

5 'A Film's First Audience'

The Composer's Role in Film and Television

GEORGE FENTON IN CONVERSATION
WITH MERVYN COOKE

George Fenton (b. 1949) began composing professionally in the mid-1970s for theatre productions by (amongst others) the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre. His early work with playwright Alan Bennett on *Forty Years On* (1968) and with Peter Gill at London's Riverside Studios led to numerous commissions for BBC TV where, in addition to other Bennett productions, he wrote signature tunes for all the regular BBC news bulletins (including the *One O'Clock News*, *Six O'Clock News*, *Nine O'Clock News*, *Newsnight* and *BBC Breakfast*) and several popular drama series (*Bergerac*, *Shoestring*, *The Monocled Mutineer*). Fenton's later scores for the BBC Natural History Unit achieved a new high standard for the genre, utilizing full orchestra and choir rather than the low-budget synthesized music which had been in vogue in the 1980s. His groundbreaking music for *The Blue Planet* (2001) won Ivor Novello, BAFTA and Emmy awards for Best Television Score, while *Planet Earth* (2006) was awarded an Emmy and a Classical Brit. The phenomenal popularity of these wildlife scores resulted in recordings and live touring performances with major orchestras, including the Berlin Philharmonic and Philharmonia, featuring large-screen HD projections of the BBC footage and presented at diverse venues ranging from regional concert halls to the Hollywood Bowl.

Fenton's early work with Gill at Riverside Studios came to the attention of Michael Attenborough, who introduced him to his father, the distinguished actor and film director Richard Attenborough. For the latter, Fenton composed his first feature-film score – for *Gandhi* (1982) – the success of which auspiciously launched a career in the movies characterized by an unusual stylistic versatility, and which was to include Academy Award nominations for *Gandhi*, *Cry Freedom* (1987), *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988) and *The Fisher King* (1991). Alongside his steady output of scores for mainstream productions in both the United States and United Kingdom, many of which are discussed below, Fenton has continued to work extensively with the independent British director Ken Loach, their collaborations including *Ladybird*, *Ladybird* (1994), *Land and Freedom* (1995), *My Name is Joe* (1998),

[81]

The Wind that Shakes the Barley (2006), *Route Irish* (2010) and *Jimmy's Hall* (2014).

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MERVYN
COOKE: It's often struck me that film music might be more varied and dramatically interesting if more film composers came to the medium with prior experience of working in the theatre. How do you feel your own early experiences composing for the stage fed into your film scoring?

GEORGE
FENTON: I think it helped me a great deal. In both theatre and film, music is part of a collaboration. In the theatre one experiences the benefits and pitfalls of the collaborative process in a living way. You get live feedback from actors because they literally move, speak and dance to what you write. But what you write is also in service to the text, and I learnt a great deal about process and dramatic structure as a result. A sense of why plays work, some better than others, about pacing, etc. The difference is that theatre and sometimes European film are writers' media, whereas film – particularly American film – tends to be a director's medium; but there are similarities in the authorship and the need to 'read' the play or film so, yes, I consider it to have been a lucky start for me.

MC: Your music first became very widely known in the shape of memorable signature tunes for TV drama series and the BBC's flagship current-affairs programmes, to the point where by the 1980s almost everybody in the UK must have heard several Fenton tunes without even realizing it. How did you approach writing signature tunes for these very different genres?

GF: Because I began in the theatre, I approached all these projects in a visual way – either literally, or sometimes in my imagination. It's hard to explain how to visualize a news jingle, but I would literally spend hours trying to capture in my head the sound of the *Nine O'Clock News* headlines or *Newsnight*: what those headlines might be, what BBC News meant around the world. Similarly, with something like *Bergerac* [BBC, 1981–91] I would think endlessly about the place, the stories, the character of the detective. Who was he? Was he cool? If so, how cool? What was his tempo? Hopefully, as you dive deeper and deeper into the particular, you reach the point where what you're writing becomes a musical issue only: you are in a quite

particular place and therefore there is a chance that what you write will have a sense of itself, and is perhaps less likely to date.

MC: What are the similarities and differences between composing music for television dramas and feature films?

