

GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNICATION IN FILM SCORING

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ABSTRACT

Film Scoring is a collaborative activity that involves several practitioners, in particular music specialists (film composers) and non specialists (filmmakers). Previous ethnographic records have shown that this creative collaboration can face large levels of misunderstanding and frustration amongst practitioners, and that little has been done to help them communicate accurately and efficiently. In this paper we present the aims and outcomes of an explorative study conducted with composers and filmmakers. Through this study we identified challenges recurrently faced by practitioners in communication. We then developed guidelines for best practice based on personal habits that practitioners elaborate to address those challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

Film scoring is a creative, multidisciplinary practice that involves two key parties: composers and filmmakers (film/television director and producer). In the position of clients, filmmakers start by hiring a composer and provide an oral or written brief describing how they would like the music to support their film. Then, musical ideas are discussed and developed through a creative collaboration between the two parties, until the score is completed and released with the picture to television or theatre.

1.1 Communication Is Crucial

During the creative collaboration, especially in the early stages of a project, communication is crucial, conditioning the success of the project. On one side filmmakers need to make their expectations clear to the composer, supervising the work throughout the process. On the other side the composer wants to be sure s/he has understood what these expectations are. *Comprehending a director's intent is the most important task of being a film composer* [9]. Hence, communication needs to be given as much attention as the pure practice of writing the music. Even if the composer writes a very fine piece of music, if in the end it does not fit to the filmmakers' tastes and expectations then the project will either be delayed or simply fail.

1.2 Communication Faces Challenges

Collaboration between composers and filmmakers can be quite confrontational and clashes of egos may generate frustration. Often composers are protective of their creative independence and are wary of simply mirroring the filmmakers' wishes, reasoning that such an approach may compromise their creative integrity [7]. However, composers have to bear in mind that the film is primarily the filmmakers' product. They have been working on it for months or even years. They know the film's journey and what message it has to carry. *Composing film music requires working with external demands in a 'composer for hire' mentality and capacity* [9]. Composers also have to accept the fact that most filmmakers enjoy having creative input in the making of the score. As they work in a client dominant occupational environment, composers have little choice; client control is prevalent in the film industry [4].

Fifty years after the end of the silent movies era and the emergence of the film scoring practice in the late nineteen-twenties, ethnographic records by Faulkner [4; 5] already depicted the confrontational aspects of the collaboration between film composers and filmmakers. Compelled by tight budgets and time-frames imposed by the film and television industries, they were facing large levels of misunderstanding and frustration while collaborating on film score productions. Now, it is striking to observe the strong and numerous similarities between Faulkner's records and the current situation described in more recent literature [7] [3] [8] or [6]. Practitioners are still facing recurrent and strong challenges in their creative communication.

This situation is aggravated by composers and filmmakers not sharing the same musical language. Composers have a deep and thorough understanding of music, which they do not necessarily share with directors and producers. For example, the latter usually think about music in terms of feelings, emotions or moods (e.g. 'I want something scary'); while the former think about music more precisely in terms of melodies, instruments or notes (e.g. 'I'll write a part for the cello to play long tremolos punctuated by dynamic staccatos'). This lack of a common language can lead to communication breakdowns, in particular because of the exchange of ambiguous or inaccurate information.

1.3 Practitioners Are Not Prepared To Handle Communication Challenges

Film scoring requires a wide set of skills. It requires not only understanding music, the picture, and its correlations to music, but also being open minded and developing social skills to handle creative communication with people from diverse backgrounds. To this day, there is no school or institution teaching these social skills, apart maybe from some obvious recommendations based on common sense. As stressed by Australian composer Atherton [1], and by American composer Fred Steiner in Faulkner's book's foreword [5]:

"The present proliferation of university courses in film music, and the few available film-composing manuals can impart little more than the most basic technical information on a subject in which true mastery can be acquired only from hard, day-to-day, practical experience."

It is true for both composers and filmmakers that there is no universal standard –yet– on how to handle the creative communication. Most practitioners, even with strong musical education, are self-taught in the particular practice of film scoring. Without prior preparation and through years of experience in the industry they elaborate personal habits to address communication issues faced with their collaborators. Through an explorative study conducted with composers and filmmakers we observed some of these personal habits and analysed them to produce guidelines for the support of creative communication in film scoring.

