call are beyond his control.



Fig. 40: Carla in No Country for Old Men

The style I adopted in improvising is especially clear in this cue, sitting squarely within a tonal jazz-inflected harmonic soundscape. This is because I felt more comfortable with the traditional methods of exploiting tension and release that are appropriate to such an idiom. I also knew it would fit the 'old world', Americana atmosphere of the film without much issue. This approach is evident in how I scored Carla's refusal to 'call' Chigurh's toss: "The coin don't have no say, it's just you" (3:08). She knows he wants to claim no responsibility and she refuses to grant him that, explaining that he is not simply doling out justice. A hopeful and pregnant Abmaj7/F harmony moves to a harsh dominant b9 sound as Chigurh responds, "I got here the same way the coin did" (3:15), ending with an ominous low F as he leaves the house and we realise he has killed Carla (3:23).

They Shall Not Grow Old

My mandate here was to improvise within an ensemble to a film I had not seen before and then to re-score those same scenes in a predetermined fashion. The idea was to experience first-hand the interplay between improvisation and 'composition' within an ensemble context. This tasked me with real-time improvising, guiding an ensemble,

utilising improvisations as building-blocks for composition and the personal experience of compositional process that composers like Carlo Mombelli and Mychael Danna regularly employ.[26]

I formed an ensemble that included myself (piano and Casiotone MT-65), drummer Saul Nossel and trumpeter Philip Cox.[27] The only information about the film given to me and the ensemble beforehand by my thesis supervisor was that it would be a film about World War I. I created my own photoplay (Fig. 41) along the lines of those catalogued in books (such as the Sam Fox anthologies) that film accompanists used in the latter half of the silent film era, as discussed in Chapter Two. It contains a melody and harmonic progression that I deemed appropriate as an outline of predetermined material to base our improvisations upon, and I supplied the ensemble with it on the day of recording.
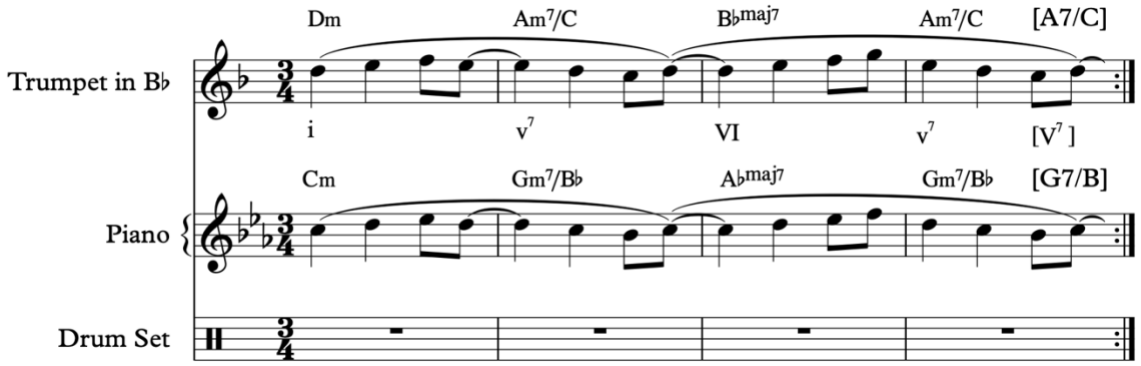


Fig. 41: My "War" photoplay for They Shall Not Grow Old

The film transpired to be the BBC documentary *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018, dir. Peter Jackson): the story of World War I as told by the men who were there, using digitally colourised archival footage. The sequences had a soundtrack that we would listen to (voiceover and sound effects but no musical underscore). I decided to give very little prior instruction to my fellow musicians other than to say they should feel free to improvise outside of any strict constraints of key, metre, rhythm, pitch, etc., that my above "War" photoplay might instantiate. I gave the ensemble real-time guidance by means of hand signals and head nods, and we were signalled by my thesis supervisor when each cue was

[26] See Chapters Four and Five respectively.
[27] Cox had experience performing a live-to-picture improvised score with Paul Hanmer for *Cinema Improvisando*, which I discuss in Chapter One.

coming to an end. This served as an interesting phenomenon: scoring a film with serious gravitas with live improvisation, as opposed to the light comedic fare of Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton films that often undergo a live improvised scoring treatment in contemporary performance practice.

My subsequent predetermined re-scorings utilised both my "War" photoplay material and elements from the ensemble improvisations as the basis for an expanded orchestral treatment. I laboured over the writing and orchestrating of these re-scorings with an analytical outlook and multiple revisions.

M1 – Preparing for War

I found that with our ensemble improvisations, unlike with my *No Country for Old Men* improvisations, an almost hypnotic state of flow was more easily attained. Efforts were made by the musicians to disrupt the flow in order to better represent the on-screen action at various junctures. For example, following the film's transition from the original monochrome footage to re-colourised wide-screen, I responded by changing instrumentation from the Casiotone to the upright piano and moving from sustained chords to an ostinato pattern with the bass drum's pulse (3:05). Another example is the piano diverting from the established pulse to rubato octave tremolos and the drums to cymbal swells when the film shifts to depict night-time explosions (6:52).



Fig. 42: Monochrome footage in They Shall Not Grow Old

In my predetermined re-scoring, I found that when faced with the choice between reverting to the structure and content of the improvised recording versus following the natural flow and arc of the music I was writing, I generally took my creative cues from the latter. Thus, the material evolved and mutated in interesting ways. Hindsight and an expanded sound palate at my disposal allowed me to be more deliberate about my scoring choices. For example, I could now score the military brass band in a pseudo-diegetic fashion (0:29). In a similar vein to Danna's use of instrumentation as cultural and geographic indicators,[28] an accordion makes its appearance after the disembarking in France (1:18). A look at the waveform comparisons between the two versions of the cues also reveals that their dynamic spectra are quite different. Despite being connected in terms of source material, choices around instrumentation, texture and intended musical gestures have led to scores with unique overall moods and emotional affects.

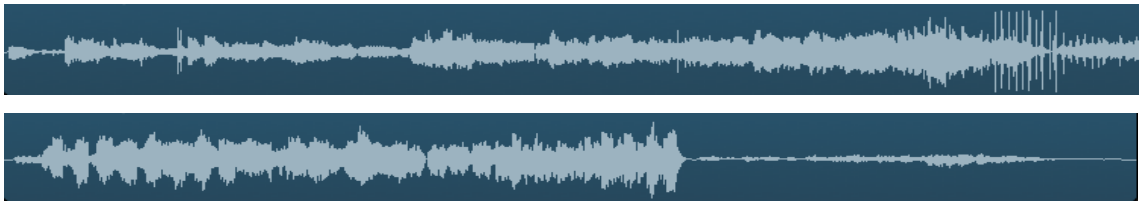


Fig. 43: Waveform comparison of the improvised (top) and predetermined (bottom) "M1 – Preparing for War" scores

M2 – Same as a Rabbit

In our improvisations, we contended with and worked around the appearance of diegetic music. For example, diegetic music begins as the soldiers amuse themselves playing harmonica and clarinets and both I and the drummer temporarily ceased playing while the trumpeter continued to noodle (0:37). To match the key and mood of the diegetic music at 4:40, the ensemble quickly adjusted by directly modulating to the parallel key of C major, playing a carefree waltz while the trumpet set my "War" theme to the major mode (4:55).

[28] See Chapter Four.



Fig. 44: British soldiers entertaining themselves performing music in They Shall Not Grow Old
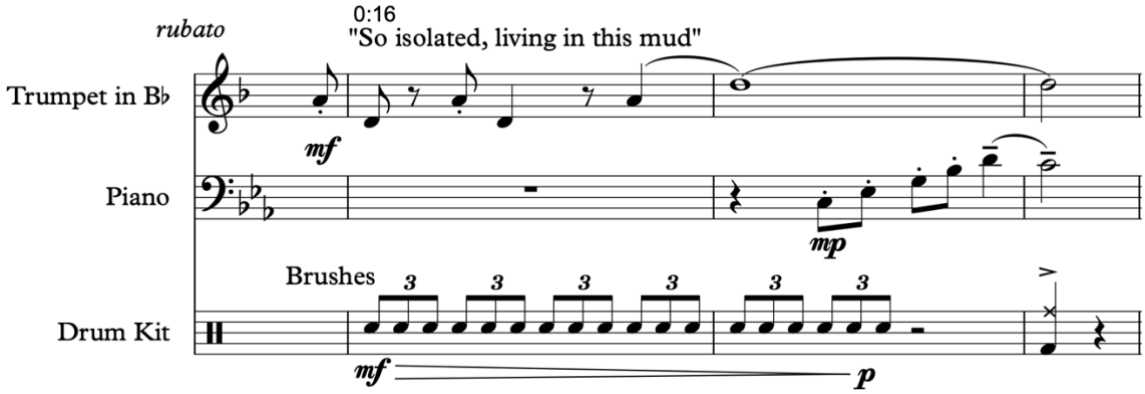


Fig. 45: Excerpt of my score for "M2 – Same as a Rabbit Improvised" with timecode and annotation (0:16-0:22)

Responding to the description of life in the trenches, the trumpet performed a melody of military-style fifth intervals (e.g. 0:05-0:19, mm.1-3). At 4:38, I quoted that melodic cell on the piano. This fifth motif, the minor ninth arpeggio I played on the piano (0:20, m. 3-4) and the triplet snare pattern (mm. 2-3) are motifs that I repeat and manipulate throughout my predetermined re-scoring of the scene (Fig. 46 below).
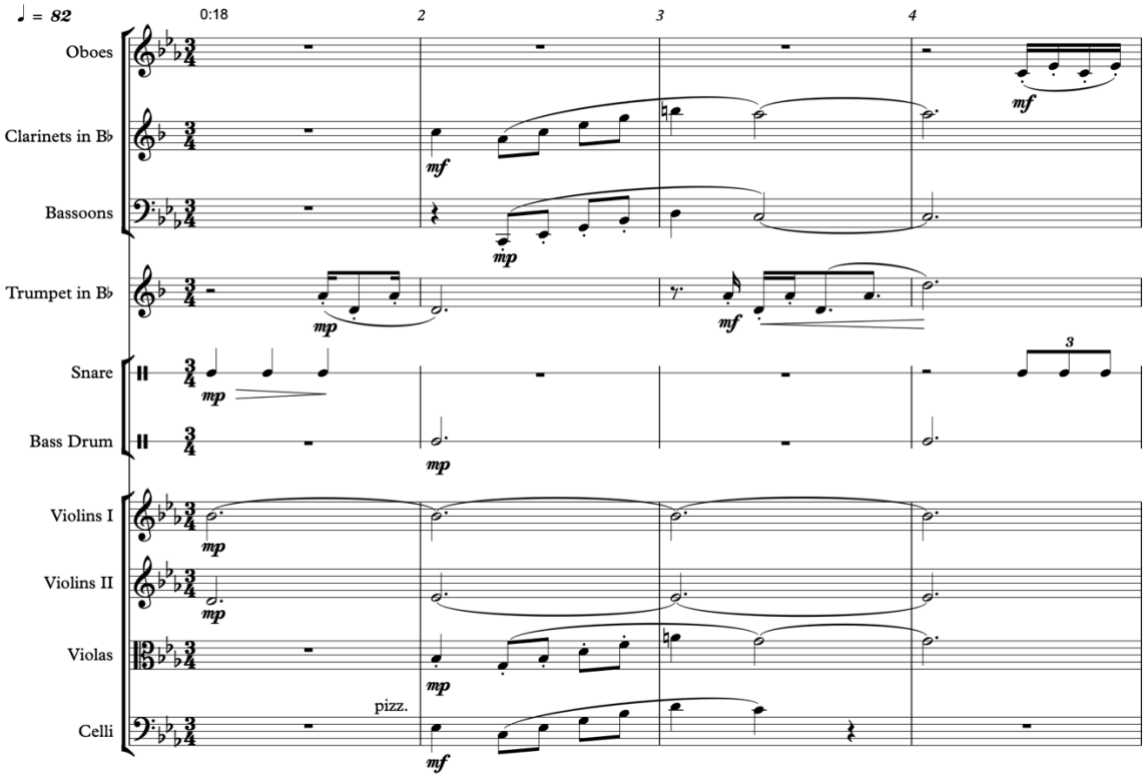


Fig. 46: Excerpt of my score for "M2 – Same as a Rabbit Predetermined" (0:18-0:27)

The alternating fifths appear in the trumpet (mm. 1-4), and an inverted quotation in minor thirds in the oboes (m. 4). The minor 9 arpeggio is harmonised in the clarinets, bassoons, violas and celli (mm. 2-3). The triplet snare pattern appears as is, sans brushes (m. 4), and also with augmentation (m. 1). This provides a good example of how I used musical elements that the ensemble generated through improvisation as material to directly shape and inform my writing of the predetermined score.

