11 Composing for the Screen

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In this chapter I will talk about some of the ways that a film composer works and think through the issues we need to consider when bringing a story to life through music. I will begin by outlining the main stages in the compositional process of a screen composer, before thinking in more detail about techniques of characterisation and world-building. I will finish by outlining some of the practical skills needed to work in film, focusing particularly on how to develop a successful collaboration with the director.

Understanding the Process

Writing music for a film or television always begins with a story. I tend to start the writing process by reading a script or original novel to get a sense of what the project is about. This often happens during the time the film is being shot, so that by the time I start to work with a director there will already be a rough first assembly of the film, which we can sit down to watch together and talk through. The next key point is the spotting session, which is where you sit with the director and decide where the music is going to start, where it's going to finish, and what the character of that music is going to be. Identifying where to place musical cues is critical in understanding music's role in the film. Finding the pivotal scenes that require strong musical support – whether that be in dramatic confrontations, action sequences, or moments of plot revelation – and understanding the rhythms of a film can unlock where music will fit into the overall jigsaw puzzle; but conversely there are times when having little or no music might be even more powerful.

In the ideal scenario you will have a blank canvas to play with here, but increasingly often a director will already have some temporary (or 'temp') tracks from other sources in place to mimic what music you might write as part of their own process of finding the language of the film. I tend to listen to these tracks once and then get rid of them to start afresh, so they do not get in the way of my creativity. It can be the case that directors get used to

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the sound of something and they want you to simply recreate the temp track (often to get round the licensing issues of using the original track), but if you are able to unlock what the director finds special about the music they are using – for example, the emotional tone, intensity, or pacing it might be offering – you can then find another way to achieve the same response. Something that has worked on numerous occasions is to pre-emptively make some temp tracks myself, to offer the director a variety of ideas early on and start to instil my sound world into their heads even before they start shooting. That is helpful because you at least know that the music that you're starting to write is going to be getting used in the edit suite.

Once you've finished spotting, you can begin writing and planning. I tend to sit at the piano for this stage with just a normal pencil and manuscript paper, but any instrument that you feel comfortable with would work. Where some composers might start with an instrumental ostinato or atmospheric sound, the first step in a film or television score for me is nearly always finding a melody. It doesn't have to be the grand tune of 21 bars; it can just be as simple as three or four or five notes, but it's a hook. It's a musical identity for that particular show. I like to know that I have something to hang on to musically that is more than just a series of sounds or colours. Whilst this hook is often the main theme or something for the opening titles or end credits, it can be other moments, such as, for example, a montage sequence where the music is going to be heard significantly or another point of the film that feels inspiring. I would be unlikely to start with a scene where there's lots of dialogue to concentrate on, since those aren't moments where the music has much agency in telling the story.

From that melody I might then think about the orchestration: is it going to be something that's played on the lower instruments (cellos, bass clarinet, basses, etc.), or is it a top-line tune? I usually do this sort of orchestration and motivic development on the computer, so I have the flexibility over, say, adding in an extra bar here or there to make sure the pacing matches and the music doesn't get in the way of dialogue. It's a technical process as well as a creative one, and other practicalities such as finishing on time (especially when the orchestra are already booked for a certain date) are always in my head alongside any artistic considerations. At that point I'll probably try out the material on the director to see if I'm heading in the right direction – usually just on the piano – because ultimately without their support, whatever you write is unlikely to end up in the production. When it comes time for the first formal playback, I will make a demo using virtual instruments in a digital audio workstation

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(DAW) and spend a considerable amount of time making sure that the mix and balance is right, and the sounds are as good as they can be to ensure it is going to give the director a realistic feel for what is going on. I don't want the sounds to be *too* realistic though, as they need to feel like they are going to be replaced by the real thing. It has to be *almost* believable as an orchestra, but not so believable that they say, 'that's great. Let's leave it like that. What do we need an orchestra for?'

When the director comes over to my studio to watch the first preview, I will also run dialogue and sound effects to try and give as clear a sense as possible of how everything fits together and demonstrate how the tempo and synchronization of key moments work. Since this process is typically alongside other elements of the film's postproduction, such as the creation of foley/sound effects and automated dialogue replacement (ADR), the dialogue and sound effects I am including are likely to be fairly rough, but good enough for the director to see whether or not the score is working and to make comments and changes. If you have worked closely with a director through the whole process it is unlikely that they will completely write off what you have done at this stage, but it is still important to be open and flexible to their suggestions no matter how tough their criticism of your material might be.

