

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH  
FILM COMPOSER  
ANTHONY WILLIS  
March 11, 2020  
Host: Bryan Smith

Bryan Smith (00:00):  
Anthony Willis, welcome to the podcast.

Anthony Willis (00:02):  
Thank you Bryan, so much for having me.

Bryan Smith (00:04):  
And can you tell us what brings you to Sundance?

Anthony Willis (00:07):  
So, I'm here to support the film Promising Young Woman directed by Emerald Fennell. And I was lucky enough to compose the score for the movie.

Bryan Smith (00:15):  
How did you get involved with that project?

Anthony Willis (00:18):  
I've known Emerald, she's been in my life a long time, because we actually, funny enough, had high school together in England. She was a very impressive actress at the time, in all the school plays. So, I've been aware of Emerald as a force of nature for a long time. And she, right when she was finishing shooting the film, she was looking for a composer, which is obviously a really challenging decision, especially for a film that's as unique as this one. And really, I just wanted to give her some advice. But she, very sweetly, invited me to watch the film and write a demo, and sort of see if... Really I was just there to be a resource to help her have a perspective on how the music could be if I were doing it, or if somebody like me were doing it.

Anthony Willis (01:06):  
And I was so inspired by Carey Mulligan's performance, and the character and the journey of the character she plays, Cassie, in the movie. And I spoke to the music supervisor as well and we sort of tried to see if we could find a theme that would actually bind the movie together. 'Cause it does move through quite a few genres. And that was really cool that she sort of steered me to that. And I wrote one and Emerald loved it, and that was that.

Bryan Smith (01:31):  
So, that's an interesting coincidence that you grew up around the filmmaker. I mean, around the director.

Anthony Willis (01:38):

Yeah, it is. Well, I mean, England is so horribly cliquey and it's a small country. And I mean people over- There's a lot of overlap. But that's also a wonderful thing about, certainly the film community in general. Especially in England, but everybody out who then moved to LA gets to know each other, and everybody's there to support each other and help each other out. So yeah, I'm really lucky to be part of that. And part of that friendship group.

Bryan Smith (02:08):

Was there an art school that you went to in England or just a regular high school?

Anthony Willis (02:12):

I was, well I started music when I was very young. I was a chorister and, if you know, in England there's a longstanding tradition where, when you were sort of eight-years-old, you got sent off to boarding school to sing in these beautiful cathedrals, or in my case, St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle. And it was the most incredible training. I mean, I was just kind of immersed in some of the world's most beautiful choral music. For- Day in and day out. And that really rubbed off on me. And then when I went to my next school, which was Marlborough, I sort of wanted to start writing my own music.

Bryan Smith (02:46):

At what age were you when you wanted to do that?

Anthony Willis (02:49):

I was 13.

Bryan Smith (02:50):

Oh wow.

Anthony Willis (02:51):

And I wrote some music for the school plays, and it was an amazing school and I had- I was a music scholar and so I had access to these amazing facilities, and then I then went on to study music at the University of Bristol, which is a really cool city. I mean, it's very vibrant, and there's a huge music scene there. A lot of dubstep came out of there, but it's also, you can look, if you look past the buildings, you can see cows in the fields. It's a very sort of rural city as well. It's a beautiful place to study. And then right after that, I went to USC, to the film scoring program. Not, well actually that's not quite true. I took a year to desperately save up money, and I moved back in with my parents and taught piano and took any job I could to save up to go to USC. And that was really valuable because it got me in to LA and it got me into the heart of the... I wouldn't say the heart of the film music business, but certainly the access that program has to alumni.

Bryan Smith (03:48):

Oh yeah.

Anthony Willis (03:48):  
It's been really great, so...

Bryan Smith (03:50):  
That's sort of the heart of the industry right there.

Anthony Willis (03:53):  
Yes.

Bryan Smith (03:54):  
USC, and all the people. I've heard that it's one of the most difficult film schools to get into, in any of those programs.

Anthony Willis (04:02):  
Yeah, no, it's tough. And I mean yeah, the new film school that they opened a couple of years ago is the Lucas School is absolutely- Well, Spielberg/Lucas school I think it is, is incredibly grand. It looks like a sort of Spanish film set. And we were kind of in the basement, which is a fairly accurate model for what the life is like as a composer in the business.

Bryan Smith (04:25):  
So let's go back to age eight and the boarding school. That sounds like a pretty unique trajectory for a young child. I don't know hardly anybody who has been to boarding school at age eight, but it sounds like that's kind of a normal thing for people in your town or your area who have musical skills and might be musical prodigies.

