Ennio Morricone

The composer Ennio Morricone has had a stellar career in films, both in Europe and the United States. One of his achievements is virtually to have invented the sound of the 'Spaghetti Western'. Anyone with even a passing interest in films can whistle the first few notes of his 'coyote' theme from The Good, the Bad and the Ugly *(Sergio Leone, 1966). He lives in Rome, in a spacious apartment near the Campidoglio, and that's where we had this conversation in December 2006.*

ANDREW FORD: I've just been watching the director's cut of *Cinema Paradiso* [Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988], a film that contains much of the history of early Italian cinema, and enjoying once again your music for the film. What drew you to this project?

ENNIO MORRICONE: I was charmed and fascinated by a scene at the end of the film, and this is what persuaded me to write the music. In this scene, there is a kind of history of cinema through clips of kisses from various films, assembled into a sequence which correspond to a logic, not forced by the director, but a natural logic which comes about from the events of the film. This also says something about the recent history of Italy, because the parish priest does not want the people to see the kisses. So they had been edited out of the films, but the projectionist has put them together in a sequence. This scene convinced me I should do the music for this movie.

AF: So is that normally the way you work on a film: you are inspired by a particular scene and that leads you into the sound of the music?

EM: No. Generally not. This was a specific film that hit me. I shouldn't have been able to accept it, and I had already rejected it – I had to do an American movie – but this final scene of kisses convinced me to do this film and to refuse the American film. But it's not a general approach. It's just what happened with this movie. And then when I saw everything that was in the movie – the events leading up to this particular episode – I understood it was a very beautiful film. It was coherent, the way the director pieced everything together, the whole narration: there was nothing left hanging. Afterwards, when I read the script that Franco Cristaldi sent me, that confirmed that the final scene was the important part for me. Then I understood that everything else was important, but that was later on.

AF: Is it possible to describe, either in relation to *Cinema Paradiso* or another film, how you get your initial musical ideas? And also what they are: whether they're thematic or instrumental or what?

EM: It depends a little upon the dialogue that one has with the film director. Later, I reflect on

the music, after having spoken with the director, having seen the film, or after having read the script or the summary or the story, and knowing the way the director works. And the idea comes for how to set the music in the film. This is in general. Then there are particular cases where, from seeing the film, the idea arrives quickly and sensationally – like lightning! It almost stuns you the way it comes. When it happens this way, the idea is generally very good, because it comes out of the story or the images. And one example of this is *Novecento – 1900* – by Bernardo Bertolucci [1976], that I composed practically in the dark! I wrote down my musical ideas in graphic symbols while I watched the film. Of course that was just the starting point. I had to develop the ideas later. But I didn't compose anything new, I only developed the ideas that arrived with this vision in the dark.

AF: In *Ripley's Game* [Liliana Cavani, 2002], music is part of the plot, because Maria, Ripley's girlfriend, plays the harpsichord and she practises and she gives a concert. Does that mean that you are forced to think differently about the music? And does the other music, in a sense, come out of these moments in the film where the music is centre stage?

EM: In all films where an instrument is played by an actor, and the music becomes an integral part of the story, that music also becomes important in the score of the film. The experience I've had over the years (and other composers have had the same experience) is that this music is internal to the film, not external – it's internal because you see the source, and this is not a casual source, like a radio, but it is a source that expresses something of the protagonist, and also the person who plays the music becomes fundamental to the film. In that case the music was fundamental. But we only hear the entire piece in the final scene, and this completes the musical idea that has been proposed in small doses throughout the film, continuing under the closing credits.

AF: Another film I've been watching recently is Almodóvar's *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* [1990]. In that film, it seems to me, the music had almost an active role, and sometimes an ironic role, too. For example, it conjures a sense of innocence at the beginning.

EM: It's certainly ironic, because the film itself was ironic. Ironic and also childlike in some way. This man is in love with this woman, and he ties her up and keeps her captive. But he doesn't want to kill her, or even rape her; he was in love with the girl and his actions were somewhere between the naïve and the paradoxical. That's why I wrote the music in that way – in collaboration with Almodóvar.

