Lalo Schifrin

It is not only actors who can be typecast; so can composers. Hollywood quickly came to believe that the Argentinian-born Lalo Schifrin was the man to turn to if you needed music for a fast-paced suspense movie. He scored all the 'Dirty Harry' films, for example, and was responsible for many TV themes, most famously Mission: Impossible *(1966–1973). But Schifrin is a far more versatile composer than this might suggest. His classical training and vast experience as a jazz player and composer took him to Sydney in 2006, where he worked with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra on one of his 'Jazz Meets the Symphony' programs. This interview was recorded during a rehearsal break.*

ANDREW FORD: It seems to me that everything you touch has some jazz in it. Your film music, your TV themes: there is a jazz sensibility behind all of your music. Is that a fair comment?

LALO SCHIFRIN: It is a little bit stereotyped, because when you embark on a movie, or a television show, it depends on how the public accepts it. So the coincidence is that some of my most successful movies like, from the beginning, *The Cincinnati Kid* [Norman Jewison, 1965] with Ray Charles singing my title song, and *Bullitt* [Peter Yates, 1968] and *Dirty Harry* [Don Siegel, 1971] and even *Mission: Impossible*, have a theme which is syncopated and could be in the periphery of jazz. They became popular, but I've done movies like *The Four Musketeers* [Richard Lester, 1974] where I was inspired by Renaissance music, and I did dramatic movies like *Voyage of the Damned* [Stuart Rosenberg, 1976], which has nothing to do with jazz. I've done a hundred movies, and you can't say the hundred movies I've done were touched by jazz. I've done many television shows, movies of the week, mini series: very few of them were jazz-oriented. But the themes became jazz-oriented; that's why I got typecast.

AF: You trained as a classical pianist first of all; did the interest in jazz come later? Did it come when you were in Paris, perhaps?

LS: No, no, it came in between. During primary school I was only into classical music; my father was a concert master with the Buenos Aires Philharmonic and my first piano teacher was his friend, with whom he played chamber music, Enrique Barenboim, Daniel's father. So I didn't have any idea about jazz at the time, it was completely esoteric, actually I didn't even know that jazz existed. When I went to secondary school, some friends started to bring records of jazz artists from the United States, and I became converted. It was almost like a religious conversion.

AF: Who were you listening to?

LS: I was listening to all jazz, like Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, Bix Beiderbecke, and I liked

them all. Then some other friends came with Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, George Shearing. So I embraced modern jazz; I realised that it was musically more demanding and more challenging, and it helped a lot my studies of harmony, because I realised that modern jazz had some similarities with the developments at that time in contemporary music in the classical field. If you could say there is an equivalent in jazz of Bartók, I would say Monk. The equivalent of Stravinsky? I would say Dizzy Gillespie. He wrote a piece called 'Things to Come' which is short – it's not as long as *The Rite of Spring*, but it had many things in common with it.

AF: So you saw all of this as different aspects of musical modernity, then?

LS: Let's say that this curiosity was open to these new explorations or discoveries they were making, and it helped my studies of harmony, as I said, because by learning from records what all these jazz artists were doing, I would go to a class of harmony and it was almost naïve what they were teaching. I couldn't understand why for instance parallel fifths were forbidden, where in jazz they use it and they are beautiful. But Ravel also used it, and Debussy. Anyway it was a very important period of my life, because I wakened to the developments that made me what I am now.

AF: You said that jazz taught you a lot about harmony, but what about rhythm? Because so much jazz is before or after the beat, rhythmically speaking, and if you play, I don't know, a composer like Webern even, there's quite a bit of the same thing going on there, where bar lines are no longer providing a strong sense of pulse. Did you find that connection as well?

LS: Oh absolutely, absolutely. I got a scholarship to the Paris Conservatoire and one of my professors was Olivier Messiaen. I already was aware of him because the professor of composition I had in Argentina, Juan Carlos Paz, had studied with Schoenberg before the Second World War in Vienna and he is the one who brought to Argentina the whole message of twentieth-century music. With him I had studied music of Messiaen, Boulez, Luigi Nono, Berio. He was in the real avant garde. And of course Schoenberg and Webern and Berg: the second Viennese school. He composed himself in that style. All of a sudden I'm studying with Messiaen. He was very nice to me, and I was avid to learn from him. He opened new windows, new horizons to my perception of music. In those days I was earning my living by playing jazz at night. Actually I became a professional jazz musician in Paris; although I was playing in Argentina, it was amateur, and the difference between amateur and professional is amateur doesn't get paid. So I played jazz at night, and when Messiaen found out, he got mad at me. For the very reason of your question, but from a different angle. He saw the walking bass in jazz as an *ostinato*. He called it '*pedale rhythmique'* – rhythmic pedal – which is repetitious. He said, 'How can you do that?' And I said, 'Well, there is another problem …' This was, like you say, going above the bar lines, borrowing from one bar and giving back maybe three or four bars later. He would have one of my jazz records, so he would say, 'Play it for me.' And so in a bar of 4/4, he was beating *one*-two, *three*-four, *one*-two, *three*-four. And

