

Custom Music for Filmmakers

by David Rubenstein

[Wonderful Music for Your Story](http://Wonderful-Music.com) (Wonderful-Music.com)

Who is this brochure for? Is it for me?

This brochure is for beginning and intermediate-level filmmakers. If you are actively thinking about or working on a film, then you may find this brochure to be helpful.

So often, filmmakers concentrate on finding or writing a good script, finding locations, actors, equipment, cinematographers—and put post-production on the back-burner. The importance of a music score is often under-appreciated. Watch a film in post-production, before music has been added, to see how much that extra emotional boost is needed.

What is the purpose of film music?

Film director James Cameron once said, “The score is the heart and soul of a film.” Perhaps 50% of the emotional underpinning of a scene can come from the music. Music can help to underline the scenes and it helps the viewer to “read between the lines”. It should tell the viewer what the characters are thinking. In a novel, the narrator can tell the reader what a character is thinking and feeling. A film usually does not have a narrator. So, we often rely on music to tell the viewer about the emotions felt by the characters, to tell the part of the story that is not explicitly shown on the screen. Music can totally change how a visual scene is interpreted. Music can sometimes even fill in for mistakes or omissions in a film’s visuals.

Music can highlight emotions, it can create atmosphere, and it can be used to glue rapid scene changes together. It can create parody, when the mood of the music contradicts the action on the screen. If the director wants, music can hint at the future, before the characters realize what is coming.

Another important purpose of film music is to help unify the film, to give it a cohesiveness that might otherwise be absent. Leitmotifs are melodies or musical themes that repeat throughout the film. Sometimes, a separate theme is assigned to each major character. The theme’s energy and mood can change as each character faces a different situation. This approach has been used with wonderful effect in some iconic movies.

Music can bring emotional associations to a film. There are certain music features—you can call them idioms—that help audiences to immediately recognize a time to laugh, to cry, to empathize with a character, to reveal a tender moment, a sarcastic remark, a celebration, an adventure, a heroic act, or an impending horror. Good composers know how to use these effects to elicit a wide range of emotions. There are a number of good examples of how a composer can use

music to manipulate emotions. Here is a wonderful example of how [different music cues can affect a scene from Lord of the Rings](#).

What is the most important thing to keep in mind?

Without a doubt, the most important thing to keep in mind is to budget for music in your film. Don't think of it as just an insignificant add-on, at the end of post-production.

Of course I would say that--I'm a composer!

No, really--think about the impact of music on your film. Imagine how your film would feel without any music at all. Or, with inappropriate music. Or with music that just doesn't quite get across the right emotion or mood. Imagine music cues that individually sound great in each scene, but fail to pull the film together.

What are my choices?

Music Libraries

There are hundreds of music production libraries out there. I personally have sold some of my tracks to music libraries. They may be a great source of inspiration for a filmmaker. However, as I am a film composer, I am going to show my bias against music production libraries. Here is why.

It can take a long time and many listening sessions to find music that is "just right". You may find a music clip that expresses exactly the feeling, in the right style, to go with a scene. But is it the right length? Does it dive down when there is dialog, does it emphasize the action appropriately, does it complement the sound effects, do action points get "hits" at precisely the right times?

Most importantly, do the music cues that you find help hold the film together? Is the style consistent? Do the melodies repeat--sometimes with variations--in order to unite the scenes and characters? Are the musical themes appropriate for the scenes and do they develop with the arc of the story, as new understandings develop about the characters?

So often, I have watched major motion pictures that insert a song with a mood or with lyrics that have absolutely nothing to do with the story! I don't understand this at all. Such films have big budgets that could easily have afforded good songwriters and relevant lyrics. Even for an Indie filmmaker, it does not necessarily require a big budget to hire a good songwriter and performer to produce a song that is directly relevant to your story.

Also, there is a strong tendency for directors or producers to include a song simply because "they like it". What? I love lots of music, but it is difficult to find existing music tracks that really fit into a scene.

What about “Royalty-Free Music?”

Royalty-free music is often misunderstood. It is not free. It is also not copyright-free. You pay once for its use, and then you can use it forever. In addition, “royalty-free” music is not actually free of royalties! When the music is performed publicly—on TV, in a film, or on the radio, for example—the network pays a royalty to a PRO (Performance Rights Organization). However, the producer does not pay these royalties. See [this useful article](#) for more information.

As a word of warning; when you license a music track, make sure to read the fine print. Sometimes a license is only good for a period of time. You do not want to have to pay the license fee again and again every year!

