

10 STEPS
To a
FILM SCORE



KYLE J HARTMAN

10 Steps To A Film Score

MAKE

YOUR

FILM

SING

*"Kyle's music knowledge and film scoring skills are superb...
he offers a unique perspective and fresh musical voice."*

-Hummie Mann, two-time Emmy-award winning Composer

Kyle J Hartman

Contents

1. Know your Budget
 2. Define the Sound
 3. Do Your Homework
 4. Narrow it Down
 5. Choose the Composer
 6. Listen
 7. Critique the Emotions (not the notes)
 8. The Goosebumps Test
 9. The Secret Sauce
 10. Finishing Touches
- References

1. Know Your Budget

When you ask composers what their rates are for composing music, the smart ones will respond "What's your budget?" This is because many of us are actually willing to work for less than our normal rates in order to get an additional credit, work on an amazing project, and/or retain all of the creative rights to our music. Commissioning new art is always a negotiation, but it doesn't have to be difficult.

Setting aside a dedicated Music Budget before you even contact composers will make this entire process significantly easier. Everyone will appreciate the forethought and transparency, and later on in this guide, I'll show you how to use this Budget to find the best composer for your specific project. Also be sure to check out the [Explanation of Music Rights](#) and the [Composer's Creative Fee](#) reference pages at the end of this book.

How much should you set aside for Music? Consider that sound makes up half of the experience of a film, and Music accounts for about one third of the sound (along with Dialogue and Sound Effects.) So music accounts for 15% of your film. It's a good idea to set aside 10-15% of your total film budget for music, although this is just a general guideline and this number will obviously fluctuate with each project.

Sample - Music Budget Breakdown:

1. COMPOSER'S CREATIVE FEE (varies by composer) – Services Include:
 - Composing & Orchestrating X minutes of Music in an allotted time frame
 - Programming & Delivery of Digital Demos/Mock Ups
2. MUSIC PRODUCTION COSTS (standard day rates) – Services Include:
 - Studio Rental - space & equipment - for a set number of recording & mixing days
 - Studio Engineer and other studio staff
 - Conductor/Orchestra Musicians/Featured Musicians

If you'd like to get a **free instant quote** for custom music for your movie, check out this nifty calculator on my website [here](#). You can use this tool to help calculate the Composer's Creative Fee based on the project type and duration of music required.

2. Define The Sound



Take a look at these two images. What words, ideas, and sounds come to mind? What kind of time period or mood is each set in? Consider the fact that a brooding, sinister score would fit the first scene perfectly, but that same music won't "jive" with the second scene. Similarly, a cheesy fun rock and roll track could fit the thrill of an animated roller coaster perfectly, but not fit the tone of a dark foggy street.

Now obviously these are stereotypes with some fairly clear tonal examples. Your film may be in a specific genre, or it may defy typical genres and the stereotypes associated with them. This is the time to define the genre and tone of your film sonically: what does this film sound like? It's good to get an idea in your head of what the finished score will contribute to the film sonically and emotionally. Think about how (and when) music can help enhance your story.

Another good idea at this point would be to collect soundtracks and songs that you find particularly effective at conveying the energy and mood for your film. This collection will serve as the jumping off point for future collaboration with a composer.

3. Do Your Homework

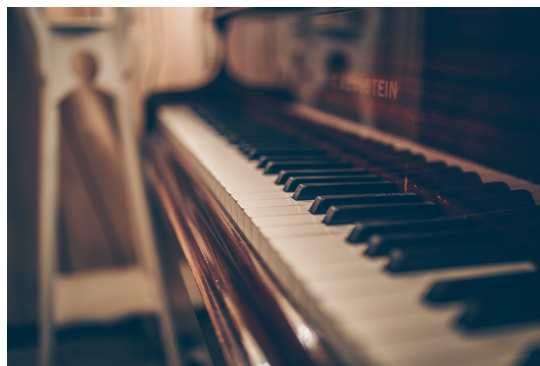
Now begins the journey of finding the perfect composer for your film. To aid you in your quest, I've compiled a short list of online composer forums and groups in the Resources section at the end of this book. (Be prepared to be swarmed by composers whenever you pitch a project online!)

Compile a list of all interested parties. Every composer who reaches out to you about your project is added to this list, along with their contact information. (Excel or Google Sheets is perfect for this.) Check out their portfolios on their personal websites, IMDb pages, SoundCloud playlists, and other social media sites.

