

Breaking Through the Muk: Defining a Successful Film Score

Featuring:
James Newton Howard's *The Last Airbender*

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Introduction

On July 1st 2010 a horrible atrocity was unleashed upon the human race. For that was the day millions of people witnessed the horror of M. Night Shyamalan's *The Last Airbender*. Needless to say this movie received an almost unanimous thumbs down in the world of Hollywood, not to mention the death threats that were undoubtedly sent to Shyamalan's house, and quite possibly set back the careers of all who worked on it by at least three years. Well, all but one.

James Newton Howard (JNH) composed the score for *The Last Airbender* and was the only member of the film's team to be congratulated instead of criticized for his role in its creation. Howard's score earned him an IFMCA* nomination for Best Original Score for a Fantasy/Science Fiction/Horror Film and his composition track "Flow Like Water" gained him a nomination for Film Music Composition of the Year. In the end JNH won nothing, but he must be condoned for his ability to create music that can flourish and shine, even through the smog-polluted film for which it was composed. By all looks and appearances Hollywood had a classic case of bad movie, brilliant music. However, there is hesitation in labeling this an open and shut case.

Despite Howard's seemingly successful film score, one might suggest we narrow that definition. What does it mean to write a "successful film score?" What is its purpose? Music that sounds brilliant off screen does not necessarily possess that same enlightened genius when paired with the cinematography that inspired its creation. For the purposes of this paper, we will define a "successful film score" as a body of music that

compliments/enhances the quality of cinematography as well as helps to translate to the audience the films intended emotions. This paper will not only analyze James Newton Howard's score for *The Last Airbender*, but will delve deeper into its placement and function in order to determine if it can (by the above definition) be considered a "successful film score."

A Brief Background

The Last Airbender is based off an American animated television series created in 2005 by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko. The original series is called *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and was a huge success, running on Nickelodeon network from 2005-2008. The show is set in a parallel world structured after the Asian continent and is filled with hybrid animals such as duck turtles and flying lemurs. Four great nations exist in this world: the Fire Nation, the Earth Kingdom, The Water Tribe, and the Air Nomads.

Each of these nations is named as such because of the abilities possessed by the people who make up their populations. It's called Bending: the ability to manipulate the elements. Fire benders, earth benders, water benders, and air benders all lived in peace for thousands of years bound together in camaraderie by the Avatar; the only being capable of mastering all four elements and the only human link to the Spirit World; a wondrous parallel dimension filled with beautiful and terrible beings.

When an Avatar dies, he is reincarnated into the next nation in the Avatar cycle, thereby keeping the balance of power intact. But one day, at the age of twelve, the Avatar accidentally traps himself in a ball of ice and one hundred years later wakes up to find the Fire Nation has wiped out the Air Nomads and waged war on the world. This is where the series begins.

Aided by his new friends (Katarra and Sokka) Avatar Aang rushes to master the remaining three elements and fight to free the world of the Fire Nation's oppression. It's a brilliant story filled to the brim with the potential to become a billion dollar blockbuster

success. At least it was, before M. Night Shyamalan drained it into nothingness. However he did do one thing right. He hired his long time collaborator James Newton Howard to compose the score.

The Actual Music

Although the purpose of this paper is to explore a harsher critique of *The Last Airbender* score, it does not question the validity of James Newton Howard's compositional skills. Instead it aims to examine the score's effectiveness in regards to the movie. This does not, however, mean that the former should not be analyzed, as it is a paramount factor in determining the existence of a "successful film score." Therefore, three cues have been chosen for analysis based on their significance to the film.

1) "Prologue"

This is the first cue we hear and because of its primary position its function is vast. This music will set the tone for the entire movie. The audience will either move to the edge of their seats or lazily put up their feet, and its purpose does not end there. The notes in this cue must foreshadow the events to come and hold musical elements that will be used repeatedly in the score. "Prologue" lives up to its expectations phenomenally. It has the entire movie within it and it is gorgeous.

