

## **The composer as alchemist: an overview of Australian feature film scores post-1990s**

When music first accompanied film it was performed live to image by an improvising composer/performer. Typically a pianist or organist filled the bill - anticipating sequences, interpreting emotions, adding a psychological dimension to the pictures. In a metaphoric sense, this was and still is a form of alchemy<sup>i</sup> needed to create the “invisible character” (Phillips, 1992) in the film. In the last decade the composer as alchemist not only writes original music but also conceives and produces a score that is a seamless and distinctive component of the composite soundtrack (Neumeyer & Buhler, 2001). And the composer as collaborator is often called on to blend genres and styles - for example, songs, world music, orchestral music and electronic textures.

This study accepts the role and function of film music as described in recent literature (Gorbman, 1987; Prendergast 1992; Brown, 1994; Lack, 1997; Coyle, 1998; Kassabian, 2001). It holds the premise that the composer is also a filmmaker caught up in an evolving aesthetic shaped by multiple approaches to creating the music. It considers collaborative processes, interactions with directors and uses of technology as a way of mapping a variety of approaches and trends in scoring the feature film. The study offers the following headings as a useful way of grouping film scores: classical legacies, hybrids and compilations, popular voices, musical offerings, and innovation. It is restricted to drawing primarily on the experiences of leading Australian film composers, using material from personal interviews as well as quotations from current literature, to provide an overview of the last decade.

### **Collaboration**

Current practice offers a range of possibilities for creating and/or compiling a music score. At one extreme there are scores that rely on classical music to be cut and pasted by music producers/composers - an approach that began with the piano/organ players accompanying films. At the other extreme, there are films that blur the boundaries between sound and music, each having an equal role in interpreting the emotion of a film.

Composers emphasise that creating film music is a complex collaborative process, which involves working in multiple roles - composing, orchestrating, music preparation and music editing. Composers have idiosyncratic working methods. Nerida Tyson-Chew, for example, a predominantly orchestral composer and conductor of her own film music, keeps to a specific time frame:

*Week One - I ask myself how many minutes I need to write...work out the budget...break the film into threads. Where are the big moments? Where are the intimate moments?*

*Week Two - I write 2 to 3 minutes a day, orchestrating as I go, working through the film and to a deadline. My approach means planning first, composing second.*

*Week Three - I preview with the director...play themes on the piano over the telephone. [To] give the orchestral effect I will do a mock up using Digital Performer and a sampling library.(i/v Tyson-Chew, 2003).*

Others such as Burkhard Dallwitz suggests early involvement:

*Sometimes you get involved when the film is in its early state, and sometimes at the final cut stage...I sometimes start with a melody idea or just some sounds (in Walker, 1999).*

And David Bridie ruminates on the close connection between sounds and the musicians who will record them:

*I create a palette of sounds and think of particular musicians playing the music. I view the whole film and think of say six to eight key scenes that stand out for me, and I compose a whole bunch of things, sometimes using a theme and variation approach. (i/v Bridie, 2003).*

The use of the temporary ('temp') track by the director is a major issue for film composers. A temp is a shortcut as well as a tool for understanding. It gives the editor and director something to cut to or discuss with the composer. Temps are mostly used early in postproduction to present rough assemblies to producers. Some composers never want to hear temps because they are a constraint that can pollute their own creativity. Martin Armiger sees the use of temporary tracks as problematic:

*The professional of course works around them but there is much ambivalence. I watch the film without 'temp' tracks, and then sit at the piano for three to four days. I test chords textures and melodies and check things again against pictures to see if they work, to see what needs to be developed (i/v Armiger, 2003).*

### **The influence of new technologies**

In contemporary culture the musical soundscape is increasingly experienced through the loudspeaker. And the increasing use of electronic sound in film is linked to rapid developments in technology in the 1990s that have influenced the way a composer works. There is also a greater appreciation of sound

design *per se*. Sound is as important an experience as the music or the images (Lack, 1997:288; Buhler, 2001:52). Sound effects, 'Foley' design, and composition are more finely integrated into the aural dimension (i/v de Vilder, 2003).

The development of music technology has made the job of a film composer easier in the last decade. Orchestral samples not only substitute live performance, but the dedicated orchestral composer will use them as a mock-up to prepare directors for the final result. However, this does not preclude the composer still using the more traditional approach to playing the score on the piano for the director, describing aspects of the full orchestration (Dallwitz in Walker, 1999). But it's now a common expectation of producers, directors and music editors to want the mock-up, much like the record companies expecting a well realised demo.