The final stage for me is to get the instrumental parts and score made before going into the studio to record the music. The whole joy for me of making music is to collaborate with real live musicians and performers that supply the sort of light and shade, dynamics, and phrasing that bring the score to life. I conduct my own scores so that I can interact and co-create with musicians, coaxing out the sort of performances that I want. That is what the studio work should be about, not about spending valuable minutes making last-minute edits. Then once you've delivered the music, that's pretty much it: it's down to the director to lay it up against film or the TV show, mix it with dialogue, sound effects, and your work is done. Even if changes are made in the final mix that you might not like – for example, sometimes cues are moved slightly from where they were originally intended to be, or even dropped completely to balance the final dialogue – the trick is not to be too precious. The director (and to some extent the editor) have the final say and it's now out of your hands.

Characterisation and Storytelling

Central to the entire process of writing music for film is an ability and desire to support and enhance the storytelling that underpins filmmaking.

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This begins by trying to capture the tone of the film's worlds and trying to build the world as a sonic atmosphere, just like the director is trying to do visually. For me, the most important tool a composer has to be able to do this world-building is to create a theme or motif that is instantly recognizable for a certain character or environment. That's very important. This can happen in lots of different ways: for example, with *Wilde* (1997) – a film about Oscar Wilde – it was a sense of the protagonist's tortured soul that inspired me to write a theme that was quite chromatic and never settled harmonically in any particular way. Other times it might be a rhythmic gesture that offers a route into the musical language, for example in the syncopated feel of the theme I wrote for the long-running documentary series *Children's Hospital* (1993–2003).

I personally want a theme to be memorable enough that you can sing it away from the film and know what it is. This is particularly important for television. I remember one of the experiences that made me want to write for film was when I saw the Mark Rydell film *On Golden Pond* (1981), which begins with a gorgeous open piano melody composed by Dave Grusin that draws the viewer into the film in a very delicate and poignant way, which remained in my mind long after leaving the cinema. Instrumentation is also important in transporting us to a musical world and giving us an insight into the character. For instance, with *Judge John Deed* (2001–7) – a contemporary courtroom series centred around a very powerful central character – I wanted to have a feeling of majesty and pomp, so I turned to a sound that immediately conjures up ceremony: a brass ensemble with a hymn-like movement and pacing. It was immediate, and clearly not written for a comedy series or something light and romantic.

Where you go from there depends on what the storytelling requires. Music has so much power over the image, but you really need to understand the characters' journeys – their thoughts, feelings, actions, past, hopes, dreams, and so on – to be able to underscore those journeys. For me, I often return to my themes to help with these transformations, almost like leitmotifs. It is a great gift for a film and for a director to have something that is unique – a memorable and melodic signature – that is used in different ways to help drive the narrative. A theme might start quite small but as the film develops or the story unfolds, you can develop and unfold your melody in more complex or more interesting ways, taking it through twists and turns by breaking it down into fragments, or creating melodic variations on its shape that reflect how the characters' stories are developing both internally and externally. How, for instance, do new perspectives or environments change the musical language of a theme?

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What does the theme sound like when underscoring dialogue in comparison to the film's climax? How can it develop into different tempi or intensity?

I always try not to put anything in the scene that is already there, so if there's a romantic scene playing out and the actors are doing a great job on screen, then there is no need to double up with the music. Overstating what is already on the screen, for example by overlaying lots of romantic music, will over-sentimentalise it and take the audience out of the journey. Instead, I think about subtext a lot so that there's always at least one other thing going on in every scene, such as unresolved tension or a foreshadowing of future drama. Playing something that isn't already happening on screen adds another dimension to the scene. For example, an action scene (say cars or motorbikes racing down a road) would work fine with rhythmic chase music, but if we think about what else is going on in the scene – are they fearful that they're going to get killed? Is there an ulterior motive? – this layers the scene, pushes forward the storytelling, and makes it more exciting and interesting to the audience. If you get it right it can be wonderfully effective, but if you get it wrong you can completely kill a scene with the wrong music. You have to constantly keep checking yourself; that you're not being over-sentimental, pushing the drama too far, getting in the way of the dialogue, or telling the audience what to think too much.

