

music**PRO**
guides

THE REEL WORLD

SCORING FOR PICTURES, TELEVISION,
AND VIDEO GAMES



THIRD EDITION

JEFF RONA

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Foreword by Peter Golub

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments and Thank Yous</i>	xv
<i>Foreword</i> by Peter Golub	xvii
<i>Introduction to the Third Edition</i>	1
SECTION ONE • THE CREATIVE PROCESS	5
Introduction	5
CHAPTER ONE • THE MUSIC	7
“The Door”: Shaping the Overall Character of a Score	7
Before the First Note: Thinking about Music and Telling Stories	8
A Few Thoughts on Thematic Writing	10
Sharing Your First Sketches with a Director	13
Hitting the Spot: Putting Music Cues in Their Place	15
Why Is There Music in This Scene?	19
A Deeper Look at Writing Cues	20
Making a Subtle Entrance: Beginning a Cue	20
The Hit: Underscoring Crucial Moments	21
Continuity and Contrast: Sustaining Interest with Variations in Tone	25
Economy: When Less Is More	26
Dramatic Transitions: The Music’s Response to Dramatic Changes	28
Tempo: Setting the Pace of a Scene	30
Graceful Exit: How and When to End a Cue	33
Styles: Is Film Music Different from Other Kinds of Music?	34
Emotional Clarity	35
In Summary	36
My First Film: A Chance to Learn on the Job	37

CHAPTER TWO • MUSIC FOR EPISODIC TELEVISION	47
Doing a Series: Music for the Smaller Screen	47
Getting Started in Episodic Television: There's a First Time for Everything	48
The Grind	52
The Interview	52
The First Meeting	53
Spotting the First Session	55
Delivering the First Episode: Demos	56
Delivering the First Episode: Final Mixes	58
Further Episodes	59
Rinse and Repeat	60
Title Music: Intro Music for Series Shows	61
Summary	61
CHAPTER THREE • DEVELOPING A PERSONAL MUSICAL STYLE	63
Ask Yourself . . .	64
Elements of Style	68
Learning by Listening	68
Flexibility	72
Music in Context: Brain Scans, Driving and Texting, Music and Stories	75
Every Note Tells a Story: Following the Emotional Arc of a Story with Music	79
Can I Send You My Demo? What Do Directors Listen for in a Composer's Demo?	81
Who Are You?	81
No Excuses	81
General versus Custom Demos	82
How Much Is Enough?	82
Bringing Order	82
Cut to the Chase	82
Technical Specs	83
But Is It "Score"?	83
What Is Style? Cultivating a Unique, Identifiable Sound	87
Modern versus Traditional Scoring	88
CHAPTER FOUR • MUSIC IN PLAY: SCORING GAMES	93
Reading the Map: How Game Scores Are Organized	94
The List	95
Understanding Interactivity	96
Audio Middleware	96
Breaking It Down	97

Variations and Variability	98
Layers	99
Transitions	100
Music Mixing for Games	102
Virtual Reality (VR) Audio	102
Testing	103
Game Time	103
Game Perspectives	105
Sarah Schachner: Video Game Composer	105
Jack Wall: Composer	108
Wilbert Roget II: Video Game Composer	113
Reality: Scoring Documentaries	116
The Times, They Are (Always) Changing: Scoring into the Future	117
Conclusion	120
Perspectives	121
John Williams: Composer	121
Ludwig Göransson: Composer	122
Carter Burwell: Composer	126
Michael Giacchino: Composer	132
James Newton Howard: Composer	134
Wendy and Lisa: Composers	138
SECTION TWO • TECHNOLOGY	145
Introduction	145
CHAPTER FIVE • SETTING UP A STUDIO	147
How Much Is Enough?	147
OK Computer	147
CPU Speed	147
Cores	148
Memory (RAM)	148
Storage Capacity and Speed	148
Monitor Size and Resolution	149
I/O Ports	150
Operating System Software Compatibility	150
Essential Peripherals: The Add-ons That Make It All Work	151
Audio Interface	151
Speakers	153
Microphones	154

MIDI/USB Keyboard	154
Faders for Automation	155
Audio and MIDI Clip Launchers	156
Headphones	157
Acoustic Treatments	157
Miscellaneous . . .	158
Sequencers: The Creative Hub and Heart of Your Studio	158
Timecode and Synchronization: The Vital Link between Sound, Time, and Moving Image	169
Music Married to Motion	170
Video File Playback	170
Time	171
Video Frame Rates	173
Sync in Action	173
Organization: The Unique Language of Cue Sheets	174
Mixing: The Art of Balance	176
A Few Tips for Mixing Demos and Sketches	177
Software Needs	178
Putting It All Together	180
In Your Studio: The Importance of a Comfortable, Efficient Workspace	184
CHAPTER SIX • THE WRITTEN NOTE	187
Making Scores and Parts for Recording Live Musicians	187
Conduct Yourself Accordingly: How to Control a Live Orchestra	197
Orchestral Simulation: Making Better Sampled Orchestra Tracks	200
The Character of Orchestral Sounds	201
Express Yourself	205
Mic Positions	206
Timing Accuracy	206
Mixing It All Together	207
CHAPTER SEVEN • SCORE RECORDING AND MIXING	209
Getting Prepared	209
MIDI File Prep	210
Scratch Audio Prep	210
Miscellaneous Prep	211
Recording Musicians	211
How to Find Musicians	212
Estimating the Cost to Record	213
Estimating the Time Needed to Record	214

Together or Apart: Overdubs	214
The Composer's Role at a Recording Session	215
Recording the Musicians	216
Recording an Orchestra	217
Recording Order to Save Time and Cost	217
Recording Singers and Choirs	218
Recording Drums and Percussion	219
Working with World Musicians	220
Remote Recording	223
Making Changes During a Session	224
Making Your Home Studio a Good Recording Space	225
In the Mix: From Stereo to Surround	226
Delivering the Final Mixed Music	228
On to the Dub Stage	229
Team Players	230
John Ashton Thomas: Orchestrator	230
Adam Smalley: Music Editor	235
Sounds Good to Me: The Film Score Mixer	242
Alan Meyerson: Recording Engineer	242
James Hill: Recording Engineer	247
Perspectives	253
Hans Zimmer: Composer	253
John Powell: Composer	258
Mark Isham: Composer	263
Joseph Trapanese: Composer	267
Basil Poledouris (1945–2006): Composer	273
Marc Shaiman: Composer	275
SECTION THREE • CAREER	281
Introduction	281
CHAPTER EIGHT • BEGINNING A CAREER	283
How Do I Get Started as a Composer?	283
How Important Is a University Music Degree?	283
Thomas Haines: Media Composition Educator	285
Windows of Opportunity	287
Apprenticing and Assisting with a Successful Composer	289
Ghostwriting	291
Live Where You Work	292