in jazz it's one-*two*, three-*four*, one-*two*, three-*four* – the weak beats in classical music become strong in jazz. And that applies to 6/8, to any kind of metre. So, he didn't get it, he couldn't appreciate jazz, period. He stopped talking to me, but he was sending messages that I was doing very good exercises, and I did very well in his class. And the sad epilogue to this story is that after he died, I went to give a kind of talk to the Paris equivalent of the Academy of Motion Pictures in Hollywood. I had just finished a movie called *Tango* [1998], with Carlos Saura. There's no jazz there! I gave a lecture and then there was a dinner, and a classmate of mine in the Paris Conservatoire, who also studied with Messiaen and became also a film composer, was there, and he said, 'Oh, it's so nice seeing you and I enjoyed your lecture so much, and above all, I want to tell you that Maître Messiaen spoke so well of you, and he was so proud of your career.' I said, 'Why didn't he tell me that when he was alive?'

AF: A compliment from the grave.

LS: Yes, exactly.

AF: What would you say is the primary function of music in film? What does it bring?

LS: I was very lucky that my father took me from an early age to see opera. There are two opera houses in the southern hemisphere that are magnificent. There's the Sydney Opera House and the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires. At that time there was not an orchestra for opera and an orchestra for the symphony. As a member of the Buenos Aires Philharmonic, my father had to play everything; he was a municipal employee, paid by the city of Buenos Aires. They played in the pit when it was the opera, and they played on the stage when it was a symphony concert. So he took me to see a lot of operas and I got the feeling of drama and comedy and tragedy from seeing operas. So I never had to study how to write film music. As a matter of fact I have a theory that films are the operas of the twenty-first century. If Verdi were alive today, he would be one of the most successful film composers. You listen to *Otello*, and what's going on in the pit is really background music for a film. He's underlined all the emotions and everything that's going on: it's really fantastic. The same thing you can say about Bizet. The same thing you can say about Puccini. And most of the more modern operas like *Pelléas et Mélisande* of Debussy, and a comic opera like *L'Heure espagnol* of Ravel, and then the [dramatic opera that] influenced me a lot, even before I became a film composer, *Wozzeck* by Alban Berg. So that's where I got my influence and then I applied it. It was not difficult to do films. This you cannot learn, you either have it or you don't have it. I had the techniques of writing music, orchestrating – it was part of my background. And the reason I went to Hollywood … Many composers go to Hollywood, because, you know, they graduate from music school and they have to make a living and Hollywood pays very well. I didn't go for the money. I went because that was the place where jazz could meet the symphony. I heard scores of Henry Mancini and many other colleagues who were using jazz, and they had a jazz group surrounded by a symphony orchestra. So I would say that 'Jazz Meets the Symphony' started in Hollywood.

AF: I spoke to Richard Rodney Bennett about a week ago, and he singled out a scene with no dialogue in Louis Malle's film *Ascenseur pour l' échafaud* in which we follow Jeanne Moreau walking the streets of Paris while Miles Davis's trumpet on the soundtrack is, in Richard's words, 'breaking your heart'.

LS: Well, this is a very accurate analysis. However, Miles Davis was not really a film composer. What happened in that situation – and I know that situation very well because I was told – was that the director liked Miles Davis and he already had it in mind to use his music. So he told him more or less what he wanted, but Miles Davis didn't have to work like we do – to the film, to timings – he didn't care about how long the scene is or if there's a cut. The director helped him a lot by saying, 'Record a piece like that, and then I'll edit it.' So Miles did what he always did; he was not really writing music for a film.

AF: So it's an example of the use of music.