AF: When the suspense music comes, it can't be taken completely seriously because it has such strong echoes of Bernard Herrmann's music for Hitchcock. It tells us that this is not really a suspenseful moment.

EM: It's up to you. This story takes us to the limits of the paradoxical. If this is something that you notice, then what you say is correct. How much one discovers in the music will depend

upon the individual filmgoer. One notices certain details and misses others. The degree to which certain musical styles will come to light depends a bit on your sensitivity and cultural background, and also on your approach to the film. I didn't notice the Hitchcockian music! Music leaves one free to interpret it. This is both the misfortune and the good fortune of music. It's not explicit.

AF: But the film's dialogue gives your music precise meanings, doesn't it?

EM: Rightly so.

AF: Can you think of any moments when you have put music into a film to say something that is not being said on the screen?

EM: All the time. I am not going to tell what you can already see and what is already being said. I try to enter the psyche of the characters and to express what they have inside them. To sum it up: I make explicit with the music what is implicit in the film.

AF: So it's like opera.

EM: In some ways, yes. Except that the music in a film has long pauses while in opera it runs through the whole story.

AF: In *Days of Heaven* [Terrence Malick, 1978], there is a piece of music by Camille Saint-Saëns – the 'Aquarium' from *Carnival of the Animals* – and your own music comes out of that, almost like a series of variations. Was that your idea?

EM: I took into account the fact that the director wanted to use this piece, so I had to connect my own score to this music somehow.

AF: It must be different for every film, but what sorts of advice do you receive from directors? Someone like Malick knows that he wants a particularly piece of music in his film, but in general do you get strong advice in terms of the kind of music you should write? And do you take it?

EM: There's always a discussion. It depends on the conversation with the director. That piece by Saint-Saëns: Malick wanted it and he put it in. There was no reason for me not to do as he wanted. But it's not always like that. Normally the director doesn't ask for anything like that. We find the way together. Sometimes the composer proposes something that is so obvious the director accepts it; sometimes he doesn't accept it and so we don't get along.

I often tell this episode. In *Lolita* [1997], the director Adrian Lyne came to Rome to listen to the themes that I had written. He told me, 'They are beautiful, these themes. But they are not immortal.' I replied to him, 'For them to be immortal, you have to wait a few years. It takes a bit of time. You can't say today if something is immortal.' Naturally he had to laugh, because it

was such an obvious answer. But I wrote the theme again, it became immortal, and we put it in the film. Sometimes directors say things to try to improve what the composer has written, but normally with me that shouldn't be necessary. I write mostly for myself. Even before writing for the movies. I must be pleased with it first of all, and then the director, and then the audience and all the other people. There was another producer many years ago – he wasn't a real producer, he only produced that movie, and he wasn't very good – he put a clause in the contract with three conditions: the music in the film must be Mediterranean; it must be a great success; and it must be beautiful. I told him, 'No, I'm already out of the contract!' You can always object that it's not Mediterranean, nor beautiful nor … what was the other one? A success! How do I know if it's going to be successful? He was very naïve and of course we removed that clause. It was quite ridiculous. The composer must see the film and express himself freely. Naturally he must also have the imprimatur of the director otherwise there is no point in going into the recording studio and wasting money.

AF: Every film composer I've spoken to has complained about directors who use 'temp' tracks [temporary music placed against the film before the composer is brought in]. Some of them have refused to have anything to do with these directors. Have you come across temp tracks very much?

