

Film Composer: Artist, Artisan or Machine Operator?

By Richard Bellis

If the current composing community was comprised solely of a handful of veteran composers, downward adjustments in the price of a film score—either due to the economy or because the composer just wanted to work on a particular low-budget project—would be made based on a reduction of their *standard* price. However, with so many of the available composers being of “emerging” status or those just starting to build their career, and without an established price or the representation (agent or attorney) to engage in negotiations, the price too often becomes whatever seems to represent a “competitive edge”. Unfortunately, that price has the potential to become an industry norm and consequently be perceived as representation of the actual value or worth of music for that particular category of media.

Deane Ogden makes a good point in a SCOREcast article where he states: “*Advanced technology has merely enabled us to be efficient, but composing music for film is much more than efficiency*”.

The composer’s ability to diagnose how much music and how that music is to function in a particular scene is essential. Then to create, not from whatever samples are available but from one’s musical background and intellect, the perfect score for that production and that particular film maker. In addition, the composer, as film music expert, offers input to the filmmaker even with the knowledge that he or she may disagree. This last duty, if not coming from a place of experience, must then rely upon an extensive backlog of viewing and analysis of film scores coupled with the tact, subtlety and charm of presentation. To be an expert, one has to be right more than fifty percent of the time.

Let’s “re-sophisticate” our profession.

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Two of the four words above deserve some reflection—*Sophisticate* and *Profession*.

Defining the Role of the Composer

- **Artist** = Unrestricted creativity
- **Artisan** = Creativity with functionality
- **Professional** = (used as a noun) Highly educated, mostly salaried workers, who enjoy considerable work autonomy, a comfortable salary, and are commonly engaged in creative and intellectually challenging work. Less technically, it may also refer to a person having impressive competence in a particular activity.
- **Profession** = A calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation.
- **Craftsperson** = A person who practices a craft with great skill. Creates to specification.
- **Worker** = A person who is employed to do physical or mental work for wages.

I would like to think of composing for media as neither the first nor last of the definitions above. I'm afraid we might be slipping toward the "Worker" category due to a perception stemming from technology and supply-and-demand ratios.

- **Sophistication** (Synonyms)
 - refinement
 - elegance
 - finesse
 - poise
 - tact
- **Sophistication** (Definition)
 - sophisticated character, ideas, tastes, or ways as the result of education, worldly experience, etc.

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Yes, the hardware and software with which we work is of sophisticated design making Software-Designer a sophisticated profession—but, once on the market, it is readily available to everyone making it commonplace. A mere tool like a hammer. To use a sample or loop as a cue makes the Software-Designer the composer.

It is the *use* of the tools and the *design* of the project on which those tools are to be used which elevates the profession or craft.

The *sophistication of our profession* comes from our experience as players and listeners; our musical education; our musical taste and our ability to write only what is needed and no more (a.k.a. discrimination). Hardware, software and the people to operate them are in plentiful supply but the musical, mental and interpersonal skills of a true media composer are what is rare and of greatest value.

What we, as composers, need to focus on are the skills and talents which cannot be purchased online or in a music equipment store. As “machine operators” we are worth slightly more than minimum wage, but as professionals we are worth what I consider to be far more appropriate compensation and respect.