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No one wants to be a paid plagiarist

Richard Harvey: “I don’t want to do a big Hollywood movie. It’s heart-breaking when you do something you really believe in and it simply gets thrown out of the film because the test audience prefers the temp track.”

Among other film music specialists to visit Tallinn during The Black Nights Film Festival’s special programme Music Meets Film, held from 25 to 27 November, is British composer Richard Harvey whose more renowned works include ‘The Little Prince’ and ‘Da Vinci Code’, written together with his long-standing collaboration partner Hans Zimmer.¹ Incidentally, Richard Harvey also has a new album to be soon released, recorded in St. Nicholas Church in Tallinn together with the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir. The Music Meets Film programme is curated by Michael Pärt and it is intended for composers who are interested in writing film music.

Please tell us a bit about your childhood and parents.

My father was an amateur composer. He really wanted to be a professional, but he just never had the ability to meet deadlines, so he missed every opportunity he ever had. He had an enormous pile of unfinished music in his cupboard. His music was tonal, he probably regarded Sibelius as the last great composer. He was born in New Zealand, but after the war he moved to England where he studied composition and the recorder. His recorder teacher was Edgar Hunt, a great name at the time, a kickstarter of early music revival. My father had a recorder group that would meet every Friday evening. I joined it at the age of about nine. My father became a teacher, but his pupils bullied him and he almost had a nervous breakdown. He then went to study law instead and became a low-level lawyer. He hated it, but at least it fed the family. When I was about 13 and it seemed I would become a professional musician, he supported me a lot. We moved to an area which had a rather strong music school with a very good choir. That is where my sense of hearing evolved and I gained an understanding of harmony and counterpoint. My mother is Welsh, from a family of a great singing tradition.

You studied the clarinet. I have also done that. What were your contacts with modernist music?

I didn’t have any, to be honest. As a clarinettist, I got to play quite a few exciting things: Martinů, Bruneau, Ibert, Milhaud...

Eugène Bozza?

No, I haven't played any of his works, but quite a few pieces were exciting to play, like Stravinsky's 'Three Pieces for Clarinet'. I also have a great admiration for Bartók, but playing his 'Contrasts' required too much work and offered little joy. In 1970–1972, I studied at the Royal College of Music in London. My harmony teacher Stephen Dodgson, whom I greatly admired, died a few years ago. Instead of harmony, we used to discuss composition. I would write fragments which we would then discuss. I also studied a bit of *viola da gamba* with Adam Skeaping who was one of the early music pioneers. We talked a lot. But as soon as I left the school I sold the clarinet and used the money to buy recorders, early woodwinds, etc. and joined the early music group Musica Reservata. That gave an enlightening experience of what it means to play without vibrato. I'd always had the feeling that vibrato was a decoration. For instance, 18th century *viola da gamba* study-books taught vibrato as a thing you used sparingly, just at the right moment.



Richard Harvey: "I've done so much TV and film music that I can relax now and just write my music."

Julian Bajzert

A special effect...

Yes, exactly. I often feel that vibrato is for building up passion that can barely be controlled. But people don't live their life in a state of constant nearly uncontrollable passion. Thanks to that realisation I understood why I didn't like romantic symphonic music. It seemed sloppy, messy, unwieldy, and kitsch. And the 1970s was the period of transition. For instance, a choir then meant a group of 100 people and the music tended to wobble like a huge jelly. Sorry to say, but to me it was just unpleasant noise. At the beginning of the 1980s, the early music pioneers just started to coming through in Britain and the Netherlands, in Eastern Europe, and later in France, and brought along an entirely different approach. A new choir singing tradition has emerged over the past 30 to 40 years.

I write tonal music, in a slightly neo-something style. I'm not worried about what critics think, because the music is not for them. I mean, we live in the 21st century. Classical music used to

be run by a clique of intellectuals like, say, the editor of Gramophone Magazine, the critics of The Sunday Times, The Guardian, and The Observer, the head of BBC Radio 3, and a handful of concert promoters and agents. These people would either give you a chance to express yourself or not. Now, in the 21st century, many people are crying their eyes out for a lack of quality control. Music just comes out, leaks into the world, and mine is a part of that. A friend of mine, a very good composer, put a hand on my shoulder and said: "I know you're worried. Don't worry, you have an individual and unique voice. Every time I hear this music you've written I know exactly in one second that it's you." I've done so much TV and film music that I can now relax and just write my music.

Could you talk about the making of big motion pictures, films like 'Death of a President', 'Luther', 'Two Men Went to War' and 'Adolf Eichmann'.² How do you work, what is the starting point? Do you make mockups?

You're talking about a very long period of time here. I was working on my first movie before the MIDI interface, timecode and synchronisation had been invented. At that point, I was assisting other composers. It was unbelievable how they got music to synchronize with picture. There were no demos, all you could do was play the piece on the piano and the director trusted you. Thus there were many monogamous relationships between directors and composers because you only had one budget to spend. You know, I've never worked on a film with a budget big enough to have a new score written if the first one didn't work.