New technology has had another significant effect on scoring. Art Phillips says

*It has enabled the composer to find a logical tempo to match the visuals, providing...space to think imaginatively without being impeded by mathematical calculations (in Hallett, 1991).*

With computers and non-linear editing, a composer can see five different versions of the film, whereas once it was necessary get up and change reels and do some splicing. Tyson-Chew says "While the computer has helped me to get faster, it's also a tool for the other collaborators, and one that is often waiting for me to catch up!" (i/v Tyson-Chew, 2003).

The use of grid based composer software has provided more options and flexibility for composers. Nearly every project finishes up in a Protools format or similar. This has negated the risk of quality loss in analogue transfer. The composer delivers what is heard in the final mix (i/v Armiger, 2003). A composer or editor can take a cue and cut it around and use it anywhere. This has become a more organic way of doing things, grabbing, looping and filtering (i/v Bridie, 2004). This technology has turned the home studio into a powerful site for composition and engineering. Bridie suggests that it alleviates some of the nervousness between composer and director if one can show 16 tracks on a computer monitor. The director can see as well as hear the geography of the music. There are no surprises when the composer can visually illustrate a gesture using different colours. It can show a director where, for example, brass enters or how the strings work together (i/v, Bridie, 2004). In this way the composer can make any necessary changes in the MIDI studio environment and avoid the anxiety of significant last minute changes on the sound stage, as the orchestra sits, money-metre ticking, waiting to record.

However, if technology helps the director to preview orchestral music before it is finally recorded, it also has the potential to debase the craft of film composition. Keyboard patches can sound seductive to directors in a MIDI environment but can often flatten the final score. While a synthesizer score can of course be sublime – for example Vangelis’s score for *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982) - it can also be the result of a composer with limited technique (i/v Gordon, 2003). The pre-set or sound effect might sound great on home studio speakers, but it can “sound pathetic in the cinema” (i/v Armiger, 2003). There's a trend in movie scoring at the moment in which beds of sustained string sounds come from the lush samples used in the preview or temp tracks. Tyson-Chew says

*It has to be kept in mind when dealing with samplers that one keystroke on a string patch may sound like 12-16 violins, so a 4-part chord in the top register may sound like 48 violins, and the budget may only allow for 8. Live strings need movement both for the sound of the music and for the musician’s intelligence. It is important to keep things moving, not only to hold the musician’s interest, but also to give the music shape and growth (i/v Tyson-Chew, 2003).*

This comment invokes a question about music technology: in helping the conception and demonstration of a score, can it have a negative influence, encouraging filmmakers to devalue music? (i/v Neal, 2003). Although outside the scope of this study, the question is worthy of future evaluation.

## **Multiple approaches**

An evolving aesthetic for film composition is also shaped by multiple approaches used for creating and/or realising the music. Every film project is essentially a *tabula rasa* for the professional composer, for which any kind of musical genre or style might be relevant, depending upon what is required and the budget to achieve it (Bell, 1994). However, in looking at the last decade some themes emerge in the overview.

### *i. Classical legacies*

Most Australian composers, if given the opportunity, aspire to projects involving orchestral music. Like their 70s and 80s counterparts, for example, Brian May and Bruce Smeaton - some contemporary composers such as Christopher Gordon, Nerida Tyson-Chew, Alan John, Sharon Calcraft and Nigel Westlake are committed to an orchestral approach. For them an orchestra allows the composer to be “subliminal, effective and emotional” (i/v Tyson-Chew, 2003).<sup>ii</sup> In a sense they emulate and build on a Hollywood-influenced aesthetic grounded in classical. Composer Guy Gross invokes this passionately:

*I believe it's because classical music is simply more expressive and can contain great empathy, sorrow, depth, you name it...all the range of emotions. Perhaps the contemporary music of today will become the classical music of tomorrow but I don't think so. I'm a huge fan of closely following dialogue, action, camera moves, etc.*<sup>iii</sup>

Gordon goes further: "Certain musical events press emotional buttons," and cites Wagner as a model for seeking the psychological element, hence his interest in the use of harmonic clusters and consonance and dissonance. Before composing for the telemovie *Moby Dick*, (dir. Franc Roddam, 1998) Gordon looked at all the characters in relation to the main character Ahab. He viewed all the characters as aspects of Ahab's psyche and created a detailed score. Whenever Ahab was 'centre-stage' he used the key of Bm and its dominant F#. But when the action changed he would 'go off into lots of keys, returning abruptly whenever the attention returned to Ahab' (i/v Gordon, 2003).

