

# Music of Chan Wook Park's Oldboy

-The art of scoring against the drama-

Culminating Experience Thesis Paper

of

**Master of Music degree in SFTV department**

at

**Berklee College of Music**

by

**AVI MEDINA**

The logo consists of a solid orange square. Inside the square, the text "Berklee college of music" is written in a white, serif font. "Berklee" is on the top line, "college of" is on the second line, and "music" is on the third line.

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Appendix:

### **1- Introduction**

- New Age Korean Cinema
- Differences with the Manga
- Revenge Theme
- Style of the Director - Influences

### **2- About the Score**

- Style of Music
- Use of Waltz
- Themes
- Contradictive style
- Evolution of Music as the film evolves into different genres
- Instrumentation (choice of using both real strings and synths)

### **3- Cue by Cue Analysis**

- 4 chapters

#### **The imprisonment**

#### **The chase**

#### **The Past**

#### **The Revenge**

## 1- Introduction

Chan Wook Park's 2003 film *Oldboy* is considered as the biggest and most successful example of South Korean New Age Cinema. It is the second of his 'Revenge' Trilogy, sequel to 'Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance' and prequel to 'Sympathy for Lady Vengeance'. However the 3 films has not much in common in terms of story and characters except for the main theme of revenge, which is, according to global data, covers %75 of the films produced in the world as the subject in one form or another. Well, this is no big surprise really. As sputnik music stated in their review of the movie, *'From the dawn of time, man had this primordial tendency to bring all kinds of evil to his fellow humans, so the anticipated reaction for the victims was to get back at them, while being equally or more inventive in the very planning and realization of their reprisal. This abundance in forms that evil and revenge can acquire has motivated contemporary script writers to write inventively about revenge, adding multiple twists in the initial (simple) pattern.'* (1) We wouldn't be just if we say the phenomena started with the movies however, many of the Greek literature like Homer and Sophocles has used the revenge subject in their stories. *In ancient Greek theater plays was that the element of revenge was aptly combined with the inherent weakness of man to escape the destiny that the gods had given him* (2) (*To πεπρωμενο φυγείν αδύνατον*). However in contemporary Hollywood and non-Hollywood films the revenge subject is generally used in a secular level, there are certain films which fully encompass the point of view of the ancient Greek poets and theatrical directors.

Chan Wook Park, who's known for technical superiority and beautiful storytelling style approached *Oldboy* as the one that came closer to the characteristics for which ancient Greek tragedies were critically acclaimed worldwide and the film score that was written for the film plays a huge part in that respect.

If we need to talk about a genre for Oldboy we can easily say Neo-Noir. Chan wook park uses a lot of elements from the classic film-noir genre in Oldboy. The first one come to mind are the character design. A man who is drawn into a situation he has no control of and try to prove his innocence and some beautiful girl who's helping the protagonist whose relationship with the man is vague to say the least. A textbook femme fatale. The scenery is another example to the genre. The city is presented as a puzzle that waiting to be solved. Oh Dae-Su, who spent 15 years in a room that has no connection with the outside world, has to figure out and adapt to the new environment ('the bigger prison' as mentioned in the movie) along with the mystery of his revenge quest. Another feat that adds Oldboy both a political content and strength to his roots as a film noir are the things that the movie says about memory. The story focuses on the role of the TV over Dae-Su's imprisonment for 15 years and how he's shaped culturally like a puppet with the continuous and strong interaction with the media collective memory on the TV. *It's not just geographical borders that are shakier. Korean movies blithely flout Hollywood's carefully policed genre rules. As a result, they end up with labels like "kimchi western" (The Good, The Bad, The Weird), "eco-kidnap serial-killer alien-invasion thriller" (Save The Green Planet!) or "man who has a gun inserted into his penis and becomes aroused at the sight of ballerinas and has a brother who's half-tiger drama" (Ebert,2005)*

The movie's composer is Jo Yeong-Wook, who's originally a music editor and supervisor in South Korea. Oldboy was the first movie that he worked with Chan Wook Park and as a composer. With Oldboy's success by the critics and especially critically acclaimed music let the 2 work together in many other Chan Wook Park films to come such as 'Sympathy for Lady Vengeance' and 'I'm a cyborg.. but that's ok'.

Jo Yeong-Wook's music in Chan wook Park movies has always been similar in terms of style.

