

# HIGH SCORE

The freewheeling style of Hong Kong director Johnnie To was mirrored by the music composition in his recent movie *Election 2*. Composer **ROBERT ELLIS-GEIGER** shares secrets with **Tim Goodyer**

## WO SING IS HONG KONG'S OLDEST

triad. Under the leadership of Chairman Lok, it has become the most feared crime organisation in the city. Jimmy, an educated gangster, wants to build a legitimate business empire and his profit-making enterprises have made him a favourite in the upcoming election for chairman, but his popularity also brings him to the attention of the Chinese authorities, as he is the perfect intermediary to negotiate peace between the central government and the triads. The Chinese authorities offer Jimmy access to the mainland's business market should he choose to lead Wo Sing for two years. In order to escape the triads, Jimmy first has to become its leader. As he embarks on a violent campaign trail, he discovers his future, as well as the future of Wo Sing, are in the balance of a far greater power...

Following the 'masterful, modern reworking of the Hong Kong Triad drama and its mythology' set out in *Election* (2005), *Election 2: Harmony is a Virtue* starring Louis Koo, Simon Yam and Lam Ka-Tung, had its world premiere at the opening of the Hong Kong International Film Festival in April. In May, 2006 the film was selected to be shown in the Out of Competition selection at the Cannes film festival and was presented in the prestigious Grand Theatre Lumière. Less cryptic than *The Longest Nite* and less minimalist than *The Mission* – two of Hong Kong director Johnnie To Kei Fung's best works – *Election 2* focuses on fewer characters, giving audiences a chance to keep track of the major players. 'For the residents of the island, to be "Hongkongese" has never meant being Chinese,' he explains. 'The political upsets of the past century have given rise to a major dichotomy between these two notions. Over the past nine years, changes seem to have gradually filled the gap that separates us. China has freed itself from the yoke of an archaic communist regime to become an economic superpower. The policy of One Country/Two Systems guaranteed Hong Kong political autonomy [but] the residents of Hong Kong look upon all these changes with concern, fear and confusion. Under the veil of economic stability, questions concerning political autonomy remain unanswered. In the shadow of that ambiguous giant



A scene from *Election 2*

known as China, what does being Hongkongese mean? In *Election 2*, even the gangsters ask themselves questions.'

Another Hong Kong character has a large part to play in the drama of *Election 2* – an assistant professor at the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong called Robert Ellis-Geiger. As well as conducting courses in audio recording, surround sound production, and sound and music for moving image and interactive applications, he scored the film's soundtrack. 'Taiwanese pop composer Lo Ta Yu composed the music for *Election* and was commissioned to also create music for *Election 2*, but Johnnie later decided to take a different narrative direction with the sequel and for the music to reflect this change,' Mr Ellis-Geiger explains. 'Another key factor for changing the musical style was to assist in reaching out to an international audience, as previously his movies were tailored for a Hong Kong audience.'

Highly recommended by Hong



Robert Ellis-Geiger (far left) recording at SCM Studio.

Kong director Patrick Tam Ka Ming (the film editor on *Election*) he was contacted in November last year by Shan Ding, the assistant general manager of Milkyway Image and Johnnie To's assistant for this film project. 'Johnnie To was in the final stages of shooting and only a very rough edit had been assembled,' says Mr Ellis-Geiger. 'I received an email from Shan Ding that pointed out the director's musical interest in *Streich quartet Nr.1 - Con sordino* from the Zehetmair Quartett,

Hartmann and Bartók CD, and he asked if I could supply short examples of my musical composition style for Johnnie to review. Shan Ding later informed me that one of the other reasons for initiating contact was that in Hong Kong it is difficult to find a composer who can compose for strings in a contemporary style such as Béla Bartók or Bernard Herrmann and who could also simulate real strings in an expressive, mature way using Midi-based technology.'

After purchasing recordings of all Bartók string quartets, Mr Ellis-Geiger realised that Mr Ding had given the incorrect title and was sent an excerpt of the movie on VHS tape that contained the Béla Bartók *String Quartet No.4 Movement 3 Non Troppo Lento Sz 91* (1928) and live dialogue but without Foley or effects. 'The instructions were to compose around three to four minutes of music,' he recalls. 'The director was very clear on the instrumentation to be used, and the music itself had to be low-key throughout, in contrast to most Hollywood productions. It was the director's request for me to use string quartet and percussion (Beijing Opera cymbals and bells). Within certain scenes, the strings were expanded to resemble a string section rather than a string quartet but not as large as a string orchestra. Later I experimented with a contemporary flute piece for traditional Irish flute and orchestral flute, which was overwhelmingly accepted.'

