MUSIC AND AUDIO PRODUCTION FOR DOCUMENTARY FILMS
“OVER THE EXAMPLE OF A PARTICULAR DOCUMENTARY:
YILAN HİKAYELERİ (SERPENT STORIES)”

Abstract

Music and audio production for documentary film have different features than the productions in other media. Making music and audio production for documentaries requires a different approach than the one used for film music and audio recording for the audio professional. Because a documentary is a whole, and only one music covers the documentary. The music is then divided into fragments which are considered suitable for different scenes of the documentary and used accordingly. Audio processing (effects, mixing etc.) comes last in the process.

All these processes are considerably time-consuming. If it were only ten years ago, these specific processes would take a lot of time. However, "the digital" changed that. Over the course of ten years, the audio world adopted the new digital audio technology which is faster to work with, easier to use, and has a higher quality.

In this paper, the process of music and audio post-production for documentaries will be described over the example of a particular documentary film called “Yılan Hikayeleri (Serpent Stories)”. The problems that are encountered during music and audio production as both sound engineer and musician are discussed. Finally, some recommendations will be given to the young musician-engineers who are at the beginning stages of their professional life.

Key Words: Music Technology, Audio Production, Music for Documentary

“YILAN HİKAYELERİ” BELGESEL FILMİ ÖZELİNDE BELGESEL
AMAÇLI SES VE MÜZİK PRODÜKSİYON SÜRECİ

Özet

Müzik veya daha genel olarak ses yapımları görsel olanlara göre daha farklıdır. Bunun da ötesinde, görsellerin film veya belgesel olması bile müzik ve ses
prodüksiyonunu etkiler. Çünkü filmden ayrı olarak belgesel bir bütündür ve tek bir müziğe tüm belgeseli işleyebilmek mümkündür. Söz konusu bu bütün belgesel görüntülerine göre parçalara ayrılır, uygun görsellere göre yerleştirilir ve bunlara ek olarak, müzik dışında diğer ses efekleri de kurgulanır. Çok değil, on yıl öncesine kadar tüm bu işlemler bir hayli zahmetliydi. Ancak günümüzün dijital olanları, tüm süreci ürün kalitesini de arttırarak en aza indirgedi.

Bu makalede, “Yılan Hikayeleri” belgeseli özelinde bir belgesel filmin müzik ve ses prodüksiyonunda kullanılan ana işlemler anlatılacaktır. Belgeselin müzik ve ses tasarım süreci, özellikle genç tonmaysterler ve mesleğinin başındaki profesyoneller için oldukça önemli tavsiyeler içermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Müzik Teknolojisi, Ses Prodüksiyonu, Belgesel Müziği

INTRODUCTION

At the bottom of many academic studies on music technology, lie the scientific researches and studies. Each one valuable in itself, many studies in various fields have been presented and discussed so far. Many studies, from the newly developed hardwares and techniques to softwares, from professional recording and dubbing methods to the specific areas of music technology such as music information retrieval systems, are the academic subjects of music technology presented in a wide range so far (Işıkhan 2015: 30). This type of academic studies in general, as well as in other disciplines, prepare a theoretical background to the field of music technology. Theoretical background triggers other studies and creates a cascade of motion process. Thus, the applicable size of the science that is the absolute reality would be revealed. The interactional and sustainable application fields of music technology including sound recording, dubbing, publishing, music arrangements, etc., are the application fields at the very final point of such an academic process which is initiated academically and finalized with the current demands and naturally with the human factor.

Also, outside the academic process, regardless of any theoretical ground, there are studies that are directly based on applications. These studies can be roughly expressed with various words, such as popular, disposable, quick and random. These are such expressions that, even if one rolls up their sleeves to form a scientific study basis on this subject, the study would barely end up in the mid-pages of a popular journal. Because the resultant has not gone through a process, it is ordinary, and, let's name it; “it's completely a story”.

