Threading Together Time, Space, and Emotion with Music

An Interview with Film and Television Composer Jeff Russo

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In 1993, American guitarist, songwriter, and composer Jeff Russo co-founded the Grammy-nominated rock band Tonic. During the band's four-year hiatus between 2004-2008, Russo discovered his interest in composing music for pre-written narrative stories in film and television (Fig. 1). His first opportunity was Noah Hawley's crime drama series *The Unusuals* (2009). Since, Russo has composed the music for all five seasons of Hawley's *Fargo* (2014-present) as well as Hawley's psychological feature film, *Lucy in the Sky* (2019). Russo has also struck up a collaborative relationship with writer and director Steve Zaillian, composing the score for the crime miniseries *The Night Of* (2016) and the Netflix limited series, *Ripley* (2024), an adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's 1955 psychological thriller, *The Talented Mr Ripley*.

Russo has scored a diverse collection of stories, from crime to sci-fi, black comedy to action thrillers. His works include *Star Trek: Discovery* (2021-present), *Picard* (2020-23), Peter Berg's espionage action-thriller *Mile 22* (2018), Craig William Macneill's biographical thriller *Lizzie* (2018), and Nick Tomnay's delightfully dark comedy, *What You Wish For* (2023), about a chef with gambling debts who assumes the identity of a friend, only to find himself asked to procure an unusual menu for an exclusive dinner party.

Speaking with *MSJ*, Russo acknowledges the difficulty of discussing music given its subjectivity. The conversation is not difficult. Instead, what becomes apparent is the limitations of words to explain how music makes us feel. It can be described, but there's something evasive and ambivalent about this description. We're left searching for a fuller way to verbally and intellectually articulate what it is that music makes us feel.

Two of today's prominent composers, John Williams and Hans Zimmer, shape the conversation about the role of music in storytelling. Russo identifies some fascinating contradictions in how we can compare the pair. It becomes apparent that Russo understands the process of composing music is the pursuit of connection and, for viewers, the subliminal manipulation of music is intrinsic to the emotional connection. This idea of connection is a recurring theme that he returns to when he discusses sublimating the experiences of characters in his own process for *Fargo*, *Picard*, and *Ripley*.

