Christopher Slaski

Applied Music: The Challenge Of Composing For Films

Gothenburg/Sweden, 10th April 2015

CHRISTOPHER SLASKI It's a great pleasure to be here. I've been working in film and applied music for almost 20 years, having started early, when still at university. My beginnings in music was as a pianist and organist. From the age of five, I studied the piano and I began composing in my early teens. The life of a touring concert musician didn't really appeal to me so I thought: How am I going to make my living out of music? I began to discover there was often very interesting music accompanying films, and I started listening to it with greater attention. I soon realised that this was what I want to do. But how to get into it ? I won't dwell on that today. That's for another lecture!

Today we're going to concentrate on the challenges that a film composer has to face, and the difference between composing absolute music and applied music. By 'applied music' I am referring to film music or music for advertising, television or theatre, that is to say, music that is written with the intention of applying it to something else. I'm going to try to cover a number of different areas that I believe are important, and give some illustrations using projects I've worked on. If anyone has any questions, we'll leave them till the end when we we'll have ten minutes or so to have a discussion.

I started to get interested in music pretty early on in life. Music always had a very powerful effect on me. Even as a baby, apparently I used to stop crying whenever music would be played. The instinctive reaction to music – where does it come from? Is it something innate or do we learn it? By the time we reach maturity, most of us will have acquired the ability to experience music's power to move us and provoke emotions. Harnessing that power, and combining it with moving images to help narrate a story and draw out emotion, is a kind of magic, a kind of alchemy that fascinates me.

Like any creative activity, composing can be a joyful experience, but it can also be immensely difficult and frustrating. So what is it that drives me on? There are two factors that encourage me to write: The first impetus is that the music is needed; that there's some kind of requirement for it. The second impetus is the possibility of a performance by real musicians in a studio. I'm always so excited to hear how they're going to interpret something that I've only heard up to that point maybe on the piano or just in my head. I can't wait to hear how they will enhance it with their own musical expressivity.

I remember attending my first film music recording session in London at the famous Abbey Road studios. Seeing the vast orchestra in the darkened hall, the cinema screen high up at the back, and the conductor cuing in the orchestra for some fast, action sequence - I was simply overwhelmed by the emotional rush of it all and, above all, seeing how the film came to life with the music. The musicians couldn't watch what was happening on screen since it was located behind them, but I could see and hear from the control room what the composer had been so diligently working on all those months. From that moment on, I really knew that I wanted to be a film composer.

People often ask me the question 'how do you compose?' or 'what inspires you?'. As a child, I listened to all kinds of music. I used to improvise at the piano in various styles. These

improvisations were usually inspired by some sort of emotion, picture or painting, or sometimes by a desire to imitate a piece of music that I liked.

From time to time I'd come up with an idea that I liked, and I'd write that down or record it. Then I would take that idea and try to develop it, maybe by extending the melodic line or by re-harmonising it, by taking it through different rhythms and styles and so on. And I guess this was the start of composing. This was the point at which composition took over from improvising, that is to say, a deliberate, intricate thought process and craft was taking over from spontaneous expression. So for this reason, one could say that composition is an equal combination of heart and mind, of instinct, emotion, craft and intellect.

Before talking about music and the image, let's look at what music actually is. We can say that it must contains some or all of the following elements: rhythm, meter, dynamics, accentuation, phrasing, velocity, harmony, counterpoint, melody, tonality and timbre. Timbre or colour is incredibly important in film music because often there's no time to extend music for very long periods. What you can do very quickly is set the mood of a scene with a colour, with a texture. It doesn't have to be orchestration in the traditional sense, that is, using an orchestra. Texture can also be produced by electronics or by the sound of a single instrument or voice. Something that has a certain colour which immediately evokes a mood and connects us with what we're seeing. So composing is the subtle manipulation and interpretation of all these elements. How to apply them to film is what I'm going to explore now.

Even after many years of writing music, the process that I follow is always the same. Images were always a very powerful inspiration for me when creating music, so from the moment I see a scene, I'm already hearing music in my head and making decisions as to what could work, what could bring something out of that's not necessarily present in the images but that maybe lies behind them.

Film has a strongly evocative quality for me. The narrative combined with the performances, the cinematography, the pacing and, of course, the genre, are all simultaneously giving me clues as to what music I should compose. I might start with a simple theme or a series of chords, or I might imagine a particular colour or texture that is being transmitted by the mood of the film or suggested by the main character. Then I will improvise with the scene playing out in front of me, almost as if it were a silent movie, to illicit an automatic, very rapid and instinctive response. That's improvising, though, rather than strictly composition.

Through a process of trial and error, and after playing the scene over and over again, after a while, hopefully, I find a musical idea that works and that enhances the emotional charge and feels natural.

