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Howard Shore
Subliminal Scores

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Howard Shore

subliminal scores

Many dream about scoring a movie, but top film composer Howard Shore '69 makes dreaming part of the scoring process.

IT'S A SULTRY SUMMER AFTERNOON when I knock on the door of the ivy-covered carriage house, headquarters for Howard Shore '69 and his Prince in New York Music company. Here, sequestered away in a sleepy community on the banks of Tuxedo Lake an hour north of Manhattan, Shore has penned scores for top films in a wide range of genres.

Some of his darker scores heighten the on-screen terror in *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Seven*, and *Single White Female*, while lighter strains add airiness to hit comedies like *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Big*, and *The Truth about Cats and Dogs*. Shore's writing has netted him numerous awards and accolades including the Los Angeles Film Critic's Award, the Gotham, Genie, and Saturn awards, and BAFTA and Grammy nominations.

Shore answers the door and shows me around the facility. The operation covers several rooms where a receptionist and several staffers handle various chores at computer workstations. Shore's nephew Ryan Shore ['96], a Berklee film scoring grad, maintains the computers and performs music preparation duties in Finale® from his uncle's pencil scores. Shore works either in a small office with an upright piano and a desk, or in his upstairs studio fully rigged with a Synclavier, a computer, recorders of various formats, a mixing board, and signal processing gear.

When his first opportunity to score a film came up in 1979, Shore had little formal training in the technical aspects. His approach has always been heuristic, improvisational, and subliminal. He devises his own systems for pairing music with an image. One of his most creative approaches involves viewing the footage only once, then napping to let it seep into his subconscious before beginning to compose or improvise on the film's emotional undercurrents. He sometimes approaches a score as a single composition, which he later digitally edits into individual cues. This is a holdover from his youth in Toronto. He used to record a piece on his tiny Wollensack reel-to-reel recorder and experiment with editing various segments together.

That Shore's well conceived scores consistently deliver just what a film needs is evidenced by the number of prominent directors who call him back for subsequent projects. Eight of David Cronenberg's films feature Shore's music. The roster of other directors who have collaborated with Shore includes Martin Scorsese, Jonathan Demme, Sidney Lumet, Al Pacino, and Penny Marshall, to name just a few.

The directors' differing styles have led Shore to create a diverse body of work (45 scores to date) covering an eccentric variety of musical expression and instrumentation. His score to *Ed Wood* (which one admiring critic dubbed "a theremin and bongo fest") combined cues sounding like classic '50s horror movie music, Latin numbers reminiscent of charts from the Ricky Ricardo Band, and poignant string orchestra cues. The austere score to *Crash* is anchored by the sonority of six sizzling electric guitars, three harps, percussion, woodwinds, and strings.

Shore's phone rings continually with new offers, but his schedule mandates that he turn down many more than he accepts. When we spoke, he was in the middle of two films: *Cop Land*, a police drama starring Sylvester Stallone, and a psychological thriller titled *The Game* with Michael Douglas and Sean Penn. Though his career is a busy one, Shore always meets deadlines—with enough dream time figured in to the schedule to get the job done right.

Q.

Did any teachers or experiences at Berklee influence your career?

Charlie Mariano was one of my instructors for improvisation. I was an alto saxophone player and a composition major, and he had a big influence on me. Hearing him play was a big deal back then. Joe Viola was also an influence in my not continuing with saxophone and learning to write. Teachers like Ray Santisi, Herb Pomeroy, John LaPorta, and John Bavicchi were also my mentors. They essentially taught me where to find the knowledge. They pointed me in the direction of the library and scores. When I came to Berklee, I needed a good foundation. I had studied harmony and counterpoint in high school, but there was so much that I didn't understand. I soaked up the material at Berklee like a sponge. It was the first time in my life where it all made sense. There was a great logic to music that I didn't know about before. The knowledge that I took away from Berklee in those years has been the foundation for everything that I do with music now.

Q.

How did you end up as the first musical director for *Saturday Night Live*?

Right after Berklee, I went on the road for four years with a band called Lighthouse. It was a rock rhythm section with horns and a string quartet. We recorded for RCA. I did over 250 one-nighters a year for four years with them. We played in the Far East, Europe, and throughout the states and Canada opening for acts like the Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead. We were able to play both jazz and pop festivals.

