



Czech-born **Elia Cmiral** is an interesting personality among the Hollywood composers. After scoring the successful Robert de Niro thriller *Ronin*, he has scored horrors (*The Wrong Turn*), mystical movies (*Stigmata*), but his name also appeared in the credits of sci-fis (*Battlefield Earth*) and French thrillers (*Six-Pack*), also doing additional music as well (*Resident Evil: Apocalypse*). We've interviewed him regarding his new movie, *Pulse*.

- Dear Mr. Cmiral! You were born in Czechoslovakia, but you worked both in Sweden and the United States before attending USC. What fascinated you in the movies that made you a score composer?

- Back in Czechoslovakia, I actually started writing for theater. The transition between writing for theater and writing for film was very natural. I moved to Prague and was hanging out with an artistic crowd. The film world was very attractive as it seems to reach a much larger audience.

I was fascinated of the complexity of the film media combining many creative layers over and above the plot and acting: cinematography, music, sounds design, set design etc. It is kind of a modern "Gesamtkunstwerk".

-Your very first score was written back in your native Czechoslovakia for a theatrical production of Cyrano de Bergerac. What was your music like and what was your biggest challenge when writing it?

- My stepfather was a stage director and gave me a chance to write music for his set up where I employed live strings, acoustic guitar, harmonium and some percussion. It was a challenge to write music and please my stepfather.

Even though he was very clear about what he needed and expected from the score, it was still my first and so was a challenge. Later, I wrote a number of scores for his set ups and I learned a lot from him. The next thing I knew, I was sitting in the darkness as a member of the audience watching an unfolding drama accompanied by my music. And that was it.

- You went to Sweden to build your career. Why did you choose this country and what special opportunities did you have there?

- My immigration to Sweden was dramatic. I didn't know much about the country or its culture and I did not speak Swedish. The decision to leave Czechoslovakia was very personal. Sweden and its people

were very good to me, though it was still a culture shock. I am tremendously thankful to have had another chance in my life, and I used every single opportunity to get where I wanted to be which was to be writing music for film and theater. After the first couple of years there, I really got my first chance to write for a TV series. Later I wrote music for a number of film, TV and theater productions. I also wrote my ballets, the first one for the father of Swedish ballet, Ivo Cramer. I made a place for myself in the Swedish music world, ending with a stipendium for music study in the U.S.A.

- Between 1989 and 1993 you've scored Swedish shorts (*Super Freak*), and television films (*Rosenholm*). Which was the most memorable of these projects for you?

- Super Freak was a short animated movie based on an Alfred Jarry story. It was a great experience and I had wonderful people to work with.

- You were admitted to USC where you studied music. How were you prepared for film scoring at this institution?

- Well, I was not really prepared. The school system as well as all the practical things as the housing, transportation etc, were very different from what I knew. But I got help, made some good friends and enjoyed it a lot.

- Do you think that composers who don't start off in Hollywood find their own identity and voice sooner? Do you get more freedom than the "in-house" musicians?

- It is perhaps easier to keep your own identity, since we were not influenced in our childhood by film and pop culture. On the other hand, we are losing certain subtle connections and references. My artistic "freedom" depends more or less on the people I am working with and the interpretation what freedom actually is.

- Your first better-known assignments were compositions for *Love Street* and *Nash Bridges*? How did you get into composing for television series'?

- The first one I got through friends and I did two episodes in the series for the Showtime Channel. With Nash Bridges, I knew some people involved in the post who pointed out my demo from the hundreds of others submitted. My music caught Don Johnson's ears.

- After a string of shorts, (*Sunsets by Candlelight*, *Prophecies*), and a video game, *The Last Express*, you've accepted John Frankenheimer's *Ronin* after Jerry Goldsmith left the project. What were your first thoughts about the assignment?

- I don't think I really knew back then how incredibly lucky and fortunate I was; I was courageous and had a healthy portion of self confidence so I knew I could do it. But the reality of working on daily bases with John far exceeded anything I could imagine.

- Apart from the strict deadline, what other demands did the filmmakers have? Were you given free-hand when composing the score?

