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Danny Elfman on Film Music

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by Doug Adams

[A more extensive excerpt from the longer Film Score Monthly interview can be found online on my web site.]

It is [a] sincerity, manifested in his music, that makes Danny Elfman the seminal composer he is today. Whatever the project is, he seems to be lurking behind every note he writes; he genuinely means them. He is not some fly-by-night music factory looking to make a quick buck before his limited scope goes out of vogue. He is a composer who carefully considers every factor that goes into his work and labors tirelessly to achieve his goals. He represents a great deal of that which is good about film music today.

Doug Adams: It seems like a lot of the work you did last year, and I mean this in a complimentary way, was dipping into our subconscious to redefine something that we already have a familiarity with. Like, **Mission: Impossible** was the new setting for the Schifrin melodies at times, **Mars Attacks!** takes that Bernard Herrmann **Day the Earth Stood Still** sound with the sci-fi correlation, and it makes it even more effective when you skew those notions. So, here's the question: how does your job differ when you're doing some of the reconstructed, or maybe deconstructed scores compared to doing something like **Beetlejuice** where there isn't really-I mean with the exception of the violin theme we don't have a lot of preconceived music/drama associations going into **Beetlejuice**.

Danny Elfman: Oh see, first off you gotta realize-everything for me is a reconstruction or deconstruction. I would actually say deconstruction. **Mission: Impossible** would be the exception. That would be a reconstruction- deconstruction. Because, I'm always tapping into my 12-year-old mind-set when I'm scoring. You know, everybody does. That's the whole thing. Every time I hear a score, if you look deep enough, you may not find a deconstruction of an earlier film, but you'll find a deconstruction of Mahler, or you'll find a deconstruction of Korngold, or you'll find a deconstruction of-it varies-Bartók. So, depending on how you look at it, every time I hear something I'm going, "Oh, this is an interesting deconstruction of a Bartók concerto that I heard a long time ago." "This is interesting deconstruction of something I'm sure that's bringing Max Steiner or Korngold to mind." Or in one famous score this last year, it certainly brought to mind classic Maurice Jarre. And whether it's intentional or not-who knows? But, with me, I'm so often tapping into sitting at that little table with Prokofiev, and Bernard Herrmann, and Nino Rota, that I feel like nodding to them all the time.

[On **Mission Impossible**] I had to do this very aggressive, big score in a very short time, and knowing that in the beginning, middle, and end would be this very, very famous theme, but I still had to weave a score around it and make it work as a score was really challenging. Because, during the scoring I never wanted to stray too far. I would try and go, "How many bars has it been?" You know, every now and then I would try and make a nod back to that period to kind of remind us where we were coming from. But, I didn't want to stay there too long. [I wanted the audience] to think that, "But, that's not where we are, now we've moved on again."

So, it was really a jigsaw puzzle where, okay I had these landmarks: beginning, middle, end. Now in between there are 62 more minutes. And in those 62 more minutes, paced every so often, I wanted to make sure I put a little piece of the puzzle here, here, here, here. Just to constantly-even if it's only for three seconds at a time, or two seconds, or five seconds, remind us from whence we came. And it was very difficult trying to keep a balance between the two eras and the two mind-sets. Not to mention the fact that I had to come up with stuff that Brian De Palma could sing-hum-and not have the luxury of a main title with which to establish it. ... The beauty of a main title is that you establish your main theme and maybe a bit of your secondary theme. You plant the seed that you're going to go water later in the score. And so, having that removed just made it so much more difficult. I had to just plant those in very subtle ways. That's a real important thing for me. By 15 or 30 minutes in if you can't tell where a melody's going once you start hearing it, then you didn't do your job right. Even if it's totally unconscious. You hear the beginning of a melody, you should kind of know it's going to lead down this path. It should start feeling like a friend, like familiar.

DA: Before 1996 it seemed like you were often more melodically oriented. That's not to say that you're not coming up with melodies now, but it seems like there's a lot more emphasis put on texture than you would find before.

