

**Stillness of the music: an analysis of  
Abel Korzeniowski's score for  
*A Single Man* by Tom Ford**

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*How did Abel Korzeniowski, with his classical background, manage to effectively combine 20<sup>th</sup> century minimalism and 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic music to create his most successful score to date?*

### **A short outline of the work**

*A Single Man* by Tom Ford represents the first Abel Korzeniowski soundtrack for a big budget Hollywood film. He achieved an important success that brought him a number of prestigious awards and this film represented a meaningful turning point in his career as a film composer.

As a student of Krzysztof Pendercki, Korzeniowski had a strong background in classical music education and, in *A Single Man*, he achieved extraordinary results with very simple yet intelligent music played by a fairly small ensemble, delivering a score of incredible elegance and intimacy.

This work will provide an analysis of the score with a specific focus on the influences of minimal music and romanticism on the composer's writing style, evaluating at the same time the dramatic role of the music in the film.

After giving a general overview of the film, I will focus my attention on the main theme, the cue named by the composer '*Stillness of the Mind*'. I will then use two of the cues that lack a proper thematic writing – '*mescaline*' and '*Going Somewhere*' – as analysis material to stress the influence of minimalism on the composer's writing style. To conclude, I will briefly analyze one of the cues written by the composer credited for the additional music,

Shigeru Umebayashi, to see how it fits with the general sound concept of the score.

### **The director: Tom Ford's cinematographic debut**

Certainly known more as a fashion designer than as a film director, Tom Ford launched his film production company in 2005, Fade to Black, of which *A Single Man* is the one and only product so far.

The film, largely produced by Ford, achieved significant standing, being nominated for a Golden Lion at the 66<sup>th</sup> Venice International Film Festival. Freely based on the novel of the same name by Christopher Isherwood – the main difference being the impelling suicide attempt of the main character - the screenplay was adapted by Ford and David Scarce.

Colin Firth was recognized in the film and nominated for an Academy Award and for a Golden Globe, going on to win the Coppa Volpi and to receive the BAFTA award for Best Leading Role.

### **Plot**

*A Single Man* takes place in 1962 in Los Angeles, at a time when the world is in the grip of fear of a nuclear war. George Falconer is a homosexual, middle-aged British professor who loses his longtime partner, Jim, in a car accident and suffers both grief and depression.

The film covers a single day (30 November, a month after the Cuban missile crisis) in the life of the main character, the day in which George will attempt to commit suicide.

After awakening from a dream in which he finds the dead body of Jim at the scene of the car accident, just like every morning since he lost his lifetime partner, George gets ready to go to the college where he teaches. He goes through the process of 'Becoming George', the person that he needs to pretend to be in order to hide his pain and to avoid the scandal of being homosexual.

Surrounded by a number of characters – Kenny Potter, a student who crosses the conventional boundaries of a student-professor relationship; Carlos, a Spanish male prostitute and Charley, George's oldest and closest friend – who will offer him a chance for deep reflection on his crisis, George will go about his day focusing on the beauty of isolated events, with the sense of enjoyment of a man who sees things for the last time.

That evening George will have dinner with Charley and he gets upset by her desire of a deeper relationship with him and by her failure in understanding his relationship with Jim.

Full of anger and confused, George goes to a bar in which he meets his student Kenny who previously showed interest in him. They have few drinks and a night swim in the sea. Back to George's house, they continue drinking and George falls asleep.

As he wakes up alone in his bed, he finds Kenny sleeping in another room, holding George's gun in his hand, which he had taken from his desk, in order to keep the professor from committing suicide.

This experience relieves George from his grief and convinces him to lock the gun away after burning his suicide notes. A voiceover then explains

how he has rediscovered the ability 'to feel, rather than think' but, whilst going to sleep, he suffers a heart attack and dies.

The cast features Colin Firth as George Falconer, Julianne Moore as Charley, Matthew Goode as Jim. Nicholas Hoult as Kenny Potter and Jon Kortajarena as Carlos.

### **The composer: Abel Korzeniowski**

Abel Korzeniowski is a Polish composer with a solid background in classical music. Under the supervision of the most important living Polish composer, Krzysztof Penderecki, he graduated from the Academy of Music in Krakow completing his studies in cello and composition.

He reached success in his home country as a composer for films like *Big Animal*, *Tomorrow's Weather*, *An Angel in Krakow* as well as in Hollywood, having scored *Battle for Terra*, *Tickling Leo*, *W.E.* and *Escape from Tomorrow* in addition to *A Single Man*.