Tyson-Chew composed the score for *Hotel Sorrento* (dir. Richard Franklin, 1995). It was her first feature film, for which she composed, orchestrated and conducted a music score that combines a commitment to a classical aesthetic with a deep respect for the orchestral musicians with whom she works:

*In Hotel Sorrento violas and second violins would often interchange and therefore sometimes violas would be above the second violins. I think this also helps to keep the music full of life and prevents things from becoming a bit dull – especially for cues under dialogue or voice-over* (i/v Tyson-Chew, 2003).

For the film *Under the Lighthouse Dancing* (dir. Graeme Rattigan, 1997) Tyson-Chew produced another memorable score, unfortunately for a film that failed at the box office. The imagery of its location on Rottneest Island seems to be more memorable than the script. However, there are some richly textured and lengthy music cues which demonstrate Tyson-Chew's mastery of orchestral technique. In the psychological thriller, *Visitors* (dir. Richard Franklin, 2002), Tyson-Chew combines her neoclassical aesthetic with the benefits of new technology. She uses electronically processed string colours ("pre-recorded weird sounds of creepy strings" i/v Tyson-Chew, 2003), which are combined with written cues for musicians. This layering approach is common in contemporary film scoring where the approach is often dictated by budget.

## *ii. Hybrids and compilations*

The creatively compiled score is another prominent approach in the last decade. This score typically includes original music supporting pre-existing

musical repertoire, which may itself be arranged, where the composer has to be a supreme alchemist to make it work.

The compositional aesthetic of the composer is often tempered by having to work in and around existing classical repertoire chosen by the director. Such is the case of *Babe* (dir. Chris Noonan, 1995) with its score composed by Nigel Westlake. In contending with music by Saint-Saëns, Delibes, Grieg and Fauré, Westlake creates transitions using lively dance rhythms, helping keep up the pace between dialogue and action. The film's theme comes from Saint-Saëns' *The Carnival of the Animals* (from *Symphony No.3 in C*). The music is heard throughout the film in a number of arrangements - for example, as a lullaby or an Irish jig. This is an exuberant and engaging music score for a fairy-tale like film, one that resonates with the Hollywood cartoon. Westlake uses the full resources of the orchestra. There are lots of layers and a brightness achieved through featured combinations of instruments such as piccolo, xylophone, celesta and string pizzicatos. Repetition in the musical segments is an important structural device in the film, one that a young audience would particularly relate to. There are musical interludes sung by a chorus of mice. There are also subtle moments that have special resonance for adults too, as when the protagonist Babe sees the implements of butchering, the fate of most pigs. The music is momentarily reminiscent of Herrmann's music for *Psycho* (Graydanus, 2003).

In *Shine* (dir. Scott Hicks, 1996) composer David Hirschfelder accepted the challenge of providing a score that "makes emotional comment" that is "unobtrusive and evocative" (Hallett, 1996:26). Hirschfelder had to integrate his own music with the idiosyncratic piano playing of David Helfgott, the subject of the film playing music by Beethoven, Schumann, Liszt, Chopin and Rachmaninoff.

A more recent hybrid score is *The Truman Show* (dir. Peter Weir, 2000). Since Weir always brings his films back to Australia for postproduction and engaged an Australian composer, Burkhard Dallwitz, *The Truman Show* might be viewed as homegrown product. Dallwitz who said it felt like he was working on an Australian film (Walker, 1999) found himself involved in a project that included a meld of composers and styles. Dallwitz provided most of the original music.<sup>iv</sup> and used synthesizers, strings, piano and percussion with some vocal colours. This was integrated with director Weir's inclusion of existing works by Philip Glass (eg from *Powaqqatsi*), Frederic Chopin, Wojciech Kilar, and a song written by Marc Bolan.

