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# SCORING “THE STAMP”

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A REFLECTION ON MY FINAL MASTER’S PROJECT

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of Master of Music in Scoring  
for Film, Television, and Video Games

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a reflection on the final assignment of my Master of Music in Scoring for Film, Television, and Video Games at Berklee College of Music, Valencia Campus. I have written about my project experiences and process from start to finish, the different sections that made up the project, the compositional material, and my thoughts on how everything turned out.

## 2. THE ASSIGNMENT

This assignment, known as the “CE”, is the final assignment of the program. We are made aware of the assignment from the beginning of the year, and a lot of what we learn throughout the program can be applied to our CE.

The criteria for the assignment:

- Find a piece of media for which to compose original music. Working with a director on a new piece of visual media is suggested, but you may also find an existing piece of visual media to rescore, work from a script, or create your own media.
- The piece must be for orchestra, and a maximum of 3 minutes.
- Prepare all materials for a recording session (scores, parts, pro tools session, mock-up, conducting).
- Record your piece in London’s AIR Studios.
- Edit, mix, and master your recording.
- Dub your final music to the media.
- Write a paper about your project.

### 3. FINDING A PROJECT

It was suggested that we work with a director to write music for a new piece of visual media. Although there were other options to consider (such as finding an already existing work on the internet to rescore), I knew from the start that I wanted to take the suggested route of finding a director who needs a score. I felt that the real-world experience of working with a director would be incredibly valuable, and I would also benefit from making an industry contact.

When looking for a new piece of media to score, I started by reaching out to Canadian schools that are known in the industry. I first contacted the Faculty of Animation, Arts, and Design at Sheridan College (which has a world-famous arts program). Sheridan College is not far from Toronto (where I am based), and I have worked previously with a few students from Sheridan College by writing music for their short films. They responded saying that unfortunately the timeline of my project does not match the timeline that the students are working with for their final projects. The next school that I contacted was Ryerson University, School of Image Arts, which is located in downtown Toronto. Their staff member told me that regrettably they are not allowed to post an opportunity like mine unless it is either a paid opportunity for their students, or something that can be used for school credit. I then sent messages to both the Toronto Film School and the Vancouver Film School. They were quite friendly and gave me links where I could post opportunities for students, but by then I had already found what I was looking for.

I had begun contacting a few directors that I knew and/or had worked with in the past. One of the directors that I reached out to was someone that I had not yet met in person, but is my boyfriend's friend's friend. My boyfriend's friend connected us on Facebook about a year ago, saying that we may want to work together in the future. I sent him a message and told him all about the project. He said that he does not have anything at the moment that would work for the criteria of the assignment, but that he has a friend who is always producing content and would probably have something that would work. So, I was put in touch with my boyfriend's friend's friend's friend, and his name is Matkai Burmaster.

#### **4. WORKING WITH A DIRECTOR**

Once I had found my director; Matkai Burmaster, we had much to discuss. After introductions, I told him all about the assignment and what I was looking for. He was very excited about the project (as was I), and we progressed rapidly. Matkai asked about the license that I was providing to him, assuming that I was conveying that the sync license would be free. Having little knowledge about contracts and licensing, I did my research and got back to him saying that indeed the sync license is free, but that I would keep the rights to the music and hold the publishing license. He was happy with that but said that we should put a contract in place. Fortunately, Matkai said that he had just started a project that he could pitch to me by the end of the week. Matkai was very professional, and started by explaining his project idea in much detail. It was great conversing with a director and communicating using their film language, and I was able to add a few more terms to my vocabulary. Matkai provided all of the info I could need about the style of the film, the

musical needs, references, information on the other team members, etc. Once the idea was set in place, we talked about the timeline of the project. Shortly after that, he was able to provide a script, and he suggested that I start coming up with themes and ideas based on the script while they finish filming. We conversed a few times about ideas and plans, and eventually Matkai created a Facebook group for us two plus the editor and sound designer. This was very helpful as we could share materials with each other and ask questions along the way. Matkai sent us all a few versions of the film, and I went to work. I sent drafts throughout the process, received feedback, and eventually found a version that worked for the film. The team is very passionate about the project and they plan to share news on social media about the journey, as well as enter the film in festivals.

