

## Encultured Musical Codes in Bear McCreary's Video Game and TV Soundtracks

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Critics and audiences recognize Bear McCreary as a highly innovative composer of television and video game music. A common thread runs through the bulk of his work: a fusion of live-recorded instruments drawn from the Western classical orchestra, folk, rock, and related popular styles, electronic technologies, and various non-Western traditions. For the sci-fi TV series *Battlestar Galactica* that aired from 2004 to 2009, McCreary turned to instruments such as the Armenian duduk, Chinese erhu, and Indian sitar. *The Walking Dead*, which begins its sixth season later this month, has paired a small string orchestra with folk instruments such as banjo, dulcimer, and autoharp. In the realm of video games, his 2010 soundtrack for *Dark Void* incorporated the Russian balalaika as well as the Indian tabla and Japanese taiko drums. He subsequently made use of a Javanese gamelan to situate 2011's *SOCOM 4* in Southeast Asia.

Because of these combinations of instruments, commentators and McCreary himself have branded his music as exotic and eclectic. However, little attention is paid to the multivalent nature of these terms and the degree to which they account for his compositional style. The scores are often described in vague terms such as inventive or unusual—qualities viewed in a positive light—though references to specific instruments are rare. McCreary's audiences seldom identify the origins of exotic sounds and gestures, but acknowledge certain stylistic elements – foremost instrumentation – as somehow different.

This paper addresses the critical reception of McCreary's scores and posits a framework through which his blending of disparate musical traditions can be understood. I will touch on definitions of exoticism and eclecticism, as well as Claudia Gorbman's concept of cultural musical codes, as a springboard for assessing McCreary's work on *Battlestar Galactica*, which leads to discussion of his game scores for *Dark Void* and *SOCOM 4*. I will argue that the tension between idiomatic and unidiomatic instrumental writing is central to McCreary's style across various platforms. Furthermore, for some composers working in small- and large-screen media, a fusion of instruments and stylistic elements has become their primary practice, complicating conventional perceptions of exoticism and eclecticism.

McCreary's soundtracks are frequently labeled "exotic," though the ways in which they suggest otherness are rather different. Jonathan Bellman defines exoticism in well-established terms: "the borrowing or use of musical materials that evoke distant locales or alien frames of

reference.”<sup>1</sup> Ralph Locke promotes a broader conceptualization that is not dependent on the listener identifying certain materials or gestures as “other.”<sup>2</sup> To what extent are such definitions, conceived largely in relation to the Western art-music tradition, applicable to McCreary’s music? I will show that his soundtracks do signify the distant or unfamiliar, in part because Western audiences may be less acquainted with other music traditions, but also because McCreary mixes instruments from several regions in a single cue. Rarely, however, does he select non-orchestral instruments to call to mind their native contexts. Instead, he uses these instruments to evoke “cultural musical codes,” a phrase coined by Gorbman in reference to viewers’ acquired associations of certain musical instruments and styles with dramatic meaning.<sup>3</sup> For McCreary, the instruments take on roles as dramatic signifiers rather than signifiers of specific cultures. For instance, a diverse soundworld may serve as a metaphor for a radically altered environment where aliens and humans cohabit, where the familiar and unfamiliar mesh. Elsewhere, McCreary exploits the sound capacity of instruments through unidiomatic writing, or layers styles in such a way that the instruments transcend their previously encultured musical codes.

Along with exotic, McCreary’s sound is often described as eclectic. What is meant by eclecticism has varied widely across the arts and over time. It is generally an affirmative (albeit hackneyed) descriptor of popular or contemporary genres but has had derogatory overtones when applied to art music. Eclecticism typically involves drawing upon musical traditions as materials that can be freely mixed. Simon Emmerson sees this as a primary practice for many younger composers rather than one by which they dabble in styles through allusion or quotation. He argues, “The composer may simply be attempting to bring together various elements, maybe to integrate, maybe not – but not playing with the elements as iconic of something else.”<sup>4</sup>

Does McCreary play with non-Western and folk music traditions, or has it become part of his “primary practice”? On one hand, he is a classically trained pianist and graduate of USC’s Thornton School of Music. He studied under the celebrated film composer Elmer Bernstein and cites figures such as Jerry Goldsmith and Alan Silvestri as influences. On the other hand, McCreary regularly worked with non-orchestral instruments at USC as part of student film projects. As will be shown, *Battlestar Galactica* provided further opportunities to write for hybrid ensembles, and that experience directly impacted his subsequent projects. Since he continues to use instruments unidiomatically while avoiding references to specific musical cultures, his style fits Emmerson’s model of eclecticism.

