

Making Beautiful Music Finding And Working With Your Composer

It's a common problem: A moviemaker who can talk shop with writers about character arcs and plot points, who can banter with actors about motivation and backstory, who can breezily chew the techno fat with DPs and special effects wizards ... completely freezes up when it comes time to talk to the composer about her film.

For most of us, our musical vocabularies are limited to phrases such as "It's got a beat you can dance to," "Man, she held that note forever," and "Hey, nice accordion solo." And our knowledge of how a song or musical score is crafted is even smaller. No wonder many of us approach the musical side of our films with uncertainty and apprehension. What we do know is the music is crucial to the emotional success of our storytelling on film, so somehow we have to learn to speak tourist phrases, at least, in the language of composers.

You might think that the first problem is finding a composer, but in reality that probably won't be all that difficult. Once you publicize that you're making a film -- particularly if you announce it in any sort of trade publication -- you'll start getting offers from composers and would-be composers, each vying to score your film.

If your community has performing and recording musicians, composers working on commercials and industrial videos, or a university community with music programs, it's likely you'll find composers looking for a chance to expand their talents into movie soundtracks. When we made our first two features, "Resident Alien" and "Beyond Bob," the stack of resume tapes we got from composers was only slightly smaller than the stack of head shots we received from actors.

But the key is not just finding a composer. It's finding the right composer; someone who understands your film and your intentions, someone who can work collaboratively with you, and someone who can work within your budget.

We're the first to admit that we got lucky when it came to finding our composer, David Reynolds. When he started on "Resident Alien," he had never scored a feature before, but he had written and produced jingles and industrial music for years, had a university education in music theory and composition, and was extremely well-connected to the local music industry. He also had the enthusiasm, energy and wit of the Road Runner.

For “Resident Alien,” he created a beautiful synthesized score (with a few live instruments in key sections) that meshed perfectly with our sci-fi tale, and he did it for virtually nothing, which fit our music budget nicely. When we graduated to “Beyond Bob,” he moved with us and spent almost a year on the film’s music, giving us a 70-minute score for only about \$800 in materials and lab work. Music to our ears and no red ink for our balance sheet.

In both instances, we provided him with the same basic materials, which was simply a VHS copy of the film, shot directly off the editing table. (Hint: Never run a patch cord from your flatbed to a camcorder. That pop you’ll hear is a \$300 repair to the flatbed.) There are, of course, more high-tech ways to do this. One can make a video transfer of the film with a timecode window burned in and with an audio SMPTE track, which will lock the composer’s computer with the tape. If your budget allows, go this route. Your composer will love it.

The next step is sitting down with your composer and “spotting” the film, which means finding those spots in the film that need music. Many directors like to edit their films to a temporary track (taking music from other soundtracks and recordings), in order to get a sense of how the music works in each scene when edited.

Some composers like this, some don’t. Years ago, in an interview in *Cinefantastique* (Vol 6, No 1), Brian DePalma told of sitting down for a spotting session with Bernard Hermann for the film “Sisters.” He had a temporary track in place. As soon as Hermann heard the music, he reportedly shouted, “Turn it off! Turn it off! How can you play that while I’m listening to the film?!” (Of course, it probably didn’t help that the temporary score was made up of music from other films that Hermann had scored, such as “Vertigo” and “Psycho.”)

In addition to the spotting session, you’ll also need to spend time talking to your composer about your intentions for each scene and sequence: How you want to build suspense here, make the main character seem sympathetic in this scene, foreshadow a later event, and so on. If this is completely foreign soil for you, watch some familiar movies and pay attention just to the music -- how it helps heighten the action and emotions, how characters may have their own theme music, and how music is used to link related scenes. You’ll get the idea of how music can help make your movie even better.

You don’t need any real musical knowledge for this discussion -- it’s the composer’s job to translate those emotions into music, and he or she will know the best way to create what the scene needs. You just need to know your movie.

In our work with Reynolds, we often played him other music that we liked, to give him an idea of what we were after. For the song that plays over the opening credits of “Beyond Bob,” we gave him a half dozen pop songs that had the feel we were after. Then he created a completely original song that still captured the spirit of the other songs.

The other key item to give your composer is the cheapest thing of all: a little creative freedom. In many cases, particularly on an ultra-low-budget film, your composer may be working for little or no money. We’ve found that the best thing you can give an artist -- when you don’t have cash -- is a license to experiment and grow.

That creativity, once released, can help your film a thousand-fold. When Reynolds scored “Beyond Bob” he used every creative trick he could think of to get us the best soundtrack for the least amount of money.

The bulk of the score was performed by a 16-piece orchestra he put together, using semi-professional players from a community orchestra -- all working for a deferred payment if the film made profits (and it was made clear that profits were a long shot). A string quartet was pulled from this larger group for other portions of the movie, and soloists were brought in for other key segments of the soundtrack -- all for no cash upfront.

For the opening and closing sequences, he and assistant music supervisor, John McKone, gathered together 17 members of the University of Minnesota Jazz Band to create a big band sound. All the musicians worked in exchange for credit in the film and for the experience of working on a film score.

Our wily and resourceful composer persuaded a local music and audio engineering school to provide us with free studio and recording time in exchange for letting their students earn credit by working on our project. This gave us access to professional studio engineers, who were assisted by the students throughout the process. It cost us nothing.

We also benefited from the generosity of a couple of local bands, including the always helpful Auto Body Experience, who gave us permission to use some of their recordings in the film in exchange for the screen credit and exposure. None of the bands are nationally known -- yet -- but all the songs were professionally produced and provide the film’s soundtrack with a nice variety of styles.

Our greatest hope for everyone that worked on our first two productions was that the films would help them get to a point in their careers where we couldn’t afford to hire them for our next ultra-low-budget film. This dream has come true for a couple of our alumni, with Reynolds leading the

pack. He has moved out of our budget range and gone on to score several larger-budget independent features, such as Eric Lea's "George B," which was at Sundance last year, and Gregory Ruzzin's "Blue Skies Are A Lie." He's also done his share of mainstream Hollywood fare, working in various musical capacities on such films as "The Flood," "Species," "Murder At 1600," and "Rounders."

We're convinced there are other diamonds in the rough out there, other composers looking for their first chance to shine. They can help make your film exceptional, if you give them the tools they need -- your input, your resources, and a little creative license -- to do their best work.

[By John Gaspard & Dale Newton. First published in "MovieMaker Magazine," Vol. 6, Number 31. Copyright by John Gaspard & Dale Newton]