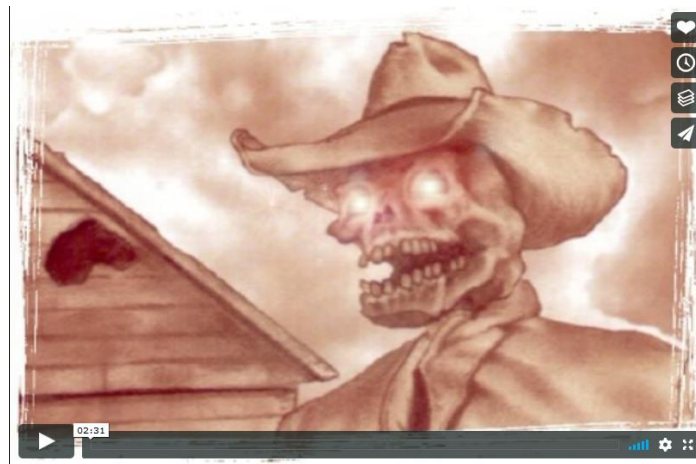


Duel of the Restless Fates: Scoring “Spaghetti”¹

by Kerry J. Byrnes (*Okemos High Class of '63*)

Introduction

Spaghetti, a 1997 experimental video (31:30) that was written, produced, directed, and scored by Ryan J. Brown “pays homage to the genre which inspired its making, the spaghetti western. The most memorable of these pictures were the works of an Italian director [Sergio Leone], and because of the predominant Italian influence in them they were given the spaghetti nickname” (Brown’s comments in a 1998 video on **The Making of Spaghetti**).



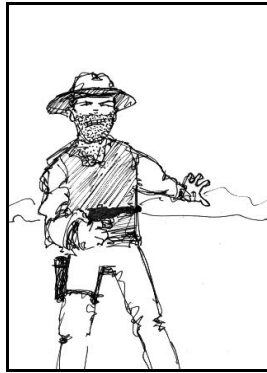
[Trailer on Vimeo for “Spaghetti”](#)

As a child, Brown was “immediately spellbound” by spaghetti westerns, with their “cool, macho characters cast against hot and hellish barren landscapes, blasting and blazing their way through odysseys full of strong, passionate music.” This passion for spaghetti westerns was noted at Brown’s Grymm Productions website (www.grymm.com – no longer active): “I have always loved ‘Spaghetti Westerns,’ particularly the strong dependence these movies have on their musical scores. The stripped down combination of the moving image and accompanying music has always appealed to me, and these films are chock full of this strong combination.” With this imprinting of the spaghetti western on Brown’s psyche, he “decided that at some point in the future [he’d] like to experiment with some of the ideas influenced by these films.” The result of the experimentation that ensued is **Spaghetti**, a sort of “quasi western dream genre” film.

¹ Copyright Disclaimer under Section 107 of the Copyright Act 1976, allowance is made for "fair use" for purposes such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research. Fair use is a use permitted by copyright statute that might otherwise be infringing. Non-profit, educational or personal use tips the balance in favour of fair use.

The story unfolds in a small western Canadian industrial town and its surrounding rural area. Tormented by horrific dreams, Daniel Grayhem (played by Brown) is unwilling to accept that he is the target of ‘paranormal’ forces. Daniel’s hopes for serenity are repeatedly dashed by a recurring dream about the restless ghosts of two rival cowboys who’ve been transported across time from the 1880s, each demanding Daniel’s help in staging a duel of revenge, a Duel of the Restless Fates!

Building on plot elements from fantasy, horror, western, and time-travel genres, **Spaghetti** was shot during a long Albertan winter. With winters averaging eight months in this part of Canada, the plot plays out against a bleak winter backdrop, giving **Spaghetti** a sort of bite *al dente* tundra. This wintry setting provides the foundation for the video’s dark, moody tone, a cold feel that is amplified by those scenes that are presented in black and white or in sepia.



