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VALUING MUSIC COMPOSITION IN AUSTRALIAN FEATURE FILM PRODUCTION

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Introduction

The thirty most successful Australian feature films based on international box office receipts have notable music scores (see <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/gtp/mrboxus.html> and <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/gtp/mrboxaust.html>). Some even have leading characters who either perform music or who perform *to* music as central parts of their narratives. These are *Happy Feet*, *Moulin Rouge*, *The Piano*, *Shine*, *Muriel's Wedding*, *Strictly Ballroom*, *Young Einstein*, *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, and *Mao's Last Dancer*. Some use existing recordings of music of very prominent popular artists, which presumably would have been expensive to licence. These notably include *Muriel's Wedding*, *Happy Feet* and *The Dish*. Some (notably *The Man from Snowy River*, *The Man from Snowy River II*, *Australia*, and *Mad Max II*) have commissioned orchestral scores that draw attention to what Gorbman (1987, p. 68) calls the epic quality or spectacle of landscape shots and action sequences. In other words, the music score draws attention to itself in its role of monumentalising the visual sequences.

In a number of other films on the list, high-profile foreign composers have been commissioned. These films include *Green Card* (score by Hans Zimmer), *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (score by Maurice Jarre), *Babe* (Jerry Goldsmith wrote a score which was rejected, then Australian Nigel Westlake was contracted), *The Piano* (score by Michael Nyman), *The Year of Living Dangerously* (score by Maurice Jarre), *Rabbit Proof Fence* (score by Peter Gabriel), *Knowing* (score by Marco Beltrami), and *Crocodile Dundee in Los Angeles* (score by Basil Poledouris). All but two of the films on the list (*Crocodile Dundee II* and *The Crocodile Hunter: Collision Course*) have accompanying soundtrack albums, thus drawing attention to the contribution of the music in the films' productions. Thus apart from these two very successful films all the other most successful Australian feature films have some kind of musical prominence either in their narrative content or in the resources expended on the music or promoting the music.

Methods

In a database developed in conjunction with a major research project with colleagues Rebecca Coyle and Philip Hayward, we currently have records for 1229 Australian feature films covering the period 1930–2009 (for more information see <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/sass/index.php/60/>). The database specifically focuses on detailed data relating to the music and sound and allows us to make statistical observations about the use of music and sound in Australian feature films. This paper employs this resource to underpin observations about the value of music.

For this paper I have also drawn upon data from interviews with six Australian film composers conducted in the period 2007–2008. The focus of the interviews was on the music budgets of the films these composers worked on. To qualify for inclusion in this survey composers needed to have scored at least four Australian feature films. I have also drawn upon 10 interview transcripts included in an honours thesis by Jude Magee (1996). Magee's criteria for inclusion in her study was that the composers had to be winners of the Australian Film Institute (AFI) award for best original score. In particular I have used data from one of the questions Magee asked: 'What sort of status does a film composer have in this country, amongst the film community, the musical community and the community at large?'

In the more recent set of interviews a number of themes emerged relevant to the notion of the valuing of music and the role of the composer in Australian feature films. These themes were music budgets, reduction in agreed music budgets, composers expected to take financial risks, pitfalls in composers' contracts, the use of the music budget to license existing music, the

practice of temping (or creating temporary scores from existing recordings as a stylistic guide for composers), the amount of time available to write and record the music, the musical understanding of film-makers, and the musical education of film-makers.

The scope of this paper is limited by the absence of interviews with directors and producers. It is necessary to acknowledge this bias.

Credits for original music

Of the 1229 feature films in our database, 182 (approximately 15%) have no credits for the composition of original music. That means that the only music cues used in these 182 films are already existing recordings that were licensed for use on the soundtrack (songs, instrumental music or electronic music). It could signal that the film makers for these films have not placed any value on the idea of using original music in their film projects either because they favour the idea of using existing songs or instrumentals or because their budget priorities did not stretch to paying for original music.

The absence of original scores in this 15% of Australian feature films could be symptomatic of a lack of value placed on the contribution of composers in the Australian feature film culture. Admittedly, the use of existing recorded music might be the most appropriate approach for some films. Significantly, however, many films that use a lot of licensed music, also employ a composer. For example this is the case for the three films highlighted in the introduction (*Muriel's Wedding*, *Happy Feet* and *The Dish*).

Budgets

In the survey the percentage of the music budget to the overall budget seemed to be in the lower range of the 2–5% typical in the US. Several composers reported that the agreed music budget was often reduced if there was overspending on the shoot. One feature film music budget from 2006 was reduced from \$50000 to \$30000 making it possible for the composer to pay the session musicians but not receive a composer's fee. In situations like this, and where the amount of money available for the composed music is particularly low for one or other reason, sometimes the composer is offered a points deal. This amounts to taking a risk that the film in question is going to be successful at the box office. Sometimes this pays off, as in the example of Guy Gross's score for *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, and Martin Armiger's contribution to the co-written score of *Young Einstein*, but given the patchy success rate of Australian feature films, the odds are stacked against the composer in this scenario.

