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Finale Spotlight: Michael Mortilla and Writing for Hitchcock's Silent Films

June 4, 2013 | by Scott Yoho

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Scenes from The White Shadow, *used with permission from the* NFPF.

Long-time Finale user Michael Mortilla is an L.A.-based composer, sound designer, and pianist. In addition to scoring music for TV, radio, concert, dance, and theater, Michael has worked extensively with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences and has received numerous commissions from them to score restored silent films.

Michael recently completed a new 70 minute score to Alfred Hitchcock's Blackmail, and on June 18, 2013 he'll be performing the score live, along with violinist Nicole Garcia, at the Academy of Motion Pictures in the beautiful 1000+ seat Goldwyn Theater in Beverly Hills (and the performance is open to the public).

While Blackmail was an early "talkie," Hitchcock also created a silent version as many theaters were not yet equipped for sound. The two versions of the film are different enough that both will be shown back-to-back on June 18th. Michael was kind enough to share some insight on the project:

Scott Yoho: How did you get involved in this project?

Michael Mortilla: I've worked with the Academy of Motion Pictures for many years on various projects. In 2011 they commissioned a score from me for The White Shadow. That was the first film Hitchcock worked on, serving as assistant director, set decorator, editor, and writer. The score was done completely in Finale and will be released on a DVD from the National Film Preservation Foundation in September. So this isn't my first stab, pun intended, at scoring a Hitchcock flick.

SY: I'm especially intrigued by the idea of Hitchcock creating two versions of the film. Can you share your interpretation of the differences?

MM: Mostly I noticed differences in character motivations. The female lead is lured into an artist's studio late at night – an artist she met only recently. In the sound version, she resists the idea of going into his studio and a full minute of dialogue ensues before she capitulates, setting up the artist as a womanizer and placing the woman in a potentially dangerous situation. In the silent version, she doesn't resist at all and we are left to question her motives.

In another scene, the artist plays piano and sings. In the silent version, there is no piano, no songs. There are many more differences between the two versions, making the Academy's decision to screen the two back-to-back all the more fascinating.

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Finale Tips

Finale User Spotlight

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SY: Did you draw any sonic inspiration from the talkie version?

MM: The sound version uses a full orchestra, sounding as you might expect a film score from that era to sound. The 1929 score tends to be moody and generally descriptive. I prefer scores that reveal what the characters might be thinking or what might be motivating them to take the actions they do, maybe revealing a bit of their psychological makeup. So to answer your question, no, the 1929 provided virtually no guidance or inspiration for the new accompaniment.

SY: What did inspire your new score? Can you share a little of your creative process?

MM: I strive to find some deep aspect of the characters that can be only be illuminated through the music. It might be some psychological aspect of their personalities or motivations that, hopefully, informs my scores. I don't want my music to be "wallpaper" that hangs behind a scene. It has to work in a constructive way that supports the narrative and never overwhelms the story or becomes a character in and of itself. I think it should reflect the story like a mirror, not paint over it.

Blackmail, in particular, had a structure that was dictating my score to a large degree and I made good use of the Repeat Tool in Finale. The structure Hitchcock employed seemed to demand a more circular structure with recurring, repeated themes.

View a page from the score.

SY: Can you tell me a little about your relationship with Finale? When you met?

MM: In 1996 I was invited to have my score for a Charlie Chaplin film performed at the Olympic Arts Festival in Atlanta. At the time the score had not been notated as it was created with a sequencer, so I purchased Finale and began the process of exporting MIDI files from Studio Vision Pro to Finale.

When I started working with the Chicago Symphony, I had several film scores to deliver. Two were sequenced in Digital Performer and exported via MIDI files to Finale. The third I created completely in Finale. What I discovered was that the third film not only took several weeks less to score, but had less to correct once it was initially composed. From that point on, whenever real musicians are going to be playing the work, I've done everything in Finale, from start to finish.

SY: Can you share a Finale trick or tip?

MM: Quite frankly, my biggest tip and trick with Finale is the Finale users forum. When I'm stumped on something I can't find in the manual, I'll hop on the forum and most of the time I can search for the answer and find it fast. If I can't, I'll post a question and one of the very experienced composers, arrangers, or engravers will answer, usually providing a solution within minutes.

SY: What do you like best about Finale?

MM: There's a lot to love about Finale, especially for a composer like myself, who started out in the traditional way of using paper, pencil, and a piano. I have always felt that whoever programmed the application "thinks like I do" about music notation. I've tried the other notation programs but none have the look and feel of actual music paper or offer the depth and flexibility that I get with Finale.

I couldn't have said it better myself. Let me encourage everyone reading this to move from the silent- to the talkie-era and to tell us what you think (or let us know what you're working on) by clicking on "Comments" below.

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by Christopher Smith

Michael, I am chuffed to see your work getting some of the recognition it deserves. This looks like a giant, complex project and has my complete admiration and respect.

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Thanks also for pat on the back for the Finale Forum. Lest others get the wrong idea, I should point out that you are also a major contributor on the forum, giving back at least as much as you get, if not more.

June 10, 2013 at 11:21 am

by Scott Yoho

Hi Christopher,

Thanks for your kind comments about Michael and his fine work!

Scott at MakeMusic

Comments are closed.

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