

For SCL's "Score" January 2017

Marketing Yourself to Obtain Work in Cinema Music

***By
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Welcome my gifted young friend. You have recently graduated from a fine music school that has a first-rate music scoring curriculum, you've "begged, borrowed, and stolen" to get the necessary funds to try your luck here in Los Angeles or in New York for awhile and be discovered as the bright, innovative media music composing talent that you are, and now you are ready to be hired for your first professional scoring assignment.

Suddenly, a wave of horrific panic overwhelms you as you realize, after some initial communications and insight, that you are one of literally hundreds of others around your same age possessing the same talent, educational pedigree and aspirations; all vying for that first media musical opportunity. Some wind up never getting a shot, give up and return home or settle for work beneath their dreams. Others even agree, in a moment of insanity, to work for nothing just to get a small back end screen credit; hardly bright outlooks in this highly competitive pursuit of building a career.

But it doesn't have to be your outcome if you learn and bring into play some fundamental, specific marketing tools to the act of selling yourself as a knowing professional hyphenate (composer / arranger / producer / conductor) as well as for the fine music you demonstrate that you can create and produce.

While the perceptive educator/composer Richard Bellis suggests that writing anything about getting a scoring job "is a work of fiction", I believe (both from objective observation and personal experience) that there are certain basic, common sense steps that have been proven to work in the past, can be effectively employed by you in the present, and increase the odds of you finding work in your desired future of movie scoring. They might not guarantee you immediate employment, but knowing these few hints is hardly rocket science and very well might get you closer to that iconic "YES YOU'RE HIRED!" and help more than you've ever realized in achieving your vocational goals. Yet, when I regularly advise young composers and arrangers who study film scoring with me, I am flummoxed

to learn that so many have hardly utilized these marketing devices and, indeed, too few have even considered the efficacy of these strategies.

Enough prologue; here's a list of ten prudent tactics to help you market yourself and land that first "big break!" So please learn them, perfect them, and practice them until they are an organic part of who you are and you become the success you always knew that you could be.

1. *Know what projects are currently in production and might not have a composer or support personnel attached as yet.*

Subscribe to all the periodicals and websites and obtain pertinent studio personnel or acting call sheets that list imminent or currently in-production projects. Be proactive in inquiring about these work possibilities and drop off a demo and resume the same day to the relevant production office. Include a music cue and or written information that say you are "tailor-made" for this particular assignment.

2. *Know how hiring is done in TV, net streaming and feature projects.*

Make a list of the shows whose music you admire and learn who is driving the bus. In other words, is it the studio or independent producer, agent packager, star, composer or someone else making the creative picks and decisions about music personnel? Knowing who is doing the hiring will prevent you from talking to the wrong people, becoming discouraged, and spinning wheels in pursuit of a writing assignment. Make friends with the appropriate person's secretary and aides as well. They are founts of information.

3. *Know the composers who are currently scoring on a regular basis.*

In our frantic deadline work environment even the most talented, ablest composers need support personnel to research, arrange, orchestrate and/or musically prepare the composer's musical ideas. Composers by necessity need to be "companies" under one name. Contacting a composer (or more realistically sending in your name and having them contact you) is a wonderful way to initially work for a professional, learn their style, artistic approach, and orient you to their successful working skills. If you get paid for your labors it is honorable work even if, at first, screen credits are unavailable for you.

4. *Hang out and socialize with those who have the power to engage and hire you.*

Most musicians hang out with other musicians (some of whom are in direct competition with you for your next job). While you should obviously be literate and informed knowing all the musicians in the community, if you want to work make friends and socialize with writers, and other non-musical acquaintances. Note the producer, director, production executive, composer, music agent, music librarian and preparation crew etc. on all shows that you admire. Research their other work as well and screen as many of their shows as possible. When you meet them you'll be knowledgeable and come across as a fan of their work. You'll also identify and associate their creative team quickly as craftsmen tend to work together again often. Learn their favorite sport activities, and service organizations and become involved along with them in volunteering in community events. Chances are you'll meet them on a social basis and get to know them as friends who might very well want to help you and have you help them. I know composers whose careers got a kick-start through pick up basketball games, charity work, and other get-togethers with established composers.