Generally the music creates an atmosphere almost like a fairy tale, which sometimes creates a very distinct contrast with the vulgar nature of the film. This contrast serves the characteristics of Chan Wook Park's writing style as the film itself is fed through such contrasts and shifts in the terms of viewer comprehension of the characters and plot.

Yeong-Wook is also very versatile in terms of technique. As we can see in Oldboy soundtrack, there are several Orchestral tracks, several tracks with synth strings and several tracks with a full on digital electronic music. The one thing that's he's really stable is the usage of 6 / 8 meters and waltzes in his scores. His compositions and orchestrations are generally very classical, and simple but they're definitely not shy and are playing an important role on the plot's progress.

It's not hard to notice that the budget for music in the movie wasn't all that big, however the score is a great example that a great and divine soundtrack is not about the money spent but the integrity of the work of the composer. Composer Yeong-wook Jo used a full string orchestra and discrete electronic sounds to give out the different drama stages of the film, and sometimes combined the two to crate a new layer of sound vision as he's trying to fit in the budget. To give a precise sonic analogue of the emotional and physical transformations of all film characters. As 'Voivod' from sputnik music puts it nicely, *the main character of the film, Oh Dae-Su, struggles in vain to get out of each dead-end both in his mind and body, the strings weave bleak melodies that seem to follow a downward spiral staircase, so as to eventually be lost to the darkness, in which a worn mind resides after 15 years of mental and physical captivity. During the hyper-violent scenes of the film, the music is either strings endorsing romantic waltzes or low-beat psychedelic electronica, providing a superb controversy. As all characters – captor, pawns and the protagonist – pretentiously think they have control over their mind, their lives and the lives of*

*others, strings, synths and piano stand behind the interrogator's light, gradually revealing to all that their proclaimed control over situations and people is in multiples of fading grey. Some string themes are repeated throughout the film/soundtrack, only to remind that what was thought as true is false and that the escape for all parties is not in bright colors. As the inevitable end is closing in, the tension in the arrangements and the nature of the melodies of the strings increases proportionally and eventually wears off to calm waltzes. Catharsis has been served.*

In this paper i will try to emphasize the unique path that the composer chose to handle this incredibly hard script to tackle, by composing not for what the audience actually see, but something deeper, something more psychological, and the methods he uses to achieve this task in hand while sounding as perfectionist as Chan Wook Park wants and shoots his pictures like a painting, and to emphasise the change and the progress of the movie's evolution in terms of genre and density in arguing themes and taboos in human philosophy.

### **Oh Dae-su's Character and Differences with the Manga**

The Movie Oldboy is based on the Japanese manga 'Oldboy' written by Garon Tsuchiya, illustrated by Nobuaki Minegishi, and serialized from 1996 to 1998. However there are several changes and alterations done by Chan Wook Park in the movie.

*'The protagonist of the Manga is Shinji Goto, who's been kept in a private prison on a secret floor of a skyscraper for some ten years. Not only does he not know who put him there or why, but he also suffers from amnesia. After being abruptly released in the manga's first (of 79) chapters, he doesn't focus on revenge or even learning the truth behind what's been done to him; instead, he meets a young and virginal girl named Eri and tries to start a normal life, despite surveillance from the man responsible for his imprisonment: his high-school classmate, Takaaki Kakinuma. True, Kakinuma is*

*motivated by revenge, having been traumatized by the protagonist in a classroom incident. But the villain's schemes, while they create an atmosphere of paranoia, don't succeed in breaking Shinichi Gotō. In fact, this protagonist remains rather stoic throughout the whole story, even in flashbacks to his time in prison. When he pursues those who incarcerated him, he seems to do so more out of curiosity than revenge, all while retaining the same stoic demeanor.' (Darius, 2013)*

In contrast, the protagonist of the 2003 film — which transfers the action to South Korea and renames characters appropriately — is a drunk man who we meet at a police station with handcuffs, cursing around and making a scene. We can tell that he's a troublemaker all his life, who doesn't care about what's going on around him, let alone like a person to dedicate all his life for a cause. However when his friend gets him out of the jail, we can see despite all his negative sides, he's a caring father. It's a very important characteristics of him which will mean a lot to the plot.

