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ON SALE 12.11.09

INTERVIEW WITH

MYCHAEL DANNA

BY PAUL FUHR

Veteran composer **Mychael Danna** has written dozens of film scores, including those for *The Time Traveler's Wife, 500 Days of Summer, The Ice Storm,* and *The Nativity Story,* among others. Lauded for his versatility and widely respected for his innovation, Danna has drawn favorable comparisons to Philip Glass and Thomas Newman. And while Danna's scores can be either epic or endearingly idiosyncratic, they all share one common bond: they are always inspiring.

I was compelled to seek you out after hearing your score to* Shattered Glass. *I discovered that your filmography was not only impressively long, but extremely eclectic. Do you actively choose projects that are different from one another?
Starting film scoring as I did in Canada, there was a much more free-spirited sense of what music was appropriate to hear in a film. So, right from the beginning, I was able to move around a great deal stylistically, although this diversity always existed in the context of serving the film in the best possible way. I enjoy creating completely different sonic worlds for each specific film, and I think a wide range of directors have heard that ability in my past work. I am very grateful for this.

I can't think of anything worse than having to write the same score for the same genre over and over again.

Many of your scores have an epic sweep to them*—Water, The Nativity Story, *etc. Are you naturally drawn to these sorts of films?
Not at all. I have a very wide background in music and in musical taste, so I try to drop my ego and selfish preferences and discover what the film wants and needs in order to help the director best tell their story. I think it's important for a composer to be open-minded enough, as well as educated enough about the music of varied times and places to be able to refer to them in film scoring. But for a film that needs epic sweep, I am happy to supply it.

At what point are you brought into a film? Early on, or after the film is shot?
This is the nice thing about working with the same director. You get to come in at the early script phase, which doesn't necessarily inform any musical decisions, but helps you understand the director's vision better: why they are making the film, what themes are important to them, and so on. The longer you have to absorb these things in conversations with the director, the better. Usually, though, I would not be brought in until the picture edit is underway, and often many decisions have already been made about the music through the placement of temporary score pieces.

Mychael with Anthony Hopkins and Jeff Danna, while scoring *Fracture*

When is a score finished in your eyes?
Never. Or, more accurately, when the mix begins and they tear the score from me! Which is why it is hard for me to see films I've done. I am always thinking of ways the score could be better.

You have collaborated with filmmaker Atom Egoyan on nearly a dozen films. Why do the two of you work so frequently—and so well—together?

We both learned about film together. He and I met in university, through our work with the theatre world. So, the world of film is something we both discovered together, and I think our mental processes are very similar because of that. Returning to this partnership every couple of years or so is something I look forward to tremendously.

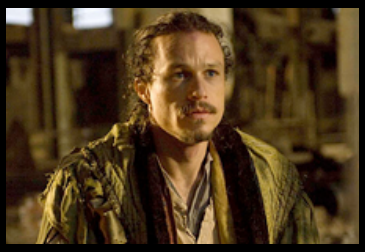
Your scores oftentimes come from esoteric places.* Ararat, *for example, is rooted in Armenian folk and church traditions. How much research do you conduct for scores like this?
A great deal. Sometimes I think the research phase, which I really love, is a method of procrastination from the writing phase, which is always difficult and often rather painful. I studied ethnomusicology in university and I find it very rewarding to soak up the music of a particular time and place and become as expert as I can.

That being said, it's important to be able to set that knowledge aside when you begin to score the film. The needs of the film always trumps period or stylistic accuracy or practice. But I believe the best music comes when you really know the instruments and the culture of those instruments as well as you can.

With* The Nativity Story, *how did you decide to fuse Middle Eastern instruments, pre-Baroque European ones, and Gregorian chants?
I wanted to portray with music the effect that this story had on all the subsequent periods in western and non-western culture. I wanted people to look at the story of this small village 2,000 years ago and think of the following civilization that it inspired.

