

EVOLUTION

There are few if any “constants” in our world. The only one I’m sure about is *evolution*. Change. This, then, may be the epitome of an oxymoronic phrase: “*The only constant is change.*”

This personal wisdom (if indeed it is either personal or wisdom) comes to me at sixty-three years of age. Many things are falling away at this age, but retrospect and derivative knowledge are the offsets. No young person, unless he or she is clairvoyant, can claim this perspective.

Evolution moves at a glacial pace. It moves like the growth of a tree, like the appearance of facial hair on a prepubescent male. It seems to move slower as our attention spans shorten. Often evolution is imperceptible due to this slow pace until it reaches critical mass. When it hits critical mass, mankind clusters in an effort to speed up evolution. Global warming will be solved, but the progress in alternative energy has, until recently, been glacial. All of a sudden it seems I’m not the only one with a five kilowatt solar array on his property.

In the big picture, evolution can be viewed as positive, but when broken into shorter periods its effects often seem negative. For example: smoking and obesity. Looking back we can see that acceptance of these lifestyles happened slowly... until recently, when that “cluster” of humanity decided to move these items to the top of the priority list and do something about them.

These are obvious, in-your-face examples. They affect large numbers of people from a health standpoint as well as a financial perspective when you consider the cost of medical treatment for complications from both.

Our business, the business of creating music for film, television, media (and whatever else might come along) is also evolving. By its very nature, our music is designed to be subliminal. It is consequently not in-your-face, and does not affect people as dramatically as cancer or diabetes. Any negative effects resulting from evolution will not easily be noticed. Nor will they motivate clusters of filmmakers, composers or even audiences to undo what has been done.

So, what am I saying? What is this “negative” evolutionary effect, and what is the cause? Should we do something about it, or will big-picture evolution eventually take care of it as is happening with smoking and obesity?

It was recently announced that China is contemplating sweeping changes to their higher education system. Apparently they have been teaching a very narrow curriculum, based almost entirely on existing knowledge. This dates back to the early days of communism and the belief that an education concentrated on a specific skill set, say engineering, would produce the world’s best in that particular field. What has evolved as a result is a population with extremely good working skills, but without the ability to invent, imagine, probe or discover. It is now speculated that a more liberal education coupled with life experience is imperative to achieve these qualities.

When I first became interested in Film Scoring (circa 1962) there was one book available on the subject: *Underscore*, by Frank Skinner. That was it. Only years later did *Sounds and Scores* by [Henry Mancini](#) hit the market. You could not take a college course on film scoring. As a matter of fact, no one could actually tell you how to become a film composer. So the “burning desire” was sated by merely writing music—for anything and everything.

The result of all that writing was a musical vocabulary that was both diverse and personal. It would be the equivalent of the musical vocabulary accrued by the instrumentalist who has played in bands and orchestras from an early age. The other equally important adjunctive skill was working with a plethora of varied personalities. Jazzers, Vegas people, concert promoters, road managers, Top 40 acts, all with different visions and expectations about their music.

We now have courses in Film Scoring at most major universities. Some even offer a Masters degree in the subject. I had a student begin studying privately with me when he was only 16 years old. This proliferation of possibilities for an education in film and media music is the product of supply and demand. In the Sixties there were a handful of film composers and that was enough. The process of making films was slower (pre-digital, you know), so fewer films were made and the tried and true professional composers could not only handle the workload but could prosper doing it.

Today’s film composer community is extremely large. The size is reflected in all the college courses that have sprung up over the last 10

years. This makes competition keener, and consequently increases the need to start on this educational path as early as possible.

Compared to concert music, the amount of film music available for study is miniscule. Less than a hundred year's worth. And styles of film music have changed so radically that, unless you are a history buff, you will likely be listening to examples from the last 5 or 10 years.

Think China! Think variety!

There have always been qualitative differences in film music, even when there was only a handful of composers. There was good film music and not-so-good film music, but at least it emanated from the minds (some better equipped than others) of human beings. Human beings, each with a personalized musical vocabulary.

