

The Screen Composer and the Chameleon Principle



Screen composers must be able to accommodate all forms of music and need to be like a chameleon, having the ability to change colour and adapt to any musical situation.

Creating music has always been an intriguing craft. From the early days of tribal chanting and spiritual songs to current creations using musical technology or orchestral palettes, music has provided society with an escape from reality. How and why it affects the listener to feel particular emotions is a fascinating science.

Music can be written to serve various purposes and is composed to create a desired effect. A great range of genres is available, from classical, symphonic works to rap songs. Creating a musical artistic work is a wonderful and rewarding experience and hopefully, the masterpiece will be fulfilling enough for listeners to want to continue their escape into that particular set of emotions, and to allow it to have a life of its own. Why one composition has appeal and another falls out of favour is a study in itself.

Music stirs our senses, takes us to places not easily reached without its inherent characteristics, characteristics derived from tonal frequencies vibrating in many combinations. Music stirs emotion and has the power to alter one's mood.

"Music is what feelings sound like" ~
Author unknown

"Music is the shorthand of emotion" ~
Leo Tolstoy

Music for the screen, which I often refer to as an invisible character, provides storyline guidance and definition for the viewer. More than simple atmospheric shadings, music alters the viewer's emotional position in a theatrical seat, and is able to create a clearer understanding about a character's personality; it can supply perspective, has the ability to grip the viewer into intended beliefs and sway the

audience into a trance-like process where their journey is transformed into a much more engaging world of entertainment.

Screen music, be it for film, television or the many visual mediums, steers emotions and creates dimensions beyond just what words and pictures are capable of.

The elements of sound and music are an integral part of the story-telling process

Silent film embraced music, live as it were, to provide emotion and depth of understanding for the viewer. It has been suggested that it originally served two purposes – that it helped camouflage the sound of the noisy projectors in the theatre and secondly and more importantly, that emotion and mood are certainly better fulfilled with the use of music to image.

"A painter paints his pictures on canvas. But musicians (composers) paint their pictures on silence" - Leopold Stowoski

"When words leave off, music begins" - Heinrich Heine

For the last 85 prolific years of the talkies, screen music has driven the viewer's emotions in desired directions. Mostly, its function is to guide the audience on what to feel and when, and has the ability to create a mood that may not necessarily be obvious in what we are seeing. Music can tell a story even without a word being spoken.

The relationship that viewers have with what they are watching is based heavily on where music takes them emotionally, whether they realise it's happening or not.

The process

Writing music for the screen not only provides an outlet for artistic expression, but it creates direct access to an audience. After all, once a work is created, the creator hopes that their newly born will survive and be able to fend for itself. Screen composition is certainly a path to this endeavour, as the creation is set for an intended purpose, on the back of another piece of creativity that is usually already commissioned for upcoming broadcast or sales.

Scoring music for the screen is a very collaborative process, and the collaboration gives the composer an important hook to "hang their hat on" - a purposeful and powerful outlet for their creation. It also provides for an income stream. The collaboration itself is guidance about what needs to be accomplished and where and when in the program various moods are needed. This is usually a director's or producer's call. When working in film we mostly take direction from the director; however, in television, in most cases we collaborate more closely with the program producer.

I view each project as a fresh exciting challenge, attempting not to overstep previous conclusions relating to formula and texture. I will watch a program a number of times until something comes out of thin air. The initial thoughts might just be a phrase or an idea about how to treat a situation within the story. Initially, the ideas might simply be a way to approach a character or situation as an emotion.

The most important period, even before a note of music is written, is the "muse" process; being the process for creative thought and direction. This process eventually provides a formula to the composer where the next stage of scoring can then take effect. Many times, part of the muse process is determining what type of instruments to use, finding a template of colours to craft our work from, and creating a limitation, if I may suggest, in order to provide solid reasoning relating to "the why" and "the how" of putting music to a scene. Every musical decision should serve a purpose, consciously or subconsciously. Those choices are mostly purpose-built by the composer in order to achieve the intended goals.

This initial muse period may take a week or two or sometimes only days. I make sure this is a known factor when I begin a project, as there is nothing worse than flying by the seat of your "muse", experimenting as you go, in a mad rush to make the deadline, resulting in a mistake that could have been avoided. Avoided, had the producer realised this most important step for both composer and filmmaker. Producers need to get their composer on board earlier than they realise.

If you start scoring too early with nothing substantial to hang your hat on, you will never make a difference and the entire process will become very difficult. Music needs to value-add emotion to the script, not just be there for the sake of sound.

In the majority of cases, the muse period only needs to be considered at the start of a television series, not for each episode. Once the composer begins scoring for episodic television, they usually have but one week to complete an episode. This period consists of the spotting session with your director / producer (watching the program, then highlighting specific moments of emotional concern and musical consideration), scoring the music, recording, director's audition, alterations if any, then mixing and delivering – hence the importance of the muse period. The same scoring process continues on a weekly basis for the entire series. Film is another story, usually taking approximately 5 to 6 weeks to create, record and deliver. Documentaries encompass approximately a 2-week scoring period.

