

So You Want to be a Film Composer? by Lukas Kendall

Taken from [FilmScoreMonthly](#)

Man alive, the number of people who want to be film composers these days... it used to be that when people wanted to be in music, they wanted to be a great pianist or a Broadway songwriter. Then, everybody wanted to be in a band. Now, everyone's *already* in a band, and they want to make money by scoring films.

I think it's great that film music is being taken seriously to the point where so many people want to get into it. But like screenwriting or professional athletics, this is a field where the available slots are few, and the hopefuls are many. To that end, here's some helpful advice, and we plan much more of this in FSM (the magazine) in 1998.

To start, two tips, from my own personal observations. If you want to be a film composer:

1) Don't try to be John Williams.

So many people, especially young people, want to be film composers because they love big, sweeping, beautiful orchestral romantic music--like the kind John Williams writes! This is a problem in that this is only a tiny fragment of what it is filmmakers are looking for in film score. Keep in mind, I am not talking about John Williams *per se*-- most directors would give their left nut for him--but the kind of melodic, symphonic score he has done on a specific type of fantasy film.

For one thing, John Williams is around 500 times smarter than most anyone reading this, and he can do these types of scores and make them great, instead of bloated and cliched. More practically, only a specific type of movie that requires a *Star Wars* type of score. They're aren't many of them made, and when they are made, they are so expensive that, if John Williams himself isn't hired, James Horner will be. Or Jerry Goldsmith. Or Bruce Broughton. Or around 40 other guys who have tons more experience than you.

If you really want to be a film composer, you have to divorce yourself from your 12 year-old dream to score the next *Star Wars* movie, and come up with the kind of sound that will make filmmakers come to you. If you write traditional, symphonic music, you will without a doubt end up working on a lot of lousy, juvenile children's films. But if you can come up with something sophisticated—something dramatic but subtle and contemporary— you can be "typecast" into good movies. Think Thomas Newman, Howard Shore, Rachel Portman, Graeme Revell, Elliot Goldenthal and the newest example, Mychael Danna. These composers write music that isn't necessarily flashy, but gets them consistently employed on high quality product. And from there you'll have a lot more options than you do now.

2) Put down the jar of paste.

Not to dwell too much on this, but I've met a few aspiring film composers whose personalities are about as fun as a Jehovah's witness at a Halloween party. Almost

without exception, the big-time working film composers are also intelligent, likable, trustworthy and fun to be around. They aren't necessarily "party" people, but they radiate a certain confidence and charm that says, "Hire me." They are sensitive, but they don't burden you with their problems.

If you really want to do this, you can't be an arrogant, nerdy dullard. Film composing is highly competitive. (First prize: the oldsmobile. Second prize: steak knives. Third prize: you're fired.) You can't afford to be a creep.

Free Advice from Top Agent-- RICHARD KRAFT Now for something useful for a change. This was a brief set of questions I put to agent Richard Kraft in August, 1994, for issue #48. Richard represents Danny Elfman, Jerry Goldsmith, Marc Shaiman, Basil Poledouris, John Barry, Elmer Bernstein, Rachel Portman, and several others, so he knows what he's talking about.

One note: since this conversation, the film scoring landscape has changed with regard to independent films, in that there is once again a thriving independent market and many of today's most promising composers came out of it-- such as Mychael Danna, John Ottman, and Stephen Endelman. But other than this I don't think anything substantial has changed. Here's Richard:

1. How tough is it to break into film scoring?

Extremely tough, because there are so few movies made. There are probably six major studios and they make maybe a dozen movies each, so that's not a large pool of films. The number of independent movies being made is substantially less than it was even ten years ago, when there were Cannon Films and New World Pictures and Dino DeLaurentiis, those were a great breeding ground for up and coming talent. But now it's like major films and that's it. Television is not the great minor leagues it once was. If you look at John Williams and Jerry Goldsmith and people like that who cut their teeth in TV, it's not the same type of music being written anymore, there aren't all those great shows like *Twilight Zone*. Plus, there's a kind of snobbery that exists between features and television that I don't think existed back in the '60s.

2. How can I meet various important people to get myself work?

I would skip "various important people" and start with people in a similar "up and coming" spot. Instead of trying to get to Steven Spielberg, I would try to get to the next Steven Spielberg by working on student films, AFI films, UCLA and USC student films and forging relationships with the people who will be the next generation of biggies.

3. Is moving to L.A. or another production center (like New York) really important?

Essential. If you want to be in the car making business, you have to be in Detroit. You've got to be where the industry is.

4. What's the best kind of demo tape?

One based on knowledge of the project you're sending it out for. If you're going up for a horror movie, there are very few directors who could listen to great music for a love story and make the leap of faith that you would be appropriate for a horror movie. I would make the tape as specific to the project as possible.

5. Is it worth it to hire live players for a demo?

The better the tape could be, the better it is. It's best to do the "A" version of what you're doing. If you're trying to achieve an orchestral score, use live players. A problem with demos is that the ambition of the music sometimes exceeds the production abilities; it's hard to hear and fill in the blanks of what it's supposed to sound like. You should only have music that sounds like the real thing you're trying to achieve.

