Lalo Schifrin

A match lights a fuse, which burns and then explodes into the titles for one of television's most popular series, *Mission: Impossible.* On the music track, a trill holds and then explodes into one of the most familiar themes in the history of film and television scoring, a Latin-flavored action piece twisted slightly askew by a 5/4 meter. The composer is Lalo Schifrin who, since his arrival in Hollywood in the early 1960s, has brought his highly sophisticated blend of jazz and classical music styles to a wide variety of films. Tony Thomas has remarked that the "film composer of the future is very likely to be a man like Lalo Schifrin,"[1] and it is easy to appreciate Thomas's judgment when listening to such a score, for instance, as the 1971 *Dirty Harry.* With its cool but frenetic rhythmic tattoos often backing up complex harmonic structures and its subtle timbre manipulations, including a tabla in the percussion and a vocalizing soprano, the *Dirty Harry* score largely blurs the lines of demarcation between the jazz and classical idioms to create a sound that has as much novelty today as it did twenty years ago. Even in a more purely classical score such as the 1967 *The Fox,* with its haunting flute theme and its chilling, slightly Ravelian winterscapes, the distinctive harmonic and instrumental effects do not fail to identify their composer.

R.S.B.: Your given name is Boris, isn't it? Did somebody give you the name Lalo?

L.S.: No, no. It legally now is Lalo. When I moved to this country [from Buenos Aires], all the contracts would say, "also known as" and it became too complicated. So I went to court and changed it.

R.S.B.: Where did the name come from?

L.S.: It's a nickname for my second name, which is Claudio. In Argentina it's like Bob for Robert and Dick for Richard. But my name has been Lalo for many, many years now.

R.S.B.: You grew up in a very musically cultured family. Your father was in the orchestra and your uncle was in the orchestra. You studied piano with Enrique Barenboim?

L.S.: Yes, the father of Daniel.

R.S.B.: How early was that?

L.S.: I was six.

R.S.B.: Did you like taking lessons at that young age, or did you feel you were forced to do it?

L.S.: I was forced to do it. I wanted to play soccer with my friends.

R.S.B.: And you had to practice instead. All the classics, I presume?

L.S.: Of course!

R.S.B.: When you were in your teens, you apparently found jazz as an escape from all this.

L.S.: It's not so much an escape. I did like classical music. But what I had to find was my own voice, my own identity. My father was an authority. He was the concertmaster of the Buenos Aires Philharmonic, and he also had a master class at the conservatory. When we would walk in the street, everybody would recognize him: "Maestro Schifrin!" I never thought I could overcome that. I was even going to give up music. I gave up music. I was going to become an attorney, and I studied law. But on the other hand, when I discovered jazz, I liked it. Again, it was a kind of rebellion, but I didn't do it as a rebellion. I did it because I liked it, and it became my passion, my obsession. Now, my father didn't like it, and that aggravated the problem.

R.S.B.: When you began to work in jazz, did you stay with the piano, or did you also work with other instruments?

L.S.: No, I just did the piano, but I also started to write. In Argentina, there was a jazz magazine, *Metronome* magazine. They had the *Metronome* All-Stars. I was seventeen years old when I was voted Best Arranger. And so they did two recordings with the Argentinian all-stars, following the American format and pattern. It was two 78s, and I wrote one of the sides. The second year, I was also voted Best Pianist, and again I wrote a side for the recording. I don't even know where those records are. But I took it very seriously.

R.S.B.: At the same time, you studied with Juan Carlos Paz.

L.S.: Yes, he had studied with Schoenberg and was a proponent of avant-garde music. I was attracted not only by jazz but also by Bartók, Stravinsky, and then Schoenberg and the Vienna School. As a matter of fact, I didn't see too much difference between all that. My father was more conservative, part of the establishment. He had a network of contacts and acquaintances. I'm glad that I continued to study music, and if I had decided to continue in my father's line, I would have had very good teachers, maybe Alberto Ginastera.

But that was establishment, those were his friends. When I rebelled, my father would say, "No, that's not music." But for me, that was music. I also discovered my own piano teacher when I was about sixteen or seventeen. He was one of the first Russian refugees to come to Argentina, and his name was Andrea Karalin. He had been director of the Kiev Conservatory. I had gone to a piano player who was selling Steinways, and I started to play one. The guy who was selling the pianos said, "You play very well. Are you studying with somebody now?" And at that moment, I was not studying with anybody. I was playing jazz, and I was studying by myself. And so he sent me to this Russian, who auditioned me, because he didn't take students so easily. He really gave me a great schooling. Even today, when I have to play . . . I don't play too often, but sometimes I have to, and I practice maybe two or three weeks before the performance, and all my technique comes back. The Russian school is so good.

