

1886: A Tall Order

Jason Graves scores a dark adventure in *The Order: 1886*.

By Fernando Fernández



The Order: 1886 is a cinematic game experience based on a tense and unique vision of a dark, Victorian-era London. Its soundtrack, composed by two-time BAFTA Award-winner Jason Graves, brings to life an alternate history, inspired by Knights of the Round Table lore and lycan mythology. Renowned for his score for *Dead Space* and the acclaimed *Tomb Raider* reboot, the classically trained American composer employs memorable orchestral writing and unique musical textures in *The Order: 1886*.

Graves' score deliberately eschews musical clichés, instead using an elegant, fascinating approach to a game that focuses on blockbuster gameplay and dramatic character performances.

Fernando Fernández: This game has had a lot of attention since its announcement at E3 in 2013. How did you become involved with the project?

Jason Graves: I'd been working with the developer, Ready At Dawn, on *The Order: 1886* since 2011. I've been told numerous times that I was their first and only choice from the beginning. It's an extremely flattering demonstration of trust and commitment, but also a high bar to set!

FF: So, how did you take that trust and commitment and what was the process to start working on the game?

JG: There was a lot of internal testing and experimenting for the first few years. I didn't compose a lot of music then—something like 15 minutes total for various sequences and gameplay bits. We were all getting a feel for the gameplay and environments, so nothing was really solidified yet. It wasn't until the first vertical slice—a complete section of gameplay, including custom music—and first official trailer with custom music ("The Pledge," released in

2012) that the musical direction began to take shape. After that, it was simply a matter of refining and solidifying the musical tone.

FF: Well, maybe it is just my personal feeling, but your video game work has always felt very cinematic. On this project, it seems like that approach could be ideal. Is that how you approached it?

JG: I really appreciate that! I've always felt that video game music can sometimes try a little too hard to *not* sound like film music. What's wrong with associating the two? If anything, game music has potential of being too stagnant and lifeless. "Interactive music" in games is still in its infancy and has tremendous potential, but eschewing the cinematic approach to music scoring altogether seems to be a missed opportunity that can result in repetitive, non-evolving music. I grew up on film music. I fell in love with it as a kid because I could relive my favorite movies through their soundtracks. The music tells a story. An action cue has peaks and valleys, it pushes and pulls, ebbs and flows with the on-screen story. I default to composing this way for games, even if I'm tasked with something as simple as a two-minute combat. I want to feel the music pushing and pulling me as I progress through the piece. So many happy accidents occur with the gameplay when the music is dynamically diverse and has a life of its own, even if it's just a simple stereo track playing back without any interactivity. Actually, *especially* if it's just a stereo track!



Fifty Shades of Graves: Look closely and you will see that this is not the same picture of Jason Graves as the one above it.

FF: So the idea was not to work like that in specific moments of the game, but to apply that style to the whole project. Is that it?

JG: Too many game developers want a specific level of intensity in their music that never changes, especially for interactive scores, which completely contradicts this wonderful concept of happy accidents. I think, to a certain extent, game music can get a little too “four-bar loop, copy, paste,” especially when it comes to rhythmic phrases and sounds. There are so many pre-packaged loops and rhythms available now. They sound amazing but they end up boxing the music into a perpetual state of predictability. I’m a drummer, so I lean on my background heavily and record my own rhythms from scratch for everything, and I try to create music that keeps the listener engaged.

A cinematic approach was most definitely an intentional thing for me, but I must admit that I approach every score—either for film, TV or games—with the same cinematic intentions. I think it makes the underscore a lot more interesting and gives the story’s plot more subtlety and nuance.



FF: So, let’s get a bit more into the details. The sound that people are going to notice in your score is very classical, with low strings and male choir—this is going to be a really dark adventure. How did you decide upon this approach?

JG: Getting the instrumentation nailed down is the first thing I like to do. I had already visited the developer many times and had been involved with the game for at least two years before finally jumping in to begin scoring the actual gameplay. The specific directive from the developer and Sony was twofold: They wanted the score to have a sense of weight to it and they wanted it to be recognizable as *The Order* after hearing a brief snippet of music.

They really gave me full autonomy to construct any kind of score I could imagine, and they truly seemed to want something different. So, how do you compose a period score set in 1886 without sounding like every other period score set in the same time? I’ve always thought that choosing the instruments you *don’t* use is just as important as choosing the ones that you do, and this definitely proved true for *The Order*.

FF: I’m sure that freedom is really welcome! So what did you do with it?

JG: I began by listing all the tried, true and expected instruments that everyone is used to hearing in an epic, historical score. The first thing I did was eliminate the entire brass section. It has such a quintessential sound, especially for neoclassical music. So, no brass at all! What about strings? I didn't want to kill them altogether, so getting rid of all the violins seemed like a good compromise—it definitely took that “expected” sound away and gave the string section a low, dark, heavy quality.

