

SCORING – COMPOSING FOR MOVIES (by Jim Carroll, Irish Times: February 1, 2014)

They shoot, they score

A new MA course in Dublin will teach composing for film. It's a popular job in the US, but can such an instinctive art be taught – and to whom?

To show the power of a film score, Conrad Pope suggests a simple experiment. Go to the end of a movie you know well and watch the final scenes with the sound turned down. (He suggests *ET the Extra-Terrestrial* because it's his favourite film score: "That might seem like an obvious choice, but it's an obvious choice because it's such a very good choice.") Then watch it again, this time with the volume up. See and hear the difference? When you have a film with a score, says Pope, "you see how much the music contributes to the emotion of the film."

Pope knows all about the nuances and the grand gestures when it comes to putting music to moving pictures, from his work on scores for the *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars* and *Matrix* movies, as well as, most recently, orchestrating and conducting the music for *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*.

The art of scoring for films is hugely complex. Composers need great flights of musical imagination and the gumption to be able to underline the drama on the screen in a way viewers will appreciate. They need to be crystal clear in their thinking and approach yet diplomatic enough to deal with executive producers who feel they should have a say in the music. They must have complete belief in their own ideas and ability but be able to fold those into what directors want.

According to Derek Gleeson, it calls for charm and tenacity. Gleeson is the director of a new MA course in scoring for film and visual media that will start at Pulse College, in Dublin, in September. Pope will be one of the tutors, as will Anna Rice, Garry Schyman, Christopher Young, Daniel Carlin, Juliet Martin and Craig Stuart Garfinkle.

The course was set up to satisfy a need for professional, intensive training in scoring for film, television, video games and other media, says Gleeson. "It's forged out of relationships built up from Screen Training Ireland courses, which have been running since 1996. They were set up as a result of government reports [that examined] the infrastructure of the Irish film industry and provide a platform to deliver that.

"By and large they have consisted of month-long modules, in which you would bring someone in from London and they would give the course twice a year. A number of people have gone through that programme, but it became evident that there was a need for a more intensive year-long programme. This is a natural progression."

The course will cover music technology, the business of scoring, compositional techniques and many other skills required to work in the industry. "I'm not sure if any of the things that make one an artist can be taught. [You can teach] things that can make someone a better craftsman and make them better aware of the artistic vision they have inside . . .

"Some of the things people hopefully have when they embark on this is a passion for what they're doing, a desire to be a dramatist and the ability to be personable and very engaging. As someone told me years ago, you have to be one of those kids that you wanted to play with in the sandbox when you were in school. We all know those kids."

The film-scoring industry has changed enormously since Pope arrived in Hollywood, 30 years ago. Back then there were a few courses in the craft, and most of the tutors had already retired from the profession. "When I started it was pencil and paper, and that was it." Now the business is on a very different footing. "I read that composing is the third-fastest-growing job in the US," Pope says.

“Part of that has to do with technology and the new demands for composers.”

Gleeson believes the course will attract applicants from afar. “There is still only a handful of these courses around the world, so there will be an international dimension to the students who will apply. We expect to attract more than just Irish people. We expect people from Europe, Asia and even the US to apply.”

He sees potential applicants breaking down into two camps. “There’s the person who has come through a formal musical training course and has a BA in music. Then there are the guys who come from a rock’n’roll background and who have put together a studio in their bedroom, but they don’t have the formal training in composition. It’s a marriage of those two types. In the business, that’s how it breaks down.”

Scoring memorable film scenes demands certain qualities. “If you could bottle what it takes to write a great piece of music for a film, I would certainly do that, but I wouldn’t share it. To write a great piece of music you have to be able to hear your ideas very clearly in your head and you have to be able to execute them. You have to be able to articulate your idea very specifically and very clearly and be able to communicate that across to the people you’re working with. Without that base you’ll never have a great work of art.”

Communication skills, says Pope, have become much more important. “It used to be that you’d sit down with the director and play him something on the piano. Now it’s much more collaborative, and everybody gets to weigh in on what they think about the music. You have to be very open and get your ego out of the way.

“You’re there to help the producer and director – people who have invested much more than you have – get the job done. It takes a special kind of musician to be a film composer or collaborative composer. Beethoven didn’t have to collaborate when he was writing his symphonies, but when you’re in this business you have to realise you’re in the service business.”

Above all, Pope says, potential composers have to be unique. “It can’t be taught, but it can be encouraged if you see it within someone: if they have an original way of looking at the world or of engaging with the world of music. Some people have a very distinctive way of viewing things, which can enlighten us. And that’s invaluable.”

SCREEN SOUNDS: Holmes, Hopkins and Hollywood

The new MA course may well tempt many musicians to try their hand at film scoring, but many have already done so without any recourse to academic study.

One of the most prominent of this school has been Belfast man David Holmes. After years DJ’ing in clubs and producing albums that people described as soundtracks to an imaginary film, Holmes went to Hollywood. Among his credits are Ocean’s Eleven, Hunger, The Edge and Haywire.

As befits a Renaissance man, Damon Albarn has also had a go at the film-score world between fronting a cartoon band (Gorillaz, not Blur), doing Chinese operas and producing albums in Mali and Congo. He worked with Michael Nyman on the score for Ravenous before working on 101 Reykjavík and Thaddeus O’Sullivan’s Ordinary Decent Criminal.

Jon Hopkins is an electronic music maker who has also found his feet in the world of scores. After working with Brian Eno and Leo Abrahams on The Lovely Bones, Hopkins has flown solo for Monsters and How I Live Now.

Yann Tiersen may claim that he's not really a film-score composer, but the Frenchman's evocative score for *Amélie* brought both that film and his career success beyond his homeland. Since then, Tiersen has worked on scores for *Good Bye Lenin!* and *Tabarly*.

Article source: <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/they-shoot-they-score-1.1673726?page=1>