



Scoring to Picture

Today's composers often draw from their experience in film to dramatize everything from TV shows and docs to spots and games. By **KEN MCGORRY**

Good movie music affects us. Especially if it's a good movie, we often remember that favorite scene later when we hear the music again somewhere — even in an elevator or a taxi. It's that guiding principle that's worked its way into sound and music for nearly every form of visual entertainment today. People who remember "Laura's Theme" from *Laura* will also likely remember the new song for Dr. Pepper. Or the reworked Al Green classic for Chevy. They'll remember the ominous, brooding threat of an orchestra setting the mood in a first-person-shooter video game as well.

Today's composers who score to picture know all this — and they have at their disposal a growing arsenal of tricks and technology that helps them express their story. Sometimes the "trick" may be a live orchestra; and sometimes it's a whistle and a drum.

MUSICBOX'S JOEL GOODMAN

The sheer number of scores from Calabasas, CA-based MusicBox (www.musicboxmx.com) is impressive; they offer a substantial library of music for films and television, including a new, highly-percussive collection called "Trailerama." Then consider the prodigious output from co-founder Joel Goodman — he's scored about 75 films, including one or two dramas a year and as many as 10 docs.

Goodman scored the drama *Canvas*, starring Marcia Gay Harden, but many of his credits are for documentary films. While he needs to see picture in order to create, Goodman says, there was a time when there was such a thing as too much picture: "Earlier in my career I was watching four-hour rough cuts!" That phase has gotten a little easier, thanks in large part to the development and prevalence of NLEs.

Goodman's work can sound serious, even monumental, on such documentary films as *Constantine's Sword* and the recent *Holy Grail in America* for the History Channel, but he also creates light, humorous pieces when needed.

Goodman writes in MOTU Digital Performer on an eight-core Mac. "In Digital Performer you can edit audio and MIDI. Now I do everything in one computer — routing audio, MIDI, video and all this other stuff — and, for me, it works just great. I have no synthesizers. I'm also very lucky because I get to record a lot of live musicians. I

use only one keyboard to trigger samples and synthesizer plug-ins." Goodman likes Omnisphere by Spectrasonics, "a wonderfully thought-out synthesizer plug-in. Most of my samples I play back via Kontakt 4." Digital Performer plays back the video as QuickTimes within the program. "Everything locks together perfectly and the picture quality is great, depending on how they compress it."

Goodman gains additional speed by using Plogue Bidule as a host program for his various synth plug-ins, allowing Digital Performer to run more smoothly. The applications speak to each other via Rewire, which transfers audio data between two computer applications in realtime. Goodman is waiting for a 64-bit version of Digital Performer to go with his Mac 64-bit OS.

As for recording live instruments such as strings, Goodman insists that "the quality be there." Does the client know from live strings versus samples? "They definitely know. Do they care? They may not care until they hear it; and when they hear it, they are knocked out." Instrumentation is a function of budget. *Constantine's Sword*, for instance, features live strings and live brass.

But are ever-improving samples of live instruments forcing producers to make a tough choice? "Some producers just want music in the show and they don't really hear it. Some producers really care about the music that goes in their show. They value it and I've been blessed in that I get to work with a lot of those people. Will samples ever really replace live musicians? No. Because the human is just too complex." Goodman allows that there are "great samples out there that can get the job done in a convincing way," but, he adds, "if you did that same recording with live musicians, it's fresh forever." Still, a favorite collection is the Vienna Symphonic Library, particularly their woodwinds.

When he roughs out a score using samples, producers might say "Wow, why do anything else to it?" But when you put real strings and brass on it, "It comes alive — you've taken the emotional meter from a two to an eight or a nine! In that experience, you feel."

Goodman scored the Walt Whitman documentary for PBS's *American Experience* (2008) and he was very gratified that the producers welcomed his more contemporary orchestral take rather than old-timey "banjos and harmonicas."

This year's *The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*, also on

PBS, features an earlier Goodman composition — with all live strings — that the director liked so much they had him reversion it. Goodman's work can also be heard on www.joelgoodman.com.

Scoring a drama like *Canvas* (2006) with its live guitars, piano and strings was "totally different from scoring a documentary," Goodman says. "Working with [director] Joe Greco was great. He insisted on live strings."

And Greco found a way to get those strings even though they were not budgeted.



Jason Graves won a BAFTA award for his orchestral score on the game *Dead Space*.

