



Minding Your Beats and Cues

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH A COMPOSER

BY MIRIAM CUTLER

Filmmakers have often told me that they find the scoring process to be one of the most daunting aspects of making movies. Even some seasoned directors admit everything from discomfort to panic when they try to explore ideas about music for their film. In the documentary world, these feelings can be even more pronounced, the fear being that musical accompaniment to real-life footage can be inappropriate or manipulative. But one need only look at such stellar examples as Aaron Copland's score for *The River* or Philip Glass' soundtrack for *The Fog of War* to realize how much the right music can enhance the power of a documentary.

There is no reason a filmmaker should view the scoring process as any more of a challenge than other aspects of post-production. There are more similarities than differences between the

editing process and scoring a film. In editing, you are developing a narrative through characters, voiceover, images and sound. I think of music as an emotional/non-verbal aspect of storytelling—a kind of punctuation to add layers, interpretation and/or accent to what is already coming from the screen. It starts with understanding the vision for the film as a whole, and then working toward that with every decision—whether it be choice of shot, narration, use of sound or the emotional tone set by music.

There is a tendency to work on sections of the film, going from cue to cue. But it's important to maintain an overview of the score throughout the film, just as you build your storyline throughout the editing process. You wouldn't want to repeat shots or skip portions of the story, making it hard to follow. If you consider music in this holistic way, you'll see

Composer Miriam Cutler at work.

that you can build the score by applying the same criteria you use to make editing decisions. Is music necessary? Will it enhance and/or support the intent of each sequence that has been selected for a cue? Is there a good structural flow and pacing to the score? Is it distracting? Is there too much music or perhaps too little? Or too much time between cues? And, finally, does the music feel appropriate, integrated and well-composed?

I always like to start at the beginning and work my way through a film organically. Early in my career, I would blaze through the entire film, hoping to develop my ideas fully before sharing my work with the director. Over the years I've discovered that it is much more productive to share as early

as possible to make sure I don't waste time developing material that the director will never be on board with. *Building on ideas that work* is my motto. What I need from the director is input and serious consideration of musical ideas I present. Together we can explore the elements of a cue, discover what supports their vision and move forward with a fruitful and enjoyable collaboration.

Enough philosophy; here are some ways of being proactive in getting the best possible score for your film: Thorough preparation, realistic budgeting of time and money, careful selection of a composer and investment in the creative collaboration all play a crucial role in making the best music with your composer.

Don't Underestimate Your Music Budget

The film scoring process begins with the initial budgeting; make sure it's realistic—wishful thinking will get you in trouble down the line. Do your research: Talk to composers, music supervisors and other filmmakers and look at some music budgets of films you like. Do you envision an electronic score, a jazz band, ethnic music or an orchestra? Do you want to work with a well-known composer, or are you willing to take a chance on someone less experienced and pay a lower fee? Do you need to license a popular song? How big a part will music play in your film? Answers to these kinds of questions will help you assess your financial requirements and ensure you'll have the resources and time you'll need for a good, effective score.

Editing with Temp Music

Although filmmakers should start thinking about music as early as the budgeting phase, most don't really focus on it until they're editing. I've worked with editors who have an amazing internal rhythm and can cut without music, but most prefer to find a temporary compositions that inspire the editing and inform scenes. Time and budget permitting, the composer can also begin to be involved at this point, and in my own experience this is a fantastic way to work. I can supply click tracks or simple beats, or I can actually start composing. Typically, we'll discuss some concepts, I'll write a piece of music, the editor will lay it in, start cutting and send it back to me for conforming. We'll go back and forth as the film takes shape. Rather than getting attached to temp music, the filmmaker can thus take advantage of all the composer has to offer, which can lead to a truly original and affecting score.

The other common way to work is to offer the composer a cut with a temp score. You can temp with other music written by your composer, or with any music that inspires. I personally prefer that temp music doesn't come from me, as it's way more interesting to do something new for every project. Referencing my own music from another

film carries baggage; I'd rather have a fresh approach. Whatever music you choose to temp with can save time for a composer and provide creative direction early on. It's important that you convey to the composer what you like and don't like about the temp music so that there won't be any confusion. Time spent discussing these details will yield great benefits throughout the process.

