

## **Music As a Key to the Unlocking of a Character**

### Introduction: the Differences Between Scoring for Live Stage and Scoring for Film

One of the most significant differences between composing sound scores for live theatre and composing sound scores for film lies in the nature of the processes involved. In film, the score is usually composed after the fact, i.e. after the shooting, editing, and assembly of the cuts has been made. In live theatre, the score is usually composed before rehearsals begin or during the rehearsal process. The consequence of this rather significant difference is that the composer for film usually only composes a score that affects the audience. The theatre sound score composer composes a sound score that affects the audience AND the actors.

It has been in my travels as a composer for the stage that I have discovered some unusual and interesting things about the nature of acting and the peculiar power of music to impact the acting. In this article I hope to impart what may be the essence of that peculiar power: the ability of music to cut through the intellectual processes that hamper the actor's ability to react, and drive straight through to the actor's heart. My most recent experiments in a production of Les Liaisons Dangereuses have confirmed some of my thoughts on the subject and will serve as examples of how music can be used

by a director in the rehearsal process to help unlock the inner character.

### Traditional Methods of Actor Training

Stanislavsky offered us something very special in our quest to present naturalistic acting on stage: a method for making the “unconscious conscious.” A primary component of the method is the process of character analysis. The first step of the character analysis is the determination by the actor of the “given circumstances” of the production, i.e., the detailing of the imaginary world as defined by the playwright and director. Stanislavski’s “key” into this world for the actor was the “Magic If.” Stanislavski realized that actors cannot “become” the character through some sort of trance like induction, but can simply go on stage and do what they would do *if* they were in the given circumstances of the actor.

The problem with this scenario lies in the limited nature of our own experiences (given circumstances). Because I have an entire life invested in making more or less moral decisions, it is almost impossible to imagine that I would not, given Valmont’s ‘given circumstances, (including his own amoral history)’ still be compelled to make a better moral choice. Intellectually I might be able to justify a vile choice, but too much of the deepest part of my being

is devoted to making moral choices to ever be able to totally let that go unconsciously in the creation of the character. All of the memories that I could conjure up of events in my life that are like those in Valmont's fall so short of adequately describing his condition, that I will inevitably *feel* compelled, at some point, to make weak choices. In short, I haven't had the necessary set of life experiences to draw upon to be able to effectively portray a character that evil.

Perhaps a simpler example will help illustrate the point. We have all been involved in rehearsals of the very first scene in the show, in which the predominant direction is very simple: "Louder, faster, funnier." Have you ever asked yourself why these scenes are perennially too slow when left to the actor's own devices? It occurs to me that audiences generally don't want to go to the theatre to see people who are as dim-witted as they are. No, quite the contrary, we want magic. We want to project ourselves into the characters of our heroes and villains who are much, much smarter than we are. These characters rarely have to think before they speak. They just immediately know what to say ("Pick up your cues!"). And they say it with a grace and eloquence that is extremely *unnatural*. This can be very difficult for an actor to comprehend, and often the expected reply is, "I don't have time to react in this scene," or "it's just too fast for me." To reply, "What would you do if you were smarter," is of no help. We aren't

smarter and we can't imagine what we would do if we were smarter unless we were smarter. The hunter simply cannot shoot the deer until the target is seen. Well, actually they can, but the chances of hitting it are about one in a trillion. So, all too often, we just have to take the director's word for it, and just do the damn thing faster and louder, and hope that the motivation for those gestures comes later.

Meisner recognized this problem and proposed a solution that has become a mainstay of many an actor's training. Of course we can't 'if' our way into circumstances of which we know nothing. However, if we allow our self-censors to turn off for just a moment, perhaps we can *fantasize* our way into the moment. Not insignificantly, a great amount of time in this training is devoted to the process of turning the analytical part of the brain off (the same part of the brain that compels me to make a 'moral' choice). Actors learn to react, and bypass the intellectual evaluation of choices. This breakthrough has, indeed produced significant advances in our actor training, but the human mind remains a stubborn and non-compliant collaborator, and it is only through long and repeated practice that we learn to turn off our brains and fantasize ourselves impulsively into characters and scenes.

This particular acting style has important implications for the conceptualization for a production such as Les Liaisons

Dangerouses. The actors immerse themselves in the characters in an attempt to seduce the audience into a similar identification. If the production is working correctly, we are all dieing in some dark, nasty, but not too deep corner of our mind to be a Valmont or a Merteuil. We would love for just a moment to be able to be so evil, so wonderfully provocatively evil, that we can seduce the most beautiful men and women, and then leave them without a care or regret. We probably would never do this in real life, but welcome the opportunity to engage in such bizarre behavior in our own private fantasies. If the audience is successfully seduced into this mindset, they experience the same consequences as the characters in the resolution of the play. The production provides not just an intellectual lesson, but a human experience that reaches the audience in ways not possible in a more didactic fashion. We go out of the theatre, and into our own lives having been enriched with the experience of the consequences of the characters, and, presumably, are less inclined to embark on a similar path.

