

Berklee College of Music

Murderer With The Mask

Thesis for Graduate Degree of Master of Music in
Scoring for Film, Television and Video Games

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Abstract

The 3-minute musical piece **Murderer with the Mask** is a very personal and intimate track, which reflects my musical personality in its truest sense, as of today. I have always been fascinated by Thriller and Horror movies and this track is a reflection of all those emotions, experiences and passion for such genre. The track is also a well-thought of and constructed score that incorporates methodical musical phrasing, experimental yet relatable motifs along with clichés that have been proven to amplify the desired emotion through decades of successful film scores. I am proud of my work on this score, since it incorporates analysis of dozens of scores, my Indian theoretical ideas of scales along with a professional film scoring approach. The pleasure of recording in one of the esteemed studios of Hollywood was the icing on the cake for this thesis. This piece has prepared me to take care of the complete end-end production of a music score for any media right from concept to final deliver.

Keywords: *film scoring, thriller movies, Indian scales, scoring process*

Acknowledgement

I am deeply grateful to each person or incident that has knowingly or unknowingly helped me in this journey. At the outset, I express outmost gratitude to my parents, relatives and friends whose support has been invaluable. I would like to thank all my professors from Berklee as well as other tutors and mentors (past and present) who have been extremely influential in my musical growth. Their support, teachings and discussions have been an eye-opener in multiple ways. Berklee has opened up new doors of possibilities for me and this wouldn't have happened without the support of my Professors, IT & Library staff, Management and everybody else who has chipped in with valuable lessons and learnings for me.

My gratitude is unfinished without the mention of the amazing technicians, engineers and musicians who have been a huge part in making my final thesis a success. The professionalism I experienced working them is synonymous to complete perfection. It gives me immense joy and pleasure to have got this opportunity and portraying this recording as one of my portfolio's masterpieces.

Introduction

Having come from an Indian musical background, I had minimum exposure to western orchestration and the production process. As I stepped into Berklee with a bag full of dreams and aspirations, I was also carrying a lack of self-belief and confidence. I was coming into this great musical school, trying to compete with fellow classmates, most of who had mastered their instrument by now. Also, I was a poor sight reader and I was trying to cope up with that. However, I strongly relied on my other musical abilities, which procured me a seat here.

As my journey started, I slowly grew accustomed to the environment and got into the program with relative ease. I was able to finish most of my assignments and recordings with supreme confidence and good quality. The course opened up my eye to various concepts regarding Production, Mixing, Orchestration, Scoring for Media, Conducting, Ear Training etc. The amount of knowledge and experience gained here has been invaluable.

I had always been fascinated by scores of legends like John Williams, Alexandre Desplat, A R Rahman, Illyaraja to name a few. I'm glad that my learnings and experience have paved a way for me to enter this humungous industry with a good skill set and confidence.

I'm confident that my final thesis "Murderer with the Mask" would be my strong selling point in the future and am grateful to everybody who has been part of this fantastic journey.

The Process

1. Locking the Video

When I went back to India during my winter break, I was positive on finalizing a video for my final recording. I wasn't too keen on getting a student project since the content quality was a priority for me. Hence, I started shortlisting various movie scenes I could possibly start working on. From the outset, I was narrowing down on Thrillers, which is the genre I most resonate with. After two weeks of research, I finally decided to re-score a neo-noir scene from an Indian murder mystery film *Dhuruvangal 16* (*D-16* in short, meaning *16 Exteremes*).

The video displays a classic neo-noir camera work supported with intense and precise editing. The visuals were extremely captivating and demanded a score that elevated the emotion and intensity that the scene carried.

The best part about choosing this video was that I could approach the director with my score for his movie scene, having recorded it with some of the best musicians in the business in AIR Studios, London. Having narrowed down on the video, I started editing it to suit a logical screenplay within the stipulated 3 minutes. By the end of the winter break, my video was ready and I could focus completely on the music.