## THE PRISONMENT

His 15 years in jail is shown to us in a montage like manner, emphasizing on some very crucial details like his training, the delicate state of his mental situation and the idea of a prison building that locks up people and torments them with the silent treatment. We are also introduced to a very important actor in the movie during this silent treatment. The melody that comes up before they give gas to make the prisoners go to sleep in a specified time. That tune will possess an enormous role throughout the film during his search and towards the end. This is an excellent use of a leitmotif in a movie that also acts as source music.

Towards the end of his jail time, the movie shows us the passing time in a very clever montage scene where we see Oh-dae Su carving up the wall towards his freedom (which will end up in failure, another reference to his lack of having a say in his life, even when he -and the audience

as well- thinks he actually has- on one half of the screen and all major South Korean and Global events on the other.

The soundtrack that accompanies this scene is ‘The Jailhouse Rock’, an electronic piece from the score.

This scene concludes the first chapter of the movie, the prison. Oh Dae Su would now have to find a way to adapt to the new environment, the big prison now. That’s the first time we hear an adaptation of Oh Dae Su’s theme in 42. minute in the fight scene. The cue ‘In a lonely place’ is a serene version of the main theme of the protagonist ‘The Old Boy’. The evolution in the theme music for the main character is also a great example how the score evolves in harmony with the movie’s plot. The scene that this cue has been used is also important because it gives away a very important scoring technique that’s been used throughout the film. Although it’s a very fierce and dramatic fighting scene with lots of actions especially when his last 15 years is considered, the music itself is lacking all kinds of action, it represents the serenity and the relief inside Oh Dae Su’s head, now that he’s a free man. This technique is used in the number of the collaborations between Chan Wook Park and Yeong Jeong-Wo. There will be even more dramatic uses of this technique in the later parts of the film.



The scene in Mido’s apartment is another very important one in terms of music. Not only because we hear the reduced version of Mido’s theme for the first time. - This also gives out the pattern in the film where everyone’s personal themes are introduced as a reduced or altered way



and they change and evolve continuously as we progress through the movie, reaching it's final form towards the end, when our perspective of the characters are fully developed and reached its final destination. This is particularly important in a film like Oldboy where the opinion for a character by the audience would change a lot during the course of the film. The scene in the subway is one of the first impressions of the movie's transmission into a drama that has some magical realist elements and it's one of the hints for the audience to expect more from the plot than a generic action flick from this film and there's a big chunk of psychological and philosophical drama coming up.

## **THE CHASE**

After Oh Dae Su meets Mido the second chapter of the movie fully settles in. Where the protagonist and his lovely companion tries to solve the mystery behind the man that prisoned Oh Dae Su for 15 years. During this chapter, mainly in his occasional meetings with the 'bad character' of the movie we start to see that our protagonist is not the perfect hero that would have been expected from the movie's Hollywood equivalent, in contrary he has several dysfunctional traits that slowly draws him away from the altar that the audience put him in the first chapter. However the bad guy would remain mysterious until the late 2nd and final part of the movie.

Music also contributes a lot to the changes in the movie. As mentioned before, the character themes used in that part of the movie, although harmonically the same is a lot more aggressive and increased in complexity as the characters do the same. For example he track 'Oldboy' is the evolved version of the 'A lonely place' which was in the first part of the movie. This part of the movie also has the only outsourced music of the soundtrack, a very fast and agitated version of

Vivaldi's Four Seasons, Winter , an excellent performance by Kyung Wha Chung and the St Luke's Chamber Ensemble.

The second part of the movie starts with Mido and Oh Dae Su searching for the prison that he lived for 15 years. The soundtrack 'Searches' accompanies a very delicate and beautiful montage of tasting food and running around the city. The contradictions are there again. Although the picture has some light and even comical elements, 'The searchers' is a very sad and depressing tune, we can easily say that the aim was to put a mirror to Oh Dae Su's inner thoughts rather than actual events with the music. This is another very oftenly used technique in Chan Wook Park films, especially the ones that he did with composer Jo Yeong-wook. There are numerous examples for that technique which will be discussed later in Oldboy as well. When they finally find the jail and Oh Dae Su goes there to check the place, we see another very cool trick from the composer, the score suddenly becomes the source music as coming from the stereo in Mido's apartment and gets out of the movie in a very elegant and subtle way.