But the dark, moody tone is also reinforced by numerous sound devices, including the wind’s constant howling (to represent the hollow or empty existence of the rival cowboy ghosts); the repeated ticking of clocks (to represent the constant passage of time); the barking of gunshots in the distant past (to represent a wrong that has yet to be set right); and a mix of howling, moaning, and screaming to represent the abrupt ending suffered by the family of one of the rival cowboys, Deputy Marshall Art Rowan (Trevor Lewis), at the hands of his evil nemesis, John Degar (Derek Flohr).



Spaghetti Western & Ennio Morricone Influences

The cold wind's recurring and restless sound also heightens the loneliness and despair that Daniel faces as he prepares for a showdown at high noon. Here **Spaghetti** pays tribute to a classic Hollywood western, as Daniel's sole friend, Mr. Spence (Chris Poole), plays on his harmonica a couple of bars of the main theme ("Do Not Forsake Me") from Dimitri Tiomkin's score to **High Noon**. The harmonica reference also functions as a melodic foreboding of the gunfight showdown yet to come in **Spaghetti**, just as the harmonica scene in Sergio Leone's **Once Upon a Time in the West** reveals the *raison d'être* for that film's showdown gunfight between the characters portrayed by Charles Bronson and Henry Fonda.



This “harmonica” reference and other musical elements in Brown’s score for **Spaghetti** pay even larger tribute to Italian film composer Ennio Morricone, the so-called Maestro or “king of the spaghetti western score.” Indeed, one of the highlights of **Spaghetti**, recipient of the Silver Award for Best Experimental Video at the 1997 Philadelphia International Film and Video Festival, is the video’s score which is constructed from a variety of elements heard in many “spaghetti western” film scores (e.g., solo guitar and whistling), especially those composed by Morricone.

Over the past 50+ years, Morricone has composed scores for a wide variety of films. Of note for this review are the scores he provided for several films that, like **Spaghetti**, have plots that play out against an icy or wintry setting, for example, 1977's **Orca** and 1982's **The Thing**. But the Maestro’s influence on Brown’s approach to scoring **Spaghetti** can best be appreciated by noting key elements of Morricone scores for two other films having plots with an icy or wintry setting – **The Red Tent** and **Il Grande Silenzio**.



Though not a spaghetti western, 1969's **The Red Tent** tells the story of the doomed voyage of an Italian dirigible expedition to the North Pole. The score's main theme in D minor, "Do Dreams Go On," conveys the suffering and the hope of the film's protagonists who have become lost in an icy desert. Another theme, "Others, Who Will Follow Us" (*Altri, Dopo Di Noi*), is a collage of atonal elements that contain the "interesting dissonance of whistles and human voices, to symbolise the cold arctic wind" (Patrick Ehresmann, "La Tendra Rossa," *MSV*, 86, July 1999).



In a vein similar to **Spaghetti**, **Il Grande Silenzio** is set in Goldstone, a remote town effectively isolated from the rest of the world by

a harsh and unrelenting winter. The strange killers hired by the townspeople to protect them from outside raiders eventually succumb to the endless isolation, and they finish by turning on themselves and the people they had been employed to defend. ... The main theme ['Restless'] of [Morricone's score] impressionistically refers to two principle components of the plot. The melody speaks of the bitter irony of death come too soon, and the instrumentation, full of glittering effects from bells and vibraphone, symbolizes the constantly falling snow, the ice, the white, the cold" (John Bender's CD liner notes for "Ennio Morricone: Main Titles, Vol. 3," DRG 32930).

Score Analysis

While Morricone's scores for **La Tendra Rossa** and **Il Grande Silenzio** are graced by beautiful melodies, these scores also feature musical and sound elements that conjure up darker emotions that range from the chilling to the conflictive. With this in mind, let's examine more closely Brown's score to **Spaghetti**. Though melodically weak when compared directly with the main themes of Morricone's spaghetti western scores, Brown's score for **Spaghetti** contains several melodies heard as guitar solos as well as strong atmospherics principally carried by keyboard and sound effects, the latter effectively complementing the film's stark winter setting and dark storyline. As noted by Brown, the score is layered on and effectively reinforces the film's stark images of a desolate wintry landscape and impending revenge and death.