Once this period of improvisation has led me to that initial idea, which might be a melody or a series of chords, I notate that on paper or I record it into the computer. Some of you may be familiar with the ways composers work today. We have very clever computer software which allows you to play directly at a keyboard, and the music will be recorded into the computer, in real time with the film. So you can watch the film whilst playing the music, and that will be instantly recorded. You can play it back, and you can adjust it in the greatest detail after it has been recorded. So you can really refine what you're composing with the image.

This is very different from the process composers followed thirty plus years ago. Back then, they didn't usually have easy access to the movie in their homes when they composed. Prior to composing the music, they would sit once or twice in a small screening room, and they would take timings with a stopwatch and a series of notes. Then, the music editor would prepare a cue sheet

for the entire film so that everybody would be aware of each music cue, what its purpose was in each scene and how much music there would be in the film. Without the technical possibility to watch the film over and over again at home, the composer would have to retain an enormous amount of information about the film in their memory. This is quite impressive when I think about it now and we have it pretty easy today, in that respect.

The technology has also enabled other major changes. For instance, the ability to have the film and the music demo playing simultaneously in the composer's studio allows the director and/or producer to be present whilst you're composing the music. They can come to your studio, or you can send them audio files, and they can see how you're working, see how the music is taking shape, listen to alternative ideas and make comments and suggestions. I would say, composing for film today - it's an infinitely more collaborative process than it used to be. This can have its advantages and its disadvantages.

So, getting back to the process of composing: Having settled on some initial ideas, I continue by adjusting the music to the images, making sure that it's synchronising correctly, that it supports the film but equally, I'm also trying to make it musically interesting. I am not content to write just functional music. Ideally, I also want it to have some quality, some sophistication and interest as music in it own right. Ideally, I would like the music to stand up on its own feet, even without the support of the images, because the best film music, in my opinion, has always been able to do that.

Ideas come to me sometimes when I'm taking a walk. Sometimes a musical solution becomes apparent to me during the night. The next morning, I'll get back to the studio and it's solved, as if the subconscious has been at work during sleep.

I'm also quite fortunate to be able to hear, more or less, what I write down on paper. So after improvising, I don't work at the piano to compose. I used to rely on the piano a lot, but now I use it only to check and, of course, to demonstrate to the director (using sampled mock ups) how the piece is working with the film. By unchaining myself from the keyboard, and allowing the music to flow freely in my mind, I'm let loose. It's a liberating feeling, and I is far less likely to repeat the same familiar patterns that way. I think there's a big advantage of distancing myself from all the technology and trying to conceive music in my imagination, because the mind is unlimited by physical and technical constraints. Anything really, any sound, any rhythm any texture is potentially possible in the imagination.

Now I'd like to move on to some real examples. The first extract contains all the musical ingredients I just mentioned that contribute something to the images. First, I'm just going to play the scene to you so you can absorb what I've done musically without any preconditioning. Then, afterwards, I'm going to tell you what my intentions were, and play it once more.

[Plays scene from Night Train, Dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet]

I chose this scene because there's no dialogue, only images and music, so it's easy to hear what's going on. In this case, my intention was:

1. To add a sense of intrigue and mystery,

2. To reflect, in a musical way, the sounds and movement of the train. However, unlike the real sounds of the train, the musical train sounds have the freedom to come and go, so they can be used in a poetic and suggestive way, rather than in a realistic way. I leave the realism to the actual sound effects. If I were to incorporate real sound effects as opposed to instruments,

such as the actual sound of a train running over the tracks, I would also want to do that in a more musically oriented way that could heighten the mood in some way. There is really no need for the music to take on the role of an additional sound effect because that is so much better accomplished by real sound (foley), and in any case, it would be a waste of an opportunity.

3. The music emphasises some physical gestures, such as doors opening using crescendos and there's a musical imitation of the Doppler Effect when the clarinet repeated notes reflects the sound signal of a level crossing.

4. I wanted to suggest some emotional states through accented bass notes, rather like a heartbeat, and tremolo passages in the strings imply some sense of tension and passion.

5. The music has its own logic with a clear beginning, middle and a sense of closure at the end, which helps to structure the scene and make it feel unified.

6. Finally, there's the use of a Turkish wind instrument called a Duduk playing the melody. It's not only a mysterious and exotic sound in its own right, but it's also related to the train's destination at the end.

To find the musical tone of the film is the hardest part of the process. But once I have it, the rest of the music tends to flow quite quickly. And I've learned over the years that there really is no right or wrong way of doing things. There's no single answer. There are many possible answers. You could ask ten different composers to score the same scene, and each one would interpret it differently using their own personal musical language, and each interpretation, assuming they were all good composers, would be equally valid.

When I see a film for the first time, what is truly terrifying are the endless musical possibilities that could work. I could go down so many different directions, and each one would be valid in some way. So where do I start? Well, I usually start by asking myself certain questions: What speed should the music be? What style? What genre? What instruments should play it? Where should the music start and end? Should I compose a single stretch of music that creates a single mood for the entire scene or should I write music that chops and changes, narrating every dramatic change and camera movement? How much space should I leave between one cue and the next cue?

