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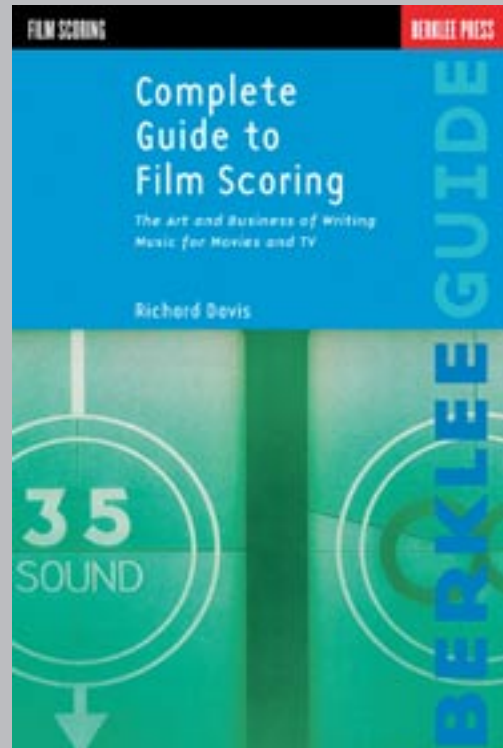
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Chapter 12

The Recording Session and Mix

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CHAPTER 12

The Recording Session and Mix

You forget and sometimes you have to pinch yourself and realize, “Oh my goodness, this is amazing!” These are the best players, definitely the best sight-readers in the world. Absolutely the best sight-readers. And, the mistakes-quotient is: there is hardly ever a mistake.

—Lolita Ritmanis

Finally the time has arrived when all the hours of work and preparation become a physical reality. There is nothing like walking onto the scoring stage and seeing dozens of musicians gathered there to play your music. It is the moment every composer waits for.

Present at the session are the composer, conductor (if the composer is not conducting), director, producer, music editor, musicians, recording engineers, and all kinds of assistants and on-lookers. The orchestrators are not required to be there, but often stop by to see how things are going. However, usually an orchestrator, or someone else with score-reading abilities, sits in the control room with the recording engineer and follows the score to check for errors that the conductor might not hear. This person also assists the engineer in determining which instruments are playing when (especially helpful if there is a solo of some kind). The music editor usually sits behind the conductor or in the control room at a table armed with all the timing notes, a copy of the score, and his computer(s).

This is also an exciting and sometimes anxiety-ridden moment for the film makers. They have put months or years of work into producing the film; all the writing, shooting and editing are complete and the music is the final element to be added. Stephen Spielberg has said that a film is “dry and lifeless” without music, and many agree with him. Even though the director and producer may have seen a sequenced mock-up of the cues, there is nothing like the real thing and there is an

air of anticipation, even apprehension, as the session begins. The reality is that when a director hands over the film to a composer, he has just lost control of the film for the first time. What the composer decides to do with the music can literally make or break the film. So the moment of truth is the first day of recording.

In the days or weeks before the sessions begin, the composer and music contractor discuss personnel requirements. The *music contractor*, or simply the *contractor*, books the studio, hires the musicians, takes care of all the union paperwork and the payroll for the musicians, and oversees the sessions to make sure everything is on time and happening according to union rules. In their initial conversations, the composer and contractor discuss the numbers of players and the breakdown of the orchestra—how many strings, woodwinds, brass, rhythm section players, etc., are needed. They also discuss any specific musicians the composer requests, and alternates. Some chairs have very specific requirements. For example, a woodwind chair might need someone who can play flute, soprano sax, recorder, and oboe. It is up to the contractor to find the appropriate players.

The music does not have to be recorded in the order it appears in the film, so the composer decides in advance which cues will be recorded in what order, and the music preparation office, as well as the music editor, are informed. There are different methods of beginning a session. Some like to start with something easy to warm up the orchestra, some like to begin with something fairly challenging. Most composers agree that if there is recurring thematic material, it is good for the orchestra to start with a cue where that material is fairly complete—usually the first or second cue—so that the musicians can hear it and recognize any variations or permutations down the line. Often, this is the main-title cue, but it could also come from another place in the movie.

Sometimes a film requires the entire orchestra to play on every cue. However, many times there are smaller groups that play various cues throughout the film, such as strings only, or a small group of strings, guitar, and oboe that are featured in several cues. In this case, the composer records all the cues for the larger group at one time, and then

lets most of the players leave while the smaller group records. This is efficient and cost-effective. The larger group is known as the “A” orchestra, the smaller combinations the “B” orchestra, the “C” orchestra, etc.

Because of an agreement with the musicians union, there are certain rules governing the recording session. For feature films, a maximum of nine minutes of music per three-hour session may be recorded. (Sessions are usually booked in three-hour blocks.) For episodic television (series) and TV movies, a maximum of fifteen minutes per three-hour block is allowed. This is so the producers cannot take advantage of the sight-reading abilities of the musicians and record a huge amount of music in a short amount of time. If the session goes into overtime then these formulas are prorated. In addition, there are other regulations, like taking a ten-minute break every hour, a meal break after a certain amount of hours recording, etc. The contractor, who is the liaison to the union, attends the session and assists the composer in keeping track of these rules.

Once the cue is recorded to the composer’s satisfaction, he goes into the control room to join the director and producer, and watch a playback of the scene with the music synced to the film. At this point, the director either signs-off on the cue, or asks for changes. Minor changes can be made right on the spot. If a major rewrite is required, the composer puts that cue away to be fixed before the next session, and he proceeds to another cue.

