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FEBRUARY 2010 £3.85
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How to make beautiful music

Making beautiful music

A lot of people want a say when it comes to creating the music for a production, so composers have to be able to take all those different views on board, as well as interpreting what the producers really want. Jon Creamer reports

While screen composers are hired for their ability to create an original and impressive score, their skills have to reach far beyond their musical creativity.

Successful composers for the screen have to become both an arbiter of the often conflicting interests among the executives in charge of a production and also an interpreter, attempting to understand what those people are asking for in the first place.

"On some shows, I've had the direction coming from the editors and then the exec will come in and ask for the music to be changed," says Alan D Boyd, whose recent credits include *The Day of the Triffids*. "You often get conflicting interests. I've heard stories where the score has been written and then, before a certain cut off point in the contract, the composer's been asked to rewrite the entire thing." On a commercial, the levels of approval can be far greater. After the agency producer has approved a piece of music it then "has to be approved by the art director and writer as it's their baby," says Jonathan Goldstein, the composer behind *Primo* as well as many high-end commercials. "If they like it, they'll put it to the director as well and they'll put their tuppence worth in. Then the creative director of the agency will cast his ear over it and then it will go to the client. If the clients are happy, that's it."

"You have to try and incorporate everybody's expectations within it," agrees Robert Hartshorne, who writes for TV and corporate films.

The trick is understanding and interpreting what those expectations are. "It's about asking questions, having discussions, taking the notes. You need to have a clear and confident idea about where you're going," says Boyd.

"You have to see through the words they're using to what you think they might be after," says Hartshorne. "It can be as simple as 'I don't like that ascension, it's too slow. Can you make it busier?' That's straightforward but you can get some fairly wild comments like 'I need it more orange.'"

Often, the direction can be as simple as pointing the composer towards a musical style or the music

DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS

Production company: Power

Composer: Alan D Boyd, Felt Music

Composer Alan D Boyd got involved with the recent *Triffids* remake at an early stage due to his working relationship with director Nick Copus. "I was speaking to him at the beginning when he was offered the job. I re-read the book and watched the old TV series and we talked about the monster movies and TV drama we liked. Then I started playing around in my studio with ideas and sending them off to him." Eventually, Boyd was hired as the production's composer. "On the *Triffids* the producers had varying points of reference from African drumming to *The Long Good Friday*. You listen to *The Long Good Friday* and you have to figure out what is it about it that they like. They didn't want the sax solos and reggae feel but they wanted the instrumentation sounds like the arpeggiated synths. We worked mostly with samples and computer-based sounds but then recorded musicians as well so we focused on the instruments that we wanted to be real. We did a lot of scratchy violin and guitar stuff to add to the horror aspect, then we had a straight violin and cello that came in and lifted the emotional pieces and added depth to the music. They wanted a Hollywood score and I like to think we did that." ▶





YELLOWSTONE

Production company: BBC

Composer: Edmund Butt, Bucks Music Group

Ed Butt: "It happens rarely but I got the job via my agent sending a showreel. When I saw the show it was jaw droppingly brilliant and I knew I had to do it and part of the deal was we had a really good orchestral budget. The process of deciding what kind of music we were going to have took six weeks. We started off thinking it should be folksy in its textures, then we decided it had to be quite dramatic and to be music of some stature. It's about Yellowstone but made by British people and the BBC. I wrote some American harmonies but predominantly we saw it as a place that happened to be in America as opposed to obviously going American. Doc features require enormous amounts of work. For one hour you're doing 50 minutes of music and we'd set the bar high with a 70-piece orchestra in Abbey Road for three sessions to record it. But even that wasn't enough to record it all. I had to record lots of ethnic wind players and vocalists separately. Live music does make a difference. Sample scores don't have the breadth that live musicians bring. When you're writing music for landscape and for animals it's all very natural so if you start incorporating too many unnatural sounds it's not in harmony with the picture." ▶

from a particular film. "If it's obvious, then you don't need a lot of explanation," says Goldstein. "But if they're searching for something they haven't found yet, you do. The more that hasn't been discovered, the more that needs to be instructed."

Though sometimes, being briefed too specifically can cut down on the creativity and originality of the score. "My preference is you don't try and find a musical avenue through talking about music," says James Burrell, who created the music for *Waybuloo*. "You can talk about it through ideas without ever referring to a particular style of music. That means you sometimes have to go round the houses but you're more likely to end up with something intrinsic to the show rather than just a stylistic add on."

