

## Audiovisionen\_Cristobal Tapia de Veer\_master.wav

**CTdV** I always need to think a lot backwards, in a sense, to analyze what I'm doing, because when I'm doing it, I don't really have a system. I don't have particular techniques that I've developed for films or anything like that. I think I work pretty much like if I was a solo artist or in a band where you could just sit with a guitar and trying to find melodies or trying to find a certain mood. But I don't have particular techniques for films. So, my approach is very much that of a musician almost making a personal album.

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**FK** Herzlich Willkommen zu einer weiteren Folge von Audio:Visionen, dem Podcast zu Film | Musiken | Sounds. Ich bin Franziska Kollinger und freue mich sehr über meinen heutigen Gast, Cristobal Tapia de Veer. As a trained multi-instrumentalist and composer Cristo, in my opinion, you have developed a very unique musical language for film music, which is characterized by the focus on rhythm and rhythmic diversity on the one hand, and the variety of sound materials on the other, and thus stands out just as much from symphonic scores as it does from a sound design centered solely on soundscapes. And in addition to the focus on the diversity of rhythmic structures, your handling of sound is, in my view, responsible for this independent character of your music. So can you tell me, Cristo, what is your idea, your conception or imagination of sound? And following on this, how can this definition be applied to film music?

**CTdV** One of my first experiences was making this British show *Utopia* and that was the first time I worked with a director, somebody who has lots of experience and lots of awards – he won BAFTAs in the UK and all of that... So to me, that was all very impressive and intimidating in a way. But lucky for me he's really artistic and what I learned from him, is to give perspectives to moments, to a scene, rather than amplify something that is already there, which could be the classical way of scoring movies; I think it comes from mute movies from the early 1900s where a piano player would have to really speak for the characters; and somehow that technique remains to this day in a certain way. I think the music could do much more by bringing scenes that are not there or that are not being said and make the story more rich in that way.

In that case of *Utopia*, it was pretty strange because there's lots of violence and it's a very dark kind of end of the world thing going on, and the music would be very dark and sci fi maybe. But the music in *Utopia* is very danceable and somehow celebratory. And the director used very often this word: celebration. There is a scene where a man has been tortured. It's a gruesome thing and he's trying to escape and he's fighting one of the aggressors who has a gun while they're fighting and they're trying not to get shot. It seems like they're dancing. They engage into a dance. And so I made some percussions and Brazilian kind of Beats. When I proposed that, I thought it was not going to work because it was so strange and contrary to what's happening. I was watching it [the scene] with the director, and he was like bouncing his head. He was feeling the moment. So for some reason we connected in that. He says, this celebratory aspect of the music is a celebration of the days of what's going there, but it's just a celebration of life in general – just things happening, whether they're dark or happy or anything.

So because of that show [*Utopia*] and the way we worked, it did an impression on people in the industry. It seems that moment people were calling me to do that stuff, whatever that is.

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**CTdV** And so I never had to do the conventional thing, where people would expect me to do an orchestral score or something like, you know, a John Williams or what you expect from a film music. For the most part, I've been doing this approach of trying to find a twist in the music maybe, to find some perspective, maybe to

surprise even the people who are working in the movie because they were not expecting to have the music that I'd given them for certain moments. Often it takes a moment for them to digest something new. Because, I suppose it's just natural that if it's really different or different for them, at least, then they probably shouldn't like it right away, I suppose, because they need to adjust something different. So I'm trying to make a long story short.

**FK** Do you know Jean Cocteau's concept of accidental synchronization? He [Jean Cocteau] considered this concept for the composition of film music, and he applied this concept directly for example in *Le Sang d'un poète* (F 1930) – *The Blood of a Poet* in 1930. The aim of this accidental synchronization of image and sound in film was to achieve a structure of image and music that was as contrary as possible. And in no case, to double or emphasize what we have seen or what was on the screen... You are a kind of follower of the Avantgarde film maker scene of the 1930s, if you want so and far away from film music conventions that were dictated a long time by the so-called Hollywood sound.

Instead, a visual language and an auditive language interact with each other, dance with each other, and get in communication with each other, but are not separated and are not combined yet they are both equally important. Your training as a multi-instrumentalist with this special view on rhythmic structures interacts perfectly with this approach. You use repetition and ostinati, for example, and at the center of these compositional practices is the play with musical time. I think maybe it's because of your experience as a multi-instrumentalist that you are best known to improvizational techniques. But yeah, just how do you get there?

