

Sounding the Somme – Somme Unseen

Hand Out: Film Composer Laura Rossi Q&A



1. Where do you write your music?

I like to write music away from the computer at the piano. First I will watch the film in full and try not to over analyse it, to get a real feel of watching it for the first time. After watching I'll think about what my impression of the film is and what my instinct for the style and sound for the music might be. Then I'll watch it again and make notes.

I like to think in adjectives and write down those words e.g. calm, reflective, agitated, melancholy - it's these words that inspire me the most by getting down to what the basic emotion is for the music for a particular scene or moment in the film.

I find making notes and writing words down helps me to reach deeper into the film and the feeling of the music. Sometimes I'll sketch a picture or a graph of the kind of music to remind me of that feeling, and the shape of the music, so that I can quickly capture that instinctive initial feeling which I find is often the right one. I try to keep it not overly analytical but more intuitive at this stage.

2. What programmes and devices do you use to write your music?

First of all I like to write musical themes at the piano on manuscript paper. I find getting away from the computer and also the film, frees up my mind and makes the process much more creative. For me writing flows much better and quicker this way, and I write better music. Everyone is different though, so I'm not saying this is the best idea for everyone. I think that's the most important thing - to find the tool or trick that works for you. This can take time and often eventually comes without formally working out a process. So when starting out it's fun and interesting to try working in different ways and see what you come up with. Some methods of writing will work better for some projects, so you may eventually end up with a few different ways of working depending on the project.

I often memorise a scene and internalise the feelings and emotions and shape of the scene, so that then I can bring all my attention and creativity into writing the music. This allows me to focus better on simply writing the music.

When I've written some musical themes, I'll go back to the computer and play it into Logic using samples. I usually do it this way when working on film and TV, because you have to play the music for directors to hear, and they want to hear it as close to the real thing as possible, so you need a good sample library.

Once the music is finalised, I always like to record real musicians whenever possible - samples are great when they are meant to be samples (electronics/ effects etc) but they are never good enough to replace the real thing, and always sound flat and lack life compared to a real musician bringing their own expression, emotion and character to the music. So, if possible, it's great to record at least 1 live musician (unless you are specifically after an electronic score).

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Until the picture is locked (finalised) there are usually many changes to make when working on film or TV in the editing stage, as timings change. Scenes are cut or extended and the director or producer may need you to make changes, so you constantly have to tweak and weld your music to fit the latest cut of the film. This is much easier to do in Logic (or similar music software programme) than it is in Sibelius (or similar notation programme).

When the final cut of the film is locked and the music has been signed off, I will then transfer the score into Sibelius ready for printing the score and parts, or if there is a crazy schedule, I'll hand it over to the orchestrator/copyist to do this.

If there's time I enjoy orchestrating and producing the parts myself. Orchestrating is a bit like colouring in and it's an important part of the composition. Also, I'll often have ideas in my head of how the orchestration will be, that I may not have had time to realise when putting into logic and demoing up for directors to hear, so if there's time, it's great to be able to do all this yourself.

I worked a slightly different way when scoring *The Battle of the Somme* and *The Battle of the Ancre* because there were no directors to talk to. The Imperial War Museum commissioned the music because they wanted today's audience to connect emotionally with the images: they wanted a contemporary composers response to the film, and gave me a free reign to write the music. I love working on feature films and working as part of a team and being guided by the directors vision, as well as the images, but it's also great to have the opportunity of writing music you are instinctively inspired to write and to be led directly by the film. To be given the freedom to do that is great!

3. What is your favourite aspect of working on a film?

My favourite thing is when you hear the music played by real musicians for the first time and you hear it all coming together. I also love the moment when you first watch the film in its entirety on a big screen with great speakers at the cinema.

I also love creating the music. I will happily lock myself away and write - I love to immerse myself in it and then I enjoy taking some time off afterwards (usually writing film music is so intense it's nice to get some breathing space in-between). I think you get inspiration from moments of calm and it keeps you fresh having time to do other things and listen to other music or films and more importantly, live life!

