

Diversified ways of approaching instruments and variety of the use of the main motif (fullground) of “Briony’s theme” according to the scenes in “Atonement”

Atonement: A case of study

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Plot

The story of *Atonement* is based on Christopher Hampton's (Academy Award winner for "*Dangerous Liaisons*") screenplay adaptation according to Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* (2002)

In 1935, Briony Tallis, 13-year-old teenage girl from wealthy family writes her first novel "*Trials of Arabella*" intending to present a performance with her cousins from the North (twins: Pierrot, Jackson and their sister Lola). During the rehearsal the twins get bored and they decide to go swimming. Briony feels sad to realize that she can't stage the play for her brother, (Leon) who is coming back home with his friend, Paul Marshall (a chocolate farm owner)

After cancelled rehearsal Briony slowly goes to the window and sees her sister (Cecilia) with the housekeeper's son (Robby) by the fountain in a moment of erotic attraction for each other.

Meanwhile Paul Marshall is having fun flirting with teenage Lola.

The next day Briony gets totally confused when Robby asks her to hand the letter to Cecilia in which he expresses his passion and describes his sexual desire in details towards her but in fact he sends a draft version of the letter by mistake. The final version that he wrote for Cecilia was not so all embracing.

Briony reads the letter (she also has childish crush for Robby) but now she thinks that Robby is a "sex maniac" willing to attack her sister and discloses everything to her adult cousin (Lola)

The same day Tallis family invites Robby for dinner and he meets Cecilia in the library where they make love and confess their feeling for each other.

Briony is watching them secretly and she gets stressed looking at this scene.

During the dinner twins run away and everyone starts looking for them including Briony and by chance she ends up finding Paul Marshall raping Lola.

Briony decides to use this motif to accuse Robby of raping crime instead of Paul Marshall and declares to the policeman that she saw him with her own eyes.

This terrible crime is the end of the love story between Cecilia and Robby and the beginning of the tragedy. Robby is arrested and 4 years after he joins the army in order to get rid of the prison. Cecilia is the only one who believes that Robby is not guilty and she leaves the family.

By this time Briony works in the hospital, living in constant regret for the mistake of her lifetime. Robby and Cecilia never get to see each other again, he dies in Dunkirk waiting for evacuation and Cecilia becomes the victim of the flood during bombing.

Years after Briony becomes a well-known writer and by the end of the movie she is the guest of the TV Program where she talks about her last autobiographical novel called "Atonement".

She changes the real scenario of the story giving Robby and Cecilia the chance to enjoy their love.

The end of the movie is very strong and dramatic. Cecilia's blue eyes with painful look express a huge regret for her unfair statement and hopeless mistake.

Dario Marianelli

A short biography of the Composer

Dario Marianelli, Italian composer of film and concert music, born in Pisa, he started piano studies and began singing at age 6, then he devoted himself to playing piano and composing. He studied privately and took exams as an external student nearby Florence, Lucca and Livorno and then moved to England, where he studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He also spent three years studying at the National Film and Television School.

Marianelli's film career started in 1994 with his score for Paddy Breathnach's movie, *Ailsa*.

He composed music for such films as *The Brothers Grimm*; *V for Vendetta*; *Agora*; *Eat, Pray, Love*; *Jane Eyre*; *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*; and *Quartet*, as well as many others. He has achieved recognition for his work with filmmaker Joe Wright, writing scores for the films: "*Pride and Prejudice*", "*Atonement*", "*The Soloist*", and "*Anna Karenina*".

Among his honors, Marianelli has won the Academy Award (for "*Atonement*") a Golden Globe Award, the Phoenix Film Critics Society Award and the World Soundtrack Award.

An interview with Dario Marianelli about his career, compositional qualities and scoring “Atonement”

(An extract from the interview of Scot Macaulay with Dario Marianelli, November 30, 2007)

Career as a film composer:

“I think it's one of those decisions that were never really "taken" — it kind of happened gradually. However, I did make a decision to spend three years at film school after I had scored my first feature film, and I haven't regretted it.”

Specific qualities that differentiate a “Dario Marianelli” score from one by another composer:

“I think you are asking the worst possible person for an answer! I'd like to think that one of the qualities I bring to a project is the approach more than the detail of the music. I have an obvious preference for horizontal (melodic) rather than vertical (harmonic) thinking, but this is vague to the point of being almost meaningless. I hope that my scores are different enough one from the other to avoid me being pigeon-holed, but in all of them I can hear my concern with a certain idea of "truth," although it comes out in a different manner every time. I am not sure I can explain much better. I am already beginning to sound pompous”...