**CTdV** I see humor is a big part. I think I'm attracted to make funny things to the image. I don't know why, but it's almost like the music is making a joke or telling a joke or a funny comment about what's happening and the absurdity. I am really interested in the absurdity.

**FK** As in *The White Lotus*: By adopting these montage techniques for the music you built up in this first session of *The White Lotus* series, you build up tension or suspense, if you can call it like that, because it's circular and it's circulating round and round and round. And at the end of the episode, this tension just finally discharges, but without any development. So it's just circling and circling and circling, and it is not driven by a developmental idea. I think it persists as the kind of musical pressure by circling around itself.

**CTdV** Yeah, I suppose maybe that's why it can be somehow accepted in the mainstream. So I've been into both music and working with pop artists and productions like that, but I also always have been into classical music and contemporary music and things like free jazz and things like that.

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**CTdV** There's so much experimental things happening in the 'underworld' that people are not aware of. I guess maybe musicians or people who are working in the mainstream somehow pick little ideas from the underground and present them to the mainstream in a different context. I like so much world music and all these non-mainstream things. Maybe they're just there, in my head, and just naturally they come into this context where I am, which is mainstream things.

I think it's because of the humor and the repetition. Like you said, this is possible because I think otherwise for a mainstream audience, people get lost very easily, very fast. If there's, for example, too much freedom rhythmically or they're not able to grasp patterns. And the humor, the funny sounds, I don't think there's a better way to win a public than with humor. I suppose, when you watch stand-up comedians or presenters or anybody since the beginning of show business, there's always this little jokes, a little humor that makes people at ease, a certain sense of concern or something like that. For me, I don't really think about what it does to the

public. I really like when I can laugh. Sometimes by putting a music that has nothing to do with the moment or with the image and it makes the situation absurd and it's just something that I like. I would say for me it's almost like just picking out a guitar and play something.

**FK** Is it the first step you take? You just get through your instruments and through your settings and maybe you build up settings with your instruments and then just try to find a groove, try to find a melody that fits for the film that you have to orchestrate, that you have to work with or what is the first step in your compositional practice?

**CTdV** I often try to find one sound that is inspiring or that feels like it's opening a door to a world of possibilities. Sometimes this happens really fast, and sometimes it takes forever. It's like I could spend weeks just listening to sounds, try new things, and almost 100% of the times, the one song that I find that sends me into the right direction is because of an accident, where I'm trying to play something that doesn't really work, or the sound is just strange or is not supposed to be played that way, or something comes up and it sounds like there's a world hiding in that sound.

So, from that moment, I can follow that and try to build on that world or look for other sounds into that world or into that aesthetic. It could be a melody, but it's often a combination of improvising with an instrument that is making a strange sound. And that combination could be a sample, just a noise from a vinyl, that has something particular. It is very much like walking outside for hours and looking into people's windows until you find one place where seems to be interesting things happening in that particular home or place.

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**FK** You're a sound collector. You're a collector of sounds. That's quite impressive and guides me to my next question, because in addition to the variety of traditional instruments and sound generators, you use a wide variety of as a song materials and you named audio recordings a few seconds ago; you use also noises prominently, for example, in your tracks for *Utopia*, but also in many other works. That means, that the accompanying voices, as well as all other elements, are characterized by continuous repetitions. And there's no division into melody on the one hand and rhythmic foundation on the other. You are very democratic in using all these sounds you're collecting, and this can be heard above all in in your music for this British TV series *Utopia*, in which even the voice recordings you used are appropriately processed and fragmented as rhythm giving passages. You used voice as an instrument and just put them as ingredient of the rhythmic structure of a phrase, for example. And this is kind of special not to use human voices or sounds connotated as human voices. So, what possibilities of sound processing do you use when you're making music?

**CTdV** Most of the time I use a sampler, which is the fastest way to me to see the possibilities of a sound, because I can just load a human voice, for example, and play it on the keyboard and see how that sounds in different registers very fast, and whether I can loop the voice and find an interesting rhythm, for example. Most of the time it's really the sampler, that is my instrument of choice, to be able to play and modify sounds in a way I like. If I play a melody, like in *Utopia*, there's some choirs that are made in this way. I can see how far I can play with one voice, because if I go too high, I don't like the sound, if it sounds like a chipmunk or if it doesn't sound natural. So in that case – *Utopia* – I wanted the choirs to feel human, like real people. But there's also that aspect that it's a little bit strange because it doesn't sound a 100% like the way people would sing normally. And it's the same thing in *The White Lotus*. The lead voice of the theme are manipulated voices. You can tell these are human, but it's impossible to really sing that voice. It is like there's something weird going on there that is more mysterious to me. I'm really interested in knowing that when sounds are on the edge of something natural and something that is unnatural.