Australian Guild of Screen Composers (AGSC)

Working as a composer can be an isolating business, on your own for long hours with little or no contact with the outside world. Rarely is there much contact between fellow composers who share the same art form. The Australian Guild of Screen Composers (AGSC) is an industry group which brings together and serves the composers.

The main purpose of the Guild is: (i) to heighten the profile of our local composers, (ii) attempt to take away the myths of how our craft works, (iii) to educate the screen industry on how to most effectively work with a composer. As screen composing is a collaborative creative process, the AGSC also works closely with other industry organisations to share information and to address various issues. For the past 30 years, the Guild has provided a multitude of seminars, organized discussion groups, supply and publish advice to industry, advise and work on policy making, give composers access to a standard contract plus many other beneficial items, including award events.

“Scoring music for the screen is a very collaborative process.”

Bruce Smeaton and Bruce Rowland first established the Guild back in 1981 as a vehicle to combat challenges and issues that were facing composers. Bob Young became the first president (1987~1991) and the current AGSC president is Clive Harrison.

In 1991, APRA became the Guild's major sponsor. APRA's contribution to the Guild has been essential, as it has allowed the aims and objectives of the AGSC to be more clearly realised through its numerous activities and incentives.

In 2002, APRA merged part of its awards system with what the Guild had established 12 years earlier as a boutique, sought-after awards program event. With APRA on board, the awards took on new vitality. The Screen Music Awards have become one of Australia's red-carpet industry events, held each year during the first week of November. The awards ceremony features a live orchestra.

To join the Guild, or to be included on its mailing list, please email Jo Smith at agsc@agsc.org.au

APRA / The Australasian Performing Right Association Limited

As a screen composer, as is the case with all composers, it is highly beneficial to become a member of APRA. APRA works to ensure that composers, songwriters and publishers are rewarded whenever, and wherever, their musical works are played, performed or reproduced and it helps Australian & New Zealand music consumers get access to the world's musical repertoire.

APRA was established in 1926 and now administers the performing and communication rights of over 62,000 composer, songwriter and music

publisher members in Australia and New Zealand. Public performances of music include music used in pubs, clubs, fitness centres, shops, cinemas, festivals, whether performed live, on CDs or played on the radio or television. Communication of music covers music used for music on hold, music accessed over the internet or used by television or radio broadcasters.

The first performing rights society was established in France in 1851. In the UK, the Copyright Act of 1842 was the first to protect musical compositions with the Performing Right Society (PRS), founded in 1914 encompassing live performances. Italy introduced a performing rights society in 1882 as did Germany in 1915. In the United States, The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) was founded in 1914; the Society of European Stage Authors & Composers (SESAC) in 1930 and Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI) in 1939.

Other than their primary purpose as an intermediary between rights holders and customers, performing right organizations are highly active in legal arenas. They are able to take alleged rights violators to court, and can lobby on behalf of rights holders, especially in discussions of legal royalty rates.

The licensing services provided by a Performing Rights Organisation (PRO) arguably provide advantage to customers who can simultaneously license all works the PRO represents.

More than just acting as a collecting society, APRA provides support and guidance to its members, and has specialist departments for the various areas.

For more information about APRA and

how to become a member go to: <http://www.apra-amcos.com.au>

The Chameleon Principle

To work effectively in our industry I believe it is important to be a diverse composer / musician. The luxury of being able to pick and choose every project is simply not a reality in the majority of cases. Being a specialist may not be beneficial, especially if you want to survive in this industry. Besides, the challenge to diversify is rewarding. Stylistically, composers must be able to accommodate all forms of music and need to be like a chameleon, having the ability to change colour and adapt to any musical situation.

The more works created by a composer, the greater the addition to their “wall of bricks and mortar”, the composer's biggest asset. It's not just one or a dozen works that build a substantial career and income flow, but the many and various copyrights a composer has in their catalogue. Whether earning 7 cents on one work or \$ 5,000 on another, all add up and become part of the composer's fortress.

APRA and the various PRO's throughout the world look after the composer's performance rights, and they make sure their members' copyrights are tracked and distributed correctly. In addition to the programs' music cue sheets, any additional information the composer can supply to APRA is important, such as the program broadcast details, including airdates, times and network / channel.

APRA and the AGSC are of immense benefit to our industry as their supporting role is invaluable. Having the resources of these organisations available to us creates a far more harmonious creative / business balance and allows the creative process the freedom to flourish.

Art Phillips is a screen composer, a Councillor on the Music Council of Australia representing Music in Film and Television, and the immediate past president of the Australian Guild of Screen Composers (2001-2008). Art is the new head consultant to the University of Western Sydney College for its Associate Degree In Creative Industries, launching in 2012. He also chairs the advisory committee for the Degree program.