

EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT FILM SCORING... BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK

OVER THE YEARS, MANY MOVIEMAKERS—even the most experienced—have admitted to me that they find the film scoring process to be one of the most intimidating and mysterious aspects of making movies. They fear that they will not be able to adequately express their ideas, which may lead to a loss of control over the film.

So how do you, the moviemaker, overcome this fear and get the best possible score? You do it by preparing thoroughly, by budgeting time and money realistically, choosing the right composer and developing a mutually satisfying working relationship. Doing these things will enable you to take the initiative and empower yourself from the get-go.

GETTING STARTED

THE SCORING PROCESS CAN begin as soon as you have a concept for your film. That's a good time to start listening to music with an ear to finding material that stimulates visuals in your mind. Imagine a scene and play different music to see how each selection makes you feel. The more you integrate music into your own creative process, the more you'll be able to hit the ground running once you begin the scoring process, saving time and money.

The next important step when formulating your overall budget is to carefully estimate how much money you'll need for your soundtrack. Do you envision a synthesized score or one with a number of live musicians? How big a sound do you want, and what style—orchestral, intimate, jazzy, rock, world beat? Would you like to work with

someone well-known or are you willing to take a chance on someone new? How big a part will music play in your film? Do you need to license any existing tunes?

You probably have some amount of money in mind, but make sure it's realistic. Do your research: Talk to composers, music supervisors and other moviemakers; find out the music budgets for films you like.

It's advantageous to engage a composer's services early on in the moviemaking process. Don't wait until you're done editing and then rush to find someone. Begin discussions with potential composers even before the film is shot. As long as you have a rough post-production schedule, you can take meetings with composers and try to get them excited about the prospect of working on your film. They might even be willing to work their schedule around yours.

FINDING THE RIGHT COMPOSER

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR in a composer? First, you want to choose someone you can relate to with ease. A composer is not a human jukebox, who can read your mind and magically churn out the perfect music without needing to eat or sleep. Personality, working style, background and experience are all part of what composers bring to the table. Even if you are drawn to someone's music, don't underestimate the importance of how you respond to one another as people. If there is a good rapport and a collaborative spirit—in addition to great composing chops—then you're more likely to have a productive creative experience.

Even though developing musical ideas and scoring a film is very hard work, it should be fun. Having realistic expectations, understanding limitations and always being respectful of the composer as an artist will contribute to getting the results you want. Maintain a mutual respect and the relationship will endure under pressure.

So how do you find this fabulous person? Start by checking the music credits in comparable films that you enjoy and respect. Ask other moviemakers whose work you appreciate for referrals. Call music supervisors or check out ads in established trade magazines. Be sure you distinguish between musical ability and actual film scoring talent and experience. Your producer's brother may be a great guitar player with a home studio and a day job (so he'll work cheap), but that doesn't mean



he has the aesthetic sensibility or technical know-how to compose and synchronize music to picture—let alone deliver on a fixed schedule and budget.

The film scoring process requires a person with many skills on top of the ability to compose music. You'll need someone who can organize, plan and budget for the overall project, communicate skillfully, prepare scores and charts meticulously, work well with musicians, handle union issues, produce and/or engineer the sessions, deal with changes and mix the score to the technical specifications of the post house all on time—all factors way beyond "Can he or she write great music?" (Though you may want to start with that question.)

After a certain composer has been recommended to you, or you've heard something the person has scored, request a sample audio reel (and video, if you'd like). Don't expect to hear the perfect music for your film on that reel, though, as it will reflect work that's already been done for

other moviemakers, not what can be written for you.

If the music seems off the mark but you can't get it out of your head, take a meeting with the composer anyway. Find out more about this person. It may be that he or she has created lots of other music, possibly closer to what you're looking to use in your own project. Don't

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underestimate the value of the creative connection that might spark between you. Just ask yourself: Does this music move me? Does it stay with me? Does it suggest any visuals?

