

For The SCL Score

Understanding “Imposed” Music

By

Michael Isaacson, Ph.D.

In our time, when music supervisors have become as important to film music as composers once were, one should rethink the whole issue of “imposed” music. “Imposed” music is simply that which was first created specifically for another purpose e.g. commercial song, dance music, religious music, exercise music, elevator music, etc. and is now imposed upon a film.

It should not be confused with source music. Source music, though originally conceived for another reason, relates to a film because it emanates directly or indirectly from a visual or aural source, “imposed” music has no organic reason but, rather, a literary, dramatic, or philosophical function.

This is where it impinges upon the composer’s craft. Instead of asking a composer to create a cue that suggests a certain point of view, a director will now “lift” from another idiom a song or other existing piece of music that either has the musical feel, history, or lyric that describes a desired point of view. The ancillary search for these impositions has now become the music supervisor’s stock-in-trade.

Far more detrimental in diminishing a film’s overall dramatic value than its “imposing” predecessor the pop tune that was imposed for nothing more than crossover recording sales, the latest generation of musical imposition pretends to have an artistic function greater than budgetary limitations or commercial greed.

Regrettably, “imposed” music inevitably emphasizes a film’s innate failures.

1. It admits the failure of the screenwriter to adequately communicate the moment in the dialogue or visual suggestion and the need for a lyric of a song to carry the literary import.
2. It admits the failure of the director to get an effective performance from the actors or inspire a compelling commenting visual from the cinematographer.
3. It admits the failure of the other designers including scene, costume, lighting et al to carry the moment through their art.
4. And, ultimately, it admits the failure of a composer to convince the director that he or she can do the musical job without the imposition.

The most annoying aspect of “imposed” music is that it is seldom in confluence with the style of the film’s other components. It screams out at you, distracting you from ingesting the gestalt of all the other dramatic elements simply because it possesses a cute phrase or musical “hook” that pertains in some loose way to the scene’s surface meaning.

Furthermore, lyrics to imposing songs, more often than not, are played over dialogue and create maddening, aural clutter. It is embarrassing that the hard work of all the other designers has to take back seat to this momentary low-level indulgence and lapse of true creativity.

What can you do to dissuade a director who asks for such an imposing solution?

Two things:

1. First, as a composer, do not be afraid of giving your honest opinion of the imposition. As a designer this is a legitimate function of your job. Communicate your feelings in the kindest, most constructive way by suggesting both analytic reasons for its structural and aesthetic weakness and at least three alternative suggestions for accomplishing the same effect by other means.

2. Secondly, before the imposition is adopted, ask the director for an opportunity to compose an original piece of music that accomplishes the same goals in a more organic, creative way. Even a “sound-alike” cue is a notch more resourceful than employing an imposition.

An early knowledge of the possible inclusion of “imposing” music suggests that a composer and music supervisor must communicate daily and be in touch on the latest directorial notions before it is too late to counter them.

If seasoned composers, in this destructive era of “reality” shows, ubiquitous library music, and corroding intellectual property values, do not speak up against this musical malaise and say “the Emperor has no clothes on” we, as the Sixties motto suggests, by our failure to be part of the solution, are, indeed, more than part of the problem.

© 2005 by Michael Isaacson

Michael Isaacson is a versatile composer, conductor and orchestrator who, aside from his own extensive credits, has assisted Alex North, Elmer Bernstein, John Williams, Walter Scharf, Charles Fox and many others. He now gives private composition and conducting lessons. Dr. Isaacson may be reached at: Eggcreamer@sbcglobal.net