However, this is a very wrong perspective. Owsinski insists that a process in music technology which is described academically as above, makes sense only when it is matched with the "ordinary" (Owsinski 2005: 4). In fact, according to the author, application fields which are regarded as ordinary, have such value that will make way for the academic studies in music technology.

It should be confessed that, we, the music technology academics in Turkey have made the same mistake in many scientific studies so far. In the papers and articles, either the specific was investigated or the thoughts were conveyed. Sometimes it was focused on a novel technique or a software, and sometimes aesthetic concerns were brought to the foreground. However, none of them had presented the direct application, the one which was previously defined as "ordinary". Until the presentation by Can Karadoğan (2013: 81-87)...
When Karadoğan chose the subject of his communique as the communication/interaction between the sound engineer and the artist in productions, we thought that this was completely a convection of application, and so it was briefly and roughly conveying the "ordinary". However, the results did not leave such an impact at all. Contrary to expectations, the importance of a direct application convection, i.e., what is popular and actual in academic level was understood well and clearly.

With the urge to pick up contextually where Karadoğan's observational studies have left off, a study coming from an application will be presented in this study. For the application field, music and sound effects production process for the documentary entitled "Yılan Hikayeleri" (Serpent Stories) which the production period lasted approximately for two years and has been completed recently was chosen. All the the process from the first presentation of the documentary for music and sound effects to me by the director to the delivery will be strived to be explained in this communique. Therefore, for the reasons explained above, this paper contains an entirety which actually, with Owinsky's words, is expected to show direction to the academic studies and therefore reflects a direct application, rather than being a presentation of an academic study carried out in the field of music technology.

The Documentary "Serpent Stories" and the Plot

One thing that all music technology workers agree on, which is confirmed when considered historically, is that the initial point of music or, with a more general expression, sound technology dates back to visual technology, briefly to movie and video technologies. Apart from Echo recording his voice to the mountains in the tale by the Latin poet Ovidius, Plato's mechanical musical instrument which works with water and is said to play a melody in every hour at the 4th Century BC, and the Monk Magnus's machine which produces human voice at the 13th Century AD, the beginning of music and sound technology dates back to the late 19th Century, to Martinville and Edison. Recording and listening practices that Edison introduced to the world with phonograph, is actually nothing more than film production and exhibition curiosity which starts with Martinville's sound recordings and is introduced to the daily life with Edison's kinetoscope... (Ünlü 2004: 27).

The late 18th century which are the birth years of the film industry, as expected, is also the beginning of the film productions with documentary purposes. However, it is not possible to talk about a professional production until the documentary called "Moana" which is about Samoa Island and released in 1926 (Ellis & Betsy 23). Documentary is actually referred to shoots for military purposes rather than the popular one. Therefore, front shoots and others made during the years of World War I are the first actual documentaries known. After 1960, in both technological and general terms, the so-called contemporary documentary productions begin. Departments of government organizations for documentary purposes only, like the BBC in particular, continue documentary production today with all their amenities.

It would not be a mistake to say that documentary music has no difference from film music in terms of production, and that they only have a visual difference in terms of their durations.

The documentary film "Serpent Stories" which is the subject of this study, tells the semi legendary semi true stories of rural population living in the Aegean Region with the snakes. The documentary starts with consecutive telling of different stories, and with the contributions by
Cihan Işıkhan

archaeologist and art historian scientists, reveals how the tales that date back to old ages and today's stories match up. These stories which gather the past and the present, sometimes directly coincide, whereas sometimes undergo various changes and evolve even if the subjects stay the same. In fact, as in the example of snake as a symbol of medicine, these changes show how wrong even some world wide accepted facts are. Because, the two entwined snakes figure which is the symbol of contemporary medicine today, is actually not the symbol of medicine in the past but it represents a publishing house that prints books on medicine.