Very often, opposites attract. Think of a scene of an impressive mountain range or even better, just look outside the window here and see this fantastic view, this beautiful lake. The obvious thing might be to accompany it with epic orchestral music. But what about a single, intimate solo flute? If you do that, the lake suddenly become something very different. It becomes intimate, nostalgic. The lake is still there in full view, but the music has coloured the scene with quite a different light.

There are so many examples of this kind of idea: a slow and tragic string piece accompanying a fast paced battle scene, or cabaret music playing over a brutal assassination. They may be clichés now, but they still have great potency. How clever and original were the people who thought of juxtaposing these opposites for the first time!

So by confounding expectations and combing seemingly unrelated things, sometimes a musical score can add an expressivity and a meaning that the images alone would never have achieved. Film makers I have worked with, have, on the whole, been delighted whenever I have tried to add

another dimension to the film, so long as it supports the overall story and does not detract from their own vision.

To illustrate this, I'm going to show you three scenes from *La Vergüenza* (dir. David Planell) which means 'shame' in English. It's a Spanish film about a family – a mother, father and adopted child – and the difficulties they encounter following this new addition to their lives. The first scene takes place towards the beginning of the film, and it shows how music can bring a new dimension and meaning to a scene. The images by themselves are that of a young woman shopping at a market, her husband running down the street, and their son alone at home. So I will play you the scene without music and sound. Apart from the brief moment at the end where there's some dialogue, this is what I had to work with:

[plays scene without music]

OK, and now with the score. I should add that a scene like this is a real gift to a composer because the lack of dialogue leaves just music and image: pure cinema, if you like, where everything is still clearly expressed. So I'll just play you what I did.

[plays scene with sound and music]

So you can see that with music, something more profound is taking place. The music is connecting all three characters, and putting forward the idea that their fates are somehow linked. The music hints at a sadness, a melancholy, that's not apparent at all from the images alone. So as soon as you add the music, the scene is enriched with meaning that is very, very effective. Montage scenes like this with no dialogue have been some of the most profound and affecting I've worked on during my career as a composer.

The next film is from an Italian movie "Mother Teresa of Calcutta". In this scene, even though complete chaos surrounding her at the railway station, the music makes us concentrate on her and her feelings and makers what is going on around her of secondary importance. The music lets us into her inner emotional world. It's this power of music to draw out the inner state of mind that makes me believe music will always exist in cinema. I simply cannot see a neater way to accomplish this emotional highlighting and heightening than with a simultaneous musical narrative which a score provides. Even the most brilliant actor or actress in the world cannot express their inner thoughts as potently as music can. They can certainly express a great deal with their face and voice, but a massive boost is given by the music. That's why I believe the art of music will always have its place in film.

[Plays scene with sound and music]

And in this next scene, you see nothing more than a woman traveling up in a lift and entering her apartment. Again, I'll just show this scene without music. Music could completely change the scene: the woman's enigmatic expression allows for any interpretation. Is she happy? Is she depressed? What is she feeling?

[Plays scene from I ANNA, dir. Barnaby Southcombe without sound and music]

And, with music.

[Plays scene from I ANNA , dir. Barnaby Southcombe with sound and music]

So the music imbues the moment with a sense of intrigue and mystery that's not in any way explicit in the images. In addition to music, the style of the music is orderly and refined, just as the character. I think this implies that, at least superficially, that the character is someone from a particular social class and lifestyle who has everything under control. Then the music ends neatly with the clock changing to eight. So I think you'd agree that the music is definitely adding meaning to these scenes.

So moving on now to structure and themes. Contrary to what happens when I write a piece of absolute music – concert music, for example – where I would conceive a structure for the work before starting to write, a film soundtrack tends to comply with the narrative of the film. The film acts as a blueprint for the structure of the music. So we've got the options to create themes for characters and themes for situations, themes that we can use every time these characters appear. Depending on the situation, these themes can be presented in one way or in another way. Sometimes they can be isolated and other times they can be combined or superimposed, for example, at the end of the film, when all the threads of the film come together. This can help to unify the film and produce the sensation of conclusion.

The musical ideas don't have to be melodies. They don't have to be tunes as such. Sometimes a memorable sound or texture or even a repetition of a chord or chord progression may be sufficient. But it's very important that they work and feel completely connected with what we're seeing, and that one finds a balance between excessively overloading the scene on the one hand, and being so impersonal and so background that the music becomes redundant and actually has no effect at all. Wallpaper music is something that we try to avoid at all costs.

I want to show you a clip from a film I did called *Beyond the Sea, dir. Kevin Spacey.* Now take a look and listen carefully to the clip, and I'll then tell you what I wanted to achieve with the music afterwards.