GF: The answer used to be simple: one is for the theatre, one is for the living room. The difference between a captive audience in a controlled space, or not. Nowadays, thanks to the improvements in home reproduction and the streaming of both, it's much harder to distinguish between them – other than perhaps in the projects' ambitions – and I think that a feature film is self-defining in its arc whereas TV, no matter how good – and some of it is spectacularly good – is always shaped according to a slot. For the composer, I can see these shapes affect things like spotting [deciding where the music cues will be located]. Also, TV traditionally offers smaller budgets, but it's still a great platform for composers.

MC: Looking back on your early film work with the benefit of hindsight, are you aware of approaching scoring tasks differently these days, with the benefit of decades of experience? Did you ever make any rookie errors you'd care to recount?

GF: I don't think I've changed my *modus operandi* much, other than nowadays I can pre-lay tracks in my own home, so I am usually better prepared now. I miss the excitement of analogue technology, though. Of course, I made lots of wrong choices, but I still do. I never look back on a score, however recent, without reservations. Where I think I have improved is in helping people to play what I've written. To my shame I once brought a session to a stuttering halt by very nicely telling a senior musician that the instrument he was playing wasn't totally in tune. It wasn't, but my comment was a mistake because I wasn't specific enough and therefore it was no help. It rendered him almost incapable of playing, which otherwise he did brilliantly, so it got us nowhere.

MC: Alongside your scores for Hollywood and big-budget European productions, you've maintained a firm allegiance to the work of the independent British director Ken Loach. How did your longstanding collaboration with him come

about, and how do you find the contrast between working for him and for more mainstream projects?

GF: Ken, or rather his producer, simply rang me and asked me to go and meet him. I was amazed because I thought of myself as far too 'commercial', but my heart leapt when they called. I rate Ken as one of the most interesting and gifted film makers ever. He has a clarity in his work that is unswerving, and it is that clarity that challenges one to do it justice with the score. He is not anti-music, not at all; in fact he loves music and is himself very musical, but he doesn't like the artifice of music in film. This is sometimes difficult to navigate because the mere use of music itself is an artifice; but then so are the camera and the cut. What is fascinating is trying to respond and speak truthfully to the film and not to inflate or sensationalize it. I suppose he makes one ask questions about 'why?', about assumptions, about truth, which affects how one thinks and creates.

MC: For Loach, you often feature intimate instruments such as solo guitar. Hollywood generally cries out for a big orchestral, or quasi-orchestral, sound, but some composers – for example, Thomas Newman – aren't comfortable with the idea that a conventional orchestra is ideal for modern film scoring. Have you ever resisted using a full orchestra when the expectation was that you would do so? Conversely, have you ever encouraged the use of an orchestra when a director didn't envisage it?

GF: Phil Joanou was very surprised when I played him the demo of the front title for his film *Heaven's Prisoners* [1996] that it wasn't orchestral – but he liked it anyway. I think in general you can rely on the movie to give you the line-up. The tendency now in contemporary films is to combine orchestral and non-orchestral elements – the best of both worlds? – but in some ways this has become as ubiquitous as the orchestra itself. I try not to have any preconceptions.

MC: Do you ever set out to achieve a specifically British sound in your film music? I'm thinking, for example, of Richard Attenborough's *Shadowlands* [1993], with its clear Anglican and Elgarian associations in the score. On the other hand,

when writing for American films do particular transatlantic musical stereotypes sometimes suggest themselves?

GF: Yes, I certainly did in *Shadowlands*, but I think that probably the influence of English music is embedded in my writing unless I deliberately avoid it in favour of another idiom, and America offers lots that I have used. *Sweet Home Alabama* [2002], for example, and *The Long Walk Home* [1990]. In *84 Charing Cross Road* [1987], I tried to create the transatlantic distance between the main characters by idiom, which eventually theoretically became one voice.

MC: You're particularly renowned for your scoring of period dramas, such as *Dangerous Liaisons* [1988], *The Madness of King George* [1994], *The Crucible* [1996], *Dangerous Beauty* [1998] and *Stage Beauty* [2004]. Do you generally follow the Miklós Rózsa principle by researching musical styles appropriate to the relevant historical periods and, if so, how important do you feel this kind of 'authenticity' to be in modern film scoring?

