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Composure: A conversation with composer Marcelo Zarvos

Wednesday, 27 November 2013

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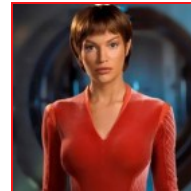
Trevor Hogg chats with Marcelo Zarvos about the art of composing, The Good Shepherd, The Big C, Ray Donovan and being nominated for an Emmy...



"When I was really young I remember watching **The Sting** [1973] and I loved that music," recalls Marcelo Zarvos. "It was one of those things which made me want to play the piano." The instrument would play a major part in obsession which would become a career for the aspiring musician. "When I was a kid I played rock 'n' roll in bands. I left Brazil when I was 18 years old. I used to write the music for the band and eventually I became interested in film." The native of São Paulo was fascinated by the effectiveness of the musical scores featured in **The Godfather** (1972), **Taxi Driver** (1976), **The Mission** (1986) and **Blade Runner** (1982). "There was a new wave of Brazilian movies that was very good and interesting starting with **City of God** [2002]. Before that there was a film called **Central Station** [1998] which did well. Not only was the country broke in the 1970s and 1980s but most of the production of Brazilian films were low-level comedies and soft porn. In the 1960s there was a great group of filmmakers who did amazing work but when I was growing up the Brazilian films weren't so good. It was all about of foreign films." The Brazilian teenager headed to America to pursue his academic studies at Berklee College of Music, California Institute of the Arts and Hunter College. "I went to college and even did a Master's Degree in Classical Piano and composition was part of the whole thing. Officially my major was always classical piano because it was easy for me to get scholarships."



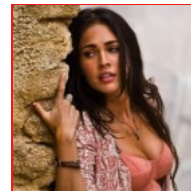
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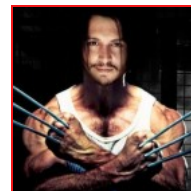
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"Everybody's approach to writing music is different," notes Marcelo Zarvos. "Even though I was classically trained there are elements from when I wrote when I was doing rock music that still remains to this day. For instance, all of the electronic stuff I was doing in the 1980s stayed with me. Back in those days you had these little sequencers which were machines that you would input notes and it could write one thing and then another and another. Layering is still a big tool that I use when I'm writing music. I always do a lot of writing which is pen and paper and

do it on a piano. I try to change it up even within the same project." A key music contributor is the piano. "I don't always use it in the end but figures prominently in my scores at least half the time." Zarvos observes, "There are so many ways you can score a film. It doesn't necessarily involve composing. It's about the director's vision so I like to use **2001** [1968] because [Stanley] Kubrick was a genius; there is no original music and it has some of the most haunting images of any kind of film. It's a mysterious thing. What makes it work? It's been proven now that you can have it John Williams traditional score all the way through what Trent Reznor did for **Social Network** [2010]. There are great ones and what they do share in common is that they greatly enhance the storytelling and are memorable."

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"The most normal is music for the movie meaning that sometimes you have themes that aren't necessarily associated with a character but they could be associated with an emotion," explains Marcelo Zarvos. "You might have a tense suspenseful theme, a tender emotional theme, and a sad and maybe a happy one. The emotional beats are what the music tends to do. But then you have cases of films where there is a great old French film called **Contempt** [1963] a [Jean-Luc] Goddard film and Georges

Delerue [**A Little Romance**] did the score; they used the same music for scoring emotional scenes, comedy scenes, and dramatic things. There is a car accident and a woman dies. In a weird way the film scores the score because the images change but the music is the same but it makes you perceive the music differently." Zarvos remarks, "Serious films you have to be mindful of what you're dealing with. A producer told me a long time ago that you have to have a lot of compassion for the good and bad characters. You have to try to understand their humanity even if they're monsters." Silence is also an option. "Whatever superfluous music you can take out it will make the rest of the score that much stronger."



"I remember when I worked with Robert De Niro [**The King of Comedy**] on **The Good Shepherd** [2006], he had a specific way to use the score," states Marcelo Zarvos. "Other directors might want a bombastic action big thing but he wanted it to be restrained because the characters and the movie were restrained." De Niro as a filmmaker is reminiscent to him as an actor. "Robert De Niro had a lot to say and reacted emotionally to the music; his biggest compliments were, 'That's pretty good. Not bad.' That's when you knew that you had it. It took me awhile to figure that out. In the

beginning he would flat out not like something but then he'd say, 'That's pretty good.' I'd say in my head, 'Pretty good? Do you like it or not?' Eventually, I realized that was the range of communication. Robert De Niro is restrained as a person. He talks quietly and precisely. It made me look at his acting differently. Even though he has done a lot of characters that are larger than life and sometimes violent there isn't a lot of screaming going on. The key words Robert De Niro used were 'restrained intensity.'"