Your Portfolio: More about Demos	293
How Does It Score?	294
Choosing the Right Material	294
Variety and Track Sequence	295
The Themes: Concise, Focused, and Memorable	296
Plagiarists Need Not Apply	296
Your Demo Reflects All Your Skills	297
A Little About You	297
Judging a Book by Its Cover	298
Sending Demos	299
The Critical List: Advice on Getting a Start	299
Advice on Being a Professional Composer	301
Agents: Someone on Your Side	304
John Tempereau: Composer's Agent	307
CHAPTER NINE • CHALLENGES	311
Getting a Lot Done in a Very Short Time	311
The Politics and Diplomacy of Scoring	315
The Interview	315
Seeking Approval	317
Conflict Resolution	318
Can You Make It Sound More Like . . . ?	320
But Are You the Right Person for the Job?	321
New Relationships	323
Someone to Watch Over You: Lawyers	324
Publicity and Visibility	325
Difficult People	326
CHAPTER TEN • MAKING A LIVING	329
What Is Your Worth?	329
Actors versus Composers	330
Composers, on the Other Hand	331
The Composer "Work for Hire" Agreement	333
How Composers Make Money: Fees, Packages, Publishing, Licenses, and Royalties	340
Sweetening the Deal	342
Royalties and Performing Rights Organizations	343
Paying the Composer	348
How Much Should You Charge?	349
Film	349

Episodic Television	350
Video Games	351
Other Income Opportunities	352
Production Music Libraries	352
Advertising	353
Other Options	353
Soundtrack Albums	354
Assembling an Orchestra	354
David Low: Music Contractor	355
Songs in Films	360
Chris Douridas: Music Supervisor	360
The Executive Suite	365
Paul Broucek: Film Music Executive	365
Financial Conclusions	372
<i>Epilogue</i>	373
<i>Glossary</i>	377
<i>Appendix: Instrument Ranges and Transpositions</i>	383
<i>Resources</i>	387
Educational Resources	387
The Society of Composers & Lyricists	388
U.S. Performing Rights Societies	388
<i>Index</i>	391
<i>About the Author</i>	405

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Foreword

A writer friend of mine once told me he liked listening to film scores while he wrote. Not understanding how he, or anyone, can concentrate on writing while listening to *anything*, I was curious to know why he preferred listening to film music in particular. I asked him what type of scores he liked: romantic, action, horror, suspense, or maybe even comedy? He said, “Any great score, because this stuff is so narrative!” Film music, he went on, tells *stories* and triggers his imagination for his own writing.

Using music to tell stories goes back centuries, or even millennia, from tribal folk tales, to the early religious *passion plays*, and later to symphonic *tone poems* and operas. The mother of all orchestral musical settings of a story is probably Berlioz’s amazing *Symphonie Fantastique*, for which the composer distributed written scenarios. Any music to a text or lyrics is, to one extent or another, *narrative*—it’s a story told in and with music.

Today’s film, television, and video game scores are a very particular variety of musical storytelling. Unlike concert music, jazz, or other instrumental genres, *it is not about music for the sake of music!* Soundtracks uniquely find a way to become an effective, and even vital, part of the totality of image, story, performance, and dialogue. A great score becomes an almost invisible part of the overall experience for an audience, and though many people like to listen to their favorite scores without the visuals, that’s not how this music was originally conceived. Whether enhancing what is already on screen or providing a more layered juxtaposition, a composer’s task is to provide not great music, but the *right* music to fulfill the intent of the project.

After studying classical music and composition, my early musical career was writing music for live theater. I spent many years sitting at rehearsals and performances soaking up the ingredients of drama and how music can play a part. Those insights stayed with me and informed my work later on scoring films. In my twenty-plus years

running the Sundance Composers Lab (a program of the highly influential Sundance Film Festival and Sundance Institute), the students and I take particular care in breaking down a scene, so each composer has a full understanding of drama, story, and character. The core theme running through the many years of the program has been consistent: write less, leave room for the movie, and always talk to your director in dramatic, not musical or technical terms.

In this third and highly updated edition of his original book *The Reel World*, composer Jeff Rona takes on these larger issues. There is something here for anyone with an interest in the subject, anyone curious about the magic that can result in combining image and music correctly. But for the aspiring film composer, this book is a veritable grab bag of useful information. Rona, a very thoughtful musical practitioner, shares with us some deeper insights into the overall approach to scoring for pictures. But his thoughts on the myriad of details of a career as a composer make this a must-read for anyone in the trenches. He gives helpful advice on how to work with directors and emphasizes the central importance of *listening*. He dissects the differences between film and TV, as well as video game scoring; gives valuable tips on how to make persuasive demos and how to conduct oneself at meetings; and gives a fair and comprehensive account of today's musical trends. There is, as we would expect, a careful breakdown of the technical side of film composing, as comprehensive as anything out there. He offers practical suggestions for how to manage the complex logistics and workflow in the professional arena. In short, he seems to have anticipated any question that could possibly come up in regard to starting a career in scoring. And there are truly illuminating interviews with a broad range of composers as well as the teams they surround themselves with—music editors, music supervisors, agents, contractors, and studio executives—that on their own are worth the price of admission.

I agree completely with his idea that film music has a “literary form” as well as his concept of every project having a sort of “Front Door,” a unique and consistent way to get into a project to bring focus and identity. Rona has a knack for having us look at composing in slow motion, breaking down the composer's journey, and shedding light on each important phase of the process. There's some welcome encouragement: “invest in yourself,” make demos that are “simple and cohesive, but colorful,” and especially “our lives are a series of firsts.”

In a very candid chapter about his first substantial scoring job (on director Ridley Scott's film *White Squall*), Rona lets the reader in on his own vulnerability. By revealing details of his meetings with the director and producers, and descriptions of how the process played out, we come away with a nuanced view of his journey that will have reverberations for anyone faced with the daunting task of scoring a project,

whatever the size or scope. This book takes the “daunting” out of the equation and demystifies the process. He encourages us to roll up our sleeves and get to work, and he gives us the tools to do so.

—Peter Golub, Film Music Lab

Peter Golub is a composer of film music, as well as works for the theater and concert hall. He was the director of Film Music at Sundance Institute and the University of Southern California, and continues to teach at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the Film Music Lab.

Introduction to the Third Edition of *The Reel World*

PLEASE READ ME!

Welcome to the Third Edition of *The Reel World*. The previous editions of this book have inspired countless people to begin their own journeys as composers for films and television. What began as a close and personal look at how music is created for movies, this third edition now covers all aspects of music for film, television, media, and (finally) video games.

So much has changed in the world of scoring since the last edition of *The Reel World*—new technology, new musical directions, new voices, new artistic and business opportunities. This edition dives deeply into all the latest and most vital information a composer must know and understand in order to have a competitive edge. The technical side of music production is truly revolutionary. Understanding how the available tools and platforms can make you a more desirable composer is covered in detail, including interviews with some of the top figures in music production, like score mixer Alan Meyerson and music executive Paul Broucek. Film and episodic TV has also seen many shifts in style and attitude, and this edition features some of the most important voices in the field, including Academy Award winners Michael Giacchino and Ludwig Göransson, as well as other important artists such as John Powell and Joseph Trapanese, and updates with the award-winning composers already featured, such as John Williams and Hans Zimmer.

The field of video game scoring has exploded as an important musical opportunity for composers. Having a deep understanding of this unique world is critical for anyone contemplating that musical path. This edition not only covers the unique challenges and methods of video game scoring (hint: it's very different from scoring movies or episodic TV), but also includes interviews with many of gaming's most in-demand composers, such as Sarah Schachner, Wilbert Roget, Jack Wall, and others.

Throughout the book you may see the word “film” or “movie”; be assured that the topics explained here apply equally whether you are focused on one medium or another. When there are specifics that apply to only one field particularly, like interactive and immersive music for games, it will be very clear. As the field of television has evolved in the era of streaming services, there is less that separates it from the film world, except for its *episodic* format. That too is distinguished here.