5. *Never bad-mouth anyone's work or personality.*

While it is natural to feel that you are as good or better than certain composers and arrangers who are working more than you, it is never smart to ever demean or "bad-mouth" their efforts to others. First of all you never know what working conditions they labored under, and secondly, negative words always manage to come full circle in this business and hit you in the head. Be a person who lavishes praise when it is earned and keeps your mouth shut when the results or the personalities are less than they should be.

6. *Have one or more one-minute elevator speeches prepared for that singular moment of opportunity.*

You don't get many moments to represent yourself (in reality, music agents do not want to represent you until you are already steadily working). When the moment arises, have a few short words that tell the right person who you are and what you can bring to their project. It is called an "elevator speech" and it should be casually and conversationally spoken in less time than it takes for a person to get on or off an elevator. If this is hard for you because of shyness, practice one-minute "pitches" in the mirror until they come easily. I began orchestrating for Alex North after an "elevator speech" I gave that informed him that I studied with his friend and colleague Henry Brant and I knew the style of his current

project very well. I began arranging dance cues for him and later substituted for him on a TV show when he was recording a simultaneous feature project. In return, when other features came along, he recommended me to the producer to carry on his TV work and later assume the full compositional responsibilities. Practice elevator speeches until they seem effortless. This is harder than it sounds but you can do it with a bit of practice.

7. *Make sure that your resume and demo reel can both be read and listened to in less than three minutes.*

As concise as you hone your “elevator speech”, make sure your demo reel tells your musical story is five or less closely segued cues of twenty seconds or less. I cannot tell you how many decision makers have lost interest in even thirty-second cues or “quasi-listened” while on the phone with someone else. People in the know can hear if you’ve got “it” in even five seconds so don’t bore them with every cue that you’ve ever loved writing. Also, a resume should not be a one size fits all. You should make a resume emphasizing different aspects of your experience for each distinct hiring possibility. Make sure that it is no more than one page, twelve-point font, and double-spaced. If they want to know more they’ll ask. Just tell them the bottom line information that will get you the job. Reading your resume and listening to your demo should take them no more than three minutes. They are busy people with short attention spans.

8. *Join the A. F. of M, the SCL, ASCAP, BMI or other rights organizations and always present your self as a professional.*

You are a one-person business. Have professionally made business cards, resumes, and demo reels to offer and belong to professional organizations. There are so many of you wanting this initial opportunity that some of you even agree, in a moment of insanity, to work for nothing just to get a back end screen credit. This is a mistake, not only does it drag everyone down in the field, but you, personally, will henceforth be known as one who works on the cheap and, therefore could never be the “real stuff”. This is your profession. Treat it as respectfully as a doctor treats his or her career. When you do, others will perceive your professional desirability, integrity and worth as well.

9. Understand each project's possible pitfalls and have some basic solutions in your back pocket just in case.

This is a more subtle, finer point but can mean the difference between being hired or passed over. Composers are often so frenzied and harassed by their producer or director that they sometimes cannot put their finger on a missing link or weak point in their own work at the moment something new and different is requested. If you know what might help them and the project's luster, it is always a plus for you as well. For example I once worked with the great Elmer Bernstein on a project that called for Cajun barroom music. Elmer wasn't certain where to get some of this music to listen to and authenticate its orchestration, but I did and shared it with him in a very timely manner that same day. I wound up orchestrating these cues for him and worked with him many times afterwards. The composing and life lessons I learned from Elmer were more than enough of a reciprocal kindness.

10. Don't take the gift of employment for granted. Send thank you notes that are heart felt and well written (not e-mails) and also consider sending a small gift of gratitude to your helpful employer when, indeed, the first and subsequent assignments come along.

The best thing you can do to lead a fulfilled and happy life is to be grateful and show your sincere gratitude for kindnesses shown to you. Say thanks in meaningful ways and be there for your employers when they need you. If you are there for them, they'll be there for you.

Good luck to you my friend. Know about the projects and the players in the community, be proactive in letting them know concisely who you are and what you can do for them and always be grateful by giving them the very best efforts that you can muster. While it is true that luck plays a big part in our careers, there is nothing more effective than concentrated preparation, dedication, and professionalism for frequently becoming "lucky" and succeeding in what you love to do.

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