Abstract

This article examines the compositional processes of established Australian jazz artists writing for film. Two specific case studies are discussed: the Necks’s score for the film The Boys (Rowan Woods, 1998) and Alistair Spence’s score for Beneath Clouds (Ivan Sen, 2002). Specific music cues from the films are analysed in relation to artists’ observations recorded in interviews. The artists featured in this research have well-established careers as improvising musicians and the application of their music making knowledge to the film scoring process is germane to the final film score. Key questions relevant to the film music concern the extent to which improvisation played a part in the scoring process, the application of improvisatory musical experience to the audiovisual domain, and the nature of the collaboration with the director.

Keywords

Alister Spence, The Necks, Australian film, composition, jazz film music

Introduction

Musicians with established careers as performing and recording jazz artists have been contracted to provide original music for film in numerous instances. Miles Davis’s music for the film Ascenseur pour L’Echafaud (Louis Malle, 1958 – French release) or Herbie Hancock’s music for Blow Up (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966 – USA release) are two prominent international examples. More recently, established Australian jazz artists including The Necks (Chris Abrahams, Lloyd Swanton and Tony Buck) have produced original music for the film The Boys (Rowan Woods, 1998) and pianist and composer Alister Spence has collaborated with Ivan Sen to produce the music for Beneath Clouds (Ivan Sen, 2002).

This article seeks to address a number of broad questions surrounding the processes utilised by jazz musicians in devising music for film. These questions include: how do experienced improvisers go about making music for film? To what extent do the improvising practices of jazz musicians, in purely musical domains, translate into making music for film? and What is the nature of the collaboration between the director/producer/sound editor and the improvising musician? It is not the intention of this paper to answer these questions definitively, instead the research presented here offers insights in relation to these questions from two specific case studies: The Necks music for The Boys and Spence’s music for Beneath Clouds. These examples highlight two contrasting music making processes
for film: one where the composer is working directly with images (Beneath Clouds), and the other where music was made without reference to specific images, instead working within a broader stylistic brief (The Boys). These two methods are common to film and have been discussed recently by New Zealand screen composer and improviser Trevor Coleman (Johnson, 2010: 66-77).

The analytical method employed examines contextual and textual features of the music and the processes by which it was produced. The author conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with Alister Spence and two members of The Necks, Chris Abrahams and Lloyd Swanton. Such approaches are well established, for example in the work of Tagg and Clarida (2003) (on music affect) and Berliner (1994) and Monson (1996) (in jazz research). Specific sections of music have been transcribed and pertinent musical features are described in relation to the image and narrative content. In this regard I have found the analytical and theoretical approaches used by Chion (1994, 2009) to be particularly relevant and make use of his terms where appropriate.

The Films

The Boys is Australian director Rowan Woods’ first feature film and is an adaptation of a play by Gordon Graham. The film tracks the events that occur over one day following Brett Sprague’s (David Wenham) release from prison and his return to the family home where his girlfriend, mother, step-father, two brothers and their girlfriends await. The day is marked by various conflicts and arguments as Brett struggles with these relationships, and he eventually forms an alliance with his two brothers. The film ends with the three brothers about to commit the crime (rape and murder) that has been alluded to throughout the film via a series of flash-forwards. The film received local critical acclaim, winning four Australian Film Institute awards for direction, adapted screenplay and supporting actor/actress awards (John Polson and Toni Collette) in 1998, the year of its release.

Beneath Clouds is the first feature film made by Australian director Ivan Sen. The two main protagonists are Lena (Dannielle Hall) and Vaughan (Damian Pitt) who meet up at a western New South Wales (NSW) roadhouse and hitch-hike together to Sydney. Lena is a young woman reacting against her part-Aboriginal heritage on a quest to find her absent Irish father. Vaughan, a young Aboriginal man, has just escaped from a low-security prison in order to visit his dying mother. The film follows their journey, much of the time spent on foot, as they negotiate their pasts and get to know one another. The film won Australian Film Institute Awards for best direction and best cinematography in 2002.

The Necks - Background

The Necks are an improvising instrumental trio featuring Chris Abrahams (piano, organ, synthesiser, samples), Lloyd Swanton (bass) and Tony Buck (drums). They formed in Sydney in 1986 and have since recorded fifteen albums (five released prior to The Boys) and performed live at major venues in Australia and internationally. In both live and recorded settings The Necks often perform single continuous tracks of about one hour in length, in an approach that avoids traditional jazz trio elements such as rehearsed themes and individual solos and instead focuses on a gradual unfolding of minimal harmonic and rhythmic
elements within a collective improvisation context. Whilst live performances by the Necks feature the acoustic instrumentation of drums, double bass and piano, some of their studio albums have explored the use of other instruments and sampled sounds. Buck suggests that in some senses there are two bands, that is, one for live settings and the other for the studio: “In the latter we don’t feel a need to eschew any approach or instrument: electric, digital or acoustic” (Shand, 2009: 112). They have received widespread critical acclaim for their work including being tagged by the New York Times (USA) as “one of the greatest bands in the world”. Their music has been described by the Guardian (UK) as “entirely new and entirely now… they produce a post-jazz, post-rock, post-everything sonic experience that has few parallels or rivals” (ibid).