Anthony Willis (04:47):  
I think it's becoming less normal. I mean, I think it's quite a thing to go leave your parents age eight, and certainly it was overwhelming, but it was also this incredible adventure. I mean, the school is situated in the foothills of Windsor Castle, and when you were senior enough as a chorister you'd have a key to go up and-

Bryan Smith (05:07):  
In a castle?

Anthony Willis (05:08):  
Yeah, yeah. Windsor castle, which is-

Bryan Smith (05:10):  
It's almost like Hogwarts.

Anthony Willis (05:12):  
It's definitely one of the most interesting castles in England. I mean, Henry the eighth is buried there, I'd walk over his grave every day.

Bryan Smith (05:20):

Oh my goodness.

Anthony Willis (05:22):

It was yeah, it was phenomenal. It was amazing adventure. I mean, we'd play hide and seek on the banks of the castle, which are these steep- We weren't supposed to, but we did. And it was a huge amount of history and it was really, really cool. Yeah. Very unique place to go to school for sure.

Bryan Smith (05:40):

Now, looking back, putting yourself in your your eight-year-old shoes, at the time did you know how special and unique that was to get a boarding school immersion experience like that at such a young age?

Anthony Willis (05:53):

I think I did. I mean, I think you pull up, you can take the train Windsor from London and takes about 20 minutes. And as you roll in you'd see this huge castle ahead of you, and in fact, the castle's very much situated... It sort of has it's butt sticking right into the town, and the towns that are wraps around it. And then, it then goes on to expand out into these beautiful park lands, where in fact were our playing fields were, where we played football and cricket. God, that sounds so pompous. But yeah, I mean, I think it was pretty obvious to me that it was a pretty special place.

Anthony Willis (06:25):

And you know, I mean it's funny, with everything that's going on right now at the Royal family and all of that press, but you know, we were singing quite regularly at those events for them. So it was, you had this sense of... There was this huge sense of ceremony to everything. I think, I mean, the big reaction I had having left was that my time was so intense, and the fear of waking up with a sore throat and not being able to sing, or it was quite, it certainly prepared me for the pressure of Hollywood, I think. But the reaction I sort of had after that was suddenly then going onto a school where I had a lot of time to myself. And that was when I was like, "Wow, I can really, I actually can have time to write some music."

Bryan Smith (07:05):

And that was University of Bristol, or was that earlier even?

Anthony Willis (07:07):

Yeah, at Marlborough. So, whereas I think you probably had about 20 minutes to yourself in the day, get up, practice instrument one, go and sing for an hour, go to lessons, go to sport, practice instrument two, go and prepare for the service. It was a very intense routine for an eight-year-old for sure.

Bryan Smith (07:27):

Yeah. And what was your goal in high school, college and then in film scoring school at USC in terms of the types of instruments that you wanted to at least become competent in, if not master, to be good at your craft?

Anthony Willis (07:43):

And I was lucky. My parents, I was a pretty reluctant pianist when I was younger, they started me very early. And really at Windsor I had the environment, there were pianos everywhere and practice rooms everywhere, and we were, we had it scheduled into our day. And that was really, where I really took off with my instruments. And I remember going to see -this is a really cheesy story- but I remember going to see Titanic. And I mean, a lot of these kids at this school were like, they had parents who are musicians or... Yeah, my parents are music lovers, but they're not professional musicians by any means. And these kids would be proficient like grade eight, in two instruments at age 11. And I was good, but I was certainly behind.

Anthony Willis (08:27):

But what I realized when I went to see Titanic, is I came back and I sat down on the piano and I played James Horner's theme. I think my parents were like, "Oh wow, that's kind of interesting." And even my peers at Windsor, they were really good readers, and of course their ears were brilliant too. But I think there was just something that I sort of discovered, and that's what really ignited the sort of, the anatomy of music. Understanding the anatomy of harmony, knowing how you can make it, how you can inject emotion into things.

Bryan Smith (08:57):

So, the film score for Titanic, it sounds like was pretty influential for you.

Anthony Willis (09:01):

Yeah, I mean, I don't know that stylistically it was something I would, I mean, of course with greatest respect to James Horner, he's one of the most wonderful composers we've ever had, and certainly, I mean his scores to Braveheart and A Beautiful Mind are some of my real favorites. But, I mean, I wouldn't necessarily say that the Titanic specifically influenced me, but it sort of was a moment that I realized that I could, it was a way into the anatomy of a good piece of music.

Bryan Smith (09:27):

So, tell us about the transition from film school at USC into the professional world, where you're actually working on real film projects, and are in the industry, and are sought after now.

