

# SOUND ON SOUND

March 2003

## Elliot Goldenthal



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“I tend to gravitate to dramatic and mythic subject matter,” admits composer Elliot Goldenthal, who, having written scores for films such as *Alien 3*, *Batman Forever*, *Interview With The Vampire*, *Titus* and *Final Fantasy*, needs little introduction in these areas. While he may not be a household name in the same way as John Williams, Goldenthal is widely appreciated amongst film-score devotees for his distinctive style of composition and orchestration, combining both tonal and atonal harmony, and bringing electronic and ethnic influences into the traditionally romantic world of film scores. His score for the recent Frida Kahlo biopic *Frida* won a Golden Globe, and he’s equally at home writing for the concert hall, theatre or ballet platforms — a quality he shares with many of the great composers of the last century.

Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1954, Elliot took instrumental lessons and immersed himself in music from an early age. “I studied the piano and trumpet, did my little piano recitals and played in community bands. But I also played a great deal of jazz and rock, and growing up in that period I was very much part of what

One of Hollywood’s most intelligent composers, Elliot Goldenthal is equally adept at writing for the big screen as the concert hall or theatre. We talk to him about his background and approach to composition, technology and orchestration.

was going on in those areas of music.” And even though he’s most commonly associated with his leanings toward Western art music today, these early influences are still very much a part of Elliot’s work, as can be heard on soundtracks to movies such as *Titus* and *Batman Forever*.

In addition to his instrumental studies, Elliot also began composing as a teenager. “I think seriously, in terms of music that holds up today, my first earnest effort went into being a composer at the age of 14. And I always had the ability, whether for better or worse, to be able to express myself in long forms — the ‘three minute song’ form was never really something that I gravitated to at first.”

### College, Corigliano & Copland

Elliot went on to study at the Manhattan School of Music for his Bachelor’s and

Masters degrees in musical composition and orchestration, and became a student of both Aaron Copland and John Corigliano, who is perhaps best known for soundtracks to movies like *The Red Violin*. But how do you end up studying with someone like Copland? “It was just one of those serendipitous friend-of-a-friend kind of a situations that I sort of fell into, and I couldn’t believe it. It was an informal thing because I was working at the time, helping him out at his house. I was a young composer having my first pieces published by Schirmer, and he was very interested in trying to mould my career. We’d sit down at the piano — he was quite old and I was quite young, my skills of sight-reading were not so good and his were deteriorating, so we were at the exact same spot. We’d sit down and play four-hand music, go through his ballets, go through his symphonies, very

slowly, page by page, and I'd ask him questions. It was a very beautiful experience because he loved playing through his old scores and revisiting them at the piano."

After leaving college, Elliot started composing professionally straight away, although, like many young musicians, he still had to take additional jobs to survive. "I had to supplement my composing with menial jobs like painting houses, because at that time the commissions I was getting were for small dance companies and regional theatre, and that's the type of subsistence one can expect. I did the typical thing where you apply to contests, and if you're lucky enough to win you get your music performed at Carnegie Hall, get a review and get your music published, and I was kind of lucky that way. One thing I knew that I didn't want to do was stick in the world of academia — not that I have a disdain for it, but I just have more of a wonderlust about music and the world in general."

So what are Elliot's views on the academic world of music? "Within various schools you have cliques of compositional style. You'll have folks who are still hanging on to 12-tone music — you have that whole world, and when a student becomes involved in that world, especially when you're impressionable in your teens and '20s, you tend to look at the rest of musical experimentation as being naive, as being 'less than'. Composers then tend to compose for other composers who are specialists within that one clique, and it can become a trap. It can become something that's external to one's life and you don't get to the source of who you are. Music becomes something that's somehow imposed as a regime, and I feel that this can be the trap of academia. The liberating thing in the conservatory, of course, is having the resources, the musicians to experiment with your music, the great libraries, the studying you can do with the composers. That's the real beauty of it."

So would he recommend study as a route for aspiring composers? "Yes I do, one on one, I really recommend it." Is it the only way to develop? "No, but I think it's an advantage because a teacher becomes more of a doctor and psychiatrist, and can get the best out of you, as opposed to getting the best out of a class."

