

Finding Work as a Film Composer

By Don B. Ray (1925-2005)

For every feature or TV film produced, there are probably ten composers with established reputations who will make an effort to capture the scoring assignment. This abundance places the young composer seeking a career in films rather in the position of a gambler playing Russian roulette: the odds are not encouraging and the stakes are high.

Still a few young composers do find work each year and do begin careers in film scoring. Such entrée is usually the product of shrewdness, dumb luck, and the ability to deliver when the “golden chance” finally arrives.

Obviously luck cannot be planned for, but at least one can place oneself where the odds are more favorable. A young composer may be the greatest talent since Erich Korngold, but if he lives in Point Mogu no one will ever know. Proximity to filmmakers increases the possibility of luck.

Unless one has an uncle who is production head for a major studio, sometimes the best access to those who hire composers is by finding work as a studio messenger, usher, clerk/typist – anything that will provide regular contact with people in the business. In such a capacity one can begin to develop the casual friendships with assistant story editors, secretaries, production assistants, etc. that will provide the crucial access when one is ready for a frontal assault on a filmmaker.

During this time the composer accommodates his impatience and sharpens his skills by writing incidental music for every little theater production and student film he can find. This builds a word-of-mouth reputation with contemporaries while also providing a portfolio of music cues for later audition purposes.

But it would be a significant mistake to expect even the best demo tape to influence the producer; only the composer’s social skills will do that. Producers take chances on people they like, so a significant personal relationship must be developed. Once this is achieved *then* examples of one’s work become important.

Presuming the interview does issue into the “big chance,” the next factor is possessing the skills necessary to capitalize on the community. Successful film composers have differing backgrounds but most have minimally the equivalent of two years college study in music plus some practical experience as a pop musician, orchestral player, arranger, etc. Training in the specifics of film scoring with a teacher who has himself been a successful film composer is useful.

But in the final analysis it will be the composer’s dramatic instincts and his musical resourcefulness that will determine his success.

It is regrettable that work opportunities in film music are so limited and that there is no effective apprenticeship system to which the young composer can submit himself in preparing for a career in scoring. This situation has led some resourceful neophytes into a variety of imaginative stratagems intended to achieve alliances necessary to the development of a career.

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There are also peripheral careers that can be either ends in themselves or adjuncts to a developing career in film music. Several successful film composers began as copyists, using contacts in this area to build access to producers while also providing them a decent living. Others have begun as apprentice music editors, although it is necessary to point out that few if any composers have risen from the ranks of music editors.

It is also possible to build a satisfying career as a composer in any major city by attracting clients from among the local industrial film houses; these too need film scores. Admittedly this field lacks the glamour of having one's name flashed on the TV tube every month, but it could provide careers for a dozen young composers willing to extend themselves.

A word of warning: it is not enough to have boundless faith in oneself or to arrive in the "big city" clad in the blind faith that somehow things will magically work out. Nor will sending tapes and resumes to a hundred faceless producers do more than bankrupt the young composer.

A career in film music involves substantial preparation, extended commitment, and confronting the possibility that, after a reasonable period of time, some "Plan B" may have to be considered.