DE: A lot depends on the film, though. The more cartoony the film, the more you rely on melody in a very simple way. In other words, in a **Batman** (with the exception of where it is now!) or a **Dick Tracy**, what we were trying to do was more in the classical genres. You have identifiable melodies that are very simple and that can be expressed in only a few notes. The goal in **Batman** was to have a theme that if I only have two bars to play it, I can state it really quickly and move on, and there's no doubt in your mind that the Batman theme just played.

Dick Tracy was exactly the same way. In a more melancholy way, **Darkman** was still essentially a sad comic [book] and had a theme that could be played very simply. Obviously, in a **Sommersby**, or **Dolores Claiborne**, you don't need to state what you need to state that simply. You're not prone to suddenly stating the character's theme for four seconds and then moving on. You just don't do that in that type of film.

So I think it was more [a case] of having different kinds of films to work on this year that were less cartoon-based in their approach. The [Erich] Korngold style-which is the model for so much action and/or cartoony stuff-does that so cleanly and simply. You see the hero, you state the theme, you move on. And you have to be able to state it very quickly and clearly-certainly before Korngold there are operas that are the same thing.

DA: Yeah, the whole leitmotif thing.

DE: And I'm sure that's where the whole concept arrived from. And Korngold certainly-not only Korngold, of course, but he comes to mind as such a clear model for that type of score for all of us. It just makes sense. You want to have moments where you splash your bit of a theme over a gesture and then move on, and it's so fun to do that. So, **Extreme Measures** and **Frighteners** and **Mission: Impossible** and **Freeway**-these were not these kind of films. They weren't hero-oriented. Actually, I would say **Men in Black** would be the closest to that type of score in the sense that we see the guys walking and there's like a motif. I'm not doing a hero theme. We're avoiding that type of gesture, so there's more like a little thing that happens whenever we see them.

Danny the Collaborator

DA: You've said it's important for you to get inside the head of the directors you work with so you can see a project through their eyes. How important is it for you to retain your identity? How much of a chameleon can you be before you undermine your own individuality?

DE: Well, there's a point where we all have lines that we can't cross. I'm trying to interpret the film through the director's head, but it all comes out through me. So, a composer is kind of like a psychic medium. They're holding their seance and trying to tap into the director's spirit. But, it's still coming out through their mouth when they speak. So, obviously my scores sound like my scores, but I'm trying to interpret the film through the director as much as I can. Sometimes you get real close, sometimes you don't. Sometimes they drive you crazy.

But, I think every composer does that. That's a big part of the job. You have to write a good score that you feel good about. At least, you're supposed to. But, if the director hates it, it ain't going to be in the movie! So, it becomes an exercise in futility if you write something that does not express the film as the director wishes. It's still their ball game. It's their show. I think any successful composer learns how to dance around the director's impulses.

... I think that most scores have too much music. And I think today 80, 90% of the films done in Hollywood are over-scored. There's a point where if a director wants music in the scene I'll go, "I might advise against it." But if they say, "No, no I really think I need it," well then, I'll just try to do the best I can and make it work. So, it's very rare that I'm trying to talk a director into having music, especially in a dialogue scene. There are always the scenes where it's very obvious. The action or a certain thing is happening, there's no or very little dialogue and you go, "Well, clearly the music goes here." And there are a bunch of other scenes where it's not so clear. Sometimes we'll end up, "Well, let's score it. But, if you don't use it, my feelings won't be hurt. We'll just see how it goes." Most often the music does end up in the movie, and sometimes there's a point where I wish that it wasn't, just because I think the score would be more effective if there was less of it. But, again, that's not my call.

DA: Well, even something like-it was in **Mission: Impossible** last summer. It was before the fish tank blew up. That scene in the diner.

