

**“I constantly have a feeling that the music is just going to burst out of my chest at any point with an intensity I can’t control. I keep myself on edge, never letting myself explode, because I know I would lose all touch with reality if it ever came out all at once like that.”**



AN INTERVIEW WITH MUSICAL MASTERMIND, JUSTIN LASSEN

# BEYOND SYNAESTHESIA

Nykolai Aleksander, CG artist, close friend and co-collaborator in Justin’s “Synaesthesia” project, took some time to sit down and talk to Justin about all the things that make him tick, and discover a side to him that may yet be unknown even to hardcore Lassen fans.

## Beyond Synaesthesia

An interview with musical mastemind, Justin Lassen



### Introduction

His scores sound like "a giant pot filled with Enya, Aphex Twin, Philip Glass, Danny Elfman, Blue Man Group, and Nine Inch

Nails swirled together until there is a black goop burning at the bottom of the fire while steaming piles of James Horner, Charlie Clouser and Rachmaninov flow into the atmosphere..." - or so it has been told.

But Justin Lassen, who has worked with celebrities such as Madonna, Robert Miles



Ascending The Mines | Image © CCP Games

and Nine Inch Nails to name but a few, is more than just another composer. He is a visionary in the true sense of the word. He's a dreamer with a knack for the dark and mysterious (no

doubt something that runs in the genes, being a direct descendent of one of the famous Grimm Brothers), as well as someone who has managed to stay with both feet firmly on the ground.



Dawn Warrior © Alex Ruiz

### An Interview with Justin, by Nikolai Aleksander

Hi Justin! First I want to thank you for doing this interview! I'm all excited ... I've never done this before, so let's hope I won't screw up too badly! OK, how about we start with the usual stuff: Could you tell the readers a bit about yourself? Hello, and thanks for having me do this interview!

Well, I'm a generally type casted as a dark artist/ composer/remixer/producer/musician, but I am also many other things. I work in a lot of different industries like films, videogames, music, radio, media, etc. doing a lot of different odd jobs and things. Not all of it is music or graphics; sometimes it's just spreadsheets and business plans, or presentations for talks at schools or pitch meetings. Whatever the project is, I just make sure to do the best I can.

I was born in Colorado but mostly grew up in Arizona, and I'm 100% self-taught musically, though I was in any school choir I could get in, all my life during those years (tenor). [Smiles]



Aside from apparently always having a love for music, what else did you do when you were growing up – any hobbies worth mentioning?

Any dream jobs you thought up as a kid?

Growing up, I was either all in, or not at all.

There was no half-way of doing things in my eyes. If I couldn't give it my all, I wouldn't try at all. I didn't see the point. I had to figure things out to the fullest.