"There is a scene where the protagonist played by Matt Damon [**We Bought a Zoo**] orchestrates the death of his soon to be daughter-in-law," remarks Marcelo Zarvos. "Matt Damon and Angelina Jolie [**Maleficent**] have been separated for a long time but they're celebrating the son's upcoming wedding. At the same time you see the bride getting on and being thrown out of the plane. There is a beautiful shot of a scarf that flies in the air. Everything is done from the emotional point of view and from the tragic thing that is happening, not the action; there's nothing ominous about the music. It's about the tragic and sadness of a man who has to do this horrible thing for the love of his country and to protect America. Other directors would have wanted to punctuate the action when she is thrown out of the plane and he didn't want that. It's played against type with the music. It works beautifully."



"During the spotting session we go through the film and at the time the director will brief me on all kinds of things that he or she is hoping to achieve," explains Marcelo Zarvos. "Sometimes a piece of temp music might be chosen for a lot of reasons but there may be one element that works and you try to understand what that is." The incorporation of pre-existing music is a common practise. "My approach has always been that you have to blow it out of the water. You have to go onto something that is much better. Sometimes they've been listening to the temp music for months so you have a hard time getting them to break away from it." Zarvos reveals, "The one thing that I hate is when my music is in the temp score. If it's somebody else's music I see what it's doing and say, 'I understand that.' I can write that music. But when

it's your own music from another movie it's functioning in a completely different way. That can be hard to shake. When it works well it shows you that there is not only one way of doing it." Changes happen even with a musical score composed specifically for a movie. "Sometimes it happens when you write music it ends up in a different scene and works even better than the original one. I spend a lot of time writing away from the picture for that reason. If the music has a good enough inner strength and integrity chances are that it will be used."



"There was a score that I did for a film called **Taking Chance** [2009], it was a HBO film with Kevin Bacon [**Mystic River**]," remembers Marcelo Zarvos. "We started with an electronic approach and the studio hated it. I always joked that I was fired and I replaced myself because we threw away the whole score and I started again. I wrote a traditional orchestral score which was what the movie needed. I worked on **Taking Chance** for over six months and went through a lot of music. In the end I was nominated for an Emmy and the movie was a success." There is room for musical experimentation with different cinematic genres. "There's no reason why it always needs to be the same way. It's a detriment to film. If you have heard that before what does that say about the film? Probably, you've seen that before too. It's the role of the composer to stretch the boundaries while of course realizing the vision of the director. Few directors would argue against, "We want to do something special for the film that doesn't sound like anything else."



"The walls have come down mostly between TV and film now," notes Marcelo Zarvos. "I find it an interesting time where you have so much talent writers, actors, directors going to television because the possibility of doing long form and the quality has improved so much. The schedule of television is gruelling. It's more like a marathon running than sprinting." The man behind the camera does not rule supreme on the small screen. "There may be a reason for why you're seeing such a big explosion in television of quality because what makes a film more than anything is the script and in TV the writers are the ones calling the shots. In the case of **Ray Donovan** [2013, Showtime] it is Ann Biderman [**Primal Fear**]; she's a genius and loves music. **The Big C** [2010 to 2013, Showtime] I dealt mostly with one producer who was the point person for music. Once we established our language and what course, there was a lot of trial and error. There's a coherency which is what you try to get with television, in particular, because it is a long run." Zarvos observes, "**The Big C** was a comedy; it was a half hour show with a lot of starts meaning that there were a lot of pieces of music. Sometimes like 15 seconds long. With **Ray Donovan** there's the family drama and intrigue. Then you have a procedural part of the show where Ray is getting the rich and famous out of trouble. It's a man on a mission with electronic pulsating music and a lot of percussion for the family drama. **Ray Donovan** has a filmic



approach as far as the score goes."

"The main difference is that I find myself more and more time writing away from the screen," reflects Marcelo Zarvos. "I look in all of the time but then I take two days and write a lot of things that feel like the movie to me. Especially in the beginning that's how I usually like to do it." A particular genre has yet to be explored. "I would love to do an animated film. You write over a long period of time. You write some music before there is anything to look at. I love animation and I'm a big fan. I've always loved as a kid and as a grown-up and now I have young children so I'm revisiting animated films through the eyes of my kids." Zarvos is being kept busy. "There are a couple things I'm talking to that I'm not at liberty to discuss. I'm definitely doing the next season of **Ray Donovan**. Right now I'm working on a classical composition for a group called ECHOES. It's a complex piece I've been working on for a long time between films."



Many thanks to Marcelo Zarvos for taking the time for this interview and to learn more visit his [official website](#).

Trevor Hogg is a freelance video editor and writer who currently resides in Canada.

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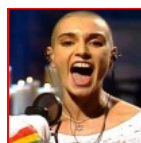
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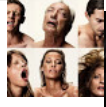
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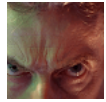
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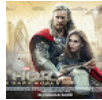


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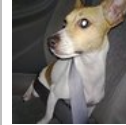
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