

# CHAPTER 17

## Ethnic and Period Music

*Motion picture art is different. It is realistic and factual. It not only tries to capture the spirit of bygone eras, but it also tries to make believe that it projects before the eyes of the spectator the real thing.*

—Miklos Rozsa<sup>1</sup>

Los Angeles is the entertainment capital of the world. And because so many films are produced there, or in New York, their locale is often set in these places. However, every year there are also countless films where the story, or part of the story, takes place in other locations. These can be exotic and unusual locations anywhere on the planet, such as Nepal, Congo, or backwoods Montana. Or they can be large urban centers of the United States or Europe. Some of these locations have music that is instantly associated with them, some do not, and the use of music to suggest a locale will be different from composer to composer, and director to director. The task is finding and creating music that helps reflect the feeling of the location while being effective dramatically.

In addition, sometimes there is the need to create a score for a period film that takes place in historical Europe or America. This presents its own set of problems, but the basic question, how to reflect the time period while being appropriate dramatically, remains the same.

This discussion necessarily takes place from an ethnocentric viewpoint. In the world of film making, we are often dealing with a situation where Hollywood is looking out at the rest of the world. The philosophy is, “Everybody else is different, and those of us here in Los Angeles are the norm.” This is actually true for any culture or country—we see the world through our own prescription glasses. Therefore, for the purposes of this book, I refer to “ethnic music” as that which is not Western Classical or popular music. So with apologies

to readers from anywhere other than the United States, or Los Angeles in particular, let's look at how to approach "ethnic music," as well as music that describes a different European or American era.

## Ethnic Music

Hollywood's approach to ethnic music has changed over the years. This is largely due to changes in film making itself, and to the shrinking "global village"—the fact that all corners of the planet are closer together due to ease of travel and the information technology that connects us.

Films have become much more "real" over the past decades. In the old films, killing was often an off-screen event, and blood was minimized. Cowboys wore fancy, fringed costumes and carried pearl-handled Colt 45s; they were always clean looking and freshly shaved. Today's cowboys are likely as not to be grungy, slightly ragged-looking and dirty, and if they kill someone, the blood flows bright red and freely. Probably this is closer to what it was really like. We not only see more "real" costumes, blood, gore, and violence in modern films, we also see more real emotions as well as special effects. Many films of past decades look dated to us; the younger generations often snicker at the "old" films. So the question becomes: Does the music also need to reflect a realism, and if so, to what degree?

This question has been answered in many different ways over the years, and part of the answer lies in the development of popular music. As popular music has become more sophisticated, the ears of its audience have developed in parallel. In the 1930s and '40s the audience was musically sophisticated when it came to Wagner, Brahms, Puccini, Duke Ellington, or Tommy Dorsey, but they were naive when it came to the music of other cultures. Today we have become more familiar with the many kinds of music heard in other countries; our global village shares resources, ideas, and technology. The composer must take more care in the way a country is represented musically.

There is also a psychological dimension of this process. We associate certain instruments with certain cultures, depending on our own experience. A mandolin played a specific way is definitely Italy;

Flamenco style guitar can only be Spain. A banjo is the mountains or the Old South of the United States. But what about accordion, which is used in many countries? Or pan flute, which can be associated with Eastern Europe or South America? The composer must take care when designing a score with certain sounds that it is really suggesting the place he intends. There is no way to please everyone because different people have different musical associations. However, one way to make sure the music is accurate is to do research.

## Research

When writing for a film that requires ethnic music, composers often do research. This can be done in many ways. It can be as simple as buying some CDs, or it can be as complex as spending time in a music library and corresponding with experts all over the world. The important thing is that the composer become familiar enough with the style of the music that he can create it in a way that is convincing dramatically. Oftentimes, he will just use one element of it, like a particular instrument blended in with an orchestra, or a scale derived from that culture. An ensemble of musicians from that country or culture can be used as a separate scoring entity, or it can be blended with the orchestra.

John Williams does this in the film, *Far and Away*, which follows the journey of an Irish couple from Ireland to the United States in the 1890s. Williams uses two Irish-derived melodies as the main themes; they are first heard in the main title, one played on pennywhistle, the other on pan flute. Both are accompanied by a symphonic orchestra. The effect is to achieve a "flavor" of the Irish location and characters, but not actually to be traditional Irish music. However, he also has scenes that are scored exclusively by The Chieftains, one of Ireland's premier groups that performs traditional Irish music. The Chieftains are often not accompanied by the orchestra, but because of the Irish nature of the orchestral sections, there is still continuity between the various kinds of textures.

