

The Mozart of film music

There's much more to Ennio Morricone than *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, the composer assures Peter Culshaw on the eve of a birthday concert in London

The sound of coyotes, ghostly voices, guitar whip-cracks, cantankerous rhythms – the instantly memorable theme to Sergio Leone's 1966 film *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* became a world-wide hit for the film composer Ennio Morricone. The dusty landscapes of Leone's dark reimagining of the Western are inseparable from Morricone's score, which still sounds utterly original.

Leone's other spaghetti Westerns starring Clint Eastwood, *A Fistful of Dollars* and *For a Few Dollars More*, also featured Morricone's inventive music that mixes the symphonic with the bizarre. What is perhaps even more remarkable about these soundtracks is that the music was written before the films were made.

"Leone had a recording of the music which he played on set," says Morricone, and this was one reason for the symbiotic relationship between music and visuals in his films; the other, he continues, was that "Leone allowed lots of space for music, that was his personal style, and it ended up being a very intense collaboration. I would initially play him the music on piano, which didn't give much idea of how it would eventually sound – he was often shocked. But pleasantly shocked, I think. (It probably helped, too, that Leone and Morricone had known each other since they were eight, having met at school in Rome.) Other directors, he says with experienced resignation, "simply don't allow composers to express themselves properly, they destroy the music with dialogue and action".

Morricone, now 75, has written music



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for more than 30 Westerns, and his often eccentric orchestrations can be found even in less distinguished examples of the genre, such as *Two Mules for Sister Sara* (1970), in which medieval flute melodies, violins swooning like wipers, and a choir of men can all be heard.

Though Morricone may be best known for his music for Westerns, he is "disturbed when people think about me as a specialist in music for Westerns: they are only a relatively small percentage of the music I've written."

In fact, Morricone is one of the most prolific composers of our age – he's not only composed the music for more than

400 films and worked with many of the best-known directors of our time, among them Pasolini and Fellini, he also has a parallel career as a non-film composer, particularly of chamber music, piano music, and symphonic works, characteristically adventurous in orchestration (symphonies mixed, with string quartets, for example) and often atonal. A couple of years ago, a concert at the Barbican memorably mixed both types of music.

For his 75th birthday next week, he returns to the Royal Albert Hall for a concert of his film music. Though he has been Oscar-nominated five times – for his scores for *The Mission*, *Bugsy*, *Days of Heaven*, *The Untouchables* and *Madness* – Morricone has yet to win an Academy Award. He should, he says, have won one for *The Mission* in 1986, as the actual winner, *Rainy Day*, had "nice arrangements by Terbie Hancock, but didn't feature original music".

How does he decide on a particular style for a film such as *The Mission*? "In that case the music was conditioned by the music of the Jesuits, who brought Western instruments to teach the Indians, also by the fact that one of the protagonists plays the oboe, and the music of the Indians themselves. The final result describes the spiritual union between the Indians and the Jesuits."

Morricone makes it clear, though, that he's not interested in merely mimicking existing styles: "Sometimes a director will say something like, 'Can you put some

ethnic African music in the film?' in which case I tell him to buy a CD of African music and put that in. He doesn't need me." Although at first sight a slightly frail man in his mid-seventies, he gets increasingly animated and energetic as the interview goes on, rushing to his piano to demonstrate a "seven tone" system of his devising, imitating a jazz trumpet "improvisation" to illustrate his belief that most jazz is not truly improvised, even getting our translator at the interview to take part in singing a canon he is writing for a new musical film.

"The fact that he has a translator, and has refused to learn English, despite working for much of his life with Hollywood directors, is indicative of a certain stubbornness in his character. He's lived his entire life in Rome, despite being offered a villa in Los Angeles, and remains wary of American cultural dominance. "There is a danger that we Europeans are losing our traditions and roots. Now nearly all the popular culture seems to be American."

The sense of a man fighting a cultural rear-guard action is further confirmed in his working method. Nearly all film composers these days work on computers, but, says Morricone, "I like the sense of being an artisan, a craftsman, I like handwriting. Sometimes you get the feeling the computer is controlling the artist, there is a loss of spontaneity."

So what makes a director good to work with? "The most important thing is trust. If a director is a dictator, I can't work with

them. And they must be open to surprise." He tells me he turns down more than half the projects offered him, and it takes around six weeks to write a score: "You could take months, but the result wouldn't necessarily be any better."

While he has had bad experiences with film directors, what has scandalised him particularly is the way his music is treated on TV films, and he now refuses all such offers – he was shocked, for example, by the way the music was edited on a television version of *Misro Jato*: "They sacrificed my music in a terrible way – they should have been ashamed of themselves."

And what makes a good film composer? "You have to have a mix of emotional sensitivity and technical ability. You should be able to write atonal music or a nice melody in C major, compose in the style of any era or composer, but the most important thing is not to lose your own personality."

Morricone, the son of a trumpet player, was open to all kinds of music from an

early age. Something of a prodigy, he began composing at the age of six. When he was 12, his parents enrolled him in a four-year learning course at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome. A fast learner, he raced through the course in two years, but, since this was during the rule of Mussolini, "there were some composers who were banned, like Stravinsky and Britten, whom I only got to hear after the War."

He also learnt trumpet and played in Roman nightclubs, and worked for RCA records in the late 1950s, arranging songs for the likes of Mario Lanza. He also provided incidental music for plays, scored a ballet and joined an experimental music group called Nuova Consonanza. His first film job came in 1961.

You might think at 75 he would be slowing down, but he shows little sign of it having produced six film scores already this year. He's jealous of his time – he refused to fly to the United States to compose some music for Tarantino's latest film *Kill Bill*: "He only wanted a few minutes of music – it wasn't worth it."

I wish Morricone all the best for his 75th and ask the man who's been called "the Mozart of film music" whether he's happy with the music he's written.

"Actually, yes. I'm satisfied with what I've done. But I still think I can improve. You can always do better, you know."

Ennio Morricone's 75th birthday concert is at the Royal Albert Hall with the Royal Symphony Orchestra on November 10.



One of cinema's most famous double acts: Clint Eastwood and Morricone's music