GF: I do a certain amount of research. I think it's good to know the subject's musical territory, but I don't get particularly hung up on it. I think I tend to use it to find if there are elements or colours, certain instruments, which will work and make the score specific to that particular film. *Dangerous Liaisons* has a lot of period music, some dating from slightly earlier than the story's historical setting, but the score owes its tone to the framing: the composition of the shots is deliberately like Hitchcock's *Notorious* [1946]. After identifying how we could use period music, particularly comically, director Stephen Frears suggested that it was all going to be a bit dry, so why not score it like Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* [1959; music by Bernard Herrmann]! So I tried to combine a highly charged Herrmannesque approach with the forces of an earlier orchestra to give it some sense of uniformity, and that ended up being the score's central concept.

Sometimes, though, I do write completely within the idiom – for example, in *Stage Beauty* – perhaps in the moments when the music is more exposed in a montage where the picture might allow for a more formal structure,

as it would for a song. Too many cadences can make a sequence less fluid, but sometimes the formality can be fun. The sequence in *Stage Beauty* where Charles changes the law begins in a mock serious way and then becomes serious. At the beginning I stayed in period (I even quoted sixteen bars of Purcell in the middle as a kind of test to my cue) and then developed the music into a different and darker tone. But honestly I think the transitions are decided by the film and aren't necessarily premeditated. Also, so many of these choices are subjective.

MC: Did you at any stage of your career feel you were being typecast, and is this tendency a common problem in the industry generally?

GF: Had I decided to settle in Hollywood I think I would have been, but thanks to living in London I am much freer. I can still work in theatre. And I would never have had the experience of composing for natural-history documentaries either. In general, I like the variety. It makes me feel I'm still learning things.

MC: In recent years your music has become widely appreciated in the shape of your resourceful orchestral scores for high-profile BBC Natural History Unit programmes, such as *The Blue Planet*, *Planet Earth* and *Frozen Planet* [2011], and their feature-film spin-offs. The groundbreaking project here was *The Blue Planet*, for which you departed from the then current fashion of using synthesizers for the scoring of wild-life documentaries. What motivated the use of a full orchestra and a choir, and was it something of a gamble in economic terms?

GF: At the time I was offered *The Blue Planet* I was very busy in LA. And my financial situation was secure enough not to have to worry that by employing an orchestra I was effectively working for slightly less than nothing. I often think about this and how different it would have been had I needed to pay myself! But I saw it as something that was good for the soul. Wonderful material, and inspiring both musically and personally. However the idea to score it with a big orchestra came from producer Alastair Fothergill. I had worked for him before and he had always loved the occasional 'bigger' moments when I evoked a large orchestral sound even in

a modest way. So he wanted the scale and I was able to oblige, but throughout I always knew there was something very special about the project.

MC: How did the concept of touring your wildlife scores with live screenings and top-level professional orchestras come about? How much do you need to adapt your cues for the concert-hall experience? And how do you account for the great popularity of these concerts internationally?

GF: The BBC Concert Orchestra had asked if I would like to conduct a concert of the *Blue Planet* music. When I mentioned this to Jane Carter at the BBC she replied that I should play with the picture, having watched me record the score. It sounds simple enough but actually to adapt the music to play as concert pieces, to edit the pictures to make sense without a commentary and to give the evening an arc of its own is a complicated process. That said, I always believed that the results could be popular in their own right. A composer is a film's first audience. Much of what he or she writes is a vocalized response to the material: 'this bit's amazing', 'this bit's hilarious', etc. Watching *The Blue Planet*, I thought that if I put it on a big screen and the orchestra played, people would just dig it in an immersive way. What's interesting is that so much of the musical thought was informed by David Attenborough's voiceover; and yet, when it's not there, the response of the audience (because it isn't controlled by the narrator) is quite different, and their experience is very different to seeing the original films themselves. The concerts have proved incredibly popular, and with each new show I've done more and more picture editing as well as music editing and rewriting. They've become a journey of their own.

