

# Beyond the Music: A Film Composer's Challenges

## **Nerida Tyson-Chew**

has scored feature films, telemovies, TV series, documentaries, internet sites, CD-ROM multipath movies, as well as working on soundtracks for theme parks and albums. She holds a Master of Music Degree in Scoring for Films. Her most recent score is the feature *Visitors*, to be released in 2003.

Being a film composer involves so much more than being able to write music, perform, orchestrate or conduct. Actually, from my experience, writing and producing the music is the easy part.

Every composer develops their own individual technique and language, their own means of artistic expression through music. For some it may come easily, for others there may be an element of angst involved. Some composers thrive on inspired improvisational techniques, others prefer to work within a well-planned organisation in which they have defined a set of rules for orchestration, harmony, and tonality. All composers have a methodology of internal logic when creating their compositions. However, when composing music for films, there are many external demands, other considerations involved, and a lot of accompanying stress, depending on how one copes with those demands.

It is interesting to me that when people think about the process of scoring movies, it is easy to be unaware of the other layers of sound production. A film's soundtrack is the blending of dialogue, music, sound effects and atmosphere. These combined elements have the power to take an audience on an emotional journey – one that allows them to become fully engaged, and at the same

time totally lost in the world on screen. Whether or not an audience remains detached, observing the events portrayed on screen, or becomes so absorbed in a film's reality that they become unaware of outside senses, can be determined by the film's soundtrack. The power of a soundtrack can also psychologically and emotionally manipulate an audience. Have you ever been in a cinema and the person behind you involuntarily screamed? Have you ever had a lump in your throat, maybe a little weep – during a fictional story about people who don't really exist?

It is essential that a composer is aware of the other elements of sound when writing a score – or the music may be altered, played too quietly, or may even be removed from the scene. Composing film music requires working with external demands in a 'composer for hire' mentality and capacity.

For film composers, the challenge is to create artistically satisfying compositions within the parameters placed upon them from the relentless external demands of scoring a movie. Being a 'composer for hire' essentially means composing music to the specific requirements requested, remaining flexible to change, and coping with the unexpected.

## **Composing music to a budget**

Under a 'package deal' contract, all expenses for the production of the music soundtrack are to be met by the composer under a blanket fee. If 50 minutes of music cannot be recorded by a live orchestra due to a low budget, it does not mean that the score is unimportant nor worthless. Nor does it mean that the composer should forfeit a creative fee and record with a

symphony. It is important to balance the realities of the expense of recording a soundtrack with one's artistic integrity. Sometimes the choice needs to be made that the score is for three soloists and chamber strings, or is perhaps primarily electronic. I find that I make unpredictable choices, and enjoy that aspect of my career.

## **Composing music within a schedule**

Film productions often run late, technical disasters can occur, directors often change their minds as to what they require, but the deadline for music delivery rarely floats. A film composer has to have the self-discipline to be a step ahead, especially when working within a compressed schedule. It is important to think backwards from the delivery date and schedule carefully the time required to accomplish the various stages of music production. Sometimes it is very easy to get caught up with the daily dramas and responsibilities of the film, and a composer must be careful not to overlook the pace needed. It is very professional to anticipate and recognise when help is required – do not leave that decision to the last minute.

## **Composing music to a director's brief**

Film scoring involves coping with the personalities of multiple directors, and the multiple personalities of a single director! A film composer rarely has the opportunity to compose only what they are inspired to do in a scene. There is always a brief from the director, often coloured by their phobia of music, and their fears and disappointments in the outcome of the

film so far. Developing dramatic instinct in one's musical palette is one part of film scoring, the other part of the equation is learning as quickly as possible how to interpret the words and intentions of another person, probably a stranger, to create the right music.

When meeting with directors, a composer does not need to be told that the main character gets into his car and drives off. One needs to be told that he despondently does so, or angrily does so, or he feels he is being stalked as he does so, or he is joyous. The music will state the unsaid and the unseen. It is the composer's responsibility to not assume the intentions of tone in the scene, as the scene may need to be scored again if the tone is not right. The only way to compose for the scene once, is to ask lots of questions and to understand very clearly what is being asked of the music.