For Robert Hartshorne, the briefing process shouldn't be one where the composer remains passive. "It is very hard sometimes for people to know exactly what they want, particularly when it comes to music so I think it's up to me to make suggestions as well."

After all, if the composer was simply a conduit for the producers' ideas, there's not much point hiring a composer. "You're trying to match up the emotions, the intensity, the excitement that everyone wants," says Boyd. "You're looking at the temp tracks they've laid down against the film, but there's a point where you have to be allowed to inject your own thoughts and feeling into it. You have to closely follow the visions people have in their heads but also bring something unique to it."



can we protect
the environment?

SYNGENTA – OUR STORY

Production company: Edge Picture Co
Composer: Robert Hartshorne

Robert Hartshorne: "Our Story is a corporate image film and they were looking at using an orchestra and mixing in world music flavours. That was the start of the brief from The Edge. With Syngenta being an agricultural company it was all about helping people and being friendly to the earth. They used words like 'warm', 'world feel' and 'epic moments'. In this case they were keen to use an orchestra so the demo I produced had to sound as close to the final piece as possible. You can't put a piano in and say there'll be strings there later. It's hard enough for me to make that leap. With a corporate image film that they'll use extensively round the globe, an orchestra gives out a sense of quality and the gravitas they want to portray.

When I got the film back and made the changes, three different sections of Syngenta needed to have an input. Each of them had differing views so you have to try and incorporate everybody's expectations within it. Then we went from locked picture to record in Prague in about two weeks.

WAYBULOO

Production company: The Foundation
Composer: James Burrell, Brighter Day Music

Burrell had worked with the *Waybuloo* creators Absolutely Cuckoo through the development of the project before being officially hired when the show went into production. That initial work "established the tone clearly. Lots has evolved since but we were never in a position of throwing random musical references around in a committee like fashion. We'd already established an emotional feel we could build on. The show is not located in a specific place but it's not trying to be a United Colours of Benetton world music compilation either. There's a Japanese influence in the set design, yet the backdrop looks like the Lake District. There's a slightly tribal element, and an Indian/Asian influence. That gives you a lot but it needs to give resonances of things without being obviously one thing. There's a tight delivery schedule so a lot of the instruments are written using samples. Where appropriate we'll bring in live stuff to lift it like the classical flute and Taiwanese pipes in the titles. Where there's an opportunity we will."



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WEETABIX - STEEPLECHASE

Production company: WCRS/Rattling Stick
Post: The Mill
Composer: Jonathan Goldstein

In the ad, a jockey decides to make do without his horse and runs past the other competitors to victory, accompanied by a mock heroic soundtrack. Says composer Jonathan Goldstein: "The live orchestra breathes a lot of air and life into the music. Samples are really good these days and it's amazing what you can achieve and the illusions you can create, but when you put the two together side by side you realise what you've been missing. When it came to recording it was really late on so the whole thing had to be done in a matter of days, the orchestra and studio had to be booked and the score had to be prepared and the parts written out. You book a series of players through a session fixer but finding a studio is hard because there are few around these days. We recorded at Lyndhurst, George Martin's place. We get one hour. The musicians walk in, play it and they walk out again. In that time we do a 60, 30 and 20-second version, then you spend several hours after mixing it."



SCHOOL OF COMEDY

Production company: Left Bank Pictures
Music company: various

Left Bank's *School of Comedy* sketch show, that has kids playing adult characters, needed a wide variety of music, says producer Jenna Jones. "When we made the pilot we started using older tracks that the children would lip-synch to. Tracks they've never heard of but their characters would have sung to in their youth like Barbra Streisand and Neil Diamond's *You Don't Bring Me Flowers* which suddenly sounds hilarious coming out of a child's mouth. Then, when we made the series, it became a format of the show. Also, because it's a sketch show, we often use a recurring piece of music as a signature track to introduce a character, so we used Audio Network because normally you can only use a commercial track three times per episode or you have to agree rates with the artist so it was handy as we could use it as much as we liked. Xenomania, who write for *Girls Aloud*, did the title music. We'd listened to a lot of music before and it was all very gameshow-y. We wanted it to be more rocky. It's an E4 show and needs to feel young."



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