

## Review #3 Sommersby Composer: Danny Elfman

<http://www.bluntinstrument.org.uk/elfman/filmography/sommersby/review.htm>

### THE ELFMAN ZONE: SYRUPY SOUTHERN GOTHIC

Okay, who gave Danny Elfman permission to score this film? Seriously, who had the conscious thought: "Hmm. . .this southern Romance could really use the talents of that little red-haired gnome - you know, the guy who does all of those Burton horror flicks!" Giving Elfman this assignment at the time would be the equivalent of handing John Williams a job to score Spice World after just completing Schindler's List! I'm surprised it never occurred to some producer that this could be a major recipe for disaster. Thankfully, it didn't, and Elfman was given the chance to prove that he could fashion a score as lush and melodramatic as any John Williams masterpiece.

Now, when I use the word melodramatic, I literally mean overemotional. While the themes and instrumentation may differ, I am reminded of the approach taken in Max Steiner's *Gone with the Wind*. Both use lush scores that seem to capture and create the emotion rather than merely complement it (Steiner's score occasionally would drown out the dialogue!). In fact, this score is literally a poor man's *Gone With the Wind*. As the score to *Gone With the Wind* reflected the grace and elegance of the Old South trying to survive the Civil War, Sommersby reflects the simple beauty of a bizarre romance taking place in the poverty stricken ruins entirely AFTER the War. This setting, and the film's plot, allows for quite a bit of musical diversity. Elfman combines the melodrama of Williams and Steiner with the soft, subtle understatement of the oft-times romantic Bernard Herrmann while mixing a touch of Americana from Aaron Copland. The result is a sweeping, over the top, romantic spectacle of a score interspersed with mystery and a good, old fashioned, rural Southern fun.

The interesting innovation that sets this score apart from his earlier works is that Elfman accomplishes this almost entirely through the strings. Unlike many of his other works (where the strings and winds are used as accompaniment in order to compliment the motion of a scene through unending stabs and arpeggios), the strings function here in more of a driving, chordal fashion. Sure there are those complex little rolling fiddle movements in the ethnic pieces (Tracks 5, 7, 11, and 16), but for the first time in an Elfman score, the strings sweep entirely in the foreground - slowly moving the main melody along in wave after wave of ascension and descent. Throw in some lukewarm brass (as well as some soothing guitar strums), and the theme takes on a slow, harmonious quality that perfectly complements the humid, lazy feel of a Southern afternoon.

The main melody remains relatively unchanged throughout the score. Though, like a snowflake, you never see (or hear, in this case) the same piece twice. While some of the differences may seem minute, Elfman does use slightly different accompaniment and orchestrations to guarantee that there is no absolute redundancy. He tells the story through the music by using counter melodies, harmony, and different instrumentation to convey the emotion of a scene while keeping the main melody unchanged (a technique he used to a greater effect in his score for *Sleepy Hollow*). It works beautifully and is best showcased in *Death* (Track 14) and *Finale* (Track 15). In these two pieces, the strings play the all too familiar main melody while a sad, solo trumpet adds a nice counter melody that musically indicates this is a tragic scene. The same musical story telling technique is used throughout the entire score - covering a wide range of emotions; from reminiscence (*The Homecoming* - Track 2) and intimate romance (*First Love* - Track 4) to delicate parental wonderment (*Baby* - Track 11) and fierce, militaristic, determination (*Going to Nashville* - Track 10). All of these vastly different emotions are dispensed through only two variations of the same theme! In this respect, the score becomes the ultimate symbol of the historical Southern psyche: warm, reflective, isolated, nostalgic, and ultimately resistant to change.

Still, for those who feel that swooning love themes are not a favorite form of music, Elfman also provides a set of upbeat, rural celebration pieces. In *Work* (Track 5 and End Credit Counterpart in Track 16), a series of guitars, banjos, fiddles, flutes, and percussion unleash a swinging little dance piece that is just pure, country fun. Coincidentally, in its more

bombastic moments, Elfman's Work theme sounds suspiciously reminiscent of Aaron Copland's "Cowboy Hoe-down" from "Rodeo." In addition, he also colors Return Montage (Track 7) with his typical rolling string arpeggios and some other clever country motifs. I must admit, though, that those who are not in the mood to relive "Hee-haw: The Glory Years" may find these tracks to be a little silly. Still, lovers of Gaelic Storm's Irish folk party-music (from Titanic) definitely should look into these pieces. In addition, the inclusion of the mystery element allows for some disturbing tone setters (Tracks 8 and 13) that should satisfy the more morbidly cultured Elfman fanatic.

If there is one problem with this score, it is that it always draws so close to becoming a cliché. Those who despise Williams' melodramatic style may have trouble coping with (what some might call) the "sappiness" of this score. Still, it must be said that Elfman never seems to cross that line. Despite the surprising universality of this score, this is still 100% Elfman's baby. Having listened to his work for ten years now, there are subtle clues that indicate his involvement - the very particular type of string arpeggios used in the lively pieces (Tracks 5,7,11, and 16), the string dissonance in Track 13 that would become a precursor to Delores Claiborne, the delicate Pizzicato oscillations (straight out of Edward Scissorhands) used in Track 11, and other subtle recurring Elfman motifs. These giveaways, and Elfman's obvious desire not to become a part of "The Establishment," ensures that no matter how sappy the piece, the listener will not be hearing a pathetic TV-Movie score or typical courtroom drama sap from THIS composer! This is not to say that Sommersby doesn't have a "mushy" factor to it.

Yes, Sommersby is syrupy. Indeed, it is unabashedly a sappy romance at heart. Undoubtedly, it is a gooey tear-jerker in the end. Yet, films are like pancakes - they all need syrup. And like all pancakes, each film is different. Some require composers to lay it on thick. Both Gone With the Wind and Sommersby required buckets of it! Fortunately, though, it was just the right amount. So why not indulge on some sweetness for once? Trust me, it's worth it!

### **The Good:**

Lush, huge, symphonic, romantic, tragic, and fun in the same spirit as Gone With the Wind. Using pure Southern Americana, Elfman once again blends his unique brand of scoring with classic techniques and fashions a romantic masterpiece on the same level as Williams and Herrmann. Fans of Sleepy Hollow's softer side and Edward Scissorhands should buy this one NOW!

### **The Bad and the Ugly:**

For the morbid Elfman fan, this could be viewed as sappy, melodramatic, mush. Those who crave the macabre, dislike folk tunes, have no room for Southern music, and abhor all things romantic may be turned off by Elfman's brief stint with pure sentimentality. But come on guys, it's a TRADEGY!

### **Ranger's Verdict:**

Even for the dark Elfman fanatics, like myself, this score is a wonderful experience that shouldn't be denied. Romantic scores like this are a rare breed in this day and age. Sadly, it's a shame to think that this score is so often ignored/forgotten by both mainstream and Elfman fans alike while light hearted fluff, like Horner's Titanic, seems to draw undeserved attention. Perhaps THAT is the TRUE tragedy of Sommersby!