CHAPTER 11

The Music Team: Orchestrators and Music Preparation

In today's world, film composing has become a team sport.
—William Ross

When writing for a large ensemble of instruments, a full score must be created. This is the version that has one line for every instrument—flutes, oboes, clarinets, French horns, trumpets, violins, etc.—and will be used by the conductor at the recording session. However, making this final score is very time consuming, and it is a job usually given to an orchestrator. So instead of filling in all the notes on a thirty- or forty-line piece of score paper, the composer writes a sketch of the music.

A *sketch* is a condensed version of the cue on 2 to 12 lines of score paper, where a composer lays out the measures and bar lines according to the timings required in a scene. The composer then fills in this sketch to varying degrees of completion. Whether eventually scoring for a full orchestra, a small ensemble, or even when sequencing, a sketch is like a map of the cue. It indicates the timings for each bar and shows the composer where the various dramatic events fall within the boundaries of the music. This sketch can be a simple 2-line piano style version or it can be as many as 10 or 12 staves. It can contain complete information for every melody, counter-melody, chord and even designate individual instruments, as in a John Williams sketch. Or it can be the barest bones, single-line melody with scant harmonic indications, the rest to be filled in by the orchestrator. This sketching process is a great time-saving device for the composer, and allows him to focus on getting the music written for each cue without getting lost in the details of notating the orchestration. It is important to note that many composers, especially the classically trained ones, are excellent orches-

trators. Some composers, like Ennio Morricone, insist on having enough time on the film to be able to do their own orchestrations. However, they may still complete a sketch first, and then orchestrate from it. (See Fig. 11.1. Sketch example and finished score.)

In some cases, the sketch itself is not even written down by the composer. This happens when the composer sequences parts of the cue or plays it live to some kind of tape format. In this case, the music needs to be transcribed, written out note-for-note as it is on the tape. Usually this is done by a third person, a *transcriber*, who listens to the cue, writes it out as a sketch, and then passes it on to the orchestrator. For composers who get their ideas by playing along to video, this system works well, for it enables them to work quickly without having to worry about setting notes down on paper.

In today's world of electronics, the sketch can also be generated as MIDI files. These MIDI files are given to an assistant to edit and make sure the printout matches the composer's music accurately. The orchestrator then works from the assistant's edited sketch. This is also known as a MIDI transcription. Some scores are electronic in the entire music preparation process; the composer generates a MIDI file, it is edited, the orchestrator orchestrates on a software program instead of by hand, and parts are generated automatically from the orchestrator's full score. All of these stages are often accomplished via e-mail or the Internet, so no one leaves his home or studio until the recording session.

Orchestrators

Once the composer has completed the sketch, or the transcription is prepared, the next stage in the journey to the recording session is the orchestration. As I mentioned, many film composers are fine orchestrators in their own right. In fact, many of these composers started out in the film-scoring business by orchestrating for established composers. However, many very talented film composers, especially those who come from the ranks of rock, pop, and solo jazz music, are not trained in orchestration and rely on their orchestrators to help them achieve an appropriate sound.

Fig. 11.1. p.1. Sketch.

Fig. 11.1. p.2. Finished score.

William Ross:

> *An orchestrator is a problem solver. Your best skill as an orchestrator is your ability to solve a problem, whether it's musical, psychological, economic—whatever it is. That's the mission: to solve these problems.*

Orchestrators themselves can be from any background in music—classical, jazz, pop, country—but they must have studied composition and orchestration in depth in order to be able to execute what is required of them in a film score. Obviously, a full knowledge of many instruments is required: their high and low ranges, where they sound strong and where they sound weak, which rhythms sound natural and which ones sound awkward, whether there are any troublesome notes, and how they balance, overpower, or blend with other instruments. A thorough knowledge of composition is required since an orchestrator might be required to write a counterline, fill in a harmony, or voice-lead a series of chords.

When the sketch is ready, the composer usually meets with the orchestrator and discusses the cues. Depending on how complete the sketch is, the composer will give instructions as to who will play a certain part, or how loud or dissonant a specific measure might get. The orchestrator then goes home and begins working on the full score. Many orchestrators like to have a video of the cue with a window burn (see chapter 15) as well as the timing notes so that they can know exactly what is happening in the scene and how the music fits. Oftentimes, the composer and orchestrator have an ongoing relationship, faxing sketches to each other and discussing cues over the phone. This saves a great deal of time so the orchestrator does not have to go back and forth to the composer's home or studio. Once the full score is completed, the orchestrator delivers it to the composer to be proofed, and either a messenger brings it to the copyist or the orchestrator sends an electronic file to the copyist.

