



ThinkSpace Education

5 Skills Every Film Composer Needs

You've heard the phrase "I don't know what I don't know?" Well that's certainly true of a lot of people when they start out learning to write film music. The first two skills are fairly obvious but the importance of the other three is frequently overlooked by musos who want to become film composers. Crucially, it's not all about you and your music. It's about communication and understanding.

- 1. Write Great Music.** Yes, no great surprise here but what do we mean by *great*? Again the obvious answer epic orchestral, big tunes, soaring strings - "uplifting" is a word frequently associated with film music. As often as not what sells right now is something more off-beat and quirky and the key element is being distinctive and slightly different to the mainstream. The rise of Daniel Pemberton is a better guide perhaps than the style of long established masters like Hans Zimmer and John Williams.
- 2. Be Good at Music Technology.** Film and games music doesn't get written with a quill on manuscript paper, it is largely created inside a computer DAW like Cubase or Logic X. And yes everyone who enters this profession needs to have mastered the use of a DAW, be good at sampled orchestration, able to manipulate digital audio to create cool new sounds, all that good stuff. But this is a rabbit hole down which many people who are hoping to become film and games composers disappear never to return. Yes it's important but these are only tools and nothing like as important as the music itself.
- 3. Be A Great Communicator.** Writing film or games music is a team sport. You are part of someone else's project - a feature film, an indie game, a TV show, whatever it might be. You need excellent communication skills to work out what your director or producer wants. Talking about music is extremely difficult and misunderstandings haunt the lonely halls of the film composer's world. Developing techniques for understanding each other is a foundational skill and something we teach on a number of our courses like Music for the Media and all our Master's programmes.
- 4. Read the Film.** You need to understand exactly how the project works, what it is trying to achieve creatively and intellectually. You need to grasp all the levels on

which the narrative is working, have some context in that you are familiar with other works by other producers or directors in that genre. At a scene by scene level therefore, having understood the role of the music in the whole project you are better able to read the individual scenes and full engage with a conversation between the music and the picture. This is a lifetime's work and is the foundational skill truly great film composers like Thomas Newman and Alexandre Desplat have absolutely nailed.

5. **Speak Accurately through Music.** Film, TV and games composers need to develop an awareness of what their music is saying. This goes well beyond the primary colours of “happy” “sad” and “scary”. Music needs to be able to say in a few bars, “proud with a hint of regret” or “jealous but in a slightly comedic way”. This means appreciating how different audiences respond to music, how their own musical history has led them to make certain connections and how audiences collectively have a common understanding of the unspoken language of music, because that is a language you need to speak fluently.

So there is a great deal more than writing great music and knowing music tech to becoming a film, games or TV composer. Acquiring these last three skills takes a lot of time, hard work and - yes, often training and mentorship, which is how our master's programmes work.