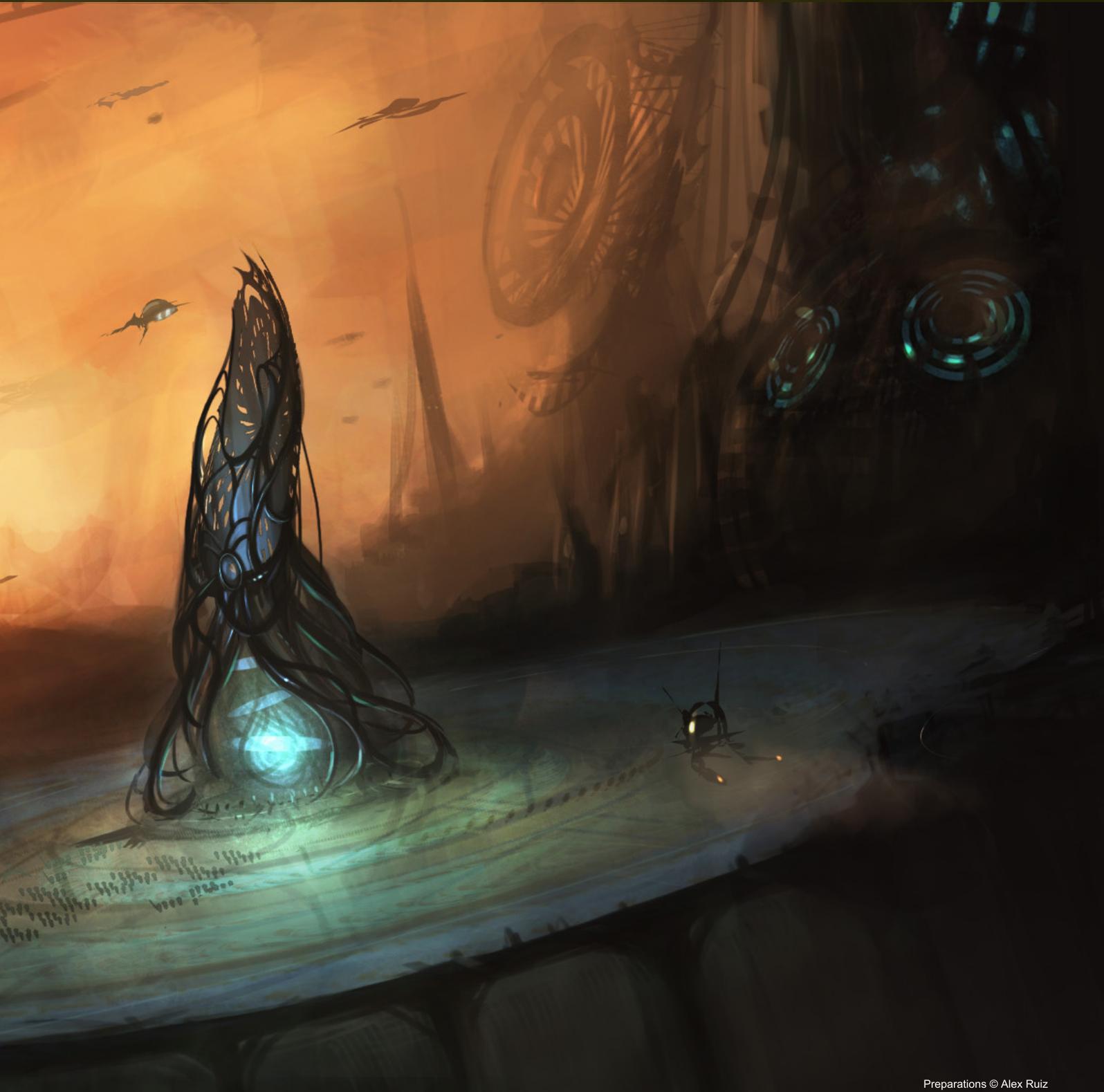
When I was into science and chemistry, I didn't just get a chemistry set, I got 10, and I ordered from the real chemistry lab catalogues – new

## **“When I was into writing plays, I got all the neighborhood kids and put together productions for all the parents at my house.”**

beakers and test tubes and such. When I was making films, I took advantage of my family's cameras to the fullest, from VHS to JVC to MiniDV; I grew with the technology as it progressed and created dozens of short films, as I wanted to be a director one day. When I was into computers I learned Basic, Pascal, C/C++, Visual Basic, and whatever else came along.

When the internet started I made it a point to learn Perl/HTML/JavaScript, etc. I learned even technologies that are obsolete today. I don't do as much programming or any of that stuff because music became my true love.

When I wanted to be a magician, I didn't just learn a few tricks, I took magic classes, I bought tons of books about tricks, I dreamed of one day



Preparations © Alex Ruiz

having a show, I put on shows. When I was into writing plays, I got all the neighborhood kids and put together productions for all the parents at my house. There was so much I did younger, and did to the fullest. I have no regrets. I like who I have become.

One dream that I would love to return to one day is marine biology. I've always had fantasies about the sea and oceans, and snorkeling for the first time in Cancun last year really re-ignited that spark inside of me. I think the oceans are the most beautiful things that we have on Earth.

I love underwater documentaries and deep sea exploration. If in the apocalyptic future when I can't make the music I love, I would return to that kind of work and keep learning as much as I can.

Even as a composer, I read so many books and learn so many things; I think life is my university and there is never a graduation date. I love documenting and archiving, which yet another passion of mine. I try to theorize how we as a people will be able to save all of our digital memories. This technologically advanced

society cannot go on forever, and maybe one day this and all record of it will be lost and future generations will have to start over from scratch again? Maybe we've been through this cycle a few times? This idea fascinates me.