'My first concern was to find the most realistic solo string samples from various hardware and software sample libraries – I eventually choose the Symphonic Orchestra library from East West. As the director had his mind set on the sound of a string quartet, I experimented with Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* that was sequenced into Nuendo.'

There was a complication to the process, however, as most of the music was to be composed while Mr Ellis-Geiger was on holiday in Singapore. A mobile system was the answer – an IBM X41 Tablet laptop PC with a 30Gb internal hard disk and 300Gb Maxtor external hard disk running Steinberg's Nuendo and HALion VSTi virtual audio sampler module and Propellerhead Reason Midi sequencing software was paired up with a Tascam US-224 audio/Midi interface and control surface, and an RME Multi-set audio interface for transferring the composition between the laptop and a more powerful desktop machine. Mobile musical input was via an Evolution 61 note semi-weighted Midi keyboard. 'In my office I use my desktop machine and connect the laptop through Steinberg's VST system link,' he explains. 'I would stream the digitised film from the laptop to conserve desktop CPU processing power as streamed video can use quite a lot of

computer resources, including hard disk streaming performance.

'In my office, I set up a digital audio workstation that could function as a computer sequencer that incorporated notation and surround sound production all-in-one. This system had to support hundreds of Midi and audio tracks that could easily be arranged and allow for easy access to the musical element within a few clicks. At that time on the market only Cubase SX 3 or Logic Pro by Apple could come close, but neither was an advanced surround sound production platform. I also needed a system that could allow me to make changes to the score at any stage without leaving the music composition digital audio workstation.'

The interface between the various systems was via Rewire, a Propellerhead application allowing Midi and audio data to be transmitted from one application to another within a single computer. This technology was first supported by Steinberg products and soon after by other software developers. 'Most of the Asian instruments and instrumental effects were audio samples loaded into eight separate NN-XT samplers within Reason,' the composer confirms. 'Midi information was sent through Nuendo to Reason, and generated audio from Reason was sent back into Nuendo allowing separate audio streams from Reason to be mixed within Nuendo's mixer.'

As he was working in surround sound for the cinema, audio monitoring was through a Lake Technology Theaterphone unit, which simulates the listening experience of difference film dubbing theatres in 5.1 through normal headphones. 'I check all of my stereo and surround pre-mixing with this unit, after which I only required a short period in the studio control room to fine-tune the effects and overall mix.'

The other essential element was an internet server for transferring work in progress between composer and director – although verbal communication was through Shan Ding. With the necessary technicalities in place, the first demo was delivered. 'I uploaded an MP3 version of my first piece and was told Johnnie thought it was "too Hollywood and that the music required more layers", Mr Ellis-Geiger recalls.



**Above: The 'spiral' fight scene from Election 2.**

**Right: Flautist Michael Spicer working on the Election 2 soundtrack.**

'He went on to say that "Johnnie feels the music should be more unpredictable – no melody and no hitting of visual cues". My instruction was to go against what I saw and to bring out the emotion and mood of the scene and of the characters.'

Johnnie To is well known for not using a script when shooting, guiding the actors by continually telling them the story until they understand their character's role within the story. In this way the actor cannot study the script in isolation and develop any preconceptions. And like fellow Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai, he likes to improvise on set to bring out the best performance from an actor or group of actors. In composing the music for *Election 2*, Mr Ellis-Geiger improvised musical ideas on a Yamaha 140S digital piano based on written sketches and recorded these performances into Steinberg's Nuendo's sequencer. 'I sat down at my electric piano and experimented with chord textures and sequences,' he explains. 'Once something caught



my interest I wrote it down on manuscript paper using a pencil. I developed a way of improvising on a written sketch and creating a lot of music from just one page of manuscript. Besides just relying on musical notation I also wanted to reflect my reaction to the movie excerpt that I was given, so I turned off the image and created a piece – improvising – that reflected the atmosphere and changing dynamics of the

picture.'

The director loved the second demo and asked for a meeting with the composer to explain the film. In return, the composer presented an AES paper he had written, in which he proposed an alternative production process for the composer and filmmaker to collaborate. *Film Music Scoring Using a Digital Audio Workstation* advocated that the collaboration should begin as early as possible

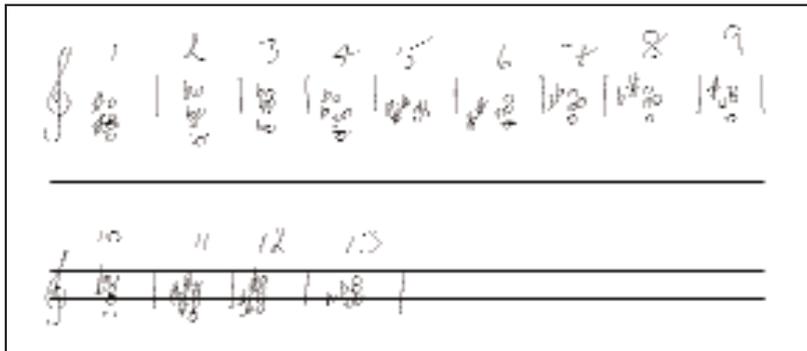
rather than at the end in postproduction, giving rise to an integrated process where the music might have an active role in shaping the film. 'To cut a long story short, we enacted many of the suggestions that I made within this paper, but it was a lot of work on my behalf as I was composing a lot of music to serve as a means of communication and experimentation,' says Mr Ellis-Geiger.