Trusting Your Taste

Before you begin working with a composer, though, it helps to hone your own sense of what music might work in your film. I always tell filmmakers to trust their ability to discern what feels like it's working and what doesn't. After all, you wouldn't be making films if you didn't have strong ideas. So spend time thinking about what styles of music resonate with your vision for the film. Analyze films with scores you like. Throw some music samples up against picture. Begin a creative dialogue in your mind. Even if you don't know much about music, you can begin to experience the effect different approaches can have on a scene. This will help develop confidence in your ability to provide solid direction for your composer.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

When you choose a composer, the relationship you establish with that person will set the tone for all the creative work that follows, so look for someone to whom you can relate, not just a music machine. Even if you're drawn to someone's music, don't underestimate the importance of your rapport. I'd also suggest you look for someone who not only is talented, but has an equally strong collaborative spirit. If so, you're more than likely to have a creative and dynamic experience.

Film and TV composers are used to tight deadlines and strict budget requirements. Regardless of the parameters of the project, our role is to support your vision, flesh out your ideas and bring all our experience and musicality to the table. Together, we can develop a language for communicating about non-verbal, emotional and abstract ideas. But while your composer is willing to make a generous contribution of time and talent to a collaborative effort, you as a filmmaker should be realistic about your expectations and respect your composer's boundaries. Most documentary scoring budgets are not going to afford the composer a lot of room for financial gain, so good will goes a long way in encouraging our best efforts. And the more satisfying the working relationship is, the more open a composer will be to spending time fleshing out your ideas and achieving what may have seemed out of reach.

Knowing What to Look for

But how do you find this fabulous person? You can start by noticing who wrote the film music

you recently enjoyed. Ask other filmmakers you admire for referrals. Then go online and Google them. Most professional composers have well-developed websites with lots of examples of their work. Remember, it's critical to distinguish between general musical ability and actual film-scoring talent and experience. Your brother may be a great guitar player with a home studio, but that doesn't necessarily mean he can take direction or has the sensibility or technological know-how to compose and synchronize music to picture (let alone deliver on a fixed schedule and budget). Just as in the rest of the filmmaking process, there are complex levels to film scoring, both creatively and technically. They include communication skills; an ability to organize, plan and budget for the overall project; compositional skills; music preparation (scores and charts); and an ability to work with musicians, handle union issues, produce sessions and record and mix the score to the technical specifications of the post house. And all this must be done on time. So be sure to check the breadth and depth of your chosen composer's experience.

Composing Credibility

But how can you assess the qualifications of your potential composer? As I said, the process usually starts with a recommendation or by hearing some of the music this person has written. But then, even if you've seen a film that person has scored, request a sample audio reel (and video, if you like). Listen to it with an open mind; get an overview of the work, and don't expect to hear the perfect music for your film. This reel probably reflects what the composer has already done for someone else, and he/she may be second-guessing what you want to hear.

Nonetheless, does what you hear move you? Does it stay with you? Even if the selections seem way off the mark for your film, if you can't get the music out of your head, then take a meeting with the composer. Find out more about this person. He or she may have other work that more closely resembles what you want—or has the ability to stretch for what you want. Don't underestimate the creative connection that may be unexpectedly forged

Your Place or Mine?

You should meet at a potential composer's studio to get a better sense of the person and how he/she works. Also, check out the gear. Does it look professional, well maintained, up to date? Get a feel for how the person thinks: Do you like his/her ideas? Bring a copy of some part of your film and discuss some of the musical ideas you've been exploring on your own. See how the composer reacts and what is offered in return. Play some of your temp ideas to illustrate what you like.

If a filmmaker doesn't offer me any musical direction in our first meeting, I have developed

ways of assessing taste. As we get deeper into a discussion, I'll start playing either my work, or music from other film scores or CDs in my collection to see what makes an impression. Is it orchestral, classic, contemporary, groove-oriented, ethnic, edgy? If the filmmaker is totally visual and has no musical vocabulary, I try to identify sounds or textures that get a response. As long as we can relate the music to a desired emotion or interpretation of a scene, I'll find the sound and instrumentation that will evoke that feeling or sensation.

If you take a second meeting with your potential composer, take it in your editing bay. There, you can begin to analyze scenes and see how the composer relates to your editor and other members of your crew. When you're ready to make the hire, have a candid discussion about what is possible within a range of budgets and just how flexible a composer can be.

Actual Budget

Let the composer know early on where you stand monetarily so that no time gets wasted on either end. But don't rule out the possibility that you may decide to raise more money if someone really inspires—or that the composer has been waiting for an exceptional project like yours and agrees to work for a lower fee than usual.