His score for *A Single Man* is probably his most successful one up until now, considering the San Diego Film Critics Society Award won in 2009 for this work and the nomination for the Golden Globe the same year.

After *A Single Man* the composer was called for many other important films but he still considers Tom Ford's movie as the real turning point of his career. The proof of this is the fact that Madonna, when hiring him as the composer for *W.E.*, used a lot of the music from his *A Single Man* soundtrack as a reference in the script.

Despite his classical music background Abel Korzeniowski declared several times that his main career aspiration has always been to become a

film composer and that his academic studies were only a medium to acquire better skills in film music composition, which has always been his main interest.

For the purpose of my analysis, the composer's use of repetitions and simple harmonies in his music are particularly important. In an interview to the German online magazine [www.original-score.de](http://www.original-score.de), Korzeniowski declared, talking about his relationship with his master K. Penderecki:

*"I doubt that one could find a direct reference to Penderecki in my music, be it film music or concert pieces. I never tried to mimic his style, my approach to music is much more minimalistic. If you are looking for some references, you'll find me closer to Philip Glass, in terms of repetitiveness and a small number of elements in my scores. But the main lesson that I learned from my master is the way I think about counterpoint and melody. And there is this specific attention to detail he thought me. We started from working on solo pieces first, and then duets, quartets, a small ensemble and so on. Because of him I learned about the importance of each single line in music. I learned to think about the individual players performing the score. Will it be inspiring for them? Will they become emotionally involved in this music? This is what I call the classical approach."*

Another noticeable work of the composer, prior to his Hollywood career – even if of minor interest for my analysis - is his rescore of the magnificent Fritz Lang silent film *Metropolis*, dated 1927.

## **Approaching the temp track**

*“Tom Ford really loved my music from the beginning. And he used a lot of what I had done before in the temp track. This was a bit of a problem for me, because it is difficult for a composer to have a temp track with his own music. With someone else’s music in the temp, it makes a healthier competition. You want to beat that cue, you want to write something better than the other composer. But you want to do it in your own way. When the temp track is based your music, it already is your language, your style. It can become very hard to find another way in your vocabulary to achieve a better expression of the scene, especially when a director loves his original find.”*

Korzeniowski highlights the common problem that composers face when approaching a temp track<sup>1</sup> using their own music.

As he attempted not to copy himself, Korzeniowski was able to preserve the same energy and pace of the temp track in his cues, avoiding any possible reference to melody or motives and looking, instead, for similarities in the general feel.

During the production process, the composer also asked if he could write the main theme without restrictions or references and, as it was the first part to be written, it became the leading path for all the other cues.

## **Style and characteristics of the score**

The main characteristic of the score is the minimalistic instrumentation used. As a specific choice, Abel Korzeniowski adopted a medium ensemble comprising a string section and a solo violin, alongside a small number of

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<sup>1</sup> Existing music used in film production during the editing phase, which serves as a guideline for the mood the director is looking for in a scene

woodwinds, percussions, piano and harp that were added at a later stage of the orchestration process.

The director's desire for a romantic and elegant score was fulfilled strictly by the beautiful melodies and warm tone of the instruments used, avoiding any superfluous orchestral device.

This is the description of the score by the composer:

*“Sir Alfred Hitchcock once said “a good film should start with an earthquake and be followed by rising tension”. Tom wanted exactly that, only with a thrill of passion and beauty instead of fear. So the movie starts with this incredible underwater image of a naked man, who, we can't be sure, is either drowning or dancing or locked up in a dream. For this scene, Tom asked for music to be of exceptional beauty and strength, something that would overload our senses with the complexity of its emotion reach. The piece I wrote (Drowning) has a lush, extremely romantic melodic line, stylistically suspended between the past and the present. After that, we only proceed to get deeper and deeper into the mind of Professor Falconer.”*

The musical language is, to use the composer's words, somehow suspended in time, mixing features of the 20<sup>th</sup> century minimalism – e.g. the obsessive repetition of rhythmic cells and the oversimplified, consonant harmonic content - with the 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism from which Korzeniowski borrows the hyper-expressive use of the string orchestra and the sinuosity of the melodic lines.



## **No click track, please. Notes from the recording session**

In his Hollywood Reporter interview, Abel Korzeniowski disclosed a variety of details about the recording session, which are indeed worth mentioning: the ensemble was made of fifty players, mostly strings, and the score has been recorded at Warner studios in Los Angeles in two recording sessions of three hours each.