Anthony Willis (09:40):

Yeah, I mean, it's definitely... I wish I could meet myself from 15 years ago and I'd probably give myself a slap and be like, "You don't realize how lucky you are." I mean, I never dreamed I'd get this far. I think that's how we all approach these things. Everybody knows how competitive the business is, and you just take each thing as it comes and try and do your best. You can't

determine so many of the opportunities, that you just hope that they come and you put your love into the music, and you do your best writing and then that speaks for you. But yeah, I mean, at USC we had a really fantastic seminar with Harry Gregson-Williams, who I'd been aware of for a long time, because he'd actually taught my sisters music in a children's opera in Holland Park in London. Which actually Michael Kamen was also involved in. So, I think my first set of awareness of film composers came from my sisters doing this children's opera.

Bryan Smith (10:33):

And then, when you were in film school, were the connections sort of fed to you through the alumni of the school, kind of reaching out to upcoming graduates and kind of pulling you into projects as perhaps in a mentor/mentee relationship? Or how did that transition into a professional career from USC to where you're at now?

Anthony Willis (10:57):

Yes, I mean there was a lot of contact with alumni and a lot of these sort of seminars or, sorry- So with Harry, he had us over to his studio and I -because I'd been aware of him- I was like, and I really loved to strike score and I really loved to score in general. I was thinking, "I've gotta nail this." If I can't- There's those moments in your life where you, it's a self-imposed challenge. Nobody's telling you if you don't do this, you won't get this. But it's something that's looking you squarely in the eyes and you're saying, "If I can't impress Harry, or do something good for Harry, then I clearly-." It's a barometer of where you should be pushing yourself and your own expectations for yourself. So, needless to say, I stayed up three days on something that I'd probably now consider quite easy, but I think he gave us a key from Schrack to EDA, and he gave us the couple of keys from a film called Twelve, which was I think a Joel Schumacher movie.

Anthony Willis (11:46):

And then he invited me to intern for him, and so I sort of got to know him and he was very supportive. He then in fact went back to England, and so I went to work at remote control. And, the other thing I'll add about USC, is there was an internship with John Powell. There was a sign in the first week and it was assigned literally the first week of our school. And I remember thinking, "Oh gosh, I wish I'd had a shot at that." I love him and his How to Train your Dragon score just come out. And I'm thinking, "Oh man, why did the program director not give us a test or give us a chance to- How did he make this decision?" And then I started to hear, of course, poor person in the internship's getting no contact with John and is sort of doing something fairly medial.

Anthony Willis (12:25):

And not that that's not an important aspect of getting into the business. But anyway, come full circle, I eventually, having worked remote, I got introduced to John and it's funny how life is. I mean, perhaps had I got that internship, I would never have been able to have John look at me as a potential composer. Whereas by the time I'd actually met him, I'd already written additional music on Despicable Me 2, which was an Illumination Entertainment movie, which he'd done, of

course, The Lorax. So he, I think it was a sort of rite of passage. So, when I met him, he viewed me as somebody who could help him in a musical way as opposed to somebody who'd cut sample. So, it's funny how life is like that. And it's so much about timing and then it's so much about when you get the opportunity, just not letting go and making sure you do everything you can to do the job as well as you can.

Bryan Smith (13:14):

So timing, luck, obviously luck is a component I think for everybody in this industry, but also being able to recognize the opportunity when it's in front of you and knowing how to capitalize on that opportunity.

Anthony Willis (13:28):

Yeah. And a lot of tenacity I think. I mean being the one who wants to stay there late to find the best way of doing that arrangement, finding the best harmony for this, finding the best counterpoint. I mean, just not letting go until you feel like you don't know how else to do it.

Bryan Smith (13:45):

So, how did you get involved with Despicable Me 2?

Anthony Willis (13:48):

So, after interning with Harry, he actually decided to go back to England to do a sabbatical and teach cricket. And I think, I mean he really loved that and he'd been working, he'd been kind of going full blast in Hollywood for the best part of 20 years. And he was about to do this and he said, "I'm so sorry, I was going to have you come on, but I'm winding down my whole operation." And in fact, he let go of the studio he had in Venice Beach. So, oh gosh, I've got another job. Somebody called me to go to remote. And I started doing arrangements and additional music for Heitor Pereira. He's a wonderful guitarist who came up also under Hans [Zimmer], and then subsequently compose his own movies. And so I was a part of that movie, it was really fun. Then after that, I sort of think I felt that I had more to give as a composer and an arranger, in sort of different styles. And so, when I met John, I certainly didn't hesitate.