EM: Certainly. And then I always refuse the film. Because I would be feeling too much influenced by music, which may be appropriate – it's not that the choice [of temp track] was silly – but I didn't feel I could accept a film where I was led to imitate that music and it deprived me of the possibility of responding personally to the film. Sometimes something even worse happens. A director who knows that I would refuse a film [with one of these tracks] puts the temporary music in, but when he shows me the film he doesn't play it! This is even more serious, because all the opinions that he will give me about my music, when the time comes to record it, will go through the filter of the music that he has already put with it. I know this happens, and when I know it is happening or I can guess that it's happening, then I ask, 'Have you used temp music?' Then they let me hear it. If it's not very important, I accept the job nevertheless, but if it's too overwhelming I refuse it. But there is this serious danger that its influence remains, and yet I don't know about it. So my ideas are in competition with this music that the director has put there. This can lead to very serious mistakes at the recording stage, because there the director's point of view stems from what he has already edited. It's like a first love: you never forget it! The first application of the music on the film remains imprinted on the director's mind. Even if that music is very ugly, it remains with him like something fundamental that gives a certain impulse to his images. Even if it's worthless. It takes the composer's balls away – excuse the expression. Well, his brain anyway. What we lose is the process of reflection.

AF: Who are the film composers who you admire?

EM: There are films … I don't want to enter down this path. Because I don't want to name

names. As soon as you start naming certain names, you forget others. And also because there is an international tendency in film music for the credited composers not actually to write the music – they get other people to write it for them. They might produce a rough sketch, but the orchestration is left to others. This is one of the most important parts of the job, it can be more important even than the creative phase from the composer. It's a very serious thing. I never heard that Beethoven would have an orchestrator, or Musorgsky or Rimsky-Korsakov. Orchestration is part of the profession and the creativity of the composer. This habit in the movies started with songs in musicals where the orchestration and the arrangements are done by others, and now it extends to film scores. We can see it in the cinema in the final credits. At the start of a film we see the name of a composer, but in the closing credits we find that the orchestration, arrangements, et cetera are the work of others. This, to me, is a very serious handicap and stops me from being able to give real judgments. Certainly I hear beautiful things and things that are less beautiful. But if something is beautiful, who is responsible? The use of orchestrators in the cinema can only be for one of three possible reasons: either the composer cannot compose, or else he's lazy – he has the ability, but he's too busy and so he leaves it up to others – or he's accepted too much work … They should accept only the jobs they can do – that's if they can write in the first place. If they can't compose, well they shouldn't even be working. But some directors wouldn't know about that.

AF: Your own music is sometimes quite intricate. In particular I'm thinking of the way you tend to superimpose ideas on top of each other, moving at different rates but fitting together. I guess *The Mission* [Roland Joffé, 1986] is one of the most blatant examples of that. You can only achieve this level of complexity by writing it down.

EM: This is normal. Sometimes the elaboration is explicit, as in *The Mission*, where there are three fundamental elements in the film that, at the end, all flow together. It gives the sense of this community between the priests and the Indians, between the history of the music that had arrived with the priests, the music of the Renaissance, and of that moment in history in the 1700s – a flowering of instrumental music that came after the Council of Trent. This coming together is something that most people don't pick up, but as the composer I wanted to have these three elements that can be used in different combinations: one and three, one and two, two and three, and then one, two and three together. In this film it is rather explicit. In other cases, there are some aspects of the score that are private to the composer, and so these combinations of counterpoint don't come to light, but they are there. All this must be written down by the composer. You can't have someone else writing it. I insist on this, because I consider it one of the most unethical practices of these people.

AF: We should talk about Sergio Leone and your invention of the sound of his Westerns. Is it possible to say where that came from?

EM: It comes from the impression made by the film, from one's own studies and experiences. The composer's contribution is the sum of his experiences. When, in *The Good, the Bad and*

the Ugly, there is the theme with the voice of the coyote, it means that the composer wants to add to the sound of the music, the sound of reality – of a possible reality. This retrieving of real sound was already there in *A Fistful of Dollars* [1964], and I also drew from real sounds in other films. But in this third Leone film it was more explicit than the others because those sounds of birds, animals – there was more than one, not only the coyote, there was also this bird – all these things are part of the written score. How did it come to my mind? Well these things are a bit strong, but they were suitable for Leone because his films are always so over the top. The stories that are being conveyed, and even more the protagonists, are always extremely quixotic and picaresque, and so in those films I could use unusual themes to convey the story to the audience. But you can't do this in every movie! You must usually be more measured. In Leone's films I was able to use these sounds, but in others you can't.

