
sounds behind the scenes

by lawrence shragge

Movies mean music. Memorable songs spark memorable scenes long after a picture is over. But, it's not as easy as it sounds. Lawrence Shragge describes the sophisticated puzzle of putting musical pieces into visual place.



'Play it again, Sam.' And how! Paul Brodie and his Saxophone Quartet trip the light fantastic while making music for *Circle of Two*

A film composer is much like a chameleon: he should be able to write all types of music, from a serial composition to a bebop tune, and a disco arrangement to a Bach fugue. With this eclecticism, the composer must be of a technical mind. He must not only create music that adds emotional impact to a film, he must be able to synchronize it with the picture.

Several essential steps occur before and after writing the music for a film score. From the spotting of the music, through to the final dubbing session, the composer should be actively involved in all these steps.

The first step of a composer's involvement is the spotting session, when the composer gets together with the director or producer, and the music film editor — or in Canada, the sound editor — to discuss the breakdown of music cues within the picture. They study the length of each music cue, and how the music will enter and exit each sequence: whether it will fade in or enter abruptly, etc. An overall music cue sheet is written to give the composer an idea of how much music is needed so he can collect his thoughts and begin writing his thematic material. Sometimes the composer is brought in during, or before the shoot. But this is rare. Usually, he is approached after the fine cut is finished.

Too much music can destroy a film's impact, so it is important to analyse when the music actually adds an emotional dimension to the picture, and when it doesn't. Then, the music film editor, or sound editor, draws up detailed cue sheets for each music cue, using a Moviola with its footage counter. Running footages are taken from the beginning to the end of each cue, including all inner timings of action, dialogue, fade-ins, fade-outs, changes of location and times... These footages are then converted to minutes and seconds by a conversion chart, or, more accurately, by multiplying by two, then dividing by three. Once the cue sheets are finished, the composer can start writing. Beforehand, he can begin to develop his thematic material and decide on how to pace the music within the film, to achieve a balanced, well-structured score.

With the finished cue sheets the composer can begin to figure out the tempos of the cues, and whether or not he will need a 'click track' — a metronome that can be locked into sync with the picture and make the music fall perfectly into place. To use the click, the composer must first determine which timings from his cue sheets he wishes to 'catch.' He will then convert the timings to frames and divide the number of frames by the click track desired, adding one more click. This will give him the exact beat at which the timings will occur within the music.

For a visual reference as to where the music will fall within the action, the composer draws up a sketch (or musical outline from which he will orchestrate), using from two to six staves, numbering all of the clicks above the top staff. Only then can he do what he does best: write the music!

Frequently, a composer will decide to use a stopwatch instead of a click track. A cue might be non-rhythmic and he may want to vary the tempos. He will then time out

every musical phrase so that it will fall into place, as accurately as possible, with the cue sheet timings.

After all the sketches are completed, the music is orchestrated. Sometimes, this is done by an orchestrator instead of the composer, who will expand the sketch to a full score. Usually, the composer is fully capable of doing this, but lack of time often makes it an impossibility. Once the orchestration is completed, a copyist extracts the notes from the score and writes them out for each instrument in the orchestra.

The recording session is the composer's high point. Finally, he has the chance to conduct and hear his music. The cues with the largest orchestrations are done first. The orchestra is cut down as the orchestrations get smaller. The cues that were written with a click track are the easiest to conduct. The click is fed to the musicians through their earphones. Assuming that they play with the click, the music will fit the picture perfectly. Cues written without a click can be handled two ways. 'Free-timing' is when the composer conducts while watching his stopwatch, to make sure that the timings indicated on the score are 'caught.' 'Picture-cueing' is when the composer conducts while watching the film. The picture is prepared with a series of streamers and punches so that the conductor will be able to anticipate any cuts he must 'catch.' After the first or second cue the conductor will stop and listen to the playbacks to hear if the orchestral balance is right. If it is, he will proceed through the session, hopefully, without problems.

After the recording session, the music is mixed, then transferred to 35mm magnetic tape. The editor breaks down all the music cues then lays them into the picture. He also prepares a dubbing log sheet with all the footages of all the music cues from the beginning to the end of each reel. These dubbing sheets are vital for the final dubbing session. In cases where the music is out of sync it is important for the composer to be present. If the music has to be 'moved,' the composer probably has the best insight as to how and where it should be moved.

Finally, there is the last dubbing session when all the sound components are mixed together. Ideally, the music, dialogue and sound effects should be mixed by three separate mixers. The composer should be present to give the sound mixer suggestions, and to make sure that all the cross fades and levels, etc., are as he originally conceived them.

A film composer's responsibility does not end with the writing of the score. If he cares about his final product, he will take an active role in all the essential steps that occur before and after the writing of his music. The more he knows and understands the mechanical aspects of film composition, the more creative he can be as a film composer. □



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