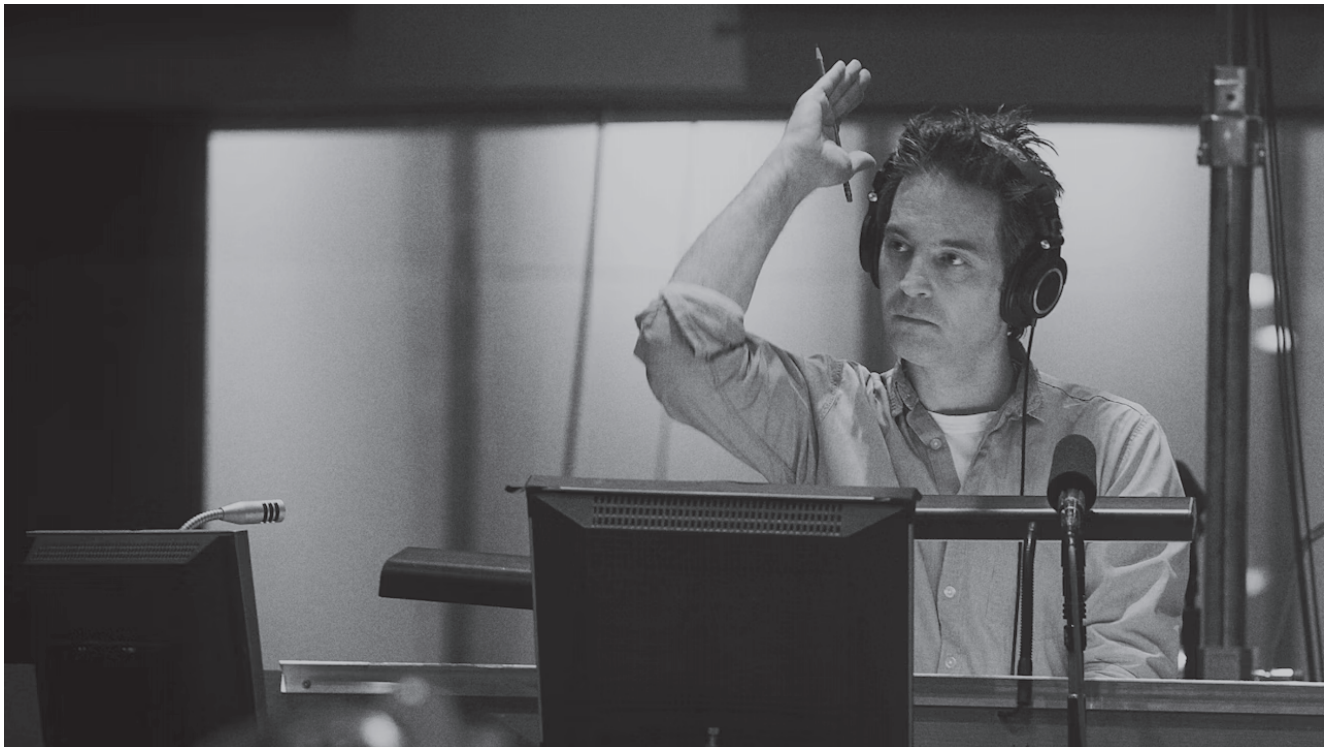

Fig. 1 | In the studio with composer Jeff Russo. *Composer Magazine*, 2024.

PR: What motivated the segue into film and television?

JR: It wasn't something I'd planned on doing. Taking a break from the band, I was trying to figure out what my next thing was going to be. I had a few friends who were doing film and TV music. They asked me to come by their studio to hang out and see what the lay of the land looked like because I wasn't sure what I was going to do. Was I going to make a solo record? Was I going to open a bar? I didn't know what my next career step was going to be, so I went to hang out with them in the studio.

They were working on a couple of television shows at the time, and I thought writing music to help tell the story that's already set was really cool. So, I stayed at my friend's studio for a year and a half just watching, helping, working and writing, and learning how to do the whole thing - that was the transition right there. That was my introduction to working in film and television, and wanting to write music that was a part of telling narrative stories that were already written. Then, about two years later, I was hired to do my own show [*The Unusuals*] and it all blossomed from there.

PR: On reflection, how would you describe your relationship with film and television over the years?

JR: I don't really know how to answer that. I've loved movies since I was a kid. For me, it was a family outing. I never really understood what it was about movies that I really loved, but now, I look back and my favourite movies, and my favourite parts of movies, were those emotional moments. What I know is that music played a big part in that. It's the reason why I was so connected to movies like *E.T.* (Spielberg, 1982). It was emotional storytelling, but if you think about the music and its interplay with the story, it was important, and John Williams is maybe the greatest film composer ever (Fig. 2).

It wasn't at the time like, 'Oh my God, I want to do that' because that was certainly not what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a rock star; I wanted to be Jimmy Page or David Gilmore. As I went through my career as a guitar player and writer in a rock band, the film score that I loved the most and made me perk up and take notice and think, 'Oh, I like the sound of that and that's something that feels familiar to me, musically, so maybe I could do something like that,' was Gustavo Santaolalla's score for *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005), which incorporated guitars and pedal steel and strings and stuff.

It was emotional and impactful and made me feel this was something I could accomplish. I'm not saying I could do it as well as he did, but I'm saying that it didn't seem out of reach. When thinking about John Williams, that just seems out of reach, right? That's not what I write or how I write, and I'm not anywhere near as knowledgeable about film music and the orchestra that would put me in a situation where I could do that. But this particular score at that time felt within reach to me. I think that piqued my interest in working in film and television.

PR: John Williams is one of those people that even if you don't know him by name, it's likely you know his music. What is it about his film scores that have captivated generations of audiences?

JR: Music is subjective, so it's impossible for me to say what is special, objectively, about his music. I can tell you what it means to me. I think his ability to connect the emotion of a character with the emotion of the viewer is unsurpassed, and he does that with

