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Dramatic Scoring Report

Every single year new movies, documentaries, educational videos, TV shows and video games are made and all of them are filled with music. Some of the music may be original compositions while some may not be. Regardless of what it is, it’s there and a bunch of people worked together to put it there. Every visual media form uses a similar, but slightly different process when it comes to selecting the music that will accompany it. It is the three major visual media forms, movies, TV shows and video games that I find to be the most interesting because these are three media forms that many people use every day.

Whether it be a suspenseful moment in a horror film or an intense fight in an action film, music is essential to instilling emotions in the viewer that the directors, writers, and producers are trying to get across. Although some rely solely on already existing music, most blockbuster movies, to some extent, have original music composed for the movie. This allows a film to have a unique/signature sound. When the Darth Vader’s theme song is played, anybody who was ever seen Star Wars is instantly going to think of it. It creates an association in the audience’s mind that, when done correctly, can be used to help brand and further market a film. While a stellar soundtrack is by far not the only way for a film to become successful, it definitely helps. So then how does a composer go about writing music for a film? What is the process behind it?

According to the “Complete Guide to Film Scoring: The Art and Business of Writing Music for Movies and TV” by Richard Davis, there is much more to the film scoring process than one might think. For the most part, the process begins when the majority of the filming is finished. However, sometimes a composer might discuss with the producer or director what kind of sound they wish for the film to be centered around during the filming process so that the composer can try to have some motifs and instrumentation already picked and ready before filming is completed. According to “The Music Business Handbook and Career Guide” by David Baskerville, composers are constantly running under strict deadlines and time restrictions; it is because of this that some composers try to get as much “prep-work” done as they can so that time can be more efficiently spent later on in the process. Once a film is recorded and usually edited a few times, the composer sits down with the music editor, the director and the producer to spot the film. They mark key turning points and begin deciding on cue timings. Then as the film is edited, the composer can start working out all the fine details so that the music fits with the important details of the scene. Once the score is finally completed, it needs to be set to instrumentation and be put into a neat and presentable form. This can be down by the composer, but is more commonly done by an orchestrater, arranger and/or a copier hired by the composer. Then once the score is completed and the editing for the film is done, musicians are hired to record the music. Recording is commonly done “live” while the conductor watches the film on a large screen. Then once the recording is complete, the cues are digitally adjusted to be exact, the dialogue, sound effects and music are all mixed, and the score is complete. This is the typical process for many major films. Some TV shows use a similar process, but most are starting to use a new technique for applying music.

The popularity of TV shows has recently seen a drastic increase thanks to subscription based streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu Plus and Amazon Prime. Some of these TV shows have numerous seasons, each filled with 10-30 episodes and nearly every single one of those episodes has music in it. So, where does it all come from? For the most part the way it works is studios hire a music supervise for a project and that person is then in charge of finding the type of music that the executive producer wants. Lists are made and the lists are then narrowed down by process of what the executive producer and other important people in the process, such as the creator, do and do not like. Then the music supervisor has to contact the artists and try to create deals to license the material and obtain the rights. This whole process of obtaining licenses for music to be put into media such as TV shows is known as synch licensing.

Alexandra Patsavas is one of the largest grossing music supervisors of all time. Unlike most high grossing music supervisors, the majority of Pastavas’ well known works have been TV shows and not movies. In an interview with A.V. Club in 2015, Patsavas discussed what exactly it is she does and how she goes about finding and picking music for various different shows. She talks about the difference between “needle drops” and “on-cameras.” How needle drops are when the song is added after the episode is filmed and on-cameras is when the song plays during the acting process. On-cameras tend to cost more than needle drops because the song is more prominently in the show, whether it’s the characters singing along to it, or dancing to it, or simply talking about it playing on the jukebox, either way, it is drawing more attention to the song and incorporating it into being a functional part of the show, therefor artists know they can get more for this. She goes on to talk about how some of the music comes from her digital library and some of it comes from her asking various publishers and labels to find a certain type of music for her. Her company also keeps their digital library sorted by tagging songs with various vibes, themes and emotions that resonate with each song. She then wraps up the interview talking about how much the industry has changed. How it use to be much more time consuming to find out who owned the rights to a song and to get in contact with the band and just to find new music. Now most of the work is done online and then it is just a matter of negotiating licensing terms with the artists. Many artists are also much more willing to have their songs put on TV shows than artists use to be 10-20 years ago. So many people discover new bands by hearing a song in an episode of their favorite show and deciding they want to download it either because they really like the song or because the song makes them think of that scene in the show. Many of these small independent bands whose music is commonly used for TV shows would never have reached such a wide audience f it was not for the exposure that these shows over to the artists. However, Dan Carlin, Chair of Berklee’s Film Scoring Department, believes that synch licensing is a trend that will eventually pass.