In the video on **The Making of Spaghetti**, Brown describes his approach to scoring **Spaghetti** as one of composing guitar themes (also played by Brown) to represent the plight of the main characters. He varies these themes by incorporating different instrumentations and methods. At various points, the melody played on the guitar is sharply contrasted by the use of a keyboard to provide the video with its darker (colder) underscoring of despair and loneliness.

On this basic framework of guitar melody and keyboard atmospherics, Brown overlays additional elements, notably the literal “bells and whistles” so often heard in the classic Morricone-scored spaghetti western trilogy—**A Fistful of Dollars**; **For A Few Dollars More**; and **The Good, The Bad and the Ugly**. According to Brown, “fairly simple harmonic combinations were carefully constructed to achieve complex sounding, feeling compositions without them becoming too busy and interfering with other elements” of the film’s soundscape. The purpose was “to contribute to [the film’s] content overall and not to become showpieces.” Yet the themes have an identity of their own that stand up away from the video (see below).



Spaghetti’s various themes, Brown relates, were “intuitively” composed and constructed, and were not specifically timed to any of the film’s edited footage. The themes were recorded first and matched to the scenes later, although “somewhat unconditionally they were allowed to flow along.” Thus, the score’s themes flow loosely with the storyline, with one exception. The score’s gunfight piece “had to be timed properly; as the story elements converge in the scene, the thematic variations were combined in the climatic build to reach the end where pistols are drawn.”



Brown also has produced a demo CD that, like the rare Italian soundtrack LP for 1965's Morricone-scored **Il Ritorno di Ringo (The Return of Ringo)**, provides the listener with a souvenir of the dialogue, sound effects, and score highlights from **Spaghetti**. The following provides capsule comments on each of this demo CD’s 11 tracks:

1. **Pastland** – This track is a “very dark and droning, howling piece of music” that starts off with the sound of wind gusts followed by a keyboard in a low register; the tolling of church bells in the background; and the return of the gusting wind as the keyboard subsides.



Actually not included in the video but in the project’s ‘trailer,’ this track’s keyboard element is given an ominous twist. Brown comments:

“I was experimenting with ‘The Bond of Vengeance’ track [see 7 below] and...created a somber interpretation of the video’s main theme by altering the pitch. Immediately the music practically forced me to imagine the haunted pasts of the characters and their surroundings. I thought ‘what better way musically, to represent the story elements overall, thematically?’ As a matter of tone, some inspiration came from Bernard Herrmann’s ‘Psycho’ and ‘Journey to the Center of the Earth.’”

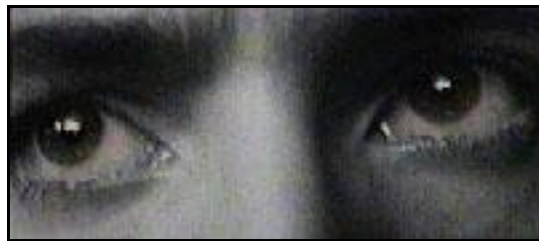
2. **Crosstown** – A slightly country rock melody on solo guitar accompanies Daniel’s morning walk across town to reach the home of his friend, Mr. Spence. “A one track acoustic guitar piece, this theme incorporates an interpretive cross between blues and country (to the best of my abilities!). Upbeat and quirky, this piece (down picked and strummed) symbolizes a busy wintry morning in a small western Canadian town.



