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**Nightmare Before Christmas: Between
Cinema, Musical & Rock**

*Musical Elements in Danny Elfman
"The Nightmare Before Christmas"*

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Nightmare Before Christmas: Between Cinema, Musical & Rock

Musical Elements in Danny Elfman

”The Nightmare Before Christmas”

Introduction

Danny Elfman is known for his dark, quirky musical style. In the contemporary Hollywood world there are only few composers that can vaunt to possess this personal and unique style. The industrialization of Hollywood’s cinema has created a standardization in the production, including the music department, but Elfman is an exception in the main trend mainly because of his musical background. He is a self-taught musician that came from rock music, that managed to write several very original orchestral scores such as Beetlejuice, Edward Scissorhands, Batman and The Nightmare Before Christmas. How can a person that never studied notation, harmony and orchestration write so much complex and well written music for orchestra? Which are his musical roots, and his masters? Why is The Nightmare Before Christmas so unique and memorable?

In this paper I will answer to these questions focusing on the musical elements that Elfman developed during his career; these approach will bring us back to the beginning, trying to establish musical connections that explain how his style has

developed. Some of these connections/relations are **direct** (for these I will make a graphical representation), others more subtle (**non-direct**).

For **direct relation** I mean that: *one or more musical elements¹ from others composers are directly used in a composition.* This doesn't mean to copy part of others' music, but to use that musical knowledge as a tool to shape a personal musical taste. However in this case we can hear a direct musical relation between the two compositions.

For **non-direct relation** I mean that: *one or more musical elements from others composers are indirectly used in a composition.* In this case we can't hear a direct musical relation between the two compositions, but rather a free inspiration.

Nevertheless each one of them is important to understand the complexity and versatility of Danny Elfman's style. In this paper I will analyze a selection of songs and underscore music that I believe, represent this paper, best.

The Nightmare Before Christmas is one of the unique scores Elfman did; it is a very original work, comprising of songs and underscored music, that not only represent the perfect mood for Burton's movie, but could also be 'concert' music by itself. If the animation they created for the characters were truly original and masterfully performed, Elfman's music gave it a touch of uniqueness and coherence adding a magical effect to the animation.

¹ The concept of musical element will be explained in the next section

I organized all musical concepts and references in four categories that I believe are mainly part of Elfman's musical knowledge and background². These will help the reader display a mind map and also understand the bigger picture. The categories are:

- Musical/Animation
- Swing/Rock
- Film Music
- Classical Music

These categories will be the framework of a more in-depth research based on what I call the 'musical elements'; in this paper for musical element I mean: *a musical gesture belonging to the primary level of the musical structure*. Examples of elements are:

- Instrumentation
- Thematic Material
- Colors
- Orchestration colors
- Rhythmic structure

² See the chart at page 32

Making the parallelism with chemistry, if we consider notes, pauses, chords, rhythms, the atoms of music, an element is the smallest musical gesture that cannot be separated into a simpler form without losing his meaning.

Frank Zappa in an interview said about music:

"It's like being a cook. And if you were a really good cook, and you had a lot of money for really excellent ingredients and really good equipment, then you could cook just about anything. But if you don't have all the gear [. . .] and you don't even own a cookbook, but you still want to eat, and nobody's going to cook it for you, then you better find some other way to improvise that dish. And that's kind of the way the stuff gets put together."³

This statement means two things:

- Firstly, like Elfman, Zappa was also a self-taught musician that managed to establish himself as a rocker and after as a contemporary composer in the music cultured elite only because of his skills in writing extremely original compositions. Elfman to a certain degree followed the same path but from the world of rock to Hollywood.
- Secondly, Zappa considered all the music as the same level, with no distinction on genres, epoch, style, cultured or not. He only made a distinction

³ Quote from *Zappa! magazine*, interview by Don Menn from <http://www.thefilerroom.org/documents/dyn/DisplayCase.cfm/id/605>

based on the "elements" included in that particular kind of music. Like a cook or a chemist that blend all the different elements in their kitchen/laboratory, the final product of every composition will be the result of how many and in which way the elements are blended.

This elements based approach works very well in understanding Danny Elfman's music, because him, like Zappa, is a musician/composer that fuses different musical styles from different periods, genres, to create a unique style. Moreover it is very interesting to note that both these self-taught musicians followed a similar path in the development of their personal style.

If in one hand the academic courses train the individual toward a pre-determined path (shared and consolidated by their predecessors) with a well structured courses of study oriented to establish in the student a linear vision of music history/theory and its development, on the other hand a self-taught individual tend to create and develop his own musical structure following a non-linear path, based more on a personal research and a unique taste on what he can learn from his ears.

To sum up, all the musical material and analysis in this paper will be organized into the four categories quoted above and each element will be part of one or more of these.