James Newton Howard masterfully combines orchestral and electronic elements to create a euphoric feeling of magic, mystery, and adventure. The electronic elements, mostly customized pads, blanket the empty space laying down a fantastic ambience. He uses LFOs on a layer of Noise to musically mimic the mysterious sound of nature at night. More LFOs make up the rest of the ambience, including a base note assigned a slow rolling sin wave for movement. JNH makes sure to have movement in all three frequency ranges: high, mid, and low, preventing the cue from ever feeling stagnant. In

fact, it sounds like most of the elements of his ethereal ambience blend so well because they have LFOs that create movement through sin waves.

Once these textures are established a wood flute plays in the foreground, allowing a hint of the main theme to be heard for the first time. Staying true to the environment established by the electronic textures, the flute is laden down with reverb and delay, spiking our interest as well as helping to maintain its foreground status when a quiet string ostinato begins to fade in as if from afar. Heavy percussion introduces a powerful rhythm that holds its own against the biting brass that enter next. It builds and builds leading the music to a climax that when reached expands into a gorgeous, yet epic four-note theme previously alluded to by the wood flute.

The theme is made up of a two-note motif that is extremely malleable. Although there are two other powerful themes that stand out in *The Last Airbender*, this is the main theme for the entire movie and can be labeled its overall musical identity. It stands out above the others because of its simplicity and the frequency of its use. Its malleability means it can be plastered all over the score and though it can be recognized easily James Newton Howard does not in any way allow its listeners to become bored. He uses it in a variety of situations throughout the movie, stretching and playing with the two-note motif within it in order to portray different emotions as well as create continuity between his different cues.

The theme, in this instance, is played by a combination of a choir and string orchestra. By putting the bulk of the melody in the strings, Howard is able to utilize most of the choir for beautiful harmonies and still have enough voices left over to smooth out

the string sound. The phrase is played twice and when the 1st violins jump the octave the second time around, it's pure magic.

Perhaps one of the most interesting innovations of the score is the idea of assigning each element of the orchestra to represent the four different nations: air, water, earth, and fire. Howard utilizes airy instruments such as woodwinds and eastern flutes for the Air Nomads; strings are assigned to the Water Tribes, percussion for the Earth Kingdom, and brass for the Fire Nation. The order in which the orchestra enters in this cue is not a coincidence. JNH writes in the order of the avatar cycle, beginning with the flute (air). Then the flowing string ostinato (water), the heavy percussion and ethnic drums (earth), and the powerful brass figures (fire). Below is a bare transcription of the afore-mentioned theme.

Main Theme



The use of thirds is how most of the scores elements are tied together throughout the film.

2) “The Avatar Has Returned”

This cue is more aggressive and fast paced than the previous “Prologue” and does a fantastic job utilizing the main theme. It starts slow but quickly works up to speed, much like the scene it represents. The music conveys a montage of Aang and his friends fighting their way through towns as they head to the Northern Water Tribe. It is deemed suitable for scrutiny because of its exposed placement and its recognizable content. In fact, though “Prologue” is the debut of the main theme, it is played so broadly that the faster paced “The Avatar Has Returned” is actually a much more memorable portrayal. While “Prologue” is richer in harmonies and small nuances that make all the difference, “The Avatar Has Returned” is all about the rhythms. With the harmonies and melodies pushed to the background and the rhythms in the fore, it’s the percussion that shine brightest.

The percussion spotlight is due to the elements assigned to the sections of the orchestra. The towns that Aang and his companions are fighting through are all in Earth Kingdom territory, and what represents earth? Drums! This cue is basically Howard adapting and playing with the film’s main theme over and over again, yet there is no monotony. Each time the theme is played its harmonies, rhythm and timbres change causing it to sound like a completely new idea, and leaving its listeners wondering why it works so well.

There are three rhythms engulfing the whole of the cue, each repeating twice and each more enjoyable than the next. The bass drum and timpani play the broadest rhythms in this cue. These powerful drums remain while the colors of the melody and harmonies change creating an element of continuity that helps to glue the piece together. Besides the

main rhythms in the low register there are sub-rhythms taking place in the mid registers. These are played by more interesting sounding ethnic drums and really give the cue a feeling of depth. Here is the first engulfing rhythm along with the melodies that accompany it the second time it plays.

