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Composer Ben Salisbury Discusses Scoring Science for Alex Garland

Ben Salisbury, Holly Rogers, John McGrath, Carol Vernallis and Dale Chapman

Edited by Carol Vernallis, John McGrath and Holly Rogers

On 28 January 2021, *Cybermedia's* film music scholars met with composer Ben Salisbury to talk about his film and television work. Below is an excerpt from our interview, which focused on his work with Alex Garland.

HR: Hi Ben. Could you tell us a bit about your collaborations with Alex Garland? I believe you often start talking about the music and sound before shooting, which is unusual.

BS: Alex's ways of working are not typical. The process is time consuming and hard work, but as a composer you're more integrated into the project. Most often, the composer comes in at the postproduction's end, and there's a danger you'll feel like you're being bolted on. Alex completely upends that: we first started working this way with *Ex Machina*. The film took nearly a year, and we were in from the start. The downside is you end up scoring the film about 50 times over, because it changes. But, for the better, you feel part of those changes. In *Ex Machina*, a strand's devoted to Caleb's infatuation with Ava. This thread contains several pillars, and we underscored them with an oscillating guitar melody. It first began when Caleb is watching Ava on CCTV, and became infatuated with her. Our pillars built to a sort of dream sequence Caleb experiences in the shower. We're now far down the line, maybe 5-6 months into the process. We were then watching a complete edit of the film with a temporary sound mix that was 80-90% done. With the film projected on a full cinema screen, we really got the feel of it. We came out

and said, “There's something wrong with their relationship—they're falling in love too quickly”. We needed to convey a sense of weirdness that Caleb was falling for an AI, a robot. Instead Caleb seemed to be immediately going “Oh, isn't she wonderful, lovely?” We had to change that first cue to include an element of strangeness. And then, we found we had to change the next one, and then the whole strand. The whole thing collapsed on us.

HR: Your soundtracks with Alex seem special. You have themes that develop, like Ava's love theme at the film's beginning when you can't hear any real-world sound. Of course the listener doesn't yet know it's her theme, yet you still immediately become aligned with her point of view.

I noticed how embedded your musical processes are for *Devs*. The sounds are complicated. It feels like the music drives the series. Did Alex ever change his imagery in response to your score? It sometimes feels like that.

BS: The plainsong, for example, which is this string thing, was something I did after talking to Alex, seeing the set, and knowing that religiosity and devotional music were going to be key. I challenged myself to create a sound resembling a Medieval plainchant but not quite.

HR: Was it original?

BS: Yes. It's got some oddness that wouldn't be present in Medieval plainchant, some sort of weird major-minor bent, but it's composed of single notes following one another. There's nothing complicated about it, although we analyzed every shift from pitch to pitch as you do with Alex. It was composed beforehand and Alex immediately latched on to that as Lily's journey music into *Devs*. It was Lily's theme, but the cue also expressed her journey.

Here's an example of the dangers of writing music upfront. We'd never seen the *Devs*'s set.

While we read the earlier scripts, we discussed the ways the show foregrounded a high-powered,

tech-like cult, led by Forest, the charismatic CEO. We spent a long time writing a sort of cult music, imagining the workers at this Google-like facility performing in a Thursday afternoon choir where they got together and sang weird music and banged on things. The music was rough and ready, especially around the edges. It sounded great, not something you often hear in film or TV music. To record the music, we put out a call on Twitter for any Americans living in Bristol who fancied singing. They didn't have to be brilliant at it. I think we got so attached to the approach, because we had such fun doing it. We did lots of chanting and cover versions of songs by Fleetwood Mac and the like, and it sounded great, and it suited the world of Devs to a degree. Alex liked it. But when we went on set to see the Devs computer in the Devs lab, we gasped. It was one of the most amazing things I'd ever seen. To give you some idea of the scale of it, those honeycomb gold leaf walls were all about 5 meters square and there was something like 400 of them. There's no effects in that, I mean obviously, with cranes and stuff, they sometimes removed the floor, but it was all there, with the computer at its center. It was absolutely jaw dropping, like walking into an art installation—we all said this is just like a temple. There's nothing unpolished about this. With such sheen and beauty, we had to get rid of almost all of that music. That was when we hit on the idea of the devotional, where we could handpick elements of new ageism, Buddhism, and Christianity and bastardize it massively. We didn't have to be true to it and there was no need to be authentic.

CV: How does color shape the music? Each of Alex's films has a different palette. *Ex Machina* is red and grey, *Annihilation* is blueish-green, and *Devs* has a lot of gold with some green.

BS: Alex sends us mood boards which include color schemes. The golds and reds of *Devs* have a sort of shimmering beauty to them. That was key to the devotional sheen that we added to the music. For *Ex Machina*, we knew it was a cold, austere film. It was very beautiful. But the

geometry of the architecture and materials are also important. Alex loves his sheets of glass, things through glass. There's a stillness to his work. He doesn't do handheld camera—with the cinematographer Rob Hardy, he does very beautiful, composed shots with tiny zooms in, most often unnoticeable. It would be difficult to articulate how precisely this affects the music, but it does. Quite often, Alex will do these still beautiful shots and you can put the most jarring music over the top of it. This can work as an abrupt handbrake, a ripping away from what you expect. It seems to work if you're being purposeful about it.

CV: Could you say more about the music you chose to represent Dev's religiosity and does this link to the show's gold palette?

