

Secondary Composition for the Screen

TEACHER NOTES

Learning Objectives

- Describe the practice of secondary composition and noncredited scoring for film and television.
- Identify the ethical questions that arise in connection with secondary composition.
- Articulate the benefits and drawbacks of secondary composition as an industry practice.
- Explain the historical reasons that lead composers rely on secondary composers.
- Assess different ways of crediting and compensating secondary composers.
- Determine a course of action for a scenario involving secondary composition.

Topics For Discussion

The Obscurity of Secondary Composition

Secondary composition is a term that describes music for a film, television show, or other media, in which the creator does not receive principal screen credit. While secondary composing is a standard practice in film and television, it is little known among those outside of the industry. This may seem unusual given the long history of the custom, and yet stigmatic words like “ghostwriting” suggest negative connotations of exploitation and secrecy. In many cases, the variety of terms for musical collaborators—including “orchestrator,” “arranger,” and “additional music by”—have distinct meanings on paper, but how these roles manifest is varied and dependent on complex working relationships.

- Are the various terms for screen music contributors adequate in capturing the work of musical collaborators, or should there be more specific and varied titles for each role?
- It is not unusual for an orchestrator to be asked to adapt preexisting musical ideas for a particular ensemble or recording session. At what point does orchestration become composition? Should orchestrators—or their supervisors—set guidelines for what they are expected to modify in a given score without receiving composition credit?
- If secondary composition is both common and necessary, why does it remain secretive outside of the industry?

Ethics

Ethical dilemmas are a recurring theme in discussions of secondary composition. While the practice is common, it is clearly obscured for a reason, and many of the individuals interviewed for this case study expressed ambivalence about the moral grounds for hiring composers without crediting them. Historically, the reasons for deploying secondary composers range from cultural and practical to financial, and many examples of secondary composition have been beneficial for all parties. At the same time, composers entering the film or television music industry must be prepared to address the ethical questions that may emerge as they cultivate their career.

- The benefits of serving as a secondary composer have been highlighted throughout the study, yet potential advantages must always be weighed against the costs of a particular working arrangement. Is there a clear point at which secondary composition becomes exploitative? How could a composer make this determination?
- Virtually every career relies on building relationships and securing professional connections. This is one reason that secondary composing can be valuable for new composers seeking to get a foot in the door of the industry. Yet some can feasibly fall into the trap of spending too long in search of connections at the expense of establishing themselves for their own creative work. At what point in one's career might a screen composer decide they will no longer work solely for "experience"?
- Miklós Rózsa is an example of a composer who relied on close colleagues—in his case, André Previn—to assist with writing music that was outside of his stylistic training and expertise. Is there an ethical concern when a lead composer is credited for writing in a style unfamiliar to them, particularly if the audience does not know the extent to which secondary composers contributed to the final soundtrack? Is this an inevitable aspect of a collaborative industry where every film and television show has many moving parts?
 - Is the industry unfair to lead composers by expecting them to have a command of many musical styles? Why might a director knowingly hire a composer to write in a style with which that composer has limited experience?
- Lead composers commonly rely on assistants when they accept more work than they can feasibly handle on their own. What are the advantages to lead composers and filmmakers when a single composer claims the lead role on such a vast number of projects? Should this practice continue, or should lead composers be more judicious in how much they take on?
- Does the long history of secondary composition justify its ongoing ubiquity in screen media, and should future composers embrace it as a necessary custom? What would have to change in order to curtail the practice of secondary composition? Consider this question from various angles, including business logistics, industry relationships, compensation, capacity, and culture.

Credit and Compensation

Staff members in Hans Zimmer’s film scoring studio (Remote Control Productions, Inc.) receive cue sheet credit for the music they write. While their names may not appear in the rolling credits at the end of a motion picture, they nonetheless earn ongoing royalties for their contributions to the final score. The result is a lucrative and financially stable working arrangement in which secondary composers earn a sustainable living on Zimmer’s team. At the same time, assistants at Remote Control Productions, Inc. may feel limited in opportunities for upward career mobility, since it is uncommon for an assistant working “behind the scenes” to acquire the same wide-scale recognition that a lead composer gains when their name is shown on-screen.

- Are Zimmer’s assistants—and those working in similar environments—pigeonholed into a career that limits future opportunities and financial growth? Or does Zimmer provide a valuable service by employing creative professionals who may otherwise struggle to gain footing in a highly competitive, saturated industry?

Orchestrators work diligently to adapt a lead composer’s music for recording sessions. The nature of the music they receive can vary from detailed scores to skeletal drafts. Gerard Schurmann, for instance, claimed to have done a substantial amount of composing for Maurice Jarre’s *Lawrence of Arabia* soundtrack, even though Schurmann’s official title was that of orchestrator. In these circumstances, an orchestrator may feel entitled to a higher fee given the significant amount of time it takes to compose and develop music for the screen. Yet even orchestrating and adapting fully composed music are time-consuming tasks, and orchestrators who are never required to work as secondary composers devote many hours to their projects.