Weir often pushes for a hybrid musical approach to suit specific needs as in his most recent success, *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (dir. Peter Weir, 2003)<sup>v</sup> For this he invited three different Australian composers to join the project: Iva Davies, Christopher Gordon & Richard Tognetti. This is an unusual collaboration between three leaders in their own

fields: Davies comes from a popular music background and Icehouse fame, but is a classically trained oboist with experience in writing for dance and film. Tognetti is the inspirational leader and virtuoso violinist in the Australian Chamber Orchestra. And Gordon is a successful orchestral film composer with an Imax film *The Story of Sydney* (dir. Bruce Beresford, 2001), and a major television feature to his credit. *Moby Dick*. Davies was engaged initially to supply an electronic element, and Tognetti first found himself on set in Mexico teaching Russell Crowe to play the violin. Weir added Gordon, when he heard the composition called *The Ghost of Time*, a piece based on one of Davies' Icehouse themes, written for the Millennium Eve celebrations at the Sydney Opera House. Weir was impressed by something in this music and wanted the trio to explore it in Los Angeles, to try things out. He engaged the trio as his personal palette (i/v Gordon, 2003).<sup>vi</sup>

Tognetti worked on the source music - folk music and classical arrangements played on solo violin and in duet with the cello; Davies drew on his experience with synthesizers to provide an electronic soundscape; Gordon worked on most of the orchestration. The use of Japanese Taiko drums in the score is also indication of the hybrid approach. The taut skins of these instruments lend themselves to sharply defined sonorities, and are used in the film to enhance the battle scenes. Gordon describes the process:

*I don't recall a single cue in which we all composed the piece equally. Iva worked on the sounds of the ship, the Surprise, and also the tempo changes. Peter wanted drums as a call to battle. Iva developed these sections and we used Taiko drums. Iva did MIDI realisations and I would compose the orchestral material. These would be passed onto a hired assistant who would realise the cues electronically with samples. We then presented them to Peter Weir. Often he would surprise us by asking for melody where we had not thought of it. In one case Iva and Richard wrote a counter-melody and worked it up on the synthesizers. A new draft was produced, and I produced a new orchestral version. We realised we were Peter's paintbrush, he would try things out. Of course, as professionals, we would often get cues right first go (i/v Gordon, 2003).*

Weir had two main requirements for the music. To emphasise that the ship was on a journey to the unknown, suggesting a lonely space voyage, electronic sounds were used to reinforce other-worldliness. The other requirement related to lives of the men on the *Surprise*. All they knew was war and preparing for or engaging in it. The film begins and ends with a battle. Clearly, Weir was working away from the convention of the sea adventure and the swashbuckling stereotype. The result is largely textural and hybrid soundtrack. Gordon says

*When Iva gave Peter The Ghost of Time album he pointed out the latter part of 'Endless Ocean' as a possible style or texture for some of the film. We were quite surprised when we found that Peter had placed the beginning of the piece into a couple of spots in the film. It is a growing single sustained note that is eventually joined by another. 'Endless Ocean' plays this three times before breaking loose. Peter liked the tension and even the irritation that this relentless crescendo brought to the scenes. I re-scored it to fit the picture but it is essentially the introduction to 'Endless Ocean'...as it turns out, a great choice of title! (i/v Gordon, 2003).*

One of the unifying devices in the film is in the use of three inversions of a major seventh chord, which the composer's called the 'ghost' chord, referring to its original in *The Ghost of Time*. Another motivic element is heard in the drumming with a couple of rhythmic cells being repeated.<sup>vii</sup>

Davies acknowledges Weir's musical concept as something that became an organic process. "Weir", he says, "was putting things in front of us ... that had elements he liked." For example, one recurring element in the score is large *taiko* drums. They became a signature call to action.

*The whole idea of a ship of that period going off into totally uncharted territory was a bit like setting off for Mars. I guess he wanted to submerge everybody in the idea that these people were in danger and they didn't know quite what they were going to run into. In that sense, rather than do the obvious Hollywood thing [the score] is quite minimal and futuristic in a peculiar way.<sup>viii</sup>*

In addition to original music from Davies and Gordon, the film also includes folk music and incorporates existing recordings of classical music and arrangements for violin and cello by Richard Tognetti. Weir goes against convention. Instead he wanted a hybrid score, looking for contrasts, and avoiding thematic construction. The combination of contemporary drum rhythms, electronic sounds and foreboding strings is achieved through a unique collaborative approach, one that is in sharp contrast with the conventional through-composed seafaring score.