Information abounds on the topic of scoring pictures—books, websites, YouTube channels, pay-for video master classes, or private seminars. Some of those are great, but much of the information available online is superficial, mere opinions, incomplete, or even inaccurate. Choosing to read a book on a topic as broad and unique as music scoring puts you ahead of many people looking for a quick intro to the topic and the possibility of a career ahead. So, thank you for taking the time to read this—it is my hope that it will help you on your journey as well.

The art and craft of putting music to pictures continues to evolve, and so does this book. There are trends and shifts in scoring pictures, just as there are in pop and other music genres. New ideas occur that influence even the most traditional and timeless musical approaches. This book is not a backward look at the history or traditions of score writing. It is, and has always been, a guide on how music—your music—can best influence and enhance the world of visual storytelling. It’s also about the tools and methods used in writing scores, which continue to evolve at a rapid pace. Knowing how to use the tools of any art or business is vital to your success. And finally, this is also a glimpse into how things are done in the “real world.” Not just theory or technique, but what it’s like to really start and sustain a successful career as a composer for pictures.

Ask yourself this: Why are virtually no films, episodic series, or video games made without music? It’s a simple, but important, question. Music adds a massive amount of emotional energy to any stories and characters in a way that a project rarely can do on its own. Music is such a uniquely powerful art form. While every other aspect of a film is designed to give the illusion of reality—from the sets, costumes, lighting, artwork, editing, special effects, right down to the actors’ performances and the director’s vision—music does nothing like that. It’s different. Music actually elevates a film’s sense of reality, and places it into an almost opera-esque level, where the characters and stories become larger than life, yet at the same time, are made easier for us to relate to in our own lives. Music is an *emotional amplifier* of everything that occurs with it onscreen. If you’ve ever seen a dramatic scene with its music removed, you will get a clear idea of the enormous contribution music makes.

My own interest in music and scoring came unexpectedly from a college roommate who was a devoted film music fanatic with an enormous collection of soundtracks. Although I was already studying music and composition, I had never paid much attention to scores. That all changed quite suddenly when I began to listen to scores on their

own. It transformed how I watched (and listened to) movies and episodic television. I was transformed. I knew I wanted to get involved in this unique and wonderful art form. I jumped in as fast as I could, initially by scoring any student films I could get my hands on. The rest would come a bit later.

A great soundtrack leads the audience through the emotions and actions on the screen, without letting them know just how much they are being helped along. If that sounds a little subversive, it's because, in a way, it is. It adds clarity and focus to everything happening on the screen. Musically, it draws from several elements of musical history (from the Romantic era to the avant-garde), while still being a very contemporary field. It allows for many kinds of musical explorations and experimentation with sound, rhythm, emotion, and structure. It differs from conventional musical genres by its basic form as a *storytelling device*, being an intrinsic component of the story on the screen. It is subordinate to that story, but the best scores almost always speak for themselves to the listener.

Here is a little secret: composing music—the actual themes and melodies—cannot really be taught nor learned. Music is either inside you or not. However, many vital skills and methods can be passed from composer to composer, artist to artist. In the years I've been involved in scoring, it has been my good fortune to meet some incredible and thoroughly inspiring fellow composers, musicians, songwriters, engineers, and others who contributed a great deal not only to the art of scoring, but generously added to my own knowledge of the craft. The tremendous amount that I've learned from them I put to use every single day in my scoring work. The same is true for all the fantastic directors, producers, picture editors, and game developers with whom I've had the pleasure to work and grow.

Composing scores for film, episodic series or video games can be a highly technical process. First, each piece of music must fit the very specific time spans, energy levels, and transitions created by the director and editor. It requires not only careful thought but, often, precise calculation as well. The audio you create must be compatible with the technical formats of movie theaters, video broadcasts, mixing stages, or the specific software used for games to be interactive. As a savvy media composer, you need to know as much as possible about the technical processes that link picture and sound together. You also need to understand the musical aesthetic at the core of your art. Knowledge of the methods and technology used in media production is more than just important. Scoring is typically a highly collaborative activity, bringing together people from a wide range of fields and crafts, and all of their contributions must join together seamlessly. This is especially true of the marriage of sound and music; there is no room for errors.

In the process of developing a musical understanding and trust with directors and producers, it is essential for a composer to create very polished and convincing demos

of each piece of music created for any project in order to show the filmmakers what you plan to deliver. Detailed and accurate-sounding demos are now expected. The bar for good-sounding demos on a project is quite high.

Having a real command of your personal studio has become a requirement for any working composer. I think of my studio as my instrument, something I have learned to play well. Just as a musician needs some level of virtuosity in order to express deep emotions, a composer must use technology and technique to translate musical ideas into something that a director or producer can grasp fully and understand in the context of their film, prior to any final recording with (or without) other musicians. In many cases, there is no longer even a difference between a demo and a finished score. This is one of the many realities of a composer's life; one that requires not only a well-equipped writing setup, but also the knowledge of how to get the most from it. There's fierce competition out there, so be ready to bring your "A" game from the start. A great musical idea that is poorly executed will miss the mark.

There are no absolute rules about what makes any score good, great, or even merely acceptable. However, there do seem to be certain tried-and-true conventions and concepts (and even some sleight of hand), which enable music to have the best possible influence on the dramatic content of a scene and the audience watching.

Every composer working to picture brings something new and personal to the craft. Yet, some musical ideas and vocabularies seem to work better than others. Entire books have been written on this, and yet they often don't shed real light. Honestly, careful listening in a darkened movie theater or in front of your TV can probably teach you as much about what makes a great score as any book or amount of academic film music theory. In *The Reel World*, I've written down my personal perspectives and observations of the key elements that contribute to a successful score. I have collected my experiences and hard-won lessons here and, additionally, have enlisted the help of some of today's most influential composers to describe their own outlook on the art and craft needed to score pictures.

A successful life composing music for film, series television, video games, commercials, music libraries, or any related musical career is based on talent, knowledge, hard work, building relationships, and some pure luck. Positive energy put toward any of these (except for luck, which you can't do much about) will help to move you forward toward the goals you've set for yourself. The ideas, examples, solutions, techniques, and perspectives here will hopefully help as you forge a path toward your own career.

Let's get started, shall we . . .



THE CREATIVE PROCESS

INTRODUCTION

We humans are story junkies. Movies, episodic TV, and video games are all about telling compelling stories, with plots and characters we connect with and like . . . or hate. Every element of movie making, from the scripts to the sets, from the acting to the picture and sound editing, from the costumes to the special effects, is designed to get an audience to believe they are experiencing something real. The story can be something from everyday existence—romance, comedy, personal struggles, or coming-of-age—or it can be a fantastic, alternate reality like science fiction, crime thrillers, or medieval dramas. Stories are stories—and the good ones feel like real events happening to real people in real places, in the ways we are drawn in, care about the outcome, and get personally involved. Movies and episodic TV create those new realities through the careful creation and manipulation of images, words, actions, and sounds.