3. **Mr. Spence Inquires / Daniel's Descent / The Meeting** –

‘Mr. Spence Inquires’: This selection opens with dialogue and sound design elements including a spaghetti western heard in the background on the television. This track reflects Daniel’s thoughts and denials concerning his somewhat confused state of mind, as Mr. Spence sternly warns him about being too careless when dealing with circumstances such as these. The sound design of this track includes an intentional ‘*deja vu*’ element achieved by introducing an “echoing” effect. “I thought the added time delay would heighten the effect of Daniel’s thinking back.... In essence, the echoing is a play on time--this idea of thinking ‘back.’ In keeping with the theme, the spookiness of the delay also represents the idea of ‘haunting,’ dealing with a theme that has been haunting him for sometime--his inability to understand these ‘dreams’ or experiences.”

‘Daniel’s Descent’: As Daniel continues his walk, he falls into one of his trance-like states and envisions the Rowan family in a series of old photographs. We hear a woman’s scream and the gunshots of the murder of the Rowan family.



‘The Meeting’: This track covers Daniel’s first dream encounter with Art Rowan, representing him and his plight as his distraught spirit leads Daniel through a dream-like state, attempting to give him a glimpse into what happened to him and his loved ones so long ago.



A soothing guitar melody, whistling, and keyboard accompany this encounter. The melody in ‘The Meeting’ is basically the pivotal and overall theme throughout the video. “Lonely and haunting, this piece contains acoustic guitar ‘picked’ against a symphonic sounding bed of keyboards that are literally topped off with gloomy sounding bells and whistles.” Brown

notes that, if “you listen closely, you will find that this theme is repeated throughout the entire score, although in some cases it cannot be recognized as such. For example, the strictly keyboard track ‘The Bond of Vengeance’ [see 7 below] is the same chord progression of ‘The Meeting’ which is played on guitar--only here repeated using a different instrument.” Instrumentally speaking, adds Brown, “this piece sets the standard for most of the music throughout the project,” reflecting inspiration from **The Fistful of Dollars** theme and ‘The Vice of Killing’ theme from **For a Few Dollars More**. The inspiration for the keyboard arrangements, notes Brown, was John Barry’s work for the James Bond films and **Dances with Wolves**.

4. **The Anger of John Degar** – John Degar, the second wandering spirit, appears in Daniel’s apartment, and tells him the reasons for wanting to meet with Art Rowan and finally settle the score.



As this scene unfolds, the Degar theme is heard – darker in tone than the other characters’ themes, representing an angry and evil spirit in search of an end to decades of wandering the plains of purgatory and revenge for the curse upon him. The theme’s arrangement follows the same path as the previous selection (‘The Meeting’) but is topped off with ‘gong’-like sounding church bells.



5. **Purgatory ... and The Digger –**

‘Purgatory’: Daniel, in one of his states, has entered into a place in purgatory, a large, frozen wasteland dotted with shallow graves lying ahead of him. This cue, notes Brown, “is an experiment dealing with speed and pitch. It is a sound design piece consisting of howls, moans and screams designed to represent the spirits of the three Rowan family members who are lost and destined to wander here forever.” The sound design (that is, the elements for the moaning husband, crying wife, and screaming child) was inspired by **The Exorcist**.



‘The Digger’: The scoring for ‘Purgatory’ is followed by a strange, clanking, plodding theme to represent ‘The Digger,’ who has been tending the graves sites. This selection consists of “warped (literally) bells and layered symphonic keyboards, accompanied by acoustic guitar picking a slightly restrained and alternate version of the main theme. This piece plays throughout this surreal scene.” Overall, the track’s disoriented keyboard elements in the low registers plus the aforementioned human wails reminded this writer a bit of the approach other composers have used to accompany a scary visit to a carnival’s house of mirrors, as in ‘Scaramanga’s Fun House’ from John Barry’s score for **The Man with the Golden Gun**.



6. **Wife and Child** – Deputy Sheriff Rowan pays another visit to explain why he needs Daniel’s help in plotting his revenge. Musically, this track represents Rowan’s grief over the loss of his loved ones and the time that has passed since the horrible events surrounding their deaths.



