

MAKING STRIDES

AFM Meets G.I. Joe: Musicians Record Score to New Video Game

Continuing the trend of growth for AFM orchestral musicians in the video game arena, Skywalker Symphony Orchestra has recently recorded the score for *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra*, which will be released August 4.

Composers Cris Velasco and Sascha Dikiciyan wrote the action-packed hour-long score. The intense recording sessions provided little respite for the 50 AFM musicians who were contracted to perform at Skywalker Sound in the Bay Area. “There is no down time in the actual game,” says Velasco. “It is 100% action all the time so it was a tough score to write because it’s relentless. It definitely gave those musicians a workout.”

Combining a traditional orchestra sound with electronics and percussion, the score for *G.I. Joe* has a big sound. Velasco knew the best way to produce his musical vision was to use AFM orchestral musicians at Skywalker Ranch. “That was my fifth or sixth time using the musicians at Skywalker,” says Velasco. “I pretty much insist on going there because I feel that our team has a really good rapport with them and they know exactly what I want. I am always extremely happy going there and seeing the same crew.”

Hasbro, Inc. (owner of the *G.I. Joe* franchise) and Paramount Pictures worked together to create the motion picture of the same name, which will be released in theaters August 7. Video Game Publisher Electronic Arts (EA) secured the rights for the game and hired Double Helix to develop it. JP Walton, Audio Director for Double Helix, chose Velasco and Dikiciyan to create the sound they needed for the modern update of the classic series. “It is a hero adventure so we wanted something up-tempo with a militaristic feel,” says Walton. “All the musicians were super professional and hit all their cues. I would love to work with them again.”

AFM session contractor Janet Ketchum of Local 6 (San Francisco) hired the musicians for the recording sessions and interfaced with EA and the composers. “The ranch is pretty amazing. There is a great sound stage and musicians always tell me they look forward to going there,” says Ketchum. “I’ve never had a problem filling the orchestra.” She assembled 50 top orchestral musicians (40 strings and 10 brass) from the San Francisco symphony, opera, and ballet to achieve the big sound that Velasco desired. Although Velasco originally wanted 60 musicians, Ketchum helped him to stay within budget by assuring him that



AFM musicians brought life to the *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra* video game score during a two-day recording session at Skywalker Ranch in the San Francisco Bay area.



Pictured (L to R): Double Helix Producer Kristian Davila; Double Helix Audio Director JP Walton; Composer Sascha Dikiciyan; AFM Session Contractor Janet Ketchum; AFM Executive Assistant to the President Linda Patterson; Conductor/Orchestrator Tim Davies; Associate Director of Electronic Media Services Savina Ciaramella, and Composer Cris Velasco.

the exceptional musicians would certainly achieve the *G.I. Joe* sound. “He was very happy with it,” says Ketchum.

Tim Davies of Local 47 (Los Angeles) conducted and orchestrated the two days of double sessions which took place October 22-23, 2008. Davies and Ketchum have worked with composers Velasco and Dikiciyan on several video game recording projects, including *Beowulf*, *Prototype*, and *Haze*. “Having worked with Cris and Sascha on many projects, I know exactly how they want me to orchestrate the score,” says Davies.

Velasco focused on the orchestral part of the score, while Dikiciyan homed in on the industrial, synth and percussion parts. “My job is to bring together these elements with

the orchestration,” says Davies. “I often get to experiment with textural sounds imitating Sascha’s sound design.”

The capability of Skywalker Sound to provide an experimental environment is due in large part to the creative expression of Leslie Ann Jones, recording engineer and director of music recording and scoring. “It was really important that we made the small orchestra sound as big as we could,” says Davies. “Leslie knows every time I come to Skywalker I have some new approach I would like to try. This time she beat me to it and had the idea to bunch up the strings to make a tight, focused sound.”

The musicians were all experienced in recording for video games and films. This project

provided an interesting option for those orchestral musicians who normally perform at live venues. During breaks, musicians could view the video in the control booth to see how the music would be used in the game. “It was pretty exciting having it instantaneous so the musicians could see it with the video,” says Ketchum.

Matt Marsala, senior producer at EA, grew up playing with *G.I. Joe* action figures and attended the session. “To see the classic theme song re-envisioned and done with this live orchestra before my very eyes was one of the most incredible experiences I’ve had in game development so far,” Marsala says.

Kristian Davila, the game’s producer from Double Helix, was pleased with the outcome of the score. “Working with that class of musicians made that experience more special and we’ve received nothing but rave reviews on the music,” comments Davila.

Davies has great confidence and enthusiasm when it comes to recording at the ranch. “It’s always a pleasure going to Skywalker,” adds Davies, “because I know that Janet is going to have a first-rate orchestra waiting for me.”

Velasco also appreciates the caliber of orchestral musicians that the AFM provides. “We had one of the producers from EA there and he was actually so moved by the main scene that I’m pretty sure I saw a little tearing up going on,” says Velasco. “That just doesn’t happen from a sampled mock-up from a studio. When you’ve got 50 musicians playing that theme and putting actual emotion and humanity into it, that’s when the game guys realize that it was money well spent.”