### *iii. Popular voices*

The 1990s saw a new wave of film composers (Baker, 1992) with popular music or rock and roll backgrounds come onto the scene. Included are Phil Judd, John Clifford White David Hirschfelder, Martin Armiger, Dave Bridie, Ricky Fataar, Chris Neal and Art Phillips. Each one is able to work in a range of genres and styles (Whiteoak & Scott-Maxwell, 2003:164).



Philip Judd<sup>ix</sup> of Split Enz fame turned to film composition and made a name with his music for the black comedy *Death in Brunswick* (dir. John Ruane, 1991). The story centres on an Anglo-Saxon leading character. The setting is a Greek nightclub in an inner city suburb with a large ethnic population. Most of the supporting characters are of Greek and Turkish origin. The music is simple yet redolent of multicultural Melbourne. Judd includes specifically Greek compositions by bouzouki player Peter Volaris, and hired a multicultural ensemble of session musicians to perform his score. The music is melodic and catchy, and effectively establishes the atmosphere of the film.

The band Not Drowning Waving led by David Bridie<sup>x</sup> worked as a collective on several feature films including *Proof* (dir. Jocelyn Moorhouse, 1991), in which orchestral strings are added to percussion, piano and guitar. The textures are light and allow dialogue its supremacy in the film and are particularly effective in augmenting the blind protagonist's flashbacks to early childhood. Bridie, the driving force behind Not Drowning Waving, has become a noted film composer in his own right. His craft has developed out of a range of skills that includes song-writing and intercultural collaboration epitomised in the *sui generis* album *Tabaran* (1991). Bridie's acute awareness of the possibilities of music technology is realised in scores for *In a Savage Land* (dir. Bill Bennett, 1999) and *Tempted* (dir. Bill Bennett, 2001). The latter film is set in the swamp country of New Orleans. Bridie did location recordings of crickets, frogs and a range of soundscapes. He mixes music and natural sounds instinctively, even using recordings of cars driving over a creaky bridge to sample and create loops. Bridie believes that getting called up early into the job and going on location makes his contribution more germane to the project, the location helping him to become more engaged emotionally. This was also the case for his score for his score for *In a Savage Land* set in the Trobriand Islands, PNG. Bridie went on location to record, and then created a multi-layered score for which he won the AFI award for Best Original Score.

Bridie also writes orchestral music according to the needs of a film and its budget, as in *The Man who Sued God* (dir. Mark Joffe, 2001). While he appreciates an orchestra's capacity for creating a big sound, he is also an advocate for being more experimental, and cautions against the credo that the orchestra is the only way to create successful film music (i/v Bridie, 2003). His capacity to blend music and sound and create new textures shows him to be working with a different aesthetic than some of his neoclassically oriented colleagues.

The seamless blending of music and sound is particularly valued by composers coming from a popular music background to the point that in some films it becomes an identifiable aesthetic. The much discussed and controversial *Romper Stomper* (dir. Geoffrey Wright, 1992) is an example of

the meld of high volume music, in particular punk or skinhead songs, and industrial noise that contributes to the disturbing experience of the film. It is this blend that contributes to the confrontational power of this film. Clifford White's approach to the music is antithetical to neoclassicism. Of course one could argue the precept that the project and the director's vision determines the choice of genre and style, where form is decided during the spotting of the film. In one composer, Philip Brophy, all the above are assured. Brophy the director, composer and musician is an iconoclast. He is just not interested in well-tried conventions. *Body Melt* (dir. Brophy, 1992) and *Only the Brave* (dir. Brophy, 1994) are two examples of his 'uncompromising drive to experiment on all levels of soundtrack composition' (Samartzis, 1998).

Other popular voices amongst Australian film composers draw on jazz and improvised music backgrounds in their work. David Hirschfelder composed the score for *Better Than Sex* (dir. Jonathan Teplitzky, 2000).<sup>xi</sup> Hirschfelder composed for an ensemble of violin, drums, guitar, double bass, vibraphone, piano and Hammond organ. The score is a combination of original music, standards, and items by The Cruel Sea and Kylie Minogue. Hirschfelder exploits his multiple skills as music director, keyboard performer and composer to create subtle underscore for the dialogue and the humour in *Better Than Sex*.

Other composers with a popular music background deserving mention are Chris Neal (*Turtle Beach* dir. Stephen Wallace, 1992) and Ricky Fataar (*Spotswood* dir. Mark Joffe, 1992) and Paul Grabowsky (*Last Days of Chez Nous* dir. Gillian Armstrong, 1992).