As I mentioned before, the film required a lush melodic movement and the string section, with its expressiveness, was the means by which characteristic features of romantic music were conveyed.

The solo violin has a predominant role in the score – it is the main instrument in the ending theme '*Stillness of the Mind*' – and Korzeniowski tried to emphasize its role by surrounding the player with a concert-like setting and asking him to stand up in front of the orchestra.

In a score that makes such extensive use of repeated rhythmical cells, the greatest risk would be a result that sounds extremely mechanical and unnatural: one of the details that made the score sound so organic and natural was the complete absence of a click track during the recording session: every cue was rehearsed with a click track through the headphones and then played without it. The result is a naturally flowing tempo, also helped by the lack of any obvious hit points throughout the film, making the otherwise mechanical and unnatural sounding melodic cells appear far more subtle to the audience. The composer himself conducted the orchestra.

## Writing the right theme for the ending: *Stillness of the Mind*

*A Single Man* is about isolation and the inability of the characters to connect with the external world, which is reflected in the deep solitude of their life. The music plays an extremely important role in this sense, working on one side to dramatically emphasize the static status of pain (the title chosen by Korzeniowski for the most important cue, 'Stillness of the mind', is a clear indication of this) and, on the other, to stress the aesthetical beauty of the picture.

As stated before, *Stillness of the Mind* is considered by the composer the most important musical moment in the film, happening in the emotionally intense last scene, as the theme that would determine the whole conceptual direction of the music in *A Single Man*.

A deep analysis of this track is essential to not only evaluate the compositional devices used to underline the dramatic feel of this scene for the audience, but also as a way to define the general concept behind the entire soundtrack.

Considering the freedom left to the composer – no temporary music or references of any kind – it was natural to start writing from the most important theme, an approach that he seems to keep in every film he scores<sup>2</sup>.

*Stillness of the Mind* uses a very simple melody in 3/8 exposed by the solo violin (Ex. 1).

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<sup>2</sup> In his interview to [www.scorenotes.com](http://www.scorenotes.com), Korzeniowski explained that he always starts writing the main theme when working on a new score because this "implies to get rid of the previous project".

Solo Vln. <sup>9</sup> *espressivo*  
*mf*

**Ex. 1**

The first theme is developed over the two simple triads of D minor and G minor – I and IV degree of the key - in a symmetric pattern:

4 bars of D minor – 8 bars of G minor – 4 bars of D minor.

Considering the static nature of the music and its almost unnatural, academic symmetry, it is impressive how a meticulous melodic writing, the orchestration within the single string section – e.g. at bar 25 first and second violin repeat the theme previously exposed by the soloist with a new harmonization (Ex. 2) – and an expressive, romantic style of playing, bring an unexpected variety to the score.

Solo Vln. <sup>25</sup>  
Vln. I  
Vln. II

**Ex. 2**

*Stillness of the Mind* is in itself is strong evidence as to the importance of the role played by music in the film. The minimalistic writing comes always as the result of a crafting process in which the musical material is carefully chosen to avoid any excessive lyrical gesture rather than as a background device.

This characteristic attention to details, declared by Korzeniowski himself as heritage of his academic background, gives a strong personality to the music that may appear oversimplified on paper but that works perfectly in accompanying the picture with outstanding beauty.

During this ending cue, Korzeniowski uses a highly effective compositional technique which consists of setting a steady pulse that is suddenly changed, evoking a deep emotional impact: the meter change from a compound meter (3/8) to a simple one that is still in a triple pattern (3/4), allows him to add variety and yet to still be consistent.

At this point of the film George Falconer starts to reconnect with reality and to free himself from the grief of his pain. He falls asleep and he starts to dream of a man in the sea, moving in a way that is not clear whether he is drowning or freely floating, as though almost dancing in the water. The cue starts at the beginning of the dream with the obsessive repetition of a D minor triad by cellos and violas (Ex. 3). Some harp glissandos, and a fast phrase in the flute are the only added colors to the string section and the soloist.

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Viola and Violoncello. Both staves are in the key of D minor (one flat) and 3/8 time. The Viola part is marked *mf* and consists of a steady eighth-note pulse on the notes D, F, and A. The Violoncello part is also marked *mf* and consists of a steady eighth-note pulse on the notes D, F, and A, with a slight delay in the first measure. The score is divided into eight measures.

