

Musical Interludes

Classical composers and their Hollywood counterparts venture into each other's realms

By Justin Davidson



PLUS: Strike Vote Deadline Looms for TV Writers

Crumbling of a Great Wall of Music

Traditionally separate, concert hall composers and Hollywood writers now look to mingle in each other's worlds

BY JUSTIN DAVIDSON

STAFF WRITER

IN A CURIOUS holdover from old hostilities, the moat that divides composers who write for the concert hall from those who write for film has remained formidably wide. Even as stylistic barriers, hoary prejudices and rigid business imperatives have fallen all over the musical world, the two kinds of creators have guarded their estrangement. Both are professional purveyors of music, both could draw on the same stock of traditions and technology, both sculpt emotions and express personality.

Why should they not mingle more?

They sometimes have, though mostly outside the United States. The Soviet Union's most distinguished symphonist, Dmitri Shostakovich, also scored nearly 40 now largely forgotten films. A generation later, the Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu was utterly smitten with the movies and penned dozens of film scores. In this country, a few composers (notably, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein and Virgil Thomson) moved back and forth with relative ease, while several studio composers (particularly Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Miklos Rosza) sought room to roam in concert genres. But by and large, the two compositional professions have occupied completely independent economies and promoted different aesthetic values.

There are indications that those divisions might be crumbling, though for now the signs are too

sporadic and equivocal to qualify as a trend. The last two Academy Awards for an original score went to composers reared in the concert world — John Corigliano for “The Red Violin” and Tan Dun for “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.” Hollywood composers always have made symphonic forays — and the American Composers Orchestra “Hollywood” concert at Carnegie Hall on Sunday, April 22, celebrates some of those — but now a handful is determinedly straddling the chasm. The composers’ concert features the world premiere of a new piece by Paul Chihara, the Los Angeles-based composer of “Crossing Delancey” (1988), the current A&E series “100 Centre Street” and a denizen of the resolutely nonprofit world of foundations, chamber ensembles and virtuous recording companies such as New World and Composers Recordings Inc. He is not alone. Stephen Endelman, who scored “Flirting With Disaster” (1996) and also came up with music of the spheres for the Space Show at the American Museum of Natural History’s Hayden Planetarium, is working on a massive work for orchestra and multiple choruses based partly on the Book of Job. (For his most recent score, for the forthcoming film “Bride of the Wind” about the composer Alma Mahler, who made a habit of marrying geniuses, Endelman had to mingle his music

with that of both Mahlers, Alma and Gustav, a bold, maybe even foolhardy, trick.) And the 28-year-old Theodore Shapiro, who has become David Mamet’s music man since scoring last year’s “State and Main,” also recently produced “Avenues,” a rollicking piano concerto written for Awadagin Pratt. Significantly, both Endelman and Shapiro live not in Hollywood but in New York City.

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The most visible and frequent border-crosser to film is Elliot Goldenthal, the much-pursued composer of “Interview With the Vampire” (1994), “Batman Forever” (1995) and “Michael Collins” (1996). Goldenthal, a faithful Manhattanite who keeps his distance from Hollywood, also has devoted considerable chunks of his calendar to writing for the theater and the concert hall. On the coffee table of the rambling duplex apartment near Union Square that he shares with the director Julie Taymor is the first act of their opera “Grendel,” whose pages mingle with music from an animated film, “Final Fantasy,” and sketches for a Mexican-flavored song from Taymor’s biopic about the painter Frida Kahlo.

“For me, it’s the same as the way Beethoven wrote incidental music for ‘Egmont,’ with two- and three-minute cues, or the way Brahms wrote popular waltzes,” Goldenthal says. “I’m not comparing

myself to them, of course, but I find it very healthy."

But though Goldenthal has the reputation and the resources to cordon off months at a time for what he calls his "personal work," the separate demands of two competitive social and musical environments are enough to dissuade most of his colleagues from his kind of versatility. For one thing, the work rhythms are virtually incompatible. Composers of concert music might produce 20 seconds of a piano concerto in a four-hour stretch, feel mentally drained and then knock off for the day, allowing a 20-minute piece to consume several months.

Writing for film, on the other hand, is "more a reflexive process than a reflective one," as Goldenthal puts it — a matter of churning out 45 minutes of music in three bleary weeks. "For composers used to working at their own pace and doing whatever they want, it can be incredibly nerve-racking to work in film," points out Barry Schrader, who teaches a course on film scoring at the California Institute for the Arts. "You can literally go for days without sleep."

Then there are the mechanics of producing music at high velocity, which require a familiarity with specialized computer setups. The most efficient film composers play along with the picture on a digital keyboard, instantly recording their improvisations, editing them and developing polished, lavishly

orchestrated and precisely synchronized demo tapes for directors to audition, cue by cue. The computer then spits out a printed sketch of the music, which is sent off to an orchestrator, who produces a finished score. It's a system that favors speed, encourages simplicity and can seduce composers into writing whatever music the computer can handle best. For that reason, composers who do skip back and forth say they never write concert music on the tools of their film trade. "Film music I write at the computer, concert music I write with a pencil, an eraser and a piece of paper," says Goldenthal.

If composers from a more rarefied realm might quail at some of the practicalities of the movie business, many aspiring professionals are also lured — by the money, the potential audience numbering in the tens of millions, the insatiable demand for a composers' creative wares, the guarantees of sumptuous recordings.

