



The Daily Film Music Blog **SPOTLIGHT:** **Revelations about Adam Balazs**

October 9th, 2009 – Interview by Gergely Hubai

I wish I had the chance to interview more compatriot composers here, but the fact is there are very few Hungarian film composers I could talk to. Adam Balazs is one of them—although he lives in Los Angeles—he recently completed his first score to a Hungarian movie: *Szíven szúrt ország* is a movie about the murder of a handball player whose tragic death brought forward many unresolved issues in the country. In addition to this new documentary, Adams new movie *The Butterfly Effect 3: Revelations* will have a soundtrack CD released pretty soon, which is a first for the composer (although several of his scores are available through download options.) We discussed these and a number of other projects in the following interview:



How did your interest in music begin?

I grew up in a fully musical environment—my father is a distinguished classical composer and before her retirement, my mother used to teach music and was the musical director of a school choir for many years.

At the ripe age of six, learning music was not my choice, but my parents'. And, when I came to the age of rebellious, self-realization—around the age of 13—I could freely walk away from this profession. So I did, only to realize two years later that I could not live without music. At that point, I made a decision to become a film composer and have focused on realizing my dream ever since. I started taking intensive English courses and started preparing myself mentally that I was to leave Hungary and to move to the United States where I wanted to live my dream.

With what kind of movies did you grow up with in Hungary?

Although I grew up under Communism, I still got to see great movies from the West and there is no shortage of classic cinema from the Eastern European and Asian part of the world either. I loved going to art house cinemas late night, mostly by myself, and enjoyed being transported to a distinctive world every great movie had to offer.

I grew up on movies made by Jirí Menzel, Miloš Forman, István Szabó, and I particularly enjoyed the works of Scorsese, Bertolucci, Jim Jarmush and Giuseppe Tornatore. I am still intrigued by the concept of independent filmmaking. Indie movies are the easiest and hardest to make. It is easy to call yourself a filmmaker and produce something with no money that is completely rubbish, but if you can strike a great movie with a limited budget and have a great vision and the right talent around you, there are fewer things more rewarding in filmmaking. I think if an indie is done right, it has a lot more to offer than a “safe” studio movie.

When did you first become aware of film scores and that it’s a viable career option for you?

I was determined to be a film composer from a relatively early age, around 16, and conducted my studies with that ultimate goal in mind. The challenge was to get hands-on experience in my native country, which is why I made a choice to move to the United States—starting in New York where I knew opportunities existed.

You studied at the Béla Bartók Conservatory in Budapest. Was there any chance to delve deeper into writing film music there?

The Conservatory was a great place to learn the fundamentals of composing, but as my beloved composition teacher Miklós Kocsár once said, *“It is a profession that cannot be taught. There are guidelines to follow but it is truly an individual path. One has to explore to learn from the mistakes and gain from the experience.”*

When I came to the United States, I had to learn a lot of new things. Film music is very technical. The Conservatory offered old-school education—we learned to write music on paper using a pen. When I moved to New York and got my first gig as a film composer, I realized that contemporary film music requires a thorough knowledge of computers, music software, synths, music editing and programming. These skills become vital if you are working on a tight budget. You have to start as a one-man-band and grow from there.

You moved to the U.S. in 1998. What are your memories of making this transition?

It was exciting times, and my life was full of challenges. New York had a lot to offer, and even though I have lived in Los Angeles for 4 years, I still think of New York City as my hometown.

The beginning is always tough; you cannot assume that everything will be handed to you. If you do, you are mistaken, and there is not much personal growth down the line. I learned it and have been appreciative of everything I have accomplished, without losing the sight of the journey my life has been and without canonizing my accomplishments. You cannot take success seriously,

because you then become the parody of yourself.

How did you further develop in your studies in the U.S.?

