

The value of providing hands-on experience for gaining skills has been recognized for millennia. What follows are stories of experiential learning efforts directed by Berklee faculty members to give their students a taste of what awaits them in their chosen fields.

On the Podium at Abbey Road

Things get real for Valencia film scoring students

By Mark Small



Zuzana Michlerová

A weeklong trip to London to record music at Abbey Road Studios and meet with key figures in the London film industry was a pivotal experience that 33 master's degree candidates from the Valencia campus will never forget. Lucio Godoy, Berklee Valencia's program director for film, television, and video games, brought the students and a handful of faculty members into the spacious environs of Abbey Road's Studio One to work with a 51-piece orchestra composed of top-notch London freelance players. For the capstone project in their program, each composer/conductor had 18 minutes to capture the best rendition of the two- to four-minute cue they had written. It was a chance to work in the facility where legendary composers have recorded hundreds of scores including those for such blockbuster franchises as *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, and many more.

"These students are getting a chance to work under the best possible conditions in this studio with these musicians," said Vanessa Garde, an assistant professor at Valencia. Along with fellow assistant professor Alfons Conde, Garde watched the scores during each take, flagging wrong or questionable notes and offering suggestions for improving the dynamic balance between the instruments. For each student composer, their time on the podium was a chance to fully experience the pressure they will face as professional composers. Each worked to get the best take as the clock ticked and Abbey Road's crack engineering team, led by Simon Rhodes, worked magic with the sound.

According to Brian Cole, Valencia's dean of academic affairs, the students learned in the fall of 2014 that this year's culminating projects would be done at Abbey Road. Previous classes had done similar projects in Warner Bros. studios in Los Angeles (in 2013) and Air Studios in London (in 2014). Most of the students prepared for months to have the best possible cue ready. "They had the choice of finding a video through Vimeo or some other source, or creating a storyline and then underscoring it," Godoy said. In preparation, they were re-



quired to create a MIDI mockup for the faculty to hear in advance of the sessions—another process they will need to understand for future work with professional movie directors.

"Some of the scenes the students chose could have been scored very simply with a sustained note and one or two other instruments," Godoy said. "But most wanted to use the full orchestra since they had the chance." Godoy also noted that the participating students made up a diverse international group with eight women and 25 men representing 19 nationalities. Participants came from Asia, North and South America, the Middle East, and Europe. "I found it interesting this year when I'd assign them all the same cue, how different each would be," Godoy said. "They didn't realize it, but often they would bring something from their own culture into the cue."

Some composers took the opportunity with their pieces to demonstrate that they are capable of writing music with the grand orchestral sweep of their heroes (e.g. John Williams, James Horner, Hans Zimmer, Howard Shore). Others preferred to reveal their own identity.

Personal Style

For her cue, Zuzana Michlerová (of the Czech Republic) chose to underscore an oceanographic clip. Images of waves crashing against tall cliffs juxtaposed with undersea landscapes and footage of sea creatures swimming slowly in small groups or darting rapidly in large formations, offered much to stimulate Michlerová's vivid musical imagination. Conducting confidently and with much animation, her waist-length blond tresses flew as she guided the orchestra through her cue's dynamic peaks and valleys.

"My background is in classical composition," Michlerová says. "Before coming to Valencia, I studied composition and voice at the Prague Conservatory. For this piece I intentionally tried to create a hybrid of classical and film music, I wanted my classical side to come out. We could choose whatever

we wanted to score for this project, but usually you are not free to really express your personality when composing for movies. You have to do what the director wants. Having this freedom, I picked a video that I knew would allow me to compose something that sounds very classical. For my portfolio, I wrote a variety of pieces. We had to write for solo instruments, woodwind quartet, brass quartet, an ensemble of 14 instruments, and string orchestra. We also worked with MIDI and did sound design."

Michlerová plans to keep developing her composing skills on whatever projects she can get. "I'm not sure that I will go back to stay in the Czech Republic," she says. "I'll search out other possibilities, I'd like to try London. For many of my classmates, composing the music is not such a big deal. We need to meet the right people so that we will get the chance to compose. I want to connect with young filmmakers who are at the beginning of their careers too. Of course, you have to be earning money while building relationships, it will take time."

By enrolling at Berklee Valencia, Fernando Nicknisch (of Brazil) journeyed further down the path begun in his undergraduate program that blended music composition and music technology. Titled "Lux Aeterna," his cue was a soundtrack for a pastiche of seemingly unrelated computer generated images in a video created by Cristóbal Vila. "The video's theme is curious; I couldn't find a concept," Nicknisch says. "The maker is not a director. He works with digital animation and video graphics. He had a temp track, and I think he was inspired by that music in making the video." Nicknisch reversed the process using the quickly changing images of Vila's video to inspire his music.