**Main Music**

Every producer in the music production does and should have a style. My style for this documentary and all the documentaries alike, is producing a single orchestral music that will cover the entire documentary that lasts approximately for 4 minutes, instead of music production unexceptionally for every scene. This music, with the contemporary words, can be described as a "single soundtrack" for the documentary. It's a music with a clear introduction, development and finale parts, formed around a relatively catchy melody, instrumental, and even if not necessarily, in "new age" genre. Seeing the entire documentary may not be necessary for this kind of music. I can say that, a brief information given by the director even at the beginning or during the shoots on the outlines of the content of the documentary is sufficient for me for a production in such style. Because the whole documentary is important, not the scene.

In this study, I proceeded to such a production method. When the subject of the documentary was explained to me and a theoretical fiction was offered to me that can be considered as a guide, both the theoretical and practical music production process lasted approximately for 2 months. The resultant was the orchestral "main theme" that lasts approximately for 4 minutes which can easily be named as "Serpent Stories".

The main theme was produced with expectations of belonging directly to the documentary, intending to evoke the documentary even without seeing it, and always reminding of the documentary again when it is listened to, after watching the documentary. This music was directly the music of the documentary, but on the other hand, this music was actually a guide for the documentary. The main theme was presented at the introduction, at the most striking scene and at the finale of the documentary. The melody was recurred in some scenes as a reminder.

**Scene Music and Silences**

Every documentary has a visual main theme. However this theme consists of a combination of a number of side-themes which are conceived as independently as possible from one another. We can briefly call these side-themes "scenes". These visually designed scenes naturally should have music of their own. These music should be designed with independent genre and arrangements from each other and each one should be independent from one another. The scene should start with the music of its own and the music should end again with the scene. The important thing here is the transition between scenes creating a whole with the music. The scenes and music that start with the ending of another is called "cut roll" and the scenes and music designed with a transition between each other are called "a/b roll". Therefore, designing the scene music as "cut" and "a/b" is an important matter for the whole documentary.

There are a total of 11 scenes in "Yılan Hikayeleri" and the same number of music is produced for every scene. These scenes are, respectively:
Music And Audio Production For Documentary Films “Over The Example Of A Particular Documentary: Yilan Hikayeleri (Serpent Stories)”

Introduction

Generic Speeches

Expert Speech Introduction

Stories 1

Expert Speech 1 (Serpent in Mythology)

Stories 2

Expert Speech 2 (Serpent in Sociology)

Stories 3 (animated narratives)

Expert Speech 3 (Serpent in Theology)

Stories 4 (Serpent in Islam)

Finale

When the music produced so far were placed consecutively, they are sorted as the main themes and the scene themes with their visuals. At first glance, all this traffic may have a continuous feeling of the music resonated throughout the documentary, from the beginning to the end. However, with John Cage's words "silence is also music". In this regard, continuous visuality does not leave a negative impact on the audience, even the gaps in the visuals may create a big problem, however, and the situation is different in music. The continuity of music, although not yet certain, may create a negative effect on the documentary whole.

The scenes which have no music, is usually the scenes that contain effective speeches or speechless visuals even as effective as speeches. However, the silence of music is generally seen in parts with the ambient speeches (not in perforations). In case of frequent existence of such conversations in the documentary, the silence is preferred in hardly heard speeches due to shooting circumstances or in the scenes with contextually the most striking speeches.

In fact, the music documentary is completed within the process explained so far. The main theme was used in the introduction and the finale and recurred in notable scenes. The scene music was aligned with the independent visuals throughout the documentary and at other times, silence (no music) was used due to reasons explained above. Thus, all the music for the documentary was produced.