[Plays scene from *Beyond the Sea, dir. Kevin Spacey* with sound and music]

So we can see we are in a defined period. This is Beverly Hills in the 1960s, and the music creates the atmosphere of the time, and inhabits the style that would have been popular in scores of the day. The tone is light and romantic. The tempo is dictated by the edit, especially the camera shot change from Kevin Spacey to Kate Bosworth at the very beginning gives me the tempo for the music. The entry of music after all the shouting also has a humorous effect. The pause of the music in the middle focuses the attention onto the dialogue. And after that, the music enters again, louder and with more momentum, when Kevin Spacey confirms what his wife has just said. So the music makes us feel complicit with the couple. We're sharing their secret. Then the wedding bells chime when she's carried over the threshold, but soon afterwards, the music enters a minor key, a sadder feeling, leaving us with the sensation that perhaps not everything is as wonderful as it appears.

[Re-plays scene from *Beyond the Sea, dir. Kevin Spacey* with sound and music]

So again, music is functional but at the same time attractive. That's my aim all the time.

The next scene is from the same film. It's from the moment where he sees his father for the first time after many years. President Kennedy has just been shot.

[Plays scene from *Beyond the Sea, dir. Kevin Spacey*]

So the music appears at the beginning almost imperceptibly, which is often the ideal way to introduce music so the audience doesn't realise it has entered. The music, in this case, is

describing what's happening in the mind of the character, the melancholy of a very painful moment in his life. It also reflects the sounds of the ocean waves. The orchestration with strings is sufficiently soft and transparent to allow the sounds of nature to come through – the wind and the waves - which also adds hugely to the mood. The climactic point is the close-up of Kevin Spacey's face, where it seems as if he's just realised something. And the music becomes warmer when he sees his father approaching.

So we've got an imperceptible entrance, music describing what's inside the character's mind, music reflecting on nature with the orchestration, a climactic point on the close-up on his face, and the music becoming warmer when he sees his father approaching. So I will play it once more.

[Re-plays scene from *Beyond the Sea, dir. Kevin Spacey*]

That's also an example of using a sound, a noise – in this case, a radio broadcast – to disguise the entrance of music so that the audience is not aware of music entering. Ideally that's what you want. You want the music to manipulate the audience without their realising it. But you don't want the audience to *feel* manipulated, or to be aware that they are being manipulated. It has to be achieved subconsciously.

The next thing I want to touch on is unity and economy of musical ideas. Most music cues in films, from my experience, last between one and three minutes, sometime less, sometimes a little more. Each cue has to work independently with the scene that it's been written for, but also has to connect with the previous one and the next. So, in that sense, composing music for film is actually fairly similar to composing absolute music, concert music, except for the fact that the film composition is fragmented into shorter units. The basic ideas of thematic material, development, transformation and logical progression are the same however.

When working under the pressure of deadlines, it's vital that I know how to economise my productivity. In any case, too many different musical ideas in a single film can actually be overwhelming and confusing to an audience and also make the soundtrack seem like a collection of disparate events, which is not ideal. I want to create a sense of unity, a sense of logic. A couple of good ideas developed logically and imaginatively and repeated with variations throughout the film is generally far more effective than string along many unrelated ideas. That's what I mean when I talk about being economical with one's material. The ideal scenario, I think, in all artistic pursuits – tis o be as economical with the material and to wring out as much as you possibly can from the smallest morsel.

So far, I've only discussed the challenges facing me when working alone. But of course, film composing is a collaboration and full of teamwork, and even more so now with the advent of composing tools and technology, which allow for the the producer and director to get involved. So besides my instincts and my own musical language, the other major guiding factor is, of course, the director. They will hopefully have a clear conception of what they intend to achieve with the film, but not necessarily how music can help them to achieve it. In the final analysis, the film is the director's personal vision, and I am there to help them achieve that mission. I'm not there to get in the way of that. I'm not there to impose my vision on them. The ideal situation is when a director can clearly explain what they expect from the music. In this way, I can then feel part of a team pursuing a common goal. In practice, however, what often happens is that nobody, including me, really knows what will work at the beginning of the journey of composing music for a film. At the start, it's a bit like entering a dark room and feeling your way around.

As we've seen, usually the process starts with some experimentation and improvisation, getting a sense of the kind of music the film will take: what's going to work with the characters and the style

of the film. The director and sometimes the producer, the editor and myself will watch the whole film from beginning to end, and decide which scenes we think need music and which scenes don't. That's called 'spotting' the film. And once we've decided where we think music should go, the placement of it, the question remains what it should do in each place, what is its purpose.

After that's been done and a list has been prepared of every cue with a description and the length, I'm on my own. I have to go away and start writing. This is the most reclusive time, when I am really alone, and I am in my own company for several months, often without much contact with the outside world. I become completely immersed in the film.