Presumably, then, it was easier for him to develop his voice as a composer in this kind of relationship? "I don't know if I have a musical voice, except that others hear it. It's sort of like someone watching you walk down the street from behind and saying 'Oh, I noticed it was you, I could tell by your walk.' But I can't tell how I walk — I wouldn't be able to recognise me!"

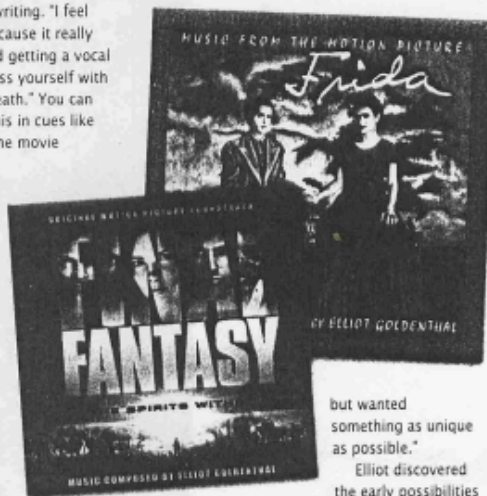
On the subject of finding a musical voice, though, I also asked Elliot which of the instruments he plays he feels a closer affinity with when he's writing. "I feel closer to the trumpet because it really helped in my writing and getting a vocal feel; being able to express yourself with the limitations of the breath." You can hear the proof of this in cues like *Pandora's Theme* from the movie soundtrack *Sphere*.

### Film & Technology

I was curious to ask Elliot how he managed the transition from traditional concert and theatre work to the big screen. "I applied to work at NYU film school — not as a composer, but just to learn about the art and language of film-making, and I became extremely interested in that medium. I worked on two Andy Warhol movies that were produced by these ex-Fassbinder German producers, but that was early on when I was in my early '20s. After that, I sort of drifted away from cinema and really made an effort on concentrating my work in the theatre and try to raise the standards of American musical theatre. However, I approached this in a way that wasn't necessarily writing better tunes or creating more successful shows, but experimenting in terms of harmony and rhythm, and how you can express yourself theatrically." At this he was clearly successful, winning the Stephen Sondheim Award in music theatre for his endeavours.

During this period he worked with directors such as Julie Taymor, who he would later collaborate with on films such as *Titus* and, most recently, *Frida*. "I composed

about seven shows in that period of my late '20s, early '30s, and through the theatre and some of my concert work, directors such as Gus Van Sant, who needed a composer for *Drugstore Cowboy*, and David Fincher, who was doing *Alien 3*, started to call. Everything sort of tied in together: not just the theatricality and the orchestral music, but also the smaller percussion and electronic experimentation I'd been doing for dance companies that couldn't afford very much



but wanted something as unique as possible."

Elliot discovered the early possibilities of music technology while he was studying, and became excited by the sonic potential it could add to a composer's palette. "We studied off an ARP, plugging things in holes, and there were no keyboards involved at that time. We also worked at the Columbia/Princeton studio and it was a period of a lot of clashing electronic sounds, using sample and hold. It was always exciting when the synthesizer started composing itself — you walk in a room and it's still playing! But it was all a part of the exciting times in the '70s and '80s when technology started to slowly grow, and I incorporated it into the theatre work and the other experimentations I was doing. I sort of grew along with it, but I can't say I'm a techie myself, I have people to help me program."

Despite not being completely technically orientated, Elliot was keen to incorporate electronics into an orchestral context, especially when sampling became possible. "It goes back to stuff Varèse was interested in that he called *musique concrète*, that one could take a piano wire and throw a ping-pong ball on it, record it, and play it on different octaves. It's all



about developing soundscapes out of home-made instruments and street noises, and just creating these beautiful and different sonorities, finding a way to orchestrate with them and bring them a further richness and mysteriousness. Yeah, I think when sampling techniques came along I really got excited about the possibilities because it all became acoustic again. In terms of film, *Drugstore Cowboy* was on a small scale of five musicians, and there was a tremendous amount of experimentation in that world. And in *Alien 3*, the orchestra played live to an electronic playback, which was all worked out with a click track."

