

Setting Frida Kahlo's World to Music

By Jim Fusilli

In his score for "Frida," composer Elliot Goldenthal manages the deft feat of creating an unforgettable musical statement and doing so without hijacking the movie, an absolute no-no for a film composer. Goldenthal's score lifts the film, at times giving "Frida" the dynamics of a musical, and it creates a touchstone for the film's ethnicity: No matter where she roams, no matter with whom she is interacting, Frida Kahlo, Mr. Goldenthal's music reminds us, is proudly Mexican.

The beauty of Mr. Goldenthal's work springs from its respect for its source. He and director Julie Taymor seamlessly marry Mr. Goldenthal's original compositions with traditional Mexican songs, including many that Kahlo, the artist and the film's subject, and her husband, muralist Diego Rivera, enjoyed during their tumultuous relationship. Ms. Taymor includes several musical performances in the film; Mexican singer Lila Downs and the 90-year-old vocalist Chavela Vargas are among the musicians who appear.

Ms. Taymor says, "Singing was part of Frida and Diego's culture and among their circle of friends. It wouldn't have been possible to make an honest film about Frida without including the songs they loved."

But "Frida" is not a musical, and Mr. Goldenthal's score is appropriately discreet when necessary, serving to enhance the color, mood and emotion of the film. Only listening to the music on the compact disk "Frida—Music From the Motion Picture" (Universal) reveals the breadth of Mr. Goldenthal's work, which manages to be intimate and abundant at the same time.

A native of Brooklyn, the 48-year-old Mr. Goldenthal studied under Aaron Copland and John Corigliano, and graduated from the Manhattan School of Music. His compositions include large-scale orchestral pieces, music for live theater and ballet. He's scored at least a dozen films, among them "A Time to Kill" and "Batman Forever," for which he was nominated for Grammy Awards, and "Interview With a Vampire" and "Michael Collins," for which he was nominated for an Oscar. He and Ms. Taymor, with whom he has lived since 1984, are working on "Grendel," an opera based on the epic poem as well as its interpreta-

tion by John Gardner.

Having traveled to and from Mexico for some 30 years, Mr. Goldenthal says he was eager to work with its musical traditions. "There is an incredible variety of sounds in Mexico," he says, "and the regional styles, they go into the hundreds. It's just a part of everyday life—when you're having a meal, when families and lovers are together. When



ida" is Ms. Vargas, a Costa Rican by birth who, decades ago, was Frida Kahlo's lover. In a chilling cameo that lasts a little over two minutes, the 90-year-old, who Ms. Taymor calls "the Edith Piaf of Latin music," sings "La Llorona," or "The Weeping," directly to Salma Hayek, who plays Frida. The song, a premonition of death, is performed over Mr. Goldenthal's subtle arrangement of guitars and strings that replicate the lilt of an accordion. Later in the film, Mr. Goldenthal revives "La Llorona" as a mariachi with Ms. Downs, the Oaxaca, Mexico, native who performs five songs on the soundtrack disc.

By the nature of his assignment, the film scorer is in a supportive role. And in "Frida," more than an hour of Mr. Goldenthal's incidental music enriches countless scenes, often mere seconds at a time—the flourish of a flamenco-style guitar, the whistle of an accordion, a delicate phrase on piano. Ten of his motifs, none longer than 2½ minutes, appear on the soundtrack disc. But several of his pieces are anything but incidental. Ms. Taymor wanted a rousing number for Ms. Hayek and Ashley Judd to dance to. Mr. Goldenthal gave them a fiery tango.

"A tango was the most appropriate," he says. "It's sexy and it has an urbane sophistication." But Mr. Goldenthal's composition plays down the urbanity of the form. He keeps it simple and, as the lusty, tequila-soaked scene demands, earthy and imprecise.

The film's bookends, which are the disc's as well, serve to introduce, then summarize, the film's emotional content, its sense of dark whimsy, tragedy and triumph. And yet the performances work on their own.

The opening bars of the haunting "Benediction and Dream," the first sounds of the film, are sung with tremulous fire by Ms. Downs, accompanied by a glass harmonica and a hammered dulcimer, until a lone guitar and accordion take over. It's a disarming piece.

For the number played over the closing credits, Mr. Goldenthal revives an earlier, modulating theme he dubbed "The Floating Bed" for a gorgeous song he wrote with Ms. Taymor called "Burn It Blue." It's sung by Caetano Veloso, whose understated yet emotive vocal captures the film's bittersweet passion. Mid-song, Ms. Downs, whose vocals Ms. Taymor said represent the spirit of Frida Kahlo, reprises "Benediction and Dream" as a booming countermelody to Mr. Veloso's soft lament. It's a magical moment in a magical score.

Mr. Fusilli last wrote on Coldplay for the Journal.

a couple in Mexico has a fight, they hire a mariachi band to help them patch things up. People sing in the street; you hear songs everywhere."

For "Frida," Mr. Goldenthal augmented an orchestra with a small group

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of Mexican musicians playing traditional instruments: the vihuela, a small guitar used primarily for rhythmic percussion; the guitarrón, the Mexican bass guitar; marimba; and a Mexican harp. A glass harmonica provides the occasionally "spooky sound," as Mr. Goldenthal puts it. Mariachi and boleros punctuate the film and the score, and orchestral interludes quote their harmonic structures.

One of the unexpected stars of "Fr-