MC: As most of today's BBC documentaries on the natural and scientific world have scores that are clearly Fentonesque, are you proud of this legacy or do you sometimes feel (as my co-editor Fiona memorably puts it) like a Dr Frankenstein figure who inadvertently unleashed an uncontrollable monster?

GF: If a composer wants to borrow or be influenced or imitate something I've written, I feel flattered because I am flattered to be part of their journey just as others have been part of mine. However, if producers or directors are asking people to

write like me I find it depressing that they think things have to be a certain way in order to tick a box. So then I feel like the 'experiment' went wrong.

MC: What do you think about the regular complaints that background music has overwhelmed the dialogue in recent BBC documentaries and dramas? Is the solution essentially just a question of improving the sound mixing and training for the presenters and actors [see, for example, D. Cohen 2011] or can some of the blame be put on how the music has been constructed? Why has audibility depreciated despite all the technological advances over the past twenty-five years?

GF: I think someone needs to take a long, hard look at sound mixing on TV. In some of the drama the dialogue is completely inaudible. My feeling is that the problem arises because the mixers have no 'average' setup to mix for. Is it a small TV with one speaker, a laptop or a 5.1 surround-sound home-cinema system? Since it's more satisfying, they tend to mix things so they sound good on the last of these. Not surprisingly, they want their work judged in the best possible conditions. But for a fuller answer you would need to ask a mixer.

MC: You've written scores for many American romantic comedies, including some directed by the late Nora Ephron [*You've Got Mail*, 1998; *Bewitched*, 2005]. Comedy scoring is traditionally cliché-ridden; for example, the widespread use of what Thomas Newman terms 'scurrying pizzicato strings', which he says are 'always good for a laugh' [Schelle 1999, 282]. Many of these clichés are now firmly enshrined in mind-numbingly formulaic reality-TV shows. Are such over-worked musical gestures hard to avoid in the comedy genre in particular?

GF: There's nothing wrong with the use of pizzicatos, but I think their overuse is largely down to the fact that they sample very well, so they tend to be used a lot on keyboards. They perhaps are a romantic-comedy cliché now – and I may have been partly responsible for that, for which I apologize! – but hopefully my use of them never plumbed the depths that they have since reached. All films benefit from freshness in the score, a sense of enthusiasm, and those seem good starting points, particularly for comedy. But just as there are 'do's' in

romantic comedy, more to do with harmony than instrumentation, there are also 'don'ts' because of peculiar prejudices amongst producers (oboe 'too sad'; clarinet 'too jazzy'). These feelings are difficult to understand for a musician but, hey, film is collaborative. Nora used to say 'jazz is the enemy of comedy!' It was funny, but not a joke.

MC: In spotting sessions, do you sometimes resist requests to furnish a particular scene with music when you don't feel it to be necessary? (The most extreme instance of this would perhaps be Malcolm Arnold's refusal to write anything except main-title music for *No Highway* (1951), on the grounds that adding music would otherwise 'ruin a good script and a good film' [see Burton-Page 1994, 53.]

GF: I tend more to move the starts and stops from their prescribed spotting, either from the notes or more usually the temp track. But, yes, in comedy particularly it is important to realize that audiences like a gap in which to laugh and too much music can be detrimental. I am a great believer in the actors being able to bat themselves in and the score should have the chance to do the same, so the early part of the film usually involves the most debate. I don't often refuse to write for a scene but I do encourage directors to let them play it without music if it seems better. Quite often they feel nervous of not having music just because they aren't confident in what they've got.

MC: How have technological developments affected film composing during your career? Have your working habits changed over the years in consequence?

GF: The technology has had a radical affect on every aspect of film. CGI digital cameras, colour timing, digital editing, and in music the advent of sequencers, samplers, Pro Tools [digital audio workstation software, similar to a multi-track tape recorder and mixer], etc. have changed the way one works; and yet for me they haven't changed things as much as for others. I think this is because I had a traditional method which was click-track tables, pencil and paper, so although I now have many different options as to how to (and how fully to) experiment, demo, etc., because I predate a lot of the technology – however interesting and inspiring some of it is – I normally end up in the same place as I always have, and I make my decisions finally that way. I still jot things down

a lot – but equally nowadays I'd probably be lost without modern technology in trying to do my job.