**FK** You just announced *The White Lotus* again and your handling of the voices for the soundtrack there. I was struck by the use of the voice as an instrument and your special kind of using it – maybe it was because I prepared our interview in my early days in southern Italy. And the way you used the voices in those titling tracks for *The White Lotus* reminded me of a series of folk music dances called Tarantella. These tarantelle are especially prominent in the Mediterranean regions, and there's a special one in Puglia where I was, that is called “Pizzica”, and it is best known for the rhythmic diversity and the use of the voices and the use of the flute.

So, when I watched the second season of *The White Lotus*, which played in Sicily, it reminded me absolutely of the folk music traditions I knew from the southern part of Italy... What I want to show you with this short excursion is, that the filmic reality in combination with my surroundings and my experiences as a musicologist, drew my attention to this frame of references, under whose auspices the tracks take on a completely different dimension. Soundtrack theory would speak here of cultural codes, that can be deciphered in many ways in film via music. And I think the way you trade the voice and the way you trade the rhythm is so special, that there are lots of opportunities for listeners to get their own stories in there, and to get their own listening experiences in there.

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**FK** The work for film is always a work that has to do with other people. Of course – it's a collective art; you have to get in touch with the filmmaker, and you have to get in touch with so many people and you see it, for example, also in your soundtracks: I saw Kim Neundorf has done some tracks on the soundtrack of *The White Lotus*, and I want to speak with you about collective working procedures as they are significant for film production as well as for music making. How do you see collectivity in working for films, for the musical composition?

**CTdV** Well, in this particular case, in *The White Lotus*, there was a concern with time and schedule because I was very busy. Normally I don't collaborate a lot. I have worked with Kim a few times. All the voices in *Utopia* is her voice. I asked her to give me long notes that I could record, different notes that I could put into a keyboard – so I make a sound bank with her voice. And after that there's a few times where we collaborated, and a few bridges where I needed help. I asked her to actually make her own compositions. And keep in mind what we've done in the first season, we discussed about the second season and the Italian influences, and then I asked her just to write her own music. I trust her to bring the right compositions.

So, I don't have that much experience with the collaboration that normally happens in film music, I'm going to say in Hollywood, because in Hollywood there's a particular concept of collaboration where there's a big name composer, for example, and they have lots of people working for him. And these people are all composers, but they are somehow helping the main composer building the whole music. I don't feel that comfortable in that system, because maybe of the way I work and there is one part where I need to be happy making the music in the sense that I feel like expressing myself or like in making my own project. And if you don't feel like that, if I feel more like a manager or a producer, that I need to keep track of all the people that are working for me and all of that, it's a very different job. I feel that being on my own and leading the project, digesting the story and all that stuff, it's a very personal process. I would feel too diluted if this was like a team project and way of working. I would feel more disconnected actually from the project if I work in that way. So I'm less interested in that.

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**FK** I only have one last question on your approach to film music composition, and then I want to talk with you at least about the future of film music. But my last question on your approach to music composition is, how does the composition process differ from other works that are not ventilated to an audio-visual experience? Does it differ at all? What do you think?

**CTdV** Sometimes I would make tests: I use to make videos and edit things, because I like experimenting with contrary music and things like that. And it could be really anything, like any music really is film music in the sense that any music is telling a story and setting a mood. So, I can't hardly see the difference. I mean, technically a pop song has a structure and doesn't seem to be manipulating in the same way that film music in particular is leading you to some place. Some film music is very, very minimalistic and there's almost nothing going on. It could be harder to listen to by yourself if you're not into listening to, you know, for example, drone music or something that is very, very static. And you need to somehow be prepared for that or otherwise you fall asleep.

**FK** They use a lot of drone music in criminal series, for example...

**CTdV** If you watch something from the 1960s or 70s, for example, this music that seems to have disappeared completely. For example, a police show like *Columbo*, where the music was very, very rich, like in the sense of Mancini – very melodic and very characterful. I can't imagine any detective or police show like that. Now it is lots of drones, but it's not telling that much. And that would be interesting that some things like that get a revival where music is very active.