Composers that inspired Marianelli:

“Inspiration comes from everywhere, really, and the list of composers who have made me stop and listen is way too long. It would be like drafting a wedding guest list — who do I leave out?”

Marianelli about scoring “Atonement”

Specific (Early 20th century Romantic composers) influences in the score:

“At the beginning of a project I try to focus on bare ideas, as simple and direct as I can make them. I try as hard as I can not to think about "style," because I found it can be a trap, and it can shift the thinking too early from the core ideas to a more superficial level. I would say that although the overall sound of a score can recall different musical idioms, that's not the way I go about writing it.

For me it has to happen from the inside out, from the idea to the sound.

Whenever musical references come into the writing, especially with Joe's films, the conversation is not about the style of the music, but about the qualities we are looking for. For example, at some point in the conversation, we talked about “Brief Encounter” and about the idea that a love that doesn't find its expression in the story could instead find it in the music. There is a wonderful contrast between the story's repressed, unfulfilled love and the expansiveness of the romantic music in that film, and that idea was probably one of the inspirations for the more

romantic parts of the score. But references can come more obliquely than that. A freewheeling chain of thoughts might make me jump from love-and-death to Argentinean tango, for example. Someone has pointed out Piazzolla influence: it wouldn't surprise me one bit. Ultimately, I try to leave the door open for these kind of lateral associations to seep into the music”

Construction of the score and moving to the actual scene:

“In Atonement, as I was saying, this was a principle that found several applications. The idea was to blur the boundaries between the different levels of "truth" within the story and covertly insinuate the idea that what we witness as spectators might be a fiction within the fiction. In most cases I would present Joe (director) with a sketch of what the cue might be like and show him how it could work with the picture. The result is completely constructed, like everything else in the picture, and occasionally it involves a conversation with the sound and editing departments to make it happen in the smoothest way possible. So I might say, "Hey, that umbrella banging on the car bonnet has a good rhythm. Can we change the placing of the strikes in the audio so it continues a little longer and give me the chance to turn it gradually into a typewriter sound? And, by the way, if the cut came eight frames later it would land on a really good accent.”

The use of typewriter in the score:

Joe started talking about the sound of the typewriter before I even read the script. He asked me to think about it: I went off and sampled every single keystroke, space bar, carriage-return from a 1930s Corona typewriter (courtesy of my agent, thanks Maggie!). Then I wrote five or six pieces for solo typewriter, and I played them on my keyboard. Each had a different character, but all of them were "musical." They all used the sound as rhythm. One of them combined really well with the "faulty brakes" idea, and the conversation progressed from there into writing more pieces for orchestra and typewriter.

Themes for the Briony and Cecilia characters:

"At some point I started to think about Briony as "the girl with faulty brakes." This was the title of the very first piece of music I wrote for Joe on this film: I was interested in bringing out the relentless quality of Briony's imagination, which is constantly on overdrive but which can get stuck in an obsessive loop. The other more romantic theme is not just for Cecilia — it was meant to take the weight of the tragic love between her and Robbie, and so it doesn't in my mind belong to a specific character. Initially I was considering writing a spoof wartime song, which would have played from a gramophone in the dormitory of the hospital where the older Briony has become a nurse. I was looking for a theme that could belong to both worlds, within the space of the film, where the characters might be able to

hear it but which would also function as a main romantic idea. Eventually we decided to use a real wartime song for the dormitory scene, but by then I had found my theme, and I kept using it for the rest of the movie.

Diversified ways of approaching instruments and variety of the use of the main motif (fullground) of “Briony’s theme” according to the scenes in “Atonement”

“Briony’s theme” is introduced from the very first minutes of the movie and it is constantly being repeated with variety of instrumentation and modulations.

The theme itself is unique and rich not just because of the beauty of the melody or harmony but in terms of character and complexity, containing a lot of small materials (motifs) that are used by composer in different ways.

The first version of “Briony’s theme” is in B flat minor with the piano, typewriter (as a percussive instrument), strings and woodwinds.