Prior to recording the music for The Boys, the three members of The Necks had well-established careers as musicians working on a number of different projects ranging from conventional jazz groups to rock and avant-garde ensembles. Between 1982 and 1985 Abrahams and Swanton released three albums with the hard-bop influenced jazz group The Benders. During the 1980s and 1990s Abrahams recorded two solo piano albums (Piano, 1984 and Walk, 1986), was a member of the indie rock band The Sparklers and worked extensively with the singer/songwriter Melanie Oxley to produce four albums. Swanton has performed as the bassist with major Australian and international jazz artists such as Bernie McGann, Vince Jones, Dewey Redman, Nat Adderley, Clifford Jordan and Barney Kessel, and has worked with pop/rock artists such as Tim Finn, Steven Cummings, Wendy Matthews and Sting. He leads another successful long running Australian group, The Catholics, with whom he has recorded seven albums. Tony Buck has worked with a string of major jazz artists such as Mark Simmonds, Paul Grabowsky, Sandy Evans, Dale Barlow, Clifford Jordan and Branford Marsalis. In the 1990s Buck formed the hardcore improvisation band Peril In Japan that featured a dense use of drum-triggered samples alongside bass and guitars. Relocating to Europe in the mid 1990s, Buck has continued to work with an array of experimental improvising artists such as Jon Rose, John Zorn, Nicholas Collins and Tom Cora. In relation to screen sound, the soundtrack for The Boys remains The Necks only music produced for film, although individual members have composed soundtracks including Swanton’s music for the short film The Beat Manifesto (Daniel Nettheim, 1994), and Abraham’s more recent music for the feature film The Tender Hook (2008, Jonathon Ogilvie).

From this brief biographical account, it is clear that members of The Necks draw on an extensive range of experiences that inform both their musical processes and aesthetic tendencies. In terms of formal music education, all three members studied jazz at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music in the early 1980s, however their subsequent performing and recording experiences reinforce Berliner’s notion of the “jazz community as an educational system” (Berliner, 1994: 36). In his detailed account of the processes of American improvising musicians, Berliner stresses the importance of informal study, jam sessions and apprenticeships with more renowned artists for the cultivation of emerging artists. Furthermore, in establishing a career, the emerging artist needs to develop a strong sense of self-reliance and personal responsibility for artistic development.

Emerging improvisers, in coming to terms with jazz’s varied conventions, do not simply absorb them. Rather, they interpret and

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2 See also references to collaborations with Mike Cooper, discussed elsewhere in this Screen Sound issue.
select them according to personal abilities and values, formative musical experience and training, and dynamic interaction with other artists. (Berliner, 1994: 59)

The formation of The Necks in many ways aligns with Berliner’s model and represents a ‘coming to terms’ with the various conventions the three emerging improvisers had encountered. In reflecting on how their experiences, both in terms of formal music education and experiences in purely musical settings, translate to working in film in a more general sense, Abrahams feels that, regardless of the level of improvisation involved in the process, the composer should arrive at the same point. On a more pragmatic level, Abrahams observed that:

being quite a good improviser means you can make a lot of product quite quickly. That’s something that can be very handy, particularly in TV, where the turnaround is very quick and you’ve got to work quite quickly.3

The Necks – Music Making Processes

The Necks established their modus operandi in their early rehearsals where, according to Swanton, they were seeking to “find a music where we were totally in the moment” (quoted in Williams, 2010). To that end they initially rehearsed as a “private experiment” (ibid) without the intention of performing but, as Abrahams recounts:

When we started rehearsing, we began to make a sound that made us think, ‘Let’s develop this.’ I don’t think we ever really verbalised it. Intuitive is the best word. Before that, I’d operated on the concept of developing what you did to a level of competence and then presenting it to an audience. But for me, the Necks brought an understanding that things can find a way of becoming other things while you’re performing. That was such a big breakthrough for me that once I’d crossed the line, I had a whole different way of playing. (ibid)

In performance, The Necks begin with silence for up to a minute or more until one of the three members begins and the other two gradually join in. The individual parts are often a spacious ostinato (a repetitive sequence of notes) that is gradually transformed as the piece develops. As Shand describes it:

the playing is free, in the sense that there are no defined parameters in advance of the rendering, but there is usually a tonal centre and, until recently, usually a groove. (2009: 95-6)

