

TIME

Composer Elliot Goldenthal

By S. JAMES SNYDER
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Elliot Goldenthal scored the music for *Public Enemies*

From Broadway to the dance stage, opera hall and movie screen, Elliot Goldenthal has proven himself one of the most versatile composers of his generation. In 1995, he adapted Shakespeare's *Othello* as a ballet. In 2003, he won an Academy Award for his score to *Frida*. In 2006, he was named a Pulitzer Prize finalist for his original three-act opera *Grendel*, which premiered at the Los Angeles Opera. And July 1, he makes his return to the big screen with a score for Michael Mann's *Public Enemies*. Goldenthal spoke to TIME about the compositional challenges he faced in scoring the life of famed gangster John Dillinger (played by Johnny Depp) and the complexities of composing for various media simultaneously.

Given the richness of the gangster genre, with so many previous visions and soundtracks, how did you approach the challenge of making your own mark with *Public Enemies*?

It was a lot of hard work. [Dillinger] wasn't an easy character to approach. There's something iconic about his presence in American gangster lore, and you also have him as portrayed by Johnny Depp, a very inward guy who offers glimpses of being gregarious. Getting that inner turbulence across was a challenge. The one thing about the script that intrigued me was the collision between the rural Dust Bowl and the new, shining, amazing city of Chicago, with all that amazing architecture. You can almost imagine Steinbeck's America, *Grapes of Wrath* in stark contrast with the high fashion of Chicago in that period. So the music in that way had a dual origin. [\(Read TIME's interview: A.R. Rahman, Slumdog Millionaire Maestro\)](#)

Given how many gangster films turn into thrillers and joy rides, I was surprised by how restrained some of this music was. (Click on the audio player at left to hear clips of the score in TIME's podcast.) Does that tie back to what you called these "stark" times?

Yes — I think so, and also the deep wounds that [Dillinger] had, and the realization that he found a romance in his life and he couldn't get out of the business.

The other thing dramatically that affects the music: Dillinger was from the old school and he came up against organized crime, which made more money on the numbers racket in a minute than they could have made on a great score on a bank. So there was a collision there between Dillinger and the type of criminals that didn't want to be really noticed as they were raking in the money. That affects the music as well — organized versus off-kilter.

In all of his movies, Michal Mann has made interesting music choices — when to use it, and at what volume. Your worked together on *Heat*, which often buried the music in the background. What was it like working with him on this period piece?

The process wasn't that much different than *Heat* — the only thing that was much different was that I had a little bit less latitude in a sense of orchestration. Because *Heat* was in a contemporary setting, one could utilize electronic music — amplified guitars and drum loops and all sorts of innovations. But with this movie, everything for the most part had to sound acoustic. Once we put in electronics, amplifiers or electronic guitars, it didn't sound right.

In 1995, you were commissioned to write the score to an *Othello* ballet. How did you approach a process like that?

Othello is going to be premiering, ironically enough, in Chicago this fall at the Joffrey. It had its world premiere in New York years ago and then went to San Francisco and Paris. Lar Lubovitch is a wonderful choreographer and we worked very closely together. The thing I had to learn was how dancers are athletes; only choreographers can really appreciate how long you can sustain a musical passage for a dancer on stage. *Othello* is a big challenge, one of the few if not the only commissioned American ballet to be in three acts. Given that it's a full evening of dance, there are all kinds of limitations in terms of how much a human being can be taxed. In symphonic works, you can have an adagio that lasts 40 minutes, but in ballet, it would be far too taxing for a soloist on stage that long.

Is it difficult, to jump between projects with these different limitations?

You use different muscles for sure. For movies, you have to think of time as set — everything else in music is variable time. In cinema, the composer has to sort of decide in the collaborative sense: Do you want time to seem like it's moving faster or slower? You can play one music to a scene, and it seems to last forever, but play a different thing and it just whizzes by. A ballet dancer can take his time with a scene, going a little faster or a little slower, and a conductor can change night after night. There are liberties with tempo. But there's a rigidity to film that makes it like a dictatorship. You have to work, and find a way to adapt, under that restriction.