Nicknisch handled the orchestra very skillfully, opening with a swirling piano arpeggio figure that led to sustained brass chords to siney cello lines supported by French horn ostinati. As the video images shift from shots of the galaxy to dew-laden spider webs to desert sandstone caves to swimming manta rays to the overleaf of a book, Nicknisch's ravishing themes stitched everything together while drawing on the many colors of the orchestra's instrumental choirs. The cue ended with a spiraling gesture of lightly bowed violins tremolos on ascending glissandos, a soft cymbal roll underneath.

"I hope the video maker will release this with my music after I send him my mix," Nicknisch says. "We have an agreement that I can—at least—post it on my website."

I complimented Nicknisch when he returned to the control room about his assured demeanor on the podium. He replied humbly, "I was confident about my piece, but not so much about my conducting. But I've learned how to deal with this kind of pressure. You cannot do more than you are capable of at the time. I did my best in this moment, in two months I will do better." Nicknisch will return to Brazil when his current visa expires, but may not launch his career there. "I hope to make connections with people in England or America and start working as a composer."

Storylines, Autobiographical Sketches

Among many composers whose cues were grounded in the contemporary orchestral film music tradition, were Felix Carcone and Felipe Téllez. Carcone grew up primarily in France but has found inspiration in his Italian and Mediterranean heritage as well as the film music of

Hollywood. "When I was eight," Carcone says, "I got Hans Zimmer's soundtrack to the *Lion King*. Later, I heard the music of James Horner." At 15, he started playing rock and jazz guitar, but was drawn to studying classical music and completed degree programs at a French conservatory and university before studying at Berklee Valencia.

Of his Abbey Road project Carcone says, "Getting a chance to record a piece here with a great orchestra was my dream. But I was very stressed feeling that I had to write something really great. My first piece was not what I felt I should record. So three days before the deadline I started writing a new piece called 'The Last Stand,' and worked on it day and night, finishing just before we all flew to London."

For his cue, Carcone envisioned a storyline about a champion runner doing the final course in a 100-meter race. He confided that it was somewhat autobiographical. He identified with his imaginary protagonist and the race represented his final music project. On the podium at Abbey Road, Carcone showed a dramatic flair in his conducting and was pleased with the take he got. "I have eight projects in my portfolio with some pieces for chamber orchestra, and others for woodwinds, brass, and more. It was important to show that I can do [a full-orchestra] project too."

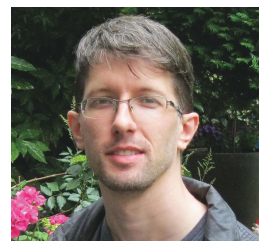
As for the future, he says, "I am hoping to make some London contacts from this trip. For now, the plan is to go back to Paris where my family lives and start showing people what I can do."

Felipe Téllez, of Colombia, wrote the cue titled "Nocturno," also to a storyline sans video. Its lush melodic theme begins in the woodwinds and strings followed by a poignant piano solo that leads to a dark, tension-filled section before the reprise of the theme.

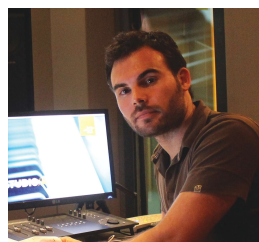
Téllez attended the University of the Andes in Bogotá with a double major in music production and composition before he came to Valencia. "I wanted to go into music, but I am also a very tech-oriented person. That's why this major was right for me." While his career preference would be writing for film, he's also intrigued with scoring for video games. "It's a niche you can't ignore, games are a huge business," he says. Following his graduation, he will remain in Valencia for another year to do a fellowship. "I'm working on a program to further integrate Berklee with the community of musicians in Valencia," Téllez says. "I'm working to form collaborations with teenage players from local conservatories and bring them into the Berklee studios to give them experience as session musicians recording for film."

Téllez is continuing with his own projects that include remote sessions with conductors and orchestral players from Budapest. "I have to start cranking out work," he says. "You can't get work if you are not working—even if the project will cost you rather than make you money. I love everything about this work: writing, orchestrating, making mockups. I also love mixing because I have a production background. So many people say there is no one avenue to a stable position in the film industry. But there are certain gateways, and if you try each of them, one will lead you to where you need to go."

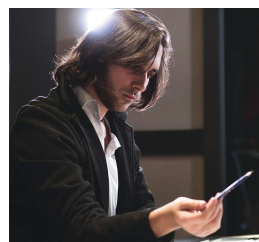
Téllez may return to his hometown of Cali, Colombia, after the fellowship. Many Colombian film productions are done by people from that city. "I'm in this for the long haul. It won't be a one-year endeavor."



Fernando Nicknisch



Felix Carcone



Felipe Téllez



Satish Raghunathan