Some questions to consider: Have they worked in your genre of film before? Do they have an amount of credits that inspires confidence in their professionalism? Does their music sound well-produced? Do their social media profiles offer any insights into their personalities and work ethic? Are they currently working on anything that might prevent them from prioritizing your film?

You may also discover insights into the personalities of different artists: be on the lookout for testimonials. The opinions of colleagues can offer a more objective take on the work ethic and personality of any potential hire.

Once you've compiled a database of eager composers, it's time to **find the right composer** for your project.



4. Narrow It Down

If you did your homework successfully, you should now have a healthy dose of composer candidates to choose from. It's time to eliminate most of them.

This should be relatively easy since you've already defined your **Budget** and the **Sound** of your film in the first two steps of this process. If you can't afford someone, it's ok to eliminate them from the applicant pool (no need to waste time there). Similarly, if someone comes across as super desperate, clingy, and begging for scraps - that is, offering their services for free just for fun with no credit attribution needed - you'd be wise to steer clear of these folks as well. You get what you pay for, as the saying goes. Or in this case, you'll get what you DON'T pay for: super low-quality music from people who don't even value their own work. Hard pass.

Once the Budget aspect has been seriously considered and candidates have been eliminated, you can see which of the remaining candidates best fits the Sound you're after. Feel free to go back to the SoundCloud or IMDb pages of these remaining composers to see what kind of music (and at what level of quality) they've produced for others in the past. Now you can begin eliminating candidates who don't seem to match the quality or genre of your production.

This is the real work right here, so it's important to slow down and really take your time evaluating the possibilities. Feel free to go back and re-evaluate the list of questions in Step 3 with this new group of composers.

It's important to break this step down into two parts, first Budget, then Sound. Since you already determined that everyone in this final group is within your budget, you can focus exclusively on listening to their music and determining what kind of sound each composer can bring to the table.

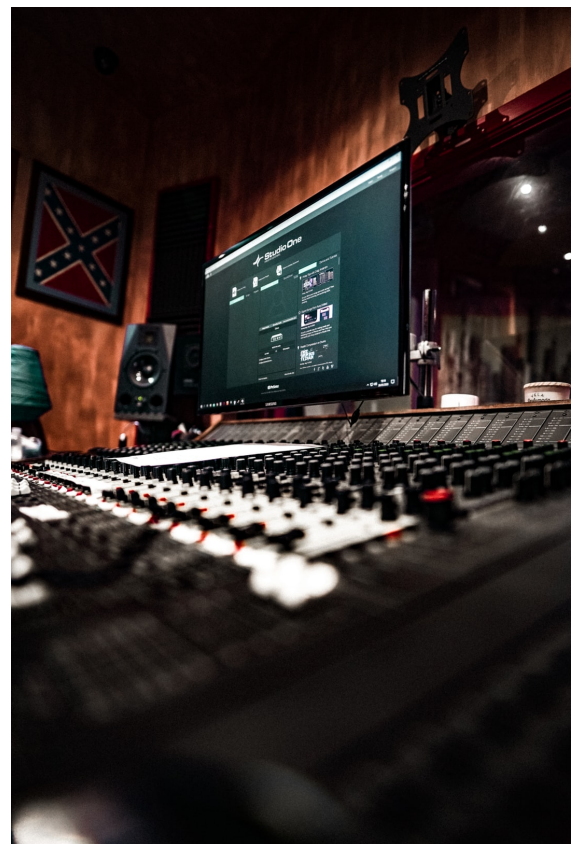
5. Choose The Composer

This step is fairly self-explanatory, and if you've followed the previous steps in this guide, you should already have at least a handful of candidates who appear to be a great fit for your project. If you still need help with this decision, at this point you can simply go with the person in this final applicant pool who has the lowest rate. Hopefully, this rate will match approximately the same amount you've set aside in your Music Budget for the Composer's Creative Fee. Remember, quality costs. High quality music demands a premium fee, but the end results speak for themselves.

If you've defined the **Budget** and **Sound** of your film, and you have a good idea of the post-production timeline, then you're already in a great place to find a composer who can meet your exact creative needs.

Now comes the fun part: Making music!

Conducting a Cue - Lady of the Lake LIM2-3 "Part of His World"



6. Listen

If you've been following along with the steps so far, then congrats on finding your composer!

All the pieces are now in place to produce a fantastic film score.