The style of acting, then, is integral to the conception of how the production works upon its audience. The challenge in the rehearsal process is to unlock this fantasy world, and invest it with the size and grandeur necessary to seduce the audience into its fantasies. The Method and Meisner's techniques may not be sufficient, in and of themselves to unlock this world. It would seem that it would be easy, but every theatre artist knows what it is like to sit behind the

old 'tabula rasa' without a creative idea. "What we need," we always say, "is a bolt of inspiration." In short, we need a *key* to help us unlock our fantasies. It should come as no surprise to any of us that music is one of the most wonderful keys there could ever be for this purpose.

There are two basic reasons why music is such a useful 'Key.' The first is that it is very hard to resist the sensory stimulation of sound. Harold Burriss-Meyer, (one of the earliest sound designers and recognized for his work with Toscanini, and Bell Laboratories in the thirties and forties), said, "you can shut your eyes, but the sound comes out and gets you." Music is amazingly hard to defy. Tap a tempo in a room that is harmonious with the human pulse. Slowly increase the tempo, and watch how your own pulse increases. Music short circuits the intellectual process and cuts straight to the emotions. Stravinski said, "Music is powerless to express anything at all," and this might be true. But it sure can get our imaginations going.

The second reasons why music works so well as a key to our emotions, is that it is predominantly a time domain art rather than a space art. The advantage of this difference is that it can slowly exert its influence over an actor simultaneously with the temporal unfolding of the script and staging. An actor can temporarily forget the costume they are wearing, or lose sight of the scenery,

but even when they are not paying attention to the music, it is still exerting a tremendous influence upon them.

In my travels with Les Liaisons Dangereuses I found hours and hours of music of the period that could certainly be used to stimulate our imaginations of the games that we play with each other, and the fun of manipulating each other's lives. But finding music that touched the darkest corners of our beings, that would allow us to zero our hearts in on the tremendous evils perpetrated by the characters in the play, would take something special. It eventually seemed that Christopher Hampton set the play during the 1780's not just because of the social circumstances that led to the French Revolution--half of our audiences know nothing about those, and could care less if they did--but because the choice of period allows for the creation of a very seductive fantasy world, and many of us will pay good money to be transported into that world.

Audience reaction to the filmed version of the play seems to support this conception. Guy Garcia, who conducted an admittedly unscientific survey of dozens of moviegoers across the country for the New York Times on October 24, 1995, discovered that the film version of the play was the only recent movie that housed a top male fantasy, and a top female fantasy. According to Garcia, among the scenes that woman find erotic is the "nobleman

seducing a virginal teenager.” Among the scenes that men find erotic is the “heartless nobleman seducing a pious married woman.”

But the characters, in the grandest tradition of theatre, must match or surpass our own fantasies of the ultimate “us,” so that we, as audience members, can become immersed in this world. In short, these characters must be portrayed on a grand scale, in a world of excessive opulence, and their fall from their lofty positions must be equally as great, as devastating and as total. A warning to all of us who have been seduced into fantasizing ourselves into being a “Valmont” or a “Merteuil.” Our challenge was to help the actors, in a short rehearsal span find these heights. Certainly, there was nothing in their own (or mine, for that matter) world of experiences that they could tap to prepare them for these sort of Herculean adventures. But there was Mozart’s Requiem.

#### Using Music As a Key to the Unlocking of the Character

At the Show and Tell that often opens rehearsal processes for companies, I set up a rather admittedly bizarre, but ultimately effective demonstration. When it was my turn to talk about what I thought sound could and would do for the production, I got up from my seat in the audience, and started to move slowly to a very tall ladder that had been strategically placed in the center of the stage.



“Many years ago, I studied the Martial Art, Hap Ki Do with a very good instructor who had a fondness for jumping out of aeroplanes. It was therefore necessary for all of his students to learn the fine art of parachuting. In order to be able to parachute from a plane you have to be able to jump from a ten foot platform and land without hurting yourself. This ability to learn how to fall from high objects has been extremely useful to me in my life in theatre. Today I would like to demonstrate how to fall off a ladder.”

At the foot of the ladder, I proceeded to demonstrate the techniques necessary for the landing.

“Place your feet together, bend the knees and roll your body in a manner thus. Start with your feet on the ground, and then proceed to try the technique from a location slightly above, but nevertheless, close to the ground.”

I stepped up to the first rung of the ladder as nervous laughter spread amongst the expectant audience. I jumped and demonstrated the technique.

“Once you have mastered the art of jumping from a location close to the ground, you can progressively increase your distance until you get to the desired height.”

