

Berklee College of Music

**Going Forward:
A Foundation for Future Career Endeavors**

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of
Master of Music in Scoring for Film, TV, and Video Games

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Abstract

The 'Culminating Experience' for all graduate programs at Berklee Valencia embodies an emphasis on real-world experience, which is what distinguishes it from a research-based Master's Thesis. The following is an analysis and reflection on my process of creating and producing the final product that is associated with this Culminating Experience, which is a 3-minute musical cue that accompanies a work of visual media, recorded with a 51-piece orchestra at AIR Studios in London.

In May 2018, I was faced with a difficult but very exciting decision to make. Two paths were laid out in front of me, both equally compelling but quite different from one another. One would take me to New York City, to enroll in the Master of Music program for Music Theory and Composition: Screen Scoring at NYU. The other was Berklee Valencia's MM: Scoring for Film, TV, and Video Games, on the other side of the pond. While it is likely that I would have found either choice a very positive experience, I knew that it was very important to consider, in a highly practical sense, exactly what I would get out of each program by the end other than a diploma. In the four years since I had graduated, I had come to realize that in the professional world and in life, experience almost always beats knowledge.

I didn't have this consideration at the forefront during my undergrad years, earning a BFA in Music Composition. Though I consider the conservatory-style theoretical training I received a great privilege and asset, hardly any of it was focused on cultivating a career in the modern world, at least one that's outside of academia. This was ultimately the main reason I decided to come to Berklee over NYU. I realized that my overall goal of going to grad school revolved around practical experience as opposed to theoretical knowledge and research. It was meant to serve as a foundation for professional confidence and expertise.

Phase 1: Finding Material to Work With

Before I had any idea what footage I would score, I came up with a few broad aims of what I wanted to achieve with the music. The most fundamental of these was that I wanted the piece to be able to stand on its own (that is, to be enjoyable without also watching the images). This is usually a secondary concern for a film composer, by definition. Seeing as how this was a much more personal project, however, and for my benefit alone, I felt that it was a valid goal.

Indeed, my favorite scores of all are the ones that I can listen to independently, or in other words, scores that can also work as concert music. Admittedly, I'm rather biased to compose music in this way, as that was the focus of my Bachelor's Degree. This alone narrowed down the potential films I could score by quite a bit, as many genres and styles don't benefit from music that demands anything more than subconscious awareness. It likely meant that dialogue would have to be very minimal, and it would be more action-based. I also hoped to have something with a dynamic narrative arc, with moments of highs and lows.

Another aim was to create something that was accessible to a relatively wide audience, something that can be appreciated by those who aren't necessarily well-versed in orchestral music or film. I felt that the best way for me to achieve this would be to find something that would let me stay in my wheelhouse, which employs a tonal, lyrical and often fantastical melodic and harmonic language. It's a language that, while perhaps a little old-fashioned and derivative, is hopefully an intriguing and entertaining synthesis of my influences. It is partially intended to sound vaguely familiar or nostalgic, with moments of satisfying catharsis as well as unexpected turns. The best compositions are those that are aware of the audience's expectations, and deftly switches between fulfilling and deliberately subverting them. My compositional style has always favored the realm of fantasy and escapism more than realism and truth, and while of course it is possible, ideally, to achieve both simultaneously, I am generally much more interested in creating art that entertains rather than intellectually stimulates. With this in mind, I considered the most logical "canvas" would be an animated short; animated because it typically relies on purely visual storytelling and often allows the music to have a leading role, and short because I wanted a relatively complete and self-contained story arc that was as close to the maximum time of 3 minutes as possible.

I acknowledge that it would have been more “real-world” and arguably more artistically honorable to find original content that had not already been scored. By chance, however, through the magic of YouTube’s algorithm for recommending videos, I came across a clip of a 2002 live-action sci-fi action film starring Guy Pearce, *The Time Machine*, directed by Simon Wells (great grandson of the author H.G. Wells, who wrote the book on which the film is based), and scored by Hans Zimmer’s protégé Klaus Badelt. I was well aware of the film already, and remembered first seeing it in when it was in theaters with my father when I was 10 years old, but it had been many years since I had thought about it. The 3-minute scene involves a scientist from 1899 traveling to 2030 in a time machine that he built. He observes the world around him rapidly changing through the passage of time. At a certain point, he drops a locket containing a picture of his deceased fiancé and helplessly watches as it ages out of existence. At the end of the clip, there is a 30-second continuous zoom out, from ground-level on Earth all the way out to a futuristic lunar base. This shot in particular adds a very large scope to the otherwise localized scene. The idea of scoring this clip as if it were its own short film intrigued me, because I realized that the greater context isn’t necessary to understand what is going on.

