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# LIBYAN SIBYL SOUND DESIGN - A STUDY OF CINEMA SOUND TRANSFORMED FOR THE VISUAL LEARNER

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**Libyan Sibyl Sound Design - A Study of Cinema Sound Transformed for the Visual Learner**

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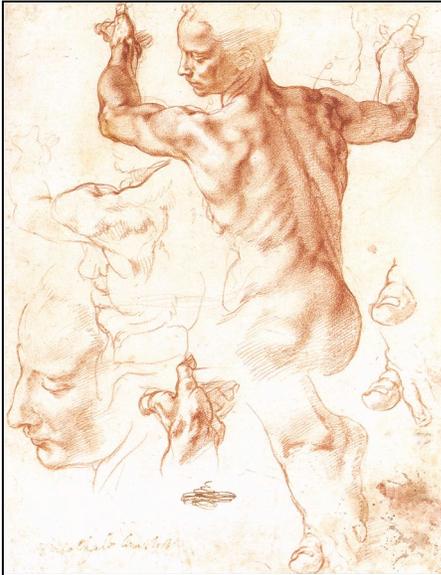
# LIBYAN SIBYL SOUND DESIGN

*A Study of Cinema Sound Transformed for the Visual Learner*

By Lee C. Payton - ©2013

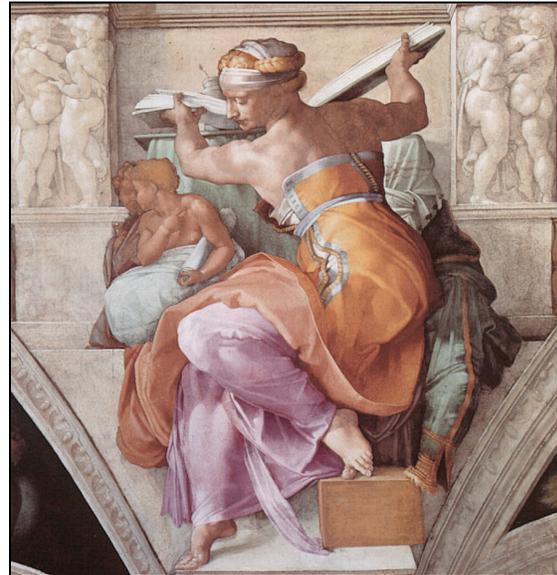
## SYNOPSIS

Comparisons between the chalk sketch and final fresco of the Libyan Sibyl from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel are transformed to represent comparisons between original production dialog recordings and the final cinema sound mix. This provides a discussion axis on Cinema Sound with students who have a more visually oriented learning style.



Study for the Libyan Sibyl<sup>1</sup>  
MICHELANGELO<sup>3</sup>

*Chalk on paper, 29 x 21 cm, 1511*



The Libyan Sibyl - Sistine Chapel Ceiling<sup>2</sup>  
MICHELANGELO

*Fresco<sup>4</sup>, post restoration, 16th cent.*

The word **Sibyl** comes (via **Latin**) from the **ancient Greek** word *sibylla*, meaning **prophetess**. There were many Sibyls in the ancient world, but the Libyan Sibyl, in **Classical mythology** foretold the "coming of the day when that which is hidden shall be revealed<sup>5</sup>." While conducting research into ways to discuss the Cinema Sound process more adroitly with visual learners, I found the comparison of images of Michelangelo's masterworks pictured above.

Prior to addressing a transformative comparison to Cinema Sound, some foundational observations should be made about the artistic mediums represented in this exploration.

On the left, chalk on paper, is a very controllable, sometimes forgiving, sketch-like medium. Many artists carry with them sketch pads or papers, chalk or charcoal sticks, sharpeners, and soft rags for smudging and softening the image. Smudging accents highlight areas of the sketch, and softening blurs contours and gives the artwork a 'dreamier' quality. Artists can also smudge or erase with their fingers. Results are simple and immediate. Chalk on paper is often used to create rough sketches, done relatively fast, to get a sense of form and proportion.

The image on the right above depicts the final fresco<sup>4</sup> painted into the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. One of the most difficult and demanding painting mediums, fresco is when pigment is applied to wet or drying plaster.

The Artist has to be an expert at painting and capturing the human form very rapidly, and also must be experienced in working with the drying time, thickness and wetness of the plaster to achieve uniform consistency of color and texture. Above all that, the Artist has to understand the chemical reactions going on between what they used for pigments (colors) and the plaster itself. Some things that were used to make paint pigments did not mix well with the plaster. Once the plaster dried, whatever the Artist used for pigment changed colors, sometimes in dramatic fashion that may have compromised the Artist's initial vision for the work.