When you work with a director, what are the sorts of discussions you have regarding a film's score?
Most often, the discussion does not begin with music, but with the film itself. Why did you make it? What is the most important theme of the film? What do you want people to notice and think about in the film? Then we talk about how the music can best serve the film: its temperature, its place, its philosophy. Only then should we talk about how that can best be accomplished, what musical instruments/ styles/ size we need to consider. [The] budget as well comes into this discussion.

Do you have a particular creative process?
Procrastinate as long as possible, then write in a frenzy of sleep-deprived panic.



What is the biggest challenge you've ever faced with a film score?
One of the biggest was on Terry Gilliam's *The Imaginarium of Dr Parnassus.* The tragic death of Heath in the middle of production of course changed everything about the film. I've never met a more positive force than Terry, but even he was faced with shutting down and discarding all the work and filming that had already occurred. The plug was about to be pulled, but Terry's indomitable spirit eventually prevailed and by signing on three of the biggest stars to help out [ed. Johnny Depp, Jude Law, and Colin Farrell], he convinced the money people that he could still finish a brilliant film.

Of course, the score my brother Jeff and I wrote had to adjust to the changes very quickly, as well as the now-very-stretched financial conditions. But we ended up with a score and film that I'm extremely proud of.

Surf's Up ***is an animated film. Did you approach this differently than the other scores, or was it like any other project to you?***
The process was much different. The scenes more or less stayed the same in length and content for over a year, but just got better and better animated, starting as rough still sketches and ending up as brilliant fully-formed animation. So, in that way, it was very interesting. You had to use your imagination a great deal. But unlike a typical feature film, which undergoes dramatic tone changes through editing, which can really disrupt the rhythm of your score writing, the order and mood of the scenes really were quite stable throughout my writing process. Musically, I approached it the same way I would any film.

***Your score for* Little Miss Sunshine *is a whimsical entry in your filmography. How do you become involved with that project? Did you enjoy working on something so tonally different than, say,* Fracture?**
The music supervisor, Sue Jacobs, who I had worked with before on Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* was involved in *Little Miss Sunshine.* The directors wanted to use alternative pop band Devotchka but others wanted to hire a composer. Sue thought it would be possible to do both if I worked with the band. It worked out very well. The character of the band's instruments perfectly fit the film and so we did a combination of their songs, and score that I wrote for them to play, so there was a seamless and natural feel to the soundtrack. Tonally, we were very careful not to write "comedy" music that would play for laughs but just set up a tone that matched the odd characters onscreen. Certainly a very different tone to the dark and brooding noir tone of *Fracture!*

What is your working relationship with your brother and fellow composer, Jeff Danna? How is that process different than working alone?
It's really very natural and transparent. I don't think we even notice any process. After all, we have been working together in music since we were kids. As the older brother, I brought him in to film scoring first as a player, then as a writer, so his process is very similar to mine. Writing is very solitary and so I think we both welcome opportunities to make it a more collaborative activity. We have the same composing software, so technically one of us will start an idea, e-mail it to the other guy who will develop/change, send it back, and on it goes. Not that there are not disagreements, even heated ones, but usually one of us feels stronger about whatever the disagreement is, and the other will relent. More often though, we are pretty much on the same page and I think given that we have the same background (growing up in the same house exposed to the same music) and slightly different paths (mine is more classically trained; Jeff's more pop music) we have different but very complimentary skill sets.

You scored 16 episodes of Joss Whedon's* Dollhouse. *What was that experience like? Was it a more demanding schedule than a feature film?
Dollhouse was a great deal of fun to work on. Television scoring is very different than film scoring. In a way, television is much more free of pressure: You have to write a great deal of music quickly, which is not difficult when you have no time to second-guess or change direction multiple times. You immediately become inspired to write, simply

because you have to, and you can amaze yourself at the speed of the writing that can happen. Again, because there is no choice. That can be useful knowledge when you have a very much longer deadline for a film and you feel you can't write even one minute of music.

For more about Mychael Danna and his music, visit his site.