I learned by taking internships, ghostwriting, which is necessary for all newcomers and by helping other composers who were kind enough to share their knowledge with me. Self-improvement and constant practice were also an integral part of my life. My curiosity towards new things and modern technology has been the same since day one and I constantly challenge myself with every project.



What was your first film score and what were the challenges of the first time around?

Without mentioning the name of the project, I was immediately confronted with the harsh reality that film composing for a living is a business, and the actual act of scoring a movie is only a part of the larger picture. I was offered to write music a film on a deferred payment basis, and reached a verbal agreement regarding the terms. It was a wonderful film, smart, well produced, funny, heartfelt with an ending that made you cry. I was on cloud nine, and got to working right away. With the completion of the score, time was of the essence, as the director of the project had terminal cancer. I worked around the clock to finish without an agreement, and managed to put together a tape of the entire score. He listened to it on his deathbed. As I learned from one of the executive producers of the movie, he smiled when he died.

Then an agreement was sent to my lawyer, and it contradicted everything that was verbally negotiated. Then the legal back and forth began, which was really slow, and as much as I wanted to make it happen, the project got lost in legal translation, and my first ever film score got canned for eternity. The film was never finished and never got a new score.

Many beginning composers usually sacrifice a part of their fee to improve the recordings of their first few works. Have you ever had to make a compromise like that?

When you take your aesthetic standards and the project is on par with your highest expectations, then it is worth investing your money into it. I go with my gut, and in some cases it proves to be the right decision—and sometimes not. You have to be sure that the project you invest your time and money into will have the potential to be a great step in your career. There is no formula, really, as you can make the right decision, but as luck also plays an important part, you will never know. Most certainly, your directors will appreciate you went the extra mile, and you hope they will think of you for their next project.

You started a fruitful collaboration with director Seth Grossman who hired you for several of his movies. How did you meet him?

Seth and I go way back. He was in film school working on his thesis film at NYU. I was doing quite well doing network image, musical identity and off-channel promotion for HBO and Cinemax, but I wanted to do more movie work. When my friend, terrific actor Richard Wilkinson, had been cast as the principal lead in Seth's movie, *Shock Act*, he called me and told me it was a fantastic project, and was worth for me to look into. Seth and I met and clicked from minute one. Seth has an extraordinary sense of humor—I cannot wait for his first feature length comedy—and we became very close friends. After *Shock Act*, I scored both of his features, *The Elephant King* and, most recently, *The Butterfly Effect 3: Revelations*.

How does he communicate his ideas? Does he use temp tracks, demos, etc.?

We listen to lots of music together, and I have a good sense of what kind of music he likes. We also share the enthusiasm for a good number of favorite artists and classical composers. We take a good amount of time with conceptualizing the score, from a musical and a cinematic point of view. Seth is particular about his score, and he is not going to let you go until he hears in a track what he wants. His visuals and score are bound together down to the last mimic.

What are your memories of *Shock Act*, your first (credited on imdb) collaboration?

Shock Act was a blast, a truly memorable experience. We had a great time creating it, and that movie solidified my longest work relationship with a director. The film turned out to be amazing, and we went all the way with the score and recorded it with a live string orchestra. I had a minimal budget, so I wrote the score with that in mind. The sound was also very fragile, nothing

bombastic, and the chamber strings gave it a slightly claustrophobic feel, which worked quite well with the theme of the movie.



The film had an unexpectedly great run at the festival circuit. I remember going to the Tribeca Film Festival Awards Ceremony with Seth and his family. The mere fact that the film got selected for the festival was already amazing but we will never forget the moment when Kyra Sedgwick announced *Shock Act* as the winner in the Short Film Category, a category a student film could only be theoretically nominated for, as there was a separate Student Short Category. Seth was caught off-guard—and on-camera—as ITV broadcast the event live, but it turned out to be only the first of many awards the film collected, including a Golden Hugo.

Eventually, every composer has to provide an ethnic score - you had it coming with *The Elephant King*, which was shot in Thailand. How did you research native music and through what means do you provide local color?

