

This article was first published in *Sounds Australian*,  
the journal of the Australian Music Centre,  
no. 61 (2003): 'Australian Screen Music'

# Educating the Screen Composer in Australia

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Film music by itself is like the hand of a Javanese dancer. In its isolation, it can be a thing of exquisite beauty. But its greater expression happens in non-isolation. In fact, it occurs when it is no longer a hand.

When integrated in movement with all the other elements of the dancer's body- the feet, the arms, the torso, the mouth and the eyes – the hand becomes something else. It becomes part of the whole that has far greater capacity for expression than any of its single parts.

The whole body has the capacity to move the audience profoundly and transform the audience. The same is true of the relationship between film music and the film itself as a whole.

Alec Morgan, filmmaker

Music departments around the country are gradually adapting to the demands of increasing musical pluralism, to meet the needs of students who seek broader training options for their career aspirations. The impact of digital technologies on music making has been dramatic over ten years. A shift away from traditional studio-based practices in the fine arts, to electronic and temporal arts, is also a shift that involves music, as the linking of sound

and image becomes more prominent in performance. So, where does screen (moving image) composition fit into our tertiary music education? This is the subject of my enquiry.

The interest in and commitment to new technologies is challenging the very core of undergraduate and postgraduate music education. A shift to technology-based careers is on. As shown in destination surveys, more graduates are gravitating to multimedia work. And there is a growing interest in screen composition. The now broad acceptance and implementation of music technology as part of the undergraduate curriculum is facilitating these career paths. However, the study of screen composition is still in the shadows. It ought to be better served in a country that has a stake in international screen industries. While there is some interest in educating the screen composer, opportunities are limited. We have nothing as comprehensive as the Scoring for Motion Pictures and Television course at UCLA or Screen Music at England's national Film and Television School. Why is the study of screen music so neglected in a country recognised internationally for unique films, prolific directors and big audiences hungry for cinema? Why do the screen composers receive the least mention in film and TV industry hoopla? Is it to do with ingrained attitudes?

Producers and directors in Australia have tended to undervalue the composer as filmmaker: firstly because the composer is introduced very late in the complex collaborative process of screen production; secondly because there has been a low priority given to the education of the filmmaker about screen music. The composer is, therefore, always at risk of being misunderstood and devalued where there is no shared language. From personal experience, when you find a producer or director who has some

knowledge of screen music, you try to build a career-long partnership, building on the common ground and rapport achieved in the first collaboration. It might sound obsequious, but one of the screen composer's first questions is to ask a producer or director about their pet hates in music. This encourages the sort of discussion that reveals a lot about one's collaborators, and noticeably about how often they show limited knowledge of how a composer works. The problem is bluntly presented in the words of prolific screen composer Michael Kamen (*Brazil*, et al.) and resonates with the experience of many Australian composers:

Part art, part artifice, a great movie score can give a picture an operatic, larger-than-life quality that elevates both the senses and the emotions, while working primarily on the level of the subconscious. The relatively anonymous film composers are some of the best – and the longest-suffering – talents in the music business, subject to the vagaries of whimsical producers, ham-fisted editors and tone-deaf directors. "It's a brutal business", says [Michael] Kamen, 45. "They don't care about your musical ambitions, or even if the oboe is in tune. They care whether the music is delivered on time and on budget".

Richard Walsh

Too many producers and directors still want the commodity and not the intelligence of the composer. Many are suspicious about the composer's capacity to create the 'invisible character' in moving images and powerfully manipulate emotion and meaning. Is this why Australian composers are rarely blessed with decent budgets and are compelled to take on multiple tasks that, in the USA, for example, are handled by a

team of specialists – composer, orchestrator, conductor, music editor, music co-ordinator, music programmer, music contractor, studio / soundstage musicians, music supervisor and music engineer?

However, negativity and suspicion are not only the province of filmmakers. I have seen concert reviews that use the term ‘film music’ pejoratively. I recall the rhythmic vitality and colour of an oboe concerto being described by the reviewer as film music because of its resonances of popular music. Ironically the composer under question is actually one of our prolific symphonists and also a successful screen composer. I suspect there is still a view prevalent in some traditional academic composition circles that the screen composer is someone who is unable to compose a major work. This is not only arrant nonsense but betrays a lack of understanding of the role and function of screen music.

In my view, screen composition is an artform that demands a better deal, and the establishment of high level tertiary training is the direction to take. Let’s engage in strategic curriculum development and implementation that allows us to train both the composer and filmmaker, whenever possible under the same roof. In the following discussion I provide a brief survey of educational opportunities for the screen composer, and follow with suggestions for further developments.

