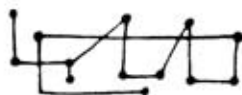


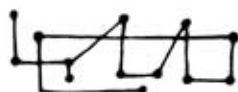
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OF NEW MUSIC



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LIVE MUSIC AND MOVING IMAGES: COMPOSING AND PRODUCING THE CONCERT VIDEO*



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MUSIC HAS BEEN paired with moving images almost since the day motion pictures were first projected to a paying audience. It was a marriage of necessity. The racket of clattering projectors and fidgeting audiences filled the new theaters of the 1890s. What to do? Muffle it with music. In time, making melodies for noise masking and crowd control evolved into the "art" of spinning an episodic series of musical fragments to underscore the psychological and dramatic elements of the picture. The film composer's customary role was not to create a fully developed, coherent musical composition. Although the results achieved by some of the musicians were remarkable, in the end their

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mission was merely to accompany. They were employees, not artistic collaborators. The situation provided financial rewards, but working relationships could be disconcerting. All too often composers labored for the spiritual and moral heirs of the industry's earliest producers—carnival showmen who created movies to exhibit at their storefront amusement parlors and county fair side-shows. Unencumbered by taste, education, or cultural values, they established and operated their new industry with the ethics of a pimp. (Q: How can you tell when a producer is lying? A: His lips are moving.) The furriers, pants-pressers, and corporate banking interests who later took control of the industry never succeeded, no matter how hard they tried, in eradicating the old methods and mentalities. Small wonder that even today the pop-song artistic level of most mass-entertainment films, as well as many experimental films, leaves room for improvement.

When one realizes that the better concert composers are, as a class, among the most intelligent and culturally perceptive members of the artistic community, a solution suggests itself. They, or at least some, should make the films themselves.

But not just the films alone. Only composers are able to restore something lost at the close of the pre-1928 silent era, when moving images unfettered with dialogue could occasionally soar with the grace of ballet, the spirit of poetry, and even be screened with an artistic live performance worthy of the concert hall. Hollywood film score composers were unconcerned with such musical attainment. Most went about their business recycling gaudy stock clichés to please the producer. Fortunately, their scores were not universally performed in the cinemas. Sometimes, whether by choice or necessity, an inventive theater pianist or organist endowed with judgment, skill, and solid classical training would score a film on his own. These unheralded composer-performers meshed a vibrant, living musicality with screen images, a synthesis as dazzling as lightning against the night air. Today, progress has put independent theater musicians out of business. In their stead, we have been blessed with six-track Dolby surround sound, all canned. It never breathes with the liveliness or communicates with the directness of a single real performer. The cutting edge glitters brightly from afar, but once in hand, can be a dull and clumsy blade indeed.

The composer-producer is the new artist who can create works oxygenating today's imaging techniques and stereo soundtracks with live musicians. The juxtaposition offers several interesting and fresh dialectical processes to a medium already profoundly characterized by opposites.

The present polarities stem from the physical reality of visuals and sounds and how they coact. The moving image is noncorporeal. It exists only as manufactured light, whether reflected (film) or generated (video). Objects one might identify within the light can't be touched—they aren't there, yet the images easily subsume the sound, which is quite present physically. There may be technical differences between the original sound that was recorded and the reproduced sound as it impinges on the eardrum, but both are the same physical

disturbance of air molecules. Yet mediated speaker sound could not be mistaken for direct, acoustically generated sound, and the two relate very differently to the picture. Speaker sound does not strongly challenge the supremacy of the image, although it can be distracting when badly done, or, as in recent features, overbearing when aggressively and witlessly superengineered to do battle in the name of sound design. Even the simplest live music is a much stronger foil to the image. The multi-directional transmission axes and complex reverberation patterns created by a single flute are richer and more developed acoustically than an entire wall of point-source speakers. They tempt the eye to glance even when the performer is obscured.

Fortifying picture and soundtrack with a musician endows them with the additional drama and unpredictability of any live performance, as well as direct unmediated human-to-human communication. Yet the palpable sight of the musician interrelates as a direct opposite to the intangible light rays of the image. Furthermore, the visible performer is frequently seen to be light years away from the speaker sound, yet the composer is able to percolate the two into a transparent musical union whenever desired. Finally, using both live and reproduced sounds establishes a fruitful counterpoint between sound and music extending far beyond those voices embedded in the same soundtrack. From this chorus of contrasting and conflicting forces can arise a wealth of genres and styles to evoke the full powers of the art of music and the art of moving images.