AF: I suppose there was a moment when you were working with Sergio Leone that people might have thought there was a certain type of Ennio Morricone film score, but since then you seem to have gone out of your way to prove exactly the opposite. I wonder whether you take a certain pride in your versatility as a film composer.

EM: In the other Westerns I worked on I didn't imitate the sounds I invented for Leone. Because of certain things that I had done in *A Fistful of Dollars*, Sergio Leone always wanted the same, because they had been successful before and so he wanted me to repeat them. And so we went on like that, with many variations, in *For a Few Dollars More* [1965] and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. But in *Once Upon a Time in the West* [1968] it was completely different. Everything changed, and also in our heads everything had changed. Leone, too, finally changed his mind and he understood that we had to move on, that we couldn't just stay the same. Because he used to say, 'No, no, you have to do it again! I want you to do the trumpets! In the duel you must have the trumpets! It went well before, so you have to continue like that!' Naturally, I discussed this with him, and I told him that he was wrong. He insisted, and then at some stage, even with many variations – because you have to be careful to have variations, and you must be able to perceive that they are variations – the approach was always similar. So if you compare the first and the third films, if you think of the musical symbols in the *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* – the voices with the coyote theme for the 'Ugly', the sound of the *arghilofono* – a large, clay ocarina – for the 'Bad', and then the recorder for the 'Good' – these symbols, which are under the opening titles, are something completely different from the sound of that whistle in the first film, which Leone had wanted for the third time!

AF: I understand that you don't want to single out particular composers …

EM: I don't remember particular cases …

AF: Are there any moments in film where you regard the absence of music as a masterstroke?

EM: I remember a particular film where there is no music except for some trumpet sounds. *The Hill* [Sidney Lumet, 1965], starring Sean Connery, was a certain sort of film. It didn't need music, and it wasn't done. It all works very well. Music is not absolutely necessary. Sometimes music becomes a bad habit. Sometimes it has happened that I've been asked to compose the music that the director wanted, and I've told him if you do this film without, it will be much better. But he wanted the music and the result was just a big noise, so overwhelming that nothing emerged from it, because the music was covered by all the other essential elements, the noises in the film. And I told the director, 'You know, leave it. Leave the music out.' But he said, 'No, you must do it.' It was a film by Sergio Corbucci, he was the director. 'Let's not do the music,' I told him. 'No, no, you must do it, you must do it …' And then you couldn't hear anything! The music must be on its own. With Leone, the music seems to work better than with others, because the music is on its own. He had good intuition for when the music had to have a clear meaning, and when it has that meaning you must take away all the other elements of sound in the film – or else reduce their volume a lot and take some out completely. Because the brain – the hearing – isn't able to discern more than two elements of a different nature. We can't follow three conversations. We don't know what's happening. It's a matter of perception. The mixing process is where the director makes the decision to reduce the levels of some sound, or cut them, and to elevate sounds while excluding others. The final mixing produces the final musical result. In the mixing, the music also belongs to the director.

AF: Do you think sound effects in today's movies tend to be too loud?

EM: Sometimes directors want that. But it's not a trend, it depends on the individual case. But even with Leone, he multiplied the volume of the whip sounds and the punches; when someone was punched in the face it sounded like slamming the door. It was only a punch in the face, but he made the sound enormous. I remember in *Giù la testa – A Fistful of Dynamite* [1971] – he had the train crash done many times, but he said, 'It's not enough, it's not enough.' So then he put all these collisions together and finally made one big collision out of them. He multiplied the crashes! The audience sees only one crash and hears only one, but he had superimposed all the crashes to give it more strength. He was very sensitive to sound, but also good about isolating it from the music. And that's fundamental.