

SPY GAME

Directed by Tony Scott
Produced by Marc Abraham and Douglas Wick
Distributed by Universal Pictures
Released in 2001

With his remarkable score for *Spy Game*, composer Harry Gregson-Williams eschews the twangy electric guitars and altered dominant chords that have been spy movie staples at least since the beginning of the James Bond series. Instead, we have florid and driving electronic sounds, ethnic instruments, choir, and snippets of Vivaldi and Dire Straits. It's a daring mix, and, with a couple exceptions, works beautifully. The composer takes some real risks, such as using filters in a style common in the 1970s, where high, rippling sounds become darker and lower as the gate is moved. His music is unobtrusive, but often plays against scenes, and he sets his hits at uncommon junctures.

Several motives reappear with some frequency. Perhaps the most prominent of these is a heavily-distorted electronic line that outlines an A-minor triad, followed by a faux drum cymbal that slowly fades away as it repeats. This music is associated with intrigue, planning, and technology. Another motif, for piano, is wryly utilized at fake-sentiment moments, such as when Robert Redford's character dupes the CIA honchos into believing he's been hiding a real-estate deal instead of the truth, that he's about to launch a military operation in China. It just alternates slowly between C-Major and G. When used in the strings, it becomes less ironic. Another very-simple piano motif is used for poignant reflection—G down to C, up to E-flat and down to G, repeated, and then B-flat and D substituting for C and E-flat, respectively. So, here it's the fake-sentiment theme with real sentiment, substituting minor for major. All together, if there is a theme for Nathan Muir, this is it.

The biggest action scene in the movie, the rescue of Brad Pitt's character, is scored for orchestra, coupled with electronics. The first half, the troops breaking into the Su Chou prison, is ostinati on C-minor. Once the explosion to Tom Bishop's cell happens, the techno groove enters.

At the tail end of this scene, the orchestra takes up an element that had been used three times earlier in the movie, with a solo boy's voice, singing in Latin. The modal feel comes through with an ambitious E-minor to A-major to C-major chord progression that is very satisfying.

Though it regards source music, an effective method of injecting humor into a scene where two parties are speaking by phone is demonstrated in the latter part of *Spy Game*. Muir is speaking to Duncan, his contact in Hong Kong. He, in turn, is trying to bribe some Chinese authorities to turn off the power around the Su Chou prison. But they are preoccupied with the opening credits for the television show "Baywatch." The humor comes when Duncan says with the song "I'm Always Here" blaring in the background, it's not like it's your money. Immediately we cut to Robert Redford sitting alone, disbelieving, at CIA headquarters, with nothing but silence confronting him. It's just punctuation on the joke.

AN ILLUMINED ILLUSIONS ESSAY BY IAN C. BLOOM

The cues in this film enter delicately, un-noticeably. They often occur not when the initial sense of conflict or danger reveals itself, but just a touch afterwards, usually between lines of dialogue. Gregson-Williams also bridges the gaps between exegetic music seamlessly, particularly in the transition from Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" to his own score, right before the phone call during the Berlin Wall sequence.

It's all well done, but the strength of the film's acting, story, production design, and editing also contribute mightily to the viewer's realization that he has been privileged to see a thoughtful and compelling motion picture.