## 5. THE COMPOSITION

I started by watching the film several times. The director sent the sound designer and I a version of the video with him talking over top of it, giving some direction for the music and sound throughout the film. This was very helpful. I watched and studied this version many times, and started to form ideas and feelings for each scene.

I began to think of musical references that I felt fit with the mood of the film. I started with a combination of Danny Elfman's music for *Edward Scissorhands*, and the *Forbidden Forest* music from John Williams' music for *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. After speaking with one of my teachers, I added *Auschwitz-Birkenau* from John Williams' score for *Schindler's List* to my group of references. I could not find the scores for

any of these pieces, but listening to the music put me in the correct mindset, which is enough as I do not use references very much when I compose.

The piece begins with a subtle, almost unnoticeable violin entrance. This happens about one minute into the film. As the violins hold their single note, there is a dialogue between piccolo and pizzicato viola, with a semitone between them. Before the musical entrance, the scene was quite mundane as the characters went about their usual daily work routine, stamping paper after paper. When the music enters, it is because something new and different from the ordinary has happened – a stamp has broken which has caused an interruption in the workflow. The music soon develops more motion as the main character hurries away to find a solution, and the rhythm of the stamping action is highlighted by the flute, clarinet, and string pizzicato. During the next chunk of the music, the main character has found that a door labeled “Restricted” has been left slightly open. She makes the decision on whether or not she wants to break the rules and go through it. The music becomes a little more intriguing and mysterious, although the woman has found a clue and so the music is less uncertain sounding. The melody is passed from the bass clarinet to a french horn, with just a subtle string and bassoon background. As she chooses to sneakily go through the door, the rest of the brass enters for the first time and we hear a large dissonant swell that crescendos until the moment that she is through the door. Now the character is wandering down the hallway of a new world, hearing all sorts of strange sounds coming out of the various rooms. The musical tempo is similar to the approximate walking speed of the main character. There is a lot going on musically here to match all of the implied activity behind the hidden doors, and there are many quirky musical lines

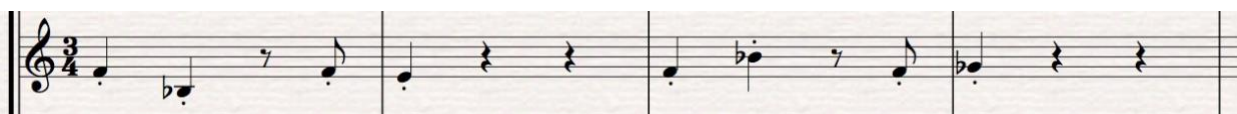
entering all over the place. Next, the character sees something interesting in one of the rooms. As the film cuts to a shot of an automatic stamping machine, the music changes dramatically to become higher pitched, creepy, and the new textures make it feel like yet another world. This is achieved with a combination of flutter tongue flute against staccato piccolo, with high tremolo strings sliding upward. A heavier, dramatic line then comes in as we see the character's reaction. She is shocked as her job is to manually stamp papers all day, and this machine is stamping dozens of papers per second. Now that she has found this machine, she realizes that her job is pointless and a waste of time, and her workplace has been using her for nothing. As the character panics, the music stops (and once the sound effects are finished, there will be a loud ringing sound indicating that the character's brain and ears are buzzing). The music enters again as she starts sprinting down the hallway in terror. The music is very big here as this is an intense and high-adrenaline moment. She returns to her office, where her two colleagues continue to mundanely stamp papers. The high intensity pauses as she stops sprinting and looks at them. She realizes that there is something strange about them, and that they are likely part of the problem. They are quite creepy and seem almost amused by her fear. The strings halt on a tremolo note as she observes them, supporting a solo bass clarinet line. As the situation and the colleagues grow creepier, the strings create strange tremolo chords, with some glissando harmonics. As she quickly exits the room and goes back into the hallway – now even more surprised and worried – the sprinting music returns even larger. She stops as a voice sounds over the speaker system, calmly telling her that she cannot leave. Here the music is calm to match the voice, yet eerie as the character is trapped. There are woodwind chords with hairpins, making sure to leave enough room for the dialogue. In the next section, the