M3 – Hot Tea

The scoring of this cue reveals how tempo, pulse and pacing from the ensemble improvisation, at certain times, provided a template and direction for my predetermined re-scoring. For example, the rhythm established by the piano in the improvisation (Fig. 47) is used as the foundation for a section of music in the re-scoring, orchestrated with flutes and violins, with rhythmic patterns from the drum kit translated to timpani (Fig. 48).

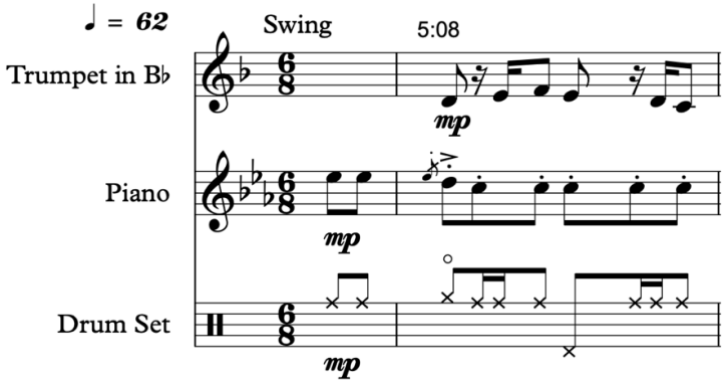


Fig. 47: Excerpt of my score for "M3 – Hot Tea Improvised" (5:08-5:12)

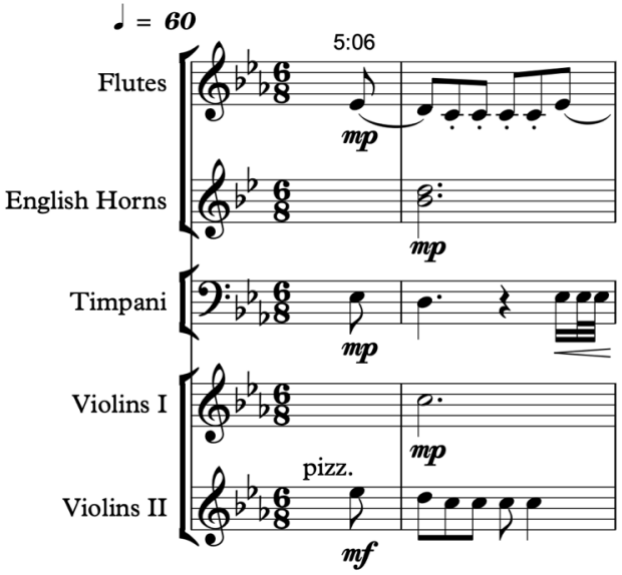


Fig. 48: Excerpt of my score for "M3 – Hot Tea Predetermined" (5:06-5:10)



Fig. 49: British medics in They Shall Not Grow Old

Melville Meander

In order to adequately explore how an improvised mode of scoring might create a cohesive filmic experience, I knew that I would have to improvise to fresh source material. The idea came to me of scoring within an ensemble in real time to a livestreaming video. I employed a friend as the cameraman, equipped with a mobile phone to record a livestream, and, wearing earphones that would feed him our performance in real-time, to walk the streets of Melville while our ensemble improvised to the footage being generated live – projected onto a screen in the studio. This created a rather novel situation where the film itself was also 'improvising': not only did the performing musicians not know anything about what was going to happen in the film, nobody could possibly know because it did not yet exist before the time of recording.[29] A case of real-time improvised multimedia interfacing transpires, where the actors do not fully subscribe to clear roles of subject and object, artwork and performer.[30]



Fig. 50: Myself, Nossel and Cox improvising in Melville Meander

I decided beforehand on the predetermined musical material on which the ensemble was to base their improvisations and created a "Livestream" photoplay that I disseminated to the ensemble before filming:

[29] An example of a similar phenomenon is a dance routine accompanied by an improvising musician in the same room, where each are informed by the other's artistic choices.
[30] Admittedly, any music set to any image will indelibly create the possibility for new and interesting interpretations whether nor not those separate elements are freshly generated.

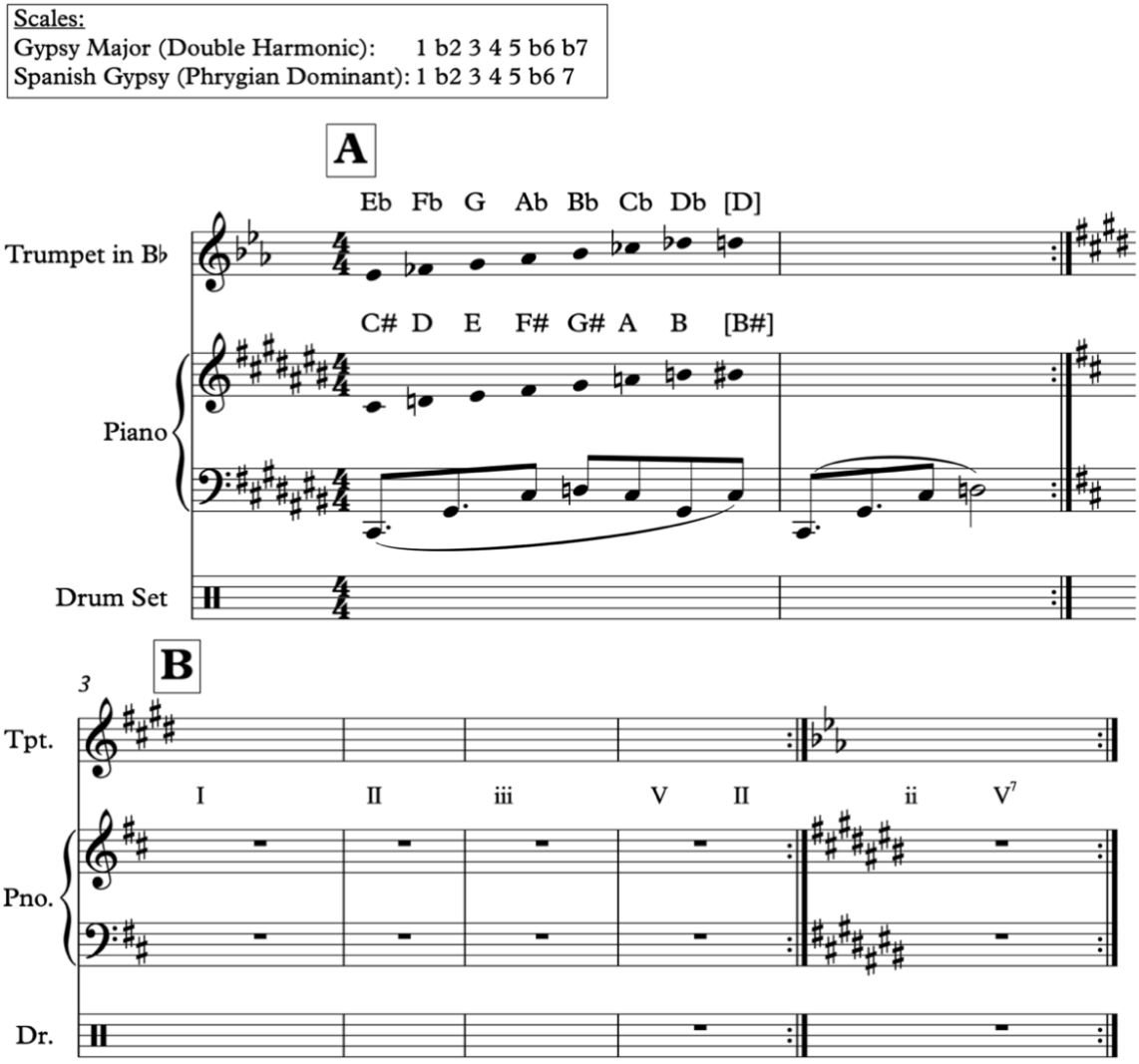


Fig. 51: My "Livestream" photoplay for Melville Meander

Limiting ourselves to the Gypsy Major (Double Harmonic) and Spanish Gypsy (Phrygian Dominant) scales struck me as appropriate to the concept of a live itinerant 'meander' whose final destination is yet unknown and which requires constant adapting and improvising as its journey progresses.

The resulting set up operated not unlike a videogame score for a sequence of gameplay of indeterminate length and content, determined at least partly by the player. I heeded musician David Bessell's words of caution regarding the pitfalls of depending on scoring approaches from "pre-existent models from sources such as film and television" for a videogame-like project, because of "the ill-fitting nature of some of these models to the task at hand, which is essentially different from that of traditional film" (2002, 142). He

points out that “the inherent uncertainty engendered by interactivity presents some difficult problems”, posing questions such as “How can the music be structured if the order of events is uncertain? How can music be constructed to occupy a time of uncertain duration without tedious direct repetition?” (idem, 141). When it came down to it, the ensemble relied mostly on intuition to create as cohesive a score as possible given the constraints of real-time improvisation in this context. Decisions as to changing musical moods were often zone-specific, triggered by the film’s gradual segues into different locations and by the appearance of new characters and objects. The ensemble’s music spoke to and ‘controlled’ the cameraman in some way, although it was not stated outright what the common language should be, as we opted to let things follow a more unconscious and unplanned path.[31] In turn, the flow and ‘narrative’ of the film (such that it is) dictated what the ensemble should play from one moment to the next.

