

WHEN NO MUSIC IS BETTER!

By

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"We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want. We work with being but non-being is what we use." Lao-tzu

The musical parallel to the idea of negative space (the absence of content that delineates a line) in visual art is, of course, the use of silence in between sound. Every musician understands the compositional value of silence but, unfortunately, not every film score demonstrates it. Far too often, music is inserted "wall to wall" at the producer or director's instruction in order to either sell recordings or put a "band-aid" on weak scenes. From a dramatic point of view too much music is as injurious to a movie as using the wrong kind of music.

After one asks the analytic questions why? where? and what music should be created for a scene? A final question should be is music needed at all? As creatively vital as knowing how to compose film music, is the understanding of when not to include it and let other elements carry the movie's dramatic moment. There are ten circumstances when no music is better.

- 1. Before a lot of music.** If a chase or a heavily scored comedic or dramatic scene is about to occur, find a way of lightening the musical content in the scene preceding it. The silence before this major cue will prepare the ear for the uniqueness of what is about to follow. More importantly, as you are preparing the audience with silence, you are also reminding them that structurally a significant scene is about to take place.
- 2. After a lot of music.** Concomitantly, after an important scene with lots of music, an audience needs time to make meanings, take a breath and avoid information overload. Punctuate the import of the preceding music and the narrative elements that have just transpired by letting silence structurally work for at least the beginning of the scene that follows.
- 3. When neutral source ambience is enough.** When dramatic music is not needed let the FX people put in ambience rather than elevator music. Mindless needle drops serve to anesthetize an audience to music's function and encourage them not to pay attention to important musical moments.
- 4. When sound effects aggressively compete.** Car screeches, artillery fire, explosions, et al. are loud traumatic sound events that do not need a musical overlay. They speak for themselves. No matter how mindful you are of the tessitura of the particular sound effect and feel you can add music in a contrasting register, it only serves to muddy things up. Far more creatively, use that sound effect as a non-musical rhythmic element in between the dramatic music that bookends it. The result will be more organic.

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- 5. When sound effects carry the moment.** A phone repeatedly ringing, an accelerating heart beat, or a close up of a burning fuse are all examples of a sound effect that is compelling and riveting all by itself. Trust that moment and eschew adding any additional music over it.

- 6. When words carry the moment.** A beautifully written speech performed by a talented actor with a compelling voice is about as good as it gets. There is no music that will make it better. Leave that speech in the clear. Unless they are sung, it is annoying to actively listen to music and words together. It is only when those vocal or literary elements are weak that directors mistakenly ask the composer for music to strengthen them; in truth, it usually does not.
- 7. When action carries the moment.** There are certain bits of business that are so visually compelling that music need not accompany them. Scoring a scene and then allowing silence to punctuate these bits of business is a far more intelligent use of music as counterpoint to the visual.
- 8. When a dramatic pause is required.** Another aspect of the previous idea is the use of the Grand Pause. It is an island of silence in a sea of music that uses negative space to underscore a speech, action, or dramatic beat that has just occurred. It is a silent gasp, an unsounded meditative moment or a tacit recovery from a dramatic impact and often, the most dramatic music that you will not write.
- 9. When making a segue from one dramatic beat to another.** A corollary to the Grand Pause is the silence or “luff” you use in between dramatic beats. For example, instead of scoring a scene right up to the next contrasting moment, try using a musical tacit to let a door close, a car drive away, or a closing reaction shot make the transition. It is the advocacy of the affect of less is more.
- 10. When Documentary reality is sought.** Finally, when a moment of stark Documentary reality is required music is not needed. Including music would either turn it into melodrama or a Movietone Newsreel. In this case the visual action needs only a sound effect of a projector or some ambient crowd noise.

Remember that our music guides audiences in how to understand a movie by listening to the silences that surround it. Articulate your positive lines through the intelligent use of negative space and always let the visual, effects and dialogue tracks alone dictate your musical imperatives and the creative usage of silence.

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