

Music, software in synthesis



Composer-musician Art Phillips . . . 'freed up creativity'

Ingenuity helps film composer hit right chord

By BRYCE HALLETT

COMPOSING the right music to complement motion pictures is no simple matter but technology advances have led to greater experimentation and invention, according to film composer Art Phillips.

Originally from the United States, the musician-composer has been creating sound for corporate videos, television and feature films for many years.

In perfecting his art, Phillips has come to rely increasingly on an array of technology — Macintosh computers, digital samplers, synthesizers and DAT — to make the most out of what he describes as "the emotional interplay" between sound and image.

In association with the Australian Film, Television and Radio School's year of the composer, Phillips gave

'Emotional interplay'

audiences at the Melbourne Film Festival last week a chance to appreciate a composer's role in film.

Surrounded by computers and synthesizers, complete with a projection of the Macintosh screen, Phillips showed how he translated his musical ideas to evoke mood and atmosphere in the film medium.

Using Performer and Cue software and giving the impression that the computer did all, Phillips said the advances in sound technology had essentially "freed up creativity".

"The impact of recent technology has had a significant effect in scoring music for film," he said.

"It has enabled the composer to find a logical tempo to match the visuals, providing them with the space to think imaginatively without being impeded by mathematical calculations.

"The crucial starting point is to complement a visual scene or the dramatic action rather than to dominate the image.

"It is important to think visually, introducing or using musical motifs to add texture to characters and events. Although the music can become a character in itself, it should not be the focus."

Phillips said composing music which was subservient to image was an exacting task and required building up musical layers around given "hit points" in a film.

"Timing is fundamental to how well the score works. It is not enough to use Ravel's Bolero simply because it seems to fit," he said.

"The onus is on the composer and, with the considerable aid of computers, he is able to explore a variety of pieces before settling on what he thinks is apt for the meaning of a scene."

By pressing a few buttons, Phillips showed how different pieces of music could transform the meaning of a scene and displayed the flexibility afforded by technology to refine or delete the music.

"Everything has to work smoothly to a cut and with an electronic time code a lot of the painstaking work is eliminated, allowing the composer to think beyond musical clichés and take a more considered approach," he said.

Phillips, based in Sydney for the past three years, began his musical career as a session musician in Los Angeles. This led to orchestration, production and musical direction.

His credits include the Australian Film Institute-nominated *Sher Mountain Killing Mystery*, *The Fatal Bond* and a US television series, *Santa Barbara*. He has taught at the Grove School of Music (US), the AFI and the ABC School of Music.