Rather than making instant and frequently shifting responses to each other’s playing, Buck suggests that the more gradual transformations produce music that is:

constantly shifting through different meanings and contexts. The centre of gravity is changing and the meaning of what you’re doing changes with it. (in Williams, 2010: online)

3 Chris Abrahams interview with author, 6 December 2010, by telephone. All quotes, unless otherwise cited, are from this source.
Buck acknowledges that The Necks’ sound has evolved as they incorporate their various other musical experiences:

_Although the sort of things we do have broadened a lot, I don’t think we’ve ever diluted the basic concept. But we play different music outside the group, and we bring in elements of those approaches, fitting it into this context, this way of working._ (ibid)

One such element, which Buck proposed as an idea for the track ‘Black’ on The Necks album Silent Night (1995), was the incorporation of various sound effects within the track. The samples used on ‘Black’ included sounds of footsteps, laughter, screams, conversations, cars, church bells, phones and sirens and were all recorded by Abrahams from films screened on SBS television (Mitchell, 2005). This recording became the point of connection between The Necks and the director (Rowan Woods) and producer (Robert Connolly) of The Boys. According to Abrahams, Connolly played the album to Woods:

_Rowan found the aesthetic we got on the record, which in terms of a broad brush stroke is quite dark, particularly the first side “Black”, you can’t get much darker I guess, and they thought that the sound of what we were doing was very much in keeping with the mood of the film ... basically we understood the brief being like ‘can you make music like what’s on Silent Night, but can you make a whole lot more of it._ (Interview, 2010)

As Mitchell suggests “the film noir-like properties of Black were especially appropriate to the disturbing psychological drama of masculine violence that is developed in The Boys” (2005: online).

The Necks and The Boys

Much of the film was shot in a house rented specifically for the purpose in Maroubra in Sydney’s east. The Necks’ music from the Silent Night album was played in the background in rehearsals as “general mood setting” (Abrahams interview, 2010). The Necks visited the house during the early rehearsal stage and “spent a lot of time absorbing the atmosphere of the film” (Mitchell, 2005). Abrahams has compared the use of the rented house to the location used for In Cold Blood (Richard Brooks, 1967), the recreation of a non-fiction USA-based crime novel by Truman Capote, where filming was undertaken in the actual house the murder was committed (Mitchell, 2005). Mitchell has discussed how this and other factors, including that it was the first feature film for many in the film crew, emphasised process over finished product, an approach that mirrors The Necks’ own music making procedures.

The emphasis on mood and ‘vibe’ as opposed to detailed and specific underscoring suited The Necks’ working methods. As Abrahams notes, “the project, for me, seemed to be largely concerned with the juxtaposition of Necks’ music with the film, rather than us writing music to the film”. To this end The Necks recorded large amounts of material in the studio to give to the sound editor, Nick Myers. As Swanton elaborates:
We knew they didn’t need one hour long pieces but we also knew that the way we work it takes a while to get a piece up and rolling and establishing a direction so we gave them quite a lot of trio textures I guess you’d say, usually running to 15-20 minutes at least and when they found a use for those we’d go back and tighten it up a bit in terms of the duration in some cases, maybe add some things that they might have wanted, then basically giving it to them in an unmixed form. But then I think they found that that was too much to work with, like they didn’t really want to be our audio mixers as well, so we gave them some versions that were roughly mixed with instruments sort of grouped where they should sound in the sonic spectrum and everything and they were still free to do what they wanted beyond that.\(^4\)

There were also logistical considerations for The Necks that precluded a close collaboration with the filmmakers throughout the placement of sound and editing processes, given that drummer Tony Buck was at the time residing in Berlin and only available for a short time for Sydney recordings. However, whilst Swanton acknowledges he stayed on in a ‘consultative role’, he was not overly concerned about handing over the control of placement and editing.

\[\text{Some people are horrified to think musicians would surrender that much control but all three of us always felt that the dramatic chord when the door opens is a little bit too didactic anyway. We tend to think in much more general terms, alluding to various ambiguities in our music and hopefully doing the same in the film.}\]

It is clear from this discussion that the editor (Nick Myers) was crucial in the construction of the final “audiovisual scene” to use Chion’s (1994:66) term. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the editor and director’s processes, the following analysis of specific cues makes reference to the whole “audio–logo-visual” text (Chion, 2009:468).