MC: When working with electronics, have you ever had the chance to integrate sound effects and music in a meaningful whole? In general, are you provided with adequate information in advance about where dialogue and sound effects are likely to coincide with your music?

GF: I like the opportunity to use sound as part of the landscape of the score. I had the chance with *Company of Wolves* [1984] and certainly in some of the Natural History Unit films such as 'The Deep' [episode 2] in *The Blue Planet*. As regards sound effects generally, I think there is a better dialogue now between departments than there has been previously, although the lines still get blurred and this is a subject all of its own.

There are numerous complainants out there who dislike the use of music in natural-history documentaries, the normal complaint being that these films are 'natural', so why not have natural sound? This response plays very well into the increasingly thin line between effects and music. Most natural-history films do not use sync sound. It's impractical to record, and in many environments – such as the ocean – pointless because there is no noise. [For further on the 'silent' ocean and various musical responses to it, including Fenton's score for *Deep Blue* (2003) – the feature-length theatrical spin-off from *The Blue Planet* – see Cooke 2015.] So the sound of a marlin or killer whale swooshing past the camera with the thunderous low-end roar of an airliner is completely fictitious. Although these effects can be enormously useful in portraying scale, they are still effects; and where the problem sometimes arises is when those effects include ambience that has tones or pitches. Traditionally, the effects editors will work with the dubbing mixer for many days before they start to integrate the music and, whilst they may be making some brilliant and eerie sounds that are highly atmospheric, effects normally only speak to the moment. If the score, which not only speaks to the moment but is also trying to control the narrative arc, is one that integrates soundscapes or is trying to produce a similar effect with instruments then there can be a conflict. There have been occasions when I've felt that the effects editor has

treated musical sample libraries as though they were a new toy box of effects, which inevitably compromises the score: firstly by the conflicting use of notes or clusters or percussion hits, but possibly more because the appetite for filling the moment means there is no space or silence (which frequently *is* real) available to the composer – and I would say that silence is one of the most important elements in music. However, if the two departments work together, as we do with the natural-history films I've done for the BBC, then it can be inspiring and collaborative and produce a soundscape where you sometimes can't tell where the score starts and the effects stop. Then it's very rewarding all round.

MC: What roles do synthesizers and computers play in the scores you've written since your more traditional orchestral scoring has been so much in demand? Are electronics more likely to feature in the eccentric worlds of films such as Terry Gilliam's *Zero Theorem* [2013], or do they still have a viable place in more conventional assignments?

GF: I tend to approach each film with an open mind. Certainly synthesizers are invaluable because they offer a massive range of textural and rhythmic possibilities, and beyond that they offer a very real solution for films where the budget won't stretch to an orchestra. It's hard sometimes to disentangle how one arrives at the palette for a score. I think it just slowly emerges and each composer will take a slightly different path. In general my interest is more in electronic sounds, analogue synths, etc., rather than imitative sounds.

MC: How often are you asked to work on the basis of temp tracks which don't use your music? Is this method useful to a composer, and are you able to give any specific examples from your experiences?

GF: I prefer that the temp track is not my music, and then sometimes it can be helpful in taking you out of yourself. A good recent example was *The Lady in the Van*, directed by Nicholas Hytner, which I have just finished. [The film was released in the UK in November 2015.] The temp track was deliberately all classical music, i.e. Beethoven, Schubert, Shostakovich, etc., because Nick felt that the film should not have 'film' music. In the end it did have film music, but the score inherited that sensibility, the formal and structural feeling

of the temp, and I hope feels different to most scores as a result.

MC: With Neil Jordan's *Interview with the Vampire* [1994], you infamously fell victim to the all-too-common phenomenon of the summarily rejected score. (Somewhat perversely, the Internet Movie Database summarizes your career thus: 'He is known for his work on *Gandhi* (1982), *Groundhog Day* (1993) and *Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles* (1994)!') Have you ever been called in to write a score to replace someone else's rejected score? And has it ever happened to you since *Interview*?

