

SPELLBOUND BY SOUNDTRACKS. AN INTERVIEW WITH FILM SCORE COMPOSER AARON FAZAKAS¹

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SUMMARY. In the following interview we tried to introduce the reader into the artistic world of a 21st century composer. We sat down with composer Aaron Fazakas to talk about inspiration, film score composing, the relationship between the audio and visual realms of a movie, and the meaning of art in his view. As the PhD student of Ede Terényi, one of the great contemporary Transylvanian composers, Aaron Fazakas revealed his own artistic creed, the reasons for which he composes and the relationship he has with his audience, while also discussing his work as a teacher, molding the minds of future generations of artists.

Keywords: cinematography, film scoring, soundtrack, cue, artistic creed, composer.

Initially, composer Aaron Fazakas planned to become a doctor, however, he ended up choosing composition as his profession. After graduating from music pedagogy at the Gheorghe Dima Music Academy in Cluj-Napoca (1997), he earned a MA in musical composition (1998), and a PhD in film score composition (2010). He participated in the M.I.D.A.S postdoctoral program at the National University of Music in Bucharest, while teaching film scoring and film sound theory at the Cinematography, Photography, Media Department of the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania,



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in Cluj-Napoca. Since 2004, his compositions had been performed at prestigious national festivals (Kolozsvári Zenei Ősz / Musical Autumn in Cluj, Modern Kolozsvár / Modern Cluj) and recitals. Within his works, composer Aaron Fazakas often employs not only the elements of classical music, but he also makes use of the opportunities offered by genres such as rock or jazz. Yet, perhaps the most important direction of his artistic expression is film music, which due to its unique distinctiveness will be the focus of our discussion.

- I would like to start out our conversation with a key inquiry: how does one compose a good film score? Some would say film scores should be inaudible, while the famous film director, Sergei Eisenstein, believed that a film's music is every bit as important as its images...

- The relationship between sound and picture as convention was seared in the viewer's consciousness as early as in the silent film era. Compared to silent films, however, the role of music in talkies has significantly changed and extended: it is capable not only to take on the role of a musical accompaniment that serves as mood-creator, but has also gained almost the same rights to dramaturgical use as the visual element, although they still cannot be completely equal, and – according to Polish film aesthetician and musicologist Zofia Lissa – probably never will be. A well-written film score does not repeat the message of the imagery, but rather it complements it, thus making way for the creation of a new aesthetic and dramaturgic dimension from the interaction between image and sound, an attribute which could not have been otherwise created separately.

- Let us take a concrete example to illustrate the difference between traditional music composition and film scoring. How would you approach a storm scene in a symphonic poem versus a film soundtrack?

- Solely autonomous instrumental music is unable to convey a unanimously decipherable semantic content, and therefore it seldom chooses visual elements as the object of mirroring. Even the genres of program music (such as the ever so popular 19th century genre of symphonic poem that you have mentioned) are fully subjectively reflecting merely the feelings and moods triggered by the visual elements. Composing a film score is completely different from that of composing independent music, for its rules differ considerably from the latter. The moving image has an independent and specific content: we can see how it rains; we also see lightening occurring... If they appear simultaneously, then the visual element substantiates the musical structure, the music, however, generalizes the meaning of the depiction. Depending on the dramaturgy of the image

sequence and the creative intent of the director-composer, the soundtrack of our storm scene, therefore, can occur in a variety of manners, as it may serve to illustrate, to stylize noise effects, may represent the composer's subjective commentary, but it could also become the symbol of something not shown, and the list of features music could fill within the context of a film could go on.

- *I would also like to ask you about the soundtrack of the film The Contract (2010), its writing process and characteristics.*

- Directed by Horațiu Damian, the film The Contract was created on a minimal budget. The well-written script and the storyboard that were clear evidences of artistic exigency made me accept the director's request even without a fee. Since I was not satisfied with the dialogues and noises recorded on the original film, I erased all the audio features of the recording, and I have rebuilt the entire sound material of the film. After re-recording the dialogues in the Sysound studio in Cluj, my first task was to create a world of noises mainly emphasizing movement and only then to compose the film's score. Studying the structure of the film helped me to identify different time planes and related scenes that were organically connected from the standpoint of message, then together with the director we jointly decided on the function of every single cue (a music sample of any duration, genre, style and function used in a film is called a cue). The actual process of composing could begin only after all these stages. I worked with total devotion for more than three months on the soundtrack of the merely thirty minute long movie.