Licensing of existing recordings

Often the licensing music costs are included in the music budget. It is better for a composer to negotiate this aspect of the music budget to be segregated from the original music aspect, especially if the licensing has not been negotiated at the time of the establishment of the music budget. Directors, especially first-time directors, often want to use their favourite song, but are unaware of how much it will actually cost for world rights. One respondent claimed he could almost tell how old a director was by the songs he or she wanted to use in a feature film. All of the composers interviewed had managed in their contracts to retain the publishing rights in the scores they wrote. This allowed for possible future income streams from soundtrack recordings, television broadcasting and DVD sales. It is, however, not always the case that composers are able to retain these rights, and it is a contractual pitfall for composers entering the field.

Temping

The ubiquitous practice of temping seems to be a source of irritation for all composers and reflects the value that film-makers place on a composer's desire to write appropriate cues in a preferred musical style or styles. Often famous pieces of music which may have taken months or even years to compose are used on the temp track. The contracted film composer is then expected to imitate these pieces without breaking copyright, and to write something just as good in a very short timeframe. These are unfair expectations.

Music as an afterthought in film-making

It is unusual for composers to be involved in the creative process of film making until the shoot is finished and often they do not see any part of the film until the final cut. They are then expected to write and record often more an hour of music in a very short time. Whereas the script for a film may have taken years to develop, the music needs to be written in 3 to 6 weeks. Rewrites of the music, related or not to re-cutting, are also sometimes expected.

Musical understanding of directors and producers

Andre Previn (1991, p. 86) tells a story about film producer Irving Thalberg, who upon hearing a soundtrack remarked ‘What’s that in the music? It’s awful, I hate it.’ Someone answered ‘It’s a minor chord, Mr Thalberg’. The next day Thalberg issued a memo with the directive: ‘From the above date no music in an MGM film is to contain a minor chord’. Previn titled his Hollywood memoir *No Minor Chords*.

Most film composers I’ve talked to have a similar story about the lack of understanding that directors and producers have about the mechanics of music and the role of music in film. A major issue in the film making process is the ability of the director to communicate his or her requirements for the score to the composer and to be able to give constructive feedback when demos for music cues are presented.

But what value is placed on music in the education of film-makers? The track record of the Australia Film Television and Radio School in providing the necessary music training for film-makers is not good. The school began its operation in the mid 1970s but it was not until 1998 that an elective “Music and the Screen” was introduced in the Graduate Diploma of Film and Television. Then, from 2000 to 2003, “Music and the Screen” became compulsory for all specialisations in the Graduate Diploma of Film and Television. But it was dropped as a compulsory unit in 2003, when another unit “Director and Music” was introduced, but only for the directing specialisation in the Masters degree.

One respondent in our study reported his disbelief that in another film school (at an Australian university where he was employed) there was total resistance to the idea of including directions for music and sound in film script-writing exercises. Music is a major element in the film medium. It makes little sense that it is not a substantial compulsory element in the training of directors and producers.

Turning to Magee’s study of processes and issues in Australian film score composition and the question of the composer’s status, the majority of respondents were negative about the respect for the composer from the film making community. A consistent theme was that Australian directors and producers did not understand the role and importance of music in film.

One of the respondents, Bruce Smeaton, also observed that academics had not paid any attention to Australian film music. From my reading of the literature on Australian music and Australian cinema this is indeed the case. A pioneering book on Australian music written by Covell (1967), made no reference to film scores at all. All the general books on Australian cinema published in the 1980s make scant reference to music. Dermody and Jacka (1987) contains no references to music or sound; Dermody and Jacka (1988a) involves only a two-sentence reference to Cameron Allan’s score for *Heatwave* (Noyce 1981; Dermody and Jacka 1988b) includes four sentences devoted to music; Hamilton and Mathews (1986) contains interviews with American critics and Australian film production “talent”, but excludes composers and sound designers; Lewis (1987) makes no reference to sound or music in Australian films; McFarlane (1983), discussing nine Australian films adapted from novels, makes six short references to music; Moran and O’Regan (1985) refers only to the pan-pipe music of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Weir 1975; Moran and O’Regan 1989), an anthology of articles and reviews of Australian cinema, contains nine short references to music.

Bruce Smeaton needed to wait a few more years after his interview with Magee to witness the appearance of an edited book devoted to Australian screen music (Coyle 1998). This project started the ball rolling and led to a second edited volume by Coyle (2005). The academic

study of Australian screen music has now gathered momentum, perhaps representing one sphere in which its value is increasing.

Conclusion

In the introduction I made a connection between music and Australia's most successful feature films. The films mentioned had placed value on music by featuring performers of music or performers to music, or alternatively by investing substantially in the music of the film, either the specially composed music or music which would have been expensive to license.

As indicated by our composer interview data, music in Australian feature films might be more greatly valued in the filmmaking process if there were reforms of the way that music was budgeted for, if directors and producers gained a better understanding through formal education processes of how music works in film and if the working conditions of film composers were improved through a more sympathetic collaborative engagement.

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