Bryan Smith (14:48):

Yeah. Well, I mean, these are really popular, great films that are iconic and are going to be- They are going to live on for decades.

Anthony Willis (14:58):

Right.

Bryan Smith (14:59):

And how does it feel to be a part of those projects?

Anthony Willis (15:02):

It's, I mean, it's wonderful and it's really wonderful for younger composers, that there's a structure that really Hans started. I think traditionally support composers, or what's called additional music composers, were orchestrators in the old Hollywood model. And with the technology of having to do demos, and have everything mocked up, and everything within the computer. That role of orchestrator has transitioned into the additional music composers. And that's something that Hans very much started, and everyone he's worked and come up under him has sort of followed a similar model. And with deadlines and changing schedules, and all these things it's great to, I mean to really... 70 pieces of music in a film.

Anthony Willis (15:44):

I mean, to have the support of arrangers and other composers is a very necessary thing on these high budget movies. So, it's a wonderful- I mean, it's wonderful to get that experience. I think I'd really encourage young composers to do that. I mean, of course there's that narrative of, "Oh, you're getting screwed. Oh you're not getting full credit." And all these things. But honestly, I mean, if you compare it to most businesses, whether it's a little firm or a finance firm, every firm has that structure. I think the confusion in Hollywood is that, because the credit's 'music by' the assumption is that person is doing every single possible task related to delivering the score.

Anthony Willis (16:27):

Which this isn't practical, and also isn't reasonable for people at the top of their game who'd been working for 30 years. And so, I mean on a- From a creative point-of-view, you're getting the chance to work with a film that you'd never be on age 25, on your own. And so when you then get the breaks, your own breaks, you have the confidence to approach them, because you've lived through, you've been a fly on the wall with these huge directors. So, it's been an essential part of my training and it sort of prepares you for battle for what's to come.

Bryan Smith (17:02):

So, tell us what a film composer, or scorer, does for listeners who really don't know the full scope of responsibilities of what you do working on a film like Despicable Me or How to Train your Dragon, or more recently Promising Young Woman?

Anthony Willis (17:20):

Your job is a composer for, I think 99.9% of the film, and I'm only saying that just because there may be an exception, is to create an authority to the film. So, you're creating a sound that helps the audience to engage in the film, and the tone of the film that they're watching. And helps them believe in it, and help set up a logic to which that experience is going to unfold in front of them. And, of course, within that there's all sorts of things one does to play with that, or mislead the audience or... But essentially you're giving them permission to feel things, which without the score they'd be left feeling a bit dry, emotionally.

Bryan Smith (18:02):

Yeah. Well the the reason I asked that is that, I hear in movies, and I heard this with almost every film that I see, there's a mix of composition, orchestral or piano, sort of traditional film score sounds and then actual songs from...

Anthony Willis (18:21):

Right.

Bryan Smith (18:22):

Bands. So, how does that work in terms of- Do you have a producer or a director that's telling you, "Alright, this scene, don't worry about it because it's either going to be silent or we're going to have a song that we get the rights to." Or are you doing a score for the entire thing and then you're letting the director cut out certain sections and insert songs?

Anthony Willis (18:48):

Yeah, I mean, that's a great question. I think there's no greater authority -and go back to what I was just talking about, this idea of giving the film authority- there's no greater authority than a song, because it's something that, especially if it's a famous song, it's something that you hear and it floods the film with a mythology. As long as it's well-chosen, I mean, obviously if it's a jarring choice, which also actually can be effective in its own way. If it's a jarring choice against the narrative, then it might counter that. So, a piece of music that you already know has a very different effect dramatically than something, than a score. And obviously a score can be much more versatile. It can be song-ish in style and in intensity, but a score is much more versatile.

Anthony Willis (19:31):

It can be extremely subtle. I mean, of course they won't have lyrics, which is obviously useful for dialogue. Although, of course songs, you can need the vocals and things like that to do edits. But no, I mean, every project, normally it's been temped with the songs. I mean, a great director and editor will design the film in such a way that they've already planned, "Okay, we want- This is a song moment." And that's going to be really good for the film. It's going to, as I said, the song will have a different feeling than a score piece. And then, he's got the film and yeah. Absolutely, that stuff has been workshopped normally before you're involved through the edit.

Anthony Willis (20:12):

So, yeah. I mean it's- But you know, that's always something that, I think when you come onto the project you should challenge those things too, to yourself. It's yourself first before, like sticking your hand up and saying, "Oh, I think you should do this." But it's always a work in progress. That balance of how much score do you have, what does it really need to do? And obviously editors are amazing partners in that, especially with new interactors, who are sort of trying to figure out where they want music and where music's needed.

