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★ Reseñas

★ Entrevistas

★ Noticias

★ Varios

★ Forum

★ Enlaces

Entrevistas

INTERVIEW WITH ELIA CMIRAL

[También en Español] 



For Scoremagazine it has been such a nice opportunity to interview you. Thanks a lot for attending, Mr. Cmiral.

Thank you for your interest in my music. I am happy to talk to you.

So, by a look at your recent and new assignments, we find "Pulse"; how did you get on this project and what was it like to work on it? Were you familiar in any way with the Japanese original movie (Kairo) or with its score in particular? Takefumi and Takeshi Haketa were responsible for that, if I remember correctly.

I and my music were brought to director Jim Sonzero attention by his picture editor and my friend Bob Lambert. I did a demo for the project, scored one scene and got the job. The demo was lately used at a different scene and some sounds and motifs were also later developed and used in the whole score.

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 vision, and both scores are very different. While Kairo score stays as a haunting complement to the restrained movie, my score is reflecting Jim more violent and paranoid vision; the paradox in our communication technology, resulting humans isolation and losing natural human interaction.

"Pulse" has some very interesting sound design, with its violently dark electronics, brass clusters and heavy orchestral dissonance. On a film about wireless communication technology, insanity and phantoms, how do you decide what musical approach to follow? Did the director have something to do with it as far as going along with his vision, or was it something you solely decide?

To work with Jim Sonzero was a great experience. The work was intense. Jim made me explore every possible or impossible musical and sonic corner. He was always very open to suggestions, especially unconventional solutions. He was very detail driven, like myself. I loved it.

The producers wanted the orchestral, classical horror score. First I thought how can I create a score for a movie about wireless communication technology, paranoia and phantoms just with orchestra?

Then I saw the Japanese film "Kairo" on which "Pulse" is based. I realized its actually a great idea, but to make it work I had to invent my own electronic soundscape and seamlessly incorporate it to the orchestra. And these sounds would be part of the orchestra pallet. Some of them were already in my demo.

So, in the very beginning of the process, one of my programmers and I developed a number of recognizable sounds which I used throughout the whole score. For example, one of them is an extremely low single pulse tumbledown- Hey this is for the Pulse movie!-which shakes subwoofers in the theater. It worked great so we ended up using it much more than I originally planned.

Of course it varies from one director to another, but generally speaking, do you personally find that they usually have a very important and drastic role as to what a score will sound like in the end? Up to which extend are you willing to make retreats to favour that?

The ultimate decision about the score direction and how to use it in the movie is up to the director and the producers. I always try to find the best way to support their ideas and write the best possible music. Its my job. There might sometimes be different ideas about the score, but its because all of us who are involved care. It is also a part of my job to explore all the directions and be very open and if I feel the direction is a dead end I explain why and even demonstrate it.

Back on "Pulse", and technically-wise; how did you come to the final result? Did you record the orchestra first and then enhanced and manipulated it electronically?



Writing the score like "Pulse" where there is so much Electronica and sound design involved, I cannot imagine it could be possible to write both parts separately and still get an organic result.

As I said before, I developed a lot of sounds, sound motifs etc., in order to invent my own original pallet and soundscape. I am not talking about electronic mock-ups of the orchestra where sampled strings substitute for the real ones, but inventing the sounds supporting the nature of the plot. And these sounds would be part of my orchestral palette.

I was writing both parts at the same time, and if I had not the sound I needed, I or one of my programmers developed it. I was also constantly reusing the sounds as motifs as I was progressing, writing the score in different cues to get all the music connected.

All strings and brass parts were recorded with a 60 piece orchestra in Prague. Some electronic elements and percussion are so specific in the pitch and the color, that is was impossible to try to produce them with an orchestra.

My goal was to write a contemporary score where both acoustic and electronic parts are seamlessly and organically integrated to each other. The listener should be drawn to this dark and dangerous world of "Pulse" and not thinking about who is playing which part.



Did you perform any of the instrumental passages of the score? The atmospheric piano perhaps?