The composer on the way to becoming a producer should first be aware that the reports of the death of film are becoming less and less exaggerated every day. Theatrical feature films will continue to be shot and released on film for some time to come, but it is electronic imaging on video that is the medium of the proximate future for non-theatrical independent productions. True, the contrast and resolution are not as good as film—yet. But a massive vocabulary of creative analog and digital image processing techniques is expanding exponentially, and some of these can be controlled by the various parameters of sound, so that music may be employed to shape images. Even better news is that the basic technology is less expensive than film, and that the form is young and open enough to welcome newcomers, women and men equally, from a host of disciplines—theatre, sculpture, painting, poetry, dance, literature, even music.

Perhaps what the composer-producer should possess above all else is a basic feeling for, and a real response to, visual images. There is a compelling quality about the light that represents reality, yet clearly is artifice. The image is flattened, the perspective is curved or collapsed, the objects are most selectively portrayed by lighting and framing, the color saturation and hue are altered—the artful distortions of reality abound and we are hypnotized and seduced and exhilarated by them. We see a scene we'd never look twice at in real life, and are captivated by the image's capturing and molding of individual elements, its ways of displaying and highlighting that just aren't seen in real life. The composer who feels this way should do time in a good film school.

After gaining an understanding of production skills and technology—camera, sound, editing, and so on—there remains the attainment of a much more elusive facility, the ability to assess and evaluate raw footage. By stripping it of its causes and its intents, by reading only what's really there on the screen, unencumbered by any outside connections or projections by the maker, the composer-producer can intimately understand the footage and begin to decide whether and how to use it.

Footage may be made before or after the music is composed, or even right along with it, but at some point it should be rigorously judged on its own terms. Although many ailing and mediocre films have been hyped by skillful scoring, good music never saved really poor images, and bad music never killed a good picture. How sad, but true. Max Steiner may have done a lot of damage, but he never did a film in. The first (and last) question to ask is, "Why am I watching this?" After all the hard-fought battles involved in producing footage are over, it is easy to fall in love with shots that are boring and ineffective. Don't waste the audience's time by projecting one frame more than absolutely necessary. Look for footage that has a tactile, palpable quality—a physicality or an energy that almost seems to jump off the screen. Static, stagebound "performance documentation" images without thrust, without screen life, disconnect the medium (televised orchestra). So does too much declamation (illustrated radio). Using footage with convincing kineticism helps establish a vibrant artificial realism in the work. This oxymoronic quality is an essential ingredient of suspension of disbelief in narrative forms, and of creating a world unto itself in the experimental genre. Finally, do not think that overstatement and exaggeration are necessary for the small screen. It's getting larger and sharper.

Many composers who begin to produce images start by filming or taping "visual music." This usually turns out to be some kind of musical waveform or vibration mode display: Lissajous figures, Chladni figures, laser displays, and the like. These musical mandalas and kaleidoscopes provide a good learning ground, since they are inexpensive and easy to produce. However, such electronic etch-a-sketch visuals tire quickly unless handled with great creativity and skill. They are very decorative and hypnotic, but often lack the depth of meaning, complex references, and richness of possibilities of art. Put another way, on a scale of A to Z, they run the emotional and relational gamuts from A to A-minus. Widely available computer graphics suffer from similar shortcomings. Many of these techno-pop programs run on video game hardware and produce nothing more than slick, hard-edge, one-dimensional cartoon figures. Algorithms utilize simple mathematical functions and geometrical figures, making the moves rigid, predictable, and devoid of multiple relationships. Resolutely uncommunicative and trite, their mechanistic quality provides even less decoration than the musical waveform displays, although computer graphics have the advantage of concrete representation.

There is nothing wrong with decoration, but it doesn't touch people the way

art does. It is certainly possible to create art with decorative elements, but it takes more than MacPaint software or pointing a camera at an oscilloscope on a test bench. If the visuals travel the road between abstraction and representation, between clarity and ambiguity, between depth and surface, and between color and luminance, they may still be "illustrated music," but they can also be something more.

