

Composer Commentary by Corinnne Tatiana Nordmann

After having read the script to *The Surprise* for the first time, I immediately thought that I wanted to incorporate the notes to "Happy Birthday" in some strange way. After my first viewing, this idea was cemented and I began working out the notes as a connective tissue between the scenes, to be played once through in the highest register of the cello. We decided that the cello and piano would be the most expressive and versatile instruments for expressing the varied emotional states of the characters. Below I've tried to parse my commentary into sections corresponding to each track, though the score (like any other) is much more fluid than these somewhat arbitrary demarcations would lead you to believe, and it is therefore best considered as a whole.

The Proposal / Park / Past

The very first music I actually composed was to the flashback/proposal sequence in the park. Chronologically, this is where the story of Katie and her husband begins. I found it to be a good starting point psychologically for me, even though this scene actually takes place in the middle of the film. After watching the scene a couple of times, I internalized the pacing and ended up writing the complete music to this section in an hour, without looking at the film at all. I decided to bring this music back in for the credits as a musical resolution after Jack tells Katie how much he loves her at the end. This is the only music which wasn't changed at all! It came very naturally, and both the director and I were pleased immediately.

Bed and Breakfast

Next, I went on to work out the opening sequence. I wanted the music to be neither white nor black -- meaning that it should not really lead the audience or comment on what is going on or how to feel about it. The cinematography starts with the perfect family pictures (white), panning on to the vomiting of Katie (black). This juxtaposition called for more ambiguous (gray) music. I discovered that if I spread out the main notes of "Happy Birthday" (minus the repeated ones) all over the piano with the pedal held down for the whole time and no recognizable rhythmic element, the effect was a stationary ambiguity.

The director loved this idea when I first played it to him over the phone via loudspeaker. But there did end up being quite a few versions of the music following the opening sequence. We had discussed using all kinds of wacky cello effects (harmonics, slides, sharp plucking) to add to Katie's distressed state of mind when she realizes that her husband has totally overlooked her birthday. But ultimately we found the music too dissonant, too psychotic. After a great deal of experimentation, the music was simplified and taken out for the beginning of the breakfast scene.

A note to all you budding composers and directors out there: it definitely takes some getting used to, this kind of musical "meddling", especially if one's background is more of the classical kind. Before this project I was mostly accustomed to being commissioned by orchestras like the Berlin Philharmonic to write a piece, and they would premiere it with no questions asked! In film, music plays a vital role in the character development and action, both of which you aim to serve to the best of your ability. As a composer, you are part of a team and a collaboration. You are consciously guiding the unconsciousness of the audience, and this is a very subtle skill not always arrived at so easily, and only then in unison with the acting, direction, design, and photography. Truly Machiavellian! But it really is great to be able to bounce ideas and perspectives off one another. My previous compositional endeavors were usually a very lonely undertaking!

Back to the opening sequence: I began building onto the soundscape by repeating the piano

pattern and then sneaking in the cello line, playing every second note from the main theme when Katie starts talking on the phone to her mother. We decided to take the music out when Katie goes off to breakfast and sees her husband -- musical silence being a strong emotional force itself. For example, when the doctor tells Katie she is pregnant or when she tells Jack's empty office that she is pregnant, these moments are punctuated by taking the music out. Also, there is no music in the scene where Sara confronts Jack, as this happens to be the only scene where Katie is not physically present.

The Doctor's Office

At one point I had also thought of basing the entire film on a tango, and eventually I did end up incorporating some elements of the tango into the score. To wit: the music for the doctor's scene at the beginning of the film and during the latter part of the luncheon scene is slightly reminiscent of the Bachian quality of Piazzolla's slow and tragic tangos.

The Office

Bach and Piazzolla were also an influence for Katie's confrontation with Jack's secretary at the office, this time in a more determined musical manner.

The Luncheon

I wanted to start off with more relaxed music with the music for the luncheon scene of Katie and Sara as a break from Katie's deteriorating emotional state. After all, Sara has no clue that Katie is falling apart. The music then moves on to the Bach-like quality of the doctor's scene and culminates in the past/proposal music, which despite being in C major, has a melancholic hue to it.

Katie's Decision / The Clinic and Homecoming

Whilst Katie is waiting at the abortion clinic, the past / proposal music comes back in a fragmented fashion, layered onto the birthday soundscape. The music continues in this fashion until the end, where it resolves into the past/proposal music in its original version. As the composer, I needed to take a stance on Katie's decision, whether she did or didn't have an abortion. My take happens to be the same as that of Nurit Monacelli, the actress playing Katie and an old friend of mine. But alas, I shall keep the audience guessing!

The score was composed and recorded in Germany last July, whilst the director and producer were in New York and Wyoming. It was a wild undertaking, especially re-arranging the music for whole scenes over the transatlantic phone line! I would be playing the piano with a click/metronome on one ear and count the director in and he would then watch the film from the exact point I had given. But, it seems to have worked! I hope you enjoy the film, and the accompanying score, and if you have any questions or comments, please feel free to send a line at comments@eighty-watt.com.

Cheers (as the producer is fond of saying)!

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