At this point, it's wise to give your composer the specific **Budget** and **Sound** breakdowns that you've established for the project, and send along any audio samples or songs that capture the mood of your film.

In this step, it's your job to LISTEN. This is where the collaboration begins, so feel free to step back now and let a professional take over who can offer suggestions and ideas about spotting and instrumentation, and start working on composing.

It's important to establish deadlines for deliveries, but trust that the expert you have hired knows how to do their job well. You can relax a bit and trust the process. A good composer will maintain regular communication with you as they begin to write and produce music for the film.

When a composer sends you a demo track for a scene and it doesn't fit the way you want it to, how do you resolve the situation professionally? (Hint: Turn the page to find out!)



7. Critique the Emotions (not the notes)

Film music is about the enhancement of story and emotions and subtext. Because of this, there's really no need to get into the technical minutiae of music theory or orchestration. Sometimes, it can be enough to say "Make it louder!" and then trust the composer to do that in a musical way.

But when things get more nuanced, it's important to communicate with musicians in a common language we all understand: **emotions**. *T*

Think about coaching your composer the same way you might coach an actor.

Help them understand the context and subtext of the scene, what the characters want, and what the audience should be feeling. Offer suggestions for a different creative approach in order to capture a different emotion. This will inevitably lead to different musical choices.

As a Director or Producer, you're good at recognizing broad strokes and managing large projects and teams. Just like there's no need for you to analyze every stitch that a costumer makes, there's similarly no need for you to analyze every note in any given score. It's not about the specific notes, it's about the emotions they convey. So if you don't like the sounds of the notes, you don't actually have to critique them; see if you can steer the composer towards a different emotion instead. When the emotion is right, the notes will be right!

In the next step, I'll share my favorite and most consistently reliable method for determining when the music in a scene is perfect.

8. The Goosebumps Test

Story time! I had the privilege of producing an album for a very talented vocalist friend. She and I spent a long time determining the "vibe" of the album and what ideas and sounds and emotions we wanted to capture. We hadn't quite pinned all that down yet, but one time while we were jamming, we both stopped and looked at each other and simultaneously said "**Goosebumps.**" There was a physiological reaction to the music we just played, and we both recognized it instantly. This became our go-to way of determining if a track was "good enough" to be recorded.

The reason I shared this story is because this method works in film scoring as well! If you are moved to goosebumps or chills or tears, then the music is right. You can feel it. It's primal. Check in with your emotions and see if your body is producing any involuntary reactions to those emotions. Chances are, if you're deeply moved by the music in a scene, your audience will be too.

But how can we elicit these deep emotional responses? Check out the Secret Sauce on the next page.



9. The Secret Sauce

record live musicians



I was really tempted to just say those three words and nothing else on this page! Nothing beats the sound, the intensity, and the emotional and musical quality of a live musician expressing themselves through their instrument.

With live musicians comes **sheet music**, and you may be surprised to learn that not every composer actually knows how to read sheet music! Programming your computer to sound like an orchestra does not require any formal music theory knowledge (but that definitely helps!) It would be a good idea to determine who will prepare the sheet music for live musicians, whether that will be the Composer or a dedicated Copyist or Music Preparation team.

If you can capture even a tiny bit of that live performance magic, you can enhance the quality of a film score exponentially. This is the Secret Sauce. **Record as many live musicians as your production budget allows.** Talk to your composer about enhancing their sample library instruments with live players. They will be thrilled!

Remember, these production costs will be calculated separately from the upfront Composer's Creative Fee. For more information, check out the [reference pages](#) at the end of this book.

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We've been on quite the journey together. In the final step, I'll show you how to get the **best possible sound** out of this epic score you and your composer just produced.

10. Finishing Touches

The final stages of this process involve two finalizing aspects of music production: **Mixing & Mastering**.

A good composer can provide a decent **Mix** of the compositions and audio recordings that have been made for each music cue in the film. But hiring a dedicated Mixing Engineer will almost always result in a higher quality sound. This is because mixing engineers are experts in producing the **highest-quality music possible**, and they can provide an objective take on the film score.

Once every track is Mixed, the final step is **Mastering**. Now Mastering is a bit of a dark art, even among musicians. Mastering is the term most commonly used to refer to the process of taking an audio Mix and preparing it for commercial-grade distribution. It is the final step of audio post-production. The purpose of mastering is to balance all the sonic elements of a stereo mix, and optimize playback across all systems and media formats. Mastering also ensures a consistent sound and volume level across multiple tracks.

