

**Song Exploder**  
**Theodore Shapiro - Severance (Main Title Theme)**  
**Episode 289**

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. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

The TV show *Severance* debuted on Apple TV+ in February 2022. It was created by writer Dan Erickson, and developed into a series by director and executive producer Ben Stiller. He directed the pilot and most of the episodes. After the first season came out, *Severance* was nominated for 14 Emmys, including Outstanding Drama, and it won two Emmys: for Main Title Design and for Musical Composition. I love this show, so I was really excited to talk to the composer, Theodore Shapiro, about how he came up with the show's theme music. In this episode, you'll hear how the theme music first came into existence in a totally different form, and then, how Teddy re-imagined it to become the final version.

But first, here's a little background on what the show is about:

Adam Scott: This is Adam Scott. In *Severance*, I play Mark Scout, an employee at a company called Lumon Industries. He leads a team whose employees have undergone a severance procedure that surgically divides their memories between their work and personal lives. When they go to work, they know nothing about their lives in the outside world, and in the outside world, they have no knowledge of their lives at work. Mark has chosen to undergo the severance procedure after the death of his wife, so he can go to work free from the overwhelming grief he feels every day. But Lumon Industries is a mysterious company. When Mark and his team start pulling at the threads, things start to unravel in ways no one expects. Here's Hishi, and *Severance* composer Theodore Shapiro.

Hrishikesh: I know you've been the composer on a lot of Ben Stiller's films; what are the projects that you two have done together?

Theodore: I worked on *Dodgeball*, which he produced. He didn't direct it, but he was a very involved producer. I worked on *Tropic Thunder*, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, *Zoolander (2)*, and then *Severance*.

Hrishikesh: Okay, yeah, so you've got a bunch of experience together.

Theodore: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: And do you remember the first time you ever heard about *Severance*? Like what the first conversation was that you had about the show?

Theodore: The first conversation I had about it was at a Halloween party, because Adam Scott's son and my son have been in the same class since kindergarten.

Hrishikesh: Wow.

Theodore: I was (chuckles) in, in a backyard in the Valley, talking with Adam, and we were just catching up. And he told me about this project, and I was immediately hooked by it. Like, it just sounded like such a great, simple, brilliant idea. And I just thought, I really hope that Ben calls me about that project.

Hrishikesh: And then what happened?

Theodore: I waited, and, and then Ben called me out of the blue one day and told me they were making this show, and would I be interested, and of course the answer was yes.

Hrishikesh: Did you say, "Oh, I've, I've been waiting, I already..."

Theodore: "Here are my, here are my many ideas that I've already written about it."  
(chuckles) No. I might have mentioned that Adam had told me about it, and that I thought it was a great idea.

Hrishikesh: Did he give you a sense of, like, what the tone of the show was going to be?

Theodore: He knew that there would be humor and drama, and strangeness.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Theodore: He referenced a film that uses Bobby McFerrin's music.

*(Bobby McFerrin clip)*

It's really strange and effective.

And so I started off wondering whether falsetto male voices might be an interesting sound.

And the other thing that we talked about at that time was, I said, you know, my first instinct here is that maybe we should have two different sound palettes: one for the world inside Lumon, and one for the world outside Lumon.

And he was like, yeah, that sounds right.

Hrishikesh: Did you two talk about the idea of you sending music before they started

shooting?

Theodore: Yes. I had pitched to him from the beginning that I would create a library of music, and that there would be a rule, which was: you can only temp in music that's original for the show.

Hrishikesh: Huh... And why did you want to set that rule?

Theodore: So, in film, there is a thing called the temp track. That is when the director or the editor or the music editor takes music from other films or other sources and cuts it into the film as a placeholder. And the problem with a temp track is that everybody gets used to the temp track.

Hrishikesh: Right.

Theodore: That is often true for the director, but it's also true for the composer. It just starts coloring your judgment.

Even when you desperately don't want to be thinking that way, it just enters your creative process in a way that closes off doors for what you might do. And so, I always relish the idea of starting as early as possible on a project.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Theodore: So, my first thought was, what if we do something really cold and electronic inside the world of Lumon, and on the outside, we'll do something really organic, and maybe that would be where these falsetto voices would come in and it would be a palette that dealt more with Mark's grief in the show.

And I pretty quickly got to work.

*(demo toms)*

I started just playing around with some cold sounds, like these computer toms that feel aggressively electronic. And some modular synth loops.

*(demo percussion)*

Just building an icy atmosphere that I thought might go with Lumon.

Hrishikesh: It's interesting that it's, those are synth sounds that you're kind of using like percussion. The toms are digital toms, but they're also still toms.

Theodore: Yes.

Hrishikesh: But then you've got these sounds that are, I don't know.

Theodore: "What is that?"

