



CELLULOID DREAMS

IF YOU WANT YOUR WORK HEARD BY A MASS AUDIENCE, YOU NEED THE BIG SCREEN. NINA LARGE EXPLORES THE OPTIONS FOR YOUNG COMPOSERS IN THE WORLD OF FILM AND TV MUSIC

Music and image have been close allies since the first silent movies. Even before soundtracks there would be a pianist at the front of the cinema, hammering out tunes to illuminate the drama of a film. Shostakovich earned an early living doing just that.

These days the world of screen composition is about more than feature films. Adverts, TV dramas, documentaries, nature programmes and the even internet and computer games all resound with music.

'Music carries emotional baggage with it,' says American composer Philip Glass, who virtually reinvented the concept of the movie score as art. 'When we attach music to an image it tends to create an emotional point of view which wasn't really there before.'

No wonder, then, that lots of people want to be writing such powerful stuff.

There are hundreds of screen composers but only a handful command Hollywood-sized

wages. The rest are working just as hard (if not harder) for considerably less financial reward. It's a job requiring first class musicianship, drive and dedication.

Competition within the film music sector is so intense that even finding somewhere to study can be tough. Dominic Murcott, head of Music Technology at Trinity College of Music, says his school has seen 'a huge increase in applications, specifically those who state an interest in composition for picture': 'Film scores are something almost every student wants to try, even if they don't want to

specialise in them. I can't recall anybody saying they don't want to compose for film.'

'There's a certain amount of luck involved in making it but people can make their own luck with the right attitude and enthusiasm,' says Miguel Mera, composer and leader of the MMus in Screen Composition at

London's Royal College of Music (RCM).

Another London conservatoire, the Royal Academy of Music (RAM), runs a four-year undergraduate degree in what it calls

Media and Applied Music. Dick Walter, head of the course, is convinced that a course in screen music isn't enough these days, and says students 'need musical skills that will allow them to work in a variety of areas of the business'.

Fourth-year student Katie Chatburn has gained a lot from the RAM's approach.

'When I first got on the course I thought I was going to be the next John Williams but I've realised that there's a whole other world to media composition,' she says.

The main difference with this type of composing is that you are always writing for an image and most likely to a definite brief.

'Media composition is not formed on solely artistic lines - it has a specific function whose form is largely dictated by the script,' Walter points out. 'It's not about writing symphonies.'

Unlike 'straight' composition commissions, the musicians often are not thought of until the end of the project, so deadlines can be extremely tight. Composer Debbie Wiseman had just 25 days in which to produce the score for the film *Wilde*. On a TV drama series you might get seven to ten days for a single episode and it doesn't end once the notes are

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Photo: courtesy of LPO

down, Wiseman warns: 'If you like to work on your own or not to be interfered with then it's not a career for you... the production designer, the director and graphics designer will all ask you to change things you've written.'

In commercials, music is even more out of your hands, as successful media and classical composer Joby Talbot explains.

'It's not really about art - it's about selling things,' Talbot says. 'You might write something that is an absolute 30-second gem and then someone will come in and say "yes, but will that shift our units of toilet paper?"...you're a hired hand and that's all there is to it.'

Composers often find it frustrating being tacked on at the end of a project and Wiseman herself prefers to be involved from the start: 'It gives you thinking time and [a chance for] conversations with the director before needing to put the notes down.'

Philip Glass has forged strong partnerships with directors such as Godfrey Reggio and Martin Scorsese, for whom he scored *Kundun*, a film about the Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet. Glass is very often in on the act from the beginning - but it's a luxury that can't be counted on.



Joby Talbot

Joby Talbot doesn't mind: 'Script stage doesn't actually make it any easier. They'll end up cutting things a lot so you have to make changes - I'd much rather write something fresh than re-edit and re-edit.'

As a composer, the range of media subject matter you face could be limitless so it is vital to be adept at employing different styles - from jazz to popular and world music. David Butterworth, a Bristol alumni now making a name for himself, says every project



Howard Shore conducting his score to the *Lord of the Rings*, ably assisted by the London Philharmonic Orchestra

necessitates a different approach: 'You need to be very flexible and understand a huge range of styles to invoke period, location and all aspects of the story being told - you'll certainly never have a moment to get bored.'

Understanding exactly what the director wants is sometimes complex since the majority have little or no musical training.

'They might ask for something to be romantic - but that could mean all sorts of things,' says the RCM's Miguel Mera. 'You have to go deeper to understand what that means to a particular person and that requires people skills.'

On top of that, composers need to understand the architecture of film including all the different camera angles and jargon. When students first arrive on the Bristol MA course, its organiser Martin Kiszko talks about how the story works in the film.