All the musical examples quoted in this paper are part of a CD that is a collection of my research in Elfman's musical elements. The CD is an integral part of the paper and I will make constant reference to it during the development of the

topic. I will not analyze all the examples of the CD, but only those that I consider most relevant.

The four categories

1. Musical/Animation

This is the first category and this should be the one where, a “musical” like *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, definitely belongs, but in reality that is not the case. Even if the movie itself is a musical created with the stop motion technique, the music does not belong much in this category for two main reasons.

First because Elfman’s music is one of a kind in the musical genre; in fact there are only few stylistic elements in common with the classic Disney animation movies like *Alice in Wonderland* or *The Beauty and the Beast*; the style is dark and gloomy, while on the other hand the Disney standard is more romantic, happy and joyful.

Second because this musical is even mostly different from the american-movie musical tradition’s like *West Side Story* and *Candide*, mainly because these musicals have a more contemporary-jazz approach. Elfman himself said several times in various interviews that in writing this score he had been inspired by old musical style, but in reality there are only few elements that can be recognized belonging to this category.

The first musical example (CD Ex. 4) is taken from Leonard Bernstein *West Side Story*. Here we have a **non-direct relation** to the song *Making Christmas*, in

particular in the band-style accompaniment in the low register: bassoon, bass clarinet, trombones, left hand piano, cello and basses. Elfman usually uses these elements in his scores, especially in combination with staccato low brass, low strings and the left hand in the piano; this reminds us of a marching band but with a dark/tragic color.

Musical score for Violoncellos, Contrabass, Trombones, and Piano. The score is in 2/4 time and features a low register accompaniment. The Violoncellos and Contrabass parts are marked '(arco) f marc.' and 'f marc.' respectively. The Trombones are marked 'f marc.' and 'p'. The Piano part is marked 'f marc.' and 'dim.'. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'f marc.', 'p', and 'dim.'.

Moreover the male vocal parts, in the low register, are another element frequently used in songs like *This is Halloween* and *Making Christmas*.

Musical score for male vocal parts. The score is in 2/4 time and features a low register accompaniment. The vocal parts are marked 'mp' and 'mf'. The lyrics are: "The Jets are gon-na have their day Tb - night. BERNARDO The Puer-to Ri-cans grum-ble: Sharks are gon-na have their way Tb - night."

The idea is the same as the previous texture: the low register in the voices creates a dark and somber atmosphere and in the case of *West Side Story* this is legitimate because the two gangs are preparing to the fight under the highway. After a few bars this piece becomes very jazz oriented and because of this we are going far from Elfman's style. However these two non-direct elements are important to underline a connection between the two American musicals. As we will see after there is also a more direct relation to the song *Making Christmas* in Orff's *Carmina Burana*.

The second example in this category is taken from Leonard Bernstein *Candide* (CD Ex. 5): here we have another **non-direct relation** with the song *What's This*. Both pieces use the same idea of a fast staccato repetition in the strings, on the same harmony, with short comments by woodwind and brass.