\textit{The Boys} Opening Credits Cue

The most prominent Necks’ music utilised in the film comprises three cues totaling about seven minutes that are variations on a repeating four bar pattern (the ‘theme’ as discussed by Abrahams below). The process employed in the creation of these cues was, according to Abrahams, a little more contrived than for a regular Necks piece:

\[\text{I don’t think the process was like ‘let’s play a Necks piece’ and if you guys can remember anything at the end that was in that piece we’ll try that. I think we actually sat down and said we have to work out a theme here and kind of nutted it out... we knew it was a theme while we were working on it but nonetheless it came about through an improvised process, knowing that the end result would be a three minute piece of music. That’s what we sat down and tried to work on in a kind of Necks’ way.}\]

\(^4\) Lloyd Swanton interview with author, 26 November 2010, by telephone. All quotes, unless otherwise cited, are from this source.
The structure of the film involves a non-linear time line where events prior to and post the central crime are presented. The switch between the two is signaled with both visual and audio elements and is set up in the opening credits sequence. Prior to hearing the first cue, there is about one and a half minutes of low pitched textural drone elements (with Bflat and G pitches prominent) interspersed with somewhat ghostly human vocal sounds including a baby crying and train station announcements (possibly slowed down) and the squeal of car tyres. Visually, this sequence features somewhat blurred images of the slowed down night-time view from a car (Fig 1). After these dark textural sounds, the opening music cue begins with a piano figure that is synchronised with the first of a sequence of shots of mundane household fittings and furnishings (Fig 2). Throughout the film the pre-crime shots feature very little non-diegetic sound, with the exception of the two Necks’s cues. The post-crime shots feature textural elements similar to those used in the opening one and a half minutes.

The first cue (approximately two and a half minutes in length) is heard in the opening credits, the second (approximately one and a half minutes) about midway through the film and the final cue (approximately fifty seconds) just before the end. The first version of the theme contains the densest texture with the piano, bass and drums augmented by organ and distorted bass guitar (see the author transcription in Fig 3).
Whilst the key signature of the transcription suggests G minor, it is not until the second cue when the bass plays the Bflat, that the key is apparent. However, as noted above, the drone elements prior to the Necks’s cue include prominent G and Bflat pitches that help to establish a sense of tonality for the listener. In the opening credits the bass is restricted to the root and fifth while the four note piano motif outlines the semitone movement from the 5 and b6 of the scale followed by a repetition of the b6 and then a repetition of a dyad, the 2 and 5, in a higher octave. The absence of the b3 makes the key ambiguous, as does the repetitive striking of ‘the lowest key on the piano’, the 5, in the third and fourth bars of the cycle. An obvious parallel to the use of the minor second interval as a theme is John Williams’s Jaws (Steven Spielberg, 1975). Yet Swanton does not consider the interval itself to be inherently menacing but rather the relationship between the scale tones is more important.

In a minor key the b6 has a particular sound and it’s a semitone above the fifth, which is very consonant and very comfortable. So maybe there is a tension and release thing there, where if you are constantly going up from the fifth to the b6th that will create an undulating effect.

However Abrahams was also attracted to the effect of the beating decay of the piano sound when two notes a semitone apart are sounded with the sustain pedal down. Thus the use of the melodic minor second can be theorised in isolation as well as in relation to a particular tonic, and both readings present a sense of unease for the listener.

Rhythmically, the different instruments repeat their own part within a four bar cycle with the opening piano motif on beat four being answered by the toms on beat two of the next bar. The repetition of the tom figure, initially every two bars (as shown in Fig 3), and then in every bar, has a march-like quality although this is disrupted by the piano rhythm. The piano repeats a dotted quaver rhythm that, with the very sensitive performance of the dynamics indicated, creates the
impression of the use of a delay effect. Abrahams has indicated his interest, particularly at the time of making the music for The Boys, in the timbral effect heard when rapidly striking a single note on the piano:

\[ I \text{ hit the same string quite hard with the sustain pedal down and you get this kind of acoustic distortion on the note and a lot of the bottom end disappears when you hit a string that has just been hit before. You get a kind of cimbalom, like a hammered dulcimer kind of effect where the rounded piano sound changes into a very metallic sound with a lot of upper mid frequencies.} \]

For Abrahams, another important timbral element in the opening cue is the intermittent sounds from the DX7 synthesiser:

\[ I \text{ love the DX7 synthesiser, and I felt that electronic, very harsh, spiky sort of sound would further orchestrate the foreboding nastiness that the theme was striving for. The way the opening credits turned out, I think the DX7 turns into a bit of a star. That real electronic, surveillance, nasty kind of quality that the keyboard has... it's quite subliminal actually. It provides these spikes, where the main thing is the band, the trio sound, and then there are these very unpleasant insect intrusions.} \]

The most prominent shifts in timbre occur in the organ and distorted bass guitar sound, with the organ sound shifting sharply from a contour containing many of the higher partials to one containing mainly the fundamental at the change of pitch in the third bar of the cycle. Walser (1993) has discussed the relationship between heavy metal music and construction of gender, in particular the use of distorted power chord as a musical articulation of power. The use of distortion in the theme music can thus be considered a form of culturally-informed musical coding.