I came off the road and had settled down a bit in Toronto. From '72 to '75, I led my own group and wrote music for documentaries—nature films and shows about Canadian parks. I was also working on radio and TV shows for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and worked with Lorne Michaels, whom I'd known since I was a kid. He asked me to do *Saturday Night Live* [SNL] when he became the show's producer. It was basically like a show we did in Canada called the *Hart and Lorne Terrific Hour*. SNL followed the same format, comedy and music.

Back in 1975, there was no rock rhythm section with a horn section on TV; it was a new thing. The whole concept for using music in that show was also different

from anything that had been on. In the beginning, I wrote all the special music for the sketches, things for the guest hosts, and arranged all the charts for the band. Then I would perform on the show. It was an 18-hour-a-day, six-day-a-week job. I thought the show would last only a few months, but it kept going and I did 120 shows between '75 and '80.

Q.

How did you move into films?

I started during the *SNL* years. I knew instinctually that a music director job was not what I was looking for. It became lucrative and allowed me to write movie scores, but I knew I didn't want to stay in television. The show became like a movie you had to keep coming back to week after week. I was interested in something that allowed me more creative musical freedom. My first film, *I Miss You Hugs and Kisses*, was an opportunity, and I took it. The next film, *The Brood*, directed by David Cronenberg, was the start of a long working relationship that has gone on for nearly 20 years.

All of Cronenberg's movies are a bit experimental, and so there weren't restrictions. *The Brood* had a 12-tone score that allowed me to do things I couldn't do on *SNL*.

Q.

You frequently seem to employ unique instrumentation in your scores. Do you develop these ideas on your own, or does the director give you some input?

A director or producer won't give you much indication about what to do with it, the movie dictates it. The movie will tell you what to do if you are open and don't have preconceived ideas about what to do with a particular film genre or what the score should be. The sound of the score is less important than the composition itself, that is what comes first.

Q.

The music to *Crash*, which is built on the sound of six electric guitars, is such an unusual score.

That was originally written as a chamber piece for three harps. *Crash* was done with a pretty small ensemble. The guitar idea came when I was thinking of making sound in a room with some volume. I tried to amplify the harps, but the piece worked better with guitars. I didn't want to have 14 acoustic instruments, I wanted to amplify something for a large sound.

We recorded all six guitars live, they were not overdubbed. There were two guitarists doubling each harp part, two percussion players, and three woodwind players. I used a string section for two cues, and I processed that sound quite a bit with reverb and delay. I spent a week manipulating what we had recorded, using it as samples and creating other things in the computer. I would lower things, change the direction of pieces, take out segments, and create new ones.

Q.

How do you approach writing a score?

There are different stages of the process for me. One is to find the notes, meter, and tempo. Once I've gotten those, I think, who is going to play this thing? That's when you have to consider budget and time restrictions, and who you want to play. That is all part of the orchestration/recording phase. I will orchestrate based on the recording and the hall. I am not orchestrating a piece to be played at lots of different courts around the world like Mozart did. I am writing a piece that is going to be recorded once for a film. There is a lot you can do in a recording session that you can't do live, so I write for the recording studio.

Next is the postproduction period. You have written the composition, done the orchestration and recording. Now you have to figure out how it all fits into the film. This involves editing, mixing and other processes. For *Crash*, about 25 percent of the score was created after the recording session with editing and digital manipulation.

Q.

Do you start playing along with the film or begin sequencing right away?

There were times when things were on a longer postproduction schedule and I could take weeks just to dream about the music. I would take long naps, wake

up and write a cue. I was trying to watch it once and then dream about it for a few weeks. I didn't think about schedules, scoring, or numbers. Nothing technical was involved. Then I would sit down to play and recall a scene in my mind and intuitively think of something for that scene at the piano. I would then log it in a notebook and note that it felt like the scene on the fire escape or whatever. Over a period of two weeks, I would have logged in hours of improvisations and ideas on tape, sequencer, or paper that related to the movie in a subliminal, dreamy way. So I wasn't looking at the movie, I was just thinking about it. Having a jazz background, I write from an improvisational point of view.

Later, I would analyze the movie in detail, going through all the math involved. Then I would go back to my creative ideas and score the movie with them. I wrote maybe 20 or 25 scores like that when I had the luxury to do it. *Crash* and *Looking for Richard* were done that way. I saw *Looking for Richard* once, then I studied the play *Richard III* by Shakespeare. I wrote that music without really dealing with the movie. I wrote hours of material then fit it into the movie.