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<sup>1</sup> Bellman asserts that “[t]he suggestion of strangeness is the overriding factor: not only does the music sound different from ‘our’ music, but it also suggests a specific alien culture or ethos.” Jonathan Bellman, ed., *The Exotic in Western Music* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), ix and xii.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph P. Locke, “A Broader View of Musical Exoticism,” *The Journal of Musicology* 24, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 483. See also Locke’s monograph *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) and his more recent essay “On Exoticism, Western Art Music, and the Words We Use,” *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 69, no. 4 (2012): 318–28.

<sup>3</sup> Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 2–3.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Emmerson, “Where next? New Music, New Musicology,” in *The “Languages” of Electronic Music: The Proceedings of the Electroacoustic Music Studies Network 2007 Conference* (Leicester, UK: De Montfort University, 2007), <http://www.ems-network.org/spip.php?article293>. See especially pp. 2 and 5.

At the age of 24, McCreary was hired to assist Richard Gibbs on a 3-hour pilot for the *Battlestar Galactica* reboot. The position of lead composer was handed over to McCreary when Gibbs left the project to pursue work in film. McCreary's soundtracks for the four seasons of *Battlestar* attracted much attention – widely praised by critics and commercially successful in their own right. The series follows the crew of an aging military space-age warship that was scheduled for decommissioning after a sustained period of peace. A sudden attack by robotic Cylons annihilates humanity's Twelve Colonies leaving fewer than 50,000 survivors. Forced back into service, the *Galactica* embarks on a perilous quest to locate Earth, the prophesized Thirteenth Colony where humanity hopes to find permanent shelter and resettle.

Following Gibbs's lead, McCreary maintained a limited instrumental palette for much of season one—not because of budget restrictions, but rather that the producers wished to avoid music reminiscent of traditional sci-fi scores. This meant no epic fanfares and McCreary was discouraged from using recurring themes. Consequently, he developed scoring techniques featuring non-Western instruments to meet the creators' demands. The early episodes are rich with ethnic-sounding vocals and percussion, most notably Japanese taikos. Example 1.

The relatively lean score is a striking departure from Stu Phillip's music for the original series in the late 1970s, and in turn, the film scores of John Williams that inspired it. Yet Christian Clemmensen points out that the layering of exotic sounds and female vocals were already stereotypes of 2000's science fiction music, citing *Dune*, *Farscape*, and *Earth: Final Conflict* as precedents that rejected established sci-fi conventions. Nonetheless, the music of *Battlestar*, which reached a larger audience through delayed viewing and online streaming, struck many as innovative if not groundbreaking.

The score evolves considerably around the end of season one when thematic development as well as a broader spectrum of non-Western instruments becomes the norm. Perhaps unexpectedly, so too does symphonic music. A track called “The Shape of Things to Come,” composed for the first season finale, features piano and orchestral strings playing minimalistic variations over an ostinato bass. Though the cue suitably accompanies onscreen imagery of the interior of an opera house, the instrumentation strikes us as highly unusual—even alien—due to its scarcity in previous episodes. Example 2.

The expanded palette was a direct response to new directions in the script. In brief, as the series unfolds, it moves beyond military science fiction to probe matters such as fate, prophecy, and the divine. From season two onward, one hears instruments such as the Irish whistle, uilleann pipes, melodica, mandolin, and Turkish lavta. Reflecting on the series as a whole, Effie Papanikolaou observes that the music “may carry unequivocal ethnic significations, but it is almost impossible for the perceiver to construct any culture-specific meaning.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, many recognize certain instruments as non-Western (or simply non-orchestral), but not

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<sup>5</sup> Eftychia Papanikolaou, “Of Duduks and Dylan: Negotiating Music and the Aural Space,” in *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica*, ed. Tiffany Potter and C. W. Marshall (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2008), 225–26. The term “perceiver” as promoted by Anahid Kassabian is used in film studies to embrace the dual activity of listening and viewing.

necessarily in association with a particular culture. Even conventional symphonic cues such as “The Shape of Things to Come” may sound displaced or unfamiliar.

*Battlestar Galactica* proved to be seminal in shaping McCreary’s approach to instrumentation and its impact on storytelling. Next, I will explore the manner in which instruments suggest and subvert culture-specific associations in *Dark Void* and *SOCOM 4*, commercially unsuccessful video games with well-regarded soundtracks.

McCreary accepted an offer from Capcom in 2008 to write music for its cross-platform release *Dark Void*, a rocket-pack adventure game set in the late 1930s. The story centers on a cargo pilot who is sucked into a vortex while flying through the Bermuda Triangle. He soon joins the Survivors, a resistance movement engaged in battle with a hostile alien force known as the Watchers. The soundtrack features an ambitious 63-piece ensemble with many of the soloists who collaborated on *Battlestar Galactica*. Although the *Dark Void* score differs through its use of recurring melodic themes, McCreary’s compositional style is still immediately recognizable with its percussive sound and non-orchestral instruments. In addition to tablas, taikos, and Middle Eastern dumbeks, he wrote for the Indian bansuri, the Portuguese guitar, and the Russian balalaika. Prominent in the title track is the ondes Martenot, an early electronic instrument that produces uncanny, haunting tones evocative of the theremin. Example 3.