2. Swing/Rock

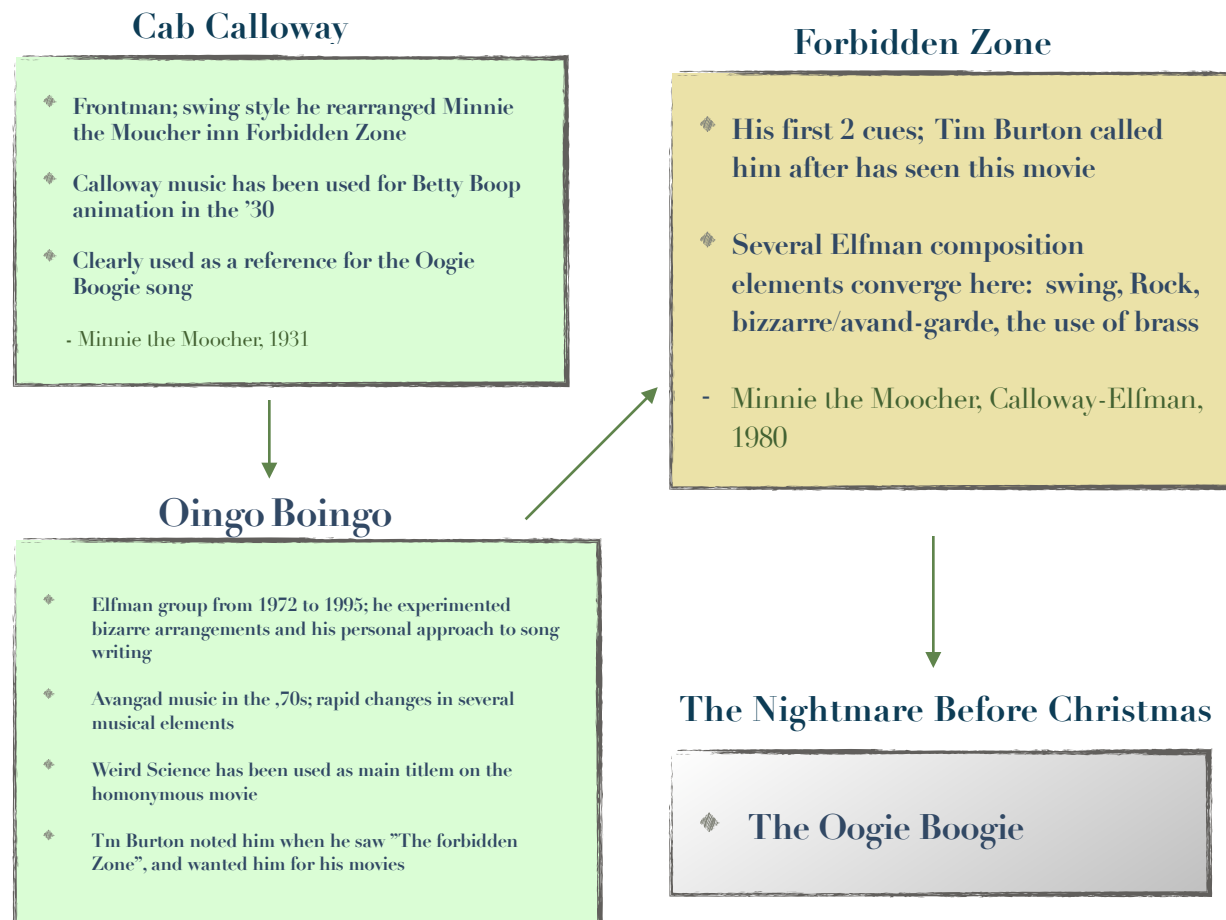
This second category definitely belongs more to Elfman's personality and background. We know he is a big fan of two great composers of the swing era, and he started his musical career with the theatrical avant-garde group "The Mystic Nights of the Oingo Boingo", where he learned by himself how to write music, especially transcribing music from Duke Ellington, Stephan Grappelli, Django Reinhardt and Cab Calloway (CD Ex 6-7):

That is where I learned my confidence in my ear. Cab Calloway's arrangements [...] could be very fast and complicated. I would listen to videocassettes of Betty Boop cartoons and old record, but I learned that if I listened hard, I could freeze it in my head and hold it there and write it down. It ended up being critical training for me, even though I didn't know it at the time⁴.

Here we have a clear **direct relation** of several elements of the swing-era used in the *Oogie Boogie* song.

Rock-Swing

Film Music



⁴ Clark, Rick "Danny Elfman" from <http://www.mixonline.com/news/profiles/danny-elfman/372795>

During the '70s he experimented with theatrical music-comedy live performances with the The Mystic Nights of the Oingo Boingo, while in the '80s he simplified the band's style in a ska/rock new wave concept. It is important to mention that the song 'Weird Science⁵', has been used for the homonymous film and TV series.

All the transcriptions he did (CD Ex. 8, Live at Karl Faustenburg, 1978) proved to be very helpful when it came to writing music for the The Mystic Nights of the Oingo Boingo and to score for picture; in fact his first cue was in a movie called "Forbidden Zone⁶" (CD Ex. 9). This is an avant-garde experimental movie directed by his brother Richard and in that particular scene Elfman made an arrangement of Calloway's, Minnie the Moocher (Danny Elman is also in this scene where he interprets the devil), and for that he gained the attention of the young director Tim Burton:

I was asked to score a midnight film, a cult film for my brother called *Forbidden Zone*, and that was my first time putting music to film, but it was far from a legitimate orchestral film score. It was performed by the Mystic Knights just before they retired, and the rock band Oingo Boingo began. The fluke was getting asked to do *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*, [Director Tim Burton was a fan of Oingo Boingo, and he just had a feeling I could do more than I did with them. Paul Reubens was a fan of the *Forbidden Zone*, so

⁵ Single by Oingo Boingo (1985) MAC

⁶ Forbidden Zone (1980), Richard Elfman, MCA

when he heard that score he made a mental note to track me down. My name crossed paths between the two of them and it eventually all tied together⁷.

In the *Oogie Boogie* song we have the following musical elements: the walking bass, the arrangement of the brass section plays the accompaniment in a “dark version” of the typical '20s style; the technique of call-response in the vocal parts, and the bizarre exclamations on the main vocal part that recall Cab Calloway’s style.

Interestingly the beginning of the *Oogie Boogie* song is very similar to the beginning of Elfman’s arrangement he did for *Minnie the Moocher*.