6. When should I start contacting agents?

The time to have an agent is when an agent wants you, when the agent feels he can parlay where you currently are in your career into something bigger. Agents are not set up to break talent in their first one or two movies. It's when there's a small movie that has some interest behind it--a *Sex, Lies and Videotape*, *Drugstore Cowboy* or *Dead Calm*--that an agent can take you to the next step.

7. How important is a traditional musical education and being classically trained?

It entirely depends on the type of composer you would like to be. The more varied your background the better, because film composing is about being a chameleon, being able to write in different styles to meet the needs of the movie. So the richer your background the better, but I don't think anybody has ever hired a composer based on looking at their degree. I think of the majority of currently successful film composers, their backgrounds are not conservatory training but life music training. Marc Shaiman was Bette Midler's musical director, Danny Elfman had the band Oingo Boingo, Stewart Copeland was from The Police, James Newton Howard was a session player and record producer, and so on.

8. How can I work on becoming a film composer while simultaneously supporting myself on a job?

There are two trains of thought. One is, have a job that has nothing to do with your career, just to make money. That way you can just do the job and leave it behind at the end of the day and concentrate on your film scoring career. Or, the best job is like being an orchestrator or a copyist, where it puts you in the situation where you meet people who are working on movies, and you can be a fly on the wall at scoring sessions and absorb all kinds of knowledge and information.

9. How many aspiring film composers are there?

Endless. Nowadays, almost all the major music schools have film scoring programs and the interest in being a film composer is at an all time high [cue *Octopussy*].

Besides writing hit songs, film composing is about the only lucrative job for somebody who composes music for a living.

10. Is it worth it to do projects for next to nothing just to get experience?

Absolutely. It's essential, as a matter of fact. The first few movies you do should be viewed like obtaining tuition to go to college. It's a learning process for you and having done three movies where you've lost money in the process puts you so many steps ahead of having no movies.

11. Should I try to develop the ability to sound like other composers, or work on developing a unique sound of my own?

I don't think it's an either/or. You definitely need to develop your own voice, but also to have an understanding of what other people might want. I wouldn't work on doing an Elmer Bernstein imitation, but if I was doing a movie where they said, "We want the feel of *To Kill a Mockingbird*," I'd need to have an understanding of what that meant so as to interpret it in my own voice.

12. Is it helpful to meet other film composers, established or otherwise?

It's helpful to commiserate and to have a support group, but--and again it's not black or white--if I had a choice I'd rather know five directors than five film composers.

13. Are there any sure-fire ways to piss off people so much that nobody will ever hire me?

Well... never say never, but I think a lot of talented people's careers haven't developed as far as they should based on them pissing people off.

14. Are there any specific pathetic stories of aspiring film composers you know about?

Specific pathetic stories? How about I give you a positive story: There was a composer several years ago who was in college and wanted to get a job in Hollywood. So what he did was he videotaped the main title sequences of all the Quinn-Martin TV shows, wrote new themes for all of them, got his college orchestra to play his new themes and sent the tape to Quinn-Martin Productions. And of course they're going to look at their own main titles, and they got such a kick out of it, they gave him a chance to write one cue for one episode of some show. They liked it and he ended up on a series. That's a positive story. The pathetic stories all tend to fall into the exact same category: People give up. It's hard. It's hard enough to be a composer, but at the beginning of your career, it's equally important to be a salesman, and that's not really a skill composers have developed. It's like selling any product, it's pounding the pavement and knocking on a lot of doors. It's hard to take the rejection so I think the reason most people don't make it isn't from a lack of talent, because I know there are a lot of really talented people out there, it's because they give up. They don't get this instant gratification and it's so hard to take the rejection that they don't keep it up.

15. What specific piece of advice would you have for getting work?

Put yourself in the shoes of the person who's hiring you. If you were making a movie, and you got a call from a composer, what would you want to hear? Get out of the brain of a composer and into the brain of the person hiring you. The people who tend to get those first few jobs are the people who make it easy for the person to hire them--by being so willing to do demos, by being available, and by being persistent, because most people aren't. It's a very delicate balance between being persistent and being pushy. Learning to finesse that, that's a real skill to work on. And this is my number one analogy: Every skill that one uses to get a date is the exact same skill one uses to get a job. Both involve seduction, it's identical. If you're a man and wanting to ask a woman out for a first date, how do you do that? How do you present yourself physically, what things do you say, how do you connect with the other person, what's the other person looking for? It's the exact same thing when you're trying to present yourself as a composer. It's a relationship you're trying to get involved in.

16. Realistically, if I'm an average aspiring film composer, what are my chances?

I don't think there's such a thing as an average one. There are so many factors. Are you talented, are you smart, do you have a good personality, do you know how to work with filmmakers? Someone who has all those ducks in a row has incredibly better odds than a social misfit who writes crappy music. I would say that if you have your act together, write really good music, and have the financial ability and determination to stick it out, the odds are you'll make it, because there are so few people who meet those requirements.
