

Going (More) Medieval on Lord of the Rings

By
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Despite Comic Book Guy's oracular pronouncement in the 1990s that *The Lord of the Rings* could never be filmed, Peter Jackson earned a place in the fantasy film pantheon by dedicating himself completely to the films' production. Jackson took his job very seriously, particularly when it came to costumes, props, and armor. Essentially, everything on screen – every sword, every robe, even the leatherwork on each horse harness – was handmade. Nothing was purchased or rented. The net effect is that it's easy to become completely sucked in to the reality of Middle Earth.

That was my tune until I spoke to Eric Moon, a long-time fan of Tolkein's *Ring* cycle, and a professional musician. "They didn't buy anything that already existed," admitted Moon, a devotee of the books, but tepid fan of the movies. "Every tile on the floor, every single design...they made everything from scratch, but they totally didn't follow that paradigm in the music. The music is absolutely 100% 20th century orchestra music. There is no instrument [on the score] that sounds like it could have been played 5,000 years ago."

Modern symphonic music is great for filling up a theater. For a movie on the scale of *Lord of the Rings*, a nine-hour epic, the modern moviegoer probably wouldn't want to sacrifice the score to something less than larger-than-life.

But Moon says you wouldn't have to compromise full sound, and in fact you could give the movie more integrity. "There's nothing wrong with going for orchestral music," he said, "but you gotta make it all yourself, the same way that you made the horse harnesses. I would have tried to assemble an orchestra that sounded like – whether or not it *was* – instruments that we don't have, handmade instruments. I would have found or built handmade instruments and taught an orchestra to play them. And then the music would have sounded like it belonged in Middle Earth."

At first blush, creating a musical instrument from scratch seems more difficult and costly than, say, leatherworking, but Moon said that doesn't have to be the case. "These things are semi-universal," he said. "The idea of a flute or a violin or a drum – these exist in every culture on the earth. It's like the idea of the horse harness. We're not reinventing the idea of how to control a horse; we're just going to make our own control. We're not reinventing buildings, we're just going to make sure the detail[s] on these buildings aren't the ones you see in our world."

Moon's idea isn't that far-out. The Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev wrote the score for the 1938 film *Alexander Nevsky*. If you rent the DVD, you will hear a powerful, primitive score rich with drums and trumpets.

"The battle horns sound like battle horns, and not like somebody took the trombones out of a modern orchestra," says Moon. "You could have built these instruments and challenged regular symphony players to learn to play them. You could build your own violins. They aren't going to sound as 'good' as a modern violin, but a violinist could pretty much play it, and it would be more representative of what you'd expect in [Middle Earth]. There's a deliberate sense in the [movies] to go back to primeval times. That's what gives it this mythical resonance. I think if people heard the movie orchestrated that way, [it] would impact at a much deeper level."

After just a few minutes' conversation with Moon I was ready to concede. Jackson had the right idea, but didn't carry it far enough.

To carry my point a bit further, I disagree with George Lucas' decision to go back and muck with the original *Star Wars* movies, I do wish there were some way for Moon to be given a budget, a team of craftsmen and musicians, and a WETA building in New Zealand.

When the 10- or 20-year anniversary edition of the *Lord of the Rings* is released in next-generation digital format, I'd love to have the "Eric Moon primitive-instruments score" audio option.

Sources:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Production_design_of_The_Lord_of_the_Rings_film_trilogy

http://www.lordoftherings.net/film/production/pr_props.html