

Scoring to Picture

Today's composers often draw from their experience in film to dramatize everything from TV shows and docs to spots and games. By KEN MCGORRY

Good movie music affects us. Especially if it's a good movie, we often remember that favorite scene later when we hear the music again somewhere — even in an elevator or a taxi. It's that guiding principle that's worked its way into sound and music for nearly every form of visual entertainment today. People who remember "Laura's Theme" from *Laura* will also likely remember the new song for Dr. Pepper. Or the reworked Al Green classic for Chevy. They'll remember the ominous, brooding threat of an orchestra setting the mood in a first-person-shooter video game as well.

Today's composers who score to picture know all this — and they have at their disposal a growing arsenal of tricks and technology that helps them express their story. Sometimes the "trick" may be a live orchestra; and sometimes it's a whistle and a drum.

MUSICBOX'S JOEL GOODMAN

The sheer number of scores from Calabasas, CA-based MusicBox (www.musicboxmx.com) is impressive; they offer a substantial library of music for films and television, including a new, highly-percussive collection called "Trailerama." Then consider the prodigious output from co-founder Joel Goodman — he's scored about 75 films, including one or two dramas a year and as many as 10 docs.

Goodman scored the drama *Canvas*, starring Marcia Gay Harden, but many of his credits are for documentary films. While he needs to see picture in order to create, Goodman says, there was a time when there was such a thing as too much picture: "Earlier in my career I was watching four-hour rough cuts!" That phase has gotten a little easier, thanks in large part to the development and prevalence of NLEs.

Goodman's work can sound serious, even monumental, on such documentary films as *Constantine's Sword* and the recent *Holy Grail in America* for the History Channel, but he also creates light, humorous pieces when needed.

Goodman writes in MOTU Digital Performer on an eight-core Mac. "In Digital Performer you can edit audio and MIDI. Now I do everything in one computer — routing audio, MIDI, video and all this other stuff — and, for me, it works just great. I have no synthesizers. I'm also very lucky because I get to record a lot of live musicians. I use only one keyboard to trigger samples and synthesizer plug-ins." Goodman likes Omnisphere by Spectrasonics, "a wonderfully thought-out synthesizer plug-in. Most of my samples I play back via Kontakt 4." Digital Performer plays back the video as QuickTimes within the program. "Everything locks together perfectly and the picture quality is great, depending on how they compress it."

Goodman gains additional speed by using Plogue Bidule as a host program for his various synth plug-ins, allowing Digital Performer to run more smoothly. The applications speak to each other via Rewire, which transfers audio data between two computer applications in realtime. Goodman is waiting for a 64-bit version of Digital Performer to go with his Mac 64-bit OS.



As for recording live instruments such as strings, Goodman insists that "the quality be there." Does the client know from live strings versus samples? "They definitely know. Do they care? They may not care until they hear it; and when they hear it, they are knocked out." Instrumentation is a function of budget. *Constantine's Sword*, for instance, features live strings and live brass.

But are ever-improving samples of live instruments forcing producers to make a tough choice? "Some producers just want music in the show and they don't really hear it. Some producers really care about the music that goes in their show. They value it and I've been blessed in that I get to work with a lot of those people. Will samples ever really replace live musicians? No. Because the human is just too complex." Goodman allows that there are "great samples out there that can get the job done in a convincing way," but, he adds, "if you did that same recording with live musicians, it's fresh forever." Still, a favorite collection is the Vienna Symphonic Library, particularly their woodwinds.

When he roughs out a score using samples, producers might say "Wow, why do anything else to it?" But when you put real strings and brass on it, "It comes alive — you've taken the emotional meter from a two to an eight or a nine! In that experience, you feel."

Goodman scored the Walt Whitman documentary for PBS's *American Experience* (2008) and he was very gratified that the producers welcomed his more contemporary orchestral take rather than old-timey "banjos and harmonicas."

This year's *The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*, also on PBS, features an earlier Goodman composition — with all live strings — that the director liked so much they had him reversion it. Goodman's work can also be heard on www.joelgoodman.com.

Scoring a drama like *Canvas* (2006) with its live guitars, piano and strings was "totally different from scoring a documentary," Goodman says. "Working with [director] Joe Greco was great. He insisted on live strings."

And Greco found a way to get those strings even though they were not budgeted.