

Freddie: 0:15

Welcome to Sound In Motion, a podcast as part of Dance Umbrella - London's International Festival for Dance. The festival is designed to be in-person across our wonderful global city and online to our international audiences. This is a podcast series where we delve into the relationship of composers, musicians, or sound designers working with choreographers. This is the unheard part of the process. My name is Freddie Opoku-Addaie, Artistic Director and Chief Executive at Dance Umbrella. Amy May is a multi-instrumentalist, arranger and composer. She plays for a variety of bands, orchestras and ensembles, including her work as the principal violinist with the Heritage Orchestra, and as the violinist for the multiple Grammy Award winning Hamilton. She writes music for adverts, films and television, and she has written and released four albums with her band, Paris Motel. Well, thank you, Amy. It's an absolute pleasure to have you on Sound In Motion. Firstly, how did you - I mean, as a composer, musician - how did you come about to work with choreographers or movement directors?

Amy: 1:48

Well, I'm a bit of a jack of all trades, really. I've worked with all sorts of different people and I write lots of commercial music and all sorts of different things. And alongside my work as a as a performer, because I play the viola and violin and various other bits and bobs, and I met Hetain Patel, whose music, whose films we're going to be talking about today. I met him in 2014, and I think I've written music for all of his major works since then. We're a team. So yeah, we've been we've been writing and creating together for several years now.

Freddie: 2:26

So is there any other movement directors you've worked with or any other things you think gives you the balance between working in the music sector as well as working across disciplines? No. It's something that is a very new thing for me and something that I really want to do more of because I've worked a lot creating live music and recording music, but choreography is something that I'm desperate to work with a lot more. So it's so working with live, live Dance is something that I haven't done. I'm a bit fresh when it comes to all that kind of thing. But yeah, that I've been working with Hetain for several years. So let's listen to the first track or score that you've picked for us today.

Amy: 3:13

Okay. This is one that we did very recently for a project called Landing. It's a creative project that was made with the people of Nottinghamshire, and it's a response to the launch of the Mayflower Boat, which sailed over to the Americas in 1620. And it was also made with a combined choir from Nottinghamshire in Worksop Priory. [First track plays].

Freddie: 4:43

That was really beautiful. And it's just you can really feel all the emotions in that music. Thank you, Amy. So what is the process when you're working with Hetain Patel? Especially in this way of working where it's a film work? Yeah. How, what is the process? Does Hetain give you a material, a section of material, movement material, and then you score it or how does that work? And this specific music that you've chosen.

Amy: 5:08

Well, it can work in different ways. And that's why I've chosen these two different works to talk about today. So the Landing Project was - I'd seen some of the footage and I knew approximately how long it would be, but I didn't know exactly what I was going to be dealing with. And so I wasn't writing for specific movement. I was writing to compliment the sort of the atmosphere of the dance and the movement that the that the dancers were using. And also, I was quite, because I used a local choir, we didn't have - that we recorded in Worksop Priory - I didn't have the usual technology to line things perfectly up with with movement on the screen, because I'd gone into the church and there was a group of people and we were feeling our way through the music. That also affected the way I structured the music itself. So it was a lot more free flowing. It wasn't to a click, it wasn't to precise movements within the dance. So it was a very...yes it was a lot more free flowing, this piece.

Freddie: 6:18

Just on top of that as well or to add to it. So what is the process? Are you normally with Hetain when the film or when the material is being recorded?

Amy: 6:29

No. I usually receive bits and bobs as we go along. When we, we start before anything is recorded and we start talking about how we're going to approach it. With this one we both felt pretty uncomfortable with the, with the topic

itself and, you know, the impact that the arrival of this ship had on the Wampanoag First Nation and had already had because settlers had arrived before then and that been something called the Great Dying, where the local communities had been absolutely annihilated by Western illnesses. And so to celebrate this boat felt very uncomfortable. So we talked a lot about how we would approach it from both our points of view. And for me, I, I was thinking about the journey of these people who are very normal day to day people, at the moment that they saw the shore for the first time. Because I didn't want to, I didn't want to write about them landing and colonising. So when you hear the music, basically the music that you can hear, there's a melody that runs through it that's from a book of Psalms that was actually found in the the log of what was on the ship. And so they would have sung it. The people on the boat would have sung it they would have sung it. And you can also hear a solo violin, which I was imagining that as they approached the shore, they heard the first bird. That's called, there's a Connecticut Sparrow, which has got a really beautiful song. And I imagine what it must have been like for them after weeks at sea and the disasters that already befallen them and lots of them had died, to hear this bird and this feeling of hope when they approached the land. So that's how I kind of, that's what we that's what we ended up thinking about when I started writing the music. And we did that just through talking. We always just we talk through things, we listen to things, we sit in our dressing gowns on Zoom and have cups of tea, and we always have meetings in our dressing gowns I don't know why, we've been doing it for nearly ten years.

Freddie: 8:49

It's very grand.

