



# Behind the Music

Music plays a crucial role in making a screen project cinematic. Amanda Diaz takes a look at the composers and companies which created some of Australia's recent critical and commercial screen successes.



## SUMMER CODA

**S**UMMER CODA might be a local film set in country Victoria but the production of the film's music was decidedly more global.

First-time feature film composer Aliess Sluiter recorded *Summer Coda's* score everywhere from Prague and New York to London and even China.

"I was playing with a group of Shaolin monks," the violinist recalls. "And I had to record for the film, so they were carrying all my equipment for me."

In the film, Heidi (Rachael Taylor) returns to Mildura after having lived in the United States since the age of seven.

Sluiter's globetrotting put her in good stead when it came to creating the



Aliess Sluiter

cross-cultural shift the story required.

"It was about trying to marry the Midwest American feel with the Australian country," she says.

Although Sluiter made use of the harmonica to achieve this, the score is predominantly violin-based.

Not only is Sluiter a violinist herself but so too is Taylor's character, Heidi, who busks with her violin to earn money.

"When one of the characters plays an instrument as an integral part of the film, it gets really interesting," she says. "It was about exploring the violin as a solo entity."

This exploration began prior to *Summer Coda* going into production, with Sluiter writing music for Taylor to learn before filming.

"I wanted to create something that sounded like a classical repertoire," she says.

While Sluiter did her own share of improvising, she also worked with up

and coming violinist, Ray Chen.

"I'm very particular about finding the right musicians," she says. "There's nothing really that beats a live sound for me."

This is something Oakland's Productions Jarrad Gilson knows all too well about Sluiter.

The two have worked together since 2002 after attending the Victorian College of the Arts at the same time.

"Aliess knows what musicians she wants and she goes and records them wherever they are in the world," Gilson says.

Despite the fact that much of the score was recorded overseas, Oakland's was responsible for *Summer Coda's* piano cues with the studio's Yamaha grand piano.

The sessions were conducted via Skype while Sluiter was in London.

Oakland's had a laptop set up in the studio so the composer could watch each take as it was recorded.

The takes would then be uploaded by Gilson for Sluiter to listen to. Once the takes were approved, Gilson was left to mix the score on Pro Tools, without having actually seen the film.

The process took less than a week. "We're always working on crazy deadlines," says Gilson.

Sluiter agrees. "You seem to have a lot of time and then it's suddenly all upon you. Everything's very pressed."

## THE WAY BACK

"With a Peter Weir movie, it's an incredible opportunity and a fantastic job to do," says award-winning composer Burkhard Dallwitz. "Peter is so into the music that it's fun to work with him."

*The Way Back* is Dallwitz's second collaboration with the acclaimed director. The two worked together on *The Truman Show* in the late '90s.

While the stark survivalist film couldn't be more different to the tale of an insurance salesman who discovers his life is a TV show, Dallwitz says Weir took a similar approach to both scores.

"It's always a fairly fluid process,



working with Peter," he explains. "There's lots of experimentation."

An epic escape story has the potential to tug at the emotional heartstrings, but Weir was adamant that the music did not actively set out to manipulate the audience.

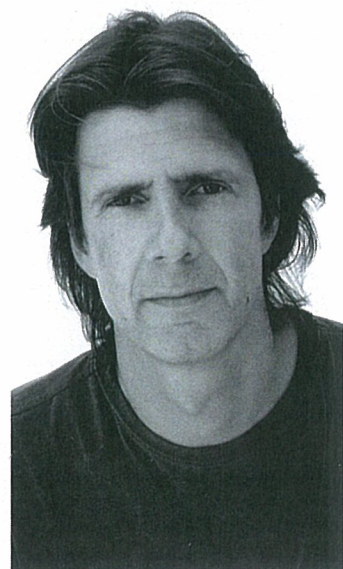
"Peter was very aware of not pushing emotional buttons too early in the film," says Dallwitz. "We tried not to play that card."

As a result, music is scarce in the first part of the film, only becoming more prominent toward the very end.

The initial plan was to perfect the opening theme with the aim of reprising the piece at the end of the film.

Instead, after five or six attempts at getting it right, Dallwitz ended up writing music for the end of the film that could also be applied to the beginning.

"The music follows the same colour palette as the film," he says. "Siberia is all white, then as they



Burkhard Dallwitz



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reach India and Tibet, things become a bit more colourful."

Music was recorded in Dallwitz's own studio in Melbourne and mixed at Trackdown in Sydney.

The score is a combination of orchestral sound and electronic – featuring a 54-piece string section, an array of brass instruments and a number of ethnic influenced themes.

"*The Way Back* has similar instrumentation to *The Truman Show*," he explains. "It's a bit of a hybrid score. Most of Peter's films have that hybrid aspect."

While the film's running time is almost two-and-a-half hours, the score itself is only 42 minutes.

"So often movies these days have wall-to-wall music and it just becomes wallpaper," says Dallwitz. "Whereas if you specifically place the music, it can have a very powerful effect."