#### *iv. Musical offerings*

A notable development in the 90s film is the combination of popular songs and dance in a way that suggests the Hollywood musical. The compilation approach is dynamically realised in *Strictly ballroom* (dir. Baz Luhrmann, 1992), *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (dir. Stephan Elliott, 1994), *Muriel's Wedding* (dir. P. J. Hogan, 1994) and *Moulin Rouge* (dir. Baz Luhrmann, 2001).

These musical offerings also use existing recordings as well as original composition in the sound track. In some cases the songs function as the narrative itself. And the composer with deep experience as a musical performer/producer/director such as David Hirschfelder is able to produce a sublime alchemy as in *Strictly Ballroom*. In this film the ballroom becomes a "metaphor, or a microcosm of the world at large. Desires are expressed through dance" (Luhrmann in Taylor, 1992:8). Cultural diversity is celebrated through music.<sup>xii</sup>

Hirschfelder describes his experience as having to create a score that was a “seamless marriage” between the diegetic music and the underscore. He says:

*I was getting to utilise all of my hats as a producer of popular music, as an arranger and blend that into underscore...The Blue Danube was used as the 'heroic call' of the Ballroom world. 'Time after time' was chosen by Luhrmann as a feature song that would connect with the audience, and connect the film with modern culture instantly...We structured it as a theatre piece. (Hirschfelder in Gordon 1992:4-5).*

Hirschfelder the alchemist substitutes the Zubin Mehta *Blue Danube* recording chosen by Luhrmann with a stunningly realistic computer generated version, all because the rights to the original were too expensive. It is such multiple skills - as composer, arranger, synthesist and engineer – that led to another outstanding score for *Shine* (dir. Scott Hicks, 1996). In *Shine* he can mix just about anything together and still retain integrity in the music score.

Like *Strictly Ballroom*, other musical offerings such as *Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (dir. Stephan Elliott, 1994) and *Muriel's Wedding* (dir. P.J. Hogan, 1994) conjure up the Hollywood musical comedy in which the songs carry the narrative through performance in the film (Lumby, 1998). Peter Best uses his skills as a songwriter to great effect composed *Muriel's Wedding*. He created a score to support a collection of Abba songs including a fully orchestrated instrumental version of the hit, *Dancing Queen* (Berardinelli, 1995). Best also composed the scores for *Dad and Dave on our Selection* (dir George Whaley, 1995) and *Doing Time for Patsy Cline* (dir. Chris Turner, 1997). Best is a versatile composer with strong sense of how a sequence of songs can work as a unifying device. In *Doing Time for Patsy Cline* he shows a mastery of the country music idiom in a fine example of another song-based score.

The use of the off camera singing voice as a narrator is central to the narrative of the *The Tracker* (dir. Rolf de Heer, 2002) with music by Graham Tardif and lyrics by de Heer.<sup>xiii</sup> This is an allegorical film dealing with race relations and reconciliation. The story takes place in the spectacular Flinders Ranges. The time is 1922. Like the medieval morality play the characters do not have proper names. They are identified by their role and function in the narrative: Tracker (David Gulpilil), Fanatic (Gary Sweet), Follower (Damon Gameau) and Veteran (Grant Page). De Heer conveys his simple story through a combination of music, movement and painting - much as an indigenous storyteller would. Graphic violence is depicted in images painted by Peter Coad, while the song-based soundtrack conveys the actions behind the images.

Mention should be made of another film, which is narrated through song: *One Night the Moon* (dir. Rachel Perkins, 2001). The score is by Paul Kelly, Kevin Carboy and Maire ad Hanna. The resembles a singer-songwriter musical with country and western resonances. The music and imagery complement each other perfectly. The film, if not a feature are *sui generis* and deserving of its many accolades.<sup>xiv</sup>

#### v. *Innovation*

Australian film composers are also innovators and given to experiment. Some have developed distinctive voices, for example Cezary Skubiszewski<sup>xv</sup> who said 'I started doing film music to surprise myself, to push myself. I wanted to break the rules, stretch myself, and get extra energy and inspiration. He lists influences including Penderecki, and "Being a big fan of French films, I'm caught up in the way they create a *cool* atmosphere." (i/v Skubiszewski, 2003).