Another important connection in defining Elfman’s elements in swing/rock music is the similitude with Frank Zappa. As we saw above they have several aspects in common:

- angular melodies
- the extensive use of brass
- avangard-bizarre music
- the use of xylophone and small percussion instruments
- low register male voices, high register male-female voices
- theatrical-orchestral arrangements
- unexpected dissonances
- rapid and drastic changing in the arrangement/orchestration

⁷ Richard Davis (2010) *Complete Guide to Film Scoring: The Art and Business of Writing Music for Movies and TV*, pp. 278-279

- fusion between rock/jazz/swing/orchestral

Frank Zappa's eclectic and bizarre musical imagination has been a great school for the young Danny Elfman; Zappa is undoubtedly a clear point of reference in developing Elfman's own style, which is referred to as 'quirky' by the critics, nowadays.

In the instrumental song "Cletus Awreetus Awrightus" (CD Ex. 10) we have an extensive use of the brass section in a rock/jazz/orchestral situation and the use of voices in the high/falsetto and very low register: all these elements are used in a grotesque and peculiar way. Moreover the arrangement of the song is very unpredictable with several changes and quite dissonant.

In Zappa's song *Nanook Rubs It* (CD Ex 11, 0:22-0:27) we have a choir in the very low register, and a fancy xylophone used as "commentator" that underline funny moments during the song. Here Zappa uses such fancy elements in a story-telling situation where the music reacts in response to the lyrics.

The image shows a musical score for the song "Nanook Rubs It". It consists of four staves: Choir, El. Bass, Xylophone, and Drum. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 8/8. The Choir part has lyrics: "Peek a boo, woo, woo, woo". The El. Bass part has a melodic line. The Xylophone part has a melodic line with a "glass" effect and a triplet. The Drum part has a complex rhythmic pattern with many rests.

All these elements are spread almost everywhere in *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, here are some examples:

- *Overture*: low brass, rapid arrangement changes, the comedic xylophone
- *This is Halloween*: low/quirky and high/falsetto voices, the funny xylophone
- *Sally's lament/Wandering Jack*: low/grotesque brass, frequent changes in the arrangement/orchestration
- *Jack Returns*: low/grotesque brass, rapid changes in the arrangement/orchestration
- *Town Meeting Song intro*: low/grotesque brass
- *Jack And Sally Montage*: low/grotesque brass, rapid changes in the arrangement/orchestration
- *Jack's Obsession*: low/quirky and high/falsetto voices, low/grotesque brass
- *Kidnap The Sandy Claws*: angular melodies, unexpected dissonances
- *Making Christmas*: low and high voices, funny xylophone, angular melodies, unexpected dissonances, rapid changes in the arrangement/orchestration
- *Nabbed*: low/grotesque brass, angular melodies, rapid changes in the arrangement/orchestration
- *To The Rescue*: funny xylophone, low/grotesque brass, rapid changes in the arrangement/orchestration
- *Finale/Reprise*: low/quirky and high/falsetto voices (analogy with voices of Cletus Awreetus Awrightus)

Moreover we know that Elfman took inspiration from Zappa during the period of *The Mystic night of the Oingo Boingo* (CD Ex. 8). It is also important to mention that Zappa has been part of a tape Matt Groening gave him as a reference for composing *The Simpsons'* Theme in 1989 (CD Ex 37-40):

*Creator Matt Groening hired Elfman personally to write the theme song. He gave him a concept of what he wanted as well as a mix tape of songs that he wanted the theme to sound like. Groening put the concept of the song like this, "The trend in TV themes for the previous 15 years had been namby-pamby synthesizer schlock that seemed to whimper, 'We can't offer you much, but please like our pathetic little show.' I wanted a big orchestrated, obnoxious, arrogant theme that promised you the best time of your life." Among the tracks on the tape were the theme songs from *The Jetsons* (both have the same first three notes), selections from Nino Rota's "*Juliet of the Spirits*," a Remington electric shaver jingle composed by Frank Zappa, some easy-listening music by Esquivel, and a teach-your-parrot-to-talk record. After listening to the tape several times, Elfman approached Groening and said, "I know exactly what you're looking for."⁸*

It is interesting to note that Nino Rota, as we will discuss in the Film Music category, is also another composer from which Elfman took inspiration.

As we have seen there are many **non direct** musical elements taken from Zappa, that Elfman reworked and inserted in his music; what is clearly missing from Zappa are two elements: the elegance in arrangement/orchestrations and the lyricism in melodies.

⁸ from https://simpsonswiki.com/wiki/Theme_Song#cite_note-1

3. Film Music

One of Elfman's masters, for his admission, is Bernard Herrmann. Herrmann's elements are spread in all Elfman's scores (CD Track 13-14), but in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* we have a **direct relation** of their use even if it is very subtle and located in specific narrative moments of the story when he needs to emphasize a scene with mysterious or magical textures.