## **Who educates the screen composer?**

The obvious answer is that most Australian screen composers are self-educated / ing. They are self-taught, multi-skilled artists, who are deeply committed to the vicissitudes of synchronising music to moving images. Typically, they commence their careers in popular music genres as singer / songwriters, guitar or keyboard players and synthesiser programmers. Collectively they are the first to explore leading edge technology and invest in the same. Their experiences as touring musicians and recording artists equip them with excellent communication and business skills, as well as priceless industry knowledge and networks. These self-taught composers are life-long learners who pursue personal study and undertake research projects to support their work. For example, several screen composers have become

excellent self-taught orchestrators, born of necessity as they move up the film ‘food chain’ into budgets that allow larger ensembles. Some have developed conducting skills in order to ensure the synchronisation of music and image on the sound stage. The screen composer is someone who composes for fiction, documentary, animation and the commercial, someone who is passionate about images, about theatre and dance, and is intensely curious about languages, rhythms and timbres from around the globe.

In writing the above, I realise that I am likely describing many stalwarts of the Australian Guild of Screen Composers, an organisation that has done much over ten years to ameliorate the status and profile of the screen composer. Guild members are actively involved in teaching and mentoring at a handful of institutions. This is providing momentum for the development of screen composition in tertiary music curricula.

Looking at the *Sounds Australian* issue on Australian tertiary music education (Number 60, 2002), it was not surprising that screen music was hardly mentioned at all. However, it was encouraging to see the growth of courses and subjects focusing on music technology and crossovers into new media, all of which provide a platform for screen composition. In October 2002, I undertook a quick survey of our tertiary providers, including the Australian Film Television and Radio School. The following is a summary of programs of study ranging from a single module to a graduate diploma in screen composition.

### **Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) (North Ryde, NSW)**

Following a few years of negotiation with AFTRS, a composer-in-residence scheme was established by the Australian Guild of Screen Composers. This then became the catalyst for the current specialist course, a Graduate Diploma in Screen Composition. The Australian Performing Right Association (APRA) also lent its support, as did a number of screen composers, in particular Edward Primrose, Jan Preston, Art Phillips, John Charles and Martin Armiger. Introducing music to the AFTRS curriculum was a major undertaking, one that required convincing all the various heads of

department of its value. It seems unbelievable that as recently as 1995 our national training institution was still operating without any music faculty.

Today, the diploma course is co-ordinated and taught by Martin Armiger. (Martin is a former President of the AGSC. His career is the subject of an article by Michael Hannan and Jude Magee, in *Screen Sounds*, edited by Rebecca Coyle). The course is described on the AFTRS website as being “unique in the world ... offering hands on training by creating music scores for AFTRS productions”. (<[http://www.aftrs.edu.au/courses/fulltime/grad\\_cert\\_scrcomp.html](http://www.aftrs.edu.au/courses/fulltime/grad_cert_scrcomp.html)>). The diploma covers several forms of screen composition through a suite of units that include “classical film music culture through to the most contemporary approaches in film music influenced by ‘popular culture’”. Conceptual studies, recent Australian filmmaking, criticism and collaborative processes are covered, as well as instrumentation and arranging, music dramaturgy, studio recording and mixing.

Flexible learning is part of the program, in which a student can negotiate a learning contract for working in collaboration with drama and documentary filmmakers in the School. The work is intensive and the numbers small. Only 3 to 4 students are enrolled each year. They are selected on merit, and judged on criteria such as composing ability, communication skills, relevant experience, professional attitude and commitment to working in the screen industry.

### **Central Queensland University, Faculty of Education & Creative Arts, Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music (CQCM) (Mackay, QLD)**

CQCM offers screen music opportunities within its Bachelor of Music / Performing Arts degree. The intensively taught elective Music and Moving Image provides students with the opportunity to participate in the scoring and performance of music to a silent movie. Art Phillips, President of the AGSC, is the principal lecturer and music director of the performances. CQCM’s Mackay campus has the facilities to support such projects: it has a full working studio, theatre spaces, computer resources and musical instruments. It has strong

links with industry practitioners and is one of the AGSC Awards sponsors.

**Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Faculty of Creative Industries (Kelvin Grove, QLD)**

QUT has specialist offerings in its undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The Bachelor of Music offers Production Studies 1-4, Music Project 1 and 2, and electives such as Composing for Film and TV or Music and Sound for Multimedia. The Master of Music includes Composing for Moving Pictures, and Music and Sound for Digital Media. Both courses are attracting healthy numbers of students. This is clearly a consequence of QUT's staffing profile: it has specialist staff in Andy Arthurs, Richard Vella and Ross McLennan, all acclaimed screen composers. Other staff include specialists in music for computer games and multimedia. Such a staffing profile with an emphasis on interdisciplinary music activity with film, TV, multimedia, dance and theatre makes this course an attractive option for the screen composer.