Is it difficult to get an orchestra to play to a pre-recorded playback? "No, not orchestras like the Hollywood orchestras or the London Symphony Orchestra, for example — they're quite used to it." But does this all rely on precise conducting, or is it common for the musicians to wear headphones? "It's a little bit of both. It's not so much that the conductor is providing the beat or the rhythm, it's that he's helping to guide the expression. Musicians can

obviously follow a metronome, but a conductor's not there just to be a metronome."

On the subject of conducting, I wondered if Elliot had ever considered conducting his own scores, following in the footsteps of other trained film composers like John Williams, Howard Shore or Jerry Goldsmith. "I studied conducting a bit, but I realised that I'm a slow learner in terms of being physically coordinated. I have to practise a great deal to actually conduct with authority, so I decided it would use up too much of my time. Also, I could easily see myself being sucked into the voluptuousness of being up there, conducting an orchestra.

"But the other thing is that I find many of the great interpretations of really great composers, like Stravinsky for example, were left to other conductors. I feel that if I'm in front of an orchestra and I want to change something three or four times, an orchestra will kind of lose it, get cantankerous, and not be with you anymore. But if another conductor is saying, 'Well the composer would like to change it back, the

composer would like to change it again,' they don't get upset. You know, there are a lot of ego traps that one can fall into if you conduct your own music."

So it's good to have separation between the role of the composer and the role of the conductor? "For me, yes. I leave it up to conductors who really know what they're doing. This way, it's like having another lifetime, you know, another clone right in front of you who's spent their whole life studying conducting."

## The Composition Process

Given Elliot's academic background, I was particularly curious to learn how he approached the actual process of composition: whether he was still a fan of pencil and paper, or a supporter of using computer sequencers. "If it's melodic, I prefer to work on the piano, you know, pencil-and-paper style, and if there's a great deal of counterpoint, I also need to work at the piano.

"But in terms of film and composing to film, I prefer working in a MIDI situation because I can play and watch the movie in an improvisatory fashion for the first 50 times, let's say, almost the way piano players would accompany silent movies, and I develop a rapport for the direction and editing. After about 20 or 30 times, the improvisations start to become compositions and I can take that raw material over to the piano to adjust and perfect the notes."

So as a pianist, does Elliot always prefer to compose with a piano sound, even when he's improvising via MIDI? "No. Quite often I'll have a whole orchestra in front of me, plus many home-made sampled sounds. If I know a certain type of project, I'll say 'Well, on this type of project I want a full orchestral sound with a very strong brass section, so I need what sounds like eight horns, I need a solo horn, I need the whole trombone section, tuba, contrabassoons.' Then I almost have what I would call a Polaroid of the orchestration at that point, so a director can listen to it and say 'Oh, I see what you're after.'"

When it comes to the studio, Elliot uses MOTU's *Digital Performer* software for his sequencing needs, and, for the moment at least, an arsenal of hardware samplers, although he can see himself going down the *Gigastudio* route like many of his contemporaries. "I might be changing over to a more computer-based situation and not relying too much on external samplers."

Of course, a sampler is of no use without a library of sounds, and I wondered where Elliot sourced his samples from. "Right now the libraries are so completely diverse.





The orchestral material for Elliot Goldenthal's *Final Fantasy* soundtrack was recorded at Watford Town Hall. This shot shows the control room, with Elliot and his orchestrator at the right.

I could have eight or nine different flutes, for instance, depending on the application: if it's a staccato thing, if it's legato, or if it's a jazzy thing. Different flutes come from different places, and everything else — strings come from the strangest sources. There are thousands of ways one can interpret and play a stringed instrument, so I just find samples almost anywhere and store them so that they can be used where I'd want those sounds." And he will create his own custom samples too: "I've done that many times, and then mixing those with the orchestra, which you can hear if you listen to scores like *Alien 3* or *Sphere* where you have those kinds of subject matters."

### The Art Of Orchestration

Many modern composers use computers to aid orchestration, and I was curious to know whether Elliot too used a sequencer for this purpose, or whether he took a step away from the technology and preferred pen and paper. "Orchestrating with the sequencer provides a minimal idea of what you're doing, but once you sit down with pen and paper, that's the art of orchestration. It's the art of knowing how to get a certain effect that the synthesizer's giving you, but going further, with doublings, registration, and all kind of things in the art of orchestration that one continues to learn."