Instrumentally, the track is strictly a ‘picked’ acoustic guitar piece that contains two subtle variations of the main theme plus harmony. Commenting on this track, Brown wrote:

“This selection stands out to me as an incredibly passionate and romantic piece of music. Subtle elements apparent in the recording process make it stand out to me in an interesting way also. While recording, I would ‘cue’ in by using my natural sense of timing—no use of a ‘click’ track or other type of guideline. Because of this, throughout the song my timing shifts slightly back and forth, adding a type of clunky or mechanical effect to the music overall—like the tick-tocking of a clock. This effect gives the piece a type of music box or carousel feel to it and not only does the music reflect a great sadness or grief, but I find that with this ‘clock’-like timing effect, thematically, it represents the passage of time element in quite a unique manner. ‘Incredibly interesting’ was how I found it once I gave it some thought, and incredibly pleasing as well. I hope others think so as well.”

7. **Mr. Spence Ponders...The Bond of Vengeance** – Daniel and Mr. Spence sort out the meaning of the ghostly visits of the two rival cowboy spirits, Degar and Rowan.



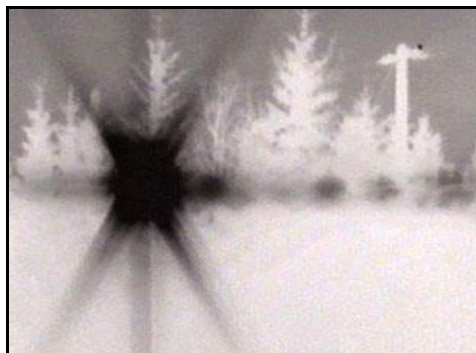
This conversation is followed by a moody or ominous (dueling?) ‘string’ piece, inspired by the aforementioned Herrmann scores. “Strictly a one-track keyboard piece, this is a dark interpretation of the main theme’s guitar part...applying the same chord progression or melody, only this time using the keyboard to give it a thicker, fuller, symphonic element.”

8. **The Picture** – Daniel tracks down a diary with a passage describing the events that happened so many years ago in Art Rowan’s home. “Here is where the story elements tie together for the first time for the passage contains with it, photographs of the young deputy and his family at that time, with a photo of their killer.” Following Daniel’s findings is a single acoustic guitar track playing a ‘strummed’ and ‘picked’ version of the main theme’s chord progression, this lonely rendition softly describing the old beaten photo, and the wandering spirit of the man within it.



9. **Do I Believe? The Eclipse... The Gunfight** –

‘Do I Believe?’: This track leads with Daniel asking himself if he believes in spirits, while Mr. Spence plays on his harmonica a couple of bars from the theme to “High Noon,” a musical prelude alluding to what Daniel must do the following day at high noon.



‘The Eclipse...’: This selection follows Daniel as he approaches the old stretch of road leading to the spot where spirits are to appear and stand off, the spot where Degar and Rowan squared off many years before. As Daniel approaches, time draws near, the sky fills with thunder and lightning, time warbles, the seasons reverse themselves under an eclipsing sky, and the spirits step through.



‘The Gunfight’: This track is the story’s climax, and the original impetus for creating this video. With the appearance of the two rival spirits in their corporal form, the showdown begins. This, according to Brown, was the only track

“[c]omposed, arranged, and timed specifically to a scene as the characters and elements are introduced. This arrangement is an interpretive return to and collection of the guitar themes already introduced in ‘The Meeting,’ ‘The Anger of John Degar,” and ‘Wife and Child.’ These are ‘picked’ themes, accompanied by soft guitar harmonies, symphonic keyboards and signature church bells surrounding a marching snare drum. This piece builds in tempo and pace, erupting into a driving, strummed flamenco type interpretation of the story’s main theme which pivots here with the drawing of pistols.”