My scores are not meant to be up in your face and twirling around your eyes. They focus on a deeper subtext emotion. This is what I love about film music and why I was interested in doing it. A significant portion of what I've done can't be readily labeled, it has more to do with feelings. *The Silence of the Lambs* is like that. It is not a score that grabs you on record, but in the movie it has a power that you can define. You feel it more than you hear it.

Q.

What is your philosophy on how music should fit a scene?

If you write too closely to the scene, you take away some of its power. You have to write to it without being too observant of it. The music has to relate to the sense of it, but you need a connection to the audience who is watching it on a much more subliminal level. You lose that subliminal effect if you approach it head-on. That is why I write so much music in advance—that subconscious kind of writing about a subject. Then I figure out how to put that with the subject without going right up against it. You don't want to be too obvious.

You can't apply this to all movies. Having been offered a lot of movies, I have been able to try different approaches. Comedies are tough because you don't want to write funny music. I will try to go for the emotion of a scene rather than the pure comedic aspect. When we would underscore scenes on *SNL*, we always focused on the drama, and let the comedy play off the music. We were always like the straight man.

Q.

It seems that there are about 25 composers who do all of the major films in the United States. Do you ever think of how hard it would be if you were just starting out now?

I've never thought about it too much because I didn't plan this. But once you arrive in a group, you stay there as long as you are doing good work. I turn down about three movies for every one I take, and it is hard enough for me to do that many films.

I'm not interested in where I am in that group. How I got there was sort of coincidental. There was no planning or trying to get there. I was a relatively obscure person doing this, and then suddenly I was known. It happened in the '80s after I had done *The Fly*, *Big*, and *After Hours*—that's a Cronenberg movie, a commercial hit with *Big*, and a Scorsese movie. Then people figured I must be doing something good to work on those films. That placed me in another category.

Q.

What drew you to film music initially?

The whole reason I got into this field was because this was a way to write music and get it recorded. I could have written music like the score to *The Brood*, but who would play it or have the budget to record it? I wanted to learn about orchestras. The only way I felt I could do it at that stage was through movies. I was always interested in movies, theater, and television, so everything went together.

Scoring movies gave me access to a recording studio even if only for a limited time. Having the London Philharmonic playing your music in Abbey Road Studios is cool. These are the reasons I was interested in this. I wasn't thinking of making money at it or becoming popular.

Q.

Do you get invitations from orchestras to conduct a suite of your film music?

I did a concert in Seville, Spain, in November, which was a retrospective going all the way back to my first movie, *The Brood*. The first hour of the concert was a suite of five pieces from David Cronenberg's movies. It included *The Brood*, *The Fly*, *Dead Ringers*, *Naked Lunch*, and *Madam Butterfly*. The second half featured themes from *Nobody's Fool*, *Big*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Ed Wood*, *Philadelphia*, and then some darker pieces from *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Seven*. The concert ended with *Looking for Richard* with orchestra and choir.

We are talking about some future concerts. I am extending what I have done in movies, trying to take it somewhere else. I want to do a concert with Ornette Coleman of the music we did for *Naked Lunch*. I'd like to do some world premieres of new music. I'd like to play the *Crash* music live with that ensemble. It is almost like coming full circle. I started out as a performer, wrote all this music—now I'm performing and writing more.

Q.

Your résumé says you did six scores in 1996. Your life must be straight out at times.

I did a lot last year—too much. I am trying to do less this year. I am also writing a piece for a record with the London Philharmonic and choir like the *Looking for Richard* music. The text will be from another historic piece. That could take a year or two.

The movie schedules keep me pretty tied up. You have to say “no” a lot, and then you have to put the time to good use since you said “no.” The whole nature of being a freelance musician is to say “yes.” You spend your whole life trying to get to the point where you can do the things you want to do. Whether you are starting in movies or playing an instrument, all you want is work. When you get there, you also want to do other things.

Q.

Does that mean you are thinking that you may one day stop scoring movies?

I'm thinking about how someone might view the body of my work. I had a successful rock-and-roll career. I did eight records and toured for four years. I did live, network television for five years, and scored 45 films, then what? I am in that same state where I was earlier when I had done five years of television. How do you know when it is enough? The show [*SNL*] has been on 22 years. I could have done 22 years of network television. So I am wondering should I do 45 movie scores or 90?

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