Themes celebrating optimism for the future and the progress of mankind can be powerful and inspiring. They allow for big, cinematic orchestration, which is what I was most interested in exploring at Air Studios.

Phase 2: Composition

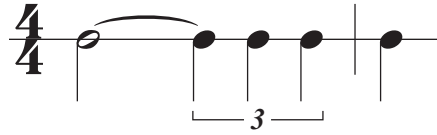
After deciding on *The Time Machine*, my process of scoring began by simply watching the scene over and over again, dozens of times, to find the rhythm of the visual cues and thus an appropriate tempo for the piece. Though, technically, the scene is just a man sitting in a chair,

the number of edits, combined with the rotating motion of the machine, combined with the time-lapse animation that surrounds it suggest a relatively fast tempo, at least fast enough to represent progress and moving forward.

I always put a lot of thought into the titles of my compositions, and it is usually quite difficult for me. This was not the case for “Going Forward” which I had named even before I had written a single note. It was taken from the title of the YouTube clip (but, fortunately, not the name of the corresponding track by Klaus Badelt on the official soundtrack album). It’s simple and elegant, and perfectly describes the scene. Obviously, the character is literally going forward in time, but he’s also figuratively moving on, leaving behind the life he had in 1899. The visual storytelling with the picture of his deceased fiancé in the locket works well to convey exposition, and is largely the reason the scene can work as a standalone short film. From the first two shots alone, it’s clear he cherishes the memory of her, and is doing what he does because of her.

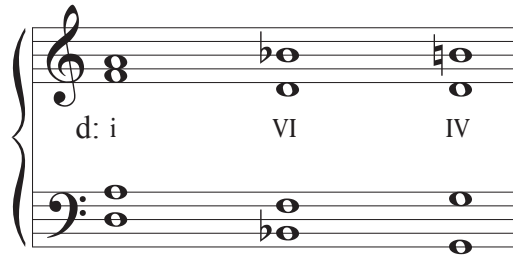
Knowing that the music would be grand and epic by the end, I wanted to start off as quietly as possible so that there was room to build. Sustained violin harmonics can be an effective tool in generating anticipation, and I decided to add portamento for a synth-like effect. Superimposed over this, on the downbeats of bars 1 and 3, are rhythmic clusters of glockenspiel, harp, celeste, and piano, which was intended to be a loving homage to Alan Silvestri’s *Back to the Future*, a score that has greatly influenced me. During the mixing process, I also decided to add some sampled choir to highlight the mystical side of time-travel and give the piece a Danny Elfman flavor. In addition, a simple pitch-bended synth was included for a sci-fi sheen. It was important to be relatively subtle with the electronic elements, however, as the start of the clip begins in the 19th century, and their use could be considered anachronistic.

In bar 6, the main rhythmic motif that will occur throughout the piece is established:



The offbeat (or displaced) triplet provides a distinguishing rhythmic hook that the audience can easily remember. It does this by disrupting the pulse, which was originally established as quarter notes by the staggered entrances in bars 4 and 5. This makes it feel like a polyrhythmic 3-against-2, which is somewhat disorienting, and contributes to an overall feeling of mysterious exoticism, foreign and unknown, as if the machine is about to take the character (and audience) to some distant alien world (which it is, effectively).

In bars 7 and 8, the main harmonic progression that will occur throughout the piece is established:



The two major chords and the rising soprano voice provide a feeling of optimism, but the non-diatonicism of the IV chord maintains some of the mysterious intrigue. Chromaticism in voice-leading is a compositional virtue of mine, and the use of IV in a minor key is a classic method I use for achieving it. In this case, the ascending chromatic line in the top voice is used to represent forward progress of both the character in the scene as well as mankind as a species. The major chords serve as strong sync points of the cue, highlighting the two shots of the machine powering up. The machine itself is beautifully designed, and the sight of it lighting up with a fantastical blue glow is one to behold, which is what the sustained chords were meant to allow.

At bar 10, the piece locks into its stride and officially enters compound metre, with the fundamental rhythmic unit being a sextuplet:



This figure was inspired, specifically, by John Paesano’s score for the Spiderman video game (2018) as well as the piano accompaniment in Schubert’s Lied *Gretchen am Spinnrade* (1814), but it can also be found in countless other instances. Though the 12/8 metre suggests a pulse of 4 per bar, the essential unit is the sextuplet, which is why I ended up conducting it in 2. I decided to leave the click track in 4, however, to keep the musicians as tight as possible, as there were subtle changes in tempo (<2 bpm) to hit the sync points with precision. I also felt it was necessary to keep the quarter notes, now used for the offbeat triplets, rhythmically tight.

