

Interview

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Scoring *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994)

Imagine twenty years of hard labor, and feel the anguish that turns the mind into a cramped prison cell. Lock in your emotions, and accept the numbing hell of Andrew Dufresne's life inside the Shawshank Penitentiary. Unjustly sentenced for life, Andrew (Tim Robbins) only has the dream of freedom to occupy his mind. In his most telling act of rebellion, Andrew pipes "The Marriage of Figaro" through the prison yard's bullhorns. And during this transcendent moment in *The Shawshank Redemption*, music is elevated to the essence of liberation. The prison's suffocating misery is completely forgotten, Mozart's opera becoming the key that unlocks the convicts' imaginations. Their spirits dance above a field of golden voices, the guards momentarily helpless to stop their taste of heaven.

Mozart is an impossible act to follow, and any other music in *The Shawshank Redemption* doesn't try to reach such metaphoric heights. But the melodies that weave through Andrew's life inside are just as important, telling us about his hopes and despairs that would prove deadly if expressed. Thomas Newman's beautifully subtle score is Andrew's voice; his humanistic use of strings and a lonely piano release Andrew's spirit from the cold synthesized environment of Shawshank. Newman's folk-inspired score is a poetic match for the direction of Frank Darabont, both men turning Stephen King's ingenious prison yarn into a work of unexpected tenderness.

This melodic combination of emotion and inventiveness has become Thomas Newman's forte. From his auspicious debut with 1984's *Reckless*, the boyish Newman has grown into a fine dramatic composer, one of the first people that Hollywood calls on for such movies as *Scout of a Woman*, *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *The War*. Beyond marrying lush electronics with a symphonic orchestra, Newman's most useful talent is touching all the three-hankie bases without melodic hamminess, playing inside the film's heads while delivering their dramatic crescendos.

In a town where blood is thicker than red ink, the soft-spoken Newman isn't one to brag about his membership in Hollywood's foremost musical dynasty. His father was Alfred Newman, a film composing legend whose classic scores include *How Green Was My Valley*, *The Captain from Castille* and *Airport*. Tom's uncle was Lionel Newman, 20th Century Fox's wisecracking music supervisor and the conductor of such scores as Bernard Herrmann's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and Jerry Goldsmith's *The Omen*. Tom's brother, David, is the prolific composer of *The Flintstones* and *Hoffa*, while his cousin Randy not only scored *The Natural* and *Maverick*, but is even more famous as the sardonic singer of "I Love L.A." and "Short People".

However, none of the new generation of Newman's has explored and innovated the craft of film composing with the brilliance of Alfred's youngest son. After his reluctant entry into scoring with the new wave synths of *Reckless*, Tom Newman's musical vocabulary grew through such teen techno-comedies as *Revenge of the Nerds* and *Real Genius*. His background in alternative rock gave the soundtracks to *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *The Lost Boys* and *Light of Day* an edgy

and propulsive feeling, his electronic melodies bouncing about at one moment, then settling on a zen hum. Newman's forays into sound sampling were equally as energetic; *The Man with One Red Shoe* employed orchestra rehearsals and monkey calls, while *The Prince of Pennsylvania* was based on a ukulele.

But with the introduction of symphonic instruments into his electronic repertoire, Newman's humorous experiments soon took on a more sinister edge. *Naked Tango* twisted around its Latin rhythms into a hallucinatory dance of death, while *The Rapture* signaled the apocalypse with blaring trumpets, distorted phonographs and a chamber orchestra. Newman's use of symphonic colors made his popularity grow with his haunting score to *Less Than Zero*, which combined rock synthesizers with tragic orchestral themes. *Men Don't Leave* was considerably lighter and truly put Thomas Newman on the map as a dramatic composer, his score employing polkas, goofy experimental music, and tear-inducing instrumentals for Jessica Lange's travails.

Newman's distinctive sound would weave between such heavy-hitters as *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Deceived* along with more eccentric scores to *Threesome* and *The Linguini Incident*. His experiments into processed sounds also varied between light and dark extremes; cicadas chirped in *Flesh and Bone* while off-tune guitars and aboriginal chants filled *The Player*.

Now Newman's work in *The Shawshank Redemption* confirms his ability to describe the human condition in the most poignant terms, his score at once moving and innovative, showing music's true power to make a prison's walls come tumbling down.

Q: *How did you and Frank Darabont decide on a direction for The Shawshank Redemption?*

TN: When I first watched *The Shawshank Redemption*, it was three hours long, and I've never had a clear idea of where I wanted a score to go after seeing a rough cut. You have notions, and experiment with them. Along the way, you have to play those ideas for directors. When I met with Frank, I tried to understand his musical tastes. But talking about music is a really tough thing, because it just boils down to opinions. So you just have to barrel through the creative process. *The Shawshank Redemption* was a tough film to score. The music could have gone in any number of directions, and sometimes that makes filmmakers uncomfortable. You're not quite there with the score, and they don't want to respond until you're ready to play something. Yet you want the director to feel comfortable with the choices you're making. It took a while before I was able to form a common musical language with Frank.