JASON GRAVES FILLS DEAD SPACE

Composer Jason Graves has repurposed his talent and experience writing numerous scores for TV spots and film to the world of videogames. And that world is glad he came — *Dead Space* alone has garnered him a slew of nominations and awards, including a BAFTA for best original score. You can hear some of his compositions on www.jasongraves.com and they are undoubtedly orchestral and dramatic, and they befit their games' subject matter — *Dead Space* (EA) and another popular example, *Section 8* (TimeGate/SouthPeak) are about horror and untimely death.

"Scoring for picture is my favorite thing to do," says Graves. "I was in Los Angeles for a number of years and doing a lot of film and television — so when I first got into games I was at an extreme loss. It was like, 'Oh, we need two minutes of combat; we need two minutes of exploring.' That gets down to the core difference between games and film. In film or television you're dealing with a linear timeline that repeats itself exactly the same way every time you watch. With games, if it's a well-constructed game, it's the exact opposite. You make different choices, you get a different experience. That's both the biggest challenge and the most important part about composing for games." Graves adds that, while today's game cinematics are linear and film-like, the game-action, "if it's a really well-done game with a good, dynamic music system, it's fairly complicated — you've got branching choices."

Many games — like sports games — today will have licensed rock songs on them. Games with custom original scores tend to be dynamic war games, first-person shooters or role-playing games. "You're a lot more immersed in the experience," he says, "and it's a lot more interactive." The two



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really general themes or moods for such games involve "exploring" or "fighting," but within those categories "you could have different shades and intensity levels." In such games, when a battle is won, the composer has brief musical stingers ready to offer the player some satisfaction and resolution.

"I always think of this the way I would have scored a film — this is what's leading up to the battle, so in the movie the people know that the battle's coming. In a game I try to do the same thing, but it's getting cut

up into a giant puzzle and then re-assembled in different ways depending on the game play."

Graves fondly recalls his work for Ubisoft in 2005 and 2006 on two WWII games — *Blazing Angels 1* and *2* — and how their 1940s milieu called for orchestral scores. "They wanted it to be very thematic, hummable and inspiring, and that was a lot of fun to work on." Still, only a few years old today, bits of those scores can sound dated to Graves's critical ear — both games were sample-based scores. "It's always frustrating trying to generate a full symphonic sound essentially from the computer," Graves says

even a six-month-old set of samples can sound "really dated" today.

The more recent *Dead Space*, while not as tuneful as *Blazing Angels*, features an interactive score that Graves recorded with a live orchestra and was "implemented brilliantly" by the game developer. Typically, a given title's budget dictates the sophistication of its music system — some games offer only a repetitive music on/off experience.

For Graves, as an orchestral composer, "it's all about the RAM — about how many instruments I can have access to at the same time." Graves exploits the new 64-bit workstation technology. "I've got universal access — six computers all networked together, about 80 Gigs of RAM

with all my orchestra sounds. Productivity just skyrockets."

Graves mainly works in Digital Performer. For mixing live orchestra sessions — which he now books regularly — Graves uses Pro Tools and systematically replaces the sampled strings with the live.

Music production for games has "a really high bar" (Graves's game work gets compared to related film scores by the John Williams/Hans Zimmer crowd) and "a really low budget by comparison to big films. It's a challenge!" He adds that scoring a film today can "feel like I'm cheating because the map has already been drawn!"

THWAK! THAT SOUNDTRACK

Tony Verderosa is a composer, producer and music supervisor who tellingly places "drummer" at the top of his list of talents. Verderosa, the founder of New York-based Thwak! Music and Sound Design (www.thwakit.com), is a classically trained percussionist. But at the recent MTV Video Music Awards, where Verderosa was music director, his live drumming and drum-pad-triggered samples and loops sounded anything but classical. Verderosa appeared live on his drums from which he directed the action on a massive-sounding remix of "We Will Rock You," which he arranged for vocalist Katy Perry and guitarist Joe Perry. For added emphasis, Verderosa hired tympani and concert-bass-drum players to help drive the beat home to the broadcast's record 27 million viewers.

Verderosa boasts that Thwak! can produce virtually any style of score for any film

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Los Angeles-based Bruce Hanifan (www.brucehanifan.com) recently scored an hour-long National Geographic special, *The Nazca Lines of Peru*, airing this month. The documentary reveals new discoveries about the mysterious giant sketches made in the desert of western Peru by ancient peoples. Hanifan evoked the drama and the mystery of the discoveries with a fusion of ethnic instruments, vocal sounds and contemporary scoring techniques. He works in Apple Logic and Digidesign Pro Tools, and ties in three additional PCs with Forte as a hosting platform for numerous programs such as Spectrasonic's Omnisphere.