The various factions in *Dark Void* are characterized by musical materials that strongly evoke well-established cultural musical codes. McCreary composed the human Survivors’ music to sound “folky” and “warm” while the angular and dissonant melodies of the Watchers are meant to sound “threatening” and “foreign.” Symbolizing the limited resources at their disposal, the Survivors are represented by bright or breathy folk instruments including the Andean quena and pan flutes. For the high-tech alien Watchers, one hears more or less the opposite – mechanical tones generated by synthesizers and distorted playing by live musicians, particularly on electric violin and the ondes Martenot, with the Turkish yaylı tambur underpinning the Watchers’ electronic soundscape.

In sum, McCreary depicts the “good guys” through folk-acoustic instruments and the “bad guys” through “advanced,” alienating music. In this limited sense, the score is rather conventional. Yet the boundaries of these sound worlds are often blurred, with combinations of Western, non-Western, electronic, and folk-inspired music representing each group. This illustrates McCreary’s eclectic approach in that individual instruments are neither iconic of a particular musical tradition nor do they rigidly represent specific in-game characters or events. Instead, they combine to function as cultural musical codes that evoke particular affective meanings for the player.

While the *Dark Void* score is loosely programmatic, the music bears limited impact on the game’s dramatic arc. With his next video game project, *SOCOM 4*, McCreary set out to write music that would evoke more *specific* associations in the player’s mind – associations he could then manipulate in ways that directly shape the broader narrative.

Released in 2011 for Sony’s PlayStation 3, *SOCOM 4* is a third-person tactical shooter set in Southeast Asia. The protagonist is a soldier tasked with leading Navy SEALs and NATO

troops against a group of rebels known as the Naga while repelling attacks from a corrupt private security company called Clawhammer. In video shorts promoting the game's release, Sony producers mention their desire to avoid "any kind of cliché, bash-crash, orchestral action music."<sup>6</sup> McCreary, in turn, reinforced the setting by drawing upon a range of Asian musical traditions rather than those of any particular nation or culture. As with his previous projects, he composed for a potpourri of non-orchestral instruments, some of which are quite rare for or had never appeared in a video game. The score includes several Japanese instruments including the biwa lute, koto, shamisen, and shakuhachi. Also permeating the score are the Chinese erhu and the dizi, a transverse membrane flute. Example 4 features excerpts from the title track that include an orchestra with Western and Asian instruments, electronics, and a Javanese gamelan.

McCreary notes in his blog that in the West, composers have used gamelan music to create a tranquil atmosphere as Westerners often associate Javanese gamelans with meditation. Playing against this expectation, McCreary builds tension in the score by exploiting the clash between Western melodic scales and those of the gamelan, which divide the octave differently. Used unidiomatically and in an alien context—a video game soundtrack—he reimagines the gamelan as a means for transmitting anxiety and violence.

In a broad sense, the three factions in *SOCOM 4* are depicted as follows: Western orchestral music for the hero, non-Western music for the rebel insurgents, and a mix of distorted electronic sounds for Clawhammer. These distinctions are fluid so that when the armies collide, their musical worlds collide. Such close ties between music and plot are commonplace in video games to say nothing of film or television, yet much in the *SOCOM 4* soundtrack is noteworthy. Often non-orchestral instruments are used unidiomatically, for instance, pan flutes played in a percussive or otherwise aggressive fashion. At the same time, standard cultural musical codes for the Western orchestra—sweeping strings and triumphant brass—become rare as the game progresses.

For Papanikolaou, an idiosyncratic fusion of traditional and world music in *Battlestar Galactica* reflects a broader trend in the entertainment industry: the embrace of cross-cultural practices and popularization of non-Western sounds. Her observation may be extended to McCreary's game scores, and other recent projects including *Defiance*, a shared universe television series and video game that premiered in 2013 for which he draws upon strategies explored in his earlier works.

Because of his approach to instrumentation, and the range of musical influences spanning five continents, McCreary's soundtracks are often labeled and marketed as exotic and eclectic. Such terms are applicable, but problematic in that the meanings associated with each vary widely. Exoticism relates largely to instrumentation used as a tool for representing Otherness, sometimes directly, but more frequently through loose associations the perceiver may or may not register as exotic. Rather than employ instruments to call to mind their native contexts, he re-contextualizes them as dramatic signifiers that become encultured as the series or game

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<sup>6</sup> Sony Computer Entertainment, "SOCOM 4: U.S. Navy SEALs Behind the Scenes: Music," YouTube video, posted by "PlayStation," April 11, 2011, [http://youtu.be/bV\\_d9WhRqUk](http://youtu.be/bV_d9WhRqUk).

progresses. McCreary's eclectic approach, his primary practice, is one by which he treats diverse instruments as material for constructing distinctive sound worlds.