

GRAVITY (2013)

The Sound of Silence

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ABSTRACT

This thesis describes the music in *Gravity* (2013) and it explains the use of electronic and acoustic elements that brought the score to life. A hybrid score which contains musical texture that melts into the picture pointing out of every small narrative detail, taking into consideration characters' state of mind, surroundings, camera perspectives and the idea that mirrors what it is like to be in space.

A score that plays a vital role in the movie, which demonstrates a thorough structure and a firm statement of the great amount of planning made ahead before the scoring process.

The music never overtakes the importance of the picture; it does so without drawing your attention away from it.

This C.E. will include a musical and dramatic analysis based on three parts of the movie, *Gravity: Above Earth, Don't Let Go* and *Tiangong* (Price, 2013)

Steven Price recorded a 80-minute score, which contains elements of traditional classical music and avant-garde sound-designing that will blow you away.

INTRODUCTION:

What is Gravity?:

Gravity is the force that attracts a body towards the centre of the Earth, or towards any other physical body having mass. Other than the scientific explanation of the term, *Gravity* was also a movie released in 2013. Behind this movie there's work of nearly five years. Alfonso Cuarón, the director, based it on a story by his son Jonas and a script they co-wrote, says: "I'm done with space... but not before inventing a new way to light, shoot and direct, which will likely impact the way cinema will be made from now on" (Space.com, 2013.)

Gravity took home seven Academy Awards:

- Best visual effects
- Best sound editing
- Best sound mixing
- Best cinematography
- Best film editing
- Best original score
- Best director

In *Gravity* we have a main character trying to understand a reason why she should try to live, or try at least to attempt to save her own life, when the last thing she wants to do is live on Earth because of the loss of her daughter. All of this leaves her to faith, which it doesn't have to be in a religious context, but it's "human faith that humans inherently have, so many have, that allows them [...] to stand up and try" said Sandra Bullock (Bradshaw, 2013). Sandra Bullock plays this role of a scientific

engineer woman, Dr Ryan Stone, who's under the supervision of George Clooney, playing Matt Kowalski.

Sound as a Story-teller & an Unconventional Score:

The score was composed and produced by Steven Price, who back in 2011 had the chance to score *Attack the Block* (2011). He was born in Nottingham, UK on 22nd April 1977 and went to Emmanuel College, Cambridge to earn a degree in Music

He went to work on *Gravity*, originally, only as a music editor and after a while he was asked by Cuarón: "Would you like to come on as composer?" (YouTube, 2013). It took him a year to score *Gravity* and at the age of 36, Price won his first Academy Award nomination.

"The visuals are incredibly beautiful, but equally, it's the most terrifying thing you've ever seen in lots of ways," Price says. "So the music had to do both of those things and feel kind of very organic and very textural, but equally kind of help your stomach to drop when things were spinning around you" (HitFix, 2013.)

The movie contains musical texture that melts into the picture taking care of every small narrative detail, taking into consideration characters' state of mind, surroundings, camera perspectives and the idea that mirrors what it's like to be in space. An under-score that plays a vital role in the movie, which demonstrates a thorough structure and a firm statement of the great amount of planning made ahead before the scoring process. The music never overtakes the importance of the picture, it doesn't draw your attention away from it; it's a real storyteller, i.e., along with being anchored in Ryan's Voice, the soundtrack is structured so that everything she feels is aurally reinforced (Walker, 2015).

The common sense of mixing in surround would put the music at the front three speakers (or consider it just stereo) and all of the FX, reverbs, etc. at the back where the Left-surround and Right-surround are.

Gravity's approach was totally different, and this is where Dolby Atmos was truly exploited.

The basic hurdle of this challenge is that in space there's no air, so how can there be sound propagation with no air? Although, this is exactly why there's no boundary in the sound, many rules that you would normally follow by the book were broken and completely torn apart for the better to achieve something, which is beyond unconventional.

Gravity's sound is very "geographical", it's dynamic and very literal, following Dr Stone's perspective and it was designed for surround systems, said the director Alfonso (Coleman, 2013.)

All of the foleys and the sounds came into the form of transducer recording¹, rather than regular air-born audio, since Alfonso wanted to respect that there is no sound in space, stressing out the fact that you're in a vacuum and sound cannot be transmitted through the atmosphere; nevertheless sound is transmitted through the interaction of elements, meaning that when the characters may grab or touch objects, then the vibration of that will travel up into their ears.

