Sounding the Somme – Somme Unseen Hand Out: Laura's Top Tips!

The Role of the Film Composer

Writing film music is usually a collaborative process working closely with the director to help realising their vision of the film by adding another dimension through music. This usually begins with initial meetings and discussions with the director, as the composer needs to have a clear idea about the film's meaning and emotional content. The score needs to both emotionally enhance and reflect what the film scenes are all about.

Before starting writing any music, you need to have a clear idea of what function you want the music to have in each scene and what emotion you want the music to convey. Music can build from a tiny idea which eventually becomes the language or heart of music.

Composing for Silent Film

Music has a much bigger role in silent films, and especially in these silent WW1 films. Here the music is needed to link together contrasting images, help make them flow and enhance the structure of the film, which is quite loose.

WW1 films are important historical films documents, so it's important to write music that appropriately fits the images on screen and makes the viewer watch them in as real a way as possible. Also, there are some very sensitive scenes of the wounded placed side by side with containing happy marching soldiers, so it's hard to get the right tone here and write music that flows between such contrasting scenes.

At same time, the music always needs to reflect the appropriate emotion for the image. For example, you may want to write a happy marching theme to match the spirit of the Soldiers marching off to war, but in sensitive scenes of the wounded, you would try to write something simple, so as not to overpower the images and to give the viewer space to think about what they are seeing.

The composer's job is not to over romanticise or dramatise anything; the images are often strong enough themselves. It is often about being quite restrained in your writing and just guiding the viewer into what's happening and drawing them into the film and helping them connect to that time in history.

TOP TIPS FOR FINDING INSPIRATION!

- ♫ *Find your own connection to WW1 or the Somme Battle.*
- ♫ *Ask your family what your ancestors were doing in the First World War. If you find anything read about it.*
- ♫ *Watch films or programmes about WW1.*
- ♫ *Look at pictures, read diary extracts.*
- ♫ *Imagine what it would feel like to be a soldier in the First World War.*
- ♫ *To deepen your own understanding and connection with that time, and to help you think more deeply about it, you may find it helpful to draw a picture or write a short story or poem. All these things can help you get the right feeling and emotion which you can then transfer to music.*

TOP TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED!

- ♫ What are you reading? What is your favourite book? What is your favourite movie?
- ♫ Which character do you like in the movie or book?
- ♫ *What are these characters like?* E.g. Think of adjectives: sad, lonely, funny, creepy, bold, happy.
- ♫ *How would you make music that sounds like your character?* E.g. How would you make music sound creepy? How would you make music sound sad? How would you make music sound funny?
- ♫ Listen to some music and try to describe the feeling is of the music? E.g. If it sounds melancholy, ask yourself why? What is it that is making the music sound that way? What are the characteristics? The Instrumentation? The Harmony? The Rhythm? etc. that are making you feel that the music is melancholy?

TOP TIPS FOR WRITING THE MUSIC!

♫ *Write the first thing that comes into your head. Don't think about it too much - don't over analyse it.*

♫ *Try to make your music flow.*

♫ *If you are stuck, draw a picture or a graph.*

♫ *Think about how you speak: your voice has lots of expression and the pitch changes all the time and the contour of it flows. You can reflect this idea when you are writing your music.*

TOP TIPS ON SYNCHRONIZING THE MUSIC

♫ Decide where the music should start - with a silent film this may be after the first title card or when the picture starts.

♫ Decide any important moments you want to mark or lead up to. For example, you may want to build up to the climatic part of the film.

♫ Decide where you want the emotion of the music to change e.g. the film cuts to waving soldiers then back to a battered landscape.

♫ Map these out on a graph with a time line with notes on the action.

♫ Then write some music.

♫ Record it into logic or play it live with the film and tweak it in tempo/ extend it by a beat or a few bars or develop it so that it works better with the images and matches any important moments.

♫ Don't try and match up every little detail, this is known as 'Micky Mousing' (like in a Disney cartoon where you catch every moment).

♫ Mark the bits you think are important to keep in sync e.g. you may want to match up the marching and you may want to ignore some of the title cards rather than using them as a place where the music stops and starts. You could instead let the music continue through these so that the film does not appear disjointed.

♫ Remember one of the things your score needs to do is to enhance the structure of the film so sometimes it's more important to keep a theme going and build on it than it is to change the mood or mark a scene change.

♫ In sound films where you have shorter cues that flow in and out of a scene it's great if the music ends subtly e.g. into the next scene so that you aren't so aware of it ending and you aren't drawing attention to the editing. You can use this idea when writing for silent films too. The music does not have to be continuous. Remember silence and space in your music is equally as important.

Scoring for silent films is a great introduction to writing film music, because once you have scored a silent film writing music for any other film seems easy!

Good Luck!

Laura