But . . . music is the only real exception to this. Music does not exist in the real world the way it exists in cinema, TV, or video games. There is no massive symphonic, electronic, or rock music floating around in everyday life, or in deep space for that matter. When two people kiss, there is no swell of music in real life, yet without the music, a romantic onscreen kiss often doesn't convey anything nearly as emotional. Life does not come with its own soundtrack. We know this. Yet the audience readily (and often unknowingly) accepts music in scenes where no music could exist in reality. Music scores are an effective and subversive way to have audiences feel moved.

Music elevates everything. It is an emotional amplifier that makes funny things funnier and sad things sadder. Music in media takes ordinary stories and raises them to a higher level in which everything is larger than life. In many cases, it is the music that conveys the true psychology of a scene and not the sights, words, or natural sounds in it.

Music is intangible. It has an undeniable emotional effect on the human species for reasons that no one has ever fully explained. Music can make us cry, smile, conjure up mental pictures, and bring up unexpected memories, and make us more receptive to everything else we see and hear. Music is pure emotion with no physical connections. It bypasses the intellect and goes straight for the heart. It is the subliminal power of music that makes it so perfect as a companion to the pictures and stories in movies and more.

Music has been a part of the human experience from the beginning of our existence. It is an intrinsic part of everyone's consciousness. We grow up with music, have music with us most every day, commemorate important events with music, create indelible memories with music, and become familiar with hundreds, or thousands, of pieces of music in our lives. Some of us are music addicts and cannot make it through the day without it. Music has within it tremendous diversity of styles, approaches, moods, and themes, from ancient rituals, to rigorous classical works, to countless modern styles. It is part of a universal human experience.

So, what distinguishes cinematic music from other forms? Is there, in fact, such a thing as "film music," that is in some way unique? Undeniably yes, it is something different. Many styles and genres of music can enhance an audience's experience of the story, characters, and events. There are definitely some musical concepts and conventions that find their way into scores more frequently simply because they work—over and over again.

Classic film scores are almost always thematic and simple, and have a structure and flow that closely matches the pictures and editing going by onscreen. Unlike pop songs, which have a specific structure (verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, etc.), film or episodic music has a "literary form." In other words, most scores are not based on traditional musical forms, but by the pace with which things happen on the screen and in the story. And while that may seem awkward and unmusical, there are methods that allow music to be supportive while still retaining its musical integrity. In video games, themes are often organized in a way to make them available at key moments in gameplay as determined by the player.

All of music's traditional organic elements—melody, harmony, rhythm, color, and even structure, have important roles in most scores. Scores can, and often do, remain musically satisfying, even on their own (though most soundtrack albums are heavily edited for a purer listening experience). They are carefully fitted to match images and actions, so the emotional connection is clear and direct. As flows one, so flows the other, in a timeline as the story unfolds. That is the challenge of composing music for pictures. Let's look at some of the peculiarities of music in *The Reel World*.

1

The Music

“THE DOOR”: SHAPING THE OVERALL CHARACTER OF A SCORE

Every great score has a primary thematic element that makes it unique, and hopefully, memorable. In most cases, that thematic element is a melody. Many great scores are identified by their main melodic themes. To dive a little deeper, a theme can be a full-blown melodic idea (like the classic scores of John Williams, for example, a consummate melodist). Melodic themes can be small musical fragments, such as the famous shower scene from Bernard Herrmann’s score to *Psycho* (arguably the most famous film theme in history), or John Williams’s iconic two-note theme in *Jaws*.

The themes in scores can be more ephemeral or subtle as well. Many great scores, in fact, are not traditionally or memorably melodic, but instead it’s the rhythms, harmonies, or sonic colors that are. Call it *vibe*—music that imparts a feeling more than a memorable melody. That doesn’t mean any less thought is put into it. In fact, it may be the opposite. If you can find a compelling musical idea that can be adapted and used throughout a score to make your musical point, then you have the makings of a good theme, even if it is not strictly a melodic one.

A successful score needs a kind of *front door*, a single, unique and consistent starting point to help create focus and memorable identity. Every composer will approach this entryway somewhat differently. Some composers will sweat over a memorable melodic theme because that theme can go a very long way to creating the score as a whole, reappearing as often as desired to function as a recurring connecting element. The musical term for this is *leitmotif*. This can be most anything in terms of musical style or approach, but it will give something unique to the project and, more importantly, give it a consistent tone and style.

However, some other composers will come up with interesting sounds, chord sequences, rhythms, electronic elements, or an unusual choice of instruments and colors. Many contemporary scores are identifiable by interesting and memorable

rhythmic figures that become the major thematic motif for the score rather than a memorable melody. They rely on elements of *ambience* or *minimalism* to convey moods and emotions. It's a matter of personal choice between composer and director. One is not preferred in any way.

Successful pop songs have *hooks* (a short, catchy, repeated phrase that draws the listener in quickly) that become their main identifying point. A hook often comes down to just a few notes. It is an important part of good pop music: to become memorable quickly through a simple, brief, catchy phrase. Successful scores are no different, though they often add a layer of ambitiousness or complexity to the music in order to make it work well in a number of programmatic or dramatic situations, or to give a sense of scope to the creative project.

One key to starting a score is to take the time to pull together a variety of themes and ideas that will define that score in a unique and memorable way, and to cover the variety of moods and emotions that may be needed. More can be added, taken away, or revised and improved throughout. But every score starts with some musical ideas that make it fresh and memorable.

BEFORE THE FIRST NOTE: THINKING ABOUT MUSIC AND TELLING STORIES

Before you create the first note of a score, there should be a thoughtful process of discovery and careful consideration in order to ensure that the road you take is the best and most preferable road. A great score is not an arbitrary collection of musical notes or cool phrases. Perhaps the single most important step in creating a score is to decide what might be the best approach from every musical possibility. A score can be for a large orchestra, electronics, or voices; it can be jazz, minimal, ambient, heavy on percussion or guitars; use only small chamber groups or world music ensembles or soloists. A score can be traditionally melodic, highly experimental, or a hybrid of styles, textures, or overall approach. The most important first step in creating a score is to *decide* on an approach and stick to it.

That decision will come from a few sources. The first, and by far most important, is to talk with your director (or producer, if they are in charge of music) and see what musical approach or sound they think is most appropriate and desirable for the project. A good director will have ideas. It is vital for any composer to really get inside the head of the director and get a deep understanding of what they like and dislike musically. If possible, sit down and ask them about what they hope the music will achieve for the project. Ask them to explain the project's story from their personal perspective *and listen carefully to what they say*—they will illuminate the story, characters, and style for you. Perhaps they see the hero as vulnerable, and that might give you musical ideas. Perhaps the love story is more tragic in their eyes than you might have thought,

and that will help you decide on more interesting musical choices. Ask questions and dig as deeply as possible into what they want, and what their overall vision is.

Generally, directors and producers have specific musical tastes, and it is helpful to find out what sorts of music they like. On one episodic series I scored, I saw the producer had a lot of blues in his music collection. So, when I suggested adding some blues to the score, he was ecstatic. It also happened to fit the project very well. Many directors are huge music fans, and not just of scores. In fact, they usually *don't* listen to scores, but have other interests in classical, pop, hip-hop, R&B, or more esoteric styles. Getting a sense of your director's tastes, as well as what they hope the music will bring to the project, should start to move you in the right direction.