Basically, my working methods have not changed. I sit at the piano and because I don't remember everything very well I video it all. I write ideas down and I fill a big page full of motifs and then I divide them up into categories. I then enter them into the computer with (Steinberg's) Cubase software. I haven't started using Dorico [notation software by the same company – A. R. Varres], but I hope that these two will reach a real symbiosis so we don't have to double handle the work – it is such massive waste of time.

Now, the reason that I got a lot of work very quickly... I was a in a band and when that split up in 1977 I became a session player and started working for independent films and TV. At that point, I had about 25 instruments. My *viola da gamba* teacher was also a keen recording engineer. He set up his own studio in West London where he managed an amazing thing for that time: he synchronised four stereo tape recorders. That system allowed you to successfully record up to four minutes of music. I moved all my instruments there and just multitracked myself. He later had an 8-track recording system and then a 16-track one.

Did you improvise or did you have a score?

I would always make a 2- or 4-stave rough score and improve from that. For instance, if someone ordered music for a TV commercial, they got a nearly final track from me as a demo, with different instruments, not just the electric piano and the drum machine like in most demos those days. So I got ahead in the game just by being a multi-instrumentalist and by having access to a studio. Of course, there were other multi-instrumentalists, Mike Oldfield was a prime example. I was playing drums, bass guitar, guitar, electric piano, I had an electric

pipe organ and some really weird things like a Yamaha electric harmonium. I also bought a string machine, a xylophone and a mellotron which was ridiculous. I had a big loan from the bank from buying these instruments. But when MIDI came along I couldn't even use many of my instruments for synchronising, like Minimoog, the Roland modular synth, the early Arp and Korg synths.

Please tell us a bit about orchestration.

I always do my own orchestration unless I run out of time. I scored 'The Little Prince' with Hans Zimmer and the way it turned out, I did the whole score and Hans just did the songs. I managed to persuade my really good friend Bill Connor who is a really good composer and a really good orchestrator to come out to LA. I was busy with getting the demos done, as at a certain stage the director may ask for changes or a complete rewrite. Thankfully at that time Wallander Instruments' NotePerformer became available and we were able to adequately play music from Avid's Sibelius notation software, and the director would approve them or disapprove them on that basis. It was unheard of. Even Hans was amazed by it. He didn't really like it, of course, because he loves to play unbelievably glossy, perfect mock-ups from Cubase, so that directors won't hear a difference whether there is a real orchestra or not. That was a rare occasion when I didn't orchestrate – I would simply not have had the time. I recently saw an interview with Tom Holkenborg who said that the reason why film music is so great now is that everybody who does it has to handle all the aspects of the music. I've done that since the 1980s. I did even more, because for 20 years I orchestrated with a pencil and paper. Printed engraved parts are still quite a recent thing. When I was writing music for TV series I would spend all morning composing and all afternoon and all evening orchestrating. At either side of midnight I would deliver the scores to a copyist who woke up at 6 o'clock and started copying the parts.

Your great orchestration can be enjoyed on various film music albums, like music for the TV miniseries 'Arabian Nights'.³

Thank you. The budget of that rare TV project was notable. We had two recording sessions with full orchestra and the rest of it we did with a smaller orchestra and I played various instruments myself. We also needed players of Indian, Arabic and Chinese instruments. I also made a mistake: I used an orchestrator for one cue, but I had to re-orchestrate it during a recording, because it just wasn't convincing enough. Orchestration is really time-consuming. When I have entered my handwritten 4-stave short score into Sibelius, it's all put to good use. I copy music for different instruments. It's a shame you can't feed Sibelius files into Cubase and have the perfect sonic transition. I played recorder and ocarina for John Williams' score for 'Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban'.⁴ As all the musicians had to be there throughout the session, I was able to freely study the score during the breaks. Some people say that Williams doesn't do his own orchestration and other say he does. I picked up the condensed score from the desk and compared it to the score. There was nothing missing from his 8-stave short score, it had a treble and bass for the strings, for the brass, for the woodwinds and for everything else. His handwriting is tiny and it is – could you believe it – written in ink. Those short scores are absolute masterpieces. I remember sitting there and I could see two clarinetists pick up an E-flat contrabass and a double B-flat contrabass clarinet and play a low

E-flat and a low G-flat in super pianissimo. And I thought that was probably missing from the condensed score. Then I looked really closely and I saw the most tiny writing on another staff: “contrabass clarinets ppp”. There was nothing missing and it was the most impressive example of craftsmanship.

You conduct as well. For instance, you conducted Hans Zimmer’s music for ‘Da Vinci Code’.

Yes, I’ve conducted other things as well, but that was where I conducted the whole thing.