Yes, I played the piano and many parts of the electronica. I also did some percussion and vocals.

"Pulse" sounds relative in places with various other modern horror scores which share the same philosophy: the electronically enhanced - atmospheric soundscapes fused with orchestral elements. Do you follow such kinds of work of your contemporaries? What is your relation with the general output of today's film music, any favourites?

I am by nature curious and if I have time I like to check out what my colleagues are doing. That the composers are somehow sharing today the similar philosophy in scoring suspenseful and horror movies is no wonder. The atmospheric soundscapes with orchestral elements are very suitable for this genre. The question is what the composer is doing with it; how deep and how original he or she is in developing the soundscape and connected it with orchestra.

The list of my favorite scores or composers would be too long. Just to mention some: I have a special bond with Christopher Young going back to the very beginning of my career. And I love his music. I also love works by James Newton Howard, Gabriel Yared and John Williams among others.

Do you use notating, sound-modulating and sequencing software or sound libraries in the primal stages of composing? Or are you more of a traditional composer, on the "paper" side of things?

When it comes to writing theme or contra point I use the traditional notation. I write directly to Digital Performer, using it as well for sequencing.

I also use a lot of different soft synths and sound processing programs already in the writing stage.



When you are firstly assigned to a movie, how do you approach it - from the very beginning up to the final score?

Every project is a challenge and requires a different approach, has different structure and the directors have different ideas about the music. I start with watching the movie a couple of times so I really know it. I try to understand what the director and the producers are expecting from the score and why. For this, the temp track is a very good and useful tool. It can open the dialogue.

Then I analyze the whole score and divide it to the themes groups. The next step is to write a demo of a representation of the most important groups and present it to both the director and the producer.

Any changes at this stage will show me how close or far I am from what they expect. As I continue writing it gets easier. I have my themes, orchestra pallet and already an idea about the right direction.

I am challenging myself to find unusual solutions and avoiding cliches and always try to find some cool different sound flavor specifically for each project.

Going back in time; what is your musical background Elia? We all know that you were born in Czechoslovakia and graduated from the Prague Music Conservatory. How did it all start though and what else can you tell us apart the above-mentioned and already known info? How did you firstly move into the film music area?

I was born in what is today part of Czech Republic called Moravia, not far from today Slovakia border. It is not far from the places where Martinu and Janacek were born.

From my childhood I was surrounded by theater, music, books and art. My grandfather was a music educator, organist and composer who took composing classes with Antonin Dvorak.

As a teenager I played guitar, piano and drums in bands. After that, I went to a music conservatory where I took composition and a double-bass class. In Sweden, I was studying electronic music in studio EMS. When I came to the U.S., I was in the film scoring program at USC in Los Angeles.

Back in Czechoslovakia, I actually started writing for theater. Later, when I moved to Prague and was hanging out with an artistic crowd the film world seems more attractive. At the same time I got my first movie to score. It was a student film but very good, poetic with a touch of bitter sweet humor.

What was the movie business in general and film music - in particular - like there (and Europe in general) and what

are the differences in comparison with the US standards? Was it difficult to adapt to those new grounds when you went to the States?

The movie business and film music in Europe was very different from U.S. fifteen years ago. I don't know how the working method in Europe has changed over this time 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.

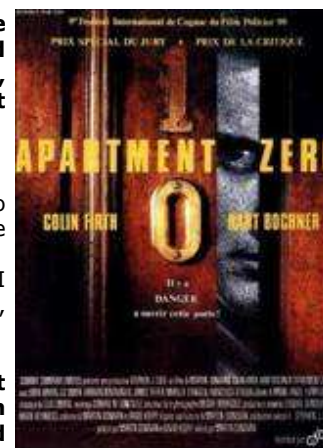
You wrote scores for several European films and three ballets before coming to the United States which led you to various assignments and a successful, varicoloured career. How do you shift between all these different musical genres (tv scores, theatre, film music: horror, drama, classical-oriented etc)? What are their similarities and what different needs do all these specifically meet?