THE FIRST MEETING

I RECOMMEND YOU TAKE the first meeting in the composer's studio or workspace, if possible. You'll get a better sense of who they are and how they work. Check out their studio gear. Does it look professional, well-maintained and up-to-date? Get a feel for how this person thinks. Do you like their ideas? If you have part of your film shot?

Bring it with you and see how the composer reacts to the images. Now's the time to discuss some of the musical ideas you've been exploring on your own. Play some of your ideas to illustrate what you like. Have

them play their own work from other films or examples from their CD collection and see if you get excited.

Emotion is the common language of artists. Unless you really know something about music, don't talk in musical terms. If you decide to work together, you'll develop your own vocabulary. What should the scene feel like? What should the audience experience? What will music bring to the storytelling? This kind of discussion can move the working relationship forward. If you want to know more before deciding who to hire, hold a second meeting with

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your potential composer in your editing bay. There, you can analyze scenes together and see how the composer relates to the material, your editor and other members of your team.

TALKING BUDGET

BEFORE YOU SIGN A CONTRACT, you'll need to talk budget. Hopefully, you've allocated a realistic amount based on your research. Then again, you may have only a very limited amount to work with, period. Let the composer know early on where you stand financially so that no time gets wasted on either end. Nowadays, most indie and doc budgets are "package" or "all-in" deals. This means the price paid includes whatever it takes for final music delivery. A savvy composer will outline what is possible for what you've offered. This can vary dramatically from composer to composer, based on status, experience, demand, resources and working style.

In general, the music package a composer provides usually includes spotting sessions (meetings with the moviemaker to decide where and how to use music), composition, review and approval meetings, music preparation, musicians, recording sessions (engineer, assistant engineer as needed), the music mix (additional gear) and finally delivery of a finished music master synchronized to picture. A composer who has his or her own studio is at an advantage, financially, but it still costs money to run the studio, so don't assume there is no studio expense.

I usually suggest various budget possibilities to moviemakers as we proceed into

the scoring process. We'll start with a basic budget, but as the score develops I may suggest that for a certain additional amount, we could add a particular performer or extra instruments. This sometimes inspires the moviemaker to raise more money. All things are possible; they just aren't free. Additional musicians, rewrites, changes after the recording sessions have occurred and picture changes after the final music mix all add up. Thus, delivering a great score on a limited budget requires lots of planning, as even the smallest detour can be expensive. Pick your priorities carefully

and listen to suggestions from your composer. The better your working relationship with the composer, the more services you're likely to receive within the parameters of the package deal. It's also a good idea to coordinate your composer's activities with your sound people early on. This can save time and money by making sure they are aware of how scenes are being treated and prioritized by sound and/or music.

There are specific kinds of composer agreements; which one you use will depend on the composer you choose. There are works for hire, synchronization licenses and master use licenses. I have developed my own agreement, and probably other composers have, too. But there are standard issues in all composer agreements. It is always a good idea to consult someone with experience before signing anything.

Don't wait until the last minute to hire someone. It's good to get your contracts in order as early as possible to ensure a composer's availability. Even if dates change, at least you've got the means to resolve the situation.

STARTING TO SCORE

OKAY, YOU'VE MADE your selection and have a composer on board. How and when do you start working together?

Some composers will not begin until you lock picture. Others may be willing to start earlier, when there is a full assembly. The earlier the composer starts working with the footage, the more work it is, as there will be many rewrites as the film takes shape. But starting to score early in the editing process

can lead to a very fruitful collaboration. The working style of the composer and your budgetary constraints may be a strong determinant of who you choose to score your film

Once there is footage, even before the film is complete, if there are sequences that are music-driven (such as montages or special scenes), the sooner you start cutting with music, the better. While I have worked with some editors who have an amazing internal rhythm and can cut without any music, most prefer to find a temporary composition that inspires editing and informs the scene. You can cut to any music you want, but you may want the editor to consider an original piece of music from your chosen composer. In my own experience, this is a fantastic way to work, if budget and schedule allow. The composer may simply come up with click tracks or basic rhythms, or write a piece based on discussions you've had. The director/editor lays it in and starts cutting, then returns it to the composer for conforming where it goes back and forth as the film takes shape. Rather than falling in unrequited love with temp music, the moviemaker can take advantage of the composer's talents.