One of the most enjoyable qualities of film music for me is that it makes an audience believe what it tells you, whatever the scene. If we see something innocent on screen, but the music is evoking tension and fear, we believe what the music is telling us. It goes straight to the heart of the emotion – straight to our hearts – and you know that something bad is going to happen. But as well as helping an audience to feel what they cannot see, it allows us to be clever in how we play with an audience's expectations. This is particularly the case in murder mysteries. I have fun with *Father Brown* (2013–22), based on the G. K. Chesterton novels, where sometimes I might throw suspicion on an innocent character by adding ominous and sinister music over a scene involving that character, setting them up as the 'bad guy' to throw the audience off the scent. Conversely, I will deliberately make sure that the character who *is* guilty never gets any dark music to avoid giving away the murderer's true identity till right at the end. That's how powerful music is.

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The Language of Collaboration

As I've alluded to throughout this chapter, filmmaking is all about collaboration. Your relationship with a director in particular is one of the most important professional relationships you'll have on a project and working effectively with them is key. When you are brought on board to start composing, you're chosen by the director because they feel that you will be able to deliver the score that they require for the film. It is likely that they have either heard your music before, or maybe they chose you because you've worked with them before and you have an established relationship, or perhaps they are just taking a chance based on your portfolio or recommendations. Either way, they like the idea of working with you because they've heard something in your music that they think will complement their approach. A successful ongoing creative relationship with a director is the key to not only a positive artistic experience on a film but also potential future employment on multiple projects.

Once you are hired, your job is to work closely with the director and follow their creative lead. That means listening closely to their ideas – particularly the nuances and subtexts in their storytelling approach – and watching the film with them over and over again until, between you, there is a shared creative and musical vision. Understanding this vision underpins nearly all the decisions I make during the writing process, whether that be which scenes need or do not need music, or how the harmonic and timbral language of my music matches with the visual world (e.g. the camera angles, shot types, or colour palette used by the director of photography). Nevertheless, music can be a notoriously difficult thing to describe and discuss, so communication is key. Translating words and ideas into music is central to the job of being a film composer, and learning how to use the conversations you have (which may be quite abstract and metaphorical) to inform how you shape the music is a hugely important skill to develop.

Finding a way of working that opens up these conversations is crucial. For some composers, this means preparing mock-ups of multiple options in advance to present to the director for feedback, but I find that being able to improvise allows for a really fluid and collaborative exchange of ideas. An example of this is when I wrote the music for *Wolf Hall* (2015). I had worked with the director Peter Kosminsky already, so we knew how to talk about music. I read both the novels and the screenplay before we started our conversations. Peter was very specific, saying that he did not want to

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have 'Tudor pastiche music' to avoid feeling as if we were looking at that world through a stained-glass window, and suggesting that the historical setting or location should not exclusively influence the choices in the score. He wanted it to sound quite contemporary because of the way Hilary Mantel writes, making it feel as if the characters are experiencing everything in the present day. I sat with Peter in my composing room and played through various themes at the piano, just improvising, until after one particular melody I played he said, 'I think that's Cromwell's theme'. It was a mixture of me trying out different things in real time, trying to come up with something that was immediate, arresting, and contemporary whilst still alluding to Tudor times, combined with Peter's instinct for what felt artistically correct to him. Although, in the end, in the final score, I did end up using some Tudor instruments – recorder, lute, and harpsichord – the thrust of the score was really a string quintet and oboe: just contemporary instruments playing music with a feeling of immediacy.

Sometimes a director is not so clear about what music fits their creative vision though, and this needs to be teased out. Directors nearly always have a clear sense about what they want with the lighting, the camera work, the script, and the acting, but for some, when it comes to music it is a mysterious world of black dots that they do not understand. What I like to do is to find a way of discussing what the score should be in non-musical terms. The minute you start talking crotchets and quavers or hearing 'I don't really like saxophones, but I love trumpets' you run a strong risk of not fully understanding what a director wants from the score. Those conversations limit what you can do creatively and risk being caught up in technical jargon or ideas. But if you can talk instead about the atmosphere, the story, the characters, and the drama, then you will likely draw a lot more out of the director for you to then translate into music. Comments like 'this is a bit bright' or 'it's not heavy enough' offer far more scope for musical exploration than 'I would prefer this in the minor' or 'I feel it should be scored for oboe instead'.