Well, I have only one criteria for myself: to write the best music I can no matter what.

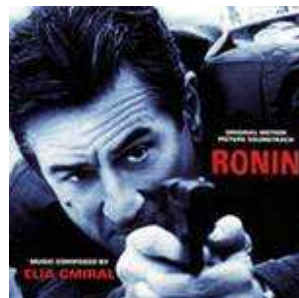
All the different music forms as you mentioned have something common, and that is music. So when you understand the specifics for each one, everything falls into place. And I am comfortable with these challenges.

I am always very impatient about the new project. I cannot sleep, thinking about it all the time. I am restless and frankly the only goal I have is to support the project no matter if it is a ballet, theatrical set up, horror movie or family drama.

The tango-based music for "Apartment Zero," – your first American project, if I am not mistaken, featured a now-classic full length score which is said to be scored in an amazing ten days only! Is this true? How did you become attached to the project and how did you come out all well out of a situation like this?



I was hired shortly after I finished my studies at USC in Los Angeles. The original composer, Astor Piazzolla, was unable to complete the score, so there was a great rush. The final dub was already scheduled and could not be moved for legal reasons. And it is true I completed score in such a short time. I wrote a number of cues for a chamber orchestra featuring a solo violin. I recorded this part in L.A. and the rest of the score I wrote and played on a rented bunch of synthesizers and percussion utilizing overdubbing with the help of the studio multi track recording machine.



About Ronin: a score that is rather different than the majority of your work. Was the musical approach your responsibility only or did John Frankenheimer affect its sound as well? How was it working on that project?

John was great to work with. He had a complete vision of what he wanted and what he expected from the score. 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.

The musical approach and choice of the solo instrument is my responsibility. 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. This way John and producers were familiar with the whole score before we went to London for the orchestra recording.

Your were also awarded the MOVIELINE YOUNG HOLLYWOOD AWARD for Best Soundtrack of 1998 for "Ronin" – how did you feel about it and what is your opinion on film music awards In general?

I was glad that my work and my efforts were appreciated. I was happy and proud that I fulfilled John's expectation. Generally, I believe music awards bring attention to our art and that is a good thing.

Your very score was led by the duduk (the Armenian wind instrument, clarinet-like in sound). Its a rather popular instrument these days, brought to the spotlight of general attention by Hans Zimmer's Gladiator and utilized further by numerous composers up to date, to the point of over-use; However back in 1998 when you scored Ronin, it was relatively unknown in the circles of film music.

How did you come to write for it? Did you have any knowledge of world music – and particularly music of the East – before that, or did it all come with that project?

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 had the right quality and timber for my theme.

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.

"Ronin" was like a Cinderella fairy-tale for me. Jerry Goldsmith was signed to write the score for "Ronin". At the last moment, when the movie was completely edited and done, he walked away. The studio asked Michael Sandoval, who was the president of the music department, to put together a list of available "A" composers. Michael knew my music, but – of course – I was far away from being even a "B" composer at that time. But Michael had a lot of guts to put me on the list with three Oscar-winning composers available at the time. John Frankenheimer was interested in my music, and he wanted to pick me, so I went to meet John and watched the movie with him. There was no music in the whole movie – not even temps. I liked the movie a lot, and I saw my great opportunity – it was a Robert De Niro and John Frankenheimer movie. I asked John to give me footage of the beginning, and I would write the opening theme – which I did over the weekend and sent it to New York. After three days, I sat with him on spotting sessions.

What are your musical influences?

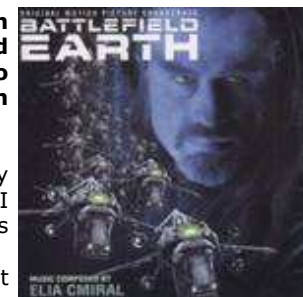
I am not really sure about my influences today, but there must be some. Maybe some musicologist can tell. Everything is connected, we are not living in a vacuum. And I still have my favorites.