Composers often do research in preparation for writing a score. If the filmmaker is interested in a highly evolved, avant-garde orchestral score, you will want to familiarize yourself with as much as you can from the top composers of that genre by listening to albums and, perhaps, checking out some of those scores to see how they were notated. If you are doing a score for a Chinese historical action film, you might listen to as many Chinese film scores and folk recordings as possible. Composers frequently draw inspiration from other scores, albums, or online videos. There is so much great material in the world, and it's a wonderful way to gain some insight if you hope to do something very specific.

The goal of research, of immersing yourself in a particular type of music, isn't to copy it or imitate it, but to allow any music you write to have depth and character. When I was asked to score a movie about Native Americans from various tribes, I listened to over a hundred recordings of Native American music. From them, I learned about the rhythms, instruments, scales, and phrases, and even how the style of music changes dramatically, depending on its geography. I did my best in a short period of time to become an expert in Native American music. My goal was to serve the film's drama and plot without resorting to music that might be shallow or cliché. I had a lot more to draw from after my research. And it was a lot of fun as well.

I've steeped myself in all kinds of music prior to most every creative project I do. I've listened to all sorts of musical styles with which I wasn't familiar, specific artists or scores the director especially loved, and music from different historical periods or from various cultures. Anything that might inspire me to do something personal, but that draws from these sources. Think of it as the difference between *what* you compose and *why*. Good music (all good art, in fact) knows *why*. Good music isn't just a bunch of notes—no matter how beautiful they may be. Film, episodic, or video game music has a *purpose* and a perspective, as it relates to the project you are doing. This doesn't just apply to musical oddities. It is as *inspiring* to listen to great artists as a warm-up to getting to your personal craft and musical personality.

After the research, and once you start to actually sketch some preliminary ideas, you can let go of all that other music and begin to sift through the music you feel is right for the project. Start sketching without thinking about specific scenes or characters. Just write. Get into your own musical head space. Sketch as many ideas as you can to find the stylistic “front door” to the overall score. Hopefully, each will get you closer and closer to something that works well. You’ll know when you’ve created themes or sketches that reflect all you hope to achieve musically in the project. Your goal right now is to fulfill the director’s vision, but do it with music that will inspire and surprise them. Organize your sketches as best you can, and draw from them as you start to actually write to picture. You are through the door.

A FEW THOUGHTS ON THEMATIC WRITING

What makes any score memorable? As mentioned earlier, any good score has something of value that tells a story and also stays with the listener. It might be a melody, a repeating rhythmic figure, an interesting harmonic progression, some interesting electronic sound design or instrumentation, or any kind of sonic signature that makes it stand out as different from other scores, including your own.

It’s valuable to remember that writing a score is first and foremost about *emotion*, and less about style, genre, or any intellectual aspects of composition. In other words, it’s all about the feel and mood that the music creates, and not about any technical or theoretical aspects of music. Scores are designed to make people *feel* something, and not really *think* about anything. The audience is supposed to be focused on dialogue or plot points, and the music is there to enhance and amplify that. A good score comes from the heart and not the head. That doesn’t mean it doesn’t help to have a good sense of music theory or compositional technique. It assuredly does because it makes the process that much easier. However, there are plenty of successful composers who don’t have any formal training and yet are able to evoke emotions flawlessly through music, and therefore be a valuable asset to any creative project they work on.

Good melodic writing is an art form. A great melody has a shape—an arc—that makes it feel like it has a beginning, middle, and end that conveys something *inevitable*. Take “Happy Birthday,” a simple melody we all know, for example.

It has the simplest of structures, but it feels cohesive and consistent. It has a perfect blend of motives (see figures 1.2 and 1.3), repetition, rhythmic, and harmonic language that make the end feel very satisfying. It’s like a lot of folk songs in that sense, and, in fact, folk melodies have frequently been used in all kinds of scores. For good reason—they are simple, clear, and easily relatable. The lesson you can take away from all this is that most good themes are most often simple in shape and structure. The complexity in some scores comes from other factors, such as the arrangements and

Happy Birthday (AABA Form)

The musical notation for "Happy Birthday" is presented in 3/4 time. The first line shows the first A section (A) with chords F and C7, and the first A variation (A var) with chord F. The lyrics are "Hap - py birth - day to you! Hap - py birth - day to you! Hap - py". The second line shows the B section with chord Bb, and the second A variation (A var) with chords F, C7, and F. The lyrics are "birth - day dear (Name -) Hap - py birth - day to you!".

FIGURE 1.1
"Happy Birthday" with annotations.
Author

orchestrations. There are, of course, many exceptions. But this carries through in a substantial majority of projects.

Motivic writing is another more contemporary way to add character and consistency to a score. Instead of focusing on a traditional melody that is several bars in length, think more about short repeating phrases that can build emotion.

The musical notation shows two examples of motivic phrases. The first example is a melodic line in 4/4 time, consisting of four groups of four eighth notes, each marked with a triplet '3'. The second example is a melodic line in 4/4 time, consisting of two groups of four eighth notes, each marked with a slur and a triplet '3'.

FIGURE 1.2
Examples of a few motivic phrases.
Author

Another key element of thematic writing is *consistency*. As a whole, a typical score may have many themes and a wide range of emotions, depending on the story and characters. However, something needs to tie a project together and make it feel like a singular experience for the audience. It might be your choice of sound and instrumentation, or it can simply be that all the pieces within the project share a similar harmonic language. Within any one theme, the best thing to do is keep it very focused.

The image shows a musical score in 4/4 time, consisting of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and contains a melodic line of eight notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, and F4. A bracket above this staff is labeled "Melodic line". The bottom staff is in bass clef and contains a bass line that recasts the melody. The first four notes (G2, A2, B2, C3) are beamed together and have a slur underneath. The next four notes (B2, A2, G2, F2) are also beamed together. A bracket below the entire bass line is labeled "Bass line from melodic shape". The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

FIGURE 1.5
Example of a melody recast as bass.
Author

Themes can be played at different tempos to shift the feel. Changing the instrumentation (for example, a melody played on a piano in one cue, moves to strings or brass in another) is also a simple way to keep a score feeling connected without becoming overly repetitious.

Creating variations of themes is a useful way to cover a lot of needs in a given project. It's a common technique in a majority of scores. Some variation techniques are very noticeable and some are more subtle. Push it too far, and you'll end up with cues that, to your ear, may seem related (after all, you know what you did to create the track) but will not feel unified to the average member of the audience. Variations can be very broad, but something in the material needs to clearly stand out as being related.

Finally, while thematic writing is a vital part of scoring, every project you do will be different in its needs and the wishes of the creators. Some directors love hearing themes and melodies throughout the score. Others prefer a much more sparing use of themes and for the bulk of a score to be more in the background and not distract the listener. It always comes down to asking a lot of questions all along the way. Be willing to try things a few different ways before settling on the final approach; and use your best instincts to create a score that has balance, cohesiveness, and uniqueness.

