The Music

CHAPTER 13

Creating the Music

It's like anyone else. If the plumber doesn't take the wrench out of the bag, he's never going to get that pipe off, right? Well, if you don't sit down and play something or write something, you're never going to get it finished.
—Mark Isham

There are times when the most intimidating experience a composer can have is looking at a blank sheet of paper or computer screen. And there are other times when that same blank paper can be something he looks forward to filling with wonderful, exciting ideas. This is the reality of the creative process; there are ups and downs, there are times when the ideas just keep coming, and times when the stream is stone dry. For a composer working in films, there is usually no luxury of waiting until the juices start flowing. Often he must find a way to turn on the faucet himself.

Three Cornerstones of Composition

There are several important, yet simple concepts that can help in actually controlling and sometimes even jump-starting the creative process: first, having a foundation of craft and knowledge of music; second, knowing what you want to say dramatically, emotionally, and psychologically; and, third, knowing your own strengths, weaknesses, and capacity to produce. In the film-scoring business, these are all extremely important. As we have seen in other chapters, because the composer comes in at the end of the film-making process, the pressure to produce in a timely manner is often enormous. So a composer relies on his craft, the intent of what he wants to say, and knowledge of his own capacities to deliver the score on time.

Craft

It is important to have developed your craft so you have as much technique as possible. If you write great romantic melodies, but that is all you do well, then obviously you are rather limited. If you are great at action/adventure films, what will you do if the project you accepted requires some scenes in the style of To Kill A Mockingbird? Will you find someone to ghost it?

The more you know about music, and the more different kinds of music you have analyzed extensively, the more tools you have at your disposal. Your musical vocabulary becomes larger and you can speak in many musical languages. Traditional orchestral, atonal, jazz oriented, or pop-music derived soundtracks will not intimidate you if you are thoroughly familiar with how these styles work.

For many, this is an ongoing life-long process that begins early. For every composer there are variations on the theme of musical learning and development. When you begin a project, if you can draw upon many different kinds of musical expressions, you are much better off. You will know the kinds of harmonies, rhythms, and melodies to write. As you watch a scene, or when you sit down to write, your familiarity with a style may start to suggest possibilities. Or if you are stuck, your knowledge of what it should sound like can bail you out. For example, if you know the director wants a particular scene to be heroic, there are certain rhythmic and melodic devices that you can draw from to create something of your own. On the other hand, if your background is narrow, and you are asked to write something outside of what you know, it can be difficult and time-consuming, if not flat-out impossible, to create something appropriate.

Study requires discipline and curiosity. If you are not interested in a particular style, if it doesn't make you sit up and take notice, curl your ears, or give you goose-bumps, then study that style as an academic exercise. This can be a necessary academic exercise for the aspiring film composer.

Alf Clausen, Emmy-winning composer for *The Simpsons*, strongly believes in the need for musical curiosity and study. He speaks about this issue in relationship to writing songs in different styles:

> *[Students'] questions are always very pointed about "How do you do this, how do you do that, how do you write these styles, etc." My response is to ask, Have you dissected the popular songs of all the eras to find out what makes them work? Have you analyzed them to find out what the chord progressions are, what the melodic tricks are, what chord tones on what chords created a certain sound in a certain era? And can you sit down and write a song in that style because you have spent hundreds of hours dissecting those songs? And they say, "Not yet." Well, I have. I have spent thousands of hours dissecting and playing those songs. It's a matter of craft, it's a matter of study.*

Intent and Concept

The intent of your music, or knowing what you want to say, is crucial. There is such a large range of emotion and feeling that can be expressed by music that it often takes a lot of thought, contemplation, and sometimes even prayer to figure out what to do with a particular film or scene. But to start writing without knowing what you want to say is like trying to swim without knowing the strokes; when you get in the water, you would just flail around and desperately try to stay afloat. It is important to take in a whole lot of information: the flow of the drama, the look of the film, and probably most important for the composer, the tempo of the scene. Every film and every scene has its own musical implications, and the composer must know what a film or scene means before beginning to write.