In my opinion, comprehending a director's intent is the most important task of being a film composer. There may be occasions when a film composer is asked to write from a point of view that truly does not make sense to the composer. In film, there are so many different ways to approach a scene in order to find the right musical tone. It is important to listen closely to the director's manner of communication.

On a telemovie I scored about six years ago, the director stated he wanted the music to be "spacey". It took about half an hour for me to understand what he meant. Did he mean science fiction – point of reference: the music of *Star Wars*, or *Star Trek* or *2001*? Did he mean "spacey" as in 'airhead loopy, out-there, and psychological'? Did he mean "spacey" as in 'filled with voids and silence'? It took me a while, but I discovered what he meant when he said "No. Spacey. Like *Out of Africa* spacey". What he meant was 'spacious equals expansive, broad sweeping, soaring'. The scene was a drug bust.

On another production, a director described a scene as "over-the-top, B-Grade spoof". Off I went having fun scoring in an overwritten tongue-in-cheek manner, only to be faced at my music previews meeting with a shocked, panicking director. He had meant that he was disappointed with the actors' performances, and that they appeared B-Grade and melodramatic and that he wanted me to 'fix it with music'. That was easy to do, but if I had challenged him with

the simple question "Is that a good thing?" after everything he said at the initial briefing meeting, I would have been able to understand his intention clearer.

It is really important to question intentions before you start composing and do not assume that the person briefing you has an internal thesaurus.

## **Composing music which pleases a team of people**

Every person has an opinion on the effect of music in a scene. One needs to be aware that the editor has been working with these images for several months and the film director relies very strongly on his opinion. However, an editor may have cut the picture to music and therefore may only 'hear' the tone in that specific way. Film composers have to establish the director's trust and be able to influence him or her on taking the film to another level – a tailor-made, especially created, original cinematic score. It is fighting a losing battle to compose new material with a budget for 10 musicians if the film was temp-tracked with John Williams' latest block buster score for 100-piece orchestra and 60 voice choir. Request a Wagnerian budget or educate your client on what they can have for their budget. Remember that directors are often insecure and rely on the opinions of their producers, entourage, and even the lady at the bus stop if they ask for her opinion, so a film composer needs to be able to make adjustments on request despite the original brief. If there is a request for a rewrite, it is not always that the music does not highlight moments in the scene – it could be that the director has a new idea of what he or she wants the scene to say emotionally. Even at the scoring session with an orchestra of 80 people, recording a piece that has already been previewed and approved, a director and his / her producers and executive producers may request changes. In times of conflict, always look to the director as the person you report to on a feature film production, as the film is their vision. On a television production, it is the producer one should focus on pleasing as there may be several directors working on the production, and the producer, probably the person who gave the creative brief, has the perspective of the tone of the overall series. A composer has to be able to cope with unexpected spontaneous

behaviour and make the modifications necessary, or the piece of music may never appear in the film.

I once scored a feature film for four producers and two executive producers, who all had different opinions, after the director was fired. I have also re-scored a new version of a film on three occasions because of distributor requests for changes. Even though there was editing of the original score to match the new cut, plus new scenes scored, it truly is like scoring two different films.

## **Composing music which is 'playable'**

Film music needs to be physically uncomplicated for ease of performance as, often due to budget and time constraints, recording needs to commence after only two reads. For music to come to life and express immediately the emotionally dramatic intentions of a scene, thought must be put into careful orchestration, an awareness of the physicality involved, and the changes of colour as a result of the use of keys. Time in the studio with the musicians should ideally be spent perfecting interpretation and refining, in performance, how the music works to picture, rather than solving difficult passages which may require a lot of rehearsing. This is the art in the craft. If the orchestra does not sound wonderful, it is more than likely the music is awkward, and written with poor technique. It is very stressful under recording conditions, with the pressure of the films 'suits', and time racing by, to not accomplish clarity in the intention of the music effortlessly.

## **Composing music in clear notation**

Choices need to be made, within the context of the piece, using common sense simplification for the sight-reading musicians and the conductor. Should the time signature be in a straight 4/4 with accents all over the place? Or, should there be meter changes so that strong accents occur on downbeats? The tempo will have an influence on this decision. Should the music be notated in semiquavers or in double time as quavers?

This decision would be determined by the timing required to catch visual action. Thought needs to be put into where the pulse is. Nomenclature is also important. I work the Hollywood way – no key signatures, and

enharmonically with the least accidentals possible. This ensures few questions, and speed in correction. Mark on the score indications for the musicians to colour their performance. Use English if Italian terms are unknown.