Weir also brought the film back to Australia, working at EFILM's StageOne Sound mixing facility. The company also completed the film's digital intermediate, visual effects and HD deliverables.

## ANIMAL KINGDOM

The dark and often confronting score of *Animal Kingdom* saw composer Antony Partos pick up an award for Best Original Music Score at the Samsung Mobile AFI awards last December.

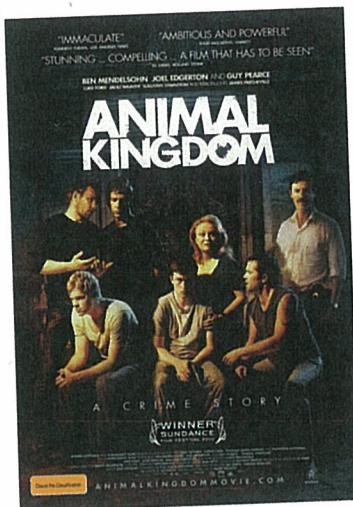
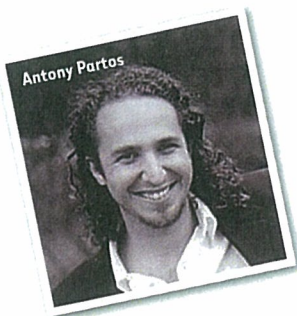
The nod for *Animal Kingdom* was Partos's third Best Music Score win at the AFI awards, having previously been recognised for *Unfinished Sky* and *The Home Song Stories*.

"I've been boxed into this whole dark, brooding thing," he jokes. "It's quietly cathartic."

When it came to creating the music for the Australian crime drama, director David Michôd had a clear idea of what he wanted.

"It was one of those rare opportunities in Australia where the director was adamant about being quite forward, quite bolshy," says Partos. "I really appreciate the boldness in his storytelling technique."

"He wanted an epic sounding score but not in a traditional sense. Not orchestral and not melodramatic".



To create this sound, Partos found himself taking a different approach to the way he would normally tackle a film score.

While the composer made use of a pipe organ and acoustic/electric guitars, the final score is heavily influenced by electronica.

"With acoustic music, there's a pre-existing palette to draw from but it's different with electronica," he explains. "You're constantly reworking a lot of sounds – muting, manipulating and amplifying. It's almost akin to painting."

Though much of the music was created with synth pads and textures, several live instruments, including violin, cello and percussion were recorded but then re-amped and treated.

For Partos, the most difficult task he faced was nailing the music for the opening credits.

Beginning with Jacki Weaver's character Janine sharing a tender moment with her son, the camera then lingers on a symbolic piece of wall art (lions in the wild) before taking the audience through a series of black and white photographs of masked armed robbers.

The sequence's chilling score sets the tone for the entire film.

"I created five different versions before we got it right," Partos says.

The end result utilises the sinister sounding pipe organ underscored by an operatic countertenor (a male singing voice with a high vocal range).

"It was the hardest thing to get right," says Partos. "It had to be beautiful but menacing, moving but powerful."

The score was recorded at Partos' own studio, Sonar Music, based at Sydney's Fox Studios, with mixing completed in Pro Tools.

The six-week process involved working closely with the film's sound designer, Sam Petty.

"There was a lot of workshopping

ideas," Partos says. "This became pivotal to making the final mix process as smooth as possible."

"*Animal Kingdom* was good on so many levels. When the director has a very clear idea and can articulate that idea, it's something special."

## DAYBREAKERS

"It's always fun to work with music that's exciting," says recording engineer Christo Curtis.

The founder of Utopia Audio collaborated with longtime friend and composer Christopher Gordon to create the vampire thriller's dark and moody score.

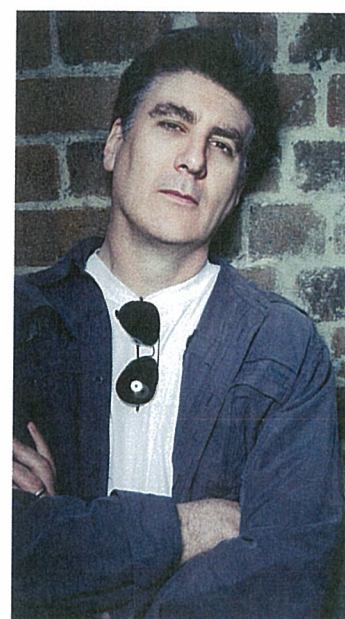
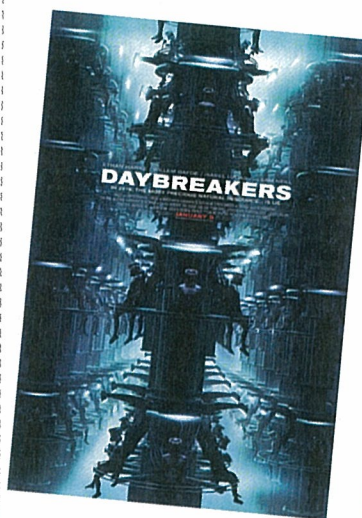
The numerous action sequences required the pair to pay particular attention to detail to ensure that the music worked properly with the film.