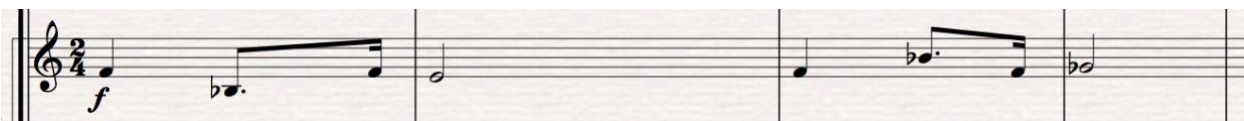
main character discovers another door with a small window that she peaks through. Here, the music is mysterious as we do not know where this door leads or if it is safe. However, there is also some hope in the music indicated by a glockenspiel entrance, as perhaps this is her way out. The film then cuts to black for a few seconds. There is no music – just the sound of the main character breathing heavily. When the picture returns, we see the woman running outside, looking helpless and sad. The music enters with the picture. We start with just strings (except for contrabass) creating a dark and unsettling motion. A solo flute enters with the creepy line heard earlier in the bass clarinet. Parts of the string melody are then doubled and passed around amongst the woodwind instruments. The contrabass enters at this time as well with a low note glissando into a lower note. More string glissandi enter and build up to a more assertive line, confirming that the main character is in a bad situation. She runs but eventually gives up. She frantically looks around, but only sees the two colleagues from inside. They are dressed very differently and seem like different versions of themselves – almost as if she is in another dimension. They have become even creepier, and they stand near her acting as guards that will not let her leave. As she looks around still processing what is happening to her, the music brings in several past themes with a new feeling of doom. We then hear the calm yet unsettling voice from the speaker saying that she has transitioned to the field. This is accompanied by strong, low, snap pizzicato, and higher, eerie, regular pizzicato. She has realized that this is the end – there is no way out of this place. The piece ends with some sad strings, and a final snap pizzicato hit as she bows her head in defeat and the screen cuts to black.

There are a few techniques that I use several times throughout the piece. The strings are the most used section. There are a lot of tremolos and glissandi in the strings, as well as some harmonics and sul ponticello indications. There are even sections that use several of those techniques at the same time. I felt that these sounds added the feelings of instability, creepiness, and other-worldly. The glissandi in particular was also used to bring out some of the camera movements, as there are a few times when the image rotates. I have also used a lot of pizzicato, including snap pizzicato. Sometimes my melodies are doubled with another instrument playing the melody in staccato notes. I have also used a lot of dovetailing. My piece is full of theme and variations. There are several motifs that can be heard throughout the piece. Most of the material is developed from something earlier in the piece, including the lines that are not in the foreground. Similarly, I also used some klangfarbenmelodie.

There are a few prominent themes in my piece, each one with variations. The first theme is:



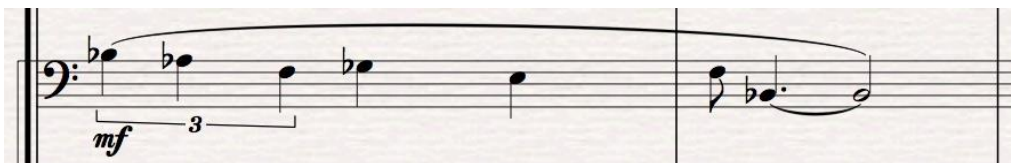
I varied this theme several times. Here are some examples:



This theme represented the idea of situations appearing normal, yet one can feel that something peculiar is happening behind the scenes. The idea is reinforced by having grounding notes B $\flat$  and F (the root and 5<sup>th</sup> of the chord) with the F sliding into E and G $\flat$  – showing a slight stray from the normal and comfortable.

Another prominent theme in my piece is:

This theme was also varied throughout the piece, for example like this:



This was more of a realization theme. When the strange happenings were more evident, this theme was often heard.

Here is another theme which was heard twice (both as solos, from the bass clarinet and the flute).



I used this theme to indicate creepiness, and the creepy surroundings almost not realizing how creepy they are. The theme sounds very confident yet unpredictable and full of chromaticism.