I want to show some examples where I had a really wonderful collaboration with the director. This is from a film called *Cuadrilátero, dir. José Carlos Ruiz* which is means 'quadrilateral' in English. There are four characters in this film, and each one – A, B, C, and D – are each in love with the other, but they can't express it. So there's a sort of circle of unrequited love. Furthermore they're all rather introverted characters. They cannot bring themselves to tell the other character what they feel for them. In this case, the music was composed before the film was made. I relied on the script, and the director's ability to communicate vividly the atmosphere that he wanted. He asked me to write a theme of unrequited love, a little melancholic, but not too sad, sort of hovering on the border between happiness and sadness, a blend of warmth but of distance as well. The fortunate thing is that one of the characters in this film is a cellist which gave me a very clear starting point.

[Plays scene from *Cuadrilátero, dir. José Carlos Ruiz*]

It was a dream for me to score that montage of real beauty and delicacy, and to be able to synchronise the cello solo in the music with the cellist in the film. Where there's a musician playing on screen, it's vital to try to make sure that they really know what they're doing because there are so few examples in films of really good portrayals of musicians. I saw one recently which was incredible, which was the film *Whiplash* about a drummer. But of course he was playing live. If you've got an actor who's imitating a musician, that's when you might have more of a challenge. The director has to be very careful to the musical performance it to look convincing otherwise when you come to add the music later in synch, it will be very obvious that they are not playing.

The next scene is from a film called *Game Therapy*. I was inspired very much by the title here, and I used the idea of playing games and mimicking to interpolate the ideas of the film into the music. The orchestration includes a toy piano and other colourful sounds that give the music the character of a child's game. The music is imitative, reflecting two couples who are mimicking each other on either side of a street. The leitmotif – or if you like, the main idea in the score – is actually the sound of an old record that comes in halfway through. I had to find a way to start a piece of music – it's actually a waltz here – that was distinct from the rest of the score.

So I had to find a way to lead out of the actual score to a piece of distinct music that would accompany this couple as they danced on the balconies of their apartments. So I said to the director: "Why don't we use the sound of a needle being dropped onto a record to introduce the music, even though there isn't actually a record there." He really liked the idea. So I introduced the sound of a needle falling onto a record, just at the point when the girl drops her jacket, as if the jacket is the needle falling onto the record. Then the dance music enters as if it is the music from an old record. In the end, the idea of the old record became a recurring idea in the film. And the film even concludes with the suggestive sound of a stuck record, you know that sound you used to hear on vinyl when the needle got to the end of the record. This became an audio metaphor for the couple's failing relationship, a sign that it was going nowhere.

So, the director, who listened to some of my ideas and incorporated them, allowed me to become very much part of the creative process, more than just the composer, and in the end I felt that the result was very good.

I should just explain very quickly that the film is about two couples: one well-to-do, young and professional who live in an elegant apartment, and the other a very bohemian, very alternative pair. They're on the same floor and overlook each other on different sides of the same street. So just for fun to spice up their flagging relationship, the bohemian couple decide to imitate what the couple in the other flat are doing. It's a silly game that they're playing, but they get caught. So let's see what happens.

[Plays excerpt from *Game Therapy, Dir. Elias Siminiani*]

So the next clip is from a film called *The PianoTuner of EarthQuakes.* It's a very unusual film by the Quay Brothers*.* The scene I've chosen is from the end of the film, and it's an overture to an opera written by a composer who has been outcast from society for his eccentricity and seeming madness. He intends to cause an earthquake at the end of his masterpiece through which he wants to destroy everything, including the critics, whom he hates with a passion. My intentions here were to create a surreal atmosphere through half music and half sound effects with unrecognisable sounds and incomplete themes. In this case, the musical performance on film was already shot, so I had to compose the score in synch to the images.

[Plays scene from *The PianoTuner of EarthQuakes, dir. The Quay Brothers*

Working with the Quay Brothers was a very, very interesting collaborative experience. They are identical twins but with very individual opinions and characters. I couldn't have worked any other way apart from having them sit next to me when I was writing, because the film is so personal. So they sat with me, sometimes for hours without saying a word, and I would be coming up with ideas. They'd suddenly say: "I like that!" And I would quickly write something down. Or: "Why don't we try something like this here?" Or, "listen to this CD, something by so-and-so. Play this. And what do you think of that over the scene?" So it was very much a hands on collaborative experience.

Now in this next scene, from the film *I, Anna* again, the music adds rhythm, highlights some aspect of the narrative, complementing the images. It's a complex scene because it's got jumps between two moments in time – the protagonist at work and the scene of the crime. The character strolling past the department store provides the rhythm with her walk, that the music takes up. The psychological state of confusion is accentuated by strange sounds, electronics and atonal music. The woman pushing the child's pram in the store evokes something in the protagonist's memory, and the music underlines this and in the rest of the scene, the music helps to gradually increase the tension as the scratching of the character at her arm becomes more and more like self-harm and violent.