Nowadays, most indie and doc budgets are "package" or "all in" deals. A savvy composer will outline what is possible for what you've offered. This can vary dramatically from composer to composer, based on experience, schedule, resources and approach. Different composers offer different levels of service and collaboration, so be sure to fully explore how your chosen composer works. The music package provided usually includes one or more spotting sessions (meetings with the director/producer to decide where and what kind of music), composing, review and approval meetings, music preparation, musicians, recording sessions, the music mix and, finally, delivery of a finished music master synchronized to picture. Be sure to clarify how many, if any, live musicians are possible within the budget.

Clearly, a composer who has his or her own studio has a budgetary advantage. Nonetheless, it still costs money to record, even in one's own studio. Sometimes I suggest various possibilities to meet a filmmaker's budget. I'll start with a basic fee, then build in possible future contingencies so there won't be any surprises. As we move along in the scoring process, I may suggest that for "x" amount more, we can add a cellist; for "xyz" amount, we can add Yo-Yo Ma! I've seen possibilities for enhancing the score sometimes inspire filmmakers to raise more money. Stay on top of what your composer is writing. If it's turning into an orchestral score, make sure

you can afford to actualize the concept. Remember that every additional service and musician adds cost. Changes made after the recording sessions have occurred or picture changes after the music has been mixed can also add expense. Delivering a great score on a limited budget requires lots of advance planning, so stay involved and informed as the scoring process evolves.

Music Rights and Wrongs

What kind of deal will you make with your composer regarding ownership and rights to the music? Will this be a "work-for-hire," where you own the copyright and/or publishing, or a synchronization deal, where you obtain a license to use the music within certain parameters? Many filmmakers aren't familiar with the way music copyright, publishing and synchronization rights work. It is not necessary that you own or even control the rights to the music in your film in order to have what you need to distribute your work with its wonderful original score.

The concept of work for hire came into being during the heyday of the Hollywood studios because they actually had music departments with composers as salaried employees. These departments included support staff, engineers and musicians, and all expenses were paid by the studios to complete the score. Thus whatever was created in that context was a work for hire and owned by the studio. In today's world of package deals, composers often function as independent contractors who agree to deliver a final product on a fixed budget. In this context, it's fair to say composers own what they create—and can negotiate those rights based on what they get in return. An ample budget that includes enough money to pay the composer and the production costs might make a work-for-hire deal more attractive. And, if there's likely to be significant royalties from broadcasts or theatrical distribution, a composer may be more open to negotiating some rights. Remember, there is room for negotiation, but not necessarily a reason for a composer to give up their music rights by accepting a work-for-hire deal.

Filmmakers do not pay music performance royalties. Broadcasters (including radio, and in some cases, Internet providers), theater owners and live venues do. The world is split into territories, which are represented by Performance Rights Organizations (e.g. BMI, ASCAP, SESAC in the US; PRS in the UK; SASEM in France, etc). Professional songwriters, composers and publishers affiliate with a PRO, granting permission to collect music performance royalties on their behalf. Royalty income derives from fees paid by these broadcasters, theater owners and live venues worldwide to obtain blanket licenses from the Performing Rights Organizations for their entire catalog—music of all their affiliated writers and publishers. The PROs then distribute the funds

to their affiliates as royalties based on the number and types of performances. This business model has worked well since the early days of our industry and has resulted in a robust music community. As music budgets have gone down in a tough economy, more and more music creators rely on the backend royalties to stay in business.

A composition is divided into 100 percent writers and 100 percent publishers share. (But even in the work-for-hire model, the composer is supposed to retain writer's share.) When a film is distributed or broadcast, performance royalties are generated and collected on behalf of whomever owns the writers' and publishers' rights to the music. How much income depends on the success of a film and is paid out based on the way the writers' and publishers' shares are split.

For a filmmaker, this can work to your advantage and may help you interest a composer you might not otherwise be able to afford. There is room for negotiation: Do you really need to own the music by using a Work-for-Hire Agreement? Do you even have a functioning publishing company? If you don't, then a well negotiated Synchronization Rights Agreement and Master Use Agreement will get you what you need. Synch Rights grant you a publishing license to use the compositions in the score, and a Master Use Agreement grants you the rights to use the recorded music.

There are negotiable aspects to these agreements as well: Are the music rights exclusive to this film? Is there a time limit on that exclusivity? How many years before the composer can repurpose that music, if ever? How else is a filmmaker allowed to use the music—for ads, or different versions of the film? Or even for another project? These should all be discussed and agreed upon prior to working together. By negotiating these issues and creating a win/win, you may open up more possible choices from which to select your composer—or perhaps find a composer who wants to score your film, but might otherwise consider the budget too low. I, for one, have been able to put more money into the production value of my scores because I know there will be income down the line if I retain my rights to the music. This gives me even more incentive to work hard to contribute to your film's success.