My piece is based on the following scale: **Bb C Db E F Gb A.**

A lot of my harmonies and melodies derive from this scale, especially at the end of the piece when the plot becomes clearer. I have the string instruments each playing a melody that moves up and down within this scale, but each string instrument is one scale note below the previous one, creating lots of clusters within this scale. Here is the Violin 1 melody:



This string motion later turns into a more dramatic melody in the horns:



As the genre of the short film is psychological drama, I composed some unsettling and creepy music. I also incorporated mystery into the style, as the viewers and the main character are unaware of what is really going on, and we are discovering things with the character. At the end of the film, when we realize the fate of the main character, the music grows and become less uncertain, and more intense.

## 6. PREPARING TO RECORD

Preparing for the recording session was the most time-consuming part of the project as it involved many different tasks. However, this variety and importance meant that it was also the most enjoyable part of the project. The best part was of course the actual composing phase, which was discussed in the previous section of this paper. That is where I get to be really creative, and utilize my musical ear, theory, orchestration, textures, and generally pull from my musicality and the skills that make up my musical background. Other tasks include creating the scores and parts, making a pro tools session, creating mock-ups, and preparing the conducting of the piece.

Creating the scores and parts is a large task. I always check my parts a lot to make sure that everything makes sense (dynamic changes, articulations, breathing, note groupings, accidentals, format, etc.). The exciting thing about making parts though is that

the actual compositional work is done – you just need to make sure that your piece makes sense for everyone and that it looks as clear as possible. Unfortunately, I did have one setback where I encountered a Sibelius error and lost all of the work I had done to format and fix my parts, so I was forced to do all of the work again. Printing the scores and parts was fun as you get to see all of your hard work on paper, and you become excited for the oncoming London recording session. We were provided with special paper for printing our parts in order to facilitate easier and quieter page turns, eliminate paper transparency, and help the eyes of the players by using paper that will not reflect light as much. I then needed to tape all of the parts and scores together using an accordion-style method. I enjoy crafts so the taping portion was fun and rewarding, but also very time-consuming.

Preparing to conduct is more work than it seems, as there is actually a lot that you can influence with your conducting. In addition to having a session with Sergio where he provided individual conducting feedback, I practiced conducting alone and in front of friends (to whom I provided scores so that they could follow along). In conducting class, we practiced conducting without a baton, but Sergio suggested that we use one for the recording session. That seemed a little bit strange, however the baton felt very natural, so it was clear that conducting with our hands really prepared us for the baton. I made many notes on my conductor score to prepare, like marking where and who I want to cue, noting the tempo changes, highlighting the dynamics, and indicating some beating characteristics.

## 7. THE RECORDING SESSION

The recording session was an experience of a lifetime! The gorgeous studio space, the calibre of the musicians, the wisdom and professionalism of the engineers, and the impressive studio resources all contributed to a very memorable event. Who knows when we will get to be there again, so we are very lucky to have had this chance, and are now prepared should the opportunity present itself in the future. There were of course many other factors that made it an incredible experience, such as being in London; a very lively and interesting place, getting to spend time with our classmates and teachers in a relaxed and celebratory environment, and the thrill of knowing that the music you are about to record will soon be part of a new film. I was a little bit nervous leading up to my session time slot (as were many of the SFTV students), which I had not encountered in previous recording sessions. I believe that we were nervous because we were in a very famous recording studio with some of the best studio musicians in the world, and so the fact that the event was a big deal was heavily reinforced. There were also many pressures such as the knowledge that all of our classmates and many of our teachers were watching us, that our family and friends were excited for us, that some of us (like myself) had directors counting on us, and we were always told that the London recording is the most important event and that there cannot be any mistakes.