Hire a Film Composer

Do you know a good film composer? Then you can hire him or her. If you do not know one personally, there are many ways to find one. There are lots of Facebook groups where composers congregate; [Film Scoring Network for Composers & Filmmakers](#), [Filmmakers that Need a Composer](#), and [I Need an Indie Film Composer](#). Other places to advertise for a composer include [Starnow](#), [Mandy](#), [Backstage](#), [Student Films](#), [The Cue Tube](#), [Music Jobs](#), ... and the list goes on!

By the way, if you are a student filmmaker and have zero budget—do not fret about it. There are plenty of aspiring film composers—some who are still in school themselves—who would jump at any opportunity. But here is a warning; if you post an opportunity in any of these places, be prepared to be SWAMPED by people who call themselves “composers” who are eager for your attention.

Does the composer need to be local? Can remote work?

This answer to this question is up to you, the filmmaker. But in today’s world of communications, it is not a problem to work remotely with a composer. Communicating is a key to a successful collaboration, but apps like Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Facebook Messenger, Discord, and many other tools make it easy. You can also transfer large video and audio files back and forth with a wide range of tools like Google Drive, DropBox, OneDrive, and a host of others. Personally, the only difficulty I have encountered in working remotely occurs when I am collaborating with someone far away, where time zones are much different.

When should I choose and start working with a composer?

Some people would say you should choose a composer as soon as you have a script. You can send the script to a candidate composer, and ask him for an opinion about style, and which

scenes should require music. Seeing the script also gives the composer a feeling for the quality of the story and the dialog.

The spotting session is where the big decisions about music are first made. The director and composer watch the film together, and decide when music should be placed, and what functions it should serve. They will decide on the style of music in each cue, the emotions that need to be engendered, and when there needs to be special “hit points” in the action that require underscoring. The composer will take notes, and may give his opinions to the director. Not only do they decide *when* music should be placed, but also *when it shouldn't* be placed. An abrupt silence in the film score can be very powerful in emphasizing a plot point.

The director and composer should have a creative collaboration. However, the director has the final say in all of these decisions.

A Film Composer *is* a Filmmaker!

A film composer is not simply a composer who writes music for films. A film composer, first and foremost, is a *filmmaker* who specializes in music. A film composer can give your film an extra edge, and give your film an extra subtext. A good film composer understands film theory and the arc of the story. He understands where there should--and should not--be music playing. A film composer can make a film even better than the director has already accomplished.

Sometimes, a film composer is called a “*final writer*” on a film project. A good film composer can completely change the interpretation of a story, and can change the nature of relationships between the characters. Working with a film composer should be a collaborative effort. You should be open to his ideas and suggestions. However, at the end of the day, the filmmaker (director, producer, etc.) will have the final say. The composer works *with* you, but also *for* you.

So, it is not an easy task to find the right composer for your film. Perhaps the most important question to ask yourself is, how easy will it be to work with him or her? Do you have compatible personalities? Do you trust him or her? Is the composer reliable--will he deliver on time?

A filmmaker must be very careful of his choice of a composer. While a good film composer can elevate your film to a new level, a poor composer can destroy the film! A good film composer understands the structure of a story, and understands film theory.

When choosing a composer for your film, what should you look for? Is he capable of producing music in the style you need? When you listen to a composer's portfolio, try not to put him into a small pigeon-hole. Try not to say “I don't hear any of his music that I could directly put into *my* film.” A good composer can emulate many styles, and you can ask him if he is comfortable composing in the style that you have chosen. Use his portfolio as an indication of the quality of his music and his range of styles. Obviously, you should look for the composer's experience, portfolio, and testimonials or references from previous filmmakers. Is the composer easy to get

along with? Will the composer give me good advice, but at the end of the day, will he/she allow me to have the final say?

The annals of film scoring are full of stories about how a director has chosen a musician without previous composing experience to create a score. The musician can play an instrument, but might not have a music education, and might not be able to read music. And he creates a masterful film score.

We hear about these stories because they are successes. We also hear about directors who hire highly experienced composers, who create beautiful film scores. However, for some reason the directors are disappointed. They throw out the film scores, and find other music for their films. (A case in point is "2001: A Space Odyssey".)

Can I have live musicians perform the film score?

A film score will almost always sound best when performed by live musicians. However, the decision to hire live musicians to perform your film score depends on the budget. If you have a low-budget or a no-budget film, then it may be out of the question. Your composer will have to do all the production himself, using his own skills as a performer, or by using realistic virtual instruments. It is possible to program a virtual orchestra to sound realistic to all but the most discriminating listeners. But be aware that producing a realistic virtual orchestra requires considerable experience, effort, and time. Keep in mind the adage, "*You want the music to be good, fast, and cheap. You get to pick two out of three.*"

If the budget allows for live musicians, it is often the composer who hires them. The director leaves the decisions about who to hire up to the composer. The composer pays for the musicians directly out of his own pocket (however, the filmmaker ultimately pays for the musicians). But it's not only the musicians who must be paid; the studio, conductor and sound engineer also need to be budgeted for a good recording. Alternatively, sometimes the composer spices up a virtual orchestration to sound more realistic with a few "real-life" musician performances. And of course, singing is always best with live performances!

