



Robert Townson

ADONIS ALETRAS 13TH OCTOBER 2017

<https://perspectiveforum.net/2017/10/13/robert-townson/>

1) ROBERT, AFTER PRODUCING OVER 1400 FILM MUSIC ALBUMS FOR VARESE SARABANDE, YOU HAVE ESSENTIALLY COLLABORATED WITH SOME PHENOMENAL COMPOSERS PAST AND PRESENT. CAN YOU PINPOINT SOME SHIFTS AND TRENDS IN FILM MUSIC? HOW ARE THINGS DIFFERENT YET SIMILAR NOWADAYS?

Oh my goodness, that is an absolutely epic question. The world of film music is constantly evolving on all fronts. In every nook of our industry. Let me just reign this one in to the biggest shift in what I do. On one hand I am still producing almost as many CDs as ever (40 to 50 a year) but there is definitely a huge difference in the way things sell. The idea of selling a million and a half copies of *Ghost*, half a million *Terminator 2*, or two or three hundred thousand copies of a few various titles every year is now a distant memory. The challenges of how you earn money from the albums produced have never been greater. The answer to how I have come to

terms with that reality and keep doing what I like to do is that I have been putting much more time into producing live events and developing a synergy between the growing demand that audiences have for hearing live film music in concert halls and arenas all over the world. I have been producing live concerts since the 90s, when I was travelling to Scotland two or three times a year with Jerry Goldsmith, Elmer Bernstein, Joel McNeely, John Debney, Cliff Eidelman and others. It was at that time that the RSNO asked if would also consider producing concerts with the orchestra when I was in town with these legends. So, that was the beginning. Over the years this has just continued to grow – developing film music festivals in various countries, there was a Bernard Herrmann tour with McNeely, and various individual concert events like the Abbey Road Studios 80th Anniversary concert. As things continued to evolve, I became particularly inspired to use the concerts as an opportunity to create all new film music repertoire for the shows. For me it is really thrilling to have composers reimagine their own scores for live performance and also to have composers I admire today do special new arrangements of iconic scores from the past. This also gives current composers the chance to really study the scores of the past masters and to learn from them. I really love this. It's much more exciting to me to do this than to simply take a film cue as is, and perform it live. That can work too, in certain cases, but the stage is definitely a different medium. Austin Wintory did a beautiful suite from Elmer Bernstein's *To Kill A Mockingbird* for flute and orchestra, for Sara Andon. Christopher Young brought the house down with his *Ghost Rider* suite for heavy metal band, choir and orchestra, featuring Dave Lombardo. I think this is an avenue of film music concerts that is really just beginning, creating an all-new repertoire catalog. Christopher Lennertz put together an amazing suite from Michael Kamen's *Brazil* for my *1985 At The Movies* concert. The cool thing with that one was that we actually went into the studio (Fox) with David Newman to record an album of the concert program before the concert itself, so that the new CD could actually be sold at the venues, in L.A. and internationally. It works the other way around also. After I did an all-Elmer Bernstein Big Band concert in Tenerife a few years ago, I was very anxious to get the band into the studio afterwards and record the program. That became the album "*Elmer Bernstein: The Wild Side*". I've also released DVDs and now Blu-rays of shows like "*Alien: The Biomechanical Symphony*" and "*Hollywood In Vienna: The Worlds of James Horner.*" The traction and momentum of all of this is really building up a good head of steam now. The concerts definitely clicked into a new gear for the Varèse Sarabande 35th Anniversary shows, and 2018 will be the Varèse 40th. We'll have to have some good fun with that!

2) RECENTLY YOU WERE PIVOTAL IN ORGANIZING THE TRIBUTE CONCERT TO THE LEGENDARY COMPOSER LALO SCHIFRIN. DID YOU FEEL LIKE A KID IN A CANDY STORE?! CAN YOU PLEASE ELABORATE ON THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF ORGANIZING SUCH AN IMPORTANT EVENT?

Absolutely! Putting the Lalo Schifrin show together was an insane amount of fun. It was an insane amount of work, also. The precursor to the whole thing was the big band show of Lalo's music that I produced in Tenerife last fall. That was a really great show and it was still fresh on my mind when I ran into John Acosta at one of the dinner events in town last December. While we were talking, John brought up a desire to present a local concert and even mentioned Lalo, but nothing had been done yet and Lalo had not been contacted. When I told John about what I had just done in Tenerife, it was as though the whole show just fell into his lap. Well, that was the beginning and when our collaboration on this began. The show itself, however, was overhauled significantly by the time we finally presented it on Saturday night. I kept having new ideas. John connected me with April Williams from Musicians At Play. We all got together for lunch, with Rick Baptist as well, to discuss the project and venue options. Once we had settled on the Alex Theatre, and then had the theatre on board by April, I just got down to work on the

show itself. I knew that time would fly by. That is always the case. Plus, I had my usual trips to Krakow and also Hollywood In Vienna, with Danny Elfman this year, (and Vienna was on the weekend immediately preceding October 7!) That was absolutely crazy, but everything worked out.