Bryan Smith (20:43):

So, it sounds like, when you get the film, you're actually seeing a fairly complete film that just does not have, it may have the music, the songs already picked by the director and placed in

certain scenes. But your job is to fill in the gaps tonally and to create that permission, as you said, for people to believe and feel certain things that the director really is looking for. Is that a fair statement?

Anthony Willis (21:14):

Yeah, I mean, as part of the edit they'll also temp in existing film music to, again, for their own workshopping of the scenes to see how things are responding. So, in most films you'll receive, sometimes you come on with a rough, very rough edit. Which I think is great, 'cause you can start to chip away. You don't have to score the whole thing at once, but you can start to find what the most important emotional anchors for the score are going to be. And then, when you get a fairly locked cut, it will have temp in it and sometimes the director will be ready attached to the temp score, and sometimes they won't. And it's a useful tool for sure. There's a huge debate about temps, whether they- 'Cause they can cause problems because, if a director's, they've really fallen in love with how a scene feels with a certain piece of music, it can be really hard to get them to fall in love again.

Bryan Smith (22:07):

Yeah. One observation I made during *Promising Young Woman*, and during other films that I've seen during the festival as well, is that the distinct comedic moments where there's a scene that is designed to be funny, there's almost no music or score of any kind. Is that your experience, that those scenes that are designed to get laughs, that they're kind of clean that way?

Anthony Willis (22:35):

Yeah, I think that's a good observation. I mean, in classic animation as a trick, which is that music's going, going, going, music stops, there's a joke. And that's a very clear way of sort of pulling the needle off the record to make space for that joke. And again, it's clearly articulating it. Whereas, I think if you have a score on going psychologically, you have something that could be very funny. And then, I mean, of course there's comedy music too. There's music that can be funny and there's music that can make things funnier, because it's ironic. So, something that's supposed to be funny, but it's been played with very dangerous music, like a parody. It's certainly like Seth Rogan's movies. What was was the movie that he made in in North Korea...?

Bryan Smith (23:21):

Hmmm, the Netflix film, right?

Anthony Willis (23:22):

Yeah and.... Huh? [Someone tells him the title]. Yeah, *The Interview*. So, a film like that you would do, you don't want to suddenly go, "Oh, let's do funny music, because it's trying to be funny." You actually counter it by making it really serious and Imperial for Kim Jong-un's character. So, in *Promising Young Woman*, yeah I think we stayed away from having too much. Some of those more sinister horror score because it would, I think it would get, creates a vapor that the audience are thinking, "Well, hang on. Is this supposed to be really scary or not?" So,

yeah. I mean that's true. And it's amazing how Emerald balances this incredible subject matter with so much humor, at some of the darkest moments.

Bryan Smith (24:08):

Well, one thing I noticed about Promising Young Woman, I saw it at the premiere, I think. Or, I saw it at the Ray a couple of days ago. I'm not sure if that was the premiere, but...

Anthony Willis (24:19):

Did you see it in the morning?

Bryan Smith (24:20):

It was... Yeah, it was in the morning.

Anthony Willis (24:22):

Yeah, the premiere was the night before.

Bryan Smith (24:23):

Oh, okay.

Anthony Willis (24:23):

On Saturday night, yeah.

Bryan Smith (24:23):

I guess I missed the premiere. But I noticed that there were, you talked about the different genres that it crossed over. And I was, first I'm thinking this is a comedy and then I'm thinking, holy shit, this is a really dark comedy. And then I'm thinking, okay, this is full on someone dealing with PTSD drama.

Anthony Willis (24:47):

Right.

Bryan Smith (24:47):

And then, at a certain point in the film, I'm thinking this is a thriller.

Anthony Willis (24:54):

Right.

Bryan Smith (24:54):

Yeah. So, what were the challenges- And I'm not, I'm trying not to give too much away about the film, because there's a lot that I think you just need to go in with no expectations on this movie.

Anthony Willis (25:05):

Yes. I agree, yeah. And I think Emerald will very much appreciate that, because it's very much an experience. It's a really cool linear experience that you want to see it unfold. You don't wanna know what's going to happen.

Bryan Smith (25:18):

Right, especially with someone attached to the film like Carey Mulligan. And she brings with her a lot of gravitas in terms of heavy drama, not a big comedic actor that I've seen in her filmography. But you come with expectations about who is in the film and then you see, "Oh, it's Bo Burnham is in there as well." So you think, "Okay, maybe there's a chance this could be a comedy." And those expectations were just blown out of the water about every 20 minutes in this movie.

