

## versione italiana

Music and cinema have a long shared history. A film's soundtrack is fundamental to the medium: creating atmosphere, provoking excitement, weaving through the moving images and supporting the narrative thread. Italy has a long, internationally recognised tradition of music in film - the most famous on its roster of composers being, beyond doubt, Ennio Morricone. Thankfully, the tradition is being carried forward.

Emiliano Mazzenga, originally from Rome where he studied at the Conservatory and began composing, is currently living in Los Angeles. In 2020, he completed the Screen Scoring Masters' Program at the University of Southern California, considered the world's leading educational institution for film scoring. Today he composes full time, working with directors from all over the world. In the last year, he has composed music for the feature films *Eli Moran* and *Void*, the TV series *Short Adam* and short films such as *Dalì*, *Hangout*, *Landing* and *Yuan Yuan and the Hollow Monster*, receiving several nominations and awards at various international film festivals.

Stepping into his studio is a great pleasure. His passion for his work shines through, as does his talent and skill in pursuing the art form. It's a job largely hidden from our ordinary perception as film viewers, but one that we experience and enjoy every time we step into the cinema or watch a film at home in front of our small screens.

If this was a movie, we would have a pause now, a moment of silence - some strings would gently come in, before a decrescendo making space for his voice and his story...

Emiliano, was this job a childhood dream of yours?

Yes, actually - even if at the beginning it wasn't a decision per se. Let's say it was an underlying idea from the moment I saw *The Legend of 1900* with Morricone's soundtrack when I was around eight or nine years old. The film really struck me - I was already playing the piano at the time, and the main character was also a pianist, but he improvised instead of playing classical pieces, improvising his own music. From that point, I also began to play around on the piano, discovering original melodies. It started a development in me as a young musician. As I got older, I became more of an 'interpreter' of others' music as a pianist and saxophonist, but the desire to compose was still there. When I attended the conservatory, I studied saxophone, and at the same time, I took private composition lessons with a teacher from the Santa Cecilia Conservatory. I took an opportunity that presented itself to write music for theatre, and from that point on it was clear - once I'd heard my music being played in the theatre alongside the actors and saw how it worked with the storyline, I told myself "this is what I want to do."



What was the path that brought you to Los Angeles?

I continued writing for theatre productions and gained other experience in composition, such as working with a group of Roman comedians, the *Minimad*, for a web series, which had a great reception. I felt the need to explore and travel, so I attended various summer workshops abroad. At a seminar in Bulgaria, I met an American composer, Christopher Young, who invited me to visit him in Los Angeles to get to know the city. After my trip where I also attended a studio recording

session, I was convinced it was the right place for me.

What are the first steps for a composer who moves to America? What has the experience been like for you?

In general if you're starting out, you work as an assistant for another composer. I'd already gained this experience in Italy, but another aspect was the arrival of the coronavirus - recording studios were closed and composers weren't looking for assistants. I got in touch directly with movie directors, and one of which, T.J. Collins, asked me to write the music for his film *Eli Moran* - a fantastic opportunity to not worry about the constraints imposed by the pandemic and just focus on composing. After that, I started working straight away on another film for a Brazilian director. You have worked with several foreign directors - **the short film *Dalì*** is by an Indian director.

Yes, it's by Kabeer Khurana - I've known him for a few years. I was finishing my studies at USC when he asked me to write the music for *Dalì*. I was very busy at the time, but when I saw the film, I really liked how it was visually beautiful and unusual, so I took the project on. I worked into the small hours composing, and luckily, I managed to record the soloists live on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 - then we went into lockdown on the 13<sup>th</sup>. It would have been really difficult (if not impossible) to record and finish the job after that date.

A stroke of luck - *Dalì* has been a success.

Yes, the film has won eight awards for best score in various international festivals. I'm really happy with the work, particularly as it's a silent film, and so the music is even more important. It's the main element, together with the visuals.

Tell me about your relationship with music, which has become your life.

As you say - it's my life. Even now that I've managed to carve out a job, it's my life. It's something that is present every day. It can keep you awake at night because you feel the need to compose, write, and find the best solutions for the film you're working on. For me, it's an incredible form of expression. I'm a pretty shy and introverted person, so music is the main channel I use to express myself. I feel my relationship with music even more strongly now, after lockdown, during which it was my daily companion. It enabled me to carry on and avoid that feeling of isolation.

What does scoring for film involve? When you spoke about writing music for theatre, you mentioned the collaborative aspect of the work...

The more time you spend in this environment, the more you realise that it's a collective process. My role is to serve the director, but at the same time, the music is an element over which the director doesn't have total control. The director can only explain things in terms of emotions, of sensations, whereas for other aspects of the film (editing, for example), the director is still

working in his or her own language. With music he/she usually needs to trust the outcome. I think it's important to remember that you're writing music for a film, not for yourself - it's not an individual album where the creative process is only linked to your own thoughts, emotions, and inspirations.

