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Freshman dramas opt for full scores

Road to the Emmys 2012: Creative Arts - Music

By JON BURLINGAME

Among the crucial decisions in the weeks leading up to the debut of a drama series are those dealing with music: Choosing a composer and deciding on the musical style that fits best.

This season's freshmen entries included three shows for which a dramatic underscore seemed more appropriate than the songs that now dominate many primetime shows: ABC's fairytale drama "Once Upon a Time," NBC's stewardess saga "Pan Am" and ABC's conspiracy-driven serial "Revenge." All used live musicians.

"Once Upon a Time" is set in dual time frames: the Enchanted Forest world of Snow White, Prince Charming and Rumpelstiltskin, and the same characters in modern-day Storybrooke, Maine. The music needed "an epic quality," says composer Mark Isham (a past Emmy winner for "Chicago Hope").

So ABC agreed, from the start, to budget for an orchestra of 24 to 43 players every week, augmented by the sampled percussion and other sounds Isham would create in his home studio.

"Music is the emotional thread of the story," says Isham, who wrote new themes for each character: harp for Jiminy Cricket, chimes for Cinderella, a warm love theme for Snow and Charming, darker sonorities for the Evil Queen and Rumpelstiltskin, and charming Renaissance-style music for the ancient land.

"Pan Am," too, was "designed as an orchestral show," says composer Blake Neely ("The Mentalist"). It began when the editor started temp-tracking the pilot with Neely's Americana music for "The Pacific" and "Jack & Bobby" and found that style effective for the 1960s stewardess drama.

Neely has fought for, and gotten, real musicians on past shows "Brothers & Sisters," "Everwood" and others. On "Pan Am," set in the 1960s, he averaged writing 25 to 35 minutes of music per episode and generally got just four to five days to compose.

He used 40 players on the pilot. "We're supplying emotion," says Neely. "Synthesizers cannot do that. They're flat. I play all of my piano parts, with the emotion that I want to convey."



Isham, composer for 'Revenge,' was asked to create a melody that captures the entire show in a 'slightly old-fashioned' string score.

For Izler, the Czech-born composer of "Revenge," the challenge came from pilot director Phillip Noyce: a demand that he write "the mother of all melodies" -- overnight. "He wanted something that felt like the entire show encapsulated in one melody," Izler says.

"Everything in the show has evolved from that -- the drama, the emotion. What really inspired it was the opening of the pilot. The Fire & Ice ball, somebody gets murdered on the beach, Emily has a very Grace Kelly moment. That immediately lent itself to this slightly old-fashioned string score."

Izler conducted a string section averaging 22 to 30 players each week, although for the season finale he managed a 50-piece orchestra with brass, woodwinds and percussion too. "It was so liberating to be able to use other colors and give it an extra kick," he says.

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