How much the orchestrator has to add, change, or rewrite depends on the composer and the individual project. Often it is a matter of the orchestrator's ability to determine whether the passage in question should remain as it is on the sketch or whether it should be changed.

William Ross has orchestrated for over 100 films, and is also a composer in his own right. He explains the orchestrator's role:

> *My job as an orchestrator is to assist the composer in getting the job done. Because of today's post-production schedules, it's very difficult for anyone to compose and orchestrate their own music.*

Orchestrators work as independent contractors; they are basically freelance and go wherever their services are needed. The pay scale for an orchestrator is determined by the musicians union (the American Federations of Musicians, or AFM), and is calculated by the number of pages scored (four measures per page) and the number of staves on the page. Depending on the texture and complexity of the cue, this could take a few hours or an entire day. The difficult cues and the easier ones tend to balance each other out in the long run.

One final thought on orchestrators. It is sometimes said that an orchestrator or team of orchestrators has saved a composer. At times this can be true. But the bottom line is that the composer has a vision of the finished music, and even if he sketches only the bare minimum, he is the driving force behind a score. Composers count on the orchestrator's ability to make the music sound good. So if the composer's musical concept is a sound one for the project, then the orchestrator is really just amplifying this concept. If the concept is poor, then no amount of help by the orchestrator can make it succeed.

Music Preparation: Copyists

Once the orchestrator completes the full score it goes to a music preparation office. In the old days of Hollywood, every studio had its own music preparation office. In fact, *all* the music people were under contract and they worked only for that studio. So, the music would go down an in-house assembly line, from composer to orchestrator to music preparation to orchestra, and never leave the studio lot. Nowadays, everything is contracted out to individuals or small companies that have offices in various locations.

When an orchestrated cue arrives at the music preparation office, it is checked off on a master chart. There can be as many as forty or fifty individual cues for a single film, so there is a lot to track. The head of this office assigns one or more copyists to work on each cue. The *copyist* is the person who makes the parts up for the individual instruments. In the past two years (1997 to 1998), most of the copying work has converted from being handwritten to computer software-generated, usually either Finale or Erata. An orchestrator can turn in either a handwritten score, or a score done in one of these programs, and the copyist can prepare and extract the parts for the orchestra.

Once the copyist finishes a part for a cue, say the viola part, he then gives it to a proofreader. The *proofreader* checks the newly copied viola part against the master score for errors. This is to ensure that these errors are not discovered on the scoring stage where they would take costly minutes to fix (time on a scoring stage can cost several hundred dollars per minute). Once the proofreader completes a part or a stack of parts, he gives them to the supervisor of the music preparation office who then goes to the master chart and checks off those parts that are complete.

The next person in line is the music librarian. This is a crucial job. The *music librarian* sees that every musician in the orchestra has the proper music on his music stand at the start of the session. There can be as many as forty or fifty cues being recorded over just a few days. The composer is in communication with the music preparation office to say which cues he wants to record on which days, and to find out which cues are actually ready. The music librarian consults the master chart to make sure the desired cues are completed, takes the music to the scoring stage, and places the music on the stands of the musicians.

By this point in the production process, the film is often behind schedule, and all these music people can be working under enormous time pressure. It is common for the music preparation office to be in full

swing from 8:00 a.m. until after midnight, or even all night. All of these people are also musicians, and many of the copyists, proofreaders, and music librarians work their way to orchestrating and composing. These are all union jobs, jobs where the salary is dictated by the American Federation of Musicians, which also covers orchestrators and recording musicians. (Interestingly enough, composers do not have to belong.) Because the union has established good "scales" or rates, these music preparation jobs can be financially rewarding.

Because of the shortened schedules in modern post-production, the composer must rely on his team to get the score from conception to the big screen. This means having reliable people to assist with the myriad details of sequencing, orchestrating, copying, booking musicians, and so forth. The goal is to create a space where the composer can focus on composing, and everyone else does his part to accomplish that.