Sometimes though, even this sort of oblique conversation fails to quite 'spark' or work first time, and then it's the composer's job to keep trying alternative approaches until something does work. If you get very hung up on the theme and you think that's the only theme that's right for that particular story, but the director does not like it, then there will be conflict. It is also important for us not to get too caught up in our ideas and to be open to some of the happy accidents that come out of sharing the creative process with others. I've been working with a director on a film recently called *To Olivia*, about Roald Dahl and his rather turbulent relationship

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with Patricia Neal, his wife. I was struggling to come up with the theme for the film's protagonist, Dahl, and spent a lot of time trying different ideas that were not quite right. That hook that I was talking about earlier – that little phrase – or idea – just was not coming to me, until the director John Hay sent me something he was listening to that was very uplifting and inspiring, and crucially, unlike any of my other approaches so far. I went to the piano to improvise and almost immediately came up with a theme, even though this was a new direction that we had not talked about. It is these completely different approaches that sometimes are what you need to steer you into unlocking your creativity.

Conclusion

Being a screen composer is a wonderful and rewarding job, but it is not without its challenges. I want to finish by going through three qualities that I believe you need to develop. The first is being *disciplined*. It is crucial in this industry to be able to work fast and to a deadline, and when an orchestra is booked in for a recording session in three weeks, you need to be efficient to write, revise, and orchestrate in time. Everybody always wants something by Friday! You must be able to come up with lots of ideas imaginatively and efficiently, which means trying over and over to come up with something that's right. As a film composer you should never run out of ideas, and the best way to do this is write something every day and keep your compositional juices flowing. When I'm sitting at the piano or looking at a blank page of manuscript paper, I will come up with an idea no matter what. It may not be the best idea in the world, and I might throw it out at the end of the day, but at least I've got something. If you have nothing, you've got nothing to change, nothing to develop, nothing to build on or get better from. Maybe you will only use the first three bars or take just the melody line and find a new harmony, but either way, it is something to work with.

The second is being able to *adapt*. I have already talked about the importance of adjusting and reshaping your music to suit somebody else's vision – often the director's – and this also means being good at writing in lots of different styles. Being a film composer is a job for a chameleon. One moment you're writing for a big costume drama with lavish costumes and sets, the next it's an intimate two-hander, or raucous comedy, or intense action film. You have to make sure that you write music that is in your own musical voice, but also to understand how that voice is

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adapted into different worlds, locations, and atmospheres. You also need to adapt to practical limitations, for example different timeframes, budgets, or ways of working. Whether you have access to a 40-piece orchestra for a week or two musicians for a couple of days, you need to bring the same problem-solving and energy to get the most out of the situation, whether that's by keeping the complexity of your score in check or being more creative about the ways that you are using your instruments.

Finally, you need to be *persistent*. Collaboration inevitably means negotiation, which also means taking criticism. Understanding that it's not personal is key: criticism is (usually) not intended to upset anyone, but rather a way for the creative team to get back in sync and find what's right for the project. As long as you can keep coming up with ideas, avoid being defensive, and not get too attached to anything you will always get there. By experimenting and getting it wrong, you learn – then you try again, and get things (hopefully) more right than you get wrong. It is all down to percentages. When you start out, you might only get things right fifty per cent of the time or even less, but the more experienced you are, the more you tend to get things right. You also need to be persistent in building up your networks. When I started out, I didn't know anyone in the business. I made some recordings of my music when I was at college, and after I graduated, I sent my showreel to all the production companies, directors, and producers that I could find. Nobody in this industry advertises for a composer, so you need to be very proactive in finding work and develop a thick skin. I had to put a lot of effort into reading through all of the trade papers (like Broadcast, Screen International, etc. which list productions that are coming up) and broadening my network to know who to approach.

Even then, it took about two years of lots and lots of rejections before I finally had a production company reply saying, 'I like this choral piece that you've got on your showreel. Do you want to come in and have a meeting?' In that case the director was brave in taking the chance on me, which allowed me to get my foot in the door and start building up credits – and obviously from then on, the more credits you have, the better – but this method of getting work is becoming increasingly rare. Whilst it might be easier now with the internet to build a website or have a SoundCloud page, you still need to put time and energy into getting people to stop and listen to it. With so much material out there for a director or producer to hear, standing out from the crowd is increasingly difficult, so as well as developing an online presence you should also spend time and energy mixing with as many filmmakers as you can. Building up real friendships with directors and producers is a great start to developing

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the professional relationships that you need for continued work in the industry. And as all of this shows, being a screen composer is fundamentally a lifestyle choice. You have to love writing music more than anything else and give it 100 per cent commitment, no matter how demanding a job it is. For me, this often means missing social events or parties, and having friends and family who are supportive and understanding when I say, 'I can't make it tonight because I've got to get this cue finished.' You do it because you know it is what you want to do and that is your passion. You want to make music for films, and you will do everything you can to achieve that.

Listening List

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