Briony's theme Fullground

♩=120

The image displays the musical notation for the 'Briony's theme Fullground'. It consists of two staves of music in B-flat minor (three flats) and 4/4 time. The tempo is indicated as ♩=120. The first staff contains three measures with long phrasing lines over the notes. The second staff contains four measures, including a measure with a 6/4 time signature change.

Even though the theme is based on not more than just 8 notes, it doesn't sound that simple. If we analyze each note of this motif trying to follow the line of the melody, there is no sharp end point for the musical phrase. The end of the motif (**F**) equals to the start (**F**) and we get kind of a looping theme, which is great and helpful for constant and smooth repetitions.

Major or minor?



The main motif is played in a small region of 1 octave and the order of repetition of the same notes provoke kind of uncertain, doubtful and undetermined feeling and by character definitely announcing that something is going to happen. Also switching between **D natural** and **D flat** notes in the melody makes it unclear if it's minor or major scale and that's the clue for expressing Briony's kind of character who is quite an imaginative young girl, her inner world doesn't look easy and seems like she doesn't have to be worried about anything but in fact

she is different from the girls of her age, trying to express her objections and feelings with writing novels and stories.

The first version of Briony's theme:

00:01:32 - Briony is sitting at a typewriter, writing the last words of her first play called "*The Trials of Arabella*"

The first sound that we hear in the movie is the typewriter, later the piano comes in, starting with quarter notes, which is being transmitted into triplets, creating an intro for the melody (fullground) to enter and later it's extended into string section and woodwinds (piano version on page 15)

Typewriter stays with the piano as a percussive instrument, providing an additional rhythmic pulse, which can be considered as an original idea from the composer and director instead of using the real percussion (see the interview on page 9)

The middleground texture (triplets in the left hand) blends totally well with the motif in terms of harmony and sounds beautiful but at the same time it declares anxiety, restless mood and makes us believe that something is not right.

Later these rhythmic triplets are repeated with the string section that sounds much stronger.

Even though in the movie everything seems to be quiet and there's no tension yet, the music (Briony's theme) makes us feel a little bit uncomfortable, expecting something to happen.

There's also the second "melodic motif" inside "Briony's theme", which is used by composer many times with modulations and with various instruments in the first part of the movie. (Page 18)

The first (piano) version of "Briony's theme" is introduced on page 15

Briony's Theme

Dario Marianelli

$\text{♩} = 120$

Piano

5

Pno.

8

Pno.

11

Pno.

13

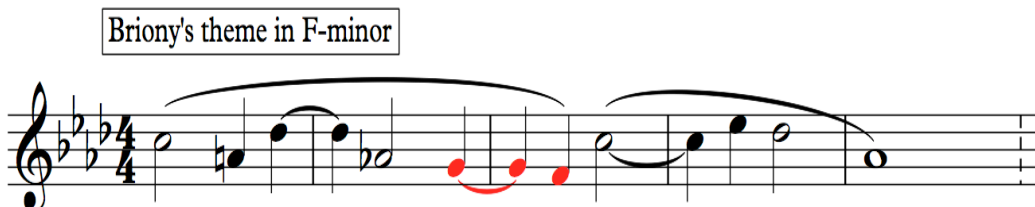
Pno.

Scene N1

00:06:11-Briony is going slowly to the window and she sees Cecilia and Robby by the fountain

Few seconds before the “Music In” we hear the sound of wasp and then strings and harp enter with the main motif in F minor. For this cue the composer used the first 8 notes of the main motif of “Briony’s theme” (page 11) with 2 modulations: F # minor, C # minor. With every modulation the tension is being increased gradually and leading instruments, which play the main theme, change from strings to clarinet and clarinet to flute. Tempo is very slow comparing to the original version and in this case the 1st F minor version of the theme has two 2 additional notes in the middle of the melody that doesn’t exist in the original version of the theme, so that it sounds a little bit stretched and therefore different.

Example:00:06:11 (Additional notes written in red)



As we can see, in this case the theme is being repeated with sustain notes on downbeats that make us lose the feeling of steady tempo and the meter in 4/4, so that it can't be identified easily with the original version of the theme.

The use of string tremolo in this cue is perfectly blended with the sound of wasp in the movie. It is kind of suspicious scene (when Briony is trying to find out what is happening between her sister and Robby) and these two kinds of similar sounds (wasp and string tremolo) that enter and leave by turn or sometimes together with crescendo and decrescendo definitely help the scene to create pressure and uncertain mood.