We assembled the team, starting with Chris Walden as Music Director. This was my first time working with Chis and it was such a joy. I am so grateful that this project connected us. He is so brilliant. Dan Savant came on board as musician contractor and also Danita and Jason Poss as librarians. Whenever I could, I was working on the show, literally 'round the clock so many nights. I started lining up the soloists, singers, and selecting the band members. Sara Andon was also helpful with this. There ended up being so many changes in personnel. It turned out that the October 7 weekend was a particularly busy weekend, both in Los Angeles and around the world! Musicians and singers who said yes, but then, for various reasons had to pull out. That is always such a challenge and causes lots of anxiety. I even received a call from one singer as I was going through security at LAX on my way to Vienna, to apologize that he was going to have to cancel. All through these months I would be making certain adjustments to the program ... finding new pieces and having new ideas. Also, adding certain guests prompted the addition of other pieces. I invited Brett Ratner to introduce one of the cool titles like *Bullitt* or *Mannix*. Brett really wanted to be part of it but wanted to introduce *Enter The Dragon*, which I didn't even have a big band chart for and wasn't on the program ... so we added that one. Then came all the video and graphics. I wrote the whole script of the concert and was also working on the Program Tribute Book. Everything was going on at once. The final few weeks were absolutely crazy. Luckily, I have been through this so many times, I never had any doubt that we would get everything done ... but that still means you have to do it! It doesn't get done by itself. I was also speaking regularly to Ray Costa regarding various promotions to help sell tickets. There were so many events going on in Los Angeles that same night. It kept so many of our musician friends from attending because almost everyone who wasn't playing for us, was working somewhere else! We still ended up with a great crowd for this.

We had a four-and-a-half-hour rehearsal on concert day. When the rehearsal was over, the Lalo birthday video that was going to precede his appearance on stage still wasn't done. But finally, while I was changing into my tux in my dressing room, I received the link from James Goodwin. It was a scene out of *Broadcast News*. I was downloading the file while I was pulling on my pants. Then I moved the file to a flash drive and literally ran it out to the video truck behind the theatre. Finally, with that done, I could join the pre-concert reception and greet the arriving composers and Lalo himself on the red carpet. I was ready for the show to start ... we just had to get everyone else into the theatre. What a night it was! So magical. Such a beautiful celebration of dear Lalo. SO much love for him. Fans, friends, family and colleagues. I think everyone will remember this night forever.

My next local concert will be December 1 at Royce Hall when we celebrate the 70th birthday of the legendary movie poster artist Drew Struzan.

3) IN A RECENT INTERVIEW YOU MENTIONED THAT ONE OF YOUR ALL TIME FAVORITE MOVIE SCORES IS ALEX NORTH'S 'SPARTACUS '. WHAT MAKES THAT SCORE SO ICONIC?

I could write a book on this. Actually, I did! From my earliest days of discovering film music, I realized that Alex North was a very special and unique composer. I think it was *The Agony and The Ecstasy* that was the first of Alex's scores that I discovered, but *Spartacus* was definitely another early one. The level of writing was just astounding to me. So much complexity but also

so emotionally deep, to a really profound level. I think that would be one of the key aspects I would point to as to what helps define Alex North. The greatest composers who write for film are always masters at capturing emotion, but Alex could really dig and get to aspects of a character's life and feelings that could truly not be conveyed in any other way. Whether it be Blanche Dubois, Willy Loman, Emiliano Zapata, Cleopatra, Michelangelo, Roslyn Tabor or Adrian Cronauer, Alex could really illuminate them in ways that nobody else could. John Williams has talked about this aspect of Alex's writing as well. In *Spartacus* he had the epic scale of the revolt itself, the feeling of the slaves, as they evolve from hopelessness and despair to aspirational. The end scene when *Spartacus* himself is facing his own death by crucifixion, but has a moment to stare down at Varinia as she holds up Spartacus' newborn son for him to see. Thanks to his father, this boy will grow up to be free and we hear that in the music. This is one of film music's most powerful cues. It's also striking to realize that of the over 3-hour film, a full 70 minutes of it are completely carried by the music. The score tells the story. No dialog, and minimal sound effects. 70 minutes! The score plays such a huge role in this film.