I recorded during the second half of the first day. I had been enjoying listening to the works of my classmates, both from the top of the church and from in the booth. We got the chance to sit in the live room during the recording session before ours in order to test out the headphones and hear the mix. As I sat there waiting for my turn, time moved very

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slowly. When my turn came though, I was ready. After introducing myself, the first take began. The first take was a little bit rough (some of the string techniques were a bit messy, and there were one or two places where an instrument did not play, which they apologized for after the first take). I was slightly concerned during the take as I know these musicians are usually able to play amazingly well right away, but I realized that of course I notice the mistakes more since I wrote the piece, and that they would be able to play it better in the takes to come. Jake Jackson (the recording engineer) suggested that we record in sections, which I definitely agreed with. He gave lots of good advice, and he ran the sessions with great efficiency and professionalism. We divided the piece into four, and did two takes of each section (except for the final section which had a third take). It sounded much better now that the musicians had a second look at the music. The mix in the headphones sounded a little bit unbalanced, but I had faith that when I received the session it would sound better (especially after some mixing), and I was right. The producers had a few suggestions that were great, such as asking certain musicians to bring out the melody more. The musicians were very nice and respectful which helps a lot as you feel that they are on your side, that they care about making your music sound good, and less like you are just being judged. Some of the musicians even spoke to me later in the day and the next day to congratulate me and tell me that they enjoyed my piece, which was very kind!

The musicians, engineers, and producers did a great job during the session, but then there is also the question of how I performed during the session. I think that I did a good job of communicating with the players, being efficient, and smiling/not being too serious or disconnected. I think that my conducting was decent, but I did not cue as much as I



practiced, likely because I was doing more listening which distracted me from following my conductor score notes a few times. I believe I was fairly consistent with my beating, and showed the character changes with my gestures, however I definitely need to improve on showing different moods with my face, and generally conveying even more information with my conducting aside from the basics.

## **8. POST-PRODUCTION**

Opening up the session was an exciting moment. I was ready to hear what the orchestra really sounded like (rather than how I heard them through the headphones while I conducted). When I first pressed play, it sounded great and I was happy, but I was not satisfied yet. I could see the potential of the piece but it was evident that editing and mixing work needed to be done before it sounded as I wanted.

Editing my track was fairly straight-forward. Usually the last take of each section was the best, but I still listened to everything and compared. I chose base tracks for sections, and then listened to the parts that were not perfect and dug into the other takes to find something better (even if it was just for one note). I then had to spread out some of the sections as the film has a couple of silent moments (which I did not record of course). I also needed to turn the last four bars into eight bars, as we were only allowed to record three minutes of music and I had about six extra seconds, so I decided to cut four bars as I knew that I wanted the end to be a little bit distorted and altered anyway.

When I moved on to mixing, it did not take long for the piece to come to life and to sound more as I intended. Just by deleting the many extra tracks that were not needed, and by panning the instruments, the mix sounded so much better already. Luckily, we have been using the same mixing template for most of the year, so I have become used to it (which is helpful as mixing is one of the areas where I definitely need to improve). I continued with adjusting levels, EQ, compression, reverb, limiting, and other small tweaks, and of course finished with a bit of mastering. AIR Studios and the musicians already sound amazing, so I found that this piece required less mixing work than previous projects.

## **9. STRUGGLES**

I am very happy with my project and what I chose to do, but one thing I noticed is that I seemed to be more restricted than the other students. Even though working with a director was suggested and encouraged, many of my classmates did not end up doing that, and therefore picked a piece of existing media to rescore. This provided them with more freedom as they were able to have control over what style of scene they chose, and they could pick anything at all that suited what they wanted to do musically. It also meant that their decisions were final, rather than having to cater to a director's needs and make changes when asked. This allowed them more creative control, and more time as they did not have to worry about revisions and hearing feedback from the director. My piece also felt less epic and grandiose than so many of the others. Mine was more of a score (requiring the accompanying film to make sense and to work with to mutually enhance), whereas some of the other pieces functioned more like concert pieces since the composers were focussed on writing a piece that sounds really cool on its own. However, despite

these benefits, I am still happy with my choice as I feel that I received a more real-world experience, and I developed a great contact that could certainly prove beneficial in the future, especially as this director is based in the same city as me and does a lot of work in the industry.

It was a bit tricky to figure out the percussion writing as there were only two percussionists (and one of them is the timpani player). There were parts of my piece where I would want three or four percussion instruments at the same time, but that would not be playable by the two players that we had. I realized that percussion is probably the easiest and best section to use MIDI instruments for, and so I decided that I would use MIDI for the snare drum, and that I would use the minimum percussion necessary as I could always add more percussion later with other MIDI samples if needed.