There are many points of synchronisation between the music and the images. The tempo of the cue is twice spelt out in the opening sequence with a rhythmic “pivot dimension” (Chion, 2009: 483) between diegetic and non-diegetic sound, first by the low pitched thudding sounds (at 1:08–1:34, possibly a windscreen wiper sound slowed down, or car tyres on raised road markings) (Fig 4) which almost act as a count in for the band, and second by the tap dripping (at 2:30–2:45) (Fig 5) which marks out the upbeats for a short time (coinciding somewhat aptly with the credit for sound designer, Sam Petty) before drifting out of time. Cuts from image to image often align with a particular part of the repeating musical cycle, although notably avoid shifting on the start of the cycle (as transcribed in Fig 3) and often lag by a beat (for example the cut from knives to light switch at 3:04) (Fig 6). The shifting timbre of the distorted bass guitar is synchronised with the blurring of various images (such as the light shade at 3:14) (Fig 7).
Figure 4: The Boys: blurred images synchronised with thudding sounds

Figure 5: Tap dripping synchronised to sound designer credit

Figure 6: Images not synchronised to musical beat
The use of music in opening titles to convey the mood of the film is an established cinematic code and the various musical features identified here work in conjunction with the images and other sounds to convey meaning. Director Woods has suggested that the opening sequence “evokes an atmosphere of dread and could possibly represent the empty house while the murder is being committed” (quoted in Mitchell, 2005: 8). Editor Myers sees a parallel between the music and the central theme of the film. “The Necks’ music is based on repeating patterns, quite appropriate for a film about men perpetrating violence against women” (Johnson and Poole, 2005: 114). The above analysis illustrates how rhythmic, harmonic, melodic, timbral and textural elements contribute to qualities such as menace, violence, unease and foreboding. The realisation of the audio-visual relationship was a product of the editor and director’s work utilising theme music arrived at via improvisation and refinement by The Necks working within set parameters.

The process detailed above can be contrasted with the one undertaken by Alister Spence and Ivan Sen in scoring the music for Beneath Clouds. Spence and Sen developed the music working directly with rushes and thus, unlike The Necks, Spence had direct input into the construction of specific cues and the placement of sounds in relation to image and narrative content. Before discussing the details of this process I will provide some background on Spence.

Alister Spence - Background

Alister Spence is a pianist and composer who has worked extensively in Australia, Europe and Asia with his own trio and with groups such as Clarion Fracture Zone (as co-leader), Wanderlust and the Australian Art Orchestra. Clarion Fracture Zone formed in 1988 and has received much critical acclaim for their live performances and recordings, including a five star review from Downbeat Magazine in 1995 for the album Zones on Parade. They have been described in The Guardian (UK) as “a truly contemporary band sensitively mixing acoustic playing and electronic sampling to produce a confection of influences that sound as if they were meant to
belong together rather than just thrown in a blender and spun” (Fordham 1994).  

Spence’s own trio, featuring the bassist Lloyd Swanton and drummer Toby Hall from Clarion Fracture Zone, have been described by Sydney Morning Herald jazz critic John Clare in glowing terms: “Beautiful. Spence’s piano vocabulary is very distinctive, his playing very fine, with rhythmic excitement and melodic beauty entwined”.

Spence has performed and/or recorded with numerous notable Australian jazz musicians such as Bernie McGann, Sandy Evans, Don Burrows, Dale Barlow, Tony Buck and Phil Slater and international jazz musicians including Mark Helias, Andy Sheppard and Phillip Johnston. Whilst his background is mostly in jazz and improvised forms, Spence has written music for a number of short films and documentaries. His interest in working with moving images has led Spence to work most recently with film artist Louise Curham, an experimental creator of visuals using ‘obsolescent’ film media like Super 8. The Alister Spence Trio has produced four albums, the most recent, Fit (2009), features a DVD with visuals by Curham, with whom the trio has performed numerous live concerts. The Australian Art Orchestra recently performed Spence’s composition ‘Soak’ that also featured visuals by Curham at the 2010 Melbourne International Arts Festival.

In terms of formal music education, Spence had a classical upbringing (theory and performance) before, like the members of The Necks, studying jazz at the Sydney Conservatorium. He has undertaken an arranging course in the USA and studied with American pianists Andy LaVerne, Cedar Walton, Mulgrew Miller and Benny Green. As for The Necks, this brief biographical account is provided in order to highlight Spence’s experience and education in improvised musical forms that align with Berliner’s aforementioned notion of the ‘jazz community as an educational system’ (1994). Comparing his experience in purely musical settings to working in film, Spence suggests that, although an improviser’s sensitivities are transferable between the different domains, he sees a critical difference in terms of orientation.

> Everything translates. If I’m playing something for myself I’m playing self expression, I’m playing to express what’s on the inside of me and to get that out. But if I’m playing for film I’m serving the film, I’m playing for it, I’m supporting that mood. I think all the same sensitivities have to be there, you have to have your antennae out about what you’re doing and why you’re doing it... it’s a very good way to learn to economise your ideas.