BS: Geoff [Barrow], The Insects, and I were inventing a sort of pan-religious musical language that could also be warped. We also had lots of tools at our disposal. The Hilliard Ensemble piece with Jan Garbarek was one that Alex chose early on. I'd introduced him to the quartet in *Annihilation*—we temped their recordings over the alien. I think Alex heard this music when he was scrolling through *Annihilation's* temp tracks, and kept the snippet in mind as he was writing the script for *Devs*. The Hilliard Ensemble recording gave us a way in, because it provided a religious element and that saxophone sounded amazing—like a call to prayer. And again, this is a simple association, but there's a sort of sheen to a saxophone itself, it's golden. There's something about the sound that seemed to fit the *Devs* building.

HR: It works so well! It's got a weird temporality to it because you've got this 12th-century medieval plainsong with this contemporary saxophone over the top and it seems to help convey *Devs's* depiction of parallel worlds.

BS: Yeah, absolutely. And we've always done that with Alex's stuff.

DC: I have a question about the organic versus the electronic. I remember a discussion with Portishead back in the '90s when they said Geoff, your co-writer, would do these really cool things. He would achieve a turntablist effect—he would actually record a live band, put it down on vinyl, and then record the vinyl rather than drawing upon an existing sound source. His vinyl-ready approach strikes me as a process that's about shifting between live and electronic, or live and pre-produced, or organic and electronic. It strikes me that with yours and Geoff's work, you're on this type of threshold.

BS: Yeah, definitely. We spend a long time on all aspects of the palette, especially in the Alex Garland films. Once you as a composer have found your palette and you've got your themes, the score almost writes itself. With *Ex Machina* we immediately realized Ava's theme needed to be organic. I don't think we made this delineation, but a lot of the human stuff is electronic, and a lot of stuff involving organic elements are guitar oscillations or Ava's celesta theme.

Again, this division came out of one of those key first discussions with Alex about *Ex Machina*'s soundtrack. When we went to see a cut I brought up some examples of music notated on slides because we talked about Ava being a fairy tale-type character. Alex thought we needed the audience to see through her point of view and we could express this through music. So you mentioned Holly that her theme was maybe from her point of view. I would say actually, it's more of a subterfuge. Yes, it's her theme, but it presents her as a fairy tale. Alex said he wanted the theme to have no edge to it whatsoever. So I then gave him a celesta theme, with a slight darkness or melancholy to it, and he said, "No, it's the right sound, but I want no edge. I want it so simple and pure; purity." I instantly wrote a new version and sent it to him. Then he said, "That's it. Don't change a note," and we didn't. I was frightened of it, because it was so naive and

simple. Can this really be our main theme for our first feature film score? And he was like “No it is!”

CV: This contrast between organic versus electronic in *Ex Machina*. Does it recur in other films?

BS: Yes. After we read *Annihilation*'s script and gathered a sense of the film's surroundings and environment, we decided we'd have no electronics except for that last third act where we're in the world of alien insanity, and then all bets would be off. Nothing in the first two acts is produced by a synth, it's all bowed waterphones and bells, as well as acoustic guitar. And this somehow matches *Annihilation*'s color palette.

But in a film, there's often a weird symbiosis between moving picture and music. *Annihilation*'s opening has a shot with a comet coming through space, and after four or five attempts, we'd settled on one serviceable fragment with waterphone that had a strange atmosphere—it was soundscapey. At 2/3 into the film, we'd written this folksy, backwoods, simple Americana guitar theme to accompany the team walking through the woods in the American South, as well as Lena contemplating things. Alex phoned one day and said, “Oh, I've put the guitar theme over the front and I think it works.” Geoff and I put our heads in our hands, and he said, “No look, just try it.” and he sent us a QuickTime immediately. We both went, “Oh my God, yeah he's right.” Alex's take on it was, in the film's opening, we've got a captive audience and some latitude to do this. Composers and a filmmaker can tease out an audiovisual relationship that just works: it can be upsetting or satisfying, it can lead you down the garden path, it can be just purely beautiful.

HR: Like the comet, I'd like to hear about another totemic object—the *Devs* computer. When the characters first encounter it, the soundtrack seems to have layers, as if it starts with strings,

and the plainsong returns. There's the saxes, some electronic washes, metallic. It sets your teeth on edge. And is it ... Tuvan throat singing?

BS: No, it was only a redoing of the cult choir chanting. We called it the posh choir: there was a lot of improvised chanting where I would stand in the room and say, "Right, tenors start with D and others come in with your solo parts and build up the chants." When we had that material, we were able to put it through granular synthesis so the chants became broken: I don't fully understand the physics of it, but it sounds as if the sound wave splits apart into grains that you can manipulate. This granulation seemed perfect: a sort of musical metaphor for the quantum computer's processes. *Devs*' music overall has a lot of processes. Alex loves getting into the physics of things, and it's brilliant fun.

Alex is an enthusiast about science and passes that on to the rest of the team. We had long discussions on *Devs* about quantum computing, and the various things existing in two spaces at once. Suddenly I said, "Oh, there's a good musical metaphor for that, you know, I'm sure you've heard about Steve Reich who did these processes with phasing in the late 60s." Two days later Alex phoned me up. He said he'd found the Reich recording, and had been playing the music in the car while driving cast members to and from their hotels and the San Francisco shooting locations. 'Come Out' was at full volume and the cast was going, "What's this?" Alex absolutely fell in love with it. Processes became an interesting way in. The plainsong is a process. It's a sequence of notes that doesn't get broken, or when it gets broken, it gets broken purposefully. I don't know whether any of those things actually make any difference, but they make the creative process more interesting as a composer. I think they probably do. You know, whether the music is good or bad, there's always a thought-out truth behind everything. Alex loves that, "This note

represents this, doesn't it?" And just the relationship between 2 notes can become a whole afternoon's discussion where we all end up murdering each other. But it's good fun, yeah.