- the use of celesta, and harp in conjunction with soft strings (normal and tremolo)
- modulation down to a minor 3rd for dramatic effect
- low strings in forte during modulations for crescendo effect

Film Music

Bernard Herrmann

- ◆ Harmonic-melodic elements
- ◆ Underscore, mysterious textures
- ◆ Instrumentations: harp, piano, high strings
- Mysterious Island, Cy Endfield, 1961
- Fahrenheit 451, Prelude, Francois Truuffaut, 1966

The Nightmare Before Christmas

- ◆ Doctor Flinkestin/In the forest at 1:15-2:00
- ◆ Jack And Sally Montage, at 3:53-4:13
- ◆ Town Meeting Song Intro at 0:28-0:35
- ◆ Christmas Eve Montage at 1:55-2:02; 5:24-6:00

In the Town Meeting Song Intro, after a moment of joy for Jack's return, we have a moment of suspense when Jack is on the podium about to reveal what he learned for Christmas Town. Herrmann's elements here are used to create tension and a mystery before Jack begins to speak. This musical part is very delicate and he uses only harp, high strings with tremolo, and a horn in pianissimo.

Another interesting moment with the same textural idea is when Jack delivers his scary presents to Christmas Town's children: the children don't know what there is in the boxes and this moment is scored with a celesta arpeggio and a short melody in the high strings.

Nino Rota is another important composer belonging to this category; some of his musical elements are present, as an **indirect relation**, in the entire score of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Rota's collaboration with the director Federico Fellini has given birth to some of the most interesting scores in Italian cinema from the 50s' to the late 70's; Rota's scores for Fellini have a tragicomic and melancholic color with a somehow dreamlike and surrealistic taste. Rota's concept behind these scores is to take Italian popular music transfiguring it utilizing a more sophisticated harmony and melody in order to create something that is still familiar and recognizable to the listener while at the same time misleading and ambiguous. Rota utilizes band music tradition that is wide spread across the country and the adaptation by Italian musicians of the Swing-American orchestras. (Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Count Basie). What Rota

takes from the band music is pretty much the characteristic strong down beat with bass drum and tuba, and the offbeat with snare drum and woodwind or saxes. Moreover he keeps the simplicity and effectiveness of melodies adapting them to his melancholic taste.

This extract is a band arrangement of Amarcord's main theme.

The image shows a musical score for a band arrangement. It consists of five staves: Cl. in Bb (Clarinet in B-flat), two F Cimb (Cymbals), Tuba, and Drum Set. The music is in 4/4 time. The Cl. in Bb part has a melody that starts with a half note, followed by quarter notes, and then a half note with a slur. The F Cimb parts have a steady pattern of eighth notes. The Tuba part has a simple line of quarter notes. The Drum Set part has a pattern of snare and bass drum hits.

One of the main results in using this technique is that these melodies (for instance in movies like, I clown, 8½, Amarcord, Prova d'orchestra) acquire a somehow dark, mysterious color that fully match Fellini's surrealistic world.

An other important movie to mention is Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather; in this score Rota showed a great ability in merging Italian popular melodies with the orchestral sound (CD Ex.17). The result is an elegant and lyrical music with a popular flavor that perfectly matches the mood of the film.

The image shows a musical score for an orchestral arrangement. It consists of five staves: Vln. I (Violin I), Vln. II (Violin II), Vla (Viola), Celli (Celli), and Basses. The music is in 4/4 time. The Vln. I part has a melody that starts with a half note, followed by quarter notes, and then a half note with a slur. The Vln. II part has a simple line of quarter notes. The Vla part has a simple line of quarter notes. The Celli part has a simple line of quarter notes. The Basses part has a simple line of quarter notes.

What I described about Rota are the musical elements Elfman's used in his music:

- band music style (downbeat, offbeat rhythm and related harmony)
- quite simple textures with melancholic, dark, mysterious melodies
- elegant, melodramatic, lyrical melodies

The entire score of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is full of these elements:

- *This is Halloween*: accompaniment in band music style (in dark fashion)
- *Doctor Flinkestin/In The Forest*: at 0:28-1:16 accompaniments in band music style (with low brass)
- *Town Meeting Song*: accompaniment in band music style
- *Jack And Sally Montage*: at 2:48-3:52 accompaniment in band music style with a mysterious, lyrical melodies
- *Christmas Eve Montage*: at 1:20-1:54 accompaniment in band music style (dark, quirky)

As we will see in the classical music category the taste for low dark brass also comes from the Russian composer Sergey Prokofiev, and in a more elegant way from Dimitri Shostakovich.

Discussing about the creation and develop of melodic material, here is where I think Elfman has an extraordinary ability. If Rota has been a master (and as we

will see Orff and Shostakovich as well) for understanding what are beautiful melodies, he managed to interiorize all these elements and make his own material.