Collaboration with Ivan Sven

Prior to making Beneath Clouds, Spence had worked on a number of documentaries and short films with director and musician Ivan Sen beginning with the documentary Journey (Ivan Sen, 1997), commissioned by the ABC Indigenous unit. Completing these projects with Sen facilitated an effective collaborative experience for Beneath Clouds by enabling Spence to consider that he had:

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7 Alister Spence interview with author, 29 November 2010, by telephone. All quotes, unless otherwise cited, are from this source.
a clear understanding about [Sen’s] mind and the way he thought about things and what things were important to him in terms of life in general as well as in the film.

Whilst Spence was the sole composer in these initial collaborations, Sen’s interests in music led to their sharing of the composition role for Beneath Clouds. As Spence elaborates:

We definitely had things which were our strengths but as it went on, because Ivan is a guitar player and very interested in music and plays quite a bit for himself, and we share some musical tastes in common, it began to be a better thing to try and work on things together.

Improvisation was a major part of the process which Spence and Sen employed for writing the music for the film. Using Sen’s home studio, they tried out ideas prior to filming and then when rushes were being done, as Spence recounts:

We would get together and watch sequences of the film and more or less jam along to that to see what came out of that that might be useful… [Improvisation] had a very big part to play. We were pretty much just trying things out against the film so making up harmonic progressions and bits of melodies on the spot and recording ourselves doing them. So a lot of, for instance, what ended up being the string parts, was me playing on a string sound on a keyboard, just getting a feeling for what worked and what progressions worked and what sort of potential counter lines could work in amongst the parts and so on.

In conversations about the music for the film, Spence recalls little discussion using particular music-theoretical terms. Instead, the conversations were

definitely more about the mood… we didn’t really talk about musical things at all like chord structures and so on, we probably don’t share that language. He’s learnt music a different way so it’s just better to talk about the mood and that’s more helpful for me because it gave me a good insight into what I was trying to provide for him musically.

Beneath Clouds Music

The score for Beneath Clouds features a range of instrumentation including a string section, uilleann pipes, solo cello, piano, guitar, drum loops and “whatever was on offer in the sampling/synth side of the world”. The choice of instruments was carefully considered and ‘played with’ early on in the process with budget a factor:

We had a larger than usual budget and we wanted to put a largish string section in so that was always part of the equation… To tag the various storylines we had a uilleann pipes, to reflect the Irish background of one of the characters [Lena], and a solo improvising cello, which we’d used before on ‘Journey’… Cello had always been a sound that Ivan was very fond of… a little bit of piano and Ivan’s trademark guitar… We were going for sounds which had some sort of emotional weight - of course then we had to be careful it wasn’t
Spence relates that the piano was chosen, in general, for two reasons: first “because I play it”, and second because

":"it seems to be one of those sounds that can be quite universal and transparent in film, it does seem to be able to carry or support things without getting in the road too much. It does seem to be able to sit in film quite easily, and I guess that’s just because of the amount of time it’s been used, people are familiar with it.

The string section is utilised throughout the film, first appearing in the opening credits and then underscoring many scenes in the film. There are two main tonal centres for the string parts that align with the two main characters, Lena and Vaughn, in a leitmotif fashion. The opening credits and the first two string cues establish the tonal centre of F minor for Lena in the opening ten minutes of the film. These cues feature a repeating four-chord progression, i – VII – VI – VII, in the key of F minor with a movement from iv – v as a police car takes her step-brother from home (Fig 8). The F minor tonality is also used to underscore key narrative events for Lena such as when she is sick at the roadhouse (a low pitched F minor drone); when two men try to pull her into their car (F minor drone), when Vaughn hands back her photo album (a reprise of the opening cue), and when Lena talks to Shaun in the pub just prior to Vaughn almost breaking into a car (a version of the opening chord progression and then a low pitched F drone) (Fig 9).