Elmer Bernstein has composed the scores to over 200 films, and is quite familiar with this process:

> *The first thing I do is to spend a week just looking at the film without prejudice. When I say without prejudice, I say to myself, I'm not even going to try to think music during this week. I just want to look at the film until the film talks to me and the film*

tells me things. What I want the film to tell me is what it's about, and that's not always on the surface. What is the film about? What is the function of music going to be in this film? Why are we having music in this film, what's it going to do? So I start with those kinds of thoughts—it's a kind of intellectual process rather than a composing process.

Now, I had a big problem with that in To Kill a Mockingbird, *because if you look at the film without music, all you're looking at is a film with a lot of kids in it. But you're also seeing a lot of adult problems—problems of racism, problems of injustice, death and violence, violence to children. So it took me the longest time to find where the music was going to go, how it was going to go, and what its specific use would be in the film. I determined after a long time—it took me six weeks—that the film is about the adult world seen through the eyes of children. All these problems, what we call adult problems, are seen as the children see them. Which led me to childlike things. For instance, playing the piano one note at a time, music box sounds, harp, bells, things of that sort. So what really got me into the film was the realization—at least, my realization—that it was a film about adult things seen through the eyes of children.*

Taking six weeks, as in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, to think about the approach to a film is a luxury most film composers don't have today. But they usually can take a few days, or perhaps a week, to come up with ideas. Once the concept becomes clear, ideas will often start to flow because the composer has a firm sense of direction.

Knowing Yourself

Dick Grove, a well-known music educator in Los Angeles, used to say, "We all think we're writing music to make money, or to move people. But what we're really doing, if we just take a look, is finding out about ourselves." When we sit down to write music, many things about ourselves come into play: How disciplined am I? How much do I trust my training and ability? How much do I believe in myself? Am I actually enjoying writing music, and having fun? Or is it a chore? Am I following the instructions of the client, or is my ego too big to listen to anyone other than my own infallible creative voice? On the other hand, am I too concerned with what people will think of me to stand up for my opinions, especially if someone asks for something I know is musically a bad idea?

These questions, and others, can come into play every time a composer accepts a gig. At some level in every writer's consciousness, there is an expression of one or more of these questions, whether they have acknowledged it or not. For example, are you the type that procrastinates until the last minute? If so, get a handle on it, for a film with 60 minutes of music won't get written the night before. Do you have a problem taking direction and/or feedback? Lose it, because as soon as you sign the contract, you are somebody's employee. Do you know you can write quickly and appropriately? Nurture that and utilize it. Are you very organized and structured? Stay organized, but don't forget to stay flexible.

When a composer sits down and starts to write, it is essential that he be brutally honest about these questions. He must know how many minutes a day he can produce, how many days there are before the recording session, which cues seem to be suggesting musical ideas, and which cues are tougher. There is very little time for second-guessing and extensive rewriting of any one cue, so confidence in ones technique is crucial. Being clear in ones communication with the director and a willingness to translate the director's requests into music are fundamental to this process.

Developing the Concept for the Score

In speaking with composers, the one thing that comes through again and again is that the most successful scores have a concept that drives the music. Then, once the concept for the whole score is set, each individual cue presents a particular problem to be solved. For example, just because the main concept for a film is big, orchestral, and Romantic doesn't mean that there cannot be a piano solo if the drama calls for it. But that piano solo must still feel like part of the rest of the

score. In today's world, almost any musical language is part of the composer's palette, so the choices abound. But keeping to the overall concept keeps the sound focused.

Elliot Goldenthal is an accomplished composer of film scores, ballets, theatre, and concert works. He has found a way of approaching a score that produces a unique sound for each of his projects:

> *Before I approach anything, I have a very strong concept of what I want to pull off, whether it works out or not. That might include limiting the choice of pitches or a very clear choice of orchestration. So I don't go into something and just start improvising, I find that if I do that, I just sort of waste my time. I stay away from the piano, away from the computer, away from the pencil. I think about the scene and I say, How can I achieve the dramatic effect that is necessary for the scene and have it still sound fresh? How can I make it sound like you haven't heard that before, you haven't lived that before? Sometimes the answer can be surprisingly simple. In* Alien 3, *for example, I used a solo piano to underline the scene with the little girl because I thought that having a piano way out in space would remind you of the most domestic of all instruments—it would remind you of home. Just things like that. That's a concept.*