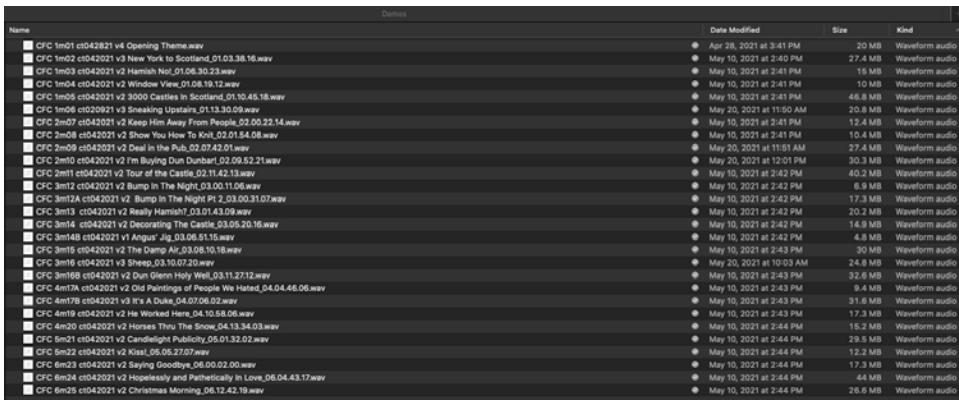
SHARING YOUR FIRST SKETCHES WITH A DIRECTOR

Once you've created your initial batch of demo material, it's time to play it for your director, producer, or whoever on the production is in charge of approving your music. Your first playback of demos is the first chance you'll really find out if you and the director are truly on the same page. This can often be a nerve-racking experience, and obviously a lot is riding on it, specifically, whether or not you are going to go forward or might have to start over. It's a bit like a first date—you really want it to go well, but you have no idea what will happen. There are a few things to keep in mind.

Before you play any sketches for your director, take as much time as you can to polish every note of each sketch. Make sure the arrangements, programming, and mix are all in great shape. Even though it's only a demo, it needs to reflect the quality of work that will appear in the project itself. Never assume producers or directors have a good musical imagination when it comes to demos. Even very experienced directors or producers don't understand how things will change between the demo phase and the final mix. So, do what you can to make this demo sound absolutely polished. There is no room for excuses or explanations of why it doesn't sound better. It's okay to preface your playback briefly, to explain whether you'll be using live instruments, an orchestra, live guitars or drums, or anything that will improve the quality of production. Nonetheless, the music has to be *the music*, and you can't speak about it, it must speak for itself.

You might consider playing your sketches for any trusted friends and get their feedback, on both creative aspects and production quality, to be sure you didn't miss anything. Once you have everything ready to your satisfaction, reach out and allow your director to decide how they wish to hear the sketches. Do they want to come to you, do they want you to come to them, or do they want you to simply send them over electronically and not have you there for the playback? If it's possible to be in the room for the playback, that seems to help things go better. If you just send your music without being there in person, be sure everything is organized and titled so there can't be any confusion as to what's what.

Another choice you want to make is just how much music to play at any one meeting. It's best not to play too much or too little in one sitting. Too little may feel like a waste of time for a busy director, and too much can be fatiguing for the listeners. I typically send about four to six sketches at any one time. Once you're actually sub-



Name	Date Modified	Size	Kind
CFE 1m01 c042021 v4 Opening Theme.wav	Apr 28, 2021 at 3:41 PM	20 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 1m02 c042021 v3 New York to Scotland_01.03.38.16.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:40 PM	27.4 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 1m03 c042021 v2 Hamish Nol_01.06.30.23.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:41 PM	16 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 1m04 c042021 v2 Window View_01.08.19.12.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:41 PM	10 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 1m05 c042021 v2 3000 Castles in Scotland_01.10.45.18.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:41 PM	48.8 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 1m06 c042021 v3 Breaking Upstairs_01.13.30.09.wav	May 20, 2021 at 11:50 AM	20.8 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 2m07 c042021 v2 Keep Him Away From People_02.05.22.14.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:41 PM	12.4 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 2m08 c042021 v2 Show You How To Kni_02.01.54.08.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:41 PM	10.4 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 2m09 c042021 v2 Deal in the Pub_02.07.42.01.wav	May 20, 2021 at 11:51 AM	27.4 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 2m10 c042021 v2 I'm Buying Dun Dumbart_02.09.02.21.wav	May 20, 2021 at 12:01 PM	30.3 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 3m11 c042021 v3 Tour of the Castle_02.11.42.13.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:42 PM	40.2 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 3m12 c042021 v2 Bump in The Night_03.00.11.06.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:42 PM	6.9 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 3m12A c042021 v2 Bump in The Night Pt 2_03.00.31.07.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:42 PM	17.3 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 3m13 c042021 v2 Really Hamish7_03.01.43.09.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:42 PM	20.2 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 3m14 c042021 v2 Decorating The Castle_03.05.20.16.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:42 PM	14.9 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 3m14B c042021 v1 Angus' ag_03.06.51.16.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:42 PM	4.8 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 3m15 c042021 v2 The Damp Air_03.08.10.18.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:43 PM	30 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 3m16 c042021 v3 Sheep_03.10.07.20.wav	May 20, 2021 at 10:03 AM	24.8 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 3m16B c042021 v2 Dun Olmri Holy Well_03.11.27.12.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:43 PM	32.6 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 4m17A c042021 v2 Old Paintings of People We Hated_04.04.46.06.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:43 PM	3.4 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 4m17B c042021 v3 It's A Day_04.07.06.02.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:43 PM	31.6 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 4m18 c042021 v2 He Worked Here_04.10.58.06.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:43 PM	17.3 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 4m20 c042021 v2 Horses Thru The Snow_04.13.34.03.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:44 PM	16.2 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 5m21 c042021 v2 Candlelight Publicity_05.01.32.02.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:44 PM	29.5 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 5m22 c042021 v2 Kiss_05.05.27.07.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:44 PM	12.2 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 5m23 c042021 v2 Saying Goodbye_05.09.02.00.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:44 PM	17.3 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 5m24 c042021 v2 Hopelessly and Pathetically in Love_06.04.43.17.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:44 PM	44 MB	Waveform audio
CFE 5m25 c042021 v2 Christmas Morning_06.12.42.11.wav	May 10, 2021 at 2:44 PM	26.6 MB	Waveform audio

FIGURE 1.6
Screenshot of a well-organized demo folder.

Author

mitting your final cues, you don't need to think about it. Sending in batches is still a good idea, but just keeping up with the deadlines is an accomplishment. My very first sketches are often in the form of a suite—a single piece of music with as many themes as I wish to present, created as a single, flowing composition.

I prefer not to tell my director or producers which theme sketches are for which characters or sections of the project. This way, they have the opportunity to make the mental connection themselves, and this seems to make them feel more ownership of the music. On many occasions, I've had a director say, "I love the theme you wrote for the lead female," when it was actually a theme I'd written with something else entirely in mind. If they make that connection, that's the connection that sticks. I organize my ideas and then start writing the actual cues for the project.

Having all your main ideas laid out in sketch form before actually working to picture is often a much more "purely musical" way to compose. You're not thinking about edits or ascend lengths. You're not thinking about any transitions or interactive elements to the score. You're just creating the musical world the project will live in. Getting those initial sketches approved makes writing to picture go much, much faster and easier.

HITTING THE SPOT: PUTTING MUSIC CUES IN THEIR PLACE

Just as important as the style of music you may choose for a particular project is deciding exactly where the music will go—the starts and stops of each musical cue. This is called *spotting* and it's the first step in building a score.

The spotting takes place in what is called the *spotting session*, a meeting between composer and director to discuss the real specifics of the score. Additionally, producers may be a part of the meeting, as well as a *music editor* who can take notes and keep track of what's discussed. Also attending may be the *music supervisor* who is in charge of placing songs into the soundtrack. Plus, it's not unusual for the picture editor to sit in on these meetings in order to discuss any potential changes that might occur in future edits, or to discuss how certain scenes are paced. Spotting sessions on episodic shows often include even more people. In order to save time on a hurried schedule, the producers may include the sound and dialogue editors so all sound elements are done at one time.