- John was great working to work with. He had a complete vision of what he wanted. He was articulate, knowledgeable, generous and gave me absolute freedom to work within the frame of his vision. He became my mentor and I cannot express enough my gratitude for his courage in giving me this opportunity.

I worked hard to meet the deadline, wrote every single note, programmed all the sound design in the score myself. Every other day, I played my fully orchestrated demos for John and Michael Sandoval, who was at the time President of the MGM Music Department.

- In your music, you've introduced the duduk, an Armenian instrument that was relatively obscure at that time. How did you discover this instrument and why did you choose it to include it in Ronin?

- When I started to write, I felt that the location, France, was irrelevant to the story. When I discussed with John about the quality of the main theme he mentioned "sadness, loneliness and heroism".

I am always looking for new sounds and listening to different instruments just to satisfy my own curiosity. So I knew the sound of the instrument, which has already two of these three qualities. and also this sad tone of timelessness.

- After the success of Ronin, duduk was frequently used in other scores as well, such as Hans Zimmer's Gladiator. How do you feel about introducing a whole new sound to Hollywood that got picked up?

- Well, the instrument has been around a couple of hundreds years, and it was sporadically used before Ronin, but I proved it can play a theme and carry a whole score. I am glad to have been able to make a contribution to the orchestral pallet.

- You've done Stigmata a year later. Do you feel close to this kind of mystical world? What opportunities did you see in this movie when you signed up for this project?

- Stigmata was produced by the same producer I worked with at Ronin, Frank Mancuso Jr. They were looking for a composer for a dark, edgy orchestral score. I love mystical themes, drama and suspense so I was very happy for this opportunity. It was a very different score. I did a lot of experiments combining synths, sound design, ethnic and techno percussion with orchestra.

I worked with great musicians in L.A. and it was very challenging work. For example I set Jesus Christ text from his scroll in Aramaic to music to be sang by a female solo as well as choir.

- On Stigmata, you've worked together with Billy Corgan, lead singer of The Smashing Pumpkins. Who suggested him for this project and how did you split the work?

- He was already hired when I came onboard. The split of the work was done through our music editors. I wrote what was assigned to me, but later on through editorial my score was greatly expanded.

- The official soundtrack didn't have any of your music, your score is only available on a promo. How do you feel about song-only soundtracks and promotional releases that might never reach everybody who wants it?

- I would of course like to see my work on the official soundtrack accessible to the audience, but these kinds of decisions are not mine to make.

- Battlefield Earth, a sci-fi based on L. Ron Hubbard's novel had received both negative reviews and flopped at the box-offices. Do you think a bad movie could have a negative impact on a composer and his career?

- I think it is unfortunately possible.

- Despite the failure at the box-office, the music became popular within the fans of the genre. Do you often receive feedback about your scores?

- Yes, I hear from people and even receive emails and phone calls from those who appreciate my music. About the music for Battlefield Earth I have heard only good things.

- In an interview you've mentioned that you've presented the main theme of Battlefield Earth to

your wife and friends before finishing it. Is it important for you to know what your friends think of your work?

- I like to hear their opinions, but it is ultimately up to me to decide the quality of the theme. But sometimes my wife, my son or somebody says something I wouldn't have thought about, and one such word can sometimes trigger my fantasy and imagination.

- You've been contracted to quite a number of horror features in a row (They, Species III, Wrong Turn). Is it hard to separate between the continuous assignments that come from the same genre?

- No, I don't think it's difficult. Every film is different, requiring a different approach, has different structure and the directors have different ideas about the music.

- While this genre is often looked over, most of us would agree that composing a good horror score is about as hard as writing for any other type of movie. What special ideas do you need for a good horror score that is not characteristic for other genres?

- To write a good horror score is not easy at all. By good, I mean an interesting, unusual approach. You don't want to write the cliché of using suspenseful sustains and stings. You want to come up with unusual solutions and different orchestration. In one way, I feel it is easy to write a score using more traditional harmony, structure and orchestration.

- You've written additional music to Jeff Danna's Resident Evil: Apocalypse. What was exactly your task, what new pieces have you composed?

- I was asked by producers to write a couple of cues to help Jeff's score and support the producer's idea of the score. It is not such an unusual situation nowadays.