R.S.B.: And then you went to Paris and studied with Messiaen. What was he like?

L.S.: He was very mystical. But I learned a lot with him. . . . Actually, it's not so much what I learned as the doors of perception he opened for me, windows to possibilities.

R.S.B.: What kinds of windows would you say he opened for you?

L.S.: One thing was the approach he had to rhythm. For instance, the use of irrational numbers. In baroque music, for a canon, when they used augmentation or diminution of values, they used rational numbers. In augmentation, for instance, an eighth note becomes a quarter note, a quarter note becomes a half note, and vice versa by diminution. Messiaen would use a crazy approach, for instance adding a fifth of the value! And that means that you have to use a lot of ties and count a lot! For instance, if you had a nonretrogradable rhythmic figure formed of one quarter note, one eighth note, and one quarter note, for augmentation you would add a dot to each note, giving you a dotted quarter note, a dotted eighth note, and a dotted quarter note. Play that against the original and it becomes very complicated. And I'm only giving you a very, very simple example. Another thing was the scales of limited transposition. Now, jazz musicians such as Thelonius Monk, Bud Powell, Dizzy Gillespie were extending the tonal roots to the point that you were getting close to twelve-tone music, but with tonal roots. With Messiaen I discovered that you could get independent of the tonal roots without having to get into the twelve-tone series, because he would use the modes of limited transposition. Actually, he didn't invent this. It had been used by Bartók, even Debussy with the whole-tone scale. The idea is that you can use any one of the notes of the scale, or the mode as he called it, as the beginning. There is no fundamental, and you can make chords within the notes of the scale. . . .

R.S.B.: Such as the ninth chords that grow naturally out of the whole-tone scale in Debussy?

L.S.: Yes, and they have no tonal relationship. And then what I did was to combine some of the rules of Schoenberg with the rules of Messiaen. That's one of the things that created my own style. For instance, you won't believe this, but one of the secondary themes I used for *Mission: Impossible,* a suspense theme [entitled "The Plot" on the soundtrack recording], is based on a mode of limited transposition.

R.S.B.: So this type of technique actually serves the film composer quite well.

L.S.: Yes. I'm going to give you a very simple example. Let's say that you are in a very dramatic scene in which the most horrible conflict is coming between good and evil, and evil is winning. And so you have maybe twelve notes, or even more. You have quarter tones, clusters, the most incredible dissonances. And all of a sudden, good wins, and there's a transition to a happy ending. The transition is not abrupt, and so you have to start getting rid of, say, a twelve-tone chord. You start getting rid of notes. And slowly you get into a mode of limited transposition, which is like a twilight zone between tonality and serialism or atonality. And finally you get to a tonal theme, and there is a happy ending. And, vice versa, if you have to go from something that is tonal, because it's kind of neutral, pleasant, or pastoral, and all of a sudden something starts becoming disturbed, disturbing, you start using the modes of limited transposition until finally it becomes very disturbing, and that gets you into the twelve tones. You can find examples of this in *Bullitt* and *Dirty Harry.*

R.S.B.: Let me ask you a kind of theoretical question. It seems to me that, as one example, Berg, in *Wozzeck,* uses atonality as a kind of parallel to Wozzeck's madness, and I was wondering whether you feel, from a dramatic standpoint, whether filmgoers tend to associate dissonance with bad, and tonality with order and good, and that sort of thing.