The concept of vibrations and transducer recording is taken quite literally by Steven Price in his score. He sampled his recordings so many times that it's hard to

¹ Considering that sound is the generalised name given to "acoustic waves". These acoustic waves have frequencies ranging from just 1Hz up to many tens of thousands of Hertz with the upper limit of human hearing being around the 20 kHz, (20,000Hz) range. The sound that we hear is basically made up from mechanical vibrations produced by an Audio Sound Transducer used to generate the acoustic waves, and for sound to be "heard" it requires a medium for transmission either through the air, a liquid, or a solid. (Storr, 2013.)

distinguish exactly what's been untouched and what has been touched when we hear acoustic elements mixed with electronic and sound designed ones.

The music comes from different places in the room and it travels, clashes and moves with other music and foleys that are coming from other places, making it really difficult to distinguish which elements are which — and this is made as a clear statement right from the beginning with the track “**Above Earth**”. Or for instance when Dr. Ryan Stone is spinning untethered through space you hear not only the voice of Kowalski, but the music moving all around you in a Dolby Atmos theatre, making you feel some of the same terrifying disorientation Stone must be feeling (Dolby - Lab Notes, 2014.)

The music and the sound tell a story and the lack of sound is always respecting the physics of space. Most of the times where we expect to hear a big explosion, then we hear nothing, no music and no foleys. Skip Lievsay, the re-recording mixer, called this minimal approach and modus operandi as: “The less is more for sound in supporting a story-telling” (YouTube, 2015.) The harmony of the score was minimal many times and simple but the mixing wasn't minimal at all, “it was flying all over the place”, Lievsay said. The movie was originally mixed in 7.1 and then transitioned in Dolby Atmos.

Price's task was not only to score Ryan's, but also to engineer the placement of the music around the theatre using the Dolby Atmos system. "Whether a musical composition or the technology of it, [the idea was] to completely immerse you in the emotional experience" (Filmmusicsociety.org, 2014.)

Most of Steven Price's Score was created using electronic elements, even though he made more use of acoustic sounds as the score progresses until the final, which is mostly orchestral (i.e.:“**Tiangong**”) and features a wordless female voice. "It

was literally a laboratory at times," Price notes, "taking a cello note but passing it through a synthesizer or guitar pedal."

He was very experimental when he recorded the musicians, there were "a lot of smaller sessions, and a couple of bigger ones at the end," Price reported. "Solo cello carried the early melodies. I did a string octet in Abbey Road Studio Two. There are a lot of individual layers to the score."

There is also a glass harmonica, Price said: "It's otherworldly, but incredibly human," present in much of the score's textural material. There's also an organ, recorded in a church in East London.

There are many recurring sounds throughout the movie, such as some vocals which, although, many times disguised or barely audible. "A lot of the textures are vocally derived," Price said. "It tends to be associated with Ryan's daughter and moments of her extreme adversity, total desolation and hopelessness. Gradually, it becomes more explicit."

Steven Price ended up with 80 minutes of music for, he says, "a director who encouraged you to push things as far you possibly could" (Ibid.)

MUSIC ANALYSIS:

The movie starts with a very strong statement:

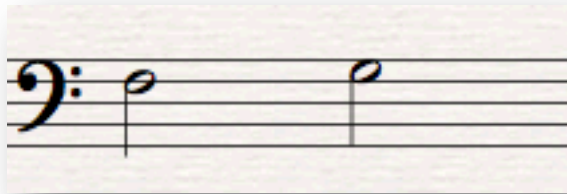
“At 600KM above planet Earth the temperature fluctuates between +258 and -148 degrees Fahrenheit, which equals to +125 and -100 degrees Celsius. There is nothing to carry sound, no air pressure, no oxygen. Life in space is impossible...”

There is no sound in space and both diegetic and non-diegetic sounds take this aspect very seriously. The music makes up for all the sound effects kept to the minimum. It compensates for every missing sound because the score involves sound design as well. Steven Price revealed in an interview with the Huffington Post that the director Alfonso Cuarón was only interested in hearing something that anyone would be able to hear if they were there in space within those suits:

“You’d hear stuff within their spacesuits; if they touched something, you’d hear the vibration that they’d hear, but you don’t hear any exterior noises. We kind of knew the music would be responsible for all the other things. I was asked to try and tonally represent things that would ordinarily be sound. You don’t hear an explosion in the film, but you might hear some pulsation in the music that reflects it. The score is doing the job of traditional sound, while the sound crew was able to do an interesting job on their own” (The Huffington Post, 2013.)

