



LEONARD MALTIN

INTERVIEW: TIM DAVIES, CONDUCTOR OF LA LA LAND

April 16, 2017



By Greg Ehrbar

Tim Davies doesn't believe in a narrow focus in music. He can turn with ease from 90-piece orchestras and big bands to rap and hip-hop. As a conductor, arranger and orchestrator, we've heard Tim's work in a variety of film and TV projects like *La La Land*, *Frozen*, *Jack Reacher*, and *Ant-Man*. He recently turned composer for the Netflix animated series *Trollhunters* at the request of series creator Guillermo del Toro:

GREG: *Just for my own "Music 101" clarification—the arranger decides the flourishes, what the beat is and things like that, right?*

TIM: It's changed a lot in recent years. If you're looking at movie credits right now, in most big budget movies you might see additional arrangers and score arrangements credited. They're people who take what the composer did and spin it out into extra cues. They're arranging his music but they might be coming up with something new and that might be an arrangement.

In the other sense, when I'm booked as an arranger for Amy Winehouse, Cee Lo Green, Miguel, Akon, Salaam Remi or Nas, I'm taking what the artists give me, writing for the orchestra and coming up with the parts. Depending on what they want, I stick to their form or I might extend it into various things. I'm given a lot more leeway in that world. I was just booked at the Kennedy Center last week and as a hip-hop arranger of all things.

GREG: *Then the orchestrator puts the music together for the specific instruments, like a singer deciding the phrasing.*

TIM: Yes, you put that phrasing on the pages so that hopefully the first time the orchestra plays it, it sounds like they've played it before. You could just print out what the computer did and put it in front of the musicians, but you'd waste an hour for one minute of music, telling them all what to do and then filling in the bits that needed filling in. Film orchestrating in this day and age requires detailed demos played so the producers and directors can approve them. You take that and transfer it to paper to make it playable. The orchestrator is the expert who can look at it and know where it can breathe, where it can stop and start, what parts the instruments should share and so forth.

GREG: *What were some of your contributions to La La Land?*

TIM: Justin orchestrated all the music himself, but for a month or so before the sessions I would meet with him and go through them. We worked out what cues needed a 90 piece orchestra and what needed 14. The studio was quite relieved to find out they did not need 90 for the whole score! We also planned how we would record, it was quite tricky with existing tracks and vocals and tempos all over the place to match.

GREG: *Was all the music for the songs prerecorded?*

TIM: It was all done in weird orders at different times. A version of the big opening production number ["Another Day of Sun"] was played on the set, then we went back and recorded it with a full orchestra. When Emma [Stone] sings "Audition," that was done live on set. Justin was playing it on his keyboard and she was listening to that. We added the orchestra to it later. I conducted all the orchestra stuff, but there were some small groups, like the jazz one, that I didn't work on.

GREG: *Was La La Land a unique project for you in that it was a traditional film musical?*

TIM: *Frozen* was the first one like that I had ever worked on. It was kind of a half-musical, about ten songs. I worked on about half of them. It was unique because the songs were original. We had no idea that *Frozen* was going to be so big.

GREG: *What do you think was the musical impact of Frozen's success?*

TIM: In a way, it gave some power to things like *La La Land*. One of the biggest changes was that the movie version of the song became a hit, not the pop version as had been the case before. Demi Lovato's "Let it Go" was going to be the big one, but it was the Idina Menzel soundtrack, with all its starts and stops and orchestral things, that was the hit. That was pretty cool.

GREG: *Does this signal a return to musicals?*

TIM: (Laughs.) Every time I release one of my big band albums, they say big band is coming back, too. That doesn't mean it can't happen, though. There will be a bunch of musicals that will get green lit, but doing an original musical is still really tough. *Frozen* was original, but a bit of its success was somewhat assured since it was already a Disney project with princesses.

It's harder to have predicted the success of *La La Land*. What was unique about *La La Land* was, whether you liked it or not, it was sincere. Justin and Damian [Chazelle] had been working on this forever. This was not a get rich quick musical or a committee made movie. But I think any genre, when it's done properly, can be a hit.