

Around The World In 30,000 Years

The composer Mychael Danna's film scores illustrate a liberal approach to the use of both global music and period form and style. This frees him from the normal conventions of film scoring practice.

Discuss.

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Introduction

The following paper will concern itself with the film scoring and compositional methodologies of Canadian composer Mychael Danna. In particular, his liberal approach when using global music and period form and style, and how this choice frees him from the normal conventions of film scoring practice.

The first section will provide a brief history of Mychael Danna's musical upbringing, development and early experiences with film music. After this, the paper will start to discuss his compositional language whilst drawing links to aspects mentioned in the earlier section. The conclusion will serve as a debate as to why this compositional preference distances Danna from the average set of film music principles.

Mychael Danna's Musical Life

Danna believes in global music as a non-fractured whole not split along the normal perceptions of western and ethnic or old and new, but more as a complete box of tools, which one can draw inspiration from at any point, if one has the justification.

He was brought up in a family very appreciative and supportive of music and from an early age the young Danna was encouraged to partake in family performances and music making activities [Mera 2007]. Family members also report the youthful boy engrossed by his parents' large record and tape collection. In his teens he developed piano skills under teacher James Gunton and began looking towards a career as a concert performer. In his late teens though this dream was halted by a serious accident in which he lost full functionality of his left hand [Davidson 2009]. It was at this point that he started to focus on the compositional area of music, initially composing short solo piano pieces [Reesman 2002].

This allowed Danna to start exploring and gain understanding in musical sensitivity, form and structure, as well as start increasing his awareness of notation and idiomatic instrumental writing.

With this promising early development and knowledge of the piano, it seemed like an obvious next step of Danna's to start looking into the new technology entering the musical landscape of his late teens. He became obsessed with new electronic synthesis equipment and joined a Progressive Rock group as a synthesiser player [Mera 2007]. The group at one point developed into such a successful act that Danna left his studies reading music at University to tour and perform around Canada. Eventually the band split leaving Danna to collaborate with fellow electronic musician Tim Clement [Danna & Clement 1982/1984]. The two albums that they created together, *A Gradual Awakening* and *Summerland* achieved high regard in the underground ambient musical arena later made popular by Brian Eno and other electronic pioneers [Middleton 1990].

After this brief time in the spotlight Danna went back to study music at a University degree level, believing that it was a necessity if he wished to progress in the career of a composer [Reesman 2002]. He enrolled at the University of Toronto and began a course which looking back on he mentions had "fascinating and pointless moments in equal measure" [Mera 2007]. It was here though that his interest in ethnomusicology grew and he immersed himself into the cultural melting pot that Toronto had recently become [Adams 2001]. He began to attend ethnic concerts and workshops, intent on not just testing the water but diving fully into the music of other cultures [Bellman 1998].

He also started lessons with Polish-Canadian composer and tutor Walter Busczynski a particularly disciplined composer who thought and had justification for every note on the page. This method of analyzing ones work has stuck with Danna to that extent that he can “still hear the words...in [his] ears while...writing” [Mera 2007].

During the end of his studies at University Danna started to investigate the synergy between music and visuals, by arranging and composing music for the Hart House and University Graduate Studies Theatres. This gave him a strong grounding in the narrative tools and communication skills later drawn upon in his film work. It was while working in the Theatre that he made contacts that would later lead him to Armenian filmmaker Atom Egoyan. The two instantly connected over a love of early music and dislike for “melodramatic” Hollywood scoring, beginning a very fruitful collaborative process based around sharing an ecstasy in new musical discoveries [Larson 2002]. It was also Atom Egoyan who gave Danna his first taste of film music by requesting that he produce the score for his second full feature film, *Family Viewing*.

From the brief history above, it is easy to see that not only did Mychael Danna have a strong technical musical upbringing in terms of classical knowledge and training but also a love and passion for music. In particular, it is possible to see that Danna had an infinity to music from other cultures and gained an understanding of the inner workings of these styles so much that he transcended the perceptions of most western composers of the time.

The Scoring Voice of Mychael Danna

As his background mentioned above, Danna's musical scope extends from early period music to twenty first century electronic productions. This knowledge is also fused with a detailed understanding of world music idioms and cultures. Two main aspects that could be seen as different to most Western film composers but give Danna a "complete box of musical tools to draw inspiration from at any point" [Muhly 2007]. It allows him to select from a vast range of musical materials, searching out the appropriate techniques and instrumentation for each individual project [Nettl 2005]. It is not just the musical knowledge that he holds which sets Danna apart from his fellow scoring peers, but the emotional and narrative way in which he uses these to enhance [Tagg 1999] and add layers to the visual world displayed on screen [Burt 1994]. An example of this subtle technique can be seen in the use of ethnic instrumentation in his scores. He constantly chooses to use ethnic instruments not for a superficial clichéd "world" flavour, but as a more powerful tool for the job [Nettl 2005]. "If the particular timbre of a melody played on duduk is a more powerful articulator...Danna sees no reason not to use it" [Mera 2007].

This approach though does almost label Danna in the "art film" scene due to its challenging effect on the audience [Scheurer 2008]. It asks them to look past dominating cultural meanings and further into the musical effect, almost in a meditative way, clearing their mind of external thoughts and just experiencing the musical sound world created.

In one of Danna's first breakthrough scores, *Exotica* by Atom Egoyan, he chooses to use this practice of fusing music from different cultures for the unambiguous conceptual reason of creating something "that should only exist in an imaginary world" [Hutnyk 2000]. The reason for this choice was a deep understanding of the film's subtext and meaning. The Toronto lap-dancing club *Exotica* is "where the [films] characters seek to exotify their own experience and sedate themselves or lose themselves in another place" [Larson 2002].

As this example shows Danna seeks a disciplined justification for every decision, something that can be related back to his University teaching from Busczynski, mentioned in an earlier section of this paper.

Nevertheless, how does this method of scoring free Danna from the normal conventions of film scoring practice?

Conclusion

The big-budget Hollywood film world can be seen to be awash with copycat films based of previously successful narratives and concepts [Tagg 2002]. Take the comic action “dick flicks” such as *Godzilla*, *X-Men*, *Spiderman*, *X-Men 2* and so on [Schmitt 1997]. These “average” films do not expect the audience to engage in the “responsibility of reading the film’s narrative, but rather the viewer becomes sewn into the surface of the film” [Welsh 2000]. In such films multiple layers of meaning, complicated narrative subtext and challenging musical effects are not needed, and not wanted by the producers holding the budget strings. This therefore creates normal film scoring conventions that lie in strong “stylistic assimilation” and mainstream scoring techniques [Brown 1994]. It can be seen as creating a musical branding, a sound world that the audience expects to hear and therefore will not be disappointed with, or feel confronted by, “switch on, tune off” entertainment [Schmitt 1997] [Welsh 2000]. These constraints really leave no room for an idealistic composer such as Danna, an inconvenient truth that can be seen in the Ang Lee film *The Hulk*. During work on this film, Danna’s distance from the average set of film music principles and political correctness of the mainstream movie industry resulted in him being fired from the production, only days before the score’s big-budget recording sessions.

It is difficult to map out the confines of Danna’s musical style due to the diversity of techniques, cultures and periods that he utilises. By just looking at this statement, it might seem to suggest that Danna lacks a stylistic focus or direction, but in contrast, this is his subtle compositional voice and identity. As focused on throughout this paper Danna discipline and justification frees him from normal western perceptions allowing him “genuine celebration and exploration that is at the service of the film”

*“Mychael Danna will continue to pursue projects
where the music has something **important** to say” [Mera 2007]*

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Discography

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