What about the full orchestras that I hear in so many films? High-budget films can afford to hire entire orchestras, although the cost can run from \$30,000 (for a small orchestra for a short piece of music) up to many hundreds of thousands of dollars. There are some superb East-European orchestras that can be hired for a low price, but buyer beware.

How much will it cost?

A custom, original film score isn't cheap. There are various guidelines, ranging from 5% to 15% of the total production cost. Your composer has accumulated a lot of education, experience, expensive tools, and understanding of film scores. And, if he is well-established, he may have a team working for him; an arranger, an orchestrator ... and that doesn't include recording

engineers. If you are working on a low-budget or no-budget film, there are ways to negotiate a low-cost or even a no-cost score.

Film composers can earn money through two avenues; a creator's fee and through royalties. The filmmaker pays the creator's fee—it is whatever you negotiate with the composer. Sometimes a portion of the creator's fee is paid up front, before the project begins. Other times, the creator's fee is not paid until all of the music has been delivered. Everything is up for negotiation.

Both the film producer and the composer can share in the royalties. If you expect your film to be shown in theaters or television, then your film production company should join a PRO (Performance Rights Organization). The film producer joins as a "publisher" and the composer joins as a "creator". Every country has its own PRO; in the United States there are three; [ASCAP](#), [BMI](#), and [SESAC](#). If you live in another country, you can easily look up [your country's PRO](#). After a film is produced, the filmmaker fills in a [cue sheet](#), and sends the cue sheet to his PRO. The cue sheet lists each music cue in a film, its duration, and the names of the people who produced each cue. Then, after the film is performed or broadcast, royalties are eventually distributed to the producer and to the composer.

Usually, the film production company owns the film score. This copyright ownership allows the company to use the music in advertisements, trailers, and even to sell the soundtrack separately to streaming services. If you are producing a low-budget or a no-budget film, you may still be able to hire a composer, even without an up-front creator's fee. Give the composer the full rights to his music, and just retain for yourself the right to use it in your film and in film trailers. Give the composer prominent credit in the film (you should always do this!) and credit in IMDB. Allow the composer to present excerpts from the film in his portfolio website. "Exposure" is not a substitute for fair pay, but it doesn't hurt, either. Alternatively, you can allow the composer to invest in your film, by replacing an up-front fee for a percentage of the potential film profits.

If you have a good track record and have produced quality films, the composer might be inclined to be more flexible in the cost. When negotiating a fee for a composer, my guideline is to consider how much the actors, the cinematographer, the director, the editor, or the sound guy are getting paid. If nobody in the production is being paid—if it is purely a passion project—then you may find a composer willing to work on it for free, as well. Otherwise, pay the composer for his effort and for the value that his music will add to your film.

What style of music do I want?

The style of music is a central question for a filmmaker. There are many styles of music to choose from. The answer depends on the genre of your film, and the effect you want it to have on your audience. Most films use either Western orchestral music, or a small set of orchestral instruments. But there are also plenty of films with music in rock, blues, folk, new age, hip-hop,

ambient, or electronic styles. Sometimes ethnic instruments are included, to give the film the exotic sound of a distant country.

But keep in mind—the film score should not necessarily be in the style that you *like*; it should be in the style that your film *needs*. Some people hold to a view that the size of the musical ensemble should be dictated by the size of the area in which a scene occurs. Put as many music performers into a scene that would actually fit there! If a scene takes place in a small room, then just one or two instruments should play. If, on the other hand, a scene takes place in an open outdoor area, then an entire orchestra would be appropriate. However, not all filmmakers would agree with this idea—it is just something to think about.

Two Schools of Thought

Everyone agrees that “the music score should serve the film.” No arguments there. But there are major disagreements about how music should serve the film. Some people say that music should be an accompaniment in the background, that it should not explicitly be noticed by the audience. It should help set the emotional stage, the atmosphere and mood, but it should not impinge on the viewer’s consciousness. People should leave the screening, and if asked how they liked the music, they would be compelled to answer, “Was there music?”

The other school of thought is that the film score should be memorable. The idea is that distinctive melodies can adapt to the moods and emotions that each scene evokes. This is music that can be hummed or whistled as the audience exits the theater. (My mother often reminded me that when I was eight years old I returned home from the movie “Lawrence of Arabia” and played the theme song over and over!) Distinctive, memorable melodies from a host of great movies help make the movies themselves memorable. (Think, for example, of “Pirates of the Caribbean”, “Star Wars”, “Superman”, “The Good the Bad and the Ugly”, “Lord of the Rings”, “The Pink Panther”). This is the school of thought that I believe in. Personally, I cannot fathom why a filmmaker wouldn’t want people to remember their film score.