The foreground features the piccolo, whose melody employs the offbeat triplet first heard in bar 6. Because the machine in the film was designed with a steampunk aesthetic, I wanted the piccolo to sound like an airy steam whistle, almost as if it could have been a sound coming from the machine itself. It is used in a question-answer dialogue with the low strings and brass from bar 10 to 18. The thick, heavy bass chords answer the light and agile piccolo with a reiteration of the VI – IV progression, each time louder and with more body to raise intensity.

The melodic answer to the piccolo’s question is given to the 1st horn:



This strong thematic material, which also uses the offbeat triplet motif, greatly affects the overall narrative vibe of the piece, and sounds as if it could be the head motive of a theme for a

superhero. I didn't intend to play so much into the idea of the scientist character as a hero going on an adventure when I first decided to score this scene, but that is what ended up happening, for better or worse. The fact that I was scoring the scene as if it was its own short film allowed me the artistic freedom to contextualize it however I wanted.

The flute and piccolo are given the sextuplet figure beginning in bar 18 to add a breathiness to the timbre as the bass temporarily drops out. Underneath them a crescendo with muted trumpets builds tension to the downbeat of bar 23. This downbeat is a hard sync point in which the spherical blue bubble that surrounds the machine appears and is punctuated with an accented hit for timpani and bass drum.

The sextuplet figure is transposed to G Major here (bar 23), adding brightness and hope to the mood. Meanwhile, the low brass and strings are given a bold melodic gesture, which uses the offbeat triplet and ascending minor second:



It is quite reminiscent of the Rivendell theme composed by Howard Shore for Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films:



The orchestration I used, however, is much bolder with the low brass, and like the horn theme in bar 12 and 17, makes it sound as if it could accompany a superhero film. This is emphasized by the fact that it lands on the cut of a close-up of the scientist's face as he looks up, framing him as a heroic astronaut about to lift off. The full brass section is then used in a

crescendo that builds to an abrupt silence in bar 31, which is the precise moment that he begins to travel forward.

There is quite a bit of tension and forward motion built up by this point, but there are still 2 minutes left. The three full beats of silence essentially bring the piece to a complete halt, and forces it to start building momentum again from zero. In bar 33, the violins are given the sextuplet motor, now in a descending pattern, starting from the ultra-quiet pianississimo and very gradually getting louder. The glockenspiel plays with them in unison for a sparkly metallic texture. While the flutes recall the offbeat triplet in parallel thirds that was sung by the violins in the opening section, the bassoon is given an espressivo melody in its high register:



The slightly weak-sounding tone of the bassoon in this range brought a certain innocence to the timbre. The trio of horns then fade in on a shot of a spider web coming into focus, and subsequently are used in a fanfare-like figure for the shot of the sky as it rapidly alternates between day and night.

After the camera is pulled outside of the greenhouse, we see the cycle of seasons. As the flowers on the outside foliage bloom, the orchestration opens up, with the main melody going back to the violins:



This is the full development of the offbeat triplet in thirds motif, and could be considered the “chorus” of the piece. The 8-bar theme is meant to represent the impermanence of all things, how everything must come to an end to make room for new life and ideas. There is a bitter sweetness to it, yet it is ultimately optimistic in character. After the snow comes and goes, the foliage can bloom once again.

Back inside the greenhouse, the music cadences back to the tonic of b minor, and a new section begins, depicting the progression of human technology and culture. The scientist observes how the man-made environment around him develops with the advent of the automobile. He also watches mannequins in a clothing store window model the evolution of fashion. The tone of this section is also decidedly optimistic, with light, agile staccato eighth notes in the woodwinds, warm brass, and rich ‘soaring’ strings. The harmony brings back the i, VI, and IV chords, but this time the progression is i – IV – VI – IV.