**James Cook University, Faculty of Law, Business and the Creative Arts, College of Music, Visual Arts & Theatre (Townsville, QLD)**

JCU provides a one-semester module called Creating the Music, offered to 3<sup>rd</sup> year Bachelor of Music students. The primary objective is to provide students with a working knowledge of the process and aesthetics of film music composition, skills-based training.

A student is engaged in an analysis of repertoire and applies this knowledge to two specific tasks: a composition of scores (orchestral, ensemble etc., depending on context) for a variety of pre-existing short films and the composition and preparation of music and foley for a range of QuickTime movies (30 seconds' to circa 5 minutes' duration). This is done via various software packages that assist the creation and synchronisation of soundtracks. Two academic staff and casuals cover the teaching of between ten and fifteen students per year.

Facilities include the Department's recording studio, portable audio recording facilities and a computer lab configured with appropriate software.

The Music Department is considering collaborating with JCU's Bachelor of Communication Design, which intends expanding its film and multimedia studies from 2003.

**Macquarie University, Division of Humanities, Department of Contemporary Music (North Ryde, NSW)**

While the Department of Contemporary Music offers no specific compositional training, Rebecca Coyle convenes and teaches the unit Screen Soundtracks, an analysis of music, sound design and dialogue in film. Currently, the unit attracts about 35 music majors. It offers an important critical-analytical focus of the music dimension. Coyle's book, *Screen Scores*, published by AFTRS in 1998, is an excellent addition to the literature.

**Southern Cross University, Centre for Contemporary Music (Lismore, NSW)**

The Bachelor of Contemporary Music (composition specialisation with 35-40 students enrolled) has a specific component of screen composition technique. Second year students study the development of a theme in different styles and moods in preparation for a more concentrated study of scoring in first semester third year.

The strand takes the form of learning practical skills in synchronisation of MIDI sequencing to video and then scoring a 5-minute film. At the same time there is a series of lectures on film scoring, film sound theory and an analysis assignment of the soundtrack of a feature film. Other relevant skills covered in the composition specialisation include Arranging, Orchestration, Electronic orchestration and an Audio-engineering elective for composition majors. The program is staffed by Peter Martin, screen composer and advertising music composer; Fred Cole, composition technology expert and documentary composer; and Michael Hannan, who publishes on film music and has some screen composing credits.

The facilities available include a well-equipped composition technology studio and a suite of recording studios. There is also a television studio with television lighting, analogue recording and editing

facilities for three-camera shoots, plus digital cameras and digital editing suites.

The School regularly invites industry professionals to present seminars and workshops. It also encourages screen composition as a postgraduate research field, and a number of its graduates are active screen composers.

**University of Newcastle, School of Music and Drama, The Conservatorium (Newcastle, NSW)**

Newcastle offers an undergraduate unit entitled Film Music: Soundtrack Creation, as well as units in music technology and scoring. Areas covered include the compositional and technical aspects, aesthetics, and psychology of composing music for film, video and other visual media. The major focus is on film music. However, the principles and techniques of film scoring transfer to other collaborative art forms using music. Essentially the primary emphasis is on the creation of a musical soundtrack with secondary study areas, including the basics of filmmaking and associated technical matters.

**University of Western Sydney, College of Arts, Education and Social Sciences, School of Contemporary Arts, Music (Penrith, NSW)**

Music technology is emphasised in both the Bachelor of Music and the Bachelor of Electronic Arts programs. Students can work in a variety of combinations, for example, music technology / composition or music technology and performance. The Bachelor of Electronic Arts emerged from links between the music technology units and digital media units in the Bachelor of Fine Arts. The Bachelor of Electronic Arts is a cross-disciplinary degree for technologists working across time-based arts such as sound, video, graphics, animation, installation and performance art. The School of Contemporary Arts has substantial high-level facilities such as live and anechoic studios, MIDI and multimedia laboratories, editing and mixdown suites (5.1, 7.1 and 9.1). Units such as Sonic Landscapes, Electric Sound and Pictures and Spatial Audio emphasise the screen medium. There is a well-established module in film composition in the composition major. Michael Atherton,

Julian Knowles and Andrée Greenwell, as well as industry professionals, including Edward Primrose, have taught this. The music technology and electronic arts strands are looking at future synergies with animation and film production, as offered by the School of Communication, Design and Media. Contemporary Arts also has a well-established acting course, which will be a bonus for the development of film-making. Graduates who majored in composition and music technology are emerging as screen composers. For example, Amanda Brown, who also completed the inaugural AFTRS Diploma in Screen Composition, and John Green are both UWS music graduates.

