Mark R. Hasan : **Pulse** is a remake of the Japanese film **Kairo / Pulse** (2001). Had you seen the original film before scoring the American project?

Elia Cmiral : I'd seen it, but it's so different. While story is very similar, the only inspiration I got from the Japanese version was the technological aspects, and the strong isolation between people.

MRH: With the Japanese film, the pacing is much more measured, and the shock sequences are very gradual. The filmmaker exploited very simple images that gradually come out of darkness, and the score itself is similarly minimal and chamber-oriented for greater intimacy. Your score has more of a technological slant, and I guess that's partly because the role of computers and technology are much more prominent in the American film.

EC: That's right. There's much more weight on the use of cellphones and text messages. The whole movie starts with people sitting in a café, and one of the young kids is sending text messages to the person sitting next to him; that's kind of the paradox where, instead of talking to each other directly, they're hiding behind text machines and voice mail and leaving messages. You never know if a person gets it or not; they're kind of hiding.

MRH: I find that many American horror films today tend to be about shocks and special effects, and I wonder, because you've scored a number of horror projects, if it's very hard to find a movie with a good story and characters?

EC: It is difficult in horror. Actually, for me, horror is not just smashing and cutting off heads and splashing blood on the wall; it's the psychological pressure of something unknown that you don't know how to deal with. That is terror for me, and I think **Pulse** has it because it has a very interesting story about the kids and the phantom coming through the Internet, through the computers, and through wireless technology. I think it's extremely interesting because we are sending so much information, so many personal opinions and emails. How do we know who is reading it? We really *don't* know.

MRH: One free email service uses ads that are based on the software that reads the content of your email, and then strategically places the ads related to the content of the email; while it's not an individual reading your correspondences, your email is still being scanned, which I always find a bit creepy.

EC: I think it is extremely creepy. We're surrounded by computers and all this automated technology which has become in one way part of our lives. How much control do we have? That's a good question. There's a very interesting line in the movie where the main character, Mattie, asks the guy how long he's been watching the images on the computer, but the question is 'How long have *they* been watching us?' which is a very significant line.

MRH: Do you find that an emphasis on graphic violence is an aspect that sometimes turns off composers?

EC: Yes, it's true, but on the other hand, when I'm writing I usually don't have the film's final graphic images, so it doesn't really affect me so much.

MRH : Some critics have a dislike for horror films, and their bias sometimes extends to the music. Instead of horror films having a very melodic score, they tend to contain experimental concepts, and there are critics who regard horror scores as lesser works, which isn't really fair, because in order to create a good score, there's a lot of careful thought that has to go into the sound design, the mood in a scene, fragments of any themes, and constructing effective shocks.

Do you find that it's unjust to view horror scores as lesser works compared to your standard drama or action score?

EC : Well, I would like to see every person who has this opinion to sit in front of a computer and try to write it, because he would discover that it's so difficult. Here's the main problem: when you are writing for an orchestra, you are dealing with familiar sounds – chords, tempi, etc. – but in horror you are combining orchestra sounds and scary sustained chords with sudden and sharp piercing sounds… It's a big challenge to then squeeze-in some emotional theme for the main character, and avoid being cheesy and cheap.

I've seen some horror movies where the score the composer wrote used pre-programmed sounds from the computer and synthesizers, adding a little groove and a little hit; it sounds cheap and cheesy. But to do it right is a lot of work; much more work than dramatic music or action music, or even comedy.

For example, last year I did **The Reading Room**, which was a very nice and warm family drama for the Hallmark Channel. I believe I have a sixty-five minutes score for strings, some woodwinds, some piano solos. I wrote everything in three weeks; every note, no problem, all done. It was so fast, so quick, so easy for me. Meanwhile, the **Pulse** score I rewrote three times, and I was on the picture for almost six months.

MRH : That's a *very* long time.

EC : Because the movie was re-shot and re-edited. There were a lot of new versions. I actually did one movie in between while I was waiting for them to finish reshooting, but it was tremendous work. When you have a certain pulse and tempo in a long sequence and they recut it and cut a couple of frames in the middle, you are losing the pulse and the tempo. It's not like, 'In this sequence I can just play parts fast or slow and make it fit.' You have to rewrite it if you want to do the best job that you can do, and I always try to do the best, so I had to rewrite it. I can't just cut out part of the bars and say, 'Here it is.' I don't do that.

MRH : I've found that with the more recent examples of horror scores, the more outstanding ones can be deceptively simple, like **Wolf Creek**, or **The Descent**. In the case of the latter, David Julyan used a very large orchestra to gradually alter a simple theme.

Then there's a work like **Wrong Turn**, which I thought had some beautiful, dense writing – very primal - for large orchestra, with a powerful sound for a film that stayed vicious all the way through and had a very energetic drive.

EC : I love the score, and I loved working on **Wrong Turn** because I love this edgy, contemporary, twentieth century language for orchestra and the incorporation of West Virginia elements, like dulcimers and drums. It was great to work with [producer] Stan Winston.

MRH : I imagine that for every shock moment in the film, whether it was gradually or created through a large sonic cluster, a lot of thought and a lot of effort went into crafting those sounds. It's not something that can be assembled simply. You have to think it out very carefully.

EC : Yes, and with every hit and every surprise and every suspenseful build you want to be a little bit different. You don't want to use the same clusters, the same colours, the same instrumentation. I see the score as a dramatic development, like building a church: not every little window has to be the same… You don't want to have all the time 'Boom-boom-boom.' You need to see the whole picture, and not hit every single scary moment.

MRH : Are there specific areas in a horror film or a suspense film that you look for in order to get inspiration? For example, do you find that when you watch a horror film, there's a certain sequence that maybe for you sets the tone of the film? Or is it the characters and their situations or their emotional trauma that clarifies the film and your score's voice?

EC : When I see the picture for the first time, I try to study and see the human emotions instead of going with the effects. I think it's important because they are people; they're scared, something's happened with the main character, and I try to think how does this person feels. With a horror movie, I don't think I'm writing any different than in films like **Stigmata** or **Ronin** or **The Reading Room**. The human and emotional aspects are important, otherwise I feel I'm doing sound design and crescendos and booms and accents, and nothing else.