Bryan Smith (25:51):

And it was a pretty wild ride.

Anthony Willis (25:53):

Yes, I think Emerald was very clever in a casting, and specifically choosing actors that did have those associations so that she was playing with us all. Starting with Adam Brody, he's one of the most likable actors and friendliest characters. He's Seth from the OC in our culture, and that's exactly what she's trying to do is show you, something you're used to seeing, and then to kind of show you the hidden camera. In those early kissing scenes where you're sort of going, "Okay, well you can see the perspective of the men that she's with, but you're actually, you're also seeing the camera from the side, and you're seeing what's really going on.

Anthony Willis (26:39):

And that, with the music, is a big part of it too, because I'm already wanting to play with the audience and lead them down certain roads. "Oh, am I in a horror movie?" Of course, and then the- So, the first cue, very first cue is a full on horror cue and then it cracks into It's Raining Men. And, oh sh-, I am giving things away, but... Everyone knows about Raining Men. And she has a hot dog and it's like, well you see sort of blood.

Bryan Smith (27:08):

The blood, yeah.

Anthony Willis (27:09):

And it's like did something happen or...? And then, of course, it's- So, that is very much something that she's playing with us all, pushing us in the horror moments, and then equally in very romantic moments. She's showing us there's this perspective which is, how the world expected to be where everything's okay.

Bryan Smith (27:30):

Right. So, how closely are you working with the director when you sit down with your, I assume you have a digital keyboard of some kind that has the ability to play standard piano pieces, but

also get into violin and all of the things that keyboards do these days. And correct me if I'm wrong, if I'm stating anything wrong.

Anthony Willis (27:54):

No, you're completely right, yeah.

Bryan Smith (27:55):

So you're sitting at a keyboard and you've got the unscored film in front of you and you're watching it and you're listening to the dialogue. How closely are you working with the director, if at all, for that first draft? You're sort of, I would guess that there's a stream of consciousness aspect to your approach to that.

Anthony Willis (28:16):

I think you definitely need, you need both things. You need that time with the door locked, nobody in there, and that you can try things out and you can- I think every composer in the world would dread to see that recorded, just because it's that moment of vulnerability where you want to try things out and you want to see, you want to be able to dare and not feel like somebody is watching you. And therefore will have to modify what you're doing to be some kind of finished product.

Bryan Smith (28:41):

Yeah.

Anthony Willis (28:42):

That said, especially on a film like this with Emerald, she really was incredibly supportive and helpful coming to the studio and getting into the anatomy of the music and saying, "Oh can we just have piano here?" And, "Oh can we, I really want string. I want a string thriller score." 'Cause it was, I mean there was a whole conversation we had early on about, because of all the pop songs in the score and because of, it has been mentioned the featuring of Toxic, which I did an arrangement of for near the end of the movie. There was this sort of question of well, should the score be a sort of version of mangled pop? And I think Emerald felt that she really wanted the score to live in its own headspace and tonally, and to support this set of old school thriller feel. So, it's really a classic thriller with a contemporary twist. I think overall the score, and obviously some very romantic moments and some very horrific moments.

Anthony Willis (29:34):

But no, she really was an integral part of being there and steering me in. I would- She'd say, "Oh... Get the strings up, play the thing, just play the theme for the strings, on the strings. Yeah. That's great. Let's go send that to the producers." And I'm going, "Oh hang on a second, Emerald. I've got to make this worthy so that, as an MP3." And everyone in there, every intern and their mother, has an opinion when these things go out. So, there's a difference between the kind of controlled environment in the studio and then actually going out to people, and you're not being able to speak for it. But no, she was a huge part of that, which isn't always the case. I

mean, obviously on a lot of films you'll write the score and it's expected that you're translating the emotions, and actually the technical maneuverings of the music is, that's your job as the head of the department to determine.

Anthony Willis (30:23):

But, I mean, Emerald is, she's sort of such an all rounder in life, and in her work. She's an author, she's an actor, she's just written the book for the Andrew Lloyd Webber's new Cinderella musical. So she's, I think it's impossible for her to not want to get under the hood. And I respect that, and it's really fun. I mean it's at, the end of the day, it's her film and you want her to understand what's going on in the score.

Bryan Smith (30:53):

When you were seeing the scenes for the first time, which toward the beginning there's some, I would call them love scenes just to make it easy. But it's more complicated than that for sure.

Anthony Willis (31:04):

Right.

