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### FACT

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### SYMPHONY IN SEE

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On a recent Tuesday, the composer Howard Shore left his hotel in London and climbed into a black Mercedes for the forty-five-minute drive to Watford, an unromantic suburb northwest of the city. There, in the Watford Colosseum, a municipal dance hall opposite a tanning salon, a sweetshop, and a pharmacy, Shore was working on the score for “The Return of the King,” the last movie in the “Lord of the Rings” trilogy, a project that has occupied him for the past three years and will soon be completed. “I knew the acoustics of this Watford room,” Shore explained. “It’s been used on several classical records; the BBC uses it. Middle-earth is old. It’s five to six thousand years preceding our culture. So it needed an antique sound.”

Shore, a meditative, unhurried man who studied at the Berklee College of Music, in Boston, and spent the early nineteen-seventies touring with a progressive-rock group, was wearing sunglasses, an untucked black shirt, and loose gray trousers. “I’m a little tired,” he said. “When I did the score for ‘The Silence of the Lambs,’ in 1991, it was written to the finished movie and we went to the studio and recorded it and that was that. It used to be an effort for a director to change a frame. You had to go back and clip it out manually, rebalance the reel. Now the digital technology is there to do these things quickly, and it allows much more fluctuation of the image. And if a frame moves it’s a ripple effect. That’s kind of what I’m in right now.

The ripple. The big wave.”

Peter Jackson, the film’s director, was attending the session, but much of the “Lord of the Rings” cycle was created in a “virtual office” devised for the New Zealand-based production which enables the musical teams in London and in Tuxedo, New York, to upload their work onto a series of secure Web sites. “People sign in and sign out, and we chat and exchange things,” Shore said. When he arrived at the Watford hall, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, which would be playing the score, was gathering on the wooden floor, amid arc lamps and a thicket of microphones. On the musicians’ stands were sheets marked “rotk 912 921b. The Black Gate Opens.” Shore smiled, said good morning, went to his podium, and without further preamble directed the players to their place in the score.

He raised his hands. The music began with a tremor of low strings, swelled with the entry of the violins, and crescendoed in a fanfare of brass. It lasted about two minutes. After several run-throughs, everybody put on headphones. A red bulb lit up on Shore’s podium, and an engineer announced the number of the take: “6084 of 912 921b, from 277, beat 3.” A filmed sequence now appeared on a small screen in front of Shore—the actor Elijah Wood, as Frodo, silently battling a giant spider. The sequence was unfinished, and flashed between live action and early-stage computer animation. A circle of white light pulsed at the center of the image, and Shore conducted the music in time with it, looking fixedly into the screen and using crisp, unflorid arm gestures.

After three takes, Shore left the podium. On the stairs leading up to the control room, he said, “If we can get three minutes of music successfully recorded in a three-hour session, then we’re doing O.K.” Shore sat down at a table behind the mixing desk with a copy of the score open in front of him, and was entirely still as he watched a monitor and listened. Next to him, Peter Jackson, a bulky man with shaggy black hair and a straggly beard, lay almost horizontally in an office chair and intermittently dipped

Chicken McNuggets in ketchup. “That lunge there should have more energy through it,” Jackson said. “Go with the energy of the spider.” At another point, he said, “This is about the scariest bit of the fight. I think it would be good if that change happened on the stab.”

Shore nodded and then thoughtfully returned downstairs to the podium, where he began rapidly annotating his score while gently and calmly giving the orchestra instructions: “The trumpets should be muted at bar 29. We need a little more crescendo at 44. A little more accent in the low strings and bassoons at 47. The A at 62 is now on the downbeat and it’s a half note. At 70, the accents should all be stresses. At 77, play the ink.” The film rolled again. Afterward, Shore said, “Very good. Very nice. Very happy with that. Let’s go to lunch.” †