2. EXPLORATIVE STUDY

We conducted an explorative study with 13 film composers and 14 filmmakers based in France, Italy, the United States and Australia to get a deep insight into the film scoring practice and catalogue specific issues that practitioners encounter in communication. Profiles of the surveyed composers were varied and covered altogether a wide range of the industry: TV series, documentaries, IMAX movies, music libraries, public or corporate events, TV commercials, and short and feature films. Some of them were semi-professional; others worked fulltime. Some were established in their respective local industry; others were internationally renowned and had worked on movies seen by hundreds of thousands of viewers.

Data collection occurred in different forms: questionnaires, video- or sound-recorded interviews, observations in the subjects' work environment (as in Figure 1) –following the principles of Contextual Inquiry [2]–, and oral or email discussions. This qualitative approach allowed to identify specific communication challenges faced by practitioners in the film scoring process. It also allowed to observe personal habits that practitioners elaborate to address these challenges, and that we analysed to develop guidelines for best practice.



Figure 1. A film composer observed at work.

3. GUIDELINES FOR BEST PRACTICE

In this section we present a list of guidelines for best practice that are important to consider in designing support for creative communication in film scoring.

3.1 Use Temp Music with Caution

Using music samples as a communication medium can save time and misunderstandings. As affirmed by an interviewed composer, music is worth a thousand words:

"If somebody calls you for the first time and says 'I want you to do some music', it's going to take a lot of conversation, meetings and emails to say what one little demo could do."

For this reason, filmmakers sometimes provide or refer to 'temp (temporary) music', that is, already published music similar to what they want. Although in some instances temp music can be a good complement for words to describe how the music should sound, its use is not necessarily liked by every composer. Indeed, if the filmmakers get too attached to the temp music, they may ask the composer to imitate it rather than create something new, which is a source of frustration for many composers, as two of them explained to us:

"Temp tracks are particularly good if you like what the clients have chosen, if you don't mind writing in that style and if you're good at writing in that style; they can be useful. But if they've put temp tracks that you don't connect with, or in a musical genre that you're not very adept in, it can be quite discouraging, and it can actually get in the way of you bringing something really good and fresh."

"Some people get so attached to the temp track that they can't see anymore. They love it so much that they can't see beyond it."

Also, quite often temp music is borrowed from repertoires of big budget movies, such as 'Superman', 'Star Wars', or 'Gladiator'. The composer is then asked to reproduce similar music while working on a drastically smaller budget, which is either quite hard or even impossible to achieve. The challenge for the composer is then to

'educate' the filmmakers, making them take some distance from the temp music, as an interviewed composer described:

"Turning a director around once he has fallen in love with something is tough. Sometimes you need to be firm. Sometimes a rational and logical approach works (by pointing out how the temp music doesn't meet the approach in the spotting notes). Sometimes preparing and presenting roughs can help. Sometimes enlisting an ally (such as the producer or the sound designer) can help. Sometimes there is nothing you can do."

Temp music is now widely used by filmmakers. Composers –whether they enjoy working with it not– often have to cope with it. However, temp music should be used cautiously. Filmmakers should be encouraged to use previous works by the composer they hire as the temp music. This would ensure both that what they ask is achievable by this composer, and that the style of music eventually produced will reflect the style of the temp music they originally selected. Also, temp music should be used parsimoniously. Filmmakers should discard the temp music as early as possible so they do not get too attached to it, leaving more room for the composer to express his/her creativity.

3.2 Provide Detailed Feedback

Composers have expressed the need for getting more feedback by filmmakers on their work as the project makes progress, and especially some acknowledgement of the efforts they exert in the work, which unfortunately only few filmmakers give:

"I just needed some positivity. I needed her [the director] to say, 'Oh this one's good, this sound you've got is good', I just needed it to be positive basically. Because it's very hard to keep offering up ideas when they're being shot down. You just need some positive feedback sometimes, to get going again. When you do something they need to acknowledge the positive aspects of what you've done, then you can move forward and it's much easier to take criticism."

Filmmakers should be encouraged to provide detailed feedback, in particular on parts of the work that are satisfactory, rather than rejecting the work altogether. Not only is it useful for composers to integrate this feedback and make amendments to the music, but it also gives them more confidence in their capacity to comprehend filmmakers' expectations.

3.3 Adopt Music Sketching

In cases when instructions provided by the filmmakers are limited or not definite yet, some composers are used to making a few musical sketches for the filmmakers to listen to and then choose from the one

they prefer¹. These sketches are only developed to a draft level and mostly contain the core of the musical idea. 'The most important is the basic idea', says a composer, 'That's what is hard to find'. Another composer confirms:

"It doesn't matter if it isn't all finished and it's not all real strings and voices or whatever, if they feel the energy's right, or they feel that the brief is right, then they'll like it."