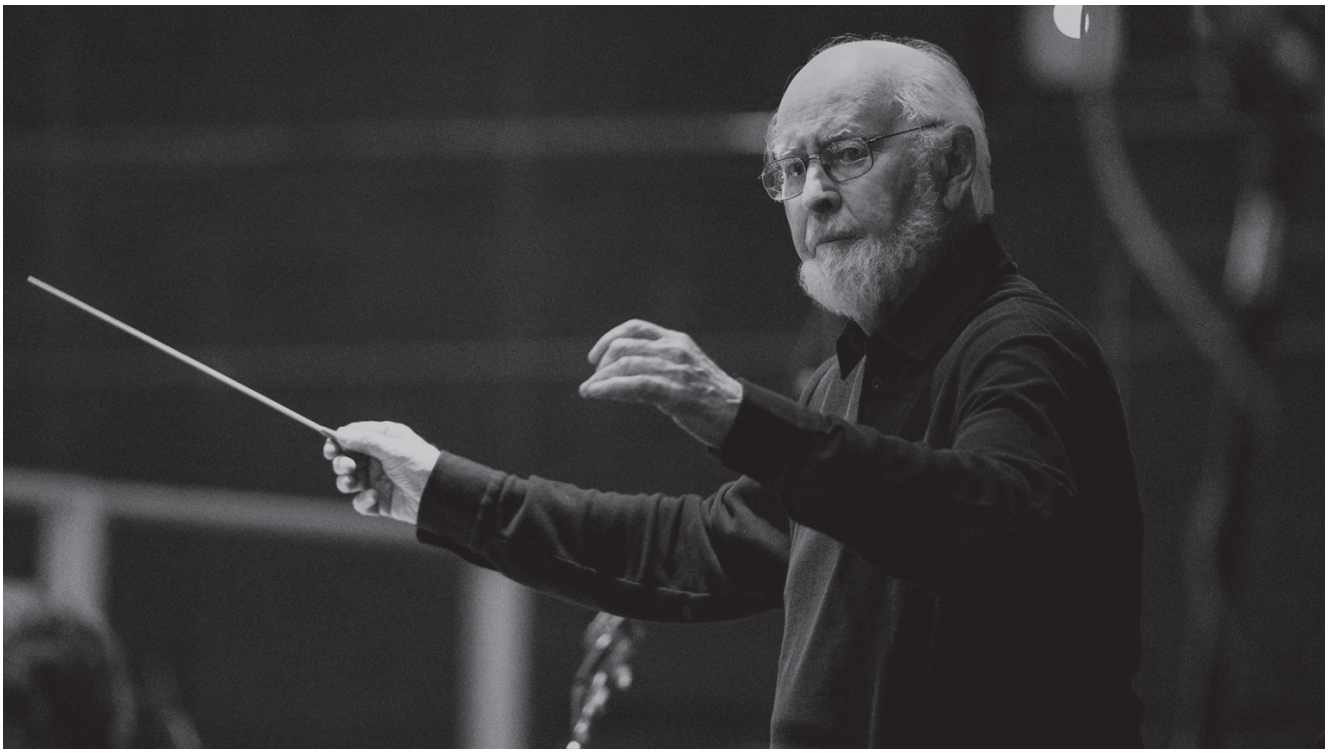

Fig. 2 | Legendary composer John Williams. Dan Brooks, 2022.

melody and harmony, counter melody and counterpoint. He does that with so many different things. It just keeps you connected to the material and that, to me, is the thing that keeps me in awe of what he does. He might say that he's not doing that on purpose - I don't know what he would say - but it seems so effortless for him to connect the emotion of a character and the scene to the emotion of the viewer, and that's my subjective opinion.

PR: Hans Zimmer is another celebrated composer, who, alongside Williams, is one of the most prominent and recognisable film composers, although Bernard Herrmann was equally notable, whose scores for Alfred Hitchcock's films were integral to Hitchcock's success. Zimmer's unorthodox approach to creating different sounds is striking. What are your thoughts on Zimmer and does he exist in a different musical context to Williams?

JR: He's a master of being evocative, whether it's sound, melody or chord progression, in terms of connecting music to the picture and having it be this one big threaded together mesh. Nobody does it as well as he does. He and Williams are very different in their processes, but the result is similar. I'm not saying the end result of the music is similar, I'm saying the end result of what it does is similar. Both are enmeshed in the narrative that connects the viewer to the emotion of the scene, and it takes a very keen eye to be able to do that, and he [Zimmer] does that very well.

All the composers you mention are in that same category. It's the ability to be evocative and yet also stay out of the way. It's a thin and difficult needle to thread and every one of the composers you mention does that really well, and that's what elevates them to that level.

PR: Given the importance of music to a film, I often find myself drawn to rewatching films not only for the narrative and characters, but to again hear the music that's set to the images.

JR: That's the thing. I don't think it's music that we want to go back and hear. I think there is something about it that we don't know - it's subliminal. Music might draw someone back, not because of the music specifically, but because there is this invisible thread that is tied to the viewer when music makes you feel something. Music can manipulate the viewer's emotion, so you may be going back to see it again, but not because the music was so great, and you were thinking, 'Oh, I want to hear that theme again.' You're drawn back to the feeling of this emotional connection.

Music, to me, is always the heart of any narrative. When I say heart, I mean it's the thing that's beating in the background that keeps the film alive, but you don't know it. You're sitting there right now talking to me, but you're not noticing the fact that your heart is beating, and blood is rushing through your body, keeping you alive. That's the thing about music, it's happening, and sometimes you notice it and sometimes you don't. It's underneath the surface weaving a thread between the film and the viewer. A talented composer, excuse me, when I say a talented composer, I'm not talking about someone whose ability to write music is high, because there are a lot of people who can write really beautiful music that are not necessarily great film or television composers. There's an underlying understanding and ability to take the music, and have it work with the picture in a way that it rises and falls is noticeable and then not noticeable. This then ties the viewer with the story. How it ties it altogether is what people go back for. It has nothing to do with a person consciously wanting to hear a piece

of music again. Instead, they subliminally want to experience that feeling again and that feeling has a lot to do with music.