- *You do not only compose film scores, but you also teach composing. What means do you employ? What would you like your students to take away from your classes?*

- Yes, I teach Film music and Film sound at the Cinematography, Photography, Media Department of the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, in Cluj-Napoca, however, since we are talking about a synthetic art form, during the introductory lectures my students are often required to take artistic photographs, to paint, sculpt or write poems, dance, etc. This makes it much easier for them to understand the fact that the synthesis of different art forms is made possible by the fact that every artistic branch depicts the human being in relation with the world, its environment and reality in its own way and with its own tools, and that creative consciousness and meaning are the crucial elements, whereas all other things are merely the means and the style of such an expression. I strive to send my students on their way with carefully developed professional skills and artistic judgment, while at the same time I try to

subtly widen their musical taste. I can proudly say that our university aims to ensure competitive theoretical and practical competences on a European level, while in turn, our young artists have brought back important awards won at numerous film festivals.

- *You have written your PhD thesis with composer Terényi Ede, one of the titans of the Transylvanian musical life. What kind of experiences have you had during this adventure?*

- I was thoroughly prepared when I first went to meet “uncle Ede”. I was convinced that he will appreciate my conscientious work. Instead, his eyes glanced over my plan and then he told me, in an amiable and calm tone, that my approach is completely wrong, and sent me home to work. The second time we met in a coffee shop, he sipped his tea with honey and lemon, and looked up at me from my (completely rewritten) plan with a paternal kindness, and silently gestured “no”. The third time we met he lingered over my work plan for a few minutes, correcting the succession of certain parts, changing a few titles, then looked at me and smiled, and simply said “Now, this is a yes”. It took three meetings for me to master the logical methodology of planning an academic paper, and at the same time understand that instead of pride and impulsivity, one must approach all intellectual and creative work with humility. The fact that I could be the last PhD student of Terényi Ede meant more to me than the summa cum laude distinction of my doctorate dissertation.

- *Let us return for a bit to your autonomous compositions. When you compose, do you ever think about whether the audience will like the work?*

- No, this is not an important standpoint during the moment of creation. The “like-dislike” aspect comes into play on the day of the premiere, when I get dressed and go to my own concert, when I watch the people arriving to the concert-hall, and at the end of the concert, when I wait to hear if they will applaud or not.

- *I also had a feeling that there is a certain degree of playfulness in your music, a child’s world, in Don’t CATch the MOUSE, or in Graffiti, for instance.*

- As an adult, I often strive – although unfortunately I do not always succeed – to look at the world through a child’s eyes. When this happens, curved lines are straightened, wrinkles are smoothed out, everyday problems change into happiness, the pursuit of financial gains suddenly makes no sense and it becomes so easy to relate to everyone and everything from a place of honest curiosity instead of personal interest. And if I succeed to bring this world to life in my music, even for a few seconds, and to pass it on to my audience, then my creative work has indeed meaning and value.

- *Do unusual things inspire you to compose music?*

- Yes. Recently, I asked for an EKG of a heart abnormality called atrial fibrillation from a doctor friend of mine, the music of which I will soon write.

- *Lastly, let me inquire about your "creed": what does composing music mean to you?*

- One should become an artist only if he/she has something to express. Composing provides an important opportunity for communication for those who dare to "speak out" even after six-seven thousand years of music. My creative urge is always generated by an inner restlessness that will not let me vegetate in a perpetually busy world, which completely redefined the concept of beauty and deliberately knocked over the values of the classical art eras. I need to be the one who is able to show my contemporary music lover audience the path out of the mass culture dominated musical jungle.

Translated from Hungarian by Köpeczi Julianna Erika