One way to make a richer visual music is to create shots, without limitation of genre or style, that do not simply bounce along with the music, but that look like music feels. Visuals made with an inherent musical resonance, an intangible sonic force, can then be musically expressed with the skill and sensitivity to enhance the power and integrity of the image instead of depleting them. Images and sounds unite, not in slavish gridlocked patterning, but cut loose into a vital poetic context of form and feeling.

In the long run, though, the specific idea behind the work, whether illustrated music or anything else, is not important. The spirit brought to the work is what counts.

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Putting the elements together can be done in dozens of different ways. Rather than attempt to offer a generalized recipe, it might be more helpful instead to describe the composition and production of a recent concert video, *The Stillness* (1985), for alto saxophone, color video, and electronic sound.

I decided to take a situation that almost amounts to a nonevent and create a piece from it: waiting in a New York City subway station. It was not to be about fear, or noise, but only about being alone with one's thoughts in a very specific environment. The footage was shot in the Broadway-Nassau station in November 1982, one hundred feet (2¾ minutes) of 16-mm film. (If the footage is brief, it is better to shoot on film instead of video because of the portability and superior image quality. The color negative is transferred to ¾-inch videotape, and the remainder of the work is done on video.)

The film footage was not even mine. It was shot by New York University faculty filmmaker Meryl Bronstein for her film *No Tollkeeper at the Gate*. As is quite usual among filmmakers, we were working in each other's crews. We had also agreed to a cooperative footage exchange, in which I could use video transfers of her unedited location footage in my videos, and she could use film transfers of my video image processing of that footage in her films. Earlier that morning, we had shot three hundred feet at the Fulton Fish Market. I really wanted to tackle those shining mounds of raw, dead fish; I had no interest whatever in the subway footage. That is, until I saw it. Actress Christine Meyer is seen waiting, looking up and down the tracks, and pacing around the platform. Her multi-valent performance was something I never suspected when we were filming her. A mute eloquence was visible only to the camera. She was lonely, solitary, yet



IMAGE FROM *The Stillness*, BY REYNOLD WEIDENAAR

guardedly watchful and attentive; lost in thought, yet her eyes reached out; pre-occupied with introspection, yet bored and indifferent; frustrated, yet she radiated a sublime spiritual peace. This inner life of mind and spirit glided through an exterior of quiet grace, of compelling stillness.

In the same station, after the camera work was done, I recorded sounds of distant voices (it was 5:30 AM, and the station was almost deserted), electrical transformer hum, moving trains, and the echoes and ambience of the cavernous space on a stereo Nagra with a pair of Neumann KM84 microphones. Later the same month, I took the video transfer to the Experimental Television Center in Owego, New York, where I processed it to yield about twenty-five different designs. At this studio, images may be processed with a Cromemco Z-2 eight-bit computer and some twenty different analog devices. Since the components are independently patchable into hundreds of operating systems, the possibilities of design are complex and far-reaching.

In January 1984, after evaluating and editing the subway sounds, I returned to Owego and spent five days producing about fifty more designs of the original footage. This time, the designs were controlled in part by audio tapes of specially-composed piano phrases and of a very penetrating tenor door squeal. These elements of skilled, fluent human articulation and complex mechanical-anthropomorphic resonances were used in the video image processing. Specifically, they were converted to frequency voltages, envelope voltages, and triggers. These were applied to such voltage-controlled parameters as color shift, key clip, pedestal, video gain, window motion, and raster scan deflection. In the final product, the "ghost piano" and "phantom door" are seen in numerous ways, but are never heard in the music.

In June 1984, I met the superb saxophonist Marshall Taylor at the Yellow Springs Institute in Chester Springs, Pennsylvania. Marshall plays with a stunning tone and luminous musicality. In a reverberant empty old barn on the Yellow Springs grounds, I set up the stereo Nagra with PZM microphones on the cement floor. I recorded a half-hour of Marshall playing the soprano and alto saxophones, using a panoply of such extended techniques as multiphonics, palm keys in fundamental frequencies, spit and wind sounds, squeals, chugs, and vocalizations. Marshall's sounds and the subway audio matched beautifully. The final element of *The Stillness* had arrived.