Scene N2

00:30:10 - Briony is going slowly to the library watching Cecilia and Robby making love.

In this cue the strings play in a very slow tempo the main motif of "Briony's theme" in E-flat minor but the harmony of sustained background is different comparing to the original version of the theme. Instead of having simple tonic chord (just like in previous versions) now it's in A-flat minor (IV), which makes it sound more doubtful and dark. Here we have an example of the importance of changing background harmony, which immediately gives a different color and a new meaning to the entire motif.

Example: 00:30:10

A musical score for piano in 4/4 time, key of A-flat minor. The score consists of two staves. The upper staff features a melodic line with a dotted half note followed by a quarter note, then a half note, and finally a quarter note. The lower staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with a series of chords, including a whole chord, a half chord, and a quarter chord, all connected by a slur.

After this version of “Briony’s theme”, an additional and kind of supportive “melodic motif” appears in A flat minor (above mentioned on page 14) which is also used later a lot of times combined with “Briony’s theme” in different cues and with different instruments.

Example: 00:30:31

"Melodic motif"

A musical score for a melodic motif in 4/4 time, key of A-flat minor. The score is written on two staves. The upper staff shows a sequence of notes: a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. The lower staff shows a sequence of notes: a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. Both staves have a slur under the first six notes.

After this “Melodic Motif”, modulated “Briony’s theme” (fullground) still appears together with “melodic motif” in A-minor. These two lines of melody cross each other just like painting various lines, sometimes stepping on each other but at the same time blending perfectly well and reflecting Briony’s inner emotions.

Example: 00:30:55 - “Briony’s theme” + “Melodic motif”

Fullground of Briony's theme

Melodic motif

The image displays a musical score for piano in 4/4 time, consisting of two systems of staves. The first system features a grand staff with two staves. The upper staff, labeled 'Fullground of Briony's theme', contains a melodic line with a long slur over four measures, starting on a whole note G4 and moving through A4, B4, and C5. The lower staff, labeled 'Melodic motif', contains a more active melodic line with eighth and quarter notes, also slurred across four measures. The second system shows a continuation of the 'Fullground of Briony's theme' in the upper staff with a long slur over two measures, and the 'Melodic motif' in the lower staff with a long slur over two measures. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4.

Scene N3 00:41:00 - Briony is looking for tweens (Pier and Jackson) and ends up finding Lola and Paul Marshall together.

Almost similar approach is used in F-minor scale (“Briony’s theme” fullground + “melodic motif”) in this mysterious and very emotional scene. We hear strings in high pitch, adding “cold colors” to the fullground of “Briony’s theme” while another string section plays beautiful “melodic motif”.

Double base background is underlined with sharp rhythmic pattern giving drive and engine to the scene, which has a lot of tension itself, as Briony feels very emotional and stressed about everything that happens around.

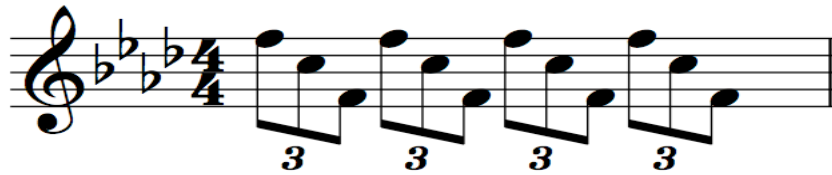
Double Base Background



Marianelli also reminds us about the triplets from the very first piano version of “Briony’s theme,” which has a “middleground” (secondary) function but it helps to increase the pressure of the scene to be more expressive/effective.

Triplets:

Middleground



Robby's arrest scene

This is one of the most important scenes in the movie when Robby is arrested and they (Cecilia and Robby) realize that this can be the end of their love story. There's also one interesting and beautiful (harp and piano) version of "Briony's theme" before Robby's arrest scene that shouldn't be left without mentioning (page 22, scene N 4)

Scene N4

00:44:19 – Tallis family is waiting for Robby:

Again, “Briony’s theme” for strings in E-flat minor but without sustain note, as it was before and harp playing in octaves an original version of the theme (with sustain notes). So in this case we have two different versions of Briony’s theme played at the same time, which sound very decent and smooth but still create the feeling of contradiction according to the scene (mainly achieved with the harp arpeggio)

The image displays a musical score for two instruments: Harp and Strings. The score is written in E-flat minor (three flats) and 4/4 time. The Harp part is in the upper staff, and the Strings part is in the lower staff. The Harp part features a complex, arpeggiated melody with many accidentals and a sustain note. The Strings part features a simpler, sustained melody with a few accidentals and a sustain note. The score is divided into two systems. The first system shows the Harp and Strings parts playing together. The second system shows the Harp part continuing with a similar arpeggiated melody, while the Strings part continues with a sustained melody. The Harp part is marked with a box labeled 'Harp' and the Strings part is marked with a box labeled 'Strings'.