- Orchestration—like composing—involves difficult, creative decision-making, and few orchestrators would claim that their work is easier than that of the lead composer. Is it reasonable for orchestrators in Schurmann’s position—who are unexpectedly asked to play the role of secondary composer—to negotiate for higher pay than they would receive otherwise? Or should secondary composition and orchestration be considered equivalent (and even interchangeable) tasks?
- The advent of digital streaming services has reduced the royalty payouts for most screen composers, including lead composers on high-profile streamed films and television series. In this environment, lead composers are less willing to allocate cue sheet credit to their assistants. If a lead composer spends the same amount of time writing music for streamed entertainment as they would for a film aired in theaters, but they earn less royalty income from the streaming contract, is it reasonable for their secondary composers to be paid a lower royalty percentage? Put in other terms, is it appropriate for the lead composer to claim a higher royalty percentage than the amount of music they write themselves?

Zoe’s frustration is compounded by the fact that she has been denied cue sheet credit, which means she will not receive future royalty distributions. She knows that other studios compensate their employees differently. If she were a member of Hans Zimmer’s team, for instance, she would be awarded cue sheet credit for her original music. Even a small percentage of royalties in a studio like Zimmer’s can amount to a substantial sum when a high-profile film earns millions in revenue.

Negotiation

The case culminates in a fictional scenario that encompasses the ethical and financial topics explored in the narrative. Zoe Hall is a recent college graduate whose industry connections have earned her the opportunity to write music for a primetime television show. She negotiates a flat rate of \$3,000 to write eight minutes of original music, and her contract includes a legally binding nondisclosure agreement that will forever conceal her work on the project. Within a few weeks, it becomes evident that the \$3,000 fee equates to a nominal hourly wage earned under untenable working conditions.

- Because the lack of cue sheet credit prevents her from earning long-term royalties, Zoe would like to negotiate a new contract that reflects a similar working arrangement to that in Hans Zimmer's studio.
 - Invite students to evaluate Zoe's options as presented in the case. What strategies could Zoe deploy to successfully negotiate a contract revision? What are the risks of asking for additional compensation, and are those risks worth taking?
 - Ask students to imagine that Zoe is willing to forfeit her fee entirely in exchange for cue sheet credit and a 25% royalty stake of any music she writes. What are the potential advantages and drawbacks of this revised contract, and how can Zoe be sure that this is a better deal?
 - Regardless of labor conditions, working as a secondary composer gives Zoe valuable experience honing her craft and learning more about the screen music industry. What are other creative and artistic benefits for Zoe as a secondary composer?
 - Suppose that Zoe has the power to dictate the conditions of her next contract. What stipulations should she ensure are included?
- Flat-fee payment structures can be both a boon and a risk for secondary composers. What are the benefits of flat-fee structures for both secondary composers and lead composers? Why might a lead composer prefer this method of compensation? What are the potential downsides for each party, and how can they safeguard against these risks?
- Film producers and directors often hire a lead composer to supervise the scoring process, giving that composer latitude to hire additional arrangers, orchestrators, and assistants. When a lead composer hires a secondary composer to meet demands set by producers and directors, who should be responsible for the details of the secondary composer's contract? Should the negotiation process be overseen by the lead composer, by the filmmakers, or by an alternate party? Consider the practical benefits and disadvantages of these different approaches.

Additional Scenario to Consider

Readers of this case may find it useful to consider varied circumstances within the theme of secondary composition. The following scenario is provided for this purpose:

Alex Santos

Having recently completed a graduate program in film music composition, Alex Santos accepts an offer to write a portion of the score for the low-budget, independent film *Western Valley*, which will be shot in Carson City, Nevada. Her contract states that she will receive cue sheet credit for the music she writes—with attendant royalties—and garner screen credit for “additional music.” After working on the project for several months, it becomes clear that Alex is generating at least half of the musical content for the finished product. While she will receive commensurate royalty percentages, she feels that the title of “additional music by” does not sufficiently represent her involvement with the film. She casually tries to bring this up with her superiors, but it is clear that the lead composer and producers are unwilling to change her screen credit title to the more accurate designation of “co-composer.”

Alex considers her options. She could continue writing music for *Western Valley*, knowing that the screen credit she receives will underrepresent her contribution to the score. She will still retain commensurate royalty percentages from the cue sheet, however, and having her name in the screen credits for “additional music” will help her negotiate with future employers. On the other hand, she is tempted to abandon the project. In this scenario, she would still retain documented credit and royalties for any cues that are used in the finished film, but leaving now means that she cannot write additional music for the project—or earn the extra royalties that would come from creating more material. She also risks possible retaliation from the lead composer that could damage her budding reputation. For instance, it is conceivable that her music could be removed from *Western Valley* entirely or that the lead composer could generate negative publicity among other filmmakers. Alex needs to decide quickly, since she has just been asked to compose a lengthy series of cues to meet a deadline the following week. If she is going to abandon the project, she would prefer to devote her energies elsewhere.