GF: *Interview* was the only occasion that it's happened to me – so far – although it might be about to happen any minute now! There is always the potential for it happening again, for whatever reason. I think it made me more cautious for a while, more conventional, but also it coincided with my doing lighter films, so the demands changed. I've been asked many times to replace other scores. I accept it, as we all do, as being an unhappy fact of life, but I have never agreed to replace a score without first talking to the composer whose work I have been asked to replace. Just as a courtesy and because usually the decision to drop the score has nothing to do with the quality of what they wrote.

MC: There seem to be occasional acts of homage in your scores to illustrious predecessors in film scoring: I'm thinking of the Nino Rota-like music at the start of *Groundhog Day* [1993] and the Rózsa-like noir scoring of *Final Analysis* [1992], for example. Were these allusions conscious, and are there other examples in your work?

GF: My work is littered with attempts to emulate my heroes. The homage in *Groundhog Day* was totally deliberate, perhaps the Rózsa influence less conscious, but certainly down to my general love of the European Hollywood composers. In *Valiant* [2005], there is a homage to Korngold. I hope in all these cases it sounds like me paying homage rather than my writing a pastiche.

MC: Do you ever have the chance (or feel the need) to read scripts in advance, or visit sets or location shoots for inspiration? Not all film composers find these activities beneficial: Richard

Rodney Bennett said he went on location to Dorset with the cast and crew of *Far From the Madding Crowd* [1967] and just 'sat there and sneezed and had no musical ideas at all' [Daniel 2000, 153].

- GF: As the film's first audience, the composer's first response to a film is important and therefore too many preconceptions based on books or scripts can get in the way of that first moment when you see a cut of the film, and water down your instinctive response. Conversely, being exposed to a film at an early stage sometimes allows one to get into the general musical landscape. Richard Attenborough always included me early on, but more in the filming than in the background. It was immensely helpful to absorb the feeling of the subject. Sometimes, though, I prefer to see the picture for the first time when there is a cut and then immediately start work.
- MC: How does the realization that most film-goers won't be paying close attention to the intricacies of the score affect your approach in composing the music? Do you feel it's important for a single score to have a long-term trajectory that can work its magic subliminally? Or do certain assignments require a more music-of-the-moment approach in the interests of variety and immediacy?
- GF: I think there's a case for both. But ultimately I hang on to the thought that the music is there for a reason and whether its effect is noticeable or subliminal shouldn't make any difference to how hard one should work on it, or that it shouldn't be defensible within the context of the score's overall arc. 'Musical' scores have a way of resonating, even if the audience may not be constantly conscious of it.
- MC: It's noticeable that in many of your film scores you write substantial end-credit cues that are not merely the potpourri recyclings of existing cues which are much more common at this point in a film. Why is this, and does it worry you that so many people in the cinema walk out during the first seconds of the credits music?
- GF: One reason is that it's a chance just to play the music without any sync issues, so it's quite liberating. I don't mind if people walk out because I dislike the way that the end crawl has become such a pointless waste of time. The requirement to

credit every compositor, animator, etc., is equivalent to listening every member of the orchestra and every employee of the recording studio. It's out of hand and has made the whole thing an indulgence. I suppose I really write end titles for the families of the music department (who are always at the very end) while they wait patiently for their loved ones' names to appear.

MC: Do you feel it's important to keep up with contemporary trends in film scoring, or with so much experience now behind you is it possible simply to pursue your own instincts? And what are your thoughts on the general state of film music today?

GF: I try to keep up. Whether it changes me I don't know. Writing involves constant choices and one's choices are so subjective. There are many composers I admire, and their solutions certainly make me think again about how and what I write. But there are also many who I feel don't really have their own voice and I think suffer from trying to make their scores sound like 'that other score' before they've had the chance to bring their own musical influences to bear. Highly useful though the [softsynth] libraries of (for example) Omnisphere and Zebra are, they are the least interesting aspects of contemporary scores – particularly some which are little more than that. Given that film music is primarily music, I think it's important to be influenced by music away from film – orchestral works or tracks or folk music, rather than only other film scores. That's the history of film music and I think today's most exciting new scores are influenced in that way too.