> Figure 8: Beneath Clouds: Lena’s stepbrother is taken away

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8 Transcribed at A=434 Hertz - the actual soundtrack is slightly flat in relation to concert pitch of A=440Hz.
The tonal centre used for cues for Vaughn is B-flat minor and is established with the more tonally ambiguous chord progression, iv – III – i – VII, when Vaughn’s sister visits him at the prison gates and then as he goes to sleep on the night of his escape. This progression is also used at a particularly poignant moment in the film when Lena looks at the cliff after Vaughn has explained its significance in relation to a massacre of his people (Fig 10). The B-flat minor tonality is reinforced later when his escape from prison is underscored with a B-flat minor drone; when the first police car stops the car Vaughn is travelling in (B-flat minor drone); and the use of a VI – VII – i progression when Vaughn tells Lena that his mum is dying, a progression that is also used at the climax of the film when Vaughn has been home and runs back to meet Lena at the train station (Fig 11). A variation on this progression, i – VI – VII, is used as a transition into another particularly poignant moment in the film when Vaughn and Lena enter an abandoned church and Vaughn lights a fire using pages from a bible (Fig 12). The connection between tonality and character can also be extended to other cues, such as the A-flat pedal note when the older lady in the car identifies Lena’s aboriginality, something Vaughn seems to have missed. This part of the story presents a moment of great insight for both Vaughan and Lena and is reinforced tonally by the sounding of B-flat (for Vaughan) and F notes (for Lena) immediately after the A-flat (possibly for the older woman herself). The relationship between Lena and Vaughn can also be examined in terms of the strong relationship in tonal music between F and B-flat, either as I – IV or I – V depending on which note is considered the tonic.
Figure 10: Beneath Clouds: landscape of grief

Figure 11: Vaughn runs to meet Lena

Figure 12: Vaughn uses pages from a bible to light the fire
Whilst Spence’s musical background draws heavily on jazz, the harmonic choices for the film were informed primarily by “the language (of) the classical, rock and folk/pop music area” (Interview 2010). Spence considers this a result of Sen’s own aesthetic:

> [in film] you are always working on the director’s terms. So in this case with Ivan it’s based on the music that he likes to listen to and the sorts of sounds that he wants to hear, so I’m trying to provide those as well and create some interest in that for myself.

The relatively simple harmonies were a conscious choice as Spence sought to:

> create a sense of movement in the harmony so that it sounded like it was going somewhere slightly interesting, and not just sticking to the primary chords.

The overarching structural organisation of harmonic elements as described above present perhaps one means by which Spence sought to create further interest.

**Improvisation in the Church Scene**

A detailed analysis of the church scene exemplifies both the harmonic underpinnings as they relate to the above discussion, and particularly the improvisatory nature of the piano part. This scene occurs about fifty minutes into the film where Lena and Vaughn seek shelter inside a disused church and Vaughn lights a fire using the pages from a bible (Fig 13). The subsequent fireplace dialogue revolves around both characters’ parents and their sense of belonging. The piano punctuates the dialogue between Lena and Vaughn in a form of “scansion”, where the piano interjections aid the viewer in comprehending the scene. (Chion, 2009: 489) The piano parts resulted from Spence improvising to the scene:

> We had demoed this up before we got to the final... Just by trying out ideas we found a phrasing or the right amount of space between the piano events so it could interact effectively with the dialogue and still give a sense of space. Later on we had to re-record that with proper piano in a good studio and try to emulate the timing as best as possible, although of course those things could be moved in editing if necessary.
The transcription (Fig 14) shows how the piano and dialogue interact in a call and response manner, one of the five prominent types of interaction Rinzler (1988) identifies as important for analysis of jazz performances. Whilst the transcription gives an approximate tempo and time signature, the actual timing of this cue is very free, unlike call and response in a jazz setting. This led to a somewhat challenging process when the strings had to be scored and conducted. As Spence recounts:

At the outset there was no time signature for all of that chordal movement, it just had to be devised so that it could occur in time and be conducted... So there was a kind of a reverse process from the improvisation into the written world to recreate that improvisational feel... So even if there was an underlying pulse, that pulse wouldn’t be discernable by the audience.
The music and diegetic sound in the scene provide a thoroughly “empathetic effect” (Chion, 2009: 477). The lack of pulse in the music reinforces the floating feel of the scene, a feel that is also established by other ambient stylistic elements in the music such as the static harmony, gentle timbres and minimal pitch materials. These elements are augmented by the sounds of the fire burning, not a threatening fire but the soothing sound of a campfire. The campfire is a strong cultural code in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian cultures denoting a sense of belonging and connection to land as well as offering a contemplative setting. However this particular campfire was lit by tearing up pages of the bible, as Tsiolkas suggests after “the trashing of European religion that mirrors the desecration Europeans have wrought on Aboriginal culture, as well as a defiant opposition to Christianity’s role in tearing apart Aboriginal families and communities” (Tsiolkas, 2002: 4). Tsiolkas is critical of many aspects of the film and he considers scenes such as the church scene do not effectively articulate (in both the sense of the minimal dialogue and the underlying political reading) the violence of Australia's past. In other words, as a “coming of age story” (Collins and Davis, 2004: 154), the rendering of the themes of disconnectedness and shame in the film are somewhat cursory. However, I suggest that the elements I describe here work together in an empathetic manner to enhance an understated exploration of issues of identity and injustice.