So is art of orchestration being diluted through the use of computers? "Yes and no.

Yes because folks might get lazy, which could dilute the will to learn about the nuts and bolts of orchestration. But the good part of computers is that people will be less likely to get stuck creatively, and they'll tend to be more free-wheeling and experiment more."

Does the use of the computer also encourage more of a separation between the roles of the composer and the traditional orchestrator? "Yes, I think it does create that. I know that when I work with an orchestrator, because I have such a strong background in orchestration, we could go over every single little detail down to the mutes and which string to use and so on. But I can imagine that if you didn't know, if you didn't have the information and mind's ear for what it's going to sound like, there would be a rift between the composer and the orchestrator."

Since Elliot is equally adept in the roles of both the composer and orchestrator, he doesn't use an orchestrator for his concert or theatre work. The role of an orchestrator in film is really a result of the constraints on time. "I could never keep up. Typically, on an orchestral piece, I will use assistants to help me, but every note, every dot, and, again, every mute and every string is my decision. But sometimes you have to let the ball go when you're dealing with a movie like

*Batman Forever*, for example, where you have over a thousand pages of orchestration that have to be done within a month — I don't have that kind of strength."

One of the perennial questions about composition and orchestration when undertaken as tasks performed by different people is where the line gets drawn between two: where does composition stop and orchestration begin, for example? So I asked Elliot to describe how he gets from the compositional idea to the fully orchestrated final work. "It goes in various stages: from what would be just a sketch, to a four-stave kind of a situation, and the four staves get augmented with what instruments are going to be playing. The score gets more and more refined, and then it goes to a full orchestral page, before, finally, little details are added: techniques that one would remember from orchestral literature that would be appropriate or effective. Often, at this stage, we'll try experimental things, like



"Hey, why not use Wagner tubas instead of French horns, but have them played below the horn range — how does that sound?" You leave yourself open for experimentation so you can always change it on the stage and say "Oh, never mind, go back to regular French horns," you know, that kind of thing.

"I always have the final say, but my assistant Robert Elhai, who has become a great orchestrator in his own right, is someone I work with very closely with. For over 10 years, he and I have been working together, going through the scores of Strauss, Mahler, Stravinsky and Penderecki, picking out every possible idea and analysing it. And when we get together, we seek out those kind of subtleties, things that, unless you're really listening, unless you're used to it, you don't really hear but they're in there."

I mentioned to Elliot that I'd heard of one composer who always takes a copy of Strauss' *Til Eogenspiegel* with him when he's orchestrating, to which he responded: "I know, I take a copy of *Electra*!" Why take a symphonic poem when you can take one of Strauss's greatest operas instead? I also wondered if he'd consider the four composers he mentioned as his influences. "I wouldn't say influences, but they're certainly a tremendous font of knowledge on how to get a certain sound — they're just amazing, although I shouldn't forget Shostakovich. I also learned a great deal from John Corigliano, studying with him every Wednesday for seven years."

In addition to studying the masters, Elliot has also experimented with exotic and Eastern instruments, and I asked him how this interest had developed over the years. "I think my love for rhythms and percussion is like a child in a candy store. When you get introduced to another percussion instrument and hear something for the first time, all of a sudden your brain starts comparing that sonority with many others and you get really excited by it. You can't do it in real life with lovers without experiencing a lot of grief, but you can certainly do it with new instruments."

### Diversity & Exploration

Although Elliot is best known for his film work, he continues to write for all musical platforms, be it the concert hall, theatre or ballet, and I asked him if this diversity was important to him as a composer. "Music to me is music, and if you look at a person like Shostakovich, for example, he composed over 40 film scores, tacky love stories and things like that, and had no problem in investing his very personal efforts in the string quartet and, of course, the theatre and the stage as well. Another composer that might be closer to how I'm modelling my own career would be Takemitsu.

## Filmography

Something you can't fail to notice when considering the list of films Elliot has scored is their incredible diversity, from Sigourney Weaver battling an old enemy in *Alien 3*, to the true story of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo in *Frida*. "I don't like to get stuck in one sort of genre, I really don't — the diversity keeps me fresh. It's nice to go back and maybe relive something you did 10 years ago, and try to reinvent within that genre, but I wouldn't want to do three of the same kind of movies over and over." Is this freedom an advantage of working in film? "No, not any more than anything else. You can obviously explore in chamber music, in opera, and that kind of thing."