**FK** Just think of musical films. How many musical films were there in the last year?! This is also a revival. Those genres that are full of music, more than 80% music in a soundtrack and then we have those drone based and atmospheric soundtracks that are just on the sound and noise as such. So, this is the two worlds we are handling out at the moment. But if you think of Thom Yorke, for example, and Trent Reznor and those guys – I have to rename them every time, when I speak with people about film music, because they just come from this musical background that allows to use noises and sounds and generate great music out of them, and they can resemble these sounds and noises to a soundtrack that is guided by more than just drones and by more than just music. I think this is brilliant what they do for film music at the moment.

**CTdV** Most of the composers I really like are actually musicians in a band. They didn't study to become composers. I think pretty much all of my favorite composers that make movies right now are from that background. So, you know, from Mike Patton to Michal Levy, Clint Mansell, – they all come from popular or rock or industrial or all of that stuff. Maybe it's because I went to the conservatory and I somehow have classical music in my head. And if I need orchestral music, I listen to classical music and to me listen to music that somehow sounds a little bit like Wagner, a little bit like this or like that – it bugs me. I have a problem with that. I'd rather listen to Stravinsky, because it's just overwhelmingly, it's just incredible what they did and it's impossible to do better. I think we have to move on from that.

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**FK** In our last chapter today, I would like to take a look into the future of film music with you. Where do you think sound in film is going? Aesthetically, production wise, socially, culturally – hat do you think?

**CTdV** I'm trying to think of all the recent movies, that I've been watching, trying to see if there is some kind of pattern or trend I can recognize. What is really hard to say is that there seems to be parallel worlds with,

classical scores – they don't seem to be moving. It seems to be the same that it was 20 years ago or 30. I think that just keeps happening the same way. And outside of that, it seems like it's individuals. There's no systems or trends or anything like that. I don't feel like Michal Levy has that much in common with Trent Reznor or, you know, with somebody else – they really feel like individuals...

**FK** And they are dependent on the filmmaker they are used to work with. So think of Jim Jarmusch. He is a very musical film maker doing music on his own, and so he's handling the music for his films. But you have other filmmakers that do not. It's always about this contact with the filmmaker.

**CTdV** I really like what Mikal Levy is doing. In the sense that I like minimalism and I look up to somebody who is able to do lots of things with very few elements. It's a very difficult thing to do. But to me, that's a very impressive thing to do, because it always feels like you need to decorate. But more often than not, you can say or give an impression or a mood with only two or three elements. And when you start adding more, the reasons for that are often not good reasons. For example, when I listen to a score that sounds very modern to me, I always think: How did that person get away with that? How did that person convince the producers? Because people always need more and need a cinematic experience. So, often I think we use more sounds than we need, and I feel like I can connect in a more emotional and personal way, a more intimate way if there's one sound that is connecting me to the character. When the idea is very clear and very minimalistic, I feel closer to the story, and it feels more modern to me, and it feels more like the future to me than very big things, very impressive things and stuff like that. Because that's the way somehow it started with *King Kong* (USA 1933) where they installed this impressive sound.

**FK** Because it was possible for the first time. I think, they were so impressed that they could use this technology to synchronize image and sound that they just went over the top...

**CTdV** Yeah, yeah, that's it! So, Minimalism feels more like the future to me. I have one film that is finished, that is called *Ponyboy*. The main character is an intersex person and the actor who plays the character, he's actually the writer. And so, when they brought me this story, I was really interested. It is a small movie. I think we did something quite interesting in the minimalistic way. I have no idea how people are going to react, because it's pretty odd, the way the music is happening in this movie. I was being able to get to that point where I have very little control and I'm like, okay, I don't want to touch it too much. And in the end, it's going to be an interesting movie...

**FK** It's one kind of ingredient of minimal music: focus on the process. So, we focused on the processes, on the several processes in your work. Cristo, I thank you for the exciting interview, for the exciting talk with you and for your Time, thank you for your Audio-Visionen.

Das waren Audio:Visionen, diesmal mit Cristobal Tapia de Veer und Franziska Kollinger. Ich verabschiede mich an dieser Stelle nicht nur von Cristo, sondern auch von allen Zuhörer:innen, jedoch nicht, ohne den Hinweis auf die Playlist zum Interview, in der alle Tracks und Titel aufgelistet sind über die wir in dieser Folge gesprochen haben. Ihr findet diese zum Selber- und Nachhören wie immer auf unserer Website. Außerdem noch der Hinweis auf die bevorstehenden Filmmusiktage, die dieses Jahr Ende November in Halla a.d. Saale stattfinden.