Men Who Stare at Notes

Six of the year's busiest composers weigh in on the importance of deadlines, going back to the creative well and the lost art of the theme

Jeff Danna, left, Marvin Hamlisch, Christopher Young, John Debney, Marco Beltrami and Rolfe Kent

ROUNDTABLE

Film composers rarely get a chance to gather and talk shop, so when they do a lively discussion is virtually guaranteed. The Hollywood Reporter's Kevin Cassidy gathered six busy composers — Jeff Danna ("The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus," co-written with Mychael Danna); Marvin Hamlisch ("The Informant!"); Christopher Young ("Creation"); Rolfe Kent ("Up in the Air"); Marco Beltrami ("The Hurt Locker," co-written with Buck Sanders); and John Debney ("The Stoning of Soraya M.") — to discuss the art and craft of film composing.

You've all had an extremely busy 12 months. What was the biggest musical challenge you faced in the past year?

Jeff Danna: Probably "The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus," the Terry Gilliam film that I worked on with my brother. Terry's worlds are just so unconventional, to say the least. His stories span different worlds and time zones so the challenge is, "How do you write something that will hold the film together cohesively and hold the characters together and still make Terry happy?"

Is it difficult to make Terry happy?

Danna: It's not difficult, but he's very demanding in the nicest, friendliest possible way. (*Laughs.*) He's got very high standards and he wants everyone to meet them.

Christopher Young: I'm blessed to have worked on different sorts of movies over the course of the year. I've done five movies and they've all been entirely dissimilar, so it's a question of how you refocus. Is the well still stored with something that's substantial and usable for that particular movie? Do I have it in me to still view each project with the same kind of vim and vigor I have over the years? That's the biggest challenge to me.

How do you resolve that? Do you just push through it?

Young: Like everyone else here, it's the deadline. The deadline combined with the need not to fail.

So it's fear and pressure?

Young: The fear within — and it's amazing how this works: The well never does seem to go dry. Not sure why, but lo and behold, thank the Lord the notes still seem to be there.

Marvin Hamlisch: I had a piano teacher once who talked about talent and said that talent was like a well — the more you pumped, the more the water comes out. So, the more you have the chance to write something, it's going to be good because you're getting a chance to do it. If you sit around not doing it, after a while the well runs dry. But as long as you're pumping away ...

Rolfe Kent: It's always a challenge working on everything in pretty much the same way. Actually the challenge is getting past the period where I write rubbish and start to get into the period where it starts sounding original and honest. In a way the biggest challenge I had this year was trying to learn violin. Or relearn violin. I've got an interesting new violin that I'm experimenting with. I hadn't touched the damn thing for 20 years, so in a way that was my most engaging bit of focus.

Why did you feel compelled to relearn it? Was it for a film score?

Kent: It's an electric violin and I really wanted to be able to play it. It's in "Up in the Air." There's two ones written entirely on it. But it was just something I really wanted to do and it's an interesting thing to come to grips with. The creative process for me seems to just be turning up and trying to do it on a very regular, consistent basis. Somehow or another I eventually find my way through. But in terms or looking for a particular challenge, there was only one particular one for me — it seems like you keep on hammering your head against the wall and eventually the wall gives.

Is writing rubbish in the beginning an unavoidable part of the process?

Young: When I start a film, I've probably heard the temp score, so usually I try to disassociate myself from it for awhile. So for the first 10 days, I'll walk around with a cassette and hum into it. I pull together as many themes as I can think of and throw things against the wall. Then I come back about 10 days later, watch the film again and see which ones actually stick. So the first 10 days are usually the most important when I'm spitting everything out, as it were. A lot of it is garbage (laughs), but hopefully something somewhere in there is going to hold together.

Hamlisch: I like the story of Michelangelo when he was asked, "How do you make an elephant?" He supposedly said, "I get the marble and I take away everything that's not an elephant and I'm left with an elephant." To a degree, that's what we all do. It's not a question of rubbish, because when you start out you don't know if the road you're starting out on is the right road. On "The Informant!" I literally could not write a note for two weeks. But there's nothing wrong with that. You

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> – Rolfe Kent

haven't wasted a day if you don't write or if you write the wrong thing. You're doing what Michelangelo did: You're taking away that which you are not going to use.

Marco Beltrami: It's like cracking a puzzle. You can work on it for a long time like it's a Rubik's cube, but once you figure it out, the rest is like busy work.

How do you know when you've figured it out?

Beltrami: You know. First of all, every now and then you check in with directors and they'll give you a sense of whether they feel strongly one way or the other. But I think you know yourself when you've cracked the puzzle.

Kent: When people say to me, "It must be brilliant to hear what you've written played back by an orchestra," that's not the high point. The high point is when you've solved the puzzle, and often it's an accident.

John Debney: But don't you guys often feel like you're really fighting yourselves? It's a really strange thing. Half the time, when I reach that "a-ha" moment, I look back and think, "Why did that take so long?" It always seems so simple.

Hamlisch: It's a combination of getting an idea you love – thank you God – and real craft. Because, come hell or high water, on the day this thing is due, whether or not it's 90% brilliance or 20% brilliance, it has to be finished, so you better have your craft down so that, no matter what, you know how to get from beginning to end. The great times are when you have that moment where you go, "I've got it!"

So does that "a-ha" moment come when you've written the theme?

Young: It can be a theme, it can be a sonority.

Debney: It can be a combination of chords. For instance, knowing and admiring Danny (Elfman), what was interesting in the first "Spider-Man" movie was how he created a chord progression that is not necessarily a theme that we can hum, but it was a recognizable progression that was really well done.

One thing you hear composers talk about a lot these days is how directors don't really ask for themes as much as they do atmospheric music.

Young: Very true – that is, I'd say, the major change in film music. Once upon a time, themes were an absolute requirement. One or more major themes would tie a movie together. When I moved out here in the '80s, that was still the prevalent aesthetic. Slowly but surely, the concept of sound design has infiltrated what makes a score a total entity.

Beltrami: I'm optimistic about it though. A lot of the music we're doing does border on sound design, but once that's achieved you can't replace the impact of a good melody. It'll come back and it is coming back.

Debney: I've found a lot of times that, while there is not a request for a theme necessarily, invariably we all try to find that theme or that motif and it's embraced (by directors). More often than not, if you stay true to that and try to develop a theme that is unique, it's almost like an epiphany for a director. A lot of times it's not obvious but, like you said, Chris, this is what we all used to do.

Danna: There's a generation of filmmakers now that wants to move their craft forward and there's been a period where there's a feeling of "that's kind of old-fashioned." What happened was that themes and melody got thrown out with the idea of this "classic score" sound. Also, a drone is an easier thing to make work with a film. With a tune it takes longer.

Kent: It takes courage.

Hamlisch: It depends on the picture, but for me there is nothing more powerful musically in a picture than when a theme comes back. Now, the theme might have to come back 20 times for an audience to notice it. Someone once said to me, "Do you realize that the first 18 times you play this, the audience hasn't heard it?" But by the 19th time they've heard it! It's the same thing on Broadway: When a song comes back and it's the right reprise, it just gets you. No drone coming back gets you like that gets you. But it really depends on the film. The most important thing for all of us is: We're all there to support the film.