Q: *Music is more than something people just listen to in The Shawshank Redemption. It represents liberation for the characters.*

TN: I think that's true. You look at moments in the film where music can open up the prison. The Mozart opera's a good example, because it exists in the reality of the movie. Then there's the scene where the prison crew is tarring the roof, and you get a glimpse of what it's like for the sky to be closer to them. But you can only play those scenes when the right emotion exists.

Q: *In the drama's that you've scored, like Fried Green Tomatoes and Scent of a Woman, the character's emotions were very obvious. But in The Shawshank Redemption, you're dealing with people who don't like to express their feelings, especially since they can mean life or death.*

TN: The movie's internal and masculine, which made me have to find the prisoners' expressions without being too flowery. Though a score can point the characters in an emotional direction, it's more interesting to invent some subtle thing that's under the surface, particularly when it's a really psychological film like this one. But that's also frustrating, because I had to figure out how the

convicts were affected by twenty years of imprisonment. I thought about Shawshank's environment, which was stone walls and dirt yards. That way my musical sensibility joins the characters and I tried to make their environment more hopeful and beautiful. I also had to find a melodic pace that was justifiable without being overblown.

Q: *While other composers might bang you over the head with music that's supposed to make you cry, you take a subtler approach with scores like Fried Green Tomatoes, Men Don't Leave and particularly The Shawshank Redemption. What is your key for scoring big emotional scenes?*

TN: Every movie has its own emotional obligations. You might resent them, but you still have to follow them. Your music's not going to make any sense if it's too earnest. But how big is "big"? If the end of a film is telling you to feel good, are you going to short-shrift it by being too subtle with the score, or go over the top to make sure that everyone cries? I don't want to be the guy telling the audience what's going on in the movie. It embarrasses me, because that's not my place as a composer. I just want to enhance the movie's emotions as much as I can. So the idea of being "over the top" isn't natural to my character. Yet I've had to do it from time to time, then ask myself why the score ended so big.

Q: *There seemed to be two schools of thought to the score, one that was very cold and metallic for the prison and the other that was warm and orchestral for the convicts' hopes for freedom.*

TN: You have to imagine how despairing and solitary prison is. It's a question of physical survival, of real character traits. How do people cope with imprisonment? Do they just drift away, or come forward to fight of their spirit? That's tough to know. On the one hand, I painted a picture of desolation with electronic colors, then pulled out the emotional scenes with actual instruments. But even the electronic parts of the score weren't totally manufactured. Some of the prison's metallic sounds were processed hurdy-gurdies, prepared steel guitars and solo pianos. So there weren't a lot of actual synthesizers.

Q: *Many people use the words "musical dynasty" to describe your family. Did that make you want to go into film scoring as a kid?*

TN: The thing I'm proud of about my family is that there's a lot of history there. I like a lot of my father's music and it's a great thing for me to think that he composed during Hollywood's Golden Age. I actually have a photograph of my father at the podium and Charlie Chaplin sitting beside him. That made me want to know more about my father, because he died when I was so young. I was fourteen and my brothers and I were more into sports at the time than music. But in my late teens, I had some creative things on my mind that I wanted to express musically.

Q: *How did you get your first score?*

TN: Scott Rudin, a longtime friend, was producing a movie called *Reckless*. He asked me to help out with some temp music and by hook or crook I got the job. More scores came after that, but it never felt easy.

Q: *The early part of your career was electronic. Tell me about the period where you were doing a lot of teen comedies like Revenge of the Nerds and Real Genius.*

TN: I'd studied music in college and was classically trained, but on a certain level I had to come to terms with music and making it in the privacy of my own room. Working with electronics was a way of coming to terms with those issues that I had to address. That's just how I happened to start out, learning what I liked and what interested me. A lot of my colors and sensibilities came

from that. But it's scary for me to use the word "synthesizer". What I do is use "electronic" music, which to me is taking acoustic sounds and working with them in an electronic environment.

Q: *How did you develop your distinctive electronic sound?*

TN: I have a lot of good and interesting musicians I work with, among them Rick Cox, who uses a prepared guitar, George Budd, who plays processed phonographs and designs sounds, and Chas Smith, who does amazing things with a pedal steel guitar. The stuff that delights and interests us is getting to new musical places that we'd never have imagined. We happen to pass by some idea, then touch and explore it.

Q: *You did a lot of interesting experiments by putting animal sounds and orchestra rehearsals into The Man with One Red Shoe, carousel music in The Lost Boys, a pump organ in Cookie, even a ukulele in The Prince of Pennsylvania.*

TN: A lot of those choices were obvious and obligatory because of the film's subjects. The Lost Boys took place around a carnival, Cookie used Italian music because it comedically dealt with the mob, and The Man with One Red Shoe centered around an orchestral violinist. A nice thing about film scoring is that it allows me to be capricious with my ideas, and to see them work themselves out quickly. Musical colors have always interested me. You're thinking about things, look on the shelf, and there's a ukulele. You start strumming away and that became part of The Prince of Pennsylvania.