Happy Together

As I've said, once the scoring process starts, it's important for you as a filmmaker to stay on top of what the composer is doing, so that time isn't wasted on unproductive tangents. Sometimes I write some music without picture and send it to the editing room to see if I'm on the right track. With today's midi, digital audio, video and Internet, filmmakers can get a sense of how the music is working with picture very early on, well before any recording sessions

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Music Story Arc

Setting a film to music is a creative and rather instinctive process. Music expresses the emotional tone of each aspect of the story, and it's critical that composer and filmmaker are on the same page. While there are no hard and fast rules for scoring a film, there are considerations that can inform decisions about how to utilize this powerful element.

With some colleagues, I have been developing a customizable Excel document as a tool for improving the ability of filmmakers to explore on their own, better communicate their ideas to a composer, develop a language for working together, and keep a perspective of how the score relates to the storytelling throughout the entire film. Using basic three-act story structure and character arc as its foundation, all musical decisions can be assessed within the context of how each cue serves the story, cue by cue, in each act, and finally in the film as a whole. The Music Story Arc is a holistic approach—the intersection of the composition of the score and the film's story structure. This perspective helps composers understand the filmmakers' vision on a deeper level and gets us closer to telling the same story. Having a one-page overview allows us to take in the relationship between the story and the music of the whole film at a glance—how much music there is and where. It's easy to determine visually if there is too much or too little, or places where the music is too fast, or bogging the film down. Or too repetitive. The detailed page for each act fleshes out the characteristics of every cue by identifying themes, emotion, intensity, instrumentation, tempo, placement and length. As much or as little of this information can feed into the Film Overview Page.

The Music Story Arc is very flexible, allowing each team to build on their own way of thinking about this process. But the main idea is to give composers and filmmakers a common point of departure and framework for discussing the music in the film. Together they can create this document and update it however they want.

As I said, first this approach can be used for analyzing and understanding the temp score—what the filmmaker likes about the temp and what isn't working can both be noted. The filmmaker can create an

overview of their ideas in putting together the temp music, and this can be a foundation for discussions during spotting sessions with the composer.

Then, as the original score evolves, either a new document, or some kind of update can be generated to help maintain an overview of how music is being used. It's very easy to get caught up in individual moments in the film, working cue by cue, and lose track of how it all fits together as a whole—especially when everyone is on deadline. Being able to see the whole film at a glance will help identify potential problems and provide a common framework from which the entire team can collaborate.

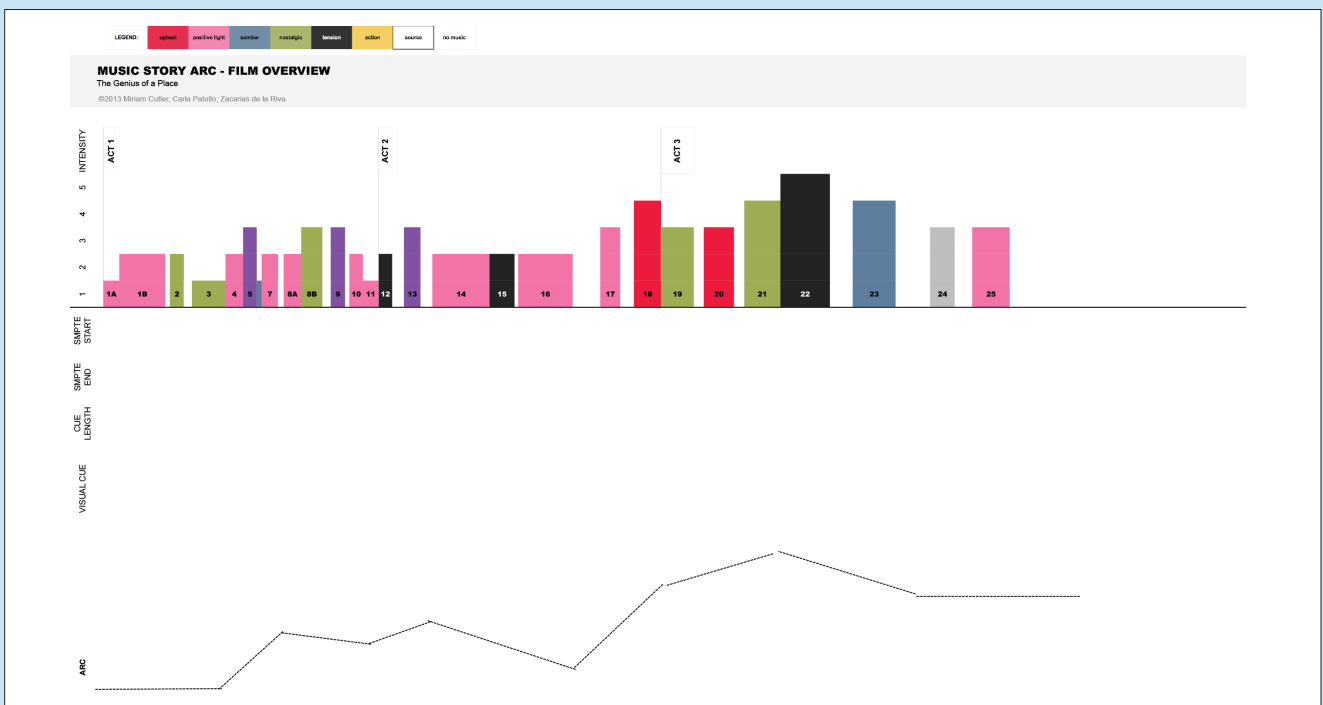
Below is a Music Story Arc in progress for my current project, *The Genius of a Place*, directed by Sarah Marder/OLO Creative Farm in Italy. I started collaborating with them to create a map of the temp music, the purpose of each cue, energy/tempo, tone, any notes she might have about these cues. That was our starting point and it gave us a lot of concrete ideas to talk about. From there, the Music Story Arc continues to evolve as I am gradually replacing temp music with midi mock-ups of the original score. We're currently about halfway through the film and we already see patterns emerging.