The score “**Above Earth**” in the opening title is a strong example of this. The music draws the listener’s attention on itself straightaway, pointing out the importance that it will always have throughout the entire film. An electronic cello and a high pitch celestial synth open the movie slowly fading it and automating up by volume. It represents the contrast between the beauty of space and the danger of being

out there in the thick of it at the same time because space is a risky business. It treads a fine line between the wonder of space and its danger. The cello plays the same interval of a major second every time there's danger approaching, which recurs in many other tracks of the movie ("Debris", "The Void" and "Don't Let Go"):



The opening title leads into a musically strong score, "Debris". The debris, speeding up towards the telescope, is approaching Dr Stone and Kowalski for the first time.. The music reads the picture in such a spectacular way that it follows the camera perspective not only with electronic texture, but also with acoustic elements involved in the score, with Low Pass EQ imitating resonances you might hear within a space suit. Foleys are not necessarily a huge part of the movie diegetic sound, because they're part of the underscore. The score is always brilliant at conveying tension to the audience. The music is constantly present where you expect to hear great explosion and/or hit sound FXs, which you cannot hear in truth because of the absence of sound in space.

In "**Don't Let Go**", we hear for the first time an example of electronic and acoustic blend leading to a dreadful and dramatic memento mori. The brass are sampled many times throughout the entire movie and the interval they play is always a falling minor 7th², resolving in E:

² The falling minor 7th is a very expressive interval used by composers going back at least to Bach and is perhaps best expressed by Elgar in his Enigma variations in the movement *Nimrod*. See: (Elgar, 2015)



Brass, string glissandi, sweeps, LFOs, filters and sirens are the classic elements of panic in this movie, they warn you that something is about to happen. They're almost anticipating the moment, yet not spoiling it, because they bring tension, not real anticipation. The G#m key is somehow anticipating the drama. The harmony is in G# melodic minor which is dictated by the violoncello's solo melody, accompanied by long vocal pedal tones at the bottom and introduced at the beginning by bowed crotales and sound design (see transcription below):

At the end of the 3rd bar (the 7th in the 4th bar is a major 7th) and also in bar 5 & 6. They are expressive and poignant in their effect on the listener because instead of the music rising a tone (uplifting) it falls down a 7th to the same letter name note, which has the effect of reflection or even sadness about it.

DON'T LET GO

The musical score for "DON'T LET GO" is presented in three systems. Each system consists of two staves: Violoncello (Cello) on the left and Vocal on the right. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system shows the initial musical phrases. The second system begins at measure 6 and features a vocal line with a "div." (divisi) marking above it. The third system begins at measure 11 and includes a "div." marking above the vocal line and a "3" marking below it, indicating a triplet.

The scene depicts Ryan and Matt , who are approaching the station. R. doesn't have much oxygen left in her suit. The music stands out here for going along with Ryan's heartbeat. While many long tracking shots follow her, the immerse Dolby Atmos³ soundtrack gives the impression of moving with her across space. Price

³ **Dolby Atmos** is the name of a surround sound technology announced by **Dolby** Laboratories in April 2012, which was first utilized in Pixar's Brave. Atmos system lets film-makers place sound elements in a 3D space. With 5.1 and 7.1 systems, when you want to create the illusion that someone is behind the audience you just throw that sound to those speakers. It's a speaker-based system. With Atmos, instead of pushing a sound to a particular speaker, it's pushed to a place in a 3D space. For example, to create the illusion of a helicopter flying overhead the sound engineering doesn't pick which speaker the sound of the helicopter will come out of. Instead, the engineer picks a point in a 3D space and the Atmos system automatically adjusts the sound coming of the appropriate speaker.

wanted the music "to be with her all the time", poetically saying that the score was designed in terms of "where the tempo of her heartbeat was" (Walker, 2015).

The score starts off with a glass harmonica and radio waves, then it changes to a degree where the perspective of the character is musically altered with filters, according to whether the camera is shooting from inside or outside Dr. Stone's suit. The score proves here again its originality and how thoroughly this was considered. The melody represents Ryan's loss of Kowalski. The melody is conveying the sweetness of the Earth seen from above, but the minor key is emphasising the drama of the fact that she might not make it home now that she's on her own, therefore it's describing where Ryan is at this stage 'emotionally'. Kowalski is gone, and here we hear for the first time Dr Stone's theme, which is a truly fascinating and ingenious way of describing one's character's state of mind, Ryan's, and the character's sweetness and courage to stand up and try.