Bryan Smith (31:05):

But the the awkwardness and the extreme discomfort that I think the audience feels, or at least I felt from not really knowing how dark this situation is, not knowing where it's going. What- How did you deal with that as a film score and how did you approach the music, or the film score to those particular scenes?

Anthony Willis (31:30):

I think that the very first one of those, I mean, we waited as long as we possibly could before the music comes in. Because if it were the kind of romantic scene that you were describing, the music probably would come in or something. Or you'd normally have a needle drop song that reassures you that this romance is consensual, and then it would cut to the next scene, or sex scene or something. Whereas in this case, it's all about reveling in that awkwardness and only when things become, only as Cassie as a character actually reveals her hand, does the score start to unfold in those scenes.

Bryan Smith (32:07):

Yeah. One of the things I think Emerald is great at is making the audience feel like, "Should I be laughing here? Like, Holy shit, I just laughed at that scene." And then you're sort of forensically going back and going, "Hmm, I shouldn't have laughed at that." Because it's just, you don't know. Like I said, you just don't know how dark and wrong it is until after you're in it and you're trying to navigate your way through the emotions, and that's what was so profound I think about the experience from an audience standpoint.

Anthony Willis (32:38):

Yeah. I mean, I think she's trying to show us all a mirror of us, of ourselves. I think we've all interacted or known or been the people in that film, on some level. And especially, I think, especially the characters that are sort of the innocent bystanders in big-

Bryan Smith (32:56):

Right.

Anthony Willis (32:57):

-Inverted commas. And I think that that's the message that she really hits home throughout the movie, and especially towards the end that... So yeah, I mean I think it certainly is, as a male, I felt very uncomfortable the first time I saw the movie. I mean in a fantastic way, because as I said it's shining this big mirror on everybody and growing us to question our perspective.

Bryan Smith (33:20):

Yeah, absolutely necessary, culturally necessary to do that. So, I see in your filmography that you have some video game work as well.

Anthony Willis (33:29):

Yes.

Bryan Smith (33:29):

Yeah. How did you get involved in video game scoring, if that's what you call it?

Anthony Willis (33:34):

I mean, I think video game music and television music in general, especially in the last 10 years, has really has become very close to film scores, in terms of the kind of production value and dramatic and emotional qualities that they're trying to achieve through their games and TV shows. And so developers of those games look for Hollywood composers to come on board. I scored Knack II, which was a PlayStation game. It was really fun, really fun adventure game, and they were looking for more of an animated Pixar score. And because I'd come from a lot of animated movies, they wanted that sort of touch on the score and that's how I got involved.

Bryan Smith (34:18):

And what do you prefer, in terms of film versus video games or other types of music performance? Which way are you leaning professionally these days?

Anthony Willis (34:29):

Honestly, I'm lucky to be, I count myself really lucky to do this for a living and tour. So I mean, I'm really interested in both. They both have their perks. I mean, the film obviously has a wonderful structure and narrative and shape to it that I find really intriguing. Where do you establish a theme? Where do you hit ideas home in the context of a film? Obviously a video game doesn't have that linear experience. It's much more expansive, which is fun too. You can't

quite control how the audience are going to experience the music and, 'cause they're determining it based on their environment a lot of the times. But it's also, I mean it's really fun.

Anthony Willis (35:08):

You're often- A big aspect of video game music is that you're trying to provide energy for the game. So, there's an opportunity to write modular tracks, which possibly they rely less on harmonic changes but more on instrumental and modular group-based changes. So, on that we did a lot of African percussion and interesting elements that you could put the same tonal shape on or not and it would still work. You know, obviously modulation and harmony is difficult to mest. If you suddenly want to put two ideas on top of each other, they won't work well. Whereas percussion is much more malleable.

Bryan Smith (35:51):

Are you working with a director in a video game context or what is the name of your boss in a video game?

Anthony Willis (35:58):

You can, it really depends on the game. I mean, often there's an audio team, a very strong audio team who, at PlayStation they'll be the ones that actually are implementing the music into the game, and how they want it to work. So they'll ask you to write a piece a certain way and yeah. They're often music producers, essentially, who you work with. So, in the case of Knack II that was that was who I worked with, predominantly. Then of course the director of the game is... The director of a video game is a lot more involved in some of the programming and coding aspects often, and in terms of actually how the game is going to work. So, the creative music aspects will often be handled by the audio directors. But it depends on the game, it depends on the company.

Bryan Smith (36:39):

What are some of the biggest challenges that you face from the standpoint of the business aspects of your job, in terms of getting paid, making sure you're treated fairly, making sure that you are considered for future projects with other studios, getting the appropriate credit. Are there challenges that jump out at you that are just really frustrating and difficult to navigate?