Sound Effects

As in every visual product, the most important sound source after the music production were the sound effects. A wide range of effects were produced, for Yilan Hikayeleri, from various animal sounds, primarily snake, to nature sounds, from movements of humans to artificial sounds such as guns and etc. For all the sound effects, libraries produced by sound effects producers which are expert in their fields (BBC, Boom, SoundScape, etc.) were used. For example, for the dry firing and gun burst sounds used in a story impersonation, provided that the same brand of gun, a variety of sound effects were overhauled, and among them, a wave file produced by Boom with a sampling rate of 192 kHz was chosen. Effects were chosen according to the related scenes with same diligence (never downloaded from the Internet). As a result, the documentary was edited with sound effects all benefited from libraries.
Mixing and Mastering

The whole music was produced VST based in Cubase and mixed in ProTools. However the mix of the documentary containing the effects was carried out in Audition. The biggest reason for that was that the documentary will be edited in Premiere. Using Audition maintained a healthier swapping of the sounds that are conceived by me between me and the final editing operator.

The music production was done entirely by using virtual libraries. However, cello playing the melody of the main theme was recorded live in the studio. The biggest reason for that, I would say, was that even if the virtual cannot be distinguished from the real, the virtual instruments become increasingly artificial particularly in the mixing stage and gradually differ from its real counterpart. Therefore, an exception was created for cello which plays the melody as the striking point of the documentary, and hence, the main theme.

Another exception was also was true for the percussion. Because the content was a documentary and therefore the visual impact became prominent, the more cinematic sounding instruments became also more prominent. Of course, these issues may be open to debate, but I can say that the percussion has the most cinematic impact among all instruments and the best library that is giving this characteristic in virtual environment is Hans Zimmer Percussion by Spitfireaudio. Therefore, all percussions formed around the main theme were selected from this set and this created a special situation for the percussions with the cello in this documentary.

Following the completion of the recording phase completely, Cubase Mix Automation was utilized in the mixing phase. Also, primarily, Waves, Izotope and Melda Mixing automation softwares were used for mixing purposes and plug-ins of these same softwares were used for the mastering.

Conclusion

One of the most important working fields of the music technology is the music arrangement editing. Especially, considering the current technology, this field has created a specific field of its own. The industry that this field directly serves is undoubtedly the music industry, however, it wouldn't be wrong to say that it has an equivalent flow of service to the visual arts, prominently to movies and documentary genres.

Within the context of visual arts, documentary genre has a more special place in music production, compared to the movies. With their shorter and more certain durations, representation of visual flow with the content in a shorter time and their necessity to describe more in less time, documentaries have a special place in visual arts. This difference in documentary production is undoubtedly reflected to the music production. Music for documentaries, in general terms, are short and clear. They facilitate instantaneous transitions. It contains an entity, although there is no such obligation.

The documentary "Yılan Hikayeleri" and its music explained in this study was prepared within this context. However, in an unconventional way in music production, a music theme that lasts approximately for four minutes was produced for this documentary, and this music was either used directly at the introduction, finale and the most striking two scenes of the documentary or the melody of the theme music was played with a specific instrument. For the rest of the scenes in the documentary, different music was used with different alignings, and although few in number, only some sound effects were used without music in some scenes.
Music And Audio Production For Documentary Films “Over The Example Of A Particular Documentary: Yılan Hikayeleri (Serpent Stories)”

The music was entirely produced in computer environment by using virtual instruments, only a live recording of a cello was made for the melody of the main theme. For the virtual instruments, a wide variety of libraries including Vienna Symphonic, Hans Zimmer Percussion and Voxos were utilized. All the recordings were mixed and mastered by also using virtual hardwares, all the visuals and audio were combined during editing.

Of course, several challenges have also emerged all throughout this process. The most prominent of these challenges is the urge for "re-editing according to the finalized music after the completed edit", which is a common characteristic of all directors. Apart from these, some director demands such as "the delivery deadline for this documentary was yesterday" or "I was feeling different previously from what I want now, let's change it" and etc., were also experienced in this production process.

Technically the biggest problem was experienced during the mixing of the virtual instruments. Virtual instruments resonate realistic alone, but they become increasingly artificial as they are combined with other virtual instruments. Therefore, the most challenging phase of the production was the mixing. This problem can be solved by using a detailed processor as much as possible and recording the instrument live (as in the cello) when necessary.

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