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Music in Film

Prisoners Soundtrack Critique

The movie I've chosen for my soundtrack critique is the 2013 psychological thriller, *Prisoners* directed by Denis Villeneuve and scored by the late Icelandic composer, Johan Johansson. *Prisoners* is a story about the abduction of two young girls in Pennsylvania and the subsequent search for the abductor by the police. After police arrest a suspect and release him, the father of one of the daughters takes matters into his own hands. The first time I'd seen this movie, I was floored by three main components of this movie: the cinematography (credit to legendary DP Roger Deakins), the performances by the two lead actors, Hugh Jackman and Jake Gyllenhaal, and the subtle, chilling score.

The score for *Prisoners* creates a palpable sense of dread, anger, and grief, all of which are experienced by the main characters. The score utilizes a string orchestra as well as electronic droning. The film takes place in Pennsylvania during the winter. The strings reflect this environment, often sounding chillingly cold. By using the strings to sound as dark and bleak as the world they're apart of, Johansson perfectly captures the color of this movie, or lack thereof. Throughout the movie, one of the main themes/leitmotifs that is used is pulled from the first piece of music heard in the film, "The Lord's Prayer". This song appears in the opening scene, after which the main character, Keller Dover, has just finished reciting the Lord's Prayer before instructing his son to shoot a deer on a hunting trip. This main theme repeats throughout the movie, and the second half of this theme also reappears in sections.

The main theme consists of this bass drone behind four sections of four notes played dreadfully legato by a string section. Johansson made sure not to make the strings sound too romantic, he did this by removing any warm notes and also having the performers refrain from playing with vibrato. This theme has slow movement, which runs parallel with the tempo of the plot of the film. The theme also gives a sense of lurking danger, created by the bass drone sound heard in the first section of the theme before removing the drone. The string section then repeats the first four phrases accompanied now by a softer, more mid frequency drone sound before that too dissipates. This main theme sets the tone early on in the movie, and provides a kind of thematic set up for the horrific events to come.

The next leitmotif that I thought worked well, which also serves as a thematic centerpiece to the movie, is “Candlelight Vigil”. It serves as a transitional piece between two very different scenes, both of which encapsulate the major themes of the movie. The piece emerges at the tail end of a scene in which both the fathers of the missing girls are torturing a suspect they believe to be the kidnapper. The scene ends with the suspect unable to offer up any information and both fathers mentally and physically exhausted from their disturbing deeds. Inserting the music here serves to suggest the moral ambiguity and insanity that is beginning to consume the fathers. The second scene that this piece accompanies takes place during a vigil held to commemorate the lives of the missing girls, who at this point in the movie are thought to be dead. Using this piece during this scene highlights the universal mourning of a loss of innocence when a community experiences a tragic event like this. It also conveys the feeling of helplessness one may feel when all that’s left to hold onto is faith.

The first sound that's heard in this piece is this haunting, organ-like instrument. The organ begins by playing a slow crescendo that eventually decrescendos. This theme, which is also repeated throughout the movie, conveys the overwhelming sense of grief and loss experienced by the parents, but also lends itself to a kind of spiritual element. The way this piece gradually moves up and down mimics the twists and turns throughout the movie, the glimmers of hope during the investigation of the missing girls, and the eventual leads that turn cold. What's powerful about this piece, and encompassing of the overall score, is the emotive nature of these sounds and the way they suggest a feeling but never quite force anything upon the listener. This allows the story that's being told on screen and the actor's performances to reel in the audience, the score is just the bait on the hook.

During the finale of the movie, the theme from "The Candlelight Vigil" is once again employed in the piece, "Through Falling Snow" except in different circumstances. Without giving away too many spoilers, this piece plays during a scene in which Jake Gyllenhaal's detective character must drive hastily to a nearby hospital through heavy traffic, thick rain and blood obstructing his vision in order to save someone's life. Although the organ is heard playing the same repeating crescendo, this time it's through the perspective of a character who is directly in a position to help, and possibly save a life. The crescendo grows louder, the strings fuller, and the tension builds to match the action happening onscreen. As a viewer, all you're left with is the small, gleaming hope that the good guy will prevail.

What I found interesting about this movie is the choice to use electronic sounds with a string section for this score. Although it's not completely uncommon, the way in which Johan Johansson seamlessly blends these two traditionally contrasting elements and marries the two,

creates a false sense of comfort, like something is out of place. What I think is even more interesting, is the creative choice to use a Radiohead song in the finale, a band known for writing songs comprised of chord progressions that unify both major and minor chords to create something beautiful, yet also anxiety inducing. Johansson has used this technique of blending string sections with electronic droning throughout his career, having also worked with *Prisoners* director Denis Villeneuve on *Sicario* and *Arrival*. Sadly, *Prisoners* would end up being one of Johansson's final scores, as the composer tragically passed away on February 9, 2018.

I chose *Prisoners* because it's a rare feat in the current atmosphere of the Hollywood movie machine. It's not a tentpole movie nor is it based off any existing material, yet because of the originality of the movie and the artistic vision being successfully executed on almost all fronts, it became a financial and critical success. Movies with a midsize budget like this are getting harder to make these days, but *Prisoners* is a great example of a cinematic feat that doesn't compromise substance or story for garish set pieces and loads of CGI. I chose *Prisoners* because at its core, it's simply great storytelling coupled with bold visuals, solid performances and a chilling, powerful score.