

# MUSIC MOVIES

FROM THE

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MUSIC MOVIES

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ALL THIS PLUS NEWS, REVIEWS, PROFILES AND A CHANCE TO WIN TICKETS TO SEE  
**JERRY GOLDSMITH** IN CONCERT WITH THE ROYAL SCOTTISH NATIONAL ORCHESTRA



# The Mechanics of Composing for Production Music

by Art Phillips

There was a time when production music was viewed as a bland, generic, uninteresting and mostly an unemotional source of music tracking. Library Music, as it was once called, is now revered as a much classier, creative and practical alternative for music track sourcing.

Why does production music exist? It is twofold from my point of view. Firstly, we have the situation where a production is unable to afford original music, albeit lower-end budget style productions. Production music allows a producer of a television series or radio programme to utilise a quality music soundtrack which suits the genre and style of what they might hope to achieve with an original music score. Secondly, it is utilised when there is simply not enough time for an original score to be written and recorded. Take for example a series that airs five days per week and air dates are tightly butted up against production schedules. In both these instances production music becomes a practical and viable alternative to an exclusively commissioned original music score. I highlight 'exclusive' as one must understand that production music can be utilised by numerous other productions, therefore it could not become a signature type score or theme exclusive to that one production.

## Classy track

As a screen composer, as well as the vice-president of The Australian Guild of Screen Composers, one would think that this concept of stock music sourcing would be viewed as not in line with professional thinking. However, it is to the contrary. I would hope that a producer is able to understand that if he or she wants to obtain an original score it is going to cost a particular amount for this service, such as creative fees and outgoing production costs which are associated with the delivery. When budgets are tight I would rather see producers utilise production music scores which would give them a classy soundtrack for an affordable price. In fact, they are much better off using production libraries rather than getting an inexperienced bedroom composer to score their job as it will probably not serve justice to their programme.

We find that in recent years production music libraries have become extremely conscious of the quality of product they deliver. Most of this CD product is being written by established screen composers and musicians with quite a large track record. And I am happy to report that when this style of music is used properly by a producer it appears to have been scored to image, therefore working in a very sophisticated manner to the screen.

Roughly, fifty percent of my recent work is in this area and I enjoy it immensely. It is not unlike writing a score to a screen production. Obviously there are not visuals to score and lock to; however, the briefs which I receive from the executive producers of these projects are honestly

some of the best director briefs I have ever received. The briefs are very detailed, extremely creative, and paint a vivid picture all along the way. It enables composers to really get inspired and sink their teeth into a production music score. It allows our imagination to coincide with imaginary visual scenes and complete storyline scenarios for every track that we are working on. A track is like a scene within the concept story of the film, the film title being the CD itself.

A production library will decide what type of product they are in need of based on their current market usage and specific requests from users, then forecast what the upcoming year might return if they release a CD in a particular market direction. There are various styles that I have scored for in this medium and will list some of my recent works: *Pacific Rim, Acoustic Anthology/Guitarworks, Impact Trailers, Visions Of Asia, Dramatic Technology/Corporate, Event Horizon/Corporate, Acoustic Portraits 2, Organic, Human Drama, Extreme Sports, Dramatic Impact 1, Acoustic Portraits, TV Suspense/Tension, Hi-Tech Corporate 2, Impressions Of Asia, Down Under.*