The downbeat of bar 78 syncs to the shot of the picture in the locket slip out of the scientist’s hand. This section is the most dramatic moment of the sequence. A pizzicato note in the cello and bass adds impact to the locket bouncing off the floor of the machine, and a sforzando piano b minor 9 chord lands when he catches it outside the blue time bubble (bar 80). This is a moment of high tension, as we see the locket and the scientist’s hand begin to age. The strings and brass crescendo on this chord until the scientist can no longer take it and he must let go. There is a moment of sadness as he watches his deceased fiancé literally and figuratively fade out of his life. The oboe is used here for a more sorrowful version of the high bassoon theme from earlier:



From here (bar 87) until the end of the piece is the long zoom out and build. The i – VI – IV progression, now firmly planted in the listener’s memory, is used thrice in a row, with the orchestration getting bigger each time. In the first iteration, the 2nd horn ascends chromatically, and the 1st repeats its “heroic” theme, now in b minor instead of d. In the second, the violins continue the mostly stepwise ascent, and the 1st horn offers a counter melody. This leads into the final phrase, which uses all brass and strings on deck. The violins are given spiccato eighth note arpeggios for an energetic texture while everyone has a development of the offbeat triplet theme first heard in bar 23, now in its grandest form. Another brief period of silence follows as we see a majestic view of the Earth as a whole, and the piece ends with a Picardy third that crescendos into the fade to black.

Phase 3: Recording

As I write this two weeks later, I would conclude that the 18 minutes of recording time I was given at AIR Studios was an invaluable experience that ultimately yielded a successful product, but this was not my initial assessment. In fact, to say that I was disappointed in the days that followed would be an understatement. This is largely due to the fact that I felt my lack of skill and confidence in conducting compromised the quality of the recording, but it’s also likely that my expectations were impossibly high. I was frustrated with myself and felt like I was unprepared, but also somewhat resentful of the expectation for SFTV students to be their own conductors. It seemed to be almost entirely born of the photo opportunity, as opposed to the experience of doing it (or certainly the best-possible recording), which is arguably disingenuous and superficial. After much reflection, however, I have come to the conclusion that this photo is part of the package, so to speak, nearly as much as the recording itself. Self-promotion is

absolutely critical for success in this business, and a photo of a composer conducting his music in a prestigious hall can look very impressive to potential collaborators and inspire a good first-impression. The photo of me conducting at AIR can work as effective marketing content, and it would behoove me to take advantage of it.

It did, however, come at the cost of my ability to listen with focus. Because I had been too concerned with how I was conducting, I wasn't truly listening to the musicians, and therefore couldn't offer much direction between takes. This is what led to my frustration and disappointment afterwards.

Having said that, the musicians and engineers at AIR were all consummate professionals, and it was truly a privilege to witness how a top-tier studio operates. Working with Jake Jackson, the Recording Engineer, was particularly inspiring, as his extensive knowledge and experience was evident. The session ran quite smoothly, without any major issues, and I ended up with four full takes. The only real mistake was in the 1st Flute part in bar 20: the downbeat should be a B-flat and the subsequent arpeggio should echo the same notes as the Piccolo, as it has been doing. Fortunately, the Flautist Karen Jones recognized this immediately, and the necessary change was made without so much as 10 seconds lost.

Phase 4: Mixing

My year at Berklee has made me greatly appreciate the intricacies of mixing. It is an artform unto itself, as far as I'm concerned, and requires an entirely different skill set from composition. Fortunately, the mixing required in this case is rather minimal with the decca tree mics already providing a good balance. Most of the task involved blending in the STEMs (harp, piano, celeste, choir, percussion) so that they sounded like they were also part of the recording.

This, too, was far easier than it normally would be, as most of the samples libraries I used were made by Spitfire Audio, which was recorded in the very same room (Lyndhurst Hall). Something I found very interesting was the fact that the timpani STEM was created using Spitfire's Joby Burgess Percussion library, who also happened to be playing for the session. Thus, the final track uses both the real and sampled Joby Burgess.

Unfortunately, there was one issue that came to my attention during mixing: the 1st horn is too loud. For most of the piece, it seems that the player was at a dynamic at least one higher than what I had intended (*mezzo forte* instead of *mezzo piano*, etc.), and thus sounds very pronounced in the mix. This is somewhat disappointing, as there isn't a good way to fix it (it can be heard in all the microphones). I'm fairly sure that I would have been able to hear this during the recording if I had been inside the booth.

Conclusion

All things considered, I would say that this experience was a positive one, and certainly very educational. In the end, the 3-minute cue achieves what I hoped it would, which is to provide a coherent emotional backdrop to the scene but also is a piece of music that could work in isolation. It can serve as an impressive part of my demo reel and website, and will hopefully help me land fruitful collaborations.

Of course, the overall experience gained from this endeavor is the true reward. If I am ever fortunate enough to record with a full orchestra again, I will be much more confident and informed and thus more prepared.