2. Musical Research

As I plunged into the process of writing music, my first steps were referencing tracks of similar genre. I had a certain characteristic sound for each scene in my head, and that proved extremely useful in researching and analyzing existing scores. Many of my thematic ideas and ideas were inspirations drawn from these soundtracks:

I. “The First Victim” - Basic Instinct

I was drawn to dark and spooky nature of the track with minimal arrangements. It had a flute and clarinet playing in major thirds with a strong, yet subtle, string backing. This was a major influence in my opening theme.

II. “Neptune” - The Planets

The Woodwind sections have been beautifully written and bring an interesting colour and mood. The enigmatic texture was something I wanted to emulate.

III. “The Dark Mark” - Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

The Brass section speaks of the intensity and darkness the track carries. This piece was a heavy influence in my piece in terms of the sound I needed for most section of my score. The ostinatos and Brass arrangements depict a sense of tension, anxiety and motion that was an important element in my music as well.

IV. “The Adventure Continues” - The Adventures of Tintin

This track has been one of my all-time favourites and it was inevitable to not have this

as one of my references. The orchestral crescendo that John Williams uses time and again was very evident and was something I was immediately drawn to.

V. “The Car Chase” - Viento en Contra

Ostinatos carry the track throughout along with strong string lines with extremely crafted Brass backings. The ostinatos are broken with some really tense voicings that proved to be a great asset to analyze and draw inspiration from.

VI. “Broomsticks and Fire” - Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2

Th modulations speak highly of Desplat’s dexterity. Also, his unpredictable ostinatos that have uncommon accents are ear-catching and serve as a good musical dictionary for audiophiles and composers.

3. Themes and Motifs

As I sat for the first time to work on my score, the sound was crystal clear in my head. I was intended on churning out a good melody that could carry the scene, preferably using clear and reed tones that sounded soft yet eerie. I loaded a Flute patch and started working out various melodic ideas with possible harmonic structure. After a few trails and the typical composer's mind-block, I was happy with the intro theme I came up with.

The opening is a subtle, eerie melody in Woodwinds with a mild string support.

As I progressed, I backed it up with counterpoints in Woodwinds along with some low strings that added gravity and darkness as the scene fades into colour from B&W.

The theme conveys the precise emotion of Engima, that leads into the next section of brisk ostinatos.

The image shows a musical score for the 'Intro theme' section. It begins with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 77$ and a 'poco accel.' marking, which changes to $\text{♩} = 82$. The score is for a woodwind ensemble and strings. The woodwinds include Flute 1, Flute 2, Oboe 1, English Horn, Clarinet in B♭ 1, Clarinet in B♭ 2, and Bassoon. The strings are indicated by a 'p' marking at the bottom right. The score is marked with 'mp' (mezzo-piano) and 'poco' (poco) throughout. A large question mark is placed over the first few bars of the Flute 1 part. A box labeled 'A' is in the top right corner. The score is titled '4 Clicks into Bar 1' and 'Enigmatic'.

Figure 1. Intro theme.

The next section begins with a string ostinato and introduces a hint of the main theme in the Brass. The main theme is not fully developed here since it moves into a more rubato and romantic melody that later transcends back into the main theme with a bigger orchestration.

The image displays a musical score for brass instruments, including Horns (Hn. 1, Hn. 2-3), Trumpets (Tpt. 1, Tpt. 2), and Trombones (Tbn. 1, Tbn. 2). The score is written in treble clef for the Horns and Trumpets, and bass clef for the Trombones. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The tempo/mood is marked *mp* (mezzo-piano). The score shows a melodic line for the Horns and Trombones in unison, starting with a quarter note followed by eighth notes. A large, stylized number '3' is overlaid on the score, indicating a measure or section. The score is divided into three measures by vertical bar lines.

Figure 2. Main theme (primitive).

The melody is carried by mellow Horn tone (Horns and Trombones in unison) that serves as a subtle introduction to the main theme.