LS: The use of music, yes. And it's happening more and more. Because of the media and the cross-fertilisation that's going on in the record world and on radio and the internet and in many areas, some filmmakers know music a lot. They are very well trained and they know how to communicate with a composer. Some of them know. But they go out and buy records and then they tell the composer, 'Write something like that', which is kind of parasitic. I don't like that. I tell them, 'I can make a contribution. Look, you're hiring me as an expert in music, like you hire a director of photography who is an expert in cinematography, so why don't you let me see the film without music and see what I can do? And if you like it …' It should be a collaboration, not a conflict. The director understands that I'm trying to help, but in some cases the director is brainwashed by living for nine months with the same edit of the movie with the same [temporary] music. It's difficult to get out of that, it's a habit. But sometimes he's open to my suggestions. The temp track is a new development. When I came to Hollywood, it didn't happen. But it's just a way for the director to show the movie to the producers and the studio executives, and for the film to have some kind of life. Music does give life to a film: even from the time of silent movies there was always a pianist in the room.

AF: Can you think of any places in films where the music does the opposite of what is happening on screen, where it tells you something quite different to what you're seeing?

LS: Oh, I like that. That's what we call audio-visual counterpoint. I've never done cartoons and I was maybe lucky. There's a lot of work in it and it is not always pleasurable work – although there were some fantastic composers doing cartoons and I admire them. But in a cartoon, if the mouse runs up stairs, the xylophone goes [sings an ascending scale], and if the mouse runs downstairs the xylophone goes [sings a descending scale]. So it is really parallel motion. What I like to do is counterpoint. I did a movie called *Rollercoaster* [James Goldstone, 1977] which was a kind of horror movie where an extortionist portrayed by Timothy Bottoms threatens to put bombs in rollercoasters in amusement parks, and people will

die unless he gets money. And there were horrible scenes, really horrible scenes, and instead of doing all the time the tension and the horror and the fear, I told the director why don't we use children's rhymes and calliopes [fairground organs], in opposition to what is going on on the screen: innocent music for this evil, Machiavellian mind. And the director accepted this and we did it and it worked out all right. That's what we call in the trade 'playing against' and I like to do that a lot.

AF: Who are the film composers you've admired?

LS: Well, there are so many … but Bernard Herrmann for his work with the movies of Hitchcock. I knew him personally and, as a matter of fact, he used to say there's no such thing as film composers. There are composers, period. And he was right, he was absolutely right. I think *Psycho* is his most brilliant score, but everything he wrote was really daring and original, right from the first score he wrote, for *Citizen Kane*. He was very aware and he had also that sense of drama. But there are film scores by Alfred Newman, by Franz Waxman. Very great films scores. But I must say something, without wishing to sound like a snob. The biggest influences on film music for me, as I said before, were Alban Berg, Debussy and Verdi. Of course when I went to see films and when I saw how well the music worked, I admired these amazing examples, but my main source was from the classical composers.

AF: What about directors? Who have been the directors you have most enjoyed working with? The ones you'd work with again, say, because they respected what you do and allowed you to be creative?

LS: Unfortunately one of them is dead and that's Don Siegel, with whom I did many films including *Dirty Harry*. And Stuart Rosenberg, who's alive [he died in 2007] but retired. For him I did *Cool Hand Luke* [1967], with Paul Newman. But I've worked with a lot of directors. I worked with John Sturges [on *The Great Escape*, 1963]. I worked with René Clément, who was the Hitchcock of France.

AF: Can you talk about working with Don Siegel on *Dirty Harry*?

LS: Yes. One thing that comes to my mind is that I told him I was going to use human voices, female voices. Not a big chorus, but in some cases three voices, in some cases just one. And he had never done a movie where the score had voices, he was used to instrumental scores. He said, 'Why do you want to use voices?' And I said, 73 'Well, it's because of you. You set me up.' He said, 'What do you mean?' So I explained that the villain of the movie, Scorpio, is a mass murderer, but he is an incongruous figure. The movie was done during the war in Vietnam, and Scorpio wears a belt buckle with a peace symbol. The guy is crazy. So I said to Don Siegel, 'Look, I think that he hears voices.' And he said, 'Oh, you have a point.' And I used a very haunting … not a song with lyrics, but just using the voice as an instrument. And that brought a chill … in combination with electronically sustained instruments, it brought a

chill to the audience. Every time you hear that sound, even if you don't see Scorpio, you feel his presence. Don Siegel liked that, and it worked and it proved to be a success.

AF: And it's very operatic, isn't it?

LS: Exactly. Exactly. Well, it always comes back to the opera.