**How did you start in the music industry? Was it a slow process, did you actively seek work, or were you discovered in some way?**

I was always fascinated with digital music creation from the mid 90s, but it wasn't until the late 90s I started taking it more seriously as a career, as opposed to a hobby. That proved to



Something was left behind © Kirsi Salonen

be the best choice I ever made. You have to give it your all, or nothing will happen.

At first I didn't know what to do; I sent out random demos to tons of labels (this was before we had MySpace and things like that). It didn't quite work, but ultimately I got my first industry gig from one of my heroes, Robert Miles, a brilliant platinum composer/artist that I was listening to for ages. After working on that project I started to get noticed by everyone and one thing lead to another ... and here I am today.

For the technically inclined readers, what kind of programs do you work with, and what kind of computer power do you have at your disposal? Believe it or not, I started making music on a 286 computer, at 33MHz and just 2MBs of RAM

**“... that's when I felt my first sincere connection with a CG artist's vision...”**

with software like Midisoft Recording Studio and Cakewalk. Over the years I've gotten more powerful machines as they've come out. I divide my time between two types of composing processes: mobile and desktop. I do a lot of travel around the world, so the last few years has required me to have kick-ass laptops, filled with the best sounds to jot down all my ideas, so it's usually Centrino systems. My current laptop is a Core2 Duo 2.8GHz, 4GB RAM – plenty to get a bunch of work done.

My stay-at-home desktop workstation is an Intel Core i7 Extreme Edition running at 3.2GHz and all the RAM and hard drive space I could ever need. Between the two, I have enough power to

do all kinds of projects and styles. I use software such as FL Studio, Sonar, Acid, Sound Forge, and so on.

Many of us frequenting the CG scene will know about your “Synaesthesia” project, a series of compositions that not only accompany CG images by various artists, but are the essence of those images in sound. You were the first to combine the two art forms. What was it that made you do it, and how does it feel to be the “founding father”, as it were, of a new art form altogether?

Well, right after I invented the internet, I decided that it needed a new art form, so I very quickly put it together in a very founding-fatherly way.

[Laughs] Just kidding! But for real, there was not any intention to create something new like that. I was just as mesmerized by the end result as the fans when it was all said and done.

I was staring at a beautiful painting by Martin Bland in 2005 called "Medusa Fields", which I fantasized for a while about, and after reading the description of it, "30 years have passed, still the epitaph of past conflict stands, the legacy of that fateful day, when the weapon was deployed, a permanent reminder of our failings, a permanent lesson for future society, these fields are sacred, doomed, cherished" I was hooked. I had goosebumps; I had felt its soul. At first I knew what was going on in the scene but when I read the confirmation and it was just as I imagined, that's when I felt my first sincere connection with a CG artist's vision, and a beautiful string piece played out of my fingers like a ghost playing or something. I knew I had something special when I heard it played back.

The CG artists tend to ask, "How did you know what was in my head?" After the first series was released, I knew I had something special, unique and original on my hands; to have been the world's first and still only composer to be front cover featured and celebrated on most of the top CG websites and magazines, was not only a huge honor (because I respect CG artists to the core), but also very humbling. I get so many supportive mails from CG artists and fans who all say my music has helped them in some way, which makes it all worth it.



Could you briefly explain the process of writing music for images? What is it that triggers you to want to write a piece for an image? How does it start?

This is a good question. I think the thing to keep in mind is that not every image makes me feel like composing. I think the thing I look for in a work, is the soul. I look for mythologies built into the setting. Not just colors triggering notes, but worlds that I feel could actually come to life. If I can't immediately see the soul, it doesn't mean it's not in there, it's just that I must be blind to that vision. [Smiles]

**“I would describe music as oxygen; if you lose too much of it, you die.”**

To me, the magic part about writing for images is that there is no process at all; if it triggers me to compose, it does it instantly and there's no complicated nonsense in the way, no step by step. The music will just flow from my fingers to the keyboard, or whatever instrument I'm playing at the time, almost instantly, and I immediately become transported into that world. The image becomes my desktop wallpaper and I live with that vision while working on the music for as long as I need it. I am a world traveler I guess, and I don't mean just here on Earth. [Winks]

If you could start over with the “Synaesthesia” project, is there anything you would do differently?