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Theodore: That's what I think modular synths do so well, this organic and yet electronic sound palette that doesn't get you too deep into something that you can really identify, but yet gives you a rhythmic impulse that you might need.

I have a Moog Model D, which I use all the time, and that was part of the palette.

Hrishikesh: The visual world of Lumon, inside the building, it has such a specific aesthetic. It feels, like, early 1980s, in terms of, like, the technology and the wardrobe. And all of this music, all of these sounds, feel like that. Were you working off of something at this point? I know they hadn't actually shot anything. How did you arrive at a place that already felt like it fit the finished product?

Theodore: That's just serendipity.

Hrishikesh: Really?

Theodore: Yes. We never had any conversations about that. It just ended up fitting with the aesthetic of the show.

*(demo synthesizer)*

In February 2020, Ben asked if I wanted to fly out to New York and come talk about music and see the sets and just sort of get a sense of what they were planning.

Hrishikesh: And you'd already sent him some music at this point?

Theodore: I had sent him a bunch of music and he was really enthusiastic about it.

I went to the set and saw a bunch of the sets that they were building. And he sat down and started playing a lot of the music.

Hrishikesh: In front of you?

Theodore: In front of me. Always very relaxing. (chuckles) And, in particular, there was a part in the middle of this piece that he kept coming back to more than anything else.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Theodore: And one of the things that I have learned over the years is that Ben has incredible instincts. And if you can follow where his head is going, it will lead you to good places.

And so, I just was aware that he, there was something he was responding to in this middle section.

*(demo chords)*

The chords were a Wurlitzer through a vibrato effect.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Theodore: That's sort of giving it that wobble and just adding a little bit of weirdness.

Pitch wobbles are, are really a good friend a lot of times in making music. A lot of what is exciting about human beings making music together in a room, has to do with discrepancies of pitch, and that is sort of what makes it human.

So I think that, having the pitch wobble back and forth there, I think just adds this kind of uncanny human element to it.

Hrishikesh: And was it specifically, like, this breakdown section that Ben Stiller kept playing, or was it the whole, this whole part?

Theodore: It was really where the, where the breakbeat comes in.

Hrishikesh: Okay. Uh, let me play that part.

*(demo breakbeat)*

Did you say to Ben Stiller, "Hey, I notice that you keep going back to this one piece of music?"

Theodore: No. And maybe part of it was that I had landed on this other thing, the falsetto voices idea. That was what I thought was going to be the main idea.

When I got home, I sat at the piano, and I started playing the chord progression.

*(voice memo - piano chords)*

As soon as I started playing the chords at the piano, it opened up this whole possible other world and other direction.

It felt connected maybe more to 70s cinema. And pretty quickly, the melody just came spilling out very fast.

And I thought, this is exciting, this could be a totally different take on what the score for this show could be. In that case, it wouldn't be a dichotomy of an innie music and an outie music.

In the world of this theme, this would be the big canvas of the show, and that canvas would be asking the question, "What's happening here?" It would present the show as one big puzzle.

Hrishikesh: You'll hear how the ideas in that voice memo got turned into the final theme, when my conversation with Theodore Shapiro continues, after this.

---

So after you recorded that voice memo, and had this new understanding of the piece, did you send that to Ben Stiller?

Theodore: No. I sat down, and I did a full rendering of this idea.

I performed the piano on two different pianos. I did the chords on an upright, and I did the melody on a grand piano.

*("Severance (Main Theme)" by THEODORE SHAPIRO - piano melody)*

I thought that the idea of like two pianos felt like it mirrored the innie, outie idea.

Hrishikesh: Yeah. That's awesome.

When Ben Stiller was playing those chords in that middle section, did you start to think, I'm definitely going to stay within these four chords, like it's going to be this hypnotic, trance-like thing that I'm going to make? Or did you feel any pressure, like "Is this gonna be okay that I'm just staying in this same chord progression?"

Theodore: I did not see that coming, to be honest.

Hrishikesh: I mean, one of my favorite things about the theme is the fact that the chords don't change.

Theodore: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: There's a real effect that comes from the repetition.

Theodore: It feels inexorable.

You have four chords. And the first chord, C minor, is over a C in the bass, as it normally would be. And then each of the next three chords are also over the same note in the bass. But the chords are changing so that they are dissonant with what's happening in the bass.

And that's creating this constant tension and release.

Hrishikesh: I think "inexorable" is such a great word. There's something about the show and this music that feels like you're caught in a trap.

Theodore: Yeah. (chuckles) Right.

The bass is set to glide, meaning when you hit the note, it comes to the note from whatever the previous note was.

Hrishikesh: Like a portamento.

Theodore: Portamento. So, I silently made the note that it's coming from at the very top of its range so that when it enters, instead of just hitting on the note, it goes BOOM!

