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Q&A With Composer Miriam Cutler

Written By John Presley



Miriam Cutler is an emmy nominated film composer with an extensive list of credits and over 20 years of experience in the music industry. She began her career as a singer and clarinet player, writing arrangements, producing records and exploring her passion for jazz music.

Cutler regularly gives back to the industry, serving on film festival juries and forums that help educate aspiring composers.

At the recent Sundance BMI roundtable you talked about developing musical themes within a score. You explained how a few simple notes can be twisted an infinite number of ways, almost like a "puzzle". What are some of your tips for creating a memorable and effective theme?

"Well of course, the notes should resonate emotionally for the desired effect. Once I feel something consistently, I know I'm on the right track. Then I start exploring the infinite possibilities for developing and expressing the motif. But my gut is always my guide. I often find myself having powerful emotional experiences alone in the studio. Don't tell anyone!"

You score for "Ethel" has a lovely, warm combination of piano, strings and other orchestral elements. What can you share about the recording process for this score?

"For such a sweeping, emotional, and historically important story, I knew it had to sound orchestral and lush, and so my support team and I worked tirelessly to figure out how to achieve that even though we couldn't afford to bring in an orchestra. We had to be very inventive in our orchestrations and choice of musicians to pull it off.

In fact, I come from a background of producing records where I often work with individual musicians or instrumental sections, layering the parts and exploring and building as we go. I really enjoy creating music that way, even though it's more time consuming and labor intensive. This process allows me much more control and even creative choices during the mix. And I am also able to respond to feedback from filmmakers, because I have alternative takes. I always record a version that adheres to the approved cue, but often I have some special alternative that I've recorded. I like being able to give the filmmaker that option."

How do you score a scene? Do you rely on technology or prefer pencil and paper?

"When I first started out, pencil and paper was the only available method. But it wasn't long before computers became available and I have always embraced technology. Over time, the computer and I have mind melded and it's pretty transparent in my process, as well as extremely fast. Except when it crashes. UGH!

Most of the time, I work to picture right away - whatever they have for me - no matter how rough. I want to try to absorb and integrate the filmmakers vision as soon as possible. It's so much better than staring at a blank page and trying to imagine what might be going on."

How has documentary film music evolved over your career? How do you stay relevant as a composer?

"I would say that doc filmmakers have really evolved in their willingness to embrace new technologies, and broaden their vision of what they are able to achieve as story tellers. There really isn't any line between docs and fiction, except as defined by journalistic ethics, since they are telling a true to life story about a real character or characters.

I think the best way I can stay relevant as a composer is to have an open mind and be willing to explore any ideas the filmmakers want me to. It's impossible for me to be familiar with all the music that is out there in the world, but I am always ready to learn something new and incorporate it into my work."

John Presley is a composer and founder of Future Composer. Visit his music site at JohnPresleyMusic.com.