*His scenes in prison after that contains some of the most intense scenes in the movie. First the infamous pulling teeth and then the one-shot fighting scene. Both are genius both in terms of how they're shot and the use of music. The teeth pulling scene was the scene that the critics were talked about the most because of its intense moments of using a hammer to pull teeth and the way they're shot in a very macro level. However all those critics and accusations of being too vulgar is just what Chan Wook Park desired for that scene. First of all there's no actual footage of teeth being pulled out. It's just the idea of it. Exactly like how Oh Dae Su proved in the second teeth pulling scene in the movie, where he was the target of the hammer this time. It's always inside your head, imagination is ten times worse than the real thing. The choice of music in both teeth pulling sequences is very peculiar too. Chan Wook Park deliberately wanted to have Vivaldi's Four Seasons Winter 1st movement for that scene. This clearly represents his method of using classic music underscoring very vulgar or fiery scenes as a contractive point. Four Seasons has also another purpose as all 3 movies of his revenge Trilogy has a movement from the same magnum opus from Vivaldi so we can say it's one of the few thing that ties the trilogy together along with the idea of revenge. A classical listener can easily tell that this version of Winter 1st mvmt, which was recorded for this movie by Kyung Wha Chung and the St Luke's Chamber Ensemble is a lot faster and dynamically*

*sharp and fierce than the original. This is probably a decision to make it even more dramatic and raise the tension level in a scene that basically runs in viewers minds.*



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His 15 years in jail is shown to us in a montage like manner, emphasising on some very crucial details like his training, the delicate state of his mental situation and the idea of a prison building that locks up people and torments them with the silent treatment. We are also introduced to a very important actor in the movie during this silent treatment. The melody that comes up before they give gas to make the prisoners go to sleep in a specified time. That tune will possess an enormous role throughout the film during his search and towards the end. This is an excellent use of a leitmotif in a movie which also acts as a source music.

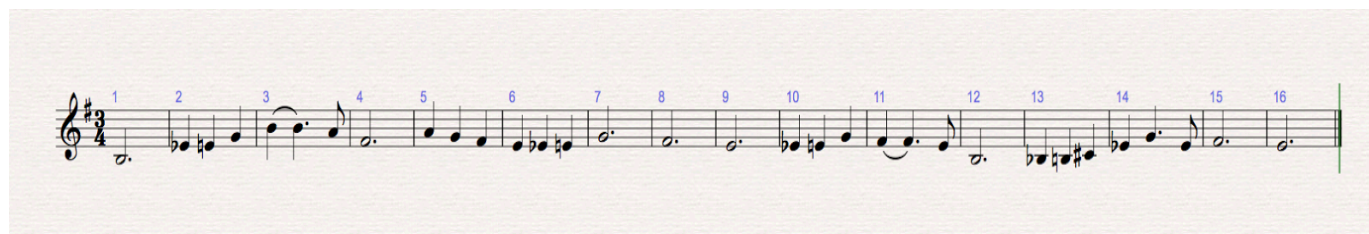
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The last one is obviously the ending scene, there's so much going on in terms of emotions in that scene that it's practically unscorable. Oh Dae-Su admits his defeat and more importantly admit

his love for his daughter in the way that Lee Woo-Jin wanted. He went through hypnosis again to erase his memory to be able to be with his daughter. Our hero protagonist is our evil antagonist now. The movie started as a revenge film, where we expected a man will beat up hundreds of guys with the hammer we saw in his hand in the movie posters, and maybe get his girlfriend back from the evil guy. But now it all came down to this, where our antagonist got the revenge instead, and the audience's empathy with it where our hero ended up in the same moral place where Lee Woo-jin started.

Davies confirms that we learn in the middle of the movie that Oh Dae-Su isn't primarily looking for revenge anymore; he just wants Lee Woo-Jin to commit to his crime. At the point where Lee Woo-Jin shows him the pacemaker he carry and gives Oh Dae-Su the option to kill him right there and then, he choses truth instead of revenge. That means, at the end of the movie, we're back in the Greek mythology area again as '*...this recalls Oedipus, who so relentlessly pursues the truth in Oedipus Rex, only to be broken when he learns it.*' (Davies, 2004)

A solo clarinet playing a very innocent melody, you can almost feel that there's no prejudice or shame in it. It's just what the moment represents in emotion, clearly tells what words can not tell anymore. The harmony or the orchestration isn't complicated or brilliant, but the score for a feeling that's so complicated that maybe no one has ever experienced before could only be that plain and simple. By the end of the movie, where 'The Last Waltz' , the big name of the score, starts in the background we see Oh Dae-su already chosen his path, the hero who at some point of his journey had ignored his urge to get his revenge to find the truth, now tries his best to escape from it.