10. **Bond Is Broken** – Even as the rival duelists have fired upon one another, to mete out final justice Daniel must yet become directly involved in determining the outcome. Here the score builds on the keyboard elements already used in ‘The Bond of Vengeance,’ although this selection musically goes a step further with the addition of piano to provide the harmonic element. Brown relates that this approach was “very much inspired by Morricone’s use of piano and soft string selections...in **Once Upon A Time in the West**. This section represents finality and closure—the ending of the tragic events that preceded and concluded with the gunfight.”



11. **The Marker** – As Daniel places a marker for the Rowan family, Mr. Spence ties up the threads of the storyline, accompanied by the lonely whistled harmony provided for ‘The Meeting,’ this referring to Art Rowan, whose plight was the main focus of the story.



One can view **Spaghetti** on Vimeo (click on hyperlinked image below):



["Spaghetti" Video on Vimeo](#)

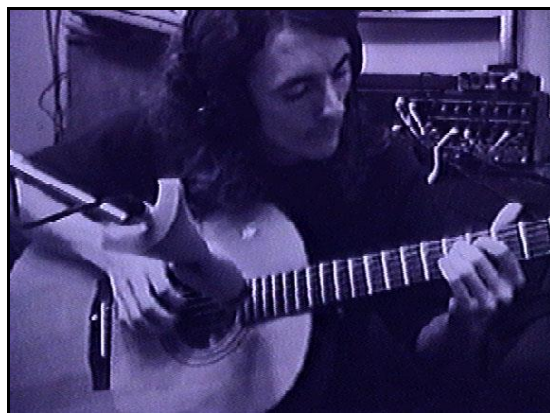
Discussion

Brown, as a first-time film composer, should not be faulted if his score for **Spaghetti** falls short of a perfect 10 in emulating the approach to spaghetti western scoring earlier paved by the Maestro, Ennio Morricone. With the possible exception of **Il Grande Silenzio** also having a wintry setting, **Spaghetti** as an experimental video is unique in placing the video's story line in the non-"spaghetti western" setting of a contemporary Canadian winter. To a great extent, Brown notes:

"winter plays an influential part in the isolated moodiness of the project's visual and aural presentation-which was directly inspired and motivated by my immediate surroundings. This was inevitable. Albertan winters can be miserable-overpowering, constricting, freezing cold and gray. When exposed to this harsh, overbearing environment for an extended period of time it can play hell with your psyche.... Couple that with being situated in a smaller, outlying community and it can leave you with a somewhat grave sense of isolation-as if you're cut off from the rest of the world. On a more practical level, as a production, we were resigned to (or 'stuck' with) dealing directly with these harsh elements on a circumstantial level due to our restraints-financial and otherwise (we weren't exactly capable of packing up and moving off to Mexico, for example, to scout our locations).

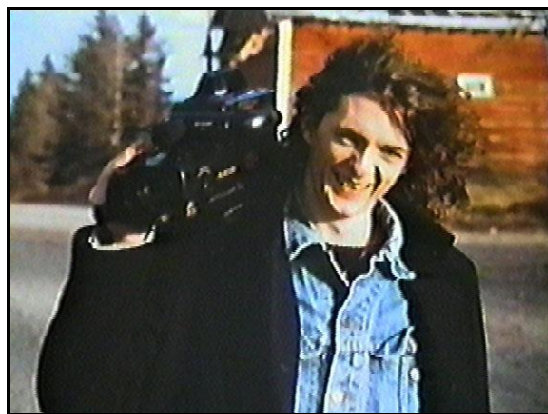
"As a result, we were resigned to weave the winter season's dark realities into the tapestry of the production, having it then become a major factor in the telling of the story and its design visually, aurally, and musically.... The keyboard elements in the score...represent this background mostly, in drones and drawn out melodic sequences-representing the constantly ominous and lonely shades of gray throughout. Such is also the case with a great deal of the sound design that is also presented in layers of drones and tones.