There is nothing complex about the harmony but this is a self-conscious score, which demonstrates that thinking 'simple' is not always a bad decision, since it can describe better a moment and have a stronger impact on who's listening:

"Some of it was melodic and some of it was intended to underscore a kind of emotional journey, and then there were a lot of sounds that were there to express real terror. It was those two extremes, really, expressing the beautiful nature of where they were but also absolutely a massively terrifying situation"
(Ayers, 2013)

In "**Tiangong**", strings start off with an epic textured performance of Dr. Stone's theme. Determined and moving, "Tiangong" dishes up chills at the two and half minute range. Midway through the cue, we are thrust once more into the void of space with Dr. Stone, but the grimness, chaos, and danger is now supplanted by

determination and a firm sense of forward movement, which is also given by a faster tempo than the original cue melody in **Don't Let Go**.

The cue starts with a cello at the bottom, which curiously has been re-sampled and filtered with an LFO at a rate of quarter notes, which is slightly driving back the music, giving it a sense of *ad-libitum* tempo that was found also in its solo in “**Don't Let Go**”. Although, this time, instead of G#m, we go up to Dm (see transcription below):

TIANGONG

Musical score for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The score is in 4/4 time and B-flat major. The Violoncello part features a melodic line with a long slur across measures 4 and 5.

Musical score for Violin I (Vln. I) and Violoncello (Vc.) starting at measure 8. The Violin I part has a rhythmic eighth-note pattern, while the Violoncello part has a long slur across measures 9 and 10.

Musical score for Violin I (Vln. I) and Violoncello (Vc.) starting at measure 10. The Violin I part continues with a rhythmic eighth-note pattern, and the Violoncello part has a long slur across measures 11 and 12.

Musical score for Violin I (Vln. I) and Violoncello (Vc.) starting at measure 12. The Violin I part continues with a rhythmic eighth-note pattern, and the Violoncello part has a long slur across measures 13 and 14.

2

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Db.

14

div.

8^{va}

19

8^{va}

div.

unis.

div.

unis.

At this point of the movie, Ryan has a final hurdle to overcome: she must reach the Japanese shuttle to fly back home. The music has two contrasting moods, which at the same time blend perfectly together, which are faith and hope with death and danger. Most of the electronic and acoustic elements so far are now gathered all together, and we distinguish more clearly the recurring human voice, which stands for Dr Ryan's re-established link with her daughter.

The strings bring hope and brightness to the picture, while the synth is filtered and modulated with an LFO interrupting and clashing with the strings. The synth stresses out the danger of the moment, while the vocals are her re-connection with her

daughter and the drive of going back home . Here you get to understand what the role of electronic elements and acoustic ones are and have been in the entire movie, they always clash and collaborate together; it's the real essence of what an hybrid score is. The score contains a lot of resampling of the recording session. Strings represent hope, while the electronic elements represent the real heart of this soundtrack and the movie itself; carrying and displaying, musically, Ryan's emotions and the danger of the debris approaching at all times.

CONCLUSION:

Music-wise, for Steven Price, it was a year of experimentation working on a score for a year non-stop: “It constantly evolved,” says Price. “I was on it for a year, and we wrote it as we went. I literally started on the first day and was still writing on the last day.”

Price worked seven days a week throughout the entire moviemaking process. Literally working from the first day when he met Cuarón on December 8, 2011, to the final day of the mix on November 2, 2012. It was 94 weekends and 237 days from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. And it paid off. Price was nominated for and won an Oscar for Best Original Score (Busch, 2014.)

The challenge analysing the music was comparing all the time the album version with the movie scenes. The score has been edited thoroughly, so you get a completely different feedback by listening to one first and then the other. Nevertheless this was necessary at times, to distinguish better the instruments blending with each other, understanding their role and the way each one of them was describing the moment.

Above Earth:

This was the first clear statement of Steven Price’s approach: experimental and unconventional, where you feel totally immersed in the movie already. This is pure sound designing expertise, we can hear distinctively the cello being re-sampled through a pedal and reversed. There is no panning rule, everything comes at you out of the blue, with a sweep coming from the back blending with helicopter and airplane sounds turning up through a musical climax, which expects the audience to cover

their ears, awaiting to hear a thunderous sound at the end. Quite unexpectedly, however, it resolves into a complete unsettling silence to the ears, almost disturbing, that draws the audience in, making the movie one that that they feel compelled to watch from beginning to end.

