

Interview with film music composer and music professor K.S. Elias: "Film music has always been a very formative part of filmmaking"

by Sassan Niasseri 02/18/2020

K.S. Elias, professor of "Composition and Arrangement for Media" in the master's program in film music at the Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf, in conversation with ROLLING STONE: about his interview series "Masterclass" and the importance of soundtracks today and then.

Karim Sebastian Elias, also known as K.S. Elias, is one of Germany's most decorated film composers. The 48-year-old wrote the music for more than 100 feature films, TV movies and documentaries, and for more than 400 series episodes. In 2019, the film "Of Fathers and Sons - the Children of the Caliphate" with the score composed by him was Oscar-nominated and awarded the "World Cinema Documentary Grand Jury Prize" at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival.

Elias' previous awards include the German Television Award for "Best Music" ("Treasure Island" and "Bella Block"), and his soundtrack for "Rhythm is it!" received the "Impact of Music Award" at the Nashville Film Festival, the German Critics Award, the Bavarian Film Award, the Echo Klassik and twice the German Film Award. In 2013, he was appointed professor of "Composition and Arrangement for Media" in the Master's program in Film Music at the Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf. Currently Elias is nominated for the German Music Authors Award of the GEMA in the category Composition Audiovisual Media.

Professor Elias, how did the idea for the Masterclass come about?

Through my work as a film composer on the one hand, and my teaching activities on the other, I have always been driven by the topic of how creativity arises, how ideas develop. That's why in 2017 we initiated the first Masterclass interviews in cooperation with the German Film Academy and the Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf, where I interviewed my film music colleagues who were nominated for the German Film Award in the category Best Music. With the "Masterclass - how it's done" we want to get to the bottom of the artistic processes of filmmaking and prepare this in such a way that it is equally interesting and also entertaining for filmmakers, students, pupils and people interested in film. So far, eight 30-40 minute masterclasses have been created, six on film music, and two on montage. The interviews on montage were conducted by my colleagues at the Film University, the professors of film editing, Gesa Marten and Gergana Voigt, and Peter Adam, who co-founded vierundzwanzig.de , the educational portal of the German Film Academy.

What were your goals?

Among other things, we wanted to get to the bottom of the following questions: How can you leave behind entrenched and outdated thought patterns, how can the departure to new shores, succeed? How does creativity develop? Where does real inspiration come from? How do you find the right trick, when does the extraordinary, the special, the unprecedented come into being? What constitutes true mastery and what inner and outer obstacles must be overcome in the process?"

Outstanding artists from Germany's film landscape give us an exclusive insight into the wealth of experience of their creative processes and the genesis of their ideas. They let us share their special thought processes: how a film comes into being, how the individual creative film works are brought together to form a whole, and how they cross-fertilize each other.

Using score excerpts mounted parallel to the image, the mechanisms of action of different compositional techniques are analyzed and shown. So on the one hand we talk about the path of the idea, but then we also show excerpts of its realization in concrete terms.

Were there any difficulties during implementation, if so, what were they?

The financing of the project is a challenge. In the beginning, the Film University and the Film Academy shared the costs, but for the past two years the GEMA Foundation and the Franz Grothe Foundation of GEMA have been supporting the realization, which I am particularly pleased about.

The realization is complex. The analysis and preparation of the film scores, the creation of the transcriptions, the particelles for the film scores where no score material is available. We shoot with up to three cameras, the editing is demanding due to the mounting of the appropriate film excerpts and the integration of the scores. Berthold Baule, who has been directing, cameraworking and editing all interviews since the beginning, has been instrumental in shaping the format with his signature. Dr. Veit Quack and our president Prof. Dr. Susanne Stürmer from the Film University supported the project from the university side, Anne Lepin and Katja Hevemeyer from the German Film Academy.

Katja Hevemeyer from the German Film Academy is taking care of the rights for the image clippings, which the producers are kindly making available to us. We receive the image clippings on the one hand because we are non-commercial, but on the other hand also because of the solidarity with the German Film Academy. It is very important to us that we are non-commercial, so that everyone has free access to "Masterclasses - how it's done". The biggest challenge is to achieve this with the elaborate implementation.

What is the aim of the "Masterclass", who is it aimed at?

The "Masterclass" has been launched with the aim of creating a comprehensive, unprecedented cinematic encyclopedia of current German film knowledge. It is intended to eventually encompass all trades: Production, Directing, Screenwriting, Acting, Cinematography, Editing, Sound Design, Music. Production design, costume design, make-up design, VFX - animation. In it, the creative wealth of knowledge of

the nominated exceptional artists will be made accessible to all interested parties - professionals as well as interested amateurs, cineastes, pupils and students.

The "Masterclass" is aimed at everyone who is fascinated by cinema in general and German film in particular. Everyone who is interested in following the arduous path of a film project from conception to realization in an exciting and instructive way.

The claim of the "Masterclass" is professional, but coupled with a generally understandable broad effect. The "Masterclass" sees itself as a promoter and amplifier of German film as a cultural asset; it wants to be a mirror for the successful work of the diverse cultural funding programs of the federal and state governments.

The "Masterclass" interviews are also intended to raise awareness of the outstanding quality of German film and make it more vivid for the wider public. It aims to enable viewers to better understand more complex artistic achievements that go into a film, and thus to learn to appreciate films more fully. But the Masterclass wants one thing above all: to whet the appetite for great cinema!

What did you yourself learn during the Masterclass talks? How surprising were these new insights?

Through the intensive preparation, the transcriptions, the analyses, I learn a lot, from these wonderful film music artists.

And just like me, anyone who watches the masterclass can learn a lot about the process of composing, of filmmaking, about communication and about creative processes in general.