"It is my perception that most "Spaghetti Western" soundtracks, or at least the ones that were of inspiration to me, contain 'chirpy' elements representing blue skies and sunshine. This is obviously a product of the environments presented in the films. The sun is used as a powerful symbol during the opening credit animations for **A Fistful of Dollars**, for example. These elements, such as whistling and plucked guitar are used in an opposite manner here in **Spaghetti** (apart from 'Crosstown, which represents something more lively-a 'bustling' small town morning)."



Looking back on producing and scoring **Spaghetti**, Brown reaffirms that music is an important and essential ingredient in any film/video:

“This is the ingredient which carries with it, the emotional weight, depth and impact of the dramatic content. In fact, there would be no drama without it—to a great extent certainly. For my own productions, I feel it is necessary to give this ingredient room to breath and flourish. It is important to give music almost it’s own ‘role’ or ‘character’ in the production and, in turn, to allow it to build character in everything surrounding it while maintaining it’s place as an emotional ‘provider’ for the story content. I believe that this is the approach used in the films that inspired **Spaghetti**, and is definitely one which I have adapted and experimented with—[considering] the fact that the story was written while listening to original ‘Spaghetti Western/Western’ film scores and various interpretations of them.”



The first edit of **Spaghetti** was completed with limited original soundtrack material, combined with a fair amount of ‘canned’ music. During the making of **Spaghetti**, Morricone’s music for the \$ trilogy films and **Once Upon A Time in the West** “was powerfully influential.... During the scoring for the first draft of the project, the harmonica played a very strong role in the accompaniment of the guitar.” Here Brown saw the use of the harmonica as presenting “a foreboding, foreshadowing of events yet to unfold.” Mr. Spence’s playing of a few bars of “Do Not Forsake Me” is “very effective (for those who realize the significance of it). Not only...was the passage left in for this reason, and to pay homage to the film’s (**High Noon**) place within the genre, but to place emphasis on the mythology and symbolism of the ‘high noon’ scenario overall.”

For the ‘definitive’ version, however, Brown decided to compose the entire soundtrack himself, and “the harmonica did not play this same role due to instrumentation and mixing constraints but the effect of its impact on the original editing of the gunfight is still very much apparent in the final version.” On the other hand, in the score that was composed for the ‘definitive’ version, Brown’s own personal favorite piece of music was that which he composed for Art Rowan’s visit to Daniel’s home (see CD track 6: “Wife and Child”). This, Brown describes, is a “wonderful piece” which reminds him of a music box or a carousel. “Here is where I gained the most personal satisfaction executing the emotional content of the story.”

As a musician, Brown relates, composing has been “an avid interest.... Combining that interest with a specific dramatic purpose in mind was a challenge—one that became something of an obsessive labor of love.” As Brown points out, the soundtrack in its entirety, including alternate mixes of various tracks, runs longer than the video itself!

The **Spaghetti** score, reports Brown, “has been something of an accomplishment for me and I’m quite happy and proud of the results. For these reasons, I’ve decided to release the music for **Spaghetti** on CD.” While he admits this CD will not be “a guaranteed ‘chart buster,’” the music likely will interest those “who enjoy the works of soundtrack composers who were of great inspiration to me while completing it. Mainly, of course, Ennio Morricone as well as John Barry and Bernard Herrmann to an extent.”



Brown adds that his ideas behind developing the video’s music were also reflected in the development of the sound design and sound effects.

“I think that sound design can be of equal aural importance—yet the music can certainly carry more emotional weight. Sound design can be constructed in a layered way much in the same way as music is, and as such can be presented as a composition as well. You’re just dealing with aspects of tone and texture instead of melodies and harmonies. The idea of both music and sound design having a strong dependence on one another will be a major factor in my next project, which will be presented as a silent film.”



Epilogue

The author gratefully acknowledges Ryan J. Brown's kindness in sharing the **Spaghetti** materials reviewed in this article. The author can be reached at the following email address: kjbyrnes@erols.com.

See <https://vimeo.com/channels/spaghetti> for more information about Grymm Productions and **Spaghetti**.