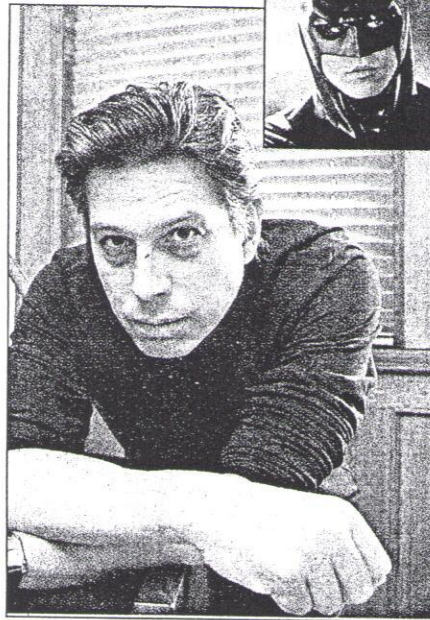
Whatever a composer can imagine, the movies — the big-budget kind, at least — can provide. A choir of 12 trombones for a two-minute cameo? No problem. A cathedral organ for a solemn duet with electric guitar? Fine. And in the fantasy world of the sound stage, the laws of live performance do not apply, which means, say, that the graceful plinking of a classical guitar can hold its own against a massive symphony orchestra. In film, notes Shapiro, "there are no limitations in acoustical space, and that can't help but feed the imagination in

conjuring up new sounds." What composer could resist working conditions like that?

What the Tinseltown pros might pine for in the symphonic concert world is less clear. Once, it was prestige, an artistic palliative for the effects of having too much money. Today, though, even a major orchestra can confer only the most esoteric sort of respectability. More concretely, the composer of a new piece of orchestral music often has to contend with small fees, curmudgeonly conductors, dutiful musicians, reluctant audiences, inadequate rehearsal time and the reality that a world premiere is much easier to come by than a second or third performance.

"It's a system that seems designed to make a composer fail," Shapiro says. "It's stiff and it's insular, but it's a challenge I can't resist."

Despite all its material disadvantages, the concert world holds out one powerful attraction to those accustomed to composing for hire: freedom. No matter how muscular a Hollywood composer's reputation, it is still the director and producer whose taste and prejudices ultimately control the score. The film composer's job is a self-effacing one, writing music that draws attention to the picture rather than to itself and that reflects the personality and emotions of the characters, the writer or the director, but only secondarily the composer.



Elliot Goldenthal, the most frequent border-crosser to film, composed music for the movies "Interview With the Vampire" and "Batman Forever," which starred Val Kilmer.

Often, too, directors demand not inspiration or personality, but rote mimicry of something they have already heard. Composers are regularly supplied with a "temp score," a provisional soundtrack cobbled together out of music from other movies, which is meant as a rough guide to the director's desires but sometimes winds up functioning as a model to be reproduced.

"I write concert works because I've got something else to say than what I can say in a movie," Endelman says. "If you start with an embryonic musical idea and you know that spinning something out of that will take 15 or 20 minutes, you know you're not writing a movie score. And you can't have a big crescendo in the middle of some quiet dialogue just because the musical logic might seem to require it. They'd fire the composer and get someone who knows what he's doing."

Freedom imposes a different set of burdens, and a looser set of rules. "The fundamental challenge of writing concert music is the construction of a musical narrative. In film, that job is done for you," Shapiro points out. At the same time, each medium nourishes the other. Writing for the movies can help hone a composer's sense of economy and dramatic clarity. Writing for the concert hall can help fend off the temptations of cliché.

For now, the traffic back and forth between the two domains mostly leads through the office of one man: Peter Gelb, president of Sony Classical, who has transformed his label into a conduit for movie soundtracks and devoted his considerable powers of persuasion to cultivating the link between classical music and film. It was he who prodded Corigliano toward "The Red Violin." It was he who signed Tan Dun, paired him with the company's star cellist Yo-Yo Ma and released the soundtrack to "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," which features Ma. It was he who nurtured Goldenthal's symphonic ambitions and in 1996 released his massive Vietnam oratorio, "Fire Paper Water."

But perhaps the tide will soon transcend the efforts of one impresario.

Aesthetically, too, there are powerful reasons why the level of snobbism on both sides of the divide might drop. The freewheeling eclecticism that commercial composers had to develop as a career necessity has become almost standard practice among "serious" artists, who willingly fuse klezmer, rock and roll, Korean court dances, medieval chant and Wagner into a concert concoction. Who could be better positioned to write the Great Postmodernist Symphony than someone who has labored in film?

"As a concert composer, you have to go inside your inner sanctum and find your voice as a composer," Goldenthal says. "At the same time, in film music there's something very liberating about being pushed into an arena where you hadn't thought you belonged. It would never have occurred to me to write Celtic music, but when I was working on 'Michael Collins,' there was a need to address that culture. It's like colliding with other worlds."

The point is that neither sort of music has anything to gain from the no-man's-land between them and the willful assumption that the other doesn't exist. Integrity can be applied even to the industrial rhythms of Hollywood, and the movies' explosive eclecticism is not a threat to art.

"Once you get out of your tribe," Goldenthal says, "you're exposed to the real world where you turn on the radio and you hear polkas and hip-hop and everything else. That's the world where you have to find yourself." ■

WHERE&WHEN The American Composers Orchestra, conducted by Dennis Russell Davies, performs "Hollywood," a program of concert music by Bernard Herrmann, David Raksin, Igor Stravinsky, Miklos Rozsa, Dmitri Tiomkin and Paul Chihara, at 3 p.m. Sunday, April 22, at Carnegie Hall. For tickets, call 212-247-7800.