

# YOU SHOOT, THEY SCORE

A Film Composer's Tips for Finding the Right Musical Accompaniment



Composer Miriam Cutler at work. Photo: Michele Kort.

by Miriam Cutler

Filmmakers have often told me that they find the scoring process to be one of the most daunting aspects of making movies. Even the most seasoned admit everything from discomfort to panic when they try to communicate their ideas for music in their film. In the documentary world, these feelings can be even more pronounced, the fear being that musical accompaniment to real-life footage can be inappropriate or manipulative. But one need only look at such stellar examples as Aaron Copland's score for *The River* to realize how much the right music can increase the power of a documentary. Thorough

preparation, realistic budgeting of time and money, careful selection of a composer and investment in the creative collaboration all play a crucial role in getting the most out of your music.

## IF MONEY GREW ON TREES...

The film scoring process begins with the initial budgeting: make sure it's realistic. Do your research: talk to composers, music supervisors and other filmmakers and look at some music budgets of films you like. Do you envision a synth score, a jazz band, ethnic music or an orchestra? Do you want to work with a

well-known composer, or are you willing to take a chance? Do you need to license a popular song? How big a part will music play in your film? Answers to these questions will help you assess your financial needs.

#### TEMP-TATION

Although filmmakers should start thinking about music as early as the budgeting phase, most don't really focus on it until they're editing. I've worked with editors who have an amazing internal rhythm and can cut without music, but most prefer to find a temporary composition that inspires the editing and informs the scene. Time and budget permitting, the composer can also begin to be involved at this point, and in my own experience this is a fantastic way to work. I can supply click tracks or simple beats, or I can actually start composing. Typically, we'll discuss some concepts, I'll write a piece of music, the editor will lay it in, start cutting and send it back to me for conforming, and we'll go back and forth as the film takes shape. Rather than getting attached to temp music, the filmmaker can thus take advantage of all the composer has to offer, which can lead to a truly original score.

The other common way to work is to offer the composer a cut with a temp score. You can temp with other music written by your composer, or with any music that inspires. Using a temp score can save time for a filmmaker and provide creative direction early on, but you'll never know what the composer might have offered up without it.

#### TRUSTING YOUR TASTE

Before you begin working with a composer, though, it helps to hone your own sense of what music might work in your film. I always tell filmmakers to trust their ability to discern musical success and failure. After all, you wouldn't be making films if you didn't have strong ideas about what works and what doesn't! So spend time thinking about what styles of music resonate with your vision for the film. Analyze films with scores you like. Throw some music samples up against picture. Begin a creative dialogue in your mind. Even if you don't know much about music, you can begin to experience the effect different approaches can have on a scene.

#### R-E-S-P-E-C-T

When you choose a composer, the relationship you establish with that person will set the tone for all the creative work that follows, so look for someone to whom you can relate, not just a music machine. Even if you're drawn to someone's music, don't underestimate the importance of your rapport. I'd also suggest you look for someone who, besides great composing chops, has an equally strong collaborative spirit. If so, you're more than likely to have a wonderfully creative and energetic experience.

Film and TV composers are used to tight deadlines and strict budget requirements. Regardless of the parameters of the project, our role is to support your vision, flesh out your ideas and bring all our experience and talent to the table. Together, we can develop a language for communicating about non-verbal, emotional and abstract ideas. But if your composer is willing to make a generous contribution of time and talent to a collaborative effort, you as a filmmaker should be realistic about your expectations and respect your composer's boundaries.

#### KNOWING WHAT TO LOOK FOR

But how do you find this fabulous person? You can start by noticing who wrote the film music you recently enjoyed. Ask other filmmakers you admire for referrals. Call music supervisors. Check ads in respectable trades. Remember, it's critical to distinguish between general musical ability and actual film-scoring talent and experience. Your brother may be a great guitar player with a home studio, but that doesn't necessarily mean he has the sensibility or technological know-how to compose and synchronize music to picture (let alone the experience to deliver on a fixed schedule and budget). Just as in the rest of the filmmaking process, there are complex levels to film scoring both creatively and technically. They include an ability to organize, plan and budget for the overall project; communication skills; compositional skills; music preparation (scores and charts) skills; and an ability to work with musicians, handle union issues, produce sessions and record and mix the score to the technical specifications of the post house. Oh yes, and all this must be done on time. So be sure to check the breadth and depth of your chosen composer's experience.

#### COMPOSING CREDIBILITY

But how can you assess the qualifications of your potential composer? As I said, the process usually starts with a recommendation or by hearing some of the music this person has written. But then, even if you've seen a film that person has scored, request a sample audio reel (and video, if you like). Listen to it with an open mind; get an overview of the work, and don't expect to hear the perfect music for your film. This reel probably reflects what the composer has already done for someone else, and he/she may be second-guessing what you want to hear.

Nonetheless, does what you hear move you? Does it stay with you? Even if the selections seem way off the mark for your film, if you can't get the music out of your head, then take a meeting with the composer. Find out more about this person. He or she may have other work that more closely resembles what you want—or has the ability to stretch for what you want. Don't underestimate the creative connection that may be unexpectedly forged.

