



Photo by: Bobby Halvorson



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TO COMPOSE, OR NOT TO COMPOSE

CHOOSING THE RIGHT MUSIC, AND UNDERSTANDING THE COSTS

Unless you idolize the austerity of certain European auteurs—the Dardenne brothers; Michael Haneke; or Cristian Mungiu, to name three diegetic music-averse directors—you're probably going to want some kind of score for your movie. And no matter how you plan to enhance your film with music (by employing something completely original, licensing music and/or songs, sound design, or some combination of the three), your decisions should be founded in a thorough exploration of your aesthetic options, as well as an understanding of actualized costs, rights procurement, and other copyright headaches.

LISTENING TO MUSIC DURING DEVELOPMENT

Exploring musical possibilities can begin as soon as you have a concept for your film. The development stage is a perfect time to start listening to music with an ear toward finding material that stimulates visuals in your mind. When you have your script, read a scene while listening to different songs and compositions to see how each makes you feel. The more you integrate music into your own creative process, the more you'll be able

to hit the ground running when you're ready to begin scoring or licensing—saving both time and money.

LISTENING TO MUSIC IN EARLY POST-PRODUCTION

Once you have rough-cut footage, experimenting with various types of music will help you understand the effect each has on your scenes. Different selections can change the meaning of the scene they accompany (and sometimes, drastically). That song you've long envisioned complementing your love scene may turn out to be a weaker choice than you originally thought. And remember, just because you have permission through a friend of a friend to use that Robyn song, doesn't mean it's the best choice for your cinematic moment.

THE COMPOSER'S POINT OF VIEW

From this composer's point of view, an original score can give nuance to every frame, thus enhancing the filmmaker's intentions, and, consequently, deepening the audience's experience. I've observed that most filmmakers realize this as soon as they begin to re-imagine the film within the context of a cohesive score that responds to their story's arc. Using existing songs can imbue a scene with unintended connotations. That Taylor

Swift track can mean very different things to different audience members. Some people hate Taylor Swift, so those people will also innately hate the scene in which her song appears. Of course, you may choose a song by a less well-known artist whose work resonates with you (this will be more affordable), but the same rubric applies. Don't confuse your emotional associations with that of your audience. Keep in mind, too, that from a technical standpoint, a singing voice can often interfere with dialogue, requiring music edits that may or may not work aesthetically—and may not even be legally permitted.

WORKING WITH YOUR COMPOSER

Emotion is the common language of artists, and as you collaborate with your composer, you'll develop a vocabulary to discuss non-verbal concepts. What should the scene feel like? What should the audience experience? Does the score reinforce an action or theme that's already obvious, or does it elicit a brand new meaning? Does music need to punctuate transitions? Should specific musical themes identify specific characters or situations? Is it more effective if the music is ironic, drawing attention to the differences between the score and the action? Should the music be grandiose and brazen, or

intimate and internal? A percussive bed can drive an otherwise slow scene, while a gentle violin passage can dramatize images by manipulating the audience's sense of time. These are the kinds of questions you and your composer should discuss as you wend your way through the film.

LICENSING MUSIC

If licensing some—or all—of the music for your film turns out to be the most effective path, give yourself plenty of time to research the material. In addition to knowing the recording artist, you'll need to find out who wrote each song, who controls the copyright and publishing, and who owns the master recording before you can think about negotiating a good deal. And don't ever assume striking music licensing deals will happen quickly or smoothly. Acquiring rights can take months, and I've seen filmmakers go crazy at the last minute because they didn't get permission before their delivery deadlines. More than once I've gotten panicked, last-minute calls from filmmakers needing me to compose new music just days before a screening.

Unless you have a wealth of experience negotiating with music executives, it's best to work with a veteran, well-connected music supervisor. Licensing fees are often unpredictable, and can vary wildly depending on artist, record company, publisher, songwriter, and the stature of the bargaining agent. If a particular piece of music becomes problematic to license, a music supervisor can be very helpful in finding and securing a suitable alternative.

If you're working with a composer for some of the music, you can consult with her about your ideas for pre-existing music. If you don't have the connections or money to license a particular song or piece, you may want to consider either replacing that piece of music with score, or having the composer create a "sound-alike." Sound-alikes can often make the audience think they're hearing a familiar song. But only a knowledgeable and skilled composer can "recreate" a recognizable tune that's different enough to keep you from getting sued down the road. And in the short run, having your composer create legal "sound-alike" material while simultaneously writing your score can save even more time and money. Invariably, the most expensive part of any film is the problem you have to fix at the last minute.

BUDGETING FOR MUSIC

If you do your homework by exploring musical possibilities early on in development you'll be able to more realistically estimate your music budget. Do you envision a synth score, or one with a number of live musicians? How big of a sound do you want, and what style will it be? Orchestral? Intimate? Jazzy and improvisational? Hard and rocking? Would you like to work with someone well known, or are you willing to take a chance on someone new? How central a role will music play in your film? Do you need to license any existing tunes? If so, how many?

You probably have some amount of money in mind, but only a composer or music supervisor can make sure your budget is realistic. So, do your research. Talk to composers, music supervisors, and other filmmakers, and find out the music budgets for both the films you admire, as well as the films similar in scope to yours. Again, don't wait until you're done editing to find your composer or supervisor. Begin discussions during pre-production. As long as you have the necessary funds allocated, and rough post-production schedule mapped out, you can take meetings before production even commences. Speaking from personal

experience, if you're a good enough salesman, composers might even be willing to work their schedule around yours.

To recap, the most effective way to save time and money is to prepare both a business and a creative plan for your music needs. If you seek out professional advice, allot reasonable funds for composition and licensing, and keep your vision flexible, you'll avoid most of the impediments that derail inexperienced moviemakers. Always remember, just because you can't afford John Williams or Rihanna, doesn't mean you can't get great music. **MM**

Emmy-nominated composer Miriam Cutler recently completed the score for Ethel (HBO), Rory Kennedy's documentary about her parents, Ethel and Bobby Kennedy. Other career highlights include: Oscar-nominated Poster Girl (HBO); "One Lucky Elephant" (OWN) which she co-produced and scored; Emmy-winner Ghosts of Abu Ghraib (HBO); Emmy nominated "Thin" (HBO); and many more. Visit her at www.miriamcutler.com to learn more about her work, as well as how to get a hold of her.



Photo by: Jon Betz

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