And I really like how it does that.

*(bass glide)*

Hrishikesh: The breakbeat kind of changed in its timbre as well.

*(breakbeat)*

Theodore: Yes. The beat hit harder, in version 1.0.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Theodore: But I think I felt like it was disrupting the music in some way, or trying too hard, or something. So ultimately, I made the beat a little bit more abstract and airy.

The tambourine has little bits chopped out of it, which is kind of a fun little, small detail. I just wanted it to be abstracted in some way. You know, I didn't want it to sound like a person in a room shaking a tambourine, just give it some strangeness.

*(strings)*

We recorded live strings. Rob Moose and Gabriel Cabezas, they work together.

But a lot of the elements that went into the final version are the same elements in the demo.

The pianos are things that I do with sample libraries, and I'm very happy with how those sound as MIDI.

Hrishikesh: Those are MIDI pianos?

Theodore: Yes.

Hrishikesh: Yeah, they sound great.

The thing that I wait for, I mean, like, just my favorite thing, is when you play, I don't know what the correct music theory term would be, but, other than to call it the wrong note. When you play the wrong note in the melody, chromatically, just off by half a step...

Theodore: Show me exactly which one you're talking about?

Hrishikesh: Yeah. Um...

*(clashing note melody)*

Theodore: (laughs) It's really fun, because you have a chord that clashes over the bass note. You sort of have two scales that are equally correct in that moment. And it leads to some really fun, "wrong note" feelings, which I think are, ultimately, very much in concert with what the show is, is making you feel.

And then, I had come up with something that I thought was interesting, which was this reverse piano that kind of stutters and fritzes out.

*(synth fritzing out)*

I felt like it was really a strong way to end the piece. And I had a sense, when I did it, that the meaning of the gesture was related to the idea of the fraying of the self. And that ended up paying a lot of dividends in the show.

I sent it to Ben.



And he did not respond for three weeks.

Hrishikesh: Huh.

Theodore: But he finally one day just called out of the blue and said, "Oh, I love this. This is really great."

That was really encouraging. But I was still hanging on to the falsetto voices idea. And then we started talking about a main title sequence, and I did one main title with the falsetto voices, and one main title with this.

Hrishikesh: Hmm. Because you wanted to present them with ideas, or because they asked for multiple ideas?

Theodore: No, I like to present Ben multiple ideas. I just think that it's nice to be presented with options sometimes. And when you choose something, you're choosing it in relation to something else which doesn't feel as good.

Hrishikesh: Yeah, and if they say yes to one and say no to the other, they've only broken half of your heart.

Theodore: Yeah! Exactly.

Hrishikesh: Okay. So you sent two options...

Theodore: And he was like, this is great. I'm really excited about this. So, at that point, I was really locked in, I felt.

Hrishikesh: Do you remember when you first saw your music against the, the actual picture of the titles?

Theodore: Well, I had to cut it down. (chuckles) I had to cut it down to, to 90 seconds.

Hrishikesh: Right, because when you wrote the suite you weren't thinking it would necessarily be main titles.

Theodore: No, I wasn't.

Hrishikesh: What was it like for you when, you know, you said that you were thinking about this kind of fraying of identity with this piano sound, to see how that actually manifested visually, in the final picture?

Theodore: It was so exciting. Oliver Latta, the brilliant designer who created those titles. First of all, to see Oliver's main title design just come together as a finished

product. But second of all, to see how he responded specifically to that musical element. It really cements the idea of this fraying of the self. To whatever extent I had that idea in mind when I made that sound, you know, it really comes into solidity with his visualization of it.

*(synth fritzing out)*

This project is uniquely exciting in the sense that it has so many elements that have come together in a great way. Just the way in which all of the various departments have put together this extraordinary work, and the cast is extraordinary, and all of that. Plus, the way in which the creative process and my work with Ben feels like an unusually productive version of a collaboration. I think that that makes it extraordinary.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's the main title theme from *Severance*, by Theodore Shapiro, in its entirety.

*("Severance (Main Titles)" by THEODORE SHAPIRO)*

To learn more, visit [songexploder.net/severance](http://songexploder.net/severance). You'll find links to buy or stream the *Severance* theme, and you'll also find the videos for the main titles for season one and season two, which are both incredible - the music and the visuals. And huge thanks to Adam Scott for doing the synopsis in the intro.

This episode was produced by me, Craig Eley, Kathleen Smith and Mary Dolan, with production assistance from Tiger Biskup. The episode artwork is by Carlos Lerma, and I made the show's theme music and logo.

Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm).

If you'd like to hear more from me, you can sign up for my newsletter, which you can find on the Song Exploder website. You can also follow me and Song Exploder on Instagram, and you can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at [songexploder.net/shirt](http://songexploder.net/shirt).

I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.