Screen Test
J.A.C. Redford on the life of a Hollywood music-maker
By Thomas May

THE WHOLE PICTURE is what counts, and the composer must see it not as a composer but as a man of the theater,” wrote Leonard Bernstein, reflecting on composing the score for On the Waterfront. Bernstein’s adventure into film scoring — marked by creative scapes with the film’s director Elia Kazan — was unplanned for him, and marked the conductor-composer’s first foray into a field (not counting already existing scores that were adapted for film) — an anomaly in an otherwise naturally collaborative career. But for many composers, there’s something perpetually alluring about the medium of film. Like a particular scent, the simplest chord progression or orchestral idea, a beloved score can instantly trigger a flood of memories — both personal and cultural.

“It’s important to me that music communicates to the audience,” says J.A.C. Redford. “I am not looking to reinvent the wheel. I write music because I love to listen to music, and I want to write music that musicians will enjoy and be able to play!”

Redford has been active in the business since the mid-1970s, when he started working for television (Starkey & Hatch; St. Elsewhere). He’s also a successful composer for film (The Trip to Bountiful, among others) and a prominent arranger, conductor and orchestrator (Asotar, Revolutionary Road, Skyfall — including Adele’s Oscar-winning title song). And all of this accounts for just one facet of a body of work that also includes a prolific catalogue of orchestral, choral, and chamber compositions outside of the film industry. Redford started composing as a child, and already a budding composition student, Bernstein wanted him to learn to read music because he believed that being a composer was more than being a singer — music and drama “were built into my life early on.” An old set of 78 records “with the Deems Taylor commentary” kindled Redford’s fascination with The Firebird. Along with Stravinsky, the Bernstein of West Side Story profoundly influenced his imagination: “They shaped my musical vocabulary.” Influences within the film industry include Jerry Goldsmith, John Williams, and Bernard Herrmann, whose comprehensive talents embraced skills typically divided up among teams today: composing, orchestrating, arranging — and conducting — all of which continue to feature in Redford’s portfolio as well. The turn away from the “craft-driven model” he believes, that something like Herrmann would probably not be able to get work today.” As he continues the discussion, the list of admired film composers expands and Redford begins to refer to details of the scores of such legendary figures as Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Alfred Newman, Franz Waxman, and Hugo Friedhofer, who was also an orchestrator for Korngold. Redford himself has worked as an orchestrator for James Horner, and has been involved with the sudden, painful news of the composer’s death, which occurred this past June when Horner’s turbotop plane crashed. “It’s really hard to remind myself that I’m not hearing that voice again on the other end of the line, telling me about his latest project,” Redford says with a heavy voice.

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Behind the Scenes
Collaborator.
Redford now enjoys complete control over a project—such is the nature of the film music industry.

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From film to art music to arrangements, the multifarious J.A.C. Redford offers many entry points to his body of work.

**FILM SCORES**

- The Trip to Bountiful (1985), based on the Horton Foote television play
- The Key to Rebecca (1985), two-part four-hour TV movie based on Ken Follett’s novel

**ART MUSIC**

- Let Beauty Be Our Memorial
- Eternity Shall in a Span
- Evening Wind

**ARRANGEMENTS**

- Joshua Bell
  Voice of the Winds

While Horner wasn’t a mentor per se — Redford had already established his career by the time they met, working together for the first time on Deep Impact (1998) — he became an inspiring model for how a composer could make artistically effective use of the medium.

Redford describes a typical visit to Horner’s work room, which was “filled with a bunch of Rube Goldberg-type machines and Russian nesting dolls. I would stand next to the piano — he was a pretty good pianist and would often improvise — and he would play through the cues with me, going through every bar from top to bottom. He was already thinking of the orchestration from the beginning.”

Redford learned from Horner how he used melody to suggest a narrative. “I challenge students of James’s film music to follow the melody and pay attention to how it’s developed and reprised. You can almost see the way the story is told just through the shape of the melody alone.”

“Curiously, explains Redford, although he found Horner’s melodic gift unusually rich, “he once told me: ‘No, melody isn’t the most important thing to me. Color is.’ The first thing he thought about was not the tune but what instrument would play it. If you think of scores such as Braveheart, it was the big band sound, and in Titanic, it was the Celtic colors.”

James, he said, Redford kept to work in primary colors. By that he meant that he didn’t want to have a lot of doubling but preferred to treat the instrumental sections as having their own voice, without layering them unnecessarily. It was a view more like Shostakovich in treating the orchestra as a body of chamber groups; only occasionally would they come together for a big climax. Horner taught me what really works.”

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When writing his own music, Redford finds that “accessibility” is far from a dirty word — but it’s also not about pandering. With communication rather than self-expression as the paramount value. “I want to write music that an audience feels they can have a response to — which means I have to intentionally create a way in. Music in film already has to act as counterpoint to something else: dialogue, to story — and what leads in film scores is by nature more direct and simpler.”

Which doesn’t mean avoiding experimentation or dissonance. “People will listen to a ton of dissonance and accept a lot of formless means of expression if it’s attached to a concept that makes sense. And when I’m writing for TV movies, there’s not as much money at stake as in features, so you have more experimental opportunity. I did a TV movie (For the Future) about the Irvine experiments with in vitro fertilization where I used some musical effects that I don’t think would read in a feature film — a commercial feature film, that is, where you tend to aim for broad strokes and an epic quality.”

Ultimately, the collaborative instinct that is the lifeblood of film music can also be an incredible adrenaline rush — more than compensating for the frustrations of ideas that are cut short during production, not to mention the budgetary headaches of being “the last guy in line after everyone else has overspent.” Redford looks forward to his upcoming sessions with Thomas Newman in London for the James Bond film.

“Tom works in a very collaborative way. He conducts the orchestra while I sit in the booth and we discuss every detail of every take, all kinds of things: the dynamics of a phrase, the way the live orchestra sounds when it gets layered with prerecorded material. There’s constant banter that goes back and forth as we fine tune the expressive qualities. He’ll ask me for my opinion, and frequently decide to do the opposite. But that creative tension is exactly what makes the collaborative process so stimulating and fruitful.”