4 Classical Music

The last ingredients we are missing to complete our elements chart belong to the European cultured music and more specifically to the Russian masters. In the previous categories we explored how Elfman learned how to deal with bizarre/quirky music style, how he managed to utilize material from the swing era into a modern musical context, and where he developed his taste for background underscore and original melodies. What is left is to investigate the orchestration and the colors of the textures he creates. Before going into this topic we have to clarify Elfman's position on the orchestration matter itself. As we saw in the first category Elfman is a self-taught musician who learned by himself how to read and write music, but these acquired abilities are not related to the orchestration. In fact from the beginning of his career Elfman always relied on his orchestrator Steve Bartek for the orchestration of his music. The relationship between the two often is not clear and is important to clarify how it works, mainly because Elfman several times has been accused of not being able to write for orchestra and to rely on ghostwriters. Steve Bartek explains their team work in this way:

He has a perfectly working knowledge of music notation, because when I joined [Oingo Boingo], he had written [Oingo Boingo Piano Concerto One and a Half], fully handwritten for piano and small ensemble. He considers notation a problem for him, because [of] the fine points of dynamic markings, where they go exactly. He is not good at bass clef, but he does everything in treble clef with an octave marking so you know exactly where he wants it to sound [...]. His notation is not strictly normal, but for anybody who knows anything about notation, you can look at it and figure out what he's saying⁹.

From this statement is clear that Elfman knows what he wants from his music and from his orchestral parts, moreover we know that he composed with paper and pen during the 70's and after he switched to the DAW¹⁰. Nowadays he creates mockups in his studio and Steve Bartek translates his orchestral ideas in a real score that musicians can understand and play.

[...]I can write a fairly elaborate sketch—12, 14 or 16 staves of music—but I depend on my orchestrator, Steve Bartek, to put into a legitimate context¹¹.

Elfman orchestral style has been consistent even when he worked with different orchestrators, meaning that he has very clear idea of what kind of sound he

⁹ Kendall, Lukas, Steve Bartek, pp. 14-15

¹⁰ from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fg_L6Ui7xjs (Danny Elfman in his Home Studio)
from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=712ntdvBBTg> (Dany Elfman talks about his composition process)

¹¹ Doerschuk Scoring Batman, pp. 84

wants from his orchestral music. Now that this topic has been clarified we can assert that Elfman's created by himself his orchestral textures and colors. His orchestrator never added or changed anything in his scores.

Camille Saint Saëns is the first composer of this category we will examine and his provisions to Elfman's musical elements are very much related to the ones we saw for Bernard Herrmann. Here we have a **direct relation** of Saint Saëns in several songs of The Nightmare Before Christmas:

Classical Music

Camille Saëns-Saint

- ◆ Mood mix sad/happy that create an indeterminate/vague textur
- ◆ harmonic progressions: similar to Hermann's
- ◆ Modal/major/minor: no clear tonal center
- ◆ The use of bass strings

The Carnival of The Animals, Aquarium, 1887

The Nightmare Before Christmas

- ◆ Doctor Flinkestin/In the forest at 1:15-2:00
- ◆ Jack And Sally Montage, at 3:53-4:13
- ◆ Town Meeting Song Intro at 0:28-0:35
- ◆ Christmas Eve Montage at 1:55-2:02; 5:24-6:00

This example from The Carnival of The Animals shows a significant similarity on the musical elements we analyzed in Herrmann's music. The texture is mysterious and unstable and is a sort of cinematic texture ante litteram. It is possible that Herrmann studied Saëns-Saint and applied these elements to his music, but it is also possible that Elfman studied this very well known opera.

In this extract from the score we can see how the two crossed arpeggio in the pianos, plus the static voicing in the strings creates this mysterious texture, furthermore the flute plays a simple but effective theme that enhances the vagueness of the music (CD Ex.24).

N° 7 **Aquarium**

Andantino

FLÛTE
HARMONICA
1^{er} PIANO
2^d PIANO
1^{er} VIOLON
2^d VIOLON
ALTO
VIOLONCELLE

1^{er} PIANO
2^d PIANO
1^{er} Violon
2^d Violon
Alto
Violoncelle

interesting to note that it is the same rhythm used constantly by Nino Rota in his swing/band music. We have this texture in:

- *Sally's Lament, Wandering Jack*
- *Jack And Sally Montage*
- *Work in Progress*
- *Christmas Eve Montage*

Dimitri Shostakovich is one of the Russian composers that influenced Elfman the most (**direct relation**). Not only we can hear his mark in his underscores materials, but more importantly this is one of the composers, that along with Nino Rota, forged Elfman's melodic taste (CD Ex. 29-31).

Classical Music

Dimitri Shostakovich

- ◆ Instrumentation, orchestration, colors
- ◆ Elegance, especially in melodies: with Nino Rota he is an important reference point in the develop of his melodic style

- The nose, Extract, 1928
- Foxtrot, Jazz Suite No.1, 1934
- Waltz 2, Jazz Suite No.2, 1938

The Nightmare Before Christmas

- ◆ Jack's Lament at 0:59
- ◆ Town meeting
- ◆ Nabbed at 1:48
- ◆ Christmas Montage Eve at 4:00

There is also a relation between Shostakovich's Jazz album and Cab Calloway's music. In fact both Jazz Suites had been composed during the swing era and are a fusion between the classic American swing and the Russian orchestration, and it is not a coincidence that Elfman liked both styles. For an artist like him, that created his personal style mixing elements and musical genres, this conjunction results to be very useful when it comes to compose an always changing texture but also coherent at the same time.