An issue I faced in presenting this work for examination is that it has an almost continuous flow of music for over thirty minutes. Indeed, the ‘all or nothing’ nature of this work is intrinsic to the exercise of improvisation. I decided to present just the parts of the film where the improvisation could be deemed to ‘work’: where there is a synchronicity between the musicians and the film that otherwise would be difficult to score and where a mutual sensitivity to the actors and mood is captured. I split the film into six separate cues as represented by the segments below:

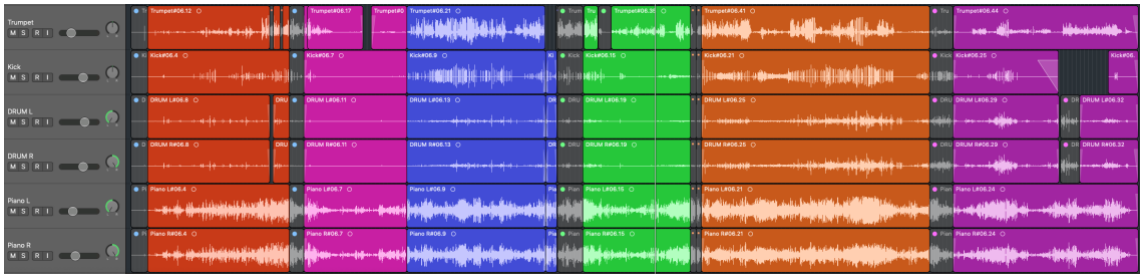


Fig. 52: Screenshot of Logic *session depicting division of* Melville Meander *into cues*

M1 – Leaving the Studio

In my reworked version of this cue, I added various predetermined musical elements on top of the existing improvised score. This presents an interesting multi-layered approach

[31] However, during a post-recording discussion, the cameraman said he increased and decreased his pace in response to the tempo and thickness of the musical texture he was hearing.

to scoring: predetermined compositions (my reworkings) are nested within improvisations (live ensemble recordings) which in turn are nested within predetermined composition (prewritten material in my photoplay). This serves as an experiment in putting these modes of scoring in direct dialogue, as opposed to the more abstract relationship between the two as manifests in my previous reinterpretations.
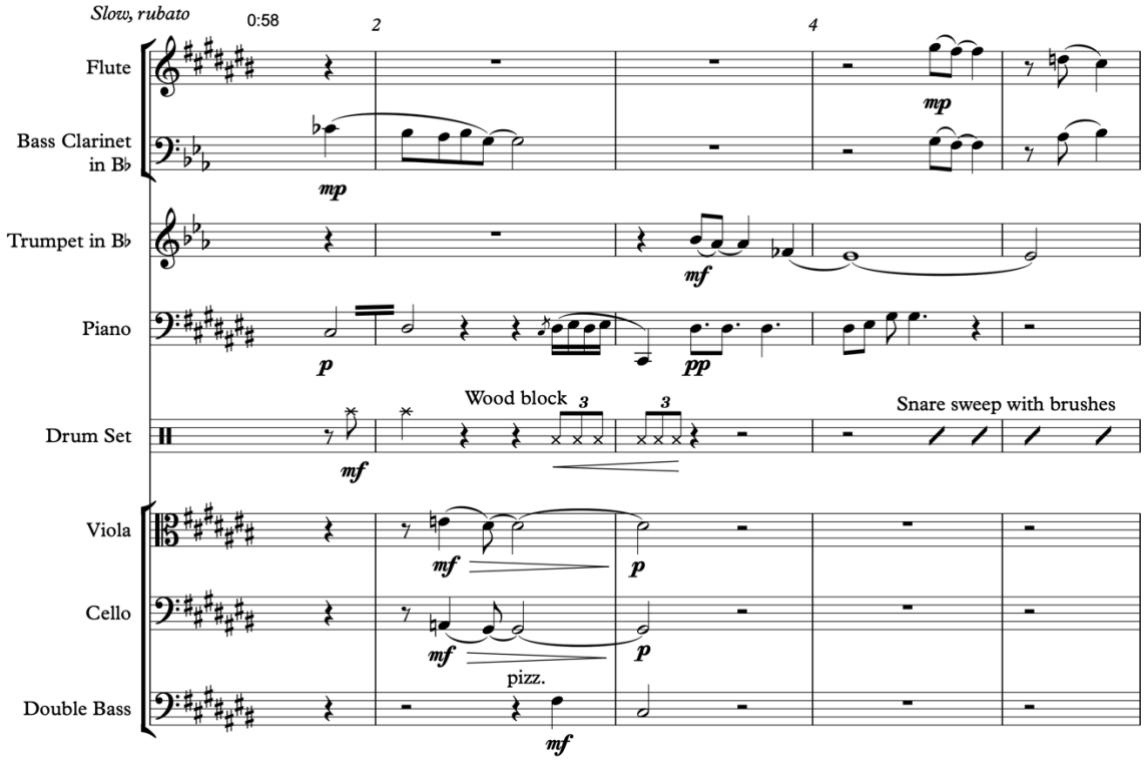


Fig. 53: Excerpt of my score for "M1 – Leaving the Studio Reworked" (0:58-1:12)

The above excerpt provides an example of how I strove to identify a musical gesture from the improvised version and re-contextualise it by manipulating it in various ways across the new orchestration – so that it exists as if it were always intended to be that way. The original descending trumpet line (mm. 3-4) is carefully embedded within a new musical context that creates a fresh and clear direction for the music to follow. The overall mood and intention of the cue is substantially redefined through my subsequent musical additions. Jazz pianist Herbie Hancock has remarked that he will often "start with an idea and something else will come out of it. Rather than me trying to follow the idea I originally had, I just go with what I have" (quoted in Woodard 1988, 20). This is certainly how I approached the reworking of this cue, and my efforts at 'predetermined' music-making were clearly subject to improvisation in this way. To this point, philosopher Bruce

Benson claims that seemingly discrete activities of performance, composition, arrangement or improvisation are "far less widely varying than one would be inclined to think", because "the difference between various forms of improvisation is *quantitative* rather than *qualitative*" (2003, 30). He explains that "each instance involves a kind of reworking of something that *already* exists, so the differences concern the ways and the degrees to which this reworking takes place" (ibid).

M2 – Koppies Lullaby; M3 – Koppies East; M4 – Melville Streets; M5 – Fourth Ave; M6 – 27 Boxes

Interesting moments of synchronicity in the *Melville Meander* improvisations include my indication to the ensemble to decrease the tempo by playing rubato tremolo chords and then shifting to the softer timbre of the sostenuto pedal to better match the mood of the sleeping man chanced upon in "M2 – Koppies Lullaby*"* (0:17-1:40), or the idea to simulate the tactile nature of the large typewriter that appears in "M6 – 27 Boxes" by playing pointillistically in the upper register on the piano and the drummer 'typing' on the cymbals and rims (2:55). Altogether these moments are too numerous to mention, however, so I have to be content with allowing the music to speak for itself for the most part. This too gets very much to the core of the nature of improvisation in relation to image: it is a mode of scoring that privileges the notion that whatever music happens to be generated to the image as an expression of the moment, is per force an 'appropriate' score. For me, no moment in the creation of *Melville Meander* encapsulates this experience quite like when the ensemble sat down to reflect on the challenges of the project after recording, and my thesis supervisor posed the question, "How *does* one score a jug of water, anyway?" (see "M5 – Fourth Ave", 6:55).

I expand upon and draw out further concluding thoughts regarding the multiplicity of roles that improvisation occupies in scoring practice in the final chapter that follows.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

The preceding research set out to explore a range of creative processes employed by screen composers in order to examine the nature and role of improvisational practices in screen music. A detailed consideration of various approaches used in the production of screen music reveals that improvisation has historically played, and continues to play, multiple and complex roles. I have addressed the research question through a combination of methodologies: examining case studies of specific films and scores; conducting interviews with musicians and composers (chiefly with Philip Cox, Mychael Danna and Carlo Mombelli); composing and improvising a portfolio of works for screen; and auto-ethnography, whereby I reflected on improvisatory experiences during the creation of my portfolio.

Paradigms from Early- to Middle-Period Screen Music

My brief exploration of music from the late 1800s to the 1960s established that improvisation was an ever-present element in screen music production, having evolved beyond the end of the silent film era. Early screen music manifested as live performance of popular or improvised musical numbers that were largely incidental to the film at hand (Altman 2004, 195-196). The introduction of 'cue sheets' which matched existing music to the on-screen action encouraged scores that reinforce a cohesive narrative (Cooke 2008, 12). As photoplay books became popular, accompanists either performed written music based on specific moods and thematic tropes (Altman 2004, 261) or developed their thematic material through compositional techniques while improvising to picture (Mathiesen 1990, 96). I used the general differences in the scoring approaches of 'Golden Age' composers Max Steiner and Erich Korngold to explore fundamentally contrasting ideas around the role of improvisation in screen music. Steiner opted to compose predetermined material and adjust it into the film's edit (Wegele 2014, 8-9) and preferred working alone without external interference in the music-making process (Schreibman & Steiner 2004, 42). Korngold on the other hand preferred to improvise musical material at his instrument in response to the film and refine it afterwards (Wegele 2014, 211), and valued collaboration with both musicians and non-musicians in the music-making process (Winters 2007, 24). Examining Miles Davis' *Elevator to the Gallows* (1958, dir. Louis

Malle) provided an opportunity to discuss the relative drawbacks and merits of how virtuosic improvised scores (Gabbard 2007, 264) sometimes preclude "inaudibility", as Gorbman terms it (1987, 75). This led to my conclusion that it is possible to utilise the 'sound' of improvisation as a stylistic choice. Establishing these fundamental creative processes provided a basis on which to examine findings regarding the role of improvisation in contemporary scoring practice.

Improvisation and Composition: Deconstructing an Imagined Binary

Through my investigation of select scoring practices, particular strategies regarding the incorporation of improvisation in screen music have come to light. They are not mutually exclusive strategies but rather are regularly used by screen composers in combination with one another as suits the needs of the project or working processes of the particular composer. An underlying distinction between the strategies depends where they lie on the continuum between anticipative versus reactive approach. This is as a result of the element of time, which affords the opportunity for more calculated revisions. These strategies can loosely be catalogued as follows:

- Fully improvised scoring (e.g. Sanchez's *Birdman* and my *No Country for Old Men* improvisations);
- Integrating improvisations generated by musicians (e.g. the Native American flute in Danna's *The Ice Storm* and the "M1 – Leaving the Studio Reworked" ensemble improvisations from my *Melville Meander*);
- Improvisation based on predetermined building-blocks (e.g. Young's *Dead Man* and my *They Shall Not Grow Old* ensemble improvisations);
- Predetermined scoring based on improvised building-blocks (e.g. Mombelli's *Roads to Restitution* and my predetermined *They Shall Not Grow Old* re-scorings);
- More traditionally 'composed' scoring that emerges out of iterative experimentation (e.g. Shore's 'intuitive writing' for *The Lord of the Rings* and my predetermined *No Country for Old Men* scores).

Scores that are 'fully' improvised, where the composer improvises to screen in real time upon the first viewing, are less tied to the need to represent character or intention, whereas

scores created with primarily predetermined musical processes afford the capacity for more premeditated synchronicities between sound and image and for proactive audience manipulation. The cross-pollination of these strategies is evident in approaches such as generating improvisations based on predetermined building-blocks and vice versa. Indeed, experimentation as an improvisatory process finds its way into scoring of the most predetermined nature, whether it be the intuitive writing that composers like Shore practise (Adams 2011, 7) or the trial-and-error processes that composers like Hans Zimmer employ when recording improvised performances, experimenting with MIDI and 'seeing what sticks' while editing (Hexel 2016, 36).

An exploration of Danna's scoring approaches showed that he generally begins with a process of conceptualisation and experimentation in order to determine the compositional framework that he feels best serves the project (Mera 2007, 19), thus marrying predetermined intentionality with the freedom of improvisational experimentation. In comparing the scoring practices of Danna and Mombelli, a difference of philosophy regarding the cybernetics of music-making revealed itself to be at play. Mombelli believes that a score should develop based on one's personal creative response in the moment (Mombelli 2019a), while Danna submits to the narrative's particular functional requirements and underlying conceptual framework to determine the necessary scoring process, be it improvised or predetermined in nature (Danna 2017). There is no binary distinction between composition and improvisation in Mombelli's scoring practice, as he insists that all his music-making is an expression of his personal creative response to the given subject matter, emanating from "a place deep inside" of him (Mombelli 2019b, 9). My experiences in creating the portfolio of works helped me to examine first-hand the interconnected network of improvised and predetermined scoring processes available to a composer, and the multiplicity of integrated strategies that one may choose to use, or indeed be forced to call upon, depending on the context and goals of a given project.

