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Composing for Film: The Art of Underscoring:

By Lisa Horan

The tension is mounting. The audience can barely keep their eyes off the screen, yet they are visibly uneasy about what they may witness next. They watch, with apprehension, as the doorknob begins to turn. Slowly, the door edges open, and then . . . BAM! The audience lets out a collective gasp of disbelief when the identity of the mystery character is revealed. It's not the stalker after all. It's the return of the only love the protagonist has ever known - the man who'd been feared dead for months. The audience is overcome with emotion, though they may never even realize just what it was that sparked their strong response.

As film and video professionals are keenly aware, the visuals that appear on screen can be compelling, but more often than not, it's the music that adds the necessary layer to affect the true emotion of a film. But there's an ironic twist involved: if the audience is focusing on the music as opposed to the story, the composer hasn't done his or her job very well. Just how do composers create music that elicits a reaction, but, at the same time, doesn't draw attention to itself? Several film composers offer their insight.

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One Goal

Whether the intent is to generate a feeling of angst or one of elation, the one thing that a successful film composer must accomplish is ensure that the music maintains a low profile. "I work on a cue until I can't hear it anymore - until it sort of disappears into the film; that's when I know I've got it right," explains 40-year music veteran and film composer Ron Riddle (www.ronriddle.com), who has scored over 150 films, from documentaries to trailers for features. "One of the most enjoyable aspects of making music for films is that, oftentimes, I



David Helping

have to cross musical lines and make a blend of new sounds that takes me where I haven't been before. I do this so that the final product is no longer its own entity, but actually becomes one with the film."

While it must maintain its anonymity, so to speak, music undeniably serves a vital purpose in films. In many cases, it tells the audience the other part of the story. "If it's done well, the music should weave its way through the film, the dialogue should become part of it, and it should all come together as one experience" explains Composer David Helping

(www.dhmmusicdesign.com), whose niche is creating music for dark, sci-fi type films. "The trick is not to make it too interesting so that the audience focuses on it, rather than on the dialogue.

Multiple Methods

Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your perspective), there is no tried and true formula for creating effective film music. Rather, each composer brings his or her own unique approach and experience to the table. Some, for example, rely on unusual ways to incorporate sounds generated from music libraries; others create their own organic sounds; and others use a combination of techniques.

"I try to use as much real instrumentation as possible, but, the reality is, there are times when I have to incorporate music from a music library," says Atlanta's Jonathan Cazenave (JCAZMUSIC, www.jcazmusic.com), whose film composing work includes a variety of independent films and shorts.

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But he doesn't stop there. If using sampled music is the route he must take, he typically employs a technique that doubles the manufactured sound with an authentic one played by himself or another musician. "This adds a whole new level of depth and dimension to the piece, and it's a great option for lower budget projects that simply don't allow me to bring in real musicians for every part," explains Cazenave, who spent years as a professional drummer and was influenced, at an early age, by John Williams.

With over 20 years of experience and a Master's Degree in Film Scoring from the University of Miami, Maryland-based Composer Carol Nethen West (ChesapeakeSFXmusic), follows a similar approach. "There's just nothing that can surpass real performance, which is why I prefer to use it as much as possible," she explains. "But, if I'm in a situation that is budget-restrictive, I usually create a score that utilizes a combination of virtual instruments, computer programming, and live performance. That," she says, "is how I get the best out of a budget and the best out of the music I write."



Jonathan Cazenave

To create truly distinctive sounds, Helping uses a lot of what he refers to as "mad science-type stuff." For instance, Helping, who derives from an ambient background and received a Grammy nomination for best new age album in 1996, relies on unconventional techniques to accomplish the sound he desires to create.



Photo by Jay Henson

Carol Nethen West

"I may take a set of stainless steel bowls, hit them, and record the sounds they make in different pitches, then filter them through the computer in different ways. Since I'm not schooled in music, I am not like the Hans Zimmers of the world who can say, 'Let's do something in A minor that's reminiscent of this German composer or that one,'" explains Helping. "I'm the opposite. I approach writing with an innocence and a childlike excitement. Though I may actually be doing things 'wrong' from a technical standpoint, that can be refreshing, as long as what I've done ultimately supports the film"

With a degree from Berklee College of Music and a long and illustrious career in the music industry, Riddle has a substantial collection of his own work, which he often draws upon. He has created an extensive library of his own music. Riddle, who was the drummer for Blue Oyster Cult, among others, says, "If a producer comes to me with a small budget, instead of having to go to another library, I can take his footage, rework music I've already created, and come up with a much more organic sound than I would if I had to work with stayed pieces within a fixed format."

Tools, Trials, and Trends

While all composers have their own preferences on the tools they use to create music for film - from Pro Tools to Digital Performer to Logic Pro - most agree that it is imperative for composers to be experts in the area of technology. "It's almost impossible for a composer fresh out of school to find work in any sort of visual media if he or she doesn't understand the technology," says Cazenave, who admits that he's always been a bit of a computer geek. He says while the big time Hollywood composers can often afford to hire others to handle the technology-side of composing for them, most composers don't have the luxury of a high-end budget. The good news is that the tools available to composers continue to improve, and as they improve, they better enable composers to work with greater efficiency. "As the technology gets better, it enables us to compose faster. For example, I can put together a full orchestral mock-up and hone my idea before having to go to the scoring stage and have to hire an 80 piece orchestra to test what I've written. It's a huge advantage over ten years ago," explains Cazenave, who organizes the Atlanta Score Study Group, which provides composers of all levels an opportunity to further perfect their craft. Helping believes part of this perfecting process involves becoming highly proficient in available technology. "These days, it's important for composers to know the gear so well not so they put emphasis on it, but so well that they don't."

In many cases, one of the biggest challenges isn't how to use the technology, but how to choose what to use out of the seemingly endless array available. "The growing arsenal of technology can actually be a double-edged sword," says Riddle. "While it's great to have every sound you could possibly imagine at your fingertips, it's also the most horrifying thing possible. You could go on forever searching for that perfect sound, and it's easy to get so overwhelmed that you become unproductive if you're not careful."

What often saves composers from falling into this trap is the typically tight time constraints within which they must work. "Time pressure is inherent in the majority of film and television work," says Nethen West, who spent 10 years under extreme time restrictions as a composer at "America's Most Wanted." "It was nothing short of creative and cerebral chaos at "AMW." I had to break through a lot of personal challenges with writing efficiency because I simply could not spend extra time perfecting my work. There is no question that my experience there helped me to develop quick responses to looking at a picture and defining it musically."

The latest trend on the film scoring front is a distinct, hybrid sound made up largely of modern orchestral performance layered with electronic rhythms. "If you listen to the opening titles of some of the newest adventure and spy movies, you'll hear this awesome blend of percussion

and orchestra and dirty synthesizer sounds. It's great and new and hip, and I definitely respond to it when it's done well," says Helping. However, in the age of score-less reality TV programs, which continue to dominate the airwaves, composers like Nethen West and Riddle believe it's crucial that film composers constantly remind audiences what good music is and not deviate too far from what they feel has always worked best: traditional skills like good orchestration and a passion for the original score.

A songwriter, herself, Lisa Horan's industry-related articles have appeared in Government Video Magazine, Videography, DigitalTV, The Washington Diplomat, AvidProNet, and, of course, iCOM. She also writes scripts for film, video, and live events. For more information, please contact her at [Click Here to Email](#).

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