Dan Carlin, in an interview with the Music Business Journal in 2008, discussed how the dramatic scoring business has changed and how he further believes it will. When he was asked about the rising popularity of synch licensing, Carlin’s reply was that it is an expensive alternative to hiring a composer. However, this is because Carlin was thinking in regards to using songs that currently are or once were really popular. However, with the exception of important scenes, most TV shows nowadays avoid using extremely popular songs. Both the internet and the more advanced recording technology available to the everyday person have allowed more and more artists to record their music and put it up somewhere on the internet. For every hit song you hear on the radio, there are at least a handful of other songs, that have a very similar message or portray a similar mood, that never made it into widespread publicity. It is just a matter of finding and categorizing all this music so that it can be found quickly and efficiently another time. Synch fees are not the only thing that Carlin talks about though in his interview. Amongst many other things, he talks about the growing market of video game scoring.

According to the PricewaterhouseCoopers, the world’s second largest services firm, the global video game industry is expected to grow from $71.3 billion in 2015 to $90.1 billion in 2020. It is expected to grow at a CAGR (compound annual growth rate) of 4.8% which is almost as much as TV and video (0.5%), music (3.2%) and cinema (1.2%) combined. According to an article by Anya Kamenetz on the Fast Company website, “Grand Theft Auto V” made $800 million within 24 hours after being released making it the largest release day for any form of entertainment ever. It also cost $266 million to make which is more than any Hollywood movie apart from “Pirates of the Carribean: On Stranger Tides.” In his interview, Carlin talked about how more and more composers are trying to get into this field because of how fast and big it is growing. However, video game scoring is quite significantly different from scoring for other forms of media. One major difference that Carlin talks about is the amount of time that is given to a composer who is scoring for a video game. Film composers usually get around six weeks to compose a score for a film, while video game composers can have anywhere ranging from a couple months to a couple years to work on, edit and adapt a score. Another large difference is the vastly different types of composing techniques that are used in video game scoring. One technique is used for cinematic cut scenes while another type is often used for background music during interactive portions of a game. Scoring for a cinematic scene in a game is similar to scoring a film in the sense that you know exactly when the cues need to be and what is going to be occurring on the screen during every second of the cut scene. Scoring for an interactive portion, on the other hand, presents many new challenges that have to be tackled. You cannot be sure of what the player will do and how long it will take him/her to do it. So then how do you get the music to “fit” what is occurring in the game? The answer is musical blocks.

According to Katie Wardrobe, a member of an online professional development community that shares music tech information, the Midnight Music Community, there is a common formula that is used for scoring video game soundtracks. This formula consists of numerous musical blocks which each is assigned a different function. Some of the common blocks that Wardrobe talks about in her article are: an intro, a loop, a transition, a stinger and a tag. An intro sets the mood for a scene, area or level in a game. Wardrobe calls a loop “the workhorse of the gaming industry” because of how much it is used within most video games. A loop is designed to repeat numerous times while a character engages in neutral activity whether it be roaming an area or just casually progressing through a level. A transition has two purposes: one is for use in cut scenes while another is to add intensity to the loop as a character nears something of significance such as an enemy or a target location. Then there are stingers which are used to represent an important action occurring in the game and finally tags which are used to end the music as a level or section is completed. Each of these blocks must be designed so that the music can transition into a plethora of other blocks smoothly. However, the actual composing process is not the only thing different when it comes to video game composing; some of the legalities behind video game composing are also noticeably dissimilar.

On GameSoundCon’s website, an article by Ray Spyda R., CEO and founder of a small recording studio in Bedford, United Kingdom, lists the various things that composers transitioning into the gaming field are surprised by. One of the differences is royalties. Video game scoring contracts are often “work for hire” positions. This means that the composer signs away all rights to the game developer or publisher. The composer usually receives no payment other than the initial lump sum, in other words, no royalties. The most beneficial difference for the composer is the fact that many big gaming companies actually hire full time composers. This guarantees the composer work and allows him/her to reap many benefits offered by a full-time job such as vacations, bonuses, stock, and 401k’s.

Dramatic scoring can be one of numerous different processes, each with its own perks and disadvantages. Films, TV shows and video games are the three largest components to the dramatic scoring industry. Each requires a composer to think differently and each requires a different group of people to assist or, in some cases, fill the role of the composer.

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