

Ratchet & Clank: A Word From the Wise

Evan Wise's feature film debut, *Ratchet & Clank*.

By Chris Hadley



Based on the popular Playstation video game series, the new animated sci-fi/action/comedy film *Ratchet & Clank* is significant not just because of its first outing on the big screen or because of its impressive voice cast that includes Sylvester Stallone, John Goodman, Paul Giamatti, Bella Thorne and Rosario Dawson, but also because it marks the first feature length assignment for composer Evan Wise. Filled with frenetic orchestral rhythms and various character themes, Wise's music for *Ratchet and Clank* captures the out-of-this-world story of a mechanic (Ratchet, voiced by James Arnold Taylor) and a robot (Clank, voiced by David Kaye) who form an alliance with a group of superheroes against the malevolent Chairman Drek (Giamatti), a madman who's determined to destroy an entire galaxy in his quest for greater power.

With his music featured in several commercials and movie trailers, as well as on television series like NBC's *America's Got Talent*, Destination America's *Railroad Alaska* and National Geographic Channel's *Diggers*, Wise has gradually developed and refined his talents, while demonstrating his own abilities to enhance key moments on-screen—qualities that led *Ratchet and Clank* co-directors Kevin Munroe and Jericca Cleland to give Wise the opportunity to create the film's larger than life score.

In this interview, Wise discusses the traditional approach he used when scoring *Ratchet & Clank*, how he was able to successfully maneuver the complexities and limitations of modern orchestral sample libraries when plans for recording with live players unexpectedly fell through, and how he managed to create a soundtrack that takes its own place beside the already memorable music for the video game on which the film was based.

Chris Hadley: Since *Ratchet & Clank* is based on a popular video game, what was it about the game itself, the adaptation and the story depicted in both that drew you to the film?

Evan Wise: When I have the opportunity to work on a project, I make sure that it is something that fits into my personal style. I've spent years cultivating a signature sound that I hope to continue develop and watch evolve. So when I was hired to score the *Ratchet & Clank* movie, I was happy to know the producers were choosing me for the demo I wrote, which had my style tattooed all over it. Knowing that my personal style of symphonic composition was what they were hiring me for drew me to the project first. I think it's important for composers to try new things, but to still be themselves and not try to sound like someone else or you'll never find your musical identity.

The film itself was attractive to work on because it was based on a franchise I knew well. I also knew it was going to include action and comedic orchestral music and I was excited to develop the themes I presented in my demo into what can be heard on the soundtrack and in the film.

CH: What differences between the original video game and the movie should people look for, music-wise?

EW: The biggest difference between the game music and the movie score, besides being two completely different composers, is probably the rate at which the music transitions. In a game, the music has to evolve but be looped in a single setting for the duration of a character's time in a specific location, but with a film score, the music is more linear. The rate at which action and tone changes in the *Ratchet & Clank* movie keeps the music in a constant state of transition. I believe transitions are the most difficult part of music. As I listen to a piece of music, the transitions are what seem to capture my attention, as opposed to when a piece is moving along within a predictable theme or whatnot. So, in the 70 minutes of music I wrote for this movie, I'd say a large portion of that time was keeping the music in a constant state of transition, and only in that linear setting of a film score is that necessary.



CH: Were there any particular movies or scores that influenced your writing here?

EW: I approached writing "Ratchet's Main Title" from within my own style of

writing a heroic theme. By using a combination of tools in theme writing and harmonic progressions, I was able to come up with a piece of music that fit Ratchet well and fit with what I believe captured the spirit of the film. Heroism and comedy aren't always dealt with in the same piece of music, so it took an understanding of the tone of the film and the characters to be able to paint a musical landscape that would depict the film in a single piece of music. I know there are hallmarks of other music that can be pointed to with that cue, but that's because so many composers borrow from the same tools when constructing these themes. I try to put as much detail as possible in my orchestrations so it leads to a more personalized style. During the sweeping B-section of the theme, there is rapid moving string and woodwind lines that are very subtle but keep the piece moving forward to give it energy and more charisma. I look for places like that to add my own personal touch.

I also try to use different combinations of instruments in my orchestrations. I look at combining sections for new textures or give what I like to call perceived or progressive texture. When a piece is quickly moving around the orchestral palette it creates this sense of progressive texture. An example of this would be moving your primary texture from strings to brass and having the woodwinds connecting them in some way. This causes a perceived or progressive texture that is interesting to listen to as the music moves along linearly. It's similar to pairing a wine with food. You can have the wine by itself or the food by itself, but when you eat a certain food and then drink a specific wine, you have a new experience. This isn't anything new to orchestrators, but it's good to point out to people looking to sharpen their listening skills. And I would say that I stay away from listening to film scores when I'm writing and I focus on implementing my style into what the project requires.

CH: But there must be space for homage in a film like this. How is that reflected your own style?