One composer known for his love of musicology and investigating the music of other cultures was Miklos Rozsa. During the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, Rozsa wrote many scores, such as *El Cid*, *Ben-Hur*, *Quo Vadis*, and

*Ivanhoe*, where he researched the music of the time and place, and incorporated it into his score. He was meticulous and immersed himself into the study of the music of the culture. For example, for the score to *El Cid*, he journeyed to Spain and studied with authorities on medieval Spanish and Moorish music. For *Quo Vadis*, he did a thorough investigation of Roman music and instruments.

Unfortunately, because of post-production schedules, composers today rarely have time for such efforts. However, research can be a valuable tool in enhancing the kinds of sounds and textures available to the composer. The deeper one gets into the music of another culture, the more it can be reflected in the original music for a film. Sometimes hours and hours can be spent researching, studying, and listening to the music of another culture, but very little specific music from that place is used in the score. But after this process, no matter how much ethnic music is used, the composer has an understanding, sometimes on a subconscious level, of the music he studied, which then comes through in his own music.

Cliff Eidelman speaks of the value of researching the music before beginning to write *Triumph of the Spirit*, a powerful 1989 film about Greek Jews in a Nazi concentration camp:

*I went to the UCLA musicology department and I started listening to recordings of Sephardic Jewish folk music. Primarily pre-war music from Greece and Spain. As it turned out, a lot of what I was hearing was stuff that felt very second nature to me. I really connected to the kinds of feelings that were in that music. They were using mandolins, mandolas, a lot of tambourines, guitars, and drums. There was a certain raw feeling to it, but it was very warm.*

*Then I read the script and started coming up with ideas. I wanted to incorporate some of those Eastern instruments into a Western orchestral setting. I took the liberty of adding an Indian instrument, the tamboura, which isn't a Sephardic Jewish instrument, but I liked the droning quality and I thought it was a nice color. Then I discovered quickly that the language they*

*were speaking was Ladino, or at least a big part of what they were speaking was Ladino, which is a combination of Spanish and Hebrew and is essentially extinct today. When I realized I wanted to use a choir, I chose Ladino as the language for the text. In addition to that, I didn't want to use preexisting poems, I wanted to have poems written that were really more specific to the emotional context of what was going on in those scenes. I found a cantor who knew Ladino really well, and he was also a very good poet. I described the emotion, and he wrote poetry based on it. He translated the poems into Ladino, and that became the text for the score.*

This story illustrates the kinds of research a composer can do in order to draw upon ethnic musical influences. Notice that Eidelman did not attempt to recreate the music of the Greek Jews; he simply tried to capture the feeling, even to the point of using an archaic language to represent the emotions of the film. Also, just for color, he used a tamboura, which has nothing to do with European Jews. This shows the creative license one can take. It is also interesting that no one outside a few people involved in the film would know that the language being sung was Ladino. But Eidelman and the director felt that the emotional content of this language would somehow transmit part of the experience of the people portrayed in the film. This is a subtle idea, yet one with a specific, if subconscious intent. Many composers and film makers rely on such subtleties to help complete the story.

Sometimes composers use ethnic instruments but inadvertently imply a different culture from the one in the film. This can happen for several reasons, not the least of which is the subjective nature of the audience's musical associations. An example of a film that reflects the exotic location, but perhaps inadvertently implies yet a second or even third different culture, is *Beyond Rangoon*. In this film Hans Zimmer uses a sampled ethnic sound reminiscent of Balinese gamelan, but also reflects instruments in the culture of Burma (now known as Myanmar), where the movie takes place. However, over the top of the texture that is glued together by this gamelan sound is a high wooden-flute sound. Many people who have heard this sound immediately associate it with Ireland, because the high flute sounds Irish in nature

to them. However, upon hearing the music and seeing the picture, they concede that it works, that with the visuals of the Burmese countryside and rivers the ethnic association with Southeast Asia comes together, “Irish” flavor or not. This shows the power of combining the sound with images. When the music is isolated, one impression is conveyed. When it is married to the picture, a whole different set of associations can be conjured.