Scene N5

00:44:57 – Robby’s arrest

In this cue we have similar approach in terms of the musical idea, fullground (“Briony’s theme”) + “Melodic motif” but with different orchestration:

Double base plays pizz. in E minor harmony, which makes the theme sound more precise/sharp and also we hear rhythmic string section that provides more tension according to the scene and celli section plays the “melodic motif”

Rhythmic strings:



After strings’ version of “briony’s theme” + “melodic motif” the same scheme is being repeated again with English horn and clarinet (example on page 24)

There’s also the second celli section playing not very important motif but it’s filling an empty space in the middle range and adding thickness to the colors of woodwinds.

Example: 00:45:30

The image displays a musical score for two instruments: Clarinet and English horn. The music is written in 4/4 time and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The Clarinet part is on the top staff, featuring a melodic line with a long slur over the first two measures and a fermata over the final note. The English horn part is on the bottom staff, playing a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes and rests, also featuring a slur and a fermata. Below the main score, there are two additional staves. The top of these two staves shows a short melodic phrase, and the bottom staff shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

The last variation of this theme is being repeated when Robby gets in the police car. Corresponding to the tension of the scene, tempo is almost twice as fast as before and all the versions that we heard so far in a slow tempo, now are being repeated with modulations. It feels like in this version, above mentioned two motifs (main theme and secondary theme) are spinning around in circles and low

string section with clear downbeat emphasizes the rhythm. It is also notable that when Robby's mother is shouting "liars" and beating the police car with an umbrella, a couple of seconds later this sound is becoming the percussive part of the score, following the rhythm of low strings.

Later when the camera zooms in Briony's face looking at Robby's arrest scene, the typewriter sound appears again, it enters gradually and ends up playing the same triplets from the very first version of the theme.

Conclusion

The first 50 minutes of the movie we hear just Briony's theme with different versions of rhythmic, melodic, tempo, harmonic changes or modulations, switching between (fullground and middleground) motifs. It could be also considered as a layering approach:

- Just motif of "Briony's theme"
- Briony's theme + triplets
- Briony's theme + another "Melodic motif"
- Briony's theme + another "Melodic motif" + Rhythmic background
- Typewriter effect
- Briony's theme + sustained background

Dario Marianelli keeps repeating the theme but each time he makes it sound different according to the scene, expressing more/less tension applying different colors with instruments.

As a listener I would say that music breathes with the scene.

The structure of the theme can provide the possibility of writing continuous modulations and therefore it can last indefinitely.

The use of Briony's theme in *Atonement* is a great example of how to break 1 theme into pieces/elements and use these parts together or individually or switching with each other whenever it's necessary.

Basically repetitions are based on constant modulations, it happens according to the scene and in a very smooth way.

We have several types of modulations:

- Modulations inside the theme (series of modulations)
- Abrupt modulations that start without any preparation but still sound smooth and natural mainly because of the last chord of the theme which is considered as dominant chord for the first (resolving tonic) chord of the next modulation.
- Transition with typewriter

- Modulation based on the last sustained note of the previous version.

Regarding the instrumentation I would like to mention the piano, which could be considered as one of the main instruments especially in the first 50 minutes of the movie and a lot of emotions are achieved or changes applied just with a single note, arpeggios or different textures on the piano.

It has been a great experience to study and analyze the use of “Briony’s theme” by Dario Marianelli, his way of thinking and orchestrating, giving every single instrument a little function of applying something that is necessary to be expressed according to the scenes and also I was impressed with his way of combining all possible versions of 1 motif so that with every repetition it sounds still fresh and different.

LIST OF REFERENCES

- Plot

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- Bio

www.allmusic.com/artist/dario-marianelli

- Interview

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