While brought up, Ethnomusicology and world music in general is one of the most frequently visited "outsider" areas in film music; do you think that the film music medium should basically follow the "western", classical-oriented and post-romantic musical paths, upon which it was initially established anyway, or do you think it is wise and useful to experiment with other musical genres as well? Some young composers today even push it to the limit, with dance music, rock and even metal...

I really think that the method and musical approach doesn't matter so much. The movie itself will tell you what it needs and music style is just a tool. Of course we go through different fashion periods of scoring but a good, inventive score which supports the movie and emotionally enhances the plot and characters remains good no matter the style.

Looking back at the rest of your works, we find a lot of interesting projects, like Nash Bridges for the tv, Six Pack, They, Wrong Turn, Iowa, The Mechanik, Stigmata, Battlefield Earth, Bones and Species III, What elements would you use to describe these works to someone who is not familiar with them? What notable memories you still carry from each and every one of those scores?

Every score I accomplished is like a child to me and I have dear memories of its childhood. I really don't have favorites between them though even I can see why one is more popular than the other. I can also see what connects them together: dramatic approach, polyrhythm, harmonic layers reflecting 20th century harmony, cues structure, melodic elements etc.. Sometimes I amuse myself seeing my own musical development, wondering why I did this and not that.



What could you tell us about the scoring process on Battlefield Earth?

It was a very ambitious score. This was my first science-fiction adventure movie, and I thought this was the opportunity to write for a big orchestra. I loved John and I loved to work with him, so from the beginning, I wanted to write something really exceptional. The main theme came very fast, and the whole concept came very fast. It was a dream job. John was very supportive and the director was very supportive – all the people I worked with were great.

In "Battlefield Earth", I wrote the opening titles – which was the main cue – then I wrote the cue for the first meeting between the human beings and the monsters. Next was the revelation, when Jonnie realizes that he is going to lead the revolution. Those three cues were the first cues I wrote at the end of the first week in January, and I presented them to John Travolta when he came back from the east coast. He liked it a lot, and there were basically no changes, so I just continued from there for the rest of the month. Usually, I had about 8-10 people coming to my studio on a Monday, watch my demo, and make little changes... It was great. I am already missing Mondays.

Your latest projects list also contains Kevin Connor mini tv series Blackbeard and also the dark drama Journey to the End of the Night, directed by Eric Eason for Millennium Films and which premiered at the 2006 Tribeca Film Festival in New York. What can you tell us about your contribution to these works? How were the Journey to the End of the Night (both movie and score) greeted in the Tribeca screenings?

Writing the score for "Blackbeard" was extremely intense. In order to finish the whole project before the last part of December 2005, I had to produce over two hours of score in a very short time. The whole score was produced in my studio with my samplers only and on top of all this insanity my second son Philip was born.

"Journey to the End of the Night," I scored while waiting for the studio to finish reshooting and reediting "Pulse". I liked the movie a lot. It is a great dark drama and working with the director Eric Eason was very creative and inspiring. He was very supportive and we had a great time together. Unfortunately I couldn't attend the festival screenings. I was already back in "Pulse" production, but I have heard that the movie made a great impression on the audience and I received many compliments for the score.

What works do you have up and coming? Any confirmed assignments or in fact, any non-film music works?

There are a couple of things on my mind but I am also rather superstitious and don't like to talk about things in advance. I am also sketching an orchestral non-film music work for myself.

What would you like to be doing in the near future and where do you realistically see yourself at, in the years to come? Is there a contrast between the two?

The film music business is very dynamic and it is impossible to predict what will happen. Of course I hope producers and directors continue liking my work and I will be continuing to write music for some exciting movies in the future. I have my dream projects and wishes to work with certain people so I hope some of them will come true. I also still hope to have another chance to write a ballet.

Thanks for the interview Mr.Cmiral, it has been a pleasure to host you in ScoreMagacine.com

Author: Demetris Christodoulides

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- [★ Entrevistas](#)
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