Don't Let Go:

This is one of the first clearest examples of hybrid music in this movie. The music starts with electronic sound design melting 'gracefully' into a wonderful cello solo. Here again, the electronic elements represent the danger of Ryan and Matt in space. Ryan is running out of oxygen and the chances of getting home are slowly fading away. The music describes the moment with a crescendo to a climax of sound designing which is always accompanied by Dr Stone's pounding heartbeat. The music seems to follow Ryan's state of mind, the more anxious she becomes, the stronger the music gets. Once Matt lets himself free into space, Ryan is now alone again as she was when her daughter passed away on Earth.

The violoncello plays a main part together with the vocals; the violoncello is describing the grieving of her loss and that she's now alone in space; the vocals represent her loneliness and the loss of her daughter, which is something that also Steven Price revealed in an interview (Filmmusicsociety.org, 2014.)

Tiangong:

This is the cue that represents a new Dr Stone, her reconciliation with her daughter and her life, she's decided that she wants to live and that she has a reason to live. Her reason is her daughter and she doesn't want to give up for her. This all justifies why the music, from atmospheric and tense, has turned into epic, with strings

ostinatos which are driving the cue forward, but at the same time with sampled strings in quarter notes which are somehow driving it backwards. It's a curious contrast that doesn't draw the attention away from the ostinato. Orchestration wise, the violoncello is melodic and is rarely used to support a melody as a bass-line. On the contrary, On the contrary, it is almost always there in the melodic foreground and rarely put into the background. It is used by Price as the instrument which relates exactly to the main character in the movie, always mirroring Dr Stone's feelings.

Observations:

In Don't Let Go and Tiangong the violoncello is always picking up on the last beat of the bar and always resolving within the interval of a 2nd (except for Tiangong in bar 3-4 and bar 20-21).

Many of the musical instruments are of vital importance, since they play in the score as though they were playing the characters' role.

This is quite an old tradition in operatic music going back to before Wagner – it started with Weber in the early 19th century (Der Freischütz). This reveals Steven Price's strong musical culture because of his classical music studies at Cambridge. Wagner (late 19th century) developed this further used (usually short) melodic motifs which he called a *leitmotiv* (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013) which always represent in the music the principal character(s) on the stage. It is something that has been used many times since by many composers and, of course by people like John Williams, e.g., in *Star Wars* (1977) (Rooney, 2006.)

In *Gravity*:

1. The strings and the violoncello represent Dr Stone and her ever-growing bond with Matt throughout the movie.
2. The human voice is Ryan's daughter

3. The electronic sounds are the danger that being in space represents and also its beauty. The audience has a part in the movie and we never feel detached from it both visually and musically. Thanks to this mesmerising sound designing, the tension it creates keeps our heart pumping faster because we are immersed in the movie as if we were with Dr Ryan. It all follows the criteria of transducer recording, exploiting constantly the low/sub frequencies and their high amplitude vibrating resonant response within the room.

If the author had had the chance, he would have certainly experienced *Gravity* in Dolby Atmos, which apparently, as many say, gives a totally different and overwhelming impact on who's watching (HitFix, 2013.)

How much was Surround part of the success of the score?

Does a film score have to be designed in surround to achieve success? Is that the formula that a nowadays composer has to adopt to create an Oscar winning score?

How much did really Dolby Atmos and 7.1 affected the score? Is this a score that can be listened on its own?

No, this is a story-telling score, which would not have achieved the same successful results without the picture. Let us take into consideration that the album version is very different from the underscore. The album version embraces a contrasting idea from the underscore. It is more minimalistic compared to the movie score, however it still conveys the great intensity we experience when watching the film. Nevertheless, they both contain an enormous amount of sound designing that on their own are both missing the catchiness you would hear in a John Williams score. Steven Price's intent was to create an experimental score and, as he said in an

interview, he had so much fun creating new sounds every time , though his purpose was always to come up with something new that Cuarón may like.

Without 7.1 or Atmos, *Gravity's* score wouldn't have been so successful, since it was purposely designed for surround systems.

If it was meant to be seen and heard on stereo it would have certainly been mixed and approached differently, because the score itself has a lot of potential and the orchestration is simply striking; it is very powerful and it contains the epic qualities that Hans Zimmer's scores would have, e.g., *Inception (2010)*, especially at the opening titles with the use of brass.

There was so much elaboration behind the score, so much sampling that it still makes it interesting to the ear and it's apparent simplicity reveals in the end that it wasn't after all a minimalistic score at all (as Skip Liensey said) (YouTube, 2013.)

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