### **University of Melbourne, Victorian College of the Arts, School of Music (Melbourne, VIC)**

The Victorian College of the Arts offers a screen subject to twelve students in its practical composition stream: Cross Media Composing for Film, TV and Radio. This provides a hands-on introduction to collaboration, working with a script, creating sound and locking in exact time points. It culminates in a student having to produce a completed score for a short film / animation.

### **Others**

The survey shows that other institutions are considering the introduction of courses for screen composition. The Queensland Conservatorium reports that it does not have a course yet but acknowledges increasing interest in the field, indicating that music and soundtrack subjects will likely be offered in conjunction with the film school at Griffith University.

Melba Memorial Conservatorium has recently begun new degree programs in contemporary music performance / composition and music technology / composition. This is in affiliation with Victoria University. There is an interest in the future development of screen composition.

Edith Cowan University and the University of Tasmania report no specific courses as yet but are exploring options for the future.

### **Where to from here?**

The development of music technology within tertiary music courses has provided a positive

platform for screen music, so too the readiness to attract professional screen composers as teachers and mentors.

Both indicate a readiness to support screen composition as a career path. Institutions recognise the need to focus on the skilled composer / sound designer and graduate.

Most of the training focuses on the creation and production of the music soundtrack itself. However, there is only limited exposure to discourses on film music aesthetics, music psychology and critical perspectives. Issues of professional practice, such as communicating with producers and directors, are only touched on. Collaborative contact between the composer and filmmaker is minimal, except at AFTRS, where one would expect maximum opportunity.

A national perspective is desirable, to look at developing cross-institutional course initiatives as well as shared musical projects with the screen music industry. It seems that a balance between a pedagogy that emphasises a one-to-one approach and group project-based learning, with the emphasis on mentoring and individualised coaching, is the ideal pathway.

Ideally, specialist courses or trajectories though combinations of study already available at some institutions should lead to a more comprehensive theoretical, practical and experiential learning in all aspects of screen composition. These broad areas must be included:

- Screen music aesthetics and historical perspectives;
- Psychological and emotional effect of a music score in dramatic contexts;
- ‘Spotting’ a film for music cues;
- Theoretical and practical exercises in screen composition;
- Acoustic and electronic orchestration;
- Conducting and communicating;
- MIDI;
- Digital controllers and audio processors;
- Navigating the recording studio;
- Business—budgets, legal issues and administration.
- Internship under a screen composer, music editor or production facility.

Project-based training should enable a student to be part of a larger group

of filmmakers, in order to understand and appreciate the collaborative process. Getting students involved in all stages of production is paramount. And learning environments that encourage music composition for film and cinema, video and television, computer screen and virtual environments are the ideal, as are facilities that enable the recording of performing musicians as well as electronically generated scores or combinations of both.

The screen composer must be familiar with the history and aesthetics of screen composition, and should also appreciate the almost cinematic scope and detail of Wagner’s operas, as well as the collaborations of Stravinsky or Cage. A screen composer should be able to develop a ‘sonic landscape’ for a laptop performance as well as compose for performing musicians. Then there is also the need to have a broad appreciation of popular culture.

The student composer should prepare case studies of local and overseas composers, for example Nigel Westlake, Laurie Anderson, Nerida Tyson-Chew, Ennio Morricone, Christopher Gordon, Rachel Portman, David Hirschfelder, Philip Brophy, Felicity Fox and James Horner, to name a few. A critical study of the contiguity of music and sound in major works such as *Romper Stomper* (John Clifford White) and *Bladerunner* (Vangelis) are indispensable.

Spotting and analysis of screen icons is invaluable – for example, *The Sea Hawk*, *Psycho* and *Star Wars*. Spotting TV series such as *Twin Peaks*, *Brides of Christ*, *Sea Change* and a raft of documentaries is a desirable habit, rather akin to ethnomusicological transcription, to bring the student close to what is going on.

We need to establish programs of sponsorship and collaboration with producers and directors, as part of a two-way educational strategy. The AGSC has done a great job, but it needs the backing of institutions to develop its contact with students through seminars, mentoring and work experience programs. Screen music study might also be assisted by staff-student exchanges between our tertiary providers. And let us encourage more postgraduate research and writing in the field.

A national view of the performance and recording of music for the screen would identify special ensembles and

musicians with specific expertise. I have long felt that the collection of Australian orchestras should be designated in particular ways. For example, the Tasmanian Symphony might also become our national film music orchestra. Of course, it needs a soundstage – one of the biggest deficits in the Australian film industry. More cross-institutional initiatives and networking might add to the cause to develop at least one decent soundstage. This might also be the impetus for recognising a national standard for facilities and teaching environments.

The challenge ahead will be to engage all our tertiary music providers in a discussion aimed at developing the study of screen composition to the extent that it deserves. The signs are there that a national summit involving universities, the AGSC, APRA and filmmakers might be achievable.

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