

Berklee College of Music

Spring: Self-Reflection Through Rescore

Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Degree of
Master of Music in Scoring for Film, Television, and Video Games

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to compose a score to a picture to be recorded at Air Studio in London at the end of the academic year. This paper includes the process I went through from searching for a collaborating video to mixing and delivering the final mix, and a sincere reflection of myself as a composer and a human being. This project is to ascertain the fulfilment of Degree of Master of Music in Scoring for Film, Television and Video Games at Berklee College of Music.

Keywords: composition, film scoring, orchestration, recording, self-reflection

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To Air Studio, for granting me the most incredible experience of not only being in one of the world's most prestigious recording studio but also live for a day the life of the composers who we all aspire to be.

Lastly, to my dear Jiana, who, despite being apart across the Atlantic Ocean with six hours of time difference, always supported me in every way one could ever ask so that I can focus on the path I took.

1. Introduction

I must admit that when I first thought of applying to Berklee Valencia, I was very insecure of myself as to whether I had what it takes to pursue further career in composition, much less qualify to be a graduate student at Berklee. Even when I received the acceptance letter from the administration's office, what struck me harder than the sheer excitement of being accepted was the question of "How did I get in?" Frankly, I ask the question from time to time even to this day, only few weeks left until graduation.

As an extension of said low self-esteem, I faced with every assignment the most classical dilemma all composers face for any project: How am I going to do this? I knew very little of the realm of scoring to picture, and therefore every assignment was a dual challenge of learning new material and fulfilling the requirement at the same time. Naturally, some works took much longer to finish than I would have preferred, and many did not quite satisfy myself. Though I was aware many classmates come from different levels of educational and professional proficiency, their music all sounded much better to mine. It took a while to convince myself that while modesty may be a virtue, it does no benefit if it turns into a discouragement that prevents the desire to push forward.

In a way, the final recording for the Culminating Experience project is a resolution to break through the wall of that harmful modesty, as well as a journey through which I had the opportunities to discover my strength and weakness to improve and to fix. Essentially, all the work that culminated into the final recording that took place in Air Studio is a lesson, in which I learned what I have accomplished thus far and what I want to accomplish in the future as a composer.

2. Decision Making

During the time at Berklee I tried to be fast with decision making, whether it is for an in-class activity or an assignment to be recorded in AKSS or Aula Magistral. For the most part I feel rather accomplished that I could make quick decisions since I was always more of the indecisive one. For a while I even felt confident that I had overcome one of my old habits that I wanted to get rid of.

It is without a doubt these kinds of moments when one succumb to one's old faults. Determining what I want to do for the final project took much longer than the time it took for me to decide on any other assignments I had to do combined. I am not sure what caused the drawback on being prompt with the decision process. Perhaps it was due to being truly stuck with finding what to do, or maybe it was because of my misconception that I had a lot of time left before I felt the need to be proactive with the project.

All these led me to realize once again that to make proper decisions in a timely fashion I need to be extremely conscious of what I am doing as well as what I will be doing. It also means that I must be fully aware of the consequences I face when I fail to complete or fulfill a task in any nature. Because I was not as thoughtful as I should have been with setting up a plan, I was always chased by the clock; because I did not allow myself enough time for safety, I had to go through such mental stress whenever something turned out wrong or different or impossible.

3. Obstacles

Finding a video to score to was already a challenge when I really got in motion with proceeding with the project. I had originally sought out for an opportunity to score an original project, since I had no prior scoring experience for a personal project. With my hopes high, I started contacting educational institutions, inquiring whether there may be any ongoing projects that need original score. My initial desire was to find a short animation film director, be it an indie director or a student, so that I can utilize this opportunity as a springboard for networking. There were, however, some oversights on my part during this process.

I had plans to go back to South Korea after graduation, and bearing that in mind I had limited my search to institutions in South Korea and the neighboring countries only. Thinking back now, I do not quite understand what my reasoning was for this strategy. There is no guarantee that I will only be working in South Korea in the near or the distant future, and even so it is not detrimental to know people from different places anyhow. In addition, there was the issue of different academic calendars. Whereas at Berklee we start the school year in September, South Korean schools start their school year in March; in the case of Japan it was beginning of April. Thus, when I first reached out to the universities in these countries back in January, all of them were in winter break. There was then some communication from mid-March onward, but collaboration with them did not happen because there was no ongoing or planned project that has even a rough cut for me to work on in time for the London recording. I had to shift my focus of search and begin to look for materials to rescore, and that is when I was introduced to Blender.org, an online community of animation makers, and ultimately ended up working with the short animation *Spring*.