One of the undisputed technological accomplishments in recent times is what we often refer to as *emulation*. We write with an *emulated* orchestra—an *emulated* oboe or French Horn. This ability would be categorized as an “advance” in technology if it weren't for the fact that it is, as we speak, paving the way for—are you ready?— ***EMULATED FILM MUSIC***.

“It sounds just like film music!”

I started arranging at the ripe old age of 13. I was NOT a prodigy. I merely had an interest and, more importantly, a father who had been a dance band leader in the 30's and was now a junior high school music teacher. MY junior high school music teacher.

Here's the thing about the (almost lost) art of arranging: unless you're a student, there is NO emulation. Emulation would be anathema to arranging. As an arranger you take an existing song and try your damndest to put it into a musical genre or setting in which it has never existed previously. This requires imagination. The same imagination that those whom we "emulate" have. Technology and the internet have given us the ability to quickly and thoroughly analyze music. We can slow things down and grab every note and glissando in an effort to see what those "anointed" among us have done. This is the equivalent of China's higher education based on existing knowledge.

For the gear junkies, or technogeeks, this is the best thing that could happen. It is the very justification we need to buy that new library of sounds or those incredible reverbs. The better the sound, the more it sounds just like MUSIC! Whoo hoo!

Every year, for the past twelve years, I listen to the demos submitted by the top fifty or sixty applicants to the ASCAP Television and Film Scoring Workshop. I know what I hear. There are a few very original works every year, but the majority are, to a greater or lesser degree, derivative.

**This is NO FAULT OF THE EMERGING COMPOSERS WHO
SUBMIT!**

"Then whose fault is it?" you ask.

“Evolution,” I reply. And, subsequently, is it a “fault” at all? Maybe it’s just the new reality. Entertainment is changing; attention spans are changing. Hell, wars are changing. Governments are changing.

As a matter of fact, I’m not sure that there is anything to be done or that there is anything wrong... except that I’m betting you would like to figure out, in a “cattle call” world of media composers, how to get work. How to be noticed in the “herd.”

I used to open my classes with the following question: “How much money do you expect to make, annually, as a film and television composer?”

Here’s the new question that starts off my class: “How many of you have: Stormdrum; East/West Gold or Platinum Orchestra; Vienna Symphonic Library Orchestra or Strings; Ivory; Hollywood Strings?”

“If you all have the same sample libraries, (and I’m thinking to myself, “...and are emulating Giacchino, Zimmer, Newton-Howard, Newman and Horner”), what separates you from everyone else?”

Now, once you’re hired, you most likely will be asked to recreate the temp score while circumventing copyright infringement, but, at least in your demos, you have the freedom to be creative and, OMG, maybe even give the filmmaker an idea that doesn’t already exist in at least one other film.

When it boils down to merely a price war, no one wins. As I am known to ask, “How many \$5,000.00 projects do you have to get every year to support yourself, your family and your gear while living in LA?”

By now you’re probably ready to go read something else unless I get to the point, and so I shall.

The computer is your tool box. You should set aside a period of time—between the viewing of the film, scene or project and the time when you open your tool box—when the ONLY thing you do is something that can be done with your eyes closed.

The thing you possess, which no one else possesses, is your musical history of listening and playing. Your likes and dislikes; your musical tastes. These individual aspects of your work may not be perceived by the filmmaker as important, but they are the very factor that sets you apart from the herd.

Once you have the job, it’s never about the music. It’s always about the film. How you diagnose the dramatic impact of the filmmaker’s vision is what’s important—NOT that you use Altiverb or sound just like “Whomever.” The determination of what is important to this particular film or scene is not inside any library or sequencing software. I feel that the most damaging phrase in contemporary jargon is “That’s cool.” Often, my response is “Very cool. Inappropriate, but very cool.”

Put your mind between the project and the computer.