It's like when you hear *Dune* (2021) for instance, there are a few themes that are really noticeable, like when the woman sings. They use that in a way that is very noticeable and there's also that percussive thing that Zimmer did in the first one, which was very unique. I didn't even notice it in the second movie, but it's there. Interestingly enough, I was talking to a friend about that. I said, "It's weird in the second movie that he doesn't use it." He told me, "Dude, it was all over the second movie, you just don't know it." I went back and watched it again, and there it is. So, to me, that was a subliminal thing and that's the beauty of music, and that's what I try to do [laughs].

PR: If we focus on some of your scores, for example *Picard*, *Ripley,* and *Fargo*, could you describe the process of how you're connecting the music to those characters in specific ways based on the story?

JR: Well, it's the same process for all three and that's just my own process. The idea is how I can connect with the feelings of the character and what they're experiencing. With *Picard*, I was able to connect with what I thought he, as a character, was experiencing in this latter stage of life. When I was writing that theme, I was trying to tie everything together for him, his feelings about the past and what his future looks like. How does that feel in a melody? How does that feel in a harmony and rhythm? How does it make me feel?

I approach all the things that I do in that way. With *Ripley*, I started in one way and had to pivot because I was writing this emotional, romantic style of Italian music. I talked to the filmmaker [Zaillian] and he said it was all beautiful and wonderful, but really, we're making a movie about a psycho killer, and a serial killer at that. How do we include that feeling of being off-kilter and that feeling of being mysterious and intense and ugly? I rethought what that meant for some of the underscore and then, of course, there was the Italian and Sicilian nature of some of the pieces of music, so the Italian setting felt authentic.

With *Fargo* season five, I look at the characters and story and try to stay in the same vein as the previous four seasons. The feeling that I'm trying to evoke is the same, but how do I do that with a different melodic and harmonic structure? We have a whole new story and cast. What does that look like? But really, the process is all the same - approaching it from an emotional connection.

PR: Rewatching Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), the ending is as dark and cynical as I remember. The main musical theme refuses to be swept up in romantic sentimentality. Composer Jerry Goldsmith holds it back from hitting those high sweeping notes, the music a cautionary voice that knows what is to come. Of course, on first viewing, the viewer is unaware of this, but on repeat viewings, what the music communicates changes.

JR: Like I said, it's almost impossible to discuss and talk about it in that much detail because the subjectivity of music makes it different for everyone. There's no one way to do it, to talk about it, or to feel it. My experience with telling stories is my experience with telling stories. Everything that I've experienced in my life with the way I've told stories, from the beginning, writing songs and then writing music for a narrative story has all led to how I do it. My connection with character is really it. I don't know how to explain it any deeper than that.

PR: I recall coming across the idea that if you try to explain why you love a piece of music, you undermine it, because it's a feeling. Music is one aspect of film and television that we're trying to find words for, but it's elusive because of that subjectivity.

JR: It's very true. There's no one way, and so it's impossible to have a conversation about it other than to talk about my process and my experience.

PR: We've done okay and had a decent conversation around a subject that's ironically difficult if not sometimes impossible to discuss.

A filmmaker once told me that the person you are before you make a film is different to the person you are afterwards. Do you share that experience in the process of composing a score?

JR: The idea of making any kind of art is certainly transformative. I'm a very fortunate individual in that I get to sublimate all of my bullshit into music, right? So, the way I sometimes get to express myself is simply through music. Artists have a one up on people who don't create art, and the one up that we have is this direct outlet for our emotional baggage. If I'm angry or sad, I can put it into music. Then, taking that one step further, that is me making music for myself, and as I get to write music for other characters, I have to sublimate someone else's. I say someone else's, but it's something else's. I have to sublimate that, turn it into something and then spit it back out and all of that gets rolled up in my own crap.

So, if I'm watching something, and I'm not connecting with it, I've got to find a way to connect to it. I have to find a way that I can make sure I can take it in, churn it up and then churn it out as something that helps tell the story. And that is certainly also transformative, sometimes positively, sometimes not. But it's transformative.

Would I say I'm a different person now than some other time? Not necessarily, but I understand why a filmmaker might say you're a different person before you start a project than you are after. There's definitely something that's transformative about making art, and I just feel transformation is different for everybody. ▪