

A FIRST COMPOSITIONAL ATTEMPT INTO THE WORLD OF SILENT SHORT FILMS – *SANCTUARY* BY NELIO COSTA (WITH MUSIC BY ȘERBAN MARCU)

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SUMMARY. This paper presents the author's first attempt at writing film music. The film under discussion is *Sanctuary*, a silent short film produced by Nelio Costa, Professor of film journalism at the UNA University Center in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The study highlights the suggestions that the composer derived from the film, the musical solutions the composer came up with in order to “counterpoint” the visual discourse and the context in which the film was presented, at the 2nd edition of the InnerSound International New Arts Festival, in Bucharest, 2013.

Keywords: Șerban Marcu, Sanctuary, Nelio Costa, short film, analysis

It is with great pleasure that I respond to the invitation extended to me by my colleague, lecturer Ph.D. Gabriela Coca, editor of the *Studia Musica* journal, to write an article about my latest composition – I must admit that without this invitation I wouldn't have dared to submit for publication a paper dealing with a composition of my own. The paper undertakes an analysis of the piece *Sanctuary*, which provides the music for the silent short film with the same title, produced by the visual artist Nelio Costa, Professor of film journalism at the UNA University Center in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

Although *Sanctuary* is my first piece of film music, it is not my first attempt at combining the sound with the visual: its antecedents are works belonging to dramatic genres like the opera *The Lesson*, based on Eugène Ionesco's play of the same name, and the ballets *Arachne* and *Orfeuridice*,

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whose titles allude to two of the most popular myths of ancient Greece. Moreover, the emergence of the cinema more than 100 years ago and the long and spectacular evolution of film art have fundamentally changed the way music lovers relate to concert music, prompting many contemporary music composers to speculate on the ease with which audiences react to visual stimuli, by associating their musical works with various types of visual performance: from instrumental theatre, to pantomime, light plays, video installations, and up to complex computer programs that translate sound into image, motion into sound, etc., turning a simple concert or recital (which often takes place in an unconventional space: a factory hall, a marketplace, etc.) into a complex audio visual show.

The piece *Sanctuary* was born in response to the invitation I received from composer Diana Rotaru – Director of the InnerSound New Arts Festival – to write the music for a silent film which, together with 12 other silent films whose scores were written especially for this event, was shown on the evening of August 30, 2013, at the second edition of the aforementioned festival, in the inner courtyard of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant, in Bucharest. The music of these 13 films was provided by live instruments (violin, viola, cello, flute, bassoon), to which electroacoustic music tracks were also added in some of the pieces. The authors of the films' scores were all young Romanian composers and the film producers were both Romanian and foreign. The five members of the quintet were Octavian Moldovean – flute, Maria Chifu – bassoon, Raluca Stratulat – violin, Tamara Dica – viola, Eugen-Bogdan Popa – cello, under the baton of young maestro Gabriel Bebeșelea.

The actual composition of the pieces started after the composers were assigned the silent films, according to a hierarchy of the preferences expressed by each of them in part. I was lucky to be entrusted with writing the score for the film that was my very top choice. Why was this film my top choice? To be able to answer this question I must first provide a broad description of the contents of the film.

Sanctuary runs for 6 minutes and 10 seconds and is divided into four scenes, with the first three being longer, and the last serving as a “coda”. The three scenes are centred around the discreet and delicate world of insects: the first scene (consisting of five different shots) depicts insects resting on flower stems,

Ex. 1



Frame from Scene 1, shot 3

The second scene (consisting of 7 different shots of which the first has a transitional function) features ants feeding on droplets of transparent liquid (placed with a stick by a person whom I assumed to be the film producer), their bodies drawing different sized circles, with a strong visual impact.

Ex. 2

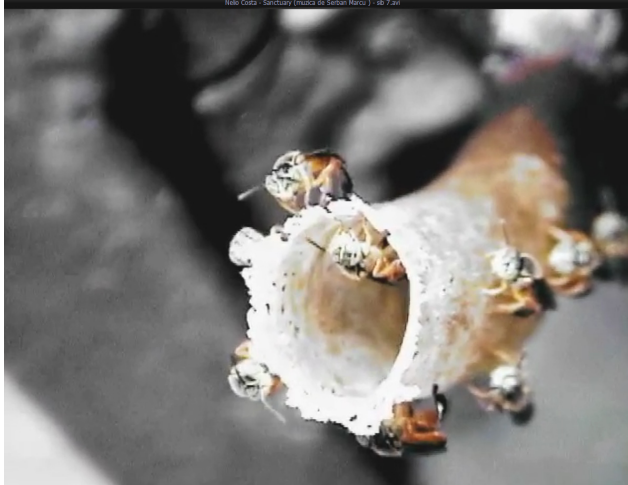


Frame from Scene 2, shot 4

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The third scene (6 shots) shows bees exiting and entering what seems to be an abandoned pipe, where they made their hive.