After a brief respite into a romantic mood, the track turns dark and this time, the main theme is brought out in an epic manner with a full Brass section. The motif portrays the character of the Antagonist, who is the central character of this whole piece. It does justice to the title “Murderer with the Mask” and characterizes elements of darkness, suspense and grandeur that symbolize the emotion that the audience experiences.

I worked with detailed attention on the main theme, since this defined my whole musical idea and would be re-iterated and presented in different forms throughout my piece. I also wanted the musicians and listeners to instantly connect to the theme.



Figure 3. Murderer with the Mask

The **b9** colour at the end, adds a spice to the cadence, bringing in intense tension when the listener would expect a complete resolution. A low Tuba gives the depth required along with the complete harmonic structure visible in the score below.

The image shows a musical score for the 'Main Theme'. It is written for a woodwind and brass ensemble. The instruments listed are Horn 1, Horns 2-3, Trumpets 1-2, Trombones 1-2, Baritone Trombone, and Tuba. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 108. The score is divided into four measures. The woodwinds (Horn 1 and Horns 2-3) play a melodic line starting in the third measure, marked *mf* and *f*. The trumpets (Tpt. 1 and Tpt. 2) play a similar melodic line, also marked *mf* and *f*. The trombones (Tbn. 1 and Tbn. 2) play a supporting bass line, marked *f* and *mf*. The Baritone Trombone (B. Tbn.) and Tuba play a similar supporting bass line, marked *f* and *mf*. The score includes dynamic markings (*mf*, *f*) and articulation marks (accents, slurs). The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 7/8.

Figure 4. Main Theme

There is a shift in the gear as the scene gets more intense and frightful with the murderer taking out his gun. A sudden tempo and meter change along with brassy accents accentuate the anxiety and implant fear. The theme here has few augmented seconds that deviate from norms and give a distinct melodic texture. As it grows, the listener is tricked into a softer section that syncs to close-up shots of the kidnapped lovers. The mood is crafted playfully using Woodwind melodies that lead into the next section.

This motif is a fast-paced chase music and goes in tandem with the visuals. The triplets are cliché to many Hollywood scores and help in instantly connecting with the audience. The motif is recognizable as a pattern, yet has my own personality to it.

The image shows a musical score titled "Pursuit" in a box. It consists of eight staves of music. The first four staves are for a string quartet (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello/Double Bass), and the last four are for a woodwind section (Flute, Clarinet, Bassoon, and Contrabass). The music is characterized by a fast, rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, with many of these notes grouped into triplets. The dynamic marking *mf* (mezzo-forte) is present at the beginning of each staff. The score is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat major or D minor) and a 2/4 time signature. The overall feel is energetic and driving, typical of a chase sequence in a film score.

Figure 5. Chase music

The next section grows bigger and massive with whole notes that go in complete sync with the bullet shots from the murderer and other significant visual hit points. The grandeur of the sound is established with strong voicings and a progressive chord movement. A small ostinato phrase, with a re-introduction of the main theme, connects to the next section.

The ultimate chase scene is well supported by a constant ostinato that grows as a crescendo dynamically and in terms of the orchestra. The effect is a classic step-by-step intensity rise that hits a peak and finally leads into the climax of the score.

The climax is a tense, complex cluster of different textures and tones that collectively produce musical goosebumps. This was the most difficult part of my entire composition, which demanded a complicated build of tension that modulates into the next section without ambiguity. After going through a number of references and experiments on various chord progressions, I was able to come up with this bridge that formed a very important part of the scene, post the climax. I have incorporated a technique of “tritone substitution” to achieve this effect.

The last section was the final piece in the puzzle and it fit perfectly as an epic conclusion and builds up to lead into a grand closure with tutti. I was initially finding a way to use the tutti without sounding too cliché; and I finally came up with a counter melody in Altered scale that few of the instruments play, to support the lead melody. The main theme comes back in the end, as a closure to the score, with a tense and unresolved harmony.