Another factor to consider is the size difference. The chalk sketch measures 29 x 21 CM. Thirty (30) centimeters is equal to about one foot. So the chalk sketch is less than one square foot in size.

The painted area of the Sistine Chapel is about 40 M long by 13 M wide. This equates to roughly 131 feet by 43 feet, which is 5,633 square feet; bit of a difference between the chalk sketch and fresco. Given that the Libyan Sibyl is but one small part of the whole fresco, it is still rather large and much more complex, compared to the sketch.

The same holds true for the cinema soundtrack. All the sonic elements required for a dynamic and effective final mix require an innumerable amount of audio tracks. Comparatively, production dialog and room tone is always recorded in single-channel mono because human characters only have one mouth. The post-production sound process is much more complex and involved than production dialog recording.

Location audio recording specialists usually take a finite set of reliable gear with them into the field to do one main job, and that is to record the Actors' dialog and the room tone, or presence, of the room in which the dialog is spoken. If the recordist is forward thinking and courteous with the AD and the Director, production sound effects and location ambiences may also be recorded. Post-production audio specialists deal with much larger and more complex sound responsibilities once backgrounds, sound effects and music are combined with the dialog.

Post-production Cinema Sound occurs in at least three different and distinct phases: the Sound Design process, the Pre-Dub or Pre-Mix process, and the final Re-Recording Mix. During Sound Design, various teams of audio specialists edit and salvage production dialog; replace dialog with ADR (Automated Dialog Replacement); record Foley for human movement and prop handling; create a vast array of sound effects; and compose, record and mix the original music score.

During the Pre-Dub or Pre-Mix process, various categories of sound are combined; layers of sound that make up specific sound effects are mixed together; and elements that comprise background ambiances are mixed. During the final Re-Recording Mixing process, all of these pre-mixed sounds are combined for stereo or surround output and mastered for distribution.

To create a full 2-hour cinema soundtrack that supports the picture is difficult, arduous and time-consuming. In this world of digitally created movies and animation where there is no production audio, the labor for the sound teams intensifies. This is not to imply that recording production dialog is an easy task. Production dialog recording is fraught with its own unique set of challenges per project and location. However, it is still a series of mono recordings of primarily human voice and room tone.

Comparatively speaking, the juxtaposition between production dialog recording and post-production cinema sound can be transformed to study the difference between a one foot square chalk sketch, and painting a fresco into the ceiling of a church in the 1500's, while lying on your back, 20.7 meters (that's 68 feet!) off the floor. This author has worked 65 feet above a concrete floor, and it is not a comfortable vantage point.

Now that Renaissance art and Cinema Sound terminology has been explored, comparisons can build even further. Imagine that the chalk sketch represents the production dialog, and the fresco represents the final sound mix. Notice that Michelangelo only studied in great detail the spine and shoulders and profile of the Sibyl in the chalk sketch. In the final fresco, this is the focal point, with the eye naturally focusing on the Sibyl's face. Location recording is mainly concerned with getting the best production dialog recording possible, as dialog is the focal point, or the spine of the cinema sound story.

Surrounding the main study in the chalk sketch, the Artist has explored a few other key anatomical features, though not in as much detail. This can be compared to the array of production sound effects and location ambiances that can sometimes accompany a good day of dialog recording. One can either record sounds that are 100% usable, and thus make it into the final mix, or sounds that can be used in post-production as a creative guide for studio based recordings. As with paper, which is compact and portable, Michelangelo may have carried this sketch with him, referring to it while contemplating and planning the final fresco. In a good relationship between the sound designer and director, the original production recordings are always available for any bits and pieces of sound that can be used in the soundtrack.

In studying the final fresco of the Libyan Sibyl, she is a complete figure, fully clothed with flowing, colorful robes, seated in a specific place holding a specific object, surrounded by an immediately recognizable environment or architecture. Each part of the composition and color choice is well balanced and complimentary. The foreground figure commands just the right amount of attention due to the use of more pastel rather than saturated colors. The simple detail and monochrome color scheme of the architectural background around the Sibyl, supports the focus on the main figure, while still depicting unique imagery in its own right.

In Cinema Sound, layers of sounds are separated into categories containing foreground sound effects, and background sound effects. Foreground sound effects are generally specific and recognizable to things moving and happening on screen. Background sounds tend to include environmental and industrial ambiances, and things so far back in the picture plane that detailed movement is imperceptible or overshadowed by foreground movement.

What are the components of audio within one scene with talking actors?