Improvised Approaches in Collaborative Scoring

Investigations into various collaborative scoring practices have shown that improvisation functions in ways that are exacerbated by the dynamics inherent to collaborative music-making. Marcel Cobussen's *actor-network theory* was useful here in mapping how the

instigation or experience of change by one actor alters the entire network, and thus the direction of the music (2017, 48). In screen music production, there are complex interactions and transformations between composer, musicians, non-musicians, the pre-prepared material, the audience, and the film itself. One such interaction I examined is collaboration with orchestrators, wherein differences of approach were revealed. Bernard Herrmann, for example, attempted to maintain as much control over the formation of the score as possible: "for Herrmann, orchestration was a composer's musical thumbprint. Unlike most other Hollywood composers of his generation he orchestrated his own music" (Cooper 2004, n.p.). Other composers, such as Zimmer, value this form of collaboration and always submit their sketches to orchestrators. Attitudes towards collaboration with improvising musicians in the creation of a score also fundamentally determine the direction of the music. Danna often utilises the contributions of improvising musicians as the bedrock of his scoring practice. His unique method of guiding and shaping improvisation is defined by his ultimate vision for the music (Danna 2017). The issue of authorship was raised in relation to the aforementioned practices, urging a reassessment of how improvisation might define its role within traditional Hollywood screen music.

The involvement of directors and editors during the processes of rearranging a score to picture sometimes manifests as a collaborative form of what I have termed post-improvisation manipulation. An examination of Davis's score to *Elevator to the Gallows*, in which Malle curated and rearranged the music (Musiq XXL 2012), and Young's *Dead Man* score, in which Jarmusch repositioned his music to fit subsequent edits of the film (Film Society of Lincoln Center, 2014), have given insight into this creative process. My post-recording involvement with improvisations in my portfolio of works offered first-hand experience into this practice, notably in editing *Melville Meander* into cues and re-contextualising "M1 – Leaving the Studio" through my reworkings.

An analysis of Mombelli's scores, such as *Story of a Beautiful Country*, revealed that his approach to collaborative scoring within an ensemble context was marked by an unwillingness to cede creative control if it resulted in a compositional process he deemed

inauthentic. There was also a fluidity in his utilisation of improvisatory processes in reference to picture or abstracted therefrom.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

By conducting a rather more detailed exploration into the role of improvisation in screen music than is found in much of the extant literature, my thesis aims to benefit composers who wish to better understand the theoretical and practical underpinnings of the scoring process. By delving into the methodologies extrapolated from past and current composers in reference to the context of collaborative interplay between musicians, editors, producers, directors, etc., I also hope it may benefit filmmakers in general in coming to a clearer understanding of the function of improvised processes inherent to much of contemporary screen music.

In my own compositional experiences, I have made efforts to unravel the complex network connecting improvised and predetermined screen music practices and have found that shining a light on the junctions where seemingly discrete modes of scoring interface has directly and irrevocably influenced my work as a composer. A closer look at the scoring processes revealed that there is indeed no clear boundary between the activities of improvising and composing – any differences begin to evaporate upon closer inspection. However, it is also true that the outcomes of the processes are often unique and that something profoundly different happens to the music if material is reworked in a predetermined fashion. Interestingly, the very process of writing this thesis and creating the portfolio of works was a lesson in understanding the nature of improvisation and served as a kind of metanarrative that operated in parallel to my research and informed in many ways the conclusions I have come to. My musings on this point chime with Cobussen's in his book *The Field of Musical Improvisation*:

> How might a book on improvisation begin? Where does it start? Where should it start? What are the options? Are these options in some sense akin to how an improvisation might begin? In theory, a typical free improvisation can have many different possible beginnings … Writing around improvisation seems to offer more or less the same possibilities: you could start with a firm statement or more hesitant, by posing questions; by throwing in some overwhelming theories or by commencing modestly, e.g. through some examples or case studies; by leaving space for the readers to form their own opinions or by throwing them in at the deep end, confronting them right away with new ideas. (2017, 21)

Just as I have, Cobussen comes to the conclusion that improvisation is an inexorable reality of both creative processes and that it behoves one to be mindful of this in order to better understand one's role as a creative:

> Relatively small details can trigger huge transformations in the music, such that the eventual outcome is disproportionate to any initial causes … Writing, at least for me, means entering a similar field of tension: the first sentences of a new, blank document often inadvertently determine the course of the argumentation, the style, the 'grain' of a text, sometimes with unforeseeable consequences. Moderately small interventions – changing a title, shifting a sentence to another paragraph, deleting a phrase – can have far-reaching effects on the (rest of the) writing process. (Ibid)

His description of the creative process as fraught with anxiety over the need to contribute something novel while still recognising that such efforts are unreasonable, is one that resonated with me throughout the creation of my thesis:

> This book has had many beginnings too. Hesitations, doubts, and insecurities permeate all my writings, especially at the start of a new project, and this recurs each and every time. With each new text, as with each new improvisation, one must start again; each text must begin anew. However, each text, like each improvisation, has also always already begun. A true new beginning is impossible to realize. (Idem, 21-22)

The field of improvisation in general, and screen music specifically, would undoubtedly benefit greatly from further in-depth research. Much of what my research has dealt with is inseparable from broader questions of human creativity, which this thesis only begins to address. There is opportunity for further philosophical, musicological and neuroscientific enquiry and I hope that as the field of screen music continues rapidly to expand and evolve, so too will research into understanding the nature of the creative processes involved in this peculiar artform.

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APPENDIX A: PHILIP COX INTERVIEW

9 October 2018
9:00 – 10:00
Rosebank, Johannesburg

DS: How did you become involved with *Cinema Improvisando*?

PC: Paul [Hanmer] does it each year as part of the *International Mozart Festival*. Each year he's tried to do a collaboration with somebody different and I think he's found that when he chooses a performer purely from a jazz background it just seems to fit like a hand in a glove and it's all a bit too comfortable and predictable and I think he wanted to get something way rawer. Even though we know each other extremely well, I come from a reading background and Paul, from a performance perspective, has moved into a more jazz improvisation arena. So even though I *do* improvise and I'm quite happy to do it, I'm not purely an improviser. I think he wanted something which stretched a little bit more, where there was that unpredictability to the evening even though we had a defined idea about what we were going to do with these themes that Paul had already written down for us, to see what could grow out of that. Particularly with myself, where I would perhaps go along the route that is contrary to what Paul is used to. I think he wanted that less comfortable thing. And I think also because of the subject matter of the film, which was quite different to what he's done previously which has always been a bit more serious – I mean this one has a real drunken subject matter, so it needed something a little bit fluid. That's where Paul said "let's use Philip".

DS: Do you not consider yourself an improviser?

PC: If I had to say whether either one or the other is more comfortable, I'd say reading is more comfortable for me because I've always done that as my main performing thing. I'm very content to improvise, I just probably don't do it as purely as other improvisers such as jazz musicians.

DS: It's somewhat ironic and counterintuitive that in an attempt to make the performance more improvisatory, Paul went for someone who isn't naturally an improviser…

PC: Yes, but despite being a reader by trade, there's that comfort of knowing that because of my knowledge of theory and progressions, if things were to grow outward slightly we always have a way of drawing it back. But not knowing the route it's going to go is truly at the heart of what improvisation is.

DS: Did Paul discuss with you beforehand how using the prewritten Mozart themes of Papageno and Papagena would operate in the film?

PC: When I sat down with him he said "OK, this is what we're going to do" and I deferred to him. I think his choice of referencing Mozart was a very good one. The two little themes he presented to me are not immediately noticeable as being Mozart – you wouldn't hear them and think "Ah, that's *The Magic Flute*". It was cunningly hidden. He was very clear to say "these are the themes we want to exploit" and they were quite interchangeable so we could reference them at any point and they would fit.

DS: Were you thinking about treating the themes in terms of functionality or more as an anchor to come back to?

PC: Actually, both of the things you just said. Yes, absolutely I was using them as a route to progress but also as an anchor to come back to. We knew that at any point we could rely on those two themes to haul us back in if it had progressed possibly beyond where it was comfortable. There's always a point in improvisation where you feel it may have just gone a bit wayward and it's a really nice thing to have to haul us back in. Now, what's interesting is that Paul really hadn't looked at the film much. He watched it maybe once or twice –

DS: He told me he hadn't watched it at all…

PC: Well I'm not entirely sure, I think he may have glanced over it. I watched it a lot more because it was probably up to me to alter the course of what we were doing, because of being the loudest and the most recognisable voice in the music that people would associate with how the visuals were changing. I think that was Paul's desire from the outset, saying "Philip, you're going to come along as being a little bit stricter as the reader and the classical musician and we'll have a very clean-cut change in the music depending on what is on-screen". I saw that as being more of my role than his – announcing certain things that were changing on the screen.

DS: What was your preparation process in terms of determining how and where those announcements would be?

PC: We had the two themes. One I regarded as the theme of the main character and each time she appeared on the screen I would try and use it almost as a *leitmotif* kind of thing. The second one I would use as a kind of incidental recurring theme in the background.

DS: And the themes were short and both tonally and harmonically related?

PC: Yes, the first one was two or three measures. The second one was little bit longer. We never modulated and if we did we would modulate within an improvisation, we would never modulate the theme. I think it was in E flat.

DS: Was that a conscious choice not to modulate so that things could be kept simple?

PC: Yes, and so we could reference it constantly. Paul said to me "Philip, however you want to reference the characters or whatever with whichever theme is entirely up to you". He was motivated by me feeling free as to how I would bring those two themes in. But we did have a small discussion before the screening that the first theme would be the main character's kind of *leitmotif*.

DS: Did you then approach it with a leitmotivic approach in that you would alter the theme based on foreshadowing or related to mood etc.?

PC: Yes, so I just watched the film a number of times and formulated a bunch of ideas, not necessarily written-down, on when I was going to bring that theme in and how I would either repeat it constantly or alter it ever so slightly. There was one particular part you may recall where there was an orchestra playing and there was a dance and I took, I think it was the second theme, and I gave it this 6/8 kind of polka thing and that was a recurring thing that was a constant and I didn't really develop that much. I felt my role was much more to keep along with the film. I didn't really look at my cues that much, I was more interested in trying to keep up with the film and use those themes to complement the film and keep it intact.

DS: What are your thoughts on your role in directing the music, being the louder and foregrounded melodic instrument in the ensemble?

PC: In the past, where Paul has collaborated with Peter Sklair on the bass and McCoy Mrubata on saxophone [predominantly jazz musicians], I think he felt it almost became background music, almost elevator music. It never really had that driving, somewhat ambitious off-the-cuff feel, coming in with trumpet calls and altering the direction of the music. I think he felt it was almost like a backing track. I think this time he wanted characters to have their own particular voice and I suspect he knew that was going to happen and that was one of his motivations for using me – knowing I would probably go away and watch the film and give a voice to each character so that it would have a bit of predictability.

DS: During the performance, how did you feel the interplay of how you were responding to Paul, your cue sheet, the film, and the audience worked? It was an interesting setup in that the two of you were on either corner of the room with the screen between you…

PC: If there were a weighting towards which one I concentrated on more, I would say I focused a lot more on the film because I knew that Paul would stick to me quite rigidly. I would remain in a general area, I wouldn't start using progressions that he wouldn't be able to anticipate. So I suppose I had like a fifty percent "let's stick to the film" and the remaining fifty percent was thirty percent listening to Paul and twenty percent on my cue sheet. I had a good idea about what I was going to be doing and those cues were just there as a bit of a crutch more than anything else [laughs]. I had worked on it quite a bit to make sure I wasn't going to just randomly blurt stuff out that wasn't going to complement anything on-screen.