## Pictorial images

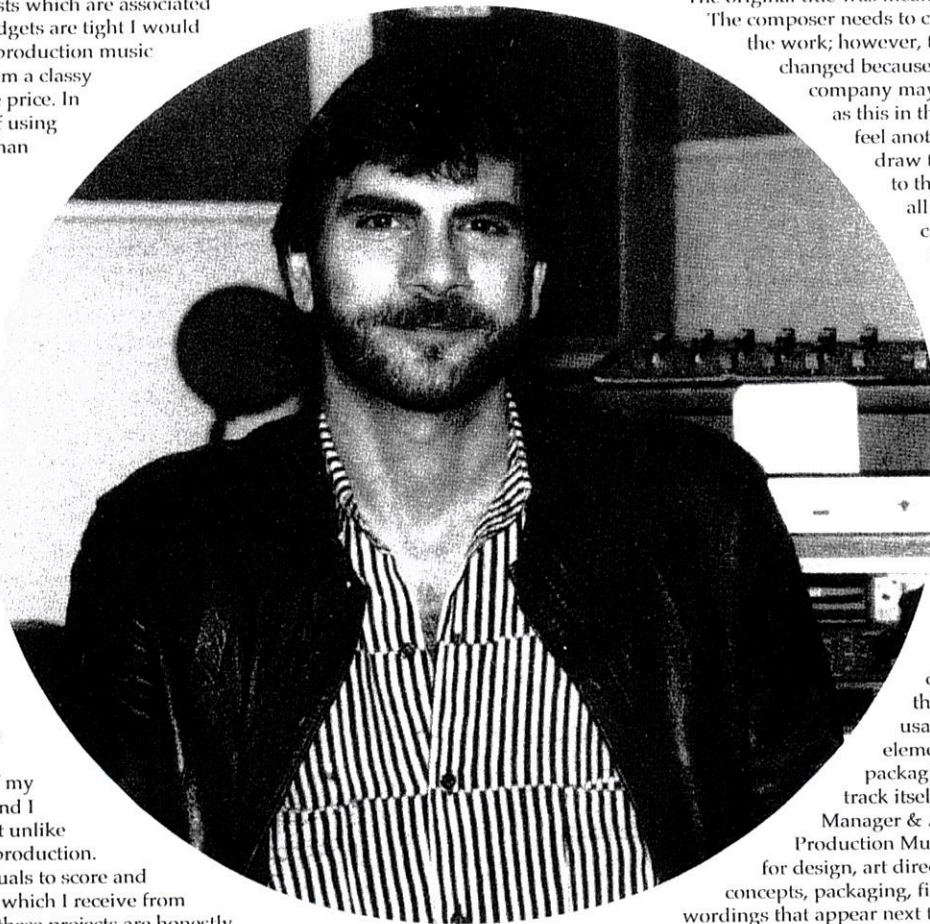
The title of the CD is extremely important as it will completely reflect what the product is geared for. Track titles on each CD are also crucial as the title must completely reveal what situations the track could be used for. Take for example the *TV Suspense/Tension* CD. There is a track titled 'Young Victim'. The brief was to write a piece of music to coincide with a scene of a baby in a nursery room about to be abducted. The producer, Stuart Livingston of Zomba Music Sydney, gave me an explicit pictorial image of what the scene might be unfolding and an outline of what could be suitable musically.

The original title was meant to be 'Nursery Crimes'.

The composer needs to create a title that best suits the work; however, the final title is sometimes changed because the production music company may already have a title such as this in their library or they simply feel another title is better suited to draw the largest number of users to the track. This is what it is all about. The ability to capture the interest of the user by descriptive titles and by a colourful characterisation

portrayal in words that proceeds each track title on the back of the CD, and of course packaging. Take for example a track from the *TV Suspense/Tension 2* (the sequel CD) entitled 'On Alert'. This has a description that reads 'swirling, turmoil with a hint of danger'.

Achieving the proper titles and their descriptive characterisations is one of the key factors for maximum usage. The other important element is the CD cover image, packaging and of course the music track itself. Marleen Ball, Production Manager & Art Director from Zomba Production Music in the UK, is responsible for design, art direction, front cover image concepts, packaging, final titles, descriptive wordings that appear next to each track, co-ordinating





the production and manufacture of all products and creation of all promotional material which promotes their catalogues. She really knows this area of the business, and as Marleen says, "The cover image, titles and descriptions should reflect the musical contents of each CD and be of aid to the client in finding the most appropriate music for their production. Finding the right selection, quickly, is extremely important. With the use of computers to make selections, descriptions relating to musical content has become even more important."

My work for the Zomba company extends from the UK based projects, Bruton Music & Chappell Recorded Music Library, to CDs which I score for Ken Nelson, Senior Vice President and Executive Producer at FirstCom Music (a Zomba Company) in the USA. Ken is an extremely creative individual who has a great insight into the market. Music production and conceptual imaging are his forte and he is a real pleasure to work for. I am currently scoring four CD projects for FirstCom Music in 1998 which range from 'Australian/Asian' documentary style scores, a solo 'Acoustic Guitar Soundscape' style, 'TV Drama' soundtracks and a 'Filmatic/Cinema' style project where I will be incorporating a medium size orchestra.

## Creative inspiration

All my work for the group of Zomba companies is overseen by Stuart Livingston, Zomba Production Music Sydney, who, as mentioned earlier, is the heart of all the creative inspiration. Stuart is a wonderful producer and really has his focus together in this area of the industry. Jez Poole, the UK producer in charge of the Chappell Music projects, is also very musical and a joy to be involved with, and the mastermind behind it all is Stephen Cole, executive in charge of all the Zomba Music (UK) based releases.

Midi sequencing and recording is the format basis for most of this work; however, I always incorporate live musicians with all my scores. There are projects which I do solely in the midi environment and overdub a few live players, and then there are projects where I utilise a medium to large orchestral setting. I have also recorded two solo acoustic guitar projects for Chappell which I wrote and performed. On these projects it is a real performance type situation which I really enjoy, as guitar is my main instrument. I utilise a variety of guitars for projects such as these, all acoustic, from nylon classical, a few different steel six-string guitars, twelve-string, dobro, hi-strung, tenor guitar for slide work, and a few other varieties. My guitar ensemble consists of fourteen very special acoustic guitars and six very rare electrics. Another recent project was the *Organic* CD, which was briefed as a contemporary pop song formula style project, such as Alanis Morissette style, but instrumental. In this instance I scored the charts, no midi whatsoever, and recorded with a live three piece band - myself on guitars (acoustics & electrics), Leon Gaer on bass and Chad Wackerman on drums. We overdubbed some keyboards when the tracking was completed.