Anthony Willis (37:04):

I think, yeah, I think everyone in life has their frustrations, and also they're huge moments of like, "Wow, this is amazing. I can't believe I'm getting to do this." Hopefully, I hope we all feel that, 'cause that's... I think everyone deserves that. I... Any kind of freelance situation for anybody is complicated because you can't determine schedules. They'll come in and then they'll change and you have to adapt. Much like any service industry, you have to accommodate your client, or not. And that pressure to succeed is hard, it's not for the faint of heart for sure. And it's something you get better at as you do it more. And it's something you, as you become more successful, you do get paid better and you get bigger budgets and it's easier to deliver at a high

level. It's very hard to deliver at high level on lower budget productions, because you have to go above and beyond to really make every dollar go as far as it can.

Anthony Willis (38:03):

But, equally not every project needs a symphony orchestra. Not- There's creative ways of breathing life and emotion into things that don't cost a lot of money. And so, it's just finding that, what's that balance of what's gonna make the director really happy and what are they going to love? What's going to make that movie fantastic, without costing them half a million dollars to produce? I think that can be frustrating when you're trying to achieve something and you're limited in terms of budget. As you know, we're in a time of more and more content and probably for slightly lower budgets than has been in the past.

Bryan Smith (38:36):

So this, going to the symphony orchestra reference that you made, are those usually reserved for the Pixar Studios pictures, where you have the budget to bring in an entire orchestra and the other projects, maybe the Indies, you're kind of doing it yourself with your own instruments?

Anthony Willis (38:54):

Yeah, I mean definitely. I mean, Dreamworks Animation and Pixar are known for their fantastic scores, and Disney animation and those budgets are allocated early on, as they have been for many years. I suppose, it really depends what you need. I mean, there's lower budget orchestra options, so you can record in Eastern Europe and you can- There's lots of other ways of doing it ,and... But yes, I mean typically you find yourself very fortunate if you're on a drama and you're given a week with a big orchestra. I mean, in terms of budget.

Bryan Smith (39:25):

Right.

Anthony Willis (39:25):

And to be honest you probably don't need it. So, it's just about that, it's that sort of melting pot of what do you need and then what's practical? What do you need dramatically and emotionally, and then what's actually practical for the filmmakers?

Bryan Smith (39:39):

What feature projects are you excited about that we can look forward to seeing or hearing?

Anthony Willis (39:44):

I'm really excited about this beautiful Arabian animation that I'm a part of, which is, it's essentially a story of friendship between a boy and his dog, except it's set in Arabia, so it's a boy and his camel. It's still in development, but I've been- Because I mean animations, you'll often come on pretty early, start developing themes and they'll start carving out the space that they need for the music. So, I started on that this year and I'm really excited to see that, 'cause that's- I mean, going back to our conversation about luck and composers are sort of judged by

their projects, but you can't choose your projects and you can only, you have to write the score that's best for the movie. And to be able to write a score like this, which is a sort of Lawrence of Arabia meets How to Train Your Dragon is a real blessing. So, I'm really excited for that and I hope to really be able to show my best work on that.

Bryan Smith (40:40):

Oh, that does sound exciting. Yeah. Can you say what studio that's through, or is it hush hush?

Anthony Willis (40:45):

Uh... Not at the moment.

Bryan Smith (40:45):

Okay. All right. And where can people find you and follow you on the internet or social media?

Anthony Willis (40:52):

I have Instagram and Twitter and Facebook. I've a Facebook composer page and I'm also on Spotify. I was very lucky to have an album for the How to Train Your Dragon holiday special put out on Spotify, which is...

Bryan Smith (41:09):

Oh, nice.

Anthony Willis (41:09):

Yeah, it's got a lot of... I mean, John's school for all the How to Train Your Dragon movies, that I was lucky to be a part of the second tier. But they're so incredible that they've generated this huge fan base for the franchise of people who really love that music, as much as they love the movies in many ways. And so it was a real privilege to have an album out as well, and those fans sort of dived into that as well. And it's really cool to see a lot of people add that to the How to Train Your Dragon playlist. So, that's being consumed, and that's been a really nice way to get my name out there as well.

Bryan Smith (41:47):

Great. Well, I'll put links to all of those sources on the show notes.

Anthony Willis (41:50):

Oh, awesome.

Bryan Smith (41:50):

And thank you for your time.

Anthony Willis (41:53):

Thank you so much. Bryan.