DS: Something unpredictable happened when the power cut out. It made the experience a lot more interesting because you continued to play into the darkness, improvising on the themes whereas Paul couldn't because he had an electric keyboard. To me it was a fascinating situation because you had the task of bridging something that was visual and something that was abstract while still maintaining the integrity of the performance experience. Aside from just keeping the audience happy until something gets sorted out, what was going through your mind?

PC: It is an odd thing because firstly you just want to preserve the performance at all costs and secondly, you're right, the audience have paid and therefore they need to get what they paid for. But there's also that strong thing of being a musician – you want to show off [laughs]. Yeah, I wanna play the trumpet! So it was partly a thing of "no, you can't bail at this point, you need to keep going as much as possible" but it's also "let's stretch my legs a little bit and play some tunes here". It was great fun actually. Those things come along very rarely in your career where you are placed in an environment where everything you try to accomplish in all the years of being a performer actually come together in one event and you are allowed to do precisely what you want to and you are somewhat of a centrepiece. Yeah, the film's very important but the audience is extremely aware of what you're up to. That environment, where it's not just watching an orchestra on the stage, the audience's senses are somewhat heightened and they're very aware of what you're doing and whether it's right or wrong, whether it fits or it doesn't. That moment is a strong directive to say "yes, let's get in there".

DS: Then something interesting happened when the film started back up from an earlier point. Being in the audience, the initial reaction was "Oh, come on! Put it back to where we were". But it was an interesting opportunity to see what you would do, whether you would replicate what you had done or do something different. And that's what happened, there were definite anchors that were replicated but there was also fluidity and that combination of familiarity and difference kept the audience engaged.

PC: Certainly for me it was an opportunity to be a bit more expressive. It allowed us to maybe put another layer on top of it and although we didn't really stray beyond the general tonality, there probably was the odd little moment that we popped out of it. And those anchors that you mentioned were very defined moments like when the uncle turned up, the horse and cart, the dinner-dance scene... We allowed those to be anchors but we were given the opportunity to allow things to go off on a tangent a bit more. In many ways it was a bit of a blessing really because it probably made the remainder of the film way better than it would've been if the power hadn't gone off. It also opened up the opportunity right at the end to stand up and actually do a little coda – well it turned into like a five minute coda. But I think because of the way we had been allowed to develop it a little bit more allowed us this to have this space to stretch our legs.

DS: What was interesting is that you traversed the membrane between screen music, performative music and the audience. Being forced into those strange mistaken moments did allow for a unique situation where the audience was very happy to listen to you continue to play long after the film was over, whereas most people would have left the theatre before the credits have rolled.

PC: Yes, the error in film actually made it more enjoyable and it probably kicked out the potential ensemble errors that may have taken place latterly in the film. It allowed us a bit more control over what we were doing and knowing where we were going, making it more of soundtrack in places rather than a true improvisation which probably made it way more complementary.

DS: In a way, if you consider the film a 'performer' in your ensemble, the film itself began to improvise (in the only way it could). This forced you to react to the film as if it were another performer in your ensemble, potentially creating a more cohesive experience overall.

PC: I think you're right. When I was viewing the film in my preparation, naturally there are bits in it that you ignore and just become like shapes and stuff because I'm looking for particular cues where I can introduce particular themes or lead somewhere else. But because of the rescreening it allowed those other moments to actually become slightly better by allowing them to not just be shapes of people in the background but rather come to the fore. Without that, it would've had the possible danger of being bland in places.

DS: As for the aforementioned anchors, some were thematic and some were sound effects, such as the horse whinny…

PC: Yes, essentially you shake the trumpet and do a long glissando half-valve.

DS: Was the motivation for that purely for comedic effect or were you trying to respond to the film with diegetic music in places, such as in the dancing scene?

PC: I was definitely trying to lift the comedy element of it because it is a funny film, there's nothing remotely serious about it other than maybe the message in there. But I wanted to portray myself intentionally as the comedy element, like getting the uncle to sound really pompous, like getting that inebriated feeling by making it sound sloppy when everyone is drunk. But at the same time, having that theme for the main character come in clean and sprightly the morning after, was important to level it out again. So it was fully intentional, almost programmatic – kind of like the Tristan chord [laughs].

DS: How did this experience differ from work you've done on films in the past?

PC: I've done a whole bunch of soundtracks previous to this but those were of course a completely different setup. Doing session work, because we don't see the screen we're just playing our little sections and the conductor references the timecodes more than what's going on on-screen. It's no different to doing ballet or opera: we don't see what's happening on stage we just have eyes on the conductor and that's it. Session work is one of the most unglamorous and thankless forms of making music because nobody is going "that's tremendous, absolutely fantastic". You're just playing your stuff according to a metronome marking and the conductor has got 'cans' on and is following a click – there's very little artistry involved.

DS: Did having that visual element make a big difference?

PC: Huge. Even in the performance I felt a real need to keep to the visuals really tightly, reacting to things very quickly. With those old films, how it segues from one scene to the next is very abrupt so you haven't got very much time to prepare for what's to come and that was very exciting, I thoroughly enjoyed that. Even on the night, although I had prepared for it I found it really tricky to get in there sometimes.

DS: After the performance you said to the audience "I hope we didn't obstruct what you were looking at" and Paul cut you off and said "It's too late to say this. I don't feel like making any disclaimer whatsoever". There's a difference there in terms of personality perhaps but is there also a difference in terms of the way you approached the music?

PC: I think because of having prepared for it, I wanted to make sure that in the world of my brain it complemented the film perfectly. I made sure to catch those themes and cues at just the right times to give it that solidity and it worked perfectly well in my head but I would've hoped that it sat well with the audience as well. Paul's perfectly right but this is where I think he sees it from a different angle. His relationship with jazz is such that he's very used to it 'being'. If you like it, great. If not, well then stuff you [laughs].

DS: Screen music is a particular medium. There is already a set linear structure and you can't go off on an flight of fancy, at least not unjustifiably. Maybe it's true that jazz music should just 'be' – no caveats or disclaimers, but do you feel screen music is a different kettle of fish?

PC: Yes, and this is probably where I have drawn inspiration from the scores I've done, and from knowing you have to react to action on-screen. If you look at *Bond,* that theme [sings first four notes of "James Bond Theme"] returns whenever 007 is on screen. Or if you take something as simple as *Peter and the Wolf* where you've got those simple elements of what makes film music.

DS: Did you feel that was somewhat of a limitation imposed on you?

PC: Not at all, that was totally my intention. In fact, it was a device to *not* limit myself. I wanted to have those crutches to let it grow within that theme. The theme was everything for me and my ability to improvise away from the theme was made better by the fact that I had those little moments to keep it relevant to the visuals. I didn't want it to have this linear thing of we started and kept on going and kept on going without referencing. But that's probably a comforting mechanism for the classical musician and session musician in me – that's the way I'd want to listen to it as well. If I had a beef with progressive jazz it would be that it's like somebody's thrown the ball out of the park and everybody's looking for it and it's uncomfortable.

DS: What does improvisation mean to you?

PC: I've always regarded it as like doing a fun run. You have a start and a finish but you have definition within that. Walking around the suburb, I know certain landmarks and I'm glad to reach them because I know where they are in relation to where I started and where I'm going to finish. That to me is chord progression. I know that for the first four measures I've got a group of chords that I'm going to be happy playing to. Then it moves on a little bit and there's a modulation probably but then it's also going to come back. For me that's really necessary because it means something to myself and the audience, not having the umbilical cord cut completely or the ball being hit into the rough and everyone's looking for it. Paul has been very deliberate about saying that in the past *Cinema Improvisando* been kind of like a jam session which just keeps moving along, like a campfire tale where somebody whispers into your ear and it goes on and on without any reference to what you had previously.

DS: What was going through your mind during the coda? Were you thinking, "when is this going to end? Are we going too far out or not far out enough…?"

PC: Oh, yeah [laughs]. But for me it was "I'm going to be 'in' and we're going to try some things. Let's depart from the progression that we have established". My plan was always to stay 'in' for a bit, then bail and let Paul just take it on a little journey there but where I can feel and hear it's coming on back to the general thematic content that he played throughout the film then I'd bring that main theme back in. I was hoping that by me constantly referring back to it might be a good moment for Paul to close it off. That bit was slightly uncomfortable in moments for me because I wasn't quite sure where I was going and I was having to react after the chordal change. That's where my improvisation had many moments of suspension and accented passing notes [laughs], which is not on the general agenda of most jazz musicians who tend to react 'pre'.

DS: Do you feel that an improvisation like that is inherently limiting in that you're flying by the seat of your pants and can't use everything you might otherwise have had at your disposal, or do you feel that it is actually *more* ideal because it might be a truer expression of what's happening in the present moment?

PC: I think it's a bit of both. The seat of the pants thing is very relevant and there were definitely moments where I was on the route to no longer being with Paul whatsoever but then it allowed everything to kind of blossom, unpredictably so. That evening certainly allowed a lot of growth for me, it allowed me to think "actually, I'm not that bad at this after all".

APPENDIX B: MYCHAEL DANNA INTERVIEW

20 February 2017
10:00 – 11:00
Hollywood, Los Angeles

MD: I'll do my best to remember, but if you ask specific things about things 15 years ago…

DS: Yeah, I understand.

MD: I'll do my best. I can't promise full accuracy but I'll do my best.

DS: OK. Let's talk about *The Ice Storm* first because that's one of your landmark scores. In Miguel Mera's book *Mychael Danna's* The Ice Storm: *a Film Score Guide*, you are quoted as saying that one of the purposes of using instrumentation such as the gamelan and Native-American flute was to add a deeper layer of meaning. You said that in your scores there exists this deeper level of meaning that the audience should be able to work out if they care to listen deeply enough. So, do you mean that the audience can achieve this by applying concentrated linear thought or is this a process that happens subconsciously? You could ask this about any aspect of intelligent filmmaking and definitely of Ang Lee's work. Does the audience have to think about what they're hearing in order to make those associations or is this something that you intended to happen subconsciously?

MD: That's a great question. I think if it only worked at the deeper level, at the intellectual level, you will have failed because you will probably have a lessening percentage of your audience that digs that deep. I literally had a meeting with a director last week who said "I saw *The Ice Storm* years ago but I didn't notice the music". So we have that level of complete obliviousness, consciously [laughs]. But of course we assume and hope that the music is working on even people who are completely oblivious to the music, what it is and to what it's saying. But we're able to work in a subconscious way. I think that music needs to first of all work on the superficial level. It has to be the right mood and the right atmosphere for the scene and for the picture as a whole. So it's got to work on that level. If it doesn't do that then, like I said, you've failed because the foundation under that is secondary, really. It's secondary to most people and certainly when you're working with directors and especially producers, they're mostly concentrating on that upper level anyway. So you're not going to get to the scoring stage unless you satisfy that kind of surface level in some way. So if you look specifically at *The Ice Storm*, the nice thing about the gamelan for instance is that it has a quality that just on a tactile level conjures up the idea of ice and water. It has a watery, icy sound to it. So just on that very superficial colour level it kind of already works, and that's a great thing. So there the layers of meaning under it are a richness, an extra bonus to those who care to be sensitive to the music and to the tiny percentage of people who would actually know what that instrument is, and then the tiny percentage of *those* who would actually think further and think "Oh, I see. This is a contrast between this ancient tradition of a society that's been extremely stable for thousands of years, and compare it to this upheaval of America in the 1970s". That's the bottom, deepest level that you might get to intellectually if you're able to and have a mind to, but it's got to work on all the levels above it. I think it's the same with the filmmaking and Ang would probably tell you that it's similar on his side of the craft.