This illustrates the difficulty of writing ethnic music for a mass audience. It can be constructed in many different ways depending on the creative directions of the composer and the director, and it can be interpreted differently depending on the audience. The composer needs to have firmly in his mind how “real” the ethnic music needs to be. Does it need to be like source music, i.e., very real? Or can it just imply the culture? Sometimes the budget of the project determines how real the music gets. Bill Ross used ethnic music in *The Amazing Panda Adventure*, as well as on the television series *MacGyver*:

*The Amazing Panda Adventure was set in China. [Director] Chris Cane wasn't sure what he wanted, so after thinking about it, I came up with the idea for this mellow Western approach with a kind of Chinese vibe. I did what I could to educate myself about some of the Chinese instruments, and wove them throughout with the Western-style orchestra. There were four cues where I wrote Chinese music as source music.*

*In MacGyver, we used some ethnic instruments, but we didn't research them. There was no time and no budget to focus it in any more than a very general way. After a while it came down to large geographical distinctions—East or West, Europe, etc.—and a small group of corresponding instruments. The fortunate thing for a film—like The Amazing Panda Adventure—as opposed to television, is that you can afford to have the recording environment and the musicians to do what's necessary.*

Having the budget to do what is necessary is paramount. Hiring extra musicians who play specialized instruments can be expensive. Sometimes composers must make do with samples. But either way, the

creative decision is to decide how much of the ethnic flavor is wanted. Most of the time, composers choose to incorporate ethnic instruments with the full palette of orchestral sounds available. This seems to be a solution that is pleasing to the ear of the modern audience, dramatically satisfying, and suggests psychological associations with certain cultures. It can mean simply adding one instrument like panpipes or koto, or a hint of a particular scale, or it can mean using a whole ensemble of ethnic musicians. A combination of research, good dramatic discrimination, and clear communications with the director usually provides the answer.

## Period Western Music

Writing music for a film that takes place in historical Europe or America has always presented a problem for scoring. The question here is similar to the question regarding ethnic scoring: should the music reflect the time period? And the answer is also similar: it depends on the vision of the director and composer. More often than not, that vision is a combination of older, period sounds, and contemporary orchestra. The reason for this is the same as with ethnic music: audiences can most easily identify with a contemporary orchestra, yet a certain amount of realism is sometimes appropriate. An excellent example of this is *Anne of the Thousand Days*, with a score by Georges Delerue. In this score, shawms and other period instruments are blended with the orchestra.

Often, in both period and ethnic scores, realism can be achieved through the use of source music. Source music and underscore can often be combined and blended together to make a dramatically and musically satisfying effect. For example, in *Shakespeare in Love*, there are several instances where we hear 16<sup>th</sup> century source music, and then the underscore played by a modern orchestra actually grows out of the source music, eventually taking over. In *Shining Through*, a film about undercover spying in World War II, there is a scene at a party where the Glenn Miller arrangement of “Moonlight Serenade” is playing. Composer Michael Kamen effectively extends this '40s song by segueing to the underscore with a love theme that is thoroughly

modern in sonority. These examples work because we accept the source music as representing the time period, and the orchestra as representing the dramatic situation.

Another example of a score that uses both period music as well as contemporary music as underscore is *Dangerous Liaisons*. In this film, which takes place amongst the aristocracy in 18<sup>th</sup> century Paris, George Fenton has constructed two distinct musical ideas that serve the drama well. In the main title, the first thing heard is a contemporary orchestra playing a very dramatic, tense and restless theme with a modern musical vocabulary. Then it segues to a harpsichord and a smaller Baroque sounding orchestra. These two contrasting sonorities provide ample material throughout the film; one reminds us of the time and place, the other is used in the more melodramatic moments.

The important concept in scoring ethnic or period films is to have a clear idea of how much of that music is necessary. This often depends on the director's vision, such as Francis Ford Coppola with *The Rainmaker* (see chapter 9). These situations call for the composer to find a solution that suggests time and place, and addresses dramatic needs.

This kind of scoring highlights what is essentially the psychology of combining music and visuals. Because the music addresses both visual and dramatic situations, the audience's attention is split. Their eyes must take in the picture, their ears take in the music. Composers are actually addressing this phenomenon every time they write a cue for any kind of film. The audience is having an experience on several sensory levels as well as several emotional levels. Music is just one part of this, although a big part. In films that use ethnic or period scores, we ask the audience to accept that we are not trying to create "authentic" music of the time or place, but simply add to the color of what they are already seeing. It is more important to be "real" in a visual sense; the music can *imply* the "reality" and still be accepted.