We compare the figure of the Sibyl to the dialog of the actors, due to its central focus and main function, or relation of story. Specific sound effects that make up any particular scene can be compared to the detailed chalks studies surrounding the sketch. In the final fresco, much more so than the chalk sketch, there is an incredible amount of specific details that give life and meaning to the Sibyl. Sound effects are specific details that give life, time, place, significance, and well... specificity and meaning to people, places and things within the scene, both on screen and off. Many times off-screen, non-synchronous sounds offer great deals of information about the time and place represented in a scene.

In addition to dialog and sound effects, the cinema soundtrack includes background sounds, room tones, location and environmental ambiances, and various degrees of silence. Silence as a cinema sound category is technically the absence of part or all of the sounds, or in film terms, lull. These background sounds need only provide a stable, believable bedrock upon which the dialog rides. Backgrounds should not draw attention away from the dialog, sound effects or music, but should also be unique enough to provide immediate recognition of time and place. Backgrounds should also be designed to faithfully represent a specific time and place. The monochrome yet uniquely detailed architecture behind the Sibyl functions in much the same way as neutral backgrounds function within the overall cinema soundtrack.

The more elusive element of the cinema soundtrack is surely the music, as it functions on many levels, but all of them primarily emotional in nature. Choice of music depends on how it best supports the emotional content of the scene or moment. Emotional content is not the focus of the chalk sketch. It is pure study

of form, specific detail and representation of figure. Within this context however, the sketch is a masterpiece.

Comparatively, it is not the location recordist's job to be enamored with the Actors' performance, or enthralled with the emotional content of a scene. Their focus should be maintaining adequate microphone placement, monitoring recording levels and writing sound logs. Within this context however, the more creative the recordist is, the better they can facilitate capturing usable production dialog. The only time a production sound recording mixer delves into emotional content has to do with the variance of acting performance between rehearsals and actual takes. Invariably, Actors tend to 'go louder' than rehearsals once the cameras are rolling on emotional scenes. This tendency nullifies pre-set recording levels.

The subtle, yet dynamic compositional device of the 'X' can be seen tracing, from left to right, downward from the cherub's right arm, across the Sibyl's left elbow and the negative space behind it, and down across her outer robe. The ascending part of the 'X' composition includes her right knee and leg, right arm, and open portion of the book she holds, and continues through the arm of the cherub on the right. The 'X' composition for visual arts is a very stable, yet very dynamic device, and has been used by artists prolifically.

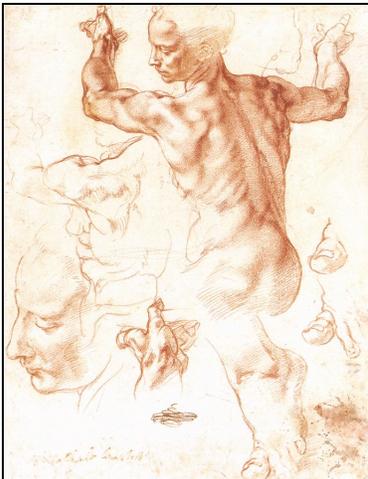
Once the Sound Design process is completed, a film must have a Final Mix, where all the separate components of the audio soundtrack are re-combined and represented in mono, stereo, or surround. The finest audio mixes are stable and dynamic at the same time, much like the visual 'X' composition in the final fresco of the Sibyl. Great cinema soundtracks often go unnoticed because if something grabs the ear in the soundtrack, it is usually a mistake. The human ear receives vibrations only. It is the human brain that deciphers the vibrations.

In Cinema Sound dynamism means a generous variance in the volume levels between quiet and loud events. Stability refers to when we can understand the dialog even at a whisper, but the car crashes, explosions and music swells don't blow our heads off. The best cinema sound mix is where you can watch the whole movie and never jockey the volume control on your remote... dynamic and robust, yet elegant and civilized.

NOTE - This Paper Presentation includes a corresponding slide presentation, and an audio comparison between interview-style production dialog recordings and the final cinema sound mix, in a scene from the documentary Gods of Fire: The Art of the Modern Blacksmith.

## SUMMATION

Michelangelo's chalk sketch of the Libyan Sibyl contains a similar focus of intent, study of specific nuance, and depth of singular purpose, as does a professional quality production dialog recording. A study of the final fresco of the Libyan Sibyl in the Sistine Chapel can be transformed to represent a final Cinema Sound mix that is elegant, stable, comprehensive and dynamic.



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## SITES & CITATIONS

1. [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Michelangelo\\_libyan.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Michelangelo_libyan.jpg)
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Slide during Presentation:

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4a/Sistine\\_Chapel\\_ceiling\\_diagramA1.PNG](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4a/Sistine_Chapel_ceiling_diagramA1.PNG) - Author:  
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