Sometimes a composer's concept for a film can be generated from a feeling or an idea that, in itself, is not musical. Many composers are very artistic in the way they look at the world; that is to say, they see the world in terms of emotional responses that eventually get translated into music. Clearly, this is a very valuable way to see things from the standpoint of writing music for the visual medium of film. Cliff Eidelman discusses his conception of the score to *One True Thing*:

> *I had this idea of time changing, the changing of seasons. The feeling of wind passing through trees and then leaves blowing off in another direction. This wasn't music yet; it was just a feeling I wanted to add.*

> *I set individual instruments apart from the orchestra, separated into their own isolation booths. Like three cellos in one room, or three violas with two woodwinds in another. They were off in their own rooms and the orchestra was in the center. Now, my concept was that the piano should be the main idea, accompanied by a small orchestra so that it felt intimate, and never too large. An introverted mood.*
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> *I also wanted it to feel like wind was carrying the music this way and out that way, creating different perspectives. The music wasn't just coming from the center of the room. It was coming from over here, and it shifted over there, and then it would come back over here.*
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> *So, early on, this conceptual approach merged with the themes. When I started producing musical ideas, my concepts worked their way in.*
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> *For me, the main thing is always the spine of the story. So, the first thing I do is look for that emotional core—that emotional spine of the story—within the soul of the music itself.*

In *Forrest Gump*, Alan Silvestri had to come up with an opening music cue that would embody the whole film. He first discussed the opening shot, of the feather floating down from the sky and almost landing on Forrest, with director Robert Zemeckis:

> *[Zemeckis] didn't really go into a whole lot of detail, but the gist of what we did talk about was somehow, "This is the start of the movie. This is the start of this whole incredible odyssey we're about to go on." My take on it was ... I've got a couple of things to deal with now. One is, I've got physical things to deal with. I've got some events; the feather floats from the blue sky, makes an entrance into this town. It winds up almost landing on somebody's shoulder then at the last moment it's blown off. It's very symbolic, you know, if you're looking at this as something descending upon someone's life, that guy is not chosen right now. Then eventually the feather lands on Forrest; he's the chosen one.*

So now we've got some physical things in terms of the image, and we've also got some events that are episodic in a sense. Coming from nowhere, blue sky, into this town, what does it mean? It's just a feather, then it almost lands on somebody, blows off. Now, there's some kind of dramatic context.

So now, what do you do? The invisible aspect of this is that somehow whatever you do also has to essentialize and embody this entire film. Right now. This cannot be "feather music." This cannot be "falling down music." This cannot be "missed opportunity music." This music somehow has to take everything, sentiment wise, that this film is about, and somehow essentialize it and present it. I'm thinking, at this point, if I can find that, I've got the key to this film. This theme will be all over the movie, and there will be a tremendous sense of cohesiveness for the overall tone of this film.

Now of course all of this is going on under the surface because I'm not sitting there making lists and treatises on IMI. *I know I've got to do something here. So I sit down at the piano, and I'm thinking, "This music has to deal with Forrest," and I start doodling at the piano. Literally in 20 minutes it's done! It's childlike, and it's simple, and yet it's not baby-like. It's innocent. It's what I'm feeling from Forrest. I look at this moment, where the feather moves away from this other guy. I make a key change there—an immediate unprepared key change there. We already planned that we're going to bring the orchestra in, with more sense of scope at this point.*

That was the mission in Forrest. *It had to be an honest attempt. Musically, as an actor, as a writer, as a cinematographer, don't get cute with this movie, or you'll sink the ship.*

This anecdote embodies many of the principles outlined above with Silvestri's own personality and musical sensibility bringing it to its ultimate destination. He had a clear idea of what he needed to do, and what *not* to do dramatically. And having this understanding, he was able to sit down and create the theme that was just right for this film.

(Ironically, this theme was eventually used in only one other spot in the film: the ending where we see the feather again. Every time he tried to use it elsewhere, it just didn't work.)

One of the joys of film composing is this process of discovering a concept. Unlike writing concert works or pop songs, the film composer is responding to the visual images and the story on the screen. These images and story-lines suggest musical ideas and provide a framework within which the music can fit. Many composers have said that once they find the initial concept, the rest of the score writes itself. The trial and error, the thought, and contemplation often result in the stimulation of the composers imagination. Then he experiences the satisfaction of completing the director's vision of the film in the language of music.