

The Music of THE KILLING – FORBRYDELSEN

Introducing composer FRANS BAK

Danish crime drama *The Killing* has proved to be the pick of the bunch of the recent wave of Scandinavian TV series, with its gripping storylines and skilfully-drawn characters. Even so, it wouldn't have become such a phenomenon without the brilliant soundtrack music composed by Frans Bak. Here for the first time, Bak himself has assembled a CD-length selection of the most atmospheric themes and evocative musical passages from the first three series of *The Killing*, the disc's release coinciding with the arrival of series three on BBC television.

"I was getting lots of emails every day from people asking where can I get this music," the composer explains, "so we've put together this album from the three Danish series. There's the opening theme from the title sequence, Pernille's theme from series one, all the themes in their basic arrangements are here. Some new elements have been introduced in series three, and I've included some music which describes those."

Following its initial success in Denmark, *The Killing* has now been seen by viewers in Brazil, Japan and Australia as well as in Iceland and most European countries. In Britain, *The Killing* was an instant hit when shown on BBC4, where it immediately became even more popular than the wildly-acclaimed *Mad Men*.

The show has become well known for its enigmatic sweater-wearing heroine, Detective Inspector Sarah Lund (played by Sofie Grabol), and for the way its stories reach into the darkest recesses of politics and the media, but Bak's music has helped to lift it from being merely an excellent television series into an unforgettable event. Viewers have been mesmerised by the way he mixes traditional forms and new technology with urgent rhythms and unsettling textures.

"The music has become like a character of its own, in a way," says Bak. "I first became involved because I had written music for another Danish TV series called *Nikolaj & Julie* [from 2002, and also starring Sofie Grabol], and the conceptual director, Birger Larsen, wanted me on board for *The Killing*. We just got together and worked out which direction the music should go in and how we should approach it. It was a great process."

One of the key concerns in writing soundtrack music is to give it a distinctive mood while not making it so intrusive that it interferes with the drama on the screen.

"The demands are different from project to project," says Bak. "On some projects I'm asked to highlight certain things in the scenes, but in *The Killing* we didn't want to emphasise particular moments and create hit points and all that. Sometimes there's a lot of dialogue, so you don't use an instrument in the same register as the voice. Sometimes there's a pause, so you can do something extra with music. Also we didn't use very short pieces of music just to fit different scenes together. We developed another way of using longer musical passages. "

It's important to Bak that he's able to watch scenes from the programme before composing his music.

"We had a long development period of *The Killing* when I read scripts and wrote some music, but it's when you first see it on the screen that you can really feel whether you're going the right way. I can get a lot of ideas, but I have to have the picture to see if it works well with what's happening on screen. So for instance there'll be themes which go with particular

characters, such as Theis and Pernille from the first series. Then when Detective Lund is getting very suspicious, you'll have a piano motif going on. I made a very detailed plan for how I see the music in The Killing."

There's no simple description for the music Bak has created, but its menacing, edgy tone is instantly recognisable. Hearing the scope of the pieces, you'd assume the recordings were done on a grand scale in a large studio, but the reality was rather different.

"Actually it's a lot of computer pieces, samples I made myself and samples I bought," he reveals. "I play all the instruments, and I also use a wonderful Swedish singer, Josefine Cronholm. Sometimes I do some very low singing myself too, where you can't hear exactly what's going on. Sometimes I use different loops and beats and synthesizers. It's a largely electronic score, although it doesn't sound like that."

There's a long and noble tradition of soundtrack composers, from Bernard Herrmann or Ennio Morricone to Hans Zimmer and David Arnold, but Bak insists that he has avoided being influenced by any of them on this score. He draws on his own inner resources and aims to create something fresh and unfamiliar.

"No, I actually don't listen that much to other soundtracks," he says. "I can get inspired by watching a movie, but not by the soundtrack. With The Killing we have been very much digging into our own concept, and I think a lot of the music is very unique. I don't think I was inspired by other composers."

Bak studied music at the Royal Danish Conservatory in Copenhagen, but although this gave him a solid grounding in classical music he has always worked in jazz, as both pianist (and occasionally saxophonist) and bandleader. As well as playing in jazz ensembles since his school days, he has always felt a powerful urge to compose original music.

"Every time I joined another band I'd write another tune and I'd say 'how about this? Let's try this one'. I started putting together my own bands and playing my own pieces, and I became known as the guy who was always composing new works. That helped me get into the film business in Denmark 30 years ago. For a long period, I've been half composer and half jazz musician."

There isn't much Bak hasn't tried. He has led showbands, and has composed music for more than 100 commercials ("I did one for Lillebror cheese which is very popular in Denmark. Do you have that too?"). He has even appeared on TV in the Danish version of The Lyrics Board and wrote an extremely popular song for the Danish Song Contest in 1987 called "Dancing In The Moonlight". However, thanks to the international reach of The Killing, Bak himself is becoming a global citizen. When American TV decided to create its own version of the show, it didn't take them long to figure out that he was the natural choice to compose the music.

"They really liked the music from the original series, and I was given an audition along with four American composers. They sent me a 12 minute clip from the programme and asked me to compose music for it. They liked what I did, so I got the job. In America they work in a different way and I have to write a lot of very small pieces for the show, but the concept of the music is taken from the Danish series."

Other recent projects have included a Ruth Rendell mystery for ITV in London, and the comedy-drama series Lilyhammer, about a Mafia informant (played by Steven van Zandt from The Sopranos) hiding out in Norway. "Suddenly I'm doing crime scenes all over the world, and I love that," he chuckles.

Bak is never happier than when he's able to shut himself away and create some new music, with the aid of a computer and Pro Tools software.

"I get up, have some breakfast and then start working in my home studio," he explains. "Sometimes I compose a melody on the piano, then sometimes I just fumble around until it feels right. Then I follow that idea and see where it leads. Sometimes the best ideas come from really crazy things."

It sounds like fun.

"Yes!" he agrees. "It is."

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