

Song Exploder
Arrival - Jóhann Jóhannsson
Episode 89

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

Hrishikesh: In the film *Arrival*, Amy Adams plays a linguist trying to decode an alien language.

(Arrival film audio: "This is the day they arrived. The object touched down 40 minutes ago. Mama, what's going to happen? I don't know. Dr. Banks, you're at the top of everyone's list when it comes to translations. You hear any words? It's their language")

("Arrival" by JÓHANN JÓHANNSSON)

Hrishikesh: The score was composed by Jóhann Jóhannsson, his third film collaborating with director Denis Villeneuve. In this episode, Jóhann breaks down a piece from the score called "Heptapod B," and how, like the film, it revolves around the concept of language. This episode is part of a series I'm doing over the next few months highlighting film music that I think could, and should, be considered for an Oscar. These awards episodes are presented in partnership with *New York Magazine's* site, *Vulture*. For more, go to vulture.com/awards.

("Arrival" by JÓHANN JÓHANNSSON)

Jóhann: Hi, my name is Jóhann Jóhannsson, and I composed the score for the film, *Arrival*.

(Music fades)

Jóhann: The film is directed by Denis Villeneuve. He sent me a script at an early stage, and the basic premise was about a linguist that is charged with the task of establishing communication with an alien species that lands on Planet Earth. The very first sessions we did, I was working in a studio in Berlin with some great analog tape machines, spent several days recording various instruments, and kind of creating these rich, very layered, very deep, and very complex analog tape loops. And recorded them at different speeds, so a very low note, for example,

(Rumble)

Jóhann: recorded at high speed, and then, played back at the lowest speed.

(Rumble)

Jóhann: It becomes this sort of subsonic rumble, really.

(Rumble)

Jóhann: And we did this with several instruments, cello, trumpets, and the human voice. Plus on each channel, we were doing sound-on-sound recording. So we were recording over the sound while keeping the previous sound. So we had these sort of ghostly remains of the previous loop.

(Rumble)

Jóhann: These sounds were a very important part of the basic kind of sound world that I was constructing. That really set the tone for the film.

(Rumble ends)

Jóhann: The rhythm was established very, very early on. This kind of basic, insistent bass drum pattern.

(Beat)

Jóhann: We use the modular synthesizer to create the bass drum, and it's played by a human, you know, so it's not a machine beat. It's not quite on-grid.

(Beat)

Jóhann: The role of the bass drum is really to keep a kind of rigid tension throughout the track, because almost everything else is arrhythmic and kind of random, you know? Those are really the only electronic elements in the whole track, the bass drum.

(Beat)

(Beat ends)

Jóhann: The rest of the percussion is all pieces of wood from various different trees that are played with various mallets.

(Percussion)

Jóhann: The score is really about very basic elements, you know, the voice language. And wood seem to be something elemental, that we could still do a lot of interesting things with by moving up and down the plank, you get different resonances and different sort of tones.

(Percussion)

Jóhann: We did many, many layers of these performances, various syncopated rhythms. Then I took those recordings and processed them further. So they are filtered, they're distorted slightly.

(Percussion fades)

Jóhann: This piece was written to an exposition montage that kind of shows the process of the linguist and physicist working together, to decipher and analyze both the written language and the vocal sounds that the aliens emit, and basically trying to learn their language. It was immediately clear that the human voice would play a large part in the score, but I wanted to use it in a way that it hadn't been used in movies before, at least, you know, and certainly not in sci-fi. If you think of science fictional choir, you think about *2001* and Ligeti, you know?

("Requiem" by György Ligeti)

(Music fades)

Jóhann: That was something that I definitely wanted to stay away from, and find other techniques, other ways of using the human voice.

(Vocals)

Jóhann: I avoided long notes. I wanted to work with this kind of stuttering, random rhythm pattern of female voices. I wanted something that was almost like a cloud of the staccato rhythms. Aleatoric, you know, unpredictable, and out of time.

(Vocals)

Jóhann: It's many layers of different singers. I was working with the Theatre of Voices conducted by Paul Hillier. Everything was written out on sheet music, but we also improvised.

(Vocals)

Jóhann: One of the first things that became clear was that this would be a wordless vocal score, so the choir is never actually singing real words, they're singing syllables, they're singing nonsense words.

(Vocals end)

Jóhann: I was listening to legendary, avant-garde vocalist Joan La Barbara, a piece of hers called "Erin."

("Erin" by JOAN LA BARBARA)

Jóhann: At one point, you hear this sort of leaping melody.

("Erin" by JOAN LA BARBARA)

(Music fades)

Jóhann: She just does it once, but I sort of latched onto that and, "Wow, this is really great." I decided to sample it, and create a loop out of it. I slightly changed one or two notes, and then I asked my frequent collaborator, Hildur Guðnadóttir to sing it.

(Vocals)

(Vocals end)

Jóhann: It's almost like baby talk, like language being developed and being formed. And that kind of resonates with the actual scene where they are reverse engineering the language based on the writing and on the sounds emitted by the aliens.

(Vocals)

(Vocals end)

Jóhann: A lot of the elements are arrhythmic, you know, random patterns, and the strings are there to emphasize that.

(Strings)

Jóhann: The strings kind of echo the choir in a way, playing a very simple harmony, but playing them slightly a-rhythmically, these sort of random patterns.

(Strings)

Jóhann: The woodwinds start about halfway through the song, and emphasize the rhythm,

(Woodwinds join)

Jóhann: and provide variation to the harmony. Towards the end, they serve a purely rhythmic purpose of just keeping the beat.

(Woodwinds)

(Woodwinds end)

Jóhann: The brass has a very simple,

(Brass)

Jóhann: swelling chord part. It makes it a little bit more kind of wide screen, you know [laughter], and then, you know, it sort of grows into this kind of finale.

(Brass ends)

Jóhann: The film is about how do you communicate with an intelligent species where there are no commonalities,

(Vocals)

Jóhann: no points of reference in common. And how language shapes our understanding of the world. That the language that you learn, and the language that you think

in, has a tremendous effect upon our understanding of the physics of the universe and physical concepts like time. And the idea of time is an important one in the film, and playing with the idea of this sort of linear, mechanical rhythm. And these arrhythmic, aleatoric rhythms was something that I think conceptually fitted very well with the film.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Heptapod B," from the *Arrival* score, by Jóhann Jóhannsson.

("Arrival" by JÓHANN JÓHANNSSON)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net/arrival to watch the trailer for the film, and to learn more about Jóhann Jóhannsson.

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