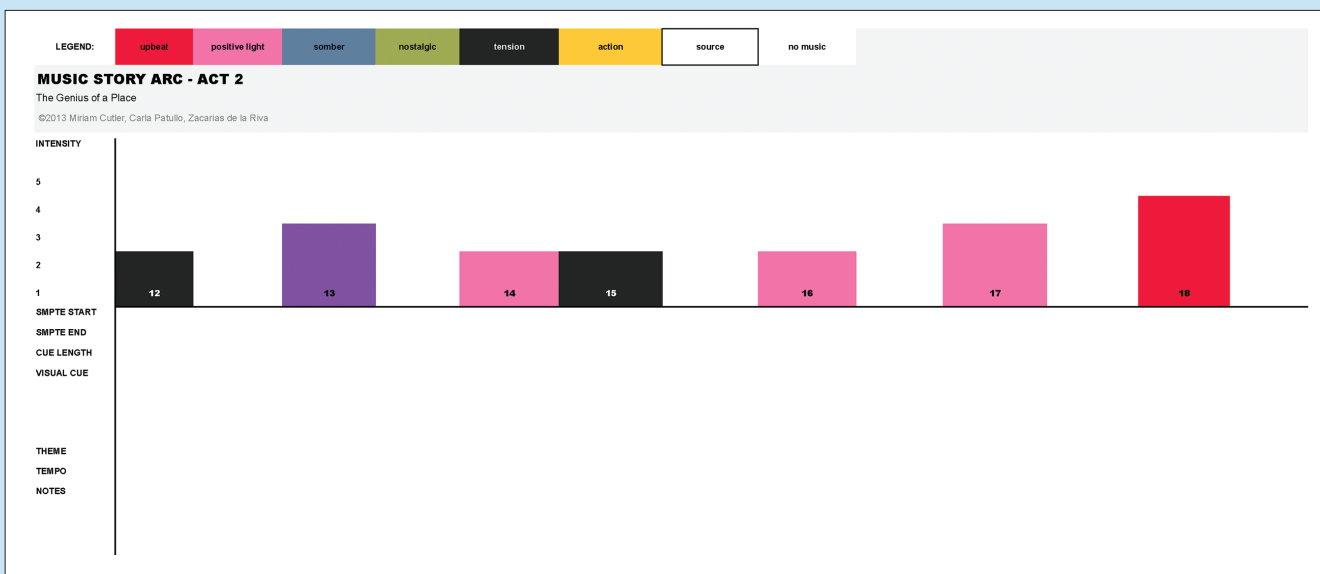
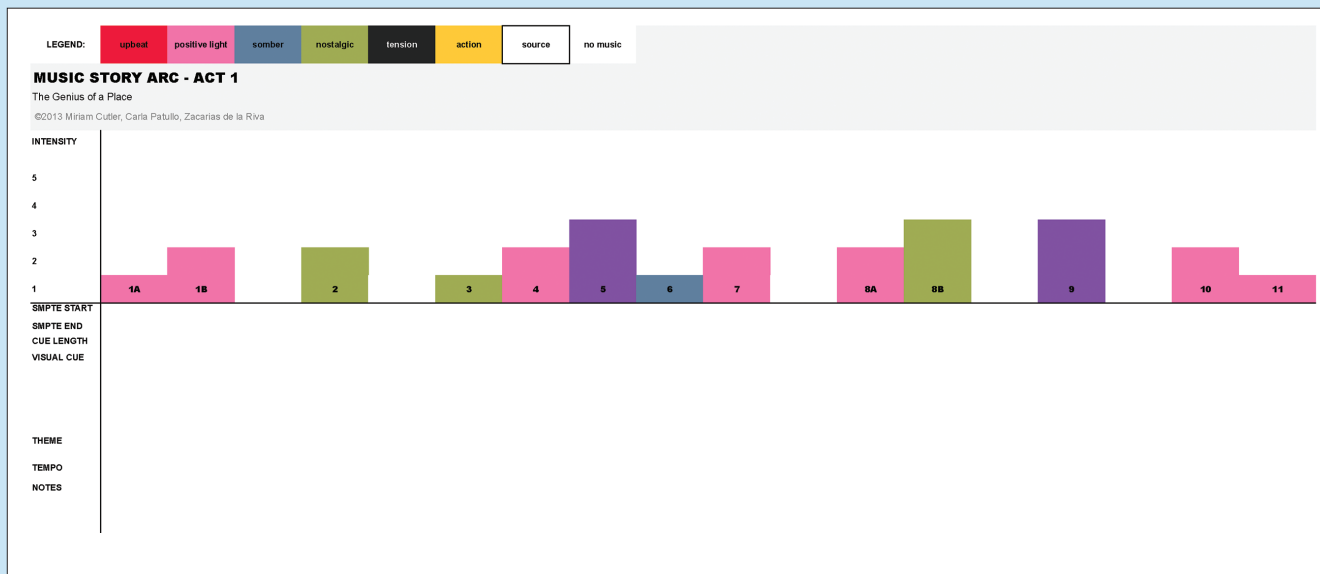
Once I've sketched out cues for the entire film, we'll use the document to give us a sense of how we've paced the music, how it relates to unfolding story, plus how the musical themes play out and fit together over the course of the film. It will also serve as a handy, orderly place to share notes for cues that need to be altered before we begin recording. It prints on 11 X 17 paper and there's room on it for written notes.