#### YOUR PLACE OR MINE?

You should meet at a potential composer's studio to get a better sense of the person and how he/she works. Also, check out the gear. Does it look professional, well-maintained, up to date? Get a feel for how the person thinks: Do you like his/her ideas? Bring a copy of some part of your film and discuss some of the musical ideas you've been exploring on your own. See how the composer reacts and what is offered in return. Play some of your temp ideas to illustrate what you like.

If a filmmaker doesn't offer me any musical direction in our first meeting, I have developed ways of assessing taste. As we get deeper into a discussion, I'll start playing either my work, or music from other film scores or CDs in my collection to see what makes an impression. Is it orchestral, classic, contemporary, groove-oriented, ethnic, edgy? If the filmmaker is totally visual and has no musical vocabulary, I try to identify sounds or textures that get a response. As long as we can relate the music to a desired emotion or interpretation of a scene, I'll



find the sound and instrumentation that will evoke that feeling or sensation.

#### FUSS-BUDGET

If you take a second meeting with your potential composer, take it in your editing bay. There, you can begin to analyze scenes and see how the composer relates to your editor and other members of your staff. When you're ready to make the hire, it's time to talk budget. Hopefully you've done your research and budgeted a realistic amount. Let the composer know early on where you stand monetarily so that no time gets wasted on either end.

Nowadays, most indie and doc budgets are "package" or "all in" deals. A savvy composer will outline what is possible for what you've offered. This can vary dramatically from composer to composer, based on status, schedule, resources and approach. The music package provided by a composer usually includes one or more spotting sessions (meetings with the director/producer to decide where and what kind of music), composing, review and approval meetings, music preparation, musicians, recording sessions, the music mix and, finally, delivery of a finished music master synchronized to picture.

Clearly, a composer who has his or her own studio has a budgetary advantage. Nonetheless, it still costs money to record, even in one's own studio. Sometimes I suggest various possibilities to meet a filmmaker's budget. I'll start with a basic fee, then build in future contingencies. As we move along in the scoring process, I may suggest that for x amount more, we can add a cellist; for xxx amount, we can add Yo-Yo Ma! The various possibilities for enhancing the score sometimes inspire the

filmmaker to raise more money. Remember that every additional service and musician adds cost, including changes made after the recording sessions have occurred and picture changes after the music has been mixed. Delivering a great score on a limited budget requires lots of advance planning.

#### HAPPY TOGETHER

During the spotting process, it's helpful to flesh out the role music will play in a given scene. Is it to reinforce something that's already obvious, or to bring out some aspect that may not already be clear? Do transitions—sections created to help an audience more easily follow the story—need to be punctuated? Should specific musical themes identify specific characters or situations? Is it more effective if music runs contrary to what appears on the screen? Does a scene call for irony or humor? 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 sense of time. These are the kind of questions to be discussed as you wend your way through the film.

Once the scoring process starts, it's important for you as a filmmaker to stay on top of what the composer is doing, so that time isn't wasted on unproductive tangents. Sometimes I write some music without picture and send it over to the editing room to get a reaction and see if I'm on the right track. With today's midi, digital audio and video, filmmakers can get a 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). I often make changes while the director



is sitting next to me in my studio; that way we can re-shape the score immediately. Even though you'll be incredibly busy with other aspects of post-production, it's well worth spending time with your composer. It's worth mentioning, though, that some composers prefer to wait until the film is more defined before getting involved, while others won't even start composing until picture has locked. The composer's work style may be something you want to explore before you make your hire.

#### THE FILM COMES FIRST

What happens if you're working well with a composer but suddenly you find you *hate* some of the music? First of all, don't panic. Composers who work in film and TV understand that not everything we write is going to be what you want (even if it's great!). Think of your editing process and how many times you make changes before you get it right. As a filmmaker you should foster a safe environment to discuss these matters and work them out. This is the essence of creative collaboration; there is no absolute right or wrong. There may be a really effective compromise that will serve the film, a solution that evolves from this kind of creative tension. But in the end, there must be a singular vision for a successful film, and the filmmaker has the last say. To me, nothing is worse than a director hemming and hawing, trying to find a polite way to tell me he/she hates something. Remember, you're dealing with professionals. We accept that sometimes our favorite cues get thrown out, so we're not too attached to each musical idea. The film comes first.

#### ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

I've had experiences where we've made it through the whole film, and there's still one cue that isn't cutting it. The music is due the next week and it feels like it'll never happen. But we just keep plugging away. Suddenly, it magically comes together. The last time that happened, my director had tears of joy in his eyes. That made *me* cry. Isn't that why we all do this?

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*Miriam Cutler has been writing, producing and performing music for over 20 years. Her credits include Lost in La Mancha; Pandemic: Facing AIDS; Scouts Honor; and Licensed to Kill, as well as many features, short films, TV shows and a circus.*

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