Skubiszewski's first feature film score was in *Lillian's Story* (dir. Jerzy Domaradzki, 1995) in which he

brings a delicate dimension to the film, contributing to it without overpowering it. There are 3 main themes. The opening theme uses a chord progression as a melodic device, moving it along every two bars (i/v Skubiszewski, 2003).

There are subtle voicings of muted strings contributing in the words of the composer to a 'sad sound' A piano theme appears as a simple statement in rondo form, only to be developed by using cello and shifting the melody by semitones.

The orchestral music includes a choir singing chords off the beat, following an example from Penderecki, and creating clusters in 16-part harmony. This is used to create tension in a courthouse scene, in particular when the topic of child abuse is addressed. Simple rhythmic elements are assigned to percussive writing for basses and cellos. The music is often sparse yet so poignant, especially under Lillian's opening soliloquy where the high voices bring us closer to Lillian's emotional state.

*The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (dir. Richard Flanagan, 1998) is a film about migration and the building of a dam in Tasmania.

Skubiszewski's music reflects on and combines different ethnic backgrounds in Australia. The approach is bold. He focuses on Gypsy musical heritage as a unifying device, using a hammered dulcimer, in this case an Iranian *santur*, common to the music of the Middle East, southern and central Europe. The score locates time, place and ethnicity in the writing. An orchestra supports

Irish *uilleann* pipes – not dissimilar in colour to the Macedonian *gaida*. Gypsy clarinet and violin styles as well as Spanish castanets and hand-clapping are included. Other instruments in the score include vocals, *bodhran*, *cajon* and a sampled music box. A significant innovation here is the daring combination of quartertones played by the santur set against the orchestra in equal temperament. And this is not simply world music per se. Skubiszewski is making an aesthetic statement about film composition that is Australian, multicultural and of our time. He is also quite bold in his featuring of solo instruments such as Spanish guitar or accordion, or in the case of *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* the bright steely timbre of the santur. *And in Two Hands* (1999) he contrasts ‘twisted Morricone type guitars with big jazzy brass, playing around with conventional voicings so that the music is never fully serious’ (i/v Skubiszewski, 2003).

Humour is also noticeable as in *La Spagnola* (dir. Brendan Maher, 2001) with a score combining colours and rhythms that once again suggests the crosscultural experience of life in Australia. Vibrant combinations of brass, guitars, accordion, castanets and orchestral strings constitute much of the sound palette. There is a confidence in his music and always a sense of doing something different. For example a sex scene in this film is underscored by music that might be heard at a bullfight. The instrumentation includes trumpets, tuba, soprano saxophone and snare drum. Innovation, versatility and humour are also evident in his score for *The Rage in Placid Lake* (dir. Tony McNamara, 2003). Here Skubiszewski combines bossa nova with hip-hop and more to capture an upbeat and youthful feel of the film. This music like that of other scores mentioned above is much admired by his peers, as evident in the number of awards he has achieved since 1995.<sup>xvi</sup>

## Conclusion

The strength of the feature film composer in Australia includes the capacity to use multiple and diverse approaches, including Hollywood orchestral influences, crosscultural music and new technologies. A new type of film culture is emerging, one that is “moving away from large-scale systems” (i/v Neal, 2003). Overall, less personnel are required in shooting and post production. Copyright libraries continue to have a prominent status in the realisation of the score, as filmmakers shift towards a blurring of sound and music. Further, in a climate of perennial budget constraints the film composer has to be protean to survive. A question emerges concerning the training and development of the film composer: what is the ideal training and development for the film composer, as musicians with different sets of skills come onto the scene, especially those who rely on technology to produce a music closer to sound effects? Given the evolving aesthetic described in this study, the composer’s alchemy will change commensurately in another decade.

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<sup>i</sup> Alchemy is a “power or process of transmuting” in *The Macquarie Dictionary* (1997) 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, ed Arthur Delbridge, et al., Sydney: Macquarie Library, p85.

<sup>ii</sup> Nerida Tyson-Chew is a multi-award winning composer who commenced her career as a concert pianist before studying film composition in Los Angeles.

<sup>iii</sup> Interviewed by Matthew Florianz ‘there are 88 notes, I put them in a certain order’  
[http://www.fod-online.com/interview\\_guygross.html](http://www.fod-online.com/interview_guygross.html)

<sup>iv</sup> Dallwitz won a Golden Globe Award for his work.