DS: But do you think that the ultimate artistic experience is for the audience to get to that deeper level? Is art meant to be interpreted intellectually or is it better if it's interpreted on a more irrational or subconscious level?

MD: Well, I don't think there's an answer to that. I think every audience member has their own answer depending on where they are in their own life, their development, where they are spiritually and intellectually and all those other things. You can't impose what the answer for me is on a twelve-year-old boy or something who's watching it. Somebody at a different stage of life or somebody from a different place. I think that's the amazing thing about art. It has the ability to speak to you

on whatever level you're at and the best works are like that. You can have a popcorn-movie that makes the twelve-year-old sitting beside you happy but gives you something deeper to think about or a reflection of where you are that enlightens you in some way. Those are the best films out there, the ones that can work on those various levels for various people.

DS: This idea of using subtext as a compositional device, which you do with many of your films, *The Ice Storm* included – how does improvisation function within that? I understand that in the case of *The Ice Storm* it's instrumentation that is the gateway to that subtext. I understand how improvisation might work in that case. But when it's leitmotivic writing, a Wagnerian approach to thematic writing, and it's the themes that are the gateway to the subtext, how does that work with improvisation? Does improvisation have a role in that in any way?

MD: Sure, it does. I think the vast majority of film scores fall into that Wagnerian model for sure. And I would say that even *The Ice Storm* does. It's really a method of how you get to that *leitmotif*. I've always felt that with Non-western instruments, I want to try and understand them on a cultural level as best as I can. When you do that you don't want to impose your colonial vision onto players who have lived their tradition their whole lives. In the give-and-take I'm more interested in what *they* have to say. Now obviously it's guided by the necessity of the film and what it is that I need the music to be doing. But I've selected the instrument for a specific reason, because of a character, because of an ability that it has to be something very specific. I think it follows that you then work with them in their system as opposed to imposing *your* system on them. So for instance, with Dan Hill who's the Native-American flute player – he doesn't read Western music anyway, but his way of looking at music is with animal sounds and to speak with the voices of animals. So that was the language that we ended up using when we worked together. So getting him to play, guiding him, coaxing him, and knowing what I knew about the film, he didn't need to know about the film. He just needed to be in *his* world and then I was able to straddle both. Knowing what I needed from the flute, I was able to record whatever, sixty minutes of him improvising with me guiding him and I found the nugget that became the *leitmotif* that we used over and over again. So it *is* a Wagnerian technique, it's just how we got there was that instead of me sitting down with my quill pen and my manuscript, it was done through this other way of working with somebody inside *their* culture to get something very authentic and real and something meaningful that's also meaningful for the film. Could we have done that if I had written the notes? Yeah, it just wouldn't have had the connection to the instrument like it does. Now with the gamelan, the gamelan was different because it was a bunch of Western guys playing an instrument that they brought back from Java. By coincidence I just went to Bali two months ago to study gamelan, so it's strange that it's coming around [laughs]. I'd never played before till a few months ago. So again, because of that particular instrument, the scale is given and the sound of the instrument is given and the technique was the idea of the Javanese minimalism and repetitive cells, and that was something I took from the culture. Those notes were written, so that was completely scored out by me. But hopefully in a way that respected the instrument and the history and the culture of the instrument and hopefully it would sound musical to actual villagers of Java, and I think it would have. So I think there's different ways of working. But for me, improvisation has been a decision that I've made because I'm working with Non-western musicians. It's very rare that I've used it with Western musicians. It's almost always been a means to an end to really get the true character of these Non-western musicians and go further towards *them* rather than having them come further towards me. So many musical traditions are improvisational – Indian music for instance.

DS: So did you go through a similar process on *Kama Sutra*, where you had them play *ragas* and then out of that you extracted a leitmotif based on whatever improvised line they played within the context of that *raga*?

MD: Yes, that's exactly right. And again, within that musical culture I had a couple of different ways of doing it. For the film *Water*, ninety percent of that was written note-by-note by me, then it was transcribed and Bombay studio musicians played it. They were all *raag*-based melodies but they were definitely written by me. For *Monsoon Wedding* I'd say that seventy percent was written and thirty percent improvised. But the main motifs were scored by me – so composed previously by a Non-Indian. *Kama Sutra* was probably ninety percent improvised. The themes and the things that I wanted to attach motifs to were given *raags*, in some cases a choice of *raags* – I knew it was

going to be one of these two or three. So I'd get the musicians to come in, and again by guiding them but not showing them the film – I never do that, I keep the film away from them…

DS: Why do you never do that?

MD: Well, I tried it a few times. Actually, *Kama Sutra* might have been one of the times where I *did*. It's not their strength, it's not their skill to score picture. Those decisions were compositional and not improvisational. It was a very different result and I just quickly figured out that it was far better to just have a discussion on a musical level with these players and say "OK, we're in *raag Desh*. Let's keep it in the lower register. OK, yeah, that motif that you played there, can you play with that a little bit?" So guiding them like that and tracking in my head what it is that we needed and for which areas we needed it and making sure I got it that way.

DS: So you'd never even discuss with them in an abstract way, conceptually, what the film was about?

MD: Back then I made the mistake of including them in some of that but it got super distracting and generally with all these players everything became overly-dramatic and overly-coloured. So it quickly became "OK, forget all that. Let's just talk about *raag* here". I think in *The Sweet Hereafter* as well when I worked with Hossein Omoumi the *ney* player, I would tell him the story, I'd say "OK, I need the *ney* to be like a magic flute that's attractive and seductive but also a little bit mysterious and even dangerous. So those are the ingredients I want you to give me". So it would be more of an emotional thing, in the same way that that's how I want a director to talk to me. I want to him to tell me emotional directions, I don't want him to start telling me what key to play in. So it's a very similar collaboration between a director and a composer: "Just tell me the emotions you want, and tell me the intellectual information too, but yeah".

DS: With *8MM* you said you went out and recorded in Marrakesh and you got groups to come in individually and then took pieces of that and put it into *Logic* and manipulated it afterwards. In a way, your compositional process was to compose post-recording?

MD: Yeah, that's absolutely true in some cases. I think it's a sliding scale, I've had different methods for different films. But again, there's a guiding that's happening, it's not completely passive. Well sometimes it has been actually. I think *Exotica* for instance, where I was out recording literally field-recordings, not people that I'd brought in but walking around in the jungle or the temple or the streets with a microphone and recording snake-charmers and they're going to play their thing, they're not going to be guided [laughs]. So yeah that's a case where you take it and then you manipulate it – cut it, slow it down and do whatever. With the Moroccan instrument players, a lot of them were like "this is what we play and that's all we're able to do". They might not have said that but that's what the result was. But then I might be able to say "OK, there's a group of four of you, I want you to start out here. This instrument begins, then you join in, then you join in…" So there was a way of shaping it somehow. But yes, there definitely is a big amount of post-recording composition. For instance, the main theme for *8MM*, the flute theme, that kind of mysterious thing – that was definitely pulled out of a field recording. It caught my ear then I pulled it out and found that one section. I probably had thirty more minutes but that was the nugget within all the sand.

DS: So it's kind of like absolute music in a sense. You tell them "play your thing, do what you do" and then afterwards you impose that on the picture?

MD: Well, no. For *them* it's absolute music but not for me because I know what I need. I've studied the picture very carefully. I have a whole plan written down of "OK I need this instrument in this, this, and this scene and I want it to play these *raags*" or whatever. And that might be as far as I go but once I start working with the player I'm applying it to the picture in my head. So it's never just me sitting back and saying "Oh play, and I'll record three hours and hopefully something will stick to this film". I mean, that would be risky and probably hopeless [laughs]. *8MM* – I'd studied Moroccan music and I knew what it was that I was going to get and what I needed. Of course there were surprises and that's what's fun about doing this. But I was pretty on top of what I was going to get and what my concept for the film was and how it was going to work. And that's what I found was the best chemistry – keep it absolute music for them, meanwhile I'm scoring it in my

head. The picture might not be there, it often isn't and even *usually* isn't. I'd say almost never. I mean, once in a while if they're in a booth and I'm running a scene kind of randomly, just seeing if the flavour of it fits the scene… But generally I do that in my head.

DS: Do you use an orchestrator? If you do, do you feel that handing over cues to him is in some sense a step away from your singular authorship and vision despite it being done with your oversight?

MD: Well, if I wasn't such a micro-manager that might be the case, but my poor long-suffering orchestrator Nicholas Dodd – ninety percent of what he's given is very much mocked-up. This is an oboe solo, this is a flute with bassoon two octaves below it, these are horns… it's pretty clearly mapped out. I'd say there's about ten percent of it where I might say "OK, take this and run with it". It might be less than ten percent, frankly. On some films it's zero percent. On the bigger, richer scores there's definitely more of that but if you heard the mock-ups for *Storks* or *The Good Dinosaur* or bigger orchestral scores and then heard the final version – they're *precisely* the same. Except they sound good instead of terrible [laughs]. But yeah, I micro-manage poor Nicholas.

DS: What is your compositional process when you are writing for the more orchestral scores where the material doesn't come from an improvised place in the same way that it does with the previously discussed scores? Do you compose with pen and paper outside of the film, do you improvise with MIDI while watching the film or do you employ some other process?

MD: Again, there's a sliding scale there. I've written with manuscript paper on an airplane but ninety percent of the time I'm in front of the film working with MIDI mock-ups. Improvising is definitely a tool of being a composer. Often I'll watch a film and maybe the second time I see it alone in my studio I'll just let it run and I sit back, then I might jump up and throw something down as it's running and keep it just so I have this impression of what I felt the first time I saw it, basically. I'll improvise to certain areas in certain scenes. Definitely, that's part of being a composer – improvising. If I see a piano I'll just sit at it and noodle as opposed to play *something*, I rarely do that. I prefer just messing around, making stuff up [laughs].

DS: Is that often how your themes are developed?

MD: Often. But you might come down to make tea and it's running in your head, so there's a combination. And like I said, I've written away from it, just completely in my head sometimes as well. But generally yeah, it's improvising with MIDI in front of the film.

DS: Ang Lee has a lot of involvement in the music-making process. How do you find that that affects the process and the final product, as opposed to the composer having a more autonomous role?

MD: The best relationships between a composer and a director is where there is some autonomy given to the composer. Even more than directors, it's picture editors. Picture editors have such a great amount of influence on where music is placed and how much and what kind of music. Specifically, with each piece of temp. And I think that's a very damaging thing because just like we have agendas as composers, I think picture editors have a certain biased way of looking at a film and it's not the one that serves the film the best. They have to do their thing and their job but in the same way that my way of looking at the picture editing would not serve the film to its best degree, I don't think that the way that the picture editor looks at the music is the best way to serve the film either. So I think that's kind of an unfortunate state of how things are right now, that they do have a lot of influence, very often in a negative way for the film.

DS: You said in an interview that often the rhythm, tempo and all the cuts in the film are determined by the picture editor's original conception of the music based on temp scores, and that this hamstrings the composer.

MD: Yeah, it's a reason why a lot of the scores these days are repetitive.

DS: Because the backbone of the score is the same as the other scores, so that's going to come through?

MD: It's just a circle within a circle. You just keep 'temping' the same things and writing over the top of that. It's really unfortunate.

DS: So how do you escape that? Is it possible to have a discussion with the picture editor from the beginning in order to prevent him from being the driving force behind everything?