My hope is that thinking about the score as a well-integrated layer of the narrative will help filmmakers build a strong, clear foundation for a fruitful, and enjoyable collaboration with their composers, enhancing their use of music as another powerful filmmaking tool.

Special thanks to Carla Patullo and Zacarias de la Riva for their contributions to the Music Story Arc format.

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(after which, changes will be more difficult and expensive to make). I often make changes while the director is sitting next to me in my studio or even on Skype; that way we can reshape the score together. Even though you'll be incredibly busy with other aspects of post-production, it's well worth spending time with your composer. It's worth mentioning, though, that some composers prefer to wait until the film is more defined before getting involved, while others won't even start composing until picture has locked. The composer's work style is something you want to explore before hire someone.

The Film Comes First

What happens if you're working well with a composer but suddenly you find you hate some of the music? First of all, don't panic. Composers who work in film

and TV understand that not everything is going to be what you want (even if we think it's great!). Think of your editing process and how many times you make changes before you get it right. As a filmmaker, you should foster a safe environment to discuss these matters and work them out. This is the essence of creative collaboration; there is no absolute right or wrong. There may be a really effective compromise that will serve the film, a solution that evolves from this kind of creative tension. But in the end, there must be a singular vision for a successful film, and the filmmaker has the last say. To me, nothing is worse than a director hemming and hawing, trying to find a polite way to tell me he/she doesn't think a cue is working. Remember, you're dealing with professionals. We accept that sometimes our favorite cues get thrown out, so we're not too

attached to each musical idea. The film comes first.

All's Well That Ends Well

I've had experiences in which we've made it through the whole film, and there's still one cue that isn't cutting it. The music is due the next week and it feels like it'll never happen. But we just keep plugging away—and magically it comes together. The last time that happened, my director shed tears of joy. That made me cry. Isn't that why we all do this? **I**

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