The Avatar Has Returned

The musical score for 'The Avatar Has Returned' is written in 5/4 time. The top staff, in treble clef, features a melody of dotted half notes and eighth notes. The bottom staff, in bass clef, features a percussive rhythm of quarter notes marked with 'x'.

The horns play the middle line here. It sounds brilliant and bringing brass into the mix helps to represent the Fire Nation soldiers that Aang and his friends are fighting during the montage. The second rhythm below is very percussive because the quarter note hits are almost completely tutti. Notice, also, that the meter changes causing an even bigger contrast from the previous line.

The musical score for 'The Avatar Has Returned' is written in 3/4 time. The top staff, in treble clef, features a melody of quarter notes and eighth notes. The bottom staff, in bass clef, features a percussive rhythm of quarter notes marked with 'bx' and 'x'.

After this percussive passage JNH smoothes it out a little with a more legato line for the winds. Don't worry though; the drums are still there, just a bit quieter.



The eighth note rhythms shown in this example are actually played on the first section of this cue as well, but with eclectic accent marks that keep it interesting. They disappear for the second rhythm tutti section.

3) “Flow Like Water”

This cue is extremely significant not only to the film, but to James Newton Howard himself. “Flow Like Water” is the cue that gained him a nomination for Film Music Composition of the Year. Although he didn't win, it's easy to see why he got the nomination. The description of “Prologue” mentioned two other largely important themes in the movie. One is a Fire Nation battle march that stems from the main theme in its use of thirds, though it is much faster paced and more complex than the minimalistic main theme. “Flow Like Water” contains the second theme, and Howard begins developing from the very first time Aang appears on screen. It continues to pop up throughout the

film but always in the background. It is tied to Aang though it would be wrong to call it his theme because it develops at the same speed as Aang's waterbending; following him on his journey and growing stronger with his emotions and determination. The way it develops suggests that it does not represent Aang, but merely a piece of him. It represents the quarter of him that is a waterbender. Using this logic it is assumed that Aang would have a different theme in each of the books. Each theme holding characteristics of the different elements and developing within their individual movie chapters until they finally came together to play, in full, his theme. It is, however, impossible to know this for sure without a sequel and after the reviews this movie received, it is not likely to happen.

The "Flow Like Water" theme's ability to provoke an emotional response from the audience is part of its development, coaxing them further and further into its arms every time it appears. When it finally takes the foreground at the climax of the film, audience members are ready to jump into each other's arms from the emotional overload of Aang's awe-inspiring determination and strength. Yes, this theme is developed so well it actually provokes a positive response from this movie's audience. That's how good it is.

Because of its connection with water, the strings, starting with the cellos and working its way up to the violins, always play the theme. It consists of an odd number of eighth notes played in a slow 7/4 meter. Another factor that suggests this theme is not entirely Aang's theme is its constant pairing with airy eastern flutes, much like the one in "Prologue." The flute represents the element of air and since Aang is the last remaining

air bender in the world, it identifies with him much heavily than the eighth note water theme.

The electronic elements in this cue are very similar to that of “Prologue” except that the white noise’s presence is much stronger. Perhaps from to mimic the froth of the ocean that Aang is manipulating during this scene. The music rises and falls like the waves of the ocean many times and consists of gorgeous orchestration. Woodwinds and horns provide great support for the smooth string ostinato and the bass drum rolls and subtle cymbal crashes are amazingly similar to the rolling and crashing of waves.

Flow Like Water Theme



The Music in a Supportive Role

Now that the legitimacy of James Newton Howard's compositional skills has been addressed it is time to look past the beauty and genius of the music and discover how it functions in a supportive role. It is the duty of a composer to improve upon the workings of his director; to enhance the action, drama, and emotions that are being portrayed on screen. When a movie is good, the composer's job is easier and much more enjoyable. They are able to focus solely on writing interesting music and don't have to worry as much about whether or not the audience will receive the necessary information from each scene. Of course, when a film has trouble, the job of interpreter is added to the composer's job title. The translation of the film from the big screen to the audience members staring at it rests on her/his shoulders.