Composing the music was a matter of constructing the electronic soundtrack (which actually consists solely of acoustic sounds) as well as writing the solo saxophone part. The first step was to edit and transcribe the saxophone and subway tapes. The soprano saxophone recordings possessed more of the yearning vocal quality that the piece required, so I did not use the alto saxophone material in the tape part. The soundtrack elements were processed with digital delay and classical tape manipulation techniques, then edited and mixed, taking care to preserve the stereo perspectives of the original location soundscapes. I composed the solo part as I made the tape part, copying out the score as the work went along.

The alto saxophone part is not technically difficult, aside from perhaps a few octave multiphonics and low notes that need to speak softly. The tape part is not particularly dense. The music required a certain understatement, almost a reticence. It afforded repeated opportunities to explore the power of a single note. Less always seemed to be more. Much of this, however, is now in the hands of the performer, since about a third of the part is improvised.

While composing the music, I repeatedly screened and evaluated worktapes of the 3½ hours of image-processed footage. The original tapes had been striped with timecode (hour:minute:second:frame). The timecoded worktapes were copied onto "window dubs," worktapes on which the timecode numbers are visible like a digital stopwatch in a small frame at the edge of the picture. This makes it very easy to identify the edit points of every selected segment. A constant alternation between composing music, selecting footage, and trying the two out together allowed the visuals and the music of *The Stillness* to be cut very closely to each other. Any anomalies were resolved in favor of the music.

The elements were not cast into a prefabricated mold; rather, the form of the work resulted from evaluating all of the footage and its possibilities. One particularly beautiful shot became the central theme: a semicircular walk on the subway platform, with an out-of-focus closeup in the middle. It resonated to a wealth of image-processing designs, and appears in the final cut as eight variations. As this walk is juxtaposed with other shots, the work also explores the oppositions of slow motion versus real time and extended versus brief segments. Beginning with more realistic footage, the images slowly progress through overlays and more pronounced abstractions to an otherworldly melding of forms and colors. A semi-realistic shot in real time is brought in sharply, almost like thunder, at the climax, followed by a slow-motion closeup broken into a collage of portraits.

The musical form is parallel in some aspects, but follows its own logic as well. It begins by establishing the subway, taped soprano saxophone, and live alto saxophone as disparate elements. Gradually, audio processing of the subway is developed, and sounds of extended techniques of the instruments begin to predominate. The separate elements combine, then alternate and join again. Several times a narrative allusion is briefly evoked, as the train brakes and the doors open. The live saxophone then shifts to more freely melodic material, followed by a long improvisatory section leading to the climax. This section is accompanied by a subway-free tape part, with a slow canon of glissandi that transform into hollow spit sounds. A very peaceful section of subway and elongated low soprano saxophone material emerges, with drawn-out melodic echoes in the alto saxophone.

In February 1985, the electronic soundtrack was finished and brought to the video editing studio; using an edit list in timecode, the video was fine-cut to the music with a CMX computer editor onto 1-inch videotape. That same month, the premiere was presented at the Zukor Theatre of the American Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, New York. A few weeks later, a second version of the work was produced, with a performance by Marshall Taylor of the live solo

part recorded and mixed onto the soundtrack. The video is identical to the concert performance version. This composite version is for broadcast and other screenings where live performance is not feasible.

I think of the work as a dreamflow, an adagio tone poem of near and distant visions. Free rushes of fantasy and sensations of disembodiment weave their way through a serene transit across an introspective world.

The Stillness received the Gold Award at the Eighth Philadelphia International Film Festival, First Prize at the Mid-America Music Video Festival, and First Prize at the Athens International Video Festival, all in 1985.

6
PAINFUL (MIMIC TAPE SAX)

SAX

TAPE

SUBWAY TRAIN, ORIGINAL SOUND, TUNED TO B^b

SOFT CLATTERS

BUZZ

WIND

02:34:18

mp cresc. -----



7

PALM KEYS
THIN SAT SOUND

SOFT

ORD.

CANTABLE

SAX

12

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32

SOFT

TAPE

SOMEONE SATOPHONE, AIR & SQUEEZE-EMBODIMENT SOUNDS

CHIME

VOICE "SS"

GLASS

(bc)

----- (cresc.) ----- mf ----- ff

02:58:14