



Working with Composers

A Handbook for Screen Directors in agreement with





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Working with Composers

If executed correctly, the score of a film or television show can be one of its most emotionally powerful aspects. Music's ability to convey emotion, theme, and story makes it a valuable asset to any post-production process, and yet the process of how to choose the perfect score for your project can be daunting.

Hiring a composer to create an original score for your film or TV show is the best way to have music that perfectly matches your work, as there is no substitute for that level of uniqueness. But how exactly do you find the perfect composer? How do you articulate your vision if you don't have any musical background? Most importantly, how can you ensure that the best music for your movie or TV show is created?

At SDGI, we want to help you find the perfect music for your film. This guide for directors we have created to answer your questions on how to find, work with, and utilize your composer to create the best score possible with approval and thanks to Screen Composers Guild of Ireland.

How do I get started?

It is important to not leave the score until postproduction or end of the project. It is a common dilemma amongst directors to have every aspect of their film ready to go except for music, and then being forced to scramble to find a composer or stock music from a library to use.

To avoid this problem, hire a composer as early on as possible. While it may feel strange to have a composer ready during filming, that early exposure to your film will feed into their work and give them a better understanding of the story as a whole. Most importantly, it will ensure that the composer's score will be ready when you need it, and not as a last minute effort.

The Screen Composers Guild of Ireland recommend doing a shortlist of composers and to have a face to face contact with them in addition to getting music samples. Having a good rapport and finding shared interests/ language can really assist in the collaborative process or as one director said 'to just make sure they are sound'!

A composer may send a director themes and sketches during the filming process and good to have director feedback on these, identifying what is not going to work or what the director likes or doesn't like from sketches, this can really help the composer get a head start on the final score. These sketches can also be used towards temp and not every composer/director team likes this but it can work for some.

It is useful to have a chat in advance about preferred workflow through the project so expectations are clear whether to send sketches early or just work from the finished cut.



It is also essential that you budget for your music. This amount will not only pay the composer, but also cover the costs of musicians, instruments, equipment and more. To choose an appropriate budget, you may want to research other film and TV show's budgets for scores and composers. A widely accepted range is somewhere between 10-15% of your overall budget being devoted to music. According to Hollywood composer Nathaniel Smith, "For something that can carry 50% of the emotional weight of your film, that's some good value."

- Hire your composer early
-
- Define music budget and workflow
-
- Consider sketches

How do I choose a composer?

Choosing a composer is a process unique to every director, but there are some guiding principles that will help you select one perfect for your style and project. Firstly, you should do your research of all the composers you are considering and the Screen Composers Guild of Ireland has a full directory of composers. Take the time to investigate their musical background, education, and experience as a film or TV show composer.

It is important to note that writing music is not the same as composing for film or television. While they can go together, film composition requires a different set of skills, such as story interpretation, working with editing and time codes, and potentially harsher deadlines. Make sure that your composer has prior experience in the film or television industry, or be prepared to educate them on entertainment composition yourself.

After you've found a composer that interests you, request a sample audio reel. This gives you the opportunity to learn more about their work and to determine if their musical style matches your own preferences and vision. While listening to this reel, don't expect to hear the perfect music for your film or TV show. This is the highlights of their work, not the work that they've written for your project. Listen for their creative potential and general musical style, and keep an open mind and an open ear!

What is temping and how do I do it well?

Temping is when you as the director choose general music to act as a "filler" throughout the editing process, before you receive your composer's score. The temp



music can be any general, pre-cleared music from stock music libraries, and should simply be a place-holder for the score.

Temping is a controversial topic in the world of composing. Some composers abhor temping and swear against it, while others point to its editing advantages and enjoy working with a temp. Here are some do's and don'ts when it comes to temping.

- Do: match your expectations to the budget

Choosing an Oscar-nominated orchestral score as your temp can be a bad decision if you do not have the time and resources to make that happen. Manage your expectations with whatever your composer brings you.

- DO: choose a neutral temp

Choosing neutral temp music from your composer's library or a third party allows the composer to create an entirely new score separate and one that is unique to your film or TV show's theme.

- DO: tell your composer what you like about the temp, but...

The temp is just a place-holder, but it can help you clarify and communicate your vision to the composer. Explain what works about it to the composer, whether it be the rhythm, tempo, instrument choice, build, or tone. These details will give your composer a good idea of the strengths of the temp, and also inspire them to create off of those notes.

- DON'T: compare them to it

You hired the composer to create their own score, not to replicate or elevate the temp. Their music will vary from the temp in unique and hopefully successful ways, so make sure to listen to their vision and encourage it! Comparing the new score to the temp can also be a sign of 'temp love'—the composer's ultimate nightmare, when the director falls in love with the temp music and rejects every original score offered.

How do I give good notes?

The Screen Composers Guild of Ireland says that it might be worth starting with a spotting session; this is where the director, composer, music supervisor and sometimes editor watch through the final cut of film in its entirety and then break it down to identify the areas where music will be into cues using time codes and come up with ideas of what that music could/should be. This helps hone in on what music will be doing within the narrative, it is like creating a music script and is a template



point for future notes. A spotting session also really helps with creating the budget for the composer, an opportunity to talk about how best to spend such as where the director might want live musicians, and prioritising cues, also include placed music in this. See our links on explanation of spotting session below.

You don't have to be a music guru (although it helps!) to communicate with your composer. If you are not a trained musician, the best way to express your vision is by using emotional action words, similarly to the ones you use with your actors—focusing on terms like dramatic intent, story arc, and elements of the narrative. These phrases communicate your desires to the composer while still giving them the creative control. If you accidentally use a musical term that means something different in the professional world, you could end up with a miscommunication that puts your score on the wrong track. Stick to what you know and allow them to create!

After hearing their first drafts of the score, it is important to give quality notes. Firstly, live with the music for a few hours in order to fully comprehend it. Write all of your notes down as you listen through, and communicate these clearly to your composer. When giving feedback, balance positive notes with your negative suggestions, and be clear about what you need changed. As long as you are direct about your notes and appreciative of the composer's work, the feedback process should lead to an improved score that meets both your and the composer's needs.

As composer Nathaniel Smith says, "Music can make a good project legendary or a fantastic film unwatchable." Your composer's score is incredibly important to the emotional experience of your film or TV show, so it is important to take the time to make sure that it is done right. Following these steps, trusting your composer's creative instincts, and communicating throughout the process will hopefully lead to a fantastic and emotionally impactful score perfect for your project.

Resources

- <https://screencomposersguild.ie>

- <https://www.zachheyde.com/blog/the-importance-of-the-spotting-session>

- <https://www.spitfireaudio.com/editorial/features/scoring-a-film/part1/>

- <https://videoandfilmmaker.com/wp/index.php/tutorials/6-directors-tips-working-composers/>

- <https://www.documentary.org/feature/minding-your-beats-and-cues-tips-working-composer>



These guidelines are suggested and recommended by the Screen Directors Guild of Ireland in agreement with the Screen Composers Guild of Ireland and are not legally binding or contractually required. If you have official concerns about collaborating with your composer, please contact either Guild, your lawyer or agent.