- What do you think about the growing number of "additional music" and "additional composers" credits?

- It usually indicates some problems with the score, artistic, political or others. And usually the additional composer cannot have a credit such as "Score by" so he or she gets credit, if any, as additional music or additional composer. It's not the ideal situation, but sometimes it is a necessity, but I think nobody really likes it when this happens.

- Your latest movie, Jim Sonzero's Pulse is the remake of a 2001 Japanese movie. Are you familiar with the music of the original feature, or did you avoid it in order not to be influenced by that score?

- Yes, I saw the Japanese version of Kairo a while ago. While Kairo is more haunting and mysterious, Pulse tries to be a bit bigger and scarier, portraying ultimate terror and paranoia without any protection. Pulse preserves the original Kairo concept but the tools are different. The idea behind Kairo made a deep impression on me when I saw it. It inspired me.

My score is an interpretation of Jim's vision; the paradox in our communication technology, resulting humans' isolation and losing natural human interaction. My music is reflecting these feelings, and when I was writing it the only thing I had in my mind was how to support the movie, how to connect certain scenes, when and how to use Mattie's theme, how to stay emotionally and creatively connected with the movie. Any intellectualizing and comparison aspects are simply not in my world.

- Which is your favorite horror score?

- There are many good scores around. It would be very difficult to mention one.

- Film music is often cut up in post-production, pieces are omitted or put into completely different parts of the movie. Did this ever happen to you? How do you feel about such decisions, which are often made without the presence of the composer?

- The ultimate decision about how to use the score in the movie is up to the director and the producers. So far, I have been lucky. My scores are often played as they were written and in the scenes for which they were written.

Maybe it is pure luck, or maybe it is because I carefully play orchestrated demo cues for the directors in order to get them familiar with the score and prevent later "surprises". In many cases, I also participated in the final dub and try to be helpful with my advise. After all, I am the one who best knows the score.

- As a native European, do you notice any differences between the working methods on both continents?

- I don't know how the working method in Europe has changed over the last ten years, but it used to be very different. I adapted the American method when I was at USC, and I love it. I think this is the perfect way to score and I don't think I can work in another way anymore.

- Where do you prefer to work?

- I have a studio and my office is built in my house. I love this way of working. Even when I am on a very strict schedule I still have a chance to see my family. I am happily married with two kids. It might be little distracting from time to time, but still it works better this way for me. I skip commuting. Most of my scores were written in pajamas.

- How well are you known in your native country? Have you ever been asked to score a Czech production? Would you like to work back in Europe?

- I am not sure if I am well-known in my country even though some people know about me. And of course there is a little sadness that I don't write for Czech productions. Two years ago I was discussing writing a ballet for National Theater. I love to write ballet, and I was very excited. I worked on the script and made a space in my working schedule here, but the production somehow fall apart. The ballet with the same name was done later with a local composer.

- Which is your favorite film score from your own filmography? Is there one you'd approach differently or re-work completely?

- I have a special feeling for all my works, even though I of course know the weaknesses of each of them. They are all my creations, my children. Going back to rewrite one, well there is not really reason for it. The only exception is my score to Ronin. I wrote an orchestral suite based on the score. It is still waiting for its premiere.

- Do you have a dream project or perhaps a director with whom you'd love work together?

- There are many dream projects and so many directors I would love to work with, the list would be too long. The director I would most have loved to work with is, sadly, no longer with us. John Frankenheimer passed away a couple of years ago. And I still hope to have another chance to write a ballet. An orchestral suite is also on my dream list.

- Is there a composer whose work you admire from your generation? Do you have a musical role model?

- Above many others I love works by James Newton Howard, Chris Young and Gabriel Yared. I don't

have a musical role model but I have my composer heroes.

- What were your thoughts about this world before getting into it and how did your perceptions change when you became part of it and learned more about how things work?

- I didn't have any idea how it would be to be part of this world. It is very different from what people can see from outside. I feel fortunate to do what.

I love, to write music. For me, it's a dream job.

- Many thanks for the interview! We will keep track of your career on our homepage and we wish you many success in the future!

- Thank you.