Ex. 3



Frame from Scene 3, shot 2

The last, and very brief, scene is the only one not featuring insects, but instead a dandelion in the foreground, in the middle of a field.

Ex. 4



Frame from Scene 4 (coda), shot 1

Two more aspects should be noted here: the use of colour and the rhythm or dynamics of the scenes. As seen in the images above, the author of the film combines colour and black and white images: in the first scene only insects are coloured, the second scene is entirely in black and white, in the third scene the bees at the end of the pipe are coloured, while the last concluding scene is entirely coloured. On the other hand, each scene has a different rhythm, on the slow to fast scale: the first scene is slow, the second one is generally dynamic, changing paces from one shot to the next – with some at a normal pace and others in fast-motion, the third scene moves slowly again, the fifth and culminating one is in slow-motion, while the final scene also flows at a peaceful “tempo”. The degree of dynamism in each scene had a major role in setting the tempos, degree of density of musical information, registers etc. of the accompanying music. Also worth mentioning is that Scene 2 is the only one featuring a human presence on the screen.

My attention was particularly drawn to this film because I was fascinated by the gentleness and discretion with which the author approached these miniature worlds that we pass by every day, engrossed in our own thoughts: the world of plants and insects, and the way they interact. On a subjective level, I realized that paying more attention to the world of such small things and beings could add a splash of colour and perhaps more meaning to our lives. I tried to explain in words why this film ranked highest on my preference list, although, of course, a choice like this is made quite intuitively, based on aesthetic, cultural etc. affinities.

Writing the score for a silent film assumes the following rule: the music must flow uninterruptedly. There are two main techniques for creating the music for a film: *mickey-mousing* and *counterpoint*. The first involves the exact synchronization of actions on screen with the accompanying music, a “painting with sounds”, similar to the correlation between text and music in Renaissance Madrigal. The second one involves the contrast between what is seen and what is heard: for example, a lot of action on the screen, much bustle and commotion, accompanied by rarefied, static music, or vice versa.

Given that writing very large *mickey-mousing* type of scores is redundant and tedious, I opted for this type of synchronization only in Scene 2, where the placement of the drops of liquid is synchronized with eighth note values in the flute and bassoon (the two wind instruments),

Ex. 5

30

mp

mf

mp

Bars 30-33, eighth notes in the flute and bassoon ("drops")

while the other scenes contain a more approximate synchronization with the images, the music creating a quasi-independent visual discourse. In Scene 1, each insect (of which there are 5 in all) is associated with a melodic incision, each time played by a different instrument,

Ex. 6

Tranquillo ♩ = 60

Flaut

mp 7

Fagot

Vioară

mp 7

Viola

pp uguale

Violoncel

Bars 1-3, melodic incisions in the flute and violin

while in Scene 3, bees are musically accompanied by a long solo bassoon, an instrument whose timbre may well conjure up the buzzing of these insects.

Ex. 7

79

mp, dolce, espressivo

mf

arco

p

arco

p

arco

p

Bars 79-82, solo bassoon

As illustrated in the above examples, the musical sections are homogeneous also from the point of view of the tonal systems used: the first section, corresponding to Scene 1, employs strictly and exclusively the whole tone scale, the second one (associated with the ants scene) makes abundant use of chromatic scales, while the last two scenes, unified by the music track, are accompanied by a post-romantic, highly chromatic music.

I must also add a few things about the live performance of the piece, accompanying the viewing of the silent film. Since there are moments in music that must be perfectly synchronized with the image, it is obvious that the mere indication of a metronome value at the beginning of the piece (or of several values if the tempo changes throughout the piece) is not enough to ensure such perfect synchronization. Synchronization is therefore achieved through the use of a *click-track*, i.e. an audio file containing only a rhythmic, percussive part, which the conductor listens to through headphones while the music is playing, and serving as a metrical map of the piece: different timbres or pitches serve to differentiate strong beats

from weak beats, tempo changes or temporary metric disruptions (pauses, *ritardandi*, *accelerating*) are achieved with great accuracy. Although the conductor's obedience to this *click-track* undoubtedly takes away some of the spontaneity of the interpretation, it ensures instead the proper conveyance of the meaning resulting from the symbiosis between image and music.

Here is what Nelio Costa, the author of the film, says about his creative undertaking: "I like to use the camera as a diary-notebook, recording various things from everyday life and whatever else catches my eye, including insects, flowers, and animals. The images for Sanctuary were filmed about 10 years ago, with a mini DV camera. Before the music was added, they were a simple collage of images. When I heard about the InnerSound Festival I submitted the video and I was very pleased with the result. My little film can now be called a "short film": it has a voice and a soul."

Sanctuary can be watched online on YouTube, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gghJuK4wMe0>.

The accompanying music was produced using the Sibelius 7 sounds library.