SPOT ON

NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE in the editing process, the creative work with your composer really begins with a spotting session, when you watch footage together to decide where there will be music. During spotting, flesh out the role music will play in any given scene. Is it to reinforce something that's already obvious, or to bring out some aspect that may not be clear? Do transitions need to be punctuated with music? Should specific musical themes identify specific characters or situations? Or is it more effective if the music is ironic or humorous? Should the music be grandiose and brazen, or intimate and internal? A percussive beat can drive an otherwise slow scene, while a gentle violin passage can dramatize images by manipulating the sense of time. These are the kinds of issues to discuss as you wind your way through the film.

While spotting, consult your composer about your ideas for using additional music (songs, source music from a radio or TV, etc.) that must be licensed. If you don't have the connections or money to license a particular piece, you may want to consider either replacing it with a score or having the composer create a "sound alike." This

approach can often serve a scene in the same way, at a fraction of the cost. If you decide to license music, give yourself plenty of time to research who wrote it, who controls the copyright and publishing rights and who owns the master recording. Then, try to negotiate a good deal. Better yet, consult a music supervisor who has the connections and experience to expedite the process. I've seen moviemakers go crazy at the last minute because they don't have the rights they need in time to show their film at a prestigious festival or make a distribution deal. Once I've been hired to produce a score, I sometimes write a piece of music without picture and send it over to the editing room to get a reaction. Am I on the right track? During these early stages, it's important for moviemakers to stay on top of what the composer is doing so that valuable time isn't wasted on unnecessary tangents. Nowadays, with midi and digital audio and video, moviemakers can get a good sense of how the music is working with picture very early on, well before any recording sessions (after which changes will be more difficult and expensive to make). If midi instruments and loops are to be replaced by real players, the moviemaker must understand that what

they are hearing from the composer is only a rendering of the score. Be sure to have the composer explain his or her vision for what it will become with final instrumentation.

Meet with your composer and review the score regularly to be sure the music is developing in the right direction. If you spend time with your composer during these early stages of the music, even though you're incredibly busy with other aspects of post-production, it will save you time and money later. I often make changes while the director is sitting next to me; I really enjoy that close collaboration and shaping of the film's score.

CREATIVE TENSION—AND RELEASE

COMPOSERS WHO WORK in film and TV understand that not everything they write is going to be what you want. There are so many nuances and complex levels on which film music must perform that it's hard to be on the money with every single cue.

Your composer may not always agree with you about what's working and what's not, but as a pro, he or she will work to find a way to please you. In an environment of mutual respect, it's possible to discuss these sensitive matters without anyone being

insulted. Be completely honest about your opinions and remember: You have the last say. Nothing is worse for a composer than a director worrying about a polite way to say something isn't working. Out with it! In any collaboration, some of the best work can result from creative tension.

Don't lose confidence in your composer if it takes a while to nail a particular cue. It's all part of the collaborative process—discovering deeper levels, communicating about non-verbal, emotional and abstract things. Always bear in mind that the scoring process is not unlike the editing process; it takes time and vigilance to work the material into a form that is cohesive and expressive, while staying true to the story.

The most effective way to save time and money while getting the best score for your film is to be prepared and focused on the important things from the start. Avoid the pitfalls of trying to cut corners in the wrong places. If you do things right, you won't have to keep doing them over. **MM**

Miriam Cutler has scored numerous documentaries and feature films, including *Lost in La Mancha*, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS*, *Arlington Road* and *Bachelor Party*. She can be reached through her Website, www.miriamcutler.com.

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