I moved up the ladder a couple of steps and stopped to ponder whether I had reached the “appropriate height.” The nervous laughter and murmuring in the audience rose proportionately. I decided that this height of four or five feet was not quite enough to demonstrate my point, and moved up several more steps. The audience was now growing noticeably uncomfortable. Those close to the bottom of the ladder decided to move to a “safer” location. The stage manager rushed to move some items that lay at the bottom of the ladder. Finally, with an air of “what the heck” I climbed to the top rung of the ladder and perched myself precariously at a height of some fifteen to twenty feet above the stage floor. As René Dupéré (the composer for the “Cirque du Soleil”) recently told me, the audience didn’t need a drum roll to know that this was risky. I continued:

“The reality is, I don’t know much at all about jumping off ladders. But I do know that if you want to increase your audience’s interest in a production you have to raise the stakes. Clearly there was not much danger in jumping off the first rung of the ladder. But I think you all became much more interested, the higher up the ladder I went. That is what I think sound can do for this production. Sound can help us to raise the stakes. It can help us put the ‘dangerous’ in Dangerous Liaisons. The journey that we want to take our audience on in this play begins with fun and games and seemingly innocent manipulations of peoples lives.”

I played a short, light harpsichord version of the Finale of Haydn's piano sonata #37 in D to help them "feel" the fun and intrigue of these games. The sound came out of a single loudspeaker.

"But by the time we reach the climax of the play, the consequences of those games has been devastating and the destruction total."

I played the "Dies Irae" from Mozart's Requiem. The sound came out of a larger cluster of 'stereo' loudspeakers and the natural reverberation of the room was enhanced by a special reverberation enhancement system that utilized many diffusing loudspeakers placed throughout the auditorium. In addition to the natural music going from small to large, the volume and spatial characteristics had gone from very small to gigantic.

"This is the journey we are about to undertake. Our next task is to fill in all of the parts in between."

That was all they heard of the sound score for the next couple of weeks. The director and I had it totally prepared and ready to go at the first rehearsal, but there is other work that needs to take place in the early stages of the rehearsal process, such as table work, blocking, etc. Along about the third week we pretty much had the

show up and on its feet, and we were able to start introducing parts of the score into scene work.

It is always stunning to me to watch the leap an actor makes the first couple of times you underscore a scene. It can be very tricky, because it is very important for an actor to “discover” a role in such a way that the actor feels it is their own. When you introduce underscoring into a scene, you are essentially telling an actor how to feel about what they are doing. Indeed, the entire idea scares many directors to death because it is so totally effective, and this puts a great burden on the composer and director to create exactly the right emotional ‘key’ to help the actor ‘unlock’ the scene. Nevertheless, the Requiem was amazing in its ability to profoundly move the actors into a higher plane of passion. They were raising the stakes.

Ironically, we decided later in the process that the Requiem was, perhaps, too big for our theatre (it’s only a 176 seats, and, with the audience that close to the actors, the size and scale of the Requiem seemed a little too much, perhaps too melodramatic), or perhaps that the audience didn’t need “a drum roll to know that this was risky.” The actors had, by now, become very attached to their underscoring, and were deeply disappointed that we were now going to take it away. But the biggest surprise yet was about to be revealed: the work of the Requiem had already been done.

When we removed it from the show, the influence it had exerted over the actors remained, particularly in raising their stakes and increasing their passion. There was no doubt in my mind as I watched the scenes without the underscoring that the actors were carrying the Requiem around in their hearts.

There are certainly many other methods that could have gotten the actors to the same place, but using music as a key to unlocking the actors ability to fantasize has one distinct advantage: it bypasses the intellect and goes straight to the heart. It is a tool that can be used to circumvent one of the most difficult problems that face actors: thinking too much. You don't think about music, you only react to it. It may, for a while, be extremely difficult to hire a composer to create scores just for the rehearsal process, but the advantages of bringing a composer in at the very earliest stages of the production process should be readily apparent. With the score in hand at the start of the actor rehearsal period, directors can use it as an enormously effective tool to complement the rest of their arsenal. The score can grow and develop integrally to the rest of the process, and not be something that is just imposed on the production during the technical rehearsals.

Conclusion: Sound Really Can Be Useful If Treated Like Another Character in the Play

The thought that “sound is like another character in a play” has become almost a cliché of the modern theatre. Surprisingly, it is seldom treated as one. It is often not given entrances and exits (i.e. cues that are not precipitated by actor ‘beats’), and will often be allowed to wander around on a stage (or worse yet in the audience, where none of the rest of the actors are) like a misguided stagehand. And at the top of the list of the disregard for this principle is the way in which sound is integrated into the rehearsal process. You wouldn’t bring a major character into the rehearsal process for the very first time at your technical rehearsals, why would you want to do the same with your sound?

Hopefully, this article has shown that there are many diverse uses for sound scores in productions beyond covering noisy scene changes. Sound can be used to help unlock emotion, style, motivation, pacing, and structure--to name just a few of the less often conceived of functions for sound in live theatre. To me, this has always been the distinct advantage of composing scores for live theatre versus composing for film. As a theatre artist and collaborator, I really don’t want to be dragged in after the baby has been made, like a doctor in the delivery room. I want to be part of the conception.