MD: Well there's very few people on earth that will give up power and picture editors are certainly not prone to do that. Very often we *are* hamstrung. I've turned down films because I felt the temp was completely wrong and I realise I'm going to be forced to do this because this is what they've got used to and it may be the wrong conception or one that I don't think serves the film as well as it could. So it's very difficult. You can work hard to stretch it but it's very, very rare that you're going to be able to just overthrow it.

DS: You've said in interviews that when you bring in 'exotic' or Non-western instruments into the score it's not necessarily simply for the purpose of culturalising a scene as many composers traditionally do. It's not always about "here's a ney – think Middle-Eastern". It might be more about colour and subtext. But there *are* cases where you do seem to be doing that. For example, in *Life of Pi* you bring in the accordion to evoke a 'French sound' whenever Pi's French roots are displayed. *Life of Pi* is a good example of this because there are so many different cultural aspects to the story to pick out and highlight. How do you make those decisions about when you use instrumentation for subtext or colour and emotion, and when you use it to outright tell the audience on a more superficial level: "this is French here"?

MD: No, you're right. In a way *Life of Pi* is one of the more superficial scores I've done, in that there is no deeper conceptual concept going on. It is more superficial. And the reason I think it works is because the film is already so profound and layered – it's already doing the things the music might do in a simpler film. So in this case the music has to do less work or the audience will get overwhelmed with processing. So yeah, the touches of colour are meant to be what they are. Things are kind of what they seem in the score, which often isn't the case with what I do. The film itself is not what it seems to be, so things kind of got reversed. And it took us a while to figure that out by the way. When I started writing, I was writing complicated… and Ang kind of figured it out. He said "look, the film is complicated. You need to be simple. You need to be just one big long line, one big arc". And it was correct, it was the right analysis.

DS: And interestingly that's what you won the Oscar for, that kind of score.

MD: Yeah it's ironic I know, I'm well aware [laughs].

DS: I mean it's obviously an amazing score, but it's interesting that that's the kind of score that they looked at and said "that's how things should be".

MD: Does that surprise you?

DS: I suppose not [laughs].

MD: Doesn't surprise me either [laughs]. I wouldn't put *Life of Pi* in my list of best scores, ironically. But I think it works with the film beautifully and I guess that is again the be-all and end-all of what we do. That's the final judge. Does it elevate the film, does it help tell the story and help you begin an emotional understanding of the story? And I think it does.

DS: Definitely. With the animated films you've done, you've said you write a lot of the score away from the film because you've got, as you called them, 'chicken scratches' to begin with – just basic sketched storyboards. And the film is then constructed around the music because it gives it its rhythm, etc. Is that the process in your experience of working on animated films?

MD: It is constructed around the audio, for sure. The audio and dialogue track that they put together. So in a way, animated films are more audio-centric than live-action. So there is a balance of thinking about film in an audio way. But I wouldn't say they *follow* the music. No, not really. It's

similar to other films in that it obviously gets temped, but because it's such a long process you have more time to kind of shape it away from the temp a little more. Because generally it is such a long process, you might see something a year before you record or maybe even more. So yeah, I think you have the possibility of having more of an influence on the concept.

DS: This might be a bit of an obtuse and convoluted question but in one of the interviews you did, you said that for *Exotica* you went to strange places to record street musicians, etc., and you said "I think there is a great sense of longing and searching in the music, and I think part of it is based on the mechanic of how it was recorded". How exactly does the mechanic of how it was recorded imbue in the score those emotions? I found it hard to grasp what you meant there…

MD: Yeah it is a bit of a complicated idea but I think anything you do is imbued with whatever state you are in. So if you're a painter and it's a cloudy day I think that can affect what you're doing. I think being on the other side of the world and definitely feeling out of your comfort element, far away, I think it can… There's a difference somehow in recording an Armenian musician here in LA and recording one in Yerevan – there is. It's hard to justify precisely but I feel there's *something* to that. I do feel that it's true that whatever you do is coloured by your present state, your surroundings, your mental state and your emotional state.

DS: With regards to improv; many times improv is built out of existing written material. And it can be the other way around that written material is based on improv, which I think is the case with many of your scores. When you work with the former compositional process, do you give musicians written material as building blocks for improvisations and say "here's the basic material now 'have a ball' with it"?

MD: Well, for sure with the Indian musicians I've done that a lot. In the two scores that I mentioned where the themes were clearly written by me, both *Water* and *Monsoon Wedding*, there's definitely ten percent of both those films, maybe more in *Water*, maybe twenty percent where "OK you know the theme, you've played it. Now I want you go and run with it, make it yours". So the theme might have been written using the notes of raag *Desh*, "here's the mood I'm looking for. Go".

DS: So in your writing process you're not thinking in a euro-centric sense and going "I like that theme I wrote, it sounds right for this". When coming up with a theme you're thinking ahead about what notes the improviser can play with within the specific *raag*, rather than writing a great sounding theme and then allowing him to impose his way of improvising on it. It's all thought-out from its conception?

MD: With *Water* or *Monsoon Wedding* there were themes. While I was mocking it up I'd go "OK I'm going to leave this section blank. I know I want them to take that theme and put it here. I want it in this character but I know it's *raag Desh* and I want it in this register and that sort of thing – space here and space there…" Its planned out in my head but it's based around a theme and a *raag*.

DS: With *8MM*, where the theme was derived from an improvised line, was all the orchestral stuff then built up on top of it after that?

MD: Yes, on top of that foundation. The first thing I did was come back from Morocco and spend weeks going through, editing and manipulating all the Moroccan things and then writing the orchestra and electronics around that. So the foundation of that film is really improvisation.

DS: Do you feel that what you compose is different depending on whether you've only had a discussion with the director, whether you've seen some footage or whether you have the full locked edit? How does that timeline affect your compositional process and the resulting music?

MD: A lot of other composers do different things but for me I rarely, if ever, begin before there's some sort of assembly. A lot of guys write from scripts and I've never done that, I don't think ever. A script is a script and a film is a film, they're completely unrelated. A film has a rhythm to it and a colour and a mood. None of those things are in a script. I mean I can come in and start talking – we did for *Life of Pi* for instance, for a year or something before I saw an assembly. We talked

about concept and philosophy so I really understood the film deeply, I understood the concept of what was behind the film. But yeah, until you see it…

DS: Right. Some theorists argue that a score should be inaudible in some way, i.e. backgrounded. Then there are theorists and composers who argue that it should be like that in some cases but it doesn't have to be that way and that the music can have a starring role if that fits within the context of the film. What are your thoughts on that?

MD: I agree. I think everything comes down to "what is the story we are telling here?". What the music is required to do and all your decisions are based on that. How it serves the film and the theme of the film. So that will dictate an answer to that but even as we've seen, someone can watch *The Ice Storm* and be oblivious to the score – it's possible. So who is the arbiter of when it's invisible and when it's not? To nine people it might be invisible but to one guy not. But yeah, clearly sometimes the score makes more of a statement, sometimes it's meant to just be on that superficial level of "this is what you're seeing and I'm repeating what you're seeing and repeating what you're feeling". Some might run a perpendicular course and go "this is what you're seeing but you're hearing something else". So again, that's all dependent on the story and on the film and on all those things. So there's no one answer to that.

DS: You've written for TV as well – *Tyrant* being a recent example. How have you found the process to be different?

MD: The process is very different. For TV you have to write fast, which is really fun. It's enjoyable because you don't have time to second guess and overthink. It gives you that constant positive reinforcement of churning out two minutes a day or something that is actually going to be recorded next week, as opposed to writing something that you know is going to have eleven more revisions before it ever sees the stage.

APPENDIX C: CARLO MOMBELLI INTERVIEW

5 February 2019
15:00 – 17:30
Johannesburg

DS: What are your thoughts on improvising to picture: do you feel that it is an inherently limiting process or that there is something interesting and different that can be achieved through that process?

CM: I've never improvised to film in the way that Miles Davis did [for *Elevator to the Gallows*] but I don't sit down to write compositions either. The only time I've done that is for animation films – I've done many animations. Animation scoring is really rough because you have to synch everything. When that little cartoon blinks, you've got to have something happening on the violin pizzicato, so you've really got to score it. Animation is really difficult to score. But usually the way I compose is I *don't* compose. I don't sit down at the piano and go "OK, I'm going to compose this now". The more you compose, the better you get at it. I've composed a lot of music in my teenage years and I can show you I've got a pile of compositions a few centimetres high. I had a garage band on the weekends and we'd play my compositions and I'd learn where I'd gone wrong. I've actually got a little message on there in a plastic bag that says "If you find this and I'm here no more – please burn." I don't want people to play them or hear them but it's hard for me to throw them away because that was how I learned – by actually doing it. Now I've got to a point where I can't really sit down and compose. I compose by things that I see. I start hearing things and I sit down at the piano for example and start playing to the visuals [in my mind's eye]. I'm an old-school composer: I sit at the piano with a pencil and a rubber. Stuff starts coming out of the visuals and when I start putting it on paper, that's when the composition actually starts taking form. But just about every single composition I've done has come out of improvisation. My improvisations come out of emotional experiences and stories I want to tell. So for me to put a movie on and try to write music to it is hellishly difficult. I'm not really a movie soundtrack person – I don't have formulas. That's why I don't really teach composition. I don't have a formula for how I go about composing my music. Nevertheless I *have* written a few soundtracks. For the documentary *Roads to Restitution* I wrote about forty pieces – a lot of music. So when I've got something to play, I watch it over and over again. I put that particular scene on loop and I start improvising to that on my own with my bass or piano. Once I have something that comes out of that improvisation, I start recording it. Also, I sometimes record the improvisations and then afterwards I go back and listen to them and transcribe the improvisations and make compositions out of them. When I have a film to do, I have all my effects, soundscapes and loops set up. So if I know I need something to build up here [for a scene], I start recording while experimenting and improvising with sounds until suddenly you find something and then you have it. I also write sketches, I have a box full of sketches. I also dream melodies. I'll wake up and I've got a melody and I'll sing it into my phone these days, but I used to have to write it down. So I might think "wait a moment, that melody that I have there in that box that I wrote five years ago is exactly what I need for this scene." Then I fetch that melody from five years ago, place it into the music and start working on it.

DS: In your PhD thesis from 2007, you categorised your approaches to composition: "The third approach is to me the most calculated or constructed because of the external imperative of film – I cannot necessarily work intuitively as I do in the first approach – although it, too, draws on my mode of work as a performer. Thus even in this third approach, where I have a set task and boundaries (a script or set of images), I try to find inspiration somewhere outside of the boundaries of the film for the musical accompaniment to images or scenes. I am most strongly drawn to the first, intuitive, approach than to one consciously structured in response to film; the first way feels the most 'natural' and has been with me the longest. Film music is a relatively recent development in my work and although par for the course of having to earn a living (as it is for many people), the first two approaches are what I prefer" [(3)]. Do you still believe that to be the case?

CM: That was when I was starting off doing films. I've learned now that my best compositions come out of improvising to screen. It's still not calculated though. The music for *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* is all improvised. However, the director took my improvisations and cut them up and placed them to film. So I didn't improvise to film for that.

DS: What did you improvise to?

CM: Nothing. Those were just improvisations that I recorded that I hadn't used in my life. He [Matabane] heard that improvised concert and said "that's what I want for the film" so I said "alright, you can use it." I didn't get paid anything for it. I still haven't figured out how to make money out of all of this to be honest with you.

DS: Was there a discussion with Matabane about how the pieces would be used in the film?

CM: No.

DS: Why do you think you use improvisation and innovating "on the edge of wrong" in your compositions?