<sup>v</sup> *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* received 9 nominations at the 76<sup>th</sup> Annual Academy Awards, 2004, including Best Picture. Russell Boyd won an Oscar for Cinematography; Richard King for Sound Editing.

<sup>vi</sup> See Interview with Gordon by Gary Dalkin from the composer’s website  
<http://www.christophergordon.net/master.html>

<sup>vii</sup> This working process is unusual for Gordon who usually looks at the structure of the film right down to tonality as would a symphonist.

<sup>viii</sup> Davies comments were sourced from Christopher Gordon’s website in December 2003.  
<http://www.christophergordon.net/master.html>

<sup>ix</sup> *Death In Brunswick* (1991) Best Original Score, APRA Awards 1991. Another film - *The Big Steal* (1990) Best Original Score, AFI 1990. Another film - *The Big Steal* (1990) Best Original Score, AFI 1990.

<sup>x</sup> Bridie enjoys a distinguished career as a musician, producer, song-writer and composer.

<sup>xi</sup> *Better than Sex* was voted best feature film score by the Australian Guild of Screen Composers.

<sup>xii</sup> For a detailed discussion of the film please refer to Rebecca Coyle “Soundbites of Cultures”: Hearing Multicultural Australia in *Strictly Ballroom’s Music* in this book.

<sup>xiii</sup> Graham Tardif worked as a sound editor for a short period of time before he decided he wanted to compose music.

<sup>xiv</sup> For a detailed discussion please refer to Phil Hayward & Kate Winchester’s *One Night The Moon* in this book.

<sup>xv</sup> Skubiszewski was born in Warsaw, Poland. He migrated to Australia in 1974 and has played in and composed for a number of rock, jazz and classical groups.

<sup>xvi</sup> He has achieved a string of successes with such films as:  
*Lillian’s Story* ( 1995) - Best music, Asia Pacific Film Festival 1997  
*The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1998) - Best Soundtrack, APRA 1998  
*Two Hands* (1999) - Best Film Score APRA 2000  
*Bootmen* (2000) - Best Original Music Score, AFI 2001  
*La Spagnola* (2001) - Best Original Music Score, AFI 2001  
*After the Deluge* (2003) – Best Soundtrack, APRA/AGSC Screen Awards,

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*Better Than Sex* (dir. Jonathan Teplitzky, 2000)  
*Body Melt* (dir. Brophy, 1992)  
*Dad and Dave on our Selection* (dir. George Whaley, 1995)  
*Death in Brunswick* (dir. John Ruane, 1991)  
*Doing Time for Patsy Cline* (dir. Chris Turner, 1997)  
*Hotel Sorrento* (dir. Richard Franklin, 1995)  
*In a Savage Land* (dir. Bill Bennett, 1999)  
*La Spagnola* (dir. Brendan Maher, 2001)  
*Last Days of Chez Nous* (dir. Gillian Armstrong, 1992).  
*Lillian's Story* (dir. Jerzy Domaradzki, 1995)  
*Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (dir. Peter Weir, 2003)  
*Moby Dick*, (dir. Franc Roddam, 1998)  
*Moulin Rouge* (dir. Baz Luhrmann, 2001)  
*One Night the Moon* (dir. Rachel Perkins, 2001)  
*Only the Brave* (dir. Brophy, 1994)  
*Proof* (dir. Jocelyn Moorhouse, 1991)  
*Romper Stomper* (dir. Geoffrey Wright, 1992)  
*Shine* (dir. Scott Hicks, 1996)  
*Spotswood* (dir. Mark Joffe, 1992)  
*Strictly ballroom* (dir. Baz Luhrmann, 1992),  
*Tempted* (dir. Bill Bennett, 2001)  
*The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (dir. Stephan Elliott, 1994)  
*Muriel's Wedding* (dir. P. J. Hogan, 1994)  
*The Bank* (dir. Robert Connolly, 2001)  
*The Rage in Placid Lake* (dir. Tony McNamara, 2003)  
*The Story of Sydney* (dir. Bruce Beresford, 2001)  
*The Tracker* (dir. Rolf de Heer, 2002)  
*The Truman Show* (dir. Peter Weir, 2000)  
*Turtle Beach* (dir. Stephen Wallace, 1992)  
*Under the Lighthouse Dancing* (dir. Graeme Rattigan, 1997)  
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