Interestingly enough, there wasn't a big mischievous scheme, no product was designed, no business plan; it was quite literally just my love for art, and especially CG artists and CG communities around the world.

I suppose maybe it would have been smarter to productize it much sooner or create a more central hub for the fans, but would that have been a wise decision? Would it have cheapened it? Or did it happen as it was going to happen, no matter what? I suppose the magic of



The Chase © PAUL GERRARD

discovering my Synaesthesia series, is the discovery part of it, itself.

I don't know the answers to these questions. I think I'm happy with the way the project worked out all these years, and all the fans I got from it. I think they can tell it was my heart speaking, and sometimes crying, and not me inspired by my need for survival.

That reminds me of a beautiful quote I once heard about music that “it is not about what you hear, not about the notes played and the melodies consumed, but about the empty spaces, the silence in between that makes it

sing.” – Any thoughts on that? What would you say if asked to describe music in one sentence?

I agree with that statement. I think there are all kinds of impressive musicians in the world; some who can shred a thousand notes a second on a guitar in melodic death metal, or a pianist virtuosi playing the keyboard at such an intensity, as if he or she has six fingers on each hand, or seemingly four hands total – much like the hero in the film, “The Legend of 1900”, when he was showing up that jazz pianist in the final “battle” scene.

I don't have my head in the sand on these matters. I, of course, think that is a very

impressive feat, but I don't necessarily draw a personal or deep connection with that sort of complicated stuff. Bach is incredibly genius and talented, and so complicated with his "inventions", yet Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, which has tons of blank space and room to breathe, can touch me more? Why do I love Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings" choral arrangement? Because it is simply beautiful, yet full of complexity in other ways.

I would describe music as oxygen; if you lose too much of it, you die. Get your fix whenever you can, because maybe one day we won't have this much accessibility to music...





Thoughts © Alex Ruiz

It's interesting that you mention Beethoven, because that quote was made about his music! Anyhow, what would be your dream environment or conditions to work in? Honestly. No holding back.

I've always fantasized about being kinda in the same situation as the main character in Charles Dickens' "Great Expectations". I dream of some random lawyer/patron of the arts/rich/illuminated type who would like to remain nameless, whom I don't know or ever heard of, to set me up in a sacred and gifted place with all that I need, and access to ensembles and instruments and costumes to boot. I can imagine waking up in a castle somewhere with all the proper amenities, no bills, not a typical care in the world – just music and creation and collaboration and experimentation.

I often wonder what it must feel like to be a "trust fund" kid, or generally people who could do anything, but choose not to. I know a lot of these types of rich people who don't appreciate their

own "wealth" or use it to their advantage; t seem to just live from one day to the next trying to blend in. Musically, I feel like all that I've given the world is only but a taste, even to me. It was a tease, a mean joke on myself.

**"I live in little "moments" of time that transition and fade into each other..."**

I often cry myself to sleep thinking of all the symphonies in my head and in my dreams, and I constantly have a feeling that the music is just going to burst out of my chest at any point with an intensity I can't control. I keep myself on edge, never letting myself explode, because I know I would lose all touch with reality if it ever came out all at once like that. It could possibly be dangerous, like writing four symphonies at the same time. I do hope to one day create these stories and orchestrated happenings ... I know, it's a selfish and simple dream, but it is mine.

Scenery and environments are so very important to me ... I have to live life, and balance life and dreams, and most of the time the dream suffers to maintain the life. I also wish for a gorgeous, very old extended octave (9) stage piano. [Smiles]

I have known you for about six years now, and I can't believe I've never asked you this, but ... [Grins] Lollipops or ice cream? And what flavor? That's an easy one! Ice-cream: mint and chocolate chip. [Smiles]

Fizzy or Flat? – Drinks, not ice cream. [Laughs] Fizzy, or never mind!

Sounds good to me! OK, before anyone thinks we're losing it ... in closing, are there any big projects you are working on at the moment, and what are your plans for the future?

There are always projects – big and small – going on constantly, and always on a global scale. People don't realize because I don't make

“When I first heard from Justin Lassen, he didn’t approach me empty-handed. His efforts were accompanied by glowing references from the artists he’d composed his work for already. He had several finished spots for me.