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Once your film music has been **Mixed & Mastered**, it's time to compile all the audio elements of the film - Dialogue, SFX, & Music - at the Final Audio Dub. This is typically the job of the film's Sound Editor(s), potentially working in conjunction with a Music Editor.

While it may be tempting to boost the SFX and constantly turn down the Music, I'd recommend the exact opposite. The sound of an explosion won't move an audience to tears, but a passionate cello solo just might! Don't eliminate all those great musical moments you captured! Remember the Goosebumps Test: if you were moved by the music, your audience will be too. So make sure they can hear it!

Resources

Here are some places online that media composers and musicians tend to lurk. Feel free to join these groups and pitch your projects, but be prepared to receive a LOT of responses.

Remember to do the first two steps BEFORE researching your potential composers! They will appreciate you already having definite answers to their inevitable questions about **Budget & Sound**.

[PERSPECTIVE: A FORUM FOR FILM, TV, AND MEDIA COMPOSERS](https://www.facebook.com/groups/556877397821248/)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/556877397821248/>

[Film Scoring Network For Composers & Filmmakers](https://www.facebook.com/groups/2244302700)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/2244302700>

[VI CONTROL - Musicians Helping Musicians](https://vi-control.net/community/)

<https://vi-control.net/community/>

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Explanation of Music Rights

Two potential Negotiation Points and possible solutions regarding the Composer's upfront Creative Fee are ownership of the **Masters & Publishing**.

The ownership of the **MASTERS** (i.e. the final recorded music materials) allows a music track's future possibility for synchronization licensing to any other third party's audiovisual content, and also the production of a soundtrack album. Both are considered sources of potential back-end compensation for the Composer.

The ownership of the **PUBLISHING** (i.e. the performance rights) allows the receipt of the generated monies (royalties) from the public performance of the music on any broadcasting platform (TV/radio) through the Performing Rights Organization (P.R.O.) the composer is a member of (BMI, ASCAP, SESAC, etc). Production companies are not publishing bodies, hence they are not members of any P.R.O.; therefore the Composers typically retain full ownership of the Publishing rights.

IMPORTANT CLARIFICATION: At no moment and under no condition, the Producer of a Picture, for which a Composer was commissioned to create an original score, loses their right to synchronize that score with that Picture, and any other content created for it (e.g. trailers). In all types of Composer Agreements, the Producer retains the so-called "Producer's Right" to synch that music with that Picture in perpetuity.

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Composer's Creative Fee \$

As for the agreed upon terms in a contract regarding the ownership of Masters & Publishing, here is a list of common and fair formulas/scenarios that are always based on the upfront Creative Fee provided to the Composer:

HIGH CREATIVE FEE:

- a) Producer retains ownership of both **Masters & Publishing** - This is the typical *Buyout/Work-For-Hire Agreement* for US & UK productions and only for very high compensations (e.g. over 250K) - however, this is prohibited as a form of agreement in Europe by the Performing Rights Organizations.
- b) Producer owns **Masters** but shares ownership of the **Publishing** on a pro-rata 50-50 basis with the Composer, in perpetuity.

MEDIUM CREATIVE FEE:

- a) Producer owns **Masters**, **Publishing** is co-owned with Composer 50-50
- b) Producer owns **Masters**, Composer owns **Publishing** or it is co-owned for a certain time period from the date of theatrical release, e.g. 2 years, and when co-ownership period ends, then **Publishing** ownership reverses to Composer 100%.

LOW CREATIVE FEE:

- a) **Masters** co-owned by Producer & Composer, **Publishing** owned by Composer.
- b) **Masters & Publishing** owned by the Composer 100%. - This is the typical *Music Licensing Agreement*, which is strongly recommended for low-budget films that don't offer at least a 30K Creative Fee upfront.

FEES EXPLANATION: No range of numbers is mentioned here to indicate what should be considered as High, Medium and Low fee for composer. This is a calculation that should be made by the Producer based on the Total Budget of a project in conjunction with all the services requested from a Composer to render and other parameters (e.g. deadlines, instrumentation, number of minutes to be mocked-up, orchestrated, programmed and recorded, music production preferences for orchestra, studio etc.). However, the most common paradigm today in independent cinema is that Film Composer's Compensation below 30,000 USD for a feature film that requires approx. 30 minutes of original score - which means an average priority commitment of 3-4 months - is automatically considered a Low Creative Fee.

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