

# Inside the Score

## Composing the Music for Craig Boreham's "Ostia: La Notte Finale"

by Annette Golden

Writing music for film is a bit like falling in love. OK, perhaps I need to qualify that. Composing music for a director's vision is like reaching into and exploring a new reality and finding you have a unique connection to it. At certain points, this connection can feel so fantastic it seems to open up new possibilities for melody, harmony and timbre....and, for a composer, there is no better experience!

More often than not, you reach this place by watching the film at an early post-production stage. You talk with the director, editor, sound designer and other key crew. When it's "happening", a certain collective "other world" starts to build. At its peak, your musical ideas meld with a torrent of other points of view, skills and insights to create something special for the story.

My experience working with Australian director Craig Boreham on "Ostia- La Notte Finale" was all of this, and quite a lot more. From the beginning, Craig pushed the boundaries for an Australian short film. Australian actors speak Italian with English sub-titles, and the film is shot in black and white. And for a composer, this film presented some unique challenges. Most of the music needed to be composed and recorded before the first frame of film was even shot. How can this be? Well, access to musicians and recording studios held the upper hand. So Craig and I took this somewhat daunting fact on board, and looked at ways of working with it, both practically and creatively. And secretly, and rather deliciously, I was more than pleased that someone else's temp music wasn't going to get there first!

Now, a few words about film composing and the art of research. The script is about the last day in the life of the brutally murdered Italian film director, Pier Paolo Pasolini. So who was this man? A study of Craig Boreham's work reveals a strong focus on stories about sexuality and desire. Delving into Pasolini's life via the extensive resources within the AFTRS library was sure to yield some fascinating information. Pasolini made a significant contribution to Italian intellectual life in the 1960s and 70s. He remained robustly outspoken and critical of many of society's key institutions throughout this time. But I wasn't expecting that Pasolini regarded the music of J S Bach with an almost mystical reverence...and that, coming from a self-styled Marxist, atheist intellectual, held my attention. Pasolini himself declared his regard for Bach to be "irrational". This could mean that he either understood its basis, but rejected any rational explanation for it, or did not understand its basis, but responded to the music with the emotion and language normally reserved for religious ecstasy. In either case, this was compositional nectar to any serious Bachophile. Adding fuel to the fire was the discovery that, in his first film "Accattone", Pasolini used Bach's music almost exclusively to delineate key psychological moments for the main characters. It is most insistent when they are at their lowest points. His use of Chorus 68 of the St Matthew's Passion was so pervasive and controversial in "Accattone", I believed I had found my first compositional "hook", ie, an idea I could build upon to delineate the story and something of Pasolini's psychology.

At the same time, I needed to understand a bit more about Italian film and film music of the time. I found myself becoming particularly absorbed with Nino Rota after attending an AFTRS workshop run by the composer Peter Dasent, Australia's own Rota specialist. Best known for his collaborations with Federico Fellini, Rota moves effortlessly between genres and compositional devices. He has a knack for musically evoking the essence of character, and the inner and outer social and psychological worlds. He invented and combined musical themes with great economy of means and artistic sensibility. One of his most compelling musical forms is the simple, almost carnivalesque waltz, coupled with darker undercurrents. It works like the voice of tragic destiny beneath a simple melodic line. This deeply resonated with what I had learned of Pasolini's life from books and articles, and I knew that I had found my second "hook".

But now, to work! Craig had provided me with the script, some background on Pasolini, and some great stills from Cinematographer, Adam Howden. I felt we'd yield a useful musical harvest by starting with the idea of music as "source". This means music heard by the actors within the film and arising from the scenes, eg, from radios, live music and suchlike. Given there was no film as yet, mirroring existing action, facial or psychological nuance, or other points of connection, just wasn't an option. So Craig and I got together over what would be the first of a number of interesting nights (did I mention red wine??) and talked through the script to identify the most logical places for source music. We settled on the opening office scene, the café scene, and the scene where Pasolini and Pino drive out to Ostia. I wanted jazz for the café, but needed to think a bit more about the other cues.

Taking a leaf from Rota's book, I set about writing a "theme" tune about destiny. As it happens, inspiration struck. A simple melody sketched on manuscript paper was midi-mocked up for violin and guitar. Craig's response was a very quick "love it, but can we try an accordion version.... imagine a street busker in mid-1970s Rome playing outside Pasolini's office". OK, so with a few more tweaks the "Ostia Waltz", accordion version, was born.

We discussed using the opening phrase from J S Bach's St Matthew Passion for the most climactic scene in the film. We needed both beauty and emotional authenticity. And we had to deeply move the audience, whether or not they were familiar with the musical reference. But the piece needed an accurate time-frame. We found the solution by working through the scene, (did I mention more red wine??). I counted crotchets to the minute, while Craig walked and talked the action. I sent Craig and Adrian Chiarella (the film's editor) a midi mock-up of what came to be called the 'La Notte Finale' cue. We decided to extend it to a full 2 mins 40 secs. Working with the script, I visualized the key points, and arced the melody and harmonies around these. Craig's feedback was extremely encouraging, and Adrian added that he was looking forward to editing the scene with pre-existing music.

We had an imminent recording date for jazz musicians for the café scene. After confirming time frame with Adrian, I prepared the melody and chord changes for "Il Treno Rosso". This scene was shot at the Red Rattler at Marrickville. Craig wanted trumpet to "represent" Pasolini, so Paul Panichi provided his unique timbre and ideas over a drum, bass and guitar framework recorded at the AFTRS studios. Craig played the cue during the shoot, and was happy with the sense of atmosphere it brought. This

left then the “radio cue” and the final end credits.

Now Craig was particularly taken with the “feel” of the mid-70s Eurovision Song Contest hit recorded by Mina Mazzini “Se Telefonado”, a somewhat iconic song from an even more iconic Italian chanteuse. But anything in the style had to be musically distinguishable enough to stand on its own merits. Paul Panichi’s defining trumpet licks set the stage brilliantly, but what about the lyrics, and who on earth would sing it?? Craig was pretty set on the theme of desire momentarily embraced but ultimately lost. Quite a subtext to the scene itself. I felt up to the task of writing the English words but “where to” for an Italian translation? Fortunately, I was put in touch with Chiara Bussini, a Master of Linguistics student at Sydney Uni. We set about the writing and translation efforts with vigour, but where to for the singer? Time was tight so one Saturday morning I sang and recorded multiple takes, and sent the best bits to the film’s conductor, Edward Primrose. I was delighted with his offer to work with the results.

This left only the end credits and it seemed right that the “Ostia Waltz” have the final say. So into some serious transcription for double string quartet and contrabass. We recorded both the “Ostia Waltz” and “La Notte Finale” with the Michelle O’Young Orchestra, Edward Primrose conducting. The results are beautiful and apt for the purpose.

“Ostia- La Notte Finale” is an extraordinary film. It offers unique insights into the last night of Pier Paolo Pasolini. The collaboration with Craig Boreham provided an opportunity to shine under pressure, and provide music that connects with the subject and the director’s vision. I hope that my career will continue to offer similar opportunities- and further excuses for red wine!

Annette Golden  
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