CM: Good artists are always searching for new angles. If I read a book and I can predict what's coming on the next page – that's cool. But if you can always predict what's coming, that's boring writing that's going nowhere. I can't predict my own compositions. I've always been interested in sound design, but naturally. I don't do sound design because it makes me different, I do it because I'm searching for the beauty in sound. I collect things, that's a cheese-cutter over there [points]. Have you heard how beautiful it is?

DS: No, but I've heard the rake before…

CM: [Plucks cheese-cutter]. You can't get that sound in a synthesiser. As a child I used to listen to nature: the wind and the rustling of leaves. I started hearing loops from birds and crickets responding to one another. I learned a lot about orchestration from nature and how nature creates composition completely spontaneously. I always wanted to do that. So I started incorporating loops with loop-stations in my music since the late 80s, many of my compositions are really five bar loops. I used to ride lifts because I loved the sound that it made when it stopped. I would tune in on radios to the short wave frequencies between stations – I used to sit and listen to that. I asked my dad "what's that?" and he told me it was all the wars that were happening around the world. Musicians are explorers. If I'm walking on a canyon and I don't walk next to the edge, I won't see all the amazing things in the valley below.

DS: Do you think that the process of improvising to an abstracted image is different to improvising or composing to an image on screen?

CM: I think so. I've got this little scene that I've got to write something for. I watch it and I listen to the lyrics [dialogue] very much. I see what they [the characters] are saying or the emotion on the faces. Then I play to try to get that emotion out. I love [visual] art very much … I've been to the greatest art galleries in the world and I've never seen anyone stand in front of a painting and weep. I haven't done that either. And I thought "why?". I love it so much and I think "wow, this is incredible", but it's never brought me to tears the way music does. But if you get a composer that has found the emotion in that voice of the dialogue and puts music together with it – it's spiritual. It sinks into your spirit. I think it's because with [visual] art it first hits my eyes and then it somehow becomes something else before it goes into my heart. But with music, there's nothing else there. It enters directly into my soul. The combination of music and visuals really hits your heart.

DS: The research that's being done on understanding what exactly is happening in the brain during improvisation, why and how it affects us emotionally and understanding the nature of human creativity in general is still in its infancy …

CM: But I don't think we *need* to know. We are all born improvisers. Even those who aren't playing music are improvising. Music is a language and we learn the rules and grammar but that doesn't cover the poetry of the music. The poetry is when we improvise. I don't understand why they teach classical musicians not to improvise. Every child learns to improvise the first time they tinkle on a piano, then they go to a teacher who tries to take that intuition away.

DS: Why do you think there's still such a distinction in people's minds between improvisation and composition to be valued differently?

CM: Because there are different levels. You get bad poets who improvise and you get people who really understand how to use the language at a higher level. We all have different gifts and some people are just born talented improvisers.

DS: In your thesis, you use "Jung's tripartite model of the psyche to look at the three approaches to composition: the outer conscious one, in which the ego is located and which comes strongly into play in relationships with other people, is the level of the psyche that comes into play most when I compose to external requirements, for film or television. The middle layer may be the area of the unconscious I draw on when composing in the abstract, away from an instrument. The central sphere is where I feel most of my work as a composer comes from and explains why I feel that in this approach my music comes from what I call a 'deeper' place, because it comes for the core of my psychological Self" [(2007, 4-5)]. How does that process work for you?

CM: Can I just tell you something? Maybe this shouldn't be on the record but when you do a PhD thesis, your supervisor tells you: "you have to read this book because you're in an academic environment and this'll be good for your thesis". So I had to look at this Jung guy but I can't even remember who this guy is! But I put it in because it kind of worked with what I was trying to say and the externals wanted it. So don't ask me about Ying and Yang, OK?

DS: OK, let's not talk about Jung. Let's just talk about what you were saying –

CM: – Tell me again what I said there?

DM: You said that improvisation comes from a 'deeper' place that's at the 'core' of your 'self', which isn't the case as much when you compose to external requirements like for film.

CM: OK. When I play, I cut myself off. An 'artificial loudness' happens where I'm so focussed on the music that everything in my environment becomes soft and starts disappearing. Then I don't hear the plates clanging or the ice-machine at the bar and I can really play. It's making the stuff inside you come out louder. It's difficult to explain what happens. But I find that if I keep my eyes open or focus on a visual thing, I can't reach that space. When I close my eyes my aural sensitivity to the music becomes greater. I hear faster. When someone plays something, I'm able to respond quicker because I'm so focussed on the music but I'm also able to cut out the noise.

DS: In your thesis you noted that: "When composing for film there is always another party involved aside from fellow musicians: the director, and behind him or her, the producers – and ultimately the funders, and the market. There is the stress of trying to keep everyone happy – giving them the feeling that they are getting value for their money and getting what they want – as well as produce something I am satisfied with. This has never stopped me from starting at an artistic level, even if I have to (and I'm afraid this is how it sometimes happens) dilute the work until director and producers are satisfied" [(2007, 35)]. How do you feel now about that 'dilution' process?

CM: Maybe I'm not the best film composer because I don't compromise anymore. I just did a film recently but I did it because they [the filmmakers] came to me and played "Motian the Explorer" and said they want a soundtrack like that. So I was the right person for it. It was the easiest thing on the planet because you can hear it's me playing. I'm not trying to play anything else. Maybe I'm not the right guy for this interview because I *am* writing film music but people come to me because they want *my* sound. They don't want a sound like Hans Zimmer. They come to me

because they want a sound like Carlo Mombelli and I'm able to give them that because that's who I am – I'm being myself. I must actually read my thesis again…

DS: You wrote that for *Roads to Restitution*, the director "used the group Dire Straits for what is known as the 'temp track' … on the opening credits. It was the opening credits that later gave me a headache, because all the director could hear was the temp track every time I played her what I had composed for this opening sequence" [(2007, 37)]. Most composers find processes like those to be very restricting and frustrating…

CM: I hate the temp track. Well I'll tell you what happened on this last film I did [*Salvation*]. They set up a temp track to the start of the movie using Massive Attack ["Teardrop"] and they said "can you write something similar to this?" I wrote an amazing piece using a cello and I got [drummer] Jonno Sweetman in here to play the grooves with me on bass and we recorded the whole thing. An amazing track on its own. But they always had *that* song ["Teardrop"] in their heads. They could *not* get it out of their heads. So do you know what they did? They contacted Massive Attack and bought the rights to use it in their movie. So the movie starts with that song because they couldn't get away from the temp track and the rest of the movie is my music.

DS: What was the creative process on that film, were you explained the narrative or did you have spotting-sessions?

CM: They didn't do *one* spotting-session with me. Not *one*. Which I thought was unusual. But listen, I'm a nutter OK? There was this famous film director in Cape Town, I'm not even going to mention his name. It was a documentary and he wanted drones all over the place. So I made drones, but not by sitting on the synthesiser and tweaking sounds. No. I composed all these amazing drones with bowing cellos. When I saw the film I saw that they had replaced my drones with someone playing a synth. Then I saw at the end of the movie it said "music composed by Carlo Mombelli". What would you have done?

DS: I probably would've asked them not to credit me for something that wasn't me…

CM: OK but I'm a fanatic. Look, I know that purists are boring. Well, purists aren't boring in certain aspects – Hitler was a purist and he certainly wasn't boring.

DS: If there's one thing that could be said of Hitler, yes…

CM: But I'm talking about purists in the way that jazz lecturers who mark students on technicalities are. Who don't see what a student *has*. Purists destroy art. But I'm a purist in the sense that I believe in my own work: I felt an emotion so I wrote *this*. And that's what they [the filmmakers] wanted but then they put this shitty synthesiser in instead. So what I did was I went to the SABC [South African Broadcasting Commission] and I said "I'm the composer, there's something I need to have still done to the film". The director was down in Cape Town. I withdrew the film and took it to a big editing and publishing suite in Auckland Park and got them to delete my name off the credits. So it comes to the end of the movie and it says "Music composed by" and there was no composer. Needless to say, the director was hellishly upset with me and I never got a film out of them again, but that's OK. I thought what they did was not cool, so I stuck to my principles. I've never compromised.

DS: What do you think about the fact that people are drawn to film composition? I myself am drawn to it but I can't always justify why, because it seems to be an inherently compromising, limiting and frustrating profession and artform to *want* to be a part of.

CM: Well, you have to have formulas. Hans Zimmer has formulas and he can churn them out. There's another guy in Joburg [names composer], and he can churn out a documentary score for National Geographic in one afternoon. So if you can find the formula, that other stuff is not going to bother you. But I'm not that type of musician. I'm searching for ways of expressing myself. So I'm not really a film composer even though I've done many films. Maybe I should actually become a film composer and make some money. I *do* love writing for film though. I love the challenge of seeing

if I can bring out the emotion in a scene. I'll watch a scene over and over again until I can find what that scene is trying to tell me.

DS: When you do that, are you thinking more in terms of narrative, character or aesthetics?

CM: No, I don't think I'm thinking about anything. I'm wanting to see what it's doing to *me*. I write music about my angels and demons because things weren't given to me. Every note I play is fought for. My father didn't want me to be a musician. My mother didn't want me to be a musician. She thought all my music came from the devil actually. I ran away from home when I was sixteen. All the demons from my youth are in my compositions. So it's these situations that affect me, and if I can find it in a film, if the right film comes along for me, I can write deep music for it because I've been through some of those things that I've seen in movies. I come from a hectic background and that's why when I play a note – I *mean* it. You know, the world does not need jazz, it does not need Brazilian music or the pyramids or the colosseum. Because that all came out of slavery. In its place could've been something just as beautiful that came out of peace and love. But beauty *is* born out of a lot of that bullshit. It's angels and demons.

DS: How is the process different when you're scoring within an ensemble?

CM: Well, for *Story of a Beautiful Country* it was me, Marcus Wyatt [on brass], Andile Yanana on piano and Kesivan Naidoo on drums. Marcus and I watched the film before and made notes of what we needed. We went "OK this interview scene here needs this type of style of music" and then we set up grooves and improvised over them and recorded that. We found the emotion of the scenes and improvised the takes. We'd look at a scene and go "OK, we need something up-tempo" and then we would go and improvise some up-tempo stuff. We made notes on what the different scenes needed – if it needed to be quirky, happy or sad and whether it had space to fill with motion or if it needed silence around the dialogue. We got Kesivan and Andile in and told them "OK, we need maybe a heavy bebop thing here" and I'd start playing a bassline then the band would start jamming. We generated all this music and then we went back to our notes and placed the takes exactly where we wanted them in the film. I wouldn't do it like that again though. I've moved on from that kind of collaborative process. I don't play in many people's bands anymore because I'm playing so personally now. People can book me only if they want Carlo Mombelli. I'm at that point now. I'm almost sixty – I'm allowed to be at that point.

DS: Did you find that in the placement of the music in the film, unexpected processes were happening – things that you thought would work didn't and vice versa?

CM: There were definitely things that were too busy in the music. When you've got people like Kesivan playing drums it can sometimes be a bit overpowering and then you can't use it. Then we'd take music that we'd played for a different scene and use it there, and it doesn't matter if you repeat things and if themes come back.

DM: Do you think about using recurring themes?

CM: No but I did use themes in the latest film I did [*Salvation*]. I found a theme for the characters like the mother that I felt were their themes and I would bring them back throughout the film. But that's not my go-to and I wouldn't do that now. Now I would try to improvise to screen. I want to watch the film and have it affect me while I'm playing and improvising and record that. And then afterwards I want to go back and say "OK, this part would be beautiful if I added three cellos to that melody I improvised". In improvisation there's many things that don't work so I tend to do too much and then start subtracting until I've got hardly anything. But I'm left with the jewels, with the magical stuff.