The image displays a musical score for the ending of a main theme, consisting of ten staves. The score is organized into four measures. The first measure begins with a large, bold number '3' on the left side, indicating a triplet. The first staff starts with a dynamic marking of *f* (forte) and contains a triplet of eighth notes. The second staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a time signature of 3/8, also marked with *f*. The third staff continues the triplet with a dynamic marking of *f*. The fourth staff begins with a dynamic marking of *f* and contains a triplet of eighth notes. The fifth staff starts with a dynamic marking of *f* and contains a half note. The sixth staff begins with a dynamic marking of *f* and contains a half note. The seventh staff starts with a dynamic marking of *f* and contains a half note. The eighth staff begins with a dynamic marking of *f* and contains a triplet of eighth notes. The ninth staff starts with a dynamic marking of *f* and contains a half note. The tenth staff begins with a dynamic marking of *f* and contains a half note. The final measure of the score is marked with *ff* (fortissimo) and contains a triplet of eighth notes. The score concludes with a double bar line.

Figure 6. Main theme - Ending

4. Recording in AIR Studios

Probably the biggest motivation and defining factor in this entire process was the experience of recording our cues with some of the best musicians in the industry in one of the best studios in the world. The fact that we would be conducting in the same room as where some of the legends have been in, gave us goosebumps.

Recording in London was always a dream and has been a highlight of this course. The entire program was designed to prepare us for this ultimate experience that would turn out to be a big portfolio for each of us, an experience that we would remember for lifetime.

As the composition got into its final form, I started working on nuances of the score in terms of harmony, dynamics and playability. From past experiences, I realized that the parts are more important than the score itself, since those are the seeds of a good harvest. The biggest challenge for me was to come out of the composer's shell and think like a player. Thanks to feedback from my professors and classmates, I was able to produce great parts which were performed beyond expectations by the artists. Not to forget, we also had a great team of engineers and technicians to support us with amazing studio gears.

The recording by itself was a magical period of time. I relished standing on the podium with the baton and conducting for 18 minutes. The sound resonated throughout the studio and it was very different from the output in the control room. I surprised myself with the composure I carried and the ease with which the recording took place; there was definitely a big contribution from the engineer Jake Jackson and my producers who made the experience exceedingly smooth.



Figure 7. Conducting in AIR Studios, London

As I finished my piece, I was extremely contented with the output. The satisfaction of a dream turn into reality is something we rarely experience; and I'm glad Berklee helped me achieve it.

5. Mixing

Considering my reputation as a good mixing engineer, I was confident of delivering the best sound I could from the materials I had. As they say, a great mix only comes from a great recording.

As I started with my mix, I realized how well it already sounded from a great room along with excellent gears and experienced engineers. The mics captured the true essence of the performance and the room, which resonated well with the mood my piece was carrying. I had great takes and it was way easier to make an edit and come up with the most seamless and best performance. Jake's reference mix was a huge inspiration to push myself to deliver a better balance in the post-production mix.

The mixing process was great fun; I realized how very different it was from my MIDI mockup. The recording brought a whole new dimension to my piece and in a lot of places, it was sounding as professional as any Hollywood track that I had referenced before.

Conclusion

As I take a deep breath and look back at the whole process, I realize that I have been burrowed so deeply into it, that life starts feeling a little empty now. The CE process was quite intense and took a toll on most of us. However, I do realize that most of professional life is going to be similar and this experience prepared us well for the same.

It has also been a huge learning curve to compose, produce, conduct and mix at a highly professional level. This experience has also made me appreciate and contemplate my music better instead of being too harsh and judgmental. Probably, the biggest learning I could take is to appreciate and learn from different composers and accept criticism in a positive way.

I have come in terms with the fact that I would need to bid adieu to the Berklee life and look forward to my next phase. I am excited to take this experience forward and share it with fellow composers and artists. I hope I can give back to the industry as much as I have gained from it. I am deeply grateful to the kind of support and community I have been able to build from the Berklee experience.

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