By late December, the composer had settled in Singapore for around three weeks and had passed details of the FTP site he had set up for transferring music files to the director's assistant. Once he had a 'sketch' ready for review, he passed an SMS to alert Shan Ding and emailed a URL link to the exact file to be downloaded and reviewed. 'Between November and December 2005 I composed a lot of music in various styles to serve as a way of communicating with the director and to help my understanding of his intent, direction, vision for the score, and to also present alternative and new music-sound-design ideas,' Mr Ellis-Geiger recounts. 'We arrived at a point where I had sketched quite a lot of music that resulted in overwhelming the director, assistant and film editor. We then decided to take up an earlier suggestion from Johnnie to view the film as a sequence of four parts. We later agreed that it would be best to create four long pieces that reflected the changing mood – becoming progressively darker – of the movie, after which the music was placed within scenes. This is the reverse process of that for most composers and filmmakers as, normally, the composer would sit down with the director and together they would discuss where music might be placed.

'Once I had composed the four long pieces and he was happy with the result, Johnnie asked me to place the music within the film, where I thought it should go, but he only gave me two days to do this huge task of bring four separate Nuendo projects into one and place the music. As a result I rushed my placement and, after Johnnie went through the movie against my music placement, he experimented for around two weeks on his own. Once he had completed his placement of my music I received a VHS tape – one track of dialogue, the other with my music. I then had to find the entire cut-up sections of my music to stitch together a complete score. This working process doesn't sound that bad as I had prepared myself for this to happen, but the problem I had was that Johnnie only gave me a few days to re-stitch my music and produce a final mix in stereo and surround 5.1, including instrumental stems for both versions. This is a huge



The recording system used in the unorthodox scoring and recording process.



Using harmonic structure to build tension in the score.

task and we burnt out one hard disk while running three computers at the same time and not sleeping for two whole days.'

The working process also produced some blind alleys along the way but these, too, often had a positive outcome. 'As an example, I uploaded a file called "ChineseFight\_1.wav" as a sketch that could potentially be used for the opening screen credit or for some of the action scenes,' the composer recalls. 'As this was still an early stage of my collaboration with Johnnie To, I needed to create a lot of different styles of music as a way for us to communicate.

'While exploring the sounds of an audio sample library called *Heart of Asia 1*, I came across a Chinese instrument phrase played by a *DiZi* [Chinese bamboo flute] performer, which was the source

of inspiration for creating a subsequent cue. This subsequent cue in essence is centred on Chinese flute, Japanese *Taiko* drums and Chinese finger bells and other high-impact sounds for dramatic effect. I gave the director two variations to review, and with version two of this piece I included a male choir singing Latin text – the word-builder for East West's *Symphonic Choir 3* allows the use of preset phrases in English or Latin to be inserted. Once a sequence is entered into the editor, each word can be triggered by a Midi note and the duration of a word controlled by the note release.

'This piece begins with the *DiZi* and, for the first 29-bars no fixed tempo or click track was used, as I wanted to establish a sense of space, mood, time and place. At

Bar 30 I developed a dramatic percussion-based movement to give a feeling of ominous darkness and that a storm was coming. For this movement I used a fixed tempo of 115bpm. Johnnie To felt this music was "too Chinese" and that it sounded like something from a Chinese New Year celebration or music for the movie *Hero*. After further discussion with Shan Ding, I learnt that the main problem was the *DiZi* which gave the director a strong association of the Chinese mainland and Chinese culture, which is very different to Hong Kong Chinese culture.'

Not everything was generated by samplers: 'If there had been a big enough budget I would have preferred to use as many "real" musicians as possible, as you can never replicate their performance

attributes and acoustic frequency radiation properties, says Mr Ellis-Geiger. There were a few 'real' players, however. 'My sonic palette included a variety of solo string samples, real flute recordings of Michael Spicer from Singapore and a HALion virtual percussion instrument created from real recordings in Hong Kong of ethnic percussionist John Lee. I had discovered John when assisting one of my student's final project recordings. I separately contracted John to give performances in various styles and asked him to improvise on the rhythm within the theme that is used for the opening screen credits. I took his performances and later added additional percussion instruments such as Wagner Bass Drum and *Taiko*. The reason for this is that the director wanted more power – not more action as I initially thought – within the final show-down scene near the end of the movie as illustrated.