# The Last Waltz

♩ = 120

The musical score is for 'The Last Waltz' in 3/4 time with a tempo of 120 beats per minute. The key signature has two flats (Bb and Eb). The score includes parts for Clarinet in Bb, Violin, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The Clarinet part features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The Violin part has a rhythmic accompaniment of quarter notes. The Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass parts provide harmonic support with chords and rhythmic patterns.

## Oldboy Cue List :

MX IN	MX OUT	Cue No.		Name	Notes:
0:00:00	0:01:22	1		Look Who's Talking	
0:04:41	0:06:00	2		Somewhere in the Night	
0:07:31	0:08:04	3	Source Music	Theme	
0:07:39	0:10:10	4		The Count of Monte Cristo	
0:11:01	0:11:31	5	Source Music	The Face - I Want to Sing	the face - i want to sing

0:13:27	0:15:17	6		Jailhouse Rock	
0:15:58	0:16:35	7	Source Music	Theme	
0:17:21	0:17:51	8		---	Music ends before the hit point. Music is like god? knows everything beforehand. The narator tells the story at the end.
0:20:08	0:20:48	9		Look Who's Talking	
0:21:40	0:23:18	10		In a Lonely Place	
0:24:34	0:25:28	11	Source Music		Typical chinese restaurant music
0:25:33	0:27:12	12			Comes right after theme n cellphone melody. No significant tension. The end cut
0:27:14	0:28:46	13		It's Alive	Segway into the next scene
0:32:50	0:33:58	14		The Last Waltz (Mido's Theme)	Last Part Music Edit
0:35:57	0:38:44	15		The Searchers	36:55 becomes source music.
0:39:03	0:39:34	16		Look Who's Talking	The guy is listening
0:40:40	0:42:22	17		Four Seasons	Vivaldi
0:42:38	0:45:58	18		In a lonely place	He's alone in the fight
0:47:23	0:49:17	19		Top Floor	
0:51:15	0:52:46	20			
0:53:04	0:56:09	21	Source Music	Mido's theme Piano	
0:57:19	0:59:20	22		Four Seasons	This recording is from Kyung Wha Chung and the St Luke's Chamber Ensemble!
1:03:27	1:05:27	23		Mido's theme	
1:06:55	1:07:35	24		The Old Boy	Is a version of 'in a lonely place'. Heavier drums
1:07:57	1:08:10	25	Source Music	High School Anthem	
1:08:38	1:09:50	26		Dressed to Kill	
1:09:50	1:12:33	27		Cries and Whispers	Crossfade

1:14:35	1:14:48	28	Source Music	Hair Saloon	
1:16:49	1:17:37	29		For Whom the Bell Tolls	
1:19:29	1:20:49	30		Out of the Past	
1:20:50	1:21:57	31		Cries and Whispers (Piano)	The Silence After
1:23:22	1:24:23	32		Cries and Whispers\	The Music comes in abruptly, like we forgot about it and now we're back
1:26:03	1:28:32	33		In a lonely place	(Instead of Oldboy, they used the calmer version, lack of confidence?)
1:31:35	1:35:33	34		Dressed to Kill / Cul de Sac	
1:36:08	1:37:24	35			
1:37:55	1:39:34	36			Return of the sound
1:43:50	1:45:50	37		-----	
1:47:51	1:48:15	38		-----	
1:49:32	1:51:14	39		Farewell my Lovely	
1:53:21	1:54:49	40		The Big Sleep	Very Similar to lonely theme
1:56:01	1:56:48	41		The Big Sleep	
1:57:03	END	42		The Last Waltz	



**References:**

- Why Hollywood doesn't get South Korean cinema - <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/nov/29/old-boy-remake-south-korea-cinema>
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- <http://www.sputnikmusic.com/review/44358/Soundtrack-Oldboy/>
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- "Revenge, Hypnotism, and Oedipus in Oldboy", 28 November 2013 - [\(http://sequart.org/magazine/30991/revenge-hypnotism-and-oedipus-in-oldboy-2003/\)](http://sequart.org/magazine/30991/revenge-hypnotism-and-oedipus-in-oldboy-2003/)