When I finally found *Spring*, it was like a rain shower at the end of a long drought. However, composing to the picture proved to be incredibly more difficult than I had imagined

it to be. One of the main reason why I fell in love with this animation was because I was searching for something I was not too familiar or comfortable with. For most of my life as a musician I have always been more attracted to the quieter, calmer, and more harmonious kind of music. Only after coming to Berklee did I encounter the term “Epic Music,” and I have been subconsciously avoiding chances to compose something that I am a stranger to. I wanted to seize this opportunity to urge myself to at least taste the experience of musical expansion: anxious chase scene, harmonic clusters, and big, full sound of the whole orchestra. Naturally, with these personal objectives in addition to the given requirements, the CE project became the most challenging task I ever had to do with almost no composure with respect to time.

4. Composition

As for all composition I approach, I tried to come up with the thematic material first. My philosophy as a composer is that no matter how complex in idea and how skillfully written a cue is, it is an unsuccessful music if the listeners cannot remember it. The problem was in this particular cue I have chosen to score, there are two drastically different scenes that I considered the significant ones: the chase scene and the triumphant scene. I wanted to write a cohesive piece of music in which different parts of the video are still connected by the music through resemblance in the musical material.

I encountered writer's block, and decided to look for some references for inspiration. I looked at the work of the big composers who everyone would go to, such as John Williams, Hans Zimmer, and Howard Shore. I felt recharged with sources and went to write the section for the chase scene. Only during my office hour with Vicente did I realize that the portion I was influenced by the reference music was dangerously similar to the reference music itself. I had to scratch the entire chase scene section of the music and start all over, and it was already less than a month left until the recording.

Thinking back, I am glad that I had that meeting with Vicente to realize the danger in the path I was going. It was extremely embarrassing at the time, and I felt terrible that I had wasted his time. Nevertheless, because of the sincere and keen input he gave me, I was able to reestablish my state of mind and focus on writing my music. Eventually I applied the main theme I have in the very beginning as well as in the triumphant section on top of the rhythmic elements I had assigned to the chase scene. One crucial advice from Vicente was that even fast, rhythmic section should have a recognizable melody, and certainly having the derived theme in the scene added intensity and action.

5. Recording at Air Studio

The recording session for me had already begun from the preparation stage of it. I still vividly remember the intense atmosphere in the library during the days all SFTV students had access to the special papers to print the parts on. It was also the first time I saw that many SFTV students in the library all at once without a class being held in there. It felt good. I felt like although everyone is working on their individual projects, we were working as a team; some were helping others with proofreading the scores for one last time, while others were helping with the taping of the parts, and all this made me proud that I am a member of this group. The printing did take forever since thirty people were trying to print out of three printers, and taping the scores continued until I reached London, but at least it was an uncommon experience where I felt my heart pounding of excitement, not from nervousness.

That lasted about three days, and the recording day came. All the excitement I felt turned into fuel for mental breakdown, and no matter how hard I tried I could not rid myself of the doubt that my music is not worth the devotion and attention everyone would give to it once the recording had started. I had a lot of time at hand on that day because I was there from the beginning at 10:00AM and my recording was second-last of the day at around 4:00PM. It was a great privilege to listen to everyone's culmination of their year at Berklee, but after each recording that took place I became incrementally nervous. It reached the point where I was not even aware that when I placed the parts to the corresponding stands for the musicians a viola part – it had to be the viola – slipped through and was stuck in my conductor score. I can still feel the sensation of my blood going cold as I write about it. Fortunately, I was able to get the parts to the players just before the recording took place, but that to me was definitely an omen.

With the baton in my hand and the headphones on my head, I stood on the podium in front of the world-renowned players and introduced myself. Then the clicks came through, and the recording started. I had already anticipated that the first take would have some rough spots since it is the first time the players are seeing the parts. Even so, I became devastated when the fast section of the cue seemed to be more troublesome than I had expected. I could not figure out whether it was because of the bowing I had or had not assigned properly, or the tempo is too fast, or I was not conducting in sync with the click. In these kinds of events, I discovered that I stop looking at the musicians as I conduct and just stare at the score, which I practiced so much not to do. I had hoped this experience to be a moment of communion with the great players and be immersed in creating the music. Instead, for the most part of the recording it was a struggle to shake off the sensation that I had failed miserably, just as I had worried.

I could barely stand after the recording was over. My head was completely blank, and all the kind words from everyone about how great it the recording session had went and how beautiful the music sounded, I felt only disappointment about myself. All the things I could have done better or differently went through in my head. What do I do now? What can I do? Can I do anything at all? I tried to stay as optimistic as possible for the rest of the evening, but I could hardly fall asleep that night, reliving the experience over and over again.

6. Mixing the Audio

The matter of mixing to me is always a puzzle without a how-to-guide. There are tools I can use to manipulate certain frequencies to make the music sound more balanced (or so have I been taught this year), and it is totally up to me as to what and how I want to use these tools. For the most part I admit I am doing more of what I have been taught to do than what pleases my ears. Trying to remember all that I have been instructed with, I collaged the best portion of the best recordings done by the best artists.

