

"You must not be afraid of failure"

Film music composer Sebastian Elias was once a Folkwang student. He talks about artistic ambition, success, and what else is important in life

by Martin Spietter

March 29, 2019

It was supposed to be a short conversation about art. It turned into a long one about the measurability of success, dealing with one's own fear, and the meaning of failure. Karim Sebastian Elias, born in 1971 and a Folkwang graduate, is one of the most important film music composers in Germany today. He writes for Tatort and television series, for feature films and is currently presenting the film "Of Fathers And Sons", an Oscar-nominated documentary about the lives of Syrian children who are to be raised to be God's warriors. Elias composed the music for it. The other day he was in Düsseldorf for it, and on the way he stopped by in Werden, where he used to study. Those who visit old scenes of their lives always look back a little, too, to take stock. "At some point, between 30 and 40, I got weird, because the composition process is a very solitary one," says Elias, who now lives in Berlin. How he noticed that? "I was just hanging around the stu-dio." He confesses, "I'm definitely ambitious, and recognition is important in my profession." Elias has received a lot of it: German and Bavarian Film Prize for "Rhythm is it" (2004), a documentary about a dance project with children from hotspot schools in Berlin. Again and again critics' prizes, awards for renowned productions, and most recently the Oscar nomination for "Of Fathers and Sons". So: fame and glory - yes. But? "At some point I understood that my ambition wants something other than winning more and more awards. It's actually about being close with people for me. People who also want something, who burn for something."

It was only then that he understood why his very first assignment for a film company, which he landed right after graduating from college in the late nineties - why this job was worth its weight in gold. A daily series for Pro 7, it was called "Mallorca - Suche

nach dem Paradies" (Mallorca - Search for Paradise) and was produced on location, 200 episodes, an insane time pressure.

Putting heads together, over and over again

Continuous filming on Mallorca, and Elias thinking up tunes inspired by the sun and sea? "That's not exactly how it was," he recalls, "I was on the beach many times in that one year, the rest was work, nothing but work." The series was definitely not a success, and yet, "Most of what's still important in my job today, I learned back then." Namely: "To work closely with colleagues. Understanding how the director thinks and feels. Understanding what the producer wants." You can't do that by e-mail or chat or video conference, you have to put your heads together again and again. "That was the good thing about Mallorca: everything was improvised, the paths were correspondingly short, you literally hung on each other." This experience became formative for Elias, even if the series itself flopped pretty badly. For his demands, his self-image. Composing film music - how does that actually work? "It's not that you see a finished film and think: Strings have to go here and wind instruments here," Elias explains. Rather, "I like to have a script sent to me in advance, then I develop initial ideas." The decisive moment is when he sees the first, rough-cut version of the film: "Seeing the images for the first time - then a compositional idea comes and, through collaboration with the others, something emerges." And if the idea doesn't come? "That's never happened before."

Film music, Elias elaborates, doesn't just want to set images to music, but to tell the stories of the people it's about. The story behind the story, so to speak. And in general: "You should always reach for the stars. And take on things, that are perhaps a bit too big for you at first and don't settle for the same old thing. If you think beforehand: I can't do that anyway, then it's actually already wrong." And if you fail? "You can't be afraid of that. Then you get up and keep going. Because it's a gift to be criticized. That means you're taken seriously, someone has taken a closer look at you and your work."

The philosophy of film music

Don't be afraid of fear! Rely on your feeling! Weigh things! Take criticism seriously! He tries to pass on these virtues to students at the Babelsberg Film Academy. Elias

now holds a professorship there. Putting himself in front of students was his answer to the realization that he spends too much time alone in the studio and perhaps ends up chasing the wrong goals. "I happened to see the college's job ad, applied and was accepted." Teaching young people the craft and philosophy of film music has helped him to come back to himself: "You have a great responsibility - not only for your family and yourself, but also for those who listen to you."

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