Since I was literally omitting more than half the string section, I beefed up the remaining players. We had 18 violas (split into two sections), 12 cellos (again, split into two sections) and five basses. This gave me the same five sections of strings as a conventional orchestra. But I couldn't score the entire thing with just low strings, so I extended the “no high-register sounds” idea to the woodwinds as well. There are 12 woodwinds in the score, which is a large ensemble, especially by today's standards. But our winds were all bass clarinets, contrabass clarinets, bassoons and contrabassoons—three of each. They were essentially the Lycan/halfbreed voices in the orchestra.

We also had choir—24 low male voices. The highest part was written for baritone, which is the second lowest voice for men, and we went down from there. We even had contrabasses that could sing notes lower than I had ever heard. A lot of the chorus music was dropped an octave at the session and they sang it without any issues—an entire octave lower!



FF: Okay, so what you are describing is not specifically “experimentation,” but it is a very bold move. Where did you go from there?

JG: One of my first considerations was where to record. Such a unique instrumentation could only be recorded in a few places in the world, especially considering the sheer number of viola players and the difficulty of the music. London was my first choice, both out of instrumental necessity, quality of sound and physical location since the entire game is also set in London. We ultimately choose Abbey Road, Studio Two for its warm, punchy sound and clear tone. The sense of weight, both in the music and on our heroes' shoulders, needed to be palpable throughout the game. I already had a very “weighty” ensemble of musicians but wanted to see how much further I could push it. There is a lot of muted string writing in the score, meaning unless it's an action cue, the strings are probably muted. They also hardly ever play on any of

their higher strings. The music is very specific and keeps the players restricted to the two thickest, throaty low strings, even when they are playing much higher notes that would always be on the thinner strings. The mutes and low string choices give the performances a veiled, thick, mysterious sound, like a heavy blanket has been thrown over the speakers.



FF: How did you prepare the soundtrack release?

JG: In many ways, choosing music for a soundtrack release is like someone asking you to pick your favorite child. I had composed over two hours of music for the game and needed to whittle my selections for the soundtrack down to almost half of that. Fortunately, we also have bonus tracks that are available with the premium editions of the game, which gave me another 10 to 15 minutes of released material to consider.

I am incredibly thankful to Sony for their enthusiasm and leeway in preparing the soundtrack. They quite literally left me alone in the room at Santa Monica Studios and asked me to create it as I saw fit. In the end, I found a combination of full-length thematic tracks and slightly “edited for time” combat music to be a good balance. There was a lot of combat music! By cutting some combat cues shorter, I was able to include more variety. I wanted listeners to be able to take a journey as they progressed through the album.

One thing that may go unnoticed on the soundtrack album but was well implemented in the game is the size of the ensemble. We start out with a string quartet at the beginning of our story. Since we have no violins, the quartet consisted of two violas, a cello and a bass. After a few chapters, the ensemble expands to a small group of strings with a few low woodwinds—approximately half the size of the final, large ensemble. Once we are well into the second half of the story, the ensemble is fully fleshed out with all 12 woodwinds, the full string ensemble and the 24-voice choir.

FF: From your personal point of view, how do you expect this project will be received by the fans? What are your own thoughts about the game?

JG: I’ve been a huge fan of this particular title since I was first introduced to it in 2011. It’s such a rich story and has detailed, deep characters. I can only hope that my musical contribution

does the game justice. I think players are in for a real treat exploring and experiencing this fantastic world.



FF: I am sure they will. It looks and sounds very exciting. What about the future? I guess you have projects already waiting for you after *The Order: 1886*, but they're usually well-kept secrets. Is there something that you can mention to us at this time?

JG: Yes, the game industry is notoriously secretive when it comes to unreleased titles. I'm happily busy and working on some very exciting projects but, unfortunately, sworn to secrecy. I can mention another game that was released a week before *The Order*. It's called *Evolve* and it couldn't be further from the musical world of *The Order*. It's completely electronic and textural—all the sounds are me in my studio and it was a wonderful change from the acoustic world of *The Order*. I was working on both of them at the same time, sometimes even the same day!

FF: So, a good change of pace and style for you then. Any other projects you'd like to mention?

JG: I also have a few films being released this year. *Adrenaline* is a rock-based score about drag racing and *Unknown Caller* is a tense, claustrophobic thriller. I performed all the instruments, even made myself into a one-man rock band for *Adrenaline*. Definitely fun and different from the two games, which I've found is the secret to keeping me happy and constantly learning new things.

—FSMO