The Last Airbender must have been an extremely daunting project for James Newton Howard. The movie is bad. That cannot be denied. The three main actors fail miserably in their attempts to portray their characters and they are weighed down even further by Shyamalan's script. Almost no emotion or charm survives to be interpreted by the audience. The information needed to enjoy a movie must come, vastly, from the movie! And yet in this instance no more than a sliver can be obtained.

This chapter refers to the music in a supportive role but it more accurately can be described as the foundation. The music is the hero and the film it's sidekick. But where did the hero save the day and where did it lie lazily on the couch staring at the television

while it's super suit hung in the closet? Two categories have been chosen for scrutiny: comedy, and action/suspense.

Comedy

There is not a single funny moment in this entire movie, but it's not from lack of trying. There are about four real attempts at humor and they are all rather awkward. However, only one of these attempts has any support from the music. The others are ignored. James Newton Howard fails to accent on almost all the comedic tries of M. Night Shyamalan and his merry band of bad actors. The opportunities for a laugh from the audience just drift by without any acknowledgement from the music. Were these scenes executed poorly? Yes. But with help from the music they could have at least retained some charm.

The opening scene of the movie is a comedic introduction of the character Sokka. His sister, Katarra, tries to water bend and Sokka gets soaked in the process. There is no music here at all, no push from JNH for a smile or laugh. *Avatar* the series is an extremely comedic cartoon, serious where it needs to be but over-all very funny. The idea that Shyamalan and Howard sat down together and decided on no mickey mousing is such a waste of what could have been a comedy packed action film.

There are two other instances where mickey mousing could have saved the punch line. One is just four minutes later when Sokka thinks Aang's trusty flying bison is trying to eat him (Sokka) with his butt. Sounds funny right? It's not. This time there is music

playing. However, it never switches gears from the previous scene. The serious tone it adopts for the drama that occurred 30 seconds before just lazily stretches through Sokka's potentially humorous plight. The scene is even edited in such a way that suggests musical support was intended to be there. It breathes after the punch line as if waiting for a musical hero to deliver the final blow of laughter. Unfortunately, the final blow never comes. JNH dropped the ball on that one.

There is a comedic moment mid-way through the movie (26:20) that was somewhat successful. Fire nation soldiers chase a child into the Avatar's camp and when Katarra tries to fight them off, she inadvertently freezes Sokka in a block of ice. The build up for this moment is great. Her airbending movements are smooth and look powerful enough to make the audience believe she might actually do something cool. The music swells and builds tension, and right at the moment of her final striking motion...it drops out, and the camera pans to see that her attack has gone in the opposite direction of the soldiers and instead has hit her brother Sokka.

JNH's build up to this moment is great and definitely makes the scene. The difference between this scene and the previous two is the type of musical support they require. Both the opening scene and the flying bison scene demanded mickey-mousing techniques from the music in order to capitalize on their humor. The soldier scene only demanded serious dramatic music. This connection makes one wonder if mickey-mousing is just something JNH doesn't like to do. His history suggests this isn't true as there is no way he wrote the music for movies like *Green Lantern*, *Green Hornet*, and *Gnomeo and Juliet* without writing a few silly lines to accent a joke. Therefore it is hopefully assumed that the two earlier scenes were either miscommunicated, or merely

overlooked. The alternative to these assumptions is devastating: that he watched the scenes and said “nah, those don’t need music.”

Action/Suspense

The action music in this movie is just fantastic. It causes moments of happy amnesia that make the audience forget about the horrible delivery of lines they just heard. One of the best segments of the movie starts about 45 minutes in and ends 6 minutes later. Aang is captured by the Fire Nation and is saved by a mysterious fighter in a mask called the Blue Spirit. Action scenes can become so boring musically speaking. There is a stereotypical sound that makes most blockbuster films all sound the same. It is a refreshing relief to hear James Newton Howard’s action music throughout this film. He manages to enhance the scenes far beyond their original quality and this 6-minute segment is perhaps the best.