I did extensive research on Thai music and Thai instruments. Apart from me listening to lots of traditional Thai music, we recorded the live musical accompaniment to a number of Thai Boxing matches in Chiang Mai and those recordings gave me tons of guidelines about the musical structure, phrasing and tempos. The score was truly a multi-cultural collaboration, with music being recorded in Thailand, New York, Los Angeles and Hungary. I loved the “kim,” a Thai instrument very close to the sound of the cimbalom. I recorded the kim in my studio in New York, but some of the thematic Western music I wrote for the movie was hard to interpret on the kim, especially for musicians who were trained on traditional Thai music. To compensate for this, I went to Hungary and recorded with a Hungarian cimbalom player, Kálmán Balogh. Kálmán is a terrific player, and he had a thorough understanding of what needed to be interpreted for the score. I also did the percussion with a combo, some Thai musicians in New York and in Thailand, and some Hungarian musicians playing Asian percussion. We recorded the strings in

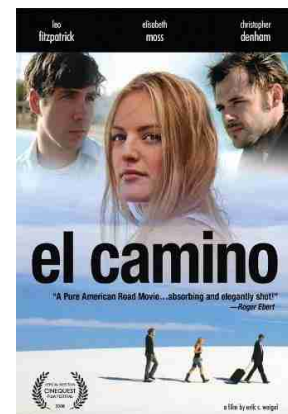


Budapest and the score got mixed by a young, but already very distinguished score mixer in New York, Lawrence Manchester.

Your score to *El Camino* features the cimbalom, a Hungarian instrument made popular in scores such as *The Ipcress File* or John Barry's *Asian Bond* scores. Why did you use it in this picture?

The instrument has a wide range, but I was most interested in the intimate, silky soft sound of it. I wanted to create a score that had an ethereal, drifting, fragile quality to it, which resonated really well with the muted emotions of the three protagonists this character piece was all about.

Eric Weigel’s movie is about loss and how individuals handle it. As the title of the film suggests, *El Camino*, “the path” in Spanish, is a physical and metaphorical journey, and the sound of the cimbalom played sparse gave an almost transcendental quality for the minimalist score I envisioned.



Kálmán Balogh is the soloist playing on this score. Do you deliberately seek out other Hungarian talents during your work to collaborate with?

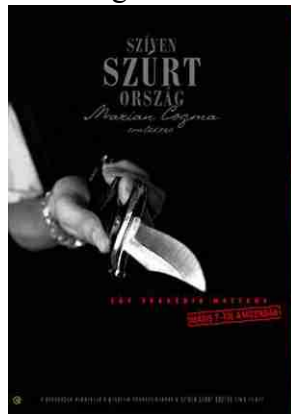
Yes, I started bringing work back to Hungary when I scored the *Gathering Storm* trailer for HBO in 2002. It was a big deal, a 05:30 giant trailer that required a full symphonic sound. I decided to record it at the Grand Hall of the Franz Liszt Music Academy. It marked my first collaboration with Hungarian musicians after I had left Hungary. The team I worked with was dedicated, professional, humble and fun to work with. They had a strong drive to show that they were able to give exceptional quality. I really liked this mentality, that everyone was free of egos, only concentrating to create the best possible product.



I went back to Hungary with three scores after the *Gathering Storm* trailer, and I do believe that the production quality and the technological background that Budapest offers, are on par with, if not exceeding, the most popular destinations for recording scores outside the United States.

Your first credit done in Hungary is the documentary *Szíven szúrt ország*. How did this project find you and why haven't you scored Hungarian movies earlier.

Gábor Kálmista is a good friend of mine, and the first producer from Hungary who has shown keen interest in collaborating with me on some of his projects. Stars aligned this time, and I knew this was a very important and personal



documentary for Gábor. The documentary was about Marian Cozma, the victim of a cold-blooded slaughter; he was Gábor's close and trusted friend. Gábor financed the film entirely out of his own pocket, and most of the talent attached worked on this film on the labor of love principle. I have always been open to working with Hungarian filmmakers and when the timing is right and the opportunity presents itself, I will be working on Hungarian movies.

