

## GSAS NEWS

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### Sound and Vision

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#### Composer and PhD student Edgar Barroso scores with a juried selection at the Tokyo Film Festival



*Composer and Harvard PhD candidate Edgar Barroso*

Even as a young child, growing up in Guanajuato, Mexico, Edgar Barroso remembers being fascinated by the possibility of creating something meaningful out of sound. Over the course of the years — having learned to play several instruments along the way — this gifted composer and Harvard PhD candidate in the [Music Department](#) has created a vast array of music, winning numerous prizes and awards in the process.

Now he has drawn his widest — certainly most global — audience, as composer of the score for *The Compass is Carried by the Dead Man*, which premiered at the [Tokyo International Film Festival](#) on October 22, competing with 14 other films for the festival's top prize. Barroso recorded the score at Harvard's state-of-the-art [Studio for Electroacoustic Composition](#), where he received support from his advisor, Professor Hans Tutschku, the director of the studio, and Ean White, the technical director.

*The Compass is Carried by the Dead Man* was selected for competition by the Tokyo festival — one of the world's most prestigious — out of almost a thousand entries. Directed by Arturo Pons, the film tells the story of a young boy who is lost in the desert somewhere along the US-Mexico border. The child meets a man in a mule-driven wagon who gives him a compass and instructs him to head north. The man soon dies, but the boy continues driving the wagon, encountering many new characters along the way. The result is a poetic piece that uses dark humor to depict an allegorical odyssey.

"The director and I decided to have the music play an important role by making it a part of the narrative," Barroso says. He notes that one of the most challenging aspects of integrating music into film is grasping the precise rhythm and tempo so that his music can set the appropriate tone. Barroso is no stranger to writing scores, having composed music for documentaries and art installations. "Music gives the image weight; you can make a scene heavy or light, and I enjoy adding an extra dimension to something that is visual and outside of my field."

For Barroso, the appeal of scoring music also lies in the collaborative nature of the work. Collaboration has always been integral to his creative process, he says. "I'm very interested in applying science to my music, so if there's an idea that I don't understand, I'll speak to a scientist here at Harvard. That's the beautiful thing about Harvard: you have people from every background."

He even launched his own cross-disciplinary workshop. In 2009, he and five other international graduate students, who met during the summer before their first year at Harvard as students in the [GSAS English Language Program](#), launched the [Open Source Creation Group](#), which is dedicated to promoting interdisciplinary collaboration through seminars and workshops. The group meets regularly to share research.

In addition to collaborating with colleagues, Barroso cites teaching as one of the most rewarding intellectual experiences he has had at Harvard. He received the [Derek Bok Center's](#) certificate of distinction for his work as a teaching fellow for Introduction to Electroacoustic Music. Many of his former composition students still meet with him on a weekly basis at [Adams House](#), where Barroso serves as Resident Tutor, to discuss their latest musical works.

Though many undergraduates have learned to play primarily classical music, Barroso encourages them to create art that speaks to their own era. He tells students that they do not need to love modern genres to be original, but they should react to contemporary music and think about how their own work will reflect their ideas rather than the voice of other composers.

For Barroso, a large part of the appeal of contemporary music is that it translates well across many different types of audiences. "It doesn't necessarily have so much weight of history or a tremendously strong aesthetic. Contemporary music is often naturalistic and focuses more on the pureness of sound."

Performing contemporary music is one of the goals of the [Harvard Group for New Music](#), an active and well-regarded ensemble that Barroso co-directs. The group includes graduate students from the composition, theory, musicology, and ethnomusicology programs, and it brings in performers from all over the world to play music written by Harvard composers. Part of what makes their performances so compelling is that pieces must not have been premiered elsewhere. "It's the newest music that we, as a group of composers, believe in," Barroso says. The next HGNM concert is **November 12**, with the [Talea Ensemble](#); all concerts and colloquia are free and open to the public.

[Learn more](#) about Edgar Barroso's compositions and research.