L.S.: Unfortunately, certain of my colleagues of the avant-garde are going to kill me for this, but there must be something in the human nature, in human feelings, in the human ear that makes this true. What you just said happens to be true. If you consider, as a concertgoer, that it's been almost one century, at least eighty years, since Schoenberg elaborated his theories on atonality and serialism—although *Wozzeck* was not serial, it was atonal—all this music has not been accepted yet. Zubin Mehta has a formula of playing a new piece always at the beginning of a concert. He did it here with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, I suppose he does it when he is in New York, and I know he does it with the Israel Philharmonic. And then he gets into the more conventional or traditional repertoire. And that allows the majority of the audience to wait outside until the piece is over, and then they come to hear Itzhak Perlman playing the concerto by Beethoven, or something like that. There must be a reason why it creates a lot of anxiety. In painting that doesn't happen, because you can walk into a museum, and if you don't like some-

thing, you just walk out. In one second you can tell whether you like it or not. But music takes place in time, not in space. For some people, a twelve-minute piece of music can take an eternity. For many, the atonal is always something disturbing. This is something that has been used by film composers, by opera composers, from the beginning. *Lucia di Lammermoor,* for instance: the music for the mad scene is not the same kind of music she was singing in the early arias. And I'm talking about something that is very, very traditional. It's not a problem here of atonality, of course, but of greater density, chromaticism. Verdi uses it in *Otello.*

R.S.B.: I wonder whether we could ever get to a point where tonality would represent something and atonality wouldn't . . .

L.S.: I don't think so.

R.S.B.: You did some film study in Buenos Aires, is that right?

L.S.: Well, I did study directing. There was no such thing as studying music for films. I went to night school: there were film directors giving lectures about filmmaking. I also went to see *Alexander Nevsky* many, many times, and I learned a lot from Prokofiev. That actually was a good school for what I'm doing now. And I would advise young people who want to get into film scoring to go and see it. Even though now many things are dated in that particular score, there's something about it that's not dated.

R.S.B.: And then you came to the United States with Dizzy Gillespie?

L.S.: That was fortuitous. I was living in Paris. I had gone to South America to visit my family, and I was going to go back to France. But one thing led to another. We put together a band, and also I wrote some movie music. And Dizzy Gillespie came with the State Department with his own band. Quincy Jones was the first trumpet in that band. It was an all-star band, great, great musicians. He played for a whole week, and I didn't sleep for a whole week! And then we played for them one night after his concert. After we played for him, he said, "Did you write all these charts?" I said, "Yes." "Would you like to come to the United States?" I said, "Yes." And here I am! This past January [1990], at the music-industry festival in Cannes, they did a tribute to me in which the different aspects of my career were exposed. They brought in the Orchestre National de Lyon, and I was able to do some of my movie music, some of my classical music, and jazz. And they asked me who I would like as guests. For instance, for classical music I brought in Julia Migenes, who played Carmen in the movie with Placido Domingo. She did Villa-Lobos and some of my own music. I also conducted a lot of French music: Honegger, Ravel. . . . And then I did some of my own movie scores, including "Twenty Sketches from *Cool Hand Luke.*" Obviously I had to do *Mission: Impossible,* and then *Bullitt* and some of *The Fox.* I think all this is going to be a video, because there was a British company there taping it, and they're going to distribute it. Anyway, they also asked me who I'd like for jazz, and so I said Dizzy Gillespie, along with Ray Brown and Grady Tate.

When I introduced Dizzy—I was acting also as MC—I said both in French and English, "my master, *mon maître*." My master, Dizzy Gillespie. I say this: I have had many teachers, but only one master.

R.S.B.: What do you think you learned the most from him?

L.S.: I learned everything from him. For instance, people say that when I do classical concerts now, I have a good sense of programming. And I told this to Dizzy. I said, "People are making comments on how good my programs are, in terms of contrast, pacing, the flow of the concert. I learned that from you." And he said to me, "Yeah, but I learned from Cab Calloway!" I also learned how to build, to know when to climb. . . . Any kind of music—jazz, classical, whatever you want to call music—is like human emotions, like language . . . anything that happens in time. Any art form that happens in time, like a play, a movie, music, ballet, opera; you have a sense of building. It's almost like—please don't take me wrong—the sexual act, which by nature has its own foreplay, prelude . . . and then it reaches climax, and after the climax a feeling of satisfaction. I'm talking about real love, not just releasing energy for the sake of releasing energy. That's very similar to the way music should flow. I learned that from Dizzy.

R.S.B.: Did you have a sense, when you were traveling with Dizzy Gillespie, that you eventually wanted to get into working with film?