How does your music start out? How does your creative process work?

It changes a lot depending on the director I'm working with and their ideas. The first conversations are important in establishing what the film needs. I often start off by improvising with the moving images in front of me, and I try to find the 'core', musically speaking. Sometimes, that can be as simple as just five 'right' notes, which become a kind of musical code for the scene, and often for the whole film. That was what happened with *Eli Moran*. I'd already written a lot of music, but one day, for one of the scenes, I found these five notes which then became a motif for the whole film. There is a typical process, but sometimes you have to let yourself be surprised, and let magic and inspiration guide you to where the music wants to go. Obviously, you still need discipline, hard work and organisation. And there are a lot of meetings with the director and producers where we try to find the right kind of music together in order to communicate the correct feeling, and try figuring out how the music can best support the scene. At the end of the process, when it's time to record with musicians, you can really feel your music come alive. That part is also teamwork, a collective effort.

How do you feel when you find the right music for a film?

When you start working on the music for a scene and you try out different options, you see how much the scene can change with one type of music instead of another. When you find the right solution, it's really a 'wow' moment - "Now it works, the scene makes sense, the correct feeling comes across." Also, music is quite intangible and subjective - it's wonderful when the music feels right not just for me, but for everyone; the music then conveys a shared feeling in that scene. Sometimes, the final music is totally different from the initial idea. It's great when the director is surprised by what the music is able to communicate, as if it was another character saying something nobody had imagined.





What is the technical side of your composition process?

Often I start by improvising at the piano, or sometimes I start on the computer where I create a kind of outline - or other times I start with pencil and paper. I also have an electronic saxophone which I sometimes use to sketch melodies. I'd say nine times out of ten I start at the piano, and then I develop the ideas with other instruments. Sometimes, I already have an idea of which instruments will play a melody when I write at the piano, and then I mock them up on the computer. Or, if I have the chance, I record it with live musicians.

Changing the subject - what has it been like leaving Italy to live in Los Angeles?

At first it was pretty overwhelming, but I fell in love with the city straight away. There's a really relaxed atmosphere in LA even though people work really hard - it's a busy city whilst being laid back too. I like Los Angeles, the space, the houses, the landscape - there's a lot of green space. Of course I miss Italy, and my family and friends, but I've found LA to have a nice atmosphere; I like it.

I imagine it's stimulating from a work point of view.

For my field of work, it's a land of opportunity - it's tangible, you can breathe it. There are so many events happening related to the world of cinema - before the pandemic there was an event at least every week! I met three of my favourite composers in the first few months I was here in Los Angeles, and they were really friendly and helpful - I was surprised that I was able to chat with some of the 'legends' of the film music scene. So yes - for my job, it's an incredible place to be.

What are your plans for the future?

I'll definitely carry on working for directors in different parts of the world. This year, I've worked with an Indian director, a Brazilian director and various directors here in the United States. I like to be exposed to other cultures and to work with films set in other countries with different cultural backgrounds. It opens up your perspective and stimulates you to experiment and try different solutions. If things go to plan, I'll shortly be working on a TV series. I like the idea of having an ongoing long-term project, and a TV series would give me the perfect opportunity to develop characters musically and be involved in a story for years. The series format allows you to follow the development of a character with music, and to elaborate those 'five notes' with lots of different forms and variations.

Do you get attached to films and characters?

The music follows the psyche of the character, their interior world. Sometimes when I finish a film, I feel really connected to the protagonist. Sometimes, you have to put yourself in their shoes,

you kind of need to live their experience to write the music - a little like the role of an actor. So yes, sometimes it's a little sad to leave them behind. For my most recent film, *Eli Moran*, I identified a lot with the main character, a young man who faces various difficulties to win a basketball scholarship and realize his dream.

Do you only write music for films or do you have other projects?

It's not official yet, but an Italian classical saxophone player has reached out to me to commission a concerto for sax and piano. My background is in classical music, but now I write film music - it's a different style, and so I'm really pleased that a classical musician wants me to write a piece for him.

And finally... what do you listen to?

Good question! I listen to film music, classical, jazz, electronica, pop... I grew up listening to a lot of hip hop. It depends on the moment, but let's just say that I try to get inspiration from as many musical influences as possible. I love writing music for international films because I love listening to music from different places with different instruments. I listen to a lot of Indian music and a lot of 'ethnic' music too. Each style is different, and the great thing is that unconsciously, all of this finds its way into my compositions. Sometimes I feel that I'm writing in a different way, but then I stop and ask myself why, and the answer is that in those moments, I had been listening to something that influenced me, bringing me to new musical ground. We should always be open to new things, to diversity, to enrichment.



To know more about his music and his work: [emilianomazzenga.com](http://emilianomazzenga.com)

*Translated from italian by Viola Cateni and Isaac Mailach.*