By the time the audience sees this part of movie they have already sunken low in their seats praying it will end soon. But the exciting sync points that JNH incorporates into his music here immediately has them sitting up. When the masked Blue Spirit first appears its from under a cart passing into the Fire Nation stronghold. The scene is dark and, at first, nothing can be seen under the cart. But when the Blue Spirit unexpectedly raises his head the action is met with a single percussion hit that makes the audience jump. It’s great and gives the illusion of watching a good movie.

Suspenseful music follows the Blue Spirit into Aang's holding cell. After some epically heroic horn melodies during his release the Blue Spirit picks up Aang's staff and throws it to him. When Aang catches the staff we have another epic sync point. The same percussion sounds that accented on the Blue Spirit's appearance now gives life once again with the catching of the staff. Small details like these sync points that can save movies and make a huge difference in the effectiveness of a scene. They should just cut out everything that happened beforehand. The movie starts here.

JNH also does a great job in the action scenes throughout the rest of the movie but those scenes weren't as helpless as certain others. Near the beginning of the movie, about 20 minutes into it, there is a scene that should have been devastatingly sad to watch. It fell painstakingly short, however and was only hard to sit through because of its awkwardness. Aang goes back to his home to find that the Fire Nation wiped all of his friends and family out years ago. Not a soul is left but him.

A small amount of leeway can be given to JNH for not coming to this scenes rescue. It is jam packed with sound design because, in his emotional state, Aang inadvertently creates a whirlwind. This scene is pulled straight out of the animated series. In the series? Epic. Here? Stagnant. It's like somebody forgot to tell James Newton Howard what this scene was about. Instead the whole scene is dominated by sound design when it was in terrible need of emotional music. There are other examples of helpless scenes that simply cannot stand up for themselves, many in fact. Perhaps it was the sheer amount of help needed by this movie that overwhelmed JNH making it impossible to rescue them all. Maybe at some point he decided to let it die and watch his

own back, writing music he knew he could proud of, even if it was for a movie so full of disappointment. Either way he left many stones unturned in his musical hero role.

Conclusion

The goal was to find out whether or not James Newton Howard deserved the praise he was receiving for *The Last Airbender*. Based on the information gathered and the scrutiny of certain scenes that needed his help and certain scenes that thrived because of his help, it has been determined that he does indeed deserve praise and recognition for writing a “successful film score.” His knowledge of music allowed him to write a score that enhanced the film over all while never resorting to stereotypical clichés. He even avoided any mickey mousing, though that decision (if indeed it was a conscious decision) was arguably a bad one that hurt the film instead of helping it. His nominations are absolutely valid reactions from critics and even though there were moments where his score fell short, its overall effect on the movie is above and beyond positive.

Original Cue List

- 1M1 Prologue
- 1M2 First Trek
- 1M2A Finding Aang
- 1M3 Fire Nation Ship
- 1M5 Grandma
- 2M1 The Test
- 2M2 Prayer Field
- 2M2A Zuko Exercises
- 2M4 Earthbender's Camp
- 3M0 Two Lifetimes
- 3M1 To The Fire Nation.....The Avatar Has Returned
- 3M1A To The Fire Nation Alt
- 3M3 Aang Waterbends
- 3M3A Tea House
- 3M4 Hall of Avatars
- 3M6 Aang in Chains
- 4M1 Blue Spirit
- 4M1A Dock
- 4M2 Northern Water Tribe
- 4M3 Aang and Pakku Spar
- 5M2 Tai Chi
- 5M2 Zuko Swims
- 5M3 To The Spirit World
- 5M3A Lizards Break Through
- 5M5 Spirit World Dragon
- 5M6 Aang and Zuko Fight
- 6M1 Our World
- 6M2 Killing Moon Spirit
- 6M3A Zhao Drowns, Pt. 1
- 6M3B Zhao Drowns, Pt. 2
- 6M3C Aang's Ballet Fight
- 6M6 The Wave.....Flow Like Water
- 6M6 Fix
- 6M10 End Credits Patch
- Airbender Teaser v17
- Airbender Suite v31

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