There were a few times when my advisor; Alfons Conde, had doubts about the functionality of the film I chose. One concern was that the director may not have the film finished in time. While I knew that I would not be able to start right away as I needed to wait for them to finish filming/editing, I really wanted the project to work out as I was excited to work with the director and I really liked the project idea. I decided to believe in the director and their timeline, and take the risk that I may need to have a back-up option to switch to last minute if the film is not delivered with enough time for me to compose. Luckily, the film was delivered to me only a few days later than originally stated, and so I was able to work with enough time. Another concern that was mentioned to me was that the film's style may call for a smaller, more electronic score (rather than a large orchestral

score). While I agreed that a smaller, electronic score would work, I told the director from the start that I need a film requiring a large orchestral score, so I figured that if he was aware of those requirements and still chose this film, he must be ok with having a large orchestral score (and therefore he thinks that would work). I had ideas that could work with the film, even if other ideas (small and electronic) could have also worked.

I had a few fragments in my piece that I knew might be tricky to play, but I was ready with back-ups for if it did not work out. The main example of this is the final beat of the piece. The celli and basses have two snap pizzicato notes in a row (eighth notes at a tempo of quarter note = 129):



Surprisingly, they were able to play it no problem and so I did not have to bring it up during the session. Had it not been playable, I would have had one third of the celli/basses play regular pizzicato (without the snap), one third play the first snapped note, and one third play the second snapped note. There is also a part near the end of my piece with some fast pizzicato lines for violin and viola:



The passage is not extremely difficult as I grouped the notes in pairs, and made it so that the players would only have to move as far as a semitone within the fast pairs of notes. However, I realized that it may still be a bit awkward, and I was ok with that (in fact it was actually better) since this part of the piece is very creepy, so I liked the sound of the slightly messy and unpredictable pizzicato in this section. Finally, I had one note in my timpani part that was quite high, and I knew could be played by some timpani but not all, so I simply doubled the note one octave lower in the part, and put the lower note in brackets to give the player a back-up option.

Matkai was very professional and polite, and I would definitely work with him again. One area that struggled a bit though was communication. At times I would have to wait a while for responses or feedback, and so I would send friendly reminders if it was something time-sensitive. Related to that, sometimes I would be told that a task would be completed by a certain day or that I would hear back from someone at a certain time, but often they did not meet their own deadlines. There was also some information that I made very clear at the beginning about the project requirements that Matkai unfortunately later

forgot. This was difficult as they were very important points (such as the maximum length that I could record), but I did not want to seem rude by insisting that he already agreed to my project needs and that the fault was his. In terms of the feedback I received on the musical material, Matkai was very clear and reasonable. While most of my ideas worked, the main critique that I received was that the creepy feelings I portrayed were a bit too fantastical, and less psychological. In particular, the sound that Matkai mentioned did not work was that of the glockenspiel. I used a lot of glockenspiel in my initial drafts, but was happy to make changes and be sure that I was writing what worked for the film and the director. In the end, there was one spot where he really liked the glockenspiel, so I ended up only using it once.

## **10. TAKEAWAYS**

One point that I already knew before this assignment was further solidified during my work. Film and media composers need to be skillful in so many areas. As a composer for film, television, and video games, you need to be proficient at composition, orchestration, mock-ups and sample library programming, editing, mixing, conducting, film analysis, self-promotion and networking, producing, communicating with film/television/video game language, middleware, and so much more! Not to mention the fact that you also need to have good knowledge of film/television/video game history, and have seen/played countless examples yourself.

This piece was a little bit different than many of my others, as it was more straightforward with few meter changes and rhythmic complexity. However, I do not like to think

that I have a certain style, as I enjoy composing in any style and I often try new things. So, I would not say that the piece sounded unlike me, and it still incorporated many elements that my compositional style could be characterized by - it was simply a genre that I have written for less frequently.

Overall, I am pleased with how my final assignment turned out. I am happy about the industry contact that I made, I appreciated the real-world experience, I like the music, I thoroughly enjoyed the full London experience and am grateful for that opportunity, and I had a lot of fun. I do not think of this as the best or most important piece I have ever written though, as I do not think that makes sense. The experience was amazing, but the piece was simply another scoring project, which I worked on much like I would any other scoring project I take on. I very much love what I do.