Amy: 8:51

We really are. We are. We keep meaning to invest in smoking jackets, but we've never actually done it. Yeah. So there's, there's a lot of talking and dreaming and imagining. And Hetain has always got really grand ideas for what he wants to hear. He'll, he'll, he'll listen to something and go Oh, I just heard this gigantic Hans Zimmer score. Do you think we could do something like that? And then, of course, the budget doesn't quite reflect going to Abbey Road record 300 musicians. So there's yeah, there's a bit of negotiating as well, but I think it's really exciting to push what can be done with the resources that we have, which is why the music that I write for him tends to be fairly grand. Yeah. So

that's kind of the rough process that happens before I sit down and start writing notes on a page.

Freddie: 9:45

So we're going to go straight into the second score, track, you have for us today. Do you mind telling us a bit more about how this came about?

Amy: 9:55

Yes. Well, this is a completely different film. It's called Don't Look at the Finger. And in it, we see two protagonists who are gathering in a church for a wedding ceremony and the proceedings are conducted in sign language. And then the action sort of changes into this full blown kung fu, hand-to-hand combat. And we look at the sort of struggle between the two central characters. And it's it's incredibly exciting and very beautiful. And in this instance, I used a lot of percussion to very accurately reflect exactly what was going on at the time. So completely contrasting to the previous music. And I had a full edited visual when I wrote the music, and it's very consistently moving with the movement on the screen. [Second track plays]

Freddie: 13:11

Great.

Amy: 13:12

Yeah.

Freddie: 13:15

I got to say, watching this back...it's just really beautiful to see, actually, how we did not move to score, then to see it being scored. It just feels, not it adds, it just completely complements one another. And it's just a beautiful piece of work. So yeah, I mean, I was in it, but to see it and this is actually it's done stunning. So thank you it's just really beautiful work. And actually, this score was orchestrated live to the film, wasn't it?

Amy: 13:43

Yes. We performed this live a few times with a string section and singers and a big percussion section, which was brilliant. We've done quite a few works, the works we've made together live, which is really good fun.

Freddie: 13:57

So how is it scoring clips or footage that you receive? And even after all the conversations that you have from the, how do you say, storyboarding? And then scoring that, and then to score an actual final edited product. In a live performance. How do you, yeah how do you work? What is the processes? There was a lot in that.

Amy: 14:20

I mean, the process of making it live and making it for film are very different. Because when I was making it for film, obviously I had the film in front of me and I could, I could time the music to exactly what was going on. And so there's a kind of a very precise structuring that goes on. That's the first thing that happens. And I look through and discuss with Hetain ooh what do you want in this bit? Do you want something kind of driving and action based? And actually Hetain's very lovely and charitable and lets me kind of go for it. And I always have big ideas and he says, oh gosh, don't do too much! And then I do twice as much as I say I will. So he's quite used to this now, which is why we have these giant epic scores, you know. But the process of making it live is very different. So. Basically the musicians, the live musicians are playing to the live film. So we have they will have headphones on with click tracks so they can tell kind of where they are. And there's a lot of electronic excitement going on. So there are certain elements of the original soundtrack which you can hear live, but then you get the live singers and the live string players and percussion. So it's a very complicated business and kind of a headache, but it's really worth it because to hear that, watch the beauty of that film but with a full live sound is really fantastic. And of course, the musicians, they all read music, they all read the scores. So because I trained as a classical musician, that's just part of what I do. So I write the scores out for them so that they can play along with it.

Freddie: 16:03

And one thing I was also just thinking as a musician yourself as well, and then working with movement, like physical movement - how does, how do you kind of find ways to have that collaborative conversation between the physical action that's very ephemeral, that happens and disappears, and with yourself as a musician playing live sometimes as well, that that also disappears? Because you don't necessarily want one to over impose on the other. So how does that, what are the processes that you go on with a choreographer in order to have that work?

Amy: 16:40

Well, there's a great deal of difference, I think, between writing collaboratively and writing music to exist in its own right. So both of these pieces are pieces that I wouldn't necessarily sit down just to listen to. And they, they have to complement and work with what's, what's there. And I suppose with these two that we've listened to today, they're very responsive. I've responded to the work that's already there. But I'm also, because I'm a performer, I'm used to that very responsive thing that happens between different performers and, say, dancers and musicians and the way that you can move time and emotion, and everything, through a glance. Through a pause. And that's something that I'm hoping to do more of in the future, actually, because it's something that I find really exciting.

Freddie: 17:38

So having spoken to the other two composers, musicians, who are also part of Sound In Motion - Vincenzo Lamagna and then Michael Mikey J Asanti, it's just something that you all share as this thing, this emotional feeling that you have towards the physical language. And I just want to understand, how do you - for you, for you, because you can't speak for the other two composers - but how do you kind of find that that, that I'm going to work with this instrument to try and get this an emotion across? Yeah. How do you, what are the tools that you use to do that?