Whether those other parties are involved or not, this is the time for a director and composer to carefully discuss detailed thematic ideas on a scene-by-scene basis. Similar to weaving a tapestry, the spotting session starts to build the relationship between music and picture, and the story and its characters: some color here, a jolt of energy there, and a sense of romance in another spot.

Spotting is a significant part of the art and craft of scoring. It has a profound effect on the feel of the score and on the project itself. Some projects thrive on having a lot of music, while others, with some careful consideration, get by with far less. The trend overall has led to an increase in the amount of music in most scores, especially

for action or suspense. If you ever watch older films or episodic TV, you may notice lengthy sections with no music, even when there are action or chase scenes with only sound effects. Compared to more recent scores, it can make some films feel quite slow. For the most part, gone are those days with a preference toward music establishing the pace and feel of those scenes. There are exceptions, and some are genuinely wonderful. It really just comes down to how the creators feel about the role of music in that project. Always be open to their choice of where to place music before you interject any of your own opinions.

When discussing how to weave music into a scene, you typically want it to enter and exit without drawing too much attention to itself. Good cues often sneak in without the audience even noticing until they are well under way. Once a cue is going, you can push it to the desired level of energy and complexity. Starting a cue at an awkward moment is a common mistake made by less experienced composers. Importantly, music should typically enter in *response* to the actions or words on the screen, and not foreshadow it by entering right on top of it, or too soon beforehand. The audience needs a brief moment to absorb a plot twist or line of important dialogue, at which point the music has become present. Of course, there are exceptions, but this works exceedingly well in most cases. At times, a scene needs to let the audience in on something that is not directly depicted. Sometimes a scene may need some sense of emotion, and music will be the best way for that to occur, even if it leads the audience to feel something in particular. Good judgment outweighs any supposed rules. It can be an incredibly valuable experience to watch some films or episodic television and just listen for how carefully the music comes in and out. You'll start to see the psychology behind spotting. At times, it's absolutely obvious, and at times very subtle, psychological, and even ingenious.

In the spotting of action, you should not only be thinking about entrances and exits, but also how to shift the tone of the music to match how things are evolving on the screen. For example, a cue might start on the hero preparing to go into battle. However, at some point the music may need to shift as you see how the villain is preparing to outsmart the hero. Once the battle begins, there is often a lot of back-and-forth between hero and villain, success and failure, setbacks and success. So, the music will probably need to encompass all of those changes and shifts throughout the scene. A lot of this will feel obvious. However, a director may not always want to let the audience know what's happening ahead of time, or even in the moment. So, while spotting, be sure you and the director are clear about how the music will make any emotional or thematic shifts to give the audience hope, concern, disappointment, or joy.

Horror and suspense projects frequently take advantage of music to build tension and fear. When done well, silence can often be used as a way to up the ante and create even more terror. And often this is the one type of score that doesn't sneak in, but can come in with a shock!

Dialogue-heavy scenes require care, and can be tricky at times. Every director cares deeply that music enhances dialogue scenes without distracting from what is being spoken. In storytelling, the word is king. It helps to have music actually weave in and out between lines. Cues will often start during a pause in a conversation. Watch for facial expressions that show how the characters are feeling and use those as a guide for beginning a cue. Once the music has begun, be careful about hitting any loud notes or heavy accents at the same time as important dialogue, especially with solo instruments, which can be more distracting than a section. Think of music under dialogue as a kind of “musical counterpoint.” Music should *never* distract from or get in the way of what is being said onscreen. They can coexist nicely and with real musical energy. Aim to write so the music falls, more or less, in between words. There’s room for greater looseness in scenes where there is no real action.

During a spotting session, someone should be taking careful *spotting notes*. To help make this easier, the production video will typically have *timecode numbers* somewhere on the screen. Timecode (explained in more detail later) is a type of visual clock that starts at the beginning of the video and then runs continuously to the end.

When the video is paused, so are the numbers. This way, each entrance, transition, or exit you wish to spot can be done with precision. You can feel free to ask for the video to be paused in order to take notes and remember to include the timecode number on the screen. As you’re watching and seeing, you may decide halfway through that music should have started earlier. Feel free to ask to back up the video to where you think the music might start, and then note the number.



FIGURE 1.7
Example of a video screen with timecode.

Author

Cue ID	Title	SMPT E In (hh:mm:ss:ff)	SMPT E Out (hh:mm:ss:ff)	Duration (mm:ss)	Cue Status	Cue Type	Orchestra	Scottish Band	Instruments	Spotting Notes	Current Version #	Mix #	Other Notes
12													
13													
14	1M1 Opening Theme v2	01:00:13:97	01:01:38:07	01:17	Written	> Score	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		Director would like the cue to have a hard cut by -01:20. The cue should build earlier, possible new intro section with Xmas bells.			Picture for sequence still changing. May be either source or score - still up in the air.
15	1M2 New York To Scotland	01:03:52:21	01:05:26:22	01:34	Written	> Score	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Whistle, Irish Fl, solo fiddle, Mandola, Celtic Harp, AC Gtr, Clannet, Str.	This cue shouldn't be Celtic. Should start slightly earlier - on Sophie looking at wall. There will be a transition within the cue to Scotland			No internal conform needed at this time, but the director does have notes on this. I don't have specifics yet. The picture ending of this sequence may be slightly extended for another line of Gaelic per Christina's note.
16	1M3 Hamish Nol	01:06:45:15	01:07:37:15	00:52	Written	> Score	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		Starts on Hamish's jump. More humor here.			No internal conform needed, though if the song changes we may need to work on that transition. Updated TC
17	1M4 Window View	01:08:36:66	01:09:02:09	00:26	Written	> Score	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		Simply - possibly just harp & flute. A swell on the cut to the window			DN 4/5 - approved
18	1M5 3000 Castles In Scotland	01:11:03:12	01:13:31:13	02:28	Written	> Score	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		The director really likes, but wants it to get shorter. The director is suggesting TC -01:13:48, then cut by -01:14:40 (pdr): TC updated to 2:25 cut			This cue has come a long way! Totally, it feels like it's headed in the right direction, but think we could make each new room feel like more of a reveal to match Brooks' excitement.
19	1M6 Sneaking Upstairs	01:13:43:14	01:14:55:03	01:11	Written	> Score	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		Make this funnier, and resync to picture			Ending is lightened (conformed music edit in folder)

FIGURE 1.8
Example of spotting notes.
Author

If a music editor is a part of the project, that's normally their job. On a smaller project, it may just be the composer. Once you've gone through the entire project, you'll end up with your *spotting notes*: a concise list of the music to be written; where it will start, where it will end; any notes from the director or producer as to the nature of the music; and any other memos you wish to include. Keep in mind that it's not unusual for the editors to continue making changes after a spotting session. Scenes may be removed, shortened, lengthened, or move to a different part of the project altogether. It helps to make notes of what's happening on screen along with the time code numbers, so if things change you can easily find what you're looking for in the new cut.

WHY IS THERE MUSIC IN THIS SCENE?