EW: While I did stay away from listening to scores while writing *Ratchet & Clank*, let's be honest here: We all know there's a lot of homage to other popular space adventures in this film. So with that weighing on me, I did take an approach that would keep the music within that genre and keep the familiarity up enough that audiences would respond to it. Having said that, I tried to stay away from copying any other composer's style, but I would implement my own style into the genre. There are specific harmonic approaches that other composers have made popular with space adventure films. One example is using a series of augmented scale progressions. We are familiar with this sound now, but it really gives you the sense of "space" with the intervals being spread out in the chordal form of the augmented scale or creating dissonance when used in its hexatonic scale form. So the best approach to not trigger the baggage this scale conjures up is to treat it differently in the orchestration than those that came before me.



CH: Tell me about your overall approach to scoring the film and how you developed its themes.

EW: My approach for scoring this film was to keep it purely in the orchestral palette. I chose to depict the action on screen with tonality and orchestral texture rather than with whatever the most popular synth is today. Also, the film is full of tongue-in-cheek humor along with some very intimate moments, so I had to approach those tone changes carefully while keeping the score sounding cohesive and within the same sonic landscape.

While there are several recurring musical themes in the movie, Ratchet and Dr. Nefarious' themes were my favorites to write and develop. I approached Ratchet's theme knowing his motif had to be a memorable melody, but that it also had to have orchestral support that could be versatile enough for comedic, heroic, melancholic and action settings. Dr. Nefarious' theme didn't have to develop as much as Ratchet's, so I approached it from the standpoint of orchestral texture with fluttering woodwinds supported with vibes and piano. I stayed away from using a theremin with him, although he does have this 1950s B-movie vibe to him. I thought the theremin would be a default, and in the end I came up with a much more creative theme that is some of the most nuanced orchestration I have written.

CH: In a recent interview with Milan Records, you discussed that you were unable to score the film with a live orchestra due to production difficulties that arose as you prepared to work on the project. As a composer, how were you able to work around those difficulties while making the most of the resources you did have?

EW: I went into the project under the assumption that the score would be recorded live. That was one reason I didn't have any reservations about only utilizing a full orchestra in my score. Most composers that have started working within the digital era write a score as they create a mockup for the director and producers to listen to. The sampled orchestras are getting better and better, and you can create some very realistic passages that sound great to the untrained ear and under sound effects in a film.

As I was writing the score and delivering the mockup for the producers, I started to realize they were not going to record the score. I had notes in my score for a live orchestra to play that can't be accomplished well in samples, so I was a bit disappointed about not getting to have my score fully realized. However, I was able to go back and sweeten it using various techniques, and it was polished with a professional mix by Adam Schmidt. At the end of the day, I am pleased with how the score sounds, and a lot of people aren't aware that it's not a full orchestra recorded all at once. Samples are getting to the point that I hope this isn't going to be a common occurrence because there still isn't a replacement for the real thing...yet. I feel that sampled orchestra has come a long way, but to me, I call it a "cherry flavored" orchestra. It sounds like it's all there but there's just an element missing, much like with cherry flavoring. Having said that, I'm happy with the level of writing and orchestration on the score and I feel confident that I'll be able to record with a live orchestra again soon.



CH: Aside from being unable to use live players, what were some of the biggest challenges you faced when working on this?

EW: Creatively, the project went very smoothly. The director, Kevin Munroe, and I worked closely in shaping the musical landscape for the film. Technically, animation is the most difficult genre of film to score. I had to be meticulous in making sure all action and tone was being represented musically or I knew a cue would come back to me. So I learned a lot about my process and feel I grew a lot in knowledge of my craft. Other than the logistical complications with my studio setup, I would say there weren't a lot of challenges faced on the creative side. Thank goodness!

CH: What was the most difficult cue?

EW: The most difficult cues to write were the ones for the Battle of Alerro City. This scene was early on in the film and it was the first major battle scene I had ever scored. I was constantly trying to balance the action and comedy while sustaining the intensity of the battle, which continues for a long period of time. When scoring long battle scenes, you learn quickly that you have to write with the textural ups and downs of a roller coaster. You can't sustain the music to keep getting larger and larger. You have to look for valleys to bring the music down, so you can build up again. That's why it's so important for a composer to have a thorough

understanding in the craft of writing music before they attempt to score a scene with such technical requirements.

CH: So, what are your overall hopes for the success of your score for *Ratchet & Clank*?

EW: I hope the level of composition and orchestration are viewed positively. I've had a lot of people on social media telling me that they're enjoying the score, so I think it is striking a chord with some. I hope the score shows my ability to score an animated film as I would love to do more work in that genre. I also hope the score demonstrates my ability to work and manage many facets on a film score and ultimately be viewed as a good start to a busy scoring career!

—**FSMO**