DE: Well, that was real difficult because Brian clearly wanted music there. That wasn't an experiment, "let's see what happens"-that was more like, "I want music to really play the weirdness, to make the uneasiness of Tom Cruise's character get more and more apparent, to get to the point where it feels like he's just going to topple over-feel nauseous or something." So I was trying to create a nauseous texture that was building underneath and growing and growing as it became apparent how his whole head was being turned upside-down, basically, in that scene. Everything he thought was one way was about to turn backwards on him. And the scene was shot in this great way that I really liked. It had this uneasiness, this claustrophobia. Everything got very close and skewed and angled and I just went with Brian, really. Ultimately, I always try to go with what I'm seeing. What Brian laid out was something that felt really uneasy and bordering on feeling like I was on a boat or something. So I went with that feeling.

DA: A lot of your scores go for the "feel" immediately. Maybe the arc of the story is an application of that. That's why I think your scores work so well in Tim Burton's films: the underlying themes are often more important than the specific story.

DE: Oh, the tone. In Tim's films the tone is the most important thing that the score can do. In any unusual film, finding the tone makes such a big difference. In Tim's films, more than most, if you miss the tone, you don't get the film. You have to nail the right tone because sometimes when you just see

his films cold, you're not quite sure. It's the same in-I'm trying to think of other directors with a similar sense-David Lynch's films, Tim's films, some of Cronenberg's stuff. Nailing the tone helps you get into the film so much. Because.. I don't know how to explain it. If you have the wrong tone, suddenly the same scene seems like, "Why are they acting this way?" But, if the tone is correct you go, "Oh okay, I'll just go with this."

DA: So, a lot of times it's more obliquely than directly what the film's about?

DE: Yeah. In other words, sometimes, by creating a sense of whimsy under a scene it makes you go, "Okay, they're talking about something deadly serious, but yet, it's whimsical. And I know that because the music is telling me this." **To Die For** was very much that way. Without the music it was kind of hard to tell. People were very confused whether you're allowed to laugh at the stuff that was happening. And the challenge there with the music was to create kind of a dark, whimsical tone and make it clear right from the get-go that it's okay to have fun with this film. Yeah, it's about a murderer, but it's okay to have a bit of fun with it at her expense. So, it was real critical to nail the tone to make that clear. There was the sense of, am I seeing a thriller? What is this?

Men in Black

DA: Could you talk a little bit about what you're doing new in **Men in Black**?

DE: I don't know. ... I just saw the film. It's a tough film in the sense that there weren't many musical sequences. It was lots of short sequences, which for a composer is very difficult. Obviously, we all hope for five or six 10-minute cues instead of 60 one-minute cues. But, really it was finding a kind of a vibe and letting that vibe carry the movie. There's kind of a cool feel that happens every now and then. I guess that feel is the thing that makes the score its own score. But, I don't know exactly what that is. ... I just hope that that comes through somewhere in the mix. And obviously I'm going to be successful or not successful to different degrees, score by score. That's more like what I hope for. And whether I'll feel like I achieved that, I don't know until I get a little distance from it. I'll look back and I'd be better to answer that in about three months from now. Or when the movie comes out and I see it. I don't even know what it is yet. I've still been in the middle of it.

DA: I didn't know that it was that recent.

DE: Yeah, well, it got stretched out. It was kind of odd that way. It got really stretched out and you finish writing, then you have a week of recording, then you have a week of mixing, then you mix the album stuff. You know, you're finishing the album mixes and they're already off doing the dub. And they're dubbing right now. So, I'll go hear it for the first time in about two weeks. When I'm in the thick of it I don't quite know how it's going to turn out. Sometimes I'm doing stuff that is a little bit of an experiment for me. And I don't really know how it's going to end up. And in fact, half the time in scoring that's the way. I don't really know what's going to happen until I see it all put together and I kind of hope for the best. I say, "God, I hope that whatever-I-was-thinking works against the movie," and if it doesn't I'll leave town. I'll pack my bags and leave town. I've said that.

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