In some ways, this tragedy made Hungary and Romania put away their differences for a short while. Could you tell us a bit about the ethnic elements in the music?

The story is of a Romanian player who died in the arms of another player who was of Transylvanian descent, while two other players, a Croatian and a Serbian, were stabbed in a Hungarian small town. This called for a very specific sound, bound to a specific part of the world, Central Eastern Europe.

I sampled a very old recording of one of my favorite Hungarian folk songs, “Ne Aludj El...”, and orchestrated around it. The song was introduced to me by my mother, therefore it holds a special place in my heart. Also, the story of a Romanian player who died in the hands of a player of Transylvanian origin while two other players, a Croatian and a Serbian got stabbed in a Hungarian small town called for a very specific sound bound to a specific part of the world, Central Eastern Europe.

I wrote a theme that incorporated folk elements specific to the ethnically mixed and culturally interwoven region of Central Eastern Europe. In my score, I used past and present in direct musical terms, with the sampled old recording and the theme I created. The warmth of the performance of the theme by Eszter Wierdl, a distinguished opera singer in Hungary, dramatically juxtaposed the stone cold reality and the emptiness of the present, while the sampled folk song mixed with progressive electronica added an infinite, timeless element to the story and the eternal phenomenon this film also plays homage to—the passing of a human being and the legacy left behind.

I see you're working on another Hungarian-connected film, *Andrássy út 60*, which is about the ÁVH, the organization that brought terror to 1950s Communist Hungary. What kind of score should we expect?

By reading the script, I had a very strong sense of what I wanted to do with this film musically. I have already written the main theme to the film, and envision a solo violin-driven score with lots of unusual modulations. There are many time layers in this story, and the score needs to reflect that.

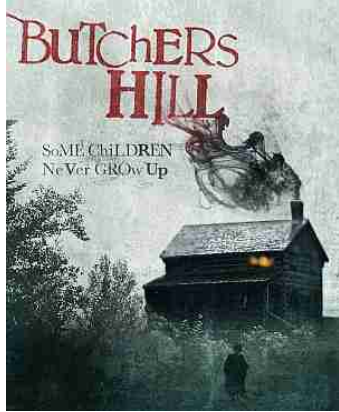
***The Butterfly Effect 3* reunited you with Seth Grossman. When coming in for a sequel, how important is it to familiarize yourself with the series past?**

I watched both prequels, and while Michael Suby's score to both of them is exceptional, the theme of the third installment, with an added horror edge, called for a somewhat different musical world. I also wanted to give my sound to this film, and instead of the orchestral approach Michael had taken, I composed a score with voices—little girls’ as a reference to the protagonist character, Jenna, static and industrial noises. I even had an analog noise machine artist featured, and strings mixed with electronica, a common element in my previous scores. However, we did keep the time travel signature element relatively close to the one everyone was familiar with from the first two installments of this franchise, to provide continuum and a sense of familiarity.



If you could have any of your scores released on CD, which would it be and why?

Five of my scores, including *The Butterfly Effect 3: Revelations*, *The Elephant King*, *El Camino*, *My Name is Alan...* and *A Country Stabbed in the Heart (Szíven szúrt ország)*, are available on all digital distribution channels



worldwide (iTunes, Amazon, Rhapsody, etc.). In addition, the *BE3* CD will be available soon in the United States. These scores are all dear to me, and I am proud to have them accessible to the public.

What are you currently working on, what's coming up in your schedule?

I will be scoring Rory Kindersley and Jason Noto's *Butchers Hill*, which I very much look forward to. The horror blog community seems to have tapped upon this disturbing horror film with a very unusual theme, and there is already considerable buzz about it.