CHAPTER 8

The Composer's Time Frame

Unfortunately, filming is all against the clock ...
it's a constant battle between commerce and creativity.
—Ridley Scott[1]

The amount of time a composer gets to score a film can vary widely. In the previous anecdote there was only six weeks for an enormous amount of music, and although this sounds like an outrageously short amount of time, it is not all that unusual. Anything can happen during production that can cause the late delivery of a film; an actor gets ill and delays shooting, the weather on location won't cooperate, the director decides to make some changes, the studio doesn't like the ending and it has to be reshot. All a composer can do is go with it. Or, if the contract allows, refuse to take on the project if it is delivered later than a certain date.

A typical feature film will have from about 30 minutes of music to over 120 minutes. Each individual piece of music is called a *cue*. Each *cue* can be as short as just a few seconds, or as long as several minutes. A *cue* can be played by an orchestra, or it can be a song coming from a radio on-screen. Every new piece of music, regardless of its origin, is still called a *cue*.

The collection of cues making up all the music in the film is called the *score*. So if someone says, "I liked the *score* to that picture," they are referring to the music from beginning to end. If they say, "I really like that *cue*," they are talking about one isolated piece of music, often for a specific scene.

There is no rule of thumb as to how many minutes of music can be written in a certain amount of time. John Williams has said that he considers a good day to be two minutes of music composed. This

means that in order to complete a *Star Wars* or *Indiana Jones* type of action film, with an average of 80 or 90 minutes of music, he needs about eight weeks to complete the writing. (Five-day-a-week schedules are often a luxury for composers; they are much more likely to go six or seven days a week for a few weeks and then take some time off.) A one-hour dramatic TV show such as *X-Files* can require as much as thirty or more minutes to be composed *and* recorded in one week. In addition, whether the music is for full orchestra or sequenced often determines the pace of writing and recording. Every composer has his own speed.

In most cases, the composer's first real involvement with the film is in post-production, after the film is locked. This is when the real composing begins. However, depending on what stage the film was in when he was hired, the composer might have had an earlier involvement. For example, if a certain composer is being considered during preproduction, the director might ask him to read the script and then informally discuss his ideas for the film. Some composers like to see the script in advance, for they like to start thinking about musical possibilities early in the process. Others prefer to wait until the picture is locked, or at least close to completed, because so much of what is composed is suggested by the actual visual images and pacing of the film.

There are also times when a director asks a composer to come to the set and observe the shooting of the film. As with reading the script, some composers are happy to participate in this early stage of making the film, but most prefer to wait until the film is completed before getting involved. This is because the shooting of a picture is a slow, painstaking, and sometimes tedious process where an enormous amount of imagination is required to envision the final product.

There are some instances when the composer gets involved with the film during preproduction or production. This is necessary when the film is a musical where characters sing on-screen *(Yentl, Mary Poppins,* etc.), or when the film contains scenes where the actors are dancing to live musicians or dancing to a song on the soundtrack. When any of these events are happening, the music must be planned in advance. The tempo must be chosen, and the music is prerecorded so that it can be played back on the set. If there are live musicians on-camera (called *sideline musicians*), they must be coordinated to appear to be playing. In modern film making, it is often the *music supervisor* who oversees this process.

The Spotting Session

In most cases, for a dramatic, or non-musical film, the composer's active involvement begins with post-production. First, he receives a locked version of the film. Very soon after receiving this tape, the composer attends the *spotting session*—the meeting between producer, director and composer where they decide how to use music in the film. The major decisions in this meeting are: where the music will begin and end for each cue, what it should sound like, and what role it will play in relation to the drama. Most composers like to view the film before going to the spotting session; it gives them a chance to think about it and get familiar with the film before discussing it with the director.

After the spotting session, the composer is really ready to get to work. The music editor prepares timing notes and the other technical aspects of synchronizing the music to the picture so that the composer can begin writing the music. The composer is acutely aware of the project's deadlines—most importantly, the delivery date for the music, the air date if it is for television, and the release date for a theatrical opening if it is a film. Many events are set in motion once the composer gets working on the film and has these deadlines. This includes hiring the orchestrators, studio musicians, booking the studio, etc. The composer must put himself on a disciplined timeline, or writing schedule, in order to make these deadlines. There can be as many as forty or fifty separate cues in a film, so there is a lot of music to keep track of. In order to complete this kind of output on time, the composer must write a certain amount per day.

The reality of this kind of schedule and the nature of the process of writing music combines to make this a solitary time for the composer despite all the necessary interaction with other members of the production team. Many hours a day must be set aside for writing, and this is something only the composer can accomplish. Through the years, film composers have commented on the lonely nature of their job, for once

a project is begun they can be like hermits locked away in their studios for days at a time. However, it is a rewarding job and only this part of it is lonely. Another large aspect of the composer's job is interacting with interesting creative people—musicians, directors, writers, and others.

Different Working Styles

Every composer has a slightly different approach to the process of writing a film score. But there are two distinct styles that, for the purposes of this book, I will call the *traditional approach* and the *non-traditional approach*. In the traditional approach, after the composer spots the film, the music editor makes detailed timing notes. The composer then writes the music, usually with pencil and paper, ultimately generating a sketch that is sent to an orchestrator.

In the non-traditional approach, after the spotting session, the composer knows where each cue begins and ends, but often will not have any timing notes at all. That is because this composer plans to sequence his ideas by playing along with the film. In this method, often a team of people assists the composer. In addition to the music editor, there will be a recording engineer and sometimes a synthesizer expert. If a live orchestra is used, then eventually the sequenced music is sent to an orchestrator, who will create a written score.