Q: *You've also done some really abstract scores like Naked Tango and The Rapture. With Flesh and Bone, you've got cicadas and crickets chirping away. What's it like when directors accept or reject your stranger ideas?*

TN: One of my best experiences was Flesh and Bone, because director Steve Kloves gave me very good suggestions. The score's abstraction came from the weird environment that surrounds the movie. I found a musical voice by matching the crickets with sounds of struck bowls, bells and bowed strings. Sometimes Steve's eyebrows would raise on a first listen, but then he let me go. I could tell that he liked what I was doing, and was encouraging and respectful. The studio left Steve alone because they also respected him. So I'm proud of my score to Flesh and Bone. But in terms of bad experiences, Whispers in the Dark was a headache. The producers had taken over the movie, and they were in New York while I worked in Los Angeles. There was a lot of geographic paranoia and frustration in what I was doing. I never saw the picture and didn't get a great feeling for the way we were interacting.

Q: *What score do you think got you real recognition as a film composer?*

TN: It's hard to have a self-impression and any perception of me as a film composer has been slow in coming. One of my first scores to stand out was The Rapture, where I combined an orchestra with electronics. It was the first opportunity I had to reference musical sizes by pairing a chamber-sized orchestra against smaller ambient sounds and solo colors. I wanted to hear what sounded lush and what was spare. I did the same thing with Men Don't Leave, seeing what happened if I put strings on top of electronics. I learned on those scores by trial and error.

Q: *Do you get more pleasure doing a big symphonic score like Scent of a Woman as opposed to a smaller film like The Linguini Incident?*

TN: I think I like smaller better, because I find more interesting places that the music can go. When you're working with a 90-piece symphony, your interaction with the players is much

different. You're standing on a podium and talking to a large number of musicians. So the notion of nuance becomes a group effort and that's a difficult thing to get. I keep thinking of ways to communicate better, to scale down the orchestra's size so it will fit into my ambient palette instead of lying on top of it. The musicians have to know what they're playing to.

Q: *Do you think there's a comic sensibility to your scores, especially with The Player?*

TN: Maybe a sense of irony. To say "comic" makes it seem like I'm trying to be funny. I just find things curious, so the music often comes across in a humorous way. I also find irony in the juxtaposition of instrumental colors and that can put a smile on a listener's face. For Threesome, I had these bizarre pedal steel sounds that I was working with. And what's a more curious place to be than in a room where three people are having sex? Movies like The Player and Threesome are psychologically interesting and complex, which makes their scores fun.

Q: *As a film composer, do you think you're going through some of the same experiences that Alfred Newman did?*

TN: I've got to figure that writing film music was a much different job then, and probably a lot more magical. There was blind poetry in the act of putting music to film. The composers of my father's generation were carving a path in what music was doing behind moving pictures. That's a really interesting thing to think about. But while there's a lot about my father's musical style that's exquisite and tender, I don't want to interpret films the way he did. We might share the same language, but we're different people and hear music differently.

Q: *David and Randy have taken a more traditional approach to film music, while you've been experimental. Does that make you the more evolutionary Newman in terms of film scoring?*

TN: If that's true, it's only circumstantial. Randy's a great songwriter and David's immensely talented. We all have our own, different paths.

Q: *Have you, David or Randy ever been in competition to score the same movie?*

TN: I don't think that's happened yet, unless it's unbeknownst to all of us!

Q: *After The Shawshank Redemption, you've got The War coming out. What does that score sound like?*

TN: Jon Avnet, who I worked with on Fried Green Tomatoes, directed The War. It compares children fighting over a treehouse to the bigger picture of the Vietnam War, which had just ended. My score again combines electronics with an orchestra.

Q: *When the albums of your earlier films came out, most would only have one or two cuts of your music on them. But now your entire scores have appeared on such CDs as Fried Green Tomatoes, Flesh and Bone and now The Shawshank Redemption. Do you think you've gotten luckier with getting your music released?*

TN: "Luck" is a good word. I might have gotten a whole album for Scents of a Woman, but I only have one cut on the Corrina Corrina-soundtrack. So I'm back to where I started! One of my real joys is producing my own soundtracks, because I get to re-order and re-invent my music, to make it work on its own. In essence, I'm reclaiming my score's ideas, severed from the movie. That's

important for the musician's end of film composing, the part of you that likes to write and listen to music for its own sake.

Q: *Now that you're getting bigger films, would you like to concentrate on more big dramas like The Shawshank Redemption, or on such quirkier films as Josh and S.A.M.?*

TN: It's fun to work on interesting things, and I'd like to think that I'll continue doing smaller films. I just want to keep growing if I can, and any movie that's complex enough like The Shawshank Redemption gives me that chance.