Could you describe working with Hans Zimmer? Your ‘Kyrie for the Magdalene’ is very impressive.

Thank you. That was a strange score because Hans initially invited me to co-write, but when I arrived in LA he had already written most of it. So he gave me a few cues to do and asked me to write the music for the Westminster Abbey sequence. That’s how ‘Kyrie’ was born. In the film it was only 30 seconds, but I decided to write a whole piece. There is a sequence in the film where the mad monk whips himself. Hans asked me to write for that as well and when I’d finished and Martin Tillman, the cellist, had played it amazingly well, Hans said – typically for him – that the music was too good for the film and I should build it into a cello concerto. That was in 2006 and I’m finishing the piece now and we’re going to perform it for the first time in Switzerland in December. But for that film, I was there for the entire time and sometime would be called out to play. If I didn’t have anything to do I would do sampling and sometimes orchestrate someone else’s cue. I also prepared piano and did a lot of all kinds of effects: we put microphones inside the piano, taped down the pedal and rolled the piano around the floor, so we created all these exciting creaks and rumblings. I told Hans that he was missing an instrument in ‘Big Secrets of Mary Magdalene’. I suggested the ukulele. Hans asked whether I’d gone mad, but the recording convinced him.

The music from the whipping scene sounds a lot like Arvo Pärt. Is it Hans Zimmer’s music?

Yes, but it was clearly influenced by Arvo Pärt.

What do you think about the sound-alike and style-alike issues? Directors often suffer from a condition called ‘temp love’ which derives from the term ‘temporary track’ – existing music used in editing a film.

Oh, it’s one of the reasons I don’t do much now. If someone asks you to temp a film, you have to flirt with plagiarism. I noticed that Peter Oxendale is giving a lecture at the Black Nights Film Festival. He’s a leading Britain plagiarism lawyer, an ex-musician. It is worth going to listen to his lecture. There are people who try to do as much work as possible to quickly get started on the next movie. And there are others who work like Renaissance painters, with ten painters under one roof. The master would paint the face and students would paint the hands, the legs, the window frame, etc.

I’ve heard that this is how Zimmer works. Is that true?

You know, he has a whole building full of film composers. In the 1980s and 1990s, I worked as an assistant to Stanley Myers, and so did Hans. He always had a good life-work balance, so he seldom worked after 8 p.m. He let us youngsters work through the night. He would say: "It doesn't matter what happens in that car chase or that conversation between policeman and the detective. What matters is this, this, and this." He would choose four or five sequences to make his own. He wanted the director to approve and love the cues. Nothing else much mattered. I understand Hans, because he's very much in demand. And he has the most amazing overheads. I wouldn't even begin to imagine his studio electricity bills and the cost of the people working there: administration, technicians, caretakers.

Hans, like myself, learnt from Stanley that if a score is 60 minutes long, there's about 25 to 30 minutes of it that really matters. And if you worked on a less important sequence and redid it several times, you wouldn't get a lot of films over the line. It may be important for the director, but it's not important from Hans' point of view. Often Hans programmes a skeletal version of a cue and then hand it over to someone like Steve Mazzaro, a genius of creating fully fledged orchestrations from a Cubase project.

Hans is one of the few people in the world of film music who has enough money to employ a large number of assistants. He has also created a number of competitors. In my much smaller world here in London I had a string of assistants who clearly wanted to take my job from me ... as quickly as possible. You know, they would try to make friends with the directors, get their e-mail address and beg for work. It's long been the opposite in Hollywood where they've given up saying: "It's all my own work." They say: "Look. I'll show you the Oscar. That's all mine." I don't want to do a big Hollywood movie, I'm not up for all the stress. It's heart-breaking when you do something you really believe in and it simply gets thrown out of the film because the test audience prefers the temp track. No one wants to be a paid plagiarist. It also sometimes happens that you no longer want to work all night, and then the next day. I'll gladly write music for a small-budget art house movie where collaboration between two people – the composer and the director – is at the forefront. It's like a contract between them.

Your collaboration album with the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir is about to be released. Which texts inspired you? I understand some of these are religious.

Some of them are, some of them are not. Like many composers, I also look for good public domain texts, in order to avoid potential problems with copyright protection. There are nature poems as well as Christian texts.

Are you a religious person?

No, my father taught me to be sceptical. He grew up in a very strict religious sect where he wasn't allowed to do anything on a Sunday except read the Bible. If he got on his bicycle, they beat him. He couldn't wait to be free of it. My wife is a Buddhist. Between Myanmar and Thailand, animist maintain tribes live in the forest, worshipping the nature and, for instance, water. There are no people on Earth who live in greater harmony with their environment.

Ironically, it's the surrounding Buddhists, Christians and Muslims who want to destroy their way of life. Yes, I think of myself as a spiritual person.