[Shows excerpt from film - I, Anna (dir. Barnaby Southcombe)

Finally, in the same film another scene where again the music is trying to create an ambiguity. The night, an empty city, a man following a woman – is it a romantic pursuit or is she being stalked? We're not sure at this stage. And the music aims to create a mood rather than accentuate every action. So it's different from the previous scene. It's also paying homage to the *film noir* style. So this music is purely mood descriptive. It's evoking an atmosphere.

A similar sort of thing in the next scene except a very different kind of atmosphere.

An exile living in Paris, he discovers that the student revolt that he took part in in Beirut has now become a revolution. He's filled with joy, but at the same time he feels very removed from what's happening in his country. So the music had to evoke a sense of pride and the longing for his country, the nostalgia that overcomes him when he finds some photos of an old friend. So again, to evoke this kind of image, this music, which is continuing beneath the dialogue throughout – is a piece of music which doesn't particularly go with the narrative; it's simply heightens the mood already present in the images and dialogue.

[Shows excerpt from film - Rue Huvelin, dir. Mounir Maasri

Something else that's just occurred to me to mention is that having worked now in different national cinemas – French, American, British, Spanish, Italian, Australian and others – clearly every country has its own style of cinema, despite the homogenising effect of globalisation. Part of the difference comes from the language itself, the sound of the language and the way that actors express themselves. Interestingly, I have found this has an effect on me and hence on the music I write. For example, when I was working on the film *Beyond the Sea*, I had to find a musical language that would fit a particularly American style of film. Superimposing a musical language that I might have adopted for a French film, say, onto a Hollywood style film, just didn't work. I had imagined that I might be able to apply the same kind of music to any nationality of film, but in actual fact I found this not to be the case. The music has to adapt to national cinema style. The style, the harmonies, the level of sophistication, the mood, the references – all sorts of things. It's quite a complicated subject, but I thought I'd just mention it.

Now I have other examples of films I could show, but I think as we're coming to the end of the time we have, so I'll just leave you with one last film that I did because it's the only type of genre that I haven't covered today, which is animation,. This is something I like to do very much. In fact, part of my non-cinema work is in commercials. I have been fortunate to work on a series of commercials which have been running since 2009 in England for a company called 'Compare the Market'. It's very, very well-known in the UK and the main character is an animated meerkat with a strong Russian accent. He has become famous and he's now starring alongside Arnold Schwarzenegger, Nicole Kidman and big stars like that. These ads have become quite a sensation in the UK and I am told it's the most successful advertising campaign in British history. I'm finding that writing for animation is just as wonderful as writing for live actors. The animation world, I think, is right now going through a renaissance. There are some incredible things going on - and very adult oriented too. *Persepolis*, for example. A wonderful, wonderful film. And various others. So I think it's a fantastic area to work in.

Now, the one I'm going to show you is quite dark, as you'll see. I'm not going to say anything about the story. There's no dialogue. It's just visuals and music. The music makes up at least 50% of the story telling. It lifts the film to another level I think.

So here it is. The title of the film is *Food*. I'll show you both versions: without and then with the music.

How many of you guessed that she was going to do that? The animator/director never intended for there to be music at all. And the film works without, which is actually great. If a film works without music, I know that by adding the right music it's going to make the film even better. So I'll play you what I did, and see what you think.

[Shows *Food* with music]

So the old lady gets the last laugh, clearly! So thank you very much. Does anybody have any questions?

AUDIENCE Thank you for your lecture. It was very nice to see all the various clips. You've told us about all your successful collaborations. Have you had any unsuccessful collaborations?

SLASKI Certain collaborations aren't as satisfying, but that's not always because it's the director's fault. It's sometimes because there are so many opinions coming at you from all sides in the filmmaking process that you can get lost or the director can get lost. When there isn't a clear vision or if the original vision is lost through a multitude of differing opinions the music suffers in the end from that. There are always difficulties along the way, that's to be expected. It's part of the creative process.

There was a time when I actually told a director I just couldn't do what he wanted because. He arrived at my studio, and I was expecting to spot the film with him. However, before we started, he said: "I want you to write music for the entire film, from beginning to end. And then I will discard out what I don't want and keep what I do" [audience laughter] I said: "We've only got six weeks, and I don't think it's the best way of working. Nor, do I think it's the best way of working artistically, as you are asking me to compose music for scenes that don't require music in my opinion." He was so insistent and so surprised by my response that I had no option but to refuse the project. I knew I wasn't the person for that, and I'm very glad I didn't attempt the task because it would have gone against all my beliefs about the use of music in film and working in an artistic, collaborative way.

To know when to say yes or no, to choose my projects carefully and make sure that I am really the right person is so important, I think, because to find myself in a situation where I'm not happy is very destructive. The ideal scenario is when people contact me for what *I* do best. That is to say, when they actually know my work, they've listened to it, and they say, "We really like what you've done on so-and-so and we'd like you to work with us because we think you can bring something to our film". That is the ideal.