### Ex. 3

The soloist exposes the first theme as I explained above and, when George wakes up the music goes back to the introductory bars to prepare the meter change. As soon as the character moves from the chair to go in the other room to find Kenny sleeping holding his gun the music meter changes to 3/4 and introduces a new theme (ex.4). In this scene the variation in music has

a significant dramatic impact, since it works as a turning point between dream and reality<sup>3</sup>, reflecting an inner change of the character state.



#### Ex.4

The music has the power to mirror the grief of Prof. George Falconer using a simple background and a lush, melodic theme as a foreground.

#### ***Mescaline and Going Somewhere***

The influence of 20<sup>th</sup> century minimal music in the score becomes more evident in the cues without the solo violin or more generally that are lacking in important melodic content.

This approach has been used extensively throughout the whole score but it becomes clear when the piano, with the triadic, very simple accompaniment of the strings, has the foreground.

This is the case of two cues in particular that are very close in the film – they appear only few minutes away from each other – and that share the same musical building blocks.

*Mescaline*, the track that we can hear during the first personal conversation between the Prof. Falconer and Kenny Potter is the first of these cues that I am going to analyze.

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<sup>3</sup> It is not a case that the bars used for the introduction are also used at the end of the dream, before the meter changes, as if they were a kind of punctuation to indicate to the audience the beginning and the end of the oneiric activity.

The music starts when the student almost chases George out of the college after an intense class about the feeling of fear that all of us, as human beings, experience in our lives. Kenny is somehow surprised about the way his professor spoke for the first time frankly in class and he follows his professor to talk with him about it. The music uses two-note melodic cells which are continually repeated by the piano while the strings provide an extremely simple yet very effective harmonic accompaniment (ex.5).

# Mescaline

From *A Single Man*

Music by Abel Korzeniowski  
Transcribed by Alessandro Mastroianni

**Moderato**

Piano *p*

**Moderato**

Violin I *p*

Violin II *p*

Viola *p*



9

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Ex. 5

18

Pno. *mp*

Vln. I *molto legato* *mp*

Vln. II *mp*

Vla. *mp*



27

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.



37

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.



47

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

4

58

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

67

Pno.

*mf*

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

*mf*  
pizz.

Db.

*mf*

The same melodic cell that appears in the second part of 'Mescaline', when the cellos in staccato give a new pace to the music, is used as the

building block for the next cue 'Going Somewhere', in which the dramatic effect of the music is very powerful.

Following a phone call with Charley to schedule a time for their dinner together, George starts to clear out his office and to tidy up his affairs, setting the scene that friends and colleagues will find after his suicide.

When he finishes, he contemplates for a moment the large clock on the wall as though he were questioning himself about the meaning of the passing of time. Then he gives a last look to the room and he closes the door.

The hit point for the music to come in is exactly the shutting of the door and this repetitive, obsessive rhythm of the piano mirrors the sound of the clock, building the tension for the audience as George reaches his car in the parking lot where he meets his student Kenny.

The harmonies are still predominantly minors and, again, the repetition of small melodic cells is the main feature of the music (ex.6). It is also interesting to note that in these two cues the symmetrical repetition of the notes is in group of six and the variety is, in a very subtle way, achieved by small musical expedients: the change from tremolo to a simple legato articulation in *Mescaline* and the simple change of the chord position in *Going Somewhere*.

**Allegro**

Piano

*mf*

**Allegro**

Violin I

*mf*

Violin II

*mf*

Viola

*mf*

9

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

**Ex. 6**

## **Additional and Source Music**

The soundtrack of *A Single Man* features a number of licensed songs<sup>4</sup> that are not of particular interest for our analysis, being usually simply historically appropriate (it is mostly background music that the characters listen to in few scenes). It is interesting however, to consider briefly the music of the composer of all of the additional music in the movie: Shigeru Umebayashi.

Considering the lack of information regarding the collaboration between Umebayashi and neither the director Tom Ford nor the main composer, I think is safe to consider the possibility of the presence of his music in the temp track.

## **Shigeru Umebayashi**

Umebayashi is a Japanese composer who started his career in the new wave - rock band *EX*. He began his journey in film scoring in 1985, with more than fifty films – mostly Asian – to his credit.

At least in the western world, he is best known for his work with the Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai (he is the composer behind *In The Mood For Love* and *2046*) and for his score for *House of Flying Daggers*, directed by Zhang Yimou.