L.S.: Well, I was trying to reach out for new forms of inspiration. I feel that life for everybody has a lot to do with reaching for horizons. It's like when you're walking on a road, and you want to get to some place that you think is the horizon. And when you get to that horizon, there is another one. And that keeps you going. One of the French horn players was Gunther Schuller, and we became friends automatically. . . . Let me put it this way: when I was in Paris, at night I would play jazz to make a living. And I would play jazz with very good jazz musicians at the Clos Saint Germain, some of the best European musicians, even American emigrés in Paris. I was playing very good jazz, and I really matured a lot in Paris as a jazz musician. During the day, I would study with my classical colleagues and fellow composers. And I would tell them, "Tomorrow night Chet Baker is in Paris. He's a great American trumpet player, and he's going to sit in with us at the Clos Saint Germain. Would you like to come?" "Oh, no, jazz, I don't like jazz." On the other hand, I would tell some of my fellow jazz musicians, "There is a Ravel festival at the Opéra. With Maurice Béjart, who did the choreography for *Daphnis and Chloë,* they're doing a short opera, *L'Heure espagnole.* All the décor is by Marc Chagall and Max Ernst. . . . It's fantastic!" And they would say, "No, that's long-hair music." And so I was always a kind of fish out of water, because I felt good on both sides of the fence. And so, every time I find someone who thinks like me . . . like Friedrich Gulda: we became friends, and in South America we played a lot of piano, four hands. Wherever I was, I would find him. Gunther Schuller became another person like that.

We had a lot in common, because he knew about classical and he knew about jazz. So, while I was with Dizzy, Gunther was into the third stream, trying to combine some of the elements of classical music with jazz. He promoted a series of concerts at Carnegie Hall. For instance, in one of them he conducted classical musicians who attempted to do some jazz, such as the Ebony Concerto by Stravinsky, "Ragtime," some things by Hindemith, Milhaud, Copland. . . . And he also did things by American composers who had the classical techniques and tried to combine them with jazz. And so, he organized these concerts, and he invited me to be a participant. The problem was that there was a limited amount of money, it was difficult to raise money to keep going. And the symphony orchestras were not interested in playing this kind of repertoire in which you always needed to bring some jazz musicians along to play with them. On the other hand, the jazz bands—I did some arrangements for Basie—they were not interested in that either. And so there was no vehicle to do that. Now, I doubt that anybody will believe this, but I came to Hollywood for artistic reasons, not to make money. Because in Hollywood I could combine the symphony musicians, who were called legitimate musicians, with the illegitimate musicians!

R.S.B.: And so what the film medium gave you was a freedom that you couldn't find on its own on one side or the other.

L.S.: Exactly. Because here the studios are paying me a lot of money to do exactly what I wanted to do. The first movie in which I was able to do this was a film I did in France [in 1963] for MGM with Alain Delon, Jane Fonda, and Lola Albright, directed by René Clément. It was called *Joy House* here in America and *Les Félins* in France. I went back to Paris to record it, and I went to the little district that I knew, the people that I used to play with, the *clos,* members of the opera and the Orchestre National de France. This kind of combination, this kind of chemistry; I was able to do it . . . with success! Everybody started to like it.

R.S.B.: There's no question that you created a sound. . . .

L.S.: I didn't create it. I heard on television what Henry Mancini was doing in *Peter Gunn* and some other things, and I saw the possibility of going a little further and expanding on that.

R.S.B.: Given the fact that there's a definite orchestral sound that you're dealing with here, do you not work with an orchestrator, or, given the time limits that you have working in film, do you have to have an orchestrator?

L.S.: I write very fast on score paper. But sometimes there is a need for an orchestrator. Let me give you an example. We have a World War II film, and there is a scene in Germany where you have a German band playing something kind of nazi. There things happen to me. . . . I mean, it's difficult to find nazi music. And so I would have to write something in the style of a German band. I would write the melody and the harmony, and then I would hire a band arranger. There was a guy in Hollywood, who's now retired, who was a

specialist in that. To write band music is so tedious and so difficult, and he had a methodology. For me this is not creative, and so I would hire him if I had a movie about the foreign legion, or requiring an American band in the style of Sousa. . . . It really requires a lot of study to discover what makes Sousa sound like Sousa. And I don't have that time. Or if you have to do something now in the Basie style: it's a lot of work to do this kind of vertical, block sound. Although I did arrangements for Basie in the past, it would be wasting my time now. And so I would write a lead sheet, I would write a melody, then hire somebody, and that's it.

R.S.B.: But for the Schifrin sound . . .

L.S.: I do it myself. Even if I use an orchestrator, when there is a lot of pressure in time, I write the sketches out so thoroughly that they are condensed scores. And I conduct from my own sketches.