I don't want to just churn out music - I want to enjoy every job I do and find each project exciting and unique - which so far it has been. I'm not sure you can do that if you don't take a break in-between and I think everyday things can be inspiring and keep your music fresh.

4. How do you get started?

I watch the film over and over again until I have the right feeling inside me, and then after that the music flows easily and I can write music that gives the right feel for the film or a particular scene.

5. What sort of notes on the film do you make?

For a silent film, I make notes on what's going on in the film and how that relates to the mood or feeling of the scene. I'll write down in adjectives what best describes the right feel for the music and the pace of the scene. e.g. happy jaunty march, sad, melancholy, expressive etc. Sometimes, if I have a clear idea, I'll make notes on orchestration e.g. solo oboe with still string-sustained slow moving accompaniment etc.

6. Where do you get your inspiration from?

My inspiration comes from the subject and the film: the images, the narrative, the feel, the style, the editing, the mood, the emotions. The film is the most important thing - your job is to help people connect in a deeper way with the images. You are guiding the viewer through the film and helping them connect emotionally with the

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film or gain a deeper understanding of the film. That doesn't mean your music isn't important - it is! And it doesn't mean your music needs to be bland or unnoticeable. It depends on the needs of the film, but personally I think all the best film music also stands up as a great piece of music away from the film, be it a melodic, experiment or minimalist score.

I like to spend lots of time researching the subject matter and immerse myself in the world of the film as much as possible. For *The Battle of the Somme* I spent months of time reading books, watching films, reading war diaries and visiting the Somme battlefields. In fact, I spent many more months researching it than I did writing the music! It was through doing this research that I discovered my great-uncle Fred's diaries. He was a stretcher-bearer attached to the 29th division on July 1st 1916, so it's possible he could even be in the film. This brought it all to life for me and helped me to write it from the soldiers view point.

I think it's important to understand the subject matter, especially on an important film such as *The Battle of the Somme*. It helps you to go deeper into the world of the film, and that is important when writing music - to reach something deeper - another dimension - something intangible, that can move you in a way that words and pictures can't.

6. Do you make mini-sketches and fragments or bits?

I often begin by writing themes, motifs and making sketches of textures and harmonies, which will often develop into larger themes and movements. Sometimes though I'll just sit down and write the whole of one scene.

8. How do you bring them together?

I then piece the themes/ motifs/ ideas together, sometimes through layering or by developing them to make a coherent and musical piece. Often the themes and ideas naturally relate to each other because they are ultimately inspired by the same feeling. I know that's not necessarily helpful but it's surprising how much stuff 'just works' and you get it right first time.

Sometimes I'll write a theme for a scene away from the film at the piano and then I'll bring it back to the film and record it into logic to match up with the picture and it just works and the contours match the shape of the scene and it peaks in all the right places. This is something that I've learnt over time to do, but it's not something I've learnt consciously; it's just you can memorise the shape of a scene and how the music might flow from one scene to the next, so that process becomes quite natural.

9. When do you think about instrumentation?

I usually think about instrumentation on a second watching of the film, and I will often work that out before writing a note, as that will affect what I write. It's also worth thinking about the budget. If there's a big budget you may want to use more instruments/musicians, but not always. Sometimes a big orchestra is just not right for a film - a small intimate ensemble may work better - you just need to meet the needs of the film. Instrumentation is important and part of finding a musical voice for the film.

I love to think about the musician too - and it's great to write for that particular player in mind, making it very real from the start - being able to imagine how the end product will sound is important to me. In fact, if I don't have a film on and I just want to write some music, I usually like to invent a scenario/ set up a concert / a recording, so I know what the end product will be and I can imagine the people playing the piece and the audience listening to it. I find that very inspiring and it really spurs me on.

10. How do you sync it with action on the screen?

My secret is - it's easier than you think to keep it in sync! Just try it! I recently wrote and taught a film music HND course. I set each composer to score a 10 minute film - each of them surprised themselves that they could do this! What is trickier, is all the subtleties in doing this. (see *Laura's Top Tips for more ideas*).

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