The life experience of any artist informs their work and that is so very true with Alex North. From his time studying in Russia, to his ballet and jazz days in New York, his brother's political views, which Alex shared ... it was a remarkable and complexed life that bred a remarkable and complexed man and composer. All of these influences are heard in *Spartacus*.

It's such a wonderful irony that perhaps the most forward thinking of film composers also wrote one of the most timeless love songs in history, in *Unchained Melody*. But really it makes perfect sense. In my documentary "*Conversations On Alex North's Spartacus: The Celebration Of A Masterpiece*" John Williams described Alex as a myth-like figure to him and his whole generation, including Jerry Goldsmith, who Alex was so supportive of.

When I was approaching my 1000th album release I knew that it had to be *Spartacus*. My goal was to celebrate this score in a way that no other score ever had. It turned into an international film music world salute to Alex North and his score for *Spartacus*. I asked so many composers to make new arrangements of the *Spartacus* Love Theme. Others I asked to be part of the feature-length documentary I was producing. Still others wrote their tributes to Alex as text. I loved the scale of it all ... to have a single project include Nathan Barr, Alan and Marilyn Bergman, Bruce Broughton, John Corigliano, John Debney, Alexandre Desplat, Pino Donaggio, Patrick Doyle, Randy Edelman, Dave Grusin, Mark Isham, John Mauceri, Joel McNeely, Ennio Morricone, Diego Navarro, David Newman, Lisbeth Scott, Lalo Schifrin, David Shire, Brian Tyler, John Williams and Christopher Young ... wow! When I called about Alex North, nobody said no. That really says something, I think.

4) WE LIVE IN A WORLD WHERE TEMP TRACKS PRETTY MUCH DICTATE THE SOUND AND FEEL OF MODERN FILM SCORES. DO YOU FEEL THAT TEMP TRACKS MIGHT NOT GIVE US THE NEXT HERRMANN OR GOLDSMITH?

Oh, this is nothing new. Composers have been putting up with temp tracks for the entire history of film music. When I was recording Franz Waxman's score for Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, I found the original cue that Waxman wrote for the introduction of Mrs. Danvers. In the film it's the temp track we hear, which is comprised of earlier music by Max Steiner and Franz Waxman himself! That's in 1940 and composer's cues were already being replaced by previous scores, when films had only been being scored for about five years at that time!

We need directors that realize the best way to get a great score is to put all of their thought into selecting the right composer ... and then trust them!! I have so often mentioned *A Streetcar Named Desire* as an example of this. The only thing that any temp track in that film would have

accomplished would have been to steer Alex North away from the landmark, groundbreaking score that he actually composed. Of course, this is also the score that actually had an instrumental cue censored for being “too carnal and suggestive” The most iconic scene in the film, when Stella is descending the staircase. This is the only time that had ever happened. It’s always something.

5) AFTER SO MANY ALBUM RELEASES, WHAT ALBUM ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF AND WHY?

Well, my usual answer to a question like this is *Spartacus*, but I have already said a lot about that one. Before I released *Spartacus*, I would often say Alex North’s *2001*, but that is Alex North again. So, here’s a completely fresh answer. Jerry Goldsmith’s *The Final Conflict*. This was my first album. I am so grateful to my younger self (I was 19) that I had the courage to put so much on the line and start my own soundtrack label (Masters Film Music) and then put together a distribution deal with Varèse Sarabande. It was this project that opened up the world of film music as a career for me and it has brought me so much joy over my lifetime. I have had a front row seat to so much film music history ... special times with composers I grew up revering ... traveling around the world, first for recording sessions (mostly regular trips to London and Glasgow) but now so many beautiful and exotic locations for the live concerts I present. And I suppose what it all comes down to is that I love to share music I feel passionately about with as many people as possible. I am also so grateful to Jerry Goldsmith for being so supportive of me when starting out. After *The Final Conflict* there was never a time when I wasn’t working on something new with Jerry. I miss him so much. Georges Delerue also. Georges was my first film music ambassador as it was *Agnes of God* that was my first recording session of all time, with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in 1985.

It also means so much to me to have been able to do so much work with almost every composer working today. And to have started working with so many of today’s giants when they were just starting out ... Hans Zimmer, Tom Newman, Patrick Doyle, John Powell, Michael Giacchino, Brian Tyler ... you know, pretty much everyone. I am so lucky to do what I do. I love it so much. That’s the passion that really drives me. It doesn’t feel like work. There are so many more albums I want to produce. So many more concerts. So many ideas. I still feel like I am just getting started.