Season 2011

Los Angeles-based composer Jesper Kyd (www.myspace.com/jesperkyd), who scored the *Assassin's Creed* and *Hitman* games, has completed the original soundtrack for *Stanton Hill*, a thriller released on DVD last month. When a group of hikers unwittingly stumble across the Stanton family, they find themselves at the mercy of a special kind of crazy that will stop at nothing to



get the trespassers off their property. To portray the rustic and un-hinging experience of the decrepit Stanton family farm, Kyd composed an instrumental score manipulated with industrial sounds and subversive ambience. The score evokes a deep sense of isolation and impending breakdown, which spirals into distorted frenzy.

or TV project, and do it live if warranted.

Thwak! has been branching out into music supervision and even video production in recent years, delving into creating branded content for large advertisers, including shooting HD footage. "We do a fair amount of shooting — everything from directing, shooting, editing, audio mixing, sound designing, everything; in-house."

The music track for a new Whirlpool Maytag promotion produced for the Internet and trade shows, is right up Verderosa's alley. The client's current TV campaign (which is CG) emphasizes the same theme: the washing machines' flawless internal workings seen too the beat of — get this — actual Maytag washers serving as percussion instruments.

"We sampled and created 100 percent sounds from the parts and machine sounds and clicks and pops and ticks," Verderosa says. "Everything that you could extract from a Maytag washer and dryer became the music and sound of the commercial."

Slamming the washer door becomes the kick drum and the dials create high-end clicks, etc. From live-action HD footage of all this, Thwak! is creating a series of video remixes. "It's not just music," he adds, "it's the heart of what they are."

Using VJamm (www.camart.co.uk/vjamm) Verderosa can map out and trigger "beat-matched video/audio clips" — from each of his electronic drum pads. "Each MIDI note on my drum interface would represent a different video clip with accompanying audio," he says.

Thwak! uses Pro Tools for final mixes on film and TV work. But in the "laboratory stage" Verderosa likes to use Cubase 5.1. "It's really stable and easy to use," he says. "I've always been a big fan of Steinberg."

These days Thwak!'s TV spot clients like Miller beer and Land Rover tend to prefer

organic sounds — "keeping it real and getting some live musicians together," Verderosa says. Thwak! also does a lot of client work that's song-based or re-recordings of popular songs. Verderosa is proud of their recent cover of the Beatles' "Dear Prudence" for Cellular South.

Thwak! recently finished a comical *Love Your Beer* campaign for Miller involving sound design and original music. The campaign includes a "bistro" spot with appropriate background piano and ambience. Another is set in a sports bar with a blaring jukebox. Each spot ends with the same raging indie-rock tag as an aural mnemonic.

Thwak! features a number of musical specialists — indie rockers, specialists in contemporary or orchestral music. For instance, Philippe Saisse, who performed the bistro piano for Miller, has been nominated for five Grammys this year for his original jazz recordings.

That all-important aural mnemonic that closes many commercials is not so easily arrived at. Even though it may be only :06 in length, "it takes 20 or 30 really fresh, distinctly different ideas before [clients] land on the magic." This could include contemporary-sounding tags, or sound-effects driven, a range of different rock styles, orchestral, triumphant and more.

Verderosa and Thwak! are also creating an organic-sounding original score for Bryan Goluboff's indie film, *Beware the Gonzo*. A film is a little unusual, but they've been working with the director since "day one."

HOUSE SOUNDS

Composer Jon Ehrlich, working with scoring partner Jason Derlatka in their LA



Joel Goodman's *Walt Whitman* score for the *Art Experience* series on PBS was a treat: evoking time in a contemporary style.

studio, is in charge of helping us to musically, Ehrlich's numerous cues for seasons on Fox's *House* are meant to take us to a spooky place where the emotion and knowledge coalesce into a saving diagnosis for Dr. House's the-week.

But are Ehrlich's cues music or sign or something else?

He swings between MOTU's software and Ableton Live as his former and Ableton Live as his current. While Ehrlich sees Performer as a sequencer, he uses the "incredibly" Ableton program for "kind of chaotic audio and effecting it with various delays and strange effects." That's reasonable since his soundtracks are meant to help evoke Dr. Gregory House's thought processes.

The often percussive results from Ableton Live are "a big part of the sound of *House*," Ehrlich says. "procedural" cues in the show's score's main purpose is to "draw

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