“His work shines a new light of inspiration for digital visual artists and is the ultimate jamming collaboration for those lucky enough to have music composed by him from their images. Many go on to create deeper, more voluminous pieces. It was worth revisiting his journey on CGSociety.org.

“This leap into aural experimentation continues to bring amazing dimensional expansion to visual digital arts. I hope he continues and I wish Justin Lassen well.” – **Paul Hellard, Editor, CG Society & Ballistic Publishing**

it apparent on the websites, but I’m constantly in touch with all kinds of creative people around the world in various countries, dreaming up and working on gorgeous ideas and contraptions. I am honored and humbled to have earned the amount of cool fans I have, big celebrated and small obscurities, in the work that I’ve put out into the world all these years. I really hope to be able to keep putting out more and more work as my life continues to progress and I continue to write new chapters in this sometimes dramatic story I’m eagerly the star character in.

I wish I could plan for the future like normal people, but lately it’s been unfolding in front of

me, without my permission. I wish I could live out of an Outlook Calendar or iPhone like all the other normal business people in the world, but my days don’t have 24 hours like everyone else’s, and my years don’t have 365 days. I live in little “moments” of time that transition and fade into each other on a constant basis. Now that we are beyond the Synaesthesia series, I look forward to my future as much as anyone else and I can’t wait to see what comes out next. I am on pins-and-needles now.

**Any last words before we are told to shut up?**

[Smiles]

Never shut up. Always dream!

## Justin Lassen

For more information please visit [www.empireofmoderthought.com](http://www.empireofmoderthought.com) (website) <http://www.justinlassen.com> (blog) or contact: [jl@justinlassen.com](mailto:jl@justinlassen.com)

A 2-Disc Special edition CD with all tracks from the Synaesthesia project is scheduled for release in October 2009.

Interviewed by: **Nykolai Aleksander**

For more information please visit:

<http://www.admemento.com/>

Or contact: [x@admemento.com](mailto:x@admemento.com)



3dtotal.com

Look for this button inside



- Free Brushes
- Free Base Image
- Free Fibonacci Spiral



## ARTIST

Concept Art, Digital & Matte Painting Magazine  
Issue 045 September 2009

**INTERVIEWS**  
Guillaume Menuel



**ARTICLES**  
Beyond Synaesthesia: Interview with Justin Lassen  
The Sketchbook of Cliff Childs



**GALLERIES**  
Richard Anderson, Arnaud Valette & Randis, plus more!



# PERFECTING

## PERSPECTIVE, LIGHTING AND COMPOSITION



### FUTURISTIC ENVIRONMENT

Darren Yeow whips up a wonderful environment filled with cool shadows and warm colors using Google SketchUp as a tool to aid painting in Photoshop



### ORGANIC AND INORGANIC CUSTOM BRUSHES

Nykolai Aleksander shows us how to create fabric & lace custom brushes in the second instalment of our returning tutorial series



### SPEED PAINTING AND CONCEPT DESIGN

Björn Hurri jumps on board and shows us how to produce a character concept design sheet in the third part of our dynamic characters series

### PROJECT OVERVIEW

David Munoz Velazquez talks us through the inspiration behind the intriguingly titled image, *Hovercraft Parrot*, whilst showing us the painting breakdown

## Interviews

Guillaume Menuel

## Articles

Sketchbook of Cliff Childs  
Beyond Synaesthesia:  
Interview with Justin Lassen  
by Nykolai Aleksander

## Tutorials

Using 3D as a Base for 2D  
Painting:

Part 3 by Darren Yeow

Custom Brushes

Part 2 - Fabrics & Lace

by Nykolai Aleksander

Dynamic Characters

Part 3: Speed Painting &  
Concept Design

by Björn Hurri

Beginner's Guide to Digital  
Painting

Part 3 by Nykolai Aleksander

## Galleries

another 10 of the best images  
from around the world.

## Making Of's

Hovercraft Parrot by David  
Munoz Velazquez

3DTotal presents the new issue of **2dartist**  
magazine: a downloadable monthly magazine for  
concept art, digital & matte painting for only **£2.75** (approx \$3.78 - €2.93)



visit [www.2dartistmag.com](http://www.2dartistmag.com)

to download the free 'lite' issue, the full issue, subscription offers and to purchase back issues.