"We watched it hundreds of times," Curtis recalls. "We became desensitised to all the gore pretty quickly."

Although Gordon describes both the score and the movie as contemporary, he was keen to take a more traditional approach to the music.

"Trying to use electronics in replacement of an acoustic sound cheapens the film," he says. "You need live musicians – that's what gives it its quality. In Australia that verges on a luxury, unfortunately."

Budget restrictions caused Gordon



Christopher Gordon

and Curtis to get creative.

*Daybreaker's* music features a live orchestra and a great deal of percussion.

"We wanted the sound of 40 percussionists and we only had four," Curtis explains.

To achieve the result they wanted 'with so few musicians, the pair recorded the four percussionists playing different instruments in different parts of the studio.

The recordings then had to be mixed and edited together to build up a bigger collage of sound.

"It sounds like a wall of drums," says Curtis. "It took a lot more work than you'd think."

Music was recorded at Trackdown Studio's in Sydney and mixed at Utopia Audio.

The work spread itself out over a year.

Last minute changes saw Curtis and Gordon back in the studio to record new material after there were changes to the film.

"It was challenging making those sessions sounding like the original score," says Curtis. "With music being the last thing that's done on a film, the music department's always squeezed for time."

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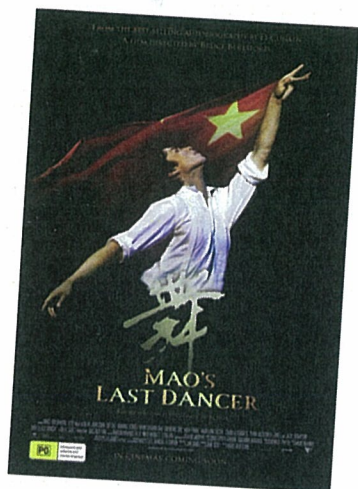


## MAO'S LAST DANCER

While composing and recording music for *Daybreakers*, composer Christopher Gordon and recording engineer Christo Curtis were also working on Bruce Beresford's *Mao's Last Dancer*.

"It was refreshing to move from something that was quite grungy to something quite stately," says Gordon.

There were two distinct parts to the production of *Mao's* music – composing the film's music and the music in the film.



Like *Summer Coda*, it was a film that required not only a score but the creation of actual music to be played within the story.

"We pre-recorded music to shoot with the ballet and rehearsal sequences. They needed to choreograph the dancing to the music that had been specially written," says Curtis.

Again, they were faced with the task of synchronising music to the picture – matching the ballet with the score.

The pieces used within the actual film were recorded both in the studio and with the performers dancing to ensure that they had perfected the tempo.

At one point, the music was actually edited on set during filming, after the director and producers decided to extend the ending of the piece.

"We had to go back to the studio afterwards and make it smoother," says Curtis.

With much of the movie set in China, the score makes use of several traditional Chinese instruments.

Part of the challenge involved in this was sourcing professional players in Australia.

"They're around," laughs Curtis. "Just hard to find."

Despite the grandness of the score, Gordon says that it was important not to overlook the mainstream element of the music.

"Ultimately, film is a popular art," he says. "And you have to know the way the world is thinking at the time and try to capture that."

## TV

"You really need to be a chameleon in terms of style and diversity," says composer Art Phillips. "That's how you're going to get the money and that's how you're going to be able to express yourself artistically."

The former president of the Australian Guild of Screen Composers has recently finished work on the score for *IRONMAN Western Australia 2011*, an hour-long documentary featuring the highlights of the Ironman competition.

"It was two solid weeks of work," Phillips recalls.


No stranger to documentary work, the composer has also been involved in projects including *The Secret Lives of Sleepwalkers*, *The Witness* and SBS's *Dead Tired*.

With such work, Phillips says there

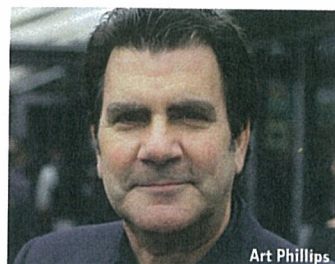
is no place for a showy score. Music has to be subtler.

"You try to underscore and underpin rather than capitalise melodically," he says. "You want a light undercurrent of sound."

Although TV producers tend to want more music per moment than those in the film business, composers working in this particular vein of the industry aren't afforded the luxury of live musicians.

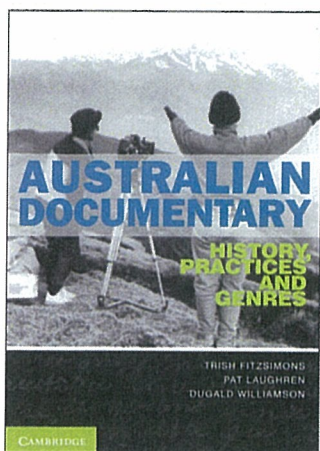
"Most practical TV budgets can't afford them," says Phillips. "You miss out on that human essence with all that electronica." 

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