



Musician's Friend Interview with Avery Watts - Monday, 09 March 2015

Tell me how you incorporate classical sounds into your rock music?

Virtually every track starts like a score of sorts during the writing process. It may begin as stripped down sounds such as a string piece, a piano part, or a guitar riff and it grows from there. I admire the orchestra; the fact that every instrument and player has a role, a note, a place and a voice for a specific reason. I take that same approach with Rock music and how I incorporate classical sounds into it. You can never discount the power of a solid cello holding out a single note. It can be extremely moving and add to a composition in ways that traditional Rock instrumentation just can't. I like my songs to take you on a ride through the arrangement and provide as much grandiosity, energy and power as possible. To me, nothing has the spatial power of a well-done orchestral piece. For instance, the opening track "It Begins" off of my last album "[The Takeover](#)" is a score that acts as a soundscape of sorts and sets the tone for what's to come. It transitions into the backbone of the following Rock track "A Cut Above" and helps to carry the theme throughout the entire album. Although I approached "It Begins" as more of an intro, the score ended up being able to stand on its own and is frequently requested by music supervisors for usage in both film trailers and mainstream television.

[\[See the Pirates/Dodgers Major League Baseball trailer featuring 'It Begins' on TBS here:\]](#)

The song "A Cut Above" demonstrates how that same piece of music can be incorporated into something completely different and generate an entirely new energy; a high-velocity Rock track in this case. Although "It Begins" by itself is a slow haunting sort of composition, when sped up and used as the underlying work in a Rock context, it takes on a more powerful anthem-like quality.

[\[See 'A Cut Above' in a TNT LeBron James/Kevin Durant NBA Promo Trailer here:\]](#)

In the live show, we may have up to a dozen stationary string players on platforms with the two lead performers, Corinne Olsen (Viola/Violin) and Rick Brandt (Cello) playing electric instruments on stage. Corinne and Rick actually run all around the stage wirelessly head-banging, singing, and stealing the show for the orchestral realm. While they provide the Rock performance aspect of the show, the other string players (usually up on risers) fill out the sound by performing the bulk of the string music; It's a great combination showmanship and Classical-meets-Rock energy.

When touring, we offer local high school kids a chance to learn the sheet music and come out on stage to be part of the sting ensemble. It's always a fun experience for them to get exposed to Classical instruments in a live Rock concert setting. It's also a nice way to get kids involved in the creative process and open new doors for them. [D'Addario Strings](#), [Planet Waves](#), [Pulse Records](#), and [Wood Violins](#) (Mark Wood of Trans-Siberian Orchestra's company) has provided us with resources and gear for the experience. From a live standpoint, I've found that the orchestral/Rock hybrid is not only a healthy outlet for kids, but helps contribute to breaking down the stereotypical boundaries which may exist between different "tribes" of musicians. When you combine players from unique backgrounds, different upbringings, and different struggles; an entirely new energy begins to form. It's ultimately gratifying to see a shy string player comingling with a rambunctious Punk or Metal guitar player and watch them start to become otherwise unlikely friends right before your eyes: That's the true power of music.

[\[See the Avery Watts live show in action, including string players, in the "A Cut Above" music video here:\]](#)



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What type of instruments do you use that incorporate these sounds?

I tend to rely heavily on the string section of the orchestra for my main melodies and sonic layers; primarily violins, violas, and cellos. I'll use a double bass if the strings are by themselves in portions of a mix, but most times it interferes with the bass guitar and bass drum in a Rock context. Secondly, I'll implement orchestral percussion as such as timpanis, Taiko drums, concert toms and anything else that goes boom in the night. At the moment, I only use brass and woodwinds to usually supplement the power of the string ensembles, but I'm expanding the palette of what I use and why I use it on a daily basis. There are always exceptions to the rule. I may use a Glockenspiel, bells, the harp, or some sort of solo orchestral instrument in a song, but my primary obsession with the orchestra is the sonic grandiosity it has the capability of creating. That said, I typically utilize the orchestra as a whole to generate a large spatial presence that traditional rock instruments just can't do.

How did you start including classical instruments/orchestral sounds in your music?

I've always enjoyed all styles of music that have creative arrangements of layering in them. Even in the old 70's Soul/Funk/R&B compositions by the greats; you'll always hear these excellent combinations of many instruments, all contributing very simple parts to create a greater whole. I love the usage of so many different types of sounds to create a more colorful sonic painting. When I began approaching rock music, it started from a very simple place; the place where most guitar/bass/drums/vocals arrangements start. From there I began experimenting with what else could be used to make the sound larger than life. I like using keyboards, sounds effects and other technological means for creating sonic depth, but nothing is ever as massive as the modern orchestra. Listen to any great film score or watch any live orchestral performance and you'll feel an energy that has remained profound for centuries. I knew that I wanted to blend the raw energy and sheer force of Rock music with the ageless power of the orchestra. The first composition I did was "It Begins". From there, I realized there were endless possibilities when you have so many instrumental selections to choose from. Once you're presented a palette of a million colors, it's tough to go back to only having five or six.

How do you capture the sound? Do you record live performances, create it digitally, etc.?

It's typically a mixture of both when resources and time allows. I've found that the different timbres and tonalities of both live instruments and sampled ones tend to complement each other. The basis of any given recording I do tends to be acoustic strings (mic'd up and recorded) as the lead/stand-out tones mixed with sampled strings, pads, or other atmospheric tones as "sweeteners" to fill out the sound. The blend of the two always seems to be the most powerful, as they never quite occupy the same EQ space and tend to nicely augment one another. There are so many amazing samples out there by companies like [Native Instruments](#), [Spitfire Audio](#), [Propellerhead](#), [8Dio](#), and [Cinesamples](#) that sometimes it's difficult to tell the sampled instruments and live instruments apart. I've had instances where a sample of something actually sounds more organic and real than the one I recorded live and in the flesh. My approach has been ultimately that it should boil down to what gets you the sound you want. I like both sides of the spectrum. Purists are constantly debating about the fundamental principles of using "fake" instruments and how the "real thing" always sounds better. Oddly enough, all the newest sampling technologies employ true performances, by real instruments, with real performers, in real studios, with the real top of the line gear; meticulously captured in the same way one would record something for a traditional recording. Does it matter if you tracked the violin yourself or another engineer did it in a studio half-way across the world? That question is up to each individual to decide. In the end, the ultimate authority has been, and should always be your ear. If it sounds great to you, use it and don't give it a second thought.