Another advantage of sketching is that it involves filmmakers in the creative process. They are then able to comment the different sketches they are given: 'Number 3 I really like. Number 4 I don't quite like, but I really like the piano melody in it'. This type of involvement has two consequent beneficial effects: it allows the composer to refine the interpretation of filmmakers' expectations, and it provides filmmakers with a greater sense of control over the creation of the score. Use of musical samples and sketches can also be handy for composers in the case when they need to convince filmmakers that their instructions might not be best or could be improved; as illustrated in this amusing anecdote:

"If somebody was making an ad for nappies and I was thinking of having a cute little guitar, some ukuleles and bells, and the director said, 'What about just a didgeridoo over the whole thing?'. Then I would think, 'Didgeridoo... nappies... It might not work.' If it really isn't going to work, then you can show them. You can go: 'Give me one second'. I've got a didge in my studio, otherwise I'll get a sample of a didge, load up the ad, put the didge on it and say 'Look at this... wooOOwooOOooOO [imitating didgeridoo]. It's going to be crazy, right?'. But at least they can look at it and go 'Ok, cool'. Now that's done, I can let that go and then move on to something else."

3.4 Communicate with All Collaborators

While communication between composers and filmmakers is at the heart of the creative collaboration, interactions with other practitioners, in particular sound effect designers, music editors and music mixers is not to be neglected. It is important to provide notes on the mix to composers so they are aware of required volume levels for the music, compared to dialogues and other sound tracks. As far as the sound design is concerned, the composer and sound designer have to communicate rigorously to be sure they appropriately share the sound frequency range:

"When there is a lot of sound design it can be problematic. For example, if there's a scene with a whale or in a basement, then the sound designer might want to make a really low sound or a deep sort of ambiance. If at the same time the composer's idea is to

¹ This is not to be confused with temp music –described earlier– which is published music provided by filmmakers, usually at the beginning of a project, to illustrate the sort of music they want.

make music with big timpani, drums and analog synthesizers that are really deep; then it will be too heavy in the low frequency range.”

3.5 Allow Visibility and Effective Marketing

As opposed to the Golden Age of film music –1930’s and 40’s–, when composers could still hope to sign long-term contracts with film production studios, today’s film composers now have a freelancing status [5]. As freelancers, visibility and marketing are vital for them to insure finding new contracts.

Most composers agree that filmmakers find and commission them because they already know about their work, style, and experience. Filmmakers have access to that information either because they were recommended by other satisfied clients, because composers previously sent them copies of their work, or because they listened to samples of composers’ music on their personal websites. Composers constantly need to increase their notoriety by advertising their work and making new connections in the industry. Yet, music broker Richard Jay [6] notes that most composers trying to find their way through the music business still make the mistake of concentrating on music to the detriment of business.

Composers also run the permanent danger of being stereotyped by those who hire them [4]. Filmmakers often base their judgment on composers’ screens credits, and success in one type of project comes to be seen as the only type of work that a composer can do. Therefore, composers have to advertise not only what they have done, but also what they can do. However, composers should take some perspective on their own abilities. They should focus on developing and advertising the styles of music they are best at making, especially those that set them apart from other freelancers: the unique selling points (USP) as introduced by Jay [6]. Jay also warns composers:

“Many composers make the mistake of claiming to be able to write every kind of music imaginable in the assumption that this is what the [potential clients] would want to hear most. This is to be avoided at all cost.”

Indeed, directors generally believe in the adage ‘Jack of all trades, master of none’. If they required a certain style of music for their film, they would be more inclined to hire a composer that is known to be particularly talented in that certain style or that has dedicated him/herself to it.

4. CONCLUSION

The explorative study we conducted with composers and filmmakers has confirmed that practitioners recurrently face challenges in their creative communication. Because practitioners are not initially prepared to handle these challenges, they elaborate personal habits through years of experience to facilitate the communication. We analysed some of these habits to develop a set of guidelines for best practice. Considering these guidelines will serve in the extraction of

general principles and models, necessary to designing effective and generalised solutions.

4.1 Future Work

Our study has provided substantial and compelling results. Yet, it is incomplete. Because most practitioners are self-taught and develop their own habits, it is expected to discover more through further surveys. As part of the second phase of our study, we will collect other significant sets of data to confirm or amend concepts we already found.

Finally, over the longer-term, we envisage the possibility of extending our research and adapting our findings to other creative and collaborative industries that are similar to film scoring, like dance, dramatic arts and graphic design.

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