The *Jack's Lament* theme (at 0:59) has several characteristics in common with the Waltz n°2 from the Jazz suite n°2. He kept the lyrical and elegance in the construction of the melody and also some of the orchestral colors.

Two others important melodies have been developed by using elements from Carl Orff's Carmina Burana, *O Fortuna* (CD Ex.32).

Classical Music

Carl Orff

- ◆ Modal melodies
 - ◆ Strong Rhythm: cross meter patterns
 - ◆ The use of low male voices
- Carmina Burana, O Fortuna, Extract, 1936

The Nightmare Before Christmas

- ◆ Jack's Obsession
- ◆ Making Christmas

Fag. 1.
 2.
 C.-fag.
 Cor. 1.
 3.
 2.
 4.
 Timp.
 Piat.
 CORO
 aut de - cres - cis, vi - ta de - te - sta - bi - lis nunc ob - du - rat
 aut de - cres - cis, vi - ta de - te - sta - bi - lis nunc ob - du - rat
 Pno. I
 Pno. II
 Viol. 1.
 2.
 Vie.
 Vcl.
 Cb.

Orff's score makes use of unisons (in two octaves) in the choir, cross meter patterns for strings, pianos, timpani and bassoons. All this texture has a considerable focus on the low register on the entire orchestra, keeping the middle register free to the choir; the result is a powerful orchestration with strong unison choir, and dark harmony with an odd rhythm. Elfman uses these elements

in a **direct relation** in his music: the power of Orff's choir with voices unison, timpani, low strings and brass. The beginning of *Jack's Obsession* has been composed using the cross meter patterns between timpani and the clock sound, creating the illusion of an odd meter, then the voices enter in unison in a vocal style very similar to Carmina Burana's *O Fortuna*.

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'Timpani' and features a bass clef with a 3/4 time signature. It contains six measures, each with a single dotted half note. The bottom staff is labeled 'Clock' and features a treble clef with a 3/4 time signature. It contains six measures, each with a quarter note followed by an eighth note beamed to the next quarter note.

The idea of creating odd meters is developed during the song, and at 0:28 the meter shifts to 4/4 but after a few bars, he uses a compound meter done by a bar of 3/4 plus one of 4/4; the result in an 7/4 meter, that destabilizes the ternary meter of the beginning.

An even more obvious use of these elements is the song *Making Christmas*. The song begins with a very dark texture with all the instruments in the low register, and the voices in unison. The meter seems to be in 4/4, but after the first few bars there is a bar in 9/4 and after one in 3/4, and this rhythmical shift continues throughout the entire song using other odd meters.

The last composer of this category is Sergey Prokofiev. Prokofiev's musical elements have a **non-direct relation** with Elfman's music but influenced his composition style, specifically in orchestral colors and textures (CD Ex. 33-36):

- angular melodies
- delicate dissonant harmonies (especially in woodwinds)
- the use of very low brass and strings in forte (specifically tuba and trombones)
- the use of low strings in staccato and marcato patterns
- delicate textures with woodwinds and pizzicato strings

Conclusions

These musical elements based analysis showed how a self-taught composer/musician has been able to use his imagination, hard work and ear to develop a unique style. In fact Elfman never copied from all the masters he learned, but has been always smart enough to blend and vary all the elements he took. This is also the reason why he has never specialized in one type of music and why his palette is much broader, and arguably more inventive than many of his contemporaries in the film music industry.

In my opinion *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is stylistically the 'broader' score Elfman has even written. As I showed in this paper there are many musical elements that converge here from different style, genre, era, and orchestral colors.

To answer to last question: "Why is *The Nightmare Before Christmas* so unique and memorable?" I believe that the sum of all these musical materials plus Elfman's great imagination and screen reading ability, are the reasons why *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is a masterpiece in his genre. Moreover he

succeeded to merge all these elements in a very fluent and harmonious way, respecting for the entire movie all the rules on scoring for picture and at the same time subverting them using a style that is a combination of all the elements previously analyzed.

Finally maybe the most important achievement in this score is the way Elfman managed to compose strong and memorable melodies in a so complex texture. All the complexity created by these elements disappear every time we hear a melody. One of the reason why all these melodies are so memorable and they work really well in the movie, is because Elfman understood really well Jack, the main character, and described him in a very intimate way; with every melody he characterized a different aspect of his personality using all the orchestral color at his disposal.

To conclude, in my opinion, the uniqueness of a score like *The Nightmare Before Christmas* has been possible thanks to the truly unique musical path the composer made in his life.