The recorded material was already fantastic even before being mixed. I was more concerned that the more I add to the mixing process the more detrimental it would be to the music. That is why when I had the mixing advising session with Pablo Schuller, I was surprised to hear him say that he finds the mix I did generally well done. Naturally, there were few things that could have been done that Pablo showed me during this session, some of which were only few clicks. The difference it makes, however, is what I believe makes him a professional. What took me hours to figure out took him seconds, and for each issue he thought there was he had instant solution to fix it. I understand that this comes from his many years of experience as a professional mixing engineer and I do not intend to insult him in any manner by what I have said, but it was truly other-worldly.

There was one thing Pablo told me that made me feel a bit better. He said not to worry too much about frequency curves and make the music sound good. As long as it sounds as beautiful as it can be, it does not have to be mechanically perfect mix. Mixing was the one friend that I could never get close to, even though I really want to. Since I never had any experience with the technical aspect of mixing prior to Berklee, I could get to understanding what certain plug-ins do but not to the level of being able to apply them comfortably by knowing what I am doing. It took more time and effort than composing, and it was more

stressful than any work I have done because the outcome of the work I put in was barely noticeable. I would tweak something here and wiggle something there until I felt like it got to where I wanted it to, and without any assurance of what I am doing is right I would finalize my work. Pablo's words at least gave me a ray of hope that what I have been doing is not for nothing.

7. Reflection

At this point of the paper, I started to wonder what I am really trying to say by writing this wordy, anecdotal memoir of the past year. Am I trying to complain about how difficult the last ten months were? Am I trying to make excuses for myself in case the teachers do not like my final composition? Am I writing this just because I am required to do it to get my degree? While the last question is partially true (as stated in the title page), I feel that there is a valuable point in this paper.

In the 21st century, everyone lives a busy life without much time for examining oneself. I argue that analyzing our own condition is crucial in living a satisfying life. In order to feel accomplished, we have to find what it is that we have accomplished. This is much easier said than done, especially nowadays. We are always thriving for results. We aim our focus on the goal and run straight at it. Once we have cleared the objective, we move directly on to the next one. In the repeated cycle of this life, we become bankrupt of things to give ourselves a pat on the shoulder.

So I took a pause in writing and thought of what it is that I have accomplished. There are three things that I realized. The first and the second are more cliché, that I learned more from the process rather than from the result and that I learned more from what I failed on than what I was successful in. The third one caught me off guard, and it was that I learned more things than I expected in ways I was not even paying attention. I may not have succeeded in managing my time in the beginning, but I managed to work under time crisis; I failed to conduct as perfectly as I had prepared at Air, but at least I was able to disguise myself and not appear as if I am having a nervous breakdown; I may not be a technical ninja with mixing and mastering, but at least during the time I spent at Berklee I developed a pair of ears that can distinguish what sounds good and what sounds bad.

In the end, it is all relative. I am nor will I ever be someone else. Putting myself in someone else's shoes should be to understand their situation and dilemma, not to try to play catch up with that person. I now realize a lot of my frustrations come from comparing myself to others. I should have been aware that I have my own pace of learning and my own level of expertise, and not try to compare to others who are better than me; if they are better, almost always it is because they have spent more time learning it and have more experience doing it.

8. Epilogue

It has been a journey: A journey I had never expected that I could be a part of, a journey full of discovery and new experiences, a journey I learned where I excel and where I fall behind, and a journey that reminded me once again of what I really yearn to do. I made many great friends along the way, and I am proud and honored to be able to call them my friends and to be their friend. I met many mentors alongside as well, who at times were not all gentle but always for the best for me. If there is anything to regret, it would be of the fact that maybe I could have given more than what I thought as my very best. I am certain that at the time I was convinced that I am going at full capacity, but now I feel some of it may have been self-justification to be done with what I was working on.

To me, the journey the girl in *Spring* goes through is much like my life. The past year has been the chasing – or being chased – scene; I lived relentlessly without holding back for the first time in my life, and through the obstacles and challenges I finally made it out of the woods. In a couple of weeks, I will be walking along my classmates proudly and gloriously to celebrate what I have achieved during the past year. I will look back to this moment one last time before I leave, and, just like the end, all this will become one recollection in my life.

All this may feel like a dream once I leave Spain and go back home. Life as I had wished may never come to be true, but now I have no fear of facing the uncertain. I am already in full throttle, and stopping now means than taking a detour; it is shipwreck. For that, I am grateful to Berklee. I can finally stop wondering between decisions to make.

No turning back. Full speed ahead.

So here is how it ends. Choistory at Berklee. It was a year full of delightful events and memories, and I hope to maintain all the relationships I have built with classmates and teachers.