Umebayashi's contribution to *A Single Man* is represented by three tracks in which he is credited as composer: '*George's Waltz (I)*', '*George's Waltz (II)*' and '*Carlos*'. He is also credited in the track '*Variation On Scotty*

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<sup>4</sup> *La Wally* sang by Alfredo Catalani; *Stormy Weather* sang by Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler; *Green Onions* by Booker T. & the M. G.'s; *Blue Moon* by Richard Rodgers e Lorenz Hart

*Tails Madeleine*, which takes its theme from the Bernard Hermann score for the movie *Vertigo* by Alfred Hitchcock.

I will be taking into consideration the cue '*George's Waltz*' as an example to evaluate the ways in which Umebayashi's writing style fits the general concepts and ideas for the soundtrack.

The image displays a musical score for a piano reduction of a string section. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system is labeled 'Strings' and the second is labeled 'Str.'. Both systems are in 3/4 time and D minor. The top staff of each system contains a melodic line with a few notes and rests, while the bottom staff contains a bass line with a long, sustained note (likely a pedal point) and some rhythmic accompaniment. The score is written in a clean, professional style with clear notation for notes, rests, and dynamics.

### Ex. 6 – Piano reduction

The theme is in a tonality that is common to many cues in the movie, D minor, and it shares the same characteristics of simplicity and stillness of the harmony. Even if the composer's voice is unique and different in the harmonic choices (it is evident an impressionistic tendency to use chord extensions), the consistent instrumentation (string orchestra with a soloist) and a general similarity in the sound achieved by recording the music of the two different composers with the same orchestra and on the same scoring stage, endows a certain degree of coherence to the cues.

# George's Waltz

From *A Single Man*

Music by S. Umebayashi  
Transcribed by Alessandro Mastroianni

Violin (solo) *espressivo*  
Vln I *mf*  
Vln II *mf*  
Vla *mp*  
Cello *mp*  
pizz.  
Bass *mf*

The score for measures 1-6 is in 3/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The Violin (solo) part begins with a whole note G4, followed by a half note A4, and a quarter note B4. The Violin I and II parts play a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, G4. The Viola part plays a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes: G3, A3, B3, G3. The Cello part plays a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes: G2, A2, B2, G2. The Bass part plays a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes: G2, A2, B2, G2. Dynamics include *mf* for Violin I and II, *mp* for Viola and Cello, and *mf* for Bass. The Violin (solo) part has an *espressivo* marking and a dynamic of *f* starting in measure 4.

The score for measures 7-12 continues the piece. The Violin (solo) part has a dynamic of *f*. The Violin I and II parts have a dynamic of *mf*. The Viola part has a dynamic of *mp*. The Cello part has a dynamic of *mp*. The Bass part has a dynamic of *mf*. The music concludes with a final chord in measure 12.

Ex. 6

## Conclusions

*A Single Man* is an emotionally intense film that aims to explore the complex feelings of pain and fear.

The aesthetic choices for the film – cinematography, colors, costumes - are also of extreme importance and represent a powerful statement of Tom Ford's view of the Christopher Isherwood's novel.

The music perfectly fits this overall concept of the movie and Abel Korzeniowski was able to create an elegant and romantic score with an incredible parsimony of elements, both instrumental and musical, delivering a masterpiece of minimalism and showing a maturity in his writing which is hard to find in young composers.

A deep analysis of the score reveals that the composer's skills were chosen to achieve a specific effect and to exploit his peculiar voice rather than to have an average dramatic score for a *genre* film.

As for Abel Korzeniowski *A Single Man* represented an important turning point in his career and a way to open new doors, it is important to remember that the film was the first experience as a director for Tom Ford as well.

It is interesting to consider the possibility that this scene brought a new approach for the entire production process of dramatic films, which was reflected in the choice of a composer who was not well known at the time but who had, indeed, a unique concept for the film.

This paper analyzed the composer's influences and his mastery in orchestral writing and I tried to underline the way in which romantic music



devices have been combined with a more contemporary minimalistic approach. It can be said that Korzeniowski's score for *A Single Man* is a triumph in that it is harmonious with the film on various levels, whilst at the same time adds a unique, personal touch to the story.

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[www.abelkorzeniowski.com](http://www.abelkorzeniowski.com)

[www.hollywoodreporter.com](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com)

[www.scorenotes.com](http://www.scorenotes.com)

### **Books**

*'On the Track: A Guide To Contemporary Film Scoring'*

Fred Karlin, Rayburn Wright; Routledge Edt.

**Various podcasts and interviews with Abel Korzeniowski were used to obtain information regarding the production process of the score for *A Single Man*.**