Amy: 18:16

That's a very good question. I mean, I think I can only speak for me. I started playing the violin when I was five and I learnt with this thing called Suzuki Method, which is I guess it's a kind of philosophy that young children learn language very quickly. So if you teach the music when they're young, music becomes like a language. So for me, it's just always been another way of speaking or communicating and I don't actually know what the process is. When I watch something, I can hear music in my head and it's almost like a kind of plug my brain, plug my brain in and write down what's going on. I couldn't tell you for a moment how that music gets into my head. I'm assuming it's partly things I've heard before and all those influences and sort of ideas of what should be heard. So, for example, with the Landing Project, the 25th Psalm, I wanted to have that in there somehow. So that became part of, that became part of the structure of it. But it's very difficult to put a finger on

where that comes from. I mean, I suppose in a way there's the very practical things of what's the budget, how many instruments can I get hold of? There's that side of it. But for me, it's more of a, almost like a dreamlike thing where I think, Oh, I can hear a choir here, or I can hear strings or a big brass section. And then I have to work out a way to make that real, which is the fun bit, that's the tricky bit.

Freddie: 19:46

So the question that comes to mind, actually with all those kind of innate skills already developed over decades, how is it working with a performance maker? You say, visual artist, like Hetain and yeah, in that way, that also works very closely with movement and is driven not just actually physical movement from martial arts, but also BSL language, and language. How does that influence your language as a musician, or not?

Amy: 20:17

I think it's all part of the same language. It's, I think as a musician you get used to - well, in my career I've worked with different types of musicians and I suppose I work with people who are creating things for television. And we've all got certain common things about the way we talk about what we're trying to express. And there might be different technical terms, and maybe I can write scores and maybe someone like Hetain knows about editing. But we're talking about creating an experience and an emotional journey for the person who's watching or listening. And in that sense, I think whoever I've worked with, we always managed to find what it is that we're trying to create. And also, I think the technical stuff, just the technical stuff, that's what you learn when you go to film school or music college. But the, the kind of the passion and the love for what you're doing is the thing that is the common language and makes it easy to work with someone and certainly when I work with Hetain we're both really passionate about what we do and we like each other's ideas and we bounce off of each other and we say, Oh, have you heard this thing? Have you heard that thing? If you read this book, have you...? And that's the language that we use to work together. And that's why I think I think it really works for us.

Freddie: 21:39

And I totally agree. I'm not just being biased, but having seen many of the work that you guys have collaborated on, you can feel there's a real synergy there

that one...not necessarily the movement is overpowering the score or the composition music, and then vice versa. And it's just really beautiful to see. And one thing I definitely get from yourselves as composers and musicians is that sense of collaboration. And they say collaboration is not easy to do, but it feels there's a real process and you can really see that there is not one form takes, takes all the, as you say the stage. But I would like to ask so moving forward, what else are you working on now? Future?

Amy: 22:25

Well, that's a good question. I'm doing all sorts of things. I'm a jack of many, many trades. So I'm doing lots, I'm doing lots of playing at the moment. And that's how I, that's how I pay many of my bills, many of my enormous bills. And I'm just starting a project. I'm actually looking for a choreographer at the moment because I'm just starting a project looking at the movement of language, of people telling stories and kind of combining the sound of people telling their stories with the movement of their, of their faces and the way that they tell stories. This is just a very new project, which I'm starting to work on. And because I'm a, I'm a jobbing musician, I'm writing lots of music for other people and doing all the kind of day to day stuff I do. So today, once I finish this, I'll go, I'm going to do a recording session, and then I play viola on a show called Hamilton. So I'll be doing that this evening. So it's that's my, this is a typical day for me, doing all sorts of weird and wonderful things. So I never know quite what I'm going to be doing. But there's always an interesting project coming up here and there.

Freddie: 23:36

I mean, I just find it, I just find it amazing how independent artists and creatives navigate that skill. I mean, what's it - I always say freelancers are never free because they're never freelancing about because when they're free, they're looking for the next freelance gig. So it's just utterly amazing that you navigate those space and being to make this quality of work. But I would ask, and I know it's really difficult to navigate this profession, what advice would you give to young budding musicians or people that want to collaborate with other art forms? Yeah. How how do you go about doing it?

Amy: 24:14

I'd say it's all the really unglamorous stuff is working really, really hard and it's talking to people being open with people, being interested in ideas, being

willing to try things and being scared of doing them but bloody doing them anyway, which is what I've made a career doing, is thinking, Oh my goodness, can I do that? Oh, I'm not really sure. And giving it a go anyway. I think. I'm, I mean, I'm 44 now. I've, I've been in the music industry for 25 years, but I think it's a very different industry to go into now. And I think the fact that it's the double edged sword of having access to technology and certain resources that maybe I wouldn't have had. But then the number of people who are interested in working across the arts is, is enormous. So I think, and I think actually another very important thing is knowing why you're doing it. I think you have to have the absolute passion for it so that you just couldn't do anything else. And if you've got that and you can work really hard, then everything else will fall into place.

Freddie: 25:22

Well, that's beautiful advice and actually knowing your work and having been moving to your work, you definitely get that sense of that commitment and passion and the hard work that goes into it. So I just want to say thank you very much. And hopefully I'm pretty sure we'll be seeing more of your work across movement, dance and film - all the amazing things you continue to do.

Amy: 25:44

I really hope so.

Freddie: 25:45

Thank you.

Amy: 25:46

Thank you very much.

Freddie: 25:52

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