'I break down the scenes, the structure of the narrative, the sound track, image system and editing,' he says. 'Start watching and analysing as much film as possible - see classics such as DW Griffiths' *Birth of a Nation*, Max Steiner's *King Kong* and Alfred Newman's *Grapes of Wrath*.'

You need to be business savvy in this world. Luckily the majority of tutors on screen courses are working composers who can put theoretical situations into context. Kiszko, who has more than 200 scores to his name, is keen not to raise students' expectations unrealistically high: 'It's harder to come in now than at any time. I tell it like it is - warts and all.' Ben Curry, one of Kiszko's

students, says this kind of industry advice 'tends to seep in all the time so that everything has a real-world slant on it'.

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Budgeting for sessions, copyright issues, royalties and so on are all covered, as Kiszko explains: 'We try and prepare students for every and any eventuality the industry might throw at them.'

Becky Applin, an MA student at the RAM, appreciates the benefit of working on a project from start to finish: 'We're given a working tape [with the images on] and a strict deadline. Then we compose the music, conduct and record it with live musicians, edit it and dub it on to video.'

The course at Bournemouth University gives composers the chance to work with other students in film, TV and production. Jim Fowler, on the MA Screen composition course, says it provides 'an incredible chance for networking since you're surrounded by people who may well end up employing you to write for them in the future'.

A recent collaboration between an RCM student and a student at the Royal College of Art resulted in the duo winning a BAFTA Award for best animation. Joby Talbot agrees that some of his best collaborations have been when he's met someone early on in their career - 'then as they have become more successful they have kept working with me,' he says.

Learning the technological side of the business is also vital since smaller budgets mean electronics are being used a huge amount instead of live instruments.

Photo: courtesy of Joby Talbot

'One of the tricks is making one or two live instruments sound like a full quota of players by mixing them with your synthesiser,' says Mera.

But that's a double-edged sword; the frustrating thing is that music budgets have been slashed partly because sounds can be approximated electronically and in turn the equipment's accessibility means that even more people are turning their hand to it.

All the best equipment in the world can't imitate the real art of composition, though.

'There are loads of people who can sit down with a computer but very few who can sit down with manuscript paper and compose on it. It takes more than just pressing "loop" on your sequencer,' says Talbot.

So how do you get in on the scene? Whether you do a specific screen course or head off on your own the trick is still the same: you need contacts.

'It's not what you know it's really who you know,' admits Mera. 'You need to meet directors and producers to get your work heard. If that means doing work for free then you should because directors tend to stick to a composer they like. It's a long game you need to play.'

But having the contacts isn't enough. Your

'show reel' – a video of your scores in performance or, better still, to images – is crucial. And make sure you have a well-written covering letter: keep it short and sweet and follow it up with a phone call to set up a meeting.

'You have to go in and meet these people. Otherwise you are just a voice or a letter and your show reel will end being "lost" somewhere in their in-tray,' warns Elisa Harris, a young composer who went it alone after graduating with an MA in straight composition.

Researching the producers is also vital, says Talbot: 'Try and find tracks which might suit them and burn them a tailored show reel. Also remember it's no good having some Brucknerian piece that slowly evolves over 15 minutes. People never listen to more than the first 20 seconds of anything even if they like it.'

Many composers subsidise their work with orchestration, arranging or copying (preparing sheet music from the composer's original) to keep the money coming in.

'You have to be prepared to throw yourself on the line,' says Harris. 'Make the most of even the tiny contacts – you don't know where they might lead.'

In the end any experience is good experience. Talbot says, 'You might as well go for it – rather

than sitting around waiting for Miramax to ring you up which is never going to happen.'

'It can be like banging your head against a brick wall,' warns Butterworth. 'Your bankability is entirely dependent on previous credits and it's hard to break in.'

Sadly, the halcyon days – the time when young composers were lucky enough to learn at the feet of others and when TV companies commissioned work directly – are over.

'In those days you became known by the actual offices of, say, Granada or Yorkshire Television,' recalls Dick Walter, who at one time composed the music for roughly one advert every fortnight. 'But now it's the production companies which sell to the TV companies – it's all become very fragmented which makes it a lot harder.'

So it isn't all Oscars and champagne – but in the end the rewards are worth it.

'When you get it right and you have it played in Abbey Road by 80 musicians it makes you feel fantastic,' says Butterworth. And although Talbot readily admits that 'it never gets any easier', the bottom line is if it's in your blood you'll do it.

'If I wasn't making a living from it, I'd be doing it anyway,' Talbot insists – and that's about as good a reason as any. ■