AUDIENCE How does it work with existing music combined with music that a composer does. For example, if you have a scene or a film with one song in it and the rest is music that is composed? How does that work?

SLASKI Before the record industry discovered they could make money for artists and for themselves by placing songs in a film, the composer would usually be asked to write the song themselves. The first example of this that I can think of is the French film "*Un home et Une Femme"* by Claude Lelouche. Francis Lai wrote the now famous song [hums "dabadabada…dabadabada"]. It was played during the love scenes throughout the film, which was the first time a song had been used in that way - as score to create a mood. But in that case, the song was written by the composer and integrated into the rest of the score, so it made perfect musical and stylistic sense. More frequently today however the record companies have a new band to plug and they're looking for ways of placing their songs into a film's soundtrack for financial or publicity reasons. Are you talking about that or are you talking about when a director chooses a particular song because he feels it will work in the film?

AUDIENCE Well, not necessarily for commercial issues, but for example, we're now working on a film that takes place in Chile, and we would love to have an old Chilean song in it. But also a composer who puts modern music into it.

SLAKSI Well, I don't see that as being a problem at all. You simply place the song where you think it should go in the film, and then the composer will compose the score around it. I don't think it's a

bad thing at all. I think it could work very well. What I do think is important is that the song is the right one for the film. So perhaps having a local Chilean artist, because the film demands that local colour, is absolutely great.

AUDIENCE Do you have a rule that a feature film needs from three to six main motives or something like that.

SLASKI I think the rule is not to go over three or four. Of course, one can always break that rule, if there is a good reason to do so, but to require more than four specific themes in one film is probably a mistake and too much for an audience to take in. I always try to keep in mind how I felt when I saw the film for the very first time. That's hard for composers and of course even harder for the director, who's lived with the film for so many months. We all have to make an effort to remember our very first impressions because that is how an audience will see the film. If they're presented with too much information, it's going to be overwhelming and convoluted.

AUDIENCE Do you often have to deal with temp tracks and pre-defined vision stuff from directors?

SLASKI Yes, because the editors will cut the film to existing pieces of music, even though they know they're not going stay in the film. I don't know if everyone knows what a temp track is? It's the temporary, placement music the director and the editor will choose to cut the film to, in order to give a sense of how the film might play when completed. The composer, when his time comes, has to compose a new score, which hopefully will be far better than the temp track. Though useful, there's something dangerous about temp music in the sense that temporary can very quickly become permanent. That is to say, there is always the danger of the film makers getting so used to the temp music that almost anything else that a composer might come up, no matter how good, is not going to feel the same. This may lead to the composer being forced to copy the temp music in order to satisfy the film makers, not the most creative way of working. This could be one reason why so many film scores today sound so similar and lack individuality or personality.

Temp music can be most useful when used as a guide, and it can very quickly be removed from the movie before it's presented to the composer. I usually ask for a version of the film without the temp music as I don't want to be influenced by somebody else's music. On other occasions, if I really don't get a clear idea of what the music should do in a scene, I might watch the sequence with the temp music because it helps me to quickly understand what the director had in mind. And sometimes playing a bit of existing music over film can really help to quickly find out what works. One might discover some magic that way, by using an existing piece of music, then analysing and incorporating what is good about it into something of your own.

But, yes, almost everything today is cut to existing music, from films, to TV to commercials. I think only and handful of directors don't cut to temp music. I know that Polanski doesn't nor does Almodovar. Two great directors of our time. I think there's a discipline in cutting a film *without music*. Music helps to gloss over a lot of cracks without actually dealing with them. Problems that are present in the film seem less stark with music, but putting music over them, doesn't solve the problems. They're still there. An audience will still see through them. So I think cutting a film without music is probably a great discipline, rather like a composer trying to hear music in his head as opposed to at a piano. If the great maestros of cinema of the past worked without temp music and still produced great films, why can't we aim to do that now? That said, there are some really good directors using temp tracks. So it probably depends very much on who is using them and how they are used.

Having grown up with the immediately recognisable music of Ennio Morricone, John Williams, Lalo Schifrin, Philippe Sarde, Jerry Goldsmith, Nino Rota, John Barry and many others, I'm a rather

disappointed by many of the film scores that I hear today. So many of them sound identical. It's as if they were composed by the very same person. Indeed, I can usually trace the music back to some other film score style that was obviously used as the temp music. In these cases, the composer has been obliged to emulate the temp score because the film makers have grown so used to it and nothing new seems to work as well for them.