Both methods are valid and used in Hollywood today. Some composers use one method exclusively, some use both, depending on the project. The non-traditional method is faster, and often must be used when the schedule is really tight.

An Ideal Schedule

For the purposes of this book, here is a generalized and ideal schedule from the time the composer receives a locked picture to the release of the film. Let's say that this film has 45 minutes of music, and the composer is using the "traditional" method:

Week 1

Composer receives the locked picture. Reviews tape at home. Spotting session with director, producer and music editor. Music editor begins preparing timing notes.

Weeks 2 to 5

Writing begins. Composer gives sketches to orchestrator. Orchestrations go to copyist as they are completed. Music editor finishes timing notes and prepares for synchronization.

Week 6

Recording the music: three to four days, six hours per day of recording. Approximately 18 minutes recorded each day. Mixing the music: two to three full days.

Weeks 7 to 8

Dubbing music with sound effects and dialogue.

Week 9

Film goes to lab for answer prints and color correction.

Week 12

Film delivered to theaters.

As with almost anything in this business, this timeline can morph in different directions. It can get shorter if there are delays in production or picture-editing, or there can even be the luxury of more time if things go smoothly during production, or if the release date gets pushed forward.

Mock-ups

As I have mentioned, there can be an enormous amount of pressure on the composer. There is also the added dimension of the pressure that comes from needing to please the director and producer. For this reason, in the age of MIDI, a composer often plays a sequenced *mock-up* of a cue for the powers-that-be. This is a rough version of the cue recorded with synthesizers and samplers to produce the sounds that eventually will be a real orchestra (unless it is an electronic or synthesizer score, in which case this version will not be so far from the final music). This is a dual-edged sword. On the one hand, it can give the director a good idea of where the composer is going with the cue, and

the composer can be assured that the director's vision is being accomplished. The director can offer suggestions and comments, feel involved in the music process, and leave the composer's studio feeling secure that the music is going in the right direction. On the other hand, it can be very uncomfortable to have the director literally standing over one's shoulder making musical suggestions. In addition, on this rough version of the cue, the director might hear only the electronic-sounding synth strings and not-quite-real sounding French horn sample and think it is terrible, not having the musical ability to make the imaginary transfer to real instruments. Because he then focuses on the fake-sounding instruments instead of the actual musical ideas, he can mistakenly think that the cue itself doesn't work when all that is wrong is the use of electronic instruments substituting for real ones. It then becomes the composer's job to explain, or even "pitch" the music he conceived, and convince the director that it will work. Or he must change the cue and go in a different direction in order to please the director. Clear communication, and the ability to listen to a director and incorporate his ideas, is necessary.

Mark Isham illustrates this process, and discusses his experience in showing the director and producers the first version of the musical cues he wrote—the synthesized mock-up—for the movie, *Nell*, starring Jodie Foster:

> *As I remember, I wrote a whole bunch of music, and Michael Apted, the director, Jodie Foster, the star and co-producer, and Renée Missel, the other co-producer, were the team that would work with me. They came over to my studio and heard the first version. And they hated it! I honestly don't remember what it was about the first pass, except that I don't think it was mysterious enough. The thing I remember having to get— and it seems sort of obvious now because it really did help to align the movie a lot once I got it—was the sense of mystery. Where? How? Why? Who is this person? What could possibly have transpired to create a life for her like this?*

> *Now Jodie Foster is one of the smartest people I've ever met in my whole life. And part of what makes her so smart is that she is really a good communicator. And Michael Apted is such an elegant gentleman. So in a meeting like that where they say, "We don't like it," it's never a feeling that you've been dealt this crushing blow and that you'll never rise up again. They don't scream and yell, "This is shit! How could you...!" It's not that at all. They have good reasons for why they don't feel it, and suggestions for where they would like it to go.*

The balancing act a composer often performs is to write something that he is happy with, that fits the film, and satisfies the director's desires. Sometimes the composer disagrees with the director. Then it becomes a matter of discrimination whether or not to speak up and argue, or go with what is asked for. This will depend on several factors, including the composer's personal relationship with the director, the composer's track record and "clout," and sometimes how badly the composer wants to keep the job.

Alan Silvestri did the music for the 1998 film, *Practical Magic*, starring Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman, in just three weeks. He had to rely on experience and instinct in order to accomplish the task:

> *They [the production team] had a bit of a meltdown and they got in some trouble, scheduling-wise. I had to think long and deep about whether I was going to do this movie. I finally decided that if they could give me the time I felt I needed to accomplish a score, I would do it. It was about 60 minutes of music. I wrote it in 12 days, and recorded the entire score in three days of recording. They were dubbing, transferring, mixing, and printing the films while we were on the scoring stage. It was the deepest schedule hole I've ever seen. There may be projects that have been crazier, but for me, writing the entire score in 12 days, and recording it in three—those were consecutive days—and then the movie was out the following weekend ... that was really crazy.*

Although the entire process described in this section is based on the scoring of a full-length, large-budget feature film, the same principles apply to television shows and movies, cable and low-budget films, documentaries, and even student films. The composer does not begin writing until the editing of the movie is complete. There is then a spotting session and the use of music will be determined. (Note that in a TV series, also called *episodic television*, the director is often not involved in the spotting. This is because in TV, once shooting is complete, the director's job is finished. The producer then guides the rest of post-production.) There are still deadlines to make and the film makers still must be pleased with the final product. The scale is different, but the concept remains the same. It is still a collaborative effort. Clear communication and good listening skills are always necessary. Proper organization of one's time is crucial in order to meet deadlines. Time frames change, and sometimes the composer feels like he is in the middle of a swirling storm of deadlines and details. But the music must be written, and the deadlines met.