On this occasion I hired Marty Irwin to play the keyboard parts. I usually play the keyboards on most of my scores. However in this instance I wanted to get someone who has a 'live band style ability' of keyboard chops.

## Finding a formula

Production CDs have a basic format that I follow. The maximum length of each CD is to be seventy-six minutes, usually incorporating twelve main tracks (twelve main themes). As well as the main track versions there are also twelve underscoring (an alternate version from the main theme), twelve sixty-second versions and twelve thirty-second versions. On certain occasions there can also be short links of eight to fifteen seconds duration as well of each theme track. The main tracks (theme tracks) end up at approximately two minutes and forty-five seconds each and the underscore versions at around one minute and fifty seconds each. Underscores are a stripped down version of the main track, generally allowing for a more atmospheric style alternative. The formula for underscoring may be that the percussion and drums are omitted so it becomes more of a pad-like track. Alternatively, it could be reversed depending on the type of the project. The key element is to achieve maximum use potential for every track and underscore variation.

I use an engineer for all my final mixes as it is best to leave this to the experts. Adrian Bolland has been my main engineer for the past eight years and we have a great rapport. He has a very musical ear and is the best in the country. We usually take about five days to mix a project and then I go into mastering for EQ smoothing,



just like any normal album project, editing and compilation of track layout. I use Kathy Naunton of dB mastering in Sydney for this process. She is the only one I would ever trust with my final product as she has such wonderful musical ears and is very accurate and quick with editing. We use Pro Tools for this process. Stuart Livingston and I usually have a rough outline concept regarding edit points and track order before we begin.

A typical project will take a week to research, five weeks to write and record, roughly five days to mix and three days in mastering. I allow about eight and a half weeks per CD project which may give me a spare seven days in between to relax, have a bit of a break between scores and gear up for another project.

I usually purchase a new synth, sound module or a few new CD Roms for my sampler before I start each project. This is something which I do for any score that I am about to take on. I review what style and approach I believe is necessary for the end result and search for new gear at that point. I believe it is always the best way to remain fresh and contemporary with your writing ideas when you practise this method.

It is difficult to explain formula regarding writing for any medium; however, simply put, I tend to find a sound which is inspirational, begin a musical idea, create a textural pad-like bed that is going somewhere, lock into some title idea for the track which defines the brief I was given, and allow the track to grow from there. Layering is the key element to my style of writing which also allows for a few different ways that the final mix can develop. It creates many last minute options for production concepts during the mix, as well as possible variations to exist within the underscore track.

As all artistic individuals find, an initial thought, colour of the paint, texture and thickness of the brush, as well as what material one is painting on, is what inspires and reflects the end result. I have always found that one cannot force a conceptual idea, it must come naturally. I have learned to walk away when an idea is not working and I usually know this within the first minute or two of a writing session.

Elements that come into play are textures, grooves, thematic motifs, musical colours, sounds and certainly form. Every work is different, therefore the birth of the initial idea can come from a number of sources, such as a percussion groove, instruments used, infectious pad-like sound, interval relationships or musical counterpoint. My favourite style of writing is drama, especially suspense and tension style scoring. I find that dramatic writing really moves the soul.

## Orchestral thinking

I like to work with orchestral projects where I will do all the pre-production of midi, write to score paper for the live musical elements and then overdub the live orchestra. I will always use a copyist for the final parts, vs. computer print outs, as I honestly believe that a string player, for example, would much rather be reading human penmanship. I believe there is emotion which extends from the manuscript in that regard. It always seems to work best for these types of projects and I am sure most musicians would agree. Having an orchestral background is very important to me as I can always hear when a composer is sequencing parts without good orchestral thinking.

I have my own midi suite where I have racks of sound modules, synths and samplers. I use a Korg Wavestation as my master keyboard, a Roland JP-8000, numerous E-Mu modules, Kurzweil modules, Korg modules, a few Yamaha keyboards and two Roland S-760 samplers. I have an arsenal of CD Roms for the sampler which is basically the heart of my sound library. The CD Rom concept works well for me as you can purchase a large variety of unusual sound patches without having to clog up your studio space with a new keyboard or module for every project. (Besides, I am running out of physical space in the rack area.) I also use the samplers to grab unusual sounds and effects which you cannot find in any existing CD Rom library. I use the Synclavier String library which I feel has the warmest most

approachable sounding string samples on the market.

Production Music Companies license their works according to the type of medium desired, duration of music utilised and territories to be broadcast in. This is defined as sync/mechanical type licensing and they are paid a fee from the producer of a programme to utilise the music. Performance royalties are paid by the broadcasting television network or cable station for duration of use in the specified medium and is logged and reported by the societies on a territory by territory basis.

Production music is a sophisticated medium and there is a large volume being utilised throughout the world. We probably hear a production music track at least once a minute if we are watching network or cable television. In between we are hopefully hearing scored music. There is a place and space for both.