Every once in a while a composer’s score is disliked by the director, the producer, or the studio executives. This can create a situation where the score is thrown out and another composer is brought in to redo it. This is embarrassing for the original composer and frustrating, as he has just spent several very intense weeks of his life on the project. It is also costly for the production team; they must still pay the first composer his full fee, they have paid the musicians and the recording studio for their time, and they must then hire a second composer and pay the music production costs all over again. It is uncomfortable for all involved, yet it has happened to almost every major feature film composer in Hollywood.

One very important thing to keep in mind is that just because a score is thrown out does not mean that the music is bad, or even inappropriate for that film. All it means is that someone with enough power didn't like it. It is entirely possible that this person (director, producer, studio exec) had his own musical concept and could not make the shift to the composer's different, yet dramatically effective, idea. Whenever a score is thrown out, it causes composers to wonder if they are really good enough, or what they did wrong. It is possible, of course, that the score was not what the production team wanted and the composer made a big error in concept even though the music was sound. But it is also possible that the score was thrown out for an irrational reason that has nothing to do with the quality of the music.

Most of the time, the recording session is an exciting and rewarding moment for the composer. Music representing weeks of work is finally heard and its effectiveness evaluated. Flexibility is a key attribute to have at the session, for changes are often requested. Sometimes the director wants a little more dissonance or less musical activity in a cue. Sometimes a cue needs to be lengthened or shortened. Sometimes everyone, including the composer, is in agreement about a certain change, and sometimes the composer disagrees. The bottom line is that the composer needs to be able to make changes quickly without being overly attached to what was already written. Making movies is a team exercise.

Overlaps and Segues

There are some instances when a composer wants to score a scene, and rather than doing the music in one piece, he records two separate cues and edits them together to create one longer, seamless cue. This is called an *overlap* or *segue*. A composer might do this if the scene is very long, if there is a significant mood or tempo change, or if there are two completely different groups of instruments involved in each cue.

Most composers like to keep each cue under three to four minutes. This is largely due to the recording process. Although the professional musicians that play the top film scores and television shows are incredible sight-readers, they do occasionally make mistakes. It is very

time consuming to stop the orchestra, go back to the start of the cue, reset the projection equipment if there are punches and streamers, and go for another take. In addition, at most sessions there is not true “separation” of the different players or sections of the orchestra in terms of multitrack recording. Although every section gets his own track, and soloists also get assigned a track, in the studio itself there is often bleed-through. So a composer or producer must be very careful about accepting a take and trying to “fix it in the mix.” For this reason, it is common practice to try to get the best recording of the entire orchestra at once. (With digital editing, it is now easier to edit different takes together, but there is not always time for this.)

So, if a cue becomes too long, then many composers will find a spot to break it up into two or more cues that are recorded separately and edited together. This can be done seamlessly by matching harmonies, finding common tones from one cue to another, or matching instrumentation. The music editor reassembles the parts into one longer piece.

Such segues are planned when the composer writes the score. The composer constructs a segue from one cue to another so that the sonorities match, or don't match, as is necessary.

Mixing and Dubbing

For a major feature film, the orchestra is recorded in 24-track or 48-track analog format, or one of the many digital multitrack formats. This gives the mixdown engineer great flexibility in the final mix. This is necessary because there might actually have to be more than one mix of the music: one for surround-sound digital theatrical playback, one for stereo theatrical playback, and one for the soundtrack CD. Depending on schedules, the composer is not always at the mixing session, often leaving it to a trusted associate.

Because of the tight post-production schedule, the many minutes of underscore must be mixed quickly. In the modern age of automated mixes (where the mixing boards are “smart” and remember fader levels, eq settings and outboard routings), the engineer actually mixes during the recording session itself. That is to say, he sets levels, adjusts



Fig. 12.2. Dubbing Stage. Studio 1, Todd-AO Studios. Hollywood, CA.

eq, and gets a rough version of the mix, so that when the music is finally mixed for real, he has a head start. A good film-score engineer can mix five to ten minutes per day. This is for an orchestra that can have as many as 80 to 100 players! Compare that to the pop-music record mix, which is going very quickly if one or two four-minute songs per day are completed.

Ideally, the same person who engineers the recording session should do the mix. This person is the most familiar with the cues, and thus can move fast. However, sometimes this is not possible. Oftentimes, the schedule is so tight that the music must be mixed as soon as it is recorded. This means that the mixing can overlap the recording. A recording session might begin on Tuesday; on Wednesday, the recording session continues, while Tuesday's tracks are mixed at a second studio.

After the music is mixed to the proper format, it goes to the dubbing stage. This is where the music, sound effects, and dialogue get mixed together for the final soundtrack (see chapter 10).

Reel by reel, scene by scene, line by line, and sometimes crash by crash, the dubbing team mixes, filters, eqs, pans, and generally tweaks the music, sound effects, and dialogue to blend together. Of course, the dialogue is the paramount force here. It always must be heard. But the music and sound effects have important roles as well. The toughest thing is when two sounds happen in the same frequency range. For example, a very high, sustained note in the violins could be cancelled out by the whine of a jet engine. Or a male actor's tender but somewhat throaty declaration of love could be challenged by a lyrical cello line. It is the job of those on the dubbing stage to make all of these things sound like one continuous whole. A sound palette that sounds natural and lets each voice or sound speak where necessary is the ultimate goal.

Dubbing is the next to last stage in the entire film-making process, and it is actually the final stage of the creative process. Nothing can be changed or altered after the dubbing, for the only stage left after this is "color correction"—when the film is processed and the director approves its colors and tints. In many ways, dubbing is the point of no return for the director, for at the various stages of production and post-production, changes can and will be made frequently. During the making of the film, the director makes many decisions, and commits to many paths of action, but the decisions made at the dubbing stage are the final commitment. For this reason, it is a detailed, painstaking process, and the feeling of completion is profound for all.

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