This method of working has led to film music that is rather bland and generic because it no longer has the fingerprints of an individual composer's personality. Moreover, commercial Hollywood film scores, are often used to temp a film or TV series, perhaps in the hope that emulating this style will increase their chances of success at the box office, or appeal to contemporary audiences' tastes. I am not too sure. But what this means, is that we are quickly losing the essence of what, in the past, made each nation's cinema and television different, so varied and rich. Cinema music is being globalised and therefore homogenised. I think this is regrettable because, just like spoken languages, music has developed for thousands of years independently in different parts of the world, and inherently goes hand in hand with the culture from which it came. Paring up an epic Hollywood style music score, which came out of a completely specific American tradition, with a French, Spanish or German film just seems at odds to me. Still, we have some wonderful composers today who are managing to hold on to their identities despite the considerable pressures: Alberto Iglesias and Alexandre Desplat are two such composers who come to mind, and I have great admiration for their work.

AUDIENCE Have you ever worked with the scriptwriter writing for the script?

SLASKI I always work with the film director, and if they happen to be the scriptwriter then yes.
A few of the examples that I showed today were from films where I took inspiration from the script before seeing the finished film. Cuadrilatero for instance.

AUDIENCE And you use that as a temp music then for the editor, and then you re-write it for the final film?

SLASKI Yes, that's exactly what happened.

AUDIENCE Is that a better way of working with temp music if you want to use temp music.?

SLASKI It is really. If there's time, and a composer is brought on board early enough and asked to write music based on the script, this method can work very well. It's a risk of course, because music inspired by a script might not work for the finished film. But if communication between director and composer is very good, and the director is able to express what he wants dramatically, I don't necessarily have to see every scene finished in order to compose music for it. There are some composers who refuse to do that. They will only start work when they've received a locked film, because they realise how much a film can change from the script. I am happy to try this however, as I have had very good results writing music up front.
Sergio Leone and Morricone worked that way often. Morricone would write music in advance based upon Leone's descriptions, and the director would then edit the film to the music. And if the music then had to be adjusted for synchronisation purposes, they'd re-record those sections.

In the days of the old film studio system, you'd have studio orchestras permanently employed. They could be called up to record as many times as was necessary as they were on a fixed wage and worked exclusively for the studio. Now, of course, hiring live musicians and a studio is relatively expensive. Nowadays, demos or mock ups using samples are very helpful because you have little doubt as to what the musical end result is going to be before the live musicians are brought in to record.

AUDIENCE Do you feel kind of a crisis in film music because I have the feeling that, especially for European films, I can never imagine that Haneke would use film music. Or most of the films that are in the main festivals. It became a sign of a weakness in a film if it has a soundtrack like classical Hollywood.

SLASKI There are so many examples throughout history of various proclamations purporting crises or the end of this and that, and these, generally speaking, never comes to pass. As I explained and demonstrated throughout my presentation today, there are numerous and profound aspects that music can bring to a film's narrative, and furthermore, it can do this in counterpoint to the dialogue, without the audience being aware of it. Music's ability to subconsciously manipulate an audience is so powerful, that I simply cannot see music being fazed out in film. Indeed, it would be utterly self defeating to do so, just as asking an actor to act with both hands tied behind his back would be. Audiences totally accept music in film and have no problem with it being there, so, apart from the sheer beauty and artistry which a great musical score can bring to a film, why would film makers choose to deprive themselves of such a useful medlium?

Haneke is a fantastic and brilliant director. His films are utterly personal and conceived to work without music, with only natural sounds as the soundtrack. As a result, they are edited differently, acted differently, and stylised quite differently to most other films. His films function without music because they were conceived to do so, and they inhabit a very personal emotional space and create a very particular mood.

AUDIENCE You could have music. Like in *Caché*, there's suspense and you could do it.

SLASKI You probably could, but, as you saw, the animation I played you called "Food" worked without music. But the music score gave it another dimension and brought a great deal of emotion, depth and pace to it. So I don't think it's a question of yes or no. There will always be directors who prefer not to use music, but the majority will generally continue to do so. Indeed, most films, without a score, would fail immediately. I know this first hand, because I see them without music when they are sent to me for scoring. The earlier question of course mentioned that it has been highlighted as a sign of a weakness in a film if it contains a classical Hollywood style score. There, I would probably agree - and I refer back to my previous answer regarding the current tendency to overuse a certain genre of large scale orchestral music that was developed in Hollywood for a certain kind of cinema.

AUDIENCE The main thing is to find the balance so people don't feel like they're being manipulated.

SLASKI Exactly. I believe the goal is to manipulate the audience without their realising it. Of course, there are different styles. You can go back to the 1930s, and music is so present and continuous. It was originally used, of course, to cover up the sound of the projector which to some extent explains this overuse of music. Music was still very present throughout the 40s and 50s. Then, little by little, as time went on, less music was used. Certainly in European cinema, music has traditionally been used sparingly, and generally not under dialogue. Today, I believe there's far too much music in TV and films. It covers everything and is relentless. The current style in TV thrillers, for instance, is for music to start at the beginning of the main titles and continue, almost without pause, until the end credits. So, after a while, it just loses its power and become redundant, wall paper. I think music is much better used sparingly and saved for important moments, and of course written in such a way that the audience are unaware of their emotions being played with.

APPLAUSE