One of Elliot's best-known films is perhaps *Batman Forever*, and while I knew he would probably have grown tired of providing an answer, I asked the obligatory question: was it strange taking over from a film that already had strong, established themes? "Not any more strange than it was for Danny Elfman to take over from a TV show that had a very recognisable theme. I mean, if you asked people today what the *Batman* theme is, they'll go back to the TV theme and sing that. So I had no thoughts or felt any pressure about the situation: I just did my best like I do on anything else, that's all."

If Goldenthal's scores could be said to have a trademark feature, it might be the use of huge brass dissonance, although he's keen to downplay this idea. "You can draw a case for the opposite also, it's just that the brass sticks out dramatically," he says, and it's true that the piano and string pieces on *Final Fantasy*, for example, are almost made more beautiful because of the way they contrast with the larger, dissonant brass writing. So does the use of tonal, older-style techniques interest him as much as

using dissonance and exploring orchestration?

"Well, I don't have any differentiation in my head between tonal and atonal, I either hear melody or I hear sonority — I don't hear atonal or tonal so much."

Speaking of *Final Fantasy*, I asked Elliot if he'd found it strange working with computer-based animation. "Yes, and what I needed to do was establish the more romantic themes, the more tender themes first to make the computer-animated characters appear to be more human. And then I did more action and more experimental things, and I wanted to make the whole thing sound orchestral as opposed to electronic and futuristic." Was this a conscious effort, then, to manipulate the audience's perspective by having a strong traditional sound against a very futuristic-looking film? "Well, the film didn't do particularly well, but I think the traditional sounds helped because if you had the coldness of computer animation and the coldness of computer music, it would turn audiences off. I think they wanted to feel like they were in some big movie experience."

The end credits of *Final Fantasy* feature a song Elliot wrote the music for, and I wondered if he was now becoming more interested in shorter forms, or whether it was still the longer forms that held his interest. "Oh yes, the smaller forms, they are coming up now. In *Frida* as well, for example, there's a great deal of melodic material, almost song- and naive-like, melodies that anybody could sing, and I wrote tunes and tangos: very simple things, even in the key of C. There's a great deal of joy that comes in just writing tunes, you know, just writing something with a simple ABA structure, working with melodic nuggets, so to speak."

"But there's something healthy about it, for me, because film composing is only maybe 100 years old, and the opportunity to develop personal styles and enjoy collaboration is very, very healthy for a composer. You get thrust into areas that you might never think you have an instinct for, and you go through it and you're glad your eyes were opened to this whole world."

There's a programmatic element that runs through much of Elliot's music even when he's not writing for film, which has often involved the use of literature as a source of inspiration. Shakespeare's *Titus* obviously helped his score to the film *Titus*, but Goldenthal has also used Shakespeare in other guises, notably in creating the ballet *Othello*. I was curious to know if he found having a narrative form helpful from a perspective of composing, even when not working on a film. "I tend to at this period of my life, yes. I'm writing another ballet based on *Artemis*, and I'm doing an opera based on *Grendel*, which is the monster's point of view from *Beowulf*, so I find that words and programmatic text are something that I feel very comfortable with."

Elliot Goldenthal clearly isn't afraid to explore any aspect of music and sound for new ideas, so towards the end of our conversation, I asked him what direction he thought film and orchestral music would take in the future. "Composers like John Corigliano, Philip Glass, myself, and the likes of the late Takemitsu, have made it so the lines between contemporary concert music and orchestral music in the movies will be blurred — there'll be no real difference, like it was supposed to be."

And looking to his own future, does Elliot see himself continuing to explore the same areas, or moving into other forms of musical expression? "Well, I have another ballet and an opera to complete, but I think there'll be an area of everything I've learned in terms of a mixture between the orchestration, the exotic percussion, and also contemporary, let's say, a rock-style, rock-orientated, electronic groove-orientated music. I'd like to combine all of these in a concert form because they're things I feel completely comfortable with, and it would be wonderful to bring them to a concert situation." □