The three current masterclasses on music could hardly be more different, and I feel that the knowledge gained is correspondingly diverse:

Martin Todscharow's experimental electroacoustic music for "Hauptmann," the ethnically-influenced score for "Tehran Tabu," or the film music for "Beuys" by Uli Reuter and Damian Scholl, which works with elements of "Minimal." The Beuys interview was also special for me because Uli Reuter is my colleague at the film university and Damian Scholl was our student.

The surprising thing is certainly that despite all the stylistic differences, you can always find analogies and regularities inherent in all three compositions.

What criteria did you use to request/select your interview partners?

The interviewees are all nominees for the German Film Award.

The nominations for the most important German film award, the "Lola", prove year after year what creative, high-quality films are made in our country in all cinematic trades. Through the film award nominations, the German Film Academy cures the film year and focuses on outstanding filmmakers and valuable films that are worth watching. In Germany, we have exciting, inspiring films and great filmmakers who, in the tension of their creative challenges, are confronted every day with precisely the issues already mentioned.

How do you assess the state of film music by German composers or composers working in Germany / for German productions?

My experience over the last 22 years of working in this wonderful profession has been very positive. As a film composer you are inspired by so much creativity of the other trades, the direction, the script, the actors, the production design, the camera work. I've always found the process to be an exciting, constructive joint search, a shared struggle to find the right tonality for the film. The paths are not always direct, often I had to learn to say goodbye to compositions I had grown fond of - but that's precisely when it becomes exciting and together you tread paths that you wouldn't have taken alone, and that you hadn't taken before. This is often exhausting, but also wonderful, and exactly the reason why I love my job so much. Because you can never stand still, you have to keep developing. Steven Spielberg once said that the sound level, i.e. music and sound together make up 50% of the effect of a film. Every filmmaker knows the power that music and film can have together. Accordingly, we usually treat it with respect in the post-production process.

How big is the circle of composers who can make a living from these film

commissions alone?

I don't know an exact number. The DEFKOM (German Film Composers Union) has 200 members. There are certainly more, but the number shows that the proportion of those who can live exclusively from film commissions is manageable. I am pleased that quite a high number of the graduates of our master's program in film music at the Babelsberg Film University can later also make a living from it and are successful, as documented by the numerous awards and nominations.

Has the situation for film composers in Germany improved or worsened financially?

It has not improved. Budgets have been stagnating for many years. This is certainly also due to the increasing cost-efficiency pressure that producers are facing. For years, the number of shooting days available for the various formats has been declining. However, the demand for quality is increasing due to the high competitive pressure, which has also been created by streaming services.

How has film music changed over the years or decades? Has the significance of film music itself even changed? Is the score, for example, more important today than it was back then?

Nowadays, film music is very diverse. There is no "one style", but a very diverse coexistence of the most different film music concepts. Film music has always been a very formative part of filmmaking, it was in the past, and it still is today. The design and the means have changed considerably in some cases - but the fundamental power of film music has not. The different formulation goes hand in hand with the immensely greater diversity of the resulting program for the various exploitation platforms, from cinema to TV to the various streaming services. I composed very different styles of music for very different programming last year. I find this stylistically broad requirement exciting, challenging and mutually stimulating.

My impression is that the demand for film music has shifted. Soundscapes and atmospheric music have become more important than symphonic orchestral music, for example.

Your impression is completely correct. 5-10 years ago I realized more orchestral productions than today. Even today I still compose for orchestra, this year I have another orchestral production of about 160 minutes coming up. But when it comes to orchestral compositions, the clear development of a cantabile main theme decreases. Orchestral compositions by John Williams, for example, are characterized by their clear and high-frequency use of themes, and the development of thematic material. Working with melody, with themes, has greatly diminished. Also, when orchestral compositions are heard in a film context, they are much less often composed thematically. But also in the overall view, it shifts more and more often in the direction of atmospheric soundscapes. Often electronically generated. Whereby I also like to create these soundscapes with recordings of real instruments. For the film music of "Of Fathers and Sons" I recorded a string quartet, oud, various guitars, piano and percussion instruments, but processed them so much that you can no longer recognize their original sound. This creates a more individual sound.

Is it cinema and television that are changing, and with it film music? Has it also happened that a score has changed the cinema or television landscape?

I think that the zeitgeist is reflected in the program. Music changes accordingly, since music is always a mirror of the times. I have been composing for cinema and television for 22 years, during which time my compositional style has changed a lot. There are always scores that shape the cinema & television landscape. "Stranger Things" with its 80s synth sound is one such case. This film score has contributed significantly to the revival of the "80s synth sound" in film music. Sometimes it is hidden, but often it is quite superficial. In any case, you can hear the synth sounds of the 80s in a lot of film music productions since then.

Which composers are your role models - domestic as well as international?

I love to listen to music of different genres. When I'm not making music myself, I often listen to some. And I always learn a lot from it, but I don't really have any role models, although I often love and admire the compositions of others. For example, the music of my colleagues I've had the privilege of interviewing has made a great impression on me, and I've learned a lot from them." Arvo Part, Gustav Mahler, Rachel Portman, Sakamoto, John Adams, Dvorak, Richard Strauss, Radiohead, Billy Joel, Sting, Peter Gabriel, Brian Eno, and the late Johann Johannson, who sadly passed away much too soon, I love to listen to.

What is your personal favorite soundtrack?

"Cinema Paradiso" by Ennio Morricone

The "Masterclass" on the website of the German Film Academy:

<https://www.vierundzwanzig.de/de/masterclass/uebersicht/>

The "Masterclass" on the website of the Film University:

<https://www.filmuniversitaet.de/film/masterclass/>

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