The Nightmare Before Christmas — Element's Chart

Musical - Animation

Rock - Swing

Film Music

Classical Music

Oliver Wallace

- ◆ **Free Inspiration**
- Alice in Wonderland, Extract 1, 1951
- Alice in Wonderland, Extract 2, 1951
- Alice in Wonderland, Extract 3, 1951

Leonard Bernstein

- ◆ There are only few elements in common with American and British musicals: rhythmic section, low brass, strings, piano and voices
- ◆ These musicals sounds too jazzy or too classical oriented
- West Side Story, Quintet, 1956
- Candide, 1956

Cab Calloway

- ◆ Frontman: swing style he rearranged Minnie the Moncher in Fehidden Zone
- ◆ Calloway music has been used for Betty Boop animation in the '30
- ◆ Clearly used as a reference for the Oogie Boogie song
- Minnie the Moocher, 1931
- Cab Calloway Snow-White, Betty Boop 1933

Frank Zappa

- ◆ Theatrical-orchestral rock arrangement
- ◆ The arrangement follows the lyrics
- ◆ Bizarre, with constant changes in every musical elements
- ◆ The use of silly voices in low and upper registers; extensive use of brass
- Easy Meat, Halloween Concert 1981
- Don't eat the yellow snow - Apostrophe, 1974
- Lets Make The Water-Turn Black, Make a Jazz Noise here, 1991
- Cletus Awretus-Awrightus - The Grand Wazoo, 1972

Ingo Boingo

- ◆ Elfman group from 1972 to 1995; he experimented bizarre arrangements and his personal approach to song writing
- ◆ Avantgard music in the '70s; rapid changes in several musical elements
- ◆ Transition from rock to New Wave in the '80s
- ◆ Tim Burton noted him when he saw "The forbidden Zone", and wanted him for his movies
- Live at Faustenburg - 1978
- Weird Science, Soundtrack - 1985

Bernard Herrmann

- ◆ Harmonic-melodic elements
- ◆ Underscore, mysterious textures
- ◆ Instrumentations: harp, piano, high strings
- Bernard Herrman - Mysterious Island, Cy Endfield, 1961
- Fahrenheit 451, Prelude, Francois Truffaut, 1966

Nino Rota

- ◆ Thematic elements; he developed from him his taste for lyrical/elegant melodies
- ◆ Styles: band music, mysterious textures
- ◆ Instrumentations: low brass, piano, strings,
- The Godfather: The pickup, 1972
- The Godfather: The Godfather Waltz, 1972
- The Godfather: II The immigrant, 1974

Forbidden Zone

- ◆ His first 2 cues; Tim Burton called him after has seen this movie
- ◆ Several Elfman composition elements converge here: swing, Rock, bizarre/avant-garde, the use of brass,
- Minnie the Moocher; Calloway-Elfman, 1980

John Harrison

- ◆ Piano, Female voice
- ◆ Harmonic movement
- ◆ Dark/quinky texture
- Creepshow, George Romero, 1982

Claudio Simonetti

- ◆ Organ, Female voice
- ◆ Harmonic progressions for horror textures
- ◆ Rock background
- Phenomena, Dario Argento, Extract, 1985

Camille Saint-Saëns

- ◆ Mood mix sad/happy that create an indeterminate/vague texture
- ◆ harmonic progressions: similar to Herrmann's
- ◆ Modal/major/minor: no clear tonal center
- ◆ The use of bass strings
- The Carnival of The Animals, Aquarium, 1887

Piotr Iljich Tchaikovsky

- ◆ Instrumentation, orchestration, sad-mood, harmonic Progressions
- ◆ The use of the harp and glockenspiel
- Romeo And Juliet, Extract, 1886
- The Nutcracker; Danse de la Fée Dragée, 1892

Igor Stravinsky

- ◆ Instrumentation, and rhythm specially in the low register; mix between an orchestra and a band
- ◆ The use of the piano in the low register
- ◆ Rapid changes in all the musical elements
- Petruska, Extract 4, 1911
- Petruska, Extract 5, 1911

Dimitri Shostakovich

- ◆ Instrumentation, orchestration, colors
- ◆ Elegance, especially in melodies; with Nino Rota he is an important reference point in the develop of his melodic style
- The nose, Extract, 1928
- FoxTrot, Jazz Suite No.1, 1934
- Waltz 2, Jazz Suite No.2, 1938

Carl Orff

- ◆ Modal melodies
- ◆ Strong Rhyth: cross meter patterns
- ◆ The use of low male voices
- Carmina Burana, O Fortuna, Extract 1, 1936

Sergei Prokofiev

- ◆ Heaviness in the orchestration
- ◆ Angular melodies
- ◆ Delicate textures with woodwinds and pizzicato strings
- Romeo and Juliet, Extract 1, 1940
- Romeo and Juliet, Extract 2, 1940
- Romeo and Juliet, Extract 3, 1940
- Romeo and Juliet, Extract 4, 1940

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