The minimal harmonic elements used in the scene are consistent with the harmonic palette used throughout the film (discussed above). The piano is restricted for most of the cue to three pitches - Bflat, F, and Aflat – again perhaps making a programmatic association with Lena (Bflat), Vaughn (F) and the Aflat possibly representing a mother/parent figure (foreshadowing the Aflat pedal used when the older woman in the car recognises Lena’s Aboriginal heritage, as mentioned above). These pitches are played either as dyads or arpeggiated in the mid register of the piano and it is only at the point in the dialogue where Vaughn asks Lena somewhat rhetorically, “You’re not from there are you?” that the piano plays a higher pitched F and also adds a C for the first time in the scene. This jump in register acts to shift the mood of the scene from a settled state (where both Lena and Vaughn are presenting their particular frame of mind in relation to their upbringing) and presents a moment of insight and clarity, where Lena and Vaughn make a deeper connection with each other. Throughout the scene the strings play sustained notes that shift subtly around a Bflat tonal centre with Bflat (root) and F (5th) notes the most prominent, and C (2nd), Eflat (4th) and Aflat (5b7th) notes contributing a suspended, unresolved tonal atmosphere to the music. The strings play in the low to mid range with the higher register utilised at the end of the scene in the same manner as the piano.

The degree to which the music for the church scene was revised from initial improvisations, or, in Spence’s words, the process of “trying out ideas” (Spence, interview 2010), is unclear. As in The Necks example, the role of the director, editor and/or sound editor is critical in terms of the creation of the completed audiovisual scene. However, in the case of Beneath Clouds, the improvising musicians (Spence and Sen) played a far more active role in this regard.

Conclusion

The analysis of cues and production processes discussed suggest two distinct approaches to improvisation elements in Australian film scoring: first, The Necks
produced a large stock of music that was then edited to the image, and second, Alister Spence devised specific music cues for edited film sequences. Whilst these two methods are not specific to improvisers, in both examples presented here, improvisation played a major role in the development of the music. In both films, improvised performances were refined, edited and re-recorded where necessary and, in the case of the string parts in *Beneath Clouds*, realised via a ‘reverse process’ where improvised draft recordings were then scored and recorded.

The idiosyncratic style of The Necks and the desire of the director to recreate the feel of earlier Necks’s music *(from Silent Night)* led to a fairly direct translation of the improvising practices of The Necks from the solely musical to the film music domain. Although the intention was to make music for the film, the band process and subsequent sonic outcomes are in many ways akin to previous Necks’ recordings. In contrast, the music for *Beneath Clouds* is markedly different from Alister Spence’s own improvised work. Spence suggests that his purely musical experiences translate inasmuch as he is using the same sensitivities developed throughout his musical career. His collaborative process has been affected by his compositional approach with director, Ivan Sen, and the overarching needs of the image track. Similarities in music education and jazz improvisation suggest that, at least in these two exemplars, such a background offers useful training for film composers. This is not to argue that such improvisatory practices are unique to jazz musicians (especially given the contested definition of ‘jazz’ today – see Chan, 2008) but rather that improvisation is a well-accepted component of jazz performance and this suggests it also has a place in jazz-inflected film composition.9

The analysis of the main theme from *The Boys* suggests that The Necks created a sense of unease, foreboding, violence and menace with a range of musical elements. These include rhythmic (repetitive elements and march-like qualities providing a sense of relentlessness), harmonic and melodic (use of a minor key, emphasis on tension and release with the movement between the flattened 6th and 5th scale degrees), timbral qualities (use of industrial sounding DX7 synthesiser sounds and the acoustic distortion of the piano) and textural elements (the combination of sound design and musical elements). The analysis of *Beneath Clouds* suggests that larger scale structural considerations were an important part of the music creation process. A sense of unity was created by the choice of instruments and use of particular tonalities for the two main characters. Uilleann pipes were used to signify the Irish background of Lena and cello and piano were used to convey emotional weight. F, B♭ and Ab key centres were ascribed to the main characters and these notes provided the foundation for piano improvisations in the particularly poignant church scene.

Regarding the nature of the collaboration between the director/producer/sound editor and the improvising musician, the two films present some distinct differences. In *The Boys*, existing band material (from The Necks’s *Silent Night* album) formed a pseudo temp track that informed both the composers’ and director’s subsequent endeavours, whereas Spence and director Sen collaborated as co-composers to developing the music score for *Beneath Clouds*. The Necks took a far less active role in the placement of their music in the film, instead assigning control of this to the sound editor and director. The working relationship between Spence and Sen had developed over the course of numerous short films, whereas The Necks were brought in by *The Boys*’s filmmakers in order to create music.

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9 See Michael Hannan’s discussion of comprovisation elsewhere in this *Screen Sound* issue.
within familiar stylistic and generic parameters. The comments from the interviews suggest a relatively deep understanding between the musicians and the directors of overall aesthetic goals, and highlight collaborative endeavours at the level of music composition and construction of the audiovisual text. This analysis of two feature film scores by contemporary jazz artists contribute to an understanding of film music practices in an Australian screen industry context.

Bibliography