'In late December 2005 I recorded Michael Spicer's flute performances in Singapore at a studio using a Pro Tools system. We later exported out of Pro Tools using OMFI and imported the session into a Nuendo project. Michael improvised on the information I provided him with, such as the proposed chords and linear shape of his part and requested him to give a totally free *rubato* style of performance and expression [speeding up or slowing down the tempo of a piece at the discretion of the solo player or the conductor]. I also sang to demonstrate the performance attributes I liked and, most importantly, I described the scene where his performance was going to be used. This recording was later edited into pitch ranges of performance as the director did not like the tone of the flute when it went into the upper middle register; the director thought that it sounded too Japanese. So I edited the performances in Nuendo and colour-coded "Low, Middle and High" segments. Later I re-arranged these performances to match the colours, then musically re-arranged them and composed for string quartet as counterpoint to Michael's performance. The music was used within the dog scene, the most violent part of the movie.

'For both John and Michael I made virtual instruments of them to allow smooth transitions



The Hong Kong skyline, as depicted in *Election 2*.

between performance edits – audio edits – and to also allow me to re-arrange on the fly a new performance of their music. Certain elements were extracted from their performances, edited and then imported into HALion. To make this work, I had to blend acoustic samples with real recordings of instrumentalists, and compose and arrange music around these real performances.'

It's a rare compliment for a composer to find their name mentioned in mainstream film reviews – but Robert Ellis-Geiger can add this accolade to his experience of working on *Election 2*. 'The technology allowed me to create music at a rapid pace that acted as a form of communication between composer and director and, in turn, changed the production process for Johnnie To,' he reflects. 'This movie represents a new approach for him in how he collaborated with the music composer – and maybe a first for a Hong Kong film. I was brought in during the editing stage

of the film and composed a variety of music styles within very short periods.'

Film composers, especially composers in Hollywood and Hong Kong often use computer sequencers for a number of reasons. In Hollywood, directors require full orchestral mock-ups before signing off on a composer's cue while, for Hong Kong composers, there is little time or money allocated to original music and the audio recording from the mock-up orchestra is the soundtrack.

'As far as audio recording is concerned, Hollywood's approach is to use Pro Tools as the default audio transfer/recording medium, meaning that most composers working in Hollywood have to export or real-time record (transfer) their completed music cues from their composition workstation to Pro Tools,' he offers. 'Later, if changes are required, a lot of time can be wasted working between platforms. It is interesting to note

that leading Hollywood film scoring engineers use Pro Tools for recording and editing; they do not mix within Pro Tools as they claim the sound is coloured.

'In Hong Kong, there is generally very little experimentation in terms of surround-sound production and design, largely due to the very short postproduction schedules and extremely tight budgets – for a full-length feature film, Foley, ADR, sound design and music composition might only be given one or two weeks. In contrast, there is a lot at stake with Hollywood budgets, investors and marketing, and it is well known that creativity often takes a back seat. There is very little opportunity for more integrated filmmaking with all agents of the team, rather than music and sound being engaged at the end during postproduction.'

So how do the films made by these two movie powerhouses stack up?

'For me the most innovative

soundtrack for a Hong Kong movie was designed by Kinson Tsang of MBS Studios for *Initial-D* directed by Andrew Lau and Alan Mak. For the car race scene, Kinson placed 10 microphones within the car and combined them with additional location microphones on the side of the road to pick up the Doppler effect of the car passing by. The movie sound track album was one of the most successful albums ever in terms of numbers sold. As far as other movies from the region, I would have to say anime director Mamoru Oshii's films, *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and *Avalon* (2001) represent fantastic attention to detail to sound design and surround-sound treatment.

'As for Hollywood, for me the most innovative surround-sound mixing treatment on the final dubbing theatre would have to be in *Spider Man 2* (2004). It might be a surprise, but there is very little innovative surround-sound treatment with Hollywood movies, besides things just flying around

the speakers. As an example, dialogue divergence away from the front centre speaker is mostly none existent within Hollywood productions, but it does exist within *Spider Man 2*. The purpose for this is to give a more realistic sense of an acoustic space to match the scene as well as movement within a given space.

'Overall I was very pleased with the end result of *Election 2*, even more so from the audience reaction at the opening of the Hong Kong international Film Festival. I would have liked more time to perfect certain elements, but I guess there is never enough time.

'It was a most fulfilling experience, and in many ways a dream come true. For better or for worse I am now part of Hong Kong film history, which is an honour in itself.'

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