Before moving on, there is one last aspect of spotting to discuss. It is one of the truly fundamental aspects of what it is to be a composer. Every cue in every project must serve a purpose. And before you can write it, you must ask yourself—"why does this scene need music, and what will the presence of music accomplish?" If you can answer that question clearly to yourself, then you will know what to write. What are some of the reasons to have music in a scene?

- To create the mood and ambience of the project as a whole, or of the scene in particular
- To establish the tone of a character
- To add tension when needed
- To add dread prior to action
- To add mystery, romance, joy, or any emotion to a scene that without which it feels empty
- To make action more exciting
- To differentiate between hero and villain
- To make a scene feel faster or slower as needed
- To help move a story forward

Finally, it's not uncommon for a director to simply say, "I think this scene needs music." If you didn't see the need, but you get the request, then you should ask them, "What would you like the music to do here?" Directors have usually seen a scene, dozens or hundreds of times before a spotting session, and may simply be bored. They may feel they did not get a good performance by an actor and want to add some missing life to the scene. Even if you disagree with the assessment of the director, the best thing is to simply comply and try music. Sometimes it takes a sketch to show a director that music isn't actually needed in a spot, but if they are happy with the concept and the result, then you are a hero to them. Accept it.

A DEEPER LOOK AT WRITING CUES

Once your theme demos are written and approved and you have spotted the project, there's nothing left but to sit in a chair and write the score! If you've already worked out your main themes, you can actually use them to work more quickly. Find a scene where you know the theme you'll use, open your sketch sequence, and start to rework it to fit the scene in any way needed. Set the sequence to start on the time code number from the spotting session for the beginning of the cue. Run the sketch in its original form and see how it looks. You might be surprised that some of your sketches often simply work. However, invariably you'll need to structure each cue more carefully to fit the scene it's in. So, look now at some of the elements that help make a cue work the best way possible.

MAKING A SUBTLE ENTRANCE: BEGINNING A CUE

When scoring a scene, think about the moment you want the music to be well established, then look backward slightly from there to find a good space to begin to start it off. Unless you intentionally want a cue to come in suddenly, the goal is typically to gradually sneak in with some subtlety. This is absolutely a judgment call on your part, and only you and your director can decide what feels right. Nonetheless, this is a technique that works the vast majority of times.

Cues often start with a single tone, harmony, the first notes of a melody, or something equally as simple. When done right, the audience often won't notice music starting, but they'll get the music's full emotional impact when it is really needed. Not all cues need to sneak in. Rhythm-heavy action pieces, scenes with no dialogue, or any time the director asks that the music come in boldly are fine. Generally, though, bringing music in a bit slowly and carefully is preferred. A good idea is to experiment with starting the cue a few seconds earlier or later, trying different ways for the cue to begin, and then settling on the one that sounds and feels best to picture.

If someone in a scene says a line of real importance to the story that triggers the music, wait for a brief moment after the line for the audience to take it in and understand its impact. Don't rush in. After that brief moment (called a *beat* in film and theater jargon, and not to be confused with an actual musical "beat"), the music can begin. Always give the audience that beat to take in the information on the screen, and then allow the music to respond. In some cases, a cue might start several seconds prior to a scene to create a sense of anticipation and curiosity (at the end of a somber scene comes a happy piece of music, which leads into a scene of a fun event). This is called a *prelap*.

Cues that are more about energy, shock, or surprise than they are about emotions or dialogue can start with a bang, sometimes starting on or just before an edit or other very noticeable visual moment. Finding the perfect moment in the scene to be the launching point for the music is like musical counterpoint. The audience sees some-

thing and takes it in. They hear some important dialogue and they take it in, and when music begins, they take it in as well. You typically don't want everything starting all at the same time. It crowds a scene and makes it confusing. It's better to weave dramatic elements in one at a time. The result is a much better flow.

THE HIT: UNDERSCORING CRUCIAL MOMENTS

With fast-paced action scenes, music that hits edits or significant moments (like something—or someone—hitting the ground, a monster appearing, a gun or explosion going off, or other exciting or vital moments) tends to add a lot to the excitement. It connects the aural and visual experience for the audience, which is part of the satisfaction of cinema, TV, or video games. These moments where the action and music hit together are called, appropriately enough, *hits*.

All of the story elements that go by in a fast-paced action scene can sometimes give the audience too much to focus on, and they can't always mentally process it quickly enough. Fast-paced editing, rapid dialogue and action, unexpected twists and turns can get a bit overwhelming. Sometimes that's the point. Directors typically don't want the audience to be confused. However, the right music, synchronized and sculpted the right way, can help lead an audience along, showing them all of what's happening as the scene unfolds moment by moment. It elevates a scene into being more emotionally compelling and exciting. Think of an exciting chase sequence: the music as it careens and hits with the action, propelling images right off the screen. Is the hero about to die? Is good about to triumph over evil? Is someone committing an act of true heroism or tremendous evil? Music often conveys emotion far better than images alone. Musical hits can take many forms:

- Heavy accents
- Starting a new melody
- Recapitulating an important theme
- Bringing in a new instrument or section
- Introducing a rhythm or variation
- Hitting a chord or note with some energy
- Modulation to another key
- A sudden tempo change
- A swell like a cymbal roll or crescendo that peaks on the desired beat
- Any sudden and noticeable event or change

Sometimes hits can be more subtle—like a shift from a minor to a major key when the hero gets the upper hand. Even silence can be used as a tool to accent a key moment in a scene.

Many times, cues have transitions that fall *near* but not directly on a transition. Staggering transitions between image and music can be a more subtle, and even desirable, effect.

It takes some practice to figure out how to make a cue feel musical while having significant moments in the score line up exactly with corresponding moments in the picture (more on that later). This usually involves a combination of tempo and time signature changes to make it happen. You may pick a tempo you like for an action scene, only to find that a key moment you want to hit lands between two beats in the music. In a situation like this, you have several options to make a downbeat, or any beat, line up with the picture:

- First, you can move the start time of the cue forward or backward a few timecode frames in order to get the hit to be right on a beat
- Second, you can change the tempo ever so slightly to get the hit to land on the beat. Sequencers all have tools to make this process fairly painless
- Third, you can use meter changes to shift the downbeat

And sometimes you can use a combo of these to get the best result. Faster tempos cause more hits to land naturally than slower tempos. Subtle tempo shifts often can't be heard. With action, you want a musical hit to be right on the desired frame, but a frame or two early is often just as effective. Hits landing even a frame or two *late* will usually feel wrong.

The figure consists of two vertically stacked examples, each showing a film strip at the top and a musical score below it. Both examples are set at 100 BPM.

Top Example: The film strip shows a character walking from left to right across a frame, then a transition to a landscape with birds. The start time is marked as *01:02:47:24* for Scene 1 and *01:02:57:12* for Scene 2. The musical score starts at 01:02:49:00. An arrow points to a specific note in the score with the text "Hit is early", indicating that the musical event occurs before the visual transition.

Bottom Example: The film strip is identical to the top example. The start time is marked as *01:02:47:24* for Scene 1 and *01:02:57:12* for Scene 2. The musical score starts at 01:02:51:07. An arrow points to the same note in the score with the text "Hit is right", indicating that the musical event now perfectly aligns with the visual transition. A note to the right of the score says "Start time changed to fix hit".

FIGURE 1.9
 Example of two sequences where the start time is shifted to get a hit to land on a beat.
 Author