

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
February 24, 2024
98th Season / Music at the Movies: Pixar in Concert
J. Michael Allsen

Pixar in Concert[™] includes music from over 20 years of releases from Pixar Studios. Conductor Kyle Knox leads the Madison Symphony Orchestra in a program that combines these colorful musical scores with excerpts from the films, allowing you to focus a bit more on the *music* than you usually do watching a film in your living room or a theater.

Pixar's first feature-length release, *Toy Story* (1995), was not only a good movie, it was a landmark in the history of film: the first feature-length film to be produced entirely with digital animation. The producers turned to **Randy Newman (b. 1943)** for a score. Newman was known at the time primarily as a songwriter and singer, with songs that were often humorous and a bit sardonic. However, film scoring was also the "family business" for Newman: his uncle, Alfred Newman, had been one of Hollywood's leading film composers from the 1930s through the 1960s, and Alfred's brothers Emil and Lionel were also film composers and musical directors. Three of Alfred's children—Randy's cousins—David, Thomas, and Maria are successful composers as well. Randy Newman created a light, humorous score for *Toy Story*, including the song *You've Got a Friend in Me*, which he also sang on the soundtrack. This was nominated for Best Original Song at the Academy Awards that year. The song appeared in various forms in all four *Toy Story* movies, all of them scored by Newman (including *Toy Story 3* of 2010, also heard on this program). In 2001, Newman scored another Pixar film, *Monsters, Inc.* with a sometimes jazzy and frenetic score. In 2013, Pixar followed this with a "prequel," *Monsters University*, for which Newman created a score filled with references to traditional college songs. Much of the music for *Cars* (2006)—the beginning of another popular Pixar series—was a set of pop songs in classic recordings or sung by contemporary pop and country singers. However, Newman composed several musical cues as well.

Another member of the Newman family, **Thomas Newman (b. 1955)**, has also done scoring for Pixar. Thomas started his career working with Stephen Sondheim as an orchestrator, though his uncle Lionel gave him his first television scoring job when he was in his mid-20s. A family friend, John Williams, also invited him to orchestrate part of the *Return of the Jedi* (1983). Thomas Newman truly hit his stride as a film composer in the 1990s, and in 1994, he received Academy Award nominations for two scores: *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Little Women*. His

first Pixar film was *Finding Nemo* (2003): he created a rich and traditional full orchestra score, that earned him another Oscar nomination. Newman was also hired for the sequel to *Finding Nemo*, *Finding Dory* (2016), for which he creating a score that combined traditional orchestral music with a host of electronic effects and natural sounds. In 2008 he scored one of Pixar’s most ambitious films, *WALL-E*. This a science fiction story set initially in a bleak future: Earth has been abandoned to robots who are left to clean up a polluted and garbage-choked planet. WALL-E, a robotic trash compacter—the last of his race—lives a quiet routine of transforming piles of trash into tidy blocks, and collecting interesting odds and ends he finds. Then one day a much more advanced robot, EVE, appears on Earth to survey the planet for signs that humans could return. This is the start of a love story that will have also have an impact on the remaining humans, now living in an enormous starship. (No spoilers here!) The score prominently uses an excerpt from the 1969 film *Hello, Dolly!* and Louis Armstrong’s 1950 recording of *La Vie en Rose*, and Newman worked with Peter Gabriel to create the song *Down to Earth* for the credits. However, most of the musical cues Newman composed were for a traditional orchestra, often incorporating unusual timbres and percussion.

One of today’s most successful film composers, **Michael Giacchino (b. 1967)**, came into film scoring by way of creating stop-motion animations as a kid and writing music for video games. In recent years, he has scored films in several blockbuster series: the recent *Star Trek* film, the *Jurassic World* series, and multiple Marvel Studios superhero movies. However, his first major film scoring assignment was a Pixar film, *The Incredibles* (2004), about a family of superheroes. In keeping with the vision of the director, Brad Bird, Giacchino created a punchy, jazz-style score that is a throwback to spy movies of the 1960s. Giacchino has scored seven more Pixar films since *The Incredibles*, six of them of them represented on this program.

In 2007, Brad Bird hired Giacchino for *Ratatouille*. The score, with a distinctive Parisian sound, is perfectly in keeping with this story about Remy the rat, whose passion is creating *haute cuisine*. Giacchino’s next Pixar project was *Up* (2009). Here he created a sweet and sentimental score incorporating the music that the curmudgeonly central character Carl must have experienced in the course of his life—everything from waltzes and classic movie music to swing. The central theme is what Giacchino describes as a “very simple waltz that grows and twists and turns through the whole course of the film.” In 2011, he scored *Cars 2*. Like the original *Cars*, it included pop songs, but here the majority of the musical cues were written by Giacchino, some of them channeling a distinctively 1960s “surf rock” sound. *Inside Out* (2015) is a sweet and imaginative story of an 11-year-old

girl, as told by the various emotions who live in her mind. The score, widely considered to be one of Giacchino's finest, is mostly quiet and introspective. *Coco* (2017), was inspired by Mexico's traditional Day of the Dead celebrations. It is largely a musical, with songs by the husband-wife team of Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez and others. (The film's *Remember Me* won the Oscar for Best Original Song that year.) The songs and Giacchino's musical cues channel a range of Mexican folk and pop styles: mariachi, bolero, son jarocho, and more. The most recent Pixar film on this program is *Incredibles 2* (2018), for which Giacchino returned to the jazzy "spy movie" style of *The Incredibles*.

program notes ©2023 by J. Michael Allsen