## **Composing music which catches visual demands**

A music score is the emotional landscape for the story. It is essentially the film's soul, and is the ultimate example of psychological manipulation through sound. By following the visual action, a fight scene can appear more aggressive with music assisting the physical blows, or the score could make the exact same scene be one of immense sadness. A film score can make an audience feel fear, and can ensure that an audience is brought to tears – music can push emotion just that little bit further.

Film scoring requires hundreds of minute decisions for synchronisation. Both in tempo and rhythm, music needs to be entwined with the images. Sometimes when composing, music has a life of its own. It may want to take longer to make its statement or it may wander off into an exciting place musically. A film composer often needs to control inspiration and make the music work within the restraints of the images. This is the craft of the art. It is so easy to start writing music which makes sense musically, but has lost its way in serving the film.

A film composer also needs to remain open and flexible to modifying music which has already been written and approved. It has not been unheard of that even after recording the musicians, edits and changes to the music may need to be made because of revised picture changes which have altered the timings of phrases and 'hits'. Sections of the composition may need to be shifted because computer-generated images are now in place and are running at a different time, or perhaps a substituted performance may have been made, because audience testing indicated a negative response to one of the actors.

## **Composing under dialogue**

If an audience can not discern what the actors are saying, the thrust of the story can be lost, and an audience may lose any affinity established with a character. It doesn't matter how

gorgeous the phrases are, how emotional or beautiful the harmony, or how skilled the counterpoint for a modulation is, if the dialogue loses its clarity by being swamped by the music one of two things will happen to the score. The sound mixer will pull the volume down and 'ride' the volume around the dialogue – and audible fader moves will happen, contrary to the music's natural build, or the piece will be dropped. Obviously, it would be better for a composer to maintain the control through careful orchestration, with guidance for the musicians' interpretation, and with the assistance of the scoring mixer, let the music support the dialogue. Keep control of what happens to your music by keeping in mind the collaborative art of film. It is essential that the music be shaped around the rhythms of the on-screen performances, that the musical ebb and flow does not occur at the same time as the dialogue's ebb and flow. Beware of percussive rhythmic lines clamouring on the words – especially 'piano figures' – shape them in the gaps between the words. Even the choice of instrumentation needs to sit with the actor's voice so that the music does not draw attention to itself. If the music feels too emotional there is the fear of turning a scene into melodrama – something to keep in mind, especially when scoring real-life documentaries.

## **Composing with an awareness of sound effects**

All layers of sound are a form of story-telling. The sound effects recordist, designer and sound effects editor are responsible not only for realistic sounds but also for the sounds which add heightened drama. There are so many other things that can be communicated through sound that are not visually directed. The sound effects team may need to be told that it is a dangerous part of town, that there is a chill in the air.

For example, there may be a scene in an office where two people are arguing. There are the obvious location sounds, which need to be recorded, and cut to picture – the hand thumping on the desk, pens and paper being swept off – foley sounds. But in this office scene there may be other stress-inducing atmospheres which do not occur on camera and are not part of the on-screen story but are a part of a back-story – a type of aural framing and context placement. There

may be an unseen rumble from the subway below (indicating a low-rental office space), a car accident outside the window, and perhaps dogs barking, people yelling at each other. These sounds may not necessarily be discerned but are layered to create a texture of tension. When scoring a scene it is important to be informed of these other sounds which do not appear on screen and will not be on the composer's work tape.

It is a terribly disheartening experience to be unaware of the other members of the soundtrack's efforts, and for everyone's work to be in competition with each other. If care is not taken, music will be meddled with at the final sound mix.

I had a difficult moment on one of my movies several years ago when the sound effects had placed windchimes in a scene that was scored. I too had wind chimes in the score, but as a musical orchestration choice. There were no windchimes physically hanging on the verandah so I was stunned when all this tinkling in a perspective of reality was occurring. I had used marktree carefully to add a bit of magic in an emotional build. The sound effects were dropped after much debate in the mixing room.

## **Summary**

In summary, there are many external demands placed on a film composer's art. Film is a collaborative art. Film scoring – is it an arty craft or a crafty art? I think it is both. ■