

*Jake Friedman*



## Ron Sadoff Tells the Score

The recently released *Lady and the Tramp* DVD sports many highlights: a breakdown of how storyboards work through the eyes of artists, directors and producers; a focus on the Disney hometown that inspired the setting of the story; a tip o' the hat to Joe Grant, uncredited developer of the original story...

But one surprising feature was a short tribute to the music of the film – and not just the songs by Peggy Lee, as noteworthy as they are (the sultry “He’s a Tramp” is as sexy as a toon tune can get). For a film that doesn’t musically overwhelm its audience, it’s easy to allow the enchanting musical score fall to the wayside.

New York University’s director of film music, Professor Ron Sadoff, makes sure that doesn’t happen. Appearing on the DVD (as are fellow NYU icons John Canemaker and John Culhane), Sadoff discusses the significance of composer Oliver Wallace’s original music for a few brief minutes – almost too brief. With a whetted appetite, I recently I had the opportunity to ask Prof. Sadoff a few more questions about musical scoring and animation.

JF: What makes a film score great?

RS: A great score can only be possible if it interacts dynamically with the film. The score must

align with the essence of the film, which may utilize a combination of stylistic, kinetic and psychological elements. The composers who can then use the necessary conventions without depending on clichés, and instill their own compelling style without smothering the picture – well, this is the blueprint for a great score.

JF: What should I keep in mind when I compose the score to an animated film?

RS: Unlike live-action films, the music must serve double duty: it is generally wall-to-wall and it must often “Mickey-Mouse” (a term that means that the music mimics a physical motion that is going on in the film) or at least emphasize an extraordinary amount of points of action or emotional punch. In animation, if the music does not “touch” physical movements, we tend to also not be aware of them. Music really shapes animation, which means a composer will be working extensively in setting the emotional and kinetic tone while at the same time juggling the timings to fit the many actions.

JF: What can I learn from Oliver Wallace’s scores?

RS: He was a consummate master at

establishing just the right tone for any given sequence. His ideas and his musical gestures were immediately attractive and dynamic. Wallace was a case study in how a composer establishes character in the least amount of notes and time possible. Take the "Elephants on Parade" sequence in *Dumbo*, for instance. Those opening horns grab you and before you know it, he begins this devilishly delicious theme that sustains interest through a marvelous variety of orchestrations and variations – magic!

JF: Which do you feel is the best Disney score? Why?

RS: I can't pin it down to one, because when any of the great Disney composers evoke that Disney sounds and have their imaginations percolating, it produces a rich score filled with a myriad of colors and gripping moments. Anyway, Wallace's score for *Dumbo* is certainly up there, as is Leigh Harline's score for *Pinocchio* (not to mention the song "When You Wish Upon a Star"). In modern times, Alan Menkin's songs and score for "Beauty and the Beast" are exceptional. There are many other wonderful scores like Buddy Baker's for "The Fox and the Hound." Frank Churchill and Edward Plumb's score for *Bambi* is comparable. Perhaps the real point is that each of these great composers had their own distinctive voice, producing scores that were clearly Disneyesque but highly personalized, too.

JF: Is there anything you wanted to say that didn't make it to the DVD?

RS: Most of what I would have said and demonstrated on the piano would have centered around "how" specifically Wallace accomplished what he did. There are so many instances where he fleshes out the feeling of a character, or gives us insights into what they are thinking. Through embellishing themes, changing keys and orchestrations, he provided another dimension to the film.

JF: If Oliver Wallace, Milt Franklyn, Scott Bradley and Carl Stalling were in a bar fight, who would win?

RS: If it's in a bar, then the action is fast-paced, and Stalling has the edge. He's bobbing and weaving and he's way out ahead now that he just quoted a series of snippets from ten pieces from well-known tunes. But Bradley and Franklyn are no strangers to this arena and are giving chase. And suddenly, Wallace appears with the bigger orchestra forces because he's got a huge film budget! Oh no, this is terrible – the bass trombones just crushed the wabbit. Oh the horror – oh, the humanity... It's Wallace by a nose!

Jake Friedman is a New York-based animator. Visit him at [www.jakefriedman.net](http://www.jakefriedman.net). Look for his upcoming article in Animation Magazine on MOMA's CalArts tribute, and his interview in *AnimatorsUnite.com* with Pixar sketch artist Jay Shuster.