How should I prepare?

How should I talk to a composer?

Speak with your composer the same way you talk with any of your actors. Talk in terms of emotions, use lots of adjectives to convey the moods you envision, the feelings that the characters are portraying. Try not to use specific musical terms! Of course, you can use general stylistic terms, like “jazz”, “rock”, “orchestral”, and so on. But, unless you are a musician yourself, you could easily use specific musical terms incorrectly. As a result, you and your composer can waste a lot of time and effort.

How much time should I budget for composing and producing a film score?

I have heard of professional composers being given a week to compose a complete score for a feature film. Generally, that would be quite an unrealistic expectation. Somewhere between six to eight weeks is more realistic. A good composer can compose about 2 minutes of music per day. Then there is production; either a live recording with mixing and mastering, or virtual orchestration. Altogether, it would be safe to allow 4 days for each 2 minutes of music.

Start talking with the composer before the film is ready. Even in the pre-production stage, send the script to him. If you are in post-production, let him watch unedited sections of the film, to give an idea of what is coming. Some composers like to compose an informal suite of themes beforehand, to give the director some ideas to talk about.

At some point in the post-production phase, the film will be ready for the composer. Do not give him a final copy of the film until it is picture locked. You can still work on color corrections at this point, but the worst thing you can do is to change the timings of scenes. Even cutting a frame or two can have repercussions, and require revisions to the music.

Should I prepare Temp Tracks?

Temp tracks can help you and your composer. It is a way to help communicate to the composer the emotions, moods, and feelings you want to convey in a scene. But, there are some dangers to using temp music. You will spend a lot of time editing your film, and if you have injected a temporary music track into your film, you might start to really “love” it. In fact, this is a well-known phenomenon called “temp love”. Instead of allowing your composer to fit the music to action in a scene, you might even edit your scenes to fit the temp music!

So, a good practice is to find music tracks that portray the emotions and atmosphere you need for each scene, but not necessarily the same duration that you require. Let your composer know the start and end points of the music cues that you need for each scene.

Oh, and one more thing. It is sometimes suggested that you use a temp track that is the *worst* production quality, as long as it portrays the emotions you are going for. If the production quality is very high, then you might be setting yourself up for disappointment.

What should I send to the composer?

Send a picture-locked version of the film. It should be complete, in the sense that it contains all the dialog, title screen, credits, and so on. If there is diegetic music from some other source, then it should be included as well. Diegetic means that the music can be heard by the characters in the film—for example, from a radio or TV, or from a band on a stage. You may already have this music prepared, or you might ask your composer to produce it.

If you have temp music, it should be supplied separately from the primary version of the film. It can be supplied as a separate audio file or in a separate video file. Sometimes people like to put the dialog in one stereo channel, and the temp music in the other channel, so that the composer can switch between the versions as needed. (Personally, I don't like this approach.)

I just received the first music cue from my composer. What should I do with it?

First, synchronize the music cue with your film, and watch it. The music may be too loud--composers love their music, and it's a common thing. Simply set the volume of the music track to where you want it to be. Dialog, of course, should always be plainly heard, and no music or sound effects should interfere with it. And, ask yourself if the dialog is clearly intelligible even without music or sound effects. Often I have heard dialog that is difficult to understand, for a multitude of reasons; It's not loud enough, or too much background noise, or simply actors not enunciating very well.

Let it sit in your mind overnight. Don't make a premature judgment. Maybe it's not what you had in mind at all--maybe it's better.

What should I do if I don't like a music cue from the composer?

Perhaps, after sitting overnight and watching the film again, you still don't like it. That shouldn't be a problem. Think about what emotion is lacking, or maybe is too strong. Convey to your composer your reaction in terms of emotions. Unless you are a musician yourself, don't try to use musical terms, because they might just confuse the composer. I've heard of stories, for example, "I don't like how the oboe comes in there with the tremolo." And the composer wonders, "But, there is no oboe in the score--and no instrument is performing a tremolo."

Instead, talk to your composer, just as if he/she is an actor. What do you want emphasized? Are there certain events (or hits) that you do or do not want synchronized with the music? What emotion is not coming through? What do you want the viewer to feel at this point, or what do you want the viewer to know--or not know--that might not be apparent on the screen?

Yes, you can ask for revisions. The number of revisions should be limited to two, or at the very most, to three